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978-1-107-02351-2 - Charles Dickens and "Boz": The Birth of the Industrial-Age Author

Robert L. Patten

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CHARLES DICKENS AND "BOZ"

Dickens's rise to fame and his worldwide popularity were by no means inevitable. He started out with no clear career in mind, drifting in and out of the theater, journalism, and editing before finding unexpected success as a creative writer. Taking account of everything known about Dickens's apprentice years, Robert L. Patten narrates the fierce struggle Dickens then had to create an alter ego, Boz, and later to contain and extinguish him. His revision of Dickens's biography in the context of early Victorian social and political history and print culture opens up a more unstable, yet more fascinating, portrait of Dickens. The book tells the story of how Dickens created an authorial persona that highlighted certain attributes and concealed others about his life, talent, and publications. This complicated narrative of struggle, determination, dead ends, and new beginnings is as gripping as one of Dickens's own novels.

ROBERT L. PATTEN, Lynette S. Autrey Professor in Humanities at Rice University, has published widely on Victorian literature and culture. He has previously published with Cambridge *Literature in the Marketplace: Nineteenth-Century British Publishing and Reading Practices* (edited with John O. Jordan, 1995). He is Scholar in Residence at the Charles Dickens Museum in 2011–12, and Senior Research Fellow in the Institute of English Studies, School of Advanced Study, University of London.

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Charles Dickens, oil painting by Daniel Maclise, engraved by William Finden.
Frontispiece to *Nicholas Nickleby*, 1839

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Epigraphs

The brave man carves out his fortune, and every man is the son of his own works.
– Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*

We ask authors to answer for the unity of the works published in their names; we ask that they reveal, or at least display the hidden sense pervading their work; we ask them to reveal their personal lives, to account for their experiences and the real story that gave birth to their writings. The author is he who implants, into the troublesome language of fiction, its unities, its coherence, its links with reality.
– Michel Foucault, "The Discourse on Language"

The meaning of "Literature" is not to be understood until we have felt its meaning for the author who wanted to be a part of it.
– Kathryn Chittick, *Dickens and the 1830s*

The writer's audience is always a fiction.
–Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*

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Acknowledgments

In the fifty years I have been thinking about Dickens as an author, I have incurred more debts to other scholars, students, librarians, research assistants, foundations and granting agencies, and university administrators than I can ever acknowledge or by any fraction repay. This particular iteration of my lifetime obsession began when, in 1991, I was introduced to book history by Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose at a Dickens Universe summer conference held at Kresge College, University of California Santa Cruz. To my first mentors and to their collaborator and Director of the Dickens Project at UCSC, John O. Jordan, I owe my conversion to a novice book historian. In the two decades since, members of the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing (SHARP), which was founded at that summer conference, have provided a continuous fountain of instruction and advice, information about cognate subjects, the location of important documents and scholarly works, and, most important, generous encouragement.

Over that score of years, several institutions have been willing to chance my trying out some ideas on their faculty and students. I am grateful to Bucknell University for inviting me to deliver the Robbins lecture in 1995, to Worcester Polytechnic Institute, which hosted a conference of the Dickens Society in 1996 on the occasion of the accession of a major Dickens library, to Texas A&M University at Laredo for the ESFA 1996 lecture, to the Graduate Center of CUNY for their spring colloquium in 1998, to SHARP and the Gutenberg Institute for the History of the Book at the Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz for their splendid observation of the 600th anniversary of the birth of Gutenberg, and to Gettysburg College for the Morris W. Croll lecture in 2003. Trial versions of portions of the chapters on *Pickwick*, *Oliver Twist*, and *The Old Curiosity Shop* were delivered at Dickens Project summer conferences in 2007, 1998, and 2003 respectively. I've incorporated as much of the feedback from audiences as possible, and this work is much richer for their insights.

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In addition, invitations to compose entries for other books on Dickens helped to clarify and extend my initial arguments. To Paul Schlicke, editor of the *Oxford Reader's Companion to Dickens*, and John O. Jordan, editor of the *Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, I extend warm thanks both for the opportunity to write entries and for their manifold editorial skills.

As part of their graduate training at Rice, Ayse Celikkol, Anne Dayton, Amanda Ellis, David Messmer, Janna Smartt, and Leah Speights were at one time or another subjected to stints of researching and reviewing parts of my messy and incomplete drafts. At the end, Sophia Hsu and an *SEL* research assistant, Michael Hart, checked every fact and transcription and tried to correct my multiple errors. They are in no way responsible for those that remain as a result of further rewrites; those I claim as my misreadings, hoping there might be some Blooming virtue in one or two of them.

Other Rice undergraduates and graduates have discussed Dickens with me in class and out. I can't list them all, but a few deserve special mention: Searcy Milam and Ben Ratner, my two Centennial Scholars who spent two years each on Dickens projects, and doctoral students Duncan Hasell, Jeffrey Jackson, Kara Marler-Kennedy, Kevin Morrison, Victoria Ford Smith, Elizabeth Coggin Womack, and at UCSC Jon Varese. These doctoral students were among the most recent who did not entirely avoid Dickens in their graduate study and dissertations. Several now completing the Rice doctoral program were faithful attenders at the year-long Andrew W. Mellon seminar on late Dickens and authorship sponsored by the Rice Humanities Research Center, and even in most cases at a preceding semester seminar on early Dickens: kudos to Kattie Basnett, Heather Elliott, Maggie Harvey, Heather Miner, and Joanna O'Leary for their amazing contributions to the seminar and this book, and thanks from all of us to the Director of the HRC, Professor Caroline Levander and her matchless staff.

The Internet creates one huge family, and the Dickens relatives are among the most convivial and verbal. I must single out the Dickens Fellowship Philadelphia Branch and their longtime president, Patricia A. Vinci, for innumerable courtesies and invitations always welcomingly received. Others who should be named include scholars both professional and superbly amateur: Peter Beal, Rosemarie Bodenheimer, H. Philip Bolton, John Bowen, Logan Browning, Jerome Charyn, Eileen Cleere, Philip Collins, Pamela Dalziel, Lew Eatherton, David Finkelstein, Kate Flint, Ian Gadd, Jonathan Grossman, Leslie Howsam, Christine Huguet,

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Stephen Jarvis, Juliet John, Frank Kermode, Patrick Leary, Sally Ledger, Valerie Browne Lester, Thad Logan, William F. Long, Helena Michie, J. Hillis Miller, Catherine Robson, Florian Schweizer, Paul Schlicke, Catherine Seville, Michael Slater, Linda Spiro, Lisa Spiro, John Sutherland, Kathleen Tillotson, and Andrew Xavier. The two anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press provided quite different, happily complementary, assessments: one responded with broad suggestions for the larger implications of the argument, the other spotted details that were either simply wrong or substantially contradicted my thesis, especially the parts about Michel Foucault. I'm a much smarter, if still fallible, author for their discrete and merciful interventions. Authorship is, as I try to show, always collaborative; I regret that I cannot name these anons.

To the principals at the Sunstone Press in Santa Fe, James Clovis Smith Jr. and Carl Daniel Condit, heartfelt thanks for providing me with a room of my own in which to draft this book, and lots of encouragement. I am, if anything, even more indebted to Warwick Gould, Director of the Institute of English Studies in the School of Advanced Study, University of London. First, he invited me to give the third John Coffin Memorial Lecture, on "Anon.," in 2006; then he and his colleagues tendered me an appointment (*sine die!*) as Senior Research Fellow. That honor provided me with the opportunity to spend 2011–12 in residence at the IES perfecting and proofing this book, among other projects. Enabling me to obtain a visa, an office, and research support, were Peter Niven and Sarah Allan of the School of Advanced Study, and Wim van Mierlo, Conor Wyer, Zoe Holman, and Jon Millington of IES. Working with them has been a joy.

Without a "golden handshake" from Rice University, arranged by Allen J. Matusow and seconded by Eugene H. Levy and Nicolas Shumway, I could not have afforded any such research adventure. I hope this book supplies intellectual capital balancing to some extent Rice's generous "real" capital expenditure.

At Cambridge University Press I have had, for twenty years, the inestimable privilege of working with (and for) Linda Bree, surely one of the most alert, discerning, and energetic of commissioning editors. The production staff has been resolutely determined to help my faltering steps reach the finish line: thanks be to Maartje Scheltens, Christina Sarigiannidou, Jacqueline French, and Mike Leach. I acknowledge with gratitude permission from Robert Darnton to reproduce his diagram of the "Communications Circuit," as it has appeared in several iterations of his seminal essay "What Is the History of Books?"

All illustrations were provided by the Charles Dickens Museum, which opened its extensive library of portrait images to me. Curators' notes on

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some of the photographs discuss sources and disagreements about authenticity. In some cases I have chosen ones that are controversial precisely because the debate adds another element to issues about the material embodiment of the author, whether Charles Dickens or Boz. The image at the beginning of Chapter 2, etched from a miniature painted by Rose Emma Drummond, Dickens gave to Catherine as an engagement present in 1835. It is therefore the face he wanted to show to her, if not yet to the world. The sketch of Dickens for Chapter 3, and an etching of it, are signed "Phiz" but Browne denied them; however, that rejection may have occurred after the break with Dickens in the 1860s. As Chapter 5 discusses, photographs of the facsimile of the Samuel Drummond portrait given to the Museum are inscribed on the back of two images with diametrically opposed opinions about its authenticity. On one a curator notes that the original did not appear in the Burdett-Coutts sale of May 1922, and refers to [B. W. Matz], "Some Gifts to the Dickens House," *Dickensian* 31, 2 (April 1925): 76, announcing its acquisition. On another image of the facsimile there is attached to the frame a printed legend that traces the history of the picture (reproduced in F. G. Kitton's 1902 *Charles Dickens: His Life, Writings, and Personality*, opposite p. 182) and its authentication by Kate Perugini in 1923, according to B. W. Matz. A different inscription now appears on the frame, citing the appendix to Charles C. Osborne's edition of *Letters of Charles Dickens to the Baroness Burdett-Coutts* (London: John Murray, 1931). The evidence seems conclusively to point to the Drummond original as being a portrait of Dickens. I am grateful to Dr. Florian Schweizer, Julia Ziemer, Shannon Hermes, and Fiona Jenkins for their help in researching and supplying these illustrations.

Finally, a word about the wrapper. The watercolor and pencil of Dickens was executed by the artist and art historian Joel Isaacson in 2000, and I am grateful to him for allowing me to reproduce his picture. At that time, painting small portraits of Impressionist artists, he became interested in beards and in "the opportunity to use their forms as fields for abstraction" (email, July 2, 2011). When I first saw the image on a website, it struck me as the perfect representation of Dickens both coming into existence as a corporeal being and being unfinished, if not erased. That his beard featured so prominently spoke to me of the older Charles Dickens whose middle-aged beard is such a constant in his portraiture, not the young, beardless Boz. So the watercolor stands here as another way of seeing the confluence, separation, and protracted birth of the authors Charles Dickens and Boz.

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Prologue

During the academic year 1963–64, I studied in London as a Fulbright scholar. Kathleen Tillotson of Bedford College, University of London, was my British supervisor. E. D. H. Johnson of Princeton was directing my dissertation on plot in Dickens's first monthly and weekly serial. My interest was essentially New Critical: I believed passionately that Dickens was an artist, and not an irresponsible, irrepressible writer who just dashed things off for money. If I could show, through a study of whatever manuscripts and proofs still existed, evidence of Dickens's planning and artistic concerns even in two early books that seemed to exhibit little evidence of those features, then I might help clear the way to look more closely at what I felt was a complex interweaving of themes, images, and variations on character embedded in and characteristic of Dickens's art. John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson's *Dickens at Work* was my bible.¹

One day while working in the Victoria and Albert Museum Library, I chanced upon an entry in a ledger recording additions to the collection that Dickens's best friend and authorized biographer, John Forster, bequeathed to the V&A. It signified that the account books of Chapman and Hall and Bradbury and Evans, Dickens's longtime publishers and printers, had been absorbed into the Forster Collection. After a few days' study, I thought I might have found hitherto unstudied evidence of Dickens's sales and profits that could be used, paradoxically, to strengthen the case for his not prostituting his art for money. Madeline House and Kathleen Tillotson were using these records as resources in annotating the Pilgrim edition of the *Letters*, but these were early days in that heroic project: the first volume, covering Dickens's correspondence through 1839, appeared in 1965. Besides, the publishers' records covered a later period in Dickens's career, from 1845–46 forward, the time at which his contractual arrangements for publication finally settled down to a standard routine with two major firms. I proposed that on finishing the thesis I would publish these records, but no American academic press was interested.

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Fortunately, Oxford University Press believed that an account of Dickens and his publishers might have merit. Jon Stallworthy, a wonderful mentor, showed me how to convert tables of figures into narrative and to round out an account of Dickens's professional life. The conclusion I reached was that Dickens's various modes of sales, from weekly or monthly parts through volumes, cheap editions, authorized translations, public readings, and collected works, supplied enough different copies and price points for him to be owned by households of varying incomes and degrees of literacy. As I said in closing,

Working closely with a succession of enterprising publishers at home and abroad, Dickens democratized fiction ... That Dickens wrote for money should be at the very least a neutral fact, and not a reason for calling his artistry or integrity in question. How it became possible for Dickens to write for money, on the other hand, takes us into the very heart of nineteenth-century culture and into all the intimately reciprocal connections between the artist and his age.²

I completed that study in 1975, and it was published three years later. At the time, I was entirely ignorant of developments in bibliography, print culture, and history of the book initiated in France and gathering practitioners across Europe, Britain, and North America. In the thirty-six years since, I have tried to educate myself about these disciplines, which deal so directly and with such finesse with the "connections between the artist and his age." So this book is either an old man's garrulous retelling of favorite stories, or if it does contribute something new to the understanding of Dickens and his times, it does so by attempting to bring several intellectual disciplines and practices together, not so much "in conversation" as in an enhanced, multivalent reconsideration of Dickens's authorial beginnings.

The disciplines I engage in this expanded narrative include, first of all, book history, comprising everything from bibliography to print culture.³ I have certainly not mastered any of these sub-disciplines, but I have combined evidence from the paratextual surrounds of Dickens's fiction (e.g., advertisements, wrappers and casings for his books, title pages, prefaces to original and reprinted editions), from his correspondence about his writings and his diaries, and from publishers' records and histories,⁴ with the history of copyright across Europe and North America up to Dickens's era, theorizations of the "communications circuit" and the place of the "author" within it, and brief mentions of the careers of his fellow authors who paved the way or illuminated the stony path for writers. I have tried to incorporate the perspective of the "sociology of

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texts” advocated by the late D. F. McKenzie as well as William St. Clair’s more recent call for a “political economy of reading.”⁵ In addition, the important statistical work initiated by Simon Eliot on the nineteenth-century British book trade and David McKitterick’s magisterial collection of essays on *The Book in Britain* from 1830–1914 have provided essential grounding for my sense of the publishing context for Dickens.⁶ Finally, introductions and anthologies of essays attempting to cover the history of the book supply overwhelming evidence of the complexity and variations of these subjects; they have cautioned me against generalizations. I’ve not ventured to go beyond Dickens, to other male writers, to women whose relation to commercial publication and the marketplace seems generally to differ from that of men in the Victorian and preceding periods, or to European or North American writers – except to instance their situations in particular contexts as comparisons and contrasts to Dickens’s choices and rewards.⁷ For me, the devil is in the details, and each writer’s situation differs, even though some careers achieve the status of paradigms. Dickens’s has.

A second broad discipline to which this narrative pays attention is history, especially the contemporary history, registered for the most part as “news” in the periodicals of the period 1830–40, that Dickens contributed to in a small way through Parliamentary and other kinds of reporting. For his first conceived, sixth published fiction, *Barnaby Rudge*, ostensibly about the Gordon riots of 1780, he also studied older history, including newspaper articles, memoirs, historical reconstructions of the events and of the topography, architecture, and civic governance of London, and interviews with survivors. While the politics of Dickens’s early journalism isn’t easy to detect or systematize, it is important to recognize that he published in periodicals appealing to very different audiences and political persuasions, and that the editorial “we” he fashioned incorporated numerous overlapping but sometimes politically opposed sectors of the reading public. Much of this study concentrates on the metamorphosis of that “we” as Dickens reinvents his relationship to his pen names, his audience, and his versions of contemporary and past British history.

An extensive, indeed dominating paradigm for this study derives from biography, and especially those notions of biography which understand that many of us live prospectively, inscribing our dreams for our future; simultaneously live in the present with all its triumphs and vexations exaggerated by momentary, largely unreflective feelings and impulses; and also live backwards, composing our lives retrospectively in order to make their end points concurrent with, and in some way a deliberate outcome of, past practices and ambitions. When recounting book history – especially

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the proliferation of minor projects and publications that litter Dickens's desk and wastepaper basket in the early years – my narrative may sometimes plod – necessarily, I think, because Dickens is searching for something substantial to do and be, and piles on commitments without much discrimination or planning. But whenever he writes about his life, however fictional that account proves to be, it pulses with his energy, his emotions, his dreams, and the rewards and disappointments of his nascent career. I cannot help seeing Dickens's invention of a kind of "industrial-age" authorship, in which he attempts to gain control over the means and ends of his writing, as centered in his own life-writing during the middle years of Britain's all-encompassing industrial revolution.

And that takes me to two other dimensions of the topic. One is the reception of his works. Reception theory and history are, like the other disciplines I've mentioned, complex and proliferating subjects.⁸ In Dickens's case, as I write it out, they include the responses of his friends, family, advisors, and publishers; the reviews; the sales and profits of his works; theatricalizations, imitations, parodies, plagiarisms, translations, sequels, and republications of the original texts in new formats for new tranches of buyers; the ways in which actual receptions and anticipated ones shape possibilities and agreements for future works; the increasingly distinguished company he keeps and the increasingly distinguished receptions, dinners, and celebrations that are given to honor his work; and the ways in which Dickens has been read by his literary and academic biographers and critics. Authorship is not a one-way street: genius delivers, the demos receives. Dickens's various publics played a significant role in shaping his career.

Finally, what may be most venturesome – and most unequal to the range and power of Dickens's literary achievements – is my effort to read within Dickens's fictions for signs of his own anxieties about authorship. What, for instance, did he have to say? When faced with a blank piece of paper and an urgent deadline, what prompted his imagination? Oddly, death, along with the improvisatory nature of industrializing urban life and the deterioration of certain kinds of once more stable significations of identity and character: names, faces, speech, occupations, family connections and obligations, and a social ethos forming and maintaining communities. In tracking Dickens's authorial concerns, I trace the devolution of the humorous narrative voice of "Boz" to its 1841 endpoint, when Dickens stops writing and publishing, having killed off his last narratorial embodiment, Master Humphrey. While the evidences of his anxieties about his career are the main subject of these interpretations of his fiction,

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I have tried not to make them tendentious. That is, I see the disguised and displaced representations of and reflections on authorship within the larger thematic contexts of the whole fiction, and want always to illustrate how embedded personal issues are part of complex ideological, structural, material, and affective architectures that work together to create the marvels of Dickens's imagination and artistry.

The multiple epigraphs to each chapter stand as instances of the ways different disciplinary perspectives have dealt with those writings of Dickens treated therein. The varied textual incarnations of Dickens's most familiar pseudonym, Boz, prove to be another way of organizing and articulating these many threads of narrative. Creating the name; deploying it as an essayist, or novelist, or editor, and sometimes as the person of Dickens himself; finding it unhelpfully adopted and adapted by others; attempting to reshape the character and occupation of Boz; and eventually trying – rather unsuccessfully – to put pseudonyms aside and establish himself, his patronym and body and voice, as the author of his works are the stages in Dickens's projection of Boz that organize the following chapters. I cannot concentrate on one title at a time, but must instead recount Dickens's authorial career across many projects at the same time, and as particular ones such as *Pickwick* and *Oliver Twist* operate over long stretches of time to enable and constrict his subsequent publishing options. Readers may feel uncomfortable or dislocated in encountering more about *Sketches by Boz* in the middle of a discussion about *Barnaby Rudge*, or in reading that something Edward Lytton Bulwer published three years before anything of Dickens went into print might have constrained Boz's mode of presenting domestic and national villainy in *Master Humphrey's Clock*. And yet it is all of a piece. That we now usually read Dickens novel by novel, taking each title on its own, insulated especially from its cumulative creative and commercial contexts, is at once the triumph of his artistry and of his capacity to teach us the limited set of contexts in which he wants us to appreciate each endeavor.

This story deals only with the "birth" of the industrial-age author. "Births" can be protracted events, and usually comprise naming the child and telling the story of its familial origins. During childhood, that birth story may change; the child may adopt a different name; its family affiliations may alter; its associations may develop in unexpected directions; and it may not live the life forecast at its birth. Those are all aspects of birth recounted here. For the adolescence and maturity of the industrial-age author, one must seek out other stories.