

VOLUME X, NUMBER 2, SPRING 2010

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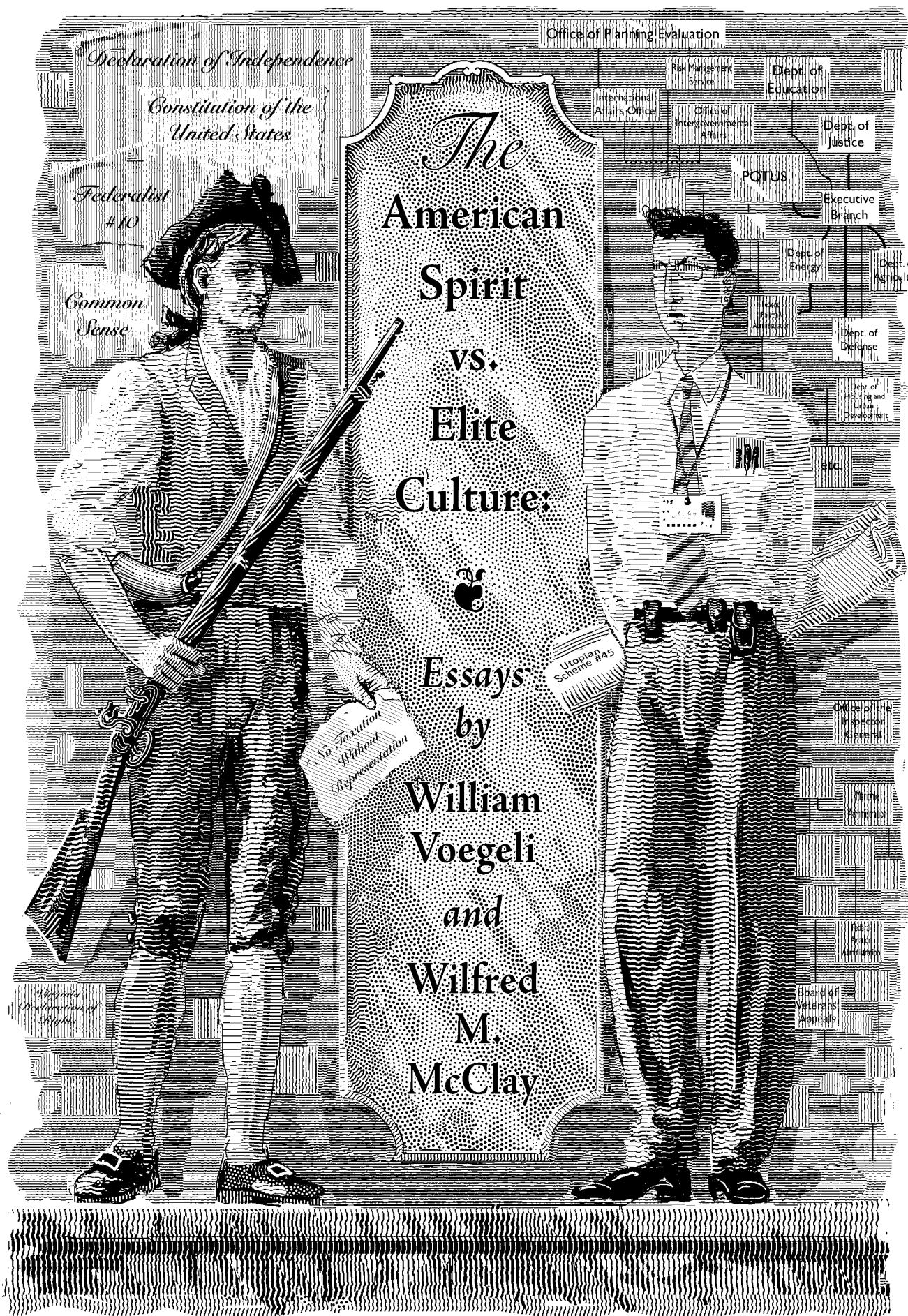
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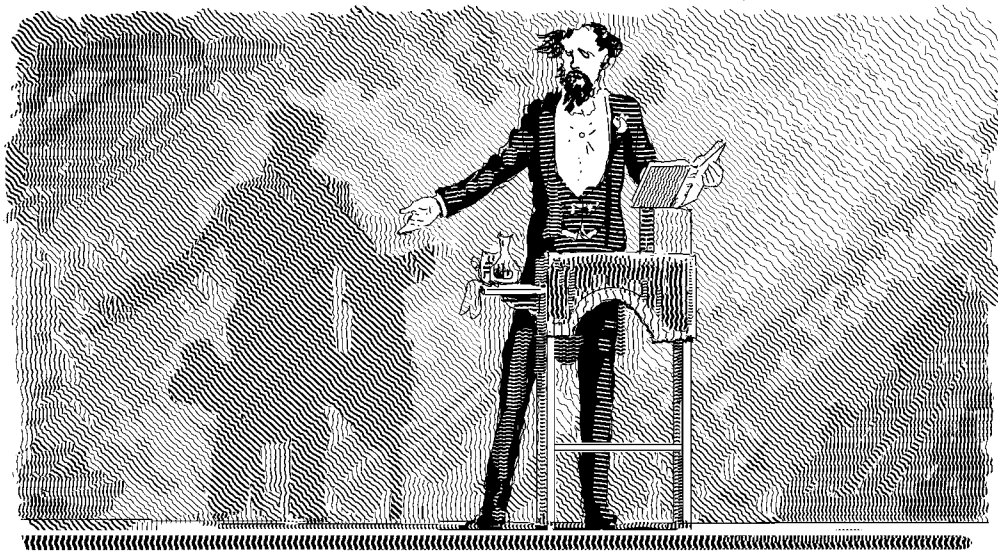


PRICE: \$6.95
IN CANADA: \$7.50

Book Review by Paul A. Cantor

INK-STAINED GENIUS

Charles Dickens: A Life Defined by Writing, by Michael Slater.
Yale University Press, 720 pages, \$35



WRITING A BIOGRAPHY OF CHARLES Dickens is not an enviable task. It is much like trying to paint a portrait of Rembrandt—the Dutchman already did such a good job himself. If, as everyone now assumes, Dickens's novels are autobiographical, then we already possess a sketch of his life, as told by one of the master storytellers of all time. It takes a kind of courage, bordering on foolhardiness, to be a biographer of Dickens. Who wants to invite comparison with a writer universally acclaimed for his ability to bring a human being to life on the page?

It would therefore be unfair of me to dwell upon the fact that Michael Slater cannot tell a story as well as Dickens could. As a past president of the International Dickens Fellowship and the Dickens Society of America, Slater has impeccable credentials as a scholar on his subject. His new book, *Charles Dickens: A Life Defined by Writing*, is obviously the product of a lifetime of study, and offers a rich compendium of facts concerning the novelist's career. Slater tries hard to create a compelling narrative out of his subject's life, and he certainly has a great deal of dramatic material with which to work. He even ends some of his chapters with the kind of cliffhangers that were Dickens's stock-in-trade, as he sought to keep the readers of the weekly or monthly installments of his novels coming back for more.

But Slater's narrative becomes repetitious, and he sometimes jumps awkwardly backwards

and forwards in his story. Occasionally what read like notes to himself seem to have survived into the printed text, such as: "Details of Dickens's arrangements with his publishers about the American trip belong to the next chapter." As he follows Dickens as a writer year by year, his narrative develops a flat character. It is as if all moments in Dickens's life become equal. Slater devotes as much space to one of the Christmas issues Dickens organized for his magazines *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* as he does to such masterpieces as *Bleak House* and *Great Expectations*.

YET WHAT I AM CALLING A WEAKNESS IN Slater's book might also be regarded as its great strength—his willingness to survey everything Dickens wrote, not just the familiar highlights. It is easy to be overwhelmed just by Dickens's titanic output as a novelist. But Slater usefully calls our attention to the fact that Dickens was much more than a novelist. He was a journalist, playwright, essayist, short-story writer, travel writer, children's book writer, editor, and publisher, and in his private life he was a prolific and—not surprisingly—remarkably entertaining letter writer. Slater has evidently read just about everything Dickens ever wrote, and offers us the first systematic, thorough account of his literary career (some of the material, such as the journalism and letters, has only recently become readily accessible).

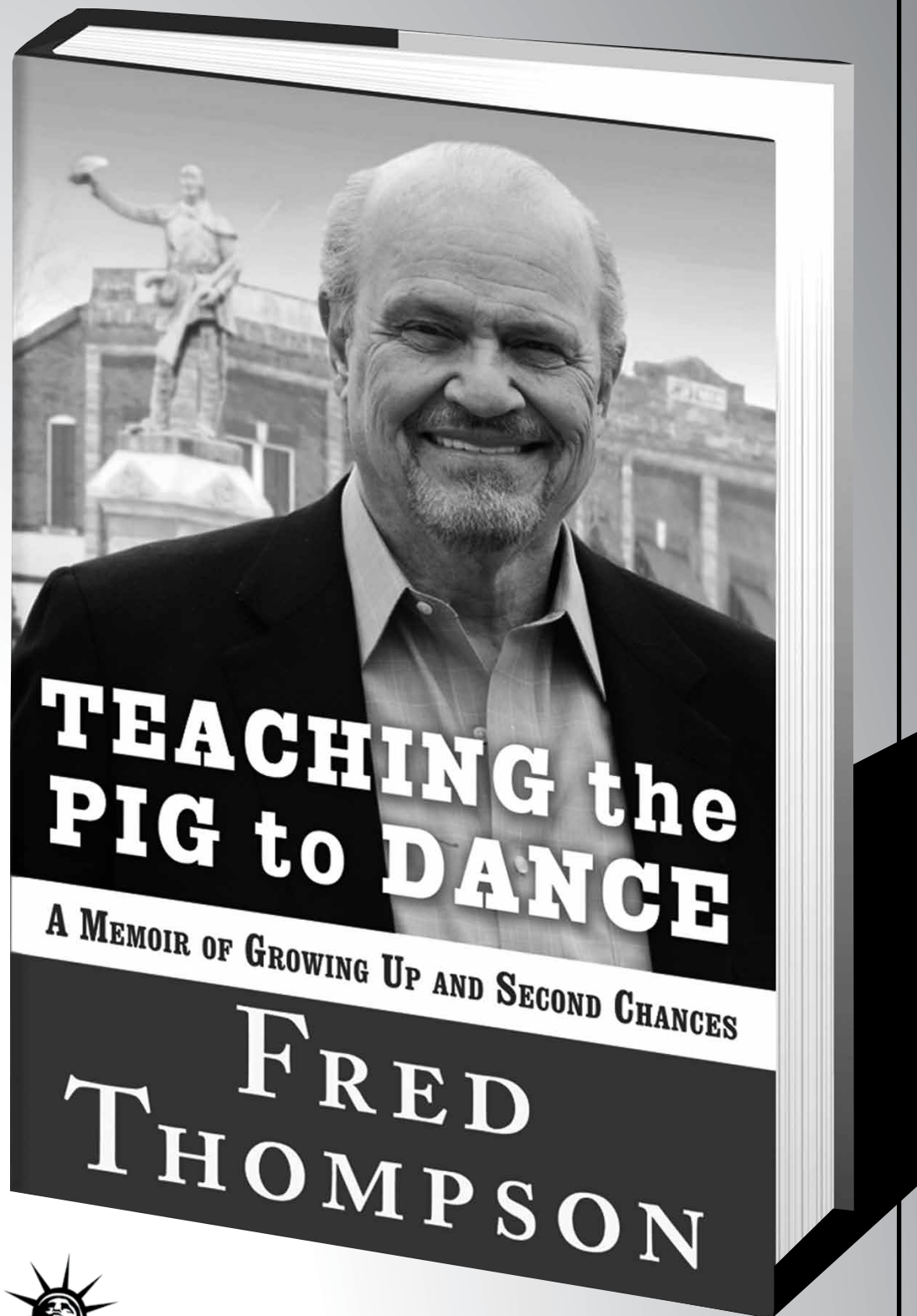
For the majority of us, who will never read more than a fraction of Dickens's total output, Slater's book provides a welcome opportunity to get a sense of how truly vast and varied his work was. For example, how many people are aware that, together with his protégé Wilkie Collins, Dickens wrote a play called *The Frozen Deep*, a response to the ill-fated Franklin Expedition to discover a Northwest Passage in the arctic wastes of Canada? Or that later Dickens and Collins, this time responding to the 1857 Indian Mutiny that shook the British Empire to its foundations, produced a timely story called "The Perils of Certain English Prisoners"? Neither work is a masterpiece, but both reveal aspects of Dickens's talents that are often overlooked, and they also fill out our understanding of his views on important subjects, such as British imperialism.

Given Slater's focus on Dickens's literary career, readers who come to this book with the usual gossipy interest in a new biography may be disappointed. For all his research, Slater provides no new revelations about Dickens's life. By and large, he tells the familiar story of Dickens's unhappy childhood, his frustrations in his marriage and family life, and his clandestine love affair with the actress Ellen Ternan. Like most biographers, Slater traces Dickens's insecurities and compulsions as an adult—above all, his obsessive need to be loved—back to his humiliation and sense of abandonment as a child, when he was forced, due to his father's financial irre-



“Teaching Latin to someone like me was like trying to teach a pig to dance.”

In his sometimes hilarious yet honest and warm memoir, Fred Thompson touches on the influences—family, hometown neighbors and teachers, team sports, jobs, romances, and personal crises—that molded his character, his politics, and the way he looks at life today.



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sponsibility, into the menial job of putting labels on bottles of shoe polish.

ON SEVERAL IMPORTANT SUBJECTS, SLATER leaves his readers largely in the dark. He says almost nothing about Dickens’s religious beliefs, and, despite many references to his health problems in his later years, he does not clarify in modern medical terms exactly what Dickens was suffering from. Perhaps Slater is so familiar with his subject that he forgot what needs to be explained to the general reader. I am afraid that Americans, with their limited knowledge of British history, may find this book tough going at times. Slater does not do much to explain the larger historical context of important moments in Dickens’s life. Americans are left to wonder what the Crimean War was all about or what the Corn Laws were (the latter had nothing to do with what Americans call “corn,” and, as for the former, to be honest, even at the time very few people knew what the Crimean War was about). Admittedly Slater cannot be expected to offer a crash course in Victorian history in this already jam-packed volume, but he might have spent a few sentences sketching the context. Similarly, he expects his readers to be familiar with the significant literary figures of the Victorian era, such as Elizabeth Gaskell, William Makepeace Thackeray, and George Eliot, whom he introduces into his narrative as if his readers already knew their importance.

Thus I hesitate to recommend Slater’s book as an introduction to Dickens for the general reader. Nor can his biography be recommended as a work of literary criticism. Now and then Slater devotes a paragraph to the aesthetic aspects of Dickens’s novels, discussing, for example, his use of the sea as an organizing symbol in *Dombey and Son*, or offering reasons for his unusual combination of first- and third-person narration in *Bleak House*. But these are rather elementary observations and this ground was well covered by literary critics decades ago. Most of the analysis is biographical in nature. In what might be dubbed the *Amadeus* or *Shakespeare in Love* method, Slater is mainly interested in showing how Dickens mined his personal experience to create his fictional characters. In a moment typical of this approach, Dickens visits an opium den and sees “a haggard old woman blowing at a pipe” and she soon emerges as the Princess Puffer in his last novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. There is nothing wrong with this straightforward kind of biographical criticism—especially in a biography—but when pursued relentlessly, it can become tiresome, and threatens to reduce Dickens to a mere chronicler of his day-to-day existence.



WHY DO I NEVERTHELESS INSIST, THEN, that Slater's work is very much worth reading? True to his basic purpose, his is one of the best studies I know of the life of a professional writer precisely in his capacity as a professional writer. The book offers a minutely detailed, step-by-step account of Dickens's whole literary career, from his early and spectacular popular success with *Pickwick Papers*, to his establishment as a respectable man of letters, to his unprecedented and unparalleled domination of the literary scene, throughout the English-speaking world, for the rest of his life. Slater gives sales figures for almost everything Dickens wrote, circulation numbers for the periodicals he edited, the juicy financial details of the many contracts he made—and broke—with publishers on both sides of the Atlantic, and also attendance figures for the public readings Dickens started giving in the late 1850s. This book would be invaluable if it did nothing more than assemble all this vital data conveniently in one volume. What I would give to have comparable facts and figures for Shakespeare's literary career!

Slater provides an intimate portrait of a writer who flourished in the rough-and-tumble, topsy-turvy world of the Victorian publishing business. As such, his biography can help dispel a number of Romantic myths that have grown up about the nature of literature and art in general, myths that have distorted our understanding of creativity. Dickens is one of the supreme masters of the novel in the English—or any other—language. And yet he emerged right in the middle of the world of commercial publishing, and never left it for a moment throughout his literary career. As Slater documents, from the beginning to the end, Dickens wrote for a largely middle-class audience, and, far from denigrating the bourgeoisie in Romantic fashion, he embraced it and welcomed his role as its spokesman and champion.

According to the Romantic myth that emerged in the early 19th century, just before Dickens began writing, the true artist must be a solitary genius. As a visionary, he is ahead of his time and at odds with his contemporaries. He must pursue his art in isolation, because any attempts at accommodation with his contemporaries would inevitably compromise his vision and integrity as an artist. The Romantic genius is a perfectionist. Catching a glimpse of the ideal world gives him a pattern of perfection according to which he must shape his work in an unimpeded frenzy of fevered creation. The resulting work, as the product of a single moment of inspiration, embodies an organic perfection that could only be corrupted if others had a hand in its production, or if it were shaped with an audience in mind—especially a middle-class audience.

The great enemy of the Romantic genius is the world of commerce. Artistic activity must never be governed by commercial considerations, which would dilute if not destroy the artist's inspiration. Hence in the Romantic view, the true artist will never be successful with the public. With its attachment to conventional ideas of art, the mass audience cannot appreciate a forward-looking genius. If, by some accident, the public embraces the work of an authentic genius, it will be for the wrong reasons, and, in his ongoing development, he will soon outgrow his audience, leave them in his aesthetic wake, and alienate his original admirers. In what amounted to a declaration of spiritual war on the middle class, Romanticism pictured the true artist as a perpetually embattled figure, inevitably at odds with the general public and its unremitting tendency to reduce artistic values to commercial ones.

This is an intimate portrait of a writer who flourished in the rough-and-tumble, topsy-turvy world of the Victorian publishing business.

As dated as some of this overheated rhetoric may sound today, this image of the artist is still very much with us, for example, in the ongoing claims that government support is necessary to shield true artists from the commercial world's philistine demands. The Romantic conception is valid for a certain kind of artist—namely, the Romantic. Certainly a lot of great art has been produced by artists who thought of themselves as solitary geniuses, warring against an unenlightened public. One thinks of William Blake, who was a masterful poet but in his whole life never sold as many copies of all his works taken together as Dickens typically sold of one installment of one of his books in a single day.

But the Romantic conception of the artist is misleading when it is set up as the sole model of creativity. It becomes especially misleading when unpopularity is offered as evidence in itself of an artist's greatness. Together with Shakespeare, Dickens offers the most effective counterargument to the Romantics' pure disjunction between artistic and commercial success.

FAR FROM STRUGGLING FOR YEARS TO GAIN recognition for his genius, Dickens was an overnight success if ever there were one. By the time he was 24, his *Pickwick Papers* had become one of the great publishing phenomena of the 19th century. As an early sign of the way he was to become a celebrity in the full modern sense of the term, Pickwick-themed products were soon being sold all over London. Once he broke out as a novelist, he never stumbled and went from success to success in his early career in a way that has rarely been equaled. The first installment of *Nicholas Nickleby* sold 50,000 copies on the day of publication. The story that began in a periodical called *Master Humphrey's Clock* and was to become the novel *The Old Curiosity Shop* sold 70,000 copies in its first installment, and, once he started focusing on the character of Little Nell, the serial reached a record-breaking circulation of 100,000 copies.

From novel to novel, he continued to grow as an artist, experimenting with new techniques and themes, pushing the limits of the form, and constantly reinventing the way it was marketed. He was a critical as well as a commercial success; despite some carping comments, contemporary reviewers quickly recognized that a new literary genius had burst upon the scene. According to the Romantic conception of art, Dickens should have maintained his success with the public only by pandering to it and slavishly sticking to the commercial formula that pleased his readers in the first place. But in fact he did just the opposite. As he grew older, his novels became more serious in tone, more biting in their satire of contemporary social and political conditions, and darker in the realms of psychology they explored. And yet, despite challenging his readers, he never lost his audience or his preeminence among Victorian novelists.

To be sure, his sales figures went up and down. Dickens had a hard time equaling the amazing success of his early works, when he was writing with virtually no competition. Still, his later works sold at rates that would make him the envy of most authors today. *Bleak House* is one of his darkest novels, and yet the initial print run of its first installment sold 25,000 copies in three days. *Little Dorrit* may be even more depressing, but it sold even more copies—38,000 of its first installment in a month. Dickens unfortunately died in the middle of writing his last novel, *Edwin Drood*. The 22 chapters he wrote suggest that this was going to be the bleakest of all his works, exploring the psychology of a murderer, linked to opium addiction and other secrets out of the Orient. Yet the first installment of *Drood* sold 50,000 copies—a clear sign his popularity was undiminished until the day he died.



DEFENDERS OF ROMANTICISM MIGHT CONSOLE themselves with the thought that, even though Dickens achieved and maintained popularity with a mass audience, he did so in Romantic fashion, on the strength of his individual genius. But Slater shows that Dickens's genius did not operate in isolation; he was in fact unusually gregarious as an author. He felt a compulsive need to make contact with his audience, and loved to parade his art in public. This compulsion took the form of a life-long devotion to amateur theatricals. He virtually never missed an opportunity to appear on stage in both tragedies and comedies, and Slater offers a wide range of testimonials that, had he chosen to go professional, he could have been one of the most successful stage actors of his day. Thackeray put it bluntly: "If that man would now go upon the stage he would make his £20,000 a year" (the equivalent of several million dollars in today's terms). Dickens's need for living contact with an audience culminated in his decision to go on tour with public readings from his novels and other fiction. These readings became an obsession in the last decade or so of his life (and most biographers, including Slater, argue that the strain they caused him hastened Dickens's death). On his inaugural tour of England, Ireland, and Scotland in 1858, he gave a total of 85 readings, averaging "five or six a week" by Slater's calculation.

There is no question that Dickens had financial motives for these readings. He made £2,500 for a series of 42 performances in Britain in 1867, and his 1867–68 American tour netted him an impressive profit of £38,000, a sum that amounted, Slater reports, to "between a quarter and a fifth of his estate at his death." But Dickens did not give his readings solely for the money.

[E]ach performance allowed him literally to "write a book in company." ...He performed alone just as he wrote alone in his study. Here, however, he was working not with his mind's eye upon a host of imaginary readers but with his physical eyes upon real readers present before him in flesh and blood, and responding, as he sometimes expressly encouraged them to, with audible sobs and laughter to his narrative as it came from his lips.

Relishing this intimate contact with a live audience, Dickens enjoyed recreating his masterpieces in front of his adoring public. He sometimes departed from his prepared text, to deepen the impression that his enraptured listeners were experiencing a story coming into being right before their eyes and ears.

In the romantic view, the integrity—and greatness—of an author rests crucially on his being wholly true to his own inner vision, and never altering a word at the behest of another. Dickens certainly could be stubborn as an author and repeatedly fought with editors and publishers to get his works into print the way he wrote them. But in the long run he proved to be remarkably pliant for a literary genius. In the most famous instance, he allowed his friend and fellow novelist, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, to persuade him to change the ending of *Great Expectations*, so that Pip and Estella marry instead of staying apart, as they do in the conclusion Dickens originally wrote. This is no minor alteration, and many critics have faulted the novel for having what we would call a "Hollywood ending."

My biggest surprise in reading Slater's book was to learn of the active role that Dickens's friend—and initial biographer—John Forster

Dickens was at his happiest when he was down in the trenches of publishing, with the enlisted men, grappling with the nuts and bolts of the day-to-day business of getting out a periodical.

played in shaping the published texts that we assume were solely the responsibility of the great Charles Dickens. At times, Dickens even put Forster wholly in charge of correcting the galley-proofs of his works. As Slater reports, Forster "was often authorized to make cuts or alterations at his own discretion and Dickens constantly discussed his characters and the story's development with him." Forster turned out to be a good biographer, but he was hardly a true author, and I still find it difficult to believe that Dickens turned over so much responsibility for his texts to someone who obviously was not in his league as a writer.

But there was something democratic in Dickens's attitude toward the literary process, and he did not fancy himself as beyond the need for help as a practicing writer. Slater records a characteristic incident when

chairing a public meeting of the Printers' Readers' Association, called to demand

better wages and conditions, [Dickens] acknowledged "most gratefully" the great debt that he as a writer owed to printers' readers. "I have never," he told his audience, "gone through the sheets of any book that I have written without having had presented to me...some slight misunderstanding into which I have fallen, some little lapse I have made..., some unquestionable indication that I have been closely followed through my work by a patient and trained mind."

I cannot imagine Romantics like Lord Byron or Percy Shelley—for all their democratic sympathies—paying such an eloquent tribute to the contribution of lowly proofreaders to their art. It says something about Dickens and his conception of authorship that he was willing to acknowledge the role of the print shop in perfecting, or at least correcting, his masterpieces.

In sum, Dickens did not in Romantic fashion feel himself raised like some creative god far above the sordid world of commercial publishing. Rather he immersed himself in that world, often as an editor and publisher himself, correcting the work of authors even as he allowed his own work to be corrected. One gets the impression from reading Slater's biography—and this may be its greatest virtue—that Dickens lived the life of commercial publishing with total commitment. He was at his happiest when he was down in the trenches of publishing, with the enlisted men, as it were, grappling with the nuts and bolts of the day-to-day business of getting out a periodical.

WHATEVER ROMANTIC NOTIONS OF authorship he may have begun with, Dickens learned to accept the realities of 19th-century publishing and even to embrace them. And that means that Dickens quickly came to think of writing as a process, in which he developed his works over time, with help from all his associates in the publishing business and feedback from the reading public. With typical Romantic bravado, Percy Shelley proclaims in his manifesto *A Defence of Poetry*: "When composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conceptions of the poet." In this quite prevalent understanding of art, perfection can be achieved only in a single moment of total aesthetic illumination, when the artist sees the whole work laid out before him with all its details perfectly organized in advance. But as Slater's detailed account of his professional career reveals, Dickens always insisted on how hard he labored on his



novels, and how much time he had to devote to get them into shape.

The remarkable success of his early novels showed that serialization was then the best way to market popular novels, and throughout his career he was stuck with a publishing format of which he had become the acknowledged master. He was not entirely happy with this system, and he often complained that serial publication cramped his style. Like several of his contemporaries, Dickens longed to escape from the shackles of serialization, always hoping that someday he would be free to write a novel at his leisure. At a minimum, as Slater indicates, he struggled to get ahead of schedule, to have several installments of a projected novel in the bank, as it were, before the process of serialization began. But the pressures of his many other commitments usually reduced him to his standard position of writing barely one step ahead of the printer. Sometimes he had to come up with new material at the print shop when the proofs showed that he had underwritten an installment and needed some additional pages. As a result, he was often forced to improvise, and revise—or sometimes completely change—his initial plans as he went along. Dickens became in effect a prisoner of a system he himself had done much to create.

As Slater shows, Dickens was very sensitive to the charge from critics that he did not plot out his novels in advance. Especially early in his career, hostile reviewers questioned his skill in constructing a plot, comparing him unfavorably in that respect to Henry Fielding. Critics complained that he lacked an architectonic sense, and achieved his best effects only on the local level. Over the years, Dickens worked on the structural problems, and began to write memo-

randa to himself to plan his novels out from the beginning. His notes have survived, and Slater records and discusses them in detail, making clear that Dickens often knew quite well where his novels were headed, and planned out striking juxtapositions or recurrent symbols or other calculated narrative effects. Nevertheless, these notes reveal just as clearly how often he changed his mind in midstream, and how often he allowed a chance occurrence in his life to alter his conception of a given work.

The romantic theory of organic form attempts to banish contingency from the aesthetic realm. The history of Dickens's career shows that accidents, sudden hunches, mid-term corrections, concessions to the audience, and artistic about-faces may have a legitimate role to play in literary creation. In Romantic fashion, we may choose to imagine Dickens in some parallel universe, in which he was freed of all commercial pressures and had all the time in the world to plan his works out in advance and to find just the right word for everything he wished to express. In such an artistic paradise, Dickens might have produced a 25-page short story of such jewel-like perfection that it would have brought tears to the eyes of Gustave Flaubert or Walter Pater. But in such a parallel universe, would we still have *Oliver Twist* and *A Christmas Carol*?

IT IS EASY TO READ ABOUT DICKENS'S LIFE and conclude that he was one of the unhappiest men who ever lived. According to his own accounts of his life and his fictional recreations of it in works such as *David Copperfield*, his childhood was miserable. His marriage became loveless, if it did not start that way, and the behavior of his vast assortment of relatives

and dependents caused him endless anxieties, financial and otherwise. What appears to have been his deep love for Ellen Ternan was unfortunately something he could not enjoy in public, but instead had to struggle to keep secret to his dying day.

It is a very sad story—until one begins to focus, not on his personal but his professional life. What Michael Slater shows is that, for good or ill, Dickens devoted far more hours of his waking life to his career as a writer than he did to his family or other personal matters. And insofar as he lived the life of a writer, it must have been one of the happiest any man has ever enjoyed. At his farewell reading shortly before he died in 1870, he took the opportunity to thank his public and to speak of how their response to his work had permitted him to enjoy “an amount of artistic delight and instruction which, perhaps, is given to few men to know.” He was always confident that he was good at what he did, and for all the signs of personal insecurity in his life, there are almost no signs of creative doubts. When it came to his literary talent, he had no modesty, false or otherwise. He was conscious of just how great he was as a writer, and Slater quotes him frequently marveling at his own ability in letters to his friends. Trumpeting his ability to move seamlessly from writing *David Copperfield* to churning out a story for *Household Words* on the spot, Dickens patted himself on the back: “What an amazing man!” He was right.

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