

ORDINARY STYLES: THE ROMANTIC ESSAYISTS AND DICKENS'S REALISM

As a topic of critical debate, 'Dickens's realism' has had nearly as long a history as 'realism' itself. Since George Henry Lewes, the inaugurator of the term in English literary criticism, set out, in his response to Foster's *Life*, expressly to assess (and deny) Dickens's realism,¹ the issue has been raised again and again in the critical studies. Many of Dickens's most eminent contemporaries, as we know, based their claims to realism at least partly on rejecting his.² And in an influential essay of the 1970s, J. Hillis Miller, purposely choosing 'an unpromising text', where 'Dickens seems to have practicing a straightforward mimetic realism', uses it as a test case on whose basis he refutes the possibility of 'realism' altogether.³ Even outside of the deconstructive extreme, so far as realism has been conceded to so flamboyant a stylist, it has invariably been recognized to be more or other than mimesis. Dickens's uniqueness, the forceful subjectivity of his narrative voice, continues to be identified with his wide creative latitude, his tendency to exceed the limits of the actual. Among recent stylistic analyses, for instance, John R. Reed's *Dickens's Hyperrealism* (2010), argues that 'the very exuberance with which Dickens approaches the world transforms it into something difficult to define as realistic'.⁴ Equally, Daniel Tyler's introduction to the anthology, *Dickens's Style* (2013), valuably asserting the inseparability of style and content in Dickens's work, dwells primarily on the transformative tendency of his style, its qualities of exaggeration and excess.⁵

My interest is in another of Dickens's styles, no less characteristic of his writing, but usually overlooked or forgotten in the notice paid to his flamboyant and subjective modes. This is his style of ordinariness, the non-transformative style in which we read a careful attention to the object or other, rather than an expression of the self. Here the moral instrumentality of Dickens's prose is closely bound up with its referential and mimetic

function. My purpose in this study is to bring to the fore, this style: Dickens's style of realism.

Already contrarian in its focus on a neglected style, my argument becomes more so in its reconstruction of a neglected literary genealogy for this style. The intense subjectivity that underwrites our view of Dickens's originality has also till now detached him from his forebears. Harold Bloom, the architect *extraordinaire* of precursive relations, declares flatly that 'Dickens [...] had no true precursors,'⁶ and the claim has hardly been questioned. In explicit contradiction, I argue the impact of Romantic essayistic practice on certain characteristic aspects of Dickens's realism. Although over the past decades, one or the other of the Romantic essayists has been sporadically linked to Dickens, there has so far been little attempt to join the dots into any perceptible shape. This study will uncover that shape, showing, first in Leigh Hunt, then Hazlitt, models for Dickens's attitude of detailed attention to the familiar or ordinary subject, before going on to explore the ethical implications of his revisions of his forebears. My case for influence begins with a source study.

Dickens and Hunt

In his early writings, Dickens is himself primarily an essayist, often publishing in the same journals as his Romantic predecessors. By the 1830s, the genre of the miscellaneous essay, as exemplified in the work of those predecessors, had achieved a considerable standing, setting an example that a new practitioner would naturally hope to emulate.

Confirming that standing, Bulwer-Lytton pronounces in *England and the English* in 1833,

It is a great literary age – we have great literary men – but [...] we must seek them not in detached and avowed and standard publications, but in periodical miscellanies. [...]

Nay, even a main portion of the essays, which now collected in a separate shape, have become a permanent addition to our literature, first appeared amidst a crowd of articles of fugitive interest in the journals of the day, and owe to the accident of republication their claims to the attention of posterity.

This last comment, preceded by a mention of ‘the admirable editor of *The Examiner*’, is footnoted with a reference to ‘Elia’ and Hazlitt.⁷

That an aspiring young writer, whose work was also beginning to appear ‘amidst a crowd of articles of fugitive interest in the journals of the day’, had in mind the model of his immediate forerunners may be taken for granted. Lamb’s *The Last Essays of Elia* was published in the same year as *England and the English*, as was Dickens’s first published sketch, a story titled ‘A Dinner at Poplar Walk’ in the *Monthly Magazine* in December 1833. Leigh Hunt’s shadow, especially, must have loomed large over Dickens’s early city sketches. Hunt’s series of nine sketches of London streets was published from September 1833 to April 1834 in the *Weekly True Sun*, at whose companion publication, the daily *True Sun*, Dickens himself was employed in 1832-3. In September 1834, following the publication earlier that year of a two-volume selection of Hunt’s familiar essays for *The Indicator* and *The Companion*, as well as the start, in April, of the weekly *Leigh Hunt’s London Journal*, a new forum for Hunt’s ‘Streets of London’ sketches, Dickens’s miscellanies, which had till then taken the form of short fiction, started to appear as ‘Street Sketches’ in the *Morning Chronicle*, and from January 1835, as ‘Sketches of London’ in the *Evening Chronicle*. That Dickens had acquired, somewhere between 1834 and 1839, the *Indicator and Companion* anthology, is indicated by a letter to George Cattermole on 21 August 1839, sent from Elm Cottage along with ‘a carpet-bag-full’ of books from his collection, including ‘Leigh Hunt’s *Indicator and Companion*’, ‘convenient’, like other books in the bag, ‘as being easily taken

up and laid down again'.⁸ Dickens's readiness to part with the anthology at this point suggests that he had had it for some time.

If the circumstantial grounds for claiming influence are substantial, the textual evidence is compelling. 'That [...] Leigh Hunt's essays,' wrote George Saintsbury in *The Cambridge History of English Literature* in 1916, 'had immense influence on *Sketches by Boz* few critical readers [...] will deny; and that the habit of the essayist [...] clung to Dickens, much better things than *Sketches* [...] remain to attest'.⁹ Yet later commentators on Dickens's early writings, occasionally mentioning the pertinence of Hunt, have failed to attach much weight to the connection. Deborah Nord, for instance, in her *Walking the Victorian Streets* (1995), notes the resemblance between Lamb's and Dickens's nostalgia for London's past and, like F.S. Schwarzbach before her in *Dickens and the City* (1979), briefly compares Dickens's metropolitan sketches to Hunt's, only to deny any significant common ground.¹⁰ My own analysis is primarily of the pertinence to Dickens of the conceptual bearings of the Romantic essayists. Nonetheless, in view of the long-standing insistence on the 'newness' of his writing in the sketches – as Nord puts it, 'he [...] created a new audience, introduced a new cast of characters, and forged a new vision of the city'¹¹ – I propose to begin, without at all contesting his originality, by listing a number of textual parallels. Where the early writings are concerned, Hunt more readily serves this purpose than Lamb.

Saintsbury's emphasis on Hunt's importance for Dickens as an *essayist* is exactly to the point. Hunt's impact on Dickens becomes clearer when our focus shifts from the metropolitan to the essayistic, from the urban to the ordinary or familiar. Describing, as Nord does, *Sketches by Boz* as 'an entirely new literary phenomenon', Schwarzbach contends that the London essays of Dickens, Hunt, and other metropolitan writers, 'were independently conceived and written in a climate of growing interest in and demand for naturalistic and detailed "sketches" of metropolitan life by [...] [a] metropolitan middle class reading

public'.¹² This declaration of independence, limited, like Nord's, to Hunt's later street sketches and their explicitly 'metropolitan' context, so misses the echoes of the earlier familiar essays in Dickens's representations of the city. The versatility of the genre is on display in the eclectic *Indicator and Companion* anthology, where the ordinary subject finds its expression, as it does in Dickens's essays, not only in the street sketch ('A Walk from Dulwich to Brockham'), but also in the character sketch ('The Old Gentleman', 'The Maid-Servant'), and the sentimental 'tale' ('A Tale for a Chimney Corner', 'The Italian Girl'). The second of these in particular, Hunt's new take on the Theophrastan 'character', has been recognized in Tracy Chevalier's magisterial *Encyclopedia of the Essay* (1997) as one of his 'greatest innovations in the genre'.¹³

Many of Dickens's titles alone, in his own various treatments of the ordinary subject – 'Shops and their Tenants' (*Morning Chronicle*, October 1834), 'The Old Lady' (from 'Our Parish', *Evening Chronicle*, May 1835), 'Hackney-Coach Stands' (*Evening Chronicle*, January 1835), 'Early Coaches' (*Evening Chronicle*, February 1835) – indicate, even if no more than inevitably, a topical closeness to Hunt's: 'The Old Lady', 'A Nearer View of Some of the Shops', 'Coaches' (all in the *Indicator and Companion* collection). But where in some instances, the likeness stops at the title, in others, the tenor of Dickens's treatment is close enough to his predecessor's to warrant remark.

Textual parallels

Dickens's 'Old Lady', for example, who lives in the suburbs and whose sitting-room is 'a perfect picture of quiet neatness' bears a family resemblance to Hunt's, who, similarly characterized – by quietness, order, a vanishing mode of life – also lives in the suburbs, in rooms that are 'in the neatest condition possible'.¹⁴ The latter's possessions are 'exquisite

things for a little girl', the former's, 'presents from little girls'.¹⁵ That the resemblance may be more than merely accidental is suggested by the detail of there being, among the 'nicnacs' of Dickens's lady, 'the little picture of the Princess Charlotte and Prince Leopold as they appeared in the Royal Box at Drury-lane Theatre'.¹⁶ The last outing of Hunt's lady was 'to see the Princess Charlotte and Prince Leopold'.¹⁷

Similarly, the content and purport of Dickens's depiction of the hackney coach in 'Hackney-Coach Stands' is markedly akin to Hunt's in his *Indicator* essay, 'Coaches'. Both essayists defend the hackney against more modern transport vehicles. Both describe the horses as drooping – Hunt, 'with still-hung head' and 'drooping ears'; Dickens, 'with drooping heads' – and patient; for Hunt, 'an emblem of all the patience in creation', to Dickens, 'standing patiently on some damp straw'.¹⁸ Both note the fading traces of old coats of arms on the coach: 'A hackney coach has often the arms of nobility on it [...] we catch a glimpse of the faded lustre of an earl or marquis's coronet' ('Coaches'); 'the panels are ornamented with a faded coat of arms' ('Hackney-Coach Stands').¹⁹ Both associate the coach with a wedding scene.²⁰ And both, finally, evoke the imagined history of the coach in a similar rhetorical style. Thus Hunt apostrophizes the coach: 'How many friends has thou not carried to merry-meetings! How many young parties to the play! How many children, whose faces thou hast turned in an instant from the extremity of lachrymose weariness to that of staring delight! Thou has contained as many different passions in thee as a human heart; and for the sake of the human heart, old body, thou are venerable.'²¹ In turn, Dickens exclaims, 'What an interesting book a hackney-coach might produce, if it could carry as much in its head as it does in its body! [...] How many stories might be related of the different people it had conveyed on matters of business or profit – pleasure or pain! And how many melancholy tales of the same people at different periods!'²²

To clinch the comparison with one further parallel, from a list too long to be fully enumerated, there is a manifest correspondence, again, between the opening of Hunt's essay, 'May Day', in the first volume of the *Indicator and Companion* anthology – 'May-Day is a word, which used to awaken in the minds of our ancestors all the ideas of youth, and verdure, and blossoming, and love, and hilarity; in short, the union of the two best things in the world, the love of nature, and the love of each other' – and that of Dickens's 'The First of May', originally published as 'A Little Talk about Spring, and the Sweeps' in May 1836: 'The first of May! There is a merry freshness in the sound, calling to our minds a thousand thoughts of all that is pleasant and beautiful in nature, in her sweetest and most delightful form.'²³ Both essays begin with the aural stimulus for the association of 'ideas' or 'thoughts', with 'verdure' or 'freshness', youth, and nature, before going on to recall past May Day traditions. (Separately, we might note, too that the May Day dance of the chimney-sweeps, to which much of Dickens's article is devoted, figures also in Hunt's piece, 'To-morrow the First of May', in the 30 April 1834 issue of *Leigh Hunt's London Journal*.²⁴)

Such textual parallels, whether or not Dickens was conscious of them, contribute to the recovery of a neglected literary relation, a key genealogy, important not simply as an end in itself, but also as a means to a further examination, of Dickens's distinctive rewriting of his precursors. The identification of source material for his early sketches in the works of the Romantic essayists serves as a necessary preliminary to a much larger claim, about his revisions of his models. In the critical distinctions between his practice and Hunt's, we may elicit, from the early work onwards, the characteristics and tendency of Dickens's realism.

Variations on the ordinary

Elsewhere, I have discussed the idealizing procedure of the Romantic essayist, by which the quotidian subject slides frequently into the visionary or ideal, and back again.²⁵ In the extracts from Hunt that I have just listed, the old lady's glimpse of the royal couple is a 'beatific vision', the hackney coach becomes the type of the 'human heart', and the essay 'May-Day' quickly moves to Milton's 'Song. On May Morning', followed by a series of quotations from other literary texts. In Dickens's sketches, by contrast, Hunt's 'beatific vision' is a 'little picture', the hackney might produce an 'interesting book', and its horses, for Hunt, 'an emblem of all the patience in creation', are here 'standing patiently on some damp straw.' Similarly, in Dickens's 'The First of May', Hunt's 'verdure' becomes 'freshness', and the writer's yearning for the romantic origins of the chimney sweeps does not obliterate 'the fact that whole families of sweeps were regularly born of sweeps, in the rural districts of Somers town and Camden Town'.²⁶ In all of these revisions, 'Boz' resolutely resists Romantic idealization, whether in the form of a grandness of scale, or of overt literary and classical association. The distinction is palpable, not only in the direct textual parallels that I have adduced here, but also more generally, in the treatment of a common subject. Take Hunt's depiction of a 'well-disposed fruiterer's window':

Here are the round piled-up oranges, deepening almost into red, and heavy with juice; the apple with its brown-red cheek, as if it had slept in the sun; the pear, swelling downwards; thronging grapes, like so many tight little bags of wine; the peach, whose handsome leathern coat strips off so finely; the pearly or ruby-like currants, heaped in light long baskets; the red little mouthful of strawberries; the larger purple ones of plums; cherries, whose old comparison with lips is better than anything new; mulberries, dark and rich with juice, fit to grow over what Homer calls the deep black-watered fountains; the swelling pomp of melons; the rough inexorable-looking

cocoanut, milky at heart; the elaborate elegance of walnuts; the quaint cashoo-nut; almonds, figs, raisins, tamarinds, green leaves,' [...]

(Hunt, 'A Nearer View of Some of the Shops')²⁷

The ellipsis at the end of my extract is occupied in Hunt's text by a long quotation from *Paradise Lost*. His adjectives and similes, along with his allusions to Homer and Milton, construct an urban pastoral, idealizing the shop window by literary representation. The contrast with, say, the following passage from Dickens's 'The Streets at Night' (*Bell's Life in London*, 17 January 1836) could hardly be more pointed:

Flat fish, oyster, and fruit venders linger hopelessly in the kennel, in vain endeavouring to attract customers; and the ragged boys who usually disport themselves about the streets, stand crouched in little knots in some projecting doorway, or under the canvass blind of the cheesemonger's, where great flaring gas-lights, unshaded by any glass, display huge piles of bright red, and pale yellow cheeses, mingled with little five-penny dabs of dingy bacon, various tubs of weekly Dorset, and cloudy rolls of 'best fresh'.²⁸

This passage exemplifies Dickens's realist depiction of the ordinary scene. Also in the *Sketches*, certainly, we find early instances of his other distinctive styles, of satire or sentimentality, where what is little is inflated for the purposes of irony or pathos. In a passage such as this one, by contrast, Dickens's realism is recognizable in the numerousness of its detail conjoined with its retention of an uncompromised smallness of scale ('the ragged boys [...] in *little* knots; '*little* five-penny dabs of dingy bacon').

The distinction between Hunt's tendency to elevate the ordinary subject and Dickens's eschewing of this kind of elevation, marks, crucially, a changing relation to the subject of representation. To the extent that the idealizing procedure transforms the ordinary subject into an imaginative creation, it may be said to close the gap between the essayist and his subject. Or to go further, as the numerous critiques of Romantic imagination have argued, idealization may be perceived as an egotistical procedure, by which the subject of representation is displaced or assimilated by the author of the representation.²⁹ In Dickens's essays, this absorption of the subject into the authorial self is rare. More usually, instead, we perceive sympathy without displacement, an avoidance of the idealizing process by which the represented subject is metamorphosed into something larger than itself.

The absence in Dickens's sketches of imaginative transformation, the abjuring of this form of egotism in his depictions of the urban subject, marks his participation in the transition from the Romanticism of the early decades of the nineteenth century to the realism of the later part of the century. Sharing what Phillip Lopate has called the 'taste for littleness' in the essay,³⁰ Dickens departs from his Romantic forebears in his eschewing of their idealizing practice, and with it, its egotistical tendency. To unfold this departure more fully, I want to return to that shared 'taste', manifest in the Romantic essayists' commitment to the minutiae of everyday life and ordinary experience, their vital legacy to their successors.

Ordinary details

In George Levine's masterly and still unsurpassed defence of Victorian realism, *Sketches by Boz*, where the piecemeal early work treated in the first part of this essay was collected into a single volume, is an early example of a 'relocation' of literature in the nineteenth century 'from the large to the small, from the general to the particular'. In the

Sketches, he further observes, ‘Dickens can be seen learning his craft by learning how to give to the particular and ordinary the resonances traditionally to be found in the universals of an earlier philosophy and literature.’³¹ If this is so, then although we might recognize with Stanley Cavell, that a ‘quest of the ordinary’ is a characteristic of Romanticism in general,³² we might still highlight as Dickens’s key precursors in this regard, the Romantic familiar essayists, who, expressing, like Dickens, in prose rather than poetry, a serious attention to the ordinary, furnish us with innumerable instances of the ‘relocation’ identified by Levine.

Dickens is indeed closer to the essayists than to the Romantic poets, not only generically, but also in the sustained intensity of that attention, manifest in its detail. Not just in the early writing in the *Sketches*, but also in the great works that follow (as Saintsbury would have it, ‘much better things than *Sketches*’), the value of the ordinary is asserted in the detail of the representation: the wealth of its detail gains, for the ordinary, its significance. In Levine’s words, ‘The particular, under the pressure of intense and original seeing, gives back the intensities normally associated with larger scale, traditional forms.’³³ Or in Hunt’s more matter-of-fact phrasing, in his essay ‘On Washerwomen’ (1816), ‘[S]ome of the plainest weeds become beautiful under the microscope.’³⁴ A prototype for this kind of seeing may be found in Hunt’s own writing, as in the following depiction of a toy shop in ‘A Nearer View of Some of the Shops’:

In the corner opposite are battle-doors and shuttle-cocks, which have their maturer beauties; balls, which possess the additional zest of the danger of breaking people’s windows; – ropes, good for swinging and skipping, especially the long ones which others turn for you, while you run in a masterly manner up and down, or skip in one spot with an easy and endless exactitude of toe, looking alternately at their conscious faces; – blood-allies, with which the possessor of a crisp finger and thumb-knuckle

causes the smitten marbles to vanish out of the ring ; kites, which must appear to more vital birds a ghastly kind of fowl, with their grim, long, white faces, no bodies, and endless tails; – cricket-bats, manly to handle; – trap-bats, a genteel inferiority; – swimming-corks, despicable; – horses on wheels, an imposition on the infant public; – rocking-horses, too much like Pegasus, ardent yet never getting on; – Dutch toys, so like life, that they ought to be better; – Jacob’s ladders, flapping down one over another their tintinnabulary shutters; – dissected maps, from which the infant statesmen may learn how to dovetail provinces and kingdoms; – paper posture-makers, who hitch up their knees against their shoulder-blades, and dangle their legs like an opera dancer; – Lilliputian plates, dishes, and other household utensils, in which a grand dinner is served up out of half an apple;– boxes of paints, to colour engravings with, always beyond the outline; – ditto of bricks, a very sensible and lasting toy, which we except from a grudge we have against the gravity of infant geometricks; – whips, very useful for cutting people’s eyes unawares; –hoops, one of the most ancient as well as excellent of toys; – sheets of pictures, from A apple-pie up to farming, military, and zoological exhibitions, always taking care that the Fly is as large as the Elephant, and the letter X exclusively appropriated to Xerxes; – musical deal-boxes, rather complaining than sweet, and more like a peal of bodkins than bells; – penny trumpets, awful at Bartlemy-tide; – jew’s harps, that thrill and breathe between the lips like a metal tongue; – carts – carriages – hobby-horses, upon which the infant equestrian prances about proudly on his own feet; – in short, not to go through the whole representative body of existence – dolls, which are so dear to the maternal instincts of little girls.³⁵

This plethora of ordinary detail, found everywhere in Dickens's writing, in the Romantic era is peculiar to its familiar essays. A description such as this one belies Nord's assertion that Dickens 'savors the quotidian and the ordinary in ways that Hunt cannot.'³⁶ If, as has widely been recognized, the hallmark of Dickens's prose is the tendency to multitudinous detail,³⁷ then it is primarily in the essayists – in Hazlitt's essays, as well as Hunt's, as I will show – that we find a Romantic precedent for this tendency.

A detailed ideal

In the context of Romantic aesthetics, the infinitude of detail constitutes what A.O. Lovejoy long ago identified as the Schlegelian ideal;³⁸ infinitely discriminated, the ordinary turns into such an ideal, the ideal constituted of innumerable particulars. The more detailed the object, the greater the value or magnitude with which it is invested. The object of representation may be amplified, then, as much by minute discrimination as by imaginative transformation. As this magnitude increases, or as the representation of the object becomes more detailed and realistic, simultaneously, by virtue of its magnitude, it also becomes more idealized. Thus the representation of the ordinary, in proportion to the density of its detail, is at one and the same time, both the more real and the more ideal; provided that is, that it constitutes a whole.

The proviso is critical. In previous studies of Hazlitt's philosophy, I have written extensively on his doctrine of abstraction, where abstraction is the condition of knowledge, the process by which the mind unifies innumerable particulars into a graspable whole or 'aggregate'.³⁹ Such an aggregate is ideal because of the unity of the whole, real because of its particular and detailed constitution. This dual nature – characterizing, to Hazlitt, all of our ideas – has an immediate bearing on the detailed representation of the ordinary in Romantic

conversational prose. In Hunt's essays, as his description of the toy shop shows, we find a prototype for such detail. In Hazlitt's, we find another:

To be in want of money, is to pass through life with little credit or pleasure; it is to live out of the world, or to be despised if you come into it; it is not to be sent for to court, or asked out to dinner, or noticed in the street; it is not to have your opinion consulted or else rejected with contempt, to have your acquirements carped at and doubted, your good things disparaged, and at last to lose the wit and the spirit to say them; it is to be scrutinized by strangers, and neglected by friends; it is to be a thrall to circumstances, an exile in a foreign land; to forego leisure, freedom, ease of body and mind, to be dependent on the good-will and caprice of others, or earn a precarious and irksome livelihood by some laborious employment: it is to be compelled to stand behind a counter, or to sit at a desk in some public office, or to marry your landlady, or not the person you would wish; or to go out to the East or West-Indies, or to get a situation as judge abroad, and return home with a liver-complaint; or to be a law-stationer, or a scrivener or scavenger, or newspaper reporter; or to read law and sit in court without a brief, or be deprived of the use of your fingers by transcribing Greek manuscripts, or to be a seal engraver and pore yourself blind; or to go upon the stage, or try some of the Fine Arts; with all your pains, anxiety, and hopes, most probably to fail, or, if you succeed, after the exertions of years, and undergoing constant distress of mind and fortune, to be assailed on every side with envy, back-biting, and falsehood, or to be a favourite with the public for awhile, and then thrown into the back-ground – or a jail, by the fickleness of taste and some new favourite; to be full of enthusiasm and extravagance in youth, of chagrin and disappointment in after-life; to be jostled by the rabble because you do not ride in your coach, or avoided by those

who know your worth and shrink from it as a claim on their respect or their purse; to be a burden to your relations, or unable to do any thing for them; to be ashamed to venture into crowds; to have cold comfort at home, to lose by degrees your confidence and any talent you might possess; to grow crabbed, morose, and querulous, dissatisfied with every one, but most so with yourself; and plagued out of your life, to look about for a place to die in, and quit the world without any one's asking after your will.

(‘On the Want of Money’; *The Monthly Magazine*, January 1827)⁴⁰

This sentence, taken from Hazlitt's essay ‘On the Want of Money’ (reprinted in his *Literary Remains* of 1836), embodies his theory of abstraction. Outside of philosophical disquisition, the notion of an abstraction or ideal that is an ‘aggregate’ of multitudinous particulars is enacted in one of the most distinctive features of Hazlitt's prose style: the magnificent compound sentence that gathers mass and momentum from clause after clause it picks up in its course, each clause sustaining and amplifying the force of the whole. Instances abound in his familiar essays; other memorable examples include the sentence that replays the juggler's skill in the *Table-Talk* essay, ‘The Indian Jugglers’, and the sentence on ‘the malice of mankind’ as shown in ‘the impertinence of friends’ in the essay ‘On the Spirit of Obligations’ in *The Plain Speaker*.⁴¹ In each of these examples, individual particulars, contained in the constituent clauses, accumulate or ‘aggregate’, to produce an abstract idea: ‘the want of money’, or the jugglers' skill, or ‘the malice of mankind’. The effect of unity or wholeness is heightened by a unitary form, that of the single sentence. The abstraction so produced is an ideal in the Schlegelian sense: multiple and disparate particulars, unified into a whole, are, in so being, idealized; the more encompassing that whole, the more multitudinous its constituting details, thus, the more infinite its character, and the more ideal. That is, detail,

the necessary constituent of a faithful and realistic representation, is also the necessary characteristic of the ideal; or, more simply, the minutely detailed representation, by virtue of its detail, is, at one and the same time, real and ideal.

Self and other

Dickens's admiration of Hazlitt may readily be established from the known facts – his numerous expressions of that admiration, his ownership of the best part of Hazlitt's oeuvre – but it is not my aim here to make a lengthy biographical case.⁴² What I want to emphasize, instead, is the painstaking record of the minutiae of ordinariness, that marks Dickens's common ground with Hazlitt more strongly, even, than it does with Hunt. In Dickens's prose, we find a closely comparable effect to Hazlitt's aggregation of detail, in the innumerable descriptions in which a scene, an experience, or a character is constituted through a mass of piled-up particulars (the opening of *Bleak House* is perhaps the most striking example). Where such details are gathered into a single sentence, the stylistic resemblance to Hazlitt becomes all the more pronounced:

Countrymen, butchers, drovers, hawkers, boys, thieves, idlers and vagabonds of every low grade, were mingled together in a mass; the whistling of drovers, the barking of dogs, the bellowing and plunging of oxen, the bleating of sheep, the grunting and squeaking of pigs; the cries of hawkers, the shouts, oaths, and quarrelling on all sides; the ringing of bells and the roars of voices, that issued from every public-house; the crowding, pushing, driving, beating, whooping, and yelling; the hideous and discordant din that resounded from every corner of the market; and the unwashed, unshaven, squalid, and dirty figures constantly running to and fro, and bursting in and

out of the throng; rendered it a stunning and bewildering scene, which quite confounded the senses.

(*Oliver Twist*, chapter 21)⁴³

Dickens's practice is more comparable to Hazlitt's than Hunt's, not only because this kind of amassing of detail is more occasional and usually less sustained in Hunt's writing than it is in Hazlitt's, but also because Hunt's detail is typically expressed as a list or series of nouns; Hazlitt's, as a sequence or unfolding of acts. The more dynamic quality of Hazlitt's detail is also the characteristic of Dickens's: both more actively and effectively engage the reader's attention in the detailed representation.

But just this similarity also foregrounds a crucial distinction, more perceptible, perhaps, between Dickens and Hazlitt, than between Dickens and Hunt. Where Hazlitt's detail conduces to the construction of a self, Dickens's directs attention towards an other. Manifestly in the sentence from the essay 'On the Want of Money', the life story of the essayist – his struggles and disappointments, the defeat of his hopes, the bitterness of failure – emerges in cameo. The reader, here, as in 'The Indian Jugglers' or in any other of Hazlitt's detailed descriptions in his familiar essays, is returned again and again to the essayist himself. By contrast, Dickens's detail at the opening of *Bleak House*, or in the sentence above from *Oliver Twist*, drives outwards, to the victims of the fog or the casualties of the city's sensory assault.

The distinction merits a closer consideration. In his unpublished review of the first volume of Hazlitt's *Table-Talk* (1821), Charles Lamb declares of the collection, 'It is in fact a piece of Autobiography'.⁴⁴ Fundamental to the theorizing of the essay genre, in this review and subsequently, is the recognition that the form of the essay is grounded in the essayistic persona or authorial self. For Marie Hamilton Law, in perhaps the first present-day study of

the Romantic familiar essay, still one of the best introductions to the genre, the identifying mark of the familiar essayist is that he is 'self-revealing'.⁴⁵ Later, in Graham Good's more wide-ranging examination, 'The mixture of elements in the essay – the unsorted "wholeness" of the experience it represents – can only be held together by the concept of self.'⁴⁶ From the unitary self, the form of the essay gains unity or wholeness. To make this claim is not to contest the constructed nature of the authorial persona, nor to disavow what is fragmentary, shifting, and discontinuous in the essayistic form, but to recognize, as Phillip Lopate eloquently describes it in his excellent introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay* (1994): 'the personal essayist tries to make his many partial selves dance to the same beat – to unite, through force of voice and style, these discordant, fragmentary personae so that the reader can accept them as issuing from one coherent self.'⁴⁷

In Hazlitt's 'aggregates' of detail, their quality of one-ness derives from their expression, not only of a single idea, but also and more vitally, of a single self. The essay's unity or coherence is all the more entailed by the distinctive singularity of that self. But where the self is singular, the other is plural. In Dickens's writing, already rejecting egotism in its delineation of detail in the early essays, this basis for unity is absent. All the more in the fiction, where detail accumulates to construct, not a self, but divers others, formal unity recedes and, so far as it remains at all, becomes, to paraphrase Henry James, loose and baggy.⁴⁸ The ordinary gains, from its detail, intensity (Levine's 'pressure of intense and original seeing'), but not wholeness. Where, in the Romantic or Schlegelian scheme, the artist's moral aspiration, in the representation of detail, is towards unity, the (infinite and unrealizable) whole to which that detail belongs, in Dickens's mode of realism, detail is itself both means and end. Produced from a sustained attention to ordinary human experience, it is itself the moral and humanistic goal. Not unity, but attention is his moral procedure.

Attention to detail

By way of illustration, I should like to recall two descriptions from *Hard Times*. The first is of Stephen Blackpool, speaking to Bounderby about wanting a divorce.

In another moment, he stood as he had stood all the time – his usual stoop upon him; his pondering face addressed to Mr. Bounderby, with a curious expression on it, half shrewd, half perplexed, as if his mind were set upon unravelling something very difficult; his hat held tight in his left hand, which rested on his hip; his right arm, with a rugged propriety and force of action, very earnestly emphasising what he said: not least so when it always paused, a little bent, but not withdrawn, as he paused.

(Book I, chapter xi)⁴⁹

The second is the reader's introduction to Bounderby's mother, Mrs. Pegler:

She was very cleanly and plainly dressed, had country mud upon her shoes and was newly come from a journey. The flutter of her manner, in the unwonted noise of the streets; the spare shawl, carried unfolded on her arm; the heavy umbrella, and little basket; the loose long-fingered gloves, to which her hands were unused; all bespoke an old woman from the country, in her plain holiday clothes, come into Coketown on an expedition of rare occurrence. (Book I, chapter xii)⁵⁰

Both descriptions are characteristic of the realist narrative, the narrative, that is, of ordinary people in ordinary situations. Their detail not only creates a clearer picture of the subjects represented but also works to another end, from which such clarity cannot be decoupled. The

focus on the ordinary is necessarily impelled by an ethical purpose. The minute details of dress and manner, all conducing to an impression of the accuracy of the representation, also show the observer's (and invite the reader's) engagement – with Stephen's struggle, his stoop, the tightness of his hold on his hat; or with Mrs. Pegler's cleanliness and simplicity, her nervousness, the spareness of her shawl, the heaviness of her umbrella. The attention given to the ordinary in this passage is a moral attention.

A contemporary reader, Hippolyte Taine, complaining that 'Dickens does not perceive great things' because he is 'lost [...] in the minute and impassioned observations of small things', still recognized that Dickens's 'minute description [...] is thus detailed, [...] because the contemplation was intense; it proves its passion by its exactness.'⁵¹ Taine's expression, 'the contemplation was intense', noticeably anticipates Levine's 'intense and original seeing'. Attesting to the intensity of his contemplation of the exterior 'other', the abundance of detail in Dickens's descriptions of the ordinary subject or 'small things' may be seen to belong to what has memorably been articulated as an ethics of attention in the twentieth century. We might cite Linda Loman's famous plea in *Death of a Salesman* (1949): 'Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. [...] Attention, attention must finally be paid to such a person.'⁵² Or, for a more theoretical expression of the same idea, we could turn to Iris Murdoch's *The Sovereignty of Good* (1971). 'I have used the word "attention", Murdoch writes, '[...] to express the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality,' such attention being 'the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent'.⁵³ Dickens's detail signals this moral attention. The criterion of realistic representation, it is also the ethical core of his realist project.

To elaborate, critical to the project of the realist text is not merely authenticity of representation, but also, through the carefully detailed rendering of a world, the denial or preclusion of the isolation of the individual. By directing the attention outwards, away from the self, the realist narrative urgently presses the relation between individuals, between self and other, or many others. This achievement of the detailed representation, the model of a meaningful relation between the self and divers others, is the end towards which Dickens's realist narrative persistently aspires.

The ethics of detail

In the subjects of Dickens's realistic representations, the minutiae of detail maintain their ordinariness or littleness. To grasp these minutiae, the narrator must remain separate from his subject, sympathetically linked to, without assimilating or transforming it. That is, the detailed exteriority of Dickens's representations upholds a mimetic principle by which the attentive rendering of the other is predicated on its separation from the observing self. Such a separation enables a relation to the other that precludes its appropriation by, or collapse into, the self, and so asserts the unconditional reality of that other. The outside of the other is the epistemological limit, the limit of what can be known by the self, and the ethical relation is formed at this limit, by minutely detailed observation. Or in other words, the outside of the other is the bound at which epistemology and ethics coincide, where mimesis performs a moral relation.⁵⁴

Insisting on the containment of the self, rather than its expansion into the other, Dickens's practice, persisting from his early sketches into his later fiction, is against Romantic idealization, or the transformation of the subject. This resistance to imaginative transformation, shown in the littleness or precisely bounded scope of the representation,

distinguishes his realist mode from his modes of exaggeration or hyperbole, and so bears directly on the argument that sets ‘detail’ and ‘realism’ against each other in conceptual and stylistic terms. Freya Johnston, for instance, has contended that Dickens’s detail shows the closeness of a realistic to a hyperbolic style: the plethora of detail, the marker of a realistic representation, also conduces, she finds, to exaggeration and excess.⁵⁵ But the details of the ordinary and those of the extraordinary (exaggerations, caricatures) are manifestly different in kind, if not always in degree. The first remains committed to the given-ness (‘reality’) of the represented subject. In the realistic representation, its detail does not transform that subject into something other than itself; it does not, that is, absorb other into self.

In *Hard Times*, for example, to which Johnston refers, and where Dickens’s transformative style is given free rein, the distinction is all the more palpable, between the fantastic versions of Coketown (‘the painted face of a savage’; ‘Fairy palaces’; ‘monstrous serpents of smoke’; ‘melancholy mad elephants’),⁵⁶ and its ordinary aspect:

Sun-blinds, and sprinklings of water, a little cooled the main streets and the shops; but the mills, and the courts and alleys, baked at a fierce heat. Down upon the river that was black and thick with dye, some Coketown boys who were at large – a rare sight there – rowed a crazy boat, which made a spumous track upon the water as it jogged along, while every dip of an oar stirred up vile smells. (Book II, chapter i)⁵⁷

This second picture conveys the everyday world that human beings inhabit, and their everyday experience in that world. The reader’s focus is shifted temporarily from the main characters of the book to the other inhabitants of Coketown. The anonymous ‘boys’ in the picture are brought fleetingly to life: their unaccustomed liberty, the discrepancy between their boyish pleasure in rowing and the pollution against which it contends, the range of

signification captured in the loaded adjective ‘crazy’. Throughout, the narrator’s just and loving gaze eschews inflation, distortion, and transformation. Its operative principle, were we constrained to name it, is not ‘imagination’, but ‘feeling’.

From Dickens’s essayistic origins, then, we are led to glimpse a larger literary-historical narrative, whose fuller reconstruction must be left to a more expansive study. Tracking his development away from his Romantic precursors, we arrive at a realist style that works in tandem with his other, more flamboyant styles of exaggeration and transformation: a style recognizable by the profusion of its detail conjoined with the smallness of its scale. The ethics of attention to which its detail belongs is a realist ethics in that it promotes a relational rather than a totalizing view. Such an ethics is grounded in the intent and careful observation that maintains the division of self from other rather than in the creative leap that closes or cancels that division; in ‘feeling’ rather than ‘imagination’. Thus Dickens’s revision of his Romantic sources begins to indicate the outlines of a larger paradigm shift, taking place in the transition from the earlier to the later part of the nineteenth century. To neglect his style of ordinariness is to overlook the extent of his contribution to the literary history of Victorian realism.

¹ In his famous essay, ‘Dickens in Relation to Criticism’, *Fortnightly Review* 17 (February 1872), 141-54.

² Jerome Meckier (among others) has explored this relationship between Dickens and his contemporaries in *Hidden Rivalries in Victorian Fiction: Dickens, Realism, and Revaluation* (Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1987).

³ J. Hillis Miller, ‘The Fiction of Realism: *Sketches by Boz*, *Oliver Twist*, and Cruikshank’s Illustrations’ in *Dickens Centennial Essays*, ed. by A. Nisbet and B. Nevius (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 85-153: 86-7.

⁴ John R. Reed, *Dickens's Hyperrealism* (Columbus, Oh: Ohio State University Press, 2010),

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⁵ Daniel Tyler, 'Introduction' in *Dickens's Style*, ed. D. Tyler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1-25.

⁶ Harold Bloom, 'Introduction' in *Modern Critical Views: Charles Dickens* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), 5.

⁷ Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *England and the English*, 2 vols (London: Richard Bentley, 1833), II, 61, 62, 62n.

⁸ Charles Dickens, *The Pilgrim Edition of the Letters of Charles Dickens: Vol 1: 1820-1839*, ed. M. House and G. Storey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 576. The editorial gloss refers to the original publications of the *Indicator* and the *Companion* as separate journals, but does not pick up on the likelier probability that Dickens's allusion is to the 1834 anthology.

⁹ George Saintsbury, 'Dickens' in *The Cambridge History of English Literature Volume XIII: The Nineteenth Century II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1916): 303-39, 307.

¹⁰ Deborah Epstein Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), 55-8.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹² F.S. Schwarzbach, *Dickens and the City* (London: Athlone Press, 1979), 37.

¹³ Charles de Paolo, 'Hunt, Leigh' in *Encyclopedia of the Essay*, ed. Tracy Chevalier (London and Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1997): 413-15, 413.

¹⁴ Charles Dickens, *Sketches by Boz* (1836), Penguin Classics edition, ed. D. Walder (London: Penguin, 1995), 26; Leigh Hunt, *The Indicator and The Companion: A Miscellany*, 2 vols (London: Henry Colburn, 1834), II, 162. For the convenience of the reader, my citations of Dickens are from the *Sketches*, rather than the first publication of each separate article.

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- ¹⁵ Hunt, *Indicator and Companion*, II, 162; Dickens, *Sketches*, 26.
- ¹⁶ Dickens, *Sketches*, 26.
- ¹⁷ Hunt, *Indicator and Companion*, II, 165.
- ¹⁸ Hunt, *Indicator and Companion*, II, 57; Dickens, *Sketches*, 107.
- ¹⁹ Hunt, *Indicator and Companion*, II, 62; Dickens, *Sketches*, 107.
- ²⁰ Hunt, *Indicator and Companion*, II, 62-3; Dickens, *Sketches*, 108.
- ²¹ Hunt, *Indicator and Companion*, II, 63-4.
- ²² Dickens, *Sketches*, 108-9.
- ²³ Hunt, *Indicator and Companion*, I, 267; Dickens, *Sketches*, 200.
- ²⁴ *Leigh Hunt's London Journal*, 2 vols (London: Henry Hooper, 1834), I, 33.
- ²⁵ See for instance, Uttara Natarajan, 'The veil of familiarity: Romantic philosophy and the familiar essay', *Studies in Romanticism* 42.1 (spring 2003), 27-44.
- ²⁶ Dickens, *Sketches*, 204.
- ²⁷ Hunt, *Indicator and Companion*, I, 315.
- ²⁸ Dickens, *Sketches*, 76.
- ²⁹ For a lucid summary of this critique, the 'central problem of Romanticism', see Michael Sprinker's 'Ruskin on the Imagination', *Studies in Romanticism* 18.1 (spring 1979), 115-39, especially 115-17. Sprinker adduces Paul de Man, with whom, perhaps, the influential expression of this critique in the twentieth century may be said to begin. See Paul de Man, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality' in *Interpretation: Theory and Practice*, ed. C.S. Singleton (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969), 173-209.
- ³⁰ Phillip Lopate, *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), xxvii.
- ³¹ George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterly* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 13.

³² Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

³³ Levine, *The Realistic Imagination*, 13.

³⁴ Leigh Hunt, *Selected Essays*, with an introduction by J.B. Priestley (London: J.M. Dent, 1929), 51. In the absence of a complete edition of Hunt's essays, I have chosen this anthology over the more recent Pickering and Chatto edition of Hunt's *Selected Writings*, because it offers the most convenient and comprehensive selection of Hunt's familiar essays available in a single volume.

³⁵ Hunt, *Indicator and Companion*, I, 311-12.

³⁶ Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets*, 57. Nord's misconception arises from her basing her comparison rather too narrowly on Hunt's 'Townsmen' sketches, without taking into account other of his London essays, readily available to Dickens.

³⁷ As identified, most famously, by George Orwell: 'The outstanding, unmistakable mark of Dickens's writing is the *unnecessary detail* [...] it is by just these squiggles that the special Dickens atmosphere is created.' – George Orwell, 'Charles Dickens' in *Inside the Whale and Other Essays* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1940): 9-85, 69-71. Subsequent commentators have recurred repeatedly to Orwell's comment.

³⁸ Distinguished, by Lovejoy, from Schiller's: see A.O. Lovejoy, 'Schiller and the Genesis of German Romanticism' in *Essays in the History of Ideas* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1948), 207-27, especially 220-7.

³⁹ See, especially, Uttara Natarajan, *Hazlitt and the Reach of Sense: Criticism, Morals, and the Metaphysics of Power* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 131-41.

⁴⁰ William Hazlitt, *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P.P. Howe, 21 vols (London and Toronto: J.M. Dent, 1930-4), XVII, 186-7.

⁴¹ Hazlitt, *Works*, VIII, 78; XII, 78-9.

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- ⁴² John Foster's biography, for instance, recounts a literary pilgrimage to Hazlitt's 'hut' in Winterslow – see John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, edited and annotated, with an introduction, by J.W.T. Ley (London: Cecil Palmer, 1928), 523. For a list of books by Hazlitt that Dickens owned, see J.H. Stonehouse (ed.), *Catalogue of the Library of Charles Dickens [etc.]* (London: Piccadilly Fountain Press, 1935), 55-7.
- ⁴³ Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (1838), Penguin Classics edition, ed. P. Horne (London: Penguin, 2002), 171.
- ⁴⁴ Charles Lamb, [unpublished review of the first volume of Hazlitt's *Table-Talk* (1821)], in *Charles Lamb: Selected Prose* (Penguin Classics), ed. Adam Phillips (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985): 215-27, 217.
- ⁴⁵ Marie Hamilton Law, *The English Familiar Essay in the Early Nineteenth Century: The Elements Old and New which went into its Making as Exemplified in the Writings of Hunt, Hazlitt and Lamb* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1934), 8.
- ⁴⁶ Graham Good, *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay* (London: Routledge, 1988), 8.
- ⁴⁷ Lopate, *Art of the Personal Essay*, xxviii-ix.
- ⁴⁸ In the famous demand in his 'Preface' to *The Tragic Muse*: '[...] what do such large loose baggy monsters, with their queer elements of the accidental and the arbitrary, artistically mean?' – See Henry James, *The Tragic Muse* (1890), Penguin Classics edition, ed. Philip Horne (London: Penguin, 1995), 4.
- ⁴⁹ Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (1854), Penguin Classics edition, ed. K. Flint (London: Penguin, 1995), 74.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 78.
- ⁵¹ Hippolyte Taine, 'Charles Dickens: son talent et ses oeuvres' in *Revue des deux Mondes* (1 February 1856), repr. in Collins (ed.), *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, 338.

⁵² Arthur Miller, 'Death of a Salesman' (1949) repr. in *Plays: One*, introd. Arthur Miller (London: Methuen, 1988): 130-222, 162.

⁵³ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (1971; repr. London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 33.

⁵⁴ For other recent versions of the relation between epistemology and ethics in Victorian writing, see George Levine's *Realism, Ethics and Secularism* (2008), which finds in realist practice 'a more expansive epistemology, one in which the boundaries between epistemology and ethics, between knowing and acting, are blurred.' – George Levine, *Realism, Ethics and Secularism: Essays on Victorian Literature and Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 3-4. Subsequently, Rebecca N. Mitchell elicits the unknowability of the other in the Victorian realist attitude, describing the endeavour to surmount it as doomed, 'an impossibility'. – Rebecca N. Mitchell, *Victorian Lessons in Empathy and Difference* (Columbus, Oh: Ohio State University Press, 2011), 10.

⁵⁵ Freya Johnston, "'Gigantic Domesticity": The Exaggeration of Charles Dickens' in Taylor (ed), *Dickens's Style*, 137-54.

⁵⁶ Dickens, *Hard Times*, 27, 66 and *passim*; 71, 71 and *passim*.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 112.