Reading the Dickens Advertiser: Merging Paratext and Novel

The floating gaze: The monthly number as cadavre exquis

To open one of the Dickens monthly numbers for the first time is a surprising experience. One’s first reaction is to compare the novel in the traditional book form with this more flimsy object which is framed by many pages of advertisements. The form of the hard-backed volume (the leather or cloth-bound edition or the sober paperbacks of today with their often ‘highbrow’ classical covers) has been entirely dismantled and, in a gesture similar to that of postmodernist architecture which places the inner workings of a building, its pipes and evacuations, on the outside, the structure has been turned inside out. The green covers (often now blue in appearance) have the frontispiece on the outside as well as an advertisement on the outside back cover so that the essence of what lies within is produced for the reader or passer-by on the outside to be taken in at a glance. The text of the novel has been reduced to a constant thirty-two pages (some three or four chapters) sandwiched between numerous pages of advertising. These chapters seem to be eclipsed amidst the other forms of text which surround them, and appear almost as an afterthought in the carnival of fonts and images which outweigh in volume the pages reserved for the Dickens text. How can this be? How can it be that the serious novels we studied at school were once presented to the public in this commercial form – so modern to our eyes?

Let us first describe the contents of some of these numbers and the growing space allocated to advertisements as the months go by. The first monthly number of Bleak House published between 1852 and 1853 in twenty monthly parts has a collection of adverts at the beginning which are sewn together and called ‘The Bleak House Advertiser’ consisting of twenty-four pages, and then a further four pages of advertising added in at the back. No. 2 has sixteen pages in the Advertiser at the front and eighteen at the back, while No. 10 has eighteen at the front before the chapter and eighteen after the chapters at the back. The double number (19 and 20), being the last in the series, has over forty pages of advertisements shared between the front
and back. The first monthly number of *Our Mutual Friend* of 1864, eleven years on, has thirty-two pages of advertisements in the Advertiser at the front and forty pages after, making a surprising seventy pages of advertisements compared with the mere thirty-two pages of the chapters of the novel itself. It is the overfull, saturated quality as well as the heterogeneity of this object which strike the reader most. The overcharged covers depicting crowds, objects, buildings in a patchwork of scenes from the novel give way in No. 1 of *Bleak House* to adverts in the form of a page of small frames in which spectacles, wigs, face cream, perfume are all advertised along with Burke’s Peerage, ‘Mudie’s Select Library’, ‘Gowland’s Lotion’ for the skin, ‘Sir James Murray’s Fluid Magnesia’ for all ills, hair oil, ‘Rowland’s Macassar Oil’, ‘Holloway’s Ointment’, ‘Rodger’s Improved Shirts’, ‘Children’s Frocks, Coats and Pelisses’ and ‘Parr’s Life-Pills’. These products are very insistent on how to differentiate the genuine product from copies – often giving the customer a sign to recognize – words in coloured ink, for example, and a list of stockists of the genuine article. On page 20 of N° 1 of the Bleak House Advertiser we find advertisements for opera glasses, race glasses, cough lozenges, insurance, loans, ‘Rimmel’s Toilet Vinegar (as exhibited in the Fountain at Crystal Palace)’ which is ‘far superior to Eau-de-Cologne’, ‘Binyon’s Patent Chest Expander’ to cure ‘stooping of the shoulders’ – all displayed together. There are smaller page inserts such as the flyers for *Household Words* which are placed between the illustrations at the start of the Dickens chapters and the first page of the chapters – so within the space of the novel. A small brilliant orange flyer is even stuck within the pages of the novel itself in the first chapter of N° 8 of *Our Mutual Friend* (between the second and third pages) which constitutes an intrusion into the world of fiction – ironically by more fiction. The flyer advertises Mrs Henry Wood’s latest sensation novel and it is stuck over a page of the novel which describes Wegg’s serial reading of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* to an illiterate dustman.1

The full page adverts are often in colour, sometimes very decorative, like the advert for ‘Glenfield Patent Starch’, appearing in the *Our Mutual Friend* numbers, which has three colours, or the brilliant yellow ‘Dr. De Jongh’s Cod Liver Oil’. There are also detachable booklets such as that for the photographer Mayall (the photographer with whom the painter Turner worked), or a cartoon-like advertisement for Thorley’s cattle feed consisting of four pages. In 19 and 20 of *Bleak House* there is an advertisement for Ransome’s patent stone filters, a sewn-in booklet of sixteen pages, including six pages of testimonials which themselves constitute a series of miniature narratives. In the same number there is a sixteen-page catalogue for the publishers Cassell with illustrations on the front and back of the booklet to take out and keep. Although the ‘Advertiser’ itself is made of standardized pages, the inserts and colour advertisements as well as the booklets are all on different sizes and textures of paper, using different typefaces and occasionally colours. Textures are added to the numbers by the inclusion of a sheet of