

The Endurance of Dickens

By Dr. Joss Marsh

When Dickens collapsed, and died, worn out by passion, depression, restlessness, and overwork, on 9th June 1870, the English-speaking world descended into mourning: newspapers were flooded by tributes; burial was demanded in Westminster Abbey, the tomb of kings and heroes. There would be no more sunny Pickwicks and feckless Micawbers, no more diffident young Pips and aspiring David Copperfields, no sons and daughters of Pecksniff the arch-humbler, or Mrs. Gamp, the garrulous, venal nurse, expert in layings-out and lyings-in, who so liked to “put her lips” to a friendly bottle, (to be left, for convenience, on the chimney-piece), “when [she was] so disposed,” and puffed her talents through running reference to an imaginary friend, “Mrs. Harris”.¹ That fecund world of characters—what Nabokov called the “magic democracy” of Dickensian characterization—would be stilled.² There would not even be an end to Dickens’s last, and most disturbing opium-dream of a novel, The Mystery of Edwin Drood (1870). The death was a seismic cultural shock.

Yet the “cultivated and critical” readers of Britain and North America had already left Dickens far behind. In a Fortnightly Review article of February 1872, George Henry Lewes pinpointed, with magisterial glee, the reasons for the “mingled irritation and contempt” in which the dead lion’s works were held by the intellectual *cognoscenti* (a class ideally represented by himself, consort of the great George Eliot, his days of toadying up to Dickens thankfully over). “Fastidious readers” of Dickens “were loath to admit that a writer could justly be called great whose defects were so glaring”: his addiction to melodrama, his showman-like exaggerations, his deficient verisimilitude, the intensity of visualization that made his works read like “hallucinations,” and the entire absence of “thought” in his mental make-up.³ The collapse in Dickens’s critical reputation, begun in the 1850s, in response to his satires on British government and institutions (the “fog”-bound law courts of Bleak House, 1852-53, the “Circumlocution Office” of Little Dorrit, 1855-57), persisted through the mid-20th century, the tide beginning to turn only with publication of Edmund Wilson’s landmark essay, “Dickens: The Two Scrooges,” in 1941, and the first full-scale modern biography, Edgar Johnson’s Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph, in 1952.

But the Lewes who summed up—and epitomized—this critical rejection, also put his finger on two reasons why, in this exhibition, in Dickens’s 200th birthday year, we celebrate the endurance, the persisting presence, and the imaginative splendor of the genius born 7th February, 1812, in the back room of a modest house in the naval town of Portsmouth, England. “Dickens has proved”—and continues to prove—“his power” for his readers, Lewes continued, “by a popularity almost unexampled, embracing all classes”: he was read alike by Queen Victoria and by High-Court judges, by potboys and by servant-girls; he captured them with laughter, and spoke to them in “the mother-tongue of the heart.”⁴ (It was the popularity that irked Lewes, as if no artist could be “popular” who was not also beneath notice.) Dickens was irresistible, even to armor-clad sneerers: “It is not long since I heard a very distinguished man express measureless contempt for Dickens,” remembered Lewes, “and a few minutes afterwards, in reply to some representations on the other side, admit that Dickens had ‘entered into his life’.”⁵ Dickens is not a perfect writer: he is not a literary technician, an architect of shapely narrative, or a philosopher, in the vein of Eliot, or the perfectionist Henry James (one of whose most vivid childhood memories was of listening, rapt and hidden, “glued” to the parlor carpet, while his mother read aloud the first chapter of David Copperfield, 1849-50, and word by word “the wondrous picture

The Endurance of Dickens

By Dr. Joss Marsh

grew”).⁶ But Dickens made and makes himself *present* to his readers as perhaps no other writer before or since has done, in a multitude of ways. Even the penname under which he published his first novels was an invitation to intimacy: the family nickname “Boz,” an infant brother’s corruption of “Moses” (after a character in the novel The Vicar of Wakefield, 1766). And he was truly (as he liked to call himself) “the *Inimitable* ‘Boz’”: “The man was a phenomenon, an exception, a special production,” wrote Lord Shaftesbury; “Nothing like him ever preceded”.⁷

To begin with—of course—there is the sheer bulk of the fiction: the fourteen full-length completed novels, not to mention the numberless sketches and short stories. Dickens made himself present to his readers, in his fiction, not only through style and direct address, but through the new serial mode of publication, which he first most famously adopted, and raised to unprecedented heights, topping 40,000 copies with The Pickwick Papers (1836-37), 50,000 with Little Dorrit. Readers looked for the familiar one-shilling green-backed monthly “numbers” of Pickwick, Nicholas Nickleby (1838-39), The Old Curiosity Shop (1840-41), and Dombey and Son (1846-48) with the anticipation viewers now await the next installment of television soaps; serial reading was an addiction and a communal experience, and it forged a relationship with the writer that, in the case of Dickens, became “personally affectionate, and like no other man’s”.⁸

That affection peaked in 1843, with publication of A Christmas Carol, the first of Dickens’s Christmas books, which created a whole genre, if not Christmas itself. Dickens’s some-time friend and long-term rival, the novelist William Makepeace Thackeray, called the slim red-and-gilt book a “gift” to humankind.⁹ It was lavishly—and sensitively—illustrated by John Leech, one of the many black-and-white artists of the day who were Dickens’s friends and collaborators: the brilliant, often drunken, and combative George Cruikshank, illustrator of Sketches and Twist; Hablôt K. Browne, known as “Phiz” (to Dickens’s “Boz”), who proved more amenable to Dickens’s (extensive) authorial directions; the well-known comic artist Robert Seymour, whose suicide two numbers into Pickwick catapulted Dickens, the junior member of the pen-and-pencil partnership, to fame and fortune; and many more. None, however, exceeded Dickens himself in the intensely *visual* quality of his imagination, which in the Carol expresses itself in dexterous manipulation of a supernatural schema—“shifting” visions, movement through space and time—taken direct from the foremost optical wonder-machine of the time, the magic lantern.

With the solitary exception of Bram Stoker’s Dracula, the Carol is the most filmed, most adapted text in history: a secular gospel, perennially popular, and (underneath—or because of—the puddings and bonhomie) profoundly true. It made Dickens a mythic figure, so that “[a] ragged girl in Drury Lane was heard to exclaim” on 9th June, 1970: “‘Dickens dead? Then will Father Christmas die too?’”¹⁰ Much as the need to turn out story after story, in after years, and the sense he had spawned an industry, regularly oppressed him, the Spirit of Christmas never failed him: Dickens was never (as Scrooge wished all Christmas-lovers to be) “boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart”.¹¹

The “personal affection” between Dickens and his public was cemented by a lifetime of journalistic hard graft. Dickens began his writing career as a shorthand reporter in the law courts and parliament, graduating to work on the Morning Chronicle and the Monthly Magazine, in 1833, some of it later collected as Sketches by “Boz”, 1836. After the stupendous surprise success of Pickwick, the same year, he acceded to editorship of Bentley’s Miscellany and Master

The Endurance of Dickens

By Dr. Joss Marsh

Humphrey's Clock. He failed as a newspaper editor—of the new Daily News—in 1846. But he was nonetheless a father of the “New Journalism” of the later 19th century: his input shaped the influential News, and “Mr. Dickens’s young men”—contributors to his successful weeklies, Household Words (1850-1859) and All The Year Round (1859-1895, continued for twenty-five years beyond his death by Dickens’s eldest son, Charley Jnr.)—shaped the more accessible, steam-driven mass press of the decades after his death. His own ATYR papers, in the character of the “Uncommercial Traveller,” are some of the most delicate and reflective of his works: late fruits of a writer who understood the privilege of being intimate at his readers’ breakfast-tables and evening hearthsides. “The Inimitable ‘Boz’” may have been the exemplary epitome of the modern celebrity constituted by media technology, but the motto on the Household Words masthead, “Conducted by Charles Dickens,” was a guarantee of his real and personal care for the people who turned his pages.

The bond between Dickens and his readers was also fostered by performance. History has drawn a kindly veil over his actual dramatic productions, dashed off in the first flush of fame, 1836, when he believed he could do anything (and had an eye for the main chance, with marriage and household expenses looming)—the comic “burletta” The Strange Gentleman, and the all-too-“English” opera The Village Coquettes. But prolific dramatization of his novels, some hitting the boards before he had even finished them, made his characters palpably present to his audience, in living flesh and three-dimensional “reality.” The adaptation machine continued without interruption after his death, morphing into the “Dickens industry” of film, television, and radio translation, which thrives to this day, across the world (The Cricket on the Hearth [Sverchok na pechi], in Soviet Russia, 1915, Hard Times [Tempos Difíceis], in modern dress, in Portugal, 1988). Continual adaptation makes Dickens, like Shakespeare, always our contemporary.

Some Dickensian performance was by Dickens himself. Nothing brought his public closer to him—literally—than his decision, in 1858, to turn an occasional foray for charity, buoyed by his success as an amateur actor-manager, into a second and “other” “interpretation of myself,” by becoming a public reader, for money, of his own works.¹² Dickens is unique among major novelists, or literary figures of any sort, in having engaged, in middle age, in a complete, and astoundingly successful, second career. The Carol was his first and most famous solo performance, a two-hour bravura production, in which he played 23 parts. But the performance that most engrossed him, and, by its demand upon his nerve and energy, depleted and shortened his life, was the public reading “Sikes and Nancy,” first performed 1868, and performed (thought friends and family) far too often thereafter, a distillation from the criminal masterpiece that was his second novel, Oliver Twist (1837-39), focused on the betrayal of Nancy by Fagin, her murder by Sikes, and the murderer’s flight and “execution” by his own rope. (Waiting in the wings, for the moment he should “kill the girl,” one night shortly before his death, Dickens whispered to his manager: “I shall tear myself to pieces”.)¹³ The audience was irradiated by his presence.

And what a presence it was! Dickens’s face, said Leigh Hunt, “had the life and soul in it of fifty human beings”; it looked, said Jane Carlyle, “as if made of steel”.¹⁴ He seemed, said Thackeray’s young daughter Annie, who met him at a party in the early 1850s, “a sort of brilliance in the room, mysteriously dominant and formless. everyone lighted up when he entered”.¹⁵ Even his male friendships were conducted with romantic intensity—sometimes comic, sometimes verging on tragic. Thus, to Forster, he once wrote a fan letter, as if from a

The Endurance of Dickens

By Dr. Joss Marsh

gushing girl, begging a memento—a hankie or a riding whip: anything blessed by the touch of his hand. Wilkie Collins, the younger and more bohemian friend of his middle age, unlocked the door to deep-seated, long-hidden needs, when he created the role of Wardour, for Dickens, in his drama of fated love and Arctic exploration, The Frozen Deep (1856): as he lay dying, as Wardour, with his lost love's tears raining down on his face, Dickens conceived not only the sacrificial plot of A Tale of Two Cities (1859), but the final romance of his real life, the secret affair with the young actress Ellen Ternan that wrecked his marriage and almost derailed his relationship with his audience. The public readings were designed to heal the rift of his 1858 separation—not for his wife, whom he put aside ruthlessly, but for the fans whose love he craved.

For Dickens understood fame, fandom, the conversion of objects into relics (the whip, the hankie, the thousands of objects friends and admirers queued to buy at the estate sale following his death), and of the famous person into an idol, better than any figure in the 19th century. He demanded, and knew astutely (as in a letter to John Forster of 1839), what was due him, from his rapacious publisher, and from life, “in the very height and freshness of my fame”.¹⁶ His experience was diagnostic, foundational, premonitory. For years, (as for Lewes), the extent of his celebrity made him critically suspect; the rise of “Cultural Studies” and the celebrification of Anglo-American culture have dramatically reinstated his relevance and importance.

The idol (like God) can be ubiquitously present: “[W]ill you let me touch the hand that has filled my house with many friends?” he was asked by one woman, in the street, in 1858.¹⁷ And nothing so enabled the ubiquity of Dickens's celebrity presence as the new technology of photography. “He was to be met,” wrote one of his “young men” G.A. Sala, “by those who knew him, everywhere--and who did not know him?”... “Who ... had not seen his photographs in the shop-windows?” They “form[ed] a legion”.¹⁸ Dickens's fame coincided with the first heyday of the photograph, the period of the *carte de visite*; “cartomania,” 1858-60, made him the most photographically famous person in Britain outside the Royal Family. This pervading photographic presence of the loved Dickens intensified the sense of his absence at his death, as in his last illustrator Luke Fildes's iconic mourning picture of his study at Gad's Hill House, poignantly titled “The Empty Chair.” Pause, you who read this: did you not already know what Dickens looked like before you walked into these rooms? Were not his stories, at heart so direct and fundamental, like the fairy stories he loved, already familiar to you before you read them?

One of my favorite cases in this exhibition is that which shows us the books Dickens devoured as a child—“reading as if for life,” as he put it in the fragment of an autobiography he wrote in 1848—hidden in the family attic, as the family itself slipped into debt and poverty.¹⁹ He may have been a “bran-new” man of the up-to-date 19th century, a herald of the 20th, but he harbored always a nostalgia for “old-fashioned” times—the mail coach brushed aside by the iron railroad; carved oak chairs; ancient inns; old curiosity shops—and for the classics of 18th-century literature: the picaresque ramblings of Smollett and Fielding; the sharp-tongued satires of Swift; the pithy realism and lonely intensity of Defoe's Robinson Crusoe, his favorite book. Scrooge recovers his humanity in remembering his child-self, and that child's reading—Crusoe and the Arabian Nights. Dickens stayed true always to the tales that had opened his child-eyes to wonder. His range of reference to fairy tales, particularly, is astonishing—not just to happy tales of childhood endurance, smartness, and triumph, like Tom Thumb or the Jack tales, but to dark

The Endurance of Dickens

By Dr. Joss Marsh

tales like the murderous and bloody Blue Beard. He resisted all Victorian efforts—like Cruikshank's, in his "Fairy Library," after he signed the Temperance pledge—to tone them down and give them "purpose."

Dickens showed that autobiographical fragment to only one person—not his wife, or his lover, but the friend he intended should one day write his biography, John Forster. Two years after his death, the secret misery of Dickens's childhood finally came to light, when Forster published the fragment, verbatim, in the first volume of his landmark Life of Charles Dickens (1872-74). At its center was class degradation: at age eleven, when his feckless, Micawberish father landed himself in debtors' prison, little Charles, all alone, was sent to work in Warren's blacking (shoe-polish) factory, a rat-ridden building crumbling into the mud of the Thames. Criticism has still barely recovered the shock of the revelation. It has made Dickens present to us, to this day, as a walking, writing paradox: a private, almost secretive man, who covered the tracks of the Ternan affair with cold-blooded skill, and burned every private letter he had ever received, but also—thanks to Forster, and his own impulse towards public confession--a writer whom we approach with extraordinary intimacy. He is catnip to biographers. The Bicentenary year brings a new attempt at the life from the scholar who first blew the whistle on Nelly Ternan, Claire Tomalin.

Dickens hid in the light, as well as in the shadows, before that posthumous revelation, of course. The autobiographical fragment resurfaced, sometimes word for word, always feeling for feeling, in David Copperfield, begun the year after it was written: the blacking jars become wine bottles, but many Victorians guessed at the identity of the fictional DC and the fiction-writer CD. But the childhood trauma expanded, also, to constitute the central myth of Dickens's fiction—the lost and violated childhood, most terrifyingly rendered before he came consciously to dwell on it, in the tale of the Workhouse orphan Oliver Twist, imperiled in the great city.

Oliver Twist, like nearly all his novels, is a fiction of London. For the legacy of his years of childhood suffering, in the city Dickens called the "fever patch" and the "modern Babylon," was a knowledge of London as "extensive and peculiar" as that of Pickwick's Sam Weller.²⁰ The lonely boy David Copperfield, his *alter ego*, "made stories for myself, out of the streets, and out of men and women".²¹ It was not nostalgia or sentiment or even an eye for the comic that made Dickens a writer, but a gift for the streetlife and strange truths of the city: one of the first, formative Sketches by Boz is titled, quite simply, "The Streets--Morning." The city drives Dickensian narration. In its slums, cells, and wildernesses was the strange freedom of the criminal and the have-not for which Dickens felt what he called "the attraction of repulsion".²² Savage London cried out in voices he transcribed but few could understand--"hook it!"--or in bestial cries that had no claim to language--"Goroo, goroo!"²³ The "Monster City," as Victorians called it, the largest in history to that date, which more than tripled in size over Dickens's lifetime, grew haphazardly, organically, entrepreneurially, utterly without central planning--unlike any other major European capital. It mirrored Dickens's creation of a new kind of novel, fusing narrative with urban sketch, character study with reportage. To penetrate the urban labyrinth, he had even to invent the first detective in English fiction, Inspector Bucket of Bleak House.

Today, the city we inherit is a Dickensian fiction: we cannot now *know* London without seeing it, in part, as it was recreated in his imagination. We live with—or by—an extraordinary semantic

The Endurance of Dickens

By Dr. Joss Marsh

slippage, without noticing it: Dickens = London = Victorian = England. The cast-away laboring boy who wandered the streets around Warren's factory rose to be, and has stayed, "Dickens of London," another Dick Whittington, more deeply enmeshed in the symbolic fabric of the city than the lost husband Queen Victoria memorialized in the Albert Hall and the Albert Memorial. Four characters who stand in for 19th-century "London" in Madame Tussaud's grand new tourist attraction, as this catalog goes to press. One is Victoria. But the others are Charles Dickens and the two most streetwise of his immortal characters—Fagin and the Artful Dodger. Welcome, reader, to their city, and to the life and times of their extraordinary creator.

¹ Martin Chuzzlewit (1843-44) Chapter 19.

² Nabokov, Lectures on Literature (New York: Harcourt, 1982) 124.

³ George Henry Lewes, "Dickens in relation to Criticism," Fortnightly Review, February 1872, 141-53: 148, 147, 143, 144, 151.

⁴ Lewes 147.

⁵ Lewes 143.

⁶ James, A Small Boy and Others: A Critical Edition, ed. Peter Collister (Charlottesville: U Virginia P, 2011) 102.

⁷ Shaftesbury, 1871, in Philip Collins, ed., Dickens: The Critical Heritage (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1971) 567.

⁸ Dickens to his close friend John Forster, 1858, qtd. in Malcolm Andrews, Charles Dickens and His Performing Selves: Dickens and the Public Readings (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007) 10.

⁹ William Makepeace Thackeray, "Charity and Humour," The Works of William Makepeace Thackeray Volume 25 (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1885) 371.

¹⁰ The inspiration for Theodore Watts-Dunton's sonnet, "Dickens returns on Christmas Day," first published in the journal Great Thoughts from Master-Minds, 5 October 1907: 239.

¹¹ A Christmas Carol (1843) Stave I: "Marley's Ghost."

¹² Dickens to Robert Lytton, 1867, qtd. in Andrews: 226.

¹³ Qtd. in Andrews: 260.

¹⁴ Both in: Dickens: Interviews and Recollections, ed. Philip Collins (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble Books, 1981) 18.

¹⁵ Anne Thackeray Ritchie, "Charles Dickens as I remember him," From the Porch (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913) 34-35.

¹⁶ Letter to Forster, 21st January 1839, The Letters of Charles Dickens, Volume One, 1820-1839, eds. Madeline House and Graham Storey (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965) 493.

¹⁷ Peter Ackroyd, Dickens (New York: HarperCollins, 1990) 835-36.

¹⁸ Collins, ed., Interviews and Recollections 199, 198.

¹⁹ Dickens, autobiographical fragment, repr. in Forster, The Life of Charles Dickens, 3 vols. (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1872) I: 32.

²⁰ The Pickwick Papers Chapter 20.

²¹ David Copperfield Chapter 11.

²² Qtd. in Forster, Life II: 116.

²³ Joe in Bleak House, Chapter 46; a nightmarish secondhand clothes seller in David Copperfield, Chapter 13.