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A NOTE ON PICTORIALISM AND DRAMATIC EFFECT IN DICKENS’S FICTION

But may I not be forgiven for thinking it a wonderful testimony to my being made for my art, that when, in the midst of this trouble and pain, I sit down to my book, some beneficent power shows it all to me and tempts to be interested, and I don't invent it — I really do not — but see it, and write it down.....

Dickens to Forster

This brief essay is meant to explore some relations between fiction, painting and drama in the 19th century as they are embodied in the work of Charles Dickens. Part of its concern lies with formal similarities and with expressive and narrative conventions that Dickens’s fiction shares with contemporary pictures and plays, but it also tries to suggest ways in which pictorial or dramatic techniques contribute to the overall formation of his narrative. The instances produced are mainly taken from two of his major novels, namely David Copperfield (1849-50) and Bleak House (1852-53), where the impact of this common representational practice is particularly well exemplified.

Seeking a vocabulary to describe their work (and seeking perhaps the support of more firmly established models), writers turned to picture and drama often enough before the nineteenth century. Smollett, for example, in his prefatory dedication to The Adventures of Ferdinand Count Fathom, announces: “A novel is a large diffused picture, comprehending the characters of life, disposed in different groups, and exhibited in various attitudes, for the purposes of an uniform plan, and general occurrence, to which every individual figure is subservient.” He goes on, however, to insist on a principal character “to attract the attention, unite the incidents, unwind the clue of the labyrinth, and at last close the scene.” ¹ In the epic and theatrical intimations that the image finally acquires, one sees that for Smollett this is only a metaphor.

In the 19th century, however, picture and drama come into the novel in ways that go beyond a general analogy and affect both style and structure, namely the way in which the novel is organized and experienced. Most Victorian fiction, in fact, shows a peculiarly melodramatic and pictorial quality that can be fully appreciated only with an eye to a typically 19th-century relish for artistic syncretism: a major tendency towards a practice of hybridization that, cutting across genres and separate sister arts (literature, architecture, painting etc....) tends to the constitution of a common representational style.

In Victorian England dramas are turned into novels and novels into dramas; poetry becomes dramatic, and narrative both melodramatic and picturesque; dramas are cast in the form of ‘picture plays’ and novels develop through the art of telling scenes; but also painting and architecture follow the new vogue of narrative and visionary styles, which in their turn provide important metaphors in the construction of literary works.  

However, the analogy between painting, fiction and drama is not exclusively limited to this even important practice of transcodification: it rather extends further within the bounds of the novel, exerting a major influence on fictional style. Pictorial and dramatic devices can be traced in a number of interrelated writing strategies: among these, the use of word-painting, for the description of settings and characters; the theatricalization of climactic moments of the narration through verbal tableau; the exploitation of rhetorical patterns for purposes of narrative sensation or fictional economy; a close integration of word and image in the attempt to expand verbal limitations. This last aspect, first and foremost embodied in the distinctive Victorian practice of providing books with illustrated plates, is crucial to a mature appreciation of the complexity of the Victorian novel (but let us remember that poets also experimented in this way) and tells us much on both the practice and the reception of literature in Victorian society. Besides, if we accept Michael Steig’s invitation to “‘read’ the text and illustrations in conjunction with one

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2 On this point a rich and stimulating book by Peter Conrad may be consulted: *The Victorian Treasure-House*, London, Collins, 1973. In three fascinating chapters (2, 3 and 5) the author charts the dense and unexpected web of relationships linking painting and architecture to fiction in the context of 19th-century aesthetic gusto.

3 A pioneering study on word-painting in Victorian poetry is the famous *The Pathetic Fallacy in the Nineteenth Century* by Josephine Miles, New York, 1965.
another" and approach the totality of the illustrated novel as an integrated product, we will soon realize how much the question of the relationship between verbal and visual elements is deeply built into Victorian sensitivity.

**Picture and Story**

Henry Vizetelly describes in this way the Londoners’ response to *The Pickwick Papers* when it first came out:

*Pickwick* was then appearing in its green monthly numbers, and no sooner was a new number published than needy admirers flattened their noses against the bookseller’s windows, eager to secure a good look at the etchings, and peruse every line of the letterpress that might be exposed to view, frequently reading it aloud to applauding bystanders.

This passage is interesting in at least two ways. It gives us an idea of the enormous success obtained by Dickens’s first collection, showing how much it fell at once into the familiar context of London’s street entertainments. But on the other hand it also suggests, in the words of an eye-witness, the peculiar way of reading that the Victorian novel called for, and the high degree of integration reached by image and text both in the production and in the reception of the final product. Rather than mere decorative embellishments, the illustrated plates were conceived — and perceived — as integral elements of the story bringing about narrative enrichment. To read was to experience a picture along with the text, in a collaboration that worked both on an intradiegetic and extradiegetic level and often implied a sophisticated practice of intertextual reference as well as acute metafictional awareness.

Undoubtedly, pictures also satisfied a very practical end, helping immensely to bridge the intervals in serials with longer periods and finding a use as handy visual memos during the accumulation of monthly parts over as much as even two years. But their impact on

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the readers' imagination was such that they often played a predomi-
nant, if not decisive, role in the overall appreciation of the novel. 
Mackeary refers in his diary to his confrontation with the illustration 
of the death of little Nell as in every sense ritual, bringing about 
fearful anticipation of the dreaded moment and the chilling con-
sciousness of the approaching climax. And it can also be to the 
point to remember that dramatic versions of Nicholas Nickleby 
and other serially-published illustrated novels were essentially dramatiza-
tions of the pictures rather than of the stories: in fact, it was just 
such a play, whose playbills ignored his name, that stirred up Cruik-
shank to claim a joint authorship for a novel credited entirely to 
Dickens. 

The terms of Dickens's collaboration with some of the most 
famous illustrators of his times have been thoroughly investigated in 
major recent studies. In particular, criticism has concentrated on 
the Hogarthian legacy in his style and on the quality of the relation-
ship linking the different component parts of his fiction. We know 
that Dickens habitually used the term 'picture' for one element in his 
narration, suggesting a working conception of the novel whereby 
'picture' and 'story' constitute alternative and even discrete elements 
(and indeed, Dickens's career may be read in the sense of a sus-
tained fight for control over both story and illustration). His number 
plans for Little Dorrit include such remarks as 'The Factory – Pic-
ture', 'Park Lane Picture. Evening', 'Open for old Pauper out for 
the Day – Picture'. His working plans for Hard Times, amid terms 
that evoke the theatre ('Separation Scene', 'The Great Effect'), call 
for numerous 'Mill Pictures', 'Wet Night Picture', 'Moving Picture 
of Stephen Going Away from Coketown', and so on. 

But as John Harvey points out, Dickens also experimented with 
the direct integration of picture and text – let us just think of the 
Master Humphrey's Clock novels, where the illustrations occur almost 
as paragraphs in the body of the story. In this case, the working 
principle adopted was based on parallelism rather than on linearity:

7 Mackeary's Reminiscences, and Selections from his Diaries and Letters, ed. by 
Frederick Pollock, London, 1871, II, 69; quoted by D. Skilton, "The Rela-
tion...", p. 305.

8 A detailed report on how some of Dickens's and Ainsworth's novels were 
brought upon the stage is ch. 13 "Novels in Epitome" of Martin Meisel, Realiza-

9 See among others: John Harvey, Victorian Novelists....; Michael Steig, Dickens....; 
J. Hillis Miller and D. Borowitz, Charles Dickens and George Cruikshank, Los Angeles, 
1971.

10 Quoted by Martin Meisel in Realizations...., p. 60.
the drawings figured in the text not as mere duplicators of pre-established narrative sequences, but rather as interactive counterparts through which the overall definition of meaning came about. As a result, the act of reading turned into a comprehensive process that originated in the joint presence of both static and progressive aspects of a single event, exploiting an effect of relais that highly enhanced its semic potentialities. For example, with reference to the much-admired “Fagin in the Condemned Cell” in *Oliver Twist*, Harvey notes that “the drawing complements the novel by giving a visible lasting emphasis to Fagin’s end, while the story moves itself forward.” 11 In this case, narrative is the element that runs, the continuing and developing movement, and picture the element that sits, asking to be explored, according to the traditional distinction between kinetic/temporal and static/spatial arts tracing back to Lessing’s influential theorization in *Laocoön* (1766). 12

But the relationship between the two component parts of the integrated text could also be made to work the other way round, and the plate, rather than being a ‘snapshot’, could become the visual epitome of a whole sequence of narrative events that in the story took place over a significant space of time. A clear example of this is another of Cruikshank’s plates for *Oliver Twist*, i.e. “Oliver Escapes Being Bound Apprentice to the Sweep” from chapter 3, which presents simultaneously – or achronologically – what is verbally given as a series of actions:

The old gentleman stopped, laid down his pen, and looked from Oliver to Mr. Limkins: who attempted to take snuff with a cheerful and unconsidered aspect. [...]  
“*My boy!*” said the old gentleman, “you look pale and alarmed. What is the matter?”  
“Stand a little away from him, Beadle”, said the other magistrate: laying aside the paper, and leaning forward with an expression of interest. “Now, boy, tell us what’s the matter: don’t be afraid”. Oliver fell on his knees, and clasping his hands together, prayed that they would

12 In this influential work, Lessing stated that the painter’s moment is unitary and without duration, whereas poetry (i.e. literature) deals with temporal extension. Therefore painters should choose subjects in comparative stasis or repose as most appropriate to their art, and avoid depicting the highest intensity of feeling – Laocoön’s scream – because in nature such a climax must be transitory. Poets, on the contrary, will find their most appropriate subject in life’s movement. Lessing’s theorization, along with Sir Joshua Reynolds’ *Discourses* (1769-1791) provided the intellectual framework for most formal pronouncements on the art of painting – and indirectly on the art of writing – in the 19th century.
order him back to the dark room – that they would starve him – beat him – kill him if they pleased – rather than send him away with that dreadful man.

"Well!" said Mr Bumble, raising his hands and eyes with most impressive solemnity, "Well! of all the artful and designing orphans..."

If we compare the plate and the extract, it is evident how the former effects a compression of the verbal text in one moment of time, only to open it up again in the reading of the picture according to an order that is no longer controlled by the words on the page.

But problems of chronology are only some of the possible issues arisen by the close interaction of word and image in Dickens's novels. Exploiting the central paradox of such composite experience of reading, writer and illustrator could work out a whole range of combinations to suit different communicative strategies. Unpeopled, descriptive plates without any direct diegetic function could be included in the text as devices of suspense: most of Browne's 'dark' plates for *Bleak House*, like 'Sunset in the Long Drawing-room at Chesney Wold' or 'A New Meaning in the Roman', help effectively to enhance the readers' expectancy, focussing their attention on scenes and places of some pivotal oncoming event. Drawings could also be cross-referenced through composition and general disposition of their parts or through the introduction of significant details in their background as a way to pass extradiegetic commentary on the events of the story: the explicit formal parallelisms between 'Oliver asks for more' and the hungry Oliver's introduction into Fagin's den in *Oliver Twist*, as well as the proleptic hint to the fall of Emily implicit in the Faust-scene hanging on the wall in 'I make the acquaintance of Miss Mowcher' in *David Copperfield* are examples of this practice. Illustrations could further be of great use to establish intertextual connections with works of the literary canon for purposes of symbolic or "emblematic" comment: the reference to Goethe's *Faust* in the above-mentioned illustration or to the Bible in *David Copperfield*'s 'Martha' (through the background pictures of Magdalen's repentance and Eve's temptation) work exactly to this end.

As we see, the exploitation of the double reading implicit in the interplay of word and image offered the author many possibilities of sophisticated semiotic practice, of which the previous ones are only some possible instances. But whatever the strategy employed, the production of the illustrated novel responded to a logic of close interpenetration between its visual and verbal dimension: a col-

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laborative work-in-progress whereby the readers’ fictional awareness could be enhanced and a more emphatic moral commentary brought home.

However, the issue of Dickens’s pictorialism goes well beyond its complement of illustrations and extends further within the limits of the written text itself, touching on questions of narrative construction and technique. We could say that the material collaboration of picture and word in the form of his novels complements a distinctive collaboration of narrative and picture within the verbal domain itself. Recent discussions of the visual qualities of Dickens’s narrative style have taken their chief clue from Ejzenštejn’s famous essay on Dickens and Griffith, where the influence is successfully argued from Dickens to Griffith to Ejzenštejn and beyond. ¹⁴ But even without resorting to the anachronistic analogy of the cinema, as Taylor Stoehr for example does when he points out the paradoxically static nature of Dickens’s descriptions of action owing to their photographic accuracy, ¹⁵ it is possible to trace a close parallelism with a contemporary tradition of reading the London scene developed by urban painters in the wake of William Hogarth. The comparison is no haphazard one, for even Dickens’s contemporaries spoke of Hogarthian touches in his narrative, and found a great similarity between the two not only in thought and power of description but also in the quality of their style. ¹⁶

A review of the work by the two artists actually reveals a surprising similarity in local techniques, foremost among them the accumulation of multifarious details in the one scene for the intensification of a single meaning and the almost allegorical use of visual particulars asking for close and protracted scrutiny. But even more than that, it is in a pervasive animism – a striking combination of energetic imaginative vision and a curious play of humour – and in a peculiar art of characterization that isolates the distinctive feature and develops it to the point of caricature that a common background of visual sensitivity and representational style may be discerned.

John Harvey, for example, points out how much the Wine-shop chapter in A Tale of Two Cities, with its grim atmosphere and montage-like structure, draws on one of Hogarth’s most terrific pic-

¹⁶ For the relationship between Hogarth and Dickens, as well as Cruikshank and Browne, see J. Harvey, Victorian Novelists..., ch. 2 and 3; M. Meisel, Realizations..., ch. 1, 2 and 7.
tures, “Gin-Lane”, where a host of concurring images and juxtaposed particulars convey with full force the sense of misery and degradation resulting from drink. 17 But also a passage like the *incipit* of *Bleak House* with its paratactic construction and the obsessive anaphoric pattern centred on the image of a thick fog shows how much Dickens relied on visual, besides verbal, emphasis to bring his point home:

London. Michaelmas term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln’s Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. [...] Fog everywhere. Fog up the river.....; fog down the river.... Fog on the marshes, fog on the Kentish heights....fog lying out on the yards.... Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners.... Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets over a nether sky of fog, with fog all around them.... Gas looming through the fog in divers places in the streets.... [...]...and the dense fog is densest....near....the threshold of a leaden-headed old corporation: Temple Bar. And hard by Temple Bar, in Lincoln’s Inn Hall, at the very heart of the fog, sits the Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery. Never can there come fog too thick....to assert with the groaning and floundering condition which this High Court of Chancery....holds, this day, in the sight of heaven and earth. 18

Here, the many details, rather than heaped cluster-like, are carefully juxtaposed in a sort of linear progression taken in from a consistent but shifting point of view. The bird’s eye view of the town held tight in the grip of the fog is progressively restricted to a more limited perspective, fixed in individual shots that follow the direction of the observer’s glance. Plunged himself into the muffled atmosphere of the ghastly streets, the reader is slowly but inexorably drawn towards the centre of the scene, the metaphorical if not real source of the suffocating mists that envelope the town. Placed ‘at the very heart of the fog’ as the final vista of the slow-moving descriptive crescendo, the House of Chancery emerges from the surrounding haze only to appear as a monstrous mythic creature, stunning people’s senses through its miasmic breath before crushing them in its claws: the terrifying imaginative origin of all social injustice, all material and spiritual plight that afflicts fellow human beings. In the careful accumulation of visual details and in the subtle shift between superimposed levels of reading, Dickens thus materializes a powerful central image visually conveying the idea of the ruthless destruction of man’s emotive and moral integrity brought about by the aseptic and impersonal English judicial system.

Such stylistic resources can be found again in another notable chapter of *Bleak House* (ch. 47) where Jo’s death is represented in a montage of verbal, visual, and auditory elements: the cart, which occurs first as a punning simile for his hard-to-draw, rattling breath, and recurs as progressively heavier, breaking down, dragging, nearly giving up, and shaken to pieces; “moving on”, a police phrase that the novel had earlier transformed from a casual remark into a distillation of social injustice, here given its final, mortal significance; prayer and knowing “nothink” in repeated conjunction, these also rich with the echoes of previous contexts; and (the final elements to enter the montage), the dark, and the light that is coming. In the end the cart, the dark, the prayer, the light, rising to a rhythmic climax, produce a violent foreshadowing of death.

The organization of verbal-thematic elements to achieve effect in the above scene is perhaps more rhetorical than strictly pictorial. But the result is an analytic, metonymic exfoliation of an event so as to command a time of presentation commensurate with its significance. Details seem to be ordered by contiguity, though marshalled by rhetoric, especially by the repeated use of the anaphora, which points to their cumulative significance. Borrowing T. Stoehr’s words, “it almost seems as if one thing does not lead to another, but everything exists at once, juxtaposed, superimposed, articulated in the consciousness by the anaphoric pattern.” 19 Montage thus provides the model for a description of how the multiple narrative lines are organized: it is the principle behind the variation upon iterated verbal motifs which constitutes a peculiar poetic dimension in Dickens’s narrative style.

But there’s another aspect of Dickens’s art that can be traced back to his close connection with Hogarth’s painting style: I am talking of that art of characterization that singles out one particular trait and imaginatively develops it almost to the point of grotesque. Who can forget the memorable train of characters that Dickens’s exuberant imagination has left us for our enjoyment? His whole work literally overflows with idiosyncratic beings fixed on the page and in our memory in their fantastic, unique individuality.

This art of word-portraiture, as it has recently been defined by Flaxman, 20 owes much to the 18th-century tradition of characters in which the author sketched a variety of representative ‘types’ in a series of brief prose vignettes. But quickly learning and turning to

19 T. STOEHR, *Dickens*..., p. 229.
his own use Scott’s lesson for whom ‘character’ meant not only physical traits but above all “habits, manners and feelings” of those portrayed, as made clear in his postscript to Waverly, 21 Dickens developed an art of the individual portrait which tended to absorb narrative and dramatic intent. All his characters somehow bear on their external appearance the unmistakable stamp of their inner disposition, which shows through their bodily traits and comes to shape their whole being. Such word-portraits, incorporating in their visual perspective a further dramatic dimension, help towards the dénouement of the story foreshadowing future developments wherein these characters will possibly play a decisive role.

Miss Murdstone’s description in David Copperfield, for example, alerts the reader to her probable oncoming role as an opponent to David’s fairy-tale romance:

It was Miss Murdstone who was arrived, and a gloomy-looking lady she was; dark, like her brother, whom she greatly resembled in face and voice; and with very heavy eyebrows, nearly meeting over her large nose, as if, being disabled by the wrongs of her sex from wearing whiskers, she had carried them to that account. She brought with her two black boxes, with her initials on the lids in hard brass nails. When she paid the coachman she took her money out of a hard steel purse in a very jail of a bag which hung upon her arm by a heavy chain, and shut up like a bite. I had never, at that time, seen such a metallic lady altogether as Miss Murdstone was. 22

An unfeeling and dehumanized being, Miss Murdstone is indelibly impressed on our mind. Her word-portrait is internally consistent, and the very opposite of enchantment, rather closer to the horrific fantasy of the stepsisters of Cinderella or the Queen in Snow White. Repeated adjectives emphasize the quality of hardness, darkness and coldness that sit on her whole person, and David’s final comment summarizes the total effect. This single paragraph establishes a context for every subsequent appearance of Miss Murdstone; her role in the novel is that of a consistent antagonist to David, both in his relationship to his own mother, and later, to Dora, and this comes out effectively in our first encounter with her. So it happens that her description, here in the form of word-portraiture, contributes directly to the general theme of the conflict between the world of the mind and that of the heart which is pivotal to the symbolic world of the novel, while further providing the story with a

21 SIR WALTER SCOTT, Waverly; or, 'Tis Sixty Years Since, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1985, p. 493.
vivid extra dimension that is perfectly suited to Dickens’s iterative style.

I have thus far argued that Dickens’s typical montage of constituent detail and figurative emblematic elements suggests the available English tradition of narrative painting stemming from Hogarth. But, as an end to this section, I would also like to point out how much his peculiar way of organizing and rendering experience, and particularly the adoption of a shifting viewpoint of a narrator functioning as camera-eye, may also reveal an affinity with other modes of visual representation indigenous to the age, notably the Panorama and the Diorama, both 19th-century inventions that through a combination of art and technology tried to effect a simultaneous perception of spatial and temporal movement. 23

The Panorama, Robert Barker’s invention (1787-89), placed the spectator in the centre of a circular painting in a building of the same form, requiring him to turn round through 360 degrees to take in the whole. Since the scene often represented great public events, like the Battle of Waterloo (1816) and the Procession of the Coronation of George IV (1822), a temporal element might come into play through the discreet incorporation of successive phases in the same scene, despite the presumption of synchrony.

The Diorama, on the contrary, brought movement to the spectators and change to the picture, but paradoxically. It was the turn of the audience now to be moved passively from one picture to another by means of a revolving chamber that, holding the spectators in their seats, moved through special partitions all around the scene, in its turn pre-arranged to enact a variety of effects through changes of illumination and perspective. The painter Leslie, objecting to the illusionism of all such forms, contrasted the strange stillness and silence of the Panorama with the effect of the Diorama “where the light and shade is varied by movement and the water is made to ripple.” 24

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24 C.R. Leslie, A Hand-Book for Young Painters, London, 1855, p. 4; quoted in M. Meisel, Realizations...
The Panorama and the Diorama required special buildings and were limited by that fixity. But trying to overcome the problem and make them available to a wider public, alternative solutions were worked out based on the creation of moving pictures: either a 'moving panorama' that unrolled before a stationary audience, or a 'diorama' framed by a proscenium and moving horizontally or vertically, apt for enactment in a theatre. Moving themselves, these theatrical dioramas achieved, to use a phrase again by T. Stoehr, “a cinematic rendering of continuous space in continuous time,” and gave the spectator – despite his bodily fixity – an illusion of relative motion in which he functioned as a moving eye.

Dickens’s interest in these shows combining picture and motion comes out in a paper written for The Examiner on the “Geographical Panorama of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers.” Dickens writes of the Panorama that “it is not remarkable for accuracy of drawing, or for brilliancy of colour, or for subtle effects of light and shade, or for any approach to any of the qualities of those delicate and beautiful pictures by Mr. Stanfield which used, once upon a time, to pass before our eyes in like manner.”

But it is a picture three miles long, which occupies two hours in its passage before the audience. It is a picture of one of the greatest streams of the known world, whose course it follows for upwards of three thousand miles. It is a picture irresistibly impressing the spectator with a conviction of its plain and simple truthfulness, even though that were not guaranteed by the best testimonials. It is an easy way of travelling, night and day, without any inconvenience from climate, steamboat company, or fatigue, from New Orleans to the Yellow Stone Bluffs (or from the Yellow Stone Bluffs to New Orleans, as the case may be), and seeing every town and settlement upon the river’s banks, and all the strange wild ways of life that are afloat upon its waters....
It would be well to have a panorama, three miles long, of England. There might be places in it worth looking at, a little closer than we see them now; and worth the thinking of, a little more profoundly. It would be hopeful, too, to see some things in England, part and parcel of a moving panorama; and not of one that stood still, or had a disposition to go backward. 

Dickens here recognizes qualities in the form pertinent to his own art. He recognizes that in the moving panorama – where assemblages of particulars, contiguous but discrete, unite in a moving contiguity – sweep and scope are not incompatible with a close attention to local detail, where much of the immediate interest lies.

He recognizes that, as in the novel, the representation combines simultaneity and succession, and all motion is relative to the spectator. But beyond such matters, when Dickens moralizes the technical characteristics of the panorama (as he does in his last remarks), he is also seeking to uncover its further mimetic potential, liberating the intrinsic idea of the moving panorama from its ordinary material form. In the end he dissolves the distinction between a potential panorama of England and England itself.

No novel of Dickens can be said to be built on a literal imitation of dioramic or panoramic effect, but both enter his conception of the reality he wishes to represent, the means whereby it can be represented, the experience of the reader before and in the scene, and the social ends to which a work of mimetic representation may be directed. His first novel, The Pickwick Papers, takes its readers on a coaching tour of the Southern and Eastern counties; and his last completed, Our Mutual Friend, seems ambitious to represent the whole of England in a moralized landscape, ranged along the navigable banks of a temporalized river. Thus, panoramic and dioramic models affect the style, the form, and the scope of Dickens's fiction.

Dramatic Climaxes

Any attempt to generalize on the collaboration of narrative and picture in Victorian fiction is considerably complicated by the concurrent dominance of a pictorial dramaturgy. In the theatre, situation took the place of action as the prime constituent of a play, and it came to be associated with an art of effect that aimed at the creation of striking situations through a use of the stage proscenium as a veritable picture-framework. In other words, the plays developed through a series of visually-arrested scenes that, exploiting the technique of the dramatic tableau, composed the actors in legible symbolic configurations, summarizing or punctuating the story at climactic moments. Each situation then, while dissolving, did not lead into consequent activity, but rather to a new distribution of elements (a new 'picture') on the stage.27

Victorian drama often provided contemporary novelists with an explicit metaphor for the art of novel-writing. The so-called Newgate and Sensation novels of Bulwer-Lytton, Ainsworth, Collins and

27 For a thorough description of the social and literary background of 19th-century drama along with a detailed analysis of its techniques and acting styles, see The Revels History of English Drama, VI, 1750-1880, London, Methuen, 1975.
Reade in particular were saturated with the climate of the stage. Ainsworth, in his introduction to his novel *Rookwood* (1836), observes:

The novelist is precisely in the position of the dramatist. He has, or should have, his stage, his machinery, his actors. His representation should address itself as vividly to the reader’s mental retina, as the theatrical exhibition to the spectator. The writer who is ignorant of dramatic situation and its effects, is unacquainted with the principles of his art, which require all the adjuncts and essentials of the scenic prosopopeia. [...] [The novel] is a drama, with descriptions to supply the place of scenery.  

Wilkie Collins, who became a successful dramatist in his own right in the Sixties and Seventies, early in his career also fully declared a similar faith in the dedication of *Basil* (1852): “Believing that the Novel and the Play are twin-sisters in the family of fiction; that the one is drama narrated, as the other is a drama acted; and that all the strong and deep emotions which the Play-writer is priviledged to excite the Novel-writer is priviledged to excite also, I have not thought either politic or necessary, while adhering to realities, to adhere to every-day realities only.” By the time he wrote *No Name* (1862-63), he significantly chose to organize his fiction into eight localized ‘scenes’ (with epistolary links “Between the Scenes”), each developing or achieving a seemingly fixed configuration as a situation.

Responsive to the appeal of this popular practice of hybridization, Dickens also experimented with the direct integration of dramatic effects in the texture of his fictions, and indeed most of his works reveal a relish for the theatrical gesture or the striking situation which may definitely be seen as a legacy of the common (melo)dramatic sensitivity of the age. An all-too-rare glimpse into his own thinking on this matter may be found in the distinction he proposed in a defence of some French paintings at the Paris Exposition Universelle...

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29 *Basil*, Leipzig, Tauchnitz, 1862, p.VI-VII. In the preface to his first novel *Antonina* (London, 1850) Collins uses the language of painting to describe his work (p. XII).
of 1855, paintings whose merits included "a vigorous and bold Idea" but which English viewers, even "the more educated and reflective" had dismissed as "theatrical." In this paper, Dickens makes a distinction between a dramatic picture and a theatrical picture, "conceiving the difference...to be, that in the former case a story is strikingly told, without apparent consciousness of a spectator, and that in the latter case the groups are obtrusively conscious of a spectator, and are obviously dressed up, and doing (or not doing) certain things with an eye to the spectator, and not for the sake of the story," 31 even though the artist is always evidently bent on the creation of a striking effect. As in the case of "The American Panorama", Dickens's distinction readily lends itself again to a discussion of his own fictions.

Practising a fictional style of the rhetorical and declamatory statement, Dickens makes use of theatrical effect according to his own definition. His characteristic performer is very much a conscious performer, to be perceived and enjoyed as such. In David Copperfield the theatrical picture wherein Agnes announces Dora's death (ch. 53) clearly betrays its declamatory stance. When Dora's Jip falls dead with a plaintive cry, David cries:

"Oh Agnes! Look, look here!"
- That face, so full of pity, and of grief, that rain of tears, that awful mute appeal to me, that solemn hand upraised to Heaven!
"Agnes?" 32

As we clearly perceive, the gestures are here for an external spectator, and a consciousness of this fact on the part of the author shows through, even though the characters themselves do not seem to be acting out on purpose.

Such is not the case, however, with the most theatrical scene of the novel, Micawber's denunciation of the villain Heep (ch. 52). There Micawber glories in his "performance" (so labelled) and his theatrical attitude keeps consistent with the character also when he departs from his script, pointing his ruler "like a ghostly truncheon" or wielding it like a broadsword while denouncing Heep as "the most consummate villain that ever lived." Heep's behaviour, with his final pause at the door for an exit speech ("Copperfield, I have always hated you.....Micawber, old bully, I'll pay you!") is quite in keeping with the structure of the tableau, and also visually counter-

32 David Copperfield, pp. 838-839.
pointed by Micawber's theatrical posture as "supremely defiant of him and his extended finger, and making a great deal of his chest until he had slunk out at the door." As we see, conscious performance has been built into these characters and they properly act their part, allowing Dickens to expand on the moment and exploit the climactic situation to unravel the thread of the story.

Elsewhere, just the presence of internal spectators is enough to justify the theatrical effect of a scene. When David and Steerforth break in on the Peggotty household (ch. 21), they catch a scene that functions very much like another verbal tableau, where the characters are momentarily arrested in a significant grouping described in terms of a 'picture':

Mr. Peggotty, his face lighted up with uncommon satisfaction, and laughing with all his might, upheld his rough arms wide open, as if for little Em'ly to run into them; Ham, with a mixed expression in his face of admiration, exaltation and a lumbering sort of bashfulness that sat upon him very well, held little Em'ly by the hand, as if he were presenting her to Mr. Peggotty; little Em'ly herself, blushing and shy, but delighted with Mr. Peggotty's delight, as her joyous eyes expressed, was stopped by our entrance (for she saw us first) in the very act of springing from Ham to nestle in Mr. Peggotty's embrace. In the first glimpse we had of them all, and at the moment of our passing from the dark cold night into the warm light room, this was the way in which they were all employed: Mrs. Gummidge in the background, clapping her hands like a madwoman.

The theatricalism of this "little picture" is made a matter of comment. When he brings the story of Ham and little Em'ly up to date for his visitors, Mr. Peggotty concludes: "Then Missis Gummidge, she claps her hands like a play, and you come in. There! The murder's out!" The scene exists as a tableau to the beholders, however, and makes an effect only by virtue of the interruption; and of course David and Steerforth, Em'ly future seducer, interrupt the scene in more ways than one. The real drama lies not in the tableau as such, but in the certainty of its imminent waning away - "so instantaneously dissolved.....that one might have doubted whether it had ever been" - when the spectators enter the picture. The interruption is thus charged with a function in the larger progression of the story and through the means of its creation the tableau acquires a significance beyond itself.

Even though David Copperfield occupies a central position in the

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31 David Copperfield, p. 829.
32 David Copperfield, p. 369.
33 David Copperfield, p. 369.
discussion of Dickens's theatricalism because of the striking series of situational *tableaux* through which it develops, such scenes may be found interspersed throughout Dickens's works. Let us just think of Estella and Miss Havisham's fierce confrontation in ch. 38 of *Great Expectations*, where Estella's cold indifference and self-possessed immobility is visually and dramatically set against Miss Havisham's wild discomposure, the whole taken in through the eyes of an astonished and dumb-struck Pip. Or of the ironic theatrical self-consciousness of the “grand pictorial composition” (so called) in *Little Dorrit* II, 3, where the Dorrits (now wealthy) encounter Mrs. Merdle in the wrongful possession of their rooms. Or even, in the same book, of the multiple textual accretions of the central image of Amy holding to her childish breast her father in the Marshalsea Prison (ch. 19), contributing dramatically and pictorially to the spinning of the symbolic texture of the novel. 

By this time, the positive side of Dickens's definition of a dramatic scene, one where “a story is strikingly told,” has achieved a more integral unit with the currents of deeper meaning, as ‘effect’ has come to be more and more organically related to the important themes and central developments of the story. 

If, as M. Meisel says, “neither probability nor the logic of necessity justifies the dramatic sensation,” in his later and mature novels Dickens increasingly grounded it thematically and poetry in the generative metaphors of his narrative. Picture and dramatic effect came to be assimilated into his art to the point of becoming distinctive features of his own style: a melodramatic, exuberant and redundant style which actually fed on shared structures in the representational arts of the Victorian period.

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36 This novel holds a central place in both Meisel’s and Flaxman’s works. But whereas the former focusses on its actual pictorial antecedents (notably, the well-known painting of *The Roman Daughter*) and sees it as a symbolic transcodification of that central image, the latter deals with the use of word-painting as visual subtext to the narration and particularly concentrates on the light/shade metaphor.

37 *M. MEISEL, Realizations...,* p. 83.