

# Drawn from Life: Categorical Specificity and Popular Sketch Writing from Mary Russell Mitford to Charles Dickens

JONATHAN POTTER (Birmingham City University)

## *Abstract:*

Literary sketches were a popular genre throughout the Victorian period, pioneered in the 1820s with Mary Russell Mitford's *Our Village* (1824-32) and Charles Dickens' *Sketches by Boz* (1833-36), both of which went through many editions across the century. Sketches were a commercially useful form since they suited periodical publication (and republication) and could be collected into volumes for different markets. Such versatility was matched in the genre's capacity to straddle fiction and non-fiction, enabling writers to engage with diverse subjects and disciplinary fields. This essay takes up the analytic challenge presented by such versatility, arguing that one of the fundamental techniques popularised by writers like Mitford and Dickens was a descriptive technique in which specific categories of phenomena are described in place of particulars. Categorical specificity enabled writers to generate an illusion of truthful depiction that was specific enough to be convincing but remained expansive enough to function across different publication contexts. Beyond its commercial value, the technique also poses questions about the nature of representation which, as this essay demonstrates, had important political implications for a newly industrialised society – a fact not missed by Victorian commentators who interrogated the “truth” of the representational categories such writing presented.

## *Keywords:*

Sketch writing; literary sketches; Charles Dickens; Mary Russell Mitford; periodical publication; literary techniques

Sketch writing, a hugely popular form in the first half of the nineteenth century, was important in the history of knowledge as well as literary history. As many scholars have now remarked, sketch writing emerged from the print revolution at the start of the nineteenth century as a new and popular genre. An explosion of periodicals, cheaply produced books, and innovations in image production combined to make serialised illustrated texts relatively quick and cheap to produce *en masse*. From a publishing perspective, sketches were a commercially useful form since the short present-tense observational mode was well suited to individual publication (and republication) across different periodical venues without the need for extraneous context or prior knowledge. Thematically arranged, sketches could then be re-packaged in collected volumes set at different price points for different markets. Sketch writing in this context was not a uniquely British phenomenon and recent studies by Martina Lauster and Christiane Schwab have shown the genre's European connections, particularly in Britain, France, and Germany, as well as its epistemological importance within the emergent knowledge economy, especially given its prominence prior to the formalisation of academic disciplines.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the genre's tendency to inhabit an ambiguous position between fiction and non-fiction enabled

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<sup>1</sup> Martina Lauster, *Sketches of the Nineteenth Century: European Journalism and its Physiologies, 1830-50* (Basingstoke, Hamps: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Christiane Schwab, “Social observation in early commercial print media. Towards a genealogy of the social sketch (ca. 1820–1860)”, *History and Anthropology*, 29: 2 (2017): 204-32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2017.1375488>.

writers to engage with a diverse range of subjects across what would later be recognised as distinct disciplinary fields. Moreover, given the observational nature of sketch writing, the genre could be conceived as a site for working through – and solidifying – popular conceptions of truth as a product of facts derived from observation – that is, what in other contexts would be called “testimony” – but also in relation to factuality as an affective valence produced by the descriptive tools employed by the writer. In concert with the larger projects of Lauster and Schwab, in this essay I approach sketch writing as an important development in the history of knowledge, aiming to demonstrate its role in establishing key norms of meaning-making.

In our own era, Dickens’s *Sketches by Boz* is probably the most well-known example of early nineteenth-century English sketch writing, having been the subject of some excellent critical analyses, most recent of which is Clare Pettitt’s analysis of Dickens’s interest in taxonomy, classification, scales of observation, and seriality as tools for modelling and describing urban modernity.<sup>2</sup> Criticism has tended to foreground *Sketches by Boz*, making claims for its importance as a high point of the genre based on its genius, its attention to new social forms in the new formations of urban London, its complex visual-textual dynamic, and its popularity as a serial and volumized text.<sup>3</sup> In tracing literary influence, such critics have noted earlier texts, most especially Washington Irving’s *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon* (1819-20) and Pierce Egan’s *Life in London* (1821) both of which were phenomenally popular the decade before Dickens began writing his sketches. Strangely, another hugely popular set of sketches, Mary Russell Mitford’s *Our Village* (1819) is rarely even noticed in Dickensian criticism, despite the fact it had arguably a much longer lasting popularity than either Irving (whose legacy centred around only a small number of stories from his *Sketch Book*) or Egan (whose work was faddishly popular and quickly faded). The reasons for this are likely in part because of Mitford’s rural subject as opposed to Dickens’s urban London, and perhaps in part because of the legacy of Victorian criticism which usually considered women writers separately from male writers. In any case, Mitford’s sketches are long overdue for attention not just for their influence on Dickens but more importantly for their role in shaping the language and epistemological grounds of periodical sketch writing. New editions of both Mitford’s sketches continued to sell up to the end of the century, and Mitford’s techniques were emulated by later sketch writers including Dickens. While interesting in terms of literary and publishing history, Mitford’s and Dickens’s popular success throughout the century is also significant for the history of knowledge since the techniques that made these texts commercially viable are primarily descriptive-interpretive and therefore cannot be separated from their epistemic stance.

Before examining the techniques of meaning-making in popular sketch writing, however, it is worth first considering what makes a collection of texts “sketches” and not some other genre like a “novel” for instance. For example, Dickens’s other early work, *the Pickwick Papers* (1836-7) was also intended – at first anyway – as sketch literature, having been

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<sup>2</sup> Clare Pettitt, *Serial Forms: The Unfinished Project of Modernity, 1815-1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 200-11.

<sup>3</sup> See: Deborah Epstein Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City* (London: Cornell University Press, 1995); J. Hillis Miller, “The Fiction of Realism: *Sketches by Boz*, *Oliver Twist*, and Cruikshank’s Illustrations”, in *Charles Dickens and George Cruikshank: Papers read at a Clark Library Seminar on May 9, 1970 by J. Hillis Miller and David Borowitz*, intr. Ada. B. Nisbet (Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 1970) pp. 1-69. Walter Benjamin was perhaps the first modern critic to describe “an abundant literature whose stylistic character forms an exact counterpart to the dioramas, panoramas, and so forth.” Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 531.

conceived by its publishers as an attempt at something like Pierce Egan's *Life in London* (1820-1) or William Combe's *Dr. Syntax Tours* (1812-21). Of course, as Richard Altick dryly comments, the *Pickwick Papers* "turned out to be something quite different."<sup>4</sup> The difference, noted by Percy Fitzgerald at the end of the nineteenth century, was that in *Pickwick*, Dickens made narrative the "chief element."<sup>5</sup> This is why, despite considerable interest in *Pickwick* as an account of a bygone time, most retrospectives and responses focus primarily on its novelistic qualities as a character-driven comedy. It is also why Egan's and Combe's work have become largely forgotten. W. M. Thackeray expressed a widely shared view when he famously re-read Egan's text and found it less brilliant than he remembered, though "the pictures are as fine as ever."<sup>6</sup> Similarly, though there is little mention of Combe in the Victorian periodical press, one article in 1883 sought to draw attention to his work, not for the writing, but for Thomas Rowland's accompanying illustrations.<sup>7</sup> Is *Pickwick* part of the sketch genre? Given Dickens's emphasis on storytelling which contrasts with the less narrative-driven observational mode of *Sketches by Boz*, it is understandable that *Pickwick* might instead be thought of as a novel and *Sketches by Boz* as sketches.

As an example, *Pickwick* raises a useful point about how we constitute what "sketches" are within print culture. From my brief account above, it can be seen that an observational descriptive mode does not on its own separate sketches from novels, nor do illustrations or periodical or part-issue publishing or even, necessarily, the subject matter (since *Pickwick* was planned along strikingly similar lines to *Life in London*). The distinction between *Pickwick* and *Sketches by Boz* is indicative of a wider schism between fictional "pictures" and "sketches" supposedly drawn from life. These two related modes of writing bear slightly different relations to truth in that the first is usually read as fiction that says something about the world (i.e. the convincing manners of a fictional character like Mr Pickwick says something about the manners of real people at that time), while the second is read as testimony with direct connection to the world it describes. In other words, one way to understand sketch literature as a distinct phenomenon is by considering its epistemological stance as a truth-telling textual form that may include fictional elements but is not considered in itself fictional. Such a conception relies primarily on reader-response and so is inherently variable, but it is evident from Victorian periodicals that even though Egan's *Life in London* tells the obviously fictional story of characters who are self-evidently not real (Jerry Hawthorn, Corinthian Tom, Bob Logic, and so on), after its initial explosion of popularity waned it was read primarily as an account of life in London at that time. Even the most ardent critics tended to denounce its vulgarity while admitting its general truthfulness: an excoriating review of a new edition for instance still felt obliged to ask and give a positive answer to the question "is the picture true?"<sup>8</sup> Texts like *Life in London* and *Sketches by Boz* were read as sketches; texts like *Pickwick* and Washington Irving's popular *Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon* were more commonly read as stories.

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<sup>4</sup> Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public 1800-1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 279.

<sup>5</sup> Percy Fitzgerald, "Pickwickiana", *The Gentleman's Magazine* 282:1994 (February 1897): 178-202, p. 192.

<sup>6</sup> [W. M. Thackeray], "Roundabout Papers, no. VIII", *The Cornhill Magazine*, 2:10 (October 1860): 501-12, p. 509.

<sup>7</sup> J. A. Blaikie, "A Forgotten Satirist", *The Magazine of Art*, 6 (January 1883): 394-5.

<sup>8</sup> [Anon.], "Life in London - Now and Fifty Years Ago", *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science, and Art*, 29: 765 (25 June 1870): 828-30, p. 829.

### Mitford's *Our Village* and Categorical Specificity

Mary Russell Mitford's "Our Village" sketches first appeared in the *Lady's Magazine* in 1819. The sketches are highly descriptive, many of them based on the conceit of a walk around or near the village of Three Mile Cross where she lived, and though they include a variety of local characters they were most often praised for their descriptions of nature which draws on the language and ideas of naturalism. Indeed, Amy King has argued that Mitford's sketches, featuring "a compendium of naturalist observations," are the "narrative instantiation of an everyday, amateur, and essentially uncredited naturalist."<sup>9</sup> The sketches were hugely successful and eventually collected into five volumes published in 1824, 1826, 1828, 1830, and 1832. Many editions followed and the 1852 edition (the last in Mitford's lifetime) was a selection only of those sketches explicitly framed as a country walk. This was an editorial choice that influenced almost every subsequent edition up to and beyond the turn of the twentieth century. Readers responded to Mitford's sketches with a remarkable passion and familiarity, writing to the author as though to a friendly acquaintance and making literary pilgrimages to the real Three Mile Cross.<sup>10</sup> The nature of Mitford's success was that it was enabled by a continual repackaging of the sketches into different periodicals and different volumes aimed at different audiences and over the course of many decades.<sup>11</sup> The reason this worked so well for so long was because of the technique employed in the "graphic detail" that made Mitford's description so compelling and seem so real that readers felt they knew the village and Mitford herself.

Looking back on Mitford's sketches, Harriet Martineau considered Mitford "the originator" of an entirely new style of writing which she calls "graphic description" notable for its attention to details.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, the American writer Louise Stockton, considering the familiarity readers felt with Mitford, suggested "it was Mary Mitford who first asked the reader to come out among the roses or to go driving along the scented lanes. Everybody else had described [...] but she went abroad with us."<sup>13</sup> For her own part, Mitford describes the familiarity of the sketches as part of a "new school" of popular writing that takes its cue from letters: "the periodical press takes charge of those bursts of gaiety and criticism which the post was wont to receive; and the public – the reading public – is, as I said before, the correspondent and confidant of everybody."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Amy King, "Searching our Science and Literature: Hybrid Narratives, New Methodological Directions, and Mary Russell Mitford's *Our Village*", *Literature Compass*, 4.5 (2007): 1485-1503, pp. 1494-5.

<sup>10</sup> See Alison Booth, *Homes and Haunts: Touring Writers' Shrines and Countries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> For more on this, see Jonathan Potter, "Mary Russell Mitford's 'Our Village' and the Development of the Professional Periodical Writer", *Women's Writing*, 32:1 (2025): 44-65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09699082.2024.2447185>

<sup>12</sup> Harriet Martineau, *Harriet Martineau's Autobiography and Memorials of Harriet Martineau*, ed. Maria Weston Chapman, 3 vols. Vol. 1 (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1877), 315-16. <https://archive.org/details/harrietmartineau01martuoft>. Volumes 1 and 2 of the autobiography were written and privately circulated in the 1850s – see P. D. Edwards, *Idyllic Realism from Mary Russell Mitford to Hardy* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p. 8.

<sup>13</sup> Louise Stockton, "Among the New Books", *New Peterson Magazine*, (January 1893): 109-14.

<sup>14</sup> Mary Russell Mitford, Letter to Sir William Elford, 23 June 1824. Repr. in *The Letters of Mary Russell Mitford*, ed. by R. Brimley Johnson (London: Kennikat Press, 1972) 176-8, pp. 176-7.

Rather than asking how “real” or “true” Mitford’s sketches actually are, I am interested in what it was that made them *feel* real and true, to the point that some readers reported feeling as though they actually knew the village and Mitford. How can a reality effect be so successful that a virtual village feels authentically familiar for readers in 1890 as well as for readers in 1819? The answer is a combination of techniques. First of all, Mitford’s sketches immerse readers in a virtual reality; readers are not like gallery visitors casually and comfortably viewing pictures. Whereas Egan’s sketches were written for “fireside heroes” and promised the cosseted viewing of a camera obscura or a painted panorama, Mitford was felt to have gone *with* readers.<sup>15</sup> Mitford addresses the reader as though speaking with a companion. Years before Dickens “collapsed the class distinctions between reader and subject” by emphasising “not the distance but the correspondence between the observer and the urban scene,” Mitford seems to have done something similar, but in a rural rather than urban setting.<sup>16</sup> In its opening chapter, Mitford’s book literally asks readers “Will you walk with me, courteous reader?”<sup>17</sup>

Mitford’s “immersive virtual world” is built using a kind of “thick description” which creates a sense of granular detail and therefore depth and authenticity.<sup>18</sup> However, the key to Mitford’s success is that although details are given, they are understood using a framework of classifications and points of reference so that the description creates impressions that connect the description with the diversity of readers’ experiences. For example, the sketch commonly used as a first chapter, entitled “Country Pictures,” opens by situating the text within a canon of “confined locality,” defined against texts that whirl readers “half over Europe” – this was a common theme in the *Lady’s Magazine* at the time of first publication – and that includes Jane Austen’s “delicious novels,” Gilbert White’s *Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* (1789), and the island locales of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (c. 1610).<sup>19</sup> Mitford thus primes readers to understand her text in isolation from real-world geopolitics and in close connection with other literary texts. The point of this is not to undermine their apparent realism but to clarify that this is a realism of affect: readers “ramble with Mr. White,” become intimate with the people and places in Austen’s novels, and feel grieved to lose the close companionship of Crusoe when he “gets away.”

After situating the sketch within a cannon of affective realism, Mitford then describes various buildings in the village and the characters that inhabit them, each of whom is presented with a mix of details designed to feel both particular and familiar. For instance:

The tidy, square, red cottage on the right hand, with the long well-stocked garden by the side of the road, belongs to a retired publican from a neighbouring town; a substantial person with a comely wife; one who piques himself on independence and idleness, talks politics, reads newspapers, hates the minister, and cries out for reform.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Pierce Egan, *Life in London, or, The Day and Night Scenes of Jerry Hawthorn, Esq. And his Elegant Friend Corinthian Tom in their Rambles and Sprees through the Metropolis*, ill. I. R. & G. Cruikshank (London: Chatto and Windus, 1870), p. 47.

<sup>16</sup> Nord, p. 50. See also: Edwards, *Idyllic Realism*, p. 10.

<sup>17</sup> Mary Russell Mitford, *Our Village* (1893), p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> Jayne Hildebrand, *Novel Environments: Science, Description, and Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 38-42. The observational mode of early nineteenth-century sketch writing that Hildebrand notes here has been elsewhere connected to painted panoramas. See Jonathan Potter, *Discourses of Vision in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Seeing, Thinking, Writing* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Alison Byerly, *Are We There Yet?: Virtual Travel and Victorian Realism* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

<sup>19</sup> Mitford, *Our Village*, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Mitford, *Our Village*, p. 5.

The nameless character is introduced with a succession of information that is enough to create an impression of the person but not enough to distinguish *this* person precisely. The effect is that readers are given an imaginative prompt to which they can add particular details from their own experience, thereby making the description seem familiar and real: even now as a twenty-first-century reader I fancy that I can recognise this character's *type* in people I have met in the English town where I live. On closer inspection, we can see certain familiar tropes in the description: the fat publican, the contrasting pairing of a large man with "comely wife," the contrast of his comfortable retirement with his outspoken politics of reform acquired (it is implied) from newspapers. Tropes, indeed, are a useful shorthand for affective description: a "little parlour seems made for Hogarth's old maid," a brook and meadows "breathe the very spirit of his [Isaac Walton's] own peacefulness," on viewing the prospect of the village from a hill Mitford finds that "Cowper has described it for me," and so on.<sup>21</sup> Tropes work as a literary form of classification that connects with the system of classification suggested by Mitford's literary and artistic references. In his work on historiography, Hayden White suggested that history "can be said to operate *tropologically* in order to prefigure a field of perception in a particular modality of relationships."<sup>22</sup> I would argue that Mitford prefigures an epistemological field where knowledge is primarily affective and the chief language for this knowledge is provided by visual-literary tropes.

The final part of Mitford's technique is to shift into an explicitly story-telling mode. For example, having described the retired publican in her opening sketch, Mitford then relates a humorous anecdote about the character introducing "into our peaceful vicinage the rebellious innovation of an illumination on the Queen's acquittal."<sup>23</sup> Mitford is witty and entertaining, but more importantly her storytelling also increases the impression of familiarity through its breezy chattiness that has the feel of real-life gossip. Narrative is not the chief element in *Our Village* but is a useful tool for affective realism: as a mode of communication, it solidifies the immersive sense that Mitford is indeed walking beside the reader, relating the local intelligence.

If Mitford's "Our Village" is an example – perhaps a key example – of affective realism, then it is worth clarifying the term. Nigel Leask usefully coined "affective realism" as a way of describing the representational modes and observational stances adopted by eighteenth and early nineteenth-century travel writers who were animated by a "fast-burning desire for novelty" in their description of exotic new places.<sup>24</sup> Mitford's affective realism however, is distinct in that since its subject is far from exotic or new it trades on familiarity to elicit an affective response. That is, generalisation, as used in the technique of categorical specificity, enables a representational practice that is phenomenological in intent, seeking to depict a convincingly realistic subjective response to phenomena rather than a detailed, particular description of phenomena as objects of observation. Mitford's affective realism therefore privileges interpretive subjectivity as a realist mode, but it also reinforces the generalising strategies of nineteenth-century science.

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<sup>21</sup> Mitford, *Our Village*, p. 9, p. 130, p. 215.

<sup>22</sup> Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 72.

<sup>23</sup> Mitford, *Our Village*, p. 5.

<sup>24</sup> Nigel Leask, *Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Travel Writing 1770-1840* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 25-6. Leask explicates the term on pp. 37-45.

### Dickens's *Sketches by Boz* and Categorical Specificity

We have seen how, in Mitford's sketches, truth is constituted as a specific form of relation between text and reality. This section examines Dickens's *Sketches by Boz* as a development of the techniques pioneered by Mitford. Like the "Our Village" sketches, *Sketches by Boz* appeared in numerous ways. From 1833, many of the sketches first appeared in periodicals including the *Monthly Magazine*, the *Morning Chronicle*, and *Bell's Life in London*, before John Macrone published them as volumes in two series under the title *Sketches by 'Boz', Illustrative of Every-day Life and Every-day People* (1836-7). Chapman and Hall then reissued these as monthly instalments between 1837 and 1839 to capitalise on the success of *Pickwick*. This latter edition was the first combined edition of all the sketches together, featured texts carefully revised by Dickens, and is probably the most familiar to twenty-first-century readers since it forms the text of the Penguin Classics edition, edited by Dennis Walder.<sup>25</sup> The long-standing popularity of Dickens's sketches hardly needs restating, and it is not possible to encompass the richness of scholarship on their publication history, influence, and connection with his later writings. Suffice to say that like Mitford's sketches, *Sketches by Boz* managed to appeal to a diverse range of readers over a long period of time in which the London it describes changed substantially.

A second similarity is that, also like Mitford's village, Boz's London was considered by readers to be a truthful, if humorous, depiction of reality. Comparing Dickens's sketches to Theodore Hook's *Sayings and Doings* (1824-8), the *London and Westminster Review* considered that "even when they describe the same things, the style of 'Boz' always presents a contrast of remarkable simplicity and truth to nature," while the *Monthly Magazine* considered that "most of his scenes the world at large, the nobodies of every-day life, can applaud and recognise as true 'to the curl of a hair'."<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the *Metropolitan Magazine* rather bombastically recommended it to American readers as an "instructive" and "perfect picture of the morals, manners, and habits of a great portion of English society" told with "sly humour" and "startling fidelity."<sup>27</sup> Dickens's humour, and indeed his flights of fancy, do not seem to undermine his sketches' claim to truth. The title, of course, claiming to show "every-day life and every-day people" announces an epistemological stance quite different from that of *Pickwick* which claims to be the "posthumous papers" of an obviously fictitious club.

Following the 1839 collected edition, Dickens's sketches are commonly organised into four sections: "Seven Sketches from Our Parish," "Scenes," "Characters," and "Tales." The sketches in "Scenes" are the most obvious examples of descriptive observation utilising the categorical specificity pioneered by Mitford. In these sketches, Dickens observes the city as a composition of categories, classes, and habitats. "In the larger and better kind of streets," he writes for instance, "dining parlour curtains are closely drawn, kitchen fires blaze brightly up, and savoury steams of hot dinners salute the nostrils of the hungry wayfarer, as he plods wearily by the area railings."<sup>28</sup> This is not a specific street or even a specific area or group of streets – it is left to the reader to decide which the "larger and better kind of streets" may be, just as it is left to the reader to imagine what smells the "hot dinners" might conjure up or what the closely drawn curtains might look like. The point of description like this is to give a granular level of categorisation that implies specificity but is general enough to seem familiar to a wide range

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<sup>25</sup> Charles Dickens, *Sketches by Boz*, ed. Dennis Walder, ill. George Cruikshank (London: Penguin, 1995).

<sup>26</sup> [Anon.], "Art. IX. Sketches by Boz [review]", *London and Westminster Review*, 5:2, (July 1837): 194-215, p. 197; [Anon.], "Sketches by Boz; second series [review]", *The Monthly Magazine*, 23:134, (February 1837): 204-5, p. 204.

<sup>27</sup> [Anon.], "Sketches by Boz [review]", *The Metropolitan Magazine*, 15:59, (March 1836): 77.

<sup>28</sup> Dickens, *Sketches by Boz*, p. 75.

of readers. It is also, primarily, an affective style of writing. Bodily sensations are viscerally felt here: the “hungry wayfarer” who “plods wearily” contrasting with the withheld satisfactions of the “savoury streams of hot dinners” and bright blazing fires behind the curtains. In this manner, Dickens’s description is immersive – using the kind of “thick” details that Mitford uses – and is primarily interested in affective responses.

The sketches from the “Our Parish” and the “Characters” sections tend to make greater use of storytelling over and above the descriptive observational mode. Yet this is a storytelling mode that draws heavily on categorical specificity for its effect. The comic description of the beadle in Dickens’s first sketch is a prime example of how this works. The sketch begins with an emotive account of poor relief that introduces the parish as a systematic response to individual suffering. Dickens uses the example of “a poor man, with small earnings, and a large family” who finds himself in debt: “What can he do? To whom is he to apply for relief? To private charity? To benevolent individuals? Certainly not – there is his parish.”<sup>29</sup> The parish is a response to a class of individuals – this poor man is not realised as a specific person but only as a nameless class example – and is itself composed of class examples. The list of parish offices neatly conflates places and people since they are all functions of the system: “the parish vestry, the parish infirmary, the parish surgeon, the parish officers, the parish beadle.”<sup>30</sup> When, in the second paragraph, Dickens finally gets to his tale of the beadle of “*our* parish” [my emphasis], he continues the idea of the beadle as a category rather than an individual. This, indeed, is how much of the humour is generated since the individual behaviours Dickens ridicules are presented not as personal failings but as official functions of the position. Absurd anecdotes are thus summarised as “a few traits of the importance and gravity of a parish beadle” – note the deliberate slip into the indefinite article.<sup>31</sup>

Dickens’s use of categories as “thick description” is prevalent, especially in the “Scenes” sketches where he often describes categories of people connected with places, in the manner of a naturalist finding species in certain habitats. Scotland Yard, for example, is described as having been “found to contain a race of strong and bulky men.”<sup>32</sup> Likewise, “the inhabitants of Monmouth Street are a distinct class; a peaceable and retiring race,”<sup>33</sup> and at Newgate prison an inmate is a “girl [who] belonged to a class.”<sup>34</sup> Whereas Mitford tended to interpret descriptive categories via a framework of literary and artistic reference that provided a catalogue of affective responses to draw upon, Dickens instead tends to use his own vivid imagination as the key to affective response. Observational detail is organised into categories and then interpreted via an imagining of what those categories involve – in practice, this usually involves imagining the lived experience of the typical class example. Such a process is most clearly explained in “Meditations on Monmouth Street” where he imagines the lives of the people who have worn the second-hand clothes on sale, and in “Thoughts on People” where he describes the classes he sees at St. James’ Park and imagines their daily lives. The technique is everywhere in the sketches though – in “The New Year,” for instance, he describes carriages going to parties as a precursor to imagining the parties, writing “we can fancy one of these parties, we think as well as if we were duly dress-coated and pumped, and had just been announced at the drawing-room door.”<sup>35</sup> Dickens’s imaginative “fancy” is a demonstration as well as an elicitation of affective response – he models how visual observation gives way to a

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<sup>29</sup> Dickens, *Sketches by Boz*, p. 17.

<sup>30</sup> Dickens, *Sketches by Boz*, p. 17.

<sup>31</sup> Dickens, *Sketches by Boz*, p. 20.

<sup>32</sup> Dickens, *Sketches by Boz*, p. 85.

<sup>33</sup> Dickens, *Sketches by Boz*, p. 96.

<sup>34</sup> Dickens, *Sketches by Boz*, p. 238.

<sup>35</sup> Dickens *Sketches by Boz*, p. 262.

viewer-response. His stance is that of a casual observer, not an all-knowing novelist, so his stories are simply fantasies prompted by his observations. Whereas Mitford's had the guise of a companion offering local gossip, Dickens has the tone of a companion offering speculative but plausible conjectures to pass the time. That these are taken as truth is a marker of their plausibility which, in turn, is a product of his use of categorical specificity. That is, they *seem* true because they *seem* to correlate with, and thus be corroborated by, readers' own casual observations.

I do not want to overstate the case for similarity between Dickens's writing and Mitford's for they are very different, but it seems clear that Dickens made extensive use of the techniques that readers had found so innovative in Mitford's sketches. Dickens's redeployment of the technique of categorical specificity is in the context of his own innovations: first, in applying it to the urban metropolis, and second by substituting the literary and artistic references for his own imaginative flair and comic wit. These differences were not actually originated by Dickens, though he made them his own: an 1820 sketch of "Life in London" promised the same thing: a study of "fellow-creatures" among "all classes of life" draws "experience and knowledge from every character and from every scene [...] from taking the living portraits of titled idlers at auctions and in ice-shops, to the toil and bustle of trade and commerce."<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, Mitford's importance in popularising this mode of sketch writing should be emphasised as it is Mitford's technique that gives Dickens the structure within which he playfully employs his comic talents.

### **Categorical Specificity and the Politics of Representation**

At least some of the political effects of Dickens's sketches are obvious: his application of categorical description to the beadle for example makes for cuttingly pointed satire. There is, nevertheless, a danger inherent to the technique in that it asks readers to view people not as individuals but within a typology. Dickens's inventive imaginings of the histories and lives of people he sees is further problematic in that it reduces all the complexities and contradictions of an individual's life to the level of generalisation. In Dickens's sketches this is clearly intended to be a harmless and amusing exercise in people watching, but it also clearly connects with the liberal politics of surveying, classifying, and measuring poverty. In less liberal hands, moreover, it becomes an exercise in bigotry and negative stereotyping. We can see this in the example of the picture of English pauperism written by Edward Gibbon Wakefield and reprinted across a number of periodicals. Wakefield, a propagandist for the British colonization of Australia and New Zealand who would become best known for his procedural "scientific" or "systematic" ideas about colonization, described a typical "English pauper" in his political pamphlet *Swing Unmasked, or the Causes of Rural Incendiarism* (1831). The description begins:

What is that defective being, with calfless legs and stooping shoulders, weak in body and mind, inert, pusillanimous, and stupid, whose premature wrinkles and furtive glance tell of misery and degradation? That is an English peasant or pauper – for the words are synonymous [...] He is married, of course – for to this he would have been

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<sup>36</sup> [Anon]., "Life in London: A Sketch", *The New Monthly Magazine and Universal Register*, 13:72, (January 1820): 45-6, p. 45. This sketch also appeared in *The Weekly entertainer and west of England miscellany* on 10 January 1820. Other similar sketches of London, presumably inspired by Egan but adopting something more akin to Mitford's style, also appeared – most notably, T. C. Morgan's "Life in London" in *The New Monthly Magazine* published at a time when both Mitford and Morgan were using the pseudonym "M." See: M. [T. C. Morgan], "Life in London", *The New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal*, 11:43, (January 1824): 226-30.

driven by the poor laws [...] But, though instinct and the overseer have given him a wife, he has not tasted the highest joys of husband and father. His partner and his little ones being, like himself, often hungry, seldom warm, sometimes sick without aid, and always sorrowful without hope, are greedy, selfish, and vexing; so, to use his own expression, he “hates the sight of them,” and resorts to his hovel only because a hedge affords less shelter from the wind and rain. Compelled by parish law to support his family, which means to join them in consuming an allowance from the parish, he frequently conspires with his wife to get that allowance increased [...].<sup>37</sup>

The passage continues in this manner and was quoted in full in the *Spectator*, *The Times*, *Niles' Weekly Register*, and *The Catholic Telegraph*.<sup>38</sup>

The different republications suggest that Wakefield's pamphlet was read not *only* as a political argument but in similar terms to other “pictures” situated on the border between journalism and literature. Indeed, the various periodicals seem more interested in his category descriptions than his political arguments. The *Spectator* suggested Wakefield's pamphlet was “important and valuable” only in that he “draws some pictures of rural degradation, with a power not inferior to that of any writer of the present day,” using the above passage as an example of such a “picture.” Similarly, *The Times* found Wakefield to be “a clever and ingenious generalizer [...] his examples become classes,” again with the above passage quoted, although the reviewer goes on to take issue with some of Wakefield's claims. Meanwhile, *Niles Weekly Register* quotes the passage as evidence in a discussion of free trade, and *The Catholic Telegraph* simply quotes the passage as an interesting literary picture, presented without comment under the title “An English Peasant.” As an example, Wakefield's “picture” points to the political significance of the drive to generalise from singular anecdotal, perhaps even fictional, examples. When it appears in support of a political argument with real-world consequences, the relation of the text to truth becomes much more important. Is, then, Wakefield's description “true”? *The Spectator* seemed to think so, though *The Times* showed a little scepticism, commenting that “much of what he says is true,” but “most is striking” so that “surprise rather than conviction is the feeling with which one lays aside his work.”<sup>39</sup> The problem is that the truthfulness of the text rests upon its persuasiveness. Thinking again of White's notion of the tropological characteristics of history writing, one might look at Wakefield's text and wonder if, and how, categorical specificity might also prefigure a field of perception in a particular modality of relationships. In other words, does Wakefield's categorical description of a pauper set epistemological limits on the reader's knowledge of pauperism – that is, does it obviate or promote certain ways of thinking about pauperism, certain political stances, and so on?

With this in mind, Wakefield's description of a pauper who relies on the parish might be compared with Dickens's “poor man, with small earnings, and a large family” who, too, turns to the parish in his sketch about the beadle. The two descriptions have a similar topic and both use an individual as an example of a class, but they have wildly divergent political messages. Whereas Wakefield attacks the personal failings of the pauper, Dickens attacks the failings of the parish. In this sense, categorical description seems open to political interpretation as a technique available to writers across the political spectrum. There is a deeper issue, however, in that the use of categorical specificity to describe people inherently supports a politics based on stereotypes. Indeed, Breton's comparison of liberal and radical writing shows

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<sup>37</sup> [Anon.], “Swing Unmasked”, *The Spectator*, (17 December 1831): 1219-20.

<sup>38</sup> [Anon.], “Swing Unmasked”, *The Times*, (30 December 1831): 2; Untitled article, *Niles Weekly Register*, (25 February 1832): 471; “An English Peasant”, *The Catholic Telegraph*, (7 July 1832): 301.

<sup>39</sup> [Anon.], “Swing Unmasked”, *The Times*, (30 December 1831): 2.

that while liberal journalism increasingly sought to map and catalogue poverty alongside descriptions of memorable individuals (Mayhew's journalism being a typical example), radical writers tended to avoid both statistical classification which encouraged a typology and the portraits of isolated individuals, preferring instead to narrativize poverty's structural causes.<sup>40</sup>

Catherine Gore confronted the problem of categorisation in the book introduction to *Sketches of English Character* (1846), but she sees it not as a problem with the tactics of representation but with society itself. "To pretend to characterize the classes or professions of a nation" was difficult, she wrote, "so late in the day as the middle of the nineteenth century," when everything had been reduced to "the most level monotony of surface" and "men are packed one within the other, like forks or spoons in a plate chest, each the same exact pattern and amount of pennyweights."<sup>41</sup> Authors who "pretend to individualize" in this context are forced to turn "to the most unsophisticated class" in search of novelty.<sup>42</sup> Gore takes this apparent uniformity as the premise for an argument against systemisation which, she argues, has eradicated individuality and a sense of wonder. She blames the influence of business for this new way of being where "people prefer to deal with a fac-simile of themselves" and "everything the least out of the common way must be avoided," to the extent that "people are made to pattern" and a person could draw a portrait or make a model of a man purely based on his profession "without ever having set eyes on his face." This latter comment is important since it clarifies the relation between representation and reality; in Gore's view categorisation in writing and art is not a convenient shorthand or a way of condensing the complex variety of real life but is in fact a direct replication of observed phenomena. Gore concludes that "the corpse of our defunct literature" will be revived with the advent of "the first man who dares to think and speak for himself."<sup>43</sup> "Meanwhile," she writes, here are "a few sketches of men and women as they are, and were, in England."<sup>44</sup> Her sketches themselves are written as contrasts of an imagined old England with modern society – sketches like "The Linkman," "The Standard Footman," and "The Lady's Maid" all introduce their subjects with references to Shakespeare – and Gore habitually extends her view outward to European countries to draw comparisons, using individual characters primarily as case studies of their type. Drawing again on White's formulation, we might say that Gore uses the tropes of categorisation to prefigure the field of perception tropologically. The effect is twofold: first to conflate the representational tactic with its subject and, second, to contrast the relational mode in view (i.e. modernity) with other relational modes (i.e. earlier forms of English society or European forms of society). Gore does not see this as an invention of representation, despite her use of references to other representational forms as a way of referring to other relational modes, as in her reference to Shakespeare, for instance.

Returning to Mitford at the start of the 1820s, it is unsurprising, given her use of tropes and categorical specificity, that her work was then co-opted into a canon of nationalist literature. As Elizabeth K. Helsinger notes, along with works by Mitford's acquaintances like S. C. Hall and William and Mary Howitt, the "Our Village" sketches offered a "potentially unifying cultural artifact and commodity [...] [that] organized a national audience around personal and collective memories of rural English origins."<sup>45</sup> By writing as "the correspondent

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<sup>40</sup> Rob Breton, "Portraits of the Poor in Early Nineteenth-Century Radical Journalism", *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 21:2 (2016): 168-183, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13555502.2016.1167766>

<sup>41</sup> Catherine Gore, *Sketches of English Character*, 2 vols (London: Richard Bentley, 1846), vol. 1: 1-2.

<sup>42</sup> Gore, *Sketches of English Character*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>43</sup> Gore, *Sketches of English Character*, p. 14.

<sup>44</sup> Gore, *Sketches of English Character*, p. 14.

<sup>45</sup> Helsinger, *Rural Scenes and National Representation*, p. 121.

and confidant of everybody,” Mitford and Dickens both place the reader-author relationship as a social relation defined virtually within the imagined world of the text; the reader’s immersion in the textual world removes critical distance and emphasises their relation to the other figures in the text. The “we” of the author/narrator looks at a “them” described using social types. The relation is thus both descriptive and interpretive since it creates a relationship at the moment of description. In Mitford’s case, individuals described using group characteristics are connected into a coherent social picture through an interpretive stance based on shared sympathy. The village is a place where the collective “we” know and are known by everyone but, even more importantly, are “interested in every one, and authorised to hope that every one feels an interest in us.”<sup>46</sup> Using sympathy as a unifying interpretive stance in the confined setting of the village, Mitford ultimately presents a coherent, if incomplete, picture of “Englishness.” Unity, is, after all, Mitford’s rationale for confining her setting, and is also found in Dickens’s sketches via his singular imaginative vision, just as it is a form of unity that Gore tries to evade as she extends her interpretive stance through historical and European comparisons.

Jonathan Potter  
Birmingham City University  
[Jonathan.Potter@bcu.ac.uk](mailto:Jonathan.Potter@bcu.ac.uk)

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<sup>46</sup> Mitford, *Our Village*, p. 3.