

Lauriat Lane, Jr.

DICKENSIAN ICONOGRAPHY: 1970

For Dickensians, 1970, the hundredth year since Dickens died, was crammed with feasts, festivities, and other functions all devoted—I use the word advisedly—to Charles Dickens. In 1970 the scholars and critics were everywhere: publishing books, editing or contributing to special Dickens issues of academic journals, lending distinction to the popular press, and chairing, addressing, or just attending formal banquets and other carousals to the Immortal Memory. So much so that at first look it might seem that the sorts of Dickensians who had presided over such occasions as the celebration of the centenary of Dickens' birth in 1912 were, by 1970, shouldered aside.

But the truth, I think, is more interesting. For by 1970, or even during that year, the "professional" Dickens critics and the Dickensians found more in common and drew closer together around banquet tables and between the covers of books than in 1912 might ever have seemed possible. To their possible surprise, the Dickensians found they were reading and responding to Dickens more awfully, more complexly, and more intensely than ever before. And the Dickens critics, on this ritual occasion, found themselves re-reading and celebrating Dickens with unexpected lumps in their scholarly throats.

One example of this new alliance between Dickensians and Dickens critics was the new role played in publications of 1970 by Dickensian iconography, traditionally left more to the amateur enthusiast. Under this heading, with its hagiographic implications, I include all those artifacts associated with Dickens and his writings, from pin-cushions and playing-cards to the original illustrations done for Dickens himself—such things as plays and films, original playbills of the kind

collected by the Comte de Suzannet and presented to Dickens House, other notices and advertisements, and sketches, paintings, and photographs of Dickens and of his world. These materials are scattered generously through many of the books and periodicals of 1970. They even lighten the formal divisions between the sections of Joseph Gold's centennial bibliography, *The Stature of Dickens*. Their special Dickensian power comes out nowhere more fully than when they jump to our eyes from the pages of a tribute to Dickens otherwise in Japanese.

We can, however, distinguish between different forms and orders of Dickensian iconography, and show how some are potentially more helpful for the appreciation of Dickens' fiction than others. Important chiefly for proof of Dickens' special fame and for little else are the pin-cushions, cigarette cards, china figurines and cups, and silver spoons and watch charms, a sampling of which are displayed in *The Observer* for May 17, 1970, and on the final pages of E. W. F. Tomlin's collection of essays, *Charles Dickens 1812-1870*. Yet even these bric-a-brac are a tribute never given to my knowledge to any other author on the same scale, and they can lead even the serious critic to ask what in Dickens' characters first called forth and still sustains such a remarkable response.

Closer to Dickens, though perhaps not to his writings, is the portraiture often found in extra-illustrated copies of Forster's *Life*, of Dickens and of his friends and contemporaries. Orwell's "face somewhere behind the page" is an imagined icon, with no necessary relation to biographical reality. Yet the actual changing images of Dickens himself—generously chronicled by both Tomlin and Angus Wilson and neatly contrasted at the front and back of Gold's bibliography—can tell us in their progression from youth and mere personality to age and absolute character something of the distance from *Pickwick Papers* to *Our Mutual Friend*. One might even suggest that earlier Dickensian iconography, with its Chestertonian emphasis on sketches of the youthful Boz, may have tricked readers away from the more complicated, older Dickens so powerfully caught, for example, in the late photographs by Gurney.

Closer to Dickens' writings are the photographic and other pictorial images of the actual look and feel of Dickens' own world, along with

other literal or allegorical attempts to catch for the eye the attitudes and values of Victorian England. Here, not only crude journalistic woodcuts and early photographs but the work of Dore, Frith, Millais, Fildes, Hunt, and the like provide us with not so much a graphic equivalent of Dickens' own versions as one mode of analytic and interpretive comment on them. Essays in Tomlin on "Dickens's London" and "Dickens as Social Reformer" are generously supplemented by such illustrations, and Angus Wilson's *The World of Charles Dickens* is saturated with them, brilliantly so. Yet if we lose sight of the essentially metaphoric relation of such images to Dickens' own writing—demonstrated, for example, by Alexander Welsh's selective and skillful use of them to underline the near-allegorical generalizations in *The City of Dickens*—then we run the risk of what Hilles Miller, in his long essay on "The Fiction of Realism: *Sketches by Boz*, *Oliver Twist*, and Cruikshank's Illustrations", calls "the formulas of realism . . . the Cratylean myth of representationalism".¹ Miller, starting from but qualifying Roman Jakobson's structural distinction between the poetic and the referential uses of metaphor and metonymy, energetically rebuts this "myth" with respect to *Sketches by Boz* and, by implication, the remainder of Dickens' writings.

(One exception to this "myth" might be the non-pictorial, yet unquestionably mimetic, linguistic content of the dialects of Dickens' characters, as identified by G. L. Brook in *The Language of Dickens*. But for the Dickens critic there is a great gulf between the broadly appreciative, impressionistic comments interspersed through Brook's survey and Miller's rigorous fidelity to internal structural literary analysis. Which of these approaches is nearer to the average or even the sophisticated reader's usual response to Dickens' language is another question.)

After his analysis of "the fiction of realism" in *Sketches by Boz*, Miller goes on to consider Cruikshank's illustrations to this book and to *Oliver Twist*. The original illustrations to Dickens' writings, guided by him or open to his veto, are by common consent that order of Dickensian iconography closest to the writings themselves, and that order of the greatest significance for those writings. But the exact importance of these original illustrations—not helped by Dickens' selective omission of them from some of his later editions—remains much debated.

For Miller, Cruikshank's illustrations for the *Sketches* point to such "incompatible references—the 'real' London, Dickens's text, Cruikshank's 'sensibility', and the tradition of caricature," that only "their own intrinsic meaning" survives "the pressure of these mutually annihilating references".² Whereas for Angus Wilson, Phiz's illustrations, whose ontological situation may be a shade less involved, "seem to me to add a dimension (and an imaginatively valid one) to Dickens's fictional world"³—still begging, however, the question: Whose dimension, Dickens' or Phiz's? Nicolas Bentley, who did the section on "Dickens and his Illustrators" for *Charles Dickens 1812-1870*, claims that of Dickens' sixteen original illustrators only "two of them, Cruikshank and Phiz, may be said to have made distinctive contributions to the understanding and enjoyment of Dickens".⁴ But Bentley never goes on to try to explain how they might do so. Miller, at the end of his separate analysis of Cruikshank, finds only a "homology" between Cruikshank's art and Dickens', one that involves "reciprocally sustaining, reciprocally destroying vacillation between literal and figurative interpretations [which] is crucial to the process of explicating both graphic and literary works".⁵

And so, in spite of Henry James's well-known tribute (quoted by Miller) to Cruikshank's "vividly terrible images" which haunted his childhood—his childhood, note—and in spite of the recent, highly perceptive, critical attention paid to the work of H. K. Browne by Michael Steig and others, and in spite of the delight given to most Dickensians and Dickens critics by these original illustrations, the question lingers: How many of us, Dickensians or Dickens critics or both, read our Dickens with the original illustrations in front of us? And if we do, do we respond to the illustrations as we read, simultaneously or in the memory's eye? In short, can these original illustrations, admittedly the highest order of Dickensian iconography, ever become more than one more version, perhaps the most brilliant and unforgettable, of the many "versions" of Dickens given to us subsequently through such pictorial arts as caricature, painting, stage, film and now television? Rather, should they not be considered—as both Miller and Bentley imply—important separate works of art in their own right, and approached as such?

Q. D. Leavis's long chapter on "Dickens Illustrations: Their Function" in *Dickens the Novelist* addresses this question directly,

along with other issues involving Dickensian iconography. Mrs. Leavis states her position as follows: "The illustrations of Dickens's novels up to *Bleak House* are a unique addition to the text, not only visualizing a scene for us in its historical social detail, and giving a visual embodiment to the characters which expresses their inner selves for us inescapably, besides being a visual embodiment of dramatic flash-points: the illustrations are frequently indispensable even to us, the highly-trained modern reader, in interpreting the novels correctly, because they encapsule the themes and give us the means of knowing with certainty where Dickens meant the stress to fall (since his touch is often lightest where most meaningful, and tactfully indirect.) Even we lose much if we don't read the Dickens novels with their original illustrations, and this is true of no other English novelist."⁶

In her long essay Mrs. Leavis introduces two important distinctions, worth extended examination. One is between the effect of the illustrations on "both a public that even when literate was not educated in reading fiction that had broken with the eighteenth-century novel, and also a public that without the illustrations would hardly have been able to cope with a novel doled out in portions at intervals of as much as a month, or even a fortnight, much less the novels of Dickens with (after *Oliver Twist*) their enormous numbers of characters and range of scenes", and on the other hand their effect on "us, the highly-trained modern reader".⁷ Her other distinction is between the role of the illustrations in the earlier novels, which are more fully in "the tradition of a visual-literary, moralistic-satiric art with its roots in Pope and Hogarth", and their role in those later novels which demand of the illustrator "more delicate distinctions" and "a greater range of feelings".⁸ Phiz was to some extent able to meet these more elaborate demands in a way Cruikshank never could have; nevertheless, "illustrations to the novels from *Bleak House* onwards would have been unnecessary but for the habit of having illustrations".⁹

Mrs. Leavis's scrutiny of the illustrations, especially those for *Dombey and Son* and, in an earlier chapter, *David Copperfield*, is always closely attuned to their literary importance—"not as an independent picture but as an illuminating contribution to the novel".¹⁰ Modulating through such terms as "equivalent", "embodiment", "impression", "addition", "contribution", "pointing", "com-

ment", "interpretation", and—with continually expanding significance—"illustration" itself, she explores and defines the "necessary partnership" intended always to "alert the readers" and "bring out the potentialities". For many Dickens critics, however, the success of this collaboration and its significance for the novels themselves still vary greatly from illustration to illustration and from reader to reader.

Mrs. Leavis identifies a final role for the illustrations, one that, for me, gives them an even stronger call on our attention. For she shows beyond doubt how some of Phiz's drawings, like Hogarth's and even Blake's, provide "the visual equivalent not merely of an episode in the story but of its meaning in the novel as a whole", how they provide, more subtly and complicatedly than did the original covers to the monthly parts, "a final and wholly different kind of illustration", one that will "summarize the theme and embody ideas rather than illustrate actual episodes", one that "incorporates the whole spirit and ethos" of Dickens' own fictional intention.¹¹ With these very high claims the case, in 1970, for the highest form of Dickensian iconography, the original illustrations to his novels, rests.

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NOTES

1. J. Hillis Miller, in *Charles Dickens and George Cruikshank* (Los Angeles, 1971), p. 6.
2. *Dickens and Cruikshank*, p. 53.
3. *The World of Charles Dickens* (New York, 1970), p. 133.
4. E. W. F. Tomlin, ed., *Charles Dickens 1812-1870* (New York, 1969), p. 206.
5. *Dickens and Cruikshank*, p. 69.
6. F. R. and Q. D. Leavis, *Dickens the Novelist* (London, 1970), p. 336.
7. Pp. 337-338, p. 336.
8. P. 344, p. 355.
9. P. 361.
10. P. 342.
11. P. 345, p. 355, p. 348, p. 354.