

Chapter 1

Dickens the entertainer: 'People must be amuthed'

Charles Dickens was born in Portsmouth on 7 February 1812, into a world and into a family offering him little security. His mother was Elizabeth Dickens, née Barrow, the daughter of a naval paymaster found guilty of embezzling money from his employer two years before Charles was born. His father, John, was a clerk in the Navy Pay Office, originally in London but moved to be near Portsmouth's naval dockyard in 1810. Dickens was the second child born into a household that never stayed anywhere for very long. He never felt he had received the support and succour he deserved from either of his parents. Rapid transitions and stark contrasts were as much a part of his childhood as they are fundamental to his novels. In his early childhood, a series of different residences in Portsmouth was followed by removal back to London in 1814 when the Admiralty reorganized at the end of the Napoleonic War. This was the earliest contact with London for a novelist whose love and loathing for the great expanding metropolis was to define his fiction for many of his readers.

Initially at least, it was a relatively short-lived encounter between a writer and his inspiration, for only two years later the family then moved to be near the naval dockyards in Kent. Dickens memorably described this flat coastal landscape of indeterminate land and sea at the beginning of *Great Expectations*, when the soldiery hunt down the escaped convict Abel Magwitch across its dreary wastes. If the young hero Pip's imaginative life is profoundly shaped by those events on the Kent marshes, then it was there too, in the fast-changing world of the 1810s, as Britain emerged from nearly three decades of war with France, that Dickens seems to have made his first attempts at writing. Not for him the introspections of a diary or the creation of a fantasy world closed to others: Dickens, instead, with an emphasis on performance he was never to lose, began by directing plays for the family in the kitchen and performing songs standing on a table in a local pub. He told Mary Howitt in 1859 that he had been 'a great writer at 8 years old or so' and 'an actor and a speaker from a baby' (*L* 9: 119). Often to the dismay of literary friends such as his biographer John Forster, entertainment remained at the heart of the literary enterprise for him. Even after he had secured his reputation as 'the Inimitable', he adapted

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his own novels for public readings and, from 1858, took them out to perform himself to audiences in England, Ireland, Scotland, France, and the USA.¹

When the Dickens family moved back to London in 1822, the financial difficulties that would continue to make problems for them were catching up with John Dickens. The most immediate result for the young Charles was being sent away from home to work at Warren's blacking factory. The firm manufactured boot polish in a warehouse by the side of the Thames. Not himself one of the urban poor or one of those thousands of economic migrants increasingly drawn to the city, this experience nevertheless seems to have given him a sharp sense of the uncertainty of life for those in the lower classes of the vibrant but harsh metropolis. Certainly the experience in the blacking factory, first written up in 'the autobiographical fragment' for Forster, reappears in one shape or another throughout his fiction, most directly in the closely autobiographical novel *David Copperfield* as the wine-bottling business of Murdstone and Grinby. More diffusely, the time at Warren's surely made its way into the horror registered in nearly all the novels at the degradation of mechanical work and, especially, in the reduction of children to mere cogs in a factory system interested only in production rather than the condition of its workers. Another event from his early life, equally calculated to undermine any sense of security in childhood, also reappears in different forms throughout the fiction: just two weeks after he started work at the factory, Dickens's father was arrested for debt.

In this period, debtors could be confined to prison by their creditors, at least until they began to pay them off. John Dickens, like Wilkins Micawber in *David Copperfield* and William Dorrit in *Little Dorrit*, was locked up in the Marshalsea Prison, and took his family with him, but not Charles, who lodged with family friends in Camden Town. *Little Dorrit* may represent Dickens's most extensive fictional transformation of these events, but, again, they play out more pervasively into a recurrent shame and anxiety of imprisonment across the novels. 'The stain of the prison,' as Pip calls it in *Great Expectations* (3: 4, 353), extending sometimes to the sense of society itself as a huge prison, certainly informs the author's relish for the descriptions of the destruction of Newgate that provide the most vibrant passages in *Barnaby Rudge*.² Dickens wrote to Forster in September 1841 about his excited self-identification with the rioters while composing these scenes: 'I have let all the prisoners out of Newgate, burnt down Lord Mansfield's, and played the very devil. Another number will finish the fires, and help us on towards the end. I feel quite smoky when I am at work. I want elbow-room terribly' (*L* 2: 385). The nervous desire to burst out of confinement, even when the prison is the structure of his own novels, drives Dickens's fiction and provides much of its anarchic energy.

John Dickens stayed in prison for three months, after which the family's position improved – for a time – when he inherited money on his mother's death. The Admiralty then granted him a pension on the grounds of ill health in 1825, and he took up a second career as a parliamentary reporter, but he remained improvident – he was arrested again for debt in 1834 – and was a drain on his son for the rest of his life. He took Charles out of the factory when things improved and sent him back to school. From there, in 1827, Charles began work as a solicitor's clerk. Tedious though this work may have been, after office hours he began to experience the freedoms provided by the money in his pocket. He had enough confidence to volunteer his services to the newspapers, a booming sector in a print culture that seemed to be expanding exponentially in the 1820s and 1830s. Originally working as a shorthand court reporter, Dickens eventually joined the full-time staff of the *Morning Chronicle* in 1834. Around this period he fell in love with Maria Beadnell, a banker's daughter, but she had rejected his suit by 1833. Her attractions were later translated into Dora in *David Copperfield*. Dickens met her again in 1855, now Mrs Winter, an experience he rather cruelly adapted into the character of Flora Flinching in *Bleak House*.

In and around the world of the law courts and what we would now call the media in Fleet Street, there washed a bright and often lurid world of leisure and entertainment, nowhere more obviously than in the theatre, for which Dickens retained an enduring love. Always a show-off, he started to spend his income on clothes and began a reputation for flashiness. This relish for performance stayed an important part of Dickens's fiction. Serious 'literature' in the nineteenth century often struggled to adjust to this burgeoning world of commercial entertainments, but Dickens always approached it with relish. Novelists, despite the recent achievements of Jane Austen and Sir Walter Scott, were particularly sensitive about the issue, perhaps because they were still regarded as vulgar interlopers into the world of learning and letters. Dickens was not without anxieties of his own on this score, always being aware of the tenuous social and economic position of his background, but he never cut his writing off from what he called in one of his most brilliant essays 'the amusements of the people' (*J* 2: 179–85 and 193–201).

Dickens was and remains a great popular novelist. The judgement is not just a question of taste: his novels proved immensely successful with the new reading publics opened by the expansion of literacy through the nineteenth century, and continued to be so. By the end of the nineteenth century, he seems to have been the favourite author among schoolchildren of both sexes. Dickens penetrated deeply into popular consciousness from early on in his career as a novelist. He may have been outsold by writers such as G. M. Reynolds in the

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1840s and 1850s, and even sometimes been suspicious of what he described to Forster as the ‘many-headed’ (*L* 2: 129), but more generally, like his friend Wilkie Collins, he remained optimistic about the potentiality lying within ‘the Unknown Public’ of ‘three millions which lies right outside the pale of literary civilization.’ Collins seems to have oriented *The Woman in White* (1860), the great mystery novel he published after ‘The Unknown Public’ (1858), towards the perceived taste for sensation in this new mass-reading audience. Dickens, especially in his decision to go directly before the public in his reading tours, which began in the year Collins published his essay, was equally drawn towards the new class of readers.³

The 1860s were a decade of debate about electoral reform and the extension of the franchise. The educated classes wished to include respectable members of the working classes in the new electorate, that is, those who could exercise their judgement but also recognize the authority of others over them. The public readings Dickens undertook from 1858 ought to be understood in this context. By attending the readings, the working classes were not only demonstrating their powers of discrimination but also perhaps acknowledging his authority over them. Not that this power was always in his control, either at his readings or in his novels. For decades after his death, Dickens remained available to working-class readers as a way of making sense of their experiences, often providing a language for those who embarked on writing themselves, even when they recognized he was far from offering any kind of realist window onto their lives.⁴ If the greatness of Dickens has nearly always been acknowledged, then this ‘popular’ side of the equation has often made the recognition grudging. For William Makepeace Thackeray, a major competitor with Dickens for much of his life, as for many other contemporary commentators, including those who, like Thackeray, became his friends, there was always a touch of vulgarity about Dickens: vulgarity about the way he dressed, vulgarity about his manner of address to his audience. Henry James complained his characters were just a ‘bundle of eccentricities, animated by no principle of nature whatever’ (*Collins a*, 470). The result was ‘a certain impression of charlatanism’ (*Collins a*, 472). Too chatty, too close to his reader, too much of a confidential agent, too quick to turn the cheap trick: too much of everything, no restraint, no limit to what G. H. Lewes complained of as ‘overflowing fun’ (*Collins a*, 570). As one early biographer put it in 1858, worrying about the venture into public readings: ‘Mr. Dickens, always fond of imagining a close, a very close, perhaps a too close, connexion between himself and his public, has, as we have seen, lifted the green curtain which generally hangs before an author’s desk.’⁵ The anxiety behind such judgements was whether Dickens was in control of his own effects and his audience’s responses to them.

Dickens always practised the aesthetics of plenitude, where repetition is the soul of wit. Critics such as Lewes saw such prolixity as infantile: ‘the reader of cultivated taste’ reduced to the state of ‘children at a play’ (*Collins a*, 576). Certainly, Dickens regularly replays as farce what the reader has often only recently encountered as tragedy, a delight in repetition that refuses to leave things for the reader to contemplate from a single steady point of view. In *Oliver Twist*, for instance, the bloodstains that spatter the room where Sikes has murdered Nancy are revisited as grotesque comedy only a few pages later when the fleeing murderer encounters a commercial traveller peddling a universal stain remover:

‘It’s all bought up as fast as it can be made,’ said the fellow. ‘There are fourteen water-mills, six steam-engines, and a galvanic battery always a-working upon it, and they can’t make it fast enough, though the men work so hard that they die off, and the widows is pensioned directly with twenty pound a-year for each of the children, and a premium of fifty for twins. One penny a square – two halfpence is all the same, and four farthings is received with joy. One penny a square.’ (*OT* 3: 10, 400)

Sikes snatches his hat from the salesman, who has threatened to use it to demonstrate the power of his product, and dashes from the scene, trying to escape from the memory of his dreadful deed. The comedy of the sales patter – with its own grotesque references to the victims of the factory system – creates a complexity of tone that is far from easy for the reader to categorize.

Recently, some critics have taken a positive attitude to Dickens the entertainer, arguing that this aspect of his writing, oriented towards a broad popular readership, is more democratic than any of his actual political principles ever were.⁶ Perhaps, nowadays, we are apt, if anything, to underestimate the degree of social protest in Dickens’s writing and its importance for his nineteenth-century reputation, but it is the entertainer who seems to have really grabbed his audience, even if we should be wary of assuming the two principles were always necessarily at odds. In one of the several direct addresses to his readers justifying his methods, Dickens identified the chiaroscuro technique in *Oliver Twist* with the rapid succession of light and dark in popular theatre: ‘It is the custom on the stage, in all good, murderous melodramas, to present the tragic and the comic scenes in as regular alternation as the layers of red and white in a side of streaky, well-cured bacon’ (*OT* 1: 17, 134). The implication of this defence is that melodrama is the genre best suited to the busy street life of the new urban world, discussed in Chapter 3 of this book, because it reproduces the welter of impressions, the

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bombardment of images that Dickens suggests is becoming part of everyday consciousness in the city:

Such changes appear absurd; but they are not so unnatural. The transitions in real life from well-spread boards to death-beds, and from mourning weeds to holiday garments, are not a whit less startling, only there we are busy actors instead of passive lookers-on, which makes a vast difference; the actors in the mimic life of the theatre are blind to violent transitions and abrupt impulses of passion or feeling, which, presented before the eyes of mere spectators, are at once condemned as outrageous and preposterous. (OT 1: 17, 135)

Dickens was the kind of radical populist, not uncommon in nineteenth-century extra-parliamentary politics, who believed authority must always reside ultimately with the people. Certainly he was often impatient with Parliament, and his *Child's History of England* (1854) showed a hostility towards royalty, but if these attitudes – in terms of political belief – often seem to slip back into bourgeois liberalism, or even an outright hostility towards popular revolution, then in his writing there seems to be an open-door policy to just about every aspect of popular culture. From melodrama to nascent forms of visual culture such as the magic lantern, from fairy stories to popular songs and ballads, from courtroom dramas to recurrent mockery of the legal profession – all these are aspects of Dickens's writing attuned to popular taste.

Critics in the universities have often remained more ambivalent or even hostile to these aspects of Dickens, especially in the early fiction. Until a late conversion based rather puritanically upon the discovery of a moral centre in the later novels, especially *Hard Times*, the most influential of these was F. R. Leavis. He dismissed Dickens from *The Great Tradition* (1948) as merely 'a great entertainer'. Ardent admirers of Dickens, on the other hand, such as Edmund Wilson, have usually looked to the darker aspects of his work to justify their case, but the commitment to entertaining in Dickens is unrelenting, and central to that commitment is the fact that he is funny. Dickens first became known, and long remained admired, as a comic writer with *Sketches by Boz* (1836), a collection of newspaper and magazine pieces, and then in 1837 the huge popular success of his first novel *The Pickwick Papers*.⁷ *The Pickwick Papers* produced a mania in the public, and many spin-offs, some authorized by Dickens, including tales reintroducing the main characters which Dickens worked into *Master Humphrey's Clock*, the weekly periodical he wrote and edited himself from 1840–1. Anecdotes abound, as they always do with Dickens's work, about the hunger to get hold of every installment of the book. John Forster retailed the story of a clergyman ministering to a sick man hearing him afterwards say: 'Well, thank God, *Pickwick* will be out in ten days any way!' (Forster 91). The book's origins were not necessarily so encouraging. They lay in a

commission from the publishers Chapman & Hall to write a volume ‘illustrative of manners and life in the Country to be published monthly’ (*L* 1: 648). Illustration was key here, as the project was centred upon four woodcuts produced by the artist Robert Seymour, who had originally wanted to provide a series illustrating Cockney sporting life. If the series was conceived of as a description of Cockneys all at sea in the country, ‘through their want of dexterity’, as Dickens put it, then he managed to turn the project round to his own interests, typically expanding his canvas to include ‘a freer range of English scenes and people’ (*PP* 761) and in the process moving away from any condescending sense of Cockney inadequacy. When Seymour committed suicide soon after the project was launched, Dickens found himself with even more latitude to explore his own interests, although he still worked collaboratively with his illustrators, the Cruikshanks. Whereas other examples of this form of writing, such as *Life in London* (1820–1) by Pierce Egan, who also collaborated with the Cruikshanks, tend to condescend to the popular culture of the metropolis even as they celebrate it, Dickens offers a comic point of view that is more open to a diversity of perspectives on the world it describes. Egan’s narrative is focused around three young gentlemen who descend, as it were, into London life, but are never seriously compromised by it. In Dickens, the middle-class Pickwick, a retired man of business, unlike the young Oxbridge gentlemen of Egan’s fiction, is buffeted about by experience but also ultimately protected by the wit and wisdom of his Cockney manservant, Sam Weller, one of the greatest comic creations in English fiction.

Dickens later claimed that friends had warned him off publishing in numbers as a ‘low, cheap form of publication’ (*PP* 761). The whole thrust of *The Pickwick Papers* is towards upsetting such hierarchies of knowledge, despite the book beginning with a parody of a rambunctious club meeting, which might seem to suggest that learning belongs only in traditional places, not the ‘Corresponding Society of the Pickwick Club’. Pickwick’s pretensions to learning are parodied throughout, but scarcely from the stable perspectives of established forms of knowledge. In the book’s many courtroom scenes, for instance, the law is revealed to be a place where truth seems open to infinite distortion. The funniest examples of legal legerdemain come in Pickwick’s trial for breach of promise with the widow Mrs Bardell. Her lawyer, Sergeant Buzfuz, does all he can to read impropriety into Pickwick’s innocent communications with his landlady:

“Dear Mrs. B., I shall not be at home till to-morrow. Slow coach.” And then follows this very remarkable expression – “Dont trouble yourself about the warming-pan.” The warming-pan! Why, gentlemen, who *does* trouble himself about a warming-pan? When was the peace of mind of man or woman broken or disturbed by a warming-pan, which

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is in itself a harmless, a useful, and I will add, gentlemen, a comforting article of domestic furniture? Why is Mrs Bardell so earnestly entreated not to agitate herself about this warming-pan, unless (as is no doubt the case) it is a mere cover for hidden fire – a mere substitute for some endearing word or promise, agreeably [sic] to a preconcerted system of correspondence, artfully contrived by Pickwick with a view to his contemplated desertion, and which I am not in a condition to explain? (PP 33, 454–5)

The world at large seems little better than the law courts when it comes to working out what is really going on. The book, to use one of the chapter titles, seems ‘Too full of Adventure to be briefly described’ (PP 16, 211). The mazy narrative of Pickwick’s own adventures is constantly interrupted and obscured by interpolated anecdotes. Embarking on the task of reporting his observations on the country back to the club, ‘that colossal-minded man’ (PP 13, 172) Mr Pickwick soon encounters and is duped by a strolling actor, the noisy but empty Mr Jingle, whose bad behaviour, grounded in his ability to pretend to be what he is not, nearly leads one of Pickwick’s fellows into a duel. Although we are quickly cleared of ‘all Doubts (if any existed) of the Disinterestedness of Mr Jingle’s Character’ (PP 10, 129), *The Pickwick Papers* delights in his shape-changing variety, having him crop up in different guises throughout the episodic narrative. Only when Pickwick takes on Sam, a shoeshine who becomes his valet, does he tap a source of protean energy able to match Jingle’s. Sam is a man of the world, but he looks upon it as a vast entertainment, made up, he tells Pickwick, of ‘Sights, Sir ... as ’ud penetrate your benevolent heart, and come out on the other side’ (PP 16, 212). In fully theatrical manner, Sam even comments on the action in asides, a speech act, minor as it is, that contributes to the familiar relationship his character builds up with the reader. More generally, Sam provides a guide to enjoying the world while struggling with it. Part of the process is his awareness of profusion and opportunity in words and situations alike. He provides a distinctive form of colloquial commentary on the narrative, rarely as proverbial as it purports to be but always offering a wry perspective from below: ‘Business first, pleasure arterwards, as King Richard the Third said ven he stabbd’ t’other king in the Tower, afore he smothered the babbies’ (PP 25, 329). Challenging but delighting the reader’s expectations, then, Sam takes every opportunity to show the world is not always as it seems, not always amenable to only one point of view.

Of course, as with Sam’s allusion to the murder of the babes in the Tower, this counter-vision often opens up a perspective much darker than Pickwick’s irrepressible optimism. Although John Carey influentially argued that Dickensian humour ought to be understood as a defence against his awareness

of the ugliness in the world, it is rarely as comforting as this diagnosis suggests.⁸ For one thing, there is no orderly sequencing of darkness and light in the novels. Rather, there are frequently sudden changes of tone of the sort Dickens claimed he took from melodrama, and sometimes the reader finds their own laughter catching uneasily in the throat. Sometimes it is cruelly laughing *at* people, like the representation of a former sweetheart as Flora in *Little Dorrit*, or the depiction of the dwarf Miss Mowcher in *David Copperfield*, a picture he was forced to redraw in later installments of the novel after complaints. Comedy in Dickens is often anarchic, frequently disturbingly so. The set-piece comedy of the universal stain remover in *Oliver Twist* scarcely makes it any easier for the reader to come to terms with the death of Nancy. Rather, recognition of the comic virtuosity here creates a complex tension with the violent events witnessed only a few pages before. So, too, in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, the tics and rages of the Punch-like Quilp in pursuit of the innocent heroine are funny and monstrous at the same time, but they scarcely soften the discomfitingly lurid nature of his interest in Little Nell nor do much to distract from the disturbing question of the reader's own voyeuristic pleasure in it. In *Great Expectations*, where the opening chapters riff on the joke of Mrs Joe Gargery bringing up Pip 'by hand', a pun originally made in *Oliver Twist* (1: 2, 6) as a description of the unloving treatment visited upon the boys in the workhouse, the mixture of humour and violence is equally destabilizing. When Joe tells Pip that he and his mother had been 'hammered' by his drunken father, then the comic vagaries of his telling, including the death of his father by 'a purple leptic fit', only add to the complexity of tone (*GE* 1: 7, 46–7). 'The uncongenial and uncomfortable manner' with which Joe rubs his eyes with the round knob on the poker, while telling Pip this story, anticipates the discomfort of the reader caught between laughing at or crying with Joe as his 'blue eyes turned a little watery' (*GE* 1: 7, 47). The fact readers laugh with Dickens is scarcely a comforting factor, then, but proliferating points of view are part of the rollercoaster entertainment value of the Dickensian world of extreme effects, part of the sensationalism of his writing.

Victorian critics were increasingly worried about what was perceived as a growth of fleshliness in literary culture, a taste for being brought close up against material appetites and displaying the body all too readily, fuelled by the expansion of the newspaper press and its lurid interest in stories of violence and murder behind the façade of progress and respectability.⁹ If *Sketches by Boz* and *The Pickwick Papers* offer a playful delight in humour, Dickens's other early novels catch a developing popular taste for shocks and awe, most obviously in Sikes's murderous rage at Nancy in *Oliver Twist*, heightened by the demand created by

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serial publication for cliffhanging cruxes and constant changes of tone. Even before the rise of the sensationalizing newspaper press, so-called ‘Newgate novels’, stories of crime and murder such as *Paul Clifford* (1830) and *Rookwood* (1834), written by his friends Edward Bulwer Lytton and Harrison Ainsworth respectively, had been among the popular literary successes of the 1820s and 1830s. Thackeray thought it ‘quite wrong to avow such likings, and to be seen in such company’, but their influence can be seen in the murder and mystery that runs through *Oliver Twist*, the tangles of whose plot Dickens struggles to control, and in the riot and violence of *Barnaby Rudge*, a novel that takes the reader back to one of the most violent episodes of eighteenth-century British history, the Gordon Riots of 1780.¹⁰ In *Nicholas Nickleby* and *The Old Curiosity Shop* too the threat of violence to children, as in *Oliver Twist*, is used to awaken even further the emotional interest of the reader. Nor are these sensational effects just a matter of plotting. In one of the most famous and most disturbing scenes in Dickens’s early fiction, the murder of Nancy, the rapid exchange of points of view, brilliantly captured in David Lean’s 1948 film version, creates the sense of violence spiralling out of control. Nor is the reader ever safely outside of the scene, granted a stable place from which to judge Bill’s rage, but pressed up close, struggling with Sikes, as he fights to free his arms from Nancy’s pleading embrace; party to her fantasy of creating a life somewhere else together; privy to his brief flash of recognition of the future consequences of his actions; blinded with her as blood pours over her eyes; and then finally shielded from the dreadful deed even as the final blow is struck:

The man struggled violently to release his arms, but those of the girl were clasped round his, and, tear her as he would, he could not tear them away.

‘Bill,’ cried the girl, striving to lay her head upon his breast, ‘the gentleman, and that dear lady, told me to-night of a home in some foreign country, where I could end my days in solitude and peace. Let me see them again, and beg them on my knees to show the same mercy and goodness to you, and let us both leave this dreadful place, and far apart lead better lives, and forget how we have lived, except in prayers, and never see each other more. It is never too late to repent. They told me so – I feel it now – but we must have time – a little, little time!’

The housebreaker freed one arm, and grasped his pistol. The certainty of immediate detection if he fired, flashed across his mind, even in the midst of his fury, and he beat it twice with all the force he could summon, upon the upturned face that almost touched his own.

She staggered and fell, nearly blinded with the blood that rained down from a deep gash in her forehead, but raising herself with difficulty on her knees, drew from her bosom a white handkerchief –