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The Illustrations in Dickens's Dombey and Son

Dickens and his illustrators have naturally been the centre of interest of many critics such as Michael Steig, Q. D. Leavis, Allan Grant, Nicolas Bentley, but, unfortunately, none of them managed to offer a profound, exhaustive analysis of their relations. The subject is generally treated as secondary, and although their importance is often unabashedly minimised, the crucial function of illustrations in the Dickensian fiction should not be underestimated. In fact, as Bentley argued in a brief essay (Bentley 196-227), illustrations should not be seen as mere "pictorial elucidation" as defined in the dictionary; they are major contributions to the public's appreciation and enjoyment. More, they often stand as so many keys to the understanding of the novels.

Indeed, in Dickens's view, illustrations were no substitutes for the text but precious additions to it. They were used in the first place to allow the reader — though presumably intellectual and often highly trained — to obtain an adequate understanding of the novels, and to interpret them correctly, for they involved elements and provided materials which could help make known the novelist's actual point of view. Dickens knew perfectly that his vast audience was not only made of middle class readers but also of common persons of restricted education. Thus he insisted on inserting illustrations in his works which could be easily grasped, but which were, at the same time, complex and full of meaning and insight. This he achieved thanks to his excellent collaboration with skilled artists of his time — such as Browne, for instance — who accepted to illustrate most of his novels.

The number of scenes, themes, and characters treated by Dickens's illustrators is considerable. Throughout his literary career, Dickens collaborated with no less than sixteen artists of various talents, tastes, inclinations, moods, styles, and techniques. Let us mention here some of the more famous ones: Hablôt Browne, who manifested a strong tendency to caricature and was deeply influenced by the Hogarthian tradition; George Cruikshank who delighted in using grotesque humour; and George Cattermole, who expressed his great interest in Romantic gothic fantasy, as well as his fondness for the picturesque. They contributed between them to almost nine hundred drawings, decorations, vignettes, and graphic initials, not to mention illustrations "commissioned by piratical publishers on the other side of the Atlantic, and the countless volumes of supplementary drawings without text which were produced by publishers and artists who wished to profit from Dickens's success" (Bentley 206).

Dickens was quite exacting in his collaboration with the various artists he engaged to illustrate his work. From beginning to end, he was never careless or indifferent to the execution of those plates. He was highly critical in controlling and supervising the work of his collaborators. Most of the time, in addition to the text, he provided them with detailed notes of instructions and directions which he wished them to respect so as to avoid any discrepancy between the text, his own intentions, and the illustrations. As Arthur Waugh has remarked:

He has left abundant testimony, in the form of counsel, comment, and written approbation, to his intense interest in the plates while they were being executed and his enjoyment of them when finished. Indeed, in many instances, he may be said to have collaborated in their composition, supplying elaborate descriptions of details and insisting on alterations and improvements (quoted in Bentley 213).

Frequently enough, he would ask his illustrators to prepare a preliminary sketch before he accepted a drawing, in order to adjust the final appearance of the characters. Then he would supply them with details about the actual setting as well as with various points which he wanted to be respected. This task accomplished, the drawing would eventually be submitted to Dickens again, for close investigation and

appreciation. If he felt that the artist failed to interpret him adequately — and faithfully —, he would ask him to revise his work until it suited him. However, it happened more than once, as we shall see in the course of our analysis, that he tolerated the independence of his illustrators and was not hostile to adding ingredients which could give the illustration more force and richness.



Dombey and Son, which is considered by many critical sensibilities as Dickens's "major work," is another evidence of the novelist's continuous evolution, and as a "great advance in his art" (Wilson 205). Indeed, it is more profound, more subtle, and more complex than its immediate predecessor. In fact, unlike *Chuzzlewit*, which teems with sub-plots and abounds with clusters of protagonists — a technique which is seen sometimes as responsible for jeopardising the unity of the novel at times —, *Dombey and Son* is a convincing example of an exemplary plot construction. All the threads of the story are tightly woven, and the different themes carefully related to one another. The novel also derives its strength and complexity from Dickens's intelligent handling of psychological, social, and moral subjects, as well as from his most convincing use of symbols — such as the sea and the railway, for instance — and of poetic language. Who can forget the famous refrain "Let him remember it in that room, years to come," recurrently appearing in the beginning and the end of several paragraphs in Chapter XVIII; or the poetic aura infusing Chapter XLIII:

"Awake, unkind father! Awake, now, sullen man! The time is flitting by; the hour is coming with an angry tread. Awake! . . . Awake, doomed man, while she is near. The time is flitting by; the hour is coming with an angry tread; its foot is in the house. Awake!" (491-92)

Dombey and Son, like *Chuzzlewit*, rests on a central idea around which the whole story pivots; it is built upon the moral development of Mr Dombey, a cold, arrogant, haughty businessman. His pride

causes the misery and sufferings of his own children, Paul and Florence, entangling him in a web of antagonisms — as regards influence and women — and finally bringing him to his downfall. Those themes are the subject matter of several of Browne's best illustrations which generally reveal a high degree of artistry and an uncommon richness of interpretation.

Most important, *Dombey and Son* both confirms and consolidates a radical change in Dickens's art. The analysis of the novel reveals that the main hallmarks of his old style have almost disappeared. The general tone sounds more serious than ever; the exuberance and joviality which used to characterise his early novels have now almost disappeared; broad exaggeration and many satirical elements which could be easily interpreted visually are now abandoned; and at times, the author's firm intention of giving up the classical devices of stage-melodrama is almost perceivable to the reader. But what should be underlined here is Dickens's new heavy emphasis on intricacy, and his tendency for more and more realism and truthfulness. M. Steig argues that caricature in this novel is not as flourishing as in his previous works. He explains that Browne's illustrations, "like the novel's text themselves display a development from an essentially caricatural style to a more complex and realistic one." And as for Bagstock, Captain Cuttle, and Mrs. Skewton as the major grotesques of *Dombey and Son*, Steig shows that, with the exception of the former, "they are less grimacing and more natural than figures in the early novels" (Stieg 1969).

As a matter of fact, from the outset and while Browning was still preparing the illustrations for the novel, Dickens was unusually ill-at-ease as to their execution, as he wrote to Forster:

The points for illustration, and the enormous care required, make me excessively anxious. The man for Dombey, if Browne could see him, the class man to a T, is Sir A— E—, of D—'s. Great pains will be necessary with Miss Tox. The Toodle family should not be too much caricatured, because of Polly. I should like Browne to think of Susan Nipper, who will not be wanted in the first number. After the second number, they will all be nine or ten years older; but this will not in-

volve much change in the characters, except in the children and Miss Nipper (Foster 399-400).

Dickens feared that his illustrator would lapse into caricature and satire again in the interpretation of his characters. He was particularly preoccupied with the illustration of Mr. Dombey whom he refused to be caricatured or even satirised. He did not conceive him in the same way as his fictional predecessors, namely Pecksniff, Squeers, and Ralph Nickleby. His view of the master of Dombey and Co. was that of a complex, tragic protagonist, a proud, unsatisfied, sad, unfeeling man, foolishly self-conscious, hard with women and children, blind to his mistakes, and indifferent to people around him. If we are to believe Forster, Dickens manifested “a nervous dread of caricature” (Foster 23) in Browne’s representation of Dombey, a fear which was not totally unfounded, for caricature, in the eyes of many critics, has often been held responsible for the deficiency in the art of both the author and his illustrator. Needless to repeat here that Dickens and Browne were both influenced by the tradition of visual satire, namely Hogarth’s satirical works and Gillray’s political attacks, as well as by a literary tradition which has much in common with visual art, since it uses the same methods and has the same purposes. Pope’s poetry, Gay’s *Beggar’s Opera*, and various works by other masters of the eighteenth-century novel — Fielding’s *Jonathan Wild*, Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, Smollett’s *Humphrey Clinker*, and Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* — belong to this category.

To make sure that his conception of Mr. Dombey would be faithfully interpreted, Dickens gave Browne his personal view of his central character — appearance, features, and background — by suggesting to him that he may be a real person. Then, he asked him to draw a series of faces so that he could select that which corresponded most to what he had in mind. He studied the drawings with great care, and his choice fell on a certain “Mr. A,” whom he saw as the embodiment of his fictional merchant-hero. As he put it to Forster: “I do wish he could get a glimpse of A, for he is the very Dombey” (Foster 23). Nevertheless, it was no easy task for Browne to answer Dickens’s demands adequately:

In themselves amusing, the heads have the important use of showing, once for all, in regard to Dickens's intercourse with his artists, that they certainly had not an easy time with him; that, even beyond what is ordinary between author and illustrator, his requirements were exacting; that he was apt, as he has said himself, to build up temples in his mind not always makable with hands; that in the results he had rarely anything but disappointment; and that of all notions to connect with him the most preposterous would be that which directly reversed these relations, and depicted him as receiving from any artist the inspiration he was always vainly striving to give (Foster 23).

Why did Dickens show so much concern for this particular illustration before it was even sketched? Two answers at least can be invoked here. First, he perfectly knew that from the moment the general appearance of *Dombey* was set on the paper, it would be almost impossible to alter it deeply. Secondly, he deemed it worthwhile to give his readers, from the very beginning, a satisfactory image of the major protagonist in the story, for he considered him the backbone of the novel.



Dickens's concern for illustration in *Dombey and Son* was not confined to *Dombey* and he actually showed a great interest in all the other plates of the novel. He wanted them to be right and effective, to be adequate reflections of the text and good interpretations of its various themes so as to spare the readers much imaginative labour. But aware that his new style might not be easily grasped by Browne and to avoid any discordance which might occur between text and illustration, the first thing Dickens did was to "educate" the artist. He attempted by means of long, detailed letters to explain to him that the illustrations should be built around such or such a particular theme and should illustrate various ideas, instead of merely depicting specific scenes and narrative sequences. He firmly insisted that the illustrations should have a purpose, should convey a message, and should not be seen by artists as pieces of work which are mainly and merely inserted into the novel for

embellishment's sake. And, as it has been pointed out with regard to *Dombey*, Dickens made every effort to make his illustrator aware that his role was to provide him with satisfactory visual representations of his text. He did not give free reign to the artist either; he was, to quote Forster once more, "exacting in his demands." As we shall see later in this paper, when he felt that his instructions were not being followed, Dickens did not fail to express his disapprobation openly by blaming his illustrator.

As a number of critics have recently emphasised, Dickens supplied Browne with a huge amount of instructions. Among many instances, two specific cases deserve to be mentioned. The first one concerns one of his most complex illustrations, ironically entitled "Major Bagstock is delighted to have that opportunity" (XXI). Dickens defined to Browne the subject of the illustration — the Major's introduction of Mr. Dombey to Mrs. Skewton and her daughter, Edith Granger, at Leamington Spa. He invited him to go down there to become imbued with the atmosphere and he indicated to him a specific room where he wished him to set the scene. Regarding the characters, he gave him directions concerning their appearances, as well as their personalities. For instance, he informed Browne that he wanted "to make the Major, who is the incarnation of selfishness and small revenge, a kind of comic Mephistophelean power in the book" (Dexter 17). But he was indifferent to their arrangement in the picture. When he received Browne's preliminary drawings, he felt at once that they did not correspond to his desire. Without further hesitation, he sent them back to him with such remarks as: "Florence [is] too old, particularly in the mouth," and "Edith something too long and flat in the face" (Leavis 358) he gave him further instructions to dress the Native in European costume and "to make the Major older and with a large face" (Stieg 1978: 93). It is to be noted that in this plate, like in many other late illustrations for *Dombey*, Browne had to rely not only on Dickens's notes but on his own imagination, for the text was not ready yet — a fact recognised by the novelist himself.

The second illustration is devoted to "Dr Blimber's young gentlemen as they appeared when enjoying themselves" (XII). Besides

specifying his purpose, Dickens gave a short but clear description of the content of the illustration:

These young gentlemen [are] out walking, very dismally and formally (observe it's a very expensive school). . . . I think Doctor Blimber, a little removed from the rest, should bring up the rear, or lead the van, with Paul, who is much the youngest of the party. I extract the description of the Doctor. Paul as last described, but a twelvemonth older. No collar or neckerchief for him, of course. I would make the next youngest boy about three or four years older than he (Dexter 824-25).

But in this illustration, like in many others, Browne did not follow his master's text and directions, and for both characters he inserted details which did not correspond to any particular part. Dickens staged ten young gentlemen at Blimber's academy, and his artist drew seventeen of them, a deviation which is serious but excusable, for it may be justified by the number of boys which he probably found too small to cover the whole design. If we look closely at the drawing, we can notice that six of them are hardly sketched, which leads us to believe that they were added later. Moreover, the scenery of the melancholy procession with its ludicrous figures and heavy atmosphere has no equivalent in the book. Browne included a group of four street urchins, and depicted two of them staring with delight at Dr Blimber's young gentlemen, whereas the other two were engaged in acrobatic movements beside the tormented boys, who, in turn, looked at them enviously with faces betraying suffering, weariness, and despair. At the back of the drawing, we can see huts on the beach and little children playing either on a cliff or by the sea, flying a kite or riding a donkey — amusements, among others, which Dr Blimber's young pupils were expected to enjoy instead of learning various subjects, from morning to night, notwithstanding their tastes, inclinations, abilities, interests, and age.

But if Dickens remained silent about Browne's independence in these illustrations, his reaction was violently angry when he saw Browne's version of "Paul and Mrs Pipchin" (VIII). Leavis has remarked that in the artist's mind, Dickens should have been satisfied with the plate and appreciative of his illustrator rather than reproachful,

for it was highly “successful” in itself (Stieg 1978: 352). True enough, it is “perhaps the most celebrated etching in the novel” (Stieg 89), but it failed to represent faithfully the text which suggested it, as Dickens abruptly explained to Forster:

It is so frightfully and wildly wide of the mark. Good Heaven! in the commonest and most literal construction of the text, it is all wrong. . . . I can't say what pain and vexation it is to be so utterly misrepresented. I would cheerfully have given a hundred pounds to have kept this illustration out of the book. He never could have got that idea of Mrs Pipchin if he had attended to the text. Indeed I think he does it better without the text; for then the notion is made easy to him in short description, and he can't help taking it in (Foster 29).

If we compare the novel and the plate, Dickens's sharp disappointment becomes easily understandable and we can even share his “pain and vexation.” Little Paul, to begin with, is seated upon a high chair with the light straight into his face, whereas in the novel, he is down low, in “a nook between Mrs Pipchin and the fender, with all the light of his little face absorbed into the black bombazeen drapery” (VIII, 92); Mrs Pipchin is introduced as a nightmarish, stooped, well-fed, old ogress, whereas in Browne's drawing, she is thin, tall, much younger, and not eerie at all; the old, sinister, black cat in whose company she stations herself in front of the fire after tea, has nothing of a witch cat; the atmosphere of her parlour is described in similar threatening, heavy words, but on the picture, it appears cheerful and light, with a kettle gaily singing on the fire; last but not least, Browne completely failed to interpret the uncanny aspect of the collection of cactus and climbing plants which the novelist mentions recurrently in the text to reinforce the witch-like and magical atmosphere of Mrs Pipchin's universe. Therefore, it is clear that Dickens's indignation at Browne's carelessness and at his boldness to produce a picture which had nothing to do with the one he had drawn in words was both comprehensible and natural. Did Browne forget that he was paid by Dickens to interpret *his* text, meet *his* expectations, and follow *his* instructions to the letter? Or did he confront any particular difficulties while working on this very plate? In Steig's view,

Browne can certainly be faulted for not getting the chair right, but one must ask how an illustrator is to deal with semifacetious suggestions of the uncanny and supernatural when he is illustrating a purportedly realistic novel. Surely he is faced with the problem of embodying a sense of the author's description without suddenly shifting his style into a more fantastic one (90).

In any case, although this illustration — among other similar instances, resulting either from Browne's heedlessness or Dickens's insufficient and too brief instructions — may diminish the pleasure of readers interested in the inseparability of text and drawing, it remains an artistic error of no great consequence or impact on the very essence of the book.



Let it be mentioned, nevertheless, that there are several cases which constitute an excellent and complete integration of text and illustrations. "Coming Home from Church" (XXI), Browne's first plate for Dickens to be executed in an horizontal form, is a convincing example of it. Dombey's general appearance and position before the procession, the scene of the Punch and Judy show, and even the old woman — "Good Mrs Brown" — sitting to the right of the portico (and whose identity, up to this stage of the story, is kept unknown to the reader), all of them literally spring from the text:

Now, the carriage arrives at the Bride's residence, and the players on the bells begin to jingle, and the band strikes up, and Mr. Punch, that model of connubial bliss, salutes his wife. Now, the people run, and push, and press round in a gaping throng, while Mr Dombey, leading Mrs Dombey by the hand, advances solemnly into the Feenix Halls. Now, the rest of the wedding party alight, and enter after them. And why does Mr Carker, passing through the people to the hall-door, think of the old woman who called to him in the grove that morning? Or why does Florence, as she passes, think, with a tremble of her childhood, when she was lost, and of the visage of Good Mrs Brown? (XXXI, 362)

Of equal significance is "Mr Dombey and the World" (LI), an illustration which, in turn, reveals the inseparability of words and pictures. The stares of all the objects which surround Dombey, including pictures or Pitt's bust, and the world itself, are all mentioned in the novel: "He feels that the world is looking at him out of their eyes. That it is in the stare of the pictures. That Mr Pitt, upon the book-case, represents it. That there are eyes in its own map, hanging on the wall" (LI, 574). It is no doubt this strict faithfulness to the text which explained Dickens's delight and satisfaction when he received this illustration.

Despite the artistic flaws mentioned above, it is widely agreed that Browne's illustrations for *Dombey and Son* are of admirable quality. This may be due to Dickens's own artistic qualities, but Browne's skill should be neither minimised nor overlooked. First of all, let us emphasise here that the artist adopted a style which is less caricatural than in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, revealing once more Browne's strong desire for realism. In "Mr. Dombey Introduces his Daughter Florence" (XXVIII), it is clear that apart from Mrs Skewton, whom Dickens himself satirised, Browne brilliantly succeeded in representing those characters without drifting into caricature. Consequently, the grotesque figures of the novel, namely Major Bagstock and Mrs Skewton, do not bear the least likeness to the other characters. Moreover, he deliberately resorted to Hogarthian style when he thought he should, as in the following satiric scenes: the christening of Little Paul, the second wedding, and the dinner-party to which the friends to the two parties of the marriage are invited. Nor did he hesitate to rely on significant emblematic details and melodramatic conventions to convey the essence of his illustrations, like in "Florence and Edith on the Staircase" (XLVII) or in "Abstraction and Recognition" (XLVI).

Aware that in *Dombey and Son*, he had not only to make his illustrations convincing but that he also had to meet the new requirements suggested by the novel, Browne did not confine himself to these traditional devices; he went as far as to attempting something new — "the dark plate" technique (Steig 1978: 106) — while dealing with Carker's flight in "On the Dark Road" (LV). The movement of the carriage and the darkness of the scene are smartly interpreted, giving

the illustration its life and vividness. This etching is not, as some critics have claimed, Browne's first dark plate; his first genuine composition in this field remains the frontispiece to Ainsworth's book *Old St. Paul* (1847 edition). The technique was largely used in *Bleak House* — ten dark plates — and in *Little Dorrit* — eight plates —, given the great number of possibilities these two grim, panoramic novels offer. But, as Steig noted, it would be a great error to believe that “the dark plate” technique was prevalent among illustrators of the time: “I suspect the technique was just too much trouble for commercial illustrators, and yet too mechanical for those etchers with pretensions to high art” (Steig 1978: 107).

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