

Charles Dickens in His Times

Shanyn Fiske

Paradox though it may seem . . . it is none the less true that Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life.

—Oscar Wilde, “The Decay of Lying: An Observation” (1889)

Despite Oscar Wilde’s scorn for Victorian sentimentalism in general and Dickensian melodrama in particular,¹ the above lines might have been penned with the author of *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-1841) in mind. Hardly an image of Victorian London appears to us now clear of the fog, soot, and mud that seep through Dickens’s landscapes and transfix his at once unfathomable and indelible characters. As one critic wrote in a 1976 study of the author and his times, “[Victorian] history is today largely reconstructed from the scenes [Dickens] depicts and the human beings he perpetuates” (Chancellor 13). Aside from shaping the historical reality of his time for later readers, Dickens also presented narrative pathways, perspectival frames, and models of behavior that guided his contemporary audience toward understanding and finding their places within a newly developed, rapidly changing, industrial age in which factories, workhouses, poverty, pollution, crime, and disease confounded traditional values and practices. As the “first great novelist of the industrial city” (Ackroyd, *London* 11), Dickens urged his readers to leaven their lives with humor, assume critical agency, and look beyond their isolation to see their part in a common struggle against violations of justice and human dignity. If, as Lynda Nead has argued, modernity is “a set of processes and representations that were engaged in an urgent and inventive dialogue with their own historical conditions of existence” (8), Dickens was one of the most active facilitators of that dialogue, consulting with the immutabilities of emotional experience while recording the cacophony of cultural change. Testimonies to the success of his orchestration abound. “It is so graphic, so individual, and so true, that you could curtsy to all the

people as you met them in the streets,” the novelist and Dickens contemporary Mary Russell Mitford remarked upon the appearance of *Pickwick Papers* (1836-1837). “I did not think there had been a place where English was spoken to which ‘Boz’ had not penetrated. All the boys and girls talk his fun . . . and yet they who are of the highest taste like it the most” (qtd. in Ford 7). Mitford’s comment indicates not only Dickens’s widespread popularity (the sales totals of his serialized fiction averaged 40,000 copies per issue) but also the extent to which his narratives wove themselves into his readers’ daily lives. Victorians of various social classes at once recognized Dickens’s imagination of the absurd and found in it a fitting expression of their experiences. Indeed, when critics—Wilde among them—fault Dickens’s realism, pointing out the caricaturish nature of his depictions, they overlook the fact that reality often did not seem real to the Victorians and that they were frequently required to make leaps of imagination in order to function in their phenomenal world.

“London created Dickens just as Dickens created London” (*London* 7), writes Dickens biographer Peter Ackroyd. The London that Dickens brought to life in his fiction is one fraught with ambivalence—a place at once of thrilling adventure and deadening monotony; of high hopes and plunging disappointments. Such contradictory impressions of the city first made their mark in the mind of ten-year-old Dickens himself, whose relocation with his family from the port town of Chatham to the outskirts of London in 1822 marked an abrupt transition from childhood tranquility to humiliation and neglect:² “It is wonderful to me how I could have been so easily cast away at such an age,” Dickens wrote of the abrupt end to his formal education upon moving to Bayham Street, Camden Town. “It is wonderful to me that, even after my descent into the poor little drudge I had been since we came to London, no one had compassion enough on me—a child of singular abilities: quick, eager, delicate, and soon hurt, bodily or mentally—to suggest that something might have been spared, as certainly it might have been, to place me at any common school” (Forster I: 21).