

L'ANALISI LINGUISTICA E LETTERARIA

FACOLTÀ DI SCIENZE LINGUISTICHE E LETTERATURE STRANIERE
UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE

3

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RECENSIONI E RASSEGNE

RECENSIONI

H. BOWLES, *Dickens and the Stenographic Mind*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2019, 193 pp.

When Charles Dickens set out to forge a career in his early twenties, he notoriously juggled his love for theatre, mimicry, and storytelling with a regular job as a “Short Hand Writer” (p. 3) in judicial courts; and while Dickens’s fondness for the stage and popular entertainment constitutes a rich field of research for scholars in Victorian literature and culture, who successfully traced back in his characters’ idiolects a testament to the author’s keen theatrical awareness, not much came out of Dickens’s reporting experience in terms of establishing a critical connection between his mastery of shorthand and his longhand writing habits. Yet, as Hugo Bowles’s work acutely points out, a connection there is, and a tight one, between Dickens’s capacity of linguistic invention, and his practice of shorthand, “because it shadowed his career as a writer and was a constant presence in his life as reporter, journalist, and novelist” (*Ibid.*). This connection, while speaking primarily to Dickens’s capacity of character-building through idiolects and his literarization of orality, could profitably be employed by literary scholars to draw a comprehensive picture of Dickens’s aesthetics, especially with respect to the theatrical and polyphonic qualities of his narrative. Bowles’s outstanding research draws on a composite multidisciplinary approach involving historiography, morphology, phonetics, phonology, stylistics, sociolinguistics, cognitive linguistics, psychology of reading, in order to map out a comprehensive study of the cognitive processes involved in shorthand reporting, addressing “a number of important debates in Victorian studies – orality and literacy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Dickens’s social status as a law reporter, the role of voice and voicing in his writing process and style, his relationship with his readers, and his various writing personae as law reporter, sketch-writer, journalist, and novelist” (p. 4). All these debates are thoroughly explored in this eight-chapter monograph, which has the merit of exploring Dickens’s approach to shorthand with scientific rigour and discursive clarity.

The first three chapters set up a fascinating journey into the history of stenography in England, drawing the reader’s attention to the cognitive mechanisms involved in applying the two main methodologies employed in Dickens’s time: the Pitman shorthand, and the Gurney shorthand. Of the two, it is Pitman’s that has survived up to this day, being much more accessible to the learner. As a phonographic system, Pitman’s shorthand was “a code (symbols) of a code (speech sounds), whereas Gurney was a code (symbols) of a code (alphabetic letters) of a code (speech sounds)” (p. 20). The author goes on to illustrate how, being a user of the Gurney method, Dickens had to pair each sign of the Roman alphabet to a corresponding sign in the Gurney code in order to transcribe court speeches. Such a complex decoding process involved a fundamental rule of flexibility in terms of the transcription of vowels – “[Gurney’s] system is not consistent in relation to vowels and writers are free to include or omit vowel symbols as long as they use some kind of phonetic principle (‘by their sound’)” (p. 35) – so that speech reporting in Gurney, as illustrated in Table 2.2. (p. 37), required a mental effort of deconstruction and reconstruction, a “constant experimentation in what was syntactically possible” (p. 42), while at the same time engaging the writer in finding and applying his own phonetic principles to translate vowel sounds on the page. In Bowles’s words, “The modern equivalent of writing a Gurney script would be for an English speaker to write text messages in Hebrew at verbatim speed” (p. 46). Bowles also acknowledges how Dickens, during his years of practice, ended up stylizing the method to his own necessities, which “made his shorthand impossible to interpret”

(p. 47); and while this practice may have informed Dickens's "fondness for hypallage" (*Ibid.*) and therefore constitute a key to look further into his discursive strategies, it nonetheless interrogates his authorship in terms of self-reflexivity, autobiographical stances, and self-narrative strategies. If, as Bowles points out, writing in shorthand is a process of encoding, reading it back and rewriting it in longhand is nothing short of a decoding process, which Dickens compared to the effort of deciphering ideograms (cf. pp. 49 *et passim*): "When stenographers are reading back what they have written down, they have to perform two sets of mental operations in sequence: recognizing the shorthand symbols and then making a mental representation of them" (p. 50). In order to figure out the meaning of such an empire of signs, and ultimately having to face a string of consonants, the stenographer needs to turn the symbols "into the sounds they represent [...] mentally spelling out the words represented by the sounds" (*Ibid.*); this translational process involves, thus, a set of skills which Bowles sums up as the "visualization" of the signs on the page as consonants, the "sounding out" or "vocalization" of those signs when adding up the vowels, and the "inferencing" process of collocating signs and words together in order to arrive at a coherent meaning.

Having established the main features of shorthand methodology in terms of the cognitive mechanisms they ignite in the writer's mind, Bowles proceeds to observe how these manifested the literary genius of Dickens, naming this mental backdrop 'stenographic mind'. In the subsequent chapters Bowles, while briefly touching on quite interesting subjects for the Victorian Studies scholar, such as the Reporting communities of Doctors Commons and of the Gallery of Parliament (par. 5.1), and the Victorian pedagogy of reading and writing (par. 7.5), concentrates mainly on how the vocalization of symbols had shaped Dickens's textuality in terms of his representation of dialects. Bowles notes that "When Dickens learned to match a letter of the alphabet with a Gurney symbol, he was 'unlearning' this notion and replacing it with the idea that the same sound can have two different graphic representations" (p. 73), so that "turning shorthand into longhand by sounding out possible words forged an unusual link between vocalization and the creation of a text. [...] through the sound of his own voice *Dickens [...] was actually creating the longhand text*" (*Ibid.*). In other words, orality played a pivotal role in the shaping of Dickens's texts, though a "mediated" kind of orality – one which, prone to the manifold possibilities offered by the linguistic ambiguity of the shorthand coding, "must [...] have frequently conjured up nonsense combinations or low-frequency combinations" (p. 76), which, according to Bowles, may have bestowed upon the reading and re-writing of a text some dream-like qualities, especially throughout the processes of visualization and vocalization. As Dickens himself had put it, "I don't invent it – really do not – but *see* it and write it down" (p. 79). According to Bowles, Dickens's own process of vocalization mirrored itself in the readers' experience, especially in front of his representation of dialects: "In this way, phonetic speech produces a different style of reading. Readers become listeners to their own inner speeches, working out for themselves how to solve the pronunciation puzzle that Dickens has set them" (p. 100). Such a hypothesis is undoubtedly solid, especially if one were to frame Dickens's linguistic experimentation in the bigger picture of literary aesthetics across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Phrases like "Dickens's word puzzles provided his readers with the pleasure of using different pathways to access meaning" (p. 157), and "Dickens's puzzle creations give his readers the freedom to enjoy the relationship between spelling and sound" (p. 158), could easily be transferred into a piece of criticism on James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, and immediately call any scholar's attention to possibly reassess, on a wider scale, the influence of Dickens on the *Wake's* textuality. However, Bowles notes how the liberty Dickens gave his readers when interpreting the characters' idiolects came with a price – a price which resembles a plain contradiction in terms. According to the author, Dickens acted in a controlling manner on his audience, since the alternative spelling he was providing them

with was just a reflection of Dickens's own inner speech: "He is going as far as he possibly can to avoid giving readers their own voice" (p. 101); "Dickens [...] is not listening to the outside world, but listening to himself, and he is not registering sounds, but changing the sounds of words by altering their spelling" (p. 163). A good solution to this aporia may come from setting up a composite hypothesis – one which would allow the aesthetic category to enter the paradigm set up in the book; that Dickens's stenographic mind was at the service of his 'artistic' mind – a mind which was steeped in, and tapped into the symbolic workings of stage representations, in order to ultimately 'dramatize' the narrative and the language through what Bowles calls "foreignization" (par. 8.1), and others would name 'defamiliarization', or 'deterritorialization'.

What just outlined does not, in any sense, intend to downsize the significance and scientific value of Bowles's research, and it must be further noted that this review presents just a small examination of the theoretical, methodological, and substantial richness of *The Stenographic Mind*. Rather, it is a testament to the utility of such an endeavour for any literary scholar attempting to deepen the understanding of Dickens's discursive strategies, and to reframe them in the wider context of Victorian literature and culture. Overall, *The Stenographic Mind* succeeds in giving the reader a comprehensive picture of Dickens's highly symbolic and peculiar access to the literarization and dramatization of language, while at the same time opening up a renewed perspective on Dickensian studies, and on literary studies as a whole. In particular, the wide-ranging linguistic perspective that Bowles skilfully employs to tackle Dickens's discourse has the merit of initiating a more constructive debate on textual semiology, and on artistic procedures in a more general sense. For example, Bowles's hypothesis that Dickens's narrative structures derive from his stenographic experience, in terms of plot intricacies and the polarization of experience in a melodramatic framework, as facets of "[...] his puzzle-creating shorthand persona [which] geared towards any possible plot, and [...] ended up with plots designed purely as puzzles" (p. 149), promises to be a fruitful ground of research. To conclude, *The Stenographic Mind* constitutes a necessary instrument for the Dickensian scholar and possibly for the linguist as well, a critical tool which could signal a fresh start in grounding an effective, composite methodology for both linguistic and literary analysis.

Francesca Caraceni

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