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Dickens and the Imagined Child

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Peter Merchant and Catherine Waters

When William Makepeace Thackeray looked at George Cruikshank's *Phrenological Illustrations* (1826), his critical conjectures themselves took on the certainty of phrenological measurement: "The artist has at the back of his own skull, we are certain, a huge bump of philoprogenitiveness."¹ When Thackeray then looked at the early novels of Charles Dickens, that certainty grew to the point where the adjective "huge" was no longer big enough: "As for this man's love of children, that amiable organ at the back of his honest head must be perfectly monstrous."² More recent readers of Dickens may hesitate to draw Thackeray's conclusion from the evidence Thackeray saw, but they are nevertheless compelled to account for that evidence somehow. In studies of the fiction and journalism of Dickens, therefore, the figure of the child and the topic of childhood have always loomed large—and have sometimes even appeared to assume "monstrous" proportions. As Mark Spilka noted in his seminal essay of 1984, Dickens broke new ground in situating the child as "the *affective* center of fiction"³—an innovation shown in the imaginative power of his portrayals of childhood in figures like Oliver Twist, Little Nell or David Copperfield. His ability to switch from seeing childhood from one perspective to seeing it from another is evidenced in the contrasting views expressed by the diners who gather around the Gargery Christmas dinner table in chapter 4 of *Great Expectations*, for while

¹ William Makepeace Thackeray, *An Essay on the Genius of George Cruikshank* (London: Henry Hooper, 1840), 6.

² William Makepeace Thackeray, "The English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century" and "Charity and Humour," ed. Edgar F. Harden (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 204.

³ "On the Enrichment of Poor Monkeys by Myth and Dream: Or How Dickens Rousseauisticized and Pre-Freudianized Victorian Views of Childhood," in *Sexuality and Victorian Literature*, ed. Don Richard Cox (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 165. Emphasis in the original.

Mr Hubble declares that children are “Naterally wicious,”⁴ Joe’s tender regard for the orphaned child is comically manifested by his mutely spooning gravy onto the young Pip’s plate. But as one of Dickens’s grown-up children, Joe himself attests to the complexity that characterizes Dickens’s treatment of the concept of childhood.

The novels’ abiding interest in the figure of the orphan is no doubt connected with Dickens’s recollections of his own childhood—particularly that most burning of boyhood memories, and the one to which since the original disclosure to Forster all biographers’ roads have led back, the period spent working in Warren’s Blacking Factory. To J. Hillis Miller, this is the centre from which “a thousand paths radiate”⁵; to John Carey, it is an episode that “Dickens goes on writing ... in novel after novel,” and “an image to which his imagination constantly returns.”⁶ The Dickens revealed by Forster, though “famous and caressed and happy,” would in his dreams “often ... wander desolately back to that time of [his] life.”⁷ Much though he might wish to “move on” (as Rosemarie Bodenheimer in this volume shows him to have committed his child characters to doing), Dickens finds that in this respect he cannot. Continually haunted by ghosts from thirty or forty years before, he was never able to forget the lessons which he obliges Scrooge to learn: lessons about bringing the younger self that absorbed experience then into vital relation with the present self that remembers it now; lessons about keeping the child alive within the man.

Clearly, the experience of his being sent to work briefly at Warren’s Blacking at the age of 12 forms a crucial vehicle for Dickens’s social criticism. Child poverty and lack of education are targeted most memorably perhaps in the savage figures of “Ignorance” and “Want,” disclosed from underneath the skirts of the Ghost of Christmas Present as a dire warning to Scrooge regarding the social consequences of such neglect. But Dickens was equally concerned to nurture and preserve the

⁴ Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. Margaret Cardwell with an introduction and notes by Robert Douglas-Fairhurst (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 24.

⁵ *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), ix.

⁶ *The Violent Effigy* (London: Faber, 1973), 149.

⁷ John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, 2 vols. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1876), 1: 27.

capacities of fancy and imagination that he associated with childhood, as the essays by Carolyn Oulton, Jonathan Buckmaster, Laura Peters and Wu Di in this volume amply demonstrate. In *Hard Times*, the childish wonderings that come into the Gradgrind home with Sissy from the circus prove vital antidotes to the endless stream of facts which it is the fate of the children—“little pitchers” as they are—to have poured into their heads. The overwhelming onrush of “stutterings” (which are all the sense that the infant tongue can manage to make of “statistics”) would otherwise carry all before it.⁸

Sissy remains capable of limitless compassion, however, precisely because calculation is something into which she has never entered. Her example suggests that there is a kind of holy idiocy for which Dickens is prepared to make some of his child figures stand: those children who exhibit G.K. Chesterton’s “sacred bewilderment,”⁹ or the “divine intoxication” of Georges Bataille.¹⁰ The next step, carrying this into adulthood, may of course be a step too far. The wish that wonder might never cease comes up against a world determined to deny that wish. Consequently, long before being treated in *Jude the Obscure*, “the contrast between the ideal life a man wished to lead, & the squalid real life he was fated to lead”¹¹ is writ very large indeed in the child characters of Dickens’s novels. In *Our Mutual Friend* it is written on the face of Jenny Wren, a face “at once so young and so old,”¹² and inscribed in the liminal space that the novel has her inhabit, somewhere between “the kingdom of childhood” and “the rational world of calculation” as Bataille (9–10) defines those two opposing realms. Although Jenny is set down by Dickens in a neighbourhood which is “anything but” flowery,

⁸ Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*, ed. Paul Schlicke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 8, 59.

⁹ G.K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1906), 123.

¹⁰ Georges Bataille, *The Literature of Evil*, trans. by Alastair Hamilton (London: Calder and Boyars, 1973), 9.

¹¹ *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Richard Little Purdy and Michael Millgate, 7 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978–88), 2: 93.

¹² Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, ed. Michael Cotsell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 224. Subsequent references to this edition are indicated parenthetically.

she fancifully repatriates herself to an enchanted region where the lame can cast off their crutch-sticks and where all of her imagined children are her own redeeming opposites: “not chilled, anxious, ragged, or beaten,” and “never in pain” (239).

Metaphorically, the hope of that same miracle—the lame beginning to walk—hangs over another of the characters whom, before they have quite ceased to be children, Dickens deposits in the anteroom of adolescence: Kit Nubbles in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Chapter 3 of this novel chronicles his halting attempts to form his letters, under the supervision of Little Nell. According to Alexander Pope, “True Ease in Writing comes from Art, not Chance, / As those move easiest who have learn’d to dance”¹³; but Kit, of course, will never be the most nimble or graceful of movers. The scene is captured on canvas in the painting, *Kit’s Writing Lesson*, which Robert Braithwaite Martineau exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1852 and which forms the cover illustration for the present collection. Martineau paints a picture of the child both as learning and as learnt from; for beside Kit stands Nell to guide him, just as Florence Dombey assists Paul (in a passage which Wu Di’s chapter discusses) and just as Bidly in *Great Expectations* leads Pip through the mysteries of the alphabet. Nell is sewing as she oversees Kit’s learning; but really this is a reversal of Tennyson’s “Man for the sword and for the needle she,” because there is no rapier wit in Kit, and he wields the pen very clumsily indeed. In the intensity of his unavailing concentration he depends absolutely upon the superior knowledge of “his instructress.”¹⁴

Beneath that knowledge, however, Nell herself displays in an acute form the vulnerability of the child; she is no better “fitted ... for struggles with the world” (32) than her pet linnet in his hanging cage. If the birdcage that Martineau has pointedly included in the painting focuses the tension between childhood as affording a safe haven and childhood as spelling limitation, the apples which sit in front of Kit and Nell—his partly eaten, but hers as yet untouched—indicate what an equivocal Eden they both inhabit, and how fragile and fleeting a thing is the innocence of the child. The serpent Quilp

¹³ *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt (London: Methuen, 1968), 155.

¹⁴ Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, ed. Elizabeth M. Brennan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 33. Subsequent references to this edition are indicated parenthetically.

has slithered from the room for now but is nowhere near to being scotched or killed as yet. Just as the Eden of *Martin Chuzzlewit* is the despair of those who invest in it, so the much-vaunted Eden of childhood might seem a terrestrial Paradise, but equally may turn into a graveyard of youthful hopes and dreams.

While Martineau faithfully represents Kit's ungainliness at his task—"he tucked up his sleeves and squared his elbows and put his face close to the copybook and squinted horribly at the lines" (33)—and the religious stained glass images and lantern slides in the background of the shop capture the novel's saintly image of Nell, what is missing from the painting is the laughter, the "fresh burst of merriment" that Dickens describes breaking from the two children "at every fresh mistake" (33) on Kit's part. The discrepancy is instructive in reminding us of the range of keynotes sounded by Dickens in his representation of childhood. While the imagined child may be laden with affect, bound up for some readers with Dickens's reputation as "Mr Popular Sentiment,"¹⁵ more humorous examples also recur in the fiction and journalism of children who are absurdly damaged or "stuck" in some way, as Rosemarie Bodenheimer puts it in the first essay of this collection. One thinks of Mr Toots, whose brains have comically "blown" too soon under the forcing regime of Dr Blimber in *Dombey and Son*, or Georgiana Podsnap, who is described on the occasion of her eighteenth birthday in *Our Mutual Friend* as

but an undersized damsel, with high shoulders, low spirits, chilled elbows, and a rasped surface of nose, who seemed to take occasional frosty peeps out of childhood into womanhood, and to shrink back again, overcome by her mother's head-dress and her father from head to foot—crushed by the mere dead-weight of Podsnappery.
(129)

Georgiana is characterized by the awkwardness of youthful limbs that have not yet settled into their adult proportions. Her sporadic "peeps out" of childhood into womanhood are comically described as she is "solemnly tooled through the Park by the side of her mother in a great tall custard-coloured phaeton" and "show[s] above the apron of that vehicle like a dejected young person sitting up in bed to take a startled look at things in general, and very strongly desiring to get her head under

¹⁵ Anthony Trollope, *The Warden* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1944), 127.

the counterpane again” (130). Poised precariously between childhood innocence and adult knowledge, Georgiana is left vulnerable to the wiles of the Lammles, husband and wife, who try to make money by marrying her off to the callow Fledgeby. While spared this fate, she departs the novel still a “credulous little creature,” “with her poor little red eyes and weak chin peering over the great apron of the custard-coloured phaeton, as if she had been ordered to expiate some childish misdemeanour by going to bed in the daylight, and were peeping over the counterpane in a miserable flutter of repentance and low spirits” (648).

Dickens’s multifaceted response to childhood no doubt owes much to the diversity of opinion circulating about the topic in his own day. A particularly salient opposition was sensed between the Evangelical emphasis on original sin and what Peter Coveney in *Poor Monkey* (1957) and then in *The Image of Childhood* (1967) has seen as the reinvention of childhood, towards the end of the eighteenth century, as an ideal state. On the one hand, the belief that children come into the world “trailing clouds of glory” (as Wordsworth expressed it in his “Immortality” Ode) was cherished by many; upon our young hearts is stamped an “image of Eden,” says one of Nicholas Nickleby’s travelling companions, that then “chafes and rubs in our rough struggles with the world, and soon wears away.”¹⁶ This belief also had its “mockers,” however—to Hardy’s Tess, “as to not a few millions of others, there was ghastly satire in the poet’s lines”¹⁷—and its opponents often insisted that the rubbing and chafing (and the Tickling, indeed) would be what saved the child, not what ruined him or her. “It was universally admitted that to spare the rod was to spoil the child,” notes Samuel Butler’s narrator.¹⁸ Far from being naturally predisposed to virtue, children, on this view, can only attain anything approaching decency if they are continually and strenuously disciplined into it. Dickens reflects and symbolically resolves this contradiction, Angus Wilson suggests, when in *Great Expectations* he

¹⁶ Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby*, ed. Paul Schlicke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 57.

¹⁷ Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, ed. Juliet Grindle and Simon Gatrell with explanatory notes by Nancy Barrineau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 344.

¹⁸ Samuel Butler, *The Way of All Flesh*, ed. James Cochrane (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1947), 53.

creates “an allegory of a child, Pip, whose good impulses are personified in Joe and whose bad impulses are acted out by Orlick.”¹⁹

To follow the giddy fluctuations of Pip’s moral capacities, Dickens creates a continual fluctuation in the novel’s retrospective first-person narrative, which has no sooner given us Pip the perceiving subject than it gives us Pip the object of contemplation. The novel combines the act of imagination that sees the environment of the child as if through the child’s eyes with the act of analysis that drills down into his mind and motives. It is a tactic ideally suited to advancing the distinctive artistic project which the essays by Rosemarie Bodenheimer and Jane Avner in this collection discuss in detail, and which involves Dickens moving the reader between a kind of knowledge *about* the child characters in his novels (typically, that they are victims of some unseen system) that is not available to the characters themselves and an exploration of the consciousnesses of these children and the knowledge that lives *inside* them, either for better or for worse.

Those texts in which Dickens writes about childhood experience in the form of a first-person narrative (as Maria Teresa Chialant demonstrates in her essay for this volume) remain the most obvious measures of his ability to balance the child with the man and ensure that the one is not swallowed up by the other. By the time he adds the story of Pip to that of David Copperfield, Dickens has completed in fiction the revolution for which, in the field of educational theory, Rousseau’s *Émile* had called a hundred years before. (Current theorists, said Rousseau’s preface, “cherchent toujours l’homme dans l’enfant sans penser à ce qu’il est avant que d’être homme”²⁰; but Rousseau’s own approach inverts their priorities.) The child takes on an interest quite independent of any that attaches to those more mature habits of mind into which his or her naïve ways of thinking will finally flow.

¹⁹ *Dickens 1970: Centenary Essays*, ed. Michael Slater (London: Chapman and Hall, in association with the Dickens Fellowship, 1970), 221.

²⁰ That is, “[t]hey are always seeking the man in the child without thinking of what he is before being a man.” The quotation is taken from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile: Or, On Education*, introduced and translated by Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 34.

In the twentieth century, Dickens attracted a good deal of critical credit for having effected just that revolutionary shift in sensibility. According to George Orwell in 1940,

No one, at any rate no English writer, has written better about childhood than Dickens ... no novelist has shown the same power of entering into the child's point of view. I must have been about nine years old when I first read *David Copperfield*. The mental atmosphere of the opening chapters was so immediately intelligible to me that I vaguely imagined they had been written by a child. And yet when one re-reads the book as an adult and sees the Murdstones, for instance, dwindle from gigantic figures of doom into semi-comic monsters, these passages lose nothing. Dickens has been able to stand both inside and outside the child's mind, in such a way that the same scene can be wild burlesque or sinister reality, according to the age at which one reads it.²¹

Many scholars have followed in Orwell's wake. Malcolm Andrews, Laura Berry and, most recently, Amberyl Malkovich have published important monographs analysing the figure of the child and the topic of childhood in Dickens, and Ashgate issued a selection of republished criticism on *Dickens and Childhood* (edited by Laura Peters) in 2012. Over the past decade, and especially in the lead-up to the bicentenary, new scholarly work on Dickens and childhood has continued apace, for as Peters notes, "the continued critical investment in the concept of the child, the ever-expanding areas for which the child and individual development are central, plus the continued centrality of global concern about the plight of children, ensure that this central area of Dickens studies will continue to offer new possibilities for understanding his work."²²

This volume of essays, ranging across Dickens's fiction and journalism and contributed by leading scholars in the field from across the globe—Australia, China, France, Israel, Italy, the UK and USA—demonstrates that exciting enlargement of scope. As our title suggests, the collection explores the function of the child and childhood within Dickens's imagination as well as the cultural resonance of his engagement with this topic.

²¹ "Charles Dickens," reprinted in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, 4 vols. (London: Secker and Warburg, 1968), 1: 423–4.

²² "Introduction," *Dickens and Childhood*, xxi.

The essays in the first of the volume's three sections address the Dickensian child as both characteristic type and particular example. The imaginative significance of the figure is richly witnessed in the opening essay by Rosemarie Bodenheimer, as it moves towards constructing a typology of the Dickensian child. The inquiry into the child as shifting signifier is then pursued by Galia Benziman with special reference to *Oliver Twist*. The second pair of essays in Part One address *Dombey and Son* and *Bleak House*. Jennifer Gribble shows that the child characters of *Bleak House*, annexed though they are to all that fall in the "great, confused city" of London, are also absorbed into the "redemptive plot" which Dickens sets simultaneously in motion. Carolyn Oulton reveals *Dombey and Son* as a novel that likewise sees children in a double perspective and testifies compellingly to Dickens's ability to, as Orwell put it, "stand both inside and outside the child's mind."

If Dickens reached a turning-point with *Dombey and Son*, the reason for that is stated in a lecture which Kathleen Tillotson gave (to mark the hundredth anniversary of his death) in 1970: "*Dombey* is the first novel that carries the full sense of recovered identification with the child's view of the bewildering adult world."²³ The essays in Part Two focus upon the relationship between childhood and memory, examining the various ways in which this "child's view" was reintegrated into Dickens's mature sensibility, and consider how the remembered experiences of childhood were realised anew in the imaginative creation—both Dickens's own and that of other writers—which they informed. For Dickens, what we become is necessarily built on the foundation of the childhood we may feel we have risen above. David Copperfield, in one of that novel's flickering Retrospects, certainly feels his former self superseded; and he struggles to recognize it except "as something left behind upon the road of life" and something he has "passed, rather than ... actually been."²⁴ However, this Copperfieldian Retrospect is itself something on which Dickens decides to double back. The 1852 Christmas Number of *Household Words* finds him once again stringing together, in "The Child's

²³ Kathleen Tillotson, Sylvère Monod and Angus Wilson, *Dickens Memorial Lectures 1970* (London: Dickens Fellowship, 1970), 11.

²⁴ Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, ed. Nina Burgis with an introduction and notes by Andrew Sanders (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 262.

Story,” the landmark moments of a life. Here, the flipbook movement from one scene to the next presents adulthood not as a break with childhood but as a repetition with variation, and suggests that each of the Ages of Man only slightly redispersed the substance of its predecessor. For Dickens, leafing continually through his own back pages, there can be no putting away of childish things.

The essays in Part Three focus upon reading and writing as particularly significant aspects of childhood experience; from Dickens’s childhood reading of tales of adventure, they move to discussion of the child readers in his novels and finally to a consideration of his own early writings alongside those that his children contributed to *The Gad’s Hill Gazette*.

That Charles and Catherine Dickens had nine children besides the destined editor of *The Gad’s Hill Gazette*, Henry Fielding Dickens, could only be a significant statistic if a novelist’s organ of philoprogenitiveness were something whose size mattered. Far more important than Henry happening to be one of the first ten bearers of Dickens’s name is the fact of those early literary efforts of his having made him one of a very large number of would-be or established writers who descended from Dickens inspirationally—rather than biologically—in the sense that they took their cue from his incalculably diffusive example. For many of these writers, children and childhood were among the topics on which Dickens had most powerfully set his stamp. Small wonder, then, that when Henri-Frédéric Amiel—a writer in whom “the influence of Dickens shines through”²⁵—penned a paean to childhood, in January 1868, it had a distinctly Dickensian ring:

Blessed be childhood, which brings down something of heaven into the midst of our rough earthliness. These 80,000 daily births, of which statistics tell us, represent as it were an effusion of innocence and freshness. ... Blessed be childhood for the good that it does, and for the good which it brings about carelessly and unconsciously, by

²⁵ Neil Forsyth and Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère, “Dickens in Francophone Switzerland,” in *The Reception of Charles Dickens in Europe*, ed. Michael Hollington, 2 vols. (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 1: 274.

simply making us love it and letting itself be loved. What little of Paradise we see still on earth is due to its presence among us.²⁶

So faithful to Dickens's vision is this beatitude of Amiel's that we can almost read the one through the other. Each delights in seeing Sissy's "stutterings" blown to wreck, as childhood takes arms against a sea of statistics and by opposing ends them. And each emphasizes the value, not that childhood possesses *per se*, but that it derives from the responses that it draws. Those who care for a child, like Caleb Plummer in *The Cricket on the Hearth* with his blind daughter Bertha—or who are famous and caressed and happy, but sensitive to childhood suffering—may respond by discovering within themselves "the magic of devoted, deathless love"²⁷ or by being moved to floods of fine feeling (and "Heaven knows we need never be ashamed of our tears").²⁸ Novelists who appreciate the artistic opportunities afforded by child characters may respond by being spurred into equally fine flights of fictional fancy. The essays that follow, exploring the multiple impingements of the imagined child upon Dickens's life and work, make it their business to reflect upon the full range of possible responses.

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²⁶ *Amiel's Journal: The "Journal Intime" of Henri-Frédéric Amiel*, translated with an introduction and notes by Mrs Humphry Ward, revised edition (London: Macmillan, 1888), 133.

²⁷ Charles Dickens, *"A Christmas Carol" and Other Christmas Books*, ed. Robert Douglas-Fairhurst (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 188.

²⁸ *Great Expectations*, 145.

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