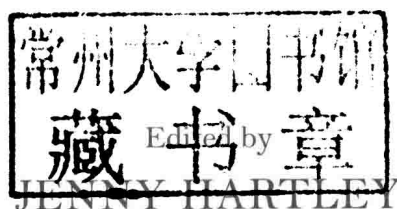


The Selected **Letters**
of
Charles
Dickens



EDITED BY JENNY HARTLEY

THE
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What was it like to be Charles Dickens? His letters are the nearest we can get to a Dickens autobiography: vivid close-up snapshots of a life lived at maximum intensity. This is the first selection to be made from the magisterial twelve-volume British Academy Pilgrim Edition of his letters. From over fourteen thousand, four hundred and fifty have been cherry-picked to give readers the best essence of 'the Sparkler of Albion'.

Dickens was a man with ten times the energy of ordinary mortals. There seem to have been twice the number of hours in his day, and he threw himself into letter-writing as he did into everything else. This eagerly awaited selection takes us straight to the heart of his life, to show us Dickens at first hand. Here he is writing out of the heat of the moment: as a novelist, journalist, and magazine editor; as a social campaigner and traveller in Europe and America, and as friend, lover, husband, and father.

Reading and writing letters punctuated the rhythms of Dickens's day. 'I walk about brimful of letters', he told a friend. He claimed to write 'at the least, a dozen a day'. Sometimes it was a chore but more often a pleasure: an outlet for high spirits, sparkling wit, and caustic commentary—always as seen through his highly individual and acutely observing eye.

Whether you dip in or read straight through, this selection of his letters creates afresh the brilliance of being Dickens, and the sheer pleasure of being in his company.

Jenny Hartley is Professor of English Literature at Roehampton University.

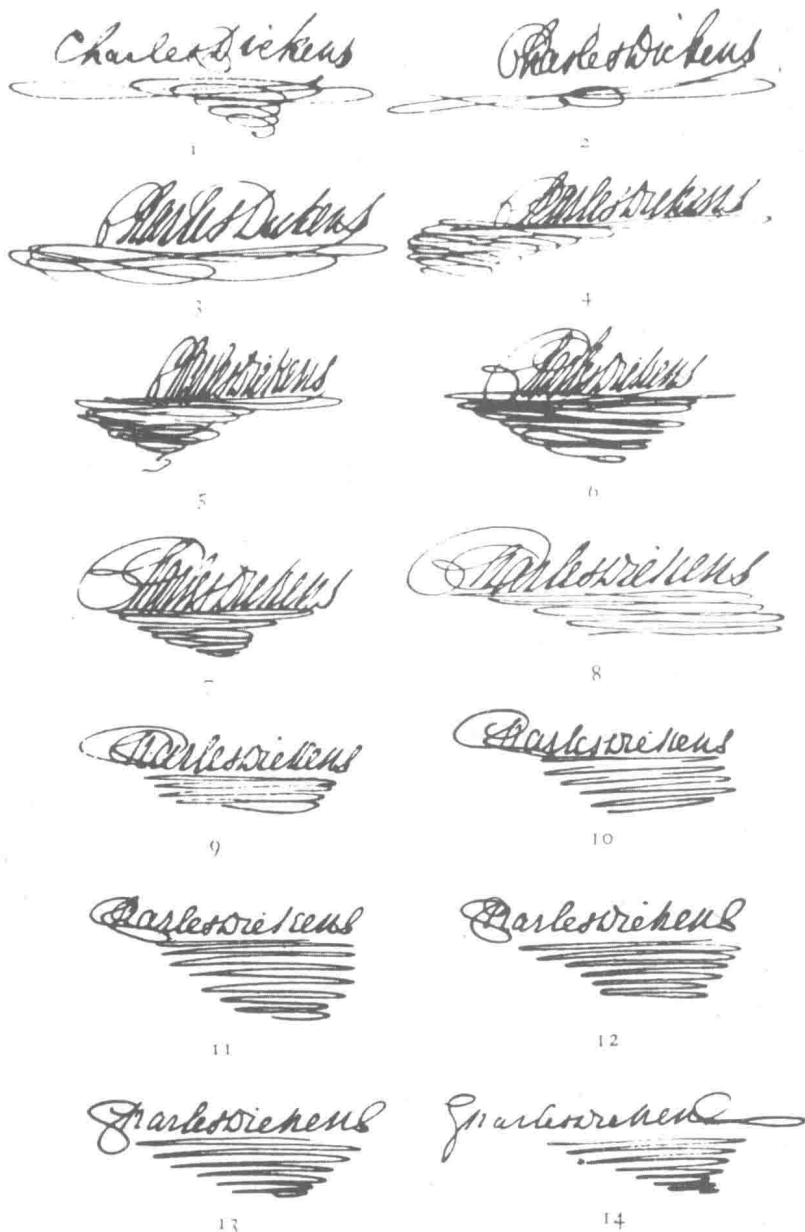
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The selection is respectfully dedicated to the editors, assistant editors, and associate editors of the British Academy Pilgrim Edition of *The Letters of Charles Dickens*.



Specimens of signatures

1. July 1832. 2. November 1834. 3. November 1835. 4. March 1836.
 5. October 1836. 6. April 1837. 7. March 1838. 8. November 1839.
 9. August 1840. 10. January 1842. 11. November 1842. 12. April 1846.
 13. June 1847. 14. July 1861

Introduction



Had it been up to Dickens, this selection of his letters would not have appeared. He was himself a great destroyer of letters, especially towards the end of his life. 'Yesterday,' he wrote in September 1860, 'I burnt, in the field at Gad's Hill, the accumulated letters and papers of twenty years.'¹ He was, he said, 'shocked by the misuse of private letters of public men'.² On the other hand, he delighted in the 'affection' which he fostered between himself and his readers; he built on that close relationship in his public readings, and he dispatched reams of letters to his friend John Forster, knowing that he was to be his biographer. So perhaps he would have given a back-handed blessing to this selection.

Dickens claimed to receive 'three or four score letters every day'.³ Answering them was a regular and lifelong commitment. He liked to reply promptly: 'I can't bear to leave anything unanswered';⁴ but they could pile up. 'Yours is the thirty eighth in the batch. Forgive me!' he apologised to Jane Carlyle, 'but I have been so much engaged in another kind of Penmanship, that I have not answered a letter this fortnight.'⁵ Letter-writing was an integral part of his writing life, and fortunately for us, the recipients of his letters did not share his habits of destruction. His early fame ensured that people kept the briefest of notes and the most unflattering rejection letters. As David Paroissien remarks, 'To receive a letter from him—even a perfunctory request to renew an order for a dozen bottles of sherry—was to take delivery of a gift.'⁶

The 14,000 surviving letters, addressed to 2,500 known correspondents and over 200 unknown correspondents, have been painstakingly collected, dated, annotated, and published between 1965 and 2002, in the magisterial twelve-volume Pilgrim Edition, from which this selection is taken. Some of the 14,000 are tantalizing ghosts: letters which exist only as a mention in another letter, or a fragment in a sale catalogue. Some are mere notes of acceptance, invitation, or refusal. Some run to many pages. 'In his letter-writing alone,' George Gissing judged, 'Dickens did a life's literary work.'⁷ All bear the stamp of the Inimitable.

Letters give us a particular version of a life: the 'freshness of first impressions', as Forster characterizes Dickens's letters from America in 1842 when comparing them

¹ 4 Sept. 1860. All references to Dickens's letters in this Introduction are to the Pilgrim Edition.

² 20 Dec. 1864.

³ 22 Oct. 1841.

⁴ 1 May 1848.

⁵ 27 Jan. 1844.

⁶ "'Faithfully Yours, Charles Dickens': The Epistolary Art of the Inimitable", in David Paroissien (ed.), *A Companion to Charles Dickens* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 35.

⁷ George Gissing, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study* (London: Blackie and Son, 1898), 235.

with *American Notes*, the book Dickens later composed from the letters.⁸ Forster maintained that 'The *personal narrative* of this famous visit to America is in the letters alone.' It was, though, just this narrative of the personal which Dickens was attempting to edit out with his bonfire. When his children protested, his justification was that letters are 'written in the heat of the moment'.⁹ This is of course what we value his letters for today: that quality of life lived on the hoof (sometimes literally so for Dickens), which the letters bring us with such immediacy.

In reducing twelve volumes to one, and the 14,000 to 450, the main criterion is to show Dickens's range as a letter writer. Readers who enjoy his fiction, his journalism, and his travel writing will appreciate his gifts in this fourth genre. On display here, notably in this condensed version, is the epistolary as the genre of exuberance. We see at first hand his indefatigable labours as a magazine editor, his exasperation with business arrangements (not always to his credit), his close involvement with philanthropic projects, his responses to issues of the day such as public hangings, and his alertness as a traveller. We can feel the warmth of his friendships, the richness of his social life, and, throughout, his pleasure in writing, if only (and sometimes especially) to an audience of one. In this selection one letter represents many more. A good example is the mass of letters concerning amateur theatricals. Dickens took sole responsibility for all the organization, which meant choosing the plays, distributing parts, cajoling cast members, and arranging rehearsals; ordering costumes, props, and scenery; booking theatres, railway carriages, and hotel rooms. 'I write 100 letters a day, about these plays,' he grumbled about this self-inflicted chore. 'I am fully persuaded that an amateur manager has more correspondence than the Home Secretary.'¹⁰

Dickens is primarily known and loved as a novelist, so letters which relate to the fiction have priority in this selection. His letters to publishers and illustrators, his letters to and about originals of his characters, and comments on sales and reception (although he claimed not to read reviews): all these augment our sense of Dickens the novelist. His progress reports—usually to Forster, his close friend and lifelong literary sounding-board and confidant—bring his working methods into focus. So, for instance, just a fortnight after 'breaking my heart' over the end of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, he describes the beginnings of *Barnaby Rudge*:

I didn't stir out yesterday, but sat and *thought* all day; not writing a line; not so much as the cross of a t or the dot of an i. I imaged forth a good deal of Barnaby by keeping my mind steadily upon him; and am happy to say I have gone to work this morning in good twig, strong hope, and cheerful spirits.

Occasional sentences suggest the ebb and flow of creativity. He reports being 'in a perpetual scald and boil' with 'the great turning idea of the Bleak House story' in November 1852. Eight months later he is 'now going, tooth and nail, at Bleak House'. We can track *Little Dorrit* from birth-pang to triumphant conclusion, growing from

⁸ Forster, 244.

⁹ Gladys Storey, *Dickens and Daughter* (London: Frederick Muller, 1939), 106-7.

¹⁰ 9 July 1847; 22 June 1848.

'motes of new books in the dirty air' in February 1855. As late as January 1856, when the first two numbers have appeared, he writes to Forster: 'Again I am beset by my former notions of a book whereof the whole story shall be on the top of the Great St. Bernard. As I accept and reject ideas for Little Dorrit, it perpetually comes back to me.' Progress could be slow. 'I have not been in a quick vein (which is not to be commanded),' he tells Angela Burdett Coutts in September. In January 1857 he describes his 'knitted brows now turning into cordage over Little Dorrit'; and finally in May he can rejoice to Wilkie Collins, 'Thank God, I *have* finished! On Saturday last, I wrote the two little words of three letters each.' In the autumn of 1865, after the trauma of the railway accident earlier that year, he was relieved to observe his creative powers still functioning well, as he told Forster about the next Christmas story and his creation of Sophie, Dr Marigold's adopted deaf and dumb daughter:

Tired with Our Mutual, I sat down to cast about for an idea, with a depressing notion that I was, for the moment, overworked. Suddenly, the little character that you will see, and all belonging to it, came flashing up in the most cheerful manner, and I had only to look on and leisurely describe it.¹¹

It is tempting to read this single volume of letters as a Dickens novel, with its cast of characters and voices, its keenly described scenes and situations, and its abundance of wit and vitality. It has stories too: long-running plots of friendships and domestic relations, sometimes with dramatic reversals. The main character is, naturally, Dickens himself, decidedly the hero of his own life in this version.¹² We can follow his trajectory from the early years of success and high spirits, through the middle years of writing confidence, to the later compulsive restlessness. The change in the letters themselves, as they become less expansive, is part of the plot of the life, and underlines how much his life altered after 1858 and the marital break-up. His resolution 'to write as short letters as I can'¹³ in the 1860s signals the more guarded and secretive Dickens of the last twelve years. Allusions to 'perpetually oscillating between Paris and London' and 'my present Mysterious Disappearance'¹⁴ hint at the life he was leading with Ellen Ternan; his sense of entitlement to privacy grew commensurately with his need for it.

According to his daughter Mamie and his sister-in-law Georgina Hogarth, who edited the first collection of his letters, 'no man ever expressed *himself* more in his letters than Charles Dickens'.¹⁵ But did he? Reviewers of that first collection argued over how revealing the letters were.¹⁶ Later, George Bernard Shaw disputed Edgar Johnson's estimation of Dickens's 'shiningly high rank as a letter writer', calling

¹¹ To Forster, early Nov. 1865.

¹² Cf. *David Copperfield*, which begins: 'Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show.'

¹³ 25 Feb. 1864. ¹⁴ 16 June 1863; 26 June 1864.

¹⁵ *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, edited by his Sister-in-law and his Eldest Daughter, 3 vols. (London: Chapman & Hall, 1880-2), preface.

¹⁶ See Philip Collins (ed.), *Dickens: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1971), 589.

them 'roast beef and pudding letters, explaining that what he meant by this was that they were all concerned with things done, places visited, what people looked like and how they acted.'¹⁷ This is unfair (Shaw did not have access to the range of letters which we have), but it is true that Dickens was not given to sustained introspection. There are, however, fleeting glimpses, such as his description of 'looking upon my mind . . . as a sort of capially prepared and highly sensitive plate. And I said, without the least conceit (as Watkins [the photographer] might have said of a plate of his) "it really is a pleasure to work with you, you receive the impression so nicely".'¹⁸ What the letters show us is Dickens the watcher of himself.¹⁹ It is worth noting that many of his friends belonged to the observing professions: they were journalists, actors, painters. Dickens observes himself as a writer, as a reader of his own work, and as man of suffering. He comments on the writing of *Martin Chuzzlewit*: 'As to the way in which these characters have opened out, that is, to me, one of the most surprising processes of the mind in this sort of invention.'²⁰ He listens to himself reading. 'I got things out of the old Carol—effects I mean—so entirely new and so very strong, that I quite amazed myself and wondered where I was going next. I really listened to Mr Peggotty's narrative in *Copperfield*, with admiration.'²¹ To Angela Burdett Coutts's companion, Hannah Brown, he confided in the troubled August of 1857: 'The vague unhappiness which tracks a life of constant aim and ever impels to some new aim in which it may be lost, is so curious to consider, that I observe it in myself sometimes, with as much curiosity as if I were another man.'

These glimpses are all the more valuable because of Dickens's reticence in life.²² The man who could write eloquent letters of consolation to bereaved friends noted his difficulty in expressing himself face to face. Three years after the death of his friend Richard Watson he visited Rockingham Castle, the Watsons' home, where he and his amateur company had acted, and commented to Georgina:

Rockingham was inexpressibly sad. . . . Mrs. Watson asked me, in a strange manner, if I had been in the old Gallery upstairs? I said No, and she returned "Then do come!" So we walked up together, and she raised that great iron latch, and we went in, and the furniture was all piled in a great ghostly heap in the middle, and the carpet was up, and the curtains were down. She turned her head away and looked out of a window; and for the life of me I could not decide upon the delicacy or friendliness of making any allusion to her grief. Consequently I turned my head and looked out of another window, until she moved. Then we both came out together, silently and sadly.²³

¹⁷ *Letters from Charles Dickens to Angela Burdett-Coutts 1841–1865*, ed. Edgar Johnson (London: Jonathan Cape, 1953), 21–2.

¹⁸ To William H. Wills, 24 Sept. 1858.

¹⁹ This point is made by Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *Knowing Dickens* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 207.

²⁰ To Forster, mid-Feb. 1843.

²¹ To Wills, 4 Feb. 1863.

²² 'He was most extraordinarily reticent for a man who was supposed to be so full of frankness and geniality,' his daughter Katey told George Bernard Shaw, preface to *Pilgrim* 1, xiv.

²³ 19 Dec. 1855.

Writing reflectively about himself did not come easily. An early attempt to keep a journal in 1838, the year after the death of his sister-in-law Mary Hogarth, foundered after a fortnight because 'I grow sad over this checking off of days, and can't do it.'²⁴ In 1842 he hinted that 'I may one of these days be induced to lay violent hands upon myself—in other words attempt my own life'.²⁵ Fourteen years later he told an enquirer, 'I may probably leave my own record of my life for the satisfaction of my children.'²⁶ But apart from the fragment given to Forster, which transmuted into David Copperfield's childhood, nothing autobiographical survives.

Dickens had, moreover, long cultivated a hedge for himself in his letters, through his recourse to the third-person persona. Most famously he is the Inimitable. This was the designation bestowed upon him by his old schoolteacher William Giles, with a silver snuff-box inscribed to 'The Inimitable Boz', midway through publication of *The Pickwick Papers*. Dickens took enthusiastically to being Inimitable; he would also refer to himself as 'the Sparkler of Albion' and 'the planet Dick', underlining his role as national treasure and irresistible force of nature. Third-person facetiousness could convey brilliant triumph: 'Dick with the heart of a lion dashed in bravely and made decidedly the best speech I ever heard him achieve.'²⁷ Other versions of himself include the comic hero beset by the disasters of household alterations, publishing arrangements, would-be authors, and impecunious relatives—his 'blood petitioners'.²⁸ He also liked to construct himself as put-upon and betrayed, and as what Rosemary Bodenheimer calls 'the Great Protester'.²⁹ As a young man he enjoyed inventing joke sign-offs: 'The Mask', 'Victoria', 'Anti Pusey', 'The Congreve of the 19th Century', 'Dick the Doomed', 'Philo Forecastle', and 'Pitchcock, Swabber, Trillington, & Dawberry'.³⁰ Writing to Forster in 1849 about yet more familial importunings, he signed himself 'Yours Despondently, | And Disgustedly, | Wilkins Micawber.'

Each one of Dickens's letters is a performance, finely calibrated to the nature of its recipient, as if he were talking to him or her. This may be why, even if the correspondent is not known personally to him, he needs a name to reply to. He tells 'Miss M.' that her letter is so 'agreeable' that it 'induces me to break through the rule I generally observe of never replying to a correspondent who writes to me anonymously, as I hold no one justified in adopting that most objectionable and stealthy form of address'.³¹ Some of his most affectionate letters are addressed to his older male friends, such as the actor William Macready, whom he had idolized as a boy and still venerated, and the painter Clarkson Stanfield ('Stanny'), who had been in the navy, evoking echoes of Dickens's Portsmouth and Chatham childhood

²⁴ 15 Jan. 1838.

²⁵ 16 Feb. 1842.

²⁶ 4 Oct. 1856.

²⁷ 28 Feb. 1844.

²⁸ 4 Dec. 1843.

²⁹ Bodenheimer, *Knowing Dickens*, 23–9.

³⁰ 9 June 1843; 30 Jan. 1843; 26 May 1843; 13 June 1843; 28 Mar. 1846; 9 Jan 1844; 4 Apr. 1846, respectively. See John Bowen, *Other Dickens: Pickwick to Chuzzlewit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 39–40.

³¹ 3 Apr. 1847.

days. Letters to the artist Daniel Maclise are more sprightly, maybe to cheer him up (he was prone to depression); letters to fellow-novelist Wilkie Collins express a racier persona. Letters to Forster confirm his reliance on him for editorial advice. 'I would give any money that it were possible to consult with you,' he wrote from Italy in the autumn of 1846, agonizing over the progress of his Christmas book. His daughter Katey wanted to burn the 137 letters to her mother, which she was entrusted to publish, 'to shew the world that Dickens once loved her',³² because in Katey's opinion they showed 'exactly the reverse'. It is true that letters to Catherine's sister Georgina tend to be livelier, but until shortly before the separation in 1858, his letters to Catherine relax into affection, a life of common concerns and gossip, private jokes, and a fully shared domestic arena. But, for her too as for every one of his correspondents: whoever he is writing to, and however briefly, he always has to perform himself, even to a clock-mender or chimney-sweep. He loves to give advice, and he always knows best: to Macready on how to organize his theatre,³³ to Angela Burdett Coutts on interior décor,³⁴ and to Wilkie Collins on novel titles (he suggested twenty-six for *No Name*, all of which Collins rejected).³⁵ He could also advise on recipes for dog-food, beef tea, and salad-dressing,³⁶ and write in French or Italian. He was aware, though, that he could overdo it. 'I find I am getting inimitable, so I'll stop,' ends his account of a visit to the Paris morgue in January 1847.

What the letters give us, then, is not so much inner Dickens as Dickens in motion. Humphry House, the prime mover of the Pilgrim Edition, claimed that 'even for the ordinary reader the view of Dickens's personality could never be complete without seeing day after day the streaming energy of his correspondence in bulk and detail; a mere selection disguises all that.'³⁷ True, but it can give a taste of the pace and flavour, as we witness the novelist writing continually to tight (and sometimes multiple) deadlines. At the same time, he was for most of his working life also a diligent magazine editor who took great pains with his contributors. He could be sharp if he thought the writer had not taken his or her work seriously, generous and helpful if he thought they had. He would offer lengthy long-distance tutorials, master-classes, and 'hints' which 'take the course that my pen would take if the story were mine'.³⁸ Then there are the letters of the social worker in charge of every detail, the sociable man who preferred not to dine alone if possible, the loyal friend, and the committed if sometimes infuriated family man. Dickens was also one of our first modern celebrities, dealing with requests for autographs and locks of hair (yes to the former, no to the latter), as well as pleas to the author in mid-flow. 'I am inundated with imploring letters recommending poor little Nell to mercy.—Six yesterday, and

³² Preface to Pilgrim I, xxiii. The letters are now in the British Library.

³³ 28 Dec. 1841.

³⁴ 1 Nov. 1854.

³⁵ 24 Jan. 1866.

³⁶ 7 Nov. 1865; 25 Sept. 1854; 21 Aug. 1868.

³⁷ Humphry House, 'A New Edition of Dickens's Letters', BBC, 14 Oct. 1951; repr. in *All in Due Time: The Collected Essays and Broadcast Talks of Humphry House* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1955), 221–9.

³⁸ To Charles Hamilton Aidé, 29 Mar. 1869.

four today (it's not 12 o'clock yet) already!' he exclaimed during the publication of *The Old Curiosity Shop* in November 1840. The letters also show his passion for such issues as the Yorkshire schools, and the fate of fallen women such as Little Em'ly.

All this extensive correspondence functioned not only to keep the frenetic mechanics of Dickens's working and social life in action. It was also a pleasure and a need. His customary long end-of-year letter to William de Cerjat (one of the circle of friends Dickens joined in Switzerland in 1846) gave him space to stand back and survey the past year. A letter to Forster could substitute for the conversation which Dickens craved. 'To tell what Venice is,' he wrote from there in 1844, 'I feel to be an impossibility. And here I sit alone, writing it: with nothing to urge me on, or goad me to that estimate, which, speaking of it to anyone I loved, and being spoken to in return, would lead me to form.'³⁹ Or it might act like therapy. After sitting with his dying sister Fanny, he described the scene at length to Forster, ending with the comment: 'I don't know why I write this before going to bed. I only know that in the very pity and grief of my heart, I feel as if it were doing something.'⁴⁰ Letter-writing could also sop up the surplus of writerly force which Dickens seems to have had, especially when young—he simply liked writing. It could help, as acting did, to vent what he called his 'superfluous energy'.⁴¹ According to his son Henry, the letters testified to the 'keen enjoyment' his father got out of life,⁴² and one source of this was letter-writing itself. 'One of the impressions left by the letters', Forster concluded—presumably while in the process of destroying them—'is that of the intensity and tenacity with which he recognized, realized, contemplated, cultivated, and thoroughly enjoyed, his own individuality in even its most trivial manifestations.'⁴³ Dickens was amused but probably not surprised to see that his 8-year-old son Sydney 'has for some time conducted a large imaginary correspondence with scores of people.'⁴⁴

Dickens wrote all his letters himself. For most of his life he employed no secretary, apart from Georgina to handle the begging letters, and his assistant editor William H. Wills for his two magazines, *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*.⁴⁵ Dickens seems at times to have thought in the written word. Being confronted with illegible writing was one of his recurring nightmares.⁴⁶ The shorthand which he learned to such good effect early in life never left him (he taught Frank Stone's son Arthur, and his own son Henry). George Dolby, who managed his reading tours in the late 1860s, spotted

³⁹ 12 Nov. 1844.

⁴⁰ 5 July 1848.

⁴¹ To Emily Jolly, 30 May 1857.

⁴² Henry F. Dickens, *Memoirs of my Father* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1928), 31.

⁴³ Forster, 818.

⁴⁴ To Revd Matthew Gibson, 18 July 1855.

⁴⁵ For AYR there was a pro forma rejection letter in a facsimile of Dickens's hand, with the details of the rejected paper filled in by office staff. In the last decade of his life he received so many requests for readings that he had a reply printed; see 29 Nov. 1861.

⁴⁶ See e.g. 2 Mar. 1853; 10 June 1857.

Dickens thinking in shorthand: 'When listening to a speech he would (if interested) follow the speaker's words by an almost imperceptible action, as if taking down the speech in shorthand, that being, as he used to say, a habit contracted in the early part of his career.'⁴⁷

The appearance of a letter mattered to Dickens, as did the process of writing it. He used a quill, and groaned when he had to 'write with a steelpen (which I can never use)'.⁴⁸ He preferred blue ink on blue paper. In addition to signing his letters, he also signed his name on the bottom left-hand corner of the envelope.⁴⁹ Percy Fitzgerald, one of the young writers Dickens befriended in the 1860s, recalled his 'practice of using a numerical word instead of a figure to mark the date of his letter. He adhered to it without fail to the day, literally, of his death.' Fitzgerald thought 'the verbal form of the numeral appealed to his eye as being the most emphatic form'.⁵⁰

Dickens attached great importance to the 'famous flourish' of his signature, and often commented on it. Replying to a youthful 'Master Francis G Waugh', he wrote underneath his signature: 'Perhaps you'll wonder why I make that flourish. I don't know. I have not the least idea.'⁵¹ He knew that it was a statement in itself, and the analogy he uses to the actor Thomas Serle acknowledges the theatricality of it. 'No room for the flourish. We must "suppose that"—as you say at Rehearsals.'⁵² In his analysis of thirty signatures from 1825 to 1870, J. Holt Schooling acclaims them as 'recorded tracings of Dickens's nerve muscular action—of his *gesture*': our only evidence of Dickens's body in motion. Holt Schooling admires the vigour and 'well-controlled activity' of the signatures. He estimates that the curves in the flourish are sometimes 'equal of about a two-feet length of pen-stroke, a fact which indicates an extraordinary amount of personal energy'. He also notes that many private letters are unostentatiously signed 'CD'. The curlicues of the more public signature are the assertion of power over the reader.⁵³ It ended by becoming his trademark and brand guarantee. The 1867 Charles Dickens edition of his novels had his signature complete with flourish stamped on its covers in gold, to 'suggest to the Author's countrymen', wrote Dickens in the advertisement, 'his present watchfulness over his own Edition'.⁵⁴ More than a decade earlier Rigaud, the villain of *Little Dorrit*, had malignly parodied his creator's flourishing tendency when he signs the convent-hotel register, 'in a small complicated hand, ending with a long lean flourish, not unlike a lasso thrown at all the rest of the names'.⁵⁵

⁴⁷ George Dolby, *Charles Dickens as I Knew Him: The Story of the Reading Tours in Great Britain and America 1866–1870* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1885), 274.

⁴⁸ 9 May 1870.

⁴⁹ Members of the National Philatelic Society suggest that this practice may hark back to the days of free franking privileges.

⁵⁰ Percy Fitzgerald, *Memories of Charles Dickens* (Bristol: J. W. Arrowsmith, 1913), foreword.

⁵¹ 30 June 1858.

⁵² 2 Jan. 1844.

⁵³ J. Holt Schooling, 'The Signatures of Charles Dickens (with Portraits)', *Strand Magazine*, 7 (1894), 80–9.

⁵⁴ See Slater, 558–9.

⁵⁵ LD bk. 2, ch. 1.

Handwriting is something Dickens always notices, whether he is complimenting Emile de la Rue for his 'elegantly small calligraphy',⁵⁶ teasing Angela Burdett Coutts for her illegibility, or joking about Mary Boyle's 'hand—twisted like the rustic work of which they make garden chairs'.⁵⁷ Dickens's own handwriting is interpreted by Fitzgerald as 'an extraordinary revelation of his character. It was so "prompt", so alert, finished and full of purpose and decision; legible also, but requiring familiarity and training to read.'⁵⁸ For Dickens, as for Fitzgerald, the hand stands for the person; your writing does not just express you, it is you. It hits him in the eye, it shakes hands with him. 'Your handwriting last night', he wrote to the Countess of Blessington, 'had as startling effect upon me as though you had sealed your note with one of your own eyes.'⁵⁹ 'Your handwriting came like the renewal of some old friendship', he wrote to Thomas Talfourd, 'and gladdened my eyes like the face of some old friend.'⁶⁰ Handwriting is often the handmaid of memory. 'When I read your handwriting', he told his old schoolteacher William Giles, 'I half believe I am a very small boy again; and you magnify, in my bewildered sight, into something awful, though not at all severe.'⁶¹ To his first love Maria Beadnell, now contacting him after twenty years, he described the action of her handwriting on his memory at some length, clearly fascinated by the process.⁶² For him, the boundaries between the process of writing and mental and bodily states are permeable. Blushing paper figures frequently: 'If blushes could be forwarded by the General Post this sheet of paper would be rose-coloured.'⁶³ Ink gets inside him: 'I may shed a good deal of ink in the next fortnight,' he comments on sitting down to the next number of *Dombey and Son*.⁶⁴

Dickens sent and received so many letters partly because people could. This was the golden age of letter-writing, ushered in by the 'new and startling experiment of penny postage'.⁶⁵ Before 1840 correspondence could be an expensive luxury. Customarily the recipient would pay (to prepay could be construed as a slur on the recipient's solvency). When Dickens apologizes to Forster in 1837, 'I am afraid you will find this letter extremely dear at eightpence', he was referring to the average cost of a letter. This was determined by multiplying the number of sheets (including envelope, or 'cover') by the distance travelled.⁶⁶ But reform was on its way. By 1839 Dickens can call his placatory letter a 'Dove . . . on twopenny wings'; and by March 1840 he can refer to 'Taking advantage of the Penny Postage Act'. Hailed by its inventor Rowland Hill as 'a powerful engine of civilization', universal penny postage was a communications

⁵⁶ To Emile de la Rue, 1 Dec. 1853.

⁵⁷ To Spencer Lyttleton, 30 Mar. 1852.

⁵⁸ Fitzgerald, *Memoirs of Charles Dickens*, 223.

⁵⁹ 2 June 1831.

⁶⁰ 15 July 1838. See also to Macready, 14 Jan. 1853.

⁶¹ 31 Oct. 1848. See also to Miss Oppenheim, 26 Jan. 1848.

⁶² See below, 10 Feb. 1855.

⁶³ 2 Dec. 1837.

⁶⁴ 13 Aug. 1846.

⁶⁵ 'Mechanism of the Post-Office', *Quarterly Review*, July 1850.

⁶⁶ See Catherine J. Golden, *Posting It: The Victorian Revolution in Letter Writing* (Gainesville, Fla.: University Press of Florida, 2009), 4.

revolution. In its first year the number of letters sent tripled; by the 1860s it had increased by more than eight times.⁶⁷ There were between ten and twelve deliveries a day in England's major cities, the first at seven in the morning, the last at 8.30 in the evening. Londoners expected to receive a letter two or three hours after posting, and wrote letters to *The Times* complaining when a letter posted 'in the Gray's-inn post-office on Saturday, at half-past one o'clock, addressed to a person living close to Westminster Abbey, was not delivered until past nine o'clock the same evening'.⁶⁸

The cheapness and speed suited Dickens perfectly, although letters sent to him abroad, and thus still costly, might be rather meanly received. 'I am afraid you must have been fishing for a compliment when you talk about the postage of your letters,' he wrote to his sister-in-law Georgina from Venice, 'so I shall punish you by saying that indeed it does come heavy and that I would propose, if you see no objection, to make your mind easy on that score by stopping it out of your quarter.'⁶⁹ But the operations of the new institution intrigued him. For the first issue of *Household Words* he collaborated with Wills on an article tracking three brightly coloured Valentine cards through the busy intricacies of the central Post Office at St Martin's-le-Grand. Taking due account of the staggering volume of postal traffic—'entirely . . . attributable to the penny system'—Dickens was predictably impressed by the military efficiency. His imagination was also engaged by the sorting rooms, 'those silent receptacles of countless millions of passionate words, for ever pouring through them like a Niagara of language, and leaving not a drop behind'.⁷⁰

'Nobody ever notices postmen, somehow,' reflects Father Brown in G. K. Chesterton's story 'The Invisible Man'. Dickens was the exception: postmen feature in his letters as members of the cast of his daily life. In the throes of a new book, he is so 'horribly cross and surly' that 'even the Postman knocks at the door with a mild feebleness'.⁷¹ When the postman's knock jars his New Year's Day hangover, 'I damned him from my heart.' But seeing whom the letter was from, 'I immediately blessed him—presented him with a Glass of Whisky—inquired after his family (they are all well)—and opened the despatch' from his American friend Cornelius Felton 'with a moist and oystery twinkle in my eye'.⁷² Postmen form a comic obstacle chorus, whether it is the drunken postman in Italy, or 'the man with the postbag . . . swearing in the passage' on the Isle of Wight, or the 'demon Postman' of Finchley, who provokes 'bitter, bitter shame' in Dickens when his dog Timber fails to mate with the postman's bitch.⁷³ Dickens knew he relied on the post, and on the messenger networks provided by younger brothers ('my small secretary', 15-year-old

⁶⁷ Rowland Hill, 'Results of Postal Reform', in William Lewins, *Her Majesty's Mails: An Historical and Descriptive Account of the British Post-Office* (London: Sampson Low, 1864), appendix H, 347. See also M. J. Daunt, *Royal Mail: The Post Office since 1840* (London: Athlone Press, 1985).

⁶⁸ *The Times*, 8 May 1861.

⁶⁹ 25 Nov. 1853.

⁷⁰ 'Valentine's Day at the Post-Office', *HW*, 30 Mar. 1850.

⁷¹ 12 Nov. 1842.

⁷² 2 Jan. 1844.

⁷³ 9 Aug. 1844; 16 July 1849; 21 Mar. 1843.

Fred) and servants ('John waiting for the Post, with his mouth open, like a Post office in itself').⁷⁴ One of the first attractions of the house he has found in Boulogne, he tells Forster, is that 'the door is within ten minutes of the post office'.⁷⁵ His magazine supported the claims of postmen for higher wages;⁷⁶ his little son Henry rejoiced in the nickname of The Jollypostboy.

Dickens constantly lamented the burden of 'a correspondence which knows no cessation'.⁷⁷ His imagery favours the wet: inundation rather than rubbish-heap. 'In the midst of such a roaring sea of correspondence'; 'Up to the chin in a raging sea of correspondence'; 'I look out of a sea of letters', 'an overwhelming and unbroken stream'.⁷⁸ Considering the inroads necessarily made upon his time, these metaphorical tidal waves seem to relate to the frequent trope throughout Dickens's fiction, of the 'sea of Time' and the 'swift river' which 'bears us to the ocean' of death.⁷⁹ His correspondence includes thousands of replies to requests for charitable donations, for support in aid of good causes, or protest against outrages. While he would often offer help privately, 'any public mention of my name' was anathema to him, as he explained to a Unitarian minister. 'I have a great objection to being supposed to "patronize" anything or anybody.'⁸⁰ He described his house as 'inundated with begging letters'⁸¹ and got crosser as he got older. 'My correspondents', he wrote in 1866, 'are of two classes. One class wants print; the other class wants money. Both are extremely lachrymose, and are surrounded by friends who hold them in unspeakable estimation, but somehow don't tangibly express it.'⁸² So afflicted was he by the barrage that he made it the subject of a coruscating article for an early number of *Household Words*. 'The Begging-Letter Writer' is Dickens at his most vituperative about 'one of the most shameless frauds and impositions of this time'.⁸³

But, for all his grumbles, Dickens never thought letters were not a good thing. If he had had more time he would have written even more. 'I walk about brimful of letters, facetious descriptions, touching morsels, and pathetic friendships,' he wrote in apology for a tardy reply. But 'the Post-Office is my rock ahead. My average number of letters that *must* be written every day, is, at the least, a dozen.'⁸⁴ He was pleased when the emigrants to Australia from Urania Cottage, the home for fallen women in Shepherd's Bush, asked for more writing paper. 'Some of them', he told Miss Coutts, 'may have nobody to write to; but the separation even from so much Earth that they have been used to, is a tremendous one, and the feeling that they

⁷⁴ 30 Nov. 1835; 21 Aug. 1850.

⁷⁵ 26 June 1853.

⁷⁶ 'Hear the Postman!' AYR, 13 July 1861.

⁷⁷ 12 Sept. 1867.

⁷⁸ 20 Nov. 1849; 19 Dec. 1861; 28 Nov. 1850; 16 Jan. 1850.

⁷⁹ See e.g. TC Fourth Quarter; D&S ch. 16.

⁸⁰ 30 Mar. 1850.

⁸¹ 13 Aug. 1848.

⁸² To the Marchioness of Downshire, 26 Sept. 1866.

⁸³ HW, 18 May 1850.

⁸⁴ 1 Sept. 1843.