

Dickens at Work

JOHN BUTT

AND

KATHLEEN TILLOTSON



METHUEN

LONDON AND NEW YORK

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Reprinted 1963 and 1968
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Abbreviated Titles of works frequently referred to

- COUTTS LETTERS = *Letters from Charles Dickens to Angela Burdett-Coutts, 1841-1865*. Selected and edited . . .
by Edgar Johnson (London, 1953).
- FORSTER = John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*
(Library edition, 2 vols., revised, 1876;
originally published in 3 vols., 1872-4).
[Reference is by book and section].
- HATTON AND CLEAVER = Thomas Hatton and Arthur H.
Cleaver, *A Bibliography of the Periodical
Works of Charles Dickens* (1933).
- JOHNSON = Edgar Johnson, *Charles Dickens, his Tragedy
and Triumph* (2 vols., London, 1953).
- LETTERS = *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, edited by
Walter Dexter (3 vols., 1938, the None-
such Dickens).

Preface

IN this book we have examined several of Dickens's novels in the light of the conditions under which he wrote them. The surviving evidence of these conditions is extensive and has been generally neglected hitherto, but if we are right in our estimate of the importance of this material, it suggests more than one new direction in the criticism of his work.

Many writers, taking their point of departure from Dickens's childhood reading, have seen him as continuing the tradition of Fielding and Smollett; but he also continues another eighteenth-century tradition. In the original Preface to *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839) he chose to call himself a 'periodical essayist', and took leave of his readers in the words of Henry Mackenzie in the last paper of the *Lounger*:

Other writers submit their sentiments to their readers, with the reserve and circumspection of him who has had time to prepare for a public appearance. . . . But the periodical essayist commits to his readers the feelings of the day, in the language which those feelings have prompted.

It is to the recovery of Dickens as a writer of 'periodical' novels that this book is especially devoted: how he responded to and conveyed 'the feelings of the day', what methods of work he evolved as best suited to his own genius and to the demands of monthly or weekly publication, and above all, how he eventually defeated Mackenzie's antithesis by learning to combine the 'circumspection' of preparation with the immediate and intimate relation to his readers which he valued so highly.

Our emphasis accordingly falls upon the process rather than the result, upon Dickens's craft rather than his art; but the inspiration and justification of our work is none the less a conviction of Dickens's greatness as a creative artist. This is widely shared. Yet, despite some excellent interpretative criticism and

much zealous biographical enquiry, Dickens studies have hardly passed beyond the early nineteenth-century phase of Shakespeare studies; while the study of his text seems arrested in the early eighteenth century. With the lifting of this spell, which can only come with a full critical edition, much that Dickens originally wrote and had to discard, but would have retained had he been writing three-volume novels, will be restored to readers, as well as passages in the early works which for a variety of reasons he removed or revised in later editions. In some of our chapters we give a few examples of such passages; more will be found in recent issues of *The Dickensian*, and in *Dickens Romancier* (1953) by Professor Sylèvre Monod, whose approach resembles ours in his use of the rich material of the Forster collection in the Victoria and Albert Library.

All of Dickens's writings have claims to be included in a study of 'Dickens at work', but our present choice fairly represents different stages of his career and different kinds of work. The variations and development of his method of work in early and late novels, in weekly and monthly instalments, are thus indicated; and also the persistence of his journalistic response to events of the day, from the 'no popery' cry of the late eighteen-thirties to the war in the Crimea—a response which is more varied and more extensive than is usually recognized or than we have had full opportunity of showing.

We arrived at our common concern in these matters by rather different routes: one of us starting from a specific interest in the effect of serial writing upon Dickens's novels, and the other from a more general interest in the conditions of publication of Victorian fiction. Some results of our earlier and largely independent investigations are to be seen in John Butt's article 'Dickens at Work' in 1948, and Kathleen Tillotson's *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* in 1954. The beginnings of collaboration appeared in John Butt's centenary articles on *David Copperfield* in 1949-50, and in the same year we converged upon *Dombey and Son*—the earliest of the fully-documented novels—on which we published a jointly-written essay.

The other studies were written in close association. Chapters i, vi, vii, and viii are mainly the work of John Butt, chapters ii, iii, iv, and ix mainly the work of Kathleen Tillotson; but we are jointly responsible for the whole book, and for chapter v in particular. That chapter is the only one which has been published

hitherto in substantially its present form: it appeared in *Essays and Studies 1951*, published for the English Association by John Murray. Parts of chapters i, vi, and vii have appeared in *The Durham University Journal*, *The Listener*, *The Dickensian*, *The Review of English Studies*, and *Nineteenth Century Fiction*. Chapter iv incorporates most of the introductory essay to *Barnaby Rudge* in the New Oxford Illustrated Dickens. To the editors of the journals mentioned, to the English Association, John Murray Ltd, and the Oxford University Press, we are indebted for permission to reprint.

For quotations from manuscripts, proof sheets, and memoranda in the Forster collection we acknowledge the permission of the Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum. Letters owned by the Henry E. Huntington Library, the Pierpont Morgan Library, the Albert A. Berg Collection of the New York Public Library, and the Rare Book Department of the Free Library of Philadelphia are quoted by permission of the owners. Permission to quote from hitherto unpublished material has been given by Mr Henry C. Dickens, O.B.E.

We are also grateful to Professor Geoffrey Tillotson for his constant advice and assistance; to Mr K. J. Fielding and Mrs Madeline House for several details which their unrivalled knowledge of unpublished letters could alone supply; to Miss Margaret Cardwell for valuable help in checking quotations and references; and generally, to members of discussion classes on Dickens at King's College, University of Durham, and Bedford College, University of London.

J. B.

K. T.

Preface to the 1968 edition

SINCE the writing of the foregoing Preface in 1957, the publication of additional material has fortunately outdated a few of its statements, though not, except in a few minor instances, the substance of the book itself. The 'full critical edition' of which we could then speak only with cautious hope was launched, under the general editorship of the authors, with the publication in 1966 of the first volume (*Oliver Twist*) of the Clarendon edition; among the several other novels of which the editing is in progress is *David Copperfield*, on the basis of extensive work done by John Butt before his lamented death. Further, many of the 'unpublished letters' to which we made a general reference are now available in the first volume of the Pilgrim edition; these naturally throw much further light on 'Dickens at work', in our sense of the phrase, and will sometimes enable the reader of our chapters to substantiate or modify our occasional conjectures or to supply additional dates. As far as I am aware, none of our conclusions is seriously affected, and no revision has been attempted. But I welcome the opportunity of this new edition to repair one oversight affecting the number plans and to add information on two small points.

P. 39, n. 1. 'Sentiment' first appeared in *Bell's Weekly Messenger*, 7 June 1834.

P. 59, n. 2. The song, 'I'll not believe love's wreath will pain', is from Thomas Haynes Bayly's farce *Perfection*, acted in 1830.

Pp. 115-6. The MSS. of the number-plans of No. 1 of *David Copperfield* and *Little Dorrit* were preserved, and are in the Forster collection (Forster MS. 168) but separated

from the other numbers and uncatalogued. To the transcript on p. 116 the following, cut off in Forster's facsimile, should now be added: 'Chapter III./ I have a change./ The stranded boat./ The life there./ comes home "father"/ Black whiskers and black dog.'

The complete number-plans of *Little Dorrit* were reproduced by P. D. Herring in *Modern Philology*, LXIV (1967) and those of *Bleak House* by H. P. Sucksmith in *Renaissance and Modern Studies*, IX (Nottingham, 1965).

K. T.

Since 1968, three further volumes in the edition mentioned above have appeared, (all containing complete number-plans): *Dombey and Son*, ed. A. Horsman (1974), *Little Dorrit*, ed. H. P. Sucksmith (1979), and *David Copperfield*, ed. N. Burgis (1981), from the Oxford University Press.

K.T.

Dickens as a Serial Novelist

I

IT is a commonplace in the criticism of early drama that the conditions in which a dramatist worked must be taken into account. He wrote for a theatre of a certain shape, with certain structural features, which permitted him to use certain dramatic effects. The analogy can be applied to the novelist who, though he has greater freedom than the dramatist, must also suit what he has to say to the current conventions of presentation. Just as Shakespeare thought in terms of a theatre without drop curtain, artificial lighting, or scenery, and of a theatrical company of male actors only, so Dickens was accustomed to think in terms of publication peculiar to his time. Today novels are customarily published in single volumes. A hundred and fifty years ago this form of publication was unusual. In the eighteenth century, novels had appeared in five volumes, or even in as many as seven; but by the time of Scott and Jane Austen the usual number was three or four. The prices varied: it was not uncommon to charge as much as half a guinea a volume, which made novel-reading exceedingly expensive to those who did not belong to a circulating library. These were still the conditions ruling when Dickens began to write. His first novel, *Pickwick Papers*, shows him attempting to reach a larger number of readers by cutting the price to suit their pockets. The method chosen was to publish in 'what was then a very unusual form, at less than one-third of the price of the whole of an ordinary novel, and in shilling Monthly Parts'.¹

1. Dickens's address announcing the 'cheap edition' of his works (1847). It is preserved in a scrap-book of cuttings in the British Museum (shelf mark K.T.C. 1.b. 5 (21)), and is reprinted in the 'National' edition, xxxiv (1908), p. 433.

After the first few numbers of *Pickwick*, each monthly 'part' or number consisted of three or four chapters, covering thirty-two pages of print, with two plates, and several pages of advertisements. It was issued in green paper covers and was published at a shilling, nominally on the first day, actually on the last day, of each month. This form of publication was chosen for *Pickwick* by Chapman and Hall, but Dickens found it so suitable that he adopted it for *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *Dombey and Son*, *David Copperfield*, *Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit*, *Our Mutual Friend*, and *Edwin Drood*. Each of these novels, except *Edwin Drood*, was planned for completion in nineteen monthly numbers, the last being a double number priced at two shillings, and containing, besides forty-eight pages of text and four plates, the title-page, frontispiece, preface, and other preliminaries. *Edwin Drood*, of which only six numbers were written, was planned for completion in eleven, the last to be a double number. Five of the other six novels were published in serial in weekly magazines and produced distinct problems of composition and form, which are touched upon in later chapters.

Although it might be supposed that Dickens would wish to complete a novel before permitting serial publication to begin, in fact he never wrote more than four or five numbers before the first was published, and by the middle of the novel he was rarely more than one number ahead of his readers. As might be expected, his practice differed at different stages of his career. Whereas *Little Dorrit* III was finished before the first number appeared and an even larger portion of *Our Mutual Friend* was ready before publication day, he had lightly embarked upon *Pickwick Papers* with nothing in hand;¹ and it seems that no more, or very little more, than the first numbers of *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Martin Chuzzlewit* were complete when publication began.² Furthermore, the writing of *Pickwick Papers* overlapped with *Oliver Twist*, and *Oliver Twist* with *Nicholas Nickleby*. In circumstances such as these, it is not surprising to learn that each number of *Nickleby* had been completed 'only . . . a day or two before its publication';³ and

1. See Forster, viii i, ix v, and below, p. 66.

2. 'The first chapter [of *Nicholas Nickleby*] is ready . . . so you can begin to print as soon as you like. The sooner you begin, the faster I shall get on' (*Letters*, I 161; 22 Feb. 1838). The first number of *Martin Chuzzlewit* was 'nearly done' on 8 Dec. 1842, with a little more than three weeks to go before publication day (*Letters*, I 493).

3. *Letters*, I 170.

this in turn meant that when something compelled him to stop working for a prolonged period, a gap in the series supervened. Thus the death of Mary Hogarth, his sister-in-law, on 7 May 1837 moved him profoundly, and the effect upon his serial publication was immediate: there were no June numbers of *Pickwick Papers* and *Oliver Twist*. On the other hand, when he himself died on 9 June 1870 there was enough of *Edwin Drood* written to permit the publication of three more numbers, the third being only two pages short of the normal complement.

The disadvantages of this method seem obvious. As Trollope remarked, 'an artist should keep in his hand the power of fitting the beginning of his work to the end'.¹ And the difficulties seem equally great. Writing in serial involved maintaining two focuses. The design and purpose of the novel had to be kept constantly in view; but the writer had also to think in terms of the identity of the serial number, which would have to make its own impact and be judged as a unit. Incident and interest had therefore to be evenly spread, since 'the writer . . . cannot afford to have many pages skipped out of the few which are to meet the reader's eye at the same time'.² Chapters must be balanced within a number in respect both of length and of effect. Each number must lead, if not to a climax, at least to a point of rest; and the rest between numbers is necessarily more extended than what the mere chapter divisions provide. The writer had also to bear in mind that his readers were constantly interrupted for prolonged periods, and that he must take this into account in his characterization and, to some extent, in his plotting. So early as the original preface to *Pickwick*, Dickens showed his recognition that not every story is suited to this type of publication.³

Great as these difficulties were, they were felt to be worth overcoming. To the reader the system meant not merely eager expectation of the day which brought a fresh batch of green covers to the bookstall, but also the impression that the story was in the making from month to month. Thus Lady Stanley is found addressing a friend in 1841 about the weekly progress of *The Old Curiosity Shop*:

How can you read Humphrey's last number and not *indulge* me with an ejaculation or two about it? Are you satisfied with the disposal of Quilp? My Lord is not, says it is too easy a death and that he

1. *Autobiography* (World's Classics revised text), p. 127.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 132. 3. See below, p. 65.