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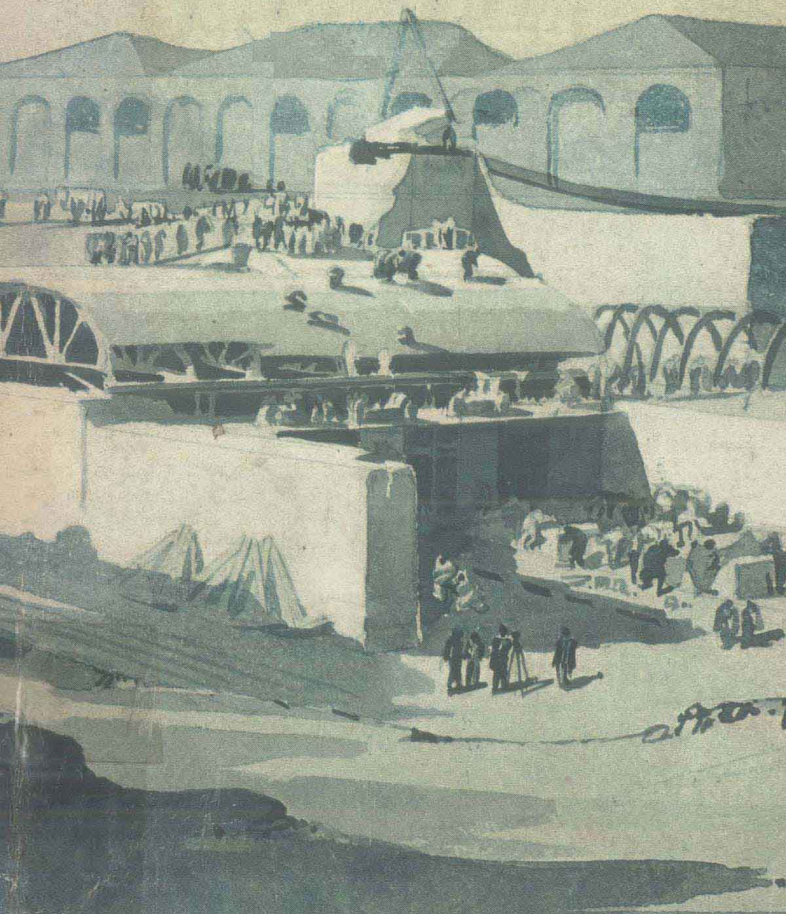
CHARLES DICKENS
DOMBEY AND SON



PENGUIN ENGLISH LIBRARY

DOMBEY AND SON

CHARLES DICKENS

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CHARLES DICKENS

DOMBEY AND SON

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CHARLES DICKENS

CHARLES DICKENS was born at Portsmouth on 7 February 1812. He was the second of the eight children of John Dickens, a clerk in the Naval Pay Office, whose mother had been in service to Lord Crewe. Although John Dickens was hard-working, he was rarely able to live within his income, and this brought a series of crises upon his family, which lived under the shadow of menacing social insecurity.

John Dickens's work took him from place to place, so that Charles spent his early childhood in Portsmouth, London, and Chatham. He was happiest at Chatham, where he attended a school run by a young Baptist minister, who recognized his abilities and paid him special attention. In 1823 the family moved to London, faced with financial disaster, and, to help out, a relative of Mrs Dickens offered Charles work in a blacking business which he managed. Two days before his twelfth birthday the boy began work at a blacking warehouse at Hungerford Stairs, labelling bottles for six shillings a week.

Shortly before this John Dickens had been arrested for debt, and soon the whole family, except for Charles who was found lodgings, joined him in the Marshalsea Debtors' Prison. The double blow – his menial job and the family shame – gave Charles a shock which transformed him. In later years he told only his wife and his closest friend, John Forster, of these experiences, which haunted him till his death.

After three months in prison, John Dickens was released by process of having himself declared an Insolvent Debtor, but it was not until weeks later that he withdrew Charles from work and sent him to school, where he did well. At fifteen, Charles began work in the office of a firm of Gray's Inn attorneys. Sensing a vocation elsewhere, he taught himself shorthand, and eighteen months later began to work as a freelance reporter in the court of Doctors' Commons.

In 1829 or 1830 he fell passionately in love with Maria Beadnell, the daughter of a banker. Their affair staggered fruitlessly on until the summer of 1833. Meanwhile, he began to report parliamentary

debates, and won himself a high reputation for speed and accuracy. His first *Sketches by Boz* appeared in magazines soon after he was twenty-one. In 1834 he joined the reporting staff of the *Morning Chronicle*. A well-received volume of his *Sketches* appeared on his twenty-fourth birthday.

His growing reputation secured him a commission from the publishers, Chapman and Hall, to provide the text to appear in monthly instalments beside sporting plates by a popular artist, Seymour. He 'thought of Mr Pickwick'. Two days after the first number appeared he married Catherine Hogarth, the daughter of a fellow journalist, on the prospect. Although early sales were unexceptional, *Pickwick Papers* (1836–7) soon became a publishing phenomenon, and Dickens's characters the centre of a popular cult. Part of the secret was the method of cheap serial publication, which Dickens used for all his subsequent novels (some, in fact, being serialized in weekly magazines edited by himself), and which was copied by other writers.

While *Pickwick* was still running, Dickens began *Oliver Twist* (1837). *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–9) provided him with a third success, and sales of *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840–41) reached 100,000. After finishing *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), Dickens set off with his wife for the United States. He went full of enthusiasm for the young republic, but returned heartily disillusioned, in spite of a triumphant reception. His experiences are recorded in *American Notes* (1842).

His first setback came when *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843–4) did not repeat the extraordinary success of its predecessors, though he promptly inaugurated his triumphant series of *Christmas Books* with *A Christmas Carol* (1843). He now travelled abroad, first to Italy (1844–5) and then to Switzerland and Paris (1846). During a brief interlude in England he projected, not another novel but a paper, the *Daily News*. This first appeared in January 1846, but Dickens resigned after only seventeen days as editor.

His next novel, *Dombey and Son* (1846–8), was more wholly serious and more carefully planned than his early work. In *David Copperfield* (1849–50) he explored his own childhood and youth, thinly disguised. In the 1850s he increased his already intense interest in public affairs. He founded *Household Words*, a weekly magazine which combined entertainment with social purpose; it

was succeeded in 1859 by *All the Year Round*, which sold as many as 300,000 copies. *Bleak House* (1852–3) and *Hard Times* (1854) have strong social themes, and *Little Dorrit* (1855–7) continues Dickens's bitter public denunciation of the whole framework of government and administration which had mismanaged the Crimean War.

In 1858 he separated from his wife. Although Kate, a shadowy, slow person, had given him ten children, she had never suited his exuberant temperament very well. He befriended a young actress, Ellen Ternan, who may have become his mistress. He was now living mainly in Kent, at Gad's Hill, near his boyhood home of Chatham. *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), *Great Expectations* (1860–61), and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–5) completed his life's main work of fourteen major novels. By the mid-1860s his health was failing, partly under the strain of his successful but exhausting public readings from his own work, which had begun in 1858. An immensely profitable but physically shattering series of readings in America (1867–8) speeded his decline, and he collapsed during a 'farewell' series in England. His last novel, *Edwin Drood* (1870), was never completed; he suffered a stroke after a full day's work at Gad's Hill on 8 June 1870 and died the following day. Lamentation was demonstrative and universal, and he was buried in the Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey.

Dickens's extreme energy was not exhausted by his unique success as a novelist. His weekly journalism made heavy demands on his time after 1850, and he constantly turned to the stage; first, in many amateur theatricals, given privately or for charity, where he produced and took leading roles with great brilliance; later, in his public readings. His concern with social reform in his novels and journalism was matched by an active personal interest in several charitable projects.

Furthermore, as Lionel Trilling puts it, 'the mere record of his conviviality is exhausting'. His typical relaxation was a long walk at great speed, and he was dedicated to any and every sort of game or jollification. In the early days of his success, observers were sometimes displeased by his flamboyant dress and a hint of vulgarity in his manners, but he had powerful, magnetizing eyes and overwhelming charm. Beneath his high spirits, friends could detect a permanent emotional insecurity and restlessness, which flavours the tragi-comic world of his novels.

Two biographies stand out among many: John Forster's *Life* (1872, many times reprinted); and Edgar Johnson's *Charles Dickens, His Tragedy and Triumph* (Gollancz, 1953), which embodies material neglected or suppressed by Forster. Readers interested in Dickens's methods as a novelist will be enlightened by John Butt's and Kathleen Tillotson's *Dickens at Work* (Methuen, 1957). There are innumerable specialized studies of his work, life, and views. A magazine exclusively devoted to this subject, *The Dickensian*, is published three times a year by the Dickens Fellowship.

A.C.

INTRODUCTION

I

It can seem superfluous to introduce Dickens. Before all English writers, Dickens introduces himself. His approach to his readers is the approach of the presenter: direct and self-conscious; telling his story rather than letting it appear to tell itself. In this, as in so much else, Dickens belongs to a popular tradition: going straight to an audience. The impersonality of other traditions – the learned and the polite – has been widely used in fiction. For certain ways of seeing, and for certain kinds of story, it is admirable and indeed inevitable. But in Dickens's way of seeing his world, direct address and presentation are radically necessary. It is not only a question of tradition or influence; it is part of his deepest creative and moral intention. And it is then profoundly important that we should see this great novelist, at a particular crisis of English society, at once drawing and composing a unique strength from the popular culture and the popular traditions of his time.

Dombey and Son first appeared in book form in 1848. It was a year of outstanding importance in English and European history. It was also an exceptional period in the development of the English novel. Within some twenty months not only *Dombey and Son* but *Vanity Fair*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*, *Mary Barton*, *Tancred* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* were first published. There has been no higher point in the whole history of English fiction. Several times before, there had been major individual novelists. Now, as it were suddenly, there was a generation.

Of course we see this more easily, looking back. We can see the 1840s as the decisive period in which the consciousness of a new phase of civilization was being formed and expressed. The radical transformation of life in Britain, by the extended development of the first industrial revolution, by the transition from a predominantly rural to a predominantly urban society, and by the consequent political struggles for representative democracy and for and against the emergence of an organized working class, was then in its most disturbed and creative phase. It was a decade which

produced, in addition to the new generation of novelists, the direct and influential social criticism of Carlyle and Engels, the great articulation of consciousness of Chartism and the struggle for the Ten Hours Bill, and, in the dominant line, the effective organization of the institutions of a new urban culture: in the popular press, in theatres and music-halls, in public parks, museums and libraries, in cheap books and their distribution. Many of the novels of the decade express these changes directly, as they express also the major economic and social changes: the struggle against poverty, the campaigns for public health and urban planning, the transforming extension of the railways.

But all these are the separable items of an active and connected history. What comes through most decisively in the novels is the effect on consciousness of this transforming, liberating and threatening time. If we take only the major achievements in fiction, we find a diversity of method but, more critically, a willing confidence in experiment: a creation of forms to express new whole experiences. And what we must then say, with the advantage of being able to look back and to distinguish the most creative achievements, is that for expressing this transformation and crisis, in its widest social reality, the methods of Dickens, proceeding directly from the issues and manners of the widest popular life, were the most decisive contribution and discovery. Emily Brontë created a supreme form of that opposition between the passion of primary relationships and the inertia of conventional relationships which was to go on being experienced throughout this disturbed civilization. Charlotte Brontë, less significantly but more influentially, created the novel of that form of isolated feeling and desire which became, in later periods, the powerful and extensive fiction of special pleading on behalf of a separated individual. So much that was new was being created and struggled with that it is right, initially, to put the emphasis on a generation. But then as we see the generation, and its relations with its world, we see Dickens as its largest and most central spirit: at once exposed and confident over the widest possible range of experience. His incompleteness, his failures, can of course be readily discerned, but we have to put the main stress on what he achieved, out of a disturbance so great that it seemed to threaten chaos.

This stress on his creative power, evident as much in the new

forms of his novels as in the more widely recognized particular achievements of situation, character and language, needs now to be very firmly made, since from the generation following that of the 1840s, a very different and very strong kind of novel emerged: a kind of novel which, as it happens, contradicts that of Dickens in almost every criterion of success. That new kind of novel, associated above all in England with the name of George Eliot, belongs to a period which, though no less disturbed than the 1830s and 1840s, was nevertheless a time in which certain agreed bearings, certain unities of tone and concern, certain confidences of scale, had been at least temporarily achieved. It is a period we can describe as that of the liberal novel, in a positive sense. It achieves a balance, a point of view, between individual character and social context – those liberal descriptions – which is, in its turn, one of the great creative achievements. In the end this balance broke down yet again: from the last decades of the nineteenth century new disturbances, a new sense of a transforming and disintegrating world, exerted pressures which again, and very decisively, altered the methods of fiction. In the twentieth century, in a culture and in a fiction again necessarily experimental, the innovating and at once idiosyncratic and popular genius of Dickens could again be understood.

But the size, the confidence, the calm of that intervening period had had its profound critical effects. Understanding of the novel, as a literary form, had been based on that magnificent but temporary and somewhat narrow achievement. Certain criteria of seriousness – the slow building of rounded characters, the intricacy of developing relationships, a certain tact in analysis and indication matched by the sobriety and subtlety of the novelist's direct language – had become decisively established. Roundness, intricacy, tact: whether operating as real modes of insight or as critical counters, these qualities not only defined what were undoubtedly major novels, from George Eliot to Henry James, but defined, or seemed to define, what was wrong, what was inadequate, what was merely popular in Dickens. From that disability, of viewing one great kind of English novel through the critical sense of another great but radically different kind, we are only now, and with difficulty, beginning to recover.

In fact it is the contrast – the profound contrast – between

Dickens and George Eliot that is the beginning of any important critical understanding of the English nineteenth-century novel. Yet this essential contrast is still not clearly seen; or rather it is not seen as a choice between two possible roads – a choice which is not yet complete, in continuing literature and experience. George Eliot's strength came, in the main, from the learned, the educated, even the polite world: with some inevitable difficulty, since much of her deepest feeling was rooted in everyday and customary life and effort. That extension of her world of concern, and yet its control, or attempted control, by an educated idiom and manner of composition, is the measure of her relation to and her distance from Jane Austen. And it is not surprising that most critics, belonging themselves to that learned and educated world, have adopted her achievement as a general standard for English fiction: overriding the historical and social pressures which in reality provoked the choice, the distance, between the two main roads.

It is indeed easy to respond to that major and indispensable achievement of George Eliot and her successors. But when, from its habits, the reader – the critic – turns to Dickens, he is all too likely to forget the fundamental choice; the division of two great roads. He may then find himself looking in Dickens for things he believes to be essential in any important novel: not for presented character, but for revealed character; not for direct moral address, but for enacted and in a way tacit significance; not for the language of display and persuasion, but for the quieter language of description, analysis and comprehension; not for the products of the year and the day but for the imperceptible processes of the minutes. And if, nevertheless, such a reader likes Dickens, and finds the essential response happening in spite of his preconceptions, he may well fall back on the popular tradition, as a reference, an explanation, an explaining away.

But this is the cart before the horse. Dickens was not a splendid exception in the novel: a great entertainer and persuader, a writer of marvellous energy, who somehow found himself, paradoxically, inside the quieter world. He was, from the beginning, another kind of novelist, another kind of creator, in another and essentially different historical period and outlook. The popular tradition – in the theatre, in newspapers, in songs and spoken stories – is indeed where he starts from, but not as a liability; as one major way, a

majority way, of responding to a very particular and rapidly changing world. It is not the old folk tradition of a pre-industrial society; it is that tradition altered, extended, sharpened, by the experience of industrial life and of cities; a popular culture, part of what it both expresses and opposes. Dickens began from this because it was, by experience, his own way of seeing his world. He was not separated, for advantage and disadvantage, from that crowded, noisy, miscellaneous life. He did not see it from another experience and through another idiom; he belonged to it, found his way in it, wrote his penny-a-line with the others. But then the important thing is that by an extraordinary effort of creative development he made it available to literature, in very original ways. Just as George Eliot's kind of novel developed, in relation to earlier novels, from the polite essay, the learned character, the sustained and documented history – all of them bearing on the narrative of personal experience – so Dickens's kind, again related to earlier novels, developed from the popular theatre, the newspapers, the public platform and the pulpit, and the stories and songs of the taverns.

These were two social worlds, though of course in reality they overlapped. Each has its strengths and its weaknesses in approaching different kinds of experience. To tell this full story (which is indeed not yet complete) would take us out into much wider fields. But we can see, when we read Dickens, that the popular tradition, which has been so much neglected, gives its life not only to continuations of itself – a crowded, many-voiced, anonymous world of jokes, stories, rumours, songs, shouts, banners, greetings, idioms, addresses. It gives its life also, through its highly original use by this remarkable writer, to a very novel form of sustained imaginative creation – to a unique and necessary way of seeing and responding to what was then an unprecedented world; to the crowded, noisy, miscellaneous world of the nineteenth-century city, and of the industrial-capitalist civilization of which the city, and above all the metropolis, was the principal embodiment. And what is new in this kind of novel is not only this new kind of life – so markedly different from the more obviously knowable and traditional communities of the village and the country town which gave form to an alternative fiction. It is also, and necessarily, a new way of seeing and valuing: above all, a new way of seeing the qualities that make

for and against life and goodness. It is a way of seeing, deeply rooted in the popular tradition, in which general vices such as pride, general virtues such as innocence, are known at once in traditional terms – as abstractions as much as individual traits – and yet at the same time are seen as being created, in all their generality, by the pressures, the relationships, the governing character of a history and a society.

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Thus it is easy to see and to say that *Dombey and Son* is a novel about pride. But we have to go on and make a more difficult distinction. There is a kind of moral analysis in which society is a background against which the drama of personal virtues and vices is enacted. There is another kind – increasingly important in the development of nineteenth-century literature – in which society is the creator of virtues and vices; its active relationships and institutions at once generating and controlling, or failing to control, what in the earlier mode of analysis could be seen as faults of the soul.

And then the important thing to realize about *Dombey and Son* is that Dickens uses, and relies on, both these kinds. In a way it is true to say that *Dombey and Son* is the novel in which he makes a decisive transition from the first to the second, in his essential organization. But compared with some of his later works, and especially with *Little Dorrit*, *Our Mutual Friend* and *Great Expectations*, *Dombey and Son* still often relies, in an isolated way, on the more traditional way of seeing error and failure.

'I have dreamed,' said Edith in a low voice, 'of a pride that is all powerless for good, all powerful for evil; of a pride that has been galled and goaded, through many shameful years, and has never recoiled except upon itself; a pride that has debased its owner with the consciousness of deep humiliation, and never helped its owner boldly to resent it or avoid it, or to say, "This shall not be!" a pride that, rightly guided, might have led perhaps to better things, but which, misdirected and perverted, like all else belonging to the same possessor, has been self-contempt, mere hardihood and ruin.'

She neither looked nor spoke to Florence now, but went on as if she were alone.

'I have dreamed,' she said, 'of such indifference and callousness, arising from this self-contempt; this wretched, inefficient, miserable