IT takes no special discernment to perceive Dickens' more blatant faults as a novelist. Most of them belong to one or other of two categories. In the first place, he is repeatedly guilty of manipulating characters and events so as to satisfy sentimental and didactic requirements. One example should suffice. When the haughty Edith Dombey runs away with Carker, she degrades herself. We have no difficulty in seeing this; but Dickens manipulates her very gestures and movements in order to publicize her degradation. We witness the performance through the eyes of her innocent step-daughter, Florence:

As Florence stood transfixed before the haggard face and staring eyes, she noted, as in a dream, that Edith spread her hands over them, and shuddering through all her form, and crouching down against the wall, crawled by her like some lower animal, sprang up, and fled away. 2

In the second place, Dickens can fail by relying excessively upon those mannerisms and automatic tricks of speech which many of his characters preserve and display like identity cards. In Little Dorrit, for instance, Rigaud's moustache keeps going up and his nose keeps coming down until he seems to be not a malevolent villain, as required by the action, but a mere grimacing puppet.

It is easy to generalize from such instances and to condemn Dickens for over-emphasis and exaggeration. Many of us did so while taking our first stumbling steps in literary criticism. But few of us go on doing so. Sooner or later, we come to recognize that, whatever faults we may have found in them, Dickens' novels have triumphantly imposed themselves upon our imaginations; and that they have imposed themselves there not in spite of their over-emphasis and exaggeration but thanks precisely to their possessing certain qualities of which over-emphasis and exaggeration are merely the excess.

1 A lecture delivered in the John Rylands Library on Wednesday, the 13th of October 1971.
2 Dombey and Son, xlvi. 

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I can best indicate what I believe these qualities to be by saying something about Dickens' relationship with his reading public. This may seem a roundabout and perilous procedure. We have the highest authority for supposing that we ought as literary critics to aim at seeing each work of literature as in itself it really is. It may be asked whether I am not coming dangerously close to suggesting that we ought to see it, not as it is, but as our knowledge of its author's relationship to his public leads us to expect it to be; and whether this would not amount to our forcing our own uninvited and presumptuous collaboration upon the helpless writer. These hazards are real enough, but they can, I think, be avoided. Criticism of Shakespeare affords a useful parallel. If we know something about his theatre, his actors, and his audience, this knowledge can alert us to qualities in his plays which really are there but which we apprehend more clearly and more fully in consequence of having traced them from the special relationship between artist and public which fostered them. The truth of this statement will nowadays be fairly widely granted. Why, then, should we not follow a similar procedure with Dickens? Why should we not allow our knowledge of his relationship with his readers to alert us to qualities in his work which literary criticism can confirm are really there and not the product of intrusive collaboration?

Some years ago John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson produced the important book, *Dickens at Work*, which has more than any other illuminated for us this novelist's "lifelong love-affair with his reading public; which, when all is said, is by far the most interesting love-affair of his life". They described in some detail the methods employed by Dickens in writing and publishing fiction. As is well-known, he was a serial-writer. Occasionally, his work would appear in magazines, accompanied by other matter: *Hard Times*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and *Great Expectations*, for example, were first published in weekly papers. But normally a Dickens novel came out on its own in monthly parts, each costing one shilling. The green paper covers of a typical number enclosed thirty-two pages of text, two illustrations, and a few pages of advertisements. It would hold

three or four chapters of the work in progress. The publication of the entire novel would take a year and a half. In this form, readers first set eyes on Pickwick Papers, Nicholas Nickleby, Martin Chuzzlewit, Dombey and Son, David Copperfield, Bleak House, Little Dorrit, Our Mutual Friend, and Edwin Drood.

When publication began, Dickens would have at the most only four or five numbers ready, and by the middle of the book he was unlikely to be more than one number ahead of his readers. He aimed to deliver his manuscript to the printer by the 20th for publication on the last day of each month. This timetable sometimes obliged the illustrator to start work on a number before Dickens had finished it. Clearly, there had to be the closest possible liaison between the two men.

Like many other writers, Dickens preferred to work during the earlier part of the day. In the middle of his career, he normally wrote from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., correcting his manuscript as he did so, sentence by sentence, but rarely making subsequent changes. His compositors were picked men, and he and his friend John Forster usually had little to put right in the proofs. But he quite often found that he had written too much to fit into thirty-two pages. When this happened, he would cut down his material, usually at the expense of the comedy. Very occasionally, he found that he had written too little. Believing in value for money, he would then add enough material to bring the text well down the last page.

There must clearly have been a master-plan for each novel. Dickens, sending copy to the printer by instalments for immediate publication, could hardly have given his work coherence without something of the kind. But no master-plan seems to have been committed to paper. It must have existed only in Dickens' head. From Martin Chuzzlewit (1843-4) onwards, however, he was trying to organize his novels more purposefully than at first; and from Dombey and Son (1846-8) onwards he wrote out a plan for each number of any novel that he published in monthly parts. These number-plans have survived, and John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson were able, by taking account of such evidence as the various inks employed, to reconstruct Dickens' method of using them.
For each number, he would fold a single sheet of paper in half, open it out, and arrange his notes on either side of the crease. On the left, he would set down general memoranda towards the number under consideration, queries addressed to himself regarding, for example, the topics to be included and the names to be given to new characters, and his decisions on these points. On the right, he would organize the approved material under three or four chapter-headings.

These number-plans served two distinct purposes. Each one of them roughed out the development of the novel for another thirty-two pages; and taken together they summarized its whole previous course in a way that made for handy reference. Dickens thus retained his freedom to modify future developments within the broad and flexible limits of an unwritten master-plan, and at the same time he acquired a concise record which could prevent him from losing sight of what had gone before. His novel might develop unpredictably, but it would not lose coherence.

It was important to Dickens that it should be free to develop unpredictably. He was always highly sensitive to his readers' reactions to the work in progress. These reactions might find expression in critical comments, uttered privately or publicly and communicated directly or indirectly; or they might be implied in rising or falling sales. Occasionally, Dickens' adjustment of his narrative in response to the criticism they conveyed is clearly demonstrable: for example, he developed the rôle of Sam Weller in *Pickwick Papers*, he gave *The Old Curiosity Shop* a tragic ending, he sent Martin Chuzzlewit to America, he decided against using Walter Gay in *Dombey and Son* for a study in moral decline, he enabled Edith Dombey to deny herself to Carker, and he allowed Pip to conclude *Great Expectations* on a note of hope. Some of these changes benefited the novels in which they occurred, others not.

But the value of Dickens' method of composition is not to be assessed merely by examining such particular identifiable results of it. Its value to him was that it permitted him to achieve and to maintain the closest intimacy with his readers. More nearly than any other of our major novelists, he was in
the position of an oral storyteller. A good oral storyteller watches his listeners and allows what he observes to dictate to some extent the tempo of his narrative, its pitch, and at times its course. It may lead him, for example, to accelerate or to retard a climax, to introduce a tantalizing digression or to omit a digression he had meant to use. Moreover, his awareness of his listeners’ interest sustains him; and, if he can feel that they share his major beliefs and attitudes, an additional spontaneity and vitality may be imparted to his performance.

This was very much Dickens’ position. He watched his readers’ changing reactions to each unfolding serial and adjusted his performance month by month to what he observed. He knew this public intimately and was happy to serve it and to be its spokesman. To a considerable extent he shared its attitudes and creed: its Christian sentiment and morality, its humanitarianism, its political individualism and distrust of established authority, its indifference or even hostility to tradition, and its love of humour. His closeness to it is clear in his advocacy of social reforms. When he attacked the Court of Chancery in *Bleak House* and the Circumlocution Office in *Little Dorrit*, he was not a lonely pioneer; others had attacked these institutions before him. Nor was he merely a camp-follower, pretending to contribute to a victory that was already won; much really was still wrong with the law and the civil service. Characteristically, he participated in an already growing awareness of the need for this or that reform; and by giving the movement his assistance he promoted its success. He was a more effective leader of opinion in that he was not too far in advance of the opinion he led.

His readers owed much to him. According to Dean Stanley, he “made Englishmen feel more as one family than they had ever felt before.”1 He in his turn owed much to them. His biographers rightly emphasize his extraordinary histrionic talent. As the self-sacrificing, rejected lover in Wilkie Collins’ melodrama *The Frozen Deep*, he drew tears from all, even from his fellow-performers; in his readings from his own works, he

virtually hypnotized whole audiences; and he proved a highly accomplished public speaker on more formal occasions. He had the actor's ability not merely to sway and unite his audience but also to derive support from it while doing so; and as he wrote each monthly number of his current novel he was sustained by a lively sense that his readers were going along with him.

His confidence that he enjoyed the support of a vast, sympathetic, exacting public, together with his urgent desire to retain its backing, helped to give his work assurance, spontaneity, breadth of appeal, and vitality. In the service of this public, he exploited outstanding gifts: a delighted observation of persons and places; a sharp eye for significant features and mannerisms; a quick ear for genuinely expressive turns of phrase; an irrepressible sense of humour; and a splendidly animated prose in which to fix unforgettably the observed traits which he had selected to dominate a portrait or a landscape.

He exploited these gifts with a view to displaying, to exhibiting, rather than to analysing his characters. A typical Dickens novel was written to be read first of all at the rate of three or four chapters a month over a period of a year and a half by a predominantly practical, individualistic, moral, humanitarian, and Christian public. Monthly numbers were often read aloud in family circles, and in due course there were readings to such groups from the complete novels. Despite the automatic modern assumption to the contrary, Dickens did not aim at cliff-hanging endings to his numbers. Counting on a lively and steady interest in his characters, he tried to make each number a balanced offering and quite often closed at a point of rest. The situation called for a Dickensian exhibition, rather than a Jamesian dissection, of the characters and the moral issues they faced. It favoured as bold and emphatic, as vivid and even exuberant, an exhibition as Dickens' genius enabled him to stage. When he fails, we complain of over-emphasis and forced exaggeration. But when he succeeds we enter the Dickens world.

Several of his opening chapters launch us straight into this. The beginnings of *Bleak House*, *Hard Times* and *Great Expectations* are deservedly famous. The first of them carries
us into the London of Dickens on a foggy November day. Careless readers have sometimes spoken as if the Court of Chancery were enveloped in physical fog throughout the novel. It is not. But by their mistake they testify to the force with which Dickens presents the enveloping fog in this opening chapter and to his success in fixing it in their minds as a potent symbol of the mental darkness in which the court operates from beginning to end.

London. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln’s Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snow-flakes—gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun. Dogs, undistinguishable in mire. Horses, scarcely better; splashed to their very blinkers. Foot passengers, jostling one another’s umbrellas, in a general infection of ill-temper, and losing their foot-hold at street-corners, where tens of thousands of other foot passengers have been slipping and sliding since the day broke (if this day ever broke), adding new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud, sticking at those points tenaciously to the pavement, and accumulating at compound interest.

Mud dominates this panorama. So far, Dickens has not mentioned the fog. Two fanciful touches remind us that we are reading an inveterate humorist: the Megalosaurus on Holborn Hill, and the snow-flakes gone into mourning. The imagined occasion for the mourning, the death of the sun, naturally prompts a doubt whether this day ever really broke. Certainly, little or no sense of time can survive in the universal dampness, miriness, and drabness. Holborn Hill looks much as it must have looked in the immediately post-diluvian period, surely the classical era of mud.

If men have lost their bearings in time, the fog ensures that they lose them in space.

Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping, and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs; fog lying out on the yards, and hovering in the rigging of great ships; fog drooping on the gunwales of barges and small boats. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards; fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper, down in his
close cabin; fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of the shivering little 'prentice boy on deck. Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all round them, as if they were up in a balloon, and hanging in the misty clouds.¹

This paragraph, like its predecessor, culminates in glimpses of human life in the depressing conditions described; and the final image of the balloononists graphically illustrates men's loss of all sense of their whereabouts. The whole description is impressionistic and repetitive. In the earlier paragraph, "mud", "smoke", "black drizzle", "soot", "mire", and again "mud" form a cumulative sequence; in the later, we have "fog", "fog", "fog", here, there, and everywhere. The two paragraphs lend themselves admirably to reading aloud, and even the silent reader quickly imagines that he hears in them the compelling voice of the storyteller.

The fanciful and humorous touches accentuate the gloom even while they help us to stand outside it. They do just this in many of Dickens’ descriptions. Mr. Tite Barnacle chooses to live in a dark and poky house in a sordid blind alley because the fashionable "Grosvenor Square" forms part of its address. It is "a squeezed house, with a ramshackle bowed front, little dingy windows, and a little dark area like a damp waistcoat-pocket".² The simile is laughable enough. At the same time it so powerfully suggests the closeness, murkiness, and dampness of the minute sunken court that we should feel only revulsion were it not that the humour persuades us to keep our distance.

This technique of insistent repetition accentuated and qualified by fanciful and humorous elaborations is as well suited to the Dickensian exhibition of the characters as it is to the Dickensian exhibition of their settings. Here is Josiah Bounderby of Coketown:

He was a rich man; banker, merchant, manufacturer, and what not. A big, loud man, with a stare, and a metallic laugh. A man made out of a coarse material, which seemed to have been stretched to make so much of him. A man with a great puffed head and forehead, swelled veins in his temples, and such a strained skin to his face that it seemed to hold his eyes open and lift his eyebrows up. A man with a pervading appearance on him of being inflated like a balloon, and

¹ Bleak House, i. ² Little Dorrit, i. x.
ready to start. A man who could never sufficiently vaunt himself a self-made man. A man who was always proclaiming, through that brassy speaking-trumpet of a voice of his, his old ignorance and his old poverty. A man who was the bully of humility.¹

In this paragraph, a lively and emphatic voice irresistibly conjures up a coarse, swollen creature. The statement that his strained skin "seemed to hold his eyes open and lift his eyebrows up" gives peculiarly forcible expression to Bounderby's nature and at the same time encourages the laughter that will regulate the disgust his nature provokes.

A more elaborate exhibition is that of old Mr. Turveydrop, as seen by Esther Summerson on her introduction to him by his devoted son. Mr. Turveydrop justifies an idle and self-indulgent existence by professing to carry over the virtues of the Regency period—its dress, manners, and deportment—into alien times.

He was a fat old gentleman with a false complexion, false teeth, false whiskers, and a wig. He had a fur collar, and he had a padded breast to his coat, which only wanted a star or a broad blue ribbon to be complete. He was pinched in, and swelled out, and got up, and strapped down, as much as he could possibly bear. He had such a neckcloth on (puffing his very eyes out of their natural shape), and his chin and even his ears so sunk into it, that it seemed as though he must inevitably double up, if it were cast loose. He had, under his arm, a hat of great size and weight, shelving downward from the crown to the brim; and in his hand a pair of white gloves, with which he flapped it, as he stood poised on one leg, in a high-shouldered, round-elbowed state of elegance not to be surpassed. He had a cane, he had an eye-glass, he had a snuff-box, he had rings, he had wristbands, he had everything but any touch of nature; he was not like youth, he was not like age, he was not like anything in the world but a model of Deportment.

"Father! A visitor. Miss Jellyby's friend, Miss Summerson."

"Distinguished," said Mr. Turveydrop, "by Miss Summerson's presence." As he bowed to me in that tight state, I almost believe I saw creases come into the whites of his eyes.

"My father," said the son, aside, to me, with quite an affecting belief in him, "is a celebrated character. My father is greatly admired."²

There is much here that suggests an eager and resourceful storyteller's voice: the emphatic repetition in "false complexion, false teeth, false whiskers, and a wig", in "He had a cane, he had an eye-glass, he had . . ., he had . . ., he had . . .", and in "he was not like youth, he was not like age, he was not

¹ *Hard Times*, i. iv.
² *Bleak House*, xiv.
like . . .”; the extraordinary animation of “pinched in, and swelled out, and got up, and strapped down”; and the high-spirited play of fancy about the neckcloth that puffed “his very eyes out of their natural shape” and which, when he bowed, almost caused creases to come into their whites. The Regency dandy’s pose is accurately and satirically noted: Mr. Turveydrop, flapping his white gloves against the large hat held under his arm, “stood poised on one leg, in a high-shouldered, round-elbowed state of elegance not to be surpassed.”

The old charlatan’s one utterance in the passage quoted, “Distinguished . . . by Miss Summerson’s presence”, is entirely characteristic. Dickens had a quick ear for idiosyncratic turns of phrase and a superb gift for incorporating them in dialogue that almost delivers itself. Here is Guppy’s proposal to Esther Summerson. The clerk’s legal habits of mind and utterance are clearly exhibited in it; but they are exhibited less for our satirical laughter than for our disinterested enjoyment of their pure, fantastic absurdity. The incongruities of the speech bring it very close indeed to nonsense-writing:

... to proceed. My present salary, Miss Summerson, at Kenge and Carboy’s, is two pound a week. When I first had the happiness of looking upon you, it was one-fifteen, and had stood at that figure for a lengthened period. A rise of five has since taken place, and a further rise of five is guaranteed at the expiration of a term not exceeding twelve months from the present date. My mother has a little property, which takes the form of a small life annuity; upon which she lives in an independent though unassuming manner, in the Old Street Road. She is eminently calculated for a mother-in-law. She never interferes, is all for peace, and her disposition easy. She has her failings—as who has not?—but I never knew her do it when company was present. . . .

If the cryptic “it” is to take full effect, the passage must not be read too fast. Ideally, we should hear it read aloud or, if we are reading silently, we should take it at the pace appropriate for reading aloud. We should have a second or two for uneasy, curious speculation regarding the mysterious failing to which the lady yielded strictly in private; and only after that should Guppy be allowed to disclose the whole truth:

She has her failings—as who has not?—but I never knew her do it when company was present; at which time you may freely trust her with wines, spirits, or malt liquors. My own abode is lodgings at Penton Place, Pentonville. It is
lowly, but airy, open at the back, and considered one of the 'healthiest outlets. Miss Summerson! In the mildest language, I adore you.¹

Again and again Dickens achieves this brilliant dramatic pointing of his characters' utterances.

"Pecksniff," said Anthony, who had been watching the whole party with peculiar keenness from the first: "don't you be a hypocrite."

"A what, my good sir?" demanded Mr. Pecksniff.

"A hypocrite."

"Charity, my dear," said Mr. Pecksniff [to his elder daughter], "when I take my chamber candlestick to-night, remind me to be more than usually particular in praying for Mr. Anthony Chuzzlewit; who has done me an injustice."²

Pecksniff's initial incredulity provokes an emphatic repetition of the charge. The unctuous meekness and complacency of his reply become fully apparent only when he speaks of "praying for" his accuser. But his adverb "usually" can now be seen to imply that such prayer for his relatives would be merely customary with him. Tonight, he is claiming with supreme self-satisfaction, he will pray with special urgency; and the subject of his prayer will be one who has done him "an injustice".

If Pecksniff makes a parade of virtue in his speech, Mrs. General makes a parade of gentility in hers. She hears Amy address Mr. Dorrit as "father".

"'Papa' is a preferable form of address," observed Mrs. General. "'Father' is rather vulgar, my dear. The word papa, besides, gives a pretty form to the lips. Papa, potatoes, poultry, prunes, and prism, are all very good words for the lips—especially prunes and prism. You will find it serviceable, in the formation of a demeanour, if you sometimes say to yourself in company—on entering a room, for instance—papa, potatoes, poultry, prunes and prism, prunes and prism."³

At a lower-middle-class level, Mrs. Wilfer makes similar pretensions in her own stately way. She speaks of her father:

His company was eagerly sought, as may be supposed, by the wits of the day, and our house was their continual resort. I have known as many as three copperplate engravers exchanging the most exquisite sallies and retorts there, at one time.⁴

This, with its formal, eighteenth-century diction, achieves much the same kind of untendentious absurdity as does Guppy's proposal.

¹ Bleak House, ix.
² Martin Chuzzlewit, iv.
³ Little Dorrit, ii. v.
⁴ Our Mutual Friend, iii. iv.
Have I dwelt too much upon humorous passages? I think not. I have tried to show that even when Dickens is most in earnest, as in the opening of *Bleak House* or the description of Josiah Bounderby, he does not, at his best, suppress his humorous insights. On the contrary, he uses them to reinforce his serious aims. No one could call Miss Murdstone a humorous element in the young David Copperfield's life; yet the humorist makes an essential contribution to her introductory portrait. Thanks to this contribution, we can share the boy's fright while at the same time standing far enough back to see the encounter in perspective.

It was Miss Murdstone who was arrived, and a gloomy-looking lady she was; dark, like her brother, whom she greatly resembled in face and voice; and with very heavy eyebrows, nearly meeting over her large nose, as if, being disabled by the wrongs of her sex from wearing whiskers, she had carried them to that account. She brought with her two uncompromising hard black boxes, with her initials on the lids in hard brass nails. When she paid the coachman she took her money out of a hard steel purse, and she kept the purse in a very jail of a bag which hung upon her arm by a heavy chain, and shut up like a bite. I had never, at that time, seen such a metallic lady altogether as Miss Murdstone was.¹

Miss Murdstone is larger than life. The same may be said of everything, or everything that is most vital, in the world that Dickens exhibits to us. Persons, places, and things in it are more odd, more ludicrous, more sinister, more appealing, more sombre, more reassuring, and more grotesque than in what we suppose, myopically perhaps, to be reality.

Nor does the imagination of Dickens stop at creating this world; it also endows certain of the persons and things in it with a representative, even a symbolic, significance. This may often have been the undesigned outcome of a mode of composition that we may fairly describe as obsessive. Dickens himself reported that over *A Christmas Carol* he "wept and laughed and wept again, and excited himself in a most extraordinary manner . . . and . . . walked about the black streets of London, fifteen and twenty miles many a night when all the sober folks had gone to bed".² Towards the end of his life he confessed that whenever he thought of the death of Paul Dombey "my remembrance wanders for a whole winter night about the streets

¹ *David Copperfield*, iv. ² Quoted by Stephen Wall, op. cit. p. 63.
of Paris—as I restlessly did with a heavy heart, on the night when I had written the chapter in which my little friend and I parted company.”¹ In more general terms, he declared “I hold my inventive capacity on the stern condition that it must master my whole life, often have complete possession of me, make its own demands upon me, and sometimes for months together put everything else away from me.”²

Whether in any particular instance he deliberately planned that this or that person or thing should carry the weight of significance that we feel it to carry, or whether its significance is the unintended consequence of his obsessive habit of mind, is an interesting biographical question. A literary critic may be content to say that the significance is certainly there: for example, in Krook, the secretive dipsomaniac who is the Lord Chancellor’s counterpart in Bleak House; in Bradley Headstone, the desperately repressed exponent of self-help and respectability in Our Mutual Friend; in the prisons, whether literally or metaphorically such, which cast their shadows over Little Dorrit, and over much of Great Expectations; in the slums, and the diseases that bred in them, which we never quite forget in Bleak House; in the spreading railway in Dombey and Son; in the circus in Hard Times; in the dust-heaps in Our Mutual Friend; in the river in the same novel; and in the cathedral in Edwin Drood.

For a closer look at a single example, we may turn to the powerfully imagined Court of Chancery in Bleak House. This is a principal vehicle of the criticism of life made in the novel. When we first see it in Chapter I, the court is deep in the London fog. “Jarndyce and Jarndyce drones on. This scarecrow of a suit has, in course of time, become so complicated, that no man alive knows what it means. The parties to it understand it least.” Dickens is satirizing the law’s delay and showing the darkness and uncertainty, suggested by the gloom and fog, consequent upon it.

But he is not concerned only with immediate social evils. Miss Flite, Gridley, Richard, Ada, and Jo are all more or less involved in the “monstrous maze” of Chancery. Even Sir

¹ Quoted by Stephen Wall, op. cit. p. 171. ² Ibid. p. 96.
Leicester Dedlock and John Jarndyce cannot remain entirely aloof from it. Eerily and grotesquely parodied by the rag-and-bottle shop of the drunken Krook, it imposes itself upon our imaginations; and, as we see it exerting its bewildering and destructive fascination in almost every part of the surrounding world, it comes to seem more than merely a particular social evil. It comes to seem just such a fantastic, nightmarish organization as persecutes the hero of Kafka’s *The Trial*. Richard, Miss Flite, and Gridley are among its victims; Tulkinghorn, Kenge, and Vholes are among its agents. The persecuting power is not inescapable: John Jarndyce keeps at a fairly safe distance from it. But for those who are less prudent or less fortunate it becomes a terrifying crazy authority, a devouring fate, pursuing them with a kind of dotty implacability.

In considering these later examples, I have allowed my concern with Dickens’ “lifelong love-affair with his reading public” temporarily to lapse. Clearly no one could pretend to ascribe his ebullient imagination and the fantastic world of its creation to the influence of his readers. In speaking of these matters, we are speaking of a unique and unaccountable individual talent. Nevertheless, the readers made a contribution. They helped to elicit the talent, and they even influenced the forms in which it expressed itself. They made Dickens their favourite entertainer, and he, in so many ways himself one of them, gladly gave himself up to entertaining them, to directing their sympathies, and to encouraging and fortifying them. His confidence that they were going along with him helped to give an exuberant vitality to his vivid displays of what went on in the Dickens world. In the end, however, this world defies explanation. When we have said all that we can about Dickens’ powers of observation, about his choice of significant detail, and about his almost explosive formulations, we must recognize that what confronts us is a work of genius such as baffles analysis.