

Volume 9 ■ Number 2 ■ June 2011

# Partial Answers

Journal of Literature  
and  
The History of Ideas

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press in cooperation with  
The School of Literatures, The Faculty of Humanities,

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem  
האוניברסיטה העברית בירושלים



Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas  
ISSN 1565-3668

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*Partial Answers* is published two times a year, in January and June, by The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2715 North Charles Street, Baltimore, Maryland 21218-4363.


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**Postmaster:** Send address changes to *Partial Answers*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2715 North Charles Street, Baltimore, MD 21218-4363.

Please direct all subscription inquiries and business communications to the publisher:

Journals Publishing Division  
The Johns Hopkins University Press  
PO Box 19966  
Baltimore, Maryland 21218-0966  
Phone: (410) 516-6987 FAX: (410) 516-3866  
Toll-Free: 1-800-548-1784  
E-mail: [jrnlcirc@press.jhu.edu](mailto:jrnlcirc@press.jhu.edu)  
[www.press.jhu.edu/journals](http://www.press.jhu.edu/journals)

This journal is a member of CELJ, the Council of Editors of Learned Journals.

*Partial Answers* is typeset by Journals Production, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, Maryland, and printed at Odyssey Press, Inc., Gonic, New Hampshire. The journal is printed on acid-free paper. The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48–1984 

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- literary works participate in the history of ideas, whether understood as a continuous line of development, as a process of inheriting and correcting schemas, or as a sequence of archeological layers;
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Published in a region where the need for consciousness of the contingency of one's ideological position is intensely felt, this journal encourages contributors to be explicit regarding their partialities and their philosophical agenda.

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**Cover Design:** Concept of "the sand and the sea" by Eyal Soffer and Renana Tobi alludes to a poem by Hannah Senesh.

## Physiognomy and the Reading of Character in *Our Mutual Friend*

Angelika Zirker

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In *Our Mutual Friend*, Charles Dickens uses physiognomy as an indirect way of portraying characters who observe others rather than as a direct means of portraying the characters observed. Moreover, the characters' success or failure in reading faces correctly raises questions about the effects of (mis)interpreting faces on reader response.<sup>1</sup> Do those characters who (mis)read other characters in the novel teach us how to read?<sup>2</sup>

While what we read about characters' appearance is not necessarily reliable, it may hold information about role-playing and manipulation. Dickens's novels construct a large range of attitudes towards facial expression and its deciphering,<sup>3</sup> Johan Lavater's theory of physiognomy figuring prominently among them.<sup>4</sup> This theory is treated

<sup>1</sup> The "nature and use of physiognomics . . . involve[s] both the question of false and deceptive surfaces . . . and of difficulties of correct physiognomical reading on the part of the numerous interpreters at work in the fiction, who must of course include the reader himself" (Hollington 1991: 7).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Neil Hertz's somewhat controversial view that characters in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* become like pieces of writing and that the reading of characters within the novel becomes a version of reading the text.

<sup>3</sup> Dickens's interest in facial expression is supported by the recollections of daughter Mamie (Mary) Dickens: "I was lying on the sofa . . . , while my father wrote busily and rapidly at his desk, when he suddenly jumped from his chair and rushed to a mirror which hung near, and in which I could see the reflection of some extraordinary facial contortions he was making. He returned rapidly to his desk, wrote furiously for a few moments, and then went again to the mirror. The facial pantomime was resumed. . . . I knew that with his natural intensity he had thrown himself completely into the character that he was creating, and that for the time being he had not only lost sight of his surroundings, but had actually become in action, as in imagination the creature of his pen" (49–50). Dickens seems to have been intrigued by "facial pantomime," and to have believed in the human capability of conveying feelings and emotions through the face. He *became* what he wrote about with "natural intensity," and this certainly influenced the physiognomic descriptions within his fictional worlds.

<sup>4</sup> In the introduction to *The Economy of Character*, Deidre Shauna Lynch explains how in the eighteenth century "physiognomy provided one influential account of what an appropriate character reading was" (12). This, however, does not seem to be true for Dickens any longer. Yet Lynch goes on to describe "the tactics texts use at definable historical moments — for instance, the changing sorts of contracts texts establish with readers to secure

sceptically,<sup>5</sup> yet attempts to read the faces of others are not presented as uniformly unreliable. In *Our Mutual Friend*, in particular, Dickens suggests that a pseudoscientific schematic method of perceiving and judging other characters must not be confused with an intelligent reading of the features of the face as “indicative of character” (*OED*, “physiognomy” I.1.a).

### Faces in *Our Mutual Friend*

The words “face” or “countenance” appear in practically every chapter of *Our Mutual Friend*; in the first chapter alone, the word “face” is used seven times, mainly in reference to Lizzie Hexam’s face and to her watching of her father’s countenance (e.g., 13, 14). At the end of the chapter there also emerges the face of a dead man; at that point “[a] neophyte might have fancied that the ripples passing over it were dreadfully like faint changes of expression on a sightless face” (17). The passage establishes a contrast between Lizzie’s observing face, her father’s observed and observing face, and the “sightless,” fleetingly observed face of the dead man, with its illusion of changing expressions.

A different contrast is set in chapter 13 of the third book, when Mr. Twemlow comes to Riah to plead with him for the postponement of his debts. During the encounter, Riah looks at his master, Fledgeby, hoping to be given a sign of permission to be lenient: “He read his master’s face, and learnt the book” (561), but the metaphoric “book” is as inflexible as a literal ledger. Fledgeby’s face contains all the clues Riah needs, and they are of the kind that is unwelcome to him. By contrast, Twemlow cannot decipher the Fledgeby intentions because his manner towards this client differs from what the expression of his face signals to Riah.<sup>6</sup> Fledgeby is polite towards Twemlow, yet as he asks Riah, “Why not be easy with Mr. Twemlow?” his face sends Riah the opposite message (560). Dickens here privileges the meaning of the face and, in particular, the eye when compared to other verbal and non-verbal signals emitted by a person.

their conditions of legibility and the particular formal techniques that produce the relations of mutual reflection between characters and readers” (16).

<sup>5</sup> See Tytler on Dickens’s “physiognomical scepticism” and on his ironic treatment of physiognomy and phrenology (247–65).

<sup>6</sup> Sroka refers to this passage and links the reading of faces to book knowledge which, however, does not affect all the characters in the novel (53), “the readers within the novel must first redefine ‘reading’ more directly in terms of human experience” (57).

Fledgeby is a “character,” in the sense of a piece of writing<sup>7</sup> that Riah can read by virtue of his *prior knowledge*. Through Riah, the reader of the novel is given a hint as to the reading of character, the limitations of visual perception being compensated by what we already know about the characters from earlier parts of the story.

### Misreadings I

By contrast to Riah, Mrs. Wilfer, who considers herself to be a physiognomist, presumes to exercise this skill without the help of any prior information. After the Boffins’ visit,

the worthy Mrs. Wilfer . . . proceeded to develop her last instance of force of character, which was still in reserve. This was, to illuminate her family with her remarkable powers as a physiognomist; powers that terrified R. W. whenever let loose, as being *always fraught with gloom and evil* which no inferior prescience was aware of. And this Mrs. Wilfer now did, be it observed, in jealousy of these Boffins, in the very same moments when she was already reflecting how she would flourish these very same Boffins and the state they kept, over the heads of her Boffinless friends.

“Of their manners,” said Mrs. Wilfer, “I say nothing. Of their appearance, I say nothing. Of the disinterestedness of their intentions towards Bella, I say nothing. But the craft, the secrecy, the dark deep underhanded plotting, *written in Mrs. Boffin’s countenance*, make me shudder.”

As an incontrovertible proof that those baleful attributes were all there, Mrs. Wilfer shuddered on the spot. (117; *my italics*)

Mrs. Wilfer is generally characterized as someone who is not to be taken seriously. The narrator distances himself from her by ironically calling her “the worthy Mrs. Wilfer” after she has, for several chapters, behaved abominably to everyone she met (cf. Sucksmith 257–59). Her husband is “terrified” by her “powers as a physiognomist” because she, as a matter of principle, never sees anything good in others; her readings are “fraught with gloom and evil.” Dickens here appears to differ from Lavater’s view that women are particularly apt physiognomists<sup>8</sup>: Mrs. Wilfer is shown

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *OED* “character” *n.* 3.a.: “A graphic symbol standing for a sound, syllable or notion, used in writing or in printing; one of the simple elements of a written language; e.g. a letter of the alphabet.”

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Graham on Lavater as the main representative of the “science” of physiognomy. For a history of physiognomy as well as its influence on fiction see, e.g., Tytler (1982) and Porter (2005). Hackenberg interprets *OMF* as a re-writing of Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd,” where

using and abusing physiognomical readings to denounce her fellow human beings, out of jealousy and ill-will.

When Mrs. Wilfer enumerates the things that she will say *nothing* about, it becomes apparent that she actually *has* nothing to say. She has no grounds for complaining about the manners, appearance, and disinterestedness of the Boffins who have behaved well throughout the visit. As a last resort, Mrs. Wilfer describes Mrs. Boffin's countenance as expressive of a bad character. Later, in chap. 16, she again refers to Mrs. Boffin, "to whose countenance no disciple of Lavater could possibly for a single moment subscribe" (206).<sup>9</sup> The verb "subscribe" is, in this context, understood in the sense of "to admit or concede the force, validity, or truth of"<sup>10</sup>: Mrs. Wilfer reads the face of her rival of Bella's affection as deceptive and untruthful, "a face teeming with evil" (601).

Dickens is, indeed, sceptical as to the scientific value of physiognomy studies, and even more sceptical about people who too confidently perceive themselves as physiognomists. A physiognomist is supposed to be unprejudiced towards his subject, which is not the case with Mrs. Wilfer, whose readings of faces "bespeak the shortcomings of the physiognomist [her]self" (Tytler 265).

Mrs. Wilfer's unreliability as a physiognomist is enhanced by the contrast between her reading of Mrs. Boffin's face and that of Betty Higden. The latter needs only to glance at Mrs. Boffin's "good face" (376) to become calm and trusting.<sup>11</sup> There is, hence, a moral dimension to the process of reading physiognomy: it is likely to succeed if the observer is not only unprejudiced but also has some inner affinity with the observed.

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the narrator is also reading people. Hollington refers to Lavater's views about the "sharpest physiognomists" and discusses Dickens's divergent views on the matter (1988: 128), particularly concerning women (131).

<sup>9</sup> When Graeme Tytler notes Dickens "quotes Lavater in *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) when, in one of a series of comical descriptions that accompany the eccentric Mrs. Boffin throughout the novel, he brings out the unusual nature of the latter's face by referring to her as one 'to whose countenance no disciple of Lavater could possibly subscribe'" (187), he is actually mistaking the words of the character for those of the narrator. The statement portrays not Mrs. Boffin but Mrs. Wilfer and her pose as a "physiognomist"; it also implicitly satirizes Lavater.

<sup>10</sup> *OED* "subscribe, v. 9."

<sup>11</sup> This is particularly emphasised when Betty wants to leave and Mrs. Boffin tries to dissuade her: "I shall be to and fro. No fear of my missing a chance of giving myself a sight of your reviving face" (378). To her, Mrs. Boffin's face is a kind of elixir.

Dickens seems to be expressing the Platonic notion that it takes one who is good to recognize goodness in others.<sup>12</sup>

### Misreadings II

Dickens's suggestion in *Our Mutual Friend* that characters can, in principle, perceive and recognize the others' true self underneath the outer shell builds on the belief that there is a "true" inner self to every person.

Of course even people in possession of the requisite ability for judging character from appearances are shown to be occasionally in error. The possible contrast between an outer shell and the true self can be traced back to the Sileni of Alcibiades in Plato's *Symposium* (215a–216e); we find it further developed in Erasmus's *Adagia*.<sup>13</sup> Erasmus explains how a beautiful character may lie hidden underneath an ugly shell:

"The Sileni of Alcibiades" seems to have turned into a proverb. . . . [as those] whose clothes and physical appearance are much less promising than what they hide in their heart. . . . what is most valuable about them is hidden away and concealed, while what is visible on the surface appears beneath contempt. They hide their treasure beneath a coarse and worthless shell, and do not let the uninitiated catch even a glimpse of it. (169; 171)<sup>14</sup>

Erasmus's observation can well be applied to Mr. Boffin, who is first introduced to us ambivalently. He is

a broad, round-shouldered, one-sided old fellow in mourning, coming comically ambling towards the corner, dressed in a pea over-coat, and

<sup>12</sup> For the question of the affinity of the reader to what he or she reads and the immersion he or she experiences, as well as the concept of reading pleasure and its ethical reverberations, see, e.g., Dames, Toket, and Miller. Dames (18) refers to Martha Nussbaum's view, in her *Poetic Justice* and *Love's Knowledge*, of the (Victorian) novel as a training instance of "ethically valuable cognitive habits." Toket stresses that "aesthetic experience has an intrinsic ethical effect" (3) and that our reading does not only give us aesthetic pleasure but also aims at striking "at our belief in the correctness of our expectations or insights, our intellectual powers, our erudition, our Podsnappian habits of thought" (4). On the practice of reading faces, see also chap. 3 in Armstrong's *Fiction in the Age of Photography*.

<sup>13</sup> For this strand of thought from Plato to the Renaissance see Müller (esp. 2).

<sup>14</sup> Erasmus directly refers back to Plato where Alcibiades compares Socrates to a Silenus: "Anyone who took him at *face value*, as they say, would not have paid a nickel for him. He had the face of a country bumpkin, a bit like that of an ox, and a snub nose always running with snot. You would have thought he was dull and stupid, good only at pulling faces. His appearance was scruffy, and his speech was plain, elementary, and working-class" (169; my emphasis). The similarity to the character of Boffin is astounding.

carrying a large stick. He wore thick shoes, and thick leather gaiters, and thick gloves like a hedger's. Both as to his dress and himself, he was of an overlapping rhinoceros build, with folds in his cheeks and his forehead, and his eyelids, and his lips, and his ears; but with bright, eager, childish-inquiring, grey eyes, under his ragged eyebrows, and broad-brimmed hat. A very odd-looking old fellow altogether. (54)<sup>15</sup>

In "coming comically ambling" the sound-play enhances the image of uncouth appearance. Boffin's wearing only "thick" things suggests a degree of inelegance as well as what is known metaphorically as thick skin and a morally interpretable insulation from environment. Less ambivalently, Boffin's eyes, "the windows of the soul,"<sup>16</sup> shine with a positive "bright, eager, childish-inquiring" light.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, a possibility of corruption is evoked by Boffin's appearing "one-sided": according to Lavater, "if a person's gait is one-sided, his manner of thinking, his character, his habits, are likewise imbalanced, incoherent, one-sided, wrong, contradictory, without feeling" (my translation).<sup>18</sup> But then again, the folds in Boffin's forehead ask to be read positively — Lavater too asserts that a forehead with only few or no folds stands for a mean and common person, one without intellectual creativity.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> In contrast to this complex annotated description, the near-metaphorical portrait of Silas Wegg is comparatively straightforward: "Wegg was a knotty man, and a close-grained, with a face carved out of very hard material, that had just as much play of expression as a watchman's rattle. When he laughed, certain jerks occurred in it, and the rattle sprung. Sooth to say, he was so wooden a man that he seemed to have taken his wooden leg naturally" (53). "Dickens's figures are defined by a phrase or gesture" (Fisch 599) but also by a recurrent motif: Silas Wegg's woodenness is further emphasised through his name; Silas is derived from the Latin *Sylvanus*, "a deity called from *sylva* (a wood)" (Yonge 179).

<sup>16</sup> Dickens uses this expression ironically regarding Mr. and Mrs. Snagsby in *Bleak House*: "If Mr. Snagsby could withstand that little woman's look, as it enters at his eyes, the windows of his soul, and searches the whole tenement, he were other than the man he is" (382). In *Little Dorrit* the metaphor is extended and purged of irony: Amy looks at Clennam "with all the earnestness of her soul looking steadily out of her eyes" (163).

<sup>17</sup> The tell-tale expression of the look, striking to the observers, is a recurrent feature in Dickens's portraits. Riderhood, for instance, takes note of "a very dark expression" on Bradley Headstone's face, "an expression that the Rogue found it hard to understand. It was fierce, and full of purpose; but the purpose might have been as much against himself as against another. If he had stepped back for a spring, taken a leap, and thrown himself in, it would have been no surprising sequel to the look. Perhaps his troubled soul, set upon some violence, did hover for the moment between that violence and another" (623).

<sup>18</sup> "[W]essen Gang schief — . . . Dessen Denkensart, dessen Charakter, dessen Manier, zu handeln, ist schief, inkonsequent, einseitig, sophistisch, falsch, listig, launisch, widersprechend, kalt-schalkhaft, hartgefühllos" (*Von der Physiognomik* 67).

<sup>19</sup> "Wie weniger Buchten, Wölbungen, Vertiefungen, wie mehr einfache Flächen, oder geradlinigt-scheinende Umrisse an einer Stirn wahrzunehmen sind, desto gemeiner, mit-

This introductory description of Boffin creates a blurred impression of this character, in keeping with the concluding comment about his being a "very odd-looking old fellow altogether." Dickens thus leaves Boffin's good nature temporarily unconfirmed, which partly prepares us for oscillations in our further response to his conduct.

The initial ambiguity of Mr. Boffin's character is largely forgotten under the influence of his emerging, in the following chapters, as an agreeable and affectionate person. It is because of his warm-heartedness and his charity agenda that he is threatened by the obscure Wegg. But then a change occurs. In the third book, the "Golden Dustman" suddenly starts to behave strangely; he seems to turn into a miser. Chapter headings illustrate this process: first "The Golden Dustman falls into Bad Company"; then he falls into "Worse Company," and by chap. 15, he is "at his Worst." After rising "a little" (628) in the second chapter of Book 4, he "sinks again" in the third, and, like earlier in the novel, he comes under "a dark cloud" (459) for yet another time.<sup>20</sup>

telmäßiger, Ideenärmer, Erfindungsunfähiger ist die Stirn" (Lavater 70). Lavater associates bright and light-coloured eyes with wit, elegance and taste, anger, pride, and a furious love of women (see 75). "Ragged eyebrows," however, never belong to a character who is gentle, obedient and affectionate (see 78). The phenomenology of literary imagination often follows the same paths: "it seems as if novelists associate eyebrows mostly with the middle-aged or the elderly, or lend them a caricatural function. This is particularly true of Dickens's novels such as *Great Expectations*, in which the enigmatic lawyer Jaggers is depicted as having 'black bushy eyebrows that wouldn't lie down, but stood up bristling,' and *David Copperfield*, where Miss Murdstone's grim character is partly indicated by the hero's constant reference to her black eyebrows" (Tyler 210).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. the description of John Rokesmith: "As on the Secretary's face there was a nameless cloud, so on his manner there was a shadow equally indefinable" (193). The cloud on the secretary's face is indicative of some dark event in his life; Boffin's being under a cloud indicates his supposed misconduct. The former metaphor recurs more frequently in Dickens's novels, e.g.: "She raised her veil . . . and disclosed a countenance of most uncommon beauty, though shaded by a cloud of sadness" (*Nicholas Nickleby* 188); "The child . . . had but feebly described the sadness and sorrow of her thoughts, or the heaviness of the cloud which overhung her home, and cast dark shadows on its hearth" (*The Old Curiosity Shop* 76); "As she looked upon [his face] now, she saw it, for the first time, free from the cloud that had darkened her childhood" (*Dombey and Son* 608); "If I came into the room where they were, and they were talking together and my mother seemed cheerful, an anxious cloud would steal over her face from the moment of my entrance" (*David Copperfield* 112; see also 622). The image of the darkening cloud can be traced to the Bible, e.g. "I have blotted out as a thick cloud thy transgressions, and, as a cloud thy sins: return unto me, for I have redeemed thee" (Isa. 44:22); it is used in a similar context, for instance, by Bunyan in *Grace Abounding*: "It came to acquaint me that a cloud and a storm was coming down upon me, but I understood it not" (93).



The change in his manner is first observed by Bella who says to her father, "Mr. Boffin is being spoiled by prosperity, and is changing every day . . . he grows suspicious, capricious, hard, tyrannical, unjust. If ever a good man were ruined by good fortune, it is my benefactor" (455). In the next chapter Mr. Boffin is harsh with Rokesmith, and Mrs. Boffin seems to wonder about his being "not quite like [his] old self" (458). Bella sees "a dark cloud of suspicion, covetousness, and conceit, overshadowing the once open face" (459).<sup>21</sup> Mrs. Boffin's "anxious" face (460; 463; 575) shows "distress" (460) at her husband's strange behavior. Bella watches him constantly and perceives "the deepening of the cloud upon the Golden Dustman's face" (461), only relieved when he can buy books about misers (461). The cloud here doubles as a cover: Boffin's face is "obscured" by "shadows of avarice and distrust" (574); like Rokesmith, Boffin hides his true emotions and his true self.

A different kind of cover is used in the case of Mr. Venus. His true character is not revealed; throughout the course of almost the entire novel it is hardly suspected. He is introduced as a character whose face can in principle be read but one does not know how:

The face looking up is a sallow face with weak eyes, surmounted by a tangle of reddish-dusty hair. The owner of the face has no cravat on [...]. His eyes are the over-trying eyes of an engraver, but he is not that; his expression and stoop are like those of a shoemaker, but he is not that. (83)

Later in the novel the narrator refers to Mr. Venus's "speaking countenance" (485). However, although much is expressed by means of his face, little can be confidently inferred from it. At first we are told only what Mr. Venus "is not" and offered features that have familiar meanings: an "engraver," a "shoemaker." The deciphering of the strange combination of these features is, however, delayed. And yet his countenance somehow represents what he really is, namely "an articulator," who as-

<sup>21</sup> The cloud is juxtaposed with Mrs. Boffin's "radiant face" (377) as well as with Mr. Boffin's "shining countenance" later (749). The contrast of dark vs. radiant, of shining vs. clouded serves as a topos throughout the novel, pitting the coherence of imagery against the implausibility of Boffin's transformation. "Mr. Boffin's zeitweilige Verwandlung in einen Geizhals unterstreicht, wie stark das Phantasiebild der Sprache Realitätscharakter vermittelt. Daß Dickens dem Leser die Verstellung verheimlicht, entbehrt auch unter diesem Aspekt nicht der Logik" ["The temporary transformation of Mr. Boffin into a miser illustrates to what great extent the phantastic imagery transmits the character of reality to language. That Dickens hides this play-acting from his reader is, seen in this light, not illogical"; my translation] (Černý 86).

sembles fragments into a whole. In a sense, he provides a model for the reading of the novel in which he appears, the novel as a "jigsaw puzzle" (Knoepfmacher 138). Mr. Venus's moral qualities are left undeciphered until chap. 14 of Book IV, where he warns Boffin of Wegg's intrigue. He thus remains a cipher much longer than Boffin in the role of the miser.

### The Case of Bella

Boffin's role-playing is finally resolved when he reveals both his and John's secrets to Bella (after she has married John and after the birth of their first child), with due references to face:

In all the first bewilderment of her wonder, the most bewilderingly wonderful thing to Bella was the *shining countenance* of Mr. Boffin. That his wife should be joyous, open-hearted, and genial, or that her *face* should express every quality that was large and trusting, and no quality that was little or mean, was accordant with Bella's experience. But that he, with a perfectly beneficent air and a plump rosy *face*, should be standing there, looking at her and John, like some jovial good spirit, was marvellous. For, how had he looked when she last saw him in that very room (it was the room in which she had given him that piece of her mind at parting), and what had become of all those crooked lines of suspicion, avarice, and distrust, that twisted his *visage* then? (749; my italics)

The words "lines" and "express" refer both to the facial and to the linguistic expression — in keeping with the meaning of "a character" as a letter, a cipher. Bella notices that the cloud has disappeared from Boffin's face; his countenance is "shining" again.

Boffin has played the part of the miser in order to save Bella from becoming mercenary, and Bella ultimately recognizes this (754). His behaviour leads to her anagnorisis: she has seen herself mirrored in what she thought he had become.<sup>22</sup> The reader has been "taken in" (Jaffe 97) along with her — misled by her attitudes reflected in chapter titles, by sharing her perception of the "cloud," by not being made privy to Boffin's intentions, and by the initial ambivalences of Boffin's portrait, which have prepared the groundwork for the play of shadows in the unfolding of his character.

<sup>22</sup> "Boffin's deception, rooted in his reading, acts as a touchstone for Bella and eventually proves her to be 'the true golden gold'" (Sroka 59); her salvation is part of the "fairy-tale wish-fulfilment" of the novel's happy ending (Cotsell 132).

Bella, whose name reflects her outer beauty, resembles the second type of Erasmus's Sileni: those of whom you would think, judging by their physical appearance, as of fine examples of humankind. But if you open the Sileni you will find that inside they may contain "a pig, or a lion, or a bear, or a donkey" (Erasmus 176) — as in *Macbeth*, "fair is foul, and foul is fair" (Müller 9). Rokesmith, alias John Harmon, sees Bella as "[s]o insolent, so trivial, so capricious, so mercenary, so careless, so hard to touch, so hard to turn!" and yet "so pretty, so pretty!" (207), a hard selfish character contained within a beautiful shell. However, her case turns out to be more complicated: the "inner self" underneath the good looks turns out to be temporary, a result of corruption caused by the dissonance between the would-be middle class status of her family and their poverty. With the help of Mr. Boffin's change of outer conduct she is able to achieve inner change. Her self-transformation when mirrored by another (even if, in this case, an other playing a part), is, in a sense, a model of a self-perfective reader response.

Thus, while *Our Mutual Friend* can be seen as testing Lavater's theory of physiognomy, pointing to its lacunae, and suggesting its own prerequisites for correct reading of the faces of others, it also sets up a model of reading in which temporary misinterpretations of the faces of others can be as morally and aesthetically significant as the unprejudiced sympathetic attention.

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