This book explores the perceptual universe of Charles Dickens as revealed in the non-discursive parts of his writings and as frequently supported by discursive statement. In his book The Problem of Style, J. Middleton Murry analyzes the special kind of thought produced by the creative writer through images and particularized details. The creative literary artist, Murry explains, "does not generalize; or rather, his generalization is not abstract." Because the artist's attitude to life is "predominantly emotional, his thoughts partake much more of the nature of residual emotions, which are symbolized in the objects which aroused them, than of discursive reasoning." Objects and episodes from experience form impressions that accumulate to become a "coherent emotional nucleus" consolidating into a "kind of speculative thought which differs from the speculative thought of the philosopher by its working from particular to particular." Murry concludes that "it is by virtue of this mysterious accumulation of past emotions that the writer, in his maturity, is able to accomplish the miracle of giving to the particular the weight and force of the universal."1

This is Dickens's gift: "to accomplish the miracle of giving to the particular the weight and force of the universal." An absorbed reader working from the "particular to particular" of a writer's imagined world comes to view experience through that author's eyes, to develop a similar emotional nucleus, to share for the time what Murry calls the writer's "mode of experience." The reader shares this imaginative experience and receives complex meaning with unmediated comprehension, as one adept in a foreign language will understand its meaning without translation.
To apprehend Dickens's mode of experience—his way of perceiving the world—one must turn, not to the discursive statements so well adapted to the "speculative thought" of the philosopher, but rather to the non-discursive materials that show rather than tell, that paint a picture without explaining its significance. In such materials one studies, not what Dickens said he thought, but rather how his mind worked in unifying experience to wrest order from chaos: the manner, style, or mode of his imaginative functions.

The Dickens mode of experience can be visualized as a figured tapestry or pictorial scroll interpreting life. In it are contained allegorical people, emblematic places and things, key epithets that provide attitudinal and emotional coloring. All of these are caught in moments of crucial and universal meaning: of birth, of death and threat of death, of crisis, of transition. In their selection and combination, they make a sprawling interpretative tapestry to which Dickens pragmatically referred the data of continuing experience and by which he judged it. That he did so is inferred from the works themselves—within those expressed artistic interpretations of life are found the materials for reconstructing his perceptual universe.

Now, if, as Murry claims, "the great writer does not really come to conclusions about life," then how is it possible for that writer first to formulate and then to communicate anything about life that is not as fragmented and chaotic as the original raw experience?

The answer seems to lie in the creation of Gestalten, defined by Richard Ohmann as "arbitrary ways of breaking up the flux" by intuitively associating, selecting, and ordering chaotic materials. Each gestalt, a gathering together of discrete elements of felt experience into a pattern or composition viewed as somehow complete, is different from "real" experience in that it has already been selected and shaped into a picture by an individual consciousness. Such sense gestalten are the primitive analogues that give abstract ideas their contact with concrete reality. Suzanne Langer explains:

The laws that govern this sort of articulation are altogether different from the laws of syntax that govern language. The most radical difference is that visual forms are not discursive. They do not present their constituents successively, but simultaneously, so the relations determining a visual structure are grasped in one act of vision. Their complexity, consequently, is not limited, as the complexity of discourse is limited, by what the mind can retain from the beginning of an apperceptive act to the end of it. . . . An idea that contains too many minute yet closely related parts, too many relations within rela-
tions, cannot be "projected" into discursive form; it is too subtle for speech.4

But not too subtle for art, which can present simultaneously all the parts of a complex picture. The Dickens mode of experience, the tapestried imagination, might now be conceived as a comprehensive gestalt, a composition of many harmoniously united patterns.

It is the function of literary art, says Langer, voicing what seems like consensus, to create "the illusion of life." And "the prose fiction writer, like any other poet, fabricates an illusion of life entirely lived and felt."5 Success in creating this illusion depends upon the writer's ability to recreate the conditions of the original experience: to include in fiction internally felt reactions to the externally imposed objects of experience. Internal and external realities blend into an implicit interpretation of experience that weaves the sense images and impressions from the inner world through descriptions of the external world. This is the illusion of life entirely lived and felt.

It is crucial to understand this function of the writer, for while the unmistakable sign of life and vitality is diversity, there is an equally insistent human drive—reflected in language—toward unity. The very identity of established language depends upon its ability to categorize, to simplify, to abstract, to eradicate the multiple differentiations that make ordering the chaotic world stuff of raw perceptions so difficult, and then to freeze meaning at its most advanced stage of abstraction. From its beginnings, language places progressively rigid bonds upon an individual's consciousness, and one's spirit must constantly struggle against this restricting tyranny of the word, which determines attitudes, memory, even what can be thought about.

It is a basic function of the writer to keep sensitivity alive in the reader and to awaken the possibility of other and richer choices than those the reader has already made through interpretation of experience. Hence the literary artist must destroy—or circumvent—entrenched patterns of unity before alternative ones can even be entertained. Yet the writer must employ the same language, already over-unified, that frustrates the communication efforts of the ordinary person. The artist's problem is how to reassert multiplicity, diversity, and abundance: to recharge language itself by surprising it back to its creative sources, reviving its dead metaphors and revitalizing its clichés. In Murry's words: "Every
work of enduring literature is not so much a triumph of language as a victory over language: a sudden injection of life-giving perceptions into a vocabulary that is, but for the energy of the creative writer, perpetually on the verge of exhaustion.” 6 Whatever else may or may not be claimed for Dickens, he had an unquestioned faculty for recharging language to create the “illusion of life entirely lived and felt.”

The secret of this ability in Dickens lies first in his image-making mind. His figurative images develop into patterns and enlarge into allegories that encompass the extended meaning of his insights. In the process, furthermore, a chaotic “reality” may intrude itself, asserting its independence from any formal control by exploding the very patterns that have made communication possible. 7 This radical intrusion becomes a further “sudden injection of life-giving perceptions.”

Sometimes Dickens’s imagery is simply associational, but most frequently it is also analogical. It is important to differentiate between the precise term analogy and the less discriminating word symbol, for a certain kind of symbol is never found in Dickens. 8 (Perhaps some of the critics who have protested against a symbolic reading of his works sense the blurred perception it fosters.) The more one studies his analogies, the less they look like symbols in the restrictive sense. It tends to be the nature of symbols not simply to suggest, but to substitute for the thing they represent and then to be that thing dependably; their occurrence is a kind of shorthand signifying the interchangeability of symbol and thing. These symbols are frequently qualitatively different from the thing they stand for. Although they may originate in image and analogy, they do not necessarily do so, but are often arbitrary and alogical.

Mr. Twemlow of Our Mutual Friend illustrates the different nature of the typical Dickens “symbol.” We first meet him as

an innocent piece of dinner-furniture that went upon easy castors and was kept over a livery stable-yard in Duke Street, Saint James’s, when not in use. . . . [H]e was in frequent requisition and at many houses might be said to represent the dining-table in its normal state. . . . Sometimes, the table consisted of Twemlow and half-a-dozen leaves; sometimes, of Twemlow and a dozen leaves; sometimes, Twemlow was pulled out to his utmost extent of twenty leaves. . . .

This evening the Veneerings give a banquet. Eleven leaves in the Twemlow; fourteen in company all told. (OMF, ch. 2)
Twemlow is clearly an elaborately developed symbol, but hardly a simply understood one. First, he has symbolic meaning only for certain characters, such as the Podsnaps and the Veneerings, who are themselves satirized by their utilitarian reduction of another person to a useful thing. Twemlow takes on this symbolic value for them through analogy with their other ostentatious possessions, also to be dragged out on state occasions when they wish to impress each other. Second, and perhaps more important, Dickens as narrator further ridicules these characters by providing Twemlow with a complicated character, concerned with his own anxieties and problems, which has nothing to do with the dining-table symbolism. Indeed, in all likelihood, Mr. Twemlow has no notion that he is so viewed by his "friends," and would be horrified to realize it.

In Dickens's analogical symbols, then, a qualitative likeness is perceived between attributes of two different things. When the likeness ceases to exist, the image is abandoned, for it has life only in the likeness. Even when simile slips into metaphor, the awareness of similarity rather than substitution remains. Without the need for consistency demanded by symbolic identity, the emotional ground under these images is free to shift in response to the immediate context. As a consequence, a reader following Mr. Twemlow through the chapter in which he is introduced has no trouble disassociating him from the dining-table "symbol."

Furthermore, as John Killham notes, the conscious remembering of one analogy for too long may even interfere with the meaning of a later analogy. For example, "fire" is, for Dickens, a recurring analogical image indicative primarily of life. But sometimes fire may be supportive, sometimes destructive of life. A rigidly symbolic reading of Dickens might find some frustration here. A reader free to respond completely to the immediate context, however, will find only the residual memory of an alternative possibility communicating the complexity of experience in which fire has such ambiguous meanings. The arbitrary symbol simplifies, the analogy diversifies.

Furthermore, an imaginative intellect constantly sees new analogues for the same thing, or sees in the old analogy new implications that produce new interpretations. Analogies are thus natural and more universal than symbols, less strained and idiosyncratic—and much more likely to be old and worn. Their age and common usage, however, is not in itself a count against them: their very
strength lies in their power to strike fire in the consciousness of a reader by suddenly touching a forgotten experience and flashing from it a moment of insight. Therefore to blame Dickens for lack of originality in his analogical language is to miss a very important point: the unexpected recognition itself creates part of the life illusion.

Dickens's ability to create this life illusion is not explained completely, however, by the analogizing quality of his imagination. Equally characteristic is its primitive picture-making quality, whereby a complex, totally felt experience repeatedly finds instantaneous expression through a configuration—a gestalt—of associated images. The supposed puzzle of the insistently recurring images in Dickens's work has provoked unnecessarily bizarre solutions. The images recur simply because they existed whole in their creator's consciousness from the moment of their inception. If they initially appeared as "Ur-choices" (see note 2) for the man in synthesizing chaotic world stuff, they remain as tools for the artist in ordering experience, part of the unquestioned assumptions by which their owner lives. None of them may be considered to have vacated his mind completely at any given moment, and they recur in various configurations like the chips of colored glass in a kaleidoscope, changing intensity, shape, and focus with each emerging pattern.

The following chapters will isolate and scrutinize in turn the various groupings of associated images that seem to constitute Dickens's perceptual universe. Chapters II and III consider the river and marsh configurations, which place human life in the perspective of eternity. These are configurations of mystery and uncertainty, filled with reminders of the great unknown preceding birth, brooding over life, and following death. Although they seem to suggest attitudes related principally to death, in Dickens's view they actually point toward life, for they provide the larger perspective necessary for full understanding of life's meanings.

The remaining configurations primarily suggest attitudes toward temporal life. Death is timeless; life is inseparable from time. Chapter IV explores the relationship between sensitivity to time and capacity for life. Chapters V through VIII, which complete the analysis of Dickens's mode of experience, then trace the development of a synthesized human life through its various stages to its ideal achievement of full humanity. Among the guiding configurations, one discovers, are embodied many lures and dangers lying in
wait to freeze an individual at an immature stage, or to transform a person into a monster.

Throughout these chapters, I have chosen the sharpest, clearest, and best-developed delineations of each pattern for the most emphatic treatment. It must be understood, however, that the patterns seldom appear thus baldly and completely isolated within the total context of a novel. More often they will be partial, displaced, or disguised by the inventive fancy.\textsuperscript{10} One may, for example, catch brief or subliminal glimpses of the marsh or the river anywhere; and it is not unusual for a number of configurations to interplay briefly or at length in the portrayal of a single person or event. In proceeding into the later chapters, the reader should try to carry actively forward the perceptions of the earlier chapters to perceive the whole interwoven pattern. In chapter IX, I shall myself attempt to synthesize the various configurations into the encompassing gestalt—the total allegory—that constitutes Dickens's imagined world.

Although I do not believe that this imagined world changed in substance once an interpretation was imprinted on his consciousness, it appears clear that Dickens steadily grew in his ability to use, control, and manipulate that world. Three of the early novels—\textit{Pickwick Papers}, \textit{Nicholas Nickleby}, and \textit{Barnaby Rudge}—are singularly free of figurative language and therefore have little or no relevance to this study. All of the others, beginning with \textit{Oliver Twist}, are rich in the imaginative materials on which this book is based. If at first, as seems likely, Dickens simply wrote down the thoughts and impressions that flowed into his mind, he learned to use the images of his perceptual world with increasing complexity and subtlety. In attempting to harness these powerful imaginative resources, he launched into experiments leading to impressive advancements in craftsmanship. His forays into both expressionistic and impressionistic writing amazingly anticipate twentieth-century writers concerned, like him, with conveying existential reality.