

Dickens's Tricks

Whenever you read a novelist's letters you are likely to find him or her saying something rude about Dickens, usually whilst confessing to enjoying reading him. Here is an example from a selection of Iris Murdoch's letters, published in 2015. She is writing to Brigid Brophy in June 1961.

Having a great phase of reading Dickens — gosh he is good — though *so* careless. But so beautifully funny — as well as other things. Oh to achieve the purely funny!¹

Few great writers so reliably provoke such mixtures of admiration and condescension. But what provokes the fellow practitioner's slight here? His carelessness? Dickens was speedy and improvisational, yes – but along with the speed and improvisation, the lack of compositional rumination, there were qualities that rarely get sufficiently valued, that often do not get noticed. These were qualities of what we might call 'formal ingenuity', what I am calling 'Dickens's tricks'. His apparent carelessness is sometimes his technical audacity, his gift for trying things out, his willingness to take risks unimagined by other novelists.

With all the risks, he also had to take care. Let us look at how he comes close to making a mistake, exactly so that the reader can see that he will not do so. We are at the end of the seventeenth monthly number – the end of the fifty-sixth chapter - of *Bleak House*, which appeared in July 1853. Inspector Bucket has arrived at the London lodgings of John Jarndyce. It is almost one o'clock in the morning. On behalf of Sir Leicester Dedlock, he is pursuing Lady Dedlock, who has fled the marital home. Her history is now known: the fact that she had a lover before she married Sir Leicester, and that she had a child from this affair. 'Her shame will be published' (*Bleak House*, Ch. LV). What is more, an invisible accuser denounces her as the murderer of Mr. Tulkinghorn. Bucket needs Esther Summerson, now revealed as Lady Dedlock's daughter. He fears that if Lady Dedlock finds herself pursued by him, she may be 'driven to desperation'. If she sees Esther, she may know that he is 'friendly'. But time flies; there is not a moment to lose.

This is all true, and the pressing nature of the case cannot be questioned. Mr. Jarndyce begs him to remain there while he speaks to Miss Summerson. Mr. Bucket says he will, but acting on his usual principle, does no such thing, following upstairs instead and keeping his man in sight. So he remains, dodging and lurking about in the gloom of the staircase while they confer. In a very little time Mr. Jarndyce comes down and tells him that Miss Summerson will join him directly and place herself under his protection to accompany him where he pleases. Mr. Bucket, satisfied, expresses high approval and awaits her coming at the door. (*Bleak House*, Ch. LVI)

This is all in the present tense, like thirty-four of the sixty-seven chapters of the novel. *Bleak House* is almost equally divided between chapters narrated in the third person in the present tense, and chapters narrated in the first person (by Esther) in the past tense. It is as an entirely innovative and unconventional structure. Here, in the present tense, Inspector Bucket will wait and wait for Esther, but he can never meet her. As he waits his mind drifts and he visualises society's outcasts.

There he mounts a high tower in his mind and looks out far and wide. Many solitary figures he perceives creeping through the streets; many solitary figures out on heaths, and roads, and lying under haystacks. But the figure that he seeks is not among them. Other solitaires he perceives, in nooks of bridges, looking over; and in shadowed places down by the river's level; and a dark, dark, shapeless object drifting with the tide, more solitary than all, clings with a drowning hold on his attention.

He thinks of drowning, the likely fate of the desperate; drowning, that temptation to extinction to be found in every Dickens novel. As he waits, the reader waits too. For the reader of the novel in its original serialised form, the wait was almost a month long.

The next (August 1853) monthly number – which is the next chapter – begins in Esther's voice, in the past tense, with her telling of being woken by her guardian. 'I had gone to bed and fallen asleep when my guardian knocked at the door of my room and begged me to get up directly ...' (*Bleak House*, Ch. LVII). This different narrative strand begins a few minutes earlier than the previous chapter ended. It is as if Dickens wants us to how closely he can bring together his two narratives, yet how they may never touch. The experience of reading *Bleak House* is, in part, the experience of crossing between two narratives, but not all Dickens's characters can do this. Esther cannot cross from her own narrative into the other one, from the past tense into the present. She is mentioned in that present-tense narrative, but she can never appear in it. Deliberately, Dickens has come close to an impossible moment. Bucket can never see her coming down the stairs.

Esther's sections of the novel have her moral authority; when we step outside her narrative we are plunged into tumultuous events, with no character as a moral arbiter.

It is night in Lincoln's Inn—perplexed and troublous valley of the shadow of the law, where suitors find but little day—and fat candles are snuffed out in offices, and clerks have rattled down the crazy wooden stairs and dispersed. The bell that rings at nine o'clock has ceased its doleful clangour about nothing; the gates are shut; and the night-porter, a solemn warder with a mighty power of sleep, keeps guard in his lodge. (*Bleak House*, Ch. XXXII)

This is how it always is – the present tense of the unchallenged state of things. It is a good tense for satire, but not for moral consolation. In this stream of narration there is no fixed point, beyond the events narrated, from where a narrator looks back to order and to judge.

Thus the reason that there is another important character who cannot inhabit both the different time zones in the novel. This is Mr. Tulkinghorn, the calculating, inexpressive lawyer who seems to serve the aristocrats who employ him, but in fact preys upon them. In contrast to Esther, he is confined to the present tense. Certainly he is mentioned within Esther's narrative; he never turns up in it. Esther is part of his plot – he discovers that Lady Dedlock has had an illegitimate child before she met and married Sir Leicester, and uses his knowledge to exert power over her - but Esther never meets him. He is the arch-schemer in a narrative of which she is innocent. Yet narrative structure limits Mr Tulkinghorn. He tries to exert control over people and events, but, clever as he is, he cannot. He is so clever that he will be murdered. Knowing the tense to which his part of the story is bound, we might have understood that his self-masking mastery was an illusion. (The pointing Roman – a decorative deity painted on the ceiling of his chambers – signals his doom.)

In the present tense plots unfold with a momentum of their own, to the bewilderment of most of those involved. Mr Snagsby, the law-stationer who lives near Krook's shop, who has employed Hawdon as a scrivener, who works for Mr. Tulkinghorn, who meets everyone, is at the very centre of the novel, but his encounters with Tulkinghorn and Bucket persuade him that 'he is a party to some dangerous secret, without knowing what it is' (*Bleak House*, Ch. XXXV).

Mr Snagsby cannot make out what it is that he has had to do with. Something is wrong somewhere, but what something, what may come of it, to whom, when, and from which unthought of and unheard of quarter is the puzzle of his life. 'Something is wrong somewhere': that might summarize the unease generated by the present tense narrative. The process of working things out, in this tense, is but one of further entanglement. Mr. Guppy, the lawyer's clerk and Esther's ludicrous suitor, gets to divine Lady Dedlock's long-hidden secret, only to be merely caught up in it, an agent of he knows

not what. “It’s going on, and I shall gather it up closer and closer as it goes on.” (*Bleak House*, Ch. XXIX).

Moving between past and present tenses is one of Dickens’s most extraordinary tricks. There are other Victorian novels that turn to the present tense – *Jane Eyre*, early George Eliot, some Trollope – usually to intensify some particular episode. These include the evening when Jane Eyre returns to Thornfield from her visit to the dying Mrs. Reed and meets Mr Rochester in his garden, an encounter leading to his proposal of marriage to her.

Sweet-briar and southernwood, jasmine, pink, and rose have long been yielding their evening sacrifice of incense: this new scent is neither of shrub nor flower; it is—I know it well—it is Mr. Rochester’s cigar. I look round and I listen. I see trees laden with ripening fruit. I hear a nightingale warbling in a wood half a mile off; no moving form is visible, no coming step audible; but that perfume increases: I must flee.²

The smells are so intoxicating that the narrator is there again, reliving her experience. Such passages in *Jane Eyre* are brief and rare, powerful precisely because they surprise the reader. In his use of the historic present Dickens was perhaps influenced by a book he much admired, Carlyle’s *History of the French Revolution*, which dramatised each key episode in present tense narration.³ But the portioning out of tenses – the sharp dividedness of the narrative – is something new. It is enough to make you think that Dickens was foreseeing the narrative trickery of literary fiction at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century. The formal division of a book into alternating sections in different tenses became something of a feature of ambitious fiction in the 1980s and 1990s. Penelope Lively’s *Moon Tiger* and Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*, winners of the Booker Prize in, respectively, 1987 and 1992, were notable examples. Others included Kate Atkinson’s *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* (1995) and Sarah Waters’s *Fingersmith* (2002). It is the tricksiness of the post-modern literary novel.

It is also one of Dickens’s tricks. The novel in which he first extensively tested the movement between tenses was *Dombey and Son* (1846-8). In its sixth monthly instalment, it suddenly switched into the present tense to present the aftermath of Paul Dombey’s death.

There is a hush through Mr Dombey’s house. Servants gliding up and down stairs rustle, but make no sound of footsteps. They talk together constantly, and sit long at meals, making much of their meat and drink, and enjoying themselves after a grim unholy fashion. ... After dark there come some visitors—noiseless visitors, with shoes of felt—who have been there before; and with them comes that bed of rest which is so strange a one for infant sleepers.

(*Dombey and Son*, Chapter XVIII)

The present tense pauses the narrative (‘There is a hush through Mr Dombey’s house’) and strangely depersonalises events. Dickens’s euphemisms – ‘visitors’, ‘bed of rest’, ‘infant sleepers’ – are, because of the shift of tense, evasive in a way designed to disturb. The modern reader might not even notice that those ‘visitors’ are the undertakers, occupationally shod in felt so that their work be as unobtrusive as possible. And the narrative itself steps back from its events and sees its characters from the outside. Things are done and things are said: nothing of what Mr Dombey feels is to be told. We have to infer his state of mind when (at the funeral, still in the present tense) the ‘someone’, who is to carve the memorial tablet, ‘appears to hesitate’ about Mr Dombey’s proposed wording. As Mr Dombey turns to go ‘a touch falls gently on his mourning cloak’.

The statuary gives him back the paper, and points out, with his pocket rule, the words, “beloved and only child.”

“It should be, ‘son,’ I think, Sir?”

“You are right. Of course. Make the correction.”

Of course he has forgotten Florence, his daughter. It is artfully done in *Dombey and Son* – the present tense being reserved for the deadlier depictions of Mr. Dombey – his ghastly wedding, his return from honeymoon with Edith, his abandonment by her, his ruin. And it is used for death, in the novel’s final chapter, lapping at the edges of the narrative.

The tense oscillation that Dickens used so boldly in *Bleak House* returns as a structuring principle in his last two novels: *Our Mutual Friend* and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. The pattern of its use in the former indicates something like Dickens’s buried purpose. *Our Mutual Friend* is divided into four Books, each one of which ends with a chapter in the present tense. The first book has four present tense chapters, the second has three, the third has two, and the fourth has just one – which is, of course, the last chapter of the novel. It is as if Dickens is slowly turning down the intensity of this narrative tense through the novel, whilst determined that we end with its irresolution. It is the tense of satire, used in every chapter in which the Veneerings make an appearance. It is the tense of malign plotting, used in the early chapters where Wegg tries to draw Mr Venus into a conspiracy. And it is the tense of death mysteriously becoming life, as the baleful Rogue Riderhood, apparently drowned in the river, is resuscitated (*Our Mutual Friend*, Bk. III, Ch. II). Here the narrator becomes one of those anxiously gathered around the nearly dead, nearly living man ‘Stay! Did that eyelid tremble?’ Riderhood’s destiny has become provisional: ‘He is struggling to come back’. The outcome really is unknown. Dickens has established our antipathy to this cunning predator, but now he imagines everyone – including himself – wanting him to be brought back from ‘that inexplicable journey’. He is ‘like all of us’, waking from sleep, or a swoon, and even his abused daughter can briefly enjoy the ‘sweet delusion’ of seeing her brutish father ‘an object of sympathy’. Then ‘he begins to breathe naturally’. He lives - and returns to his brutish self. He walks out of the chapter and back into the past tense.

Ten of the completed twenty-three chapters of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* are narrated in the present tense. It is strange that none of the introductions to the available Penguin Classics and Oxford World’s Classics editions of this novel or of *Our Mutual Friend* even makes mention of these tense alternations. Equally, I have yet to find a Victorian reviewer commenting on Dickens’s divisions of tenses. The author himself left no record of his purposes in moving between tenses, but the manuscript of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, now in the Forster Collection of the V&A, shows that he was clear in those purposes. Spend any time poring over the surviving manuscripts of his novels and you will gain a strong impression of Dickens’ peculiar blend of speed and stylistic scruple. Even the ink was designed for speed. He reportedly wrote in blue ink because it dried faster and did not require blotting.⁴ Harry Stone, whose wonderful edition of *Dickens’ Working Notes for His Novels* is a trove for any Dickens critic, rightly describes how the surviving manuscripts of his novels, ‘with their bewildering tangles of additions, cancellations, and rewritings’, are the ‘tessellated, in-progress record’ of Dickens’ creative rigour.⁵ As his son Charley put it, they set ‘all kinds of traps for compositors’.⁶

Now and then Dickens directed the printers to look at the back of a sheet, where he has added sentences that needed to be interpolated. Very occasionally he appears to have made a fair copy of a page that has, presumably, been so heavily corrected as to be indecipherable, but for the most part the compositors at his printers had to work from his first drafts.⁷ He never employed a copyist. Dickens’s tiny handwriting would be enough of a challenge without all the crossings out and new wordings squeezed in above or below the crowded lines. Almost always, his first thoughts set the pattern for the sentence, which is then corrected and supplemented. Words and phrases are heavily crossed out, and new words and phrases written in above the line. It is often hard to read the finished sentences, but Dickens

has made sure that it is usually impossible to see the words and phrases that he has excised. His deletions, as Helen Small puts it well, take the form of ‘overwriting in close circling patterns, rather like old-fashioned telephone cable, rather than a single strikethrough that would permit the underlying text to be detected’.⁸ It seems that Dickens wants to blot out his earlier thoughts not just from the compositor but even from himself. Though we usually cannot see the wordings that Dickens has rejected, and therefore follow the process of his composition, we can get a strong sense of how he wrote - on the wing of inspiration, yet meticulously adjusting his diction. Occasionally the first words of a sentence are excised, indicating a false start, but very rarely is a whole sentence erased.

Present tense narration sometimes inspires revisions that heighten its immediacy. Chapter XI of *Bleak House* opens just after the impoverished law writer has been found dead in Krook’s lodgings. In manuscript, Dickens at first begins writing, ‘Mr. Tulkinghorn stands in the death room, irresolute ..’. But then he quickly changes his mind for a better beginning: ‘A touch on the lawyer’s wrinkled hand as he stands in the death room, irresolute ...’.⁹ The new phrase is as immediate and electric as the touch itself. That touch is the repulsive Krook’s; it ‘makes him start’. (‘Death room’ will be changed to ‘dark room’ in proof.) Dickens is revising as he writes – not after he has written. Later, at proof stage he will make minute adjustments to his wordings, as when, in the previous chapter, we find Mr. Tulkinghorn in his chambers, withdrawn and retentive. ‘Like as he is to look at, so is his apartment,’ wrote Dickens in ms. At proof stage he inserts, after ‘apartment’, ‘in the dusk of this present afternoon’.¹⁰ The sense of mystery and foreboding is sharpened with the sharpening of the present tense.

Look at the manuscript of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* and you will see that Dickens knew about his tenses from the start of each chapter. When he has decided to use the present tense, he does so decisively and without any change of mind. With the exception of one chapter, I have found just a couple of instances in the manuscript where Dickens has made the mistake of using a verb in the perfect tense – the default narrative tense - where he meant to use the present tense, and has had to make a correction. That is, until we get to the highly wrought Chapter 19, ‘The Shadow on the Sun-Dial’. We have already seen how the beautiful Rosa Budd is repelled by and terrified by John Jasper, the Cloisterham choirmaster – and her music teacher. We have seen him exerting his power over her as he accompanies her singing at the piano. Her new friend and *confidante* Helena Landless, who has been a witness to the performance, asks her if she loves him and she replies “Ugh!” (Ch. VII) But Helena understands something. ““You know that he loves you?” Rosa cannot bear to hear this, but can acknowledge something disturbing, going on to tell Helena, “He has made a slave of me with his looks. He has forced me to understand him, without his saying a word; and he has forced me to keep silence, without his uttering a threat ...”.

After Edwin Drood’s disappearance, Jasper visits Rosa at Miss Twinkleton’s establishment for young ladies, trapping her into a meeting in the garden, where he talks whilst leaning casually on the sun-dial. “I do not forget how many windows command a view of us.” He delights in the fact that no one who sees him but cannot hear him would think anything untoward is being said. But it is. He is telling her that he loves her “madly” (he relishingly repeats the word seven times). She is terrified of him and repulsed by him. He is happy with her hatred, if he can have her.

“I don’t ask you for your love; give me yourself and your hatred; give me yourself and that pretty rage; give me yourself and that enchanting scorn; it will be enough for me”.

Unsuspected by anyone looking in to the garden, he sets about blackmailing and compelling her. He has the means to ruin her friend Helena’s good name. And he has the power of knowing something about Rosa - that she has not really been attached to Edwin, the young

man to whom she was engaged. “I did love him!” she says. His reply is confidently piercing. “Yes; but not quite — not quite in the right way, shall I say?” He, in contrast, offers her all the force of sexual passion.

“I love you, love you, love you. If you were to cast me off now — but you will not — you would never be rid of me. No one should come between us. I would pursue you to the death.”

The encounter, narrated in the present tense, epitomises the novel’s central interests: mania, obsession, fantasy – all unguessed at by the world.

Here, in the course of this charged exchange, Dickens strangely and unusually kept forgetting himself. In manuscript, a chapter that begins decisively in the present tense, frequently reverts to the past tense and has to be corrected. “I did love him!” said Rosa’ has to be changed to “I do love him!” cries Rosa’.¹¹ It is the first of a sequence of such amendments: ‘She was so conscious’ to ‘She is so conscious’; ‘her spirit rose’ to ‘her spirit rises’; ‘she struggled’ to ‘she struggles’; ‘This time he did touch her’ to ‘This time he does touch her’; ‘She started’ to ‘She starts’. The thicker ink makes it look as if Dickens has gone over this again, discovering that he has lapsed into the perfect tense in the intensity of this exchange. So intent has he been on the vehement dialogue, the direct speech that is the marrow of the chapter, that he has not remembered his own narrative principle. Indeed, he sent the manuscript to the printer with the last paragraph of the chapter in the wrong tense. The corrected page proofs of the novel survive only incompletely, but do include the proofs of Chapter XIX. These show that the printer had dutifully replicated Dickens’s manuscript, where the whole of the final paragraph is in the past tense. Now Dickens duly corrects each verb:

he quietly pulled off his hat ... went away ... was visible ... Rosa fainted ... was carried ... was coming on ... the maids said ... had upset ... they had felt their own knees all of a tremble all day long

to

he quietly pulls off his hat ... goes away ... is visible ... Rosa faints ... is carried ... is coming on ... the maids says ... has upset ... they have felt their own knees all of a tremble all day long.

The maids at Miss Twinkleton’s might well have felt their knees ‘all of a tremble’, for the present tense strand of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* is where mania, obsession, and fantasy are released. These are not just the novel’s themes – they are the forces that ripple through it. They are made narrative flesh in the division of tenses. We begin the novel, incredibly, in the drugged imagination of an opium addict, and the prose itself is opiated, following in the present tense what turn out to be John Jasper’s distorted perceptions.

An ancient English Cathedral Tower? How can the ancient English Cathedral tower be here! The well-known massive gray square tower of its old Cathedral? How can that be here! There is no spike of rusty iron in the air, between the eye and it, from any point of the real prospect. What is the spike that intervenes, and who has set it up? Maybe it is set up by the Sultan’s orders for the impaling of a horde of Turkish robbers, one by one. It is so, for cymbals clash, and the Sultan goes by to his palace in long procession. (*The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Ch. I)

What is happening? ‘Stay! Is the spike so low a thing as the rusty spike on the top of a post of an old bedstead that has tumbled all awry?’ Yes, it is, and we have been in an opium reverie. We follow Jasper back to Cloisterham, and stay in the present tense for our viewing of the cathedral city. It is like Trollope on drugs. Until, at the beginning of Chapter VI, we enter the domestic world of the Reverend Septimus Criparkle – our moral compass – and the novel adopts the past tense. With this representative of healthily muscular yet magnanimous Christianity, perhaps we are indeed safely back in a Trollopian world.

Whenever we have access to John Jasper's consciousness we are in the present tense; where he is seen only from the outside, we go to the past. But not just Jasper. Whenever male fury or desire warps the story, as with Edwin Drood's antagonist Neville Landless, we are in the present tense. Here is that warping, in the chapter where Edwin and Rosa, promised to each other by their now dead fathers, agree not to marry.

They have come very near to the Cathedral windows, and at this moment the organ and the choir sound out sublimely. As they sit listening to the solemn swell, the confidence of last night rises in young Edwin Drood's mind, and he thinks how unlike this music is to that discordance.

"I fancy I can distinguish Jack's voice," is his remark in a low tone in connection with the train of thought.

"Take me back at once, please," urges his Affianced, quickly laying her light hand upon his wrist. "They will all be coming out directly; let us get away. O, what a resounding chord! But don't let us stop to listen to it; let us get away!"

(The Mystery of Edwin Drood, Ch. III)

Their awkwardly rational conversation is disturbed by that deceptively 'heavenly' sound. In this novel, the present tense is for that part of the narrative where characters – male characters – are possessed.

Dickens liked to play tricks with time. The mystery that he left us with in his last, half-finished novel has become a test of our narratological abilities, a sequence of clues planted but never explained. But his narrative also looks forward in another way, as he often did when he scribbled the number plans that make visible his designs. Take this moment, from one of the past tense chapters of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, where the Reverend Septimus Crisparkle visits John Jasper to try to broker a truce between Edwin Drood and Neville Landless, who have quarrelled violently. (We know, as Crisparkle does not, that Jasper has carefully fomented this quarrel.) Receiving no answer to his knock on the door, Crisparkle turns the handle and looks in.

Long afterwards he had cause to remember how Jasper sprang from the couch in a delirious state between sleeping and waking, and crying out: "What is the matter? Who did it?" *(The Mystery of Edwin Drood, Ch. X)*

Whether under the influence of opium or not, Jasper is haunted by his own fantasies. This is one of those moments in the narrative, looking ahead at what is to come, that is sometimes used as evidence by those who foresee a plot device reminiscent of Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*. Perhaps Jasper under the influence of the drug will do something that his rational self does not remember?

Dickens likes this trick of prolepsis, which might remind us of the 'long afterwards' of some post-modern narratives. Take Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, which is punctuated by leaps forward in time. Early in the novel, unobserved, Briony Tallis witnesses the strange scene where her sister Cecilia, undresses and plunges into the basin of a fountain, with their servant's son, Robbie Turner, watching. What a tableau for her imagination to work on!

... she wanted to chase in solitude the faint thrill of possibility she had felt before, the elusive excitement at a prospect she was coming close to defining, at least emotionally. The definition would refine itself over the years. She was to concede that she may even have attributed more deliberation than was feasible to her thirteen-year-old self.¹²

A few chapters later, but the same day, Robbie has written his note to Cecilia declaring his love and is walking across to the house to give it to her.

In the years to come he would often think back to this time, when he walked along the footpath that made a shortcut through a corner of the oak woods and joined the main drive where it curved towards the lake and the house.¹³

In McEwan's narrative, these are explicitly the marks of trickery. The novel, we are to discover, is being written – and re-written – by its central character, the elder Briony, and we are to detect the signs of her activity.

Dickens was on to this game. Here is another example of his willingness to stretch to what happens 'afterwards'. It is the end of the chapter in *David Copperfield* where the narrator remembers his return from school to see his mother and her new baby, and, the Murdstones being away, the lucky bliss of his short stay with her and Peggoty. But it cannot last long; he must leave.

I was in the carrier's cart when I heard her calling to me. I looked out, and she stood at the garden-gate alone, holding her baby up in her arms for me to see. It was cold still weather; and not a hair of her head, nor a fold of her dress, was stirred, as she looked intently at me, holding up her child.

So I lost her. So I saw her afterwards, in my sleep at school—a silent presence near my bed—looking at me with the same intent face—holding up her baby in her arms. (David Copperfield, Ch. VIII)

Dickens's first-person narrator refuses, as he often refuses, to pretend that he does not know what is going to happen. The next chapter narrates the young David's discovery of his mother's death, but this cannot surprise us. He has already 'lost her', the pressure of the narrator's knowledge making it impossible for him to wait for the proper moment to tell us what happens.

For Dickens, there sometimes seems a kind of pleasure in disobeying the unities of a narrative when he foresees what is yet to come. It could be thought careless that he had to write extra lines to fill space when he had come up short for the first number of *David Copperfield*, and that he did so by reflecting on the picture of Little Em'ly, by the sea at Yarmouth, running along 'a jagged timber which protruded from the place we stood upon, and overhung the deep water at some height, without the least defence'.

There has been a time since when I have wondered whether, if the life before her could have been revealed to me at a glance, and so revealed as that a child could fully comprehend it, and if her preservation could have depended on a motion of my hand, I ought to have held it up to save her. There has been a time since — I do not say it lasted long, but it has been — when I have asked myself the question, would it have been better for little Em'ly to have had the waters close above her head that morning in my sight; and when I have answered Yes, it would have been.

This may be premature. I have set it down too soon, perhaps. But let it stand. (David Copperfield, Ch. III)

The narrator thinks of the girl's future fate, seduced then abandoned by Steerforth, and wonders if she might not have been better off drowning. It is the kind of thought for which Dickens is arraigned (for a woman, better death than a sexual fall), yet here turned brilliantly into a narrative impropriety that David cannot resist. Carelessly, Dickens left the gap that his narrator fills with his un-innocent confession.

Setting things down too soon is that post-modern trick that Dickens got to too soon. Here is an example from one of its most practised exponents.

The woman has large breasts, she is clothed in a pink summer coat and dress. She smiles and is amiable in this transient intimacy with Lise, and not even sensing in the least that very soon, after a day and a half of hesitancy, and after a long midnight call to her son, the lawyer in Johannesburg, who advises her against the action, she nevertheless will come forward and repeat all she remembers and all she does not remember, and all the details she imagines to be true and those that are true, in her conversation with Lise when she sees in the papers that the police are trying to

trace who Lise is, and whom, if anyone, she met on her trip and what she had said. 'Very gay,' says this woman to Lise, indulgently, smiling all over Lise's vivid clothes.¹⁴

This is an encounter in an airport bookstall from Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat* (1970). Lise, Spark's protagonist, has walked out of her job, on impulse, and is travelling somewhere abroad. But her fate is sealed. She will be murdered at the very the end of the novel, and the narrative cannot help itself foreseeing this. So too, when David sees Little Em'ly in his memory on that spar over the water, she is 'springing forward to her destruction (as it appeared to me)'. Narrative pattern is only made by what he knows is to come.

That 'as it appeared to me' takes us into an aspect of his trickery that later novelists have hardly been able to match. It is there in the famous opening of *Bleak House*.

London. Michaelmas term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill.

Here is almost the first dinosaur in English fiction. (The Megalosaurus had already been mentioned in a fictional article by Henry Morley in *Household Words* in August 1851). The first instalment of *Bleak House* appeared in March 1852, the year that Benjamin Hawkins was commissioned to create concrete dinosaurs for the grounds of the re-erected Crystal Palace in Sydenham. That 'as if ...' gives us a flourish of fantasy, itself containing a simile ('like an elephantine lizard') that establishes it as substantial. Such a flight of fantasy, for which there is no proper rhetorical term, is a uniquely Dickensian trick.

He was up to it from the first. In the second chapter of *Pickwick Papers*, Mr. Pickwick and the reader encounter the waterman, who waters the horses at the cab-stand and notifies the driver that he has a fare (in this instance, fetching him from the nearest pub).

"Here you are, sir," shouted a strange specimen of the human race, in a sackcloth coat, and apron of the same, who, with a brass label and number round his neck, looked as if he were catalogued in some collection of rarities.

(*The Pickwick Papers*, Ch. II)

In fact the label is an anachronism. By the London Hackney Carriage Act of 1831, watermen had to be licensed and wear a badge with his number 'conspicuously upon his breast'. It is a suitably Dickensian example of that 'as if ...'. Everyone met in Pickwick's peregrinations will be one in 'a collection of rarities'. For good novelists from Jane Austen to Henry James to Alan Hollinghurst, *as if* is the phrase preceding some intimation of one character's thoughts as inferred by another. In Dickens, it is the way in to a fantastic likeness.

Here is our first sight of Uncle Pumblechook, in *Great Expectations*:

a large hard-breathing middle-aged slow man, with a mouth like a fish, dull staring eyes, and sandy hair standing upright on his head, so that he looked as if he had just been all but choked, and had that moment come to. (*Great Expectations*, I iv)

There he is, identified and undermined forever, this petty provincial tyrant who – when Pip comes into money – claims him as his friend and protégé. A fish drowning in air, he belongs to the gallery of beings just brought back to life in Dickens. It is one of the 266 *as ifs* in *Great Expectations*.¹⁵ As a device, it does justice to the mysterious – apparently providential but in fact threatening or punishing – world in which Pip must make his way.

Mr. Jaggers never laughed; but he wore great bright creaking boots, and, in poisoning himself on these boots, with his large head bent down and his eyebrows

joined together, awaiting an answer, he sometimes caused the boots to creak, as if they laughed in a dry and suspicious way. (*Great Expectations*, II v)

Pip is somehow being laughed at. Each of Dickens's later novels has, I think, its own distinctive *as if*-ness. That of *Great Expectations* is captured in the novel's use of the phrase in its very first chapter, fusing childhood terror with an adult's sense of the ludicrous.

On the edge of the river I could faintly make out the only two black things in all the prospect that seemed to be standing upright; one of these was the beacon by which the sailors steered,—like an unhooped cask upon a pole,—an ugly thing when you were near it; the other, a gibbet, with some chains hanging to it which had once held a pirate. The man was limping on towards this latter, as if he were the pirate come to life, and come down, and going back to hook himself up again.

(*Great Expectations*, I i)

It is a childish thought, haunted and comic at once.

So often, Dickens's fearless experiments with narrative prose are also offences against polite style. The offences happen in his sentences, careless as they are of propriety. Spend time with his manuscripts and you cannot doubt that the sentence is his favourite unit – his space of invention. Other novelists might achieve eloquence, complexity or wit in their sentences, Dickens goes for stranger properties: incantation, repetition, intensification. When Pip recalls his second visit to Miss Havisham's, he remembers meeting the Pockets, who haunt the house in hope of securing an inheritance.

There were three ladies in the room and one gentleman. Before I had been standing at the window five minutes, they somehow conveyed to me that they were all toadies and humbugs, but that each of them pretended not to know that the others were toadies and humbugs: because the admission that he or she did know it, would have made him or her out to be a toady and humbug.

(*Great Expectations*, I xi)

Only Dickens would have ventured the second of these sentences, with the certainty of its infant judgment, the colloquialism of its 'toadies and humbugs', and the twice-repetition of that phrase. The childish reiteration stands against the deceit of those Pockets. Such tricks of repetition can be daringly simple. Here is David Copperfield, narrating his parting from Peggotty after his mother's death, as he knows that he must return to live with the Murdstones.

I felt the truth and constancy of my dear old nurse, with all my heart, and thanked her as well as I could. That was not very well, for she spoke to me thus, with her arms round my neck, in the morning, and I was going home in the morning, and I went home in the morning, with herself and Mr. Barkis in the cart.

(*David Copperfield*, Ch. X)

That 'in the morning' returns as David dreads returning.

In defiance of stylistic restraint, Dickens will take repetition to extremes. In *Dombey and Son*, when Carker flees from Mr. Dombey across France, his journey is 'like a vision, in which nothing was quite real but his own torment' (*Dombey and Son*, Ch. LV). The next paragraph begins, 'It was a vision of long roads ...' – and then, for ten paragraphs, until we get to England, almost every sentence, every phrase begins with 'Of ...'. On and on. Everything is 'a vision of ...' something. A different structural repetition insists on the strangeness of a perception, as when we are introduced to the Veneerings' dinner party near the beginning of *Our Mutual Friend* and Dickens decides that we must see every person as reflected in the 'great looking-glass above the sideboard' (*Our Mutual Friend*, I ii). This 'reflects the table and the company', whereupon, for the length of a long paragraph, every sentence begins 'Reflects ...' – eleven times in all. By which means the persons themselves are robbed of agency, reduced to the collection of their attributes. Within this pattern of

repetition are other repetitions, notably in the characteristics of the ‘mature young gentleman’ (who is Lamble) with ‘too much nose in his face, too much ginger in his whiskers, too much torso in his waistcoat, too much sparkle in his studs, his eyes, his buttons, his talk, and his teeth’.

It can all be too much, as Dickens’s figurative language itself acknowledges when he surveys the Marquis’ chateau in *A Tale of Two Cities*.

It was a heavy mass of building, that chateau of Monsieur the Marquis, with a large stone courtyard before it, and two stone sweeps of staircase meeting in a stone terrace before the principal door. A stony business altogether, with heavy stone balustrades, and stone urns, and stone flowers, and stone faces of men, and stone heads of lions, in all directions. As if the Gorgon’s head had surveyed it, when it was finished, two centuries ago. II, Ch. IX

All that stone! Stoniness is what is given to the poor of *ancien regime* France. The fancy of the Gorgon’s gaze, saving the paragraph from mere hammering, is the fantastic measure of its excess of stoniness.

We may find it hard to admire Dickens for his itch to repeat, but he can achieve an audacious poetry of repetitiousness. Here is Pip in *Great Expectations*, as he describes his journey by boat down the Thames estuary, rowed by Herbert and Startup, with the intention of placing Magwitch on a packet ship for the Continent.

It was like my own marsh country, flat and monotonous, and with a dim horizon; while the winding river turned and turned, and the great floating buoys upon it turned and turned, and everything else seemed stranded and still. For now the last of the fleet of ships was round the last low point we had headed; and the last green barge, straw-laden, with a brown sail, had followed; and some ballast-lighters, shaped like a child’s first rude imitation of a boat, lay low in the mud; and a little squat shoal-lighthouse on open piles stood crippled in the mud on stilts and crutches; and slimy stakes stuck out of the mud, and slimy stones stuck out of the mud, and red landmarks and tidemarks stuck out of the mud, and an old landing-stage and an old roofless building slipped into the mud, and all about us was stagnation and mud. (*Great Expectations*, Ch. LIV)

We are back to the marsh country of the novel’s opening and the narrator’s childhood, and those ballast-lighters are indeed like a child’s representation of boats. Childlike too are the inelegant repetitions that run through these sentences: ‘turned and turned ... turned and turned’; ‘the last ... the last ... the last’. The whole is connected by all those (nineteen) *ands* taking us to ‘... in the mud ... in the mud ... out of the mud ... out of the mud ... into the mud ... stagnation and mud’. As the tide seeps out, the mud stretches away and the past claims the narrator back in the very rhythm of his narration. Gosh he *is* good - so careless about how you should write, so full of tricks.

¹ *Living on Paper: Letters from Iris Murdoch 1934-1995*, ed. Avril Horner and Anne Rowe (London: Chatto & Windus, 2015), 217.

² Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 250-1.

³ See Clare Pettitt, ‘Dickens and the historical present’, in *Dickens’s Style*, ed. Daniel Tyler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 110-36.

⁴ James L. Hughes, *Dickens As an Educator* (New York, 1900), 107.

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- ⁵ Harry Stone, Harry, ed., *Dickens' Working Notes for His Novels* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), xiv.
- ⁶ In Philip Collins, ed. *Dickens. Interviews and Recollections*. 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1981), I, 120.
- ⁷ See John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson, *Dickens at Work* (London: Methuen & Co, 1957), 20-1.
- ⁸ Helen Small, 'Dispensing with style', in Daniel Tyler, ed., *Dickens's Style* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 268.
- ⁹ Forster MS 162.
- ¹⁰ Forster 48.B.15.
- ¹¹ Forster 167.
- ¹² Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (2001; rpt. London: Vintage, 2002), 40.
- ¹³ *Ibid*, 90.
- ¹⁴ Muriel Spark, *The Driver's Seat* (1970; rpt. London: Penguin, 1974), 23.
- ¹⁵ Such totaling is made reliable by Birmingham University's CLiC Dickens website, which allows for complex searches through the corpus of Dickens's fiction: clic.bham.ac.uk/