Dickens and his readers

Gabriel Pearson

Dickens the man, remains after a half-century of biography and much literary, social and psychological criticism, a baffling figure, as complex, dynamic and tragic as the age in which he lived. We thinking of his dominating the early Victorian period, not so much as a combatant in its ideological warfare but as a sort of folk hero, an embodiment of the resources and frustrations of a nation. It is almost a shock to realize that he died at the age of fifty-eight in 1870, so clearly do we envisage him as venerated and adored, so almost patriarchal in the modes of feeling he fathered, yet another of the tribe of long-lived Victorian sages. As a Victorian he died in what for most would have been prime middle-age; but he died a prematurely old man who, it could without fantasy be argued, committed what was virtually suicide. He had lived at just the pace of his society, and it had worn and worried him to death.

Dickens's life was not peripheral to his artistic career but one with it. In a complex variety of ways he managed, in his actual career, to embody nearly all the typical experiences of his age, and this despite the fact that he was personally very neurotic with a private case-history of mental trauma. Yet somehow he was able to make his private conflicts and compulsions public, to integrate them with a wide social vision and to stir the imaginative depths of a vast national audience. What will be demonstrated here is the way in which his personality, his audience, and the popular forms he used combined into a typicality, a generality of appeal, which has never since, significantly, been equalled.

Rochester: the opium dream

Pickwick is the starting point of the great career. His is the figure most immediately evoked by the adjective Dickensian. Much of The Pickwick Papers is set, as we remember in Rochester and Rochester was the scene of Dickens's early childhood. It is a very significant part of his childhood, of his life indeed, for it became the symbol, not only of pre-industrial England, but of Dickens's own innocence before the fall, the trauma of the little drudge in the Blacking Factory, the son of a bankrupt father sheltering from a world of creditors in the Marshlea debtor's prison, of "the child of singular abilities, quick, eager, delicate and soon hurt, bodily or mentally" who was always haunted by "the sense ... of being utterly neglected and hopeless"* in the crowded desert of industrial London. No wonder then that the happy and carefree childhood of Rochester became in memory an idealized as the age of good fellowship, good living, altogether of the good life. And the teens of the century, though indeed they have their black side, could be seen, at least in rural Kent, as the fast vanishing remnant of a more genial and spacious age. Dickens, as a writer, returned several times to Rochester, once as the tormented figure of little Nell seeking a sanctuary in which to die, once as the Uncommercial Traveller (a title fascinating to ponder) but finally and momentarily in his last work, the only half-completed Edwin Drood. It was a very different Rochester to which the exhausted novelist limped home, indeed it was no longer home. Cloisterham, its fictional pseudonym, in 1870 is a muffled and sinister ruin, where the relics of proud decay sway through miasma of the opium-dream suffered by the divided soul of an artist in the strange disguise of a cathedral organist. The Orient, the victim of the new form of capitalist exploitation, has come to roost in the ideal world of childhood, there to poison and subvert its host.

Dickens as public figure

What happened to the fictional Rochester, what happened through his suffering the sea-change of that symbol is, in general, what happened to England. As we have suggested, the childhood world is not without its foundation in historical reality. The change over from stage-coach to railway is not what we call the Industrial Revolution itself, but it must have been a palpable and all evident manifestation of it. Likewise, the growth of cities, with the accompanying horror of tenement and disease, must have been in the earlier years of the century a very visible confirmation that England was passing through the throes of its transformation from an agricultural into a ruthlessly expanding industrial nation. This transformation, Dickens, as we have seen, experienced through the subjective agony of thwarted childhood. He also experienced it, as one might say professionally. It is indicative of the typicality of Dickens's career that, in his earlier years, he was of that then most modern of occupations, a successful and very high-powered journalist. This, in the grand style, even when he had achieved established fame as the best-selling novelist of his day he continued to be. During the last twenty years of his life he half-owned and edited two weeklies, Household Words and All The Year Round. In his early years as reporter for the Mirror of Parliament and the Morning Chronicle, he was whirled from the Commons to the hustings, travelled all over England in search of sensational copy, was renowned for the devices he invented for pushing through news ahead of rivals and has a good claim as the originator of the "scoop". His career as a journalist had two important issues. It sent him, out actively as a young man and through widespread contacts as the controller and dominator of his own magazine later, into the arena of social transformation. It also gave him a miraculously sensitive finger to the national pulse. He developed preternatural sensitivity as to what constitutes a public, its demands and the extent to which its demands could be formed and its tastes governed. Dickens is the last great writer who was, in

*Forster: Life of Charles Dickens, Chap. 2.
Dickens and his readers

the fullest sense a public figure. In his visits to America, he went as a sort of unofficial ambassador. He moved in the principle literary circles of his time. He knew most of the leading intellectuals, was made much of by the great and revered by the working class. All this, of course tells us much of the quality of his sheer success. But there is another significance: his position, almost outside the class structure of his time yet living all its complex gradations, was experience. It is a tribute to his greatness as an artist that so much of what would have been for a lesser man the mere reward of pre-eminence, found its way back into the world of the novelist.

There was another aspect of his typicality which can only briefly be touched on. In his personal life he was in turn a typically Victorian husband and father, getting a host of children and later a rebel against sexual convention, separating from his wife and (the evidence is almost conclusive) taking as his mistress a young actress, Ellen Ternan.*

Through this world of experience he was, then transformed into something like the representative of an epoch. But the most typical part of his life was his childhood. He remained true always to that shift from the world of innocence to that of experience. And it was the unity between his life and his art that enabled him to become the embodiment of the case-history of a nation in the throes of social revolution.

We have been arguing that on many levels Dickens embodied the life of his times. Yet in a very obvious way he was not typical, in that he did not participate to any outstanding degree in the intellectual life of the century. When we think of the sages, Arnold, Carlyle, Ruskin, they seem to us typical precisely because of the sturdy consistence of their diversity; it is the quality of their participation rather than its content that marks them. This is true of the pure creative talents also. George Elliot exists not only in relation to Middlemarch but to "topics" as well; to Puritanism and German Idealism, to Lewes and Spencer. It would be possible to summarise the "thought" of minds even as obviously unintellectual as Tennyson's and Browning's; or of Trollope and Thackeray, for that matter. Even a popular novelist like Bulwer Lytton was an intellectual in a way Dickens never was.

No terrible muses

It would be possible to extract almost any number of opinions from Dickens's works. He could be characterized as an unconscious socialist, a radical individualist, a Carlylan authoritarian, and almost anything else under the sun, all with the immediate legitimacy that quotation affords. He was, at once, all of these and none. In trying to establish his "position" it is as well to assert what he wasn't.

In general, his imagination was caught only at the point where ideas impinge on the lives of ordinary people. Hence he was consistently concerned with popular science as the policy of his two weeklies, entirely in his own hands, proves. But he did not live the conflicts of ideology with anything like enough involvement to suffer the agonies of that typically Victorian malady, "Dubbi". He was not, as Tennyson was, terrorized by the "twice terrible Muses, Astronomy and Geology", nor does he seem to have had much time for the religious controversies of the period. Although it was the topic of one of the most sensitive periods of his career, the 'Thirties, he evinced no interest in the Oxford Movement. He disapproved of Anglicanism as being a buttress of the class system, of Catholicism which stood for the dogma and superstition which he loathed, and of Nonconformist in particular, which had so oppressive and thwarting an effect on the individual; he explored this effect in great detail in a novel, Little Dorrit, in a short story, George Silvenmdrt's Explanation, and satirized non-conformist preaching many times in his fiction.

Anarchism and order

His social attitudes are very complex indeed. He hated the state apparatus, and particularly Parliament ("the national cinder-heap") yet was convinced that the State should intervene to control the rapacity of landlord and capitalist and to raise the standards of the working-class. At the same time he attacked the ideology of radicalism, Malthusianism and Utilitarianism, particularly in "Hard Times" with a fervour that owes much to Carlyle. With Carlyle, a certain modified conserva-

*In the reputed confession made to Canon Benham many years after Dicken's death, Ellen Ternan declared that "she loathed the very thought of this intimacy". If these are in fact her words, they throw a curious light on Dickens himself of course, but also on the whole sexual ethos of Victorian England. One may hazard that the mere fact that the relationship was necessarily illicit is a partial explanation of what was evidently a genuine personal failure. George Elliot of course may be cited as evidence of what sort of relationship could be achieved. But she was not, I think, typical in the way Dickens was; nor submitted to the kind of scrutiny a public idol would inevitably incur. The failure must also be related to Dickens' own psychological development of which there is ample illustration.

53
unformulated and hidden in the minds of a, working
class not always very politically conscious. It explains
further why he so disastrously misunderstood political
activity such as Trade Unionism. His portrait of
industrial conflict in "Hard Times" is narrow and un-
convincing. It is significant that in this novel his working
class hero, Stephen Blackpool, is, for personal reasons,
oulawed both from his own work-mates and the
Capitalists. The only comment he can find to contain
his situation is; "See how we die and no need, one way
and another—in a muddle—every day!" This almost
the despairing cry of the ideological agnostic of all
ages.*

Release

Another aspect of Dickens's anarchism accounts for
his love-hate relationship to the idea of revolution.
This had the obvious superficial attraction that sheer
contemporaneity must bestow: the fear of revolution
was an ever present possibility throughout the larger
part of the period of his most abundant activity. Of
course, the same type of fascinated horror is to be found
in Carlyle; the success both of *The French Revolution*
and of *A Tale of Two Cities* has the same source so far
as the general imaginative context is concerned. With
Dickens however, there was a further psychological
incentive: the symbolic relationship between the actual,
lateral explosiveness of capitalist society and the de-
struction of the prison (the archetype here is the storming
of the Bastille, which, as Lyonel Trilling has pointed
out in his essay on *Little Dorrit*, is a dominant Nine-
teenth Century symbol for the liberating power of
revolution); and the prison was quite precisely the
Marshalsea, the debtor's jail where Dickens's father was
imprisoned. In *A Tale of Two Cities* the theme of
incarceration, of release, of the dead brought back to
life permeates the fabric of the novel; there is, if one
may use the term, a psychological objectivity in the
exploration of this theme which survives the falsities
of sentiment and the subjective haziness of character-
ization which is now an impediment to evaluation.
Popular violence constantly dovetails with the theme of
release. The mob has, so the conscious Dickens who
has to get his ending "right" feels, in the end to be
thwarted and repulsed; order has to be restored; and
"order" is the complacencies of the individual existence.
The novels social participation is destructive. The
high point in the description of the rising of the Paris
mob is undoubtedly the storming of the Bastille itself.
This, it could be argued, is historically the moment of
exaltation any way. But in the much earlier *Barnaby
Rudge* (1841), set in the Gordon Riots, there is the
same fascination with mob violence, and again the
high point is the burning down of the jail. The subject-
ive symbol of the Marshalsea Prison (his childhood
experience of it was unquestioningly seeing, relating as
it does to the particular parental betrayal he believed
himself to have suffered) thus had a real existence in
the imagination of his audience; and his private anarch-
ism relates closely to the latent though unspecified
movements of revolt in his time.

Impresario of popular form

In the preceding pages we have tried to define some
of the qualities that in Dickens, the man and artist,
tended to make for typicality. Equally important to
this consideration is the literary forms that were
available to him, their relationship to audience and the
particular effect that they had on the workings of his
creative imagination. The novel, when Dickens opened
his career with the Sketches and Pickwick was hardly
a respectable form. Scott, it is true, had lent it his
authority, at first, it is worth noting, anonymously.
But it was a popular form. This was because part-
publication (novels were generally published in twelve
monthly parts before they achieved three-volume status)
created an audience that feasted on the stimulus of
suspense, that demanded excitement, entertainment and
thrills. A popular form demands a popular (in all senses
of the word) author, and this Dickens superlatively
was. He was not, it is fair to say, at least not in the
most superficial sense, a revolutionary in the matter of
form. The genius he generally found ready-made; what
he did was to breathe into the old body his at once
personal and typical spirit. Most of the types of novel
were ready to hand. Thus Pickwick is essentially a
fusion of the rambling and disconnectedly episodic
Eighteenth Century picaresque novel and a popular
form of the time, the sporting sketches, whose most
famous example is Surtees's *JORROCKS JAUNTS AND
JOLLITIES*; the complex, Gothic novel often combined
with a socially contemporaneous theme, unified through
an altogether melodramatic plot, was a feature of the
work of such "popular" novelists as Ainsworth and
Bulwer Lytton. Examples of this kind could be multi-
plied. The point is that Dickens used his popular forms
with such success because he believed in them, in his
audience and, it should be added, because they could
bring in big money. His treatment of his audience
through the popular form always, even to the end, had
something of the grand manner of the impresario. He
depended on the support of a mass-audience to keep
him really in business at all, yet he was always one
step ahead; often it was a false step and he had to
retrace and retract only to spring a new imaginative
vision from the vantage-point of an apparent conces-
sion. The nature of part-publication called for a
relationship between artist and public of an ardous
sensitivity. Dickens could always feel just how his
new line was "going down" by that crudest of baro-
meters, sales! There were, of course, reviews which,
though Dickens pretended never to read any, did have
some influence on him; but to nothing like the extent
they would have today. There was the advice of friends,
but this was generally taken when it seemed to Dickens
represent a prevision of a public demand.* Of course,
after the mid-fifties, Dickens's fame was so established,
(at least, he had never again to fear the type of failure,
with its accompanying anxieties and its threat to his
personal position that Martin Chuzzlewit evoked)
that he had no need to angle for support when in fact
he received worship. Nevertheless, the habits of the
great popular novelist remained; his feel for an

• There are two good examples of this: (1) Jeffrey, venerable
critic of the Edinburgh Review, along with the bulk of readers
was passionately enthusiastic about Little Nell in *The Old
Curiosity Shop*; he did not like Martin Chuzzlewit; nor did
the bulk of readers. His advice played a considerable part in
causing Dickens to put another child's death in his next novel:
the death of Little Paul in Dombey and *Son*.
(2) Bulwer Lytton did not think the original "disillusioned" ending of
*Great Expectations* would go down. Dickens agreed with him
and substituted the more sentimental ending.

54
Dickens and his readers

Drama, melodrama, death

Dickens's audience wanted, rather in the modern film-sense, “drama”, and this the novelist provided in a very complex way. The more or less strict contemporaneousness of a Dickens novel does not provide the social content of the novels, rather, the symbolic structure that gives a specific significance to a general pattern of social vision. Thus, the “theme” of Bleak House is concerned with the evil effects of the venerable and decaying Court of Chancery (so Oliver Twist attacks the Poor Law; Nicholas Nickleby attacks Yorkshire schools; Little Dorrit satirizes the bureaucratic incompetence of the Crimean War through the Circumlocution office; and Our Mutual Friend uses as one of its symbols the actual dust-heaps that were sold at great profit in the London of the sixties)—and it could be said that that novel is concerned with remedying an obvious public scandal. Such particular attack was Dickens's dramatic fodder; in the earlier part of his career the novelist lived through a certain notoriety; and even when established his tendency to attack another soft section of the Establishment made him disliked in many official and conservative quarters. This activity has, obviously, a good deal in common with the capacity for scoop journalism discussed above. It was another of the ways through which he held and fascinated his audience and by means of which he was able to compete with the contemporary sex-fiction (for it existed: cf. Ford, Dickens and his Readers) of his time. But most important it was way of integrating his personal vision with an ever present individual social reality. The Court of Chancery was a crying scandal whose anti-social practice Dickens sharply focused; what is typical of Dickens however, is that he uses a decaying sector of society that is under attack as, in turn, a symbol for the whole of society. Around a central symbol or overt pre-occupation Dickens weaves a complex tapestry of unsuspected and unlikely relationships; extra-ordinary coincidences with an obscure connection, and a plot which manages to show that the aristocracy has an ultimate connection with the outcast and disowned (Lady Deadlock and Jo, the crossing-sweeper in Bleak House); that in the end all are reducible to the same social terms; Dickens manages in fine to image a society organic beyond all its rigidities and apparent stratifications.
Drama and death

Melodrama was the medium in which Dickens could come to terms with his audience through the contemporary theatre, as was farce and Shakespearian tragedy. It is no accidental part of his success that the novelist was constantly absorbed in some aspect of the theatre. Undoubtedly, he learned, not in a very conscious manner it is true, much from Shakespeare; with whom Dickens had this in common, that he was professionally committed to literature at the most obvious level, that he held something for all in an heterogeneous audience and that he worked towards large symbolic structures that could be "taken" as specific and mythical simultaneously. Thus, the boast that Dickens is a second Shakespeare is not just a wild hyperbole of evaluation; it is a quite exact parallel, descriptive rather than adulatory. Ben Jonson was his real love however; Jonson's grasp of the caricature of the humourous declares itself omnipresently in the pre-1850 Dickens. The novelist himself acted Ben Jonson, and composed, directed and acted farces (and romantic comedy) of his own composition and questionable merit. He was in fact fascinated by the theatre, the feel of a live audience, the arranged unreality in which illusion is created and lived, through grease-paint and foot-light. This throws much light on the personality of the novelist who in "real" life was irritable, rather ruthless, domineering and gloomy. Given any sort of an audience however he breathed and expanded in a radiance of mimicry, high spirits and almost hysterical hilarity. It serves also to explain why, when he was secure (at least, outwardly; for he never lost the deep compulsion with its roots in his childhood trauma which drove him to bolster himself more and more with a drive towards money-making) financially and socially, and hence had lost something of his old sensitive intimacy with his readers, he was driven, so naturally to the device of public readings. Through these he was enabled, during the last years of his life when composition had become agonizingly arduous, to achieve once again, in a new form, the exhilarating sense of the artist's power to control an audience, with the additional advantage of being able to see with his own eyes the physical effect. His readings were nearly all from the earlier novels and the Christmas stories—a striking example of their folk appeal. (He read to audiences that ranged from the mechanics of Manchester to the leaders of fashionables). Not the readings themselves, but the fascination Dickens found in them, lends them the effect of a last, portentously fascinating disease. We have on record Dickens's pulse-rate, and it soared alarmingly whenever he read. With his audience he acted out the hidden conflicts and compulsions of the age. The murder of Nancy in Oliver Twist became a favourite piece, and Dickens noted, with morbid satisfaction, the number of women who fainted during performances. He was forbidden to give any more performances by his doctors but he pressed on with a kind of intense frenzy. When he did heed the warnings it was too late, the damage was done, and he died exhausted and paralysed. In a sense his audience, or rather his lover's passion for it, destroyed him; but not before his artist's passion had, beneath the guise of the performer, moulded it and recreated it, and, in the process, the imaginative landscape of Nineteenth Century England.