Charles Dickens

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PART ONE

CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

THE DICKENS PERIOD

Much of our modern difficulty, in religion and other things,
arises merely from this: that we confuse the word “indefinable”
with the word “vague.” If some one speaks of a spiritual fact
as “indefinable” we promptly picture something misty, a cloud with
indeterminate edges. But this is an error even in commonplace logic.
The thing that cannot be defined is the first thing; the primary fact.
It is our arms and legs, our pots and pans, that are indefinable.
The indefinable is the indisputable. The man next door is indefinable,
because he is too actual to be defined. And there are some to whom
spiritual things have the same fierce and practical proximity;
some to whom God is too actual to be defined.

But there is a third class of primary terms.
There are popular expressions which every one uses and no one
can explain; which the wise man will accept and reverence,
as he reverences desire or darkness or any elemental thing.
The prigs of the debating club will demand that he should define

his terms. And, being a wise man, he will flatly refuse.
This first inexplicable term is the most important term of all.
The word that has no definition is the word that has no substitute.
If a man falls back again and again on some such word
as “vulgar” or “manly,” do not suppose that the word means
nothing because he cannot say what it means. If he could
say what the word means he would say what it means instead
of saying the word. When the Game Chicken (that fine thinker)
kept on saying to Mr. Toots, “It’s mean. That’s what it is—
it’s mean,” he was using language in the wisest possible way.
For what else could he say? There is no word for mean except mean.
A man must be very mean himself before he comes to defining meanness.
Precisely because the word is indefinable, the word is indispensable.

In everyday talk, or in any of our journals, we may find the loose
but important phrase, “Why have we no great men to-day? Why have we
no great men like Thackeray, or Carlyle, or Dickens?” Do not let
us dismiss this expression, because it appears loose or arbitrary.
“Great” does mean something, and the test of its actuality is to be found
by noting how instinctively and decisively we do apply it to some men
and not to others; above all, how instinctively and decisively we do apply

it to four or five men in the Victorian era, four or five men of whom Dickens was not the least. The term is found to fit a definite thing. Whatever the word “great” means, Dickens was what it means. Even the fastidious and unhappy who cannot read his books without a continuous critical exasperation, would use the word of him without stopping to think. They feel that Dickens is a great writer even if he is not a good writer. He is treated as a classic; that is, as a king who may now be deserted, but who cannot now be dethroned. The atmosphere of this word clings to him; and the curious thing is that we cannot get it to cling to any of the men of our own generation. “Great” is the first adjective which the most supercilious modern critic would apply to Dickens. And “great” is the last adjective that the most supercilious modern critic would apply to himself We dare not claim to be great men, even when we claim to be superior to them.

Is there, then, any vital meaning in this idea of “greatness” or in our laments over its absence in our own time? Some people say, indeed, that this sense of mass is but a mirage of distance, and that men always think dead men great and live men small. They seem to think that the law of perspective in the mental world is the precise opposite to the law of perspective in the physical world.

They think that figures grow larger as they walk away.

But this theory cannot be made to correspond with the facts. We do not lack great men in our own day because we decline to look for them in our own day; on the contrary, we are looking for them all day long. We are not, as a matter of fact, mere examples of those who stone the prophets and leave it to their posterity to build their sepulchres. If the world would only produce our perfect prophet, solemn, searching, universal, nothing would give us keener pleasure than to build his sepulchre. In our eagerness we might even bury him alive.

Nor is it true that the great men of the Victorian era were not called great in their own time. By many they were called great from the first. Charlotte Bront  held this heroic language about Thackeray. Ruskin held it about Carlyle. A definite school regarded Dickens as a great man from the first days of his fame: Dickens certainly belonged to this school.

In reply to this question, “Why have we no great men to-day?” many modern explanations are offered. Advertisement, cigarette-smoking, the decay of religion, the decay of agriculture, too much humanitarianism, too little humanitarianism, the fact that people are educated insufficiently, the fact that they are educated at all, all these are reasons given.

If I give my own explanation, it is not for its intrinsic value;
it is because my answer to the question, “Why have we no great men?”
is a short way of stating the deepest and most catastrophic difference
between the age in which we live and the early nineteenth century;
the age under the shadow of the French Revolution, the age in which
Dickens was born.

The soundest of the Dickens critics, a man of genius,
Mr. George Gissing, opens his criticism by remarking that
the world in which Dickens grew up was a hard and cruel world.
He notes its gross feeding, its fierce sports, its fighting and
foul humour, and all this he summarises in the words hard and cruel.
It is curious how different are the impressions of men.
To me this old English world seems infinitely less hard
and cruel than the world described in Gissing’s own novels.
Coarse external customs are merely relative, and easily assimilated.
A man soon learnt to harden his hands and harden his head.
Faced with the world of Gissing, he can do little but harden his heart.
But the fundamental difference between the beginning of the nineteenth
century and the end of it is a difference simple but enormous.
The first period was full of evil things, but it was full of hope.

The second period, the fin de si�cle, was even full (in some sense) of good things. But it was occupied in asking what was the good of good things. Joy itself became joyless; and the fighting of Cobbett was happier than the feasting of Walter Pater. The men of Cobbett's day were sturdy enough to endure and inflict brutality; but they were also sturdy enough to alter it. This "hard and cruel" age was, after all, the age of reform. The gibbet stood up black above them; but it was black against the dawn.

This dawn, against which the gibbet and all the old cruelties stood out so black and clear, was the developing idea of liberalism, the French Revolution. It was a clear and a happy philosophy. And only against such philosophies do evils appear evident at all. The optimist is a better reformer than the pessimist; and the man who believes life to be excellent is the man who alters it most. It seems a paradox, yet the reason of it is very plain. The pessimist can be enraged at evil. But only the optimist can be surprised at it. From the reformer is required a simplicity of surprise. He must have the faculty of a violent and virgin astonishment. It is not enough that he should think injustice distressing; he must think injustice absurd, an anomaly in existence,

a matter less for tears than for a shattering laughter.
On the other hand, the pessimists at the end of the century could hardly curse even the blackest thing; for they could hardly see it against its black and eternal background. Nothing was bad, because everything was bad. Life in prison was infamous—like life anywhere else. The fires of persecution were vile—like the stars.
We perpetually find this paradox of a contented discontent.
Dr. Johnson takes too sad a view of humanity, but he is also too satisfied a Conservative. Rousseau takes too rosy a view of humanity, but he causes a revolution. Swift is angry, but a Tory. Shelley is happy, and a rebel. Dickens, the optimist, satirises the Fleet, and the Fleet is gone. Gissing, the pessimist, satirises Suburbia, and Suburbia remains.

Mr. Gissing's error, then, about the early Dickens period we may put thus: in calling it hard and cruel he omits the wind of hope and humanity that was blowing through it. It may have been full of inhuman institutions, but it was full of humanitarian people.
And this humanitarianism was very much the better (in my view) because it was a rough and even rowdy humanitarianism.
It was free from all the faults that cling to the name.

It was, if you will, a coarse humanitarianism. It was a shouting, fighting, drinking philanthropy—a noble thing. But, in any case, this atmosphere was the atmosphere of the Revolution; and its main idea was the idea of human equality. I am not concerned here to defend the egalitarian idea against the solemn and babyish attacks made upon it by the rich and learned of to-day. I am merely concerned to state one of its practical consequences. One of the actual and certain consequences of the idea that all men are equal is immediately to produce very great men. I would say superior men, only that the hero thinks of himself as great, but not as superior. This has been hidden from us of late by a foolish worship of sinister and exceptional men, men without comrade-ship, or any infectious virtue. This type of C�sar does exist. There is a great man who makes every man feel small. But the real great man is the man who makes every man feel great.

The spirit of the early century produced great men, because it believed that men were great. It made strong men by encouraging weak men. Its education, its public habits, its rhetoric, were all addressed towards encouraging the greatness in everybody. And by encouraging the greatness in everybody, it naturally encouraged superlative greatness

in some. Superiority came out of the high rapture of equality.
It is precisely in this sort of passionate unconsciousness and bewildering community of thought that men do become more than themselves.
No man by taking thought can add one cubit to his stature;
but a man may add many cubits to his stature by not taking thought.
The best men of the Revolution were simply common men at their best.
This is why our age can never understand Napoleon. Because he was something great and triumphant, we suppose that he must have been something extraordinary, something inhuman. Some say he was the Devil; some say he was the Superman. Was he a very, very bad man?
Was he a good man with some greater moral code? We strive in vain to invent the mysteries behind that immortal mask of brass. The modern world with all its subtleness will never guess his strange secret;
for his strange secret was that he was very like other people.

And almost without exception all the great men have come out of this atmosphere of equality. Great men may make despotisms;
but democracies make great men. The other main factory of heroes besides a revolution is a religion. And a religion again,
is a thing which, by its nature, does not think of men as more or less valuable, but of men as all intensely and painfully valuable,

a democracy of eternal danger. For religion all men are equal,
as all pennies are equal, because the only value in any of them
is that they bear the image of the King. This fact has been
quite insufficiently observed in the study of religious heroes.
Piety produces intellectual greatness precisely because piety
in itself is quite indifferent to intellectual greatness.
The strength of Cromwell was that he cared for religion.
But the strength of religion was that it did not care for Cromwell;
did not care for him, that is, any more than for anybody else.
He and his footman were equally welcomed to warm places in the
hospitality of hell. It has often been said, very truly, that religion
is the thing that makes the ordinary man feel extraordinary;
it is an equally important truth that religion is the thing
that makes the extraordinary man feel ordinary.

Carlyle killed the heroes; there have been none since his time.
He killed the heroic (which he sincerely loved) by forcing upon
each man this question: “Am I strong or weak?” To which the answer
from any honest man whatever (yes, from C�sar or Bismarck)
would “weak.” He asked for candidates for a definite aristocracy,
for men who should hold themselves consciously above their fellows.

He advertised for them, so to speak; he promised them glory;
he promised them omnipotence. They have not appeared yet.
They never will. For the real heroes of whom he wrote had appeared
out of an ecstacy of the ordinary. I have already instanced such a case
as Cromwell. But there is no need to go through all the great men
of Carlyle. Carlyle himself was as great as any of them; and if ever
there was a typical child of the French Revolution, it was he.
He began with the wildest hopes from the Reform Bill, and although
he soured afterwards, he had been made and moulded by those hopes.
He was disappointed with Equality; but Equality was not disappointed
with him. Equality is justified of all her children.

But we, in the post-Carlylean period, have be come fastidious about
great men. Every man examines himself, every man examines his neighbours,
to see whether they or he quite come up to the exact line of greatness.
The answer is, naturally, “No.” And many a man calls himself
contentedly “a minor poet” who would then have been inspired
to be a major prophet. We are hard to please and of little faith.
We can hardly believe that there is such a thing as a great man.
They could hardly believe there was such a thing as a small one.
But we are always praying that our eyes may behold greatness,

instead of praying that our hearts may be filled with it.
Thus, for instance, the Liberal party (to which I belong) was, in its period of exile, always saying, “O for a Gladstone!” and such things. We were always asking that it might be strengthened from above, instead of ourselves strengthening it from below, with our hope and our anger and our youth. Every man was waiting for a leader. Every man ought to be waiting for a chance to lead. If a god does come upon the earth, he will descend at the sight of the brave.
Our prostrations and litanies are of no avail; our new moons and our sabbaths are an abomination. The great man will come when all of us are feeling great, not when all of us are feeling small.
He will ride in at some splendid moment when we all feel that we could do without him.

We are then able to answer in some manner the question, “Why have we no great men?” We have no great men chiefly because we are always looking for them. We are connoisseurs of greatness, and connoisseurs can never be great; we are fastidious, that is, we are small.
When Diogenes went about with a lantern looking for an honest man, I am afraid he had very little time to be honest himself And when anybody goes about on his hands and knees looking for a

great man to worship, he is making sure that one man at any rate shall not be great. Now, the error of Diogenes is evident.

The error of Diogenes lay in the fact that he omitted to notice that every man is both an honest man and a dishonest man. Diogenes looked for his honest man inside every crypt and cavern; but he never thought of looking inside the thief And that is where the Founder of Christianity found the honest man; He found him on a gibbet and promised him Paradise. Just as Christianity looked for the honest man inside the thief, democracy looked for the wise man inside the fool. It encouraged the fool to be wise. We can call this thing sometimes optimism, sometimes equality; the nearest name for it is encouragement. It had its exaggerations—failure to understand original sin, notions that education would make all men good, the childlike yet pedantic philosophies of human perfectibility.

But the whole was full of a faith in the infinity of human souls, which is in itself not only Christian but orthodox; and this we have lost amid the limitations of a pessimistic science. Christianity said that any man could be a saint if he chose; democracy, that any man could be a citizen if he chose.

The note of the last few decades in art and ethics has

been that a man is stamped with an irrevocable psychology,
and is cramped for perpetuity in the prison of his skull.
It was a world that expected everything of everybody.
It was a world that encouraged anybody to be anything.
And in England and literature its living expression was Dickens.

We shall consider Dickens in many other capacities, but let
us put this one first. He was the voice in England of this
humane intoxication and expansion, this encouraging of anybody
to be anything. His best books are a carnival of liberty,
and there is more of the real spirit of the French Revolution
in “Nicholas Nickleby” than in “The Tale of Two Cities.” His work
has the great glory of the Revolution, the bidding of every
man to be himself; it has also the revolutionary deficiency:
it seems to think that this mere emancipation is enough.
No man encouraged his characters so much as Dickens. “I am
an affectionate father,” he says, “to every child of my fancy.”
He was not only an affectionate father, he was an
over-indulgent father. The children of his fancy are spoilt children.
They shake the house like heavy and shouting schoolboys;
they smash the story to pieces like so much furniture.

When we moderns write stories our characters are better controlled.
But, alas! our characters are rather easier to control.
We are in no danger from the gigantic gambols of creatures
like Mantalini and Micawber. We are in no danger of giving our
readers too much Weller or Wegg. We have not got it to give.
When we experience the ungovernable sense of life which goes
along with the old Dickens sense of liberty, we experience
the best of the revolution. We are filled with the first
of all democratic doctrines, that all men are interesting;
Dickens tried to make some of his people appear dull people,
but he could not keep them dull. He could not make a monotonous man.
The bores in his books are brighter than the wits in other books.

I have put this position first for a defined reason.
It is useless for us to attempt to imagine Dickens and his life
unless we are able at least to imagine this old atmosphere
of a democratic optimism—a confidence in common men.
Dickens depends upon such a comprehension in a rather unusual manner,
a manner worth explanation, or at least remark.

The disadvantage under which Dickens has fallen, both as an artist

and a moralist, is very plain. His misfortune is that neither of
the two last movements in literary criticism has done him any good.
He has suffered alike from his enemies, and from the enemies
of his enemies. The facts to which I refer are familiar.
When the world first awoke from the mere hypnotism of Dickens,
from the direct tyranny of his temperament, there was, of course,
a reaction. At the head of it came the Realists, with their documents,
like Miss Flite. They declared that scenes and types in Dickens
were wholly impossible (in which they were perfectly right), and on
this rather paradoxical ground objected to them as literature.
They were not “like life,” and there, they thought,
was an end of the matter. The realist for a time prevailed.
But Realists did not enjoy their victory (if they enjoyed anything)
very long. A more symbolic school of criticism soon arose.
Men saw that it was necessary to give a much deeper and more delicate
meaning to the expression “like life.” Streets are not life,
cities and civilisations are not life, faces even and voices are not
life itself Life is within, and no man hath seen it at any time.
As for our meals, and our manners, and our daily dress, these are
things exactly like sonnets; they are random symbols of the soul.
One man tries to express himself in books, another in boots;

both probably fail. Our solid houses and square meals are in the strict sense fiction. They are things made up to typify our thoughts. The coat a man wears may be wholly fictitious; the movement of his hands may be quite unlike life.

This much the intelligence of men soon perceived. And by this much Dickens's fame should have greatly profited. For Dickens is "like life" in the truer sense, in the sense that he is akin to the living principle in us and in the universe; he is like life, at least in this detail, that he is alive. His art is like life, because, like life, it cares for nothing outside itself, and goes on its way rejoicing. Both produce monsters with a kind of carelessness, like enormous by-products; life producing the rhinoceros, and art Mr. Bunsby. Art indeed copies life in not copying life, for life copies nothing. Dickens's art is like life because, like life, it is irresponsible, because, like life, it is incredible.

Yet the return of this realisation has not greatly profited Dickens, the return of romance has been almost useless to this great romantic. He has gained as little from the fall of the realists as from

their triumph; there has been a revolution, there has been a counter revolution, there has been no restoration. And the reason of this brings us back to that atmosphere of popular optimism of which I spoke. And the shortest way of expressing the more recent neglect of Dickens is to say that for our time and taste he exaggerates the wrong thing.

Exaggeration is the definition of art. That both Dickens and the Moderns understood. Art is, in its inmost nature, fantastic. Time brings queer revenges, and while the realists were yet living, the art of Dickens was justified by Aubrey Beardsley. But men like Aubrey Beardsley were allowed to be fantastic, because the mood which they overstrained and overstated was a mood which their period understood. Dickens overstrains and overstates a mood our period does not understand. The truth he exaggerates is exactly this old Revolution sense of infinite opportunity and boisterous brotherhood. And we resent his undue sense of it, because we ourselves have not even a due sense of it. We feel troubled with too much where we have too little; we wish he would keep it within bounds. For we are all exact and scientific on the subjects we do not care about. We all immediately detect exaggeration in an exposition of Mormonism or a patriotic speech from Paraguay. We all require sobriety on

the subject of the sea-serpent. But the moment we begin to believe
a thing ourselves, that moment we begin easily to overstate it;
and the moment our souls become serious, our words become a little wild.
And certain moderns are thus placed towards exaggeration.
They permit any writer to emphasise doubts for instance, for doubts
are their religion, but they permit no man to emphasise dogmas.
If a man be the mildest Christian, they smell “cant;” but he can
be a raving windmill of pessimism, “and they call it ‘temperament.”
If a moralist paints a wild picture of immorality, they doubt its truth,
they say that devils are not so black as they are painted.
But if a pessimist paints a wild picture of melancholy, they accept
the whole horrible psychology, and they never ask if devils are
as blue as they are painted.

It is evident, in short, why even those who admire exaggeration
do not admire Dickens. He is exaggerating the wrong thing.
They know what it is to feel a sadness so strange and deep
that only impossible characters can express it: they do not know
what it is to feel a joy so vital and violent that only impossible
characters can express that. They know that the soul can be so sad
as to dream naturally of the blue faces of the corpses of Baudelaire:

they do not know that the soul can be so cheerful as to dream naturally of the blue face of Major Bagstock. They know that there is a point of depression at which one believes in Tintagiles: they do not know that there is a point of exhilaration at which one believes in Mr. Wegg. To them the impossibilities of Dickens seem much more impossible than they really are, because they are already attuned to the opposite impossibilities of Maeterlinck. For every mood there is an appropriate impossibility—a decent and tactful impossibility—fitted to the frame of mind. Every train of thought may end in an ecstasy, and all roads lead to Elfland. But few now walk far enough along the street of Dickens to find the place where the cockney villas grow so comic that they become poetical. People do not know how far mere good spirits will go. For instance, we never think (as the old folklore did) of good spirits reaching to the spiritual world. We see this in the complete absence from modern, popular supernaturalism of the old popular mirth. We hear plenty to-day of the wisdom of the spiritual world; but we do not hear, as our fathers did, of the folly of the spiritual world, of the tricks of the gods, and the jokes of the patron saints. Our popular tales tell us of a man who is so wise that he touches the supernatural, like Dr. Nikola; but they never tell us

(like the popular tales of the past) of a man who was so silly
that he touched the supernatural, like Bottom the Weaver. We do
not understand the dark and transcendental sympathy between fairies
and fools. We understand a devout occultism, an evil occultism,
a tragic occultism, but a farcical occultism is beyond us.
Yet a farcical occultism is the very essence of “The Midsummer
Night’s Dream.” It is also the right and credible essence of
“The Christmas Carol.” Whether we understand it depends upon whether
we can understand that exhilaration is not a physical accident,
but a mystical fact; that exhilaration can be infinite, like sorrow;
that a joke can be so big that it breaks the roof of the stars.
By simply going on being absurd, a thing can become godlike;
there is but one step from the ridiculous to the sublime.

Dickens was great because he was immoderately possessed
with all this; if we are to understand him at all we must
also be moderately possessed with it. We must understand this
old limitless hilarity and human confidence, at least enough
to be able to endure it when it is pushed a great deal too far.
For Dickens did push it too far; he did push the hilarity to
the point of incredible character-drawing; he did push the human

confidence to the point of an unconvincing sentimentalism.
You can trace, if you will, the revolutionary joy till it reaches
the incredible Sapsea epitaph; you can trace the revolutionary
hope till it reaches the repentance of Dombey. There is
plenty to carp at in this man if you are inclined to carp;
you may easily find him vulgar if you cannot see that he is divine;
and if you cannot laugh with Dickens, undoubtedly you can
laugh at him.

I believe myself that this braver world of his will certainly return;
for I believe that it is bound up with the realities,
like morning and the spring. But for those who beyond
remedy regard it as an error, I put this appeal before any
other observations on Dickens. First let us sympathise,
if only for an instant, with the hopes of the Dickens period,
with that cheerful trouble of change. If democracy has
disappointed you, do not think of it as a burst bubble,
but at least as a broken heart, an old love-affair. Do not sneer
at the time when the creed of humanity was on its honeymoon;
treat it with the dreadful reverence that is due to youth.
For you, perhaps, a drearier philosophy has covered and eclipsed

the earth. The fierce poet of the Middle Ages wrote, “Abandon hope, all ye who enter here,” over the gates of the lower world.

The emancipated poets of to-day have written it over the gates of this world. But if we are to understand the story which follows, we must erase that apocalyptic writing, if only for an hour.

We must recreate the faith of our fathers, if only as an artistic atmosphere If, then, you are a pessimist, in reading this story, forego for a little the pleasures of pessimism.

Dream for one mad moment that the grass is green.

Unlearn that sinister learning that you think so clear; deny that deadly knowledge that you think you know.

Surrender the very flower of your culture; give up the very jewel of your pride; abandon hopelessness, all ye who enter here.

CHAPTER II

THE BOYHOOD OF DICKENS

Charles Dickens was born at Landport, in Portsea, on February 7, 1812. His father was a clerk in the Navy Pay-office, and was temporarily on duty in the neighbourhood. Very soon after the birth of Charles Dickens, however, the family moved for a short period to Norfolk Street, Bloomsbury, and then for a long period to Chatham, which thus became the real home, and for all serious purposes, the native place of Dickens. The whole story of his life moves like a Canterbury pilgrimage along the great roads of Kent.

John Dickens, his father, was, as stated, a clerk; but such mere terms of trade tell us little of the tone or status of a family. Browning's father (to take an instance at random) would also be described as a clerk and a man of the middle class; but the Browning family and the Dickens family have the colour of two different civilisations. The difference cannot be conveyed merely by saying that Browning stood many strata above Dickens. It must also be conveyed that Browning belonged to that section of the middle class which tends

(in the small social sense) to rise; the Dickenses to that section
which tends in the same sense to fall. If Browning had not been
a poet, he would have been a better clerk than his father,
and his son probably a better and richer clerk than he.
But if they had not been lifted in the air by the enormous accident
of a man of genius, the Dickenses, I fancy, would have appeared
in poorer and poorer places, as inventory clerks, as caretakers,
as addressers of envelopes, until they melted into the masses
of the poor.

Yet at the time of Dickens's birth and childhood this
weakness in their worldly destiny was in no way apparent;
especially it was not apparent to the little Charles himself.
He was born and grew up in a paradise of small prosperity.
He fell into the family, so to speak, during one of its
comfortable periods, and he never in those early days
thought of himself as anything but as a comfortable
middle-class child, the son of a comfortable middle-class man.
The father whom he found provided for him, was one from whom
comfort drew forth his most pleasant and reassuring qualities,
though not perhaps his most interesting and peculiar.

John Dickens seemed, most probably, a hearty and kindly character, a little florid of speech, a little careless of duty in some details, notably in the detail of education. His neglect of his son's mental training in later and more trying times was a piece of unconscious selfishness which remained a little acrimoniously in his son's mind through life. But even in this earlier and easier period what records there are of John Dickens give out the air of a somewhat idle and irresponsible fatherhood. He exhibited towards his son that contradiction in conduct which is always shown by the too thoughtless parent to the too thoughtful child. He contrived at once to neglect his mind, and also to over-stimulate it.

There are many recorded tales and traits of the author's infancy, but one small fact seems to me more than any other to strike the note and give the key to his whole strange character. His father found it more amusing to be an audience than to be an instructor; and instead of giving the child intellectual pleasure, called upon him, almost before he was out of petticoats, to provide it. Some of the earliest glimpses we have of Charles Dickens show him to us perched on some chair or table singing comic songs

in an atmosphere of perpetual applause. So, almost as soon
as he can toddle, he steps into the glare of the footlights.
He never stepped out of it until he died. He was a good man,
as men go in this bewildering world of ours, brave, transparent,
tender-hearted, scrupulously independent and honourable;
he was not a man whose weaknesses should be spoken of without
some delicacy and doubt. But there did mingle with his merits
all his life this theatrical quality, this atmosphere of being
shown off—a sort of hilarious self-consciousness. His literary
life was a triumphal procession; he died drunken with glory.
And behind all this nine years' wonder that filled the world,
behind his gigantic tours and his ten thousand editions, the crowded
lectures and the crashing brass, behind all the thing we really
see is the flushed face of a little boy singing music-hall songs
to a circle of aunts and uncles. And this precocious pleasure
explains much, too, in the moral way. Dickens had all his life
the faults of the little boy who is kept up too late at night.
The boy in such a case exhibits a psychological paradox;
he is a little too irritable because he is a little too happy.
Dickens was always a little too irritable because he was
a little too happy. Like the overwrought child in society,

he was splendidly sociable, and yet suddenly quarrelsome.
In all the practical relations of his life he was what the child
is in the last hours of an evening party, genuinely delighted,
genuinely delightful, genuinely affectionate and happy, and yet
in some strange way fundamentally exasperated and dangerously
close to tears.

There was another touch about the boy which made his case more peculiar,
and perhaps his intelligence more fervid; the touch of ill-health. It
could not be called more than a touch, for he suffered from no formidable
malady and could always through life endure a great degree of exertion,
even if it was only the exertion of walking violently all night.
Still the streak of sickness was sufficient to take him out of the common
unconscious life of the community of boys; and for good or evil
that withdrawal is always a matter of deadly importance to the mind.
He was thrown back perpetually upon the pleasures of the intelligence,
and these began to burn in his head like a pent and painful furnace.
In his own unvaryingly vivid way he has described how he crawled
up into an unconsidered garret, and there found, in a dusty heap,
the undying literature of England. The books he mentions chiefly are
“Humphrey Clinker” and “Tom Jones.” When he opened those two books

in the garret he caught hold of the only past with which he is at all connected, the great comic writers of England of whom he was destined to be the last.

It must be remembered (as I have suggested before) that there was something about the county in which he lived, and the great roads along which he travelled that sympathised with and stimulated his pleasure in this old picaresque literature. The groups that came along the road, that passed through his town and out of it, were of the motley laughable type that tumbled into ditches or beat down the doors of taverns under the escort of Smollett and Fielding. In our time the main roads of Kent have upon them very often a perpetual procession of tramps and tinkers unknown on the quiet hills of Sussex; and it may have been so also in Dickens's boyhood. In his neighbourhood were definite memorials of yet older and yet greater English comedy. From the height of Gads-hill at which he stared unceasingly there looked down upon him the monstrous ghost of Falstaff, Falstaff who might well have been the spiritual father of all Dickens's adorable knaves, Falstaff the great mountain of English laughter and English

sentimentalism, the great, healthy, humane English humbug, not to be matched among the nations.

At this eminence of Gads-hill Dickens used to stare even as a boy with the steady purpose of some day making it his own. It is characteristic of the consistency which underlies the superficially erratic career of Dickens that he actually did live to make it his own. The truth is that he was a precocious child, precocious not only on the more poetical but on the more prosaic side of life. He was ambitious as well as enthusiastic.

No one can ever know what visions they were that crowded into the head of the clever little brat as he ran about the streets of Chatham or stood glowering at Gads-hill. But I think that quite mundane visions had a very considerable share in the matter. He longed to go to school (a strange wish), to go to college, to make a name, nor did he merely aspire to these things; the great number of them he also expected. He regarded himself as a child of good position just about to enter on a life of good luck. He thought his home and family a very good spring-board or jumping-off place from which to fling himself to the positions which he desired to reach.

And almost as he was about to spring the whole structure broke
under him, and he and all that belonged to him disappeared
into a darkness far below.

Everything had been struck down as with the finality of a thunderbolt.
His lordly father was a bankrupt, and in the Marshalsea prison.
His mother was in a mean home in the north of London,
wildly proclaiming herself the principal of a girl's school,
a girl's school to which nobody would go. And he himself,
the conqueror of the world and the prospective purchaser
of Gads-hill, passed some distracted and bewildering days
in pawning the household necessities to Fagins in foul shops,
and then found himself somehow or other one of a row of ragged
boys in a great dreary factory, pasting the same kinds of labels
on to the same kinds of blacking-bottles from morning till night.

Although it seemed sudden enough to him, the disintegration had,
as a matter of fact, of course, been going on for a long time.
He had only heard from his father dark and melodramatic
allusions to a "deed" which, from the way it was mentioned,
might have been a claim to the crown or a compact with the devil,

but which was in truth an unsuccessful documentary attempt on the part of John Dickens to come to a composition with his creditors.

And now, in the lurid light of his sunset, the character of John Dickens began to take on those purple colours which have made him under another name absurd and immortal.

It required a tragedy to bring out this man's comedy.

So long as John Dickens was in easy circumstances, he seemed only an easy man, a little long and luxuriant in his phrases, a little careless in his business routine. He seemed only a wordy man, who lived on bread and beef like his neighbours; but as bread and beef were successively taken away from him, it was discovered that he lived on words. For him to be involved in a calamity only meant to be cast for the first part in a tragedy. For him blank ruin was only a subject for blank verse.

Henceforth we feel scarcely inclined to call him John Dickens at all; we feel inclined to call him by the name through which his son celebrated this preposterous and sublime victory of the human spirit over circumstances. Dickens, in "David Copperfield," called him Wilkins Micawber. In his personal correspondence he called him the Prodigal Father.

Young Charles had been hurriedly flung into the factory by the more or less careless good-nature of James Lamert, a relation of his mother's; it was a blacking factory, supposed to be run as a rival to Warren's by another and "original" Warren, both practically conducted by another of the Lamerts. It was situated near Hungerford Market. Dickens worked there drearily, like one stunned with disappointment. To a child excessively intellectualised, and at this time, I fear, excessively egotistical, the coarseness of the whole thing—the work, the rooms, the boys, the language—was a sort of bestial nightmare. Not only did he scarcely speak of it then, but he scarcely spoke of it afterwards. Years later, in the fulness of his fame, he heard from Forster that a man had spoken of knowing him. On hearing the name, he somewhat curtly acknowledged it, and spoke of having seen the man once. Forster, in his innocence, answered that the man said he had seen Dickens many times in a factory by Hungerford Market. Dickens was suddenly struck with a long and extraordinary silence. Then he invited Forster, as his best friend, to a particular interview, and, with every appearance of difficulty and distress, told him the whole story for the first and the last time. A long while after that he told the world some part of the matter in the account of Murdstone and Grinby's in "David Copperfield." He never

spoke of the whole experience except once or twice, and he never spoke of it otherwise than as a man might speak of hell.

It need not be suggested, I think, that this agony in the child was exaggerated by the man. It is true that he was not incapable of the vice of exaggeration, if it be a vice. There was about him much vanity and a certain virulence in his version of many things. Upon the whole, indeed, it would hardly be too much to say that he would have exaggerated any sorrow he talked about. But this was a sorrow with a very strange position in Dickens's life; it was a sorrow he did not talk about. Upon this particular dark spot he kept a sort of deadly silence for twenty years. An accident revealed part of the truth to the dearest of all his friends. He then told the whole truth to the dearest of all his friends. He never told anybody else. I do not think that this arose from any social sense of disgrace; if he had it slightly at the time, he was far too self-satisfied a man to have taken it seriously in after life. I really think that his pain at this time was so real and ugly that the thought of it filled him with that sort of impersonal but unbearable shame with which we are filled, for instance, by the notion of physical torture, of something that

humiliates humanity. He felt that such agony was something obscene.
Moreover there are two other good reasons for thinking that his sense
of hopelessness was very genuine. First of all, this starless
outlook is common in the calamities of boyhood. The bitterness
of boyish distresses does not lie in the fact that they are large;
it lies in the fact that we do not know that they are small.
About any early disaster there is a dreadful finality; a lost child
can suffer like a lost soul.

It is currently said that hope goes with youth, and lends to youth
its wings of a butterfly; but I fancy that hope is the last
gift given to man, and the only gift not given to youth.
Youth is preeminently the period in which a man can be lyric,
fanatical, poetic; but youth is the period in which a man can
be hopeless. The end of every episode is the end of the world.
But the power of hoping through everything, the knowledge
that the soul survives its adventures, that great inspiration
comes to the middle-aged; God has kept that good wine until now.
It is from the backs of the elderly gentlemen that the wings
of the butterfly should burst. There is nothing that so much
mystifies the young as the consistent frivolity of the old.

They have discovered their indestructibility. They are in their second and clearer childhood, and there is a meaning in the merriment of their eyes. They have seen the end of the End of the World.

First, then, the desolate finality of Dickens's childish mood makes me think it was a real one. And there is another thing to be remembered. Dickens was not a saintly child, after the style of Little Dorrit or Little Nell. He had not, at this time at any rate, set his heart wholly upon higher things, even upon things such as personal tenderness or loyalty. He had been, and was, unless I am very much mistaken, sincerely, stubbornly, bitterly ambitious. He had, I fancy, a fairly clear idea previous to the downfall of all his family's hopes of what he wanted to do in the world, and of the mark that he meant to make there. In no dishonourable sense, but still in a definite sense, he might, in early life, be called worldly; and the children of this world are in their generation infinitely more sensitive than the children of light. A saint after repentance will forgive himself for a sin; a man about town will never forgive himself for a faux pas.

There are ways of getting absolved for murder; there are
no ways of getting absolved for upsetting the soup.
This thin-skinned quality in all very mundane people is a thing
too little remembered; and it must not be wholly forgotten in
connection with a clever, restless lad who dreamed of a destiny.
That part of his distress which concerned himself and his social
standing was among the other parts of it the least noble;
but perhaps it was the most painful. For pride is not only,
as the modern world fails to understand, a sin to be condemned;
it is also (as it understands even less) a weakness to be very
much commiserated. A very vitalising touch is given in one of
his own reminiscences. His most unendurable moment did not come
in any bullying in the factory or any famine in the streets.
It came when he went to see his sister Fanny take a prize at
the Royal Academy of Music. “I could not bear to think of myself—
beyond the reach of all such honourable emulation and success.
The tears ran down my face. I felt as if my heart were rent.
I prayed when I went to bed that night to be lifted
out of the humiliation and neglect in which I was.
I never had suffered so much before. There was no envy in this.”
I do not think that there was, though the poor little wretch could

hardly have been blamed if there had been. There was only a furious sense of frustration; a spirit like a wild beast in a cage.
It was only a small matter in the external and obvious sense;
it was only Dickens prevented from being Dickens.

If we put these facts together, that the tragedy seemed final,
and that the tragedy was concerned with the supersensitive
matters of the ego and the gentleman, I think we can
imagine a pretty genuine case of internal depression.
And when we add to the case of internal depression the case
of the external oppression, the case of the material circumstances
by which he was surrounded, we have reached a sort of midnight.
All day he worked on insufficient food at a factory.
It is sufficient to say that it afterwards appeared in his works
as Murdstone and Grinby's. At night he returned disconsolately
to a lodging-house for such lads, kept by an old lady.
It is sufficient to say that she appeared afterwards as
Mrs. Pipchin. Once a week only he saw anybody for whom he cared
a straw; that was when he went to the Marshalsea prison,
and that gave his juvenile pride, half manly and half snobbish,
bitter annoyance of another kind. Add to this, finally,

that physically he was always very weak and never very well.
Once he was struck down in the middle of his work with sudden bodily pain. The boy who worked next to him, a coarse and heavy lad named Bob Fagin, who had often attacked Dickens on the not unreasonable ground of his being a “gentleman,” suddenly showed that enduring sanity of compassion which Dickens had destined to show so often in the characters of the common and unclean. Fagin made a bed for his sick companion out of the straw in the workroom, and filled empty blacking bottles with hot water all day.
When the evening came, and Dickens was somewhat recovered, Bob Fagin insisted on escorting the boy home to his father.
The situation was as poignant as a sort of tragic farce.
Fagin in his wooden-headed chivalry would have died in order to take Dickens to his family; Dickens in his bitter gentility would have died rather than let Fagin know that his family were in the Marshalsea. So these two young idiots tramped the tedious streets, both stubborn, both suffering for an idea.
The advantage certainly was with Fagin, who was suffering for a Christian compassion, while Dickens was suffering for a pagan pride.
At last Dickens flung off his friend with desperate farewell and thanks, and dashed up the steps of a strange house

on the Surrey side. He knocked and rang as Bob Fagin,
his benefactor and his incubus, disappeared round the corner.
And when the servant came to open the door, he asked,
apparently with gravity, whether Mr. Robert Fagin lived there.
It is a strange touch. The immortal Dickens woke in him
for an instant in that last wild joke of that weary evening.
Next morning, however, he was again well enough to make himself
ill again, and the wheels of the great factory went on.
They manufactured a number of bottles of Warren's Blacking,
and in the course of the process they manufactured also the greatest
optimist of the nineteenth century.

This boy who dropped down groaning at his work, who was hungry
four or five times a week, whose best feelings and worst feelings
were alike flayed alive, was the man on whom two generations
of comfortable critics have visited the complaint that his view
of life was too rosy to be anything but unreal. Afterwards, and in
its proper place, I shall speak of what is called the optimism
of Dickens, and of whether it was really too cheerful or too smooth.
But this boyhood of his may be recorded now as a mere fact.
If he was too happy, this was where he learnt it. If his school

of thought was a vulgar optimism, this is where he went to school. If he learnt to whitewash the universe, it was in a blacking factory that he learnt it.

As a fact, there is no shred of evidence to show that those who have had sad experiences tend to have a sad philosophy. There are numberless points upon which Dickens is spiritually at one with the poor, that is, with the great mass of mankind. But there is no point in which he is more perfectly at one with them than in showing that there is no kind of connection between a man being unhappy and a man being pessimistic. Sorrow and pessimism are indeed, in a sense, opposite things, since sorrow is founded on the value of something, and pessimism upon the value of nothing. And in practice we find that those poets or political leaders who come from the people, and whose experiences have really been searching and cruel, are the most sanguine people in the world. These men out of the old agony are always optimists; they are sometimes offensive optimists. A man like Robert Burns, whose father (like Dickens's father) goes bankrupt, whose whole life is a struggle against miserable external powers and internal weaknesses yet more miserable—

a man whose life begins grey and ends black—Burns does not merely sing about the goodness of life, he positively rants and cants about it. Rousseau, whom all his friends and acquaintances treated almost as badly as he treated them—Rousseau does not grow merely eloquent, he grows gushing and sentimental, about the inherent goodness of human nature. Charles Dickens, who was most miserable at the receptive age when most people are most happy, is afterwards happy when all men weep. Circumstances break men's bones; it has never been shown that they break men's optimism. These great popular leaders do all kinds of desperate things under the immediate scourge of tragedy. They become drunkards; they become demagogues; they become morphomaniacs. They never become pessimists. Most unquestionably there are ragged and unhappy men whom we could easily understand being pessimists. But as a matter of fact they are not pessimists. Most unquestionably there are whole dim hordes of humanity whom we should promptly pardon if they cursed God. But they don't. The pessimists are aristocrats like Byron; the men who curse God are aristocrats like Swinburne. But when those who starve and suffer speak for a moment, they do not profess merely an optimism, they profess

a cheap optimism; they are too poor to afford a dear one.

They cannot indulge in any detailed or merely logical defence of life;

that would be to delay the enjoyment of it. These higher optimists,

of whom Dickens was one, do not approve of the universe;

they do not even admire the universe; they fall in love with it.

They embrace life too close to criticise or even to see it.

Existence to such men has the wild beauty of a woman, and those

love her with most intensity who love her with least cause.

CHAPTER III

THE YOUTH OF DICKENS

There are popular phrases so picturesque that even when they are intentionally funny they are unintentionally poetical. I remember, to take one instance out of many, hearing a heated Secularist in Hyde Park apply to some parson or other the exquisite expression, “a sky-pilot.” Subsequent inquiry has taught me that the term is intended to be comic and even contemptuous; but in the first freshness of it I went home repeating it to myself like a new poem. Few of the pious legends have conceived so strange and yet celestial a picture as this of a pilot in the sky, leaning on his helm above the empty heavens, and carrying his cargo of souls higher than the loneliest cloud. The phrase is like a lyric of Shelley. Or, to take another instance from another language, the French have an incomparable idiom for a boy playing truant; “Il fait l’école buissonnière”—he goes to the bushy school, or the school among the bushes. How admirably this accidental expression, “the bushy school” (not to be lightly confounded with the Art School at Bushey)—

how admirably this “bushy school” expresses half the modern notions of a more natural education! The two words express the whole poetry of Wordsworth, the whole philosophy of Thoreau, and are quite as good literature as either.

Now, among a million of such scraps of inspired slang there is one which describes a certain side of Dickens better than pages of explanation. The phrase, appropriately enough, occurs at least once in his works, and that on a fitting occasion. When Job Trotter is sent by Sam on a wild chase after Mr. Perker, the solicitor, Mr. Perker’s clerk condoles with Job upon the lateness of the hour, and the fact that all habitable places are shut up. “My friend,” says Mr. Perker’s clerk, “you’ve got the key of the street.” Mr. Perker’s clerk, who was a flippant and scornful young man, may perhaps be pardoned if he used this expression in a flippant and scornful sense; but let us hope that Dickens did not. Let us hope that Dickens saw the strange, yet satisfying, imaginative justice of the words; for Dickens himself had, in the most sacred and serious sense of the term, the key of the street. When we shut ‘out anything, we are shut out of that thing. When we shut out the street, we are shut out of the street.

Few of us understand the street. Even when we step into it,
as into a house or room of strangers. Few of us see through
the shining riddle of the street, the strange folk that belong to
the street only—the street-walker or the street-arab, the nomads who,
generation after generation, have kept their ancient secrets
in the full blaze of the sun. Of the street at night many of us
know even less. The street at night is a great house locked up.
But Dickens had, if ever man had, the key of the street;
his stars were the lamps of the street; his hero was the man
in the street. He could open the inmost door of his house—
the door that leads into that secret passage which is lined
with houses and roofed with stars.

This silent transformation into a citizen of the street
took place during those dark days of boyhood, when Dickens
was drudging at the factory. When ever he had done drudging,
he had no other resource but drifting, and he drifted
over half London. He was a dreamy child, thinking mostly
of his own dreary prospects. Yet he saw and remembered much
of the streets and squares he passed. Indeed, as a matter
of fact, he went the right way to work unconsciously to do so.

He did not go in for “observation,” a priggish habit;
he did not look at Charing Cross to improve his mind or count
the lamp-posts in Holborn to practise his arithmetic.
But unconsciously he made all these places the scenes
of the monstrous drama in his miserable little soul.
He walked in darkness under the lamps of Holborn, and was
crucified at Charing Cross. So for him ever afterwards
these places had the beauty that only belongs to battlefields.
For our memory never fixes the facts which we have merely observed.
The only way to remember a place for ever is to live in the place
for an hour; and the only way to live in the place for an hour
is to forget the place for an hour. The undying scenes we can
all see if we shut our eyes are not the scenes that we have
stared at under the direction of guide-books; the scenes we
see are the scenes at which we did not look at all—the scenes
in which we walked when we were thinking about something else—
about a sin, or a love affair, or some childish sorrow.
We can see the background now because we did not see it then.
So Dickens did not stamp these places on his mind; he stamped
his mind on these places. For him ever afterwards these streets
were mortally romantic; they were dipped in the purple dyes

of youth and its tragedy, and rich with irrevocable sunsets.

Herein is the whole secret of that eerie realism with which Dickens could always vitalise some dark or dull corner of London. There are details in the Dickens descriptions—a window, or a railing, or the keyhole of a door—which he endows with demoniac life. The things seem more actual than things really are. Indeed, that degree of realism does not exist in reality; it is the unbearable realism of a dream. And this kind of realism can only be gained by walking dreamily in a place; it cannot be gained by walking observantly. Dickens himself has given a perfect instance of how these nightmare minuti grew upon him in his trance of abstraction. He mentions among the coffee-shops into which he crept in those wretched days one in St. Martin's Lane, "of which I only recollect it stood near the church, and that in the door there was an oval glass plate with 'COFFEE ROOM' painted on it, addressed towards the street. If I ever find myself in a very different kind of coffee-room now, but where there is an inscription on glass, and read it backwards on the wrong side, MOOR EEFFOC (as I often used to do then in a dismal reverie), a shock goes through my blood." That wild word, "Moor Eeffoc," is the motto of all effective realism;

it is the masterpiece of the good realistic principle—the principle
that the most fantastic thing of all is often the precise fact.
And that elfish kind of realism Dickens adopted everywhere.
His world was alive with inanimate object. The date on the door
danced over Mr. Grewgious's, the knocker grinned at Mr. Scrooge,
the Roman on the ceiling pointed down at Mr. Tulkinghorn, the elderly
armchair leered at Tom Smart—these are all moor eeffocish things.
A man sees them because he does not look at them.

And so the little Dickens Dickensised London. He prepared
the way for all his personages. Into whatever cranny of our city
his characters might crawl, Dickens had been there before them.
However wild were the events he narrated as outside him,
they could not be wilder than the things that had gone on within.
However queer a character of Dickens might be, he could
hardly be queerer than Dickens was. The whole secret of his
after-writings is sealed up in those silent years of which no
written word remains. Those years did him harm perhaps,
as his biographer, Forster, has thoughtfully suggested,
by sharpening a certain fierce individualism in him which once
or twice during his genial life flashed like a half-hidden knife.

He was always generous; but things had gone too hardly with him for him to be always easy-going. He was always kind-hearted; he was not always good-humoured. Those years may also, in their strange mixture of morbidity and reality, have increased in him his tendency to exaggeration. But we can scarcely lament this in a literary sense; exaggeration is almost the definition of art—and it is entirely the definition of Dickens's art. Those years may have given him many moral and mental wounds, from which he never recovered. But they gave him the key of the street.

There is a weird contradiction in the soul of the born optimist. He can be happy and unhappy at the same time. With Dickens the practical depression of his life at this time did nothing to prevent him from laying up those hilarious memories of which all his books are made. No doubt he was genuinely unhappy in the poor place where his mother kept school. Nevertheless it was there that he noticed the unfathomable quaintness of the little servant whom he made into the Marchioness. No doubt he was comfortless enough at the boarding-house of Mrs. Roylance; but he perceived with a dreadful joy that Mrs. Roylance's name was Pipchin. There seems to be no incompatibility between taking

in tragedy and giving out comedy; they are able to run parallel
in the same personality. One incident which he described in his
unfinished “autobiography,” and which he afterwards transferred almost
verbatim to David Copperfield, was peculiarly rich and impressive.
It was the inauguration of a petition to the King for a bounty,
drawn up by a committee of the prisoners in the Marshalsea,
a committee of which Dickens’s father was the president, no doubt
in virtue of his oratory, and also the scribe no doubt in virtue
of his genuine love of literary flights.

“As many of the principal officers of this body as could be got
into a small room without filling it up, supported him in front
of the petition; and my old friend, Captain Porter (who had washed
himself to do honour to so solemn an occasion), stationed himself close
to it, to read it to all who were unacquainted with its contents.
The door was then thrown open, and they began to come in in a long file;
several waiting on the landing outside, while one entered,
affixed his signature, and went out. To everybody in succession
Captain Porter said, ‘Would you like to hear it read?’
If he weakly showed the least disposition to hear it,
Captain Porter in a loud sonorous voice gave him every word of it.

I remember a certain luscious roll he gave to such words
as ‘Majesty—Gracious Majesty—Your Gracious Majesty’s
unfortunate subjects—Your Majesty’s well-known munificence,’
as if the words were something real in his mouth and delicious to taste:
my poor father meanwhile listening with a little of an author’s vanity
and contemplating (not severely) the spike on the opposite wall.
Whatever was comical or pathetic in this scene, I sincerely
believe I perceived in my corner, whether I demonstrated
it or not, quite as well as I should perceive it now.
I made out my own little character and story for every man who put
his name to the sheet of paper.”

Here we see very plainly that Dickens did not merely look back
in after days and see that these humours had been delightful.
He was delighted at the same moment that he was desperate.
The two opposite things existed in him simultaneously, and each
in its full strength. His soul was not a mixed colour like grey
and purple, caused by no component colour being quite itself.
His soul was like a shot silk of black and crimson, a shot silk
of misery and joy.

Seen from the outside, his little pleasures and extravagances seem more pathetic than his grief. Once the solemn little figure went into a public-house in Parliament Street, and addressed the man behind the bar in the following terms—"What is your very best—the VERY best ale a glass?" The man replied, "Twopence." "Then," said the infant, "just draw me a glass of that, if you please, with a good head to it." "The landlord," says Dickens, in telling the story, "looked at me in return over the bar from head to foot with a strange smile on his face; and instead of drawing the beer looked round the screen and said something to his wife, who came out from behind it with her work in her hand and joined him in surveying me. … They asked me a good many questions as to what my name was, how old I was, where I lived, how I was employed, etc., *etc.* To all of which, that I might commit nobody, I invented appropriate answers. They served me with the ale, though I suspect it was not the strongest on the premises; and the landlord's wife, opening the little half-door, and bending down, gave me a kiss." Here he touches that other side of common life which he was chiefly to champion; he was to show that there is no ale like the ale of a poor man's festival, and no pleasures like the pleasures of the poor.

At other places of refreshment he was yet more majestic.
“I remember,” he says, “tucking my own bread (which I had brought
from home in the morning) under my arm, wrapt up in a piece
of paper like a book, and going into the best dining-room
in Johnson’s Alamode Beef House in Clare Court, Drury Lane,
and magnificently ordering a small plate of -la-mode beef to eat
with it. What the waiter thought of such a strange little apparition
coming in all alone I don’t know; but I can see him now staring
at me as I ate my dinner, and bringing up the other waiter to look.
I gave him a halfpenny, and I wish, now, that he hadn’t taken it.”

For the boy individually the prospect seemed to be growing drearier
and drearier. This phrase indeed hardly expresses the fact; for, as he
felt it, it was not so much a run of worsening luck as the closing in of
a certain and quiet calamity like the coming on of twilight and dark.
He felt that he would die and be buried in blacking. Through all this
he does not seem to have said much to his parents of his distress.
They who were in prison had certainly a much jollier time than
he who was free. But of all the strange ways in which the human
being proves that he is not a rational being, whatever else he is,
no case is so mysterious and unaccountable as the secrecy of childhood.

We learn of the cruelty of some school or child-factory from journalists;
we learn it from inspectors, we learn it from doctors, we learn
it even from shame-stricken schoolmasters and repentant sweaters;
but we never learn it from the children; we never learn it from
the victims. It would seem as if a living creature had to be taught,
like an art of culture, the art of crying out when it is hurt.
It would seem as if patience were the natural thing; it would seem
as if impatience were an accomplishment like whist. However this may be,
it is wholly certain that Dickens might have drudged and died drudging,
and buried the unborn Pickwick, but for an external accident.

He was, as has been said, in the habit of visiting his father
at the Marshalsea every week. The talks between the two must
have been a comedy at once more cruel and more delicate than
Dickens ever described. Meredith might picture the comparison
between the child whose troubles were so childish, but who felt
them like a damned spirit, and the middle-aged man whose
trouble was final ruin, and who felt it no more than a baby.
Once, it would appear, the boy broke down altogether—
perhaps under the unbearable buoyancy of his oratorical papa—
and implored to be freed from the factory—implored it,

I fear, with a precocious and almost horrible eloquence.
The old optimist was astounded—too much astounded to do anything in particular. Whether the incident had really anything to do with what followed cannot be decided, but ostensibly it had not. Ostensibly the cause of Charles's ultimate liberation was a quarrel between his father and Lamert, the head of the factory. Dickens the elder (who had at last left the Marshalsea) could no doubt conduct a quarrel with the magnificence of Micawber; the result of this talent, at any rate, was to leave Mr. Lamert in a towering rage. He had a stormy interview with Charles, in which he tried to be good-tempered to the boy, but could hardly master his tongue about the boy's father. Finally he told him he must go, and with every observance the little creature was solemnly expelled from hell.

His mother, with a touch of strange harshness, was for patching up the quarrel and sending him back. Perhaps, with the fierce feminine responsibility, she felt that the first necessity was to keep the family out of debt. But old John Dickens put his foot down here—put his foot down with that ringing but very rare decision with which (once in ten years, and often on some trivial matter) the weakest

man will overwhelm the strongest woman. The boy was miserable; the boy was clever; the boy should go to school. The boy went to school; he went to the Wellington House Academy, Mornington Place. It was an odd experience for anyone to go from the world to a school, instead of going from school to the world. Dickens, we may say, had his boyhood after his youth. He had seen life at its coarsest before he began his training for it, and knew the worst words in the English language probably before the best.

This odd chronology, it will be remembered, he retained in his semi-autobiographical account of the adventures of David Copperfield, who went into the business of Murdstone and Grinby's before he went to the school kept by Dr. Strong. David Copperfield, also, went to be carefully prepared for a world that he had seen already.

Outside David Copperfield, the records of Dickens at this time reduce themselves to a few glimpses provided by accidental companions of his schooldays, and little can be deduced from them about his personality beyond a general impression of sharpness and, perhaps, of bravado, of bright eyes and bright speeches.

Probably the young creature was recuperating himself for his misfortunes, was making the most of his liberty, was flapping the wings of that wild spirit that had just not been broken. We hear of things

that sound suddenly juvenile after his maturer troubles, of a secret language sounding like mere gibberish, and of a small theatre, with paint and red fire; such as that which Stevenson loved. It was not an accident that Dickens and Stevenson loved it. It is a stage unsuited for psychological realism; the cardboard characters cannot analyze each other with any effect. But it is a stage almost divinely suited for making surroundings, for making that situation and background which belongs peculiarly to romance. A toy theatre, in fact, is the opposite of private theatricals. In the latter you can do anything with the people if you do not ask much from the scenery; in the former you can do anything in scenery if you do not ask much from the people. In a toy theatre you could hardly manage a modern dialogue on marriage, but the Day of Judgment would be quite easy.

After leaving school, Dickens found employment as a clerk to Mr. Blackmore, a solicitor, as one of those inconspicuous under-clerks whom he afterwards turned to many grotesque uses. Here, no doubt, he met Lowten and Swiveller, Chuckster and Wobbler, in so far as such sacred creatures ever had embodiments on this lower earth. But it is typical of him that he had no fancy at all to remain a solicitor’s clerk.

The resolution to rise which had glowed in him even as a dawdling boy,
when he gazed at Gads-hill, which had been darkened but not quite
destroyed by his fall into the factory routine, which had been released
again by his return to normal boyhood and the boundaries of school,
was not likely to content itself now with the copying out of agreements.
He set to work, without any advice or help, to learn to be a reporter.
He worked all day at law, and all night at shorthand. It is an art
which can only be effected by time, and he had to effect it by overtime.
But learning the thing under every disadvantage, without a teacher,
without the possibility of concentration or complete mental force
without ordinary human sleep, he made himself one of the most rapid
reporters then alive. There is a curious contrast between the casualness
of the mental training to which his parents and others subjected him
and the savage seriousness of the training to which he subjected himself.
Somebody once asked old John Dickens where his son Charles was educated.
“Well, really,” said the great creature, in his spacious way, “he may
be said—ah—to have educated himself.” He might indeed.

This practical intensity of Dickens is worth our dwelling on,
because it illustrates an elementary antithesis in his character,
or what appears as an antithesis in our modern popular psychology.

We are always talking about strong men against weak men;
but Dickens was not only both a weak man and a strong man,
he was a very weak man and also a very strong man.
He was everything that we currently call a weak man;
he was a man hung on wires; he was a man who might at any moment
cry like a child; he was so sensitive to criticism that one may
say that he lacked a skin; he was so nervous that he allowed
great tragedies in his life to arise only out of nerves.
But in the matter where all ordinary strong men are miserably weak—
in the matter of concentrated toil and clear purpose and
unconquerable worldly courage—he was like a straight sword.
Mrs. Carlyle, who in her human epithets often hit the right nail
so that it rang, said of him once, “He has a face made of steel.”
This was probably felt in a flash when she saw, in some social crowd,
the clear, eager face of Dickens cutting through those near him
like a knife. Any people who had met him from year to year would
each year have found a man weakly troubled about his worldly decline;
and each year they would have found him higher up in the world.
His was a character very hard for any man of slow and placable
temperament to understand; he was the character whom anybody
can hurt and nobody can kill.

When he began to report in the House of Commons he was still only nineteen. His father, who had been released from his prison a short time before Charles had been released from his, had also become, among many other things, a reporter. But old John Dickens could enjoy doing anything without any particular aspiration after doing it well. But Charles was of a very different temper. He was, as I have said, consumed with an enduring and almost angry thirst to excel. He learnt shorthand with a dark self-devotion as if it were a sacred hieroglyph. Of this self-instruction, as of everything else, he has left humorous and illuminating phrases. He describes how, after he had learnt the whole exact alphabet, “there then appeared a procession of new horrors, called arbitrary characters—the most despotic characters I have ever known; who insisted for instance, that a thing like the beginning of a cobweb meant ‘expectation,’ and that a pen-and-ink sky rocket stood for ‘disadvantageous.’” He concludes, “It was almost heartbreaking.” But it is significant that somebody else, a colleague of his, concluded, “There never was such a shorthand writer.”

Dickens succeeded in becoming a shorthand writer; succeeded in

becoming a reporter; succeeded ultimately in becoming a highly effective journalist. He was appointed as a reporter of the speeches in Parliament, first by The True Son, then by The Mirror of Parliament, and last by The Morning Chronicle. He reported the speeches very well, and if we must analyze his internal opinions, much better than they deserved. For it must be remembered that this lad went into the reporter's gallery full of the triumphant Radicalism which was then the rising tide of the world. He was, it must be confessed, very little overpowered by the dignity of the Mother of Parliaments; he regarded the House of Commons much as he regarded the House of Lords, as a sort of venerable joke. It was, perhaps, while he watched, pale with weariness from the reporter's gallery, that there sank into him a thing that never left him, his unfathomable contempt for the British Constitution. Then perhaps he heard from the Government benches the immortal apologies of the Circumlocution Office. "Then would the noble lord or right honourable gentleman, in whose department it was to defend the Circumlocution Office, put an orange in his pocket, and make a regular field-day of the occasion. Then would he come down to that house with a slap upon the table and meet the honourable gentleman foot to foot. Then would he be there to tell that honourable gentleman that the Circumlocution Office

was not only blameless in this matter, but was commendable
in this matter, was extollable to the skies in this matter.
Then would he be there to tell that honourable gentleman that although
the Circumlocution Office was invariably right, and wholly right,
it never was so right in this matter. Then would he be there to tell
the honourable gentleman that it would have been more to his honour,
more to his credit, more to his good taste, more to his good sense,
more to half the dictionary of common places if he had left
the Circumlocution Office alone and never approached this matter.
Then would he keep one eye upon a coach or crammer from the
Circumlocution Office below the bar, and smash the honourable
gentleman with the Circumlocution Office account of this matter.
And although one of two things always happened; namely, either that
the Circumlocution Office had nothing to say, and said it, or that it had
something to say of which the noble lord or right honourable gentleman
blundered one half and forgot the other; the Circumlocution Office
was always voted immaculate by an accommodating majority."
We are now generally told that Dickens has destroyed these abuses,
and that this is no longer a true picture of public life.
Such, at any rate; is the Circumlocution Office account of this matter.
But Dickens as a good Radical would, I fancy, much prefer that we

should continue his battle than that we should celebrate his triumph; especially when it has not come. England is still ruled by the great Barnacle family. Parliament is still ruled by the great Barnacle trinity—the solemn old Barnacle who knew that the Circumlocution Office was protection, the sprightly young Barnacle who knew that it was a fraud, and the bewildered young Barnacle who knew nothing about it. From these three types our Cabinets are still exclusively recruited.

People talk of the tyrannies and anomalies which Dickens denounced as things of the past like the Star Chamber. They believe that the days of the old stupid optimism and the old brutal indifference are gone for ever. In truth, this very belief is only the countenance of the old stupid optimism and the old brutal indifference.

We believe in a free England and a pure England, because we still believe in the Circumlocution Office account of this matter. Undoubtedly our serenity is wide-spread. We believe that England is really reformed, we believe that England is really democratic, we believe that English politics are free from corruption.

But this general satisfaction of ours does not show that Dickens has beaten the Barnacles. It only shows that the Barnacles have beaten Dickens.

It cannot be too often said, then, that we must read into young Dickens and his works this old Radical tone towards institutions. That tone was a sort of happy impatience. And when Dickens had to listen for hours to the speech of the noble lord in defence of the Circumlocution Office, when, that is, he had to listen to what he regarded as the last vapourings of a vanishing oligarchy, the impatience rather predominated over the happiness.

His incurably restless nature found more pleasure in the wandering side of journalism. He went about wildly in post-chaises to report political meetings for the Morning Chronicle. “And what gentlemen they were to serve,” he exclaimed, “in such things at the old Morning Chronicle. Great or small it did not matter. I have had to charge for half a dozen breakdowns in half a dozen times as many miles. I have had to charge for the damage of a great-coat from the drippings of a blazing wax candle, in writing through the smallest hours of the night in a swift flying carriage and pair.” And again, “I have often transcribed for the printer from my shorthand notes important public speeches in which the strictest accuracy was required, and a mistake in which would have been to a young man severely compromising, writing on the palm of my hand, by the light of a dark lantern,

in a post-chaise and four, galloping through a wild country
and through the dead of the night, at the then surprising rate
of fifteen miles an hour." The whole of Dickens's life goes
with the throb of that nocturnal gallop. All its real wildness
shot through with an imaginative wickedness he afterwards uttered
in the drive of Jonas Chuzzlewit through the storm.

All this time, and indeed, from a time of which no measure can be taken,
the creative part of his mind had been in a stir or even a fever.
While still a small boy he had written for his own amusement some
sketches of queer people he had met; notably, one of his uncle's barber,
whose principal hobby was pointing out what Napoleon ought to
have done in the matter of military tactics. He had a note-book
full of such sketches. He had sketches not only of persons,
but of places, which were to him almost more personal than persons.
In the December of 1833 he published one of these fragments
in the Old Monthly Magazine. This was followed by nine others
in the same paper, and when the paper (which was a romantically
Radical venture, run by a veteran soldier of Bolivar) itself collapsed,
Dickens continued the series in the Evening Chronicle, an offshoot
of the morning paper of the same name. These were the pieces afterwards

published and known as the “Sketches by Boz”; and with them Dickens enters literature. He also enters upon many things about this time; he enters manhood, and among other things marriage. A friend of his on the Chronicle, George Hogarth, had several daughters. With all of them Dickens appears to have been on terms of great affection. This sketch is wholly literary, and I do not feel it necessary to do more than touch upon such incidents as his marriage, just I shall do no more than touch upon the tragedy that ultimately overtook it. But it may be suggested here that the final misfortunes were in some degree due to the circumstances attending the original action. A very young man fighting his way, and excessively poor, with no memories for years past that were not monotonous and mean, and with his strongest and most personal memories quite ignominious and unendurable, was suddenly thrown into the society of a whole family of girls. I think it does not overstate his weakness, and I think it partly constitutes his excuse, to say that he fell in love with the chance of love. As sometimes happens in the undeveloped youth, an abstract femininity simply intoxicated him. In what came afterwards he was enormously to blame. But I do not think that his was a case of cold division from a woman whom he had once seriously and singly loved. He had been bewildered in a burning haze,

I will not say even of first love, but of first flirtations.
The whole family stimulated him before he fell in love with one of them;
and it continued to stimulate him long after he had quarrelled
with her for causes that did not even destroy his affection for her.
This view is strikingly supported by all the details of his attitude
towards all the other members of the sacred house of Hogarth. One of
the sisters remained, of course, his dearest friend till death.
Another who had died, he worshipped like a saint, and he always
asked to be buried in her grave. He was married on April 2, 1836.
Forster remarks that a few days before the announcement of their
marriage in the Times, the same paper contained another announcement
that on the 31st would be published the first number of a work called
“The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club.” It is the beginning
of his career.

The “Sketches,” apart from splendid splashes of humour here
and there, are not manifestations of the man of genius.
We might almost say that this book is one of the few books
by Dickens which would not, standing alone, have made his fame.
And yet standing alone it did make his fame. His contemporaries
could see a new spirit in it, where we, familiar with the larger

fruits of that spirit, can only see a continuation of the prosaic and almost wooden wit of the comic books of that day.

But in any case we should hardly look in the man's first book for the fulness of his contribution to letters. Youth is almost everything else, but it is hardly ever original. We read of young men bursting on the old world with a new message. But youth in actual experience is the period of imitation and even of obedience. Subjectively its emotions may be furious and headlong; but its only external outcome is a furious imitation and a headlong obedience. As we grow older we learn the special thing we have to do. As a man goes on towards the grave he discovers gradually a philosophy he can really call fresh, a style he can really call his own, and as he becomes an older man he becomes a new writer. Ibsen, in his youth, wrote almost classic plays about vikings; it was in his old age that he began to break windows and throw fireworks. The only fault, it was said, of Browning's first poems was that they had "too much beauty of imagery, and too little wealth of thought." The only fault, that is, of Browning's first poems, was that they were not Browning's.

In one way, however, the "Sketches by Boz" do stand out

very symbolically in the life of Dickens. They constitute
in a manner the dedication of him to his especial task;
the sympathetic and yet exaggerated painting of the poorer
middle-class. He was to make men feel that this dull middle-class
was actually a kind of elf-land. But here, again, the work
is rude and undeveloped; and this is shown in the fact that it
is a great deal more exaggerative than it is sympathetic.
We are not, of course, concerned with the kind of people
who say that they wish that Dickens was more refined.
If those people are ever refined it will be by fire.
But there is in this earliest work, an element which almost
vanished in the later ones, an element which is typical
of the middle-classes in England, and which is in a more real
sense to be called vulgar. I mean that in these little farces
there is a trace in the author as well as in the characters,
of that petty sense of social precedence, that hubbub of little
unheard-of oligarchies, which is the only serious sin of
bourgeoisie of Britain. It may seem pragmatical, for example,
to instance such rowdy farce as the story of Horatio Sparkins,
which tells how a tuft-hunting family entertained a rhetorical youth
thinking he was a lord, and found he was a draper’s assistant.

No doubt they were very snobbish in thinking that a lord must be eloquent; but we cannot help feeling that Dickens is almost equally snobbish in feeling it so very funny that a draper's assistant should be eloquent. A free man, one would think, would despise the family quite as much if Horatio had been a peer. Here, and here only, there is just a touch of the vulgarity, of the only vulgarity of the world out of which Dickens came. For the only element of lowness that there really is in our populace is exactly that they are full of superiorities and very conscious of class. Shades, imperceptible to the eyes of others, but as hard and haughty as a Brahmin caste, separate one kind of charwoman from another kind of charwoman. Dickens was destined to show with inspired symbolism all the immense virtues of the democracy. He was to show them as the most humorous part of our civilisation; which they certainly are. He was to show them as the most promptly and practically compassionate part of our civilisation; which they certainly are. The democracy has a hundred exuberant good qualities; the democracy has only one outstanding sin—it is not democratic.

CHAPTER IV

"THE PICKWICK PAPERS"

Round the birth of "Pickwick" broke one of those literary quarrels that were too common in the life of Dickens. Such quarrels indeed generally arose from some definite mistake or misdemeanour on the part of somebody else; but they were also made possible by an indefinite touchiness and susceptibility in Dickens himself. He was so sensitive on points of personal authorship that even his sacred sense of humour deserted him. He turned people into mortal enemies whom he might have turned very easily into immortal jokes. It was not that he was lawless; in a sense it was that he was too legal; but he did not understand the principle of de minimis non curat lex. Anybody could draw him; any fool could make a fool of him. Any obscure madman who chose to say that he had written the whole of "Martin Chuzzlewit"; any penny-a-liner who chose to say that Dickens wore no shirt-collar, could call forth the most passionate and public denials as of a man pleading "not guilty" to witchcraft or high treason. Hence the letters of Dickens are filled with a certain singular type of quarrels and complaints,

quarrels and complaints in which one cannot say that he was on
the wrong side, but that merely even in being on the right side
he was in the wrong place. He was not only a generous man,
he was even a just man; to have made against anybody a charge
or claim which was unfair would have been insupportable to him.
His weakness was that he found the unfair claim or charge,
however small, equally insupportable when brought against himself.
No one can say of him that he was often wrong; we can only say
of him as of many pugnacious people, that he was too often right.

The incidents attending the inauguration of “The Pickwick Papers”
are not, perhaps, a perfect example of this trait, because Dickens
was here a hand-to-mouth journalist, and the blow might possibly have
been more disabling than those struck at him in his days of triumph.
But all through those days of triumph, and to the day of his death,
Dickens took this old tea-cup tempest with the most terrible gravity,
drew up declarations, called witnesses, preserved pulverising documents,
and handed on to his children the forgotten folly as if it had been
a Highland feud. Yet the unjust claim made on him was so much
more ridiculous even than it was unjust, that it seems strange that
he should have remembered it for a month except for his amusement.

The facts are simple and familiar to most people. The publishers—Chapman & Hall—wished to produce some kind of serial with comic illustrations by a popular caricaturist named Seymour. This artist was chiefly famous for his rendering of the farcical side of sport, and to suit this speciality it was very vaguely suggested to Dickens by the publishers that he should write about a Nimrod Club, or some such thing, a club of amateur sportsmen, foredoomed to perpetual ignominies. Dickens objected in substance upon two very sensible grounds—first, that sporting sketches were stale; and second, that he knew nothing about sport. He changed the idea to that of a general club for travel and investigation, the Pickwick Club, and only retained one fated sportsman, Mr. Winkle, the melancholy remnant of the Nimrod Club that never was.

The first seven pictures appeared with the signature of Seymour and the letter press of Dickens, and in them Winkle and his woes were fairly, but not extraordinarily prominent.

Before the eighth picture appeared Seymour had blown his brains out.

After a brief interval of the employment of a man named Buss, Dickens obtained the assistance of Hablot K. Browne, whom we all call “Phiz,” and may almost, in a certain sense, be said to have gone into partnership with him. They were as suited

to each other and to the common creation of a unique thing as Gilbert and Sullivan. No other illustrator ever created the true Dickens characters with the precise and correct quantum of exaggeration. No other illustrator ever breathed the true Dickens atmosphere, in which clerks are clerks and yet at the same time elves.

To the tame mind the above affair does not seem to offer anything very promising in the way of a row. But Seymour's widow managed to evolve out of it the proposition that somehow or other her husband had written "Pickwick," or, at least, had been responsible for the genius and success of it. It does not appear that she had anything at all resembling a reason for this opinion except the unquestionable fact that the publishers had started with the idea of employing Seymour. This was quite true, and Dickens (who over and above his honesty was far too quarrelsome a man not to try and keep in the right, and who showed a sort of fierce carefulness in telling the truth in such cases) never denied it or attempted to conceal it. It was quite true, that at the beginning, instead of Seymour being employed to illustrate Dickens, Dickens may be said to have been employed to illustrate Seymour. But that Seymour invented

anything in the letterpress large or small, that he invented either the outline of Mr. Pickwick's character, or the number of Mr. Pickwick's cabman, that he invented either the story, or so much as a semi-colon in the story was not only never proved, but was never very lucidly alleged. Dickens fills his letters with all that there is to be said against Mrs. Seymour's idea; it is not very clear whether there was anything definitely said for it.

Upon the mere superficial fact and law of the affair, Dickens ought to have been superior to this silly business. But in a much deeper and a much more real sense he ought to have been superior to it. It did not really touch him or his greatness at all, even as an abstract allegation. If Seymour had started the story, had provided Dickens with his puppets, Tupman or Jingle, Dickens would still have been Dickens and Seymour only Seymour. As a matter of fact, it happened to be a contemptible lie, but it would have been an equally contemptible truth. For the fact is that the greatness of Dickens and especially the greatness of Pickwick is not of a kind that could be affected by somebody else suggesting the first idea. It could not be affected by somebody else writing the first chapter.

If it could be shown that another man had suggested to Hawthorne (let us say) the primary conception of “The Scarlet Letter,” Hawthorne who worked it out would still be an exquisite workman; but he would be by so much less a creator. But in a case like Pickwick there is a simple test. If Seymour gave Dickens the main idea of Pickwick, what was it? There is no primary conception of Pickwick for anyone to suggest. Dickens not only did not get the general plan from Seymour, he did not get it at all. In Pickwick, and, indeed, in Dickens, generally it is in the details that the author is creative, it is in the details that he is vast. The power of the book lies in the perpetual torrent of ingenious and inventive treatment; the theme (at least at the beginning) simply does not exist. The idea of Tupman, the fat lady-killer, is in itself quite dreary and vulgar; it is the detailed Tupman, as he is developed, who is unexpectedly amusing. The idea of Winkle, the clumsy sportsman, is in itself quite stale; it is as he goes on repeating himself that he becomes original. We hear of men whose imagination can touch with magic the dull facts of our life, but Dickens’s yet more indomitable fancy could touch with magic even our dull fiction. Before we are half-way through the book the stock characters of dead and damned farces astonish us like splendid strangers.

Seymour’s claim, then, viewed symbolically, was even a compliment.
It was true in spirit that Dickens obtained (or might have obtained)
the start of Pickwick from somebody else, from anybody else.
For he had a more gigantic energy than the energy of the
intense artist, the energy which is prepared to write something.
He had the energy which is prepared to write anything.
He could have finished any man’s tale. He could have breathed a mad
life into any man’s characters. If it had been true that Seymour
had planned out Pickwick, if Seymour had fixed the chapters and
named and numbered the characters, his slave would have shown even
in these shackles such a freedom as would have shaken the world.
If Dickens had been forced to make his incidents out of a chapter
in a child’s reading-book, or the names in a scrap of newspaper,
he would have turned them in ten pages into creatures of his own.
Seymour, as I say, was in a manner right in spirit.
Dickens would at this time get his materials from anywhere,
in the sense that he cared little what materials they were.
He would not have stolen; but if he had stolen he would never
have imitated. The power which he proceeded at once to exhibit
was the one power in letters which literally cannot be imitated,

the primary inexhaustible creative energy, the enormous prodigality of genius which no one but another genius could parody.
To claim to have originated an idea of Dickens is like claiming to have contributed one glass of water to Niagara. Wherever this stream or that stream started the colossal cataract of absurdity went roaring night and day. The volume of his invention overwhelmed all doubt of his inventiveness; Dickens was evidently a great man; unless he was a thousand men.

The actual circumstances of the writing and publishing of "Pickwick" shows that while Seymour's specific claim was absurd, Dickens's indignant exactitude about every jot and tittle of authorship was also inappropriate and misleading.
"The Pickwick Papers," when all is said and done, did emerge out of a haze of suggestions and proposals in which more than one person was involved. The publishers failed to base the story on a Nimrod Club, but they succeeded in basing it on a club.
Seymour, by virtue of his idiosyncrasy, if he did not create, brought about the creation of Mr. Winkle. Seymour sketched Mr. Pickwick as a tall, thin man. Mr. Chapman (apparently without any word from Dickens) boldly turned him into a short, fat man.

Chapman took the type from a corpulent old dandy named Foster, who wore tights and gaiters and lived at Richmond. In this sense, were we affected by this idle aspect of the thing, we might call Chapman the real originator of “Pickwick.” But as I have suggested, originating “Pickwick” is not the point. It was quite easy to originate “Pickwick.” The difficulty was to write it.

However such things may be, there can be no question of the result of this chaos. In “The Pickwick Papers” Dickens sprang suddenly from a comparatively low level to a very high one. To the level of “Sketches by Boz” he never afterwards descended. To the level of “The Pickwick Papers” it is doubtful if he ever afterwards rose. “Pickwick,” indeed, is not a good novel; but it is not a bad novel, for it is not a novel at all. In one sense, indeed, it is something nobler than a novel, for no novel with a plot and a proper termination could emit that sense of everlasting youth—a sense as of the gods gone wandering in England. This is not a novel, for all novels have an end; and “Pickwick,” properly speaking, has no end—he is equal unto the angels. The point at which, as a fact, we find the printed

matter terminates is not an end in any artistic sense of the word.
Even as a boy I believed there were some more pages that
were torn out of my copy, and I am looking for them still.
The book might have been cut short anywhere else. It might have
been cut short after Mr. Pickwick was released by Mr. Nupkins,
or after Mr. Pickwick was fished out of the water, or at a hundred
other places. And we should still have known that this was not
really the story's end. We should have known that Mr. Pickwick
was still having the same high adventures on the same high roads.
As it happens the book ends after Mr. Pickwick has taken a house
in the neighbourhood of Dulwich. But we know he did not stop there.
We know he broke out, that he took again the road of the high adventures;
we know that if we take it ourselves in any acre of England,
we may come suddenly upon him in a lane.

But this relation of "Pickwick" to the strict form of fiction
demands a further word, which should indeed be said in any case
before the consideration of any or all of the Dickens tales.
Dickens's work is not to be reckoned in novels at all.
Dickens's work is to be reckoned always by characters,
sometimes by groups, oftener by episodes, but never by novels.

You cannot discuss whether “Nicholas Nickleby” is a good novel, or whether “Our Mutual Friend” is a bad novel. Strictly, there is no such novel as “Nicholas Nickleby.” There is no such novel as “Our Mutual Friend.” They are simply lengths cut from the flowing and mixed substance called Dickens—a substance of which any given length will be certain to contain a given proportion of brilliant and of bad stuff. You can say, according to your opinions, “the Crummles part is perfect,” or “the Boffins are a mistake,” just as a man watching a river go by him could count here a floating flower, and there a streak of scum. But you cannot artistically divide the output into books. The best of his work can be found in the worst of his works. “The Tale of Two Cities” is a good novel; “Little Dorrit” is not a good novel. But the description of “The Circumlocution Office” in “Little Dorrit” is quite as good as the description of “Tellson’s Bank” in “The Tale of Two Cities.” “The Old Curiosity Shop” is not so good as “David Copperfield,” but Swiveller is quite as good as Micawber. Nor is there any reason why these superb creatures, as a general rule, should be in one novel any more than another. There is no reason why Sam Weller, in the course of his wanderings, should not wander into

“Nicholas Nickleby.” There is no reason why Major Bagstock,
in his brisk way, should not walk straight out of “Dombey and Son”
and straight into “Martin Chuzzlewit.” To this generalisation
some modification should be added. “Pickwick” stands by itself,
and has even a sort of unity in not pretending to unity.
“David Copperfield,” in a less degree, stands by itself,
as being the only book in which Dickens wrote of himself;
and “The Tale of Two Cities” stands by itself as being
the only book in which Dickens slightly altered himself.
But as a whole, this should be firmly grasped, that the units
of Dickens, the primary elements, are not the stories,
but the characters who affect the stories—or, more often still,
the characters who do not affect the stories.

This is a plain matter; but, unless it be stated and felt,
Dickens may be greatly misunderstood and greatly underrated.
For not only is his whole machinery directed to facilitating
the self-display of certain characters, but something
more deep and more unmodern still is also true of him.
It is also true that all the moving machinery exists only to display
entirely static character. Things in the Dickens story shift

and change only in order to give us glimpses of great characters that do not change at all. If we had a sequel of Pickwick ten years afterwards, Pickwick would be exactly the same age. We know he would not have fallen into that strange and beautiful second childhood which soothed and simplified the end of Colonel Newcome. Newcome, throughout the book, is in an atmosphere of time: Pickwick, throughout the book, is not. This will probably be taken by most modern people as praise of Thackeray and dispraise of Dickens. But this only shows how few modern people understand Dickens. It also shows how few understand the faiths and the fables of mankind. The matter can only be roughly stated in one way. Dickens did not strictly make a literature; he made a mythology.

For a few years our corner of Western Europe has had a fancy for this thing we call fiction; that is, for writing down our own lives or similar lives in order to look at them. But though we call it fiction, it differs from older literatures chiefly in being less fictitious. It imitates not only life, but the limitations of life it not only reproduces life, it reproduces death. But outside us, in every other country, in every other age, there has

been going on from the beginning a more fictitious kind of fiction.
I mean the kind now called folklore, the literature of the people.
Our modern novels, which deal with men as they are, are chiefly
produced by a small and educated section of society.
But this other literature deals with men greater than they are—
with demi-gods and heroes; and that is far too important a matter
to be trusted to the educated classes. The fashioning of these portents
is a popular trade, like ploughing or bricklaying; the men who
made hedges, the men who made ditches, were the men who made deities.
Men could not elect their kings, but they could elect their gods.
So we find ourselves faced with a fundamental contrast between what is
called fiction and what is called folklore. The one exhibits an abnormal
degree of dexterity operating within our daily limitations; the other
exhibits quite normal desires extended beyond those limitations.
Fiction means the common things as seen by the uncommon people.
Fairy tales mean the uncommon things as seen by the common people.

As our world advances through history towards its present epoch,
it becomes more specialist, less democratic, and folklore turns gradually
into fiction. But it is only slowly that the old elfin fire fades
into the light of common realism. For ages after our characters have

dressed up in the clothes of mortals they betray the blood of the gods.
Even our phraseology is full of relics of this. When a modern novel
is devoted to the bewilderments of a weak young clerk who cannot decide
which woman he wants to marry, or which new religion he believes in,
we still give this knock-kneed cad the name of “the hero”—the name which
is the crown of Achilles. The popular preference for a story with “a
happy ending” is not, or at least was not, a mere sweet-stuff optimism;
it is the remains of the old idea of the triumph of the dragon-slayer,
the ultimate apotheosis of the man beloved of heaven.

But there is another and more intangible trace of this
fading supernaturalism—a trace very vivid to the reader,
but very elusive to the critic. It is a certain air of
endlessness in the episodes, even in the shortest episodes—
a sense that, although we leave them, they still go on.
Our modern attraction to short stories is not an accident of form;
it is the sign of a real sense of fleetingness and fragility;
it means that existence is only an impression, and, perhaps,
only an illusion. A short story of to-day has the air of a dream;
it has the irrevocable beauty of a falsehood; we get a glimpse of grey
streets of London or red plains of India, as in an opium vision;

we see people—arresting people with fiery and appealing faces.
But when the story is ended, the people are ended. We have no
instinct of anything ultimate and enduring behind the episodes.
The moderns, in a word, describe life in short stories
because they are possessed with the sentiment that life itself
is an uncommonly short story, and perhaps not a true one.
But in this elder literature, even in the comic literature
(indeed, especially in the comic literature), the reverse is true.
The characters are felt to be fixed things of which we have
fleeting glimpses; that is, they are felt to be divine.
Uncle Toby is talking for ever, as the elves are dancing for ever.
We feel that whenever we hammer on the house of Falstaff, Falstaff
will be at home. We feel it as a Pagan would feel that,
if a cry broke the silence after ages of unbelief, Apollo would
still be listening in his temple. These writers may tell
short stories, but we feel they are only parts of a long story.
And herein lies the peculiar significance, the peculiar
sacredness even, of penny dreadfuls and the common printed matter
made for our errand-boys. Here in dim and desperate forms,
under the ban of our base culture, stormed at by silly magistrates,
sneered at by silly schoolmasters,—here is the old popular

literature still popular; here is the unmistakable voluminousness,
the thousand and one tales of Dick Deadshot, like the thousand and one
tales of Robin Hood. Here is the splendid and static boy, the boy
who remains a boy through a thousand volumes and a thousand years.
Here in mean alleys and dim shops, shadowed and shamed by
the police, mankind is still driving its dark trade in heroes.
And elsewhere, and in all other ages, in braver fashion,
under cleaner skies, the same eternal tale-telling goes on,
and the whole mortal world is a factory of immortals.

Dickens was a mythologist rather than a novelist; he was
the last of the mythologists, and perhaps the greatest.
He did not always manage to make his characters men,
but he always managed, at the least, to make them gods.
They are creatures like Punch or Father Christmas. They live
statically, in a perpetual summer of being themselves.
It was not the aim of Dickens to show the effect of time
and circumstance upon a character; it was not even his aim
to show the effect of a character on time and circumstance.
It is worth remark, in passing, that whenever he tried to describe
change in a character, he made a mess of it, as in the repentance

of Dombey or the apparent deterioration of Boffin. It was his aim to show character hung in a kind of happy void, in a world apart from time—yes, and essentially apart from circumstance, though the phrase may seem odd in connection with the godlike horse-play of “Pickwick.” But all the Pickwickian events, wild as they often are, were only designed to display the greater wildness of souls, or sometimes merely to bring the reader within touch, so to speak, of that wildness.

The author would have fired Mr. Pickwick out of a can non to get him to Wardle’s by Christmas; he would have taken the roof off to drop him into Bob Sawyer’s party.

But once put Pickwick at Wardle’s, with his punch and a group of gorgeous personalities, and nothing will move him from his chair. Once he is at Sawyer’s party, he forgets how he got there; he forgets Mrs. Bardell and all his story. For the story was but an incantation to call up a god, and the god (Mr. Jack Hopkins) is present in divine power. Once the great characters are face to face, the ladder by which they climbed is forgotten and falls down, the structure of the story drops to pieces, the plot is abandoned; the other characters deserted at every kind of crisis; the whole crowded thoroughfare of the tale is blocked by two

or three talkers, who take their immortal ease as if they
were already in Paradise. For they do not exist for the story;
the story exists for them; and they know it.

To every man alive, one must hope, it has in some manner
happened that he has talked with his more fascinating
friends round a table on some night when all the numerous
personalities unfolded themselves like great tropical flowers.
All fell into their parts as in some delightful impromptu play.
Every man was more himself than he had ever been in this vale
of tears. Every man was a beautiful caricature of himself.
The man who has known such nights will understand the exaggerations
of “Pickwick.” The man who has not known such nights will not
enjoy “Pickwick” nor (I imagine) heaven. For, as I have said,
Dickens is, in this matter, close to popular religion, which is
the ultimate and reliable religion. He conceives an endless joy;
he conceives creatures as permanent as Puck or Pan—creatures whose
will to live ons upon ons cannot satisfy. He is not come,
as a writer, that his creatures may copy life and copy its narrowness;
he is come that they may have life, and that they may have it
more abundantly. It is absurd indeed that Christians should be

called the enemies of life because they wish life to last for ever;
it is more absurd still to call the old comic writers dull
because they wished their unchanging characters to last for ever.
Both popular religion, with its endless joys, and the old comic story,
with its endless jokes, have in our time faded together.
We are too weak to desire that undying vigour. We believe
that you can have too much of a good thing—a blasphemous belief,
which at one blow wrecks all the heavens that men have hoped for.
The grand old defiers of God were not afraid of an eternity of torment.
We have come to be afraid of an eternity of joy. It is not my
business here to take sides in this division between those who like
life and long novels and those who like death and short stories;
my only business is to point out that those who see in Dickens's
unchanging characters and recurring catchwords a mere stiffness
and lack of living movement miss the point and nature of his work.
His tradition is another tradition altogether; his aim is another
aim altogether to those of the modern novelists who trace
the alchemy of experience and the autumn tints of character.
He is there, like the common people of all ages, to make deities;
he is there, as I have said, to exaggerate life in the direction
of life. The spirit he at bottom celebrates is that of two

friends drinking wine together and talking through the night.
But for him they are two deathless friends talking through an
endless night and pouring wine from an inexhaustible bottle.

This, then, is the first firm fact to grasp about “Pickwick”—
about “Pickwick” more than about any of the other stories.
It is, first and foremost, a supernatural story.
Mr. Pickwick was a fairy. So was old Mr. Weller. This does not
imply that they were suited to swing in a trapeze of gossamer;
it merely implies that if they had fallen out of it on their
heads they would not have died. But, to speak more strictly,
Mr. Samuel Pickwick is not the fairy; he is the fairy prince;
that is to say, he is the abstract wanderer and wonderer,
the Ulysses of comedy; the half-human and half-elfin creature—
human enough to wander, human enough to wonder, but still sustained
with that merry fatalism that is natural to immortal beings—
sustained by that hint of divinity which tells him in the darkest
hour that he is doomed to live happily ever afterwards.
He has set out walking to the end of the world, but he knows
he will find an inn there.

And this brings us to the best and boldest element of originality in “Pickwick.” It has not, I think, been observed, and it may be that Dickens did not observe it. Certainly he did not plan it; it grew gradually, perhaps out of the unconscious part of his soul, and warmed the whole story like a slow fire. Of course it transformed the whole story also; transformed it out of all likeness to itself. About this latter point was waged one of the numberless little wars of Dickens. It was a part of his pugnacious vanity that he refused to admit the truth of the mildest criticism. Moreover, he used his inexhaustible ingenuity to find an apologia that was generally an afterthought. Instead of laughingly admitting, in answer to criticism, the glorious improbability of Pecksniff, he retorted with a sneer, clever and very unjust, that he was not surprised that the Pecksniffs should deny the portrait of Pecksniff. When it was objected that the pride of old Paul Dombey breaks as abruptly as a stick, he tried to make out that there had been an absorbing psychological struggle going on in that gentleman all the time, which the reader was too stupid to perceive. Which is, I am afraid, rubbish. And so, in a similar vein, he answered those who pointed out to him the obvious and not very shocking fact that our sentiments about Pickwick are very different

in the second part of the book from our sentiments in the first; that we find ourselves at the beginning setting out in the company of a farcical old fool, if not a farcical old humbug, and that we find ourselves at the end saying farewell to a fine old England merchant, a monument of genial sanity. Dickens answered with the same ingenious self-justification as in the other cases—that surely it often happened that a man met us first arrayed in his more grotesque qualities, and that fuller acquaintance unfolded his more serious merits. This, of course, is quite true; but I think any honest admirer of “Pickwick” will feel that it is not an answer. For the fault in “Pickwick” (if it be a fault) is a change not in the hero but in the whole atmosphere. The point is not that Pickwick turns into a different kind of man; it is that “The Pickwick Papers” turns into a different kind of book. And however artistic both parts may be, this combination must, in strict art, be called inartistic. A man is quite artistically justified in writing a tale in which a man as cowardly as Bob Acres becomes a man as brave as Hector. But a man is not artistically justified in writing a tale which begins in the style of “The Rivals” and ends in the style of the “Iliad.” In other words, we do not mind the hero changing in the course of a book; but we are not

prepared for the author changing in the course of the book.
And the author did change in the course of this book.
He made, in the midst of this book, a great discovery, which was
the discovery of his destiny, or, what is more important, of his duty.
That discovery turned him from the author of “Sketches by Boz”
to the author of “David Copperfield.” And that discovery constituted
the thing of which I have spoken—the outstanding and arresting
original feature in “The Pickwick Papers.”

“Pickwick,” I have said, is a romance of adventure, and Samuel Pickwick
is the romantic adventurer. So much is indeed obvious.
But the strange and stirring discovery which Dickens made was this—
that having chosen a fat old man of the middle classes as a good thing
of which to make a butt, he found that a fat old man of the middle
classes is the very best thing of which to make a romantic adventurer.
“Pickwick” is supremely original in that it is the adventures of an
old man. It is a fairy tale in which the victor is not the youngest
of the three brothers, but one of the oldest of their uncles.
The result is both noble and new and true. There is nothing which so
much needs simplicity as adventure. And there is no one who so much
possesses simplicity as an honest and elderly man of business.

For romance he is better than a troop of young troubadours;
for the swaggering young fellow anticipates his adventures,
just as he anticipates his income. Hence both the adventures
and the income, when he comes up to them, are not there.
But a man in late middle-age has grown used to the plain necessities,
and his first holiday is a second youth. A good man, as Thackeray said
with such thorough and searching truth, grows simpler as he grows older.
Samuel Pickwick in his youth was probably an insufferable young coxcomb.
He knew then, or thought he knew, all about the confidence tricks
of swindlers like Jingle. He knew then, or thought he knew, all about
the amatory designs of sly ladies like Mrs. Bardell. But years
and real life have relieved him of this idle and evil knowledge.
He has had the high good luck in losing the follies of youth to lose
the wisdom of youth also. Dickens has caught, in a manner at once wild
and convincing, this queer innocence of the afternoon of life. The round,
moonlike face, the round, moonlike spectacles of Samuel Pickwick
move through the tale as emblems of a certain spherical simplicity.
They are fixed in that grave surprise that may be seen in babies;
that grave surprise which is the only real happiness that is possible
to man. Pickwick’s round face is like a round and honourable mirror,
in which are reflected all the fantasies of earthly existence;

for surprise is, strictly speaking, the only kind of reflection.
All this grew gradually on Dickens. It is odd to recall to our minds
the original plan, the plan of the Nimrod Club, and the author who was
to be wholly occupied in playing practical jokes on his characters.
He had chosen (or somebody else had chosen) that corpulent old
simpleton as a person peculiarly fitted to fall down trapdoors,
to shoot over butter slides, to struggle with apple-pie beds,
to be tipped out of carts and dipped into horse-ponds. But Dickens,
and Dickens only, discovered as he went on how fitted the fat old man
was to rescue ladies, to defy tyrants, to dance, to leap, to experiment
with life, to be a deus ex machin&#xfffd; and even a knight errant.
Dickens made this discovery. Dickens went into the Pickwick Club
to scoff, and Dickens remained to pray.

Moli&#xfffd;re and his marquises are very much amused when M. Jourdain,
the fat old middle-class fellow, discovers with delight
that he has been talking prose all his life. I have often
wondered whether Moli&#xfffd;re saw how in this fact M. Jourdain towers
above them all and touches the stars. He has the freshness
to enjoy a fresh fact, the freshness to enjoy even an old one.
He can feel that the common thing prose is an accomplishment

like verse; and it is an accomplishment like verse;
it is the miracle of language. He can feel the subtle
taste of water, and roll it on his tongue like wine.
His simple vanity and voracity, his innocent love of living,
his ignorant love of learning, are things far fuller of romance
than the weariness and foppishness of the sniggering cavaliers.
When he consciously speaks prose, he unconsciously thinks poetry.
It would be better for us all if we were as conscious
that supper is supper or that life is life, as this true
romantic was that prose is actually prose. M. Jourdain is
here the type, Mr. Pickwick is elsewhere the type, of this
true and neglected thing, the romance of the middle classes.
It is the custom in our little epoch to sneer at the middle classes.
Cockney artists profess to find the bourgeoisie dull,
as if artists had any business to find anything dull.
Decadents talk contemptuously of its conventions and its set tasks;
it never occurs to them that conventions and set tasks are the very way
to keep that greenness in the grass and that redness in the roses—
which they have lost for ever. Stevenson, in his incomparable
“Lantern Bearers,” describes the ecstasy of a schoolboy
in the mere fact of buttoning a dark lantern under a dark

great-coat. If you wish for that ecstasy of the schoolboy,
you must have the boy; but you must also have the school.
Strict opportunities and defined hours are the very outline
of that enjoyment. A man like Mr. Pickwick has been at school
all his life, and when he comes out he astonishes the youngsters.
His heart, as that acute psychologist, Mr. Weller, points out,
had been born later than his body. It will be remembered that
Mr. Pickwick also, when on the escapade of Winkle and Miss Allen,
took immoderate pleasure in the performances of a dark lantern which
was not dark enough, and was nothing but a nuisance to everybody.
His soul also was with Stevenson's boys on the grey sands
of Haddington, talking in the dark by the sea. He also was
of the league of the "Lantern Bearers." Stevenson, I remember,
says that in the shops of that town they could purchase
"penny Pickwicks (that remarkable cigar)." Let us hope they
smoked them, and that the rotund ghost of Pickwick hovered
over the rings of smoke.

Pickwick goes through life with that godlike gullibility which
is the key to all adventures. The greenhorn is the ultimate
victor in everything; it is he that gets the most out of life.

Because Pickwick is led away by Jingle, he will be led to the
White Hart Inn, and see the only Weller cleaning boots in the courtyard.
Because he is bamboozled by Dodson and Fogg, he will enter
the prison house like a paladin, and rescue the man and the woman
who have wronged him most. His soul will never starve for
exploits or excitements who is wise enough to be made a fool of.
He will make himself happy in the traps that have been laid for him;
he will roll in their nets and sleep. All doors will fly open
to him who has a mildness more defiant than mere courage.
The whole is unerringly expressed in one fortunate phrase—
he will be always “taken in.” To be taken in everywhere is to see
the inside of everything. It is the hospitality of circumstance.
With torches and trumpets, like a guest, the greenhorn is taken
in by Life. And the sceptic is cast out by it.

CHAPTER V

THE GREAT POPULARITY

There is one aspect of Charles Dickens which must be of interest even to that subterranean race which does not admire his books. Even if we are not interested in Dickens as a great event in English literature, we must still be interested in him as a great event in English history. If he had not his place with Fielding and Thackeray, he would still have his place with Wat Tyler and Wilkes; for the man led a mob. He did what no English statesman, perhaps, has really done; he called out the people. He was popular in a sense of which we moderns have not even a notion. In that sense there is no popularity now. There are no popular authors to-day. We call such authors as Mr. Guy Boothby or Mr. William Le Queux popular authors. But this is popularity altogether in a weaker sense; not only in quantity, but in quality. The old popularity was positive; the new is negative. There is a great deal of difference between the eager man who wants to read a book, and the tired man who wants a book to read. A man reading a Le Queux mystery wants to get to the end of it. A man reading the Dickens novel wished that it might never end.

Men read a Dickens story six times because they knew it so well. If a man can read a Le Queux story six times it is only because he can forget it six times. In short, the Dickens novel was popular not because it was an unreal world, but because it was a real world; a world in which the soul could live. The modern “shocker” at its very best is an interlude in life. But in the days when Dickens’s work was coming out in serial, people talked as if real life were itself the interlude between one issue of “Pickwick” and another.

In reaching the period of the publication of “Pickwick,” we reach this sudden apotheosis of Dickens. Henceforward he filled the literary world in a way hard to imagine. Fragments of that huge fashion remain in our daily language; in the talk of every trade or public question are embedded the wrecks of that enormous religion. Men give out the airs of Dickens without even opening his books; just as Catholics can live in a tradition of Christianity without having looked at the New Testament. The man in the street has more memories of Dickens, whom he has not read, than of Marie Corelli, whom he has. There is nothing in any way parallel to this omnipresence and vitality in the great comic characters of Boz. There are no modern Bumbles

and Pecksniffs, no modern Gamps and Micawbers. Mr. Rudyard Kipling
(to take an author of a higher type than those before mentioned)
is called, and called justly, a popular author; that is to say,
he is widely read, greatly enjoyed, and highly remunerated;
he has achieved the paradox of at once making poetry and making money.
But let anyone who wishes to see the difference try the experiment
of assuming the Kipling characters to be common property like
the Dickens characters. Let anyone go into an average parlour
and allude to Strickland as he would allude to Mr. Bumble,
the Beadle. Let anyone say that somebody is “a perfect Learoyd,”
as he would say “a perfect Pecksniff.” Let anyone write a comic
paragraph for a halfpenny paper, and allude to Mrs. Hawksbee
instead of to Mrs. Gamp. He will soon discover that the modern
world has forgotten its own fiercest booms more completely
than it has forgotten this formless tradition from its fathers.
The mere dregs of it come to more than any contemporary excitement;
the gleaning of the grapes of “Pickwick” is more than the whole vintage
of “Soldiers Three.” There is one instance, and I think only one,
of an exception to this generalisation; there is one figure in our
popular literature which would really be recognised by the populace.
Ordinary men would understand you if you referred currently to

Sherlock Holmes. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle would no doubt be justified in rearing his head to the stars, remembering that Sherlock Holmes is the only really familiar figure in modern fiction. But let him droop that head again with a gentle sadness, remembering that if Sherlock Holmes is the only familiar figure in modern fiction Sherlock Holmes is also the only familiar figure in the Sherlock Holmes tales.

Not many people could say offhand what was the name of the owner of Silver Blaze, or whether Mrs. Watson was dark or fair.

But if Dickens had written the Sherlock Holmes stories, every character in them would have been equally arresting and memorable.

A Sherlock Holmes would have cooked the dinner for Sherlock Holmes; a Sherlock Holmes would have driven his cab. If Dickens brought in a man merely to carry a letter, he had time for a touch or two, and made him a giant. Dickens not only conquered the world, he conquered it with minor characters. Mr. John Smauker, the servant of Mr. Cyrus Bantam, though he merely passes across the stage, is almost as vivid to us as Mr. Samuel Weller, the servant of Mr. Samuel Pickwick. The young man with the lumpy forehead, who only says “Esker” to Mr. Podsnap’s foreign gentleman, is as good as Mr. Podsnap himself. They appear only for a fragment of time, but they belong to eternity. We have them only for an instant,

but they have us for ever.

In dealing with Dickens, then, we are dealing with a man
whose public success was a marvel and almost a monstrosity.
And here I perceive that my friend, the purely artistic critic,
primed himself with Flaubert and Turgenev, can contain himself no longer.
He leaps to his feet, upsetting his cup of cocoa, and asks
contemptuously what all this has to do with criticism. “Why begin
your study of an author,” he says, “with trash about popularity?
Boothby is popular, and Le Queux is popular, and Mother Siegel
is popular. If Dickens was even more popular, it may only mean
that Dickens was even worse. The people like bad literature.
If your object is to show that Dickens was good literature, you should
rather apologise for his popularity, and try to explain it away.
You should seek to show that Dickens’s work was good literature,
although it was popular. Yes, that is your task, to prove that
Dickens was admirable, although he was admired!”

I ask the artistic critic to be patient for a little and to believe
that I have a serious reason for registering this historic popularity.
To that we shall come presently. But as a manner of approach I may

perhaps ask leave to examine this actual and fashionable statement,
to which I have supposed him to have recourse—the statement that the
people like bad literature, and even like literature because it is bad.
This way of stating the thing is an error, and in that error lies
matter of much import to Dickens and his destiny in letters.
The public does not like bad literature. The public likes a certain
kind of literature and likes that kind of literature even when it
is bad better than another kind of literature even when it is good.
Nor is this unreasonable; for the line between different types
of literature is as real as the line between tears and laughter;
and to tell people who can only get bad comedy that you have some
first-class tragedy is as irrational as to offer a man who is shivering
over weak warm coffee a really superior sort of ice.

Ordinary people dislike the delicate modern work, not because it
is good or because it is bad, but because it is not the thing
that they asked for. If, for instance, you find them pent in
sterile streets and hungering for adventure and a violent secrecy,
and if you then give them their choice between “A Study in Scarlet,”
a good detective story, and “The Autobiography of Mark Rutherford,”
a good psychological monologue, no doubt they will prefer “A Study

in Scarlet." But they will not do so because "The Autobiography of Mark Rutherford" is a very good monologue, but because it is evidently a very poor detective story. They will be indifferent to "Les Aveugles," not because it is good drama, but because it is bad melodrama.

They do not like good introspective sonnets; but neither do they like bad introspective sonnets, of which there are many. When they walk behind the brass of the Salvation Army band, instead of listening to harmonies at Queen's Hall, it is always assumed that they prefer bad music.

But it may be merely that they prefer military music, music marching down the open street, and that if Dan Godfrey's band could be smitten with salvation and lead them they would like that even better.

And while they might easily get more satisfaction out of a screaming article in The War Cry than out of a page of Emerson about the Oversoul, this would not be because the page of Emerson is another and superior kind of literature. It would be because the page of Emerson is another (and inferior) kind of religion.

Dickens stands first as a defiant monument of what happens when a great literary genius has a literary taste akin to that of the community. For this kinship was deep and spiritual.

Dickens was not like our ordinary demagogues and journalists.

Dickens did not write what the people wanted. Dickens wanted what the people wanted. And with this was connected that other fact which must never be forgotten, and which I have more than once insisted on, that Dickens and his school had a hilarious faith in democracy and thought of the service of it as a sacred priesthood. Hence there was this vital point in his popularism, that there was no condescension in it. The belief that the rabble will only read rubbish can be read between the lines of all our contemporary writers, even of those writers whose rubbish the rabble reads.

Mr. Fergus Hume has no more respect for the populace than Mr. George Moore. The only difference lies between those writers who will consent to talk down to the people, and those writers who will not consent to talk down to the people. But Dickens never talked down to the people. He talked up to the people. He approached the people like a deity and poured out his riches and his blood.

This is what makes the immortal bond between him and the masses of men. He had not merely produced something they could understand, but he took it seriously, and toiled and agonised to produce it. They were not only enjoying one of the best writers, they were enjoying the best he could do. His raging and sleepless nights, his wild walks in the darkness, his note-books crowded, his nerves

in rags, all this extraordinary output was but a fit sacrifice
to the ordinary man. He climbed towards the lower classes.
He panted upwards on weary wings to reach the heaven of the poor.

His power, then, lay in the fact that he expressed with an
energy and brilliancy quite uncommon the things close to
the common mind. But with this mere phrase, the common mind,
we collide with a current error. Commonness and the common
mind are now generally spoken of as meaning in some manner
inferiority and the inferior mind; the mind of the mere mob.
But the common mind means the mind of all the artists and heroes;
or else it would not be common. Plato had the common mind;
Dante had the common mind; or that mind was not common.
Commonness means the quality common to the saint and the sinner,
to the philosopher and the fool; and it was this that Dickens
grasped and developed. In everybody there is a certain thing
that loves babies, that fears death, that likes sunlight
that thing enjoys Dickens. And everybody does not mean
uneducated crowds; everybody means everybody: everybody means
Mrs. Meynell. This lady, a cloistered and fastidious writer,
has written one of the best eulogies of Dickens that exist,

an essay in praise of his pungent perfection of epithet.
And when I say that everybody understands Dickens I do
not mean that he is suited to the untaught intelligence.
I mean that he is so plain that even scholars can understand him.

The best expression of the fact, however, is to be found
in noting the two things in which he is most triumphant.
In order of artistic value, next after his humour, comes his horror.
And both his humour and his horror are of a kind strictly to be
called human; that is, they belong to the basic part of us,
below the lowest roots of our variety. His horror for instance
is a healthy churchyard horror, a fear of the grotesque defamation
called death; and this every man has, even if he also has the more
delicate and depraved fears that come of an evil spiritual outlook.
We may be afraid of a fine shade with Henry James; that is,
we may be afraid of the world. We may be afraid of a taut silence
with Maeterlinck, that is, we may be afraid of our own souls.
But every one will certainly be afraid of a Cock Lane Ghost, including
Henry James and Maeterlinck. This latter is literally a mortal fear,
a fear of death; it is not the immortal fear, or fear of damnation,
which belongs to all the more refined intellects of our day.

In a word, Dickens does, in the exact sense, make the flesh creep;
he does not, like the decadents, make the soul crawl.
And the creeping of the flesh on being reminded of its fleshly failure
is a strictly universal thing which we can all feel, while some
of us are as yet uninstructed in the art of spiritual crawling.
In the same way the Dickens mirth is a part of man and universal.
All men can laugh at broad humour, even the subtle humorists.
Even the modern fl�neur, who can smile at a particular combination
of green and yellow, would laugh at Mr. Lammle's request for
Mr. Fledgeby's nose. In a word—the common things are common—
even to the uncommon people.

These two primary dispositions of Dickens, to make the flesh creep
and to make the sides ache, were a sort of twins of his spirit;
they were never far apart and the fact of their affinity is
interestingly exhibited in the first two novels.

Generally he mixed the two up in a book and mixed a great many
other things with them. As a rule he cared little if he kept six
stories of quite different colours running in the same book.
The effect was sometimes similar to that of playing six tunes at once.

He does not mind the coarse tragic figure of Jonas Chuzzlewit crossing the mental stage which is full of the allegorical pantomime of Eden, Mr. Chollop and The Watertoast Gazette, a scene which is as much of a satire as “Gulliver,” and nearly as much of a fairy tale. He does not mind binding up a rather pompous sketch of prostitution in the same book with an adorable impossibility like Bunsby. But “Pickwick” is so far a coherent thing that it is coherently comic and consistently rambling.

And as a consequence his next book was, upon the whole, coherently and consistently horrible. As his natural turn for terrors was kept down in “Pickwick,” so his natural turn for joy and laughter is kept down in “Oliver Twist.” In “Oliver Twist” the smoke of the thieves’ kitchen hangs over the whole tale, and the shadow of Fagin falls everywhere. The little lamp-lit rooms of Mr. Brownlow and Rose Maylie are to all appearance purposely kept subordinate, a mere foil to the foul darkness without.

It was a strange and appropriate accident that Cruikshank and not “Phiz” should have illustrated this book. There was about Cruikshank’s art a kind of cramped energy which is almost the definition of the criminal mind. His drawings have a dark strength: yet he does not only draw morbidly, he draws meanly.

In the doubled-up figure and frightful eyes of Fagin in
the condemned cell there is not only a baseness of subject;
there is a kind of baseness in the very technique of it.
It is not drawn with the free lines of a free man;
it has the half-witted secrecies of a hunted thief.
It does not look merely like a picture of Fagin; it looks like a
picture by Fagin. Among these dark and detestable plates there
is one which has, with a kind of black directness, the dreadful
poetry that does inhere in the story, stumbling as it often is.
It represents Oliver asleep at an open window in the house
of one of his humaner patrons. And outside the window,
but as big and close as if they were in the room, stand Fagin
and the foul-laced Monks, staring at him with dark monstrous visages
and great white wicked eyes, in the style of the simple devilry
of the draughtsman. The very na�vet� of the horror is horrifying:
the very woodenness of the two wicked men seems to make them worse
than mere men who are wicked. But this picture of big devils
at the window-sill does express, as has been suggested above,
the thread of poetry in the whole thing; the sense, that is,
of the thieves as a kind of army of devils compassing earth
and sky crying for Oliver’s soul and besieging the house

in which he is barred for safety. In this matter there is,
I think, a difference between the author and the illustrator.
In Cruikshank there was surely something morbid; but, sensitive and
sentimental as Dickens was, there was nothing morbid in him.
He had, as Stevenson had, more of the mere boy's love of
suffocating stories of blood and darkness; of skulls, of gibbets,
of all the things, in a word, that are sombre without being sad.
There is a ghastly joy in remembering our boyish reading about Sikes
and his flight; especially about the voice of that unbearable
pedlar which went on in a monotonous and maddening sing-song, "will
wash out grease-stains, mud-stains, blood-stains," until Sikes
fled almost screaming. For this boyish mixture of appetite and
repugnance there is a good popular phrase, "supping on horrors."
Dickens supped on horrors as he supped on Christmas pudding.
He supped on horrors because he was an optimist and could sup
on anything. There was no saner or simpler schoolboy than Traddles,
who covered all his books with skeletons.

"Oliver Twist" had begun in Bentley's Miscellany, which Dickens
edited in 1837. It was interrupted by a blow that for the moment
broke the author's spirit and seemed to have broken his heart.

His wife's sister, Mary Hogarth, died suddenly.
To Dickens his wife's family seems to have been like his own;
his affections were heavily committed to the sisters, and of
this one he was peculiarly fond. All his life, through much
conceit and sometimes something bordering on selfishness,
we can feel the redeeming note of an almost tragic tenderness;
he was a man who could really have died of love or sorrow.
He took up the work of "Oliver Twist" again later in the year,
and finished it at the end of 1838. His work was incessant and
almost bewildering. In 1838 he had already brought out the first number
of "Nicholas Nickleby." But the great popularity went booming on;
the whole world was roaring for books by Dickens, and more books
by Dickens, and Dickens was labouring night and day like a factory.
Among other things he edited the "Memoirs of Grimaldi," The incident
is only worth mentioning for the sake of one more example of the silly
ease with which Dickens was drawn by criticism and the clever ease
with which he managed, in these small squabbles, to defend himself.
Somebody mildly suggested that, after all, Dickens had never
known Grimaldi. Dickens was down on him like a thunderbolt,
sardonically asking how close an intimacy Lord Braybrooke had
with Mr. Samuel Pepys.

“Nicholas Nickleby” is the most typical perhaps of the tone
of his earlier works. It is in form a very rambling,
old-fashioned romance, the kind of romance in which the hero
is only a convenience for the frustration of the villain.
Nicholas is what is called in theatricals a stick. But any stick
is good enough to beat a Squeers with. That strong thwack,
that simplified energy is the whole object of such a story; and the whole
of this tale is full of a kind of highly picturesque platitude.
The wicked aristocrats, Sir Mulberry Hawk, Lord Verisopht and
the rest are inadequate versions of the fashionable profligate.
But this is not (as some suppose) because Dickens in his
vulgarity could not comprehend the refinement of patrician vice.
There is no idea more vulgar or more ignorant than the notion
that a gentleman is generally what is called refined. The error
of the Hawk conception is that, if anything, he is too refined.
Real aristocratic blackguards do not swagger and rant so well.
A real fast baronet would not have defied Nicholas in the tavern
with so much oratorical dignity. A real fast baronet would probably
have been choked with apoplectic embarrassment and said nothing at all.
But Dickens read into this aristocracy a grandiloquence and a

natural poetry which, like all melodrama, is really the precious jewel of the poor.

But the book contains something which is much more Dickensian. It is exquisitely characteristic of Dickens that the truly great achievement of the story is the person who delays the story. Mrs. Nickleby, with her beautiful mazes of memory, does her best to prevent the story of Nicholas Nickleby from being told. And she does well. There is no particular necessity that we should know what happens to Madeline Bray. There is a desperate and crying necessity that we should know Mrs. Nickleby once had a foot-boy who had a wart on his nose and a driver who had a green shade over his left eye. If Mrs. Nickleby is a fool, she is one of those fools who are wiser than the world. She stands for a great truth which we must not forget; the truth that experience is not in real life a saddening thing at all. The people who have had misfortunes are generally the people who love to talk about them. Experience is really one of the gaieties of old age, one of its dissipations. Mere memory becomes a kind of debauch. Experience may be disheartening to those who are foolish enough to try to co-ordinate it and to draw deductions from it. But to

those happy souls, like Mrs. Nickleby, to whom relevancy is nothing,
the whole of their past life is like an inexhaustible fairyland.
Just as we take a rambling walk because we know that a whole
district is beautiful, so they indulge a rambling mind
because they know that a whole existence is interesting.
A boy does not plunge into his future more romantically and at random,
than they plunge into their past.

Another gleam in the book is Mr. Mantalini. Of him, as of all
the really great comic characters of Dickens, it is impossible
to speak with any critical adequacy. Perfect absurdity
is a direct thing, like physical pain, or a strong smell.
A joke is a fact. However indefensible it is it cannot
be attacked. However defensible it is it cannot be defended.
That Mr. Mantalini should say in praising the “outline” of his wife,
“The two Countesses had no outlines, and the Dowager’s was a
demd outline,”—this can only be called an unanswerable absurdity.
You may try to analyze it, as Charles Lamb did the indefensible
joke about the hare; you may dwell for a moment on the dark
distinctions between the negative disqualification of the
Countess and the positive disqualification of the Dowager,

but you will not capture the violent beauty of it in any way.
“She will be a lovely widow. I shall be a body.
Some handsome women will cry; she will laugh demnebly.”
This vision of demoniac heartlessness has the same defiant finality.
I mention the matter here, but it has to be remembered in connection
with all the comic masterpieces of Dickens. Dickens has greatly
suffered with the critics precisely through this stunning
simplicity in his best work. The critic is called upon to
describe his sensations while enjoying Mantalini and Micawber,
and he can no more describe them than he can describe a blow
in the face, Thus Dickens, in this self-conscious, analytical
and descriptive age, loses both ways. He is doubly unfitted for
the best modern criticism, His bad work is below that criticism.
His good work is above it.

But gigantic as were Dickens’s labours, gigantic as were
the exactions from him, his own plans were more gigantic still.
He had the type of mind that wishes to do every kind of work at once;
to do everybody’s work as well as its own. There floated before him
a vision of a monstrous magazine, entirely written by himself.
It is true that when this scheme came to be discussed,

ho suggested that other pens might be occasionally employed;
but, reading between the lines, it is sufficiently evident that
he thought of the thing as a kind of vast multiplication of himself,
with Dickens as editor opening letters, Dickens as leader-writer
writing leaders, Dickens as reporter reporting meetings,
Dickens as reviewer reviewing books, Dickens, for all I know,
as office-boy opening and shutting doors. This serial,
of which he spoke to Messrs. Chapman & Hall, began and broke off
and remains as a colossal fragment bound together under the title
of “Master Humphrey’s Clock.” One characteristic thing he wished
to have in the periodical. He suggested an Arabian Nights
of London, in which Gog and Magog, the giants of the city,
should give forth chronicles as enormous as themselves.
He had a taste for these schemes or frameworks for many tales.
He made and abandoned many; many he half-fulfilled. I strongly
suspect that he meant Major Jackman, in “Mrs. Lirriper’s Lodgings”
and “Mrs. Lirriper’s Legacy,” to start a series of studies
of that lady’s lodgers, a kind of history of No. 81,
Norfolk Street, Strand. “The Seven Poor Travellers”
was planned for seven stories; we will not say seven poor stories.
Dickens had meant, probably, to write a tale for each article of

“Somebody’s Luggage”: he only got as far as the hat and the boots.
This gigantesque scale of literary architecture, huge and yet
curiously cosy, is characteristic of his spirit, fond of size
and yet fond of comfort. He liked to have story within story,
like room within room of some labyrinthine but comfortable castle.
In this spirit he wished “Master Humphrey’s Clock” to begin,
and to be a big frame or bookcase for numberless novels.
The clock started; but the clock stopped.

In the prologue by Master Humphrey reappear Mr. Pickwick
and Sam Weller, and of that resurrection many things have
been said, chiefly expressions of a reasonable regret.
Doubtless they do not add much to their author’s reputation,
but they add a great deal to their author’s pleasure.
It was ingrained in him to wish to meet old friends.
All his characters are, so to speak, designed to be old friends;
in a sense every Dickens character is an old friend,
even when he first appears. He comes to us mellow out of many
implied interviews, and carries the firelight on his face.
Dickens was simply pleased to meet Pickwick again, and being pleased,
he made the old man too comfortable to be amusing.

But “Master Humphrey’s Clock” is now scarcely known except as the shell of one of the well-known novels. “The Old Curiosity Shop” was published in accordance with the original “Clock” scheme. Perhaps the most typical thing about it is the title.

There seems no reason in particular, at the first and most literal glance, why the story should be called after the Old Curiosity Shop. Only two of the characters have anything to do with such a shop, and they leave it for ever in the first few pages. It is as if Thackeray had called the whole novel of “Vanity Fair” “Miss Pinkerton’s Academy.” It is as if Scott had given the whole story of “The Antiquary” the title of “The Hawes Inn.” But when we feel the situation with more fidelity we realise that this title is something in the nature of a key to the whole Dickens romance.

His tales always started from some splendid hint in the streets. And shops, perhaps the most poetical of all things, often set off his fancy galloping. Every shop, in fact, was to him the door of romance. Among all the huge serial schemes of which we have spoken, it is a matter of wonder that he never started an endless periodical called “The Street,” and divided it into shops.

He could have written an exquisite romance called “The Baker’s Shop”;
another called “The Chemist’s Shop”; another called “The Oil Shop,”
to keep company with “The Old Curiosity Shop.” Some incomparable
baker he invented and forgot. Some gorgeous chemist might have been.
Some more than mortal oil-man is lost to us for ever.
This Old Curiosity Shop he did happen to linger by:
its tale he did happen to tell.

Around “Little Nell,” of course, a controversy raged and rages;
some implored Dickens not to kill her at the end of the story:
some regret that he did not kill her at the beginning.
To me the chief interest in this young person lies in the fact that she
is an example, and the most celebrated example of what must have been,
I think, a personal peculiarity, perhaps, a personal experience
of Dickens. There is, of course, no paradox at all in saying
that if we find in a good book a wildly impossible character it
is very probable indeed that it was copied from a real person.
This is one of the commonplaces of good art criticism. For although
people talk of the restraints of fact and the freedom of fiction,
the case for most artistic purposes is quite the other way.
Nature is as free as air: art is forced to look probable.

There may be a million things that do happen, and yet only one thing that convinces us is likely to happen. Out of a million possible things there may be only one appropriate thing.

I fancy, therefore, that many stiff, unconvincing characters are copied from the wild freak-show of real life.

And in many parts of Dickens's work there is evidence of some peculiar affection on his part for a strange sort of little girl; a little girl with a premature sense of responsibility and duty; a sort of saintly precocity. Did he know some little girl of this kind? Did she die, perhaps, and remain in his memory in colours too ethereal and pale? In any case there are a great number of them in his works. Little Dorrit was one of them, and Florence Dombey with her brother, and even Agnes in infancy; and, of course, Little Nell. And, in any case, one thing is evident; whatever charm these children may have they have not the charm of childhood. They are not little children: they are "little mothers."

The beauty and divinity in a child lie in his not being worried, not being conscientious, not being like Little Nell. Little Nell has never any of the sacred bewilderment of a baby.

She never wears that face, beautiful but almost half-witted, with which a real child half understands that there is evil

in the universe.

As usual, however, little as the story has to do with the title, the splendid and satisfying pages have even less to do with the story. Dick Swiveller is perhaps the noblest of all the noble creations of Dickens. He has all the overwhelming absurdity of Mantalini, with the addition of being human and credible, for he knows he is absurd. His high-falutin is not done because he seriously thinks it right and proper, like that of Mr. Snodgrass, nor is it done because he thinks it will serve his turn, like that of Mr. Pecksniff, for both these beliefs are improbable; it is done because he really loves high-falutin, because he has a lonely literary pleasure in exaggerative language. Great draughts of words are to him like great draughts of wine—pungent and yet refreshing, light and yet leaving him in a glow. In unerring instinct for the perfect folly of a phrase he has no equal, even among the giants of Dickens. “I am sure,” says Miss Wackles, when she had been flirting with Cheggs, the market-gardener, and reduced Mr. Swiveller to Byronic renunciation, “I am sure I’m very sorry if –-” “Sorry,” said Mr. Swiveller, “sorry in the possession of a Cheggs!” The abyss of bitterness is unfathomable. Scarcely less precious is the poise of Mr. Swiveller when

he imitates the stage brigand. After crying, “Some wine here! Ho!” he hands the flagon to himself with profound humility, and receives it haughtily. Perhaps the very best scene in the book is that between Mr. Swiveller and the single gentleman with whom he endeavours to remonstrate for having remained in bed all day: “We cannot have single gentlemen coming into the place and sleeping like double gentlemen without paying extra… . An equal amount of slumber was never got out of one bed, and if you want to sleep like that you must pay for a double-bedded room.” His relations with the Marchioness are at once purely romantic and purely genuine; there is nothing even of Dickens’s legitimate exaggerations about them. A shabby, larky, good-natured clerk would, as a matter of fact, spend hours in the society of a little servant girl if he found her about the house. It would arise partly from a dim kindliness, and partly from that mysterious instinct which is sometimes called, mistakenly, a love of low company—that mysterious instinct which makes so many men of pleasure find something soothing in the society of uneducated people, particularly uneducated women. It is the instinct which accounts for the otherwise unaccountable popularity of barmaids.

And still the pot of that huge popularity boiled. In 1841 another novel was demanded, and “Barnaby Rudge” supplied. It is chiefly of interest as an embodiment of that other element in Dickens, the picturesque or even the pictorial. Barnaby Rudge, the idiot with his rags and his feathers and his raven, the bestial hangman, the blind mob—all make a picture, though they hardly make a novel. One touch there is in it of the richer and more humorous Dickens, the boy-conspirator, Mr. Sim Tappertit. But he might have been treated with more sympathy—with as much sympathy, for instance, as Mr. Dick Swiveller; for he is only the romantic guttersnipe, the bright boy at the particular age when it is most fascinating to found a secret society and most difficult to keep a secret. And if ever there was a romantic guttersnipe on earth it was Charles Dickens. “Barnaby Rudge” is no more an historical novel than Sim’s secret league was a political movement; but they are both beautiful creations. When all is said, however, the main reason for mentioning the work here is that it is the next bubble in the pot, the next thing that burst out of that whirling, seething head. The tide of it rose and smoked and sang till it boiled over the pot of Britain and poured over all America. In the January of 1842 he set out for the United States.

CHAPTER VI

DICKENS AND AMERICA

The essential of Dickens’s character was the conjunction of common sense with uncommon sensibility. The two things are not, indeed, in such an antithesis as is commonly imagined. Great English literary authorities, such as Jane Austen and Mr. Chamberlain, have put the word “sense” and the word “sensibility” in a kind of opposition to each other.

But not only are they not opposite words: they are actually the same word. They both mean receptiveness or approachability by the facts outside us. To have a sense of colour is the same as to have a sensibility to colour. A person who realises that beef-steaks are appetising shows his sensibility.

A person who realises that moonrise is romantic shows his sense.

But it is not difficult to see the meaning and need of the popular distinction between sensibility and sense, particularly in the form called common sense. Common sense is a sensibility duly distributed in all normal directions; sensibility has come to mean a specialised sensibility in one.

This is unfortunate, for it is not the sensibility that is bad,
but the specialising; that is, the lack of sensibility
to everything else. A young lady who stays out all night
to look at the stars should not be blamed for her sensibility
to starlight, but for her insensibility to other people.
A poet who recites his own verses from ten to five with the tears
rolling down his face should decidedly be rebuked for his
lack of, sensibility—his lack of sensibility to those grand
rhythms of the social harmony, crudely called manners.
For all politeness is a long poem, since it is full of recurrences.
This balance of all the sensibilities we call sense;
and it is in this capacity that it becomes of great importance
as an attribute of the character of Dickens.

Dickens, I repeat, had common sense and uncommon sensibility.
That is to say, the proportion of interests in him was about the same
as that of an ordinary man, but he felt all of them more excitedly.
This is a distinction not easy for us to keep in mind, because we
hear to-day chiefly of two types, the dull man who likes ordinary
things mildly, and the extraordinary man who likes extraordinary
things wildly. But Dickens liked quiet ordinary things;

he merely made an extraordinary fuss about them. His excitement
was sometimes like an epileptic fit; but it must not be confused
with the fury of the man of one idea or one line of ideas.
He had the excess of the eccentric, but not the defects, the narrowness.
Even when he raved like a maniac he did not rave like a monomaniac.
He had no particular spot of sensibility or spot of insensibility:
he was merely a normal man minus a normal self-command. He had no
special point of mental pain or repugnance, like Ruskin's horror
of steam and iron, or Mr. Bernard Shaw's permanent irritation
against romantic love. He was annoyed at the ordinary annoyances:
only he was more annoyed than was necessary. He did not desire
strange delights, blue wine or black women with Baudelaire,
or cruel sights east of Suez with Mr. Kipling. He wanted
what a healthy man wants, only he was ill with wanting it.
To understand him, in a word, we must keep well in mind
the medical distinction between delicacy and disease.
Perhaps we shall comprehend it and him more clearly if we think
of a woman rather than a man. There was much that was feminine
about Dickens, and nothing more so than this abnormal normality.
A woman is often, in comparison with a man, at once more sensitive
and more sane.

This distinction must be especially remembered in all his quarrels.
And it must be most especially remembered in what may be called
his great quarrel with America, which we have now to approach.
The whole incident is so typical of Dickens's attitude to everything
and anything, and especially of Dickens's attitude to anything political,
that I may ask permission to approach the matter by another,
a somewhat long and curving avenue.

Common sense is a fairy thread, thin and faint, and as easily
lost as gossamer. Dickens (in large matters) never lost it.
Take, as an example, his political tone, or drift throughout
his life. His views, of course, may have been right or wrong;
the reforms he supported may have been successful or otherwise:
that is not a matter for this book. But if we compare him
with the other men that wanted the same things (or the other men
that wanted the other things) we feel a startling absence of cant,
a startling sense of humanity as it is and of the eternal weakness.
He was a fierce democrat, but in his best vein he laughed
at the cocksure Radical of common life, the red-faced man
who said, "Prove it!" when anybody said anything. He fought

for the right to elect: but he would not whitewash elections.
He believed in Parliamentary government; but he did not,
like our contemporary newspapers, pretend that Parliament
is something much more heroic and imposing than it is.
He fought for the rights of the grossly oppressed Nonconformists,
but he spat out of his mouth the unction of that too easy
seriousness with which they oiled everything, and held up to them
like a horrible mirror the foul fat face of Chadband. He saw
that Mr. Podsnap thought too little of places outside England.
But he saw that Mrs. Jellaby thought too much of them.
In the last book he wrote he gives us, in Mr. Honeythunder,
a hateful and wholesome picture of all the Liberal catchwords
pouring out of one illiberal man. But perhaps the best
evidence of this steadiness and sanity is the fact that,
dogmatic as he was, he never tied himself to any passing dogma:
he never got into any cul de sac or civic or economic fanaticism:
he went down the broad road of the Revolution. He never
admitted that economically, we must make hells of workhouses,
any more than Rousseau would have admitted it. He never said
the State had no right to teach children or save their bones,
any more than Danton would have said it. He was a fierce Radical;

but he was never a Manchester Radical. He used the test of Utility, but he was never a Utilitarian. While economists were writing soft words he wrote “Hard Times,” which Macaulay called “sullen Socialism,” because it was not complacent Whiggism. But Dickens was never a Socialist any more than he was an Individualist; and, whatever else he was, he certainly was not sullen. He was not even a politician of any kind. He was simply a man of very clear, airy judgment on things that did not inflame his private temper, and he perceived that any theory that tried to run the living State entirely on one force and motive was probably nonsense. Whenever the Liberal philosophy had embedded in it something hard and heavy and lifeless, by an instinct he dropped it out. He was too romantic, perhaps, but he would have to do only with real things. He may have cared too much about Liberty. But he cared nothing about “Laissez Faire.”

Now, among many interests of his contact with America this interest emerges as infinitely the largest and most striking, that it gave a final example of this queer, unexpected coolness and candour of his, this abrupt and sensational rationality. Apart altogether from any question of the accuracy of his picture of America,

the American indignation was particularly natural and inevitable.
For the large circumstances of the age must be taken into account.
At the end of the previous epoch the whole of our Christian
civilisation had been startled from its sleep by trumpets to take
sides in a bewildering Armageddon, often with eyes still misty.
Germany and Austria found themselves on the side of the old order, France
and America on the side of the new. England, as at the Reformation,
took up eventually a dark middle position, maddeningly difficult
to define. She created a democracy, but she kept an aristocracy:
she reformed the House of Commons, but left the magistracy
(as it is still) a mere league of gentlemen against the world.
But underneath all this doubt and compromise there was in
England a great and perhaps growing mass of dogmatic democracy;
certainly thousands, probably millions expected a Republic
in fifty years. And for these the first instinct was obvious.
The first instinct was to look across the Atlantic to where lay
a part of ourselves already Rebublican, the van of the advancing
English on the road to liberty. Nearly all the great Liberals
of the nineteenth century enormously idealised America. On the
other hand, to the Americans, fresh from their first epic of arms,
the defeated mother country, with its coronets and county magistrates,

was only a broken feudal keep.

So much is self-evident. But nearly half-way through the nineteenth century there came out of England the voice of a violent satirist. In its political quality it seemed like the half-choked cry of the frustrated republic. It had no patience with the pretence that England was already free, that we had gained all that was valuable from the Revolution. It poured a cataract of contempt on the so-called working compromises of England, on the oligarchic cabinets, on the two artificial parties, on the government offices, on the J.P.‘s, on the vestries, on the voluntary charities. This satirist was Dickens, and it must be remembered that he was not only fierce, but uproariously readable. He really damaged the things he struck at, a very rare thing. He stepped up to the grave official of the vestry, really trusted by the rulers, really feared like a god by the poor, and he tied round his neck a name that choked him; never again now can he be anything but Bumble. He confronted the fine old English gentleman who gives his patriotic services for nothing as a local magistrate, and he nailed him up as Nupkins, an owl in open day. For to this satire there is literally no answer; it cannot

be denied that a man like Nupkins can be and is a magistrate, so long as we adopt the amazing method of letting the rich man of a district actually be the judge in it. We can only avoid the vision of the fact by shutting our eyes, and imagining the nicest rich man we can think of; and that, of course, is what we do. But Dickens, in this matter, was merely realistic; he merely asked us to look on Nupkins, on the wild, strange thing that we had made. Thus Dickens seemed to see England not at all as the country where freedom slowly broadened down from precedent to precedent, but as a rubbish heap of seventeenth-century bad habits abandoned by everybody else. That is, he looked at England almost with the eyes of an American democrat.

And so, when the voice, swelling in volume, reached America and the Americans, the Americans said, “Here is a man who will hurry the old country along, and tip her kings and beadles into the sea. Let him come here, and we will show him a race of free men such as he dreams of, alive upon the ancient earth. Let him come here and tell the English of the divine democracy towards which he drives them. There he has a monarchy and an oligarchy to make game of. Here is a republic for him to praise.” It seemed, indeed, a very natural sequel,

that having denounced undemocratic England as the wilderness,
he should announce democratic America as the promised land.
Any ordinary person would have prophesied that as he had pushed
his rage at the old order almost to the edge of rant, he would
push his encomium of the new order almost to the edge of cant.
Amid a roar of republican idealism, compliments, hope, and anticipatory
gratitude, the great democrat entered the great democracy. He looked
about him; he saw a complete America, unquestionably progressive,
unquestionably self-governing. Then, with a more than American coolness,
and a more than American impudence, he sat down and wrote
"Martin Chuzzlewit." That tricky and perverse sanity of his had
mutinied again. Common sense is a wild thing, savage, and beyond rules;
and it had turned on them and rent them.

The main course of action was as follows; and it is right to record
it before we speak of the justice of it. When I speak of his
sitting down and writing "Martin Chuzzlewit," I use, of course,
an elliptical expression. He wrote the notes of the American part
of "Martin Chuzzlewit" while he was still in America; but it was a later
decision presumably that such impressions should go into a book,
and it was little better than an afterthought that they should go

into “Martin Chuzzlewit.” Dickens had an uncommonly bad habit
(artistically speaking) of altering a story in the middle
as he did in the case of “Our Mutual Friend.” And it is on
record that he only sent young Martin to America because he did
not know what else to do with him, and because (to say truth)
the sales were falling off. But the first action, which Americans
regarded as an equally hostile one, was the publication of
“American Notes,” the history of which should first be given.
His notion of visiting America had come to him as a very vague notion,
even before the appearance of “The Old Curiosity Shop.” But it
had grown in him through the whole ensuing period in the plaguing
and persistent way that ideas did grow in him and live with him.
He contended against the idea in a certain manner.
He had much to induce him to contend against it. Dickens was
by this time not only a husband, but a father, the father of
several children, and their existence made a difficulty in itself.
His wife, he said, cried whenever the project was mentioned.
But it was a point in him that he could never, with any satisfaction,
part with a project. He had that restless optimism,
that kind of nervous optimism, which would always tend to say
“Yes;” which is stricken with an immortal repentance, if ever

it says “No.” The idea of seeing America might be doubtful,
but the idea of not seeing America was dreadful. “To miss this
opportunity would be a sad thing,” he says. “… God willing,
I think it must be managed somehow!” It was managed somehow.
First of all he wanted to take his children as well as his wife.
Final obstacles to this fell upon him, but they did not frustrate him.
A serious illness fell on him; but that did not frustrate him.
He sailed for America in 1842.

He landed in America, and he liked it. As John Forster very truly says,
it is due to him, as well as to the great country that welcomed him,
that his first good impression should be recorded, and that it should be
“considered independently of any modification it afterwards underwent.”
But the modification it afterwards underwent was, as I have said above,
simply a sudden kicking against cant, that is, against repetition.
He was quite ready to believe that all Americans were free men.
He would have believed it if they had not all told him so.
He was quite prepared to be pleased with America. He would have been
pleased with it if it had not been so much pleased with itself.
The “modification” his views underwent did not arise from any modification
of America as he first saw it. His admiration did not change

because America changed. It changed because America did not change.
The Yankees enraged him at last, not by saying different things,
but by saying the same things. They were a republic; they were
a new and vigorous nation; it seemed natural that they should
say so to a famous foreigner first stepping on to their shore.
But it seemed maddening that they should say so to each other
in every car and drinking saloon from morning till night.
It was not that the Americans in any way ceased from praising him.
It was rather that they went on praising him. It was not merely
that their praises of him sounded beautiful when he first heard them.
Their praises of themselves sounded beautiful when he first heard them.
That democracy was grand, and that Charles Dickens was a remarkable
person, were two truths that he certainly never doubted to his dying day.
But, as I say, it was a soulless repetition that stung his sense
of humour out of sleep; it woke like a wild beast for hunting,
the lion of his laughter. He had heard the truth once too often.
He had heard the truth for the nine hundred and ninety-ninth time,
and he suddenly saw that it was falsehood.

It is true that a particular circumstance sharpened and defined
his disappointment. He felt very hotly, as he felt everything,

whether selfish or unselfish, the injustice of the American piracies of English literature, resulting from the American copyright laws.

He did not go to America with any idea of discussing this; when, some time afterwards, somebody said that he did, he violently rejected the view as only describable “in one of the shortest words in the English language.”

But his entry into America was almost triumphal; the rostrum or pulpit was ready for him; he felt strong enough to say anything.

He had been most warmly entertained by many American men of letters, especially by Washington Irving, and in his consequent glow of confidence he stepped up to the dangerous question of American copyright.

He made many speeches attacking the American law and theory of the matter as unjust to English writers and to American readers.

The effect appears to have astounded him. “I believe there is no country,” he writes, “on the face of the earth where there is less freedom of opinion on any subject in reference to which there is a broad difference of opinion than in this. There! I write the words with reluctance, disappointment, and sorrow; but I believe it from the bottom of my soul… . The notion that I, a man alone by myself in America, should venture to suggest to the Americans that there was one point on which they were neither just to their own countrymen nor to us, actually struck the boldest dumb!

Washington Irving, Prescott, Hoffman, Bryant, Halleck, Dana,
Washington Allston—every man who writes in this country is devoted
to the question, and not one of them dares to raise his voice
and complain of the atrocious state of the law… . The wonder
is that a breathing man can be found with temerity enough to suggest
to the Americans the possibility of their having done wrong.
I wish you could have seen the faces that I saw down both sides
of the table at Hartford when I began to talk about Scott. I wish
you could have heard how I gave it out. My blood so boiled when I
thought of the monstrous injustice that I felt as if I were twelve
feet high when I thrust it down their throats."

That is almost a portrait of Dickens. We can almost see the erect
little figure, its face and hair like a flame.

For such reasons, among others, Dickens was angry with America. But if
America was angry with Dickens, there were also reasons for it.
I do not think that the rage against his copyright speeches was,
as he supposed, merely national insolence and self-satisfaction.
America is a mystery to any good Englishman; but I think Dickens
managed somehow to touch it on a queer nerve. There is one thing,

at any rate, that must strike all Englishmen who have the good fortune to have American friends; that is, that while there is no materialism so crude or so material as American materialism, there is also no idealism so crude or so ideal as American idealism. America will always affect an Englishman as being soft in the wrong place and hard in the wrong place; coarse exactly where all civilised men are delicate, delicate exactly where all grown-up men are coarse. Some beautiful ideal runs through this people, but it runs aslant. The only existing picture in which the thing I mean has been embodied is in Stevenson's "Wrecker," in the blundering delicacy of Jim Pinkerton. America has a new delicacy, a coarse, rank refinement. But there is another way of embodying the idea, and that is to say this—that nothing is more likely than that the Americans thought it very shocking in Dickens, the divine author, to talk about being done out of money. Nothing would be more American than to expect a genius to be too high-toned for trade. It is certain that they deplored his selfishness in the matter; it is probable that they deplored his indelicacy. A beautiful young dreamer, with flowing brown hair, ought not to be even conscious of his copyrights. For it is quite unjust to say that the Americans worship the dollar. They really do worship intellect—another of the passing superstitions

of our time.

If America had then this Pinkertonian propriety, this new,
raw sensibility, Dickens was the man to rasp it.
He was its precise opposite in every way. The decencies
he did respect were old-fashioned and fundamental.
On top of these he had that lounging liberty and comfort
which can only be had on the basis of very old conventions,
like the carelessness of gentlemen and the deliberation of rustics.
He had no fancy for being strung up to that taut and quivering
ideality demanded by American patriots and public speakers.
And there was something else also, connected especially with the
question of copyright and his own pecuniary claims. Dickens was not
in the least desirous of being thought too “high-souled” to want
his wages, nor was he in the least ashamed of asking for them.
Deep in him (whether the modern reader likes the quality or no)
was a sense very strong in the old Radicals—very strong especially
in the old English Radical—a sense of personal rights, one’s own
rights included, as something not merely useful but sacred.
He did not think a claim any less just and solemn because it
happened to be selfish; he did not divide claims into selfish

and unselfish, but into right and wrong. It is significant
that when he asked for his money, he never asked for it with
that shamefaced cynicism, that sort of embarrassed brutality,
with which the modern man of the world mutters something
about business being business or looking after number one.
He asked for his money in a valiant and ringing voice, like a man
asking for his honour. While his American critics were moaning
and sneering at his interested motives as a disqualification,
he brandished his interested motives like a banner.
“It is nothing to them,” he cries in astonishment,
“that, of all men living, I am the greatest loser by it”
(the Copyright Law). “It is nothing that I have a claim
to speak and be heard.” The thing they set up as a barrier
he actually presents as a passport. They think that he,
of all men, ought not to speak because he is interested.
He thinks that he, of all men, ought to speak because he is wronged.

But this particular disappointment with America in the matter
of the tyranny of its public opinion was not merely the expression
of the fact that Dickens was a typical Englishman; that is a man with
a very sharp insistence upon individual freedom. It also worked back

ultimately to that larger and vaguer disgust of which I have spoken—
the disgust at the perpetual posturing of the people before a mirror.
The tyranny was irritating, not so much because of the suffering it
inflicted on the minority, but because of the awful glimpses that it gave
of the huge and imbecile happiness of the majority. The very vastness
of the vain race enraged him, its immensity, its unity, its peace. He was
annoyed more with its contentment than with any of its discontents.
The thought of that unthinkable mass of millions, every one of them
saying that Washington was the greatest man on earth, and that the Queen
lived in the Tower of London, rode his riotous fancy like a nightmare.
But to the end he retained the outlines of his original republican ideal
and lamented over America not as being too Liberal, but as not being
Liberal enough. Among others, he used these somewhat remarkable words:
“I tremble for a Radical coming here, unless he is a Radical
on principle, by reason and reflection, and from the sense of right.
I fear that if he were anything else he would return home a Tory… . I
say no more on that head for two months from this time, save that I
do fear that the heaviest blow ever dealt at liberty will be dealt
by this country, in the failure of its example on the earth.”

We are still waiting to see if that prediction has been fulfilled;

but nobody can say that it has been falsified.

He went west on the great canals; he went south and touched
the region of slavery; he saw America superficially indeed,
but as a whole. And the great mass of his experience was
certainly pleasant, though he vibrated with anticipatory passion
against slave-holders, though he swore he would accept no public
tribute in the slave country (a resolve which he broke under
the pressure of the politeness of the South), yet his actual
collisions with slavery and its upholders were few and brief.
In these he bore himself with his accustomed vivacity and fire,
but it would be a great mistake to convey the impression
that his mental reaction against America was chiefly,
or even largely, due to his horror at the negro problem.
Over and above the cant of which we have spoken; the weary
rush of words, the chief complaint he made was a complaint
against bad manners; and on a large view his anti-Americanism
would seem to be more founded on spitting than on slavery.
When, however, it did happen that the primary morality of man-owning
came up for discussion, Dickens displayed an honourable impatience.
One man, full of anti-abolitionist ardour, button-holed him

and bombarded him with the well-known argument in defence
of slavery, that it was not to the financial interest
of a slave-owner to damage or weaken his own slaves.
Dickens, in telling the story of this interview, writes as follows:
“I told him quietly that it was not a man’s interest to get drunk,
or to steal, or to game, or to indulge in any other vice;
but he did indulge in it for all that. That cruelty and
the abuse of irresponsible power were two of the bad passions
of human nature, with the gratification of which considerations
of interest or of ruin had nothing whatever to do… .”
It is hardly possible to doubt that Dickens, in telling the man this,
told him something sane and logical and unanswerable.
But it is perhaps permissible to doubt whether he told it
to him quietly.

He returned home in the spring of 1842, and in the later part
of the year his “American Notes” appeared, and the cry against him
that had begun over copyright swelled into a roar in his rear.
Yet when we read the “Notes” we can find little offence
in them, and, to say truth, less interest than usual.
They are no true picture of America, or even of his vision of America,

and this for two reasons. First, that he deliberately excluded from them all mention of that copyright question which had really given him his glimpse of how tyrannical a democracy can be. Second, that here he chiefly criticises America for faults which are not, after all, especially American. For example, he is indignant with the inadequate character of the prisons, and compares them unfavourably with those in England, controlled by Lieutenant Tracey, and by Captain Chesterton at Coldbath Fields, two reformers of prison discipline for whom he had a high regard. But it was a mere accident that American gaols were inferior to English. There was and is nothing in the American spirit to prevent their effecting all the reforms of Tracey and Chesterton, nothing to prevent their doing anything that money and energy and organisation can do. America might have (for all I know, does have) a prison system cleaner and more humane and more efficient than any other in the world.

And the evil genius of America might still remain—everything might remain that makes Pogram or Chollop irritating or absurd.

And against the evil genius of America Dickens was now to strike a second and a very different blow.

In January, 1843, appeared the first number of the novel called "Martin Chuzzlewit." The earlier part of the book and the end, which have no connection with America or the American problem, in any case require a passing word. But except for the two gigantic grotesques on each side of the gateway of the tale, Pecksniff and Mrs. Gamp, "Martin Chuzzlewit" will be chiefly admired for its American excursion. It is a good satire embedded in an indifferent novel. Mrs. Gamp is, indeed, a sumptuous study, laid on in those rich, oily, almost greasy colours that go to make the English comic characters, that make the very diction of Falstaff fat, and quaking with jolly degradation. Pecksniff also is almost perfect, and much too good to be true. The only other thing to be noticed about him is that here, as almost everywhere else in the novels, the best figures are at their best when they have least to do. Dickens's characters are perfect as long as he can keep them out of his stories. Bumble is divine until a dark and practical secret is entrusted to him—as if anybody but a lunatic would entrust a secret to Bumble. Micawber is noble when he is doing nothing; but he is quite unconvincing when he is spying on Uriah Heep, for obviously neither Micawber nor anyone else would employ

Micawber as a private detective. Similarly, while Pecksniff is the best thing in the story, the story is the worst thing in Pecksniff. His plot against old Martin can only be described by saying that it is as silly as old Martin's plot against him. His fall at the end is one of the rare falls of Dickens. Surely it was not necessary to take Pecksniff so seriously. Pecksniff is a merely laughable character; he is so laughable that he is lovable. Why take such trouble to unmask a man whose mask you have made transparent? Why collect all the characters to witness the exposure of a man in whom none of the characters believe? Why toil and triumph to have the laugh of a man who was only made to be laughed at?

But it is the American part of "Martin Chuzzlewit" which is our concern, and which is memorable. It has the air of a great satire; but if it is only a great slander it is still great. His serious book on America was merely a squib, perhaps a damp squib. In any case, we all know that America will survive such serious books. But his fantastic book may survive America. It may survive America as "The Knights" has survived Athens. "Martin Chuzzlewit" has this quality of great satire that the critic forgets

to ask whether the portrait is true to the original,
because the portrait is so much more important than the original.
Who cares whether Aristophanes correctly described Kleon,
who is dead, when he so perfectly describes the demagogue,
who cannot die? Just as little, it may be, will some future
age care whether the ancient civilisation of the west,
the lost cities of New York and St. Louis, were fairly depicted
in the colossal monument of Elijah Pogram. For there is much
more in the American episodes than their intoxicating absurdity;
there is more than humour in the young man who made the speech
about the British Lion, and said, “I taunt that lion.
Alone I dare him;” or in the other man who told Martin that when
he said that Queen Victoria did not live in the Tower of London
he “fell into an error not uncommon among his countrymen.”
He has his finger on the nerve of an evil which was not only
in his enemies, but in himself. The great democrat has hold
of one of the dangers of democracy. The great optimist confronts
a horrible nightmare of optimism. Above all, the genuine Englishman
attacks a sin that is not merely American, but English also.
The eternal, complacent iteration of patriotic half-truths;
the perpetual buttering of one’s self all over with the same

stale butter; above all, the big defiances of small enemies,
or the very urgent challenges to very distant enemies; the cowardice
so habitual and unconscious that it wears the plumes of courage—
all this is an English temptation as well as an American one.
“Martin Chuzzlewit” may be a caricature of America. America may
be a caricature of England. But in the gravest college,
in the quietest country house of England, there is the seed of
the same essential madness that fills Dickens’s book, like an asylum,
with brawling Chollops and raving Jefferson Bricks. That essential
madness is the idea that the good patriot is the man who feels
at ease about his country. This notion of patriotism was
unknown in the little pagan republics where our European
patriotism began. It was unknown in the Middle Ages. In the
eighteenth century, in the making of modern politics,
a “patriot” meant a discontented man. It was opposed to the word
“courtier,” which meant an upholder of present conditions.
In all other modern countries, especially in countries like
France and Ireland, where real difficulties have been faced,
the word “patriot” means something like a political pessimist.
This view and these countries have exaggerations and dangers
of their own; but the exaggeration and danger of England is

the same as the exaggeration and danger of The Watertoast Gazette.
The thing which is rather foolishly called the Anglo-Saxon
civilisation is at present soaked through with a weak pride.
It uses great masses of men not to procure discussion but to
procure the pleasure of unanimity; it uses masses like bolsters.
It uses its organs of public opinion not to warn the public,
but to soothe it. It really succeeds not only in ignoring
the rest of the world, but actually in forgetting it.
And when a civilisation really forgets the rest of the world—
lets it fall as something obviously dim and barbaric—then there
is only one adjective for the ultimate fate of that civilisation,
and that adjective is “Chinese.”

Martin Chuzzlewit’s America is a mad-house: but it is a mad-house
we are all on the road to. For completeness and even comfort are
almost the definitions of insanity. The lunatic is the man who lives
in a small world but thinks it is a large one: he is the man
who lives in a tenth of the truth, and thinks it is the whole.
The madman cannot conceive any cosmos outside a certain tale or
conspiracy or vision. Hence the more clearly we see the world divided
into Saxons and non-Saxons, into our splendid selves and the rest,

the more certain we may be that we are slowly and quietly going mad.
The more plain and satisfying our state appears, the more we
may know that we are living in an unreal world. For the real
world is not satisfying. The more clear become the colours
and facts of Anglo-Saxon superiority, the more surely we may know
we are in a dream. For the real world is not clear or plain.
The real world is full of bracing bewilderments and brutal surprises.
Comfort is the blessing and the curse of the English, and of Americans
of the Pogram type also. With them it is a loud comfort, a wild comfort,
a screaming and capering comfort; but comfort at bottom still.
For there is but an inch of difference between the cushioned chamber
and the padded cell.

PART TWO