



Shaw on Dickens

Edited, with an Introduction, by
Dan H. Laurence and Martin Quinn

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Shaw
on
Dickens

To Three Ellens:
Two Past And One Present

Introduction

"Now it is pretty clear," Bernard Shaw wrote when he was nearly thirty-seven, "that Dickens, having caught me young when he was working with his deepest intensity of conviction, must have left his mark on me."¹ Archibald Henderson confirms that "at the age of seven Sonny eagerly devoured the tense dramas of *Great Expectations* and *A Tale of Two Cities*," and—by the time he was thirteen—*Pickwick Papers* and two of the darker novels, *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*.² Ample evidence exists that Shaw's identification with Charles Dickens was thorough and that his sense of affection, rising even to hero worship, was vast. Moreover, this enthusiasm would exert an early and profound impact on Shaw's art. When he first read *Great Expectations*—mentioned so frequently as to suggest that it was his favorite Dickens novel—Shaw was, he related in an 1893 music review, "not much older than Pip was when the convict turned him upside down in the churchyard."³

Dickens's burgeoning works were themselves frequently turned upside down, if not inside out, by Shaw as budding novelist and later as celebrated playwright perennially in search of characters, situations, and conversations to illustrate an evolving philosophy. As he determined to win a reputation by his pen, Shaw perceived Dickens as a kindred genius who had filled his own childhood imagination and directed the first quickenings of his social conscience. As the Dickensian Walter Crotch observed in 1919: "[I]n temperament they were alike, in that both of them were intensely earnest, intensely vitalised, and intensely pugnacious. There was no subject on which they had not views that they did not rush to express—usually, both of them with the force and point that comes from originality of belief; there was no current controversy in

which they did not take part."⁴ Dickens became the most dramatic of novelists in an era when theater, committed almost wholly to melodrama and spectacle, was scarcely an admissible vocation. Shaw found himself the most prolific and forensic of modern playwrights in an age when the new drama had become not only respectable but simultaneously relevant, serious, and subversive. Both were irrepressibly egotistical writers, addicted to their roles as public personalities and entertainers. One crashed headlong into success in the flush of youth while the other labored in comparative obscurity until near middle age. The triumph of "Boz" had been edged in tragedy and cut short by early death, while the devil's Celtic disciple in serene old age threatened to survive his own legend. Of Dickens's great influence upon him, Shaw flamboyantly pronounced the challenge: "Nothing but the stupendous illiteracy of modern criticism could have missed this fact."⁵

However deep he may have been touched, Shaw was to write no extended work about Charles Dickens as he had written about Henrik Ibsen in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891), and about another of his well-advertised heroes, Richard Wagner, in *The Perfect Wagnerite* (1898). Nevertheless, that his enthusiasm for Dickens must have considerably antedated his attraction to the Norwegian playwright and the German composer, to both of whom he devoted book-length studies, is reflected in an incomplete essay entitled "From Dickens to Ibsen," a draft Shaw began in November 1889. The fragment, subsequently abandoned, is reproduced here for the first time; the surviving twenty-two manuscript pages are all on Dickens. Shaw presumably dropped the project after he had finished what he wanted to say about Dickens but before he could collect his thoughts for whatever was intended to follow. Indeed, he had already absorbed Dickens rather efficiently through five apprentice novels, written, he liked to claim, in the style of Dickens and Scott. While Shaw sprinkled everything he wrote, including his plays, with allusions to Dickens's stories and characters, his major statements were to await invitations in 1911 and in 1936 to write introductions for editions of *Hard Times* and *Great Expectations*.

Although their lifetimes overlapped for nearly fourteen years, Shaw reported in answer to a February 1912 *Bookman* question-

naire that he had no personal recollections of Dickens,⁶ who had given his second series of public readings from the novels in a Fenian-plagued Ireland at Dublin and Belfast in early 1867.⁷ Nevertheless, Blanche Patch, Shaw's confidential secretary for thirty years, was guilty of perpetuating a colossal misunderstanding and a rash of troubled queries to *The Dickensian*, house organ of the Dickens Fellowship, when in a ghost-written memoir published after her employer's death she claimed that "Shaw himself had met Charles Dickens . . . [who] had shown him a different ending to *Great Expectations*."⁸ Since Dickens died in June 1870, before Shaw was quite through adolescence or had yet gone to England, this strange, charming legend remains just that. Yet, as in myth generally, an element of truth lurks: Shaw *did* know about the original discarded ending of the novel before most readers, and in 1936 took pains to see it restored, almost as an act of revisionist filial piety to his master. Perhaps the most significant fact, however, is that Shaw's familiarity with Dickens was so intense and obvious that a long-time associate received the impression that the two had been friends.⁹

Actually, Bernard Shaw and Charles Dickens emerged from rather different backgrounds, with Shaw holding the edge on social and cultural advantages. While Shaw's antecedents sprung from well-connected Irish Protestants, Dickens's paternal grandparents were life-long servants. Nevertheless, the parents of both spent most of their lives skirting the fringes of shabby-gentility, never achieving success, though always looking, Micawber-like, for the fresh opportunity. Perhaps more significant psychologically, Shaw and Dickens shared as children remarkably similar embarrassments in a sudden loss of social status—a factor which in itself may have drawn "Sonny" Shaw to the adventures of those castaway boys, Oliver Twist, David Copperfield, and Pip.

Dickens suffered lifelong pangs from the shameful experience of the blacking factory to which he was consigned following his father's imprisonment for debt. Edgar Johnson relates how John Dickens held a respectable position as a clerk in the Navy Pay Office, so that the family was even able to maintain a servant, until his arrest and the confiscation of the family belongings dashed his young son's expectations. The account of Dickens's containment of

disgrace is familiar: "I never said, to man or boy, how it was that I came to be there, or gave the least indication of being sorry that I was there. That I suffered in secret, and that I suffered exquisitely, no one ever knew but I." Deeply wounded by his lost expectations, the boy Dickens would walk after work to the doorstep of an imposing house, in an effort to delude fellow factory hands concerning his real circumstances. Years later, successful and secure beyond question, he habitually avoided Hungerford Stairs, crossing to the other side of the street when he smelled the cement of the blacking corks coming from Robert Warren's blacking factory in the Strand.¹⁰

For Shaw the months as a student in the Dublin Central Model School among mainly working-class Catholic boys during a spell of family hard times was the painful "Secret Kept for 80 Years," published under the title "Shame and Wounded Snobbery" in *Sixteen Self Sketches*, 1949. Shaw described his adjustment to reduced status in terms that are like nothing so much as an unmasking of Dickens's reaction to the blacking factory: "There I was a superior being, and in play hour did not play, but walked up and down with the teachers in their reserved promenade."¹¹ B. C. Rosset, in *Shaw of Dublin* (1964), suggests that Shaw concocted this Dickens-like experience to cover his real anxiety about his paternity in an effort to throw inquisitive biographers off the true scent as to the identity of his father: George Carr Shaw, the alcoholic ne'er-do-well married to his mother, or George John (Vandeleur) Lee, the talented musician whose house the Shaw family shared in Dublin and who led the mother's, daughter's, and eventually son's hegira to London. This circumstance, according to Rosset, might have encouraged young Shaw to empathize with Dickens's orphans, and, moreover, could account for the number of occasions in which Shaw introduces foundlings and an element of doubtful paternity into his plays and novels, as in *Cashel Byron's Profession*, *Mrs Warren's Profession*, *Major Barbara*, *Misalliance*, and *The Fascinating Foundling*.¹² Rosset's ingenious thesis notwithstanding, anyone familiar with theater would immediately recognize that Shaw was drawing upon a tradition as venerable as *Oedipus Rex* and as modern as Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, employed as frequently by Gilbert and Sullivan in fourteen comic operas as by Shaw in his extended canon of fifty-one plays and five novels.

Dickens, of course, drew heavily on his bitter memory in *David Copperfield*, but Shaw felt the compensatory necessity to acquire a philosophy rather than, as he put it, to “bombinat[e] in vacuo.” “We have,” he wrote to H. G. Wells, whom he once described as Dickens’s successor, “all been throug[h] the Dickens blacking factory; and we are all socialists by reaction against that; but the world wants from men of genius what they have divined as well as what they have gone through.”¹³ Accordingly, Shaw’s sharpest criticism of Dickens was finally that he was an artist who suffered without achieving a productive philosophy.

Perhaps as important as Shaw’s supposedly suppressed concern for his legitimacy was the unquestioned fact of his unhappy upbringing and a sense of remoteness from a mother forever pursuing her own ambitions, albeit never fulfilled. The “Parents and Children” preface to *Misalliance*, in which the notion of consanguinity engendering revulsion is introduced, was an indictment from the depth of his being; the document, moreover, is filled with references to Dickens. “The very people,” Shaw writes, “who read with indignation of Squeers and Creakle in the novels of Dickens are quite ready to hand over their own children to Squeers and Creakle, and to pretend that Squeers and Creakle are monsters of the past.”¹⁴ His theory, “as you may have noticed in my books here and there,” he told Gilbert Murray in 1911, “is that blood relationship tends to create repugnance, and that family affection is factitious.”¹⁵ Yet, as if to admit that he knew the pangs of something more than familial ambivalence, he wrote to Ellen Terry of his life as a boy: “Oh, a devil of a childhood, Ellen, rich only in dreams, frightful and loveless in realities.”¹⁶ In his ninth decade Shaw confided almost enviously to Esmé Percy, “You are very lucky to have such a nice mother [the mother in question was ill]. Look at the awful mothers most people have.”¹⁷

Dickens’s biographer John Forster reported that even after his deliverance Dickens never pardoned his mother for her willingness to keep him working at the hated warehouse: “I never afterwards forgot, I never shall forget, I never can forget, that my mother was warm for my being sent back.”¹⁸ Thus, we have in Dickens’s works typically two kinds of mothers: the ideal, angelic, and—significantly—dead mothers of Oliver, David, and Pip and the more sharply visualized, believable, remote and Puritanical

“mother” of Arthur Clennam in *Little Dorrit*, a work Shaw insisted was Dickens’s real autobiography. Actually, Mrs Clennam is not the hero’s biological parent since Arthur, we learn, is the product of an extramarital by-blow.

Similarly, the parade of unsympathetic and/or ineffectual mothers in Shaw’s works—notably Adelaide Gisborne, Mrs. Warren, Mrs. Clandon, Mrs. Dudgeon, Mrs. Whitefield, Lady Britomart, Mrs. Knox, Mrs. Tarleton, Mrs. Higgins, and Mrs. Moppy—is formidable. The very names “Britomart” and “Dudgeon” are evocative of character. Mrs. Dudgeon, Shaw confessed, was but “a replica of Mrs. Clennam with certain circumstantial variations, and perhaps a touch of the same author’s Mrs. Gargery [Pip’s shrewish sister and surrogate mother] in *Great Expectations*.”¹⁹ The play in which Mrs. Dudgeon appears, *The Devil’s Disciple*, was, moreover, clearly “written round the scene of Dick’s arrest,”²⁰ which Shaw knew could not help but remind audiences of Sydney Carton’s ultimate predicament in *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Saturated as he was with Dickens and keenly aware of embarrassments in his family background, Shaw sensed, not surprisingly, an extension of George Carr’s spirit in John Dickens, the father of the novelist, on whom Dickens’s portraits of Wilkins Micawber and, later, William Dorrit were principally modeled. Dubbed “The Hermit” by his offspring and their friends, George Carr Shaw became increasingly unresponsive to his children as he lapsed into ever more profound bouts of depression and dipsomania. It was natural and inevitable that young Sonny should turn to the sympathetic and considerate Lee, from whom he received encouragement in art and music, and remain on friendly terms with the “Professor” long after his mother and sister had dropped him. Charles MacMahon Shaw, an Australian cousin of G. B. S., wrote that he could not “help feeling that Mr. Micawber is probably far more like G. B. S.’s father than is G. B. S.’s own sketch [in the preface to *Immaturity*].” “Like John Dickens,” C. M. Shaw recalled, “he began in a Government office, and what could be more optimistically Micawberish than Uncle George’s venture into the corn trade, about which he knew nothing whatever?”²¹ Like Dickens in his portrait of Micawber—and through Freudian

impulses—Shaw may, cousin Charles suggests, have “struck at his father to protect his own ego.” Thus Shaw’s famous remark about clinging at an advanced age to his father’s coattails and hurling his mother into the struggle for life may be interpreted as bravura utterances designed to conceal a painful reality. In fact, rather like Dickens’s waifs, no one in his family cared much about him.

In essence Sonny Shaw—a lonely, sensitive, unloved boy, as isolated himself as “The Hermit”—moved into Dickens’s world of castaway youngsters who generally managed ultimately to find safe havens, in Daniel Peggotty’s converted boathouse (a motif Shaw uses as late as *Heartbreak House* in Captain Shotover’s drawing room got up like the poop deck of a ship), in Solomon Gills’s snug Wooden Midshipman, or even ultimate legitimacy as the adopted son of the benevolent gentleman Mr. Brownlow. (Consider the parallel relationship of Adolphus Cusins and Andrew Undershaft in *Major Barbara*.) Thus, the child acquired a whole set of fictional relatives and warm associations that seeped into his consciousness and stayed with him all his life—to emerge demonstratively in his creative works and as metaphor in his very language.

And while children as characters do not figure in his plays,²² the Dickensian legacy is that Shaw understood children and was to a rare degree sensitive to their peculiar angle of vision. Typically, he treated children as if they were adults—and thus his equals—often developing a special avuncular-fraternal affinity with the offspring of close friends. Tom Archer, son of the critic William Archer, admitted G. B. S. alone into his imaginary, mystical land of plenty, the world he called “Piona.”²³

Childhood trauma aside, there are several other inescapable biographical parallels between Shaw and Dickens that strengthen the affinity. Both began their writing careers in journalism, Dickens as a shorthand Parliamentary reporter, Shaw as a part-time art, music, and—finally—drama critic. Both outgrew the workaday expository medium, yet neither entirely forsook it for the more durable crafts of fiction and drama. With a mind perhaps as much on Dickens as on efficiency, Shaw even took the trouble to acquire and master Pitman shorthand, which he employed in diaries, correspondence, and drafts of many of his plays. Long after he was established as a playwright, G. B. S. continued to contribute to *The*

Nation, the *Labour Leader*, the *New Statesman*, and numerous newspapers of varying political persuasion in Britain and the United States. And, of course, he continued to coax the world to sanity in his lengthy prefaces. Similarly, Dickens wrote for many of the leading magazines of his day and, having secured an unsurpassed reputation as a novelist, conducted for the last twenty years of his life first *Household Words*, then *All the Year Round*, while simultaneously producing the later novels that Shaw and very few others of his generation recognized as major achievements.

Both Shaw and Dickens labored at first in the shadows of musically-talented elder sisters, singers with modest reputations that their brothers eventually eclipsed. Dickens's sister, Fanny (Frances Elizabeth Dickens Burnett), won a scholarship and actually took a prize at the Royal Academy of Music while Charles was still pasting labels on ink bottles. Her talent had blossomed early and she embarked on a promising musical career. Shaw's sister Lucy's entrancing voice similarly received recognition while her brother earned only frustration and a fluid prose style as a self-employed "novelist." Although her professional efforts are somewhat better known than those of Dickens's Fanny, Lucy never got beyond brief musical-theater success to achieve the prima-donna celebrity for which she longed.

While one hesitates to ride the horse of Plutarchian parallels too far, both brothers survived their sisters by more than twenty years as, unhappily, both Lucy and Fanny had their singing careers cut short by tuberculosis. The reactions of Shaw and Dickens to their sisters' final moments suggest nothing so much as very different responses to, or instincts about, the meaning of life. Or, as Hugh Kingsmill notes, "The chief and immense difference between them was in intensity of feeling,"²⁴ with the advantage falling to Dickens.

At Fanny's bedside, with an infallible eye for theatrical pathos, Dickens wrote his wife: "'No words can express the terrible aspect of suffering and suffocation—the appalling noise in her throat—and the agonizing look around,' followed repeatedly by a lethargy of exhaustion. 'Sleep seems quite gone, until the time arrives for waking no more.'"²⁵ Shaw in a very different tone dramatized the death of Lucy with ruthless objectivity, in cool, almost clinical, restrained, yet self-conscious, language containing barely a hint of sympathy:

One afternoon, when her health was giving some special anxiety, I called at her house and found her in bed. When I had sat with her a little while she said: "I am dying." I took her hand to encourage her and said, rather conventionally, "Oh, no: you will be all right presently." We were silent then; and there was no sound except from somebody playing the piano in the nearest house (it was a fine evening and all the windows were open) until there was a very faint flutter in her throat. She was still holding my hand. Then her thumb straightened. She was dead.²⁶

In stoic dignity Shaw exhibited the philosophical response that his hero Dickens conspicuously lacked. His calm, unemotive reaction to mortality is the perfect antithesis to Dickens's sentimental, effusive rhetoric. The contrast is interesting not so much as a stylistic distinction (especially since Dickens is not seen here at his best), but rather as an indication of different apprehensions of reality and habits of perception.

Like many in turn-of-the-century London, Shaw *was* intimate with people who remembered Dickens in the flesh. Some, indeed, had sat at the table with the Dickens family, and through their eyes Shaw could attain to what Henry James called "the visitable past." Since he had read John Forster's book and was well acquainted with Dickens's pastimes, including an enthusiasm for tramping great distances through the city and the countryside, Shaw could refer casually to Dickens (and Meredith) "desperately taking long walks, like postmen," to relieve the strain of brainwork.²⁷ Moreover, he was apparently as inquisitive as most of literary London about the liaison with actress Ellen Ternan (who, he divined, must have been the model for Pip's Estella) and was aware of the cloud of personal scandal under which Dickens, after casting off his wife, spent his last and in many respects most miserable decade. G. B. S.'s own philanderings with actresses may even have been held in check by his knowledge of Dickens's bitter experience as well as by his vested interest in philosophic stability.

In 1885 Shaw—through the agency of William Archer—landed his first job as art (and, later, as music) critic on *The World*, then under the direction of Edmund Yates.²⁸ Son of Dickens's old actor-friend Frederick Yates and a frequent contributor in earlier days to *Household Words*, Edmund Yates first met Dickens in the spring of 1854. Yates had been intimate with Dickens, advising against publishing his "personal" statement on his separation from Mrs. Dick-

ens and later embroiling the novelist in a feud with Thackeray that continued until just the week before Thackeray's death. Yates, however, would likely have done little to indulge Shaw's curiosity about Dickens's personal life since a year earlier he had put the public on notice that "My intimacy with Dickens, his kindness to me, my devotion to him, were such that my lips are sealed and my tongue is paralyzed as regards circumstances which, if I felt less responsibility and delicacy, I might be at liberty to state."²⁹

Yet gossip flowed freely when Shaw asked the poet Richard Hengist Horne, who knew the Dickens household, what he thought of their domestic relations. R. H. Horne, who in 1852 became Commissioner for Crown Lands in Australia, had been a reporter on the ill-fated *Daily News* and a contributing editor to *Household Words*, as well as a sometime habitu   of the Dickens party during holidays at Broadstairs. Consistent with a well-earned reputation as a colorful, flamboyant journalist, Horne related to Shaw Dickens's delight in mocking his wife's clumsiness, throwing "himself back in his chair . . . , his eyes streaming with mirth," utterly unable "to restrain his fits of laughter when Mrs. Dickens's bangles dropped from her fat little arms into the soup."³⁰ Shaw cautiously concluded that "Mrs. Dickens may have suffered from a want of respect in her humorous family, especially as the household was run and ruled by her sister Georgina."³¹ Undoubtedly, Shaw's own evaluation of the conflicts in Dickens's life was partly shaped by this revealing conversation with Horne and by other testimony concerning the less flattering habits of the Victorian Household Saint.

Though the paths of Shaw and Dickens, Blanche Patch's fantasy notwithstanding, regrettably did not meet, for at least the last third of her long life (1839—1929) Shaw was a friend—if not precisely an intimate—of twice-married Kate Macready Dickens Collins Perugini, Dickens's third child and younger daughter (named both for her mother, Catherine, and the great actor and family friend William Charles Macready). Shaw's first encounter with Kate, fifteen years his senior, who had established herself as a painter of children's portraits and scenes from the nursery, seems to have occurred after he had severely criticized her paintings on display at the Royal Academy, complaining in *The World* that her pictures always told stories. As the widow of a member of the Pre-

Raphaelite Brotherhood (Charles Allston Collins, brother of Wilkie) and the wife of a wellknown Italian painter, Kate had reason to be proud.³² Shaw's condescension apparently so infuriated Mrs. Perugini that she dashed off a bitter reply, which she almost instantly wished to recall. Sometime later they met at the Mansion House, where Shaw, ever playing the gallant, introduced himself to the distressed lady. Kate's wounded pride was soon assuaged, and her critic began sending inscribed copies of his latest works. On one occasion G. B. S. presented her with a picture postcard of himself that she dutifully exhibited on her mantelpiece next to a photograph of a friend's chauffeur's fiancée—fitting revenge upon a man Kate once sarcastically referred to as "Sher-nard Bore."³³

While it must be emphasized that Shaw's friendship with Mrs. Perugini was purely incidental to his already profound involvement with Dickens's fiction, the relationship proved responsible for the rescue of a cache of 137 letters that Dickens had written to Catherine Hogarth before and long after their marriage. These letters, spanning the period 1835–1867, have since demonstrated their value to scholars and especially to Edgar Johnson, the heaven-sent biographer into whose hands Shaw hoped such documents might fall. The story of the letters is confusing, but it seems that a year before her death in 1879 the misused Mrs. Dickens entrusted the packet of correspondence to her eldest daughter, Mamie, asking only that their contents might one day be published. On Mamey's death in 1896 the burden of the letters fell upon Kate Perugini. "They would show the world, she [Mrs. Dickens] said, that my father had once loved her; and would make it apparent that the separation which took place between them in 1858, was not owing to any fault on her side,"³⁴ as Dickens had publicly and ungenerously suggested. Fiery-tempered Kate, "Lucifer Box" as her father dubbed her,³⁵ indignant about the treatment her mother had endured and probably suffering some guilt for the years that she had neglected her mother (in accord with what she supposed were Dickens's own wishes), was on the verge of committing the package to the fire when G. B. S. intervened.³⁶ As Shaw tells it, he opened her eyes "to the fact that there was a case for her mother as well as for her father" in what the letters might reveal.³⁷

With urging from Shaw, Mrs. Perugini eventually changed her mind and agreed to deposit the letters in a sealed packet in the British Museum, with the stipulation that they not be made public until she and her surviving brothers, Sir Henry Fielding Dickens and Alfred Tennyson Dickens, could no longer be touched by their contents. After Henry's death in December 1933, the letters were finally made available to the public under the title *Mr. & Mrs. Charles Dickens*.³⁸ Ironically, without Shaw's timely persuasion, fewer of "those tragic monuments of dumbness of soul and noisiness of pen,"³⁹ as he later styled the correspondence of Charles Dickens to his family, would exist. This caustic remark in one of his own letters to the dean of Dickensians, G. K. Chesterton, was not the first disparaging reflection that Shaw made on his hero's human shortcomings, nor was it his last.

Forty years after Shaw rescued the Dickens letters from oblivion, and not long after the letters themselves were printed, the publication of two biographies stirred a vituperative squabble between defenders of Dickens's public reputation (marshaled under the banner of the Dickens Fellowship) and a few revisionists, including Shaw, who insisted on knowing even the unpleasant facts of Dickens's life. The two works that sparked this controversy were Thomas Wright's *The Life of Charles Dickens*⁴⁰ and Gladys Storey's overly-feared exposé, published four years later, *Dickens and Daughter*.⁴¹ The daughter in the title was Kate Perugini, while the book itself is based on conversations with Mrs. Perugini, in lonely old age in her Chelsea flat confiding ambivalent feelings about her father.

Dickensians who still saw the novelist as the patron spirit of the English fireside stubbornly refused to accept the revelations about Dickens's character that seemed all at once to be coming to light, and suggested that Kate Perugini had gone senile. Public loyalty to lady friends was a chivalrous habit with Shaw; and indifferent to the purity of Dickens's posthumous image, he attested to the continuing soundness of Mrs. Perugini's judgment on the basis of a conversation shortly before her death. G. B. S. professed to have "no doubt that Miss Storey has carried out the wishes, early and late, of Mrs. Perugini in publishing her work." To the reviewer of *Dickens and Daughter* in the *Times Literary Supplement* who had entertained his readers with conjectures about the daughter's san-