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# 1828–1833 The parliamentary reporter

## I

Literary critics have usually had little to say about the 1830s. The era between the Prince Regent and the Prince Consort is often thought of as an interregnum. The great men of the Romantic era, Byron, Napoleon, and Beau Brummell, had all died in exile, and William IV's reign (1830–37) seems but a brief prelude to the settling in of the domesticity of Victoria and Albert and *In Memoriam*. Still, the bohemian literary life of that decade took on something of a legendary nature for the young inhabitants of New Grub Street who came afterwards. A generation of writers of whom Dickens is only the most famous served their apprenticeship then. A number of them, including Dickens, left highly personal accounts of these formative years: *Pendennis*, *Godfrey Malvern*, *Ranthorpe*, and *David Copperfield*.

Thackeray's Arthur Pendennis represents the typical young literary idler who imagines that a bit of writing will support him until called to a proper profession such as the bar. He falls for the cheerful projections of an Irish newspaper man – clever Irishmen and scandalous sporting papers were a quintessential feature of Regency London – who tells him that a successful novelist can command £300 a volume. Thus, with the help of a few mediocre verses and an Irishman, Pendennis makes his début as a hack and gets some books to review. His future seems assured. He will take up his legal studies ("I shall take chambers ... and enter myself at an Inn of Court") and in the meantime take his place in the literary world ("I have little doubt my pen will support me, as it is doing with several Oxbridge men now in town").[1] Pendennis is perhaps complacent because, along with his verses and his reviews, he has also a tragedy, a comedy, and a novel in his trunk: there is therefore every reason to believe that this twenty-one year old will dazzle the London literary world. None the less, even his closest friend remains oddly sceptical of this hero's talent: "There are

thousands of clever fellows in the world who could, if they would, turn verses, write articles, read books, and deliver a judgment upon them'' (I, 327).

This satire on the vanities of authorship is one of the most constant features of a novel where the rhetoric about literature is steadily unromantic. The daily drudgery of the author's life is one ingredient of Thackeray's realism, and, by the second volume, it becomes apparent that a naive climb to fame could never be mistaken for this novel's definition of heroism. Pendennis's fine speeches about critical honesty and Grub Street's reform are put down to youthful conceit merely. When his own precious volume of verses is published, it is handed over by his editor to a critic named Bludyer: this dispassionate judge, ''having cut up the volume to his heart's content, went and sold it at a bookstall, and purchased a pint of brandy with the proceeds of the volume'' (I, 352). Pendennis's biographer does not seem to find this a harsh or inappropriate fate.

Still, it is acknowledged that Pendennis's hackwork for the *Pall Mall Gazette* is proficient of its kind, and for this he earns £4 4s a week; with freelance magazine work, his annual salary comes to £400 a year, a rather good sum for an unmarried man. Pendennis's eighteen-twentyish fashionable novel, *Walter Lorraine*, written while he is a young man at Oxford, also does well. But Thackeray's realistic novel of the 1840s preaches scepticism in the face of such success:

> I shall not mention what was the sum of money which Mr. Arthur Pendennis finally received for the first edition of his novel of ''Walter Lorraine,'' lest other young literary aspirants should expect to be as lucky as he was, and unprofessional persons forsake their own callings, whatever they may be, for the sake of supplying the world with novels, whereof there is already a sufficiency. Let no young people be misled and rush fatally into romance-writing ... (*Pendennis* II, 29)

What young writers might be apt to overlook is that *Walter Lorraine*'s publication owes more to the quality of its author's gloves than his talents. In selling Pendennis's novel to an interested publisher, his friend Warrington emphasizes that Pendennis is himself a member of the best London society. The publisher is a social climber who has no opinions on the novel itself and leaves the reading of it to paid hacks and to his wife; in calling on Pendennis, he happens to see various cards of the *haut monde* on the young man's table, and this fortunate accident clinches Pendennis's future. Pendennis's reputation by virtue of his manners, dress, and invitations is that of a man who can write at his leisure – ''than which there cannot be a greater

recommendation to a young literary aspirant'' (I, 355). It is to the acceptance of his person that Pendennis owes the acceptance of his novel. Warrington may be just as trenchant in his criticism, and Captain Shandon may be a good deal more learned, but it is Pendennis who acquires the reputation both for gentlemanly frankness and for scholarship.

After a while, Warrington's social status is exploded by the revelation of a *déclassé* marriage, and Captain Shandon, like too many real literary men of the time, is relegated to prison.[2] Pendennis's friendship with him after this seems almost an act of condescension. For Pendennis comes (and it is this which marks him as the hero) into property. His uncle Major Pendennis says, ''You are like the fellow in Sterne, sir – the Marquis who came to demand his sword again ... never forget you are a gentleman'' (II, 230). Little more about Pendennis's daily routine as a writer is heard of after this. A landowner now, he looks forward to becoming an M.P. and a husband. Marriage earlier in the story would have meant not only financial hardship but also professional disgrace – *vide* Warrington, who must virtually put his wife away in order to carry on in literary society, and Shandon, whose wife is hardly to be seen outside the prison she must share with him. However, property safe in hand, Pendennis's moral career is capped by prudent marriage to a respectable woman who will not have her value impugned by taking up residence in Grub Street. The moral seems to be that writing for newspapers and leading the life of a literary hack constitute a form of wild oats, something forgivable only in bachelors.

This is the moral, too, of *Godfrey Malvern; or The Life of an Author* (1842) – a working-class *Pendennis* – by Thomas Miller (1807–74), a poet and author of some forty-five works. Miller was a basket-maker who came to London to set up a business, and having enclosed some of his verses in baskets sent to the Countess of Blessington, was noticed by the most fashionable part of literary society.[3] The hero of Miller's novel, Godfrey Malvern, is a poor country schoolteacher who writes some verses, and, having achieved a local fame, goes to London. He is fortunate enough to be given reviewing hackwork and to have verses accepted by an annual, one of the coffee-table books of pictures and verse that were in their heyday during the twenties and thirties. His verses are noticed by Lady Smileall (perhaps a compliment to the Countess), who invites him to one of her soirées, where his figure and face are striking enough for him to make a hit. With a reputation for being ''intellectual'' (he is tall), he thus falls into what Miller calls the

"'LITERARY RAT-TRAPS.'"[4] This is a facile kind of literary celebrity Victorian novelists are always warning their readers against, as if it were a particularly regular temptation of the era. Miller is as moralistic as Thackeray in showing how a young author may be falsely seduced by the hectic social blandishments of London into becoming one of its passing entertainments:

> There is a kind of neutral ground which talented authors will ever occupy; and although they may never become what the world calls "gentlemen," in the worldly sense of the word, still they will always be received and treated with respect, by those who move in the highest circles of fashionable society. (*Godfrey Malvern* I, 59)

Malvern's rural schoolmastering background is completely forgotten, and as a sort of natural reward for versemaking and poetic good looks, he becomes the lover of a dark-eyed young Brompton woman.

Unlike Pendennis, however, Malvern is already married. In the country scenes during the first third of the novel, he has wooed and won the squire's daughter. In London, Malvern attends his literary assemblies as a bachelor, as was the custom. Malvern's moral position is akin to that of Thackeray's Warrington, but he does not maintain the same integrity. Eventually, for all her tempestuous intellect, the dark-eyed young lady falls in love with the tall Malvern and becomes pregnant. All is made right at the end, however: the mistress conveniently dies in childbirth and Malvern goes back to his country wife. And like Pendennis, he turns out to be really a gentleman after all, for he is discovered to be the rightful heir to the squire's estate. The false mistress Literature is powerless to keep the hero from his rightful consort – Politics.

In his literary life, Malvern, like Pendennis, had taken to heart the advice offered by his first editor, that although "The political principles of a literary man have often a great influence in his works ... an author ought not to belong to any party" (I, 108). But it is perhaps a sign of the fascination of political topics for this period that, even if both Malvern and Pendennis easily enough put politics to one side in their literary lives, in their prosperity they choose to stand as members of Parliament. The question of party is fudged in both cases: it is the issues embraced – the Poor Law and repeal of the Corn Law – which are given pride of place. Thus, it is boasted of Malvern, "he is not the man to say, 'Aye, or No,' at the bidding of any party-leader in the House" (II, 397). Pendennis also refuses to be a party man and tells Warrington, "There are no politics now; every man's politics, at least, are pretty much the same" (II, 309).

Later, he will describe himself as a Liberal Conservative, which is to say:

> "I shall go pretty much with Government, and in advance of them upon some social questions which I have been getting up during the vacation; – don't grin, you old Cynic [this aside to Warrington], I *have* been getting up the Blue Books, and intend to come out rather strong on the Sanitary and Colonisation questions." (*Pendennis* II, 309)

The connection between literature and politics is crucial to any study of the 1830s. John O. Hayden in his introduction to *British Literary Magazines: The Romantic Age 1789–1836* is inclined to discount the importance of party politics in reviewing at this time, and this is suggested by the personal stances of Dickens and Thackeray, both of whom showed a distaste for party-mongering though not for politics. Hayden cites a discussion by De Quincey in 1835, for example, on the question of Coleridge's political affiliations. In his essay "Samuel Taylor Coleridge" published in *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, De Quincey argues that the terms *Whig* and *Tory* are being replaced by "Conservative" and "Reforming," and that the strength of institutionalized party interests is much overestimated.[5] *Whig* and *Tory* are merely two varieties of aristocratic feeling; Reformism is the popular sentiment of the day, allied to the growth of the fourth estate.

In defence of Coleridge's infamous Toryism, De Quincey further argues that, for the generation before Reform, Toryism had meant little more than support of the war against Napoleon, and Whiggism, withdrawal from Europe. It so happened that the Tories were in power when war was declared and hence became the party of nationalism and the defence of Europe against Napoleonic imperialism: "all distinctions of party were annihilated – Whig and Tory were merged and swallowed up in the transcendent duties of patriots" (*Tait's* NS 2 no. 13 Jan. 1835: 8). The parliamentary Whigs may have tried to maintain some sense of themselves as the Opposition, but opposition to the defence of liberty could only make for a sterile existence in the 1790s, and in so far as they might have insisted upon party distinctions, the Whigs extinguished themselves. Coleridge would not be the only example of a Tory tracing his pedigree back to Napoleon.

The Whigs were no stronger in 1830, for by then national sentiment was Reformist, and this merely shifted the emphasis slightly on to them as the other half of the coalition. Peel was astute enough to realize that though in opposition the Tories might still direct Government policy; when the reaction against the Whigs came in 1835, he had

succeeded in distinguishing the "Conservatives" from the old patriot Tories. His triumph in 1841 was impatiently awaited from the mid-thirties.[6]

The Peelite statements of both Malvern and Pendennis are a faithful reflection of the prevailing sentiment after Reform had had its day: "The fiercest reformers grow calm, and are fain to put up with things as they are" (*Pendennis* II, 233). This brand of 1840s popular liberalism does not pass without satiric jibes from Warrington:

> "We give lectures at the Clavering Institute, and shake hands with the intelligent mechanics. We think the franchise ought to be very considerably enlarged; at the same time we are free to accept office some day, when the House has listened to a few crack speeches from us, and the Administration perceives our merit." (*Pendennis* II, 310)

Not all novels of literary life in the 1830s end with the translation of an author into landowner and parliamentarian. George Henry Lewes's *Ranthorpe*, written in the year of *Godfrey Malvern*'s publication and published five years later (1847), depicts the author's life as an ambition for its own sake. The hero, Percy Ranthorpe, is an attorney's clerk at 10s a week who writes poetry and is impatient "to set himself fairly afloat upon the wide sea of literature."[7] The trouble is, as a publisher tells him, that poetry is no longer the rage that it was in the 1820s: "'I couldn't sell "Childe Harold" if it were now first published'" (18). However, Ranthorpe is finally launched when a newspaper editor offers him a guinea a week to write regular theatrical reviews and occasional poetry criticism. The young critic's pride in his profession is supreme: "Every Sunday morning the paper lay upon his breakfast-table, and made him feel that he was 'somebody,' as he cut the leaves and eagerly read over his own contributions" (38). Alas, this pleasure palls after his Sunday appearances have become a matter of routine. He publishes a volume of poetry at his own expense, quits his job and starts work on a tragedy. He becomes a Literary Lion.

Lewes is agreed with Miller and Thackeray that lionism is not necessarily a sign of genius: "handsome young men, of gentlemanly bearing, and living in a certain style, are always gladly invited to parties" (60). However, the fawning approbation of Ranthorpe's person at fashionable parties gains him neither lasting affection nor glowing reviews. His second volume of poetry is panned, and his tragedy is treated as a farce. At this point, Ranthorpe escapes for two years to Germany, where he gives English lessons and devotes himself to private study.[8] The work of this interval enables him to produce

a dramatic work of solid merit. Lewes is elliptical about exactly how Ranthorpe manages to get his drama staged – "the usual harassing preliminaries, which need not again be described" (285) – but his success this time is emphatic, and "Ranthorpe from that day took his place amongst the literary men of England" (285). This time he avoids the pitfalls of literary lionism and adheres to a quiet routine where the reward of an author's life is the creative life itself. Lewes's novel, which is a good deal shorter than *Malvern* or *Pendennis*, ends with domestic peace and professional activity: "The storms are below him. The poor attorney's clerk has become an honoured author" (350). Lewes does not seem to find it remarkable that this serenely famous man is only twenty-five years old.

Unlike Miller or Thackeray, Lewes is at pains to stress that authorship is an honourable profession. The literary activities of Godfrey Malvern and Arthur Pendennis fall out of view once their position in society is established by other means, and, in retrospect, their literary life is known only as a period of temptations and failures. The solitary pleasures, whatever they might be, remain undepicted. What becomes of lifelong bohemians such as Captain Shandon is not significant. In fact, the scholar and hack generally taken to be the original of Shandon, William Maginn, died bankrupt and consumptive in 1842 – the same year *Ranthorpe* was completed and *Malvern* published.

There is reason to believe that Lewes had the career of Dickens in mind when he wrote *Ranthorpe*. The editors of Dickens's letters remark that the novel "betrays Lewes's mingled admiration and half-jealousy of CD's 'genius' and success."[9] And reading Lewes's maxim that, even if one is "immortal amongst gerunds" at Cambridge, a knowledge of books is insufficient to compete with a knowledge of life, one cannot help but think of the young Boz, famous at twenty-four. Dickens did not come down from Oxbridge, a book of poems tucked carelessly under his arm, to dabble in law and literature. The practice of law was not for him something to be put off as long as possible with Pendennian idylls in Bohemia. He never had the leisure to write a *Walter Lorraine* – or any three-volume novel. Nor was newspaper work a casual pocket-money affair for Dickens, who took great pains to get taken on full-time at the *Morning Chronicle*. Not a scholar or a gentleman, nor ever likely to be, his great advantage over an Oxbridge wit was to be already in London and at work. In the early years he did show some jealousy of the institutionalized rewards of the life of the bar and the three-volume novel, but his own urgent need of a living resulted in his making

professional authorship uniquely remunerative. Dickens read *Ranthorpe*, and he expressed great pleasure at its moral to Lewes: "When Literary men shall begin to feel the honor and worth of their pursuit, as you would teach them to, Literature will be a happier calling" (*Letters* V, 191). Much as Dickens responded to *Pendennis* (and Thackeray noted the writing in *David Copperfield* as one sign that he was responsive), he and Thackeray were always to be at variance on the respectability of the literary profession.[10]

Dickens's novel of literary apprenticeship contains no fond accounts of the Bohemia frequented by Arthur Pendennis. David Copperfield approaches reporting with a blueprint for fame: "I had heard that many men distinguished in various pursuits had begun life by reporting the debates in Parliament."[11] In the MS, for "various pursuits," Dickens originally wrote "at the bar and in other pursuits," and, as we shall see, the combination of parliamentary reporting and legal studies was commonly taken as a route to success. When David looks back at this period later, he ascribes his "success" to "thoroughgoing, ardent, and sincere earnestness" (518). Where *Pendennis* dilates on the pleasures of good living, *David Copperfield* praises undivided attention to work: "Never to put one hand to anything, on which I could throw my whole self; and never to affect depreciation of my work, whatever it was; I find, now, to have been my golden rules" (518). The ascent into authorship is equally single-minded. David one day sends something to a magazine, and quite simply by the next he has a regular income. What takes Lewes or Thackeray a whole volume to relate occupies Dickens for no more than a paragraph. The praise of critics seems to have been anticipated, and David is self-collected enough not to have his head turned. Whatever temptations in the way of literary lionism he has to endure take no more than a paragraph to recount (588). The last extended treatment of the topic of his vocation is just another aside: "Having some foundation for believing, by this time, that nature and accident had made me an author, I pursued my vocation with confidence" (589).

The evidence provided by the letters of Dickens himself undercuts the idea that any author's relationship to his vocation is a straightforward one. The word "accident" in David's description should not be overlooked. We may be reminded of it when reading a contemporary discussion of professional authorship. In the *Morning Advertiser* of 19 April 1838, there is a letter to the editor which in the context of the copyright debate then going on talks about the inducements – or lack of them – to take up authorship as a living. The writer of the letter comments on how nearly it was, for instance,

that Scott did not publish *Waverley*, because of the low status accorded to authors. Of the recent rise to fame of Charles Dickens, the letter comments, "He has got beyond his *accidents*[12] – that is all."

The letter goes on to stress how unlikely it was that *Sketches by Boz* or *Pickwick Papers* should ever have been published:

> Some will believe that when an author displays himself to be a genius, and produces certain works – that these were inevitable – that he being a genius *must* have of necessity produced these very works. To an author this will at once appear an absurdity ... (*Morning Advertiser* 19 Apr. 1838)

Critics since 1838 have continued to commit this kind of absurdity; they continue to discuss the development of Dickens into Boz, man of letters, retrospectively – that is to say, as inevitable. What is offered here instead is an account of the uncertainties of the young reporter in the parliamentary press gallery of 1833 – when Dickens hardly knew whether or not he should turn out to be the hero of his own life.

## II

In order to understand Dickens's movement into the realms of professional authorship, it is useful to look more narrowly at what the life of a parliamentary reporter would have been like during the 1830s. In the first years of the decade, Dickens's alternating ambitions were to get taken into the law or to become a full-time reporter on one of the prominent dailies. His training in shorthand was the first step to be taken in either case. Like David Copperfield, he had noticed that many distinguished careers had begun in the parliamentary press gallery. It is important to see how the circumstances of such a life then intersected with the emerging ambition to become a writer.

Dickens's career as a parliamentary reporter coincides with the years of most intense political excitement for the early nineteenth century. He became a freelance shorthand reporter in 1828, and, between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one (1828–33), witnessed the repeal of the Test Act, the end of George IV's reign, the passage of the first Reform Bill, and two general elections in two years. In 1833, when his first sketch appeared, he had been a shorthand reporter on the *Mirror of Parliament* for at least two years and on the *True Sun* for an overlapping period of five months (March–July 1832). He came into parliamentary reporting just as momentous changes for the better were taking place. Over the course of the late eighteenth

and early nineteenth centuries, parliamentary reporters had to fight Parliament's objections, first, to "strangers" being admitted ("I espy strangers" signalled the closing of the gallery), to notes being taken, and, finally, to seats being specially provided for those taking notes. But by 1828, Macaulay was able to say that "The gallery in which the reporters sit, has become a fourth estate of the realm" ("Hallam's Constitutional History," *Edinburgh Review* 48 no. 95 Sept. 1828: 165), and he traced support for the reporting of parliamentary proceedings to growing public criticism of the British constitution. Parliament had used to be the public censor of the Crown and hence preferred to preserve some secrecy about its proceedings; by the late eighteenth century, however, the People had found in the press their censor of the Government. The pressure of interest in Reform was such that the Lords allotted a separate row for reporters in its strangers' gallery in 1831 and, when the new Houses were erected in 1835, reporters got their own permanent galleries and no longer had to jostle with the casual public for seats.[13]

The *Morning Chronicle* had long been famous for the quality of its parliamentary reporting, and John Black (1783–1855), its editor for the years 1817–43, was universally respected. Understandably, Dickens's ambition at this time was to become a full-time reporter on the *Morning Chronicle*. Coincidentally, though, he was to attain this just when the writing career he had improvised for himself in the recesses between parliamentary sittings began to take on its own momentum. For, despite all the political excitement of the early 1830s, Dickens was generally left without work in the ebb-time when Parliament was not sitting. As he says in a letter of 6 June [1833] to the private secretary to Lord Stanley, who had praised Dickens's accuracy, "I am always entirely unemployed during the recess" (*Letters* I, 30). His request to Earle on this occasion for a recommendation to other shorthand work was unsuccessful, as were efforts at this time to be taken on at the *Morning Chronicle*. During the recess and election of 1832, he found work as a poll clerk. During the parliamentary recess of 1833, he seems to have produced his first sketch, "A Dinner at Poplar Walk," which appeared in December 1833. He finally became a reporter for the *Morning Chronicle* in August 1834, when the paper had been sold to John Easthope and two others.

During his tenure on this paper, in addition to his parliamentary reporting, Dickens covered a banquet given in Edinburgh for Earl Grey (September 1834), Lord Russell's campaign for a seat at South Devon (May 1835), a "Liberal" members' dinner at Bristol