Introduction: Dickens and the popular radical imagination

On an autumn day in 1842, William Hone lay dying. He was by now an obscure figure, but through the services of an old friend, George Cruikshank, he sent a request to Charles Dickens that he might shake his hand before he died. The famous novelist agreed to the request, and for a brief moment Dickens, Cruikshank and William Hone came together in the latter’s shabby London home. The meeting apparently meant little to Dickens, who, subsequently attending Hone’s funeral, recounted with a sharply comic tongue Cruikshank’s histrionics as his old friend was laid to rest. Writing to an American friend, Cornelius Felton, Dickens described how Cruikshank, feeling that the Reverend conducting the service had been disrespectful towards the dead man, had allowed his feelings to overflow: ‘I was really penetrated with sorrow for the family, but when George (upon his knees, and sobbing for the loss of an old friend) whispered me “that if that wasn’t a clergyman, and it wasn’t a funeral, he’d have punched his head”, I felt as if nothing but convulsions could possibly relieve me.’ The scene ‘has choked me at dinner-time ever since’, Dickens remarked.

The encounter between Dickens, Cruikshank and Hone in 1842 is a little-known but with hindsight a significant convergence. For despite Dickens’s seeming display of comic disrespect at the funeral of the ailing and rather threadbare old bookseller, the deathbed tableau crystallises an important and much-overlooked connection between Dickens’s writings and an earlier popular radical tradition.

Who was this man whose death Dickens exploited as good comic matter? And what was the exact nature of his relationship to Dickens and his work? Born in 1780, in the early nineteenth century William Hone, a radical pamphleteer and bookseller, had – in collaboration with George Cruikshank – for a brief spell wreaked political havoc with a series of satirical attacks on George IV, his government, the clerisy and the corrupt legislature that he saw all around him in Regency England. Hone’s satires
form an important part of a tradition of popular radical culture in the
nineteenth century, to which Dickens’s novels and journalism owe a more
considerable debt than has yet been recognised. From the nineteenth
through to the twenty-first century much has been made of Dickens’s
debt to Smollett and Fielding, his boyhood heroes. The London and
Westminster Review’s reflection in 1837 that ‘The renown of Fielding
and of Smollett is that to which [Dickens] should aspire, and labour to
emulate, and, if possible, to surpass’ has been echoed by a succession of
critics in the last 150 years, with Lyn Pykett early in the twenty-first century
once more identifying Smollett and Fielding as perhaps Dickens’s most
important antecedents. Nods have even been made towards Juvenal and
the Augustans in creating a satirical genealogy for Dickens’s writings, with
Sylvia Manning claiming that ‘there is good evidence for Dickens’s knowl-
edge of Juvenal’. Dickens’s middle-class and, to a lesser extent, his classical
satirical antecedents have been well documented, and doubtless he would
have approved of this. Far too little, by contrast, has been made of the
relationship between Dickens and the popular radical culture of the early
nineteenth century. One of the aims of this book is to begin to reveal the
extent of this hitherto more or less occluded relationship.

That Dickens was a radical political writer on the side of the poor and
the dispossessed was blazingly clear to his contemporaries and to many
critics in the first half of the twentieth century. Most subsequent critics,
though, have followed Humphry House’s 1941 evaluation of Dickens as an
essentially middle-class writer committed to middle-class values. Even
John Lucas, one of the few recent critics to have considered the contem-
porary political status of Dickens’s fiction and journalism, places him
firmly within a middle-class tradition of radical writers and publishers,
positioning W. J. Fox, William Howitt and Percy Bysshe Shelley as
Dickens’s radical antecedents. Whilst I would acknowledge the import-
ance of Radicals such as W. J. Fox to the political cast of Dickens’s novels
and journalism, I want simultaneously to propose an altogether less
respectable, more truly disruptive, more popular radical genealogy.

Dickens, like Hone and Cruikshank before him, was able to negotiate
and frequently to transcend the boundaries between popular and radical
culture in a way that virtually no other mid-nineteenth century writer was
able to do; it is to his less acclaimed popular radical forbears that he owes
this achievement. As an inheritor of the popular radical cultural networks
of the early nineteenth century Dickens acted as a cultural bridge between,
on the one hand, an older, eighteenth-century political conception of
‘the People’ and, on the other hand, a distinctly mid-nineteenth-century,
modern conception of a mass-market ‘populace’ that had been created by
the rise of the commercial newspaper press during Dickens’s formative
years as a journalist and a novelist. Moving between these twin concep-
tions of ‘the People’ (a political entity) and the (mass-market) ‘populace’
(a commercial entity), the extent of Dickens’s attempt to politicise the
latter was unrivalled in the second half of the nineteenth century. In the
first part of the nineteenth century the boundaries between popular and
radical culture had been highly permeable, with ‘popular’ as an epithet
embracing both the political entity of ‘the People’ and the idea of a popular
marketplace. But the ‘popular’ and the ‘radical’ (or, the ‘popular’ and
‘the People’) became increasingly distinct categories as the second half
of the century approached, as a direct result of the rise of the mass-market
commercial newspaper press in the 1840s. I will turn my attention to the
bifurcation of the ‘popular’ and the ‘radical’ in the 1840s and 1850s, and
to the negotiation of this process by Dickens, Douglas Jerrold and the
Chartist writers G. W. M. Reynolds and Ernest Jones, in the central
chapters of this book.

Dickens’s ability to negotiate and even to disregard the gradually
encroaching boundaries that were being erected between the popular and
the radical in the Victorian period was quite remarkable. He was able to
build on and promote popular radical cultural traditions at the same time
as commercially exploiting them and becoming a rich man: by the end of
1837 part sales of *The Pickwick Papers* had reached 40,000 and *Oliver Twist,*
too, was a huge commercial success.¹⁰

Dickens was also able, like William Hone before him, to transcend the
boundaries between high and low culture. In the Regency years the
demarcation between high and low culture had not yet been set in
stone, with satire and parody in particular equally the tools of both.
Dickens’s cultural positioning in Victorian England was rather more
difficult, with the literary classes of the period generally rather suspicious
of what some regarded as his vulgar embrace of the popular: whilst
Anthony Trollope rather sniffily characterised him as ‘Mr Popular
Sentiment’ in *The Warden,* an anonymous reviewer for the *Saturday
Review* derided Dickens’s determined engagement with contemporary
social and political concerns, remarking that ‘Mr Dickens’s writings are
the apotheosis of what has been called newspaper English.’¹¹ Others,
though, valorised his cross-class appeal, lauding him as a truly popular
writer. Walter Bagehot, who deplored the political tenor of Dickens’s
novels, none the less admired the fact that ‘There is no other contempo-
rary English writer, whose works are read so generally through the whole
house, who can give pleasure to the servants as well as to the mistress, to the children as well as to the master.' The young Queen Victoria read and enjoyed *Oliver Twist* and the poorest of the poor read *Dombey and Son*. Richard Altick has written of ‘the old charwoman who never missed a subscription tea . . . at a snuff shop over which she lodged when the landlord read the newest numbers of *Dombey and Son* to his assembled guests’.

To be a popular writer is not merely to achieve high levels of circulation, although this is part of its meaning. As Arnold Kettle has put it, truly popular writing involves ‘an attitude to art in which the audience is seen neither purely as consumer (the commercial relationship) nor as a superior group of like-minded spirits (the highbrow relationship) but in some sense as collaborator’. To put it another way, the popular author needs to establish a sense of ‘us’ between himself and his readership, and this is something that both Dickens and William Hone before him achieved on a large scale. Dickens’s ‘us’ is a conception of ‘the People’ that embraces the lower and middle classes of society, and in this sense it is very much of the eighteenth century. I follow Arnold Kettle in closely allying ‘popular’ literature to a political concept of ‘the People’: ‘Dickens, then, sees the People not as a vague or all-inclusive term – an indiscriminate ‘everybody’ – but as a specific force in contradistinction to those who rule . . . A popular tradition in literature implies, then, a literature which looks at life from the point of view of the People.’

The persistence of ‘the People’ as a social and political category in nineteenth-century culture has been importantly debated by social historians and is key to understanding Dickens’s work. Patrick Joyce has argued that the social vision promoted by popular radicalism in the nineteenth century was not primarily based on class, its vocabulary circling rather around key terms such as ‘democracy’ and ‘freedom’ rather than class conflict. Whilst he never used those terms, this is the tradition of popular radicalism to which Dickens’s work belongs. Where he does employ the language of class conflict, it is most often directed against the aristocracy, once again allying him with an eighteenth-century conception of ‘the People’. Where this study has used ‘class’ tags to identify social groups – the working class, the middle class and so on – I am again following historians such as Patrick Joyce and Gareth Stedman Jones in regarding class as a category of discursive and social formation through which identity may be constituted rather than as an economic category determined by one’s relationship to the means of production.
Ian Haywood’s important and generally sure-footed study of popular literature has argued that Dickens ‘was not truly popular in the sense that he was available directly to working-class readers’.

Contrary to Haywood’s view, reviews in the Chartist press suggest that Dickens did indeed have a literate non-elite readership. My quarrel with Haywood’s brief account of Dickens, though, is that whether Dickens’s fiction reached a lower-class readership directly is not, I would suggest, the litmus test of his popularity. Popular plagiarisms and theatrical adaptations of Dickens’s work; communal family, landlord-lodger, coffee-house, and master-servant readings of his fiction; and, not least, Dickens’s own public readings, meant that his popular ‘reach’ was quite staggering.

Dickens’s project as a writer needs to be understood as the culminating point of a network of popular and radical cultural traditions that stretched from the late eighteenth century through to the last throes of Chartism in 1858. His fiction draws on a tradition of radical satire that began with Thomas Spence and John Wilkes in the late eighteenth century and which flourished in the 1810s in the popular radical pamphlets produced and circulated by William Hone and George Cruikshank. The Prince Regent’s perceived marital outrages against Queen Caroline once he was crowned King, and the massacre of peacefully demonstrating men, women and children in Manchester’s St Peter’s Field were the two main political flashpoints of the Regency years, giving rise to what E. P. Thompson has described as the ‘heroic age of popular radicalism’.

The radical satirical inheritance resonates not only in the work of Charles Dickens in the early and mid-Victorian period, but also in the fiction and journalism of Douglas Jerrold, his close friend and theatrical cohort, some of whose satirical writings will also feature in this study.

The significance of the term ‘radical’ in the nineteenth century was by no means stable. Byron, writing in 1820, commented that the term was entirely new to him. Writing to John Hobhouse from Ravenna he commented that ‘Upon reform you have long known my opinion – but radical is a new word since my time – it was not in the political vocabulary in 1816 – when I left England – and I don’t know what it means – is it uprooting?’ Byron’s etymological understanding of the term is spot on, and in an abstract way tells us all we need to know about the political force of nineteenth-century radicalism. More localised, and nicely in tune with the atmosphere surrounding the political and cultural uprising against Lord Liverpool’s repressive administration in Regency England, is the satirical journalist Thomas Wooler’s sharp-witted account of radicalism.
in his trial parody, **TRIAL EXTRAORDINARY: MR CANNING VERSUS THE RADICAL REFORMERS:**

**JUDGE.** What complaint have you to make, Mr Canning, against the men, whom I see there, behind you, looking so thin and pale, clothed in rags, and having pad-locks on their mouths and thumb-screws on their hands?

**MR CANNING.** Oh! Don’t you know them? I thought all the world knew them! They are the Radicals.

**JUDGE.** The Radicals, Sir! What does that name mean?

**MR CANNING.** Mean! (What a fool the man must be – aside) Mean! Why, it means everything that is bad.

Dickens’s ‘Young Barnacle’, in *Little Dorrit*, thinks the mild-mannered, middle-aged Arthur Clennam a ‘most ferocious Radical’ for daring to make some enquiries of his government department. Clearly in the 1850s Dickens was alert to the visceral response of some elements within the upper classes to anyone who seemed to challenge them, and the ‘Radical’ tag is humorously used to indicate this in his mature political novel. In the political culture of mid-Victorian England the title of ‘Radical’ tended to be attached to those politicians who wanted root-and-branch reform of Parliament, and in this particular sense Dickens was of their number. As Peter Ackroyd has put it: ‘There was another central stance from which he never moved, his hatred of Parliament, and his disgust at a ‘rotten’ system of representative government . . . the self-interest and even bribery which Dickens always associated with the House of Commons. In that sense he was and remained a “Radical”.’

My own use of the phrase ‘popular radicalism’ refers quite specifically to the politics and culture of popular writers of the Regency period such as William Hone, Thomas Wooler and William Cobbett. This book traces the influence of these writers in the work of Dickens and other writers of the Victorian period whose work bears the hallmarks of the popular radical inheritance. The dominant rhetorical strategy of Regency popular radicalism was satirical, and this study will trace that radical satirical inheritance through Dickens’s rewriting of radical trial parodies, through his harnessing of radical satire against the Poor Laws in *Oliver Twist*, through Douglas Jerrold’s satirical journalism in *Punch* and *Douglas Jerrold’s Shilling Magazine*, through Dickens’s own satirical contributions to the *Examiner* and to *Household Words*, and will conclude with the extended satires on government and its institutions in *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*.

Alongside satire, the radical pamphleteers, essayists and writers of ballads in the Regency period also deployed a melodramatic mode of writing in their attacks on King and government, as the first chapter of this study
will demonstrate. Melodrama had long been established as an aesthetic of protest when Dickens, Douglas Jerrold, G. W. M. Reynolds and Ernest Jones (amongst others) began to negotiate its conventions in the Victorian period. Forged as a dramatic form during the French Revolution, the first melodrama (although it didn’t name itself as such) is generally agreed to have been Boutet de Monvel’s *Les Victimes cloitrées*, written and performed in 1791. Characteristic of French Revolutionary melodrama is Sylvain Maréchal’s *Le Jugement dernier des rois*, first performed, to great acclaim, in Paris in October 1793, two days after the execution of Marie Antoinette. The play’s melodramatic denouement involves the swallowing up of a whole crowd of European monarchs by a volcano, which ‘consumes their very bodies’.

Melodrama, with its roots in the theatrical semiotics of gesture, is a bodily aesthetic, prioritising non-verbal languages over dialogue. It is also, in Peter Brooks’s words an ‘intense emotional and ethical’ genre, ‘based on the Manichaeistic struggle of good and evil’. The purpose of melodrama is to ‘recognize and confront evil, to combat and expel it, to purge the social order’. As domestic melodrama developed across the first half of the nineteenth century as a popular form, it acquired a number of readily identifiable additional characteristics: the suffering of mothers and their children, trial scenes and last minute reprieves, sudden reversals of fortune, secret Wills, inheritances, and so on. In this study I will track the development of the melodramatic mode in popular radical fiction and culture across the period 1819–57. Beginning, again, with the popular radical responses to ‘Peterloo’ and the ‘Queen Caroline Affair’ in 1819 and 1820, thereafter the book will consider Dickens’s negotiation of melodrama in *Oliver Twist*, the Christmas Books, and *Barnaby Rudge*; it will examine the Chartist encounter with melodrama in Ernest Jones’s works of fiction; and will close with Dickens’s simultaneous embrace and interrogation of melodrama in his great social novels from the 1850s.

Dickens’s absorption into his writings of the melodramatic and satirical aesthetics of popular radicalism was powerfully combined with a consciousness that he could try to bring about positive social and political change, and to this extent he was a thoroughly instrumental writer. He stated his purpose as a novelist clearly in 1854:

To interest and affect the general mind in behalf of anything that is clearly wrong – to stimulate and rouse the public soul to a compassionate or indignant feeling that it *must not be* – without obtruding any pet theory of cause or cure, and so throwing off allies as they spring up – I believe to be one of Fiction’s highest uses. And this is the use to which I try to turn it.
Like William Hone, Dickens never allied himself to any particular party but preferred to attack individual social and political abuses. In this he was a political novelist in the broadest sense and should be distinguished from writers of more ideologically programmatic works of fiction such as Harriet Martineau and Benjamin Disraeli. 

Dickens none the less desired to influence government policy as well as public opinion through his writing of fiction and journalism, and in this he resembles another of his popular radical forebears, William Cobbett. Cobbett, whose anti-Malthusianism and anti-clerical satire would echo down the years in Dickens’s works, had a similarly instrumental view of his work as a writer. He differed from Dickens, though, in his belief that he could achieve more as a parliamentarian than as a scribe. In his address ‘To the Reformers of Leeds, Preston, and Botley’, in which he berates over-expenditure on the Church’s dependants, he comments that ‘With my pen, I shall do what I can; but I cannot do with that pen a ten thousandth part of what I could do if I were in the House of Commons.’ Cobbett’s desire to become an MP would be fulfilled in 1832, the year of the great Reform Act, when he would be returned as a Radical MP for Oldham. Dickens, although equally desiring to make a social and political impact, took a different course. Asked on three occasions to stand for Parliament between 1841 and 1851, he repeatedly declined, having a greater faith in the power of his pen to effect change than in any parliamentary role he may have taken on. This is hardly surprising from a man who would later tell his friend and biographer John Forster that it was his hope ‘to have made every man in England feel something of the contempt for the House of Commons that I have’. Dickens didn’t need to be a Member of Parliament to influence the country: as the middle of the nineteenth century approached the population increasingly got its political opinions from journals and from novels, and it is in this way that he became an influential political figure.

Despite the different trajectory of their careers, Cobbett was as conscious as Dickens of the political role that his writing could play, and of the need to ensure a healthy circulation amongst as wide a readership as possible. As he projected the launch of *Cobbett’s Evening Post* in January 1820, a newly ‘stamped’ publication, Cobbett sought to overcome the 4d per copy stamp duty by urging his readers to form ‘themselves into little reading partnerships of twenty or thirty, and by getting one of their number to write to a news-man in London, sending him the money before-hand for a quarter of a year’ so as to receive the paper ‘regularly by post’. Cobbett’s vision of communal literary consumption looks forward to the shared
reading of the shilling parts of Dickens’s novels in the 1830s and beyond. In both cases the limits of literacy could be overcome with the more literate readers reading aloud to those unable to read. The links between Dickens and the popular radical culture of the early nineteenth century are, then, material as well as aesthetic, as I shall demonstrate in the first chapter of this book.
CHAPTER 1

Popular radical culture in Regency England:
Peterloo and the Queen Caroline Affair

PETERLOO, 1819

On 16 August 1819, a peaceful assembly of 60,000 men, women and children demonstrated in St Peter’s Field, Manchester. The demonstration was the culminating moment of a series of popular protests in the years following the Battle of Waterloo. Excessively high levels of taxation, near-starvation amongst the poor, ‘Borough-Mongering’ in particular and the unrepresentativeness of the British Parliament in general all contributed to levels of popular unrest never to be exceeded in the nineteenth century. The meeting in St Peter’s Field, as at Spa Fields in London three years earlier, demanded lower taxes, universal male suffrage, a secret ballot and annual parliaments. Both meetings were led by the hugely popular radical leader Henry ‘Orator’ Hunt. As he took to the hustings to address them, the protestors in St Peter’s Field were attacked by the Manchester Yeomenry, backed up by the Fifteenth Regiment of the British Hussars, many of whom were veterans of the Battle of Waterloo. An unconfirmed number of protestors were killed, and between 300 and 400 were injured. An already ebullient popular radical press became positively mutinous.

The ‘Massacre at Peterloo’ became an over-determined cultural moment in what Asa Briggs has described as ‘one of the most troubled years of the nineteenth century’. 1819 was also, though, the high water mark of the age of popular radicalism, the events at Peterloo provoking a veritable outpouring of radical satirical pamphlets, broadsides, ballads, songs and cartoons from across the cultural spectrum. Radicalism was ‘popular’ at this period in that it was a cross-class movement based on an eighteenth-century conception of ‘the People’ against ‘Old Corruption’. This harnessing of radicalism to a broadly defined popular culture greatly strengthened and emboldened radical writers in Regency England; the coalescence of popular and radical culture in the period was rarely repeated later in the century, but notably was achieved in a considerable body of writing by Charles Dickens.