

# Dickens and his readers

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Dickens the man, remains after a half-century of biography and much literary, social and psychological criticism, a baffling figure, as complex, dynamic and tragic as the age in which he lived. We think of his dominating the early Victorian period, not so much as a combatant in its ideological warfare but as a sort of folk hero, an embodiment of the resources and frustrations of a nation. It is almost a shock to realize that he died at the age of fifty-eight in 1870, so clearly do we envisage him as venerated and adored, so almost patriarchal in the modes of feeling he fathered, yet another of the tribe of long-lived Victorian sages. As a Victorian he died in what for most would have been prime middle-age; but he died a prematurely old man who, it could without fantasy be argued, committed what was virtually suicide. He had lived at just the pace of his society, and it had worn and worried him to death.

Dickens's life was not peripheral to his artistic career but one with it. In a complex variety of ways he managed, in his actual career, to embody nearly all the typical experiences of his age, and this despite the fact that he was personally very neurotic with a private case-history of mental trauma. Yet somehow he was able to make his private conflicts and compulsions public, to integrate them with a wide social vision and to stir the imaginative depths of a vast national audience. What will be demonstrated here is the way in which his personality, his audience, and the popular forms he used combined into a typicality, a generality of appeal, which has never since, significantly, been equaled.

## Rochester: the opium dream

Pickwick is the starting point of the great career. His is the figure most immediately evoked by the adjective Dickensian. Much of *The Pickwick Papers* is set, as we remember in Rochester and Rochester was the scene of Dickens's early childhood. It is a very significant part of his childhood, of his life indeed, for it became the symbol, not only of pre-industrial England, but of Dickens's own innocence before the fall, the trauma of the little drudge in the Blacking Factory, the son of a bankrupt father sheltering from a world of creditors in the Marshlea debtor's prison, of "the child of singular abilities, quick, eager, delicate and soon hurt, bodily or mentally" who was always haunted by "the sense . . . of being utterly neglected and hopeless"\* in the crowded desert of industrial London. No wonder then that the happy and carefree childhood of Rochester became in memory an idealized as the age of good fellowship, good living, altogether of the good life. And the teens of the century, though indeed they have their black side, could be seen, at least in rural Kent, as the fast vanishing remnant of a more genial and spacious age. Dickens, as a writer,

returned several times to Rochester, once as the tormented figure of little Nell seeking a sanctuary in which to die, once as the Uncommercial Traveller (a title fascinating to ponder) but finally and momentously in his last work, the only half-completed *Edwin Drood*. It was a very different Rochester to which the exhausted novelist limped home, indeed it was no longer home. Cloisterham, its fictional pseudonym, in 1870 is a muffled and sinister ruin, where the relics of proud decay sway through miasma of the opium-dream suffered by the divided soul of an artist in the strange disguise of a cathedral organist. The Orient, the victim of the new form of capitalist exploitation, has come to roost in the ideal world of childhood, there to poison and subvert its host.

## Dickens as public figure

What happened to the fictional Rochester, what happened through his suffering the sea-change of that symbol is, in general, what happened to England. As we have suggested, the childhood world is not without its foundation in historical reality. The change over from stage-coach to railway is not what we call the Industrial Revolution itself, but it must have been a palpable and all evident manifestation of it. Likewise, the growth of cities, with the accompanying horror of tenement and disease, must have been in the earlier years of the century a very visible confirmation that England was passing through the throes of its transformation from an agricultural into a ruthlessly expanding industrial nation. This transformation, Dickens, as we have seen, experienced through the subjective agony of thwarted childhood. He also experienced it, as one might say professionally. It is indicative of the typicality of Dickens's career that, in his earlier years, he was of that then most modern of occupations, a successful and very high-powered journalist. This, in the grand style, even when he had achieved established fame as the best-selling novelist of his day he continued to be. During the last twenty years of his life he half-owned and edited two weeklies, *Household Words* and *All The Year Round*. In his early years as reporter for the *Mirror of Parliament* and the *Morning Chronicle*, he was whirled from the Commons to the hustings, travelled all over England in search of sensational copy, was renowned for the devices he invented for pushing through news ahead of rivals and has a good claim as the originator of the "scoop". His career as a journalist had two important issues. It sent him, out actively as a young man and through widespread contacts as the controller and dominator of his own magazine later, into the arena of social transformation. It also gave him a miraculously sensitive finger to the national pulse. He developed preternatural sensitivity as to what constitutes a public, its demands and the extent to which its demands could be formed and its tastes governed. Dickens is the last great writer who was, in

\*Forster: Life of Charles Dickens, Chap. 2.

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the fullest sense a public figure. In his visits to America, he went as a sort of unofficial ambassador. He moved in the principle literary circles of his time. He knew most of the leading intellectuals, was made much of by the great and revered by the working class. All this, of course tells us much of the quality of his sheer success. But there is another significance: his position, almost outside the class structure of his time yet living all its complex gradations, was experience. It is a tribute to his greatness as an artist that so much of what would have been for a lesser man the mere reward of pre-eminence, found its way back into the world of the novelist.

There was another aspect of his typicality which can only briefly be touched on. In his personal life he was in turn a typically Victorian husband and father begetting a host of children and later a rebel against sexual convention, separating from his wife and (the evidence is almost conclusive) taking as his mistress a young actress, Ellen Ternan.\*

Through this world of experience he was, then transformed into something like the representative of an epoch. But the most typical part of his life was his childhood. He remained true always to that shift from the world of innocence to that of experience. And it was the unity between his life and his art that enabled him to become the embodiment of the case-history of a nation in the throes of social revolution.

We have been arguing that on many levels' Dickens embodied the life of his times. Yet in a very obvious way he was not typical, in that he did not participate to any outstanding degree in the intellectual life of the century. When we think of the sages, Arnold, Carlyle, Ruskin, they seem to us typical precisely because of the sturdy consistence of their diversity; it is the quality of their participation rather than its content that marks them. This is true of the pure creative talents also. George Elliot exists not only in relation to *Middlemarch* but to "topics" as well; to Puritanism and German Idealism, to Lewes and Spencer. It would be possible to summarise the "thought" of minds even as obviously unintellectual as Tennyson's and Browning's; or of Trollope and Thackeray, for that matter. Even a popular novelist like Bulwer Lytton was an intellectual in a way Dickens never was.

### No terrible muses

It would be possible to extract almost any number of opinions from Dickens's works. He could be characterized as an unconscious socialist, a radical individualist, a Carlylian authoritarian, and almost anything else under the sun, all with the immediate legitimacy that quotation affords. He was, at once, all of these and none. In trying to establish his "position" it is as well to assert what he wasn't.

\*In the reputed confession made to Canon Benham many years after Dicken's death, Ellen Ternan declared that "she loathed the very thought of this intimacy". If these are in fact her words, they throw a curious light, on Dickens himself of course, but also on the whole sexual ethos of Victorian England. One may hazard that the mere fact that the relationship was necessarily illicit is a partial explanation of what was evidently a genuine personal failure. George Elliot of course may be cited as evidence of what sort of relationship could be achieved. But she was not, I think, typical in the way Dickens was; nor submitted to the kind of scrutiny a public idol would inevitably incur. The failure must also be related to Dickens' own psychological development of which there is ample illustration.

In general, his imagination was caught only at the point where ideas impinge on the lives of ordinary people. Hence he was consistently concerned with popular science as the policy of his two weeklies, entirely in his own hands, proves. But he did not live the conflicts of ideology with anything like enough involvement to suffer the agonies of that typically Victorian malady, "Doubt". He was not, as Tennyson was, terrorized by "the twin terrible Muses, Astronomy and Geology", nor does he seem to have had much time for the religious controversies of the period. Although it was the topic of one of the most sensitive periods of his career, the 'Thirties, he evinced no interest in the Oxford Movement. He disapproved of Anglicanism as being a buttress of the class system, of Catholicism which stood for the dogma and superstition which he loathed, and of Nonconformist in particular, which had so oppressive and thwarting an effect on the individual; he explored this effect in great detail in a novel, *Little Dorrit*, in a short story, *George Silven-dmrt's Explanation*, and satirized non-conformist preaching many times in his fiction.

### Anarchism and order

His social attitudes are very complex indeed. He hated the state apparatus, and particularly Parliament ("the national cinder-heap") yet was convinced that the State should intervene to control the rapacity of landlord and capitalist and to raise the standards of the working-class. At the same time he attacked the ideology of radicalism, Malthusianism and Utilitarianism, particularly in "Hard Times" with a fervour that owes much to Carlyle. With Carlyle, a certain modified conservatism caused him to take the wrong side in the case of Governor Eyre; and yet he had no time for the divine dictator hero; on the contrary, he declared in 1869: "My faith in the people governing is, on the whole, infinitesimal; my faith in the people governed is illimitable". This is a long way from Carlyle's contempt for the people; likewise, it is not a socialist opinion. It could best be described, bearing in mind the period, as lower middle-class common sense. Lower middle-class is of course, if we have to make the assignment, Dickens's class position. But as is very frequently the case such a position goes with a distinct Anarchism. Of course, a careful division must be made between the kind of opinions that went with the public persona of the novelist whose financial success, popularity and philanthropic activities combined into a general respectability (though never conformity) and the attitudes formulated in artistic terms which increasingly become more and more anarchistic as the novelist's social vision deepened. This Anarchism has, in certain aspects, much in common with that traditionally English working class scepticism displayed towards institutions and the men that "work" them. In other ways, it was the product of a fundamental isolation, the lonely and irrational cry of a bruised and uncomprehending childhood. Basically, on the psychological, as on the social level, it was the expression of a disappointed and ineffective idealism, which persisted through all the activity of an often startlingly successful mission to improve the lot of the common man. This Anarchism must have been a potent contribution to his popularity. It enabled him to reach the levels of revolt that were

unformulated and hidden in the minds of a, working class not always very politically conscious. It explains further why he so disastrously misunderstood political activity such as Trade Unionism. His portrait of industrial conflict in "Hard Times" is narrow and unconvincing. It is significant that in this novel his working class hero, Stephen Blackpool, is, for personal reasons, outlawed both from his own work-mates and the Capitalists. The only comment he can find to contain his situation is; "See how we die and no need, one way and another—in a muddle—every day!" This almost the despairing cry of the ideological agnostic of all ages.\*

## Release

Another aspect of Dickens's anarchism accounts for his love-hate relationship to the idea of revolution. This had the obvious superficial attraction that sheer contemporaneity must bestow: the fear of revolution was an ever present possibility throughout the larger part of the period of his most abundant activity. Of course, the same type of fascinated horror is to be found in Carlyle; the success both of *The French Revolution* and of *A Tale of Two Cities* has the same source so far as the general imaginative context is concerned. With Dickens however, there was a further psychological incentive: the symbolic relationship between the actual, latent explosiveness of capitalist society and the destruction of the prison (the archetype here is the storming of the Bastille, which, as Lyonel Trilling has pointed out in his essay on *Little Dorrit*, is a dominant Nineteenth Century symbol for the liberating power of revolution); and the prison was quite precisely the Marshalsea, the debtor's jail where Dickens's father was imprisoned. In *A Tale of Two Cities* the theme of incarceration, of release, of the dead brought back to life permeates the fabric of the novel; there is, if one may use the term, a psychological objectivity in the exploration of this theme which survives the falsities of sentiment and the subjective haziness of characterization which is now an impediment to evaluation. Popular violence constantly dovetails with the theme of release. The mob has, so the conscious Dickens who has to get his ending "right" feels, in the end to be thwarted and repulsed; order has to be restored; and "order" is the complacencies of the individual existence. The novelists' social participation is destructive. The high point in the description of the rising of the Paris mob is undoubtedly the storming of the Bastille itself. This, it could be argued, is historically *the* moment of exaltation any way. But in the much earlier *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), set in the Gordon Riots, there is the same fascination with mob violence, and again the high point is the burning down of the jail. The subjective symbol of the Marshalsea Prison (his childhood experience of it was unquestionably searing, relating as it does to the particular parental betrayal he believed himself to have suffered) thus had a real existence in the imagination of his audience; and his private anarchism relates closely to the latent though unspecified movements of revolt in his time.

## Impresario of popular form

In the preceding pages we have tried to define some of the qualities that in Dickens, the man and artist,

tended to make for typicality. Equally important to this consideration is the literary forms that were available to him, their relationship to audience and the particular effect that they had on the workings of his creative imagination. The novel, when Dickens opened his career with the *Sketches and Pickwick* was hardly a respectable form. Scott, it is true, had lent it his authority, at first, it is worth noting, anonymously. But it was a popular form. This was because part-publication (novels were generally published in twelve monthly parts before they achieved three-volume status) created an audience that feasted on the stimulus of suspense, that demanded excitement, entertainment and thrills. A popular form demands a popular (in all senses of the word) author, and this Dickens superlatively was. He was not, it is fair to say, at least not in the most superficial sense, a revolutionary in the matter of form. The genus he generally found ready-made; what he did was to breathe into the old body his at once personal and typical spirit. Most of the types of novel were ready to hand. Thus *Pickwick* is essentially a fusion of the rambling and disconnectedly episodic Eighteenth Century picaresque novel and a popular form of the time, the sporting sketches, whose most famous example is Surtees's *Jorrocks Jaunts and Jollities*; the complex, Gothic novel often combined with a socially contemporaneous theme, unified through an altogether melodramatic plot, was a feature of the work of such "popular" novelists as Ainsworth and Bulwer Lytton. Examples of this kind could be multiplied. The point is that Dickens used his popular forms with such success because he believed in them, in his audience and, it should be added, because they could bring in big money. His treatment of his audience through the popular form always, even to the end, had something of the grand manner of the impresario. He depended on the support of a mass-audience to keep him really in business at all, yet he was always one step ahead; often it was a false step and he had to retrace and retract only to spring a new imaginative vision from the vantage-point of an apparent concession. The nature of part-publication called for a relationship between artist and public of an arduous sensitivity. Dickens could always feel just how his new line was "going down" by that crudest of barometers, sales! There were, of course, reviews which, though Dickens pretended never to read any, did have some influence on him; but to nothing like the extent they would have today. There was the advice of friends, but this was generally taken when it seemed to Dickens to represent a prevision of a public demand.\* Of course, after the mid-fifties, Dickens's fame was so established, (at least, he had never again to fear the type of failure, with its accompanying anxieties and its threat to his personal position that Martin Chuzzlewit evoked) that he had no need to angle for support when in fact he received worship. Nevertheless, the habits of the great popular novelist remained; his feel for an

\*There are two good examples of this: (1) Jeffrey, venerable critic of the *Edinburgh Review*, along with the bulk of readers was passionately enthusiastic about *Little Nell* in *The Old Curiosity Shop*; he did not like *Martin Chuzzlewit*; nor did the bulk of readers. His advice played a considerable part in causing Dickens to put another child's death in his next novel: the death of *Little Paul* in *Dombey and Son*. (2) *Bulwer Lytton* did not think the original "disillusioned" ending of *Great Expectations* would go down. Dickens agreed with him and substituted the more sentimental ending.

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audience, lively, responsive and fascinated was a stimulus essential to the creative method. It is significant that his last unfinished novel, *Edwin Drood*, was designed to be a detective thriller of the kind which a much younger novelist, Wilkie Collins, had made popular. Even at the end, he could not submit to the status of a revered anachronism.

## Cash and folk figures

The novel published in parts had of course very distinct effects. Since it was being written and sold before it was finished, it demanded haste, a monthly crisis, and no pause for rewriting or manipulations towards an over-all pattern. This does much to account for the loose structure, diffuseness and often inadequately tied-up plot of what we think of as the typically Dickensian novel. It meant also, on the debit side, that Dickens was particularly before he had really established his impregnable position as the leading novelist of his day, led, when the sales-barometer showed signs of sinking, to non-literary devices designed to bolster demand. Thus, in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, when sales began to drop, he inserted the grand American excursion, reasoning that the recent notoriety of his *American Notes* would make an irresistible appeal. (In fact, the public refused to take the bait, and by so doing shewed excellent taste). On the credit side, however, the monthly publications did have this extraordinary result; that in a sense novelist and audience, by the extremely close touch they maintained (not only through the sales statistics, but through correspondence and more intangible forms of response as well) created the work together; instead of the artist merely offering the done thing, he entered into the community of his readers and created for them and, to an extent, through them. The audience was the whole of early Victorian England. Dickens was read with equal avidity by intellectuals (though here, from the first, there were dissentors) and by working people. This was the period before the Education Acts and a public captured by mass-circulation journalism. Many of Dickens's audience were illiterate, but accessible through reader's clubs, where one member, literate, read to the rest. Dickens was also family reading, and on the whole he was careful to keep his tone approved and moral; he minded his d-mns and G-ds! It was through his preternaturally close contact with a mass audience, that Dickens was able, in the first half of his artistic career, to achieve what no other writer has succeeded since in doing: he created genuine folk-figures, Pickwick,

Fagin, Scrooge, Quilp, which not only bear the clear stamp of their popular origin but have found their way back into a current mythology, where they are still renewed through our modern mass-media, the film and the radio.

By 1850, this era of the creation of folk heroes was over for Dickens. The reasons for this change are of course very complex, but they certainly have something to do with an increasing and irremediable urbanization with its accompanying loss of traditions, an increasing self-consciousness on the part of the novelist's public, and, most certainly, the development of Dickens himself towards a highly conscious artist of the modern type; though whether cause and effect can be separated is doubtful. This change is shewn very clearly in the

fate of the Christmas stories. *A Christmas Carol*, for all its crudities and sentimentalities, possesses obviously, as its present seasonal popularity testifies, to an insistent degree, an archetypal popular appeal. Cashing in on their popularity, Dickens went on producing Christmas stories throughout his career. They continued to sell prodigiously; but they must strike us now as decidedly mechanical and mass-produced. They degenerated, almost admittedly into pot-boilers; though they always retained the function of shewing which pot was being boiled. Dickens tried hard, in his last novels, to return to the type of folk-humour that early endeared him. After 1850, however, Fagin, Sairey Gamp, Sam Weller, all the typically "Dickensian" characters, somehow evaded his art; such late attempts as Silas Wegg, in *Our Mutual Friend* and the Wopsall-playing-Hamlet scene in *Great Expectations* are not really successful. Dickens was by then on to deeper and gloomier things.

## Drama, melodrama, death

Dickens's audience wanted, rather in the modern film-sense, "drama", and this the novelist provided in a very complex way. The more or less strict contemporaneity of a Dickens novel does not provide the social content of the novels, rather, the symbolic structure that gives a specific significance to a general pattern of social vision. Thus, the "theme" of *Bleak House* is concerned with the evil effects of the venerable and decaying Court of Chancery (so *Oliver Twist* attacks the Poor Law; *Nicholas Nickleby* attacks Yorkshire schools; *Little Dorrit* satirizes the bureaucratic incompetence of the Crimean War through the Circumlocution office; and *Our Mutual Friend* uses as one of its symbols the actual dust-heaps that were sold at great profit in the London of the sixties)—and it could be said that that novel is concerned with remedying an obvious public scandal. Such particular attack was Dickens's dramatic fodder; in the earlier part of his career the novelist lived through a certain notoriety; and even when established his tendency to attack another soft section of the Establishment made him disliked in many official and conservative quarters. This activity has, obviously, a good deal in common with the capacity for scoop journalism discussed above. It was another of the ways through which he held and fascinated his audience and by means of which he was able to compete with the contemporary sex-fiction (for it existed: cf. Ford, *Dickens and his Readers*) of his time. But most important it was way of integrating his personal vision with an ever present individual social reality. The Court of Chancery was a crying scandal whose anti-social practice Dickens sharply focused; what is typical of Dickens however, is that he uses a decaying sector of society that is under attack as, in turn, a symbol for the whole of society. Around a central symbol or overt pre-occupation Dickens weaves a complex tapestry of unsuspected and unlikely relationships; extra-ordinary coincidences with an obscure connection, and a plot which manages to show that the aristocracy has an ultimate connection with the outcast and disowned (Lady Deadlock and Jo, the crossing-sweeper in *Bleak House*); that in the end all are reducible to the same social terms; Dickens manages in fine to image a society organic beyond all its rigidities and apparent stratifications.

## Drama and death

Melodrama was the medium in which Dickens could come to terms with his audience through the contemporary theatre, as was farce and Shakespearian tragedy. It is no accidental part of his success that the novelist was constantly absorbed in some aspect of the theatre. Undoubtedly, he learned, not in a very conscious manner it is true, much from Shakespeare; with whom Dickens had this in common, that he was professionally committed to literature at the most obvious level, that he held something for all in an heterogeneous audience and that he worked towards large symbolic structures that could be "taken" as specific and mythical simultaneously. Thus, the boast that Dickens is a second Shakespeare is not just a wild hyperbole of evaluation; it is a quite exact parallel, descriptive rather than adulatory. Ben Jonson was his real love however; Jonson's grasp of the caricature of the humorous declares itself omnipresently in the pre-1850 Dickens. The novelist himself acted Ben Jonson, and composed, directed and acted farces (and romantic comedy) of his own composition and questionable merit. He was in fact fascinated by the theatre, the feel of a live audience, the arranged unreality in which illusion is created and lived, through grease-paint and foot-light. This throws much light on the personality of the novelist who in "real" life was irritable, rather ruthless, domineering and gloomy. Given any sort of an audience however he breathed and expanded in a radiance of mimicry, high spirits and almost hysterical hilarity. It serves also to explain why, when he was secure (at least, outwardly; for he never lost the deep compulsion with its roots in his childhood trauma which drove him to bolster himself more and more with a drive towards money-making) financially and socially, and hence had lost something of his old sensitive intimacy with his readers, he was driven, so naturally to the device of public readings. Through these he was enabled, during the last years of his life when composition had become agonizingly arduous, to achieve once again, in a new form, the exhilarating sense of the artist's power to control an audience, with the additional advantage of being able to see with his own eyes the physical effect. His readings were nearly all from the earlier novels and the Christmas stories—a striking example of their folk appeal. (He read to audiences that ranged from the mechanics of Manchester to the leaders of fashionable society). Not the readings themselves, but the fascination Dickens found in them, lends them the effect of a last, portentously fascinating disease. We have on record Dickens's pulse-rate, and it soared alarmingly whenever he read. With his audience he acted out the hidden conflicts and compulsions of the age. The murder of Nancy in *Oliver Twist* became a favourite piece, and Dickens noted, with morbid satisfaction, the number of women who fainted during performances. He was forbidden to give any more performances by his doctors but he pressed on with a kind of intense frenzy. When he did heed the warnings it was too late, the damage was done, and he died exhausted and paralysed. In a sense his audience, or rather his lover's passion for it, destroyed him; but not before his artist's passion had, beneath the guise of the performer, moulded it and recreated it, and, in the process, the imaginative landscape of Nineteenth Century England.

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