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***Dickens the Designer* by Juliet McMaster (review)**

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

114 LETTERS IN CANADA 1987 text in such a way as to put to rest a common and rather unsophisticated notion of a man permanently wounded by childhood experiences, divided against himself and carefully concealing that division and that pain. We are shown, instead, that 'although [Trollope] ... was thoroughly of, and at one with, his time, he was, as a man, more playfully ironical and, as a writer, more subversive than his own age generally realized.' Our age has now thoroughly assimilated that view through increasingly careful readings of his work, but Terry has shown us that that view, that 'truest sort of biography,' can be realized through the words of his contemporaries. Despite the disclaimer in the introduction, it has been impossible for Terry to avoid analysis of the work; nevertheless he has been faithful to his intentions and produces it only when it reinforces the biographical matter or when to omit it would do violence to his texts. It is churlish to complain of omissions in a book of this kind, but readers might wish to have had some further commentary concerning Trollope's pronouncements on such public issues of his day as the controversy over the introduction of competitive examinations for the civil service (he was against them). So much that is here is good, making it impossible to select anything for extensive quotation. Terry has given us a book that is useful and a

pleasure to read. Better still, through the comments of others he has allowed us to detect in Trollope a character that is at once subtle and unified, a character like that of Trollope's own Septimus Harding, of whom his son-in-law in *The Last Chronicle of Barset* says, 'The fact is he never was wrong. He couldn't go wrong. He lacked guile, and he feared God - and a man who does both will never go far astray.' (MICHAEL LAINE) Juliet McMaster. *Dickens the Designer* Macmillan Studies in Victorian Literature. Macmillan. 248. \$53.00

Though the title of Juliet McMaster's *Dickens the Designer* might suggest 'design' in a rather general sense - the design of Dickens's plots, for example - the book is essentially a discussion of certain image-patterns and motifs, both within individual novels and throughout his oeuvre as a whole. The first part of the book, 'some notes towards a dictionary of Dickens's body language' (11), focuses on various aspects of the human form - 'Heads,' 'Paces,' 'Bodies,' 'Eyes,' 'Noses,' 'Clothes,' and so on - in a series of brief lively essays which suggest the fertility and expressiveness of Dickens's imagery and also sum up the evidence about his somewhat sceptical interest in the pseudo-sciences of phrenology and physiognomy. This opening section - entitled 'The Value and Significance of Flesh,' though it concludes with discussions of 'Colour,' 'Space,' and 'Light and Shade' which also involve 'larger pictorial concerns' (72) would suggest that the focus of a book as a whole will be on body imagery, and this is confirmed by McMaster's discussion of the polarized image-patterns in the first three novels she deals with - fatness vs thinness in *Pickwick Papers*, 'Gothic' roughness and particularity vs 'classical' smoothness and generalization in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, 'warmth and coldness, hardness and softness' (149) in *Dombey and Son* and by her treatment of the motif of fragmentation in *Our Mutual Friend*. In the *Bleak House* chapter, however, the focus shifts from imagery of eyes and watching to light and darkness, clarity and obscurity, and in the *Hard Times* chapter the subject is Dickens's use of colour. This summary of the book's content may suggest the strengths and weaknesses of McMaster's approach. *Dickens the Designer* reads like a series of entertaining lectures. McMaster's style is fluent and lucid, sometimes breezily colloquial, often witty. She communicates her enthusiasm for the texts she is discussing. But though appealingly accessible, and often acute and illuminating in its individual details, the book is also somewhat thin and facile. The focus on image-patterns is at once too limited and schematic and yet at the same time too loose and associative to provide a very rigorous or subtle account...

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Juliet McMaster. *Dickens the Designer*

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