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I

GRAHAME SMITH

The life and times of Charles Dickens

What does it mean to write the life and times of a major writer in the era of poststructuralist literary theory? What it doesn't mean, of course, is to contrast the current situation with some pretheoretical paradise in which the exercise would have been unproblematic. The fact is that the *study* of literature is by definition theoretical; it is simply that the terms of the debate differ between then and now. An example of how one method challenges another can be seen by glancing at the impact of new, or practical criticism, on two of the favorite kinds of Dickens studies from earlier in the century. Prototype studies attempted to identify the "real" human beings behind Dickens's characters, while topographical studies sought to identify the "real" places which formed the inspiration for the settings of Dickens's novels. New criticism, which flourished as a movement in the 1950s and 1960s, sought to remove literary texts from the historical arena through a concentration on their structure and language, and so was committed to a rejection of this implied equation of art and reality. This approach was superseded by new kinds of theory which problematized, among other matters, the existence of an external reality without the experience of the observer as subject and suggested that the author was now dead, as a challenge to the traditional role of the artist as creator of fictional worlds which mirrored both external reality and the writer's personal life. But whatever the differences between new criticism and poststructuralist literary theory, they do have one thing in common in their stress on the primacy of language. Contemporary theory has, of course, taken this position further by way of the concept of textuality, the notion that the individual and the world, as well as the literary artifact, are *written*; that is, are inscriptions of those ideological formations which are the distinguishing features of major historical epochs.

There are signs that the more extreme versions of these positions are beginning to loosen their grip on the academic study of literature. The movement known as new historicism has provided renewed opportunities for

history in the search for cultural, as well as specifically literary, understanding, and it is even possible that the author is struggling back into life, although in different forms from those that *he* enjoyed in his heyday as creative genius. However, it would reduce cultural enquiry to a trivial game of swings and roundabouts to suggest that it is now possible simply to return to older versions of a life and times. Poststructuralist literary theory seems certain to have a legacy, and among its most important discoveries is its stress on the centrality of writing in the construction of the self and the world, as well as literary texts.

A glance at the first major biography of Dickens, published only a few years after his death in 1870, by his life-long friend, John Forster, may illustrate the relevance of contemporary theory to this discussion. Forster was a highly intelligent professional biographer and his work has the inwardness with Dickens that comes not merely from their intimacy, but also from his shared position as a fellow Victorian. Even this privileged access is subject to reservations, however. For one thing, Forster chose to ignore material, such as Dickens's relationship with the young actress Ellen Ternan, which he thought would damage Dickens's reputation, and also be hurtful to living people. But a more fundamental reservation arises when we grasp how much of the biography was orchestrated by Dickens himself, in that Forster's sources are mainly letters written to him by Dickens and reports of their conversations together. This dependence is strengthened by our knowledge that Dickens wished Forster to be his biographer, a challenge that Forster embraced.

It is obviously possible to feel superior toward these apparent limitations, especially in light of the massive Clarendon British Academy edition of Dickens's letters which is currently in the process of appearing. Vivid and amusing, they provide us with what amounts to an autobiography, but like all autobiographies it is partial and to some extent self-regarding. Nonetheless, countless critics, scholars, and biographers rely on these letters as evidence of Dickens's life with little acknowledgement of this partiality and bias. The life and times attempted here will, then, be written in recognition of the extent to which Dickens's life is a textual construct, much of it created by the writer himself. The method will be thematic, examining major aspects of his life and times, and the ways in which these might relate to the work, although a simplistic reduction of the novels as explicable in terms of the life, or vice versa, will be avoided as much as possible. Many would argue that Dickens's stylistic innovations are radical; in keeping with this view, a radical account will be offered of his personal life and the ways in which it relates to the life of his times.

An appropriate starting point is one of Dickens's best-known writings

outside the novels, the so-called “Autobiographical Fragment” written for Forster in 1847, which recounts his incarceration in Warren’s Blacking Factory, a shoe-polish warehouse, at the age of twelve for probably a year. Incarceration is a loaded word, with its connotations of imprisonment, and the primacy of the experience has been challenged in recent years while its writing has been seen to indulge in a self-dramatizing sentimentality. There is no doubt that the Fragment, precipitated by a stray word of Forster’s, is carefully crafted, presenting its boy hero’s suffering in a series of pathetic vignettes which, designedly or otherwise, maximize the stresses and potential dangers of the episode on a child who is seen as sensitive, imaginative, and highly intelligent.

However, the story needs to be contextualized within a wider narrative if it is to be fully appreciated. Dickens’s family background is richly representative of the social and class tensions which had existed for many generations in English society and intensified in the Victorian period as part of the general movement toward reform. His grandparents, on his father’s side, were servants of a superior kind in being butler and housekeeper in an aristocratic family, and thus holding positions of power and authority, which were as likely to claim the respect of their masters as the awe of their inferiors. (The position of Mrs. Rouncewell in Sir Leicester Dedlock’s household in *Bleak House* is a good indication of the esteem in which such upper servants could be held.) This settled prosperity, and access to aristocratic influence, were the springboard for an upward social mobility on the part of Dickens’s father, John, who was a clerk in the Navy Pay Office, retiring in 1825 on grounds of ill health. Clerkships were important positions in the evolving world of nineteenth-century bureaucracy, and John Dickens moved through a number of promotions which afforded him, by the standards of the day, an excellent salary and secure pension. The available evidence suggests that Dickens’s father was an able, attractive, and hard-working man but liable to a prodigality difficult to separate from a generous response to the pleasures of life and an admirable desire to move up the social scale. Its results were, however, disastrous in the short term. In 1819 he borrowed £200, then a very large sum, the starting point for a gradual descent into debt signaled by frequent changes of address. John Dickens was transferred to London, for a second time, in 1822; Dickens was not sent to school; and his father was overwhelmed by financial difficulties which led to his imprisonment for debt in the Marshalsea Prison. Shortly before this, Dickens began work at Warren’s Blacking, presumably as an aid to the family finances.

How should this be interpreted for clues to Dickens’s inner life, and its possible connections with his work? His own view of the Blacking Factory episode has been dismissed by some recent critics as the self-indulgent

whining of a poor little rich boy whose fate was much better than that of hundreds of thousands of child laborers in the period. But this is to discount the expectations of a twelve-year-old brought up in a comfortable lower-middle-class home in which he was made much of and his talents admired. He can hardly have set his sights on university, which in the England of the day would almost certainly have meant Oxford or Cambridge, but he must have expected to remain at school until about sixteen, followed by entry to the law, a clerkship, or some other respectable calling. The reality was his removal from school, in 1822, which he clearly chafed under, and then a job which he was surely right to see as demeaning and stultifying to his talents, even if some find excessive his revelations of “the secret agony of my soul as I sunk into this companionship . . . of the shame I felt in my position . . . of the misery it was to my young heart” (Forster, 1.2). What cannot be doubted, however, is that this was an experience “which at intervals haunted him and made him miserable even to that hour” (Forster, 1.2) in which he was writing. Equally understandable is Dickens’s belief that in wandering alone and unprotected through the streets of a wild and violent city he might well have become “. . . a little robber or a vagabond” (Forster, 1.2).

But there are positives, one of them being the repeated kindnesses shown to him by his fellow workers, especially the interestingly named Bob Fagin, which may suggest a link from the life to the work. Dickens worked the Fragment into the early, autobiographical passages of *David Copperfield* (1849–50) and the runaway David marks the conclusion of his early deprivations by a prayer: “I prayed that I might not be houseless any more, and never might forget the houseless” (13). Even if we accept that Dickens succumbed to a sentimental idealization of his personal life, in the work his suffering was objectified into generous indignation and righteous anger at the fate of the helpless, the poor, and the unprotected. Having glimpsed dispossession fueled Dickens’s concern for the dispossessed for the whole of his writing life. And the very intensity of this concern may relate to his famous repression of this period. Dickens’s claim to have told no one of Warren’s is debatable (one of his sons claimed that it was known to his wife), but it is certain that it was a closely guarded, and rankling, secret. However, personal repression did not prevent the experience from flowing into his work, in however subterranean a way, as we can see from a glance at *Bleak House* (1852–53). The fate of Jo, endlessly moved on, and the dangers faced by vulnerable little girls such as Charley, move the novel to superbly controlled irony and anger. More profound is the study of a young woman, Esther Summerson, who is as much an abused child as the others despite her more comfortable material surroundings. Esther represses the trauma of her upbringing in the interests of a positive engagement with life, an effort which

exacts its penalties in her dreams and in an inner life whose stresses are hinted at, although masked by Esther herself. This is only one of a number of anticipations of Freud which have their roots in Dickens's own meditated experience.

The intensity of living through the imprisonment of a beloved and respectable family seems also to have made an indelible impression which, again, was objectified in action as well as in creativity. Just as Dickens campaigned for the poor in his philanthropic activity, his journalism, and his speeches, as well as the fiction, so his evident obsession with prisons, visiting them at every available opportunity, was transformed into a rationally humane concern for penal reform expressed in a similar range of activities. Imaginatively, his work is haunted by the "taint of prison and crime" which pervades *Great Expectations* (1860–61, 32). The genial humour of his first novel, *Pickwick Papers* (1836–37), modulates into the darkness of Mr. Pickwick's imprisonment for refusing to pay the damages awarded against him for supposed breach of promise. Prisons are broken into, and their inmates released, most notably in *Barnaby Rudge* (1841) and *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859). And what many regard as one of Dickens's greatest novels, *Little Dorrit* (1855–57), is permeated by prisons, real and imaginary, its structure and the texture of its writing inescapably implicated up to, and including, its vision of "the prison of this lower world" (1.30).

One of Dickens's best-known statements concerning the Blacking Factory period arose at his moment of release from it: "I do not write resentfully or angrily: for I know how all these things have worked together to make me what I am: but I never afterwards forgot, I never shall forget, I never can forget, that my mother was warm for my being sent back" (Forster, 1.2). This leads into a network of relationships within the life, and between the life and the work, that can be pursued in a number of ways. Dickens's mother has been written into history largely on the basis of this and similar statements, and through her identification with the absurdly scatterbrained figure of the hero's mother in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–39). What is frequently ignored in this reductionism is that Elizabeth Dickens gave the small Charles his basic educational grounding at home, including in Latin. In addition, his mother was described by an accurate-sounding observer as a woman who possessed "an extraordinary sense of the ludicrous, and her power of imitation was something quite astonishing . . . as also considerable dramatic talent."¹ If true, this would suggest a fruitful influence for any writer, one unacknowledged by Dickens himself and pretty much ignored by those writing on him.

What we are examining in Dickens's biography is, clearly, the transmutation of the life into myth. One way of reading Dickens is as a representative

Victorian figure, the self-made man, and it is certainly the case that he made himself over a number of times in the early part of his life. He makes the claim for himself in the Warren's Blacking period that, despite the suffering involved, "I kept my own counsel, and I did my work. I knew from the first that, if I could not do my work as well as any of the rest, I could not hold myself above slight and contempt" (Forster, 1.2). This determination to do what had to be done hardens into the drive for success revealed by his determination to master the "savage stenographic mystery" (DC 43) of Gurney's shorthand system while in his second job, as a solicitor's clerk. This enables him to leave and become a freelance shorthand reporter at Doctors' Commons, an obscure part of the current legal system in England. He then moves to *The Mirror of Parliament*, a publication devoted to recording the proceedings of the House of Commons. It is widely accepted, although at least some of the evidence is Dickens's own, that he became a crack parliamentary reporter noted for his speed and accuracy. He moved between a number of periodicals at this stage – he was still only twenty – and in 1834 became a reporter for the *Morning Chronicle*, where he remained until 1836, leaving behind him "the reputation of being the best and most rapid reporter ever known!" (to Wilkie Collins, 6 June 1856, Pilgrim 8.131).

During this period Dickens wrote many of the brilliant little vignettes, collected as *Sketches by Boz* (First Series 1836), and then resigned from the paper because the success of the serialization of *The Pickwick Papers* opened the way to his career as a professional writer. This is an amazing series of achievements, and Dickens obviously enjoyed the sense that they were due to his own unaided efforts, struggles in which his parents had little part to play. However, allowing for their possession of the usual human failings, it seems clear that his mother and father were talented and energetic people who had provided a loving, supportive environment in the pre-Warren's period. But the Blacking Factory was a watershed in Dickens's feelings about them, and in his general attitude to the world, which helps to explain the extent to which the novels are on the side of youth, and the generally disparaging view they adopt of mothers and fathers. It is hard to find examples of normally happy families in his work, and *Bleak House* again provides a particularly vivid example of his exploration of domesticity. The Pardiggles are the nearest approach to the ordinary, although not without their own touches of the bizarre. The Smallweeds, on the other hand, are a brood monstrous in their greed and miserliness. Those who seem marked out for parenthood by their vigorous warmth – Mr. Jarndyce, Boythorn, and George – are singularly childless, although Jarndyce does at least acquire a surrogate family. And it is noteworthy that Caddy Jellyby's touchingly happy marriage to her Prince produces a severely disabled baby. But the fictions' rendering

of the deficiencies of parents is far from the petty revenge of a disappointed adult. As with other aspects of his personal experience, this is objectified and transformed by Dickens into a comprehensive artistic vision of a parentless, above all a fatherless, world. The societies depicted in *Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit*, *Great Expectations*, and *Our Mutual Friend* signally fail to provide for their poorest members. Personal experience – the fear of becoming “a little robber or a vagabond” – is transmuted into metaphor, the depiction of worlds which ignore the most basic of fatherly roles in the traditional scheme of things, that of provider, an example of the radicalism that will be discussed in more detail later.

It is no accident that the avowedly autobiographical *David Copperfield* depicts a relationship between child and mother which is both edenic and open to a psychoanalytic reading. The text could hardly be more cunningly orchestrated for these purposes. The father is dead, the evil second father, Mr. Murdstone, is not yet on the scene, and the tiny David has two “mothers”! One is the bustling, stout, commonsensically affectionate servant, Peggotty, the other the sensationally glamorous and helpless Clara. It is impossible to exaggerate the charm, delicacy, and exquisite comedy of this early section of the book, all of which suggest an element of control guiding Dickens’s ability to tap into depths of feeling which must have some relation to his mother, either as part of a lost paradise or in the dramatization of a relationship he longed for but never had. Yet again, there is a foreshadowing of Freud. This, then, is the first of a number of relationships with women central to Dickens’s life and work. Those to be singled out are his first love, Maria Beadnell; two sisters-in-law, Mary and Georgina Hogarth; his wife, Catherine; and Ellen Ternan.

Dickens met Maria in 1830, when he was eighteen, and was in love with her for three or four years. It is obvious, given the intensity of his nature, that this was a serious relationship for him. Maria, and her feelings, are much harder to make out, lost as she is not merely in the mists of time, but in the role of heartless manipulator so firmly inscribed for her by Dickens himself. Her interest for us lies in her reappearance, more than twenty years after he broke off their relationship in 1833. Two days after his forty-third birthday, on 9 February 1855, Dickens received a letter from Maria, now Mrs. Winter, which initiated a correspondence remarkable for the strength of its feeling, on Dickens’s part, and not without comic overtones. It provides yet another example of a psychological pattern already analyzed in relation to Warren’s Blacking and *David Copperfield*: repression followed by a passionate outburst of feeling, artistically controlled in the depiction of David’s relationship with his mother, more nakedly raw in the Autobiographical Fragment, although shaped even there into an overarching narrative

reinforced by vividly realized episodes. Dickens's letters to his former sweetheart follow a rapidly increasing intimacy, from Mrs. Winter to Maria, with an abrupt return to the more formal address once they had met. In its recall from the depths of his memory the episode provoked an almost alarming degree of emotion in Dickens. He clearly expected, at some level, that the Mrs. Winter of now would be the Maria of yesterday and the visual evidence of his fatuity brought his dreams (whatever, precisely, they were) and the potential relationship to an abrupt, if not unkindly managed, conclusion. Artistry takes over, yet again, although with a possible hint of revenge on this occasion as Mrs. Winter was unfortunate enough to make her reentry at about the time he was meditating on a new novel. She thus makes her appearance as Flora Finching in *Little Dorrit*, the youthful sweetheart of Arthur Clennam whose looks, twenty years later, provide such an unflattering series of contrasts: "Flora, whom he had left a lily, had become a peony; but that was not much. Flora, who had seemed enchanting in all she said and thought, was diffuse and silly. That was much. Flora, who had been spoiled and artless long ago, was determined to be spoilt and artless now. That was a fatal blow" (1.13).

One can only flinch at what Maria Winter made of all this when she read the novel, as one supposes she must have done, but what does it tell us about Dickens? The contrast between abandonment to feeling, followed by iron control, is remarkable. And yet his letters suggest that his withdrawal from intimacy was managed with a degree of tact as well as unyielding firmness. In the fiction also, the picture of Flora is not simply cruelly comic. She is kindly as well as fatuous, and is genuinely helpful in providing employment for the impoverished Little Dorrit. But, such is the unsparing complexity of great art, Flora cannot resist indulging in a kind of torment of Little Dorrit, who is in love with Clennam, by constantly reminding her of her own past relationship with him.

Another woman of major importance in Dickens's life, his sister-in-law Mary Hogarth, was at least spared the invidious comparisons of age by dying at seventeen. Examination of Mary plunges us into a number of problems, some arising out of Victorian social habits that may seem strange to us, others that demand psychoanalytic probing. Dickens married Catherine Hogarth in April 1836, and their first child was born ten months later, in January 1837. Mary joined the new family in February for a month's holiday, and from then until her early death became part of the household, moving into their first permanent London home, in Doughty Street, in April 1837, and dying there suddenly and unexpectedly on 7 May. The modern emphasis on privacy makes such arrangements appear odd, but they were perfectly usual for the Victorians. Large extended families demanded some

sharing of responsibilities, especially toward unmarried daughters, and it would have seemed obvious that a sister who had acquired a home of her own should be willing to share it; the easy acceptance of such arrangements should raise no contemporary eyebrows. What is less easy to explain is the intensity of Dickens's feelings for Mary, especially once she was dead. But if interpretation is unavoidable here, so is judgment, and it is imperative to insist that whatever else was going on, Dickens was not "in love" with Mary at the expense of her sister. On the other hand, we have to note that he was unable to complete his monthly installments of *Pickwick Papers* and *Oliver Twist* for June. (Such were the pressures of his early career that he was forced to write parts of both novels concurrently.) We know that Dickens wished to be buried in the same grave as Mary, and was distraught when it was occupied by her brother, George, who died aged twenty in 1841. She occupied an important place in his dreams until February 1838, and then returned in a dream of extraordinary vividness in 1844, while he was living in Italy. And he does not fail to note the eleventh anniversary of her death in a letter to Forster of 1848.

It is, of course, impossible to say who or what the "real" Mary Hogarth was, so many years after her untimely death. She seems to have been a charming young person, lively, intelligent, and attractive. In Dickens's life and work, however, she appears as a kind of palimpsest, an initially almost blank document memorialized and inscribed by a combination of his desires and the images of femininity presented by Victorian society. It is probably the case that she died in Dickens's arms, but from that dramatic moment on she was consigned to the realm of reflection, rather than independent selfhood, as a mirror in which Dickens could see one of his ideal versions of the womanly. Implicit in the praise of the purity heaped on her by her adoring brother-in-law is the fact of sexual inexperience, an absence which became a significant presence in Dickens's fictional representations of young women. And it is hardly possible to doubt that Rose Maylie, the young aunt of *Oliver Twist* in the novel he was writing at the time of her death, is not some kind of tribute to Mary. Unfortunately, Rose is one of the most vacuous characters he ever created. This is not the place to pursue Dickens's attempts to confront the depiction of youthful femininity in artistically successful terms. The most that can be done is to point to the interesting levels of complexity achieved with Esther Summerson in *Bleak House* and the eponymous heroine of *Little Dorrit*, both of whom suggest that Dickens was able to work through and modify this troubling area of response, in art if not in life.

Patterns seem to repeat themselves in Dickens's experience, as well as in his work, a fact revealed by the role of another sister-in-law, Georgina Hogarth, who became an important and permanent member of the family

circle from the age of fifteen. Again, there is nothing particularly odd, in Victorian terms, about this arrangement. Georgina seems to have been a friend and helper to Dickens, his wife, and the children. She no doubt eased the burden of suffering at the death of an infant, Dora, in 1851, and she seems to have assisted in tasks such as helping with the arrangements for the family's often complicated holidays, a regular feature of their domestic routine.

But the amazing moment in her life with Dickens arose in 1858 with his separation from Catherine after twenty-two years of marriage. In May 1858 Catherine left the family home accompanied by only one of her children; the rest remained with their father, and Georgina elected to stay on, apparently as a mother-surrogate or housekeeper. She was thirty-one years old and could hardly have done anything more damaging to her prospects of marriage. As an intensely famous public figure whose work had been associated in the public mind with what we would now call family values, Dickens's break-up of his domestic life caused rumours to abound, leading him to publish denials of the whispering campaign against him in his own weekly magazine, *Household Words*. One of the more scurrilous suggestions was that he and Georgina were conducting an affair, a relationship that would have been considered incestuous given the Victorian prohibition on marrying a deceased wife's sister.

What, then, motivated these surprising decisions? It is hard to decipher what lay behind Georgina's apparent betrayal of a beloved sister. Clearly she loved Dickens, although it seems unlikely that she was in love with him. She may well have felt genuine concern for a family of "motherless" children, but it is equally plausible that the lively and intelligent Georgina enjoyed her proximity to the most famous writer of the day and the excitements that accompanied this position. But what does the arrangement tell us about Dickens? Only a combination of passionately intense self-belief and a radical contempt for Victorian social mores could have enabled him to carry off such a bizarrely unconventional ménage. He seems to have respected as well as loved Georgina, turning to her for advice and appreciating her assistance in the smooth running of the household upon which he insisted. He was apparently disturbed from time to time that his monopolization was endangering her marriage prospects, but a deeper response is indicated by his joking reference to her in conversation as "the virgin". This seems to have caused no offense to anyone, including Georgina herself, but does suggest another expression of the complex of feelings released by the death of Mary. Here, however, we are in the realm not of the helplessly girlish Rose but, rather, the angelic and yet domestically competent Agnes Wickfield of *David Copperfield*.

It may seem odd that this attempt to recreate a sense of Dickens's personal life through the women who occupied important places within it should have placed such emphasis on her sisters rather than the wife herself. It is, of course, partly what was unusual in the relationships with Mary and Georgina that gives them interest. But at another level, the apparently central relationship is the more difficult to recover as Catherine seems to have been the victim as much of erasure as of inscription. From the moment that Dickens decided that she had to disappear from his life – he never saw her again after the separation and she was not present at her daughter, Kate's, wedding in 1860 – he rewrote her character, personality, and their life together in terms that have been almost wholly accepted by biographers. Catherine's appearance on the stage of Dickens's life is, then, at best shadowy and at worst that of an emotionally frigid incompetent constructed by him as justification for actions that would seem cruel in any period and near damning in the Victorian era. We are dealing here, it goes without saying, with one of the towering geniuses of western culture, a writer whose creative processes exerted a sometimes dominating influence on his personal and social life; how far that excuses the rejection of conventional morality is a large issue. But what seems clear from the tone, and forms of address, of his own letters to her is that Dickens found in his wife a desirable, engaging, and responsive companion for many years, although any remaining rapport was shattered at the moment in August 1857 when Ellen Ternan entered his life.

This is one of the most engrossing, if mysterious, phases of Dickens's personal odyssey; however, it is important to remember at this point that we are seeking to explore not merely his life but also his times. In fact, this is a moment when the division between life and times becomes a false dichotomy. In other words, the crisis engendered by the appearance of Ellen Ternan is not simply part of a sentimental melodrama of desire, or the most boringly predictable of crises, that of mid-life. Dickens may have been forty-five in 1857, looking and perhaps feeling much older, while Ellen was eighteen. But the intensity of his response to her, and rejection of Catherine, can be fully understood only in the context of Dickens's public life and his involvement in the events of his epoch.

How, then, did Dickens relate to the social and political world of the nineteenth century and how can we see this playing its part in these determining actions of his life? It is, of course, impossible to offer an "objective" account of the main events of Victorian history in Dickens's lifetime. Many would now agree that history of any kind can only be written from a specific viewpoint; in any event, what follows will be an attempt to glimpse the outlines of Victorian politics and social history from Dickens's own perspective. The

best starting point might be the three dominating passions of his political life: education, penal and legal reform, sanitation and public health. Dickens's judgment of his society's performance in these fields was colored by an essential feature of his character and success in life, the extent to which his achievements were built on the foundations not merely of literary genius but on the energy and efficiency with which he conducted his career as a professional writer, what has been called a literary producer.² We have seen already that Dickens was liable to depreciate the possible contributions of his parents to his self-made success. Even if only to that extent, it thus becomes possible to see him as representative of the middle-class energies released by, among other forces, the Industrial Revolution. Dickens gloried in his status as a professional writer, supported by the patronage of his readers, and a clue to his general hostility toward public life in his period is his belief that he was a professional in a country run by amateurs. Such a stance explains one thread of contemporary hostility toward him, the conviction that he was an undereducated upstart whose satirical attacks via, for example, the Court of Chancery and the Circumlocution Office, were the jibes of an ignorant outsider.

What Dickens saw himself as up against is suggested by a House of Commons speech in 1846 by the young Benjamin Disraeli, who is often credited with real insight into the life of his times as novelist as well as politician. Disraeli suggested that there is "a balance between the two great branches of national industry . . . and we should give a preponderance to the agricultural branch."³ He was defending the past here as well as the status quo, and also the material interests of aristocratic landowners. In doing so, he failed to understand the changes precipitated by the Industrial Revolution and the new social order demanded by the move toward industrial production, life in cities, and middle-class entrepreneurship, an error of lasting importance to the national health of the United Kingdom. A glance at *Hard Times* is enough to show that Dickens's attitude toward industrialization is far from idealized, although a balancing perspective is provided by the presentation of the ironmaster, Mr. Rouncewell, in *Bleak House*. In this context, it is worth noting that, before the First Reform Bill of 1832, Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds, and Sheffield had not a single Member of Parliament between them, and that into the twentieth century the House of Commons was still dominated by the interests of the aristocratic land-owning class.

Specific examples of the amateurism that Dickens railed against in the novels, as well as in his journalism, public speaking, and philanthropic activity, come readily to mind. Until the year after he died, appointments to the Civil Service were made on the recommendation of a Member of Parliament or peer, and when entry was opened by public examination in 1871, the

Foreign Office was excluded because of internal opposition. This was the seed-bed of such literary ideas as the division of government between the Coodles and Doodles in *Bleak House*, with the latter eventually coming to the national rescue: "At last Sir Thomas Doodle has not only condescended to come in, but has done it handsomely, bringing in with him all his nephews, all his male cousins, and all his brothers-in-law. So there is hope for the old ship yet" (40). Equally relevant is the domination in *Little Dorrit* of the Circumlocution Office by the Tite Barnacles, an aspect of their battenning on the ship of state, from Lord Decimus Tite Barnacle himself down, through the sprightly young Barnacle, Ferdinand, to the lower depths of the idiot Barnacle Junior, Clarence. The great radical journalist, William Cobbett, frequently referred to what he saw as the corruptions of aristocratic patronage as "The System," and Dickens agreed in regarding much of the social and political structure of his time as a vast amateurish racket in which, for example, the "one great principle of the English law, is to make business for itself" (BH 39). Again, we know that the sleazy farce which is the Circumlocution Office was prompted by Dickens's anger and disgust at the conduct of the Crimean War in which thousands of soldiers died of privation and sickness because of bureaucratic bungling and inefficiency. This is the world in which, until the reforms of the army instituted in the late 1860s and early 1870s, commissions could be bought and sold with no regard whatever to the professional competence of those involved. And just as with the Foreign Office's opposition to competitive examinations, there was resistance at the highest levels to the setting-up of a permanent General Staff and persistence in the use of muzzle-loading, as opposed to breech-loading, cannon, reforms which had previously been accepted by the armies of Prussia and France.

The conflict between professionalism and amateurism was, for Dickens, a struggle between the forces of life and death, and goes a long way to explain his relative indifference to the Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867. For him, neither was significant enough to change the class-based power structure of Victorian society. If this seems a limited and even philistine view it is worth remembering of the second Act that, although it doubled the electorate, which now included industrial workers living in towns, it excluded agricultural laborers and miners living in villages, as well as all women, and it still failed to incorporate the secret ballot, one of the major planks of radical reform throughout the nineteenth century. From an ideological position other than Dickens's, the Victorian era can be, and is, seen as one of the great reforming epochs of British history. But for Dickens reform came with agonizing slowness – always against huge opposition and often qualified – or not at all. Victorian society was driven, to a large extent, by the principle of

laissez-faire (governmental non-interference in the actions of individuals), a doctrine regarded by many as God-given, and so was a world in which services were provided to the well-to-do by private utilities, and to the poor by benevolence and Christian charity. Against this background, government intervention in education, perhaps the most passionately held of all Dickens's causes, was minimal until the Education Act of 1870, and even that failed to make school attendance compulsory. The muddle and piecemeal development of the legal system since medieval times was not fully dealt with until the Judicature Act of 1873. And the worst problems of public health and sanitation were not remedied until the Public Health Act of 1875, although numerous attempts had been made previously in, for example, the Act of 1848, which failed because it lacked powers of compulsion.

One group in Victorian society which shared Dickens's commitment to efficiency and professionalism was the Utilitarians or Philosophical Radicals, whose immensely influential challenges to the status quo were put into practice by the commitment and energy of figures such as Edwin Chadwick. Dickens was happy to cooperate with Chadwick in areas of mutual concern such as public health, but the movement as a whole was anathema to him since it was as strongly committed to *laissez-faire* as it was to efficiency. One of its most famous reforms was the Poor Law Amendment Act (the New Poor Law) of 1834, pilloried by Dickens in *Oliver Twist* for the inhumanity of its underlying motivation, which was to make entrance to the workhouse as unattractive an option for the poor as possible. This led to the tyrannizing over the helpless by public officials (the beadle, a minor parish functionary, remained one of Dickens's life-long *bêtes noires*), the provision of food just above the level of deprivation, and the separation of children from parents, and of married couples even when they were long past child-bearing.

The fusion of Dickens's public and private worlds is revealed in a letter of 1861 in which he contrasts the uproar made by bishops over theological disputes and their silence "when the poor law broke down in the frost and the people . . . were starving to death. The world moves very slowly, after all, and I sometimes feel as grim as – Richard Wardour sitting on the chest in the midst of it" (to Mrs. Nash, 5 March 1861, Pilgrim 9.389). Richard Wardour was the character he played in Wilkie Collins's play, *The Frozen Deep*, the first occasion on which he met Ellen Ternan. We can see at this point a complete fusion between the life and the times which make up the substance of Dickens's biography. His rage and disappointment at a society which seemed to him willing to tolerate ignorance, poverty, and suffering indefinitely is mirrored in what he saw as the failure of his marriage. But if he had failed, in his own eyes, to achieve the kinds of social change he had struggled for, he

could at least effect changes in his personal life, as the rejection of Catherine in favour of a kind of renewal with Ellen shows. The reading of Dickens offered here is, then, of a man radical in his personal as well as his social life who, rightly or wrongly, felt himself driven to desperate measures by desperate times.

NOTES

- 1 Michael Allen, *Charles Dickens' Childhood* (Macmillan, 1988), p. 58.
- 2 See Grahame Smith, *Charles Dickens: A Literary Life* (Macmillan, 1996).
- 3 Norman Low, *Mastering Modern British History* (Macmillan, 1998), p. 95.

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2

ROBERT L. PATTEN

From *Sketches* to *Nickleby*

In 1847 Dickens was a world-famous author raking in profits from serial novels and Christmas books. At that time he wrote several versions of his earlier life, attempting to explain to himself and his vast public how he had transformed himself from an ill-educated boy sent to work at the age of twelve in a shoe-blackening factory into the toast of European letters. The inauguration of a cheap edition of his novels provided an opportunity to write new prefaces accounting for each work's origin. For *Pickwick Papers*, his second title (1836–37) and first novel, he disclosed the beginning of his vocation as writer. William Hall, formerly a bookseller and in 1836 the partner of Edward Chapman in a modest publishing firm, arrived at Dickens's rooms in Furnival's Inn on 10 February 1836 with a proposal for the young author, known for his street sketches and tales published under the pseudonym "Boz." It was to supply letterpress accompanying etched illustrations by the comic artist Robert Seymour, some of which had already been prepared to illustrate the story Seymour had in mind.

In Hall, Dickens reported, he recognized

the person from whose hands I had bought, two or three years previously . . . my first copy of the [*Monthly Magazine*] in which my first effusion – dropped stealthily one evening at twilight, with fear and trembling, into a dark letter-box, in a dark office, up a dark court [Johnson's Court] in Fleet Street – appeared in all the glory of print; on which occasion by-the-bye – how well I recollect it! – I walked down to Westminster Hall, and turned into it for half-an-hour, because my eyes were so dimmed with joy and pride, that they could not bear the street, and were not fit to be seen there. I told my visitor of the coincidence, which we both hailed as a good omen; and so fell to business.¹

On the surface this would seem to be a familiar plot: poor aspiring writer submits a piece to a magazine, and when later on he meets someone connected to that first publication who brings a proposal for a new venture, he senses "a good omen" and signs a contract that leads within months to fame

and, a decade later, fortune. But on closer examination the narrative shimmers with half-concealed alternatives hovering below the surface. Although the magazine to which the twenty-two-year-old Dickens submitted his story did not pay contributors, he went on, after this first successful application, publishing in it anonymously for another fifteen months, during which period Dickens was so desperately poor he could not afford to marry. Why give away stories? On the other hand, these stories received about forty complimentary notices, whereas the extensive range of paid journalism and fiction Dickens published over the next two years never was reviewed anywhere.² Furthermore, “appearing in all the glory of print” would seem to be cause for celebration, but Dickens confesses that seeing his writing published reduced him to tears; he hid from the street whose activities he would pry into in subsequent sketches, almost as if he were ashamed for being known as a writer. These seem mixed, even contradictory, responses, especially when presented as the definitive start of a literary career. But they are consistent with the self-fashioning of an author who publishes anonymously and pseudonymously, striving to be at once a professional author, writing for pay, and a gentleman and amateur, working for the love of it.

When Dickens began life on his own account (the title of a chapter in the autobiographical novel *David Copperfield*), he didn’t exactly know what he wanted to become. He only knew what he wanted to be: “famous and caressed and happy,” as he put it in an autobiographical fragment also composed around 1847 (Forster, 1.2). Dickens’s childhood alternated between times when he did a star turn in the parlor before his parents’ friends and months – years, they seemed – when his education was neglected or he was sent to work while his parents and siblings lived in debtors’ prison. One early love affair, with Maria Beadnell, daughter of a banker, had withered because, though as suitor he was lively, agreeable, and clever in composing party rhymes, his background and prospects made him unsuitable. As office boy in a succession of lawyers’ chambers, he was not much more promising. He mimicked customers and denizens of the neighborhood and attended popular entertainments – everything from Shakespeare to circuses – most evenings. Yet he kept himself apart from the shabby debaucheries he witnessed and maintained a neat, “military” appearance that was his way of distancing himself from his Marshalsea past.

Cleverness, energy, high jinks, and a tendency to extremes of emotion are characteristic of adolescents; Dickens did not turn 21 until 7 February 1833. One passing ambition was to go onto the stage of the public theatres he frequented after work. The impersonations achieved by dress, costume, gesture, and speech, the rapid-fire jokes and plot development, the dramatized, essentialized moral and spiritual conflicts – all appealed to the young

Dickens. But something kept him from pursuing an acting career: he caught a cold the night before his audition, missed it, and never rescheduled it.

Another outlet for this as yet undirected energy and talent was reporting. When Dickens left the law at sixteen, he taught himself shorthand and perfected his skill in taking down speeches until he was the most accurate and speedy stenographer in Parliament. This, like acting, was a way of ventriloquizing others' words. The rhetoric of civic discourse permeated Dickens's imagination, while the histrionics of parliamentary debate fitfully aroused his critical and humorous faculties. In 1828 Dickens commenced as a free-lance shorthand writer at the Consistory Court of Doctors' Commons (a site memorably represented in *David Copperfield*); three years later, he advanced to a job transcribing parliamentary debates for his maternal uncle's paper, *The Mirror of Parliament*, just when politicians were agitated over impending electoral reform. Many of Dickens's colleagues in the gallery were destined for careers in the law, but the profession never particularly appealed to him, though from time to time into the mid-1840s he would think about entering it.

In 1834, through the influence of a friend, Dickens obtained a position at the liberal, Whig-owned *Morning Chronicle*, second only to *The Times* in circulation. The editor, John Black, sent him out to cover events throughout Britain; the cub reporter relished the coach races home to beat competitors into print. In October of that year Dickens began contributing theatre reviews and sketches, first to the daily *Morning Chronicle*, and from January 1835 also to the tri-weekly off-shoot, the *Evening Chronicle*, edited by Dickens's future father-in-law George Hogarth.

Those pieces about urban middle-class life, sometimes acutely observed, sometimes brash, and sometimes trite, brought in cash, but at twenty-two Dickens was still not clear what direction to pursue or whether he should publicize his own name. He signed his *Chronicle* sketches and tales "Boz," borrowing a nickname from a younger brother. Its peculiar character attracted attention; some thought it meant that the writer was a Boswell for the middling classes. Within two years Dickens had, in fact, made quite a reputation as "Boz." He sold stories to other journals under that pseudonym, and a young publisher, John Macrone, proposed collecting the papers, adding illustrations by the veteran London caricaturist George Cruikshank, and republishing them. But while *Sketches by Boz* were being revised and prepared for the press in the winter of 1835-36, Dickens wrote twelve more journalistic pieces published in *Bell's Life in London* under the pseudonym of "Tibbs." Although these papers, no longer by "Tibbs," were eventually swept up into the February 1836 two-volume *Sketches by Boz* or the one-volume December 1836 supplement, at some level Dickens was

not yet, at the age of twenty-four, fully invested in a single literary projection, Boz.

Nor was he committed to a particular genre. He speaks, during these formative years, of having a novel planned or partly written, which later on he thinks of cutting up into journalistic snippets. In 1836 and 1837, in addition to writing two novels, Dickens composes (1) a pamphlet attacking Sabbatarianism, *Sunday Under Three Heads*, illustrated by Hablot Knight Browne and written by “Timothy Sparks”; (2) a farce in two acts, *The Strange Gentleman*, adapted from one of the *Sketches by Boz*; (3) an “operatic burletta,” *The Village Coquettes*, with music by his sister Fanny’s friend John Pyke Hullah; (4) a one-act burletta, *Is She His Wife? or Something Singular*, written “long before I was Boz” but premiered in March 1837 by John Pritt Harley, star of the previous pieces; (5) fourteen new “Sketches by Boz”; (6) revisions of many of his previous sketches for the collected volume publication; (7) a dozen miscellaneous papers and reviews, and (8) a children’s book he abandons.

Thus in February 1836, at the age of twenty-four, Dickens might have picked one of several careers: newspaper journalism, leading perhaps to a position as editor, editorialist, and political spokesperson, possibly even as MP for a London constituency; theatre, in which he would write, act, direct, or produce plays and musical entertainments; or more general writing, of kinds, subjects, and genres not yet clear. As it turned out, Dickens continued in both journalism and theatre. In the 1840s he edited a newspaper for a few months and in the 1850s and 1860s he edited two periodicals running for twenty years. In those same decades he staged amateur theatricals, wrote plays, and gave readings from his fiction. But the writing of fiction received a decisive impetus from William Hall’s invitation to contribute letterpress to Robert Seymour’s illustrations about the mishaps of Cockney sportsmen.

What Seymour, Chapman, and Hall envisaged was a monthly publication featuring four etchings by the artist along with text written to match. Dickens, from the moment the proposal was offered, knew he wanted to go in a different direction – toward connected incidents and fiction, not a succession of illustrated comic anecdotes. His relations with Seymour were strained, in large part because the artist was unhappy about many things in his life including the direction his “junior” partner wanted to take the collaboration. When Seymour committed suicide before the second monthly number was published, and his successor proved inept at etching plates, Dickens took charge. All the energy that had characterized his madcap races to beat *The Times* in delivering copy about provincial elections, all the directorial verve he threw into amateur theatricals, all the management he exhibited in instructing his future wife, Catherine Hogarth, how to behave (“I perceive you have not yet

subdued one part of your disposition," (18 December 1835, Pilgrim 1.109-10), became focused on this failing venture, the monthly part-serial entitled *The Pickwick Papers*. And Dickens succeeded. He hired an illustrator (Hablot Knight Browne, known as "Phiz") capable of producing effective images consonant with Dickens's improvised, developing story and characters; he expanded the number of pages of letterpress from twenty-four to thirty-two and reduced the number of pictures from four to two, changes that shifted costs and primacy from illustrator to author; and he convinced the publishers to continue the venture until it caught on with the public.

It did catch on. The last number sold 40,000 copies. It was a "double" number of sixty-four pages, comprising the wind-up of the story, four illustrations including a frontispiece and a vignette title, a Preface, a Table of Contents, and a List of Illustrations, so the whole twenty numbers could be bound up as a book. Chapman and Hall had stumbled on a gold mine. Dickens was capable of turning out effervescent copy on a regular basis; the publishers could invest in a single thirty-two-page publication, sell it, and reinvest the proceeds, so their capital turned over and multiplied manyfold in the course of publishing a single title. No wonder they were keen to secure from Dickens a contract for another book in the same format.

But Dickens was not exclusively bound to one firm. John Macrone was desperate to repeat his success by commissioning a new novel from Dickens in three volumes ([9] May 1836) and by reissuing the *Sketches* in monthly parts. Dickens was not about to have materials which had already appeared at least twice recycled as if they were another *Pickwick*. To forestall Macrone, Dickens persuaded Chapman and Hall (17 June 1837) to buy the copyrights he had signed over to Macrone; then, since somebody was likely to profit from the success of *Pickwick*, they could publish the *Sketches* in shilling monthly numbers on their own account. But this arrangement put the young author more in the hands of his *Pickwick* publishers, at a time when the expense of maintaining his family forced him to work ever harder just to keep solvent.

Meanwhile, another enterprising publisher, Richard Bentley, eager to bind Dickens to future publications for his firm, negotiated a contract (22 August 1836) for two further novels by Dickens, each to be published in the conventional three-volume format. He then snapped up Dickens and his *Sketches* illustrator, George Cruikshank, to edit and illustrate respectively a new half-crown monthly magazine, *Bentley's Miscellany*, starting in January 1837 (Agreement, 4 November 1836). In addition to editing, Dickens contracted to provide "an original article of his own writing, every monthly Number, to consist of about a sheet of 16 pages." By January 1837 Dickens was disastrously overcommitted – a burletta in the offing, the *Pickwick* installments due