The Grotesque in the Fiction of Charles Dickens and Other 19th-century European Novelists

The Grotesque in the Fiction of Charles Dickens and Other 19th-century European Novelists

Edited by

Isabelle Hervouet-Farrar
and Max Vega-Ritter

The Grotesque in the Fiction of Charles Dickens and Other 19th-century European Novelists

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Part III: Resisting and Negotiating Change

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Introduction

The Grotesque in the Nineteenth Century

Isabelle Hervouet-Farrar

"Real and apparent contradictions abound in discussions of the grotesque; it is an extremely flexible category" (Harpham 1976, 464). Whoever reads into the bulk of criticism attached to the grotesque will see instability as the first defining characteristic of an aesthetic category which Baudelaire called "this indefinable element of beauty […] that obscure and mysterious element" (Baudelaire 1956, 132). The purpose of this brief introduction is not to provide an exhaustive survey of the many nuances found in the exegesis of the grotesque, which would require a deep foray into historical, architectural, aesthetic and literary approaches, but to sketch in the theories deemed essential to a correct assessment of the prominence and meaning of the grotesque in the context of 19th-century European fiction. The grotesque was theorized in the 19th century notably by Hugo, Ruskin and Baudelaire, who shed light on its significance within Romanticism and Victorian realism. In the following century, the works of the two most influential critics of the grotesque, Wolfgang Kayser and Mikhail Bakhtin, taken together with the comprehensive analysis offered in the 1980s by Geoffrey Galt Harpham, offer a reasonably clear insight into the fundamentally ambivalent concept.

The grotesque famously borrows its name from the accident of the discovery around 1480 of the remains of Nero's *Domus Aurea* and its elaborate ornaments. Its meaning then gradually expanded from the designation of the decorative grotesque of the Renaissance to what may appear as a vague or all-inclusive category. Critics agree, however, on the central idea that the grotesque achieves the harmonious or hair-raising, but always impossible, fusion of heterogeneous elements. The word has come more prosaically to designate an unexpected mixture of comic and horror or of comic and disgust. Laughter is central, since distortion, even taken to

its extreme, is not grotesque without laughter. "For an object to be grotesque, it must arouse three responses. Laughter and astonishment are two; either disgust or horror is the third" (Harpham 1976, 463). Harpham's 1976 definition puts to the fore the idea that the grotesque originates in the viewer's gaze and isn't inherent in the grotesque object, an essential aspect which Baudelaire underlined as early as 1855: "Indian and Chinese idols are unaware that they are ridiculous; it is in us, Christians, that their comicality resides" (Baudelaire 1956, 142). To grasp the impact of the viewer's feeling of estrangement and his (at least initial) impossibility to make sense of the grotesque image, one must also remember that the grotesque emerges in a realistic context: "[The grotesque] threat depends for its effectiveness on the efficacy of the everyday, the partial fulfilment of our usual expectations. We must be believers whose faith has been profoundly shaken but not destroyed; otherwise we lose that fear of life and become resigned to absurdity, fantasy, or death" (Harpham 1976, 462).

Virginia Swain explains that "the history of the grotesque is usually described as falling rather neatly into two distinct moments. [...] The early grotesque has a carefree, utopian flavour," whereas "the grotesque that arises after the French Revolution," imbued with Romanticism, becomes the expression of "the artist's struggle to overcome feelings of 'helplessness and horror'" (Swain 2004, 3-4). This historical distinction may be too "neat,"[1] but it appealingly points to the traditional distinction between two modes of the grotesque: "the comic and the burlesque" on the one hand, "the abnormal and the horrible" on the other, to use Victor Hugo's terminology (Hugo 1910, 347). Each mode famously has its 20th-century champion: Mikhail Bakhtin and Wolfgang Kayser.

Kayser bases his 1957 analysis of *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* on the Romantic period and the 20th century. Starting from the observation that in the grotesque "the realm of inanimate things is no longer separated from those of plants, animals, and humans" (Kayser 1966, 21), he describes the grotesque as the inscription of familiar elements in a context in which they cease to be recognizable and become menacing, in a manner reminiscent of what Freud develops with *das Unheimliche*. In quite emphatic terms Kayser describes the grotesque world as radically and frighteningly alien, "nocturnal and inhuman" (157), destroying our faith in our world, "instill[ing] fear of life rather than fear of death" (185),

---

[1] The Dance of Death, an important grotesque motif, dates back to long before the Romantic period, and seems to have little "carefree flavour." Besides, as this volume will show, 19th-century grotesque is not concerned only with "helplessness and horror."

rendering us "unable to orient ourselves in the alienated world" (185). Grotesque art, a source of terror, is finally described as an "attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world" (188), though Kayser fails to clearly identify the "dark" or "ominous forces" (188) exorcised by grotesque art.

If Kayser consistently insists on disharmony and alienation, it is, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, because he is incapable of seeing the bigger picture, because he "offers the theory of the Romantic and modernist forms only" (Bakhtin 1984, 46). In 1965 Bakhtin thus goes further back in time to argue that the grotesque is not a post-Renaissance category. In his study of the popular sources of Rabelais's fiction he shows how "grotesque realism" (the literary grotesque) is rooted in medieval carnival culture and fed by festive, universal and ambivalent laughter. Just as medieval carnivals stage political or social inversion through humorous parodies of serious rituals, grotesque realism is based on "degradation […], the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract, […] a transfer to the material level" (19). Such degradation is seen by folk culture in cyclical terms, as part of a movement of universal regeneration celebrating "moments of death and revival, of change and renewal" (9). The emphasis of grotesque realism is placed on materiality and corporeality, "the body and the bodily life hav[ing] […] a cosmic […] character" (19). In folk culture, the grotesque body is "a principle of growth" (26), its "lower stratum" (21) a zone of sheer regenerative force.

Geoffrey Harpham's ground-breaking analysis sees beyond grotesque themes and styles to bring to the fore the idea that the grotesque ignores time to create "images of instantaneous process," or "narrative compressed into image" (Harpham 1982, 11). Harpham considers the two main periods of human history concerned with the grotesque: the grotesque of the Renaissance–"the *grottesche*"–and the "grotto-esque" or cave art. Of the Renaissance *grottesche*, he explains that it is characterised by the creation of human-animal or human-vegetal hybrids. Faced with such crossing of species the viewer is arrested between the possibility that it makes no sense and the idea that it means something he/she does not understand. This state of indecision is the grotesque experience. Of the "grotto-esque," Harpham shows how it presents the same crossing of species and reminds us that anthropologists have described hybridity in cave art as corresponding to a primitive, essentially mythic, vision of the world: the anthropomorphic figures are symbols of human-animal intercourse, or of ritual enactment of such union. The grotesque is thus the experience of perceiving "primitive elements in a modern context" (51) and not quite knowing what to make of such presence. As far as critics of the grotesque

are concerned, Harpham divides them between the "mythic-minded" like
Baudelaire and Bakhtin, who consider the grotesque as a positive force
because they perceive mythic or primitive elements as a source of
regeneration, and the "less mythic-minded," i.e. those who consider the
grotesque with fear and repulsion, like Kayser (69-76).

    The grotesque ignores time, but time does not ignore the grotesque:
"Each age redefines the grotesque in terms of what threatens its sense of
essential humanity" (Harpham 1976, 463). The diversity of sub-genres and
aesthetic categories on which 19th-century grotesque fed (caricature, the
macabre, drama, tragicomedy, etc.) bears witness to the century's passion
for the grotesque, both as an aesthetic category (considered by Hugo as
pivotal in the definition of modern literature) and as a way of investigating
reality, of questioning 19th-century political and social (r)evolutions.
French art-critic André Chastel explains that the hybridity of Renaissance
grotesque, "the antithesis of representation," could only appeal to
Romantic writers aspiring to creative freedom (Chastel 1988, 25). In 1827,
Victor Hugo's influential "Preface to *Cromwell*" turns into a passionate
defence of the grotesque as an artistic category: "And so, let addle-pated
pedants […] claim that the deformed, the ugly, the grotesque should never
be imitated in art; one replies that the grotesque is comedy, and that
comedy apparently makes a part of art" (Hugo 1910, 356). For Hugo, the
grotesque is a necessary ingredient of comedy, which he sees as a
combination of the sublime and the grotesque, because the grotesque is an
essential aspect of reality, of "all creation" (350): "everything in creation
is not humanly *beautiful*, […] the ugly exists beside the beautiful, the
unshapely beside the graceful, the grotesque on the reverse of the sublime,
evil with good, darkness with light" (345). If for Hugo the grotesque
testifies to man's imperfect nature, "the human beast" (350), it is not, as in
Ruskin, a sign of man's imperfect vision, which if removed would leave
only the sublime. Hugo's grotesque exists next to the sublime and is
necessary to man's apprehension of it, as "a halting-place, a mean term, a
starting-point whence one rises toward the beautiful with a fresher and
keener perception" (349). Hugo may describe the grotesque as inferior to
the beautiful or the sublime–in his view it remains, from an artistic point
of view, "the richest source that nature can offer art" (348).
    In 1853, in Part III, Chapter 3 of *Stones of Venice*, Ruskin "examine[s]
into the nature and essence of the Grotesque" (Ruskin 2009, 114) and
establishes two important distinctions. The first is between "sportive" (or
"playful") grotesque and "terrible grotesque." Ruskin thus writes: "The
grotesque is, in almost all cases, composed of two elements, one ludicrous,

the other fearful; […] as one or other of these elements prevails, the grotesque falls into two branches, sportive grotesque and terrible grotesque" (127). Both modes of the grotesque can be "noble" or "ignoble,"–the second distinction established by Ruskin. Ignoble grotesque is an illegitimate act of artistic creation, "work as false as it is monstrous, a mass of blunt malice and obscene ignorance" (150). Ruskin rejects the grotesque's inventive licence and is indignant at the apparent pointlessness of Renaissance ornamental grotesque in which he can discern no moral or spiritual truths. Ruskin thus logically sees Raphael's work as "the fruit of [a] great [mind] degraded to base objects" (144). For Ruskin, ornamentation must be "rational" (145).

His insistence on noble grotesque shows however that Ruskin has a positive vision of many forms of the grotesque. Even sportive grotesque, the product of "the minds of inferior workmen" (132), can be noble as "the fruits of a rejoicing energy in uncultivated minds" (134). Terrible grotesque, "this […] more interesting branch of imaginative work" (137), originates in fear, "the fear which arises out of the contemplation of great powers in destructive operation, and generally from the perception of the presence of death" (138). Fear of the divine is experienced by the artist or workman of noble grotesque; terrible grotesque, when noble, is thus contiguous to the sublime. If Ruskin agrees with Hugo that grotesque art remains the sign of man's imperfect vision and fallen nature, he doesn't share Hugo's conception of the grotesque as necessary to man's perception of the sublime. For Ruskin, the grotesque is always an imperfect artistic expression susceptible, as "the mind of the workman becomes informed with better knowledge, and capable of more earnest exertion" (145), of "pass[ing] into perfect sublime" (146).

In "On the Essence of Laughter" (1857), like Hugo, Baudelaire adopts a deeply Romantic approach to the grotesque.[2] Like Hugo and Ruskin, he sees the grotesque as the sign of man's fallen condition, since laughter is always the expression of "the Satanic in man" (Baudelaire 1956, 137). Baudelaire's analysis breaks new ground however in that he sees man's fallen nature in religious but also mythical terms. The grotesque is the primitive expression of an archaic past: "the laughter caused by the grotesque has about it something profound, primitive and axiomatic, […] [close] to the innocent life and to absolute joy" (144). From such a premise, Baudelaire distinguishes between absolute comic–the grotesque– and significative comic. "[Significative] comic is an imitation mixed with

---

[2] Baudelaire also expresses his love for European masters of the grotesque like Hogarth, Cruikshank or Goya in "Some Foreign Caricaturists" (see Baudelaire 1956-2).

a certain creative faculty" (143), whereas the grotesque, that "intoxication of laughter […] both terrible and irresistible" (148), is "a creation mixed with a certain imitative faculty–imitative, that is, of elements pre-existing in nature" (143) and the expression of the superiority "of man over nature" (143). The grotesque, Baudelaire seems to lament, is not produced by French artists because it is not suited to French mindsets: "In France, the land of lucid thought and demonstration, where the natural and direct aim of art is utility, we generally find the significative type" (145-6). The grotesque is however seen as a true European production:

> Germany, sunk in her dreams, will afford us excellent specimens of the absolute comic. There all is weighty, profound and excessive. To find true comic savagery, however, you have to cross the Channel and visit the foggy realms of spleen. Happy, noisy, carefree Italy abounds in the innocent variety. […] The Spaniards […] are quick to arrive at the cruel stage, and their most grotesque fantasies often contain a dark element. (146)

It is time for a quick visit to "the foggy realms of spleen" to say a few words about the grotesque of Dickens's fiction, in the wake of Michael Hollington's wide-ranging analysis (Hollington 1984). If Dickens was wary of high Romanticism,[3] be it English or European, he famously wished to explore "the Romantic side of familiar things"[4] and there found the grotesque. His "streaky bacon" conception of fiction, as expressed in Chapter 17 of *Oliver Twist*,[5] has a great deal in common with Hugo's vision of the Romantic drama: "[…] the romantic drama […] would lead the audience constantly from sobriety to laughter, from mirthful excitement to heart-breaking emotion […]. For the drama is the grotesque in conjunction with the sublime, the soul within the body; it is tragedy beneath comedy" (Hugo 1910, 383). Even leaving Hugo's definition aside, Dickens's art includes, or offers examples of, all the facets of the grotesque mentioned by 19th- and 20th-century theorists. Dickens's grotesque is alternately funny and violent, carefree and sinister. On the sunny side, and because "energy and joy are the father and mother of the grotesque," as G. K. Chesterton once wrote (Chesterton 2014, Chapter 6) Dickens shares Baudelaire's love of pantomime and indulges in sheer farce. On the

---

[3] See John 2001.
[4] A phrase found in his 1853 Preface to *Bleak House*.
[5] "It is the custom on the stage, in all good murderous melodramas, to present the tragic and the comic scenes, in as regular alternation, as the layers of red and white in a side of streaky bacon" (Dickens 1980, 168).

sombre side, he also shares Baudelaire's fascination with the dislocation, incongruity or ugliness of human bodies and constantly displays his awareness of the corporeality of the grotesque. If Bakhtin saw the grotesque body as a source of regeneration but seems to have failed to perceive its horror, fragmentation and dismemberment are often brought to the fore by Dickens, in whose fiction the hybrid, fragmented grotesque body is obsessively represented as a source of fascination, not untinged with repulsion and horror (for example Carker's teeth) or fun (the ubiquitous leg[6]).

Dickens's grotesque is rooted in the exploration of "the Romantic side of familiar things," and thus serves the representation of a new reality, bearing witness to his conviction that in the wake of the disruptions brought about by the advent of an industrial society, "'real life' is more grotesque and fantastical than anything the artistic imagination can produce" (Hollington 1984, ii). The incongruous distortion which characterizes the grotesque becomes an essential element of Dickens's faithful depiction of reality, and the contradiction is only apparent: Harpham reminds us that "by the end of the nineteenth century, it was more common than not to speak of the 'naturalness' of the grotesque."[7] The grotesque is not necessarily pure fantasy but serves for example to denounce the devastation caused by the industrial age: thus the "strange engines" of Chapter 45 of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, "like tortured creatures […] wild and […] untamed […], [screech] and [turn] round and round again" (Dickens 1985, 424). In Dickens's fiction, 19th-century reality becomes "grotesque and wild but not impossible" as he explains in the 1848 Preface to the novel (42).

"To think of Dickens in relation to the grotesque is almost inevitably to stray freely and frequently across national boundaries" (Hollington 1984, 7). This book thus proposes to address Dickens's use of the complex aesthetic category in relation with other 19th-century European writers of the grotesque. This crossing of geographical boundaries aims at providing a close look into the reasons behind the extensive use of such a favoured mode of expression. Rather than providing the reader with a mere survey, the chapters here use intertextuality and comparative or cultural analysis to shed light on Dickens's influences (both given and received) as well as to compare and contrast his use of the grotesque with that of other key

---

[6] See Chapter Twelve of present volume.
[7] This quote is from Harpham's preface to the 2006 edition of his 1982 book (Aurora: The Davies Group Publishers, xxv).

European writers like Victor Hugo and Charles Baudelaire, Nikolai Gogol, William Makepeace Thackeray and Thomas Hardy.

The first section is centred on the first half of the century and looks at the fundamental texts and techniques that shaped 19th-century novelists' conception of the grotesque, notably Dickens's. French specialist of the literary grotesque Dominique Peyrache-Leborgne insists on the visual dimension of the grotesque and the technical developments which made possible the emergence of the "iconotext," the grotesque combination of text and image explored to the full in Nodier's *L'Histoire du roi de Bohême et de ses sept châteaux* (1830), and in *Oliver Twist*. In Chapter 2 Sylvie Jeanneret also considers the visual facets of the grotesque. She analyses the spectacular staging of bodies in Victor Hugo's fiction and highlights its political dimension. Anne Rouhette then situates Dickens's love of Smollett in the context of their shared predilection for grotesque effects through the examples of the human-raven hybrid and the figure of the idiot. In Chapter 4 Dickens specialist Michael Hollington documents the impact that Dickens's 1844-5 trip to Italy had on his creation of grotesque characters in the *Christmas Books* and *Dombey and Son*, and suggests that Dickens's obsession with giants can be partly traced back to his visit of the *Sala dei Giganti* in Mantua's *Palazzo del Te.*

The second section looks into the grotesque as a strategy of representation of 19th-century reality. It focuses on how writers resorted to the grotesque as a strategy aiming at domesticating change, yoking together unconnected or antagonistic emotional, social and political drives and aspirations in order to verbalise and make sense of a fast-changing world. Thus Florence Clerc explains how Gogol used grotesque aesthetics to represent Russian reality as discordant and ambivalent, poised between carnivalesque and sombre distortion. The analysis of Gogol's grotesque expressivity, she argues, enables one to grasp his kinship with Dickens. In Chapter 6 Jacqueline Fromonot's close textual analysis of *The Book of Snobs* shows how Thackeray "truly builds an aesthetics and a poetics of the grotesque" in order to lampoon and denounce the false values of that particular section of British society. The birth of the modern metropolis, a key 19th-century grotesque motif, is then considered by both Bérangère Chaumont and Isabel Vila-Cabanes. Bérangère Chaumont examines how Nerval's perambulations in the Parisian night served as a pretext for putting literary realism to the test; Isabel Vila-Cabanes studies the many descriptions made by Dickens's and Baudelaire's *flâneurs* of the grotesque freaks populating the "uncanny metropolis." Both chapters insist on the fact that at textual level, only grotesque aesthetics were deemed suitable for rendering the paradoxes of modern urban experience. In Chapter 9

Max Véga-Ritter delineates the characteristics of Dickens's collective and individual grotesque monsters from *The Old Curiosity Shop* to *A Tale of Two Cities*. Finally Thierry Goater analyses Hardy's use of the grotesque in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, whose hybridity, he argues, is also generic, to show how the regenerative power of the grotesque enables the artist to "renew a perception dulled by habit" and unveil the monstrosity of the modern world.

The third section explores darker facets of the Romantic and Victorian grotesque as symbolic expression of resistance to change. The analysis ranges from the difficult confrontation with scientific discoveries–notably Darwin's theory of evolution–to the question of gender. In an essay on *The Mystery of Edwin Drood,* I have examined grotesque metamorphosis resulting from the unsettling permanence of the past in a modern context, due notably to the characters' rejection of progress. Fiction-writer and specialist of the Gothic Victor Sage explores Dickens's persistent fondness for the "Leg" and other body parts which crop up in his work, notably in *Our Mutual Friend*. Victor Sage situates Dickens's passion for paleontological tropes in the context of his allegiance to his friend Professor Owen, the famous expert in comparative anatomy. Also drawing on this allegiance, Delphine Cadwallader then contrasts Dickens's response to Darwin's theory of evolution with Wilkie Collins's. The two following chapters examine grotesque metamorphosis from the angle of gender. The common assumption that the female characters of Dickens's fiction who do not conform to Victorian stereotypes are to be read as grotesque is the central oversimplification corrected by Marianne Camus in Chapter 14. Gilbert Pham-Thanh then looks towards the early 20th century to explore grotesque masculinity in Max Beerbohm's *Zuleika Dobson* and to argue that in this novel, which belongs to the Oxford Novel tradition, grotesque deformity marks the disempowerment of patriarchy at diegetic and discursive levels. As a conclusion to this third section, Florence Bigo-Renault considers the renewed interest in the grotesque in very recent TV adaptations of the novels of the Dickens canon. Such renewed interest attests to the regenerative power of the grotesque–this distinctive feature of Dickens's work and of 19th-century European fiction.

References

Bakhtin, Mikhail. (1965) 1984. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Hélène Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Baudelaire, Charles. (1857) 1956. "On the Essence of Laughter." In *The Mirror of Art, Critical Studies by Charles Baudelaire.* Translated by Jonathan Mayne, 131-54. New York: Doubleday Anchor Books.

—. (1857) 1956. "A Few Foreign Caricaturists." In *The Mirror of Art, Critical Studies by Charles Baudelaire*, edited and translated by Jonathan Mayne, 179-90. New York: Doubleday & Co. [1956-2]

Chastel, André. 1988. *La Grottesque*. Paris: Editions Le Promeneur.

Chesterton, Gilbert Keith. (1903) 2014. *Robert Browning*. The Project Gutenberg eBook.
http://www.gutenberg.org/files/13342/13342-h/13342-h.htm

Dickens, Charles. (1837-9) 1980. *Oliver Twist*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

—. (1841) 1985. *The Old Curiosity Shop.* Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Harpham, Geoffrey Galt. 1976. "The Grotesque, First Principles." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 34, No. 4: 461-8.
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/430580. Accessed: 01/08/2012

—. 1982. *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Hollington, Michael. 1984. *Dickens and the Grotesque*. Beckenham (Kent): Croom Helm.

Hugo, Victor. (1827) 1910. "Preface to *Cromwell*." Translated by J.R. Effinger. In *Prefaces and Prologues to Famous Books*, edited by Eliot, Charles W., 337-87. New-York: P.F. Collier & Son.

John, Juliet. 2001. *Dickens's Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kayser, Wolfgang. (1957) 1966. *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*. Translated by Ulrich Weisstein. New-York: McGraw-Hill.

Ruskin, John. (1853) 2009. *Stones of Venice, Vol. III: The Fall*. The Project Gutenberg eBook.
http://gutenberg.readingroo.ms/3/0/7/5/30756/30756-h/30756-h.htm

Swain, Virginia. 2004. *Grotesque Figures: Baudelaire, Rousseau, and the Aesthetics of Modernity*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

PART I

INFLUENCES AND EARLY FORMS

CHAPTER ONE

L'HISTOIRE DU ROI DE BOHÊME AND OLIVER TWIST UNDER CRUIKSHANK'S PATRONAGE: THE DYNAMICS OF TEXT AND IMAGE AT THE CORE OF THE GROTESQUE IN THE NOVEL OF THE 1830S

DOMINIQUE PEYRACHE-LEBORGNE

In his book on Romantic vignettes, the art historian and Baudelaire's friend Champfleury wrote in 1883: "There is no other period in history, it seems to me, when pencil and the engraver's burin formed one body with literature so closely as they did during Romanticism"[1] (Champfleury 1883, v). In *Le Métier d'illustrateur*, Philippe Kaenel confirms that "the genesis of commercial and popular illustration coincided with the history of Romanticism" (Kaenel 1996, 39). The novel of the beginning of the 1830s is indeed linked to the rapid development of illustration, thanks to etchings and on-wood engravings. From the 1820s, the publication of novels in magazines also favoured the development of illustration. The engravings illustrating novels were displayed in shop windows to attract potential readers whenever a new installment was published. There were thus commercial reasons behind the development of the illustrated novel. What this paper wishes to examine however is the intrinsic link–beyond the strictly chronological concomitance–between the emergence of the grotesque as the dominant aesthetic category of European Romanticism and the growing recourse to novelistic illustration and to iconotexts–or bi-generic works. This close alliance of text and image brings to the fore the specificity of the literary grotesque, highlighting the differences with other genres like the comic–namely its essential visual quality. In France, the publication of Nodier's *Histoire du roi de Bohême et de ses sept châteaux*

---

[1] All translations from the French in this chapter are mine unless specified otherwise in the references.

(1830) marked the beginning of such interaction of image and text, the novel acting as an iconotext conceived as such from the very beginning by its author.[2] Nodier's novel is the result of the novelist's close and amicable collaboration with the illustrator, Tony Johannot,[3] and then with the engraver Porret. The result was a new and unique category of work in French production, a montage in which fifty vignettes engage in an ironic, disruptive and complex dialogue with the text. During the same period in England, there was already a solid tradition of literary illustration established by a group of caricaturists who devoted some of their time and talent to the illustration of novels. The most famous among them was George Cruikshank (1792-1878), who produced engravings for novels by Cervantes, Smollett, Fielding, Sterne and Goldsmith. He illustrated Dickens's *Sketches by Boz,* published as a two-volume set in 1836; then *Oliver Twist* (1838) which Dickens wanted from the start to be a bi-generic work. In France, Cruikshank was well-known by 1830 and had inspired Monnier and Daumier. Nodier claimed to have drawn the inspiration for the eccentric and satiric orientation of his novel from Cruikshank. Thus, in spite of their differences, these two examples of iconotexts, the Romantic and the Victorian, *L'Histoire du roi de Bohême* and *Oliver Twist*, were both placed–though to a different degree–under Cruikshank's patronage. The two works suggest a diametrically opposed conception of the novel, but they share the same vision of illustration as an integral part of the grotesque.

L'Histoire du roi de Bohême was both "one of the first important illustrated books" (Boisacq-Generet 1994, 270) of French Romanticism and one of the first novels to explicitly combine Romanticism and the tradition of the eccentric narrative. Such an approach runs of course parallel to Hugo's first theoretical and poetic writings on the grotesque ("The Preface to *Cromwell*" in 1827, *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* in

---

[2] In his work on illustrations in French novels in the 18th century, Christophe Martin explains that "the illustration of a literary work was organized by printers-*cum*-booksellers: they usually selected the artist and the segments to illustrate. Apart from a few exceptions (Rousseau, Restif), the authors had no say in the matter." Because of the high costs of illustrations, "booksellers usually concentrated their attention on works already considered as classics" (Martin 2005, 4).

[3] A prolific vignette-artist, Johannot was one of the main illustrators of French Romanticism, esp. between 1826 and 1850. He illustrated, among others, the works of W. Scott, Balzac, A. Dumas, Goethe, Hoffmann, Hugo, Jules Janin, Lamartine, Eugène Sue, George Sand and A. de Vigny (Cf. Marie 1925).

1831), but is not informed by the Hugolian alliance of the grotesque and the sublime. *L'Histoire du roi de Bohême,* based on an anecdote briefly mentioned in *Tristram Shandy* and not at all referred to in Nodier's novel, was actually written to put to the test the combination of the eccentric and the grotesque in a literary text. It also explored the limits of writing and of the association of text and illustration.

The originality of the work lies first in the radical deconstruction of the novel. Every aspect of *L'Histoire du roi de Bohême* works as a metatextual game and as a matter of literary auto-derision. The loosely-connected chapters often only have in common their titles in "*–tion*" (such as "Convention," "Demonstration," "Objection," but also "Dentition," "Equitation," "Mystification" or "Distraction"). The narrator–a new literary Don Quixote–is accompanied by two companions for his novelistic adventures, one called "Breloque" and the other "Don Pic de Fanferluchio," two paper characters whose impossible names[4] reveal that all literary enterprise and academic knowledge are both imposing and derisory.

It is therefore a light-hearted novel without a plot or a hero which playfully does away with diegesis and sometimes results in pages in which illustrations replace the text. The originality of the grotesque attempt therefore also lies in the disconcerting effect produced by the intertwining of vignettes and words. Tony Johannot's drawings deliberately interfere with a discursive fabric which is itself overtly disjointed. Such imbrication of two modes of representation was possible thanks to the new wood-engraving technique invented in England by Thomas Bewick and Charles Thompson. This technique allowed greater correspondence between text and image[5] whereas throughout the 18th century and at the beginning of the 19th, the wood-cut technique of Bewick's predecessors meant that text and image had to be placed on two separate pages.

Nodier and Tony Johannot were therefore able to opt out of the simple system of illustration and to write four-handedly a work in which images could turn into text and text–or rather words–could become images. Such imbrication of the two media came in a variety of forms, original ones but also traditional ones like historiated initials, arabesque frames or tailpieces. As to the new practices, they introduced new ways in which vignettes could interact with text, by illustrating, not the adventure, but

---

[4] "Breloque" means "bracelet charm;" the name "Don Pic de Fanferluchio" sounds Italian and evokes the "acme (Pic) of frills and flounces" (in French "franfreluches").
[5] Bewick's technique consisted in carving hard wood against the grain, which allowed greater detail and finer engraving than in the past (cf. Mélot 1984).

sometimes only a word or an idea. Further vignettes could be entirely unrelated to the text, or subvert the traditional hierarchy between text and illustration and therefore the concept of illustration itself. In such cases, the image comes first and the text is simply used to clarify meaning. In other examples, images appear where the reader expects words, thereby disrupting the visual and graphic continuity of sentences which are left unfinished. This extreme case is found in the chapter entitled "Convention," in which the image of Don Pic de Fanferluchio, carnivalesque scholar of Romantic culture, is seen entering the text.[6]

Furthermore, among the purely textual effects we can also note the devices used to reinforce the illusion of an *ut pictura poesis*, i.e. the illusion of an almost complete fusion of narrative and iconography. Liliane Louvel in *L'Oeil du texte* distinguishes between several principles of "interpicturality," some in the mode of what she calls "hypopicturality" (the narrativisation of a painting or of a painting-effect in the style of…), others in that of "archipicturality" (the main currents in painting acting on the narrative modes) (Louvel 1998, 151-5). It is precisely at the level of interpicturality that the reference to Cruikshank is crucial since his work serves both as a model ("hypopicturality") creating *mise-en-abyme*, and as an informing principle ("archipicturality"). It would only be slight exaggeration to say that Tony Johannot was the illustrator of *L'Histoire du roi de Bohême* but George Cruikshank its secret inspirer. This comes as no surprise in the light of Nodier's love of English culture,[7] and how much influence the golden age of English caricature had on 19th-century French culture (from Monnier to Daumier and Gavarni, from Nodier to Baudelaire and Champfleury).[8] Werner Hofmann notes that Daumier as well as Monnier, who was Cruikshank's friend, owed their inspiration in part to English satiric imagery; and that Thackeray, staying in Paris around 1830, noted everywhere how influential English caricature was.[9]

---

[6] To view Johannot's illustrations, go to
http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k108013v/f3.image
[7] Nodier was inspired by Ann Radcliffe and Walter Scott; he edited Byron's works and published *Promenade de Dieppe aux montagnes d'Ecosse (A Walk from Dieppe to the Mountains of Scotland)* in 1821.
[8] In his *Histoire de la caricature moderne*, devoted almost exclusively to the French tradition, Champfleury evokes the influence of Cruikshank's Punch on Daumier's political cartoons, notably his caricatures of Adolphe Thiers (Champfleury 1865, 45-6).
[9] Werner Hofmann is probably thinking of the chapter "Caricatures and Lithography in Paris" published by Thackeray in 1840 in *The Paris Sketch Book* (Hofmann 1958, 44). Philippe Kaenel underlines the frequency of exchanges between Paris and London: "Eugène Lami, Henry Monnier, William Thackeray,

In Nodier's work, the explicit reference to Cruikshank first creates a form
of metatextual interruption in the middle of the narrative when Nodier
takes on the theatrical role of a narrator himself, busy reading or looking at
an image:

> "By Popokambu," I cried, dropping Cuyshank's Punch (*sic*). (Nodier 1979,
> 219)

Although left unspecified, the allusion to Punch seems to be a
reference to the series of engravings that Cruikshank did in 1828 depicting
puppet theatre and Punch and Judy. In the character of Punch, we find all
the main ingredients of the grotesque, and more specifically of the
Romantic grotesque: visual comedy based on the character's deformed
body and excessive gesticulation, timeless, decontextualized comedy
melding the ancient and the modern, popular, anti-classic and non-
academic art, relying on artifices and language opposed to those of
scholarly culture, e.g. simple drawing and the rejection of complex
allegorical references; finally an overtly meta-literary grotesque since in
Nodier, the reference to Punch comes after a relatively long section on the
mock-heroic praise of the *commedia dell'arte* character, who is raised to
the rank of symbol of modernity and Romantic irony.[10]
Similarly, Cruikshank's taste for popular culture and his early interest
in literary illustration enabled him to expand his range of caricatures and
to separate his grotesque drawings from any specific socio-political
context.[11] Did Nodier know about Cruikshank's series of wood-engravings
inspired by popular literary sources, destined to advertise lotteries (*Lottery
Puffs and Advertisements*) and in which playful structures based on words

---

Gavarni, Gustave Doré and Edmond Morin saw a great deal of their English
neighbours and took part in shared editorial ventures" (Kaenel 1996, 37).
[10] Ironically placed under the double patronage of Cruikshank and of the German
theorists of Romanticism (notably Schlegel), Nodier's praise of Punch undermines
academic culture and thwarts all attempts at turning Romanticism into serious
theoretical literature. The two chapters devoted to Punch are entitled "Insurrection"
and "Dissertation," the former parodying the precepts of the Romantic revolution,
the latter ironically staging the inherent contradictions of Romanticism itself,
which is seen as doomed to contest Classicism while using its rhetorical figures,
reducing to pastiche or parody all attempts at producing a new type of serious
literature.
[11] Besides the *Punch and Judy* series, between 1810 and 1826 Cruikshank
produced numerous engravings illustrating popular English tales or tales by
Grimm; as well as little humoristic drawings used for advertisements in which text
and image interact.

in –*tion*, as in Nodier,[12] appear? Similarly carnivalesque inversion of the order in which the text should be read is also a characteristic of both. For example, Cruikshank's advert for the lottery reads from bottom to top, whereas Nodier's text can sometimes only be read by turning the page upside down, or by going to and fro between the text and the image next to it. In the chapters on Punch, a drawing by Tony Johannot is very similar to Cruikshank's engravings. Placed on a level with the text, the drawing takes over from the narrative and completes the unfinished sentence. The drawing provides immediate access to reality, which abstract words might not do. In this particular case, the image becomes a text in its own right. In other instances, the text becomes image: hence Punch's box is as though materialized by framing words in large font and capital letters which are hollow and shaded and form a parallelogram. Here words regain their primary status as ideograms–or image-words.

When it is used to expand meaning, the image sometimes also ironically conflicts with the apparent or literal meaning of the text and thus reveals what has been left unsaid or should remain taboo. In this case, the relationship between the two media can be defined as ironic dialogism, the iconotext being the pretext for role-play between novelist and cartoonist, one feigning to respect propriety and to show due deference to monarchy and censorship, the other developing political satire thanks to the resources of graphic caricature. For example in the final chapter ironically entitled "Approbation," the text parodically authorizes the publication of the book that Nodier is writing, *L'Histoire du roi de Bohême*.[13] On the contrary, the image represents an ageing, wrinkled Charles X, holding a gigantic pair of scissors in his hands which represent his immoderate passion for censorship. The reference to Cruikshank as the underlying figure of archipicturality then takes on its full meaning, since it is the entire tradition of graphic caricature which implicitly becomes a system of comic criticism that can be transposed into the language of the anti-novel.

The variety of iconic strategies used in *L'Histoire du roi de Bohême et de ses sept châteaux* therefore considerably reinforces the grotesque effect

---

[12] At the end of his novel Nodier explains that the titles of the chapters (made of words in –*tion*) are inspired by an old French game in which everyone has to provide an answer in –*ion* to the question "What shall we put in my *corbillon* ?" A "*corbillon*" is a small basket.

[13] "I, the undersigned Expert Weigher of Ideas, Official Translator of Equivocal Words, […] Timbuktu's Literary Provost, hereby certify that I have tried to read *L'Histoire du roi de Bohême et de ses sept châteaux*, and that the said novel is neither impious, obscene, seditious nor satiric" (397-8).

of the eccentric novel. For such a bi-generic work, it would be unthinkable to publish the text without the illustrations. Never in the 19th century was the combination of the two media pushed so far. It is difficult to find another work in which images so radically disrupt reading habits as in *L'Histoire du roi de Bohême*, and this in spite of the inventiveness found in iconotexts such as *Voyage où il vous plaira* (with drawings by Tony Johannot, 1842), *Un autre Monde* (1842) and *Scènes de la vie privée et publique des animaux* by illustrator Jean-Jacques Grandville (1840-2); or, in England, *Vanity Fair* (1847-8)[14] and *A Book of Nonsense* by Edward Lear (an instance of the incongruous, published in 1846). Did Sterne's influence wane more rapidly in England than in France and Germany? The novelistic and illustrative strategies chosen by Dickens and his publisher may seem relatively conventional when compared to Nodier's experiments, since the traditional wood-cut technique chosen rendered compulsory the separation of text and illustration.

A novel such as *Oliver Twist* nevertheless attests even today to what the development of the literary grotesque owes to the art of illustration and the influence of caricaturists. The collaboration between Dickens and Cruikshank, which started with *Sketches by Boz*, shows the importance of such interpicturality. As a title for his *Sketches*, Dickens had initially considered *Sketches by Boz and Cuts by Cruikshank*, or even *Etchings by Boz and Wood-Cuts by Cruikshank*, which explicitly associated writing with drawing and the visual arts (see Monot 1986, 1550). Even if Cruikshank's influence was played down by Dickens when *Oliver Twist* was published, it is clear that the synergy worked both ways: first because sections of the novel were inspired by iconic elements that make up the interpicturality of the novel (see Hill 1981, 55-62), secondly because Cruikshank, who did not always see the final version of the text, was allowed a certain amount of leeway and therefore left his personal mark on the novel's general tone.[15]

The rhetoric of laughter in *Oliver Twist* is heavily influenced by several iconic references which create the inherently grotesque (i.e. concrete and visual) dimension of verbal comedy. As Michael Hollington has shown, grotesque iconicity is here mainly based on three elements: the writing of Hogarthian scenes, the general influence of pantomime, and that

---

[14] Thackeray illustrated *Vanity Fair* himself mixing several techniques (full-page illustrations as well as vignettes). He also chose a somewhat Sternian narrator whom he represented wearing carnivalesque costume and hat.
[15] "Cruikshank drew Fagin, Sikes and Nancy before the story was written at all. The originals were models or drinking acquaintances of Cruikshank." (Jack Lindsay, "At Closer Grips," in Hollington 1995, Vol. II, 175).

of graphic caricature (Hollington 1984, 7-25; 58-65). Hogarth, referred to in the 1841 preface to the third edition and praised for the realism of his London street scenes, appears as the original model shared by the two artists–and the true founding father of English caricature.[16] And as in some of Hogarth's or Cruikshank's engravings, Dickens's world relays an impression of number and crowds which reflects the collective dimension of social satire. It is essentially in the depiction of the multitude of secondary characters that strategies that complement the grotesque are to be found: the caricature of worthies shaping social satire; eccentricity interfering with the sentimental sphere and creating characters both comic and amiable; finally the grotesque of physical and moral deformity provoking neither clear derision nor clear adhesion, but ambivalent reactions whenever the reader encounters Fagin, his accomplices and the murky world of criminality.

The first group of characters brings us closer to Cruikshank's *London Characters*, a series of engravings of 1827-9 in which a potbellied beadle wearing an impressive button-coat and a cocked hat could be understood as Dickens's inspiration for the (in)famous Bumble who plays such a significant part in *Oliver Twist*. Dickens continually draws on recurrent and concrete images as his inspiration for his small world of miserly, middle-class materialists; the ancient carnivalesque tradition–the allegory of thin men and fat ones, so often developed by Brueghel–being thus updated again in modern caricature, both verbal and iconic.[17]

Inspiring the text and inspired by it, Cruikshank's work as an illustrator bears witness to his developed understanding of Dickens's rhetoric of description. In his illustrations, the caricaturist's characters too are systematically contrasted, and are placed within "the realm of contrasts and anomalies" to use Jean Emelina's definition of the comic (Emelina 1991, 43). As in the ancient carnivalesque tradition, faces and profiles fall within the province of expressionist excess with their prominent outlines and twisted expressions. This type of imagery is entirely in keeping with the comic-grotesque described by Bakhtin:

---

[16] Dickens knew Hogarth's works very well and acknowledged his influence when he chose "A Parish Boy's Progress" as the sub-title of his novel. The phrase evokes Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678-84) of course, but also Hogarth's series "A Harlot's Progress," whose last two engravings represent scenes very much like those in Chapter One of *Oliver Twist*.

[17] There are numerous examples of this type of character in the novel: Mr. Fang, Mr. Gamfield, Mr. Bumble, Mrs Mann or Mrs Corney, to name but a few.

> Of all the features of the human face, the nose and mouth play the most
> important part in the grotesque image of the body. […] The grotesque is
> interested only in protruding eyes […] [since] it is looking for that which
> protrudes from the body, all that seeks to go out beyond the body's
> confines. (Bakhtin 1984, 316)

Finally, Cruikshank's particularly dynamic and gesticulating style[18] perfectly matches Dickens's taste for pantomime. Extravagantly expressive or writhing faces and bodies are found throughout, in the narrative and its illustrations, creating a subterranean web of similitudes between the different spheres of the novel: the comic-grotesque sphere of the worthies, the sentimental circle of Oliver's friends and adoptive family, and the sinister world of criminality. After the famous inaugural scene in which Bumble explains why he chooses to give Oliver the patronym of "Twist," the reader finds the motif of torsion and contortion in the descriptions of other characters: Noah Claypole for example, the other orphan from the workhouse, turned crook, who is both Fagin's dupe and his accomplice and whose body regularly wriggles like an eel. Similarly Toby Crackit's sparse hair is "tortured into long corkscrew curls" (Dickens 1980, 209) and the "little ugly hump-backed man" who guards the thieves' den "[a] misshapen little demon […] twist[s] himself, dexterously, from the doctor's grasp" (286-7). Then there is Fagin who devises his Machiavellian plans "busying his bony hands in the folds of his tattered garment" (403). Even Mr. Brownlow, Oliver's benefactor, greets the boy with an expression going through "a very great variety of odd contortions" (129). Grimwig, Brownlow's old bachelor friend, first appears dressed in incongruous clothing, making numerous facial contortions and burlesque gestures borrowed from pantomime (147). Finally Mr. Losberne, the philanthropic doctor-*cum*-detective (to meet the needs of melodrama), answers "with many wry faces" (375) when told about a risky plan to arrest the thieves and protect Oliver.

In such a context, the most remarkable element is that the dialogue between text and image enables the bi-generic work to go beyond the models offered by Hogarthian grotesque realism and to create a new, more somber–almost fantastic–type of grotesque, which generates a mixture of contradictory tones and reactions. We find here one specificity of the grotesque, if compared to satire and caricature: it has a wider range of

---

[18] Cf. Baudelaire, "I would say that the essence of Cruikshank's grotesque is an extravagant violence of gesture and movement, and a kind of explosion, so to speak, within the expression. Each one of his little creatures mimes his part in a frenzy and ferment, like a pantomime character" (Baudelaire 1956, 183).

tones and goes from the comic to the unfamiliar and the uncanny. Satire usually remains univocal or monological, because inextricably linked to clearly-defined moral and social references, but the grotesque can free itself from all realistic reference and remain semantically equivocal, thanks to the range of contrasted emotions it stages and provokes. Mixing the influences of the Gothic novel, of ancient demonology and of modern caricature, Dickens thus peopled his London world with poverty-stricken figures, sinister elderly men and women with grimacing faces. Macabre laughter is thus made spectacular (in the original sense of the word) and becomes the obsessional leitmotif which gives the depiction of madness or abject poverty its scandalous dimension. One of the first key scenes of terrifying grotesque is found in Chapter 5, when Oliver and the undertaker visit a poverty-stricken family in which the mother has starved to death. The scene is highly visual, thus reinforcing the trauma inflicted on young Oliver: the slums are infested with rats, the atmosphere of the rooms is somber and noxious, and the narrative focuses on the grandmother, a hideous old woman with a grimacing face, as she chuckles and mumbles madly.

After Chapter 5, these macabre images resurface and become a leitmotiv. With the old woman in the asylum who is to play a part in Oliver's fate, Dickens takes up again the rhetoric of *ut pictura poesis*, and invokes a graphic, visual universe, though he does not mention any specific artist:

> […] her face, distorted into a mumbling leer, resembled more the grotesque shaping of some wild pencil, than the work of Nature's hand. (223)

The references to the cartoonist's art, to madness and to the importance of night-time, irresistibly evoke Goya. At that point Dickens seems closer to the fantastic grotesque of the *Caprichos* (1799) than to social caricature. We know however that the combination of the fantastic and the comic grotesque was not unfamiliar to the English satiric tradition: the medieval archetypes of the Dance of Death, of the Devil and of Hell, were used by caricaturists like Rowlandson and also by the Cruikshank brothers.[19] It is

---

[19] "With the Devil, the caricatures inherited also the medieval Death. In 1815-1816, Rowlandson and Combe let the traditional skeleton rove through the world in which they lived, in *The English Dance of Death*. From caricature, the Dance of Death was passed on the book-illustration by such prints as the frontispiece by Robert Cruikshank for Pierce Egan's *Finish to the Adventures of Tom, Jerry and Logic*. […] Dickens had read *Finish to Tom and Jerry*, and he could scarcely have

unlikely that Dickens then knew of the *Caprichos*, even if towards the end
of the 1820s a small group of connoisseurs had become familiar with
Goya–but they were mainly French. As Nigel Glendinning notes, Goya's
work was introduced in England by rich collectors and aristocrats (the
Duke of Wellington and the Earl of Clarendon who was the English
ambassador in Spain in 1830).[20] Only in the 1840s and the 1850s does
Goya become well-known to French and English intellectuals as
producing examples of fantastic grotesque. His name is mentioned in the
works of intellectuals and in travel narratives through Spain (for example
Musset, Gautier[21] and Baudelaire, Bulwer Lytton's brother, Augustus J.C.
Hare[22] and Thackeray[23]).

In 1838 however, like Goya with Madrid and his *Caprichos*, Dickens
recreates London as a kind of hell on earth. In the novel, the criminal
sphere that revolves around Fagin logically partakes of the blending of the
grotesque and the uncanny. Occasionally compared to an actor in a
pantomime, both satanic and carnivalesque, Fagin remains, from beginning
to end, essentially a nocturnal character and is associated with dark places.
He is often described as grinning horribly, his whole face contorted
(Chapters 15 and 20) and an "expression of villainy perfectly demoniacal"
(189) screws up his face. This terrifying grotesque reaches its peak in the
novel's final scenes. In Fagin's imprisonment scene, important modulations
of the narrative voice may be identified. An unexpected narrative mode
takes over in which free indirect speech expresses introspection and which

escaped seeing the Dance of Death in the caricatures of Rowlandson and others.
He also owned a set of Holbein's *Dance of Death* bought in 1841. […] The
caricatures of the early 19th century, of Gillray, Rowlandson and the Cruikshanks,
are not merely caricatures. They perpetuate and revitalize an older vision of life,
and this vision coincides surprisingly with that of Dickens" (John R. Harvey,
"Bruegel to Dickens: Graphic Satire and the Novel" in Hollington 1995, Vol. IV,
473-4). F.D. Klingender notes that Goya's fantastic caricature presents similarities
with the English tradition, notably Cruikshank (see Klingender 1948).
[20] On Goya's reception in England, see Glendinning and Macartney 2010. Besides,
we know now that Goya was influenced by English caricature, notably Gillray,
thanks to the part played by the painter's friend, Leandro de Moratin, who had
lived in London (see Wolf 1991).
[21] Before his 1845 trip to Spain where he studied Goya's art, Gautier wrote an
article in 1838 entitled "Les Caprices de Goya" (*La Presse*, July 5th 1838).
[22] *Wanderings in Spain*, 1873. See Glendinning and Macartney 2010.
[23] In the introduction to his *History of Caricature and Grotesque*…, Thomas
Wright explains that Thackeray once told him that he contemplated writing a
similar type of book, a chapter of which would be devoted to Spanish caricature
and Goya (see Wright 1865).