

## PRIMITIVE CRITICISM AND THE NOVEL: G. H. LEWES AND HIPPOLYTE TAINÉ ON DICKENS

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*By Peter Melville Logan*

IN A CONTROVERSIAL ARTICLE ON the life and fiction of Charles Dickens, George H. Lewes ponders the inexplicable preference of readers for the novelist's too-simplistic characters over the more complex characters of other writers. He finds an answer in the primitive reaction to fine art: "To a savage there is so little suggestion of a human face and form in a painted portrait that it is not even recognized as the representation of a man" ("Dickens" 150). The implication, it would seem, is that readers turn to Dickens because they are similarly incapable of appreciating more refined modes of art. Today the remark reads as gratuitous and insulting to readers, to Dickens, and to the other cultures Lewes stereotypes as savage. At the same time, the casual nature of the passage also suggests that it reflects commonly held beliefs about primitive life, beliefs we do not have but that Lewes and his readers took for granted. He was clearly safe in assuming such a body of common knowledge, for many other articles in the *Fortnightly Review* (in which Lewes's article appeared in 1872) had similar references to primitivism. Reading through the journal issues of the time, the extent to which anthropological concepts had escaped the covers of books on primitive society and taken up residence in the pages of review essays on contemporary issues – from history, to life in the colonies, to life in Britain itself – is striking. In its print context, the comment about savages and art is less isolated and inexplicable than it is representative of a broad turn to the topic of primitivism in social commentary and analysis during the 1870s.

While in this sense typical of other articles in the *Fortnightly*, Lewes's piece was atypical in that it extended the trope of Victorian primitivism beyond the field of social commentary to the field of novel criticism. In terms of his critical method, this represented a change of direction. One of the most prominent critics in the generation preceding Henry James, Lewes differed from critics who viewed the novel as mere entertainment. He stood out because he insisted on its status as art and called for a more formalist approach to criticism than did most of his contemporaries (Stang 79–80). But, that same desire to establish the novel as a serious art form meant building a cordon sanitaire between it and the popular fiction entertainment industry. In 1856, his partner George Eliot made the distinction between artistic and popular fiction famously in "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," and Lewes framed another version of the argument in 1865, in "Criticism in Relation to the Novel." His *Principles of Success in Literature*, which was published the same year, took a dim view of popular fiction and of popular readers, for whom "it is enough if they are amused" (178). However, in "Dickens in

Relation to Criticism,” he reversed course: “Dickens has proved his power by a popularity almost unexampled, embracing all classes. Surely it is a task for criticism to exhibit the source of that power?” (143).

Analytically examining the best of popular fiction was a new project for novel criticism, but one its methods were ill-equipped to address, as much of his article explains. Applying criticism to popular literature required new tools. As I will argue, Lewes found them in “the science of culture,” the term anthropology used to define the discipline (Tylor 1: 1). Far from being gratuitous, the association of Dickens’s readers with primitivism gave him the core logic of his analysis of popular fiction. Anthropological ideas were already being used to explain Victorian social relations, and Lewes shows how they could be used to rethink the cultural production and reception of the novel.

In applying anthropology to the question of Dickens’s popularity, Lewes’s article echoed the 1856 assessment of Dickens by the French critic Hippolyte Taine, one of the most influential critics in France during the second half of the nineteenth century. Like Lewes, Taine also employed a form of primitive criticism, and the two arguments have regularly been compared, beginning in 1874 when John Forster linked them together in his biography of Dickens (Forster 3: 293–306). I examine both arguments here because they use different paradigms of primitivism, a traditional one employed by Taine and a newer, positivist one by Lewes. Together, they give us a clear picture of the multiple uses of primitivism in nineteenth-century novel criticism and the different critical methods each produced.

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THE LATE HISTORIAN HENRIKA Kuklick has argued that British anthropology in the nineteenth century appealed to elite, highly-educated readers because it told stories they saw as illuminating their own experiences and clarified the nature of the social order: “They wanted to know what relationships properly obtained between superior beings such as themselves – educated men – and the persons they somehow equated with inferior ‘primitive’ peoples – children, women, the mentally disordered, and the ‘dangerous classes’” (21). As an explanatory premise, primitivism had immense utility, and we see it used increasingly in British and American periodical literature beginning in the late 1860s. Articles with some version of the word *primitive* in the title more than tripled in number between the 1850s and 1870s, jumping from about 160 to 480 in each decade. Their number doubled again in the 1890s, reaching about 860.<sup>1</sup> Only a subset of articles about primitivism actually included the term in the title, so these numbers provide an index to a greater number of articles referencing primitivism, and they illustrate the growing reliance on anthropological concepts in periodical literature generally between 1865 and 1900.

We can get a closer look at the form this reliance took by looking at the February 1872 issue of the *Fortnightly*, the same one in which “Dickens in Relation to Criticism” appeared. Of its eight articles, half referenced contemporary anthropology’s paradigm of primitivism. A. C. Lyall’s “Religion of an Indian Province” immediately precedes Lewes’s article and uses the language of Victorian anthropology to examine contemporaneous India; the “primitive folk” there practice the religion of “primitive Fetichism” – an endowment of nature with human-like consciousness – that results in “primitive tree-worship” and “primitive animal worship” (127, 129, 131). A piece by Leslie Stephen on William Warburton directly follows Lewes in the *Fortnightly*. Its subject, the eighteenth-century Bishop of Gloucester and

literary executor of Alexander Pope, is far removed from the earliest condition of humanity, yet Stephen chose to describe Warburton's England with a quote from John Lubbock's *The Origin of Civilization and the Primitive Condition of Man*, published two years earlier and one of the most important anthropological studies at the time (Stephen 165). Later in the same issue is a polemic in favor of female suffrage by the radical editor of the *Echo*, Arthur Arnold. Arnold was also the author of *From the Levant* (1868), and in his *Fortnightly* article, "The Political Enfranchisement of Women," he used his experiences "in a mud-built town upon an oasis in the Great Desert, where every householder walked with the huge key of his house – and of his wives – slung on his girdle," to compare the condition of English women to their treatment in societies further down the supposed hierarchical ladder of social development (206–07). Allusions to the theory of primitivism occurred regularly in the other issues of the *Fortnightly* that year as well, and they included a catholic range of topics. H. Lawrenny's "Custom and Sex" looks at the social role of women in primitive society. Sydney Colvin's review of William Wilson Hunter's history of the British administration of India, *Orissa*, described in historical terms "the primitive races" there (732). Walter Bagehot's serial installments of *Physics and Politics* ran for five years in the *Fortnightly*, concluding one month prior to the issue containing Lewes's article.<sup>2</sup> Bagehot's study of physiology, natural selection, and political economy drew repeatedly on Henry S. Maine's *Ancient Law* and ensured a steady diet of information about primitive life drawn from recent research by anthropologists, particularly the two he terms "chiefs among them": the same Lubbock referenced by Leslie Stephen and Edward B. Tylor, the author of *Researches into the Early History of Mankind* and *Primitive Culture* (Bagehot 696). The list of topics in just these few sample entries shows the range of uses to which the anthropological idea of primitivism was put – from contemporary India to eighteenth-century England, the Woman Question, and political economy – and it demonstrates the degree to which it had become an indispensable element of British social commentary by the 1870s.

What did anthropology look like? How did it imagine primitive humanity? And what did it say about art and the nature of creativity? Anthropology in the second half of the nineteenth century was unlike anthropology earlier in the century or anthropology today. It was a historical discipline but one focused on the evolution of the human mind from its assumed primitive origin to the present. It attributed the development of civilization to that mental progress. Much of its utility to social commentary derived from applying paradigms of primitivism to colonial subjects and British subalterns, as Kuklick points out. Importantly for criticism, it also contained an association of primitives with a lost mode of organic creativity. The paradigm of primitivism was not always spelled out, and so its influence remains opaque to later readers, who lack the familiarity with it that periodicals like the *Fortnightly* took for granted. That paradigm had a familiar intellectual basis. George Stocking points out that the road to Victorian anthropology lay through Auguste Comte, whose Positive theory of universal social development became the foundation of scientific anthropological thought until the end of the century (29). The circulation of Comte's ideas in Britain received a dramatic boost in 1853 when they were condensed for an English-speaking audience in two competing translations, Harriet Martineau's *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte* and Lewes's own *Comte's Philosophy of the Sciences*. Together, they created a widespread familiarity with the Positivist theory of social development among well-educated Britains.

Many Victorian allusions to primitive life derived directly or indirectly from Comte's account of primitive fetishism as the initial rung on the hierarchical ladder of human

development. As he explains, the “first intellectual condition of man must have necessarily begun by a state of pure *fetichism*; *i.e.* by our primitive tendency to conceive all exterior bodies as animated with a *life* essentially analogous to our own” (Lewes, *Comte’s Philosophy* 273; emphasis original). Comte reasoned that primitives had not yet developed a capacity for rational thought to account for a world beyond their subjective experience. Instead they projected their feelings and emotions onto the world around them, peopling it with human-like spirits who made the rain come; who inhabited every tree, rock, and river; and who capriciously favored humans with good or ill luck. The association of fetishism with primitives was not original to Comte, but he systematized the long-standing theory of African religious fetishism by integrating it into a universal developmental scheme premised on an evolving capacity for reason in the mind, giving fetishism a new gloss of respectability in Victorian scientific thought.<sup>3</sup>

Because fetishism was a projection of one’s sense of self onto the external world, it was also a fundamentally imaginative activity. Comte recognized this and associated the primitive state with a profound, pure form of artistry: “It is, indeed, evident that a philosophy which animated directly the whole of nature, must have tended to favour the spontaneous impulse of the imagination” (273). Free of social convention and artistic rules, primitives were never not artistic by nature, and their imaginative perceptions were fundamental to their existence. Martineau describes their perception of the external world as “a kind of permanent hallucination” (551). While it appeared like mental pathology to Victorians, this hallucinatory imagination was an unadulterated form of self-expression that marked the birth of art: “Thus, the earliest attempts in all the fine arts, not excepting poetry, are to be traced to the age of Fetichism” (Lewes, *Comte’s Philosophy* 274). This line of reasoning in Comte’s thought, linking the fine arts to primitive society, persisted in Victorian anthropology and was directly reasserted by Tylor, the anthropologist closest to Comte’s philosophy. Because of assumptions about the primitive’s unconscious projecting activity, Tylor argued that although scholars view mythology as metaphorical, it actually described beings the mythologists believed were real. Thus, ancient poets did not use language figuratively, because they described what they saw directly in front of them: “The similes of the old bards and orators were consistent, because they seemed to see and hear and feel them: what we call poetry was to them real life, not as to the modern versemaker a masquerade of gods and heroes” (Tylor 1: 269). Victorians in their exalted condition of course knew better than to imagine such beings were real, and yet Tylor regarded the hallucinatory imagination with admiration, associating it with a profound artistry that later poets can never recapture.

The fetishistic psychology underlying this early art had two key characteristics. Together they serve as the marker of primitivism in Victorian discourse – a conceptual fingerprint indicating its presence when otherwise unacknowledged. Both critical articles under discussion here employ this telltale combination of traits. The first marker, projection, is the activity of anthropomorphism represented as a generalized worldview. To the primitive mind, all objects are “immediately personified, and endowed with passion” (Martineau 548). This first marker has subsidiary traits; because the external world is comprehended in terms of the observer’s inner life, distinctions between the internal and external worlds collapse in a psychology of comprehensive solipsism. On the plus side, we find “a perfect harmony” between the perceiver and the perceived, subject and object, leading to an “exact correspondence between the universe and Man” (548). But this harmony comes at a cost. Ideas become “completely adherent to the sensations, which were incessantly presenting

those ideas; so it was almost impossible for the reason to abstract them in any degree, or for a single moment” (549). In such a psychology, ideas are inseparable from sensations, negating any possibility for early humans to reach a critical understanding of either the world or their own experiences.

The second marker of primitivism is particularity, and it follows directly from Comte’s basic assumption that the development of civilization was driven by the evolving complexity of the human mind. Every step in his three stages presupposed an increasing mental capacity for reason and, along with it, a diminished reliance on fetishism and magical thinking. Primitive humans, he theorized, begin in a psychological condition dominated by concrete sensations, because at such an early stage in the development of the mind they lack any capacity for “comparing, abstracting, and generalizing” (558). This inability to think abstractly renders them incapable of synthesizing particulars into larger types. Primitives see many specific trees, but never a forest. In consequence, they experience the world as one of radical particularity, perceiving every object as a singularity rather than part of a larger conceptual whole.

The two markers, globalized projection and radical particularity, create a distinctive psychology. Together they generate an affective experience of the world as overflowing with singular living objects. The world of primitive fetishism was experienced in concrete terms, with every object and the related sensation individualized, every event explained through investing the world with anthropomorphic life, and every thought indivisible from the sensation that occasioned it. Primitive art was the expression of this psychology. Comte argued that such art reached its peak of social influence during the age of Homer, attaining then “a degree of social importance never since equaled” (Lewes, *Comte’s Philosophy* 279). Both positivist thought and Victorian anthropology held that it has been all downhill for art ever since.

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IN HIS *HISTORY OF English Literature*, Hippolyte Taine outlined a historical narrative that directly contradicted Comte. And yet, the fingerprint of primitive fetishism remains and is clearly evident in his chapter on Charles Dickens. His description of Dickens’s imagination would be completely at home in Comte’s depiction of the primitive mind, combining projection and particularity in telling fashion:

An imagination so lucid and energetic cannot but animate inanimate objects without an effort. It provokes in the mind in which it works extraordinary emotions, and the author pours over the objects which he figures to himself, something of the ever-welling passion which overflows in him. . . . [B]lank nature is peopled, inert matter moves. But the images remain clear . . . and the dream is equal to the reality. (Taine, *History* 4: 118–19).

While it resembled Comte’s, Taine’s use of primitive fetishism owes less to his older contemporary than it does to the prior assumptions about religious fetishism that both writers drew on. He first published his analysis of Dickens’s writing as an article in the well-respected *Revue de Deux Mondes* in 1856. At that time, he would have had a general idea of Comte’s argument, which he acquired during his student years (Kahn 228–30).<sup>4</sup> But, its influence is hard to discern in the critical method he developed in those early years

for analyzing literature within its historical context. Taine's famous theorization of cultural development as the product of race, milieu, and epoch was instead antithetical to Positivism's teleological narrative of the march of science because Taine omits the essential element of Comte's system, the mind's growing capacity for abstract thought. Instead, Taine describes the initial formation of a fixed racial psychology; he then tells a story of historical contingency, tracking the fate of a static racial character as it confronts changing circumstances over time.

Taine's theory was above all one of regional or national identity, translated into racial terms. As he explains, *race* consists of the "innate and hereditary dispositions which man brings with him into the world" and which "vary with various peoples" (*History* 1: 17). That predisposition is forged by the influence of geography and climate over "a great many ages, perhaps of several myriads of centuries" (1: 18). As an accumulation of "actions and sensations" over an "almost infinite past," race outweighs in importance the briefer and more "superficial," accumulations of milieu and epoch (1: 18, 17). Thus the latter are subordinate to race, whose shaping force on identity is always evident as "the primitive stamp underneath the secondary imprints," serving as a constant factor in a changing world (1: 17). The imbalance, however, is misleading, because race is itself the accumulated effect of milieu at an earlier period, when it molded the soft clay of an unformed primitive people. As a result, Taine's system relies on the recursive effect of milieu at two points, the initial race formation and again, in later stages of development, when race interacts with changes in milieu caused by migration or conquest.<sup>5</sup> This double emphasis on milieu makes Taine's theory of primitivism a profoundly regional one. Unlike Comte's universalism, Taine's theory of race leads to multiple modes of primitive psychologies.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, the two philosophers define opposite relationships between the primitive mind and the external world. Comte describes a universal primitive mind that imagines the external world in its own image. Taine reverses the relationship, describing a world that shapes the mind into a reflection of the material environment. Where Comte privileges the mind as the causal agent of social change, Taine privileges the world. For Comte, change is driven by the growth of the mind and tends inevitably in a single, teleological direction. For Taine, development occurs through the historical accident of altered circumstances on the mind, and so it has no predictable course or necessary end.

When he describes the reception of Dickens's work, Taine does so in terms of the "primitive foundation" of the English race (1: 36). His use of the term *primitive* thus differs from that of Comte and Victorian anthropology. It is closer to the idea of a fixed character that, for all of Taine's apparent historicizing, subsequently transcends history and persists unchanged within the population in later milieus and epochs. Behaviors change as each group adapts to changing circumstances, but racialized primitive traits are forever. In other words, *primitive* in Taine's work refers to that which is specifically resistant to change, rather than an early state in a scheme of organic developmental change.

Taine argues that English national character stems from an existential crisis that occurred when the early Germanic settlers confronted a sudden change of milieu in the form of the Norman Conquest. As Taine summarizes, "The barbarous age established on the soil a German race, phlegmatic and grave, capable of spiritual emotions and moral discipline" (4: 73). Once forced to submit, this passionate, individualistic race preserved what independence it could by learning the politics of compromise and practicality. Thus, "[t]he feudal age imposed on this race habits of resistance and association, political and utilitarian prepossessions" (4: 73). The

result was an unstable combination of individualism with conformity, and of moral passion with practicality. The tension between “these two natures, one innate, the other acquired,” between “natural bent and constraining force,” defines English literature and produces what Taine sees as its characteristic and paradoxical combination of moral passion and social conventionality (1: 36).

In Taine’s hands, Dickens’s novels become a composite of these two forces. On the one hand, his novels are conventionally moral. While there are marriages, they only involve “the innocent loves and virtuous attentions of a little boy and girl of ten” (4: 145). Sexual feeling is limited to transgressive acts, such as James Steerforth’s elopement with Little Em’ly, and then, the novelist only depicts the “misereries, despair, and remorse” that inevitably follow (4: 145). While rigidly moral, his works also overflow with passion that is perverted away from its proper objects toward those associated with the conventional, mundane details of life. Taine reasons that because such details are necessarily numerous Dickens’s novels overflow with emotion: “[H]e only rails or weeps,” but he makes up for a lack of subtlety with a non-stop experience of sorrow and joy, so much so that his work “never abandons this impassioned tone” (4: 133). Tom Pinch’s stagecoach trip to London, in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, with its repeated refrain of “Yoho! Yoho!,” illustrates this propensity for flights of lyricism about banalities (Dickens 559; ch. 36). The “most poetic extravagances spring from the most vulgar commonplaces. . . . We shall have [Dickens’s] portrait if we picture to ourselves a man who, with a stewpan in one hand and a postillion’s whip in the other, took to making prophecies” (Taine, *History* 4: 133). This style is distinctively English, and “the English public” responds because the style matches their own racial character, whose “primitive foundation was impassioned sensibility” (4: 164, 163). Dickens’s novels reflect a national psychology in which that primitive passion subtends practicality: “The poet subsists under the Puritan, the trader, the statesman. The social man has not destroyed the natural man” (4: 164). His novels appeal to the audience’s primitive nature, and this explains their popularity: “when a talented writer, often a writer of genius, reaches the sensibility which is bruised or buried by education and national institutions, he moves his reader in the most inner depths, and becomes the master of all hearts” (4: 164). More than any other novelist, argues Taine, Dickens captures the racial essence of the English, and thus his fiction’s emotionalism is paradoxically the key to its popularity in a practical culture.

Taine’s mechanism of race, milieu, and epoch explains the reception of Dickens’s novels, but not their creation. In accounting for the production of art, Taine ties Dickens firmly to the model of primitive psychology. In this, the traditional paradigm of primitivism serves as his premise. Both critical markers of the paradigm – projection and particularity – figure largely in Taine’s interpretation of Dickens. As we have already seen, he claims that Dickens animates inanimate objects by projecting his “ever-welling passion” onto them (4: 118). The second characteristic, radical particularity and a related absence of synthesis into generalities, is Taine’s major complaint about Dickens as a novelist. Never “did a mind figure to itself with more exact detail or greater force all the parts and tints of a picture” (4: 118). But, those parts are not synthesized into a larger whole. He argues that “Dickens does not perceive great things,” and instead is “lost, like the painters of his country, in the minute and impassioned observation of small things” (4: 129–30). The novelist adds immense quantities of details without grasping the general pattern, and so misses the “delight and harmony which in other hands they might have retained” (4: 130). What sets his fiction apart from everyone

else's, according to Taine, is an anthropomorphic treatment of objects imagined in exhaustive detail without aesthetic synthesis. By associating this combination of anthropomorphism and radical particularity with Dickens, Taine situates him within the psychology of primitive fetishism.

Taine attributes this distinctive use of detail with the author's psychological propensity to reify ideas into things. Details originate as ideas in his mind, but they become real objects to Dickens, taking on a life of their own. Taine illustrates the problem with the description of the instruments that fill Solomon Gill's shop, in *Dombey and Son*, and claims that Dickens is overtaken by the multiplicity of fictional objects he himself creates: "He sees so many, sees them so clearly, they are crowded and crammed, they replace each other so forcibly in his brain, which they fill and obstruct; there are so many geographical and nautical ideas exposed under the glass cases hung from the ceiling, nailed to the wall, they swamp him from so many sides, and in such abundance, that he loses his judgment" (4: 123–24). Taine's language twice describes the conflation of ideas and things that Comte identified with primitive fetishism. First, the objects cluttering the shop are also ideas crowding the physical space of his mind. Second, "nautical ideas" are nailed to the wall, not nautical instruments, as though ideas and objects were indistinguishable for Dickens. This is, in other words, the same collapse of the distinction between inner and outer, subjective and objective, that characterizes the use of primitivism in critical discourse.

For Taine, this conflation in Dickens's work ultimately takes the form of authorial hallucination. He identifies a subcategory of Dickens's characters who exemplify the same problem and argues that they have an autobiographical resonance: "Dickens is admirable in depicting hallucinations. We see that he feels himself those of his characters, that he is engrossed by their ideas, that he enters into their madness" (4: 125). To illustrate the point, he uses Dickens's description of Jonas Chuzzlewit's delirium, after his murder of Montague. Dickens describes Jonas as obsessed with the closed room far off in London where he was supposedly asleep at the time of the murder. According to Dickens,

This made him, in a gloomy, murderous, mad way, not only fearful *for* himself, but *of* himself; for being, as it were, a part of the room: a something supposed to be there, yet missing from it; . . . and when he pictured in his mind the ugly chamber, false and quiet; . . . and the tumbled bed, and he not in it, though believed to be; he became in a manner his own ghost and phantom, and was at once the haunting spirit and the haunted man. (*Martin Chuzzlewit* 726–27; ch. 47)

For Taine, the real and imaginary in the passage become so interchangeable to Jonas "that he is not sure that he is not in London" (Taine, *History* 4: 126). The same conflation equally describes Dickens's act of creation. His depictions of hallucinations may be admirable, says Taine, but they are "so true that they are in reality horrible," because they suggest a too intimate familiarity with the same phenomenon (4: 128). He notes that, "we are terrified to gauge the lucidity, strangeness, exaltation, violence of imagination which has produced such creations . . . and which found itself in its proper sphere in imitating and producing their irrationality" (4: 128). Jonas matters, in Taine's view, because he represents the basic workings of Dickens's own imagination: a projecting action that blurs the distinction between subject and object, and a radical particularity that follows from an inability to synthesize. Dickens not only expresses the primitive qualities of the English; he exemplifies the primitive's experience of the world in his novels and becomes himself, in Taine's hands, a modern primitive.



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LEWES AND TAINE AGREED on the presence of anthropological attributes in Dickens's fiction but they disagreed on the nature of primitivism and on its relationship to Victorian literature. Lewes was closer to positivism than Taine, and thus the word "race" does not appear in his analysis, reflecting positivism's claims to universality – all societies go through the same developmental stages and thus all primitive societies are fundamentally alike.<sup>7</sup> For Taine, race is a set of inheritable physical and psychological attributes, features that were baked into racial biology in the distant past. Lewes disagreed with this view of race and clearly identified it as a social rather than biological product. When he wrote his article on Dickens, he was immersed in his multi-volume *Problems of Life and Mind*. In Volume 4, *The Study of Psychology*, Lewes stresses human commonality rather than racial difference, arguing that "since men differ more in their social relations than in their physiological relations, it is in the former that we should first seek the explanation of intellectual and moral differences not obviously assignable to differences of structure" (164). His reduced emphasis on biology parallels a correlate increase in emphasis on social factors as key to understanding racial or national differences.

Ideas about race are not the only differences between the two critics. Although both mention Dickens's use of commonplace objects in description, Taine sees it as separating him from "the path to sublimity," while Lewes thinks the same details "at once familiar and potent" in their effects (*History* 4: 134; "Dickens" 144). Nor do they draw the same conclusions about the significance of primitivism to critical practice. Taine articulates a national critical theory that applies equally to Dickens, Swift, Shakespeare, and all the other British writers; Lewes's essay differentiates elite and popular writing in general and proposes separate critical methods – one aesthetic, the other anthropological – for each.

But the most significant difference stems from Lewes's decision to focus his argument on a different topic: the problem of novel criticism itself and its inability to understand a writer as successful as Dickens. He structures his argument around a distinction between Dickens's negative critical reception and his popularity, a question Taine never considers.<sup>8</sup> Lewes asks, "Were the critics wrong, and if so, in what consisted their error? How are we to reconcile this immense popularity with this critical contempt?" ("Dickens" 143). Arguing that Dickens's popularity "proved his power," he insists that criticism's inability "to exhibit the sources of that power" is a failing of the critical enterprise that limits itself to identifying aesthetic weaknesses in his work (143). Aesthetic value and popular reception are thus at loggerheads. In Lewes's critical vocabulary, the term "power" has a specific meaning, similar to the sense Thomas De Quincey gives it, in his theory of poetry, of the ability to affect or move readers. "All Literature is founded upon psychological laws," Lewes wrote in 1865, and "ascertaining the psychological principles involved in the effects" of great literature is a neglected but necessary prerequisite for criticism (*Principles* 11, 141). Critics ignore these laws, but "if there is any real power in the voice it soon makes itself felt in the world," because literature succeeds through psychological effect, not critical standards (143). In the Dickens article, he proposes to show "what those powers were, and their relation to his undeniable defects," aesthetic defects that nonetheless are connected to that power ("Dickens" 143). His essay raises question, then, not about Dickens – his popularity is not in dispute – but about the system of critical values that ignores his success and labels his works as aesthetic failures.

Identifying Lewes's intentions in writing the article matters, because they have come to define how seriously subsequent critics have approached his stated mission of identifying an alternate critical theory for popular fiction. Those intentions have been the subject of much dispute. "Dickens in Relation to Criticism" is most often remembered today for its catalog of the novelist's technical deficiencies, which Lewes spells out in withering detail. But, it was written as a defense of his work, according to Lewes's biographer, Rosemary Ashton (256–59). He wrote it as a corrective to Forster's treatment of Dickens in his biography, after publication of the first volume, in December 1871. While working on *Problems of Life and Mind*, he had given up writing articles, but made an exception "with the avowed intention of *defending* Dickens against criticisms of his exaggeration, vulgarity, and so on" (Ashton 257; emphasis original). While Ashton believes Lewes had the best of intentions, she also thinks he was "in two minds when writing his piece," split between his admiration for his friend and his dedication to the more erudite style of his novelist partner (258).<sup>9</sup> When published, the article predictably infuriated Forster. He responded to it a year later, in the final volume of the biography, when he claimed that Lewes was even worse than Taine: "the trick of studied depreciation was never carried so far or made so odious as in this case" (*History* 3: 300). While some critics join Ashton in thinking Lewes's article an attempted defense, most follow Forster in viewing it as a thinly-veiled attack.<sup>10</sup> Considering Lewes's litany of Dickens's shortcomings, this is easy to understand. Still, such a claim has always been difficult to reconcile with the life-long friendship between Dickens and Lewes. The dissonance between critique and biography invites ambiguous explanations for the article, such as treating it as anomalous: he was "speaking out of both sides of his mouth"; he "forgot all about" his own critical theory; his writing has an "apparent glibness" (Tjoa 80; Ford 151; Slater 172). The two writers were not intimate like Dickens and Wilkie Collins, but only three months before his death, Dickens lunched with Lewes and Eliot at their home, which does not suggest antagonism late in the relationship (Eliot, "To John Blackwood" 81). Following the publication of his article, Lewes was surprised and "greatly hurt" by Forster's response, according to Trollope, who recalled it as "the simple expression of his critical intellect dealing with the work of a man he loved and admired, – work which he thought worthy of the thoughtful analysis which he applied to it" (Trollope 23). None of this fits the assumption that he meant to denigrate Dickens, let alone to do so with the vehemence that Forster and later critics describe.<sup>11</sup>

Critics who classify the article as an attack generally dismiss its challenge to critical standards as window dressing; Ford views it as "a front" to cover Lewes's real intention of destroying Dickens's reputation (152). But there are good reasons not to jettison Lewes's complaint about novel criticism as a practice. In his other critical writing, Lewes repeatedly faulted the practice of novel criticism, and the Dickens article's claims are consistent with his earlier stance. He made similar charges in "Criticism in Relation to Novels," seven years before, when he protested the dismissive attitude of critics toward novels in general, complaining that "the general estimation of prose fiction as a branch of Literature has something contemptuous in it" (352). The title, "Dickens in Relation to Criticism," announces it as a continuation of the earlier article, now addressing the dismissive attitude of critics toward one novelist in particular.

The article's combination of praise and denunciation of Dickens contributes to the confusion about Lewes's intentions. His treatment of Dickens's characters as mechanical particularly seems like an attack on the novelist, and yet the article insists throughout on the

fact of his greatness and of criticism's inadequacy in the face of it. At the beginning, in the middle, and at the conclusion, he repeats his central claim, that "even on technical grounds their criticism has been so far defective that it failed to recognize the supreme powers which ensured his triumph" ("Dickens" 154). Part of the problem is structural. In order to use Dickens to question critical standards, he has to position the writer as a non-conformist whose style violates those standards. In this context, the list of his supposed defects reflects criticism's failures rather than those of Dickens because of his creative "power." But Lewes complicates the position, because he identifies with the critical class as one who has long subscribed to the basic system of aesthetic values he now questions as a whole, in the face of Dickens's success. This identification lends earnestness to his account of how dramatically these novels violate his own critical standards, and it conflicts with a similar earnestness in appreciating how the same novels produce such a compelling effect in the mass of readers. He is trying to occupy two mutually-exclusive positions at once, crossing the boundary from his own elite culture to an alien popular one, and back, like the participant observer of anthropology who demonstrates "an *outsider's insideness*" with its concomitant ambivalence (Buzard 10; emphasis original). One can privilege one side over the other, leading alternately to a sense of Lewes's disingenuousness or of masochistic self-lashing, but together they constitute a strong statement of the terms that make up the paradox of Dickens's success, in Lewes's view. Such a reading is more consistent with Lewes's work as a whole, for he is nothing if not methodical and does not show a penchant for glaring self-contradiction, like promoting in practice the same critical values he faults as useless.

When taken seriously, Lewes's analysis of the existing practice of novel criticism and his proposal for an innovative approach to popular fiction are more coherent than the dispute over his intentions. The bulk of the article identifies two specific aspects of critical practice as biases that produce this failure. The "bias of technical estimate" causes critics to overvalue technique, at the expense of the work's effect ("Dickens" 149). Since the "main purpose of Art is delight," critics who focus on its technical aspects alone are blind to the causes of Dickens's success and reject the whole of his work simply because they dislike his technique (149). The second complaint involves a similar substitution of part for whole. Criticism is prey to a pattern in which a critic's exasperation with a particular aspect of a work, such as factual error, leads them to ignore everything else. In this "bias of opposition," a critic's "mingled irritation and contempt" causes them to miss the writer's general strengths and to dwell instead on a particular weakness (147). These two critical failures are both examples of subjective bias, but Lewes does not fault criticism for its subjectivism, arguing instead that it must reflect "the individual character of criticism" (142). Unfortunately, criticism too often offers up "individual impressions given forth as final judgments" (142). When critics "pronounce absolute verdicts," they ignore the "great difficulty, sometimes a sheer impossibility, in passing from the individual to the universal" (142). The fundamental problem of criticism is not its subjectivism, but rather its tendency to parade personal impressions as objectivism, thus substituting individual affect for universal truth.

The reverse holds true for Dickens's fiction, whose power is precisely its ability to move in the opposite direction, from the universal to the individual. It does so, he argues, by inviting readers to project their own experiences onto his characters. Dickens populates his canvas with broadly drawn character types. More suggestive than mimetic, these "artistic daubs" embody "some real characteristic vividly presented" in their speech, manner, or physical shape (147, 146). While "unreal" and "wooden" – Lewes compares them to anencephalic frogs – his types

are the “puppets of a drama every incident of which appeals to the sympathies” because he places them in “situations having an irresistible hold over the domestic affections and ordinary sympathies” (146–47). Dickens’s characters are thus both familiar and generic, and this sketchy treatment, counter-intuitively, makes them seem more concrete to his readers, not less. Lewes explains: “an image and a name were given, and the image was so suggestive that it seemed to *express* all that it was found to *recall*, and Dickens was held to have depicted what his readers supplied” (146; emphasis original). This insight mimics the theory of primitivism and reiterates one of its two central marks: the projecting activity of the primitive mind, here applied to the experience of the popular reader. Thus, while Taine sees Dickens’s fiction as an active expression of national character, Lewes sees it as a passive object of readerly inscription. For him, it is not that Dickens’s fiction expresses something intrinsic in his readers, but rather that it expresses little, like an ink blot in which readers see their own image reflected back to them. “Universal experiences became individualized in these types,” creating the “power” of Dickens’s fiction (146).

\* \* \*

LEWES KNEW THE POSITIVIST theory of primitivism well, and his method of evaluating works of popular culture draws directly on its assumptions. Comte’s vision of primitive life informs his representation of popular readers, constituting certainly the most offensive aspects of his article, in large part because Victorian anthropological assumptions are intolerable today, but also because Lewes engages in the widespread nineteenth-century practice of characterizing all uneducated people as primitives and situating them within the same paradigm of primitive fetishism used by anthropologists. The assumption of a psychology dominated by radical particularity appears when he attributes the success of Dickens’s characters to the concrete immediacy of their gross physicality. Instead of rich psychological presentation, Lewes claims, Dickens uses externalized character traits that appeal directly to the senses: “some well-marked physical trait, some peculiarity of aspect, speech, or manner” (146). Popular readers understand these characters because they understand physicality better than abstractions: “Think of what this implies! Think how little the mass of men are given to reflect on their impressions, and how their minds are for the most part occupied with sensations rather than ideas, and you will see why Dickens held an undisputed sway” (146). To present-day sensibilities, this denigrates both Dickens and popular readers. In terms of Victorian anthropology, it restates the radical particularity of the primitive mind, which perceives the world through the lived experience of concrete immediacy because it lacks the capacity for abstract reflection. I am describing anthropology’s view of humanity at the dawn of its existence, but it is also Lewes’s view of popular readers.

That he primitivizes the popular novel’s reception is most evident in his most objectionable examples. He contrasts the opposite responses of popular and elite readers to Dickens’s characters, explaining how “these unreal figures affected the uncritical reader with the force of reality” (146). He illustrates this claim with that parallel between popular readers and primitives that we began with, and he completes the thought as follows: “To a savage there is so little suggestion of a human face and form in a painted portrait that it is not even recognized as the representation of a man; whereas the same savage would delight in a waxwork figure, or a wooden Scotchman at the door of a tobacconist” (150). The “educated eye” does the reverse, admiring the portrait and loathing the wax and wooden figures. The

example juxtaposes the three-dimensional physicality of the latter with the more abstract, representational nature of the two-dimensional painting. He repeats the point in a further example, substituting a child for the primitive: “Give a child a wooden horse, with hair for mane and tail, and wafer-spots for colouring, he will never be disturbed by the fact that this horse does not move its legs, but runs on wheels – the general suggestion suffices for his belief; and this wooden horse, which he can handle and draw, is believed in more than a pictured horse by a Wouvermanns or an Ansdell” (146). The child believes in the wooden horse for the same reason that the savage believes in the wooden Highlander – both objects bear a closer physical relationship with the represented object than does a painting, and thus it is easier to imagine them as living beings by investing them with imaginary sentience. A toy horse can be moved and felt, while a painting has no physical presence beyond its frame and canvas.

The example illustrates the principle of primitive fetishism that Comte defined, and similar examples abound in ethnology. In *Primitive Culture*, published the year before Lewes’s article, Tylor also illustrates the concept of projection with child’s play, using the same example of the toy horse; for children, “the first explanation of all events will be the human explanation, as though chairs and sticks and wooden horses were actuated by the same sort of personal will as nurses and children and kittens” (1: 258). Tylor, as every other anthropologist at the time, equates primitives with children because they represent “the childhood of the human race” (1: 257). But children were only one example of social types that Victorian intellectuals figured as primitive. Equally common was the conflation of primitives with non-elites – in this case, the popular reader at the heart of Lewes’s remarks: “Just as the wooden horse is brought within the range of the child’s emotions . . . so Dickens’s figures are brought within the range of the reader’s interests, and receive from these interests a sudden illumination . . .” (“Dickens” 146). For Lewes, projection explains the effect of Dickens’s characters on non-elites, an effect that seems inexplicable to the elite reader. Tylor emphasizes this same gap in modes of understanding when he notes, “savages and barbarians, apparently without an effort, can give consistent individual life to phenomena that our utmost stretch of fancy only avails to personify in conscious metaphor” (1: 260). He may as well be talking about Lewes’s two types of readers. Tylor saw “barbarians, or peasants, or children” as equivalent examples of “simple unschooled minds,” and Lewes views non-elite readers similarly in theorizing the problem of popular literature (1: 285).

Much as Lewes primitivized Dickens’s readers, he does the same to the writer himself, and on this topic he restates several of Taine’s earlier claims: “Dickens sees and feels, but the logic of feeling seems the only logic he can manage” (“Dickens” 151). He notes that there is “a marked absence of the reflective tendency” in Dickens, who “never connects his observations into a general expression. . . . Compared with that of Fielding or Thackeray, his was merely an *animal* intelligence, *i.e.*, restricted to perceptions” (151). Dickens, in other words, is immersed in the world of particularity and lacks the ability to synthesize parts into wholes, much as Taine had argued. But, the most often remarked echo of Taine is in linking Dickens with the hallucinatory imagination. Lewes insulates Dickens from claims of insanity, arguing that “nothing is less like genius than insanity” (145). Instead, he references the pathology of hallucination heuristically, insisting that “there is considerable light shed upon his works by the action of the imagination in hallucination” (145). While Forster and many later critics use the reference as evidence of Lewes’s plagiarism of Taine, the centrality of hallucination to the Victorian idea of primitivism should make us expect the repetition.

Lewes is more careful in his treatment of the association and in his description of hallucination as a pathology. Some hallucinatory experiences are normal, and he explains the difference between these and pathological hallucinations clearly: “Belief always accompanies a vivid image, for a time; but in the sane this belief will not persist against rational control,” while the insane resist appeals to reason and remain firm in their delusion (145). The description of Dickens’s imagination that follows appears to reflect the pathological type: “To him also *revived* images have the vividness of sensations; to him also *created* images have the coercive force of realities, excluding all control, all contradiction” (145; emphasis original).<sup>12</sup> Does he mean at all times, or “for a time,” like the moment of composition, as Dickens had told him in 1838? “I thought that passage a good one *when* I wrote it, certainly, and I felt it strongly . . . *while* I wrote it,” a self-description that differentiates between the past moment of a writer’s immersion and his present lucidity (Dickens, “To G. H. Lewes” 404; emphasis original). It remains unstated, but Lewes describes Dickens as a person who was aware of and engaged with the world around him. Dickens wanted his writing to make “the lot of the miserable Many a little less miserable,” according to Lewes (152). It gave the writer a “seriousness” that became “prominent in his conversation and his writings,” and one deserving of praise: “*Il se prenait au sérieux*, and was admirable because he did so” (152). Lewes’s depiction of Dickens as actively engaged with the social world suggests that he distinguishes between Dickens’s self-involvement while writing and the absence of it otherwise. But, it does more than this. It also positions the novelist as someone able to traverse the boundary between primitive and civilized, between the popular culture his writing embodies and the writer’s own rational reformist agenda on Victorian social issues. This repeated boundary-crossing becomes the defining feature of Dickens as an author for Lewes and an essential component of his writing.

Ultimately, the “power” of Dickens’s novels is the power of primitive mythology. For all their technical defects, Dickens’s characters are rare examples of types that “stir the universal heart. Murders are perpetrated without stint, but the murder of Nancy is unforgettable” (151). They function as mythological figures within the world of neo-primitives that constitute popular readers. Notwithstanding the evident problems in equating Dickens with primitivism, it has more positive implications for artists than for readers, because anthropology identified myth-makers as the first poets. Tylor’s was merely the most recent restatement of that position when he described “the savage poet or philosopher” as the ideal of human creativity, and identified their modern descendants as pale imitators: “The state of mind to which such imaginative fictions belong is found in full vigour in the savage condition of mankind . . . and at last in the civilized world its effects pass more and more from realized belief into fanciful, affected, and even artificial poetry” (1: 327, 331). This was a view Lewes shared. “All early ages are poetical; their language is vitally metaphorical – unconsciously so,” he wrote in his 1846 review article on Homer’s poetry, which references “Comte’s law of human evolution” (“Grote’s *History*” 409, 387). Lewes characterizes Dickens exactly as anthropologists, like Tylor, characterized the first mythologists, as seeing their narratives unfold directly in front of them.<sup>13</sup> Dickens, Lewes claims, did not invent his fiction but saw and heard what he described: “When he imagined a street, a house, a room, a figure, he saw it . . . in the sharp definition of actual perception” (“Dickens” 145). This claim and others mirror arguments he himself made twenty-five years earlier in his article on Homeric poetry. He writes, “Homer, like all early poets, can scarcely be said to feign: he writes things, not words; and in his day all things were vivified with imagination. Later poets have to imitate things *that were*. . . . The

later poet has to create, by art, something of the effect which the early poet created, by a rude untutored utterance of the thoughts and feelings that were struggling within him" ("Grote's *History*" 410; emphasis original). Homer's poetry has the same traits Lewes attributes to Dickens. It exhibits "vivid imagery, clear pictures, healthy vigour, *naïveté*, simple passions, and untrammelled originality" (409). And like the novelist, Homer's "characters are *true*; but they are merely outlined" (410–11; emphasis original). Homer's writing also fails to adhere to the critical rules of style: "rude, careless, *naïve*, tautologous – all which . . . are not to be regarded as poetical excellencies. The merits . . . are the merits which all early poets . . . possess; and its faults, if we dare call them so, are likewise the faults of early poets. In fact, the style is not an elaborate – not a cultivated – not an artistic style" (412). Instead, it illustrates the organicism of early mythology that drops out in more refined and artificial ages.

Lewes defines Dickens like Homer, as if he too were someone from that lost age, a modern-day poet from the time Giovanni Battista Vico terms the Age of Gods, and a true poet by virtue of his supposed lack of abstract thought and deficient education. Dickens's "power" is the power of mythology, and that accounts for his unique ability to reach the popular reader. Lewes saw him as a primitive poet speaking to a neo-primitive society. This was clearly an ambivalent characterization on Lewes's part. It combines his own intellectual elitism with an awareness of what was lost in attaining it. At the same time, the primitive paradigm of projection and particularity gives him a defensible means to begin theorizing the production and consumption of cultural objects in the world's first mass culture.

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WHILE BOTH TAINÉ AND Lewes's methods were original, neither were generative in the sense of being reproduced in the work of subsequent critics of the novel. Of the two, Tainé's method was the more generic, applying to all of literature equally. Looking at this breadth, Welck calls it a precursor of the "sociology of literature" and argues that critics interested in that approach turned away from Tainé in favor of the "more rigorous method" found in Marxism (28). Lewes's method was anything but generic, being specifically formulated not even for the novel as a whole, but for critiques of the popular novel that existing novel criticism could not explain. His use of anthropological thought to systematize our understanding of the popular novel as a form of mass media represents a less travelled road in the history of criticism, until the rise of media studies that followed World War II, and one can only wonder what might have happened if Lewes's argument had not been caught up in the polarizing debate about Dickens that Forster championed.<sup>14</sup>

Although neither method led to a school of criticism, recognizing the logic of primitivism at work in both helps to better situate the work of these major critics.<sup>15</sup> Each writer's claims about anthropological issues were themselves part of a larger discourse, rather than eclecticism. Nicholas Dames's work on the role of physiological psychology in Victorian novel criticism has improved our understanding of criticism's time-bound logic and opened up new research avenues. Recognizing the cultural context of anthropological ideas in which novel criticism arose is similarly helpful in understanding the structure of beliefs that writers like Tainé and Lewes used in creating their distinct methods. Certainly in the British context, we need to understand the ubiquity of anthropological ideas in social commentary generally between about 1865 and 1880, as we saw in the review of periodical literature with which we

started. The Victorians were wrong in these ideas, but while their beliefs about primitivism tell us nothing about life in other societies, they can reveal much about the people who imagined them in the self-serving terms that reinforced their own sense of superiority. They understood their version of primitive life far better than we do today. They deployed the paradigm so widely that we have much to gain by recognizing how radically different their cultural beliefs were from our own and seeing them in all of their alien strangeness, even at the expense of our own moral comfort with the Victorian company we keep.

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### NOTES

1. Search of C19 Periodicals Index, all periodicals, for items with “primitive\*” in the title. 1840–49: 201; 1850–59: 159; 1860–69: 183; 1870–79: 480; 1880–89: 475; 1890–99: 862; 1900–9: 879. The increase begins when the number grows from 78 in 1860–64 to 105 in 1865–69.
2. The five installments of Bagehot’s “Physics and Politics” appeared in the *Fortnightly* from Nov. 1867–Jan. 1872.
3. On the history of fetishism, see Logan 17–45.
4. While Taine was not a disciple of Comte, the two French philosophers are often linked because they shared a serious interest in the sciences (Kahn 228–29). Taine first read *Positive Philosophy* in 1860–61, in preparation for his article on the philosophy of J. S. Mill. In 1864, he did a closer reading in preparation for his review of a new edition of *Philosophie positive* that year.
5. I agree with Welck’s conclusion that only milieu matters in Taine (27–33). See also Buzard’s discussion of the concept of culture as geographical space and its translation into the space of the novel (12).
6. Taine was closer in approach to Montesquieu, whose *Spirit of the Laws* explained that people in cold climates develop differently from those in warm ones (in Books 14–18). On Taine and race, see Evans 87–95; on Taine and national literature, see Appiah.
7. The elimination of the consideration of race is consistent with 1870s British anthropological theory; see Tylor 1.6–1.7.
8. For other reasons, Taine’s article on Dickens was a significant intervention in French critical methods when first published in 1856. It established Dickens’s reputation in France as a major novelist, and its appearance on February 1, in the midst of the controversy and trial over Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, gave support to literary realism at a critical moment. See Flibbert.
9. Ashton follows Forster in this, who claimed that Lewes’s “prodigious professions of candour” were disingenuous, implying that Lewes saw Dickens as a rival to George Eliot (Forster 3: 300).
10. Critics viewing Lewes’s piece as a defense include Haight, Greenhut, and Stoehr.
11. Recent examples include a dismissive view by Grenier in a short piece that never engages Lewes’s ideas; a thoughtful view by Winter, juxtaposing an older faculty psychology with the new physiological approach promoted by Lewes; and Bodenheimer’s claim of a subconscious mode of intelligence in Dickens. Bodenheimer articulates an important pattern in Dickens’s writing, one which she attributes to Freudian-derived premises but which is more consistent with Lewes’s claims for primitive genius than she allows.
12. Ford (145) and Bodenheimer (4–5) both read the passage as an attempt to pathologize Dickens.
13. The association of Dickens with mythology is longstanding and formed part of George K. Chesterton’s defense of him, when he calls him “the last of the great mythologists” (87).
14. Dames points out that Victorian novel theorists were “media theorists *avant la lettre*” (10).
15. James Sully, the physician and critic friend of Lewes and Eliot, comes perhaps closest to reproducing Lewes’s method, in his work on primitivism and the poetic imagination. See Sully.



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