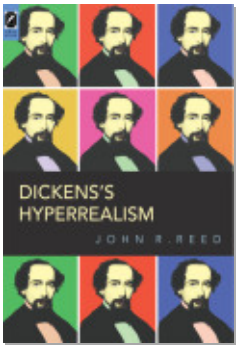
Chapter 5. Dickens and Personification



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CHAPTER 5

Dickens and Personification

George Ford wrote that at the height of Dickens's career, there was a general growing appreciation of the esthetics of fiction along with a growing demand for realism in the novel, which created a tendency for critics to misvalue the developments in Dickens's own writing (128). Though Dickens employed many nonrealist techniques, one feature of his writing that might have been off-putting for a critic demanding greater realism was his frequent use of personification. What figurative device is less conducive to realism than personification, so deeply connected to unrealistic genres such as allegory and fable? Although Dickens was fully aware of his fanciful use of personification in his fiction, he also used the device frequently in his personal discourse.

This tendency surfaces early in Dickens's career, sometimes with amusing irony. Referring to an essay for *Bentley's Miscellany,* Dickens wrote to Theodore Martin, "The Dying Student is also at the Printer's. I will look him up, and entomb him in the February number" (*Letters* I, 479). The personification of a piece of writing is not remarkably original, but to transform publication into entombment is. Rodney Stenning Edgecombe has examined personification in Dickens, but his approach is to discuss abstractions made concrete, such as Mendicity. He also makes an interesting observation about how alert Dickens was to the

whole idea of personification, by pointing out that Dickens converts an idle personification—the allegory of the pointing Roman on Tulkinghorn's ceiling in *Bleak House*—to a functional one (232–33).

In this chapter, however, I emphasize the animating quality of personification and am not interested in locutions such as "blind justice," which offer embodiments of abstractions, or "Heep was the personification of guile," which offers an individual as an abstract model. Instead, I shall demonstrate that Dickens combines personification and deanimation as companion devices to emphasize the way in which human existence may be perceived as hyperreal, hence constituting an implied resistance to the realist movement, for which personification was not an acceptable tool. That his tendency to this form of personification was part of Dickens's worldview is evident in some of his public statements. In an address at a banquet in his honor at Hartford on February 7, 1842, he stated his belief that nothing is high because it is in a high place, and that nothing is low because it is in a low one, and then added:

> This is a lesson taught us in the great book of nature. This is the lesson which may be read, alike in the bright track of the stars, and in the dusty course of the poorest thing that drags its tiny length upon the ground. This is the lesson ever uppermost in the thoughts of that inspired man, who tells us that there are
>
> Tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
> Sermons in stones, and good in everything. (*Speeches* 24)

For Dickens, all of existence, both animate and inanimate, contained a kind of spirit that the human imagination could release. Dorothy Van Ghent notably called attention to this practice in "The Dickens World: A View from Todgers's," stating that "[t]he course of things demonically possessed is to imitate the human, while the course of human possession is to imitate the inhuman" (213). She stresses, as I do, not only the animation of the inanimate, but the deanimating of the living. She offers many examples, of which the following is one instance. "Those who have engaged, as Grandfather Smallweed has, in the manipulation of their fellows as if they were things, themselves develop thing-attributes, like Podsnap, the capitalist, who has hair-brushes on his head instead of hair . . ." (214). Raymond Williams also notes that "the characteristics of houses and of people are consciously exchanged" in Dickens's fiction, providing "a way of seeing the city as a destructive animal" (159). Harvey Peter Sucksmith states that animism and a sense of force permeating things is typical of introverted vision, which he argues is part of Dickens's makeup (345). This may be so, but my claim here is that Dickens consciously

employed the device of personification or animation to create a literature that feels free to exceed the limits of realism and to stimulate a similar kind of animating activity in his readers.[1]

An early and simple instance of my sense of personification occurs in *The Pickwick Papers.* I choose this particular example because it combines humans, other living creatures, and inanimate things all contained in one modal presentation.

> The morning which broke upon Mr. Pickwick's sight, at eight o'clock, was not at all calculated to elevate his spirits, or to lessen the depression which the unlooked-for result of his embassy inspired. The sky was dark and gloomy, the air was damp and raw, the streets were wet and sloppy. The smoke hung sluggishly above the chimney-tops as if it lacked the courage to rise, and the rain came slowly and doggedly down, as if it had not even the spirit to pour. A game-cock in the stable-yard, deprived of every spark of his accustomed animation, balanced himself dismally on one leg in a corner; a donkey, moping with drooping head under the narrow roof of an outhouse, appeared from his meditative and miserable countenance to be contemplating suicide. In the street, umbrellas were the only things to be seen, and the clicking of pattens and splashing of rain-drops, were the only sounds to be heard. (713)

In this passage, which opens chapter 51, Dickens starts us out with his central character, noting his depressed mood. He then proceeds to an ordinary description of the weather, but soon modulates into a projection of human agency onto smoke and rain, though this agency appropriately mirrors Mr. Pickwick's gloomy mood. Having thus animated smoke and rain, he turns to animals, attributing to them similar bad human moods, with the alarming prospect of the donkey considering suicide. Having taken us to this extreme point, Dickens returns to straightforward description, with the forceful detail of the clicking pattens. While seeming to be a description of the day, the passage is actually an improvisation on Mr. Pickwick's subjective state. This extending of a human mood to the nonhuman world is a technique that Dickens used throughout his career, often in his descriptions of buildings, whose windows are blind eyes, and who must sometimes, as in *Little Dorrit,* lean on crutches to support themselves. The technique, even with the moderating "as ifs," is one that calls attention to the way in which humans construct the world around them according to their moods, a perception that Dickens inherited from the Romantic writers who had called attention to the positive, restorative aspects of this human tendency, but also to its negative qualities. Drawing upon John Ruskin, the New Critics referred to this tendency as the Pathetic Fallacy. It would be frowned upon in realistic writing.

I believe that Dickens was well aware of what he was doing and was able to amuse himself with the idea. An extreme example of such play, also from *Pickwick,* occurs not as a mere figure of speech, but as a core part of plot. In chapter 14, a bagman tells the story of Tom Smart, who stops at a country inn and takes a fancy to the widow who owns it, though she is already apparently being courted by "a tall man—a very tall man—in a brown coat and bright basket buttons, and black whiskers, and wavy black hair . . ." (181). Tom thinks how nice it would be to marry the widow and become owner of the inn while he is having five tumblers of hot punch before retiring to bed. In his room, Tom is particularly struck by "a strange, grim-looking high-backed chair" with "legs carefully tied up in red cloth, as if it had got the gout in its toes" (183). This description already hints at personification, for the chair has traces of character in the opening adjectives, and the reference to its possible gout intensifies the tendency. Later, Tom awakes from a dream and immediately focuses on the chair again. He tries to go back to sleep, but can only see chairs dancing before his eyes, so he opens them. And now something peculiar indeed occurs.

> Tom gazed at the chair; and, suddenly as he looked at it, a most extraordinary change seemed to come over it. The carving of the back gradually assumed the lineaments and expression of an old shrivelled human face; the damask cushion became an antique, flapped waistcoat; the round knobs grew into a couple of feet, encased in red cloth slippers; and the old chair looked like a very ugly old man, of the previous century, with his arms akimbo. (183–84)

Here is personification with a vengeance! What's more, Tom actually engages in conversation with the chair, which comes around to the subject of the landlady, the chair remarking on her attractions. "Here the old fellow screwed up his eyes, cocked up one of his wasted little legs, and looked altogether so unpleasantly amorous that Tom was quite disgusted with the levity of his behaviour . . ." (185). The chair recounts his youthful romantic adventures, noting that women were always fond of him, but soon gets to the point of his conversation. He wants Tom to marry the widow because the tall man is an adventurer, who would sell all the furniture and abscond, leaving the old chair himself to waste away in some broker's shop, whereas he knows that Tom would never leave the inn while there was anything left to drink there. To aid Tom, therefore, the chair tells him of a letter that reveals Jinkins, the tall man, to be already married. The next morning, Tom cannot draw the chair into conversation, but does find the letter, and with it informs the widow of the true situation and eventually marries her himself. At the end of the story there is discussion among its immediate audience whether

it was believed to be true, and the bagman says Tom himself declared it was.

The personification in this tale is literally acted out, though the discussion about its verity calls its truthfulness into question for Dickens's reader. Garrett Stewart some time ago called attention not only to Dickens's inclination to personification, but also to his self-consciousness about it. Stewart writes of Tom's story:

> In the sober light of day, "it must have been a remarkably ingenious and lively imagination, that could have discovered any resemblance between it and an old man." Dickens himself, of course, has just such an imagination, and the whole tale seems to have unrolled from a simple instance of his typical descriptive trick—the animation of lifeless objects. (*Dickens and the Trials* 41)

Stewart gives an instance of Dickens's self-consciousness about the animating power of his mind by citing a passage from "The Parlour Orator" ("Characters," *Sketches* 5). Praise for the narrator's oratorical abilities follows his speech, after which the company disbands, leaving him alone with his mind. What takes place is an unusual revelation:

> "If we had followed the established precedent in all such instances, we should have fallen into a fit of musing, without delay . . . and we should have gone dreaming on, until the pewter pot on the table, or the little beer-chiller on the fire, had started into life, and addressed to us a long story of days gone by. But, by some means or other, we were not in a romantic humour; and although we tried very hard to invest the furniture with vitality, it remained perfectly unmoved, obstinate, and sullen." (17)

Stewart notes that Dickens has failed in this effort because of the false rhetoric of another speaker; such false rhetoric is an enemy of romantic fancy.

In *Versions of Pygmalion,* J. Hillis Miller argues that all story telling is an act of prosopopoeia, "the ascription to entities that are not really alive first of a name, then of a face, and finally, in a return to language, of a voice" (5). The author and narrator create living characters out of nothing living, just as Pygmalion creates his statue of a woman, which takes on real life as Galatea. Miller argues that characters thus created take on a life of their own and thus escape the dominion of both author and narrator, for the reader also performs an act of prosopopoeia by giving life to mere markings on a page. Dickens seems to have intuited, in Tom Smart's case, the insight that Miller has worked out logically. He, as author, has created a narrator who brings Tom Smart to life, who in turn brings the chair to life. But Dickens also

implies in this episode his own interest in retaining control of his begotten Galateas, for just as Tom makes use of the chair to achieve the fulfillment of his own desires, so the bagman achieves his purpose in conveying an amazing tale, which leaves him still in a position of narrative power. Though his audience are left doubting whether they have Pygmalion's power to make these characters real or to discount them as frauds, this abeyance, in turn, leaves Dickens, not the reader, in control of the interpolated tale and its context in the larger narrative.

And yet the bagman has told his tale with realistic detail and engaging humor that makes it a success as a story, with the one exception of the talking chair, which should place it outside the realm of realism. Personification is a literary device that does not sit well with realistic literature. Metaphors and similes can be recognized as tropes common to ordinary language, and often seen as necessary to clear communication, but personification serves no such utilitarian end, operating largely for its own effects.[2] In the bagman's tale the talking chair makes the truthfulness of the tale impossible as a realistic narrative. Thus, at the outset of his career, Dickens very clearly notes the antagonism between personification and realistic narrative, and chooses sides. He is not deeply interested in realism, despite the acclaim he received, and continues to receive, for the detailed realism of his writing. Rather, like Jack Bamber, who narrates a tale himself later in *Pickwick,* Dickens wishes to depict "'the romance of life, sir, the romance of life!'" (279).

In midcareer, Dickens made another memorable use of personification in a narrative that was clearly not intended to be realistic. I refer to *A Christmas Carol.* Scrooge returns to his chambers on Christmas Eve. "They were a gloomy suite of rooms, in a lowering pile of building up a yard, where it had so little business to be, that one could scarcely help fancying it must have run there when it was a young house, playing at hide-and-seek with other houses, and forgotten the way out again" (14). This personification is qualified by the fact that it is merely fancied, but it has particular point, since just before this description, we have been told that Bob Crachitt has hurried home to play at blindman's buff. The old house is long past play now, as is Scrooge, but in the overall atmosphere of the story, the house's fate seems to foretell the mood that would fall upon the Crachitts if Tiny Tim died. And the theme of death is immediately raised by a more startling personification, for Scrooge comes to his door and undergoes a shock.

> And then let any man explain to me, if he can, how it happened that Scrooge, having his key in the lock of the door, saw in the knocker, without its undergoing any intermediate process of change—not a knocker, but Marley's face. (15)

This might not be considered true personification, because the knocker does not have an identity of its own. Nonetheless, an inanimate object takes on human qualities—very specific human qualities. There is a further irony in this apparition, since it was customary in Victorian times to muffle door knockers when there was illness or death in a house; instead, Marley perversely appears alive again as a knocker. This irony highlights the conflict between personification and realism. Scrooge does not want to believe in the visions he experiences, and tells Marley's ghost when it appears: "'There's more of gravy than of grave about you, whatever you are!'" (18). He does not wish to believe in what is not realistic, yet he is forced to endure an experience that is well beyond the range of the real. Before he encountered the knocker, Scrooge was described as lacking any fancy, but, for Dickens, fancy—the capacity to use one's imagination—was essential to a satisfactory life.[3] Personification is a striking manifestation of a fanciful mind, and thus an endorsement for Dickens's preferred mode of narrating.

The episode with Marley and the knocker is adumbrated in the sketch "Our Next-Door Neighbour," in *Sketches by Boz,* which opens with the narrator's theory of door knockers. He asserts "that between the man and his knocker, there will inevitably be a greater or less degree of resemblance and sympathy" (40). A large round lion-faced knocker is invariably owned by a convivial fellow, but a small attorney or bill-broker will patronize a knocker lion with a "countenance expressive of savage stupidity"—it is "a great favourite with the selfish and brutal" (40). Little spare priggish men prefer "a little pert Egyptian knocker, with a long thin face, a pinched-up nose, and a very sharp chin" (40). This amusing identification of human character with door knockers is not personification, but it demonstrates Dickens's ready penchant for aligning the animate and the inanimate. It also makes explicit the function of passages like the one from *Pickwick* with which I began this chapter. Just as Pickwick's mood is extended to the animate and inanimate things around him, so men extend their characters to their doorknockers.

Various critics have called attention to certain tensions in Dickens's fiction that I believe are relevant here. Susan Horton notes the mechanical use of repetition in Dickens's fiction, while also indicating that Dickens greatly disliked what appeared mechanical (100ff). She draws the conclusion that: "Since sameness or stasis is the beginning of the death of feeling, the Victorians love its opposite: violent contrasts" (107). And Dickens satisfies that love by constantly shifting modes of presentation. John Kucich makes a related observation. "In effect, by absorbing machine-like language into his own narration, Dickens out-machines the machine, performing with the very impersonal linguistic energy he can at the same time condemn in his characters" (214).[4] For me, the tension between the repetitions

either rhetorical or diegetic is of a piece with Dickens's dramatic vision of a world both perilous and safe, comprehensible and mysterious, good and evil. Susan Horton puts it differently, but tending in the same direction. She says that Dickens diverts the reader with an unending parade of miscellaneous human beings, but they remind us of exactly those things we most need to escape from (65). The consequence of this "struggle" in Dickens's fiction is ordinarily a happy ending, with even the ghosts that haunt characters helping them to a better comprehension of their place in the world. Hence Marley's face animating the knocker is prelude to an experience that will open a metaphorical doorway into an improved future for Scrooge. I believe that personification, the animation of inanimate objects, is related to this overall narrative drive.

On the borderline with actual personification is another form of identification with the inanimate closely related to the house owner and his door knocker. This is the interest in objects for their own sake. A very simple example of this approach also appears early in *Sketches by Boz* in "Shops and Their Tenants," where the narrator follows with personal interest, his "old friend," a certain building holding various shops in succession in its progress through decline to degradation. It is almost like following the moral decline of a fellow human, although the building is seen more as a victim than an agent of that decline. More intimate yet is the connection so acutely examined by J. Hillis Miller between clothing and its former owners in the sketch "Meditations in Monmouth Street," mentioned in a previous chapter, where the narrator imagines the kinds of people who wore the various items of clothing and even creates brief stories of their lives (Miller, *Sketches* 1ff). The articles of clothing themselves do not take on life, but recall what is metonymically associated with them. They are Galateas now once more returned to stone.

"Meditations in Monmouth Street" is a *tour de force* of creative reportage and meant to be perceived as such, but Dickens uses a similar technique in his fiction, sometimes to very complicated effect. Dickens was as much given to deanimating the human as he was to animating the nonhuman, a version of the contrast between mechanism and dynamism mentioned above. There are intriguing examples of this method in *Dombey and Son*. Dombey is a man unconcerned with the imagination and devoted to material things, especially those involved with commerce, especially money, so it is not surprising that when his son is born he anticipates passing on his wealth and his name to him. His daughter, Florence, however, he regards, because she is a girl, as "merely a piece of base coin . . ." (3). Dickens can, here and elsewhere in the novel, slyly reveal the mindsets of his characters through such deanimations (just as he can with their animations). But the narrator himself is already at

work to prepare the reader for outcomes of the plot through his own animations, particularly in his description of Dombey himself on the first page of the novel. "On the brow of Dombey, Time and his brother Care had set some marks, as on a tree that was to come down in good time—remorseless twins they are for striding through their human forests, notching as they go . . ." (1). Not only has Dombey been transformed into a tree, as though he were a figure out of Ovid's *Metamorphosis,* but the abstractions Time and Care have assumed human characters as though they were in an allegory such as *Pilgrim's Progress.* But even more significant is the proleptic hint that the upright tree is destined for a fall—something that is delayed until Dombey's ruin near the end of the novel. Elsewhere, Dombey is described as wooden or as a piece of statuary. At a dinner dreadful to others, "Mr. Dombey alone remained unmoved. He might have been hung up for sale at a Russian fair as a specimen of a frozen gentleman" (57). He may retain his human form, but the great merchant has been transformed into an inanimate being now an object for a commercial venture, not its organizer. Earlier in the novel Dombey is likened to money itself; he "was one of those close-shaved close-cut moneyed gentlemen who are glossy and crisp like new bank-notes, and who seem to be artificially braced and tightened as by the stimulating action of golden shower-baths" (17). Dombey's stiffness is associated not only with his concern for wealth, but also with his pride and egotism. Also greatly given to egotism is another unappealing character Major Bagstock, who is also "wooden-featured" (83).

If negative characters have their animation compromised by various tropes, a livelier figure in the novel is the nonhuman wooden midshipman, "which thrust itself out above the pavement, right leg foremost, with a suavity the least endurable," who represents the true domestic sanctuary of Sol Gill's shop (32). Hence, while humans are turned into wood, wood has conferred upon it pert but attractive qualities that suggest the kind of long-lasting fidelity and integrity manifested by both Sol and Captain Cuttle. This is clearly not accidental writing, but coding with a vengeance. At the same time, the wooden midshipman can mimic the traits of humans. Both Dombey and Bagstock are depicted as relatively heartless men, and the wooden midshipman can behave as they do.

> The Wooden Midshipman at the Instrument-maker's door, like the hard-hearted little midshipman he was, remained supremely indifferent to Walter's going away, even when the very last day of his sojourn in the back parlour was on the decline. With his quadrant at his round black knob of an eye, and his figure in its old attitude of indomitable alacrity, the midshipman displayed his elfin small clothes to the best advantage, and, absorbed in

> scientific pursuits, had no sympathy with worldly concerns. (258)

Of course, a wooden midshipman may be forgiven for remaining heartless, since he truly is made of wood, but he stands out as an indictment against the unfeeling men in the novel who have pulsing hearts, but do not heed them. Dickens thus uses animation in a way prohibited to realism, for it works toward the intensifying of his novel's scheme, and emphasizes its fanciful over its factual elements.

More striking yet in the way of deanimating humans and animating the nonliving is *Hard Times,* the opening of which offers a sophisticated example of dehumanization and personification engaged in a hand-to-hand struggle. Thomas Gradgrind has been speaking about the necessity for facts.

> The emphasis was helped by the speaker's square wall of a forehead, which had his eyebrows for its base, while his eyes found commodious cellarage in two dark caves, overshadowed by the wall. The emphasis was helped by the speaker's mouth, which was wide, thin, and hard set. The emphasis was helped by the speaker's voice, which was inflexible, dry, and dictatorial. The emphasis was helped by the speaker's hair, which bristled on the skirts of his bald head, a plantation of firs to keep the wind from its shining surface, all covered with knobs, like the crust of a plum pie, as if the head had scarcely warehouse-room for the hard facts stored inside. The speaker's obstinate carriage, square coat, square legs, square shoulders—nay, his very neckcloth, trained to take him by the throat with an unaccommodating grasp, like a stubborn fact, as it was—all helped the emphasis. (7)

Here is an apt way to open a novel whose theme is the conflict of Fact (or Realism) and Fancy. The spokesman for fact has his human qualities obscured. His forehead is a wall overshadowing a cellarage. His sparse hair is a line of trees to protect the bald surface of his head, which itself is knobbed with projections like those on the crust of a plum pie. All of these images dehumanize Gradgrind, but they are energetically at war with one another as well, for the softness of the crust of the pie seems to belie the stoniness of the forehead. However, this is just one sly way of indicating that the rigidity of belief in facts has a similar fault. The facts stored in the warehouse of Gradgrind's mind are pushing through the pulpy surface of his head. The mind is better served by containing some airier ballast of fancy. And facts themselves seem to know this better than the philosophers who promote their hegemony, for, in the personification of the neckcloth, they take the living man by the throat as though to strangle him and deprive him of life—the ultimate dehumanization.

The narrator anticipates the negative characters themselves by appropriating their inhuman perspective and applying it to them just before he discloses what their outlook is. The three fact-worshipping men in this scene "swept with their eyes the inclined plane of little vessels then and there arranged in order, ready to have imperial gallons of facts poured into them until they were full to the brim" (7–8). These men feel that walls decorated with horses or carpets with flowers are unacceptable because they violate the principle of realism. It is clear from the outset of *Hard Times,* that Dickens will himself engage in a battle against such realism by using the tools of fairy tale, exotic narratives, and other resources of fancy, as he makes clear with his apostrophe to Mr. M'Choakumchild, himself, like other schoolmasters, "lately turned at the same time, in the same factory, on the same principles, like so many pianoforte legs" (12).

> He went to work, in this preparatory lesson, not unlike Morgiana in the Forty Thieves: looking into all the vessels ranged before him, one after another, to see what they contained. Say, good M'Choakumchild. When from thy boiling store thou shalt fill each jar brimful by-and-by, dost thou think that thou wilt always kill outright the robber Fancy lurking within—or sometimes only maim him and distort him? (12)

Here Dickens turns the tables on the fact men. While they perceived the children merely as vessels, Dickens now appropriates those vessels and puts the living if maimed spirit of Fancy back into them, using as his medium *The Arabian Nights,* a text the adults would abominate as nothing but Fancy.

If disagreeable humans are thus deanimated, the unappealing city of Coketown is contrarily given life. Its walls are "red and black like the painted face of a savage," and from its tall chimneys come "interminable serpents of smoke," while the pistons of the steam engine work up and down "like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness" (22). If these unliving things are brought to life, it is not a promising life, but a foreign and threatening place, suggestive of an Indian tropical forest. The negative effect of Coketown and its owners (the fact men) is made manifest at the end of the novel when Tom Gradgrind appears with a painted face to help effect his escape from the law in a foreign country where he dies of a fever. This could be the West Indies, India, or any other part of the British empire, but the early ominous description of Coketown forecasts and hovers over young Tom's fate.

Two instances of the inanimate world taking on human powers in a minatory way occur in *Bleak House.* One is the third-person narrator's warning that the slum Tom-All-Alone will have its revenge on those who have occa-

sioned its neglect. The other is the clock that speaks out, telling the doomed Tulkinghorn "Don't go home." Both instances clearly violate the spirit of realism and do so self-consciously. Dickens wants his readers to think of the natural and the man-made world as having a meaning that is discoverable by the imagination, not merely by reason and the interpretation of facts. Virgil Grillo remarks that "Dickens' novels offer us a world where character and object merge; where symbolic identifications are more than comments on human personality; character and symbol merge in an almost totemic system" (211). Metonymy, such a valuable tool for the realists, here becomes not merely identification of a character with some object, but a merging with it, an assumption of its nonhuman traits.[5] But the opposite is also true, as human traits are transferred to objects. Mildred Newcome argues that Dickens's mode of experience can be visualized as a figured tapestry or pictorial scroll interpreting life, containing allegorical people, emblematic places, and so forth (2ff). She contends that internal and external realities blend in the interpretation of experience. For her, Dickens knows that he is reweaving parts or all of the total allegory of the pilgrimage of life (189). I agree that Dickens's narratives share certain qualities with allegory, though they never become precisely that. Nonetheless, his bestowing on humans traits associated with inanimate life and his personification of the inanimate, resemble that feature of allegory that makes humans and objects manifestations of moral traits. In *The Pilgrim's Progress,* which Dickens knew and loved, a wicket is not merely a wicket, but a gateway into a new life. A broom is not merely a broom, but an instrument of human imagination.

I want to end and summarize with a few brief examples from *The Uncommercial Traveller* that illustrate Dickens's tendency to exchange human and nonhuman traits in a way that works against a simple realist practice. I choose *The Uncommercial Traveller* as a source because these essays, like the *Sketches by Boz* can easily be taken as realistic reportage, though I believe there is a hint at the romantic side of everyday things in the "Uncommercial" part of the title. The title of the essay "Shy Neighborhoods" already suggests a transfer of human qualities to nonhuman space. It turns out largely to be a study of animals. The narrator calls attention to the bad company birds keep and makes similar comments on donkeys and dogs. Cats, he observes, tend toward barbarism in shy neighborhoods. But what interests me most in this essay is the narrator's observation that there are certain dogs who keep people. This reversal of the "natural" order is conspicuous. Dickens self-consciously shocks his readers out of the normal expectation that animals will be "kept" by humans. It is a conscious part of Dickens's literary arsenal.

In "The City of the Absent" the Uncommercial Traveller meditates on all of the empty locations, such as banks, that people do not go to on Sunday

as though they were acquaintances neglected, while in "Arcadian London," which also deals with a London emptied of many of its citizens in August, the narrator muses on the grim dentist's room that is now doing penance. These places are treated as humanlike not because they metonymically suggest their human counterparts; they are humanized precisely because no humans are there to compete with them. It is the absence of humans that calls up in the narrator's imagination the possible humanity of nonhuman entities.

Finally, in "Aboard Ship," generally a very straightforward account of the narrator's experiences on a ship crossing the Atlantic from New York to Liverpool, one passage sharply calls attention to itself and shifts the moral register of the whole piece. Early in the essay the narrator recalls odd church services that once were practiced aboard ship. A little later he argues that, despite temperance opponents, there is no harm in the distribution of grog to sailors. These references to issues that fall within the realm of morality take on a different cast when the narrator describes the constant noise of the screw propeller as like the voice of conscience, always there. Soon after, as though prompted by a bad conscience himself, he ponders the many dangers of sea travel. Turning the inanimate propeller into a moral guide is precisely the kind of trick Dickens often uses to defamiliarize his material for his readers and make them take notice. What is a little taking of grog in the large scale of moral behavior when your life itself might be in the balance? If our conscience must always be working, let it work on serious matters.

Some time ago, J. Hillis Miller wrote a brilliant study of *Sketches by Boz.* I have already referred to his treatment of "Meditations in Monmouth Street." Elsewhere I differ with Miller concerning Dickens's use of metonymy, but I agree with the following passage.

> If a movement from things to people to stories is the habitual structural principle of the *Sketches,* the law which validates this movement is the assumption of a necessary similarity between a man, his environment, and the life he is forced to lead within that environment. (14)

What I have argued in this chapter is that Dickens was fully aware of his own perception of the relationship of persons to places and things, and one way for him to make his readers aware of this relationship as well was to exchange human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate traits within his narratives. So humans lose some of their humanity and become wooden like trees, or dark and forbidding like caves, while chairs and buildings take on the ability to speak or to become ill and infirm. Some of the most interesting instances of this practice are points of amalgamation, such as the wooden advertising

sign in the form of a midshipman—where the wood has a human form and is credited with human behavioral traits—or Marley's face that appears as a door knocker. In these instances, the genuinely human and the genuinely nonhuman merge, with the balance toward the latter in the midshipman and toward the former with Marley. But in both instances, and as a regular aspect of his writing, Dickens was trying to demonstrate his narrative control over his readers by exceeding the self-imposed limits of literary realism, and employing techniques related to emotions deeply embedded in the human imagination. He did not want to be a mere realist, master though he was of many of its techniques. He wanted rather to be something closer to a magus.