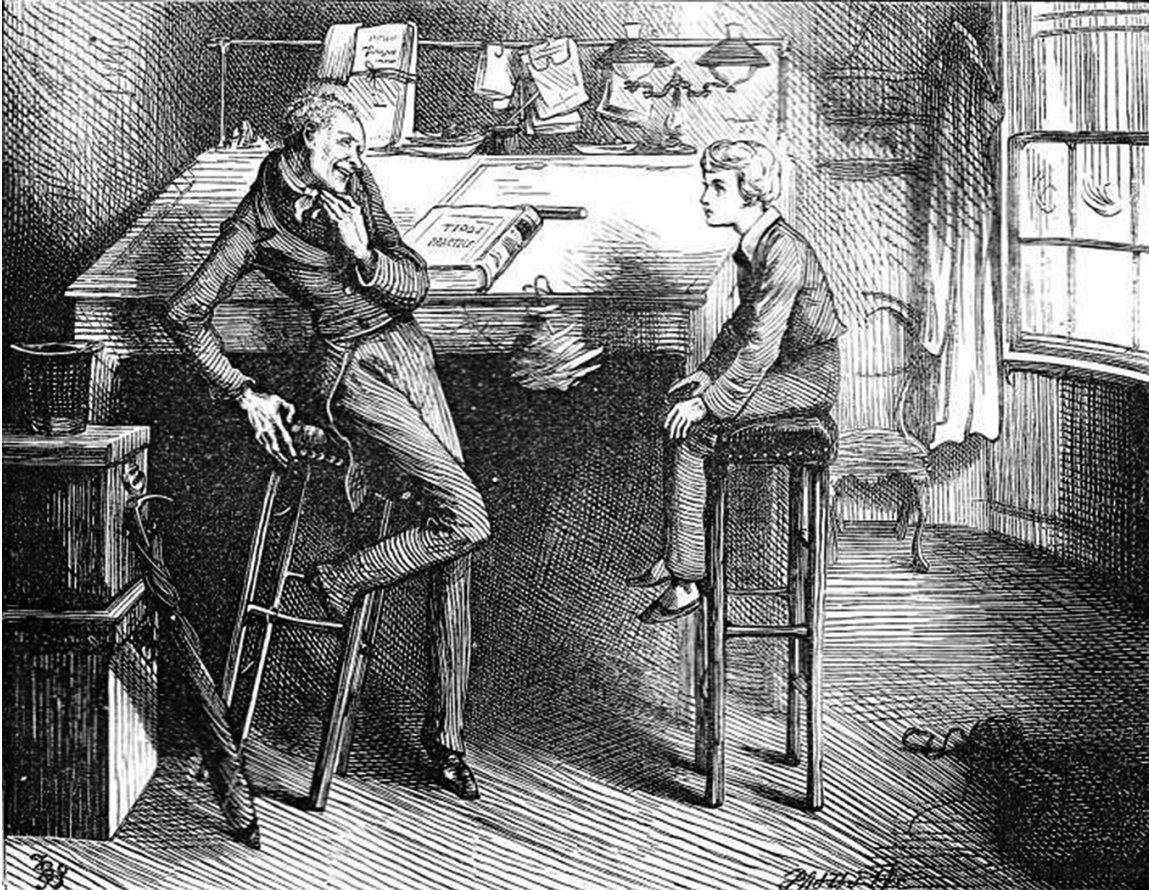


6

Edith Hall

Making it really new: Dickens *versus* the Classics



The present splendid brotherhood of fiction-writers in England, whose graphic and eloquent pages have issued to the world more political and social truths than have been uttered by all the professional politicians, publicists and moralists put together, have described every section of the middle class from the “highly genteel” annuitant and fund-holder who looks upon all sorts of business as vulgar, to the little shopkeeper and lawyer’s clerk. And how have Dickens and Thackeray, Miss Brontë and Mrs. Gaskell painted them? As full of presumption, affectation, petty tyranny and ignorance; and the civilised world have confirmed their verdict with the damning epigram that it has fixed to this class that “they are servile to those above, and tyrannical to those beneath”.

Thus thundered Karl Marx in *The New York Tribune* on 1st August 1854,¹ recognising the crucial role the British writers of realist fiction played in exposing the worst aspects of industrial capitalism. Heading his roll of honour is Charles Dickens, ‘the first great urban novelist in England’ and ‘one of the most important social commentators who used fiction effectively to criticize economic, social and moral abuses in the Victorian era.’² Marx’s admiration for Dickens’ reformist power was well-founded. Scarred forever by his childhood misery when his father was imprisoned in the Marshalsea Debtors’ Prison under the Insolvent Debtors Act of 1813, required to work at the age of twelve in a shoe-blackening factory, Dickens transformed his deep empathy with the poor and disadvantaged into scintillating story-telling. His extraordinarily popular novels helped to change attitudes to class, poverty, crime, housing, child employment, and education; they were at least indirectly instrumental in the passing of several pieces of reformist legislation. Dickens himself wrote to another novelist, Wilkie Collins, four years after Marx’s accolade, that he felt a strong personal commitment to society and its improvement: ‘Everything that happens [...] shows beyond mistake that you can’t shut out the world; that you are in it, to be of it; that you get yourself into a false position the moment you try to sever yourself from it; that you must mingle with it, and make the best of it, and make the best of yourself into the bargain.’³ And Arnold Kettle showed, in a famous study, how Dickens’ own understanding of capitalism, or at least of how as an economic system it created inhumane social conditions, steadily increased over his writing career, the more he ‘mingled’ with the world.⁴

Mingling with the world in order to make the best of it: in his novels Dickens described the class-conflicted world of late Georgian and early Victorian society in the way he had experienced it, and at this time the ancient Greeks and Romans were deeply

implicated in the class struggle. Romantics and revolutionaries had taken inspiration from the rebellious gods and heroes of classical antiquity—Prometheus, Spartacus, Brutus, the Gracchi;⁵ Dickens is satirizing such radical appropriations of classics when he makes Slackbridge, one of the Trade Union organisers in *Hard Times* (1854), drop classical names into his inflammatory oratory in book 2 ch. 4, ‘Men and Brothers’:

Then Slackbridge, who had kept his oratorical arm extended during the going out, as if he were repressing with infinite solicitude and by a wonderful moral power the vehement passions of the multitude, applied himself to raising their spirits. Had not the Roman Brutus, oh, my British countrymen, condemned his son to death; and had not the Spartan mothers, oh my soon to be victorious friends, driven their flying children on the points of their enemies’ swords? Then was it not the sacred duty of the men of Coketown, with forefathers before them, an admiring world in company with them, and a posterity to come after them, to hurl out traitors from the tents they had pitched in a sacred and a God-like cause? The winds of heaven answered Yes; and bore Yes, east, west, north, and south. And consequently three cheers for the United Aggregate Tribunal!⁶

Despite Dickens’ sympathy with the factory workers of Coketown, there is a bitter satire in his imputing to Slackbridge a reference not to Brutus’ foundation of the Roman Republic but to his brutal act of filicide, and in the firebrand’s obvious confusion about Spartan maternal heroism. Yet, at the same time, Dickens was all too aware that the upper and aspiring middle classes were using classical education to create barriers between their

sons and those of factory workers, and to shore up class snobbery in both public and private life.

Dickens was of course far from the only novelist of his time to express his disapproval of the contemporary classical curriculum. A searing indictment of the conventional adulation of antiquity by the aspiring classes is put by Thackeray in the mouth M. A. Titmarsh, describing a journey to Athens. Titmarsh regards the ten years of Classics he endured as ‘ten years’ banishment of infernal misery, tyranny, arrogance’. In Attica Titmarsh was visited by the Greek muse, and explains that he could not effect any reconciliation with her because he read her poets ‘in fear and trembling; and a cold sweat is but an ill accompaniment to poetry’. Ancient History was ‘so dull . . . that when the brutal dulness of a schoolmaster is superadded to her own slow conversation, the union becomes intolerable’. People only ‘say they are enthusiastic about the Greek and Roman authors and history, because it is considered proper and respectable’.⁷

Dickens, however, was more sensitive than Thackeray to the role of classics in social exclusion, and his allusions to classical authors and episodes, although relatively rare, often use irony in order to expose classically informed snobbery. This will be one theme in this essay. Another will be his exposure of the abusive forms that classical education often took in schools at the time, where grammar, rote learning, and corporal punishment inculcated in boys and youths, even of the upper and relatively privileged middle classes, an incurable hatred of everything to do with the Greek and Latin languages: educational reform, in Dickens’ view, was entangled with the question of the very desirability of the classical curriculum, at least as it was taught in his day.

Yet Dickens’ stance on classics is complicated. My examination of the nature of the classical presences in Dickens’ works therefore leads into a consideration of his own aesthetic project: his desire for social reform is analogous with his project of reforming

fiction, of creating a new form of literary prose that responded to the ever-changing world of the industrial revolution all around it, rather than to the inherited literary canon fundamentally based on classical notions of rhetorical structure, genre, balance, appropriateness, and literariness of language. Dickens' struggle to push at the frontiers of possibility in the language of prose fiction entailed replacing the idiolects of Enlightenment and Romantic classicism with an acute sensitivity to the languages and soundscapes of the newly industrialised 19th-century reality. This agenda in the realm of literary form, I argue, corresponds at a profound level with his moral and social objective, which was to make people draw their own conclusions from looking hard at the new dystopia around them and paying attention to their own emotional responses to the prevalent squalor, hypocrisy and hardship.

During the alterations to Dombey House in *Dombey and Son* (1848), which herald the imminent wedding of Mr Dombey and the arrival of the beautiful second Mrs Dombey as the new mistress of the house, Dickens describes the young Florence Dombey's amazement at the sight of the workmen on the internal scaffolding:

The staircase was a labyrinth of posts and planks like the outside of the house, and a whole Olympus of plumbers and glaziers was reclining in various attitudes, on the skylight.⁸

This workmen are compared with the reclining gods on the East Pediment of the Parthenon, part of the 'Elgin Marbles', sculptures acquired in Athens by Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin, between 1801 and 1805, and presented by Parliament to the British Museum. In 1832, the elegant new 'Elgin Room' on the west side of the museum had

been opened to much public fanfare, and many of Dickens' readers will have seen either the marbles or drawings of them in periodicals and encyclopaedias. But Dickens' image replaces the elegant gods of Olympus with early Victorian working men.

This is in some ways an atypical Dickensian classical reference, because it is positive about both the ancient artefact and the individual whose subjectivity is being explored. It asks the reader to remember the beauty of the ancient sculptures. Unlike the standard, even clichéd idealisation of classical Greek statuary and art in the literature of his immediate predecessors and contemporaries, aesthetic beauty is hardly ever the point of comparison when Dickens refers to ancient Greece or Rome. But its role here is indeed to help the reader understand the pleasing visual experience of a virtuous character—Florence Dombey—who is portrayed most sympathetically throughout the novel. Many of Dickens' classical allusions make an acerbic point about the character with whom they are associated, as we shall see. It is interesting that Florence's dog, Diogenes, named for the founder of the ancient school of Cynic Philosophy, functions as a consistent moral presence, capable of sniffing out individuals whose characters are marred by hypocrisy and malice, and offering Florence the only straightforward, wholehearted and unconditional love she has experienced.

From other perspectives, however, the comparison with the Parthenon pediment is indeed typical of Dickens' overt classical references. First, it democratises an ancient artefact by making a claim that contemporary working people are as fit subjects for art—whether sculpture or prose fiction—as ancient divinities. We are asked to imagine the plumbers and glaziers as beautiful ancient gods, with muscular bodies developed in the athletic pursuits of the leisured class, taking their ease at a festival where they are honoured by the temple-visiting public. The comparison is a perfect example of what G.K. Chesterton called Dickens' 'democratic reality', which supports equality by insisting

on ‘the interest and variety of all men.’⁹ In this democratic aspect of ‘the interest and variety of all men’, there is, of course, no democrat so great as Dickens. Second, Florence’s father, Paul Dombey senior, is precisely the kind of aspirational *nouveau riche* who would enthuse over the ‘Elgin’ marbles and Grecian taste. As Jenkyns writes, for the Victorians, ‘Grecian culture easily became a symbol of social or cultural pretentiousness’.¹⁰ Yet the Olympus comparison and Diogenes the dog are slim pickings for a novel of the length and substance of *Dombey and Son*: it contains few other allusions to either Greece or Rome (most of them are mentioned later in this essay). We must not overstate the rather sparse Dickensian evidence for even ironic references to the study and cultivation of Mediterranean antiquity.

Dickens has been a bestseller for over a century and a half, beaten into third place amongst popular classics only by the bible and Shakespeare.¹¹ His impact on culture has been inestimable: he almost single-handedly created the Victorians’ own mental pictures—which we have inherited—of urban life, London, prisons, schools, childhood and Christmas. His cultural presence may not be ignored by anyone seeking to write about 19th-century English-speaking fiction, literature, or theatre. Nor may the scholar of the 19th-century reception of Greek and Roman Classic underplay his significance. The issue becomes more pressing on account of the massive importance of ancient Greece and Rome to other major 19th-century novelists such as Thackeray, Eliot and Hardy, as also to other novelists of Dickens’ era who enjoyed outstanding popularity in their own time, especially Bulwer (later Bulwer-Lytton), above all through his 1834 bestseller *The Last Days of Pompeii*.¹²

Moreover, Dickens’ avoidance of classical material does look deliberate. He was theatre-mad, and we know he frequently attended spectacles, plays and burlesques on classical themes. It is not easy to specify, from the available evidence, his reasons for

liking some and loathing others. For example, when he saw the famed horseman, strongman and exponent of artistic tableaux Andrew Ducrow adopt various ‘classic poses’ at the reopening of the Colosseum in 1835, including his famous ‘Brutus condemning his son to death,’ Dickens was appalled.¹³ His revulsion may have been caused by the unpalatable content of the story (a father incapable of empathy with his son), the French republican neoclassical associations of the patriotic tale, or just the extravagant heroic pantomimic idiom in which Ducrow specialised. It certainly was not the simple adoption of a classical story to a popular art-form, because Dickens thoroughly enjoyed the best of the classical burlesques, including Frank Talfourd’s witty, Ovidian *Atalanta, or the Three Golden Apples, an Original Classical Extravaganza* (Haymarket 1857); he savoured Frederick Robson’s emotive performance in the role of Medea in Brough’s dazzling burlesque *The Best of Mothers, with a Brute of a Husband* (1856), discussed by Richardson in the previous chapter of this volume. Dickens’s personal stance on the Greek and Roman classics was connected both with his particular model of indigenous radicalism and with his conventional mid-nineteenth-century taste for theatrical farce, sentimentality, and melodrama. He wrote with some glee to Bulwer-Lytton in 1867 that the public of their day could only be induced to go and see a Greek play in the form of burlesque: moreover, ‘a Greek name and breakdown nigger-dance [the (to us shocking) term for a type of musical frolic characteristic of the mid-nineteenth-century popular burlesque theatre] have become inseparable’.¹⁴ Dickens tolerated some of the more affecting contemporary plays set in antiquity, including John Oxenford’s Roman tragedy *Virginia*, based on Livy’s tale of Appius Claudius, at the Royal Marylebone theatre in May 1849, especially the scenic effect of the Roman forum. But even his mildly approving response to this classicising drama contrasts powerfully with his far greater enthusiasm for Douglas Jerrold’s tale of contemporary working-class tribulations, *Black-Eyed Susan*.¹⁵

Clarity about Dickens' views of classical stories as retold in the theatre is made harder to achieve because he was absent from London throughout the first half of 1845, when the 'Mendelssohn' *Antigone*—a spectacular performance of an English translation of the Sophoclean play, with music by the outstandingly popular Continental composer—made such a huge impact at Covent Garden. This production, and the familiarity with Sophocles' heroine it encouraged, demonstrably informed works by Thackeray, Eliot, Bulwer and Elizabeth Barrett; Dickens would certainly have seen the production had he not been in Italy at the time.¹⁶ One of the reasons why Dickens did not like reusing *some* classical material was that (as is clear from his editing of other people's stories), in literature he loathed excessively emotional females and amoral adventuresses of the type which is to be found in abundance in Greek and Roman authors. But the virginal, god-fearing Antigone is another matter. We can speculate on a possible connection between Antigone and Louisa Bounderby (née Gradgrind) in *Hard Times* (1854), who sacrifices herself for her brother and takes the whole novel trying to be heard by her Creon-like and emotion-despising Utilitarian father. Another virtuous Greek tragic heroine who, I have sometimes thought, makes an appearance in Dickens is the dying queen in Euripides' *Alcestis* (in the 19th century one of the most famous of Greek tragedies through its adaptation into operas). Florence Dombey weeps over her dying mother at the opening of *Dombey and Son*, unaware as yet that she will be faced with an unsatisfactory stepmother, just as Alcestis fears her little girl will be persecuted (Euripides, *Alcestis* 309-19).

But both these parallels between Dickensian and Greek tragic heroines are speculative. There is just one possible Dickensian reaction to a classical text, as experienced through the theatre, where there is at least a little documentation. 1837 was a momentous year for Dickens. His first child, Charles, was born on the 6th of January. In May he was driven nearly to despair by the death of his wife's sister, with whom he had a

seriously ambiguous relationship. But in April he had moved to 48 Doughty St., London, just a block or two from the Foundling Hospital, and this made a huge impact upon him: he used to watch the orphan children lining up against the wall.¹⁷ There may be another ‘foundling’ connection. Dickens attended the premiere of the *Ion* by Thomas Talfourd in May 1836, and it was during the immediately subsequent months that Dickens’ shift to the novelistic type of the foundling *Bildungsroman* began with *Oliver Twist*, which started to appear in serialised form in 1837. This new interest developed into the fatherless young man outmanoeuvring a dastardly elder male in *Nicholas Nickleby* (serialisation of which commenced in 1838), although the most autobiographical of them all, *David Copperfield*, had to wait until 1849. Before *Oliver Twist*, Dickens’ principal work, besides his *Sketches*, had been *The Pickwick Papers*. There were few signs in this genre of writing that the emotive story of a child, from babyhood to rediscovery of his true identity and birthright, would become the shape taken by what have become his most famous books.

Thomas Talfourd, radical Whig MP and judge, was seventeen years older than Dickens and an established figure on both the literary and political scene. His adaptation of Euripides’ *Ion*, which also uses material from the other ancient Greek foundling tragedy, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, was a popular hit at Covent Garden in 1836. Talfourd’s *Ion* tells the tale of a virtuous youth in ancient Greek city-state, who sacrifices love and life to help his fellow-citizens rid themselves of a vicious tyrant and found an idealised, peaceful republic. Despite its high-minded politics, *Ion* is warm, emotional, stirring and made excellent theatre. Talfourd sent Dickens a private copy, which Dickens wrote he would ‘always be more proud of, and value more highly, than any book I possess’.¹⁸ Dickens was also a close friend of its star, the actor Macready, and genuinely seems to have admired both *Ion* and Talfourd’s other Greek foundling play using both *Ion* and *Oedipus Tyrannus*, *The Athenian Captive*, a vehicle for Macready in 1838.¹⁹ Dickens wrote with

great enthusiasm to John Forster that he had heard a reading of *The Athenian Captive*, ‘which, as an acting piece, I think admirable; I am as much surprised as you to imagine by what mental process such a very striking and complete thing can have been forged in so short a time’.²⁰ The philhellene Talfourd and the innovation-loving Dickens seem to have shared a special bond at this time: Talfourd dedicated a sonnet to Dickens, written on Christmas Day 1838, entitled ‘On perusing the completed *Oliver Twist*’.²¹

Dickens had dedicated *The Pickwick Papers* to Talfourd, and he named the secondary couple in *Nicholas Nickleby* after Talfourd’s children. He formed the adorable character of the well-meaning lawyer Tommy Traddles and his pious wife in *David Copperfield* upon Talfourd and his dissenting wife Rachel. Although no close parallels can be pressed between Talfourd’s *Ion* and *Oliver Twist* or *Nicholas Nickleby*, I see no reason why the basic plot shape and over-riding youthful subjectivity of these orphan novels should not owe something to Dickens’ experience of Talfourd’s play, especially its combination of social propaganda with a personal rite-of-passage, rags-to-riches structure featuring an initially ingénue and always virtuous hero. We know how much Macready’s performances in other roles, especially those of Shakespeare, affected Dickens. Macready’s *Lear* of 1838 informed the delineation of Little Nell’s grandfather, and his heartbreak at her death, in *The Old Curiosity Shop* of 1840, and also *Dombey and Son*. His *Hamlet* affected *David Copperfield*, and his *Macbeth* *Bleak House*.²² Dickens’ change from social satire in the form of artfully arranged individual sketches, or those arranged around a theme like the Pickwick Club, may, therefore, have been partly inspired by the success of Talfourd’s *Ion*. Such a response to a performance based on an ancient text, however, would scarcely constitute an instance of Dickens deliberately using the classics. But it *would* constitute an instance of him responding to a powerful, indeed melodramatic stage play with a sympathetic foundling hero and a socially reformist agenda. He liked

Ion, I believe, *in spite* of its ancient Greek credentials. He would almost certainly probably have preferred the play to have been given a new, more up-to-date setting: he advised Bulwer to transfer the setting of his *The Captives*, an adaptation of Plautus' comedy by that name, from ancient Greece to more recent Russia.²³

Leaving aside the possible implicit influence of fundamental plot-types, what sort of work is done by Dickens' explicit classical allusions? An article by Pauline Fletcher proposes that there is a discernible development in Dickens' use of classical references.²⁴ She argues that, in his earlier books, the treatment of Greek and Latin material is oppositional and parodic and almost always in the spirit of denigration of both the classics *and* the individual or attitude under scrutiny. In particular, in *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844), Mrs Hominy, the horrendously self-important literary lady, is referred to as 'the Mother of the modern Gracchi' and wears a 'classical cap'.²⁵ Fletcher argues, however, that Dickens' references gradually become less parodic and less oppositional over his writing career, as his own relationship with the dominant culture evolved.

Now in the earlier books it is true that classical allusions of any explicit kind tend to be in mouths of, or in relation to, pedants and/or social aspirants. The best example is Alfred Jingle, the charlatan actor with pretensions to gentility in *The Pickwick Papers*. But I am not sure that Fletcher lends enough weight to the places in which they occur in *all* his books— they almost invariably mark a contrast between views of *class* at a moment when class identity is being formulated, challenged, or asserted. Throughout chapter 21 of *Dombey and Son*, the sight of Edith Dombey's affected, hypochondriac seventy-year-old mother, who languishes regally in a wheelchair she does not need and declares herself too pure at heart for urban life, is consistently described as an absurd parody of Cleopatra in her galley. In *Our Mutual Friend* the bride's aunt at a fashionable wedding — exactly the sort of venue where class distinctions are publicly fine-tuned -- is compared with Medusa

‘in a stony cap, glaring petrification at her fellow-creatures’.²⁶ In *Hard Times* the self-styled aristocrat fallen on hard times, Mrs Sparsit, has a ‘Coriolanian style of nose’, a ‘classical countenance’, and looks as though she is invoking ‘the infernal gods’.²⁷

In *David Copperfield* (1850), where the hero’s talent at Latin may reflect Dickens’ own childhood experiences (see below), the pawnbroker to whom the boy takes Mr Micawber’s possessions used to get him ‘to decline a Latin noun or adjective, or to conjugate a Latin verb’, since the presence of the ‘little gent’ was a novelty.²⁸ The most famous example of all occurs in ch. 17 during one of David’s encounters with Uriah Heep, as illustrated here [FIG.] by Fred Barnard (1870). In the complex class politics of this novel, the envious Uriah sees David as a privileged young snob. Heep is studying law in order to try to better his income social position. Without knowledge of Latin, the mark of an educated gentleman and much used in legal discourse, it is difficult for him to achieve his dreams of self-improvement. David offers to teach him Latin. Heep refuses:

'Oh, thank you, Master Copperfield,' he answered, shaking his head. 'I am sure it's very kind of you to make the offer, but I am much too umble to accept it.'

'What nonsense, Uriah!'

'Oh, indeed you must excuse me, Master Copperfield! I am greatly obliged, and I should like it of all things, I assure you; but I am far too umble. There are people enough to tread upon me in my lowly state, without my doing outrage to their feelings by possessing learning. Learning ain't for me. A person like myself had better not aspire. If he is to get on in life, he must get on umbly, Master Copperfield!²⁹

To sum up our findings so far: Dickens *may* have used classical myth occasionally at a structural level, as mediated through an exciting theatrical performance, in writing a human story. He *certainly* uses classical references occasionally in order to define individuals' class positions and class aspirations. But the classics remain virtually invisible in Dickens relative to other prominent fiction writers of his time, just as they are virtually invisible in the drama of his reformist friend Douglas Jerrold. So what we need to do is try to explain the reasons for this.

One reason that has been proposed is Dickens' own education. His schooling was interrupted and he did not go to university. He did not get the chance to learn Greek. But this will not do as an explanation: he was taught the rudiments of Latin by his mother when at Chatham, where he lived from the age of five. He learned more at William Giles' school at Chatham,³⁰ and later, at Wellington House Academy, on the Hampstead Road, London, which he attended for two years in his teens, he actually won the Latin Prize.³¹ This was unusual because the prize was almost always given, cynically, to boys with younger brothers who were prospective pupils. But Dickens had forged an intense relationship with the Latin teacher, Mr Shier, who coached him for the prize; he even gave Shiers a copy of the works of Horace to thank him.³² The idea, sometimes suggested, that there were not avenues by which Dickens could have accessed the classics is therefore simply not tenable. New avenues of access opened up in his adulthood. He became close friends with Cornelius Felton, Professor of Greek at Harvard (1832-1860), during his first visit to America in 1842. He thereafter consulted Vergil in the original, and read several other ancient authors including Plutarch, Cicero, and Horace. He had translations of Greek tragedy in his library and had read Daniel Burgess' 1729 study, *A Short Account of the Roman Senate*.³³ He was a tourist at classical sites, learning a great deal in Rome, Pompeii and Herculaneum;³⁴ he was probably the author and certainly the commissioner of an

article entitled ‘Trèves, the Belgic Rome’, on the Roman ruins in the Rhineland, which he published in the English periodical he edited, *Bentley's Miscellany*.³⁵

When it is appropriate to the subject-matter, as in his *Pictures from Italy*, the travelogue arising from his extended vacation in 1844-5, Dickens competently discusses Horace, Tiberius, Septimius Severus, Constantine, and the Etruscans, demonstrates the detail in which he has read Bulwer’s *Last Days of Pompeii*, and describes his responses to the murals of Pompeii and Herculaneum.³⁶ His control of ancient sources does also, occasionally, surface in his fiction. There is a subtle comparison between Odysseus and Florence’s patient admirer Walter Gay, which evolves during *Dombey and Son*. Despite being shipwrecked on his way to Barbados, Gay survives to win the hand of his woman despite the machinations of his dastardly rival Cawker. In one of Dickens’ most sophisticated novels, *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5), there are signs of an experiment in using ancient history to illuminate a transhistorical vision of the rise – and inevitable fall – of societies based on empty values. Boffin, the plutocrat and parvenu whose entire life revolves around the accumulation of money, is studying what else but Edward Gibbons’ *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*?³⁷

Angus Wilson patronisingly suggests, of Dickens’ studies at Wellington House, that ‘their mediocre level is suggested by the triteness of Dickens’s classical references’.³⁸ But the idea that he was either too ignorant or too insecure to draw on more than a limited range is to underestimate the man. He was a voracious reader quite capable of devouring any ancient author he wished in translation, at any time. The more usual proposal is that Dickens was polemically *opposed* to study of the classics. It has been suggested that his true attitude can be heard in the addition he made, during his his public readings of *Nicholas Nickleby*, to the schoolmaster Squeers’ explanation of the meaning of the word *quadruped*. In the text, he tells the pupils to whom he teaches English spelling and

philosophy, that a horse is ‘a quadruped; and quadruped’s Latin’. But in the performance version, Dickens added to this speech of Squeers a denunciation of training in the ancient tongues: ‘. . . or Greek, or Hebrew, or some other language that’s dead and deserves to be’.³⁹ Yet if he really believed that the study of Latin and Greek was obsolete, why did he send his own oldest son to the ‘public school’, Eton? What Dickens really objected to was the sort of education handed out in abysmal minor *private* schools (on the distinction between these two types of institution see further Stray’s chapter in this volume). There are more schools in Dickens’ novels—fifty—than in those of any other 19th-century novelist, and more than that number of teachers.⁴⁰ And it is true that he was violently opposed to grammar and flogging as a substitute for a liberal education in a humane environment.

In 1825, he enrolled at Wellington House Classical and Commercial Academy, run by the brutal William Jones, who meted out terrible scourgings. Although Dickens himself, as a day boy, personally avoided such torture, he was traumatised by what he witnessed. This regime informed his depiction of Dotheboy’s Hall in *Nicholas Nickleby*, Dr Blimber’s in *Dombey and Son*, and Salem House in *David Copperfield*: Mr Creakle is directly modelled on Jones, whose business, Dickens still angrily recalled more than three decades later, was ‘to make as much out of us and put as little into us as possible.’⁴¹ More extreme resurrections of the vile Mr Jones appear in two of Dickens’ shorter stories. First, the vicious headmaster in ‘Our School’ (1851). The Headmaster (known as ‘The Chief’) is said to enjoy ruling ciphering-books, and ‘smiting the palms of offenders with the same diabolical instrument’.⁴² But the most colourful example occurs in the fantasy of Robin Redforth (aged 9), the narrator of part III of Charles Dickens’ 1868 novella *Holiday Romance*. The hero of this fantasy is a pirate named Captain Boldheart, who embraced his criminal career out of loathing for the Latin master who had ‘spited’ him. In the China

seas, Boldheart encounters a ship flying the flag of ancient Rome, and it turns out that its captain is the Latin master. Boldheart orders his men ‘that the Latin-grammar master should be taken alive’, and then defeats him in ‘a terrific cannonading’. The Latin master is then punished for his perfidy and spite against little boys by being cast adrift in a small boat with a few provisions and a Latin grammar. Later, the master is about to be cooked by wildly dancing ‘savages’ on an island. He is being coated with flour and has had his head shaved. Boldheart rescues him but only on condition that ‘he should never, under any circumstances, presume to teach any boy anything any more’, and that he would spend the rest of his life voluntarily helping boys with their Latin exercises.⁴³

Incompetent and even sadistic teachers of the ancient Languages like these feature regularly in Dickens’ many lousy educational establishments, since bad teaching of Latin had become, for him, a *symbol* of bad education. But the only *novel* in which Dickens specifically attacks the coercion of children into classical pursuits is in the first chapter of *Dombey and Son*, though the portrait of a woman, the Übersnob Cornelia Blimber; she loved dead languages, which we would dig up ‘like a ghoul’, and worshipped Cicero.⁴⁴ In *David Copperfield*, on the other hand, Dr. Strong the lexicographer is a brilliant scholar, and pathetic rather than malevolent. Even in the semi-autobiographical *Our School* the real problem is not the scholarly Latin teacher himself but the vicious headmaster.

A third theory is that Dickens’ class consciousness and sympathy with marginalised groups led him deliberately to avoid classical references as elitist. It has been argued that his repudiation of the classics is a form of ‘alienation’ that ‘offers a means of understanding the nature and mechanisms of class marginalization, the patterns of which, psychological and social, inscribe themselves on Dickens’ texts.’⁴⁵ But this explanation will not do, either. Dickens was certainly insecure about his own status as a ‘gentleman’ and used that laden term, as statistical analysts of his prose can inform us, nearly three

times as often as any other significant 19th-century novelist.⁴⁶ He was also committed to the creation of a populist literature accessible to all literate members of the public at large. As the first advertisement for *Household Words* put it, everything he wrote was suited to ‘the entertainment and instruction of **all** classes of readers’.⁴⁷ But there is no evidence that he opposed the humane study of the classics in general or indeed in principle, either in the original languages or in modern-language translation.

Thinking in terms of literary genealogy may be more helpful. Dickens can be understood as an heir or at least successor to the Wordsworthian Romantic tradition. In his rejection of regulated neoclassicism he was in a profound sense a Romantic: besides loathing French neoclassical theatre, he claimed that he had written the death of Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop* in order to ‘substitute a garland of fresh flowers for the sculptured horrors which disgrace the tomb’.⁴⁸ But he also reacted massively *against* the Romantic poets’ disapproval of technology and civilisation, their cult of the noble savage, and idealisation of the past as visited through travels conducted in the imagination. As he wrote to Douglas Jerrold on May 3rd 1843, ‘If I ever destroy myself, it will be in the bitterness of hearing those infernal and damnably good old times extolled’.⁴⁹ Classical Italy did deserve to be remembered, he thought, but not because of any virtue immanent to that civilisation. The reason, rather, was that ‘in every fragment of her fallen temples, and every stone of her deserted palaces and prisons, she helps to inculcate the lesson that the wheel of Time is rolling for an end, and that the world is, in all great essentials, better, gentler, more forbearing.’⁵⁰

Fletcher concludes that Dickens’ lack of classical material is because ‘he always wrote from the heart rather than the intellect’,⁵¹ although there is some truth in this, it underplays how much Dickens had thought through his purpose in writing his novels. What we are dealing with is not a *rejection* of the classics as much as a positive *embrace*

of the future possibilities of prose fiction -- a conscious vote for progress and for making new things in literature. He did not want to ‘make it new’ in the sense meant by Ezra Pound,⁵² who advocated reblending and selecting from previous literary styles to produce a ‘new’, synthetic, Modernist aesthetic. Dockens wanted to make something *wholly new* in a form of permanent aesthetic revolution against the inherited plot shape or word cluster.

Getting at Dickens’ own aesthetic views is notoriously difficult, since he wrote so little about them. Some of the more important statements are actually to be found in his remarks about the visual arts. Confusingly, for a man who despised neoclassicism in literature, he liked Canova, but in general he expressed fairly trenchant objections to conventionality in art and to the use of stereotyped typologies. In a letter of 1845, on the re-use of the same model by artists in Rome, Dickens deplored the fact that ‘students should go on copying these people elaborately time after time out of mind, and find nothing fresh or suggestive in the actual world around them’.⁵³

When it comes to literature, his recorded views even on canonical authors are not illuminating: he revered Chaucer, Shakespeare, the New Testament, Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, Tobias Smollett’s *Humphrey Clinker* and Walter Scott’s *The Bride of Lammermore*. Richard Lettis has tried to reconstruct Dickens’ aesthetic tenets from his editorial work in *Household Words* and other journalistic ventures.⁵⁴ Dickens preferred any story to possess an inherently proper length, to be realistic and probable, to use characterisation to help along the action, and to restrict the story sternly to what was needed for the plot as a whole. These tenets in a sense could not be more classical, reproducing Aristotle’s categories in the *Poetics* of *mēkos*, *eikos*, *prepon*, *hen* and *holon*. But they sit alongside a pervasive and emphatic rejection of the trite, the ordinary, the clichéd and predictable. Dickens encouraged all his writers to strive to create new

plotlines and new combinations of words. In the case of one story by Harriet Martineau, his high praise showed the three virtues he most admired: it was ‘affecting’, it had ‘a fine plain purpose’ and ‘a singular novelty’. His approving reactions to Wilkie Collins’ work reveal his admiration for avoidance of the obvious plot pattern and a penchant for the striking and wild against an ordinary, everyday background.⁵⁵

In his editorial work, Dickens particularly admired fictionalisations of real human stories of the ‘here and now’ that he found in newspapers. Much that appears far-fetched in his *own* work can also be proven to be inspired by real-life human stories, drawn from his experience writing police reports for *The Morning Chronicle* or data extracted from the report of the Poor Law Commission or the *Second Report on Children’s Employment in Mines and Factories*. I used to be tempted to see a Cyclopean reference in the vile Mr Squeers, the one-eyed despotic headmaster of Dotheboys Hall, the Yorkshire School attended by Nicholas Nickleby. But this turns out to be a detail inspired by his real-life prototype, a schoolmaster named William Shaw, who was really one-eyed and had been put on trial for gross neglect of the boys at his school in 1823.⁵⁶

It is difficult for us to recreate a sense of how shockingly revolutionary Dickens’ *style* seemed to his contemporaries.⁵⁷ Trollope disliked it intensely:

Of Dickens's style it is impossible to speak in praise. It is jerky, ungrammatical, and created by himself in defiance of rules... To readers who have taught themselves to regard language, it must therefore be unpleasant.⁵⁸

The Professor of Rhetoric at Edinburgh, W.E. Aytoun, published a disguised satirical attack on Dickens, in which he says, with faux-admiration, ‘You have....undertaken to

frame a new code of grammar and of construction for yourself; and the light and airy effect of this happy innovation is conspicuous ... There is no slipslop here – only a fine, manly disregard of syntax'.⁵⁹ These features -- rejection of strict rules of syntax and grammar, innovation, and wordiness -- also appear in responses by authors more favourable to Dickens' work, such as Horne, who saw that Dickens 'continually exhibits the most trifling and commonplace things in a new and amusing light'.⁶⁰

The main difficulty in our feeling the extreme newness of Dickens' prose style is that he contributed so much diction to the English language, besides all those proper names that have become part of everyday locution (Gradgrind, Micawber).⁶¹ A brilliant study by Sørensen has shown that he introduced well over a thousand lexicographically demonstrable neologistic words and phrases, including dozens that are part of everyday speech—doormat, abolitionist, an acquired taste, on the cards, casualty ward, flummox.⁶² The second difficulty in hearing how innovative he was is that his adventures in style prefigure so many of the tropes usually associated with Modernist fiction that we, post-Woolf and Joyce, are insensitive to the shock that they must originally have caused. The chief novelistic innovations with which he has been credited are these: his experimental confusion between Free Indirect Discourse, direct speech, indirect speech, and focalisations; his freedom with the confusion of tenses: in *Bleak House*, for example, he experiments with the present tense in roughly half the whole book in order to represent the interminable dragging out of the lawsuit and to conjure up 'the peculiar and sinister atmosphere';⁶³ (3) he is happy to write non-sentences, lacking finite verbs. See for, example, 'The time, an hour short of midnight; the place, a French apartment...'⁶⁴ But here there is a reason for the lack of verbs, and that is that Dickens is reproducing the style of stage directions, just as he elsewhere reproduces the definite and indefinite-article-free style of newspaper headings and especially newly invented telegraph, as in 'Venerable

parent promptly resorts to anathematisation, and turns him out. Shocked and terrified boy takes flight'.⁶⁵ These three 'dialects' – stage directions, journalistic compression, and 'telegraphese' – show Dickens once again anticipating the great Modernists by replicating patterns of speech as they occur in the real world rather than making them all conform to a preconceived model of a correct novelistic *koinē*.⁶⁶

It would be interesting to look for ancient equivalents – they are unlikely to be models – for other distinctively Dickensian stylistic innovations. These include the ascription of subjectivity to inanimate objects ('The wooden leg looked at him with a meditative eye'⁶⁷), the premodification of nouns by strings of parallel attributive adjectives ('a bawling, splashing, link-lighted, umbrella-struggling, hackney-coach-jostling, patten-clinking, muddy, miserable world'⁶⁸), and the attempt to imitate, through prose rhythm, the rhythms of the newly technologised and mechanised world around him – another profoundly Joycean trick. The most famous example is the breathtaking description of the train in *Dombey and Son*, 'away, with a shriek, and roar, and a rattle, through the fields, through the woods, through the corn, through the hay, through the heath, through the mould, through the clay, through the rock'.⁶⁹

The argument I have been struggling to frame is about one author who wanted to forge a new kind of prose fiction, one which engaged at every level with immediate reality by listening intently to that reality rather than to inherited texts. How we talk about Dickens' relationship with classical texts brings us into one of the most frustrating limitations on conventional aesthetic theory. An *antithesis*—a Hegelian, dialectical reaction against established tastes and norms—is just as closely indebted to its thesis as a simple-minded imitation. When abstract art reacted against figurative art, or Dadaism against 19th-century realism, it is easy enough to see how the antithetical, rejecting aesthetic movement retains, immanently within it, the analytical categories it opposes. But

in the case of Dickens it is much easier to define what he wanted to *do* than what he *didn't*.

I began by entitling this essay 'Dickens *versus* the Classics', but it has become apparent to me that this is not an adequate account of the relationship between the man and the cultural property. He wanted something real, and new, far more than he wanted something that *wasn't old*. I think he would have agreed with e.e. cummings, who once asked why T.S. Eliot 'couldn't write his own lines instead of borrowing from dead poets.'⁷⁰ Perhaps the title 'Dickens *regardless* of the classics' would get over better what I mean. But I conclude with the profound statement on Dickens' anti-classicism of George Gissing, a classical scholar from the North of England who himself became an outstanding writer of realist fiction. It comes in Gissing's essay on *Dombey and Son*. Although he underestimates the extent of Dickens' classical education, he sees the clear link between Dickens' conscious break with hoary literary precedent and his zeal for social reform: Dickens, he says,

had a strong prejudice against the "classics"; their true value he was not capable of appreciating, and his common sense told him that, as used in the average middle-class school, they were worse than valueless.. Great is the achievement of a public man who supplies his audience with the picture that abides, the catch word unforgettable, and Dickens many a time did so. It is the picture and the catch-word, not reason or rhetoric, that effect reform.⁷¹

¹Article reproduced in Marx and Engels 1975-2005: vol. 13, 664.

²Diniejko 2009.

³Letter dated September 6, 1858; see Marlow 1994: 132.

⁴Kettle 1963.

⁵Hall 2011*a*; Hunnings 2007; Hall and Wyles 2015.

⁶Dickens 1854: 170.

⁷Thackeray 1903: 272, 276.

⁸Dickens 1848: 448.

⁹Chesterton 1906: 179.

¹⁰Jenkyns 1980: 137.

¹¹Hobsbaum 1972: 10.

¹²On e.g. Eliot and the Classics see Easterling 1991; on ethical uses of Greek tragedy in fiction see Hall 2009; On *The Last Days of Pompeii* see Hunnings 2011.

¹³Slater 1996: 17.

¹⁴Dickens 1965–2002: vol. 7, 171, to Macready, 8 Aug. 1856.

¹⁵See his remarks in Slater 1996: 158-9: ‘a remarkable illustration of what a man of genius may do with a common-enough theme, and how what he does will remain a thing apart from all imitation’.

¹⁶Hall and Macintosh 2005: chapter 12.

¹⁷On Dickens and the Foundling Hospital See especially Taylor 2001. On the impact made by the Foundling Hospital on earlier, 18th-century culture, with which Dickens is likely to have been familiar, see Hall and Macintosh 2005: chapter 5.

¹⁸ Letter of 30th August 1837, in House and Storey 1982: 299.

¹⁹ Hall and Macintosh 2005: chapter 11.

²⁰ House and Storey 1982: 355-6.

²¹ House and Storey 1982: 478 n.1; see also Ackroyd 1990: 117.

²² On Dickens and Shakespeare see Gager 1996 and the brilliant article by Poole 2011.

²³ van Amerongen 1926: 72.

²⁴ Fletcher 1998.

²⁵ Dickens 1844: 53.

²⁶ Dickens 1865: 13.

²⁷ Dickens 1854: 53.

²⁸ Dickens 1850: 144.

²⁹ Dickens 1850: 169.

³⁰ Allen 1988: 65-6. 109.

³¹ Matchett 1911; Allen 1988: 104-5.

³² Compare Dickens 1851: 51: the Latin master ‘took great pains when he saw intelligence and a desire to learn.’

³³ See especially Litvack 1999.

³⁴ Dickens 1957: 366-433.

³⁵ Dickens 1863; see further Hall 2011.

³⁶ Dickens 1957: 38-9, 320, 366-7, 411, 413-14, 417.

³⁷ Dickens 1865: 55-6.

³⁸ Wilson 1970: 62.

³⁹ See van Amerongen 1926: 47.

⁴⁰ See Manning 1959.

⁴¹ Dickens 1850: 5-7 and Dickens 1869: 240.

⁴² Dickens 1851: 49.

⁴³ Dickens 1851: 52.

⁴⁴ Dickens 1848: 23.

⁴⁵ Morris 1991.

⁴⁶ Hori 2004: 37.

⁴⁷ Thomson 1904: 72. My emphasis.

⁴⁸ Speech delivered at a banquet held in his honour at Edinburgh, June 25th 1841, quoted from Dickens 1869: 3.

⁴⁹ Dickens 1880: vol. 1, 87.

⁵⁰ Dickens 1957: 433.

⁵¹ Fletcher 1998: 22.

⁵² *Make it New* was the title of Pound's influential essay collection/manifesto of 1935.

⁵³ Letter from Dickens to Angela Burdett-Coutts of 18th March 1856, quoted and discussed in Ormond 1984: 258.

⁵⁴ Lettis 1990.

⁵⁵ Lettis 1990: 29, 79.

⁵⁶ Clark 1918.

⁵⁷ Ford 1955: 113.

⁵⁸ Trollope 1883: 200.

⁵⁹Aytoun 1846, quoted from Collins 1971: 210.

⁶⁰Horne 1844: 000, quoted from Collins 1971: 201.

⁶¹Sørensen 1985: 12.

⁶² Sørensen 1985.

⁶³Sørensen 1985: 74-5.

⁶⁴Dickens 1848: 54.

⁶⁵Dickens 1865: 66. On Dickens and the language of journalism see especially the anonymous article in the *Saturday Review* for 1858, quoted in Collins 1971: 385: ‘Mr Dickens’ writings are the apotheosis of what has been called newspaper English. He makes points everywhere, gives unfamiliar names to the commonest objects, and lavishes a marvellous quantity of language on the most ordinary incidents’.

⁶⁶ I am deeply indebted to Sørensen 1985 in my comments on Dickens’ style, and especially in the examples of innovative practice.

⁶⁷Dickens 1865: 48.

⁶⁸Dickens 1850: 286.

⁶⁹Dickens 1848: 137.

⁷⁰ Paraphrase of cummings’ reported view in Grant 2012: 121.

⁷¹Gissing 1925: 151-3.