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Dickens and the Comic Extraneous*

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What, then, constitutes the extraneous in fiction, let alone the comic extraneous? When Dickens is at issue, it is probably simpler to describe the comic first: he has accustomed us to the recurrent appearance in a given text of flat caricatures who delightfully repeat their signature tunes, coming and going without apparent significance in the same one-sided fashion. But are they always one-sided, and if not, do they cease to be caricatures? As to the generally extraneous in Dickens, George Orwell (45-46) had no doubt that "*unnecessary detail*" (his italics) was "the outstanding, unmistakable mark" of the novelist's writing. He says, in this respect, that when Dickens tells us a family is having dinner, he cannot resist adding, between parenthetical dashes, "baked shoulder of mutton and potatoes under it." But Orwell grants that it is through such detail that "the special Dickens atmosphere is created." Indeed thickness of detail, far from being extraneous, is the mark of the true novelist. That is the way novelists see. It is with these two reflections in mind that I wish to consider whether Mr. Guppy of *Bleak House* and Flora Finching of *Little Dorrit* should be regarded as representative of the comic extraneous in Dickens. I have to confess, at the outset, that when I published my book on Dickens some forty years ago, though I'm sure I relished both Guppy and Flora, I must have considered them quite extraneous to the important matter of the texts concerned, for I find now that I have only

*Reference: H. M. Daleski, *Dickens and the Art of Analogy* (London: Faber, 1970).
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two incidental references to Guppy in my chapter on *Bleak House* and no mention at all of Flora in the chapter on *Little Dorrit*.

Guppy is created through the particular linguistic modes in which he expresses himself, and is not merely provided with comic tags. He comes to us rather through a complex mixture of styles. He is first and foremost a Cockney, and the Cockney in him keeps breaking out, though it is overlaid by his legal pretensions and his devastating use of legalese. The Cockney is there when he first presents himself to Mrs. Rouncewell at Chesney Wold: "Us London lawyers," he says, "don't often get an out" (*Bleak House* 81). This London lawyer is not yet even an articled clerk, though in the course of the narrative he does duly attain this status. And he can't help giving himself away with his bad grammar and his habitual slang.

The mixture of styles that characterizes both his speech and his image of himself is perfectly caught in his first major appearance, the occasion of his preposterous proposal to Esther Summerson (I. 9). In this scene his formula as a caricature is established, though the fertility of Dickens's comic genius is so great that subsequent repetitions never stale. Guppy has dressed specially for the occasion, looking "so uncommonly smart" that Esther hardly recognizes him (111). He prides himself on his forensic eloquence, and whenever and wherever he can, makes use of legal terminology, almost invariably inappropriately. Thus he starts his proposal by asserting, to Esther's astonishment, that "what follows is without prejudice"—meaning that it cannot be used in evidence against him. "It's one of our law terms, miss," he condescendingly explains. And he concludes the proposal not only by stating he adores her but that he wishes "to file a declaration." In between he lists his qualifications for acceptance by her, and does so with an eye for exhaustive detail that reflects the master's, giving a full account of his past, present, and future earning capacity. Nor does he omit to bring in his mother, who, in a delicious slip, is pronounced "eminently calculated for a mother-in-law," who can be fully trusted not only with "wines" but also with "spirits or malt liquors." His combination of the elevated and the homely is incompa-

rable, as he declares, for instance, that his "own abode is lodgings." And always, at inappropriate moments, he is let down by his aitches, stating that his abode, being "open at the back," is "considered one of the 'ealthiest outlets" (113), just as his romantic feeling for Esther, he insists, was aroused when he first saw her and "put up the steps of the 'ackney-coach" she was in (114).

We should not allow ourselves, however, to be taken in by the repetition of Guppy's formulaic presentation. In this respect he certainly is a caricature, but we may be surprised to discover that he is by no means one-sided. In fact his many-sidedness becomes so disconcertingly evident that we have to revise our view of him and of his fictional status. Quite unexpectedly, he turns out to be an interesting character rather than a caricature, as repeatedly different traits are concretized in his presentation.

Despite the obtuseness that is so palpable in his proposal to Esther, Guppy is exceptionally sharp and perceptive. The moment he sees the portrait of Lady Dedlock on his visit to Chesney Wold, he is struck by a resemblance that he cannot place. Though he has only seen Esther once and for a short time on her arrival in London, he soon enough makes the connection. There follows the proposal to her and the dramatization of another striking aspect of his character: he is an unmitigated opportunist, with an eye very steadily fixed on the main chance. Seeing an opportunity to exploit Esther's apparent connection with Lady Dedlock, he quickly decides to get in on the ground floor and propose to her. Before the proposal, he first confirms his sense of the resemblance when he repeatedly looks at Esther in a "scrutinising and curious way" (112).

When Esther rejects the proposal out of hand, he then resorts, with a strange innocence, to revealing his cards. "I have been brought up in a sharp school," he says, "and am accustomed to a variety of general practice. […] Blest with your hand, what means might I not find of advancing your interests, and pushing your fortunes!" To cap it all, he insists he has been in love with Esther from the moment he first saw her. "Love," he emphatically declares, came before "interest" (114).

Thereafter he publicly adopts the role of the suffering, rejected lover, declaring, with a resounding displacement of adjective and a revelatory dropping of an aitch, that he has "an unrequited image imprinted on his art" (397). We begin to see that a great deal is packed into his presentation.

An even more devious side of Guppy is revealed in the superb scene when he confronts Lady Dedlock with all the facts he has astutely amassed about her and Esther and Hawdon. He ends by proposing to bring her the "bundle of old letters" Hawdon has left behind. She moves to end the meeting and is apparently about to give him money, but he self-righteously states he is "not actuated by any motives of that sort" and "couldn't accept of anything of the kind" (364). When his friend Weevle later complains, however, that he cannot make out how obtaining the letters from Krook is "likely to be profitable," Guppy insists that, in this matter and apart from hoping to further his interests with Esther, he is "no fool" (400), though blackmail or a shady sale are terms he would not care to use.

Despite his repeated protestations of unrequited love, Guppy's passion for Esther proves to be only skin-deep when he registers her pockmarked face, and the "image […] on his art" is easily erased. But the complexity of his presentation is such that, even when he falls back into the forensic mode and asks her to admit, "though no witnesses are present," that it was she who had repelled and repudiated his former "declaration" (478), he is deeply "ashamed," as she notes (480). A further inherent decency also asserts itself when, quite disinterestedly, he informs Lady Dedlock that the letters have not been destroyed as was supposed, and that Smallweed and Co. have that same day been using them to blackmail Sir Leicester. Dickens's Working Plans for this scene bear the note "Mr. Guppy's magnanimity" (799).

Guppy may exercise great skill and ingenuity in putting together the details of the story of Lady Dedlock and Hawdon and Esther, but he remains woefully without any insight into himself and his position. Accordingly, when he finally becomes an attorney and is sure of his

worldly prospects, he does not hesitate to renew his proposal to Esther, seemingly having overcome his repugnance and reverting to a cherished role. He proudly states then that her image has not been "eradicated from [his] art" as he had supposed (756). He is quite bewildered when he is turned down.

Guppy, therefore, is hardly a caricature, and his detailed presentation is far from being extraneous in the narrative. Indeed, he is a central figure in the plot, and there is no need to take an uneasy pleasure in a supposedly dubious fictional presence in an important text. His significance, moreover, is not one that we 'construct' in seeking overall coherence, but is impressed on us by the narrative itself. It is he who makes the connection between Lady Dedlock and Esther and so brings about the convergence of the two seemingly separate narratives when Lady Dedlock reveals herself to her daughter. And he is the one who is behind Lady Dedlock's flight to her death when he warns her that Sir Leicester has met the blackmailing group. Furthermore, the idea of connection is also a major theme in the novel, as disease is made to link Tom-all-Alone's and other slums to Bleak House and fashionable London areas.

In *Little Dorrit*, Flora Finching's comic formula is at once established in all its unstoppable flow of associative abandon. One short example of this must suffice:

> "And to think of Doyce and Clennam, and who Doyce can be," said Flora; "delightful man no doubt and married perhaps or perhaps a daughter, now has he really? then one understands the partnership and sees it all, don't tell me anything about it for I know I have no claim to ask the question the golden chain that once was forged being snapped and very proper. […]
>
> Dear Arthur—force of habit, Mr. Clennam every way more delicate and adapted to existing circumstances—I must beg to be excused for taking the liberty of this intrusion but I thought I might so far presume upon old times for ever faded never more to bloom as to call […] to congratulate and offer best wishes. A great deal superior to China, not to be denied and much nearer though higher up!" (268).

That reference to China and "higher up" is inimitable, relating as it does to the step-ladder she has just climbed to Clennam's office.

Little need be said about the constituents of Flora's comic formula not only because it is so directly expressive but because the narrator says it all in charting Clennam's exasperated reactions to her. She is "diffuse and silly" (150); she never "[comes] to a full stop" (151); she interweaves "their long-abandoned boy and girl relations" with the present in an "inconsistent and profoundly unreasonable way" (153-54); she is "disjointed and voluble" (269); she "[plunges] over head and ears into loquacity" (282); and she holds forth "in a most distracting manner on a chaos of subjects" (684). It would appear that the author himself was still smarting from the real-life experience on which Flora is based.

Like Guppy, however, though in a less complex manner, Flora is not one-sided. She has a capacity that he notably lacks for real self-knowledge. On the memorable occasion when news of Mr. Dorrit's fortune is broken to Little Dorrit, she heartily congratulates her "from the bottom" of her heart, though, she adds, she is "sensible of [often] blundering and being stupid" (416). And unlike Guppy she can accurately register the reactions of others. She immediately takes in that Clennam is "disappointed" in her on their first meeting, adding she well knows she is "not what [he] expected" (153). She also at once intuits Little Dorrit's situation, responding to her with an innate kindness of disposition when she gives her employment, generously supplies her with food, and presses her face between her hands "like the gentlest of women" (281). Furthermore, she takes in Little Dorrit's account of her life "with a natural tenderness that quite [understands] it, and in which there [is] no incoherence" (287). In addition she tends "to be always honest" when she gives herself time to think about it (286). Finally, she even conquers her own fixation and, prior to the marriage of Clennam and Little Dorrit, not only grants that her "visions have for ever fled and all is cancelled," but manages to rise above herself and "heartily" wishes the couple well (819).

Flora, then, like Guppy, unexpectedly turns out to be more than a caricature with a comic formula that is detailed over and over again with thick particularity. Indeed, she is seen from a sufficiently varied

number of angles to take on a roundness of form that is not merely attributable to her fondness for porter and “a great deal of sherry” (158). Unlike Guppy, however, she has no significant role in the plot, though she does occupy what appears to be a carefully chosen position in the narrative. The opening 150 pages or so of *Little Dorrit* must be among the darkest and most depressed in Dickens’s work. This prevailing dismalness is broken with Flora’s first appearance, and she continues to figure as a needed counterbalance throughout this dour, grim book. It is notable too that, of all the characters in the novel, it is Flora who figures in the scene that immediately precedes the final episode of the marriage. Moreover, she is in no way extraneous to a number of thematic threads. She is stuck in the past, like a very Barnacle to a post, not to mention major characters such as Mr. Dorrit and Mrs Clennam. And if she so “[runs] away with an idea” (536) that she never gets anywhere, the Circumlocution Office might easily accommodate her. One has to be very careful, it appears, not to make quick assumptions about the nature of Dickens’s art—as I would appear to have done some forty years ago.

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