

THE DEVELOPMENT OF DICKENS'S TREATMENT  
OF HIGH SOCIETY,  
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE PERIOD 1833 - 1852

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A B S T R A C T

This thesis is divided into two parts, each covering roughly a decade and concentrating on a major phase in the development of Dickens's treatment of High Society. A general introduction gives reasons for reassessing this development and indicates the lines of argument to be followed with an explanation of the terminology involved. Part One, Chapter I, discusses the background to Dickens's treatment of High Society in the period up to Barnaby. It pays special attention to historical and literary influences and compares prevailing attitudes to High Society with Dickens's own. Chapter 2 is a detailed study of the parts Gordon and Chester play in Barnaby. It highlights the importance of Gordon in Dickens's treatment of High Society and sees Barnaby as the culmination of one phase of its development.

A general introduction to Part Two emphasise<sup>s</sup>d that the eighteen-forties was a decade of change and stresses the problems of discussing such a decade. Chapter 1 is a further background chapter, following the same lines as Part One, Chapter 1. It shows Dickens increasingly discriminating between High Society as an institution and individual members of it. Three Chapters on individual novels shows Dickens's progress towards an overall view

of Society and his maturing ability to understand and portray the upper classes. In the Chapter on Bleak House Dickens's treatment of High Society is seen to have matured and the portraits of Sir Leicester and Lady Dedlock are discussed as the culmination of development, traced through preceding chapters. Chapter 5 is a brief survey of the period after 1852 and suggests that what<sup>t</sup> further development there is is merely a refinement of attitudes and techniques apparent in Bleak House. A brief conclusion sums up the argument of the thesis as a whole.

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INTRODUCTION

Together with Dickens the creator of 'characters', Dickens the critic of society is still the Dickens best known to the general reader. Dickens the critic of High Society, though less discussed in particular, can be fitted happily into his general role as a reformer. His achievement here has been widely discussed and, with some reservations, widely admired. It is of the author not as a critic but as a portrayer of High Society that the adverse judgement has been made. In 1857 the Edinburgh Review stated the case clearly :

.....we cannot recall any single character in his novels, intended to belong to the higher ranks of English life, who is drawn with the slightest <sup>touch of</sup> approach to probability.<sup>1</sup>

The British Quarterly Review, making a slightly different point, complained in 1862 of 'the obvious injustice with which he treats the higher classes, especially if allied to the nobility.' Giving the grounds for his complaint, the writer continues :

He has certainly given us very few <sup>Specimens</sup> examples, but all of them are unpleasing, if not <sup>actually</sup> repulsive; while, as though to point his meaning more forcibly, the lower classes are represented, unless convicts or trampers, as almost faultless. The silliest men in Dickens' novels are allied to the nobility; Lord Verisopht, Cousin Feenix, and Sir Leicester Dedlock's <sup>2</sup> lispings, lounging relations. The Honourable Olivia Dedlock, too, never opens her lips but to talk nonsense; nor does the Honourable Mrs. Skewton, save when she is manoeuvring to marry her daughter. But why should the <sup>mother</sup> only scheming in the whole series belong to the aristocracy?<sup>3</sup>

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1. 'The License of Modern Novelists', Edinburgh Review, July 1857, p. 127
  2. Presumably Volumnia is meant here. The mistake may be due to dim memory, for the reviewer says that 'Bleak House is the tale of all others in Mr. Dickens' series that we would least willingly take up again.'
  3. 'The Collected Works of Charles Dickens', British Quarterly Review, January 1862. The Edinburgh Review, Loc.cit., also wishes that Dickens had dealt <sup>lower</sup> as fairly and kindly with the upper classes of society as he has with the

The criticism is itself unjust; Mrs. Skewton, for example, is not the only scheming mother in Dombey, let alone the 'whole series'. In our own day, however, an eminent historian of the period, who should be in a position to judge, makes the same criticism when he claims that Dickens is 'wildly inaccurate and exaggerated in his description of gentlefolk.'<sup>1</sup>

Two powerful voices have been raised in Dickens's defense. Shaw claims that, in contrast to Thackeray, 'Dickens, even when making his aristocrats politically and socially ridiculous and futile, liked making real gentlemen of them.' Discussing Dickens's country gentlemen, Shaw states that Dickens 'knew all that really mattered to the world about Sir Leicester Dedlock', while 'Thackeray knew nothing that really mattered about him.'<sup>2</sup> G. K. Chesterton, in his preface to Dombey, magnificently defends Dickens's understanding of Cousin Feenix, and concludes :

Of a man who saw all these gentle foibles so clearly it is absurd to merely say without further explanation that he could not describe a gentleman. Let us confine ourselves to saying that he could not describe a gentleman as gentlemen like to be described.<sup>3</sup>

The general impression remains, however, that Dickens was both ignorant of and unfair to High Society. That he was ignorant of High Society is an error of fact, that he was unjust to it an error of criticism. It seems only fair to Dickens, therefore, that his treatment of High Society should be looked at again and an attempt made to see it for what it is and not for what it is generally thought to be.

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1. E. L. Woodward, The Age of Reform, 'Oxford History of England', Vol. XIII, 1938, p.536.
  2. Preface to Great Expectations, Edinburgh, 1937, p.5.
  3. Dombey and Son, Everyman's Library edition, 1907, p.xv.

It is no longer necessary to refute the claim that Dickens's artistic progress is in fact a decline. The greatness of the later novels has been established, and the author's increasing emotional and artistic maturity well documented. It would seem at least possible, therefore, that his treatment of High Society matured also. It is the purpose of what follows to investigate fully this aspect of Dickens's art, and, if possible, demonstrate that it did.

Other considerations have been taken into account: the corpus of Dickens's work is so enormous and his successes so varied, that by isolating one small area, and pursuing it through the novels themselves and against the back-ground of contemporary events, we may be able to come to a more precise assessment of Dickens's achievements in this area, and, in doing so, throw a clearer light on his achievement as a whole.

The danger in discussing Dickens's treatment of High Society is that it can so easily become yet another thesis on Dickens as a critic of society, or, and closely linked to it, on Dickens and Politics. In a sense any attack on political and social abuses can be seen as an attack on the aristocratic ruling class, the 'they' of the earlier novels especially. The danger is a real one, for immediately the eye is turned on Dickens the reformer one begins to lose sight of Dickens the creative artist, to see the workhouse system rather than the inmates. This is never true of Dickens himself -



his success as a reformer stems from his ability to see real human sufferers - but it has too often been true of his critics. The emphasis is necessary; for as it is through the hungry Oliver that Dickens makes us feel his anger at the system, so by concentrating on High Society as people rather than as an institution we arrive at a clearer understanding of Dickens's attitude towards it. Such a point of view is important in that, as Dickens came to know the upper classes better and to treat them more personally, so they ceased to serve as so many Aunt Sallies to be knocked down by socialistic brickbats and became integrated into the total view of society presented in the novels from Bleak House on. Discussing the popularity of Oliver Twist, Forster remarked that 'only to genius are so revealed the affinities and sympathies of high and low, in regard to the customs and usages of life.'<sup>1</sup> I doubt the revelation in that novel but it is certainly apparent in Bleak House. The following example will help, I trust, to make this clear and can well serve as an introduction <sup>to</sup> of my main argument.

The aspect of High Society that the young Dickens knew best was not the thing itself but its imitators and admirers. In an early sketch, 'The Boarding House', we are introduced to one of the inmates, Mr. Wisbottle;

He was a clerk in the Woods and Forests office, which he considered rather an aristocratic employment; he knew the peerage by heart, and could tell you, off-hand, where any illustrious person<sup>as</sup> lived.<sup>2</sup>

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1. John Forster, Life of Charles Dickens, 1872-74, Vol. I, p.125 (ii,2). Future references will be to 'Forster', and will give first the more accessible book and chapter reference, with the Volume and page numbers of the 1st edition in parenthesis.
  2. Sketches by 'Boz', 1st series, 1836, Vol. I, p.194.

Social pretension<sup>s</sup>, from 'Horatio Sparkins' to Mrs. Wilfer, is a recurring source of humour in Dickens, and the pretensions<sup>s</sup> of the au fait Wisbottle are played purely for laughs :

.../ the Dowager Marchionness of Publiccash was most magnificently dressed, and so was the Baron Slappenbachenhausen.<sup>1</sup>

In Bleak House the joke is repeated, but Weevle (né Jobling) 's passion for the Aristocracy is not merely funny.

But what Mr. Weevle prizes most, of all his few possessions (next after his light whiskers, for which he has an attachment that only whiskers can awaken in the breast of man), is a choice collection of copper-plate impressions from that truly national work, The Divinities of Albion, or Galaxy Gallery of British Beauty, representing ladies of title and fashion in every variety of smirk that art, combined with capital, is capable of producing. With these magnificent portraits, unworthily confined in a band-box during his seclusion among the market-gardens, he decorates his apartment.<sup>2</sup>

The effect, though more elaborate, may seem basically the same. It is only later that we learn that the 'Galaxy Gallery' includes Lady Dedlock. It has been noticed that Lady Dedlock, an aristocrat by marriage rather than birth, unites the various classes of society through her relationship to Esther and Hawdon and her dealings with Joe and Jenny - (the changing of dresses is clearly symbolic). It has not been noticed, as far as I know, that her picture hangs in the room where her lover died destitute. This small detail not only suggests Lady Dedlock's own death at the gate of a pauper's grave, but emphasises in her ascendancy the essential relationship between all classes of society that is to be proved by her fall.

1. Op. cit., p.200.

2. Bleak House, 1853, Chap.xx, p.202.

I should add that we are made aware of this relationship, not simply through the brilliant construction of the book and a wealth of detail such as that mentioned above, but primarily because Lady Dedlock is a human being with whom we suffer. It is not merely that Dickens managed to fit the piece marked 'High Society' into his social jigsaw. The essential point is that he came to see the members of High Society as real people, with the same eyes in fact as he saw his other characters, and in so doing reached a profounder understanding of the pattern of society and the common virtues and failings that unite it. The symbols of the later novels, the fog, the prison and the marshes, are relevant to all classes, and it is this that largely accounts for the increasingly dark tone of the period. Once the ruling class ceases to be a convenient whipping-boy and is seen as part of an integrated whole (the Barnacles are an aspect not the whole of the attack in Little Dorrit), then the ills of society allow of no facile remedy. Unlike Dotheboys Hall they cannot be removed by a good law or a strong demolition gang and are perhaps best characterised by the inescapable prison and the 'Fog everywhere.'

The development of Dickens's treatment of High Society is one part of his general development as an artist. The two cannot be kept entirely separate, and obviously it has frequently been necessary to refer to the latter in order to put the

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former in perspective. I have tried, however, to avoid lengthy discussion of the artistic merits of individual novels. The one exception to this rule is Barnaby Rudge. It seemed necessary when treating Barnaby to make a case for it as a carefully planned novel in order to reach a fairer assessment of the parts Gordon and Chester play in it.

Before proceeding to detail step by step the development of Dickens's treatment of High Society from its beginnings in the Sketches to its maturity in Bleak House, it will be necessary to give some explanation of the terminology involved. 'High Society', in fact, implies two distinct entities: first, the Aristocracy and their untitled relations, and secondly, the social life or 'Society' that they built around them. The<sup>is</sup> fashionable 'Society' however, was not entirely confined to members of the Aristocracy, but often admitted people with money and determination, witness Disraeli's Mrs. Guy Flouncey, or of exceptional talent, witness the overtures, usually rejected, made to Dickens himself. Often, indeed, only a display of wealth<sup>or talent</sup> was needed, and successive charlatans had their moments of fashionable glory. Hanging on to the skirts of 'Society' were a host of wealthy and ambitious imitators, the nouveau riche. The matter is further complicated by the fact that High Society, in both senses of the word, was itself

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strongly hierarchical, and many of its most elite members, especially the frequenters of Almack's, looked on other parts of the fashionable world as vulgar.

It is precisely because 'High Society' is an all-embracing term that it has been chosen in the title of this thesis. At the beginning of his career Dickens hardly distinguished between these different elements at all, but saw High Society as a class of people, socially, financially and politically privileged, whose frivolous and selfish social life was an extension of their self-centred and socially unconcerned political administration. At the end of his career Dickens not only clearly understood the composition of High Society, but could discriminate between the institution and its individual members.

I have myself tried to keep these distinctions clear through the terminology employed. The term 'Aristocrat', for example, is used only to refer to the titled leaders of society, and 'upper-class' for those immediately below them. When such a distinction is unnecessary, 'upper-classes' or 'privileged classes' has been used. In the same way 'Society' and 'the fashionable world' refer only to the Court Circular - Fête Champêtre aspect of High Society. 'High Society' itself refers throughout to the subject as a whole.

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PART ONECHAPTER ONETHE EARLY YEARS UP TO BARNABY

My remarks in the introduction may give the impression that Dickens's treatment of High Society matures and develops along easily discernable lines. In the final analysis we may be able to see some pattern, but it would be totally at odds with the spirit of the age, and with Dickens's character, to assume that his progress was in any way straightforward. Woodward chooses to call his volume of the 'Oxford History of England' The Age of Reform, and it is interesting to note that it covers almost exactly the years of Dickens's life<sup>1</sup>. In such an age we must inevitably expect contradictions. The great Reform Bill of 1832 was piloted through parliament by the most aristocratic cabinet of the century<sup>2</sup>. When it was first thrown out by the Lords in October 1831, 108 of the 112 peers whose creation dated from before 1790 voted for the Bill, though<sup>3</sup> 21 Bishops voted against<sup>3</sup>. Disraeli dreamed in Coningsby of changing back 'the oligarchy into a generous aristocracy round a real throne'<sup>4</sup>, yet the Prime Minister of the day was the son of a cotton manufacturer who was also the seventh wealthiest man in England. Indeed Disraeli himself went on to prove that title and blood are not absolutely vital and that

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1. This Vol. XIII of the 'Oxford History,' was published in 1938 and covers the years 1815-1870.

2. See Woodward, op.cit., p.76.

3. See Woodward, p.79.

4. Lothair, 1870, General Preface to 1870-71 edition of Disraeli's novels, p.x.

the lack of the latter does not necessarily prevent one from ending up with the former.

Dickens himself is a man of contradictions, a man who for ten months could write Pickwick Papers and Oliver Twist side by side, and who in the same novel could take such infinite pains with both Mrs. Harris and Ruth Pinch's pudding - with what differing success is here irrelevant. Certainly his attitude towards High Society, as displayed in his letters and the reports of his contemporaries, seems at first sight to be contradictory. Caroline Fox, after meeting him at Holland House in 1839, was much taken with him, and liked everything but 'the intolerable dandyism of his dress', while Lord Holland, after Dickens's first visit on 12 August 1838, found him 'very unobtrusive, yet not shy, and altogether prepossessing',<sup>1</sup> Dickens was clearly on his best behaviour<sup>r</sup>, but we get no suggestion of the awkwardness noted by a later biographer, who claimed that he had 'a lurking fear' that the circumstances of his youth 'exposed him to contempt', and that there was 'something of the defensive, even of the aggressive'<sup>2</sup> in his attitude towards 'cultured society.'

Whether as a result of 'lurking fear' or not, Dickens guarded his own social position jealously, refusing to perform The Frozen Deep at Buckingham Palace because his daughters were members of the cast and he

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1. See Lord Ilchester, Chronicles of Holland House, 1937, pp. 240-41.

2. Encyclopaedia Britannica, 9th edition, 1877.

'did not feel easy' as to their social position 'at a Court under those circumstances'.<sup>1</sup> This awareness of social niceties and distinctions is obvious in his reminiscences of his time in the blacking factory:

But I held some station at the blacking warehouse too ... Though perfectly familiar with them [his fellow workers], my conduct and manners were different enough from theirs to place a space between us. They, and the men, always spoke of me as 'the young gentleman'.<sup>2</sup>

Crabb Robinson suggests that there was an element of snobbishness in Dickens's insistence that he was a gentleman:

Dickens is a fine writer and an excellent man. It is to be lamented that he is ambitious of living genteelly and giving dinners to the rich. With an income of three or four thousand a year, and sometimes much more, it is to be feared that he may at length leave his children to be maintained by the public.<sup>3</sup>

It is fair to say, however, that Dickens made no effort to be taken up<sup>by</sup> fashionable society. This was partly because he hated being treated as an exhibit<sup>4</sup>, but more importantly because he found 'the world of fashion', both trivial and boring:

I declare I never go into what is called 'society' that I am weary of it, despise it, hate it, and reject it.<sup>5</sup>

There may have been contradictions in Dickens's attitude to High

1. Forster, xi, 3 (Vol. III, p. 465).
2. Forster, i, 2 (Vol. I, pp.37-8).
3. See Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and their Writers, ed. Edith J. Morley, 1938, p. 543.
4. See Letters of Charles Dickens, ed. Walter Dexter, 1938, 'Nonesuch' edition, Vol. I, p. 327 (23 June 1841) for a letter from Edinburgh complaining of the 'horrors of lionization'. All future references to this edition of the Letters will be to Nonesuch.
5. Nonesuch, 1, 588 (March 1844)



Society, especially in these early years, but Carlyle comes near to reconciling them in his penetrating appraisal of Dickens as 'a quiet, shrewd little fellow, who seems to guess pretty well what he is and what others are.'<sup>1</sup> A letter to Lady Holland accompanying a presentation copy of Nicholas gives ample proof of how well Dickens knew what he was and what others were:

In begging you, my Lady Holland, to accept from me a copy of Nickleby in a dress which will wear better than his every-day clothes, I am not influenced by any feeling of vanity or any supposition that you will find in the book, a solitary charm to which you have not already done more than justice. I must not scruple to say that I am actuated by a most selfish feeling, though, for I wish to have the gratification of acknowledging your great kindness, and I do not know how I can better do so than by this poor token; which I venture to send you - not for its own sake (for that would be presumptuous indeed) but simply and solely for the reason I have just mentioned. 2

The studied politeness and modesty of the letter show that Dickens knew very well what Lady Holland was and how she liked to be addressed. Despite the disclaimer, however, the fact that Dickens sent a copy of Nickleby at all indicates that he was well aware of the value of his own work.

It would be unnatural for a young man with Dickens's past, and who was struggling to make his way in the world, not to have considerable reservations about the idle rich. The aggressiveness noted by the Encyclopaedia Britannica is apparent in his novels; but it is the aggressiveness of one who saw plainly that the existence of a privileged class amidst general poverty was grossly unjust. To this is attributable

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1. Letter to John Carlyle of 17 March 1840, quoted by J.A. Froude, Carlyle's Life in London, 1884, Vol.I, pp. 177-8.
  2. Letters of Charles Dickens, ed. Madeline House and Graham Storey, 'Pilgrim edition', 1965, i, 598-9. Future references will be to Letters.

his refusal to court High Society. On the other hand a man of Dickens's ebullience<sup>e</sup> and love of life could lay himself open to charges of flamboyance and social pretension<sup>s</sup>. Yet it is this love of life and of people that, despite his distaste for the class, led him to acknowledge the kindness of Lady Holland. In the same<sup>e</sup> way Ashley's title did not prevent Dickens from admiring his work, and when, on the voyage to America, he met the charming Lord Mulgrave, Dickens could pronounce him 'nothing but a good 'un to go'<sup>1</sup>.

In attempting to describe these contradictions in both the age and the man, no period presents greater problems than the eighteen thirties. The feeling of dissatisfaction with the Reform Bill gave rise to both Chartism and the 'Young England' movement, and, in the case of Dickens himself, <sup>o</sup>one is hampered by the simple lack of direct evidence. None of his contemporary letters discuss the political upheavals of the time, and of his printed works up to Barnaby only Nicholas Nickleby makes any real attempt to introduce the Aristocracy. Yet the thirties, as indeed the twenties, were formative years for Dickens both as a writer and a person, and, if we except the well-documented traumas of the Marshalsea, <sup>the Blacking Factory</sup> ~~Warrens~~, Maria Beadnell and Mary Hogarth, it is surprising that they have been so little discussed. The task, it must be admitted, is not an easy one. In the following sections of this chapter I have had to assume a great deal. The assumption is, I trust, of the probable rather than the impossible, and in

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1. Nonesuch, i, 373 (17 January 184<sup>2</sup>).

building up a picture of the thirties and its attitude towards the ruling class I have tried to concentrate only on those opinions, both literary and journalistic, which can be reasonably expected to have had some influence on Dickens, or about which he is almost certain to have known.

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Neither the Reform Bill of 1832, perhaps the greatest single blow against aristocratic privilege since 1649, nor the social reforms that followed it were the result simply of an industrial revolution that made existing constituency boundaries meaningless, and exposed, through massing it together, the suffering of the working class. They were to an almost greater extent the outcome of a new philosophical and moral approach. It is the moral aspect of the change that primarily concerns us here, for its effect on both rulers and ruled was profound.

The Evangelical movement, in its attempt to restore the moral fibre of the nation, turned instinctively to the Aristocracy, whose potential influence on the better feelings of society was seen to be as powerful as its current influence upon the worst. The undoubted leaders of this movement were William Wilberforce, who proclaimed impressively in his journal that God had 'set before me two great objects, the suppression of the Slave Trade and the reformation<sup>1</sup> of manners', and Hannah More. The

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1. Quoted by R. Coupland, Wilberforce, 2nd edition, 1945, p.80.

latter, taking advantage of <sup>the</sup> royal proclamation of 1787 against 'Vice and Immorality', produced in the next year her Thoughts on the Importance of the Manners of the Great to General Society. The tone is restrained; she addresses those

... persons of rank and fortune who live within the restraints of moral obligation, and acknowledge the truth of the Christian religion; and who, if in certain instances they allow themselves in practices not compatible with a strict profession of Christianity, seem to do it rather from habit and want of reflection, than either from disbelief of its doctrine, or contempt of its precepts. 1

But when Miss More comes to the meat of her argument the tone changes, and we hear the theme that is to be so constantly repeated in following years:

[But there is another sort of fashionable character, whose false brightness is still more pernicious, by casting a splendour over the most destructive vices, ~~Corrupt~~ manners, ruinous extravagance, and the most fatal passion for play ... 2

And the final moral is firm and unequivocal:

Reformation must begin with the GREAT, or it will never be effectual. Their example is the fountain from whence the vulgar draw their habits, actions and characters. To expect to reform the poor while the opulent are corrupt, is to throw odours into the stream while the springs are poisoned. 3

The pamphlet is in no sense of the word revolutionary or even anti-aristocrat. 4 There is no suggestion that the 'Great' should cease to be.

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1. 4th ed., 1788, p.3-4.

2. pp. 27-28.

3. p. 116.

4. Wilberforce also is no leveller. In a letter to his son he remarks 'surely no pauper should have the right of voting'. Private Papers of William Wilberforce, ed. A.M. Wilberforce, 1897, p.236.

There is, however, a clear statement of the fact that noblesse obliges more than outward show and an uncertain code of behaviour<sup>1</sup>. Once this had been pointed out, once it was realised that ~~that~~ aristocratic privilege carried heavy responsibility, then the immorality of High Society had to be seen not as a prerogative of rank but as a betrayal of it.

But if Hannah More was relatively gentle, there were others who were less cautious in their approach. The revolutionary Thomas Spence denounced the landed Aristocracy as 'blood-sucking Landlords and State Leeches',<sup>1</sup> and in the Courts Lord Kenyon attacked the 'titled adulterers at Newmarket, in Bond Street and the stews.'<sup>2</sup> Certainly the Court, headed by a King who was periodically insane and, a Prince whose immorality was notorious, provided plenty of ammunition. The salvos of disgust were not long in coming, and it seems almost incredible to us to-day that the monarchy could have been so treated. In the year of Dickens's birth, for instance, Leigh Hunt in The Examiner described the Prince Regent as

... a corpulent man of fifty ... a violator of his word, a libertine over head and ears in disgrace, a despiser of domestic ties, the companion of gamblers and demireps.<sup>3</sup>

Yet it was in this atmosphere of contempt for Royalty that Dickens was brought up. He was eight in 1820 when the new King George IV instituted divorce proceedings against his wife, and, though living in Chatham, Dickens

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1. The Rights of Man, 1793, Preface, p. iv.

2. Quoted by Muriel Jaeger, England before Victoria, Cheap edition, 1967, p. 51.

3. Examiner, 22 March 1812.

must have heard something of Caroline's triumphant entry into London and been affected by the wave of sympathy that surrounded her. The scandal of her exclusion from George's coronation must have reached him, and cannot have favourably influenced a young boy who in his later years, though he always wished to be thought of as a gentleman, never minded that he was not an aristocrat.

George proved to be no better a King than he had been a Regent, and the signal lack of mourners at his funeral in 1830 is notorious. The next year Dickens entered the gallery of the House of Commons as a reporter for the Mirror of Parliament. The agitation for reform was at its height, and Dickens sat through hours of wearisome wrangling over the Bill. Its opponents he detested, and the attitude of the Lords must have confirmed him in Ashley's opinion that that house contained 'few sparks of generosity and no sentiment'.<sup>1</sup> Certainly his contempt for parliament only increased as he grew older.

The passing of the Bill enraged some as much as it delighted others; and its effect seems to have been an increase rather than the opposite of class hostility. The playwright, John Westland Marston, referring in 1876 to his play The Patrician's Daughter (1842), for which Dickens wrote the prologue, states that it was written at 'a period when the fierce class animosity excited by the first Reform Bill had by no means subsided'.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Quoted by Edwin Hodder, The Life and Work of the Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, 1886, Vol. I, p. 328.

2. Dramatic and Poetical Works of John Westland Marston, 1876, Preface p. ix.

In any case the extreme radical papers had always felt that the Bill did not go far enough, and attacks on aristocratic privilege and vice continued unabated. With the resignation of the reform government in December 1834 and the advent of Tory Rule, the fear that the Bill might in fact be a step nowhere became widespread.

The new Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel, had taken office without the backing of a parliamentary majority. In order to attain this he called an immediate election, an election chiefly remembered for his speech at Tamworth in which he described the Reform Bill as 'a final and irrevocable settlement of a great constitutional question'.<sup>1</sup> The reaction was immediate and startling. Among the first to protest was the recently created Lord Brougham. Brougham used the pseudonym of Isaac Tompkins, but the pamphlet 'Thoughts upon the Aristocracy of England' was generally known to be his. The attack is specifically directed at aristocratic privilege:

... the eldest son alone is deemed by our institutions to be born a lawgiver, a senator, and a judge; ... he alone, be he ever so ignorant, stupid, and vicious, is allowed to decide upon the great questions of policy and of jurisprudence. 2

Brougham, like Hannah More, can see the attractions of 'cultured society':

There is a lightness, an ease, a gaiety, which to those who have no important object in view, and who deem it the highest privilege of existence, and the utmost effort of genius, to<sup>3</sup> pass the hours agreeably, must be all that is most attractive.

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1. See Annual Register, 1834, appendix to Chronicle, p.341.

2. Op. cit. 1835, p.4.

3. P.12.

But the (implied criticism) here later becomes explicit:

[The want of sense and reason which prevails in these circles is wholly inconceivable. 1

Yet for all the stringency of Brougham's remarks he is by no means a leveller. It is for the upper and middle classes that he fears. It is for them that

... the fabric of government is reared, continued, designed. How long are they likely to suffer a few persons of overgrown wealth, laughable folly, and considerable profligacy, to usurp, and exclusively hold, all consideration, all individual importance? 2

Although it does not include the lower orders of society, the pamphlet is important, for it is in effect the declaration of war by one class upon another. Brougham does not urge the moral duty of the Aristocracy, but doubts its political right altogether. There were others ready to follow Brougham's lead and urge the case of the people as a whole. The titles of contemporary election addresses make clear the air of class struggle that surrounded the election of 1835. In 'The People or the Peerage?' the anonymous writer claims that the interests of the People and the 'Oligarchy' are 'diametrically and distinctly opposed',<sup>3</sup> and continues, with a nice feeling for historical progress,

Formerly the spirit of the Aristocracy was a bold and lofty spirit, a spirit of open daring - and insolent assumption. The Barons of the Sixteenth Century were as ready to beard their sovereign as they were to boar-spear their swineherds.

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1. p.13.

2. p.18.

3. Op. Cit., 1835, p.8.



They were 'bold-faced villains', who believed that might was right, and maintained their creed at the point of their swords.

Times have changed since, and the spirit of Aristocracy has changed with them. The first French revolution struck it a blow under which it has staggered ever since, until at last it has become the meanest of creeping things, still remaining, however, the most mischevius. It is now the spirit of paltry compromise and petty peddling cabal - a spirit of lying, hypocrisy, and fraud. 1

The idea that times have changed, however crudely expressed here, is an important one, and one that Dickens with his keen sense of History would have felt deeply.

A second address, 'The Peers or the People' by a 'Reformer', is a manifest declaration of class war. The Tories are referred to as 'old enemies', and the people are exhorted to resist anti-reform and 'Rouse up, and repel the foul calumny, by voting to a man against the Tories'. 3

The alternative is complete subjection to the aristocratic whim:

You will then have doomed yourselves, your children, and your children's children, to be the prey of a rapacious and all-devouring oligarchy. 4

Though Peel did not get the majority he hoped for, he did remain in office, and it is not surprising that, in such an atmosphere, dislike of the Tories and distrust of the ruling class permeated all levels of the Press.

In particularly hot water were the Marquis of Londonderry and his son Lord Castlereagh. A declaration of the latter after being elected Member

1. p.14.

2. Op. cit., 1835, p.2.

3. p.5.

4. p.8.

of Parliament for <sup>The County of Down</sup> ~~Downpatrick~~ in 1835 gives some idea of what the protestors were protesting about:

... to the democratic and revolutionary spirit, which with unbridled violence is stalking abroad, as long as I have an arm to lift, or a leg to stand on, so help me, heaven! I will give my most strenuous <sup>and determined</sup> opposition.

The Times, quoting this statement<sup>ment</sup>, adds '(It is impossible to convey by words, any idea of the rapturous sensation predominant, in so crowded an assemblage, at this declaration)<sup>1</sup>'. The virulence of some contemporary attacks may be gauged from the outraged comment of Figaro in London:

[That any spawn of the vile Castlereagh<sup>gh</sup>-breed should feel an innate hatred to even a whisper of reform, is not to be wondered at. This male excrescence of that filthy family, whose founder was a pedlar, - this thing, whose uncle was a traitor to his country, and whose father is the dandy of sixty, the 'too-bad' Lord Londonderry - dares to place himself in opposition to a united country. 2

But it was not only in the extreme radical papers that this family found themselves abused. On 6 February 1835 the Marquis's appointment to the Embassy in St. Petersburg was <sup>an</sup> announced. The Evening Chronicle, in which Dickens's 'Gin Shops' appeared on the same day, was scandalised.

Surely the appointment is a very appropriate one. The noble Marqu<sup>e</sup>ss is a bigot; his noble master, the Duke of Wellington is a bigot; the Monarch at whose Court he is to represent the Majesty of England is a bigot also ...  
sSurely the Marqu<sup>e</sup>ss of LONDONDERRY is as fit to represent

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1. Times, 26 January 1835.
  2. 31 January 1835.
  - ~~3. 7 February 1835~~

England's dignity and civilization as the Noble Duke  
by whom he is accredited. 1

Perhaps the most significant aspect of this criticism is the attack on the Duke of Wellington. It is a measure of strength of popular feeling that this former hero could arouse such resentment, even taking into account his opposition to the Reform Bill, in a far from extremist paper.

The Times, going through one of its more radical periods, supported the Chronicle's view:

Nothing can reconcile the people of England to the employment of a functionary whose unfitness to represent the dignity and <sup>the</sup> civilization of England has been already demonstrated. 2.

Of the widely read dailies only the Morning Post, later much satirised in Punch, seems to have approved. It calls the Times' report 'a foul injustice <sup>upon the character</sup> of the Marquis of Londonderry' and adds:

The reputation of the Marquis of Londonderry is of infinitely greater <sup>value</sup> importance than the advocacy of the Times. 3

But it is a lone voice, and certainly not one to which Dickens would have paid much attention.

One radical paper, Figaro in London, requires special attention, both because of its success (Figaro in London sells more than four times the number of its namesake in the French capital<sup>4</sup>) and its possible influence on Dickens. The first editor, Gilbert A. Beckett, was certainly known to

1. 7 February 1835.
2. 6 February 1835.
3. 7 February 1835. In the face of this general attack the Marquis was forced to withdraw. <sup>^</sup>, omitted: 'to the cause of good government in this country'
4. Vol. I, Preface.

Dickens at this time, probably personally. The tone of a letter to Bentley discussing the Miscellany suggests this.

I like your notion of a dramatic sketch, and have this moment, oddly enough, received one from A. Beckett. 1

Apart from this they both, at different times, collaborated with the same illustrator, the ill-fated Seymour, with whom Dickens began work on Pickwick.

That Dickens read Figaro is almost certain, and if he did so he cannot fail to have been influenced by its contempt for the Aristocracy and its withering scorn (shared by Dickens) for those who pandered to it. Its particular butt was the 'Court Circular', then reprinted in extracts in nearly every daily paper, (Both the Morning and Evening Chronicle, for which Dickens wrote, had their 'Mirror of Fashion' column.). The following example, though very long, deserves to be given in full, not only because <sup>it is very funny, but because</sup> its matter and manner may well have influenced Dickens:

#### Flooring a Marchioness

... the words of the Court Journal will be more characteristic than any we should employ in reference to so strange a proceeding as the 'knocking into next week,' of that venerable old soul the Dowager Marchioness of Salisbury. We therefore print the paragraph:-

'While the honourable Mr. Herbert was <sup>tw</sup>whirling the Lady C. Grimston in the mazy dance, the revolving couple came in violent contact with the venerable Marchioness, who was thrown on her face,

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1. Letters, i, 208 (5 December 1836).

and received some severe bruises.'

This was horrible; though with all due respect for the Marchioness, she must have been most cursedly in the way when she managed to get 'grassed', as they say in pugilistic circles, or (with due deference to the twirling couple) Herbert and Lady C. Grimston, must have been waltzing with much awkwardness to send the Marchioness flying along the floor of the ball-room. The awful contretemps was the cue of course for unbounded gammon, and our Court friend thus proceeds in his description:-

'The amiable and innocent causes of the disaster were in dismay; the music ceased, the dancers dispersed, and the splendid sal de bal, a few minutes before the scene of <sup>such</sup> general gaiety, became the chamber of mourning, and presented only looks and words of lamentation and anxiety.'

This description is good in the extreme; it is truly melodramatic, and shadows forth a scene worthy the awful catastrophe. A Marchioness pitched upon the ground is a theme fit to inspire a mind having a due sense of the really horrible. 'The Music ceased!' Of course it would cease. Could a flute have the heart to play; or would a piece of catgut be so far without the feelin (feline) bowels of comparison as to utter a single note, with a Marchioness on her beam ends, as they would say in nautical phraseology. The next paragraph is particularly pleasant, and we cannot help subjoining it:-

'With that kindness towards the feelings of others which has always characterised the excellent Marchioness, she appeared in the breakfast-room the next morning'.

How very kind; how very considerate in the old lady, to come and eat her breakfast! It is, as the Court Journal says, so very indicative of a consideration for the feelings of others in one to eat the daily meal, which the wants of humanity render a matter of necessity. What a sacrifice on the part of the Marchioness. If she had not been the kindest creature in the universe, she would never have eaten another morsel in all her days. How very good of her, to eat after she had been floored in a ball-room!! 1

The triviality of the 'Court Circular' Dickens always despised, and years later in Bleak House he was to use the superficial attitude of the 'fashionable intelligence' to point the genuine tragedy of the Dedlocks.<sup>1</sup> From a stylish<sup>fic</sup> point of view there is particular interest here in the juxtaposition of high and low - the Marchioness 'grassed' - for comic effect. It is a trick that Dickens is extremely fond of, especially in the Sketches and Pickwick. In this example, for instance, it occurs in reverse:

... Mr. Weller and the fat boy, having by their joint endeavours cut out a slide, were exercising themselves thereupon, in a very masterly and brilliant manner. Sam Weller, in particular, was displaying that beautiful feat of fancy-sliding which is currently denominated 'knocking at the cobbler's door,' and which is achieved by skimming over the ice on one foot, and occasionally giving a two-penny postman's knock upon it, with the other. 2

Certainly Figaro took up the young Dickens. The early parts of Nickleby get a review to themselves under the headline 'BOZ', significantly because book reviews are rare in this weekly. The review is highly favourable and only criticises Dickens for 'making the Portsmouth company, a strolling one, - for many years it has and does rank high as a provincial theatre'.<sup>3</sup> It prophesies that the players 'may yet be even with Boz, by cooking Nicholas Nickleby up into a melodrama, farce, or burlesque'. On 21 November

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1. See Part Two, Chapter 4, pp. 238-240, below.

2. Pickwick Papers, 1837, Chap. xxxix, p.312.

3. 5 November 1838.

Nicholas was in fact presented in dramatic form, and as the production is both announced and extremely favourably reviewed in Figaro <sup>1</sup> one cannot but assume a fairly close knowledge of, and concern for, Boz's doings.

In one instance, at least, their interests show a remarkable parallel. Duelling had been since the inception of the evangelical movement a much criticised aristocratic pastime. It was not, in fact, made illegal until 1844, and Dickens satirizes it gently in 'The Great Winglebury Duel', finished (from the evidence of letters) <sup>2</sup> between 20 and 27 October 1835. In the Figaro of 7 November 1835 there is an ironic account of a challenge issued to the Lord Mayor:

Directly it was known that he was called upon to fight in his character as a gentleman, it was allowed there could be no fight at all.

That there is any relationship between the two <sup>may</sup> ~~be~~ doubtful, but it does seem odd that when the 'Duel' was presented in dramatic form as The Strange Gentleman, Figaro not only reviewed it favourably but came up the following week with an actual incident that provides an interesting parallel. The story, 'A Duel Prevented', reports the case of a man called Mitchel, arrested because it was feared that he would fight a duel. He

1. 26 November 1838.

2. See Letters, i, 79, for a letter to Catherine Hogarth stating that 'I am finishing my Duel'. On 27 October (1,83) Dickens wrote to Macrone saying that he would have a proof of the 'Duel' 'in the course of a few days', suggesting that it had then been finished.

was in fact the least likely man in the world to do so, but on realizing that the law would prevent it anyway he blustered in front of the magistrates and thereby achieved a great reputation. Figaro comments:

When the reputation of a hero is to be had only at the price of a warrant, we shall not be surprised to find all our choleric citizens turned into duellists. All that is necessary is to splutter before a timorous friend, who will get a warrant, and then bounce a little bit before a police magistrate, and reluctantly promise, upon being bound over in your own recognizances, that under the circumstances, you will rest contented without having the life of anybody, at least for twelvemonths, when the recognizances will expire. 1

and we remember Mr. Horace Hunter in the 'Duel' who 'took great credit to himself for practising on the cowardice of Alexander Trott'.<sup>2</sup>

How far there was any close connection between Dickens and Figaro it is impossible to say, but there does seem to be a noticeable influence in both directions and a marked unity of interest. We should remember that for his portrait of Fang in Oliver, Dickens drew on the Hatton Garden magistrate, Alan Stewart Laing, who had been attacked in Figaro from 1832.<sup>3</sup>

### 3

It is not surprising, then, that, in the face of such violent criticism, the Aristocracy turned for its light reading to matters which concentrated on its virtues rather than its

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1. 15 October 1836.
  2. Sketches by 'Boz', 1st Series, 1836, Vol.II, p.243.
  3. The first attack I can find appears in the Figaro of 18 February 1832 and is entitled 'Urbanity of the Bench'.



vices. The novels popular with fashionable society, and equally with those who desired to be fashionable, were those that took fashionable society for their subject. The novels of Mrs. Gore, Lady Charlotte Bury (another Figaroan Bête Noire)<sup>1</sup>, Lytton and Disraeli are products of what came to be known, after Hazlitt, as the 'silver-fork school'. The general attitude towards High Society is uncritical, though here<sup>even</sup> there are exceptions. Lytton, for example, can be quite censorious:

The English make business an enjoyment, and enjoyment a business; ... They are sometimes polite, but invariably uncivil; their warmth is always artificial - their cold never, they are stiff without dignity, and cringing without manners ... There is not another court in Europe where such systematized meanness is carried on. 2.

Far more typical, however, is the sickly idolatry of Disraeli:

The young Marquis was an excellent specimen of a class superior in talents, intelligence, and accomplishments, in public spirit, and in private virtues, to any in the world - the English nobility. 3

The tradition has been amply treated by W.M. Rosa,<sup>4</sup> but its influence on Dickens was the negative one of being almost completely ignored. There is a lively and clever parody in Nicholas Nickleby which

1. See for example 'Quiet Splendour', 18 January 1834, which makes fun of Lady Charlotte's presentation to the Queen of her poem Three Sanctuaries of Tuscanny. Figaro complains about royal patronage of aristocratic writers, though it admits that 'if persons with titles can scribble even common sense, it ought to be encouraged for its startling novelty.'
2. Pelham, 1828, Vol. III, Chap. ii, pp. 30-31.
3. Henrietta Temple, 1837, Book V, Chap. i, Vol. II, p. 252.
4. In The Silver-Fork School: Novels of Fashion preceding Vanity Fair, New York, 1936.

suggests that Dickens had something to gain by ridicule,<sup>1</sup> but by 1842 he clearly felt that its day was over. Describing American reading habits in a letter to Forster, he comments:

There are some mawkish tales of fashionable life before which crowds fall down as they were gilded calves, which at home have been snugly enshrined in circulating libraries from the date of their publication. 2

Four years later he writes gleefully from Lausanne, describing a lively young lady who had asked him 'And did you ever read such infernal trash as Mrs. Gore's?'<sup>3</sup>

Dickens's rejection of the fashionable mode has its importance, however, if only to demonstrate his confidence in his own particular powers and his contempt for the established form.<sup>4</sup> It was part of his triumph that he managed to reach all classes of readers. Some, like Lady Carlisle, found his work disgusting:

I know there are such unfortunate beings as pick-pockets and street walkers ... but I own I do not much wish to hear what they say to one another. 5

But the British Quarterly Review of 1862 confirms that for the majority his novels were a welcome change:

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1. Nicholas Nickleby, 1839. Chap. xxxviii, p.270.
  2. Nonesuch, i, 453 (3 May 1842).
  3. Nonesuch, i, 794 (3 October 1846).
  4. The British Quarterly Review of January 1862 in a review of 'The Collected Works of Charles Dickens' claims interestingly that it was his reaction to the attitude of the Silver-Fork novelists that made Dickens so 'unjust' in his own pictures of High Society.
  5. Quoted by Lord Ilchester, Chronicles of Holland House, 1937, p.245. See also Lockhart's famous remark that Pickwick was 'All very well but damned low' and Melbourne's criticism of Oliver as 'just like the Beggar's Opera'. Both are quoted by Amy Cruse, The Victorians and their Books, Boston, 1935 pp.152 and 138.

... silver-forks had been paraded so continually that grim old Fagin, with his rusty toasting-fork and frying-pan, was considered as a relief. 1

Not unnaturally the fashionable novelists, with their audience in mind, chose to ignore the vices of the Aristocracy; equally naturally the penny press did not. By 1851 Bracebridge Hemming could complain:

The ruin of many girls is commenced by reading the low trashy wishy-washy cheap publications that the news-shops are now gorged with, and by devouring the hastily-written, immoral, stereotyped tales about the sensualities of the upper classes, the lust of the aristocracy, and the affection that men about town, - noble lords, illustrious dukes, and even princes of the blood - are in the habit of imbibing for maidens of low degree 'whose face is their fortune'. 2

But the influence on Dickens of the cheaper and more popular fiction must be left to a later chapter.

Before leaving the fashionable novel to its fate, it is interesting to note one case of Dickens' use and rejection of the silver-fork tradition. The aristocratic heroines of these novels fall into something of a pattern: this, for instance, is Ferdinand Armine's first glimpse of Henrietta Temple:

Her countenance was raised and motionless. It seemed to him that it was more radiant than the sunshine. He gazed with rapture on the dazzling brilliance of her complexion, the delicate regularity of her features, and the large violet-tinted eyes, fringed with the longest and darkest lashes that he had ever beheld. From her position her

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1. Loc. cit.

2. London Labour and the London Poor, Additional Volume, 1862, p.250.

hat had fallen to the very back of her head, revealing her lofty and pellucid brow, and the dark lustrous locks that were braided over her temples. The whole countenance combined that brilliant health and that classic beauty which we associate with the idea of some nymph tripping over the dew-bespangled meads of Ida, or glancing amid the hallowed groves of Greece. Although the lady could scarcely have been eighteen summers, her stature was above the common height; but language cannot describe the startling symmetry of her superb figure. 1.

The somewhat wearisome perfection of Dickens's heroines may owe something to the ideal of the fashionable novelists, and that ideal seems to have permeated the whole of Victorian Society. 2 There is one small difference, however; Henrietta, in true aristocratic manner is 'above common height'; Dickens may well be asserting his independence of the tradition and his allegiance to the masses by insisting so often that his heroines are 'little'. If this is so his description of Lady Dedlock is extremely subtle:

Her figure is elegant, and has the effect of being tall. Not that she is so, but that 'the most is made,' as the Honourable Bob Stables has frequently asserted upon oath, 'of all her points.' 3

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1. Book II, Chap. iv, Vol. I, p. 158.
  2. Encouraged, no doubt, by the rash of Annuals such as the Keepsake and Book of Beauty which were so popular at that time. Middlemarch it must be remembered is set 'about 1829' (Vol. II, Chap. xiii, p. 263) and George Eliot makes Ned Plymdale bring Rosamund 'the last 'Keepsake', the gorgeous water-silk production which marked modern progress at that time; and he considered himself very fortunate that he could be the first to look over it with her, dwelling on the ladies and gentlemen with shining copper-plate cheeks and copper-plate smiles ...' (Middlemarch, 1871-72. Vol. II, Chap. xxvii, p. 80.
  3. Bleak House, 1853, Chap. ii, p. 7.

She is, it will be remembered, an aristocrat by marriage, and not by birth. Perhaps it is because of this that she appears taller than she actually is.

It is impossible to say how much contemporary fiction Dickens read, though it is clear from the parody in Nicholas that he knew and despised the silver-fork manner and the 'fashionable world' that it described. When we turn to Dickens's reading of earlier novels we are on safer ground. He tells us himself that he read Smollett and Fielding as a boy, and the influence of Scott is particularly marked in Barnaby Rudge. Smollett especially, with his savage exposé of the viciousness of High Society, must have influenced the young Dickens considerably. At so impressionable an age he can hardly have read of Peregrine's exploits in London and Bath or the 'Memoirs of a Lady of Quality' without being affected by Smollett's picture of the callousness behind the superficial glitter. In Scott he found the same contempt for 'good society'. Effie Deans gains a title but is forced to stifle her humanity and hide 'like many of her compeers, an aching heart with a gay demeanour'.<sup>1</sup> In her first letter to <sup>J</sup>Heanie after she has been refined into a 'lady', she speaks of 'the cruel tone of light indifference with which persons in the fashionable world speak together on the most affecting subjects',<sup>2</sup> and one is reminded both of the unfeeling chatter at the Veneerings and the air of boredom with which Lady Dedlock cloaks her sorrow. It is not until Bleak House that Dickens

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1. Heart of Midlothian, 1818, Vol. IV, Chap. xiv, p. 371.

2. Vol. IV, Chap. xi, p. 227.

shows a real and sympathetic understanding of those caught up in the prison of High Society. In the early novels, and particularly in *Chester and Sir Mulberry*, it is the callousness that dominates. At the same time, however, Dickens must have found in Scott's *Duke of Argyle* what his own experience was beginning to prove, that to be an aristocrat is not necessarily to be bad.

If many of the novelists of the eighteen-thirties chose to adulate rather than analyse the 'world of fashion', the dramatists did not, and it is when we turn to the Theatre, almost completely deserted by High Society and a largely popular form of entertainment, that we find some reflection of the views of contemporary journalists and moralizers. As regards Dickens's personal experience we are on safer ground here than with the novel. Dickens was an inveterate theatre-goer and a dramatic critic, and it is probably no exaggeration to say that he saw every play of any value staged in these years and the great majority of those that were worthless.

The drama of the 19th century up to Robertson's Caste is the least known and the least regarded of any period of English literature. Among a heap of bathetic and melodramatic rubbish, however, there are some good, though no great plays, and one is struck in these by a social awareness that is so lacking in the silver-fork novel. The lack of quality in these plays is largely attributable to the lack of a cultured audience, but their popular nature gives them at the very least a value as social documents. They were aimed, not at a privileged few, but at the ordinary man, and may

therefore be taken to reflect majority tastes and opinions in a way that Congreve's Way of the World, for instance, clearly does not. The drama, like the penny press, came increasingly to be built around the designs of the wicked aristocrat upon the humble and virtuous maiden; but in these early years, though there are some screamingly bad Barts of the Ruddigore stamp, there is some reasonable and intelligent criticism as well. What the better playwrights seem to have grasped before their novelist contemporaries was the increasing power of money in an industrial society. Certainly the fashionable novelists are not blind to its power, but their attitude to the parvenu is one of contempt born of fear for the security of their social position. In the main, when the problem of marriage with an inferior is raised, the concessions are made to those of only marginally lower rank. In Henrietta Temple, for instance, Ferdinand Armine comes of a destitute but immaculately noble family and there is no doubt which is the prime consideration. Armine's love for the rich heroine offers the chance of restoring the family fortunes, but, though highly accomplished and utterly lady-like, Henrietta's lack of ancient lineage proves, if not an insuperable, a very real barrier.

The playwrights are far more realistic. In Jerrold's Golden Calf for instance, the wicked Lord Tares attempts to ruin the extravagant Montney in the hopes of having a better chance of

seducing his wife. Both are saved by Chrystal who, breathing heavy morality, exposes not only the peer's iniquity but also his willingness to grovel to Chrystal, a man of inferior rank, because he is rich:

Echo [Tare's pander] '... as his lordship says, if you'd know whether you ought to honour a man, you should first put your hand into his pocket.'<sup>1</sup>

Jerrold of course was strongly radical in his views and could hardly be expected to show much sympathy for the rich and titled. Lytton, however, though well aware of aristocratic failings, was of a different political stamp; yet in Money his criticism is basically the same as Jerrold's :

'I've not been rich and poor for nothing! the Vices and virtues are written in a language the World cannot construe; it reads them in a vile translation, and the translators are - FAILURE AND SUCCESS!'<sup>2</sup>

Evelyn: What is honesty? - Where does it exist? - in what part of us?

Sharp: In the heart, I suppose, sir.

Evelyn: Mr. Sharp, it exists in the breeches' pocket!<sup>3</sup>

Most interesting of all is Marston's Patrician's Daughter which attracted Dickens 'by the beauty of its composition less than by the courage with which its subject had been chosen from the actual life of the time.'<sup>4</sup> In its topicality the play was

1. The Golden Calf, (1835) 'Cumberland Minor Theatre', Vol IX, p.15, (I,ii).

2. Money, 1840, p.140 (V,iii).

3. p.37 (II,ii).

4. Forster, iv, 1. (Vol. II, p.24).



something of a new departure in 1842. It ~~cr~~ystallizes, however, the attitude towards the Aristocracy suggested in the drama of the eighteen-thirties and, in its praise of the 'new man', anticipates the class struggles of the forties which were to centre upon the agitation for repeal of the Corn Laws.

Mabel the Patrician's daughter of the title longs for a husband who is:

High born, handsome, I'd rather; but at least  
With features lit up by the sacred light  
Which marks the elect band of noble men  
Whose history is the world's, and whose high names,  
Linked close with empires, sound their synonyms: 1

She falls in love, however, with the talented, but lowly politician Mordant. Her dilemma is insupportable:

O, would that he had rank - that he were poor,  
So he were well derived! 2

But before she can resolve it, her Aunt Lydia, an aristocrat of the old school, tricks her into believing that Mordant, though he has not yet asked for her hand, considers her acceptance a foregone conclusion. This, of course, her patrician pride cannot bear, and Mordant is duly spurned. When, after several years and manifold complications, the trick is discovered and the couple <sup>is</sup> reunited, it is too late; the emotional anguish has been too much for Mabel and she dies in Mordant's arms. The plot is not one of the best, it must be admitted. The play's value lies in the fact that Marston

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1. Act.I. Scene i, pp.257-8.

2. p.278, (III, ii).

faces squarely the financial realities behind class prejudice. The young Mordant can be safely despised, but when, during the course of the play, he achieves wealth and a title, he is immediately courted by the 'fancy'. In his new position he asks them their opinion of those that 'rise by our desert from lowliness'. 'Such men adorn their country' comes the sycophantic reply :

Sir Archer Taunton:	Their merit Transcends all praise!
Lydia:	They are the earth's master spirits!
Mordant:	Then had you known one such in his first years Of Effort, you would have aided him - at least. Given him encouragement, showed him respect.
Lydia:	Respect most due! <sup>1</sup>

The influence of Ben Jonson, enjoying one of his rare periods of wide popularity, is strong here, as in many plays of the period. Jerrold's Golden Calf is Jonson's 'dumbe God', and the better dramatists were quick to spot that what really mattered now was not what a man was but what he seemed. To be wealthy was the safest way of making a show, though if, like Becky Sharp, one could live well on nothing a year, that was acceptable too. Dazzle in Boucicault's London Assurance describes himself thus:

Nature made me a gentleman - that is, I live on the best that can be procured for credit. I never spend my own money when I can oblige a friend. I'm always thick on the winning horse. I'm an epidemic on the trade of tailor. For further particulars inquire of any sitting magistrate.

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1. p.291 (IV,ii).

To be rebuked by Sir Harcourt in the final lines of the play:

And these are the deeds which attest your title to the name of gentleman? I perceive that you have caught the infection of the present age ... The title of gentleman is the only one out of any monarch's gifts, yet within the reach of every peasant. It should be engrossed by Truth - Stamped with Honour - sealed with good-feeling - signed Man - and enrolled in every true young English heart. 1

The answer is interesting in that it states clearly the moral stand-point of those to whom **the** profligate Aristocracy was unendurable. If we add to this Chrystal's rebuke to Montney the picture is complete:

What were the means that gave to your father the wealth and honourable station of an English merchant? - Not hollow words - not a morbid love of show and ceremony - not a false ambition: far different means, and those I send you. Used with wisdom, there is wealth at your feet. The means of riches lie before you:- for there is the garb, the tools of independence - an apron, a day-book, and a ledger. 2.

Rather than inherited wealth and bad manners, natural dignity and hard work were becoming the Victorian ideals, and they are of course themselves a bitter comment on the ruling classes. There can be little wonder that the Aristocracy quailed before an attack that ranged from virulent abuse to solid disapproval and were quick to see in every disturbance the beginnings of a second French Revolution.

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1. London Assurance, 1841, pp.85-6, (V,i).

2. Op.cit. p.48, (II,iv).

The final words in this survey of prevailing attitudes towards High Society in the eighteen-thirties must come from the voice that was to dominate the age, Carlyle's. Carlyle was to make his most damning attack upon the Aristocracy and their self-centred 'Dilettantism' in Past and Present. Sartor Resartus, however, contains the germ of future attacks in the magnificent passage that ends Chapter IV of Book III. Typically Carlyle goes to the heart of the matter and in a devastating question and answer makes the most valid of all criticisms against the Aristocracy: that what their privileged position calls them to do and what they actually do are two completely different things:

'Alas, where (are) now the Hengists and Alarics of our still glowing, still expanding <sup>Europe</sup> Empire; who, when their home has grown too narrow, will enlist and, like Five-pillars, guide onwards whose superfluous masses of indomitable living Valour; equipped, not now with the battle-axe and war chariot, but with the steam-engine and ploughshare? Where are they? - Preserving their Game!'<sup>1</sup>

## 4

Such a lengthy discussion of the contemporary background is necessary, for Dickens's treatment of High Society, such as it is, in these early years is the result of received impression rather than personal knowledge. His only possible point of contact up to 1838 (when he was invited to Holland House) must have been his

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1. Sartor Resartus, 1834, Book III, Chap. iv, p.83.

time as a parliamentary reporter, though this must have meant a great deal at Dickens's young and impressionable age. A bibulous peer features in 'A Parliamentary Sketch'<sup>1</sup> and when reading the contemptuous description of the House of Commons we must remember that a large percentage of its membership was closely connected with the aristocracy:

... the body of the House and the side galleries are full of Members, some with their legs on the back of the opposite seat; some with theirs stretched out to their utmost length on the floor; some going out, others coming in; all of them laughing, lounging, coughing, o-ing, questioning, or groaning; presenting a conglomeration of noise and confusion, to be met with in no other place in existence, not even excepting Smithfield on a market day, or a cock-pit in its glory. 2

His opinion of the House of Lords may be inferred from his description of Lord Peter in 'The Great Winglebury Duel'.

'Ay, ay, I see,' replied the mayor. - 'Horses and dogs, play and wine: grooms, actresses, and cigars. The stable, the green-room, the brothel, and the tavern; and the legislative assembly at last.' 3

The influence of popular opinion is obvious here and one is reminded of Brougham's attack on the hereditary lawgiver who 'be he ever so ignorant, stupid, and vicious is allowed to decide upon great questions of policy and jurisprudence'.

1. Sketches, 2nd Series, 1837 pp.252-4.

2. Loc.cit.pp.241-2.

3. ~~Vol.II, p.226.~~ (1836) Sketches, 1st. Series, 1836, Vol. II, p.226.

On the whole, however, Dickens chooses the tactful line of leaving alone what he does not know well, and at times one gets the impression that he is not particularly interested. In 'The Streets - Night', for instance, the 'larger and better kind of streets' are dismissed in four lines:

... dining parlour curtains are closely drawn,  
kitchen fires blaze brightly up, and savoury  
steams of hot dinners salute the nostrils of  
the hungry wayfarer, as he plods wearily by  
the area railings'. 1

One does not have to be rich to describe a rich man's street, and I would suggest that Dickens is brief here because he wishes to be. The shift of emphasis onto the 'hungry wayfarer' plodding home is surely the clue to where Dickens's creative interest lies.

But when a nobleman does come upon the scene, Dickens's reluctance to commit himself too far is even more noticeable. Lord Mutahead is simply a 'splendidly dressed young man' and is caught for us by a somewhat hackneyed vocal trick.

'Gwacious Heavens!' said his Lordship, 'I thought evewebody had seen the new mail cart; it's the neatest, pwettiest, gwacefullest thing that ever wan aupon wheels - painted wed, with a cweam piebald.' 2

Most significant of all Lord Peter, positively Dickens's first aristocrat, is merely an offstage figure, and his exit is nothing

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1. Sketches, 2nd Series, p.20.

2. Pickwick Papers, 1837, Chap. xxxiv, pp.380-81.

if not conventional:

... Lord Peter, who had been detained beyond his time by drinking champagne and riding a steeple-chaise, went back to the Honourable Augustus Flair's, and drank more champagne, and rode another steeple-chaise, and was thrown and killed. 1

The interesting point to note here is the good humour with which aristocratic vices are treated. Certainly any of the withering attacks on social abuses may be taken as attacks upon the Aristocracy, but when he comes to the aristocrats themselves Dickens's tone changes. There are the traditional jibes, of course, such as those noted above or Quilp's remark to Fred in the Old Curiosity Shop:

[It's very true,' said Quilp, 'that your grandfather urged repeated forgiveness, ingratitude, riot, and extravagance, and all that; but as I told him "these are common faults." "But he's a scoundrel," said he. "Granting that," said I, (for the sake of argument of course), "a great many young noblemen and gentlemen are scoundrels too!" But he wouldn't be convinced.' 2

But, viewed in the light of prevailing opinion, Dickens appears not as wildly radical, but as unusually reasonable. Furthermore, even in these early years, his attitude towards High Society noticeably matured. Kathleen Tillotson has noticed two interesting changes in the Sketches between their first appearance and their publication in volume form. Part of the original text of 'A little Talk about Spring, and the Sweeps' reads as follows:

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1. Sketches, 1st Series, Vol.II, p.242-3.
  2. Old Curiosity Shop, 1841, Chap.xxiii, p.211.

We never saw a green so drunk, a lord so quarrelsome  
(except in the house of peers after Dinner). 1

In the second series of the Sketches the interjection has been changed to '(no: not even in the house of peers after dinner)',<sup>2</sup>. More startling is the change made at the end of 'Thoughts about People'. In the original version, the penultimate paragraph<sup>3</sup>, after describing the pretensions of apprentices, mentions the fear that these, because they ape the upper class, may cease to be a distinct class themselves. To counter this Dickens suggests that

... the same gentleman of enlarged and comprehensive views who proposes to Parliament a measure for preserving the amusements of the upper classes of society, and abolishing those of the lower, may not with equal wisdom preserve the former more completely, and mark the distinction between the two more effectively, by bringing in a Bill 'to limit to certain members of the hereditary peerage of this country and their families, the privilege of making fools of themselves as often and as egregiously as to them shall seem meet.' Precedent is a great thing in these cases, and Heaven knows he will have precedent enough to plead. 4

In the version printed in the first series of the Sketches this paragraph has been completely altered and considerably softened. Of the apprentices he says:

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1. Library of Fiction, June 1836.
  2. Sketches, 2nd Series, p.345, with title changed to 'The First of May'. See Dickens at Work, cheap edition, 1968, p.54.
  3. The final paragraph is a merely a farewell to the reader and a promise to 'think about People' again. It is omitted in the revised version.
  4. Evening Chronicle, 23 April 1835.



as these

We may smile at such people, but they can never excite our anger. They are usually on the best terms with themselves, and it follows almost as a matter of course, in good humour with everyone about them. And if they do display a little occasional foolery in their own proper persons, it is surely more tolerable than <sup>the</sup> precocious puppyism of the Quadrant, the whiskered dandyism of Regent Street and Pall-Mall, or gallantry in its dotage anywhere. 1

It might be argued that these changes were occasioned by the fact that the bound volume demanded more caution than the newspaper. I hope to show, however, that they could well be part of the increasing maturity noted above.

As has been suggested Dickens always seems to have taken his own line on the Aristocracy. A case in point is the contemporary urging of Hannah Moore's claim that it is the duty of High Society to set an example to the rest. Not unnaturally Figaro in London 'Comes out Strong' here, but the Evening Chronicle, in which Dickens's sketches were appearing, makes the point with equal force:

The abominable nuisance of low gambling houses will continue, <sup>however,</sup> so long as the high-gambling-houses are sustained by our nobility and gentry. The evil is a serious one. The example of the higher classes is made an excuse for keeping up these dens of iniquity,<sup>2</sup> The vices and follies of the upper classes of society exercise a powerful influence over those beneath them; and it might admit of very clear proof, had we time and space to devote to the disquisition, that the crimes of the latter are very often, in their necessary reaction, caused by the vices of the former. More than half the cases of embezzlement, robberies, of masters etc., may be traced to these fruitful hotbeds of villainy. Legislation may do somewhat to abate the evil, but it cannot do everything. A reformation in

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1. Sketches, 1st Series, Vol. I, pp. 105-6. See Dickens at Work, p. 46.

2. λ, omitted, 'and even-handed Justice forbids that one should be punished whilst the other escapes with impunity.'

the manners and morals of the upper classes must be effected; and this can only be accomplished by bringing the power of public opinion to bear strongly upon their conduct and pursuits. 1

Dickens must have read this, for his sketch 'The Streets - Morning' appears in the same number; yet his own comment on aristocratic example in the final paragraph of 'Thoughts about People' quoted above is mild by comparison. It is interesting to note that in the gambling scene in Nicholas, though there is disapproval, the question of example is never raised.

Another curious instance is Dickens's 'love affair' with Queen Victoria. It was, of course, a vast and rather tedious joke of which we have the first inklings in a letter to Maclise protesting the 'veneration due to their youthful sovereign'.<sup>2</sup> It is significant, I think, that Figaro in London was on the same day going in for this sort of thing:

#### More Royal Wit

[The following is so full of simplicity and brilliant wit, that it is with the truest gratification we give it a place in FIGARO:-

[The Queen and the Duchess of Kent were both looking out of the Palace window, upon one of the dullest days that ever was seen, both regretting that the usual airing could not be accomplished. After viewing the prospect in silence for a few minutes, the Queen exclaimed in a voice of ineffable softness, 'Why, mother are we like a reduced tradesman, who has been better off?' The Duchess of Kent was startled by a melancholy quære. 'Because', continued Victoria, scarcely pausing for reply, 'we have both seen better days. Look at the weather!' The Duchess caught the

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1. Evening Chronicle, 21 July 1835.

2. Letters, i, 380 (24 February 1838).

Queen in her arms, and they both rolled affectionately onto a neighbourin<sup>g</sup> ottoman. 1

The point that emerges is that Dickens, however, he may disapprove of the aristocracy as a class, is too sensitive an observer to discrim<sup>i</sup>nate against individuals. This is even truer of his creative writings. The aristocrats of Nicholas Nickleby, are hardly his greatest creations. Sir Mulberry Hawk, patron of the ring, wielder of his horsewhip and downer of bumpers extraordinary, could well have stepped from the pages of a melo-  
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drama. His tool, Lord Frederick Verisopht, is not much better drawn, but he is drawn differently. Sir Mulberry is thoroughly evil while Lord Frederick is merely weak, and in the end the worm is allowed to turn:

'If you had told him who you were; if you had given him your card, and found out, afterwards, that his station or character prevented your fighting him, it would have been bad enough then; upon my soul it would have been bad enough then. As it is, you did wrong. I did wrong too; not to interfere, and I am sorry for it. What happened to you afterwards, was as much the consequence of accident as design, and more your fault than his; and it shall not, with my knowledge, be cruelly visited upon him; it shall not indeed.' 3

The effect is stagy in the extreme; Dickens has merely shifted from one stereotype to another, from conventional aristocratic evil to melodramatic noble virtue. What matters is that he made the shift at all, and one cannot blame him for writing badly about what he did not know well. The gambling scene, especially, shows his uncertainty. It shows also that Dickens was aware

1. 27<sup>4</sup> February 1838.

2. At the end of his life Dickens was to call Verisopht 'that depreciative and profoundly unnatural character'. See Speeches of Charles Dickens, ed. R.H. Shepherd, 1884, p.291, for a speech made at Liverpool, 10 April 1869.

3. Chap. xxxviii, p.372.

of the fact, for he writes in that hysterical vein to which he often has recourse when he lacks confidence in what he is doing.

Here, they encountered another party, mad like themselves. The excitement of play, hot rooms, and glaring lights, was not calculated to allay the fever of the time. In that giddy whirl of noise and confusion the men were delirious. Who thought of money, ruin, or the morrow, in the savage intoxication of the moment? More wine was called for, glass after glass was drained, their parched and scalding mouths were cracked with thirst. Down poured wine like oil on blazing fire. And still the riot went on - the debauchery gained its height - glasses were dashed upon the floor by hands that could not carry them to lips, oaths were shouted by lips which could scarcely form the words to vent them ~~it~~; drunken losers cursed and roared; some mounted on the tables, waving bottles above their heads and bidding defiance to the rest; some danced, some sang, some tore the cards and raved. Tumult and frenzy reigned supreme; when a noise arose that drowned all others, and two men, seizing each other by the throat, struggled into the middle of the room. 1

Yet Nicholas Nickleby, for all its faults, is a real break-through in Dickens's treatment of High Society. Not only does Dickens try seriously for the first time to portray all levels of society, but the attempt is haltingly made to forget the class and concentrate on the individual.

It is significant that at the final duel, while we only see and hear Sir Mulberry, Dickens gives us Lord Frederick's thoughts:

Fields, trees, gardens, hedges, everything looked very beautiful; the young man scarcely seemed to have noticed them before, though he had passed the same objects a thousand times. There was a peace and serenity upon them all strangely at variance with the bewilderment and confusion of his own half-sobered thoughts, and yet impressive and welcome. He had no fear upon his mind; but-as he looked about him-he had less

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1. Chap. 8, p. 500.

anger, and though all old delusions, relative to his worthless late companion, were now cleared away, he rather wished he had never known him than thought of its having come to this. 1

← In this we are a step nearer the far maturer portraits of Gordon and Chester in Barnaby Rudge.

Between these two novels comes the Old Curiosity Shop which, Dick Swriveller's delightful pretensions apart, offers nothing of value in the aristocratic line. Nevertheless, the period between the last number of Nicholas and the first number of Barnaby was of considerable importance in the development of Dickens's social thinking, and therefore, if only indirectly, in his attitude towards High Society. The topical relevance of the riot scenes in

Barnaby has been discussed by Mrs. Tillotson. 2 What, I think, has not been noticed is the extremely close relationship between contemporary events and Dickens's spasmodic interest in the novel. The history of Barnaby is a chequered one and will be discussed fully in the next Chapter. We first hear of it in 1836 though it did not in fact begin to appear until February 1841. He seems to have begun<sup>n</sup> thinking about it seriously in mid-December, 1838 for the remark in a letter to Forster of that time 'Vincent I have'<sup>3</sup> presumably refers to William Vincent's 'A plain and succinct<sup>c</sup> narrative of the Late Riots (1780). In early January he can proclaim that 'the book is in training at last,<sup>4</sup> though by the 21st. of that month problems with Bentley had forced its

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1. Chap. 6, p. 502.

2. Dickens at Work, 1968, pp. 76-84.

3. Letters, i, 471 (December 1838).

4. Letters, i, 490 (4 January 1839).

nostroment yet again. December 1838 saw the beginnings of the great torchlight meetings of the Chartists and the arrest of James Stephens, a leading agitator. The widely expressed fears of revolt must have spurred Dickens's resolution to finally begin Barnaby. Despite the fact that the novel had to 'stand over',<sup>1</sup> Dickens clearly did not forget it. On 5 March 1839, at the height of the Chartist Convention, he is 'reading a book of celebrated trials for High Treason',<sup>2</sup> and the postscript to a letter of 7 April reflects the alarm that the Convention aroused:

The King Street business has almost floored me. If Coutts's were to be broken open by a riotous mob tomorrow, I should be magnanimous and Christian like'.<sup>3</sup>

When Dickens finished Nickleby in October 1839 and was 'forthwith tooth and nail at Barnaby',<sup>4</sup> the Chartist danger seemed to be over. On November 6th, however, Londoners were shattered by the news of the Newport rising, and even Greville, who had earlier asserted 'Nothing will happen, because in this Country, nothing ever does',<sup>5</sup> felt the general apprehension.

'Parties are violent, Government weak, everybody wondering what will happen, nobody seeing their way clearly before them'<sup>6</sup>

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1. Letters, i, 494 (21 January 1839).
  2. Letters, i, 523.
  3. Letters, i, 540.
  4. Letters, i, 589 (? 3 October 1839).
  5. Greville Memoirs, ed. Lytton Strachey and Roger Fulford, 1938, Vol. III, p. 369. (16 June 1837).
  6. Op.cit. Vol. IV, p. 116, (1 January 1839).

Despite the difficulties of house-hunting and moving, Dickens contrived to work on Barnaby, and by February 1840 the first two chapters were 'in hand'.<sup>1</sup> As it turned out, Greville had been right originally and nothing did happen. Barnaby was temporarily abandoned for the Old Curiosity Shop, but no-one who reads it can doubt the profound influence upon it of the Chartist risings.

The strength of Dickens's response to these disturbances is apparent in every page of the riot scenes in Barnaby. That it is equally apparent during the early stages of the book's creation I hope I have demonstrated above. Chartistism was in part a protest against the inadequacies of the Reform Bill and is therefore an aspect of the class enmity noted by Marston. Dickens's disapproval of the violence is by no means a vote of confidence in the ruling class. On the other hand, the events of 1839 must have affected his social philosophy and given him a clearer understanding of the dangers of an ignorant populace wrongly led. At the very least, they must have made him realize that any issue in which human emotions are involved is never a cut-and-dried matter of right and wrong.

What emerges from this study of a small aspect of Dickens's art in these formative years is, I would suggest, applicable to Dickens's development as a whole. By the time he began Barnaby in earnest, Dickens had come to understand intellectually what I believe he had always felt creatively: that any blanket philosophy is woefully incomplete. That he knew and accepted a great deal of the contemporary view of the Aristocracy as a class

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1. Nonesuch, i, 249 (February 1840).

can be seen in direct references, and, by implication, in the attacks on social abuse. When he came to deal with High Society in his novels, however, his genius for creating the individual character would not allow of a general view. In these earlier works, and in Nicholas Nickleby above all, we see the beginnings of Dickens's progress, strengthened by personal contact with the aristocracy, towards a view of Society as a collection of individuals, not divided by class but united by a common nature. From here the road to the social viewpoint of the later novels, though a hard one, is clearly defined.



CHAPTER TWOBARNABY RUDGE

Barnaby Rudge presents us with two very different aristocrats, Chester and Lord George Gordon. The most obvious differences are simply moral and personal; one is basically good but irrational and misguided, the other coolly and calculatingly wicked. More important to this study, however, is the different manner in which they are treated. Chester retains many of the elements of theatrical stereotype so noticeable in Dickens's treatment of Sir Mulberry and Lord Frederick Verisopht. Gordon, on the other hand, is treated as an individual and looks forward to Dickens's most successful portraits of members of the upper class in Bleak House and Our Mutual Friend. For this reason alone Barnaby can be seen as a watershed in this aspect of Dickens's development. As I shall show, Dickens's more individualistic and sympathetic treatment of Gordon was largely dictated by the demands of the novel and the extent of his researches into the historical figure. The bulk of this chapter, therefore, will be taken up with Gordon, partly because Dickens's use, and, at times, abuse of the historical sources is in itself a fascinating study, but chiefly because the effects of his detailed consideration of

Gordon's character are of such vital importance to the future development of Dickens's treatment of High Society.

Difference in manner of treatment apart, both Gordon and Chester are of major importance to this thesis, for the simple reason that they figure so largely in the novel and are the first of Dickens's aristocrats to be given something really relevant to do. In addition both have their part in the thematic and narrative scheme of the novel.

That the novel has much scheme of any kind is far from generally recognised;<sup>1</sup> Edgar Johnson, for example complains of 'a clumsy and broken-backed plot, with which the feeble-witted Barnaby, its central character, has no organic connection.'<sup>2</sup> The judgement is both unfair and extremely damaging.

Just under five years elapsed between Dickens's original agreement with Macrone to produce 'a work of Fiction (in Three Volumes of the usual size) to be written by me, and to be entitled Gabriel Varden, the Locksmith of London'<sup>3</sup> and the final appearance of the first weekly number of Barnaby in February 1841. If the novel is as feebly constructed as Johnson seems to think, then we cannot put this down to youthful impetuosity but must assume that at this stage of his career Dickens, even after five years consideration, could not

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1. One contemporary critic at least found it a well planned novel: Hood writing in the Athenaeum, January 1842, said that 'as to workmanship, we consider the story as better built than any of its predecessors.'
  2. Charles Dickens, his Tragedy and Triumph, 1953, p.330.
  3. Letters, i, 150 (9 May 1836).

construct a novel properly. Since, in my view, one of the features of Barnaby is the skill with which Dickens has worked in his upper-class characters, and since Dickens's success with Gordon in part stems from demands of the novel's thematic scheme, it will be necessary to state briefly my reasons for considering Barnaby a well planned novel and to indicate what I consider its thematic scheme to be.

The broken back of the plot to which Johnson refers is the device by which five years are allowed to elapse between the purely fictitious parts of the novel and the historical Gordon riots. Johnson further claims that the first section of the novel, apart from the use of the same characters, has little relevance to the riots of the second. In fact he suggests that we should really divide Barnaby into three parts, the last being a convenient epilogue in which the problems of the fictitious characters are cosily sorted out. 1

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1. Op.cit. p.330.

A close re-reading of the first half of Barnaby convinces one that, far from there being any disregard of the deluge to come, there is an elaborate preparation for it. This is especially noticeable in Dickens's ironic pointers to the future, in his constant references to forces that strive to be released, and in the images of fire and blood that menace the first as much as they dominate the second half of the novel.

The image of blood, like the image of fire, pervades the first half of the novel, as much in Rudge's spilling of blood as in the blood feud between Chester and Haredale. So too, Barnaby's vision of 'wild faces'<sup>1</sup> in the fire and dream of a phantom 'dashing the ceilings and <sup>the</sup> walls with red'<sup>2</sup> lead us on to the holocaust of the future.

Many examples could be given to illustrate Dickens's irony in the

1. Barnaby Rudge, 1841, Chap. xvii, p.30. The first edition of Barnaby is bound from the weekly numbers which formed the end of Vol. II of Master Humphrey's Clock (Chaps. i-xii) and the whole of Vol. III (Chaps. xiii-end). Pagination therefore begins again at 1 with Chap. xiii.
2. Chap. xvii, p.29.

first half of Barnaby. The following will serve, I hope, to give an idea of his method. In Chester's first interview with Hugh the latter becomes drunk - 'Give me enough of this ... and I'll do murder if you ask me!' <sup>1</sup> - and Chester warns him:

'... I must caution you against having too many impulses from the drink, and getting hung before your time.' <sup>2</sup>

No-one can doubt, surely, that Dickens had in mind here both Hugh's death and the scene of the drink-maddened crowd about Newgate and the Warren. <sup>3</sup> In the same way, when Haredale asks Varden if Barnaby is in league with his mother to protect the mysterious cut-throat, we get the prophetic reply:

'... I tremble for the lad - a notable person, sir, to put to bad uses ...' <sup>4</sup>

The references to forces that strive to be released concern, aptly enough, those who are to be prominent in the riots. Barnaby's mother complains of his 'terrible restlessness' <sup>5</sup>, and Hugh is described by John Willet

1. Chap. xxiii, p.65.

2. Ibid.

3. The Warren is itself the subject of grim prophecy. Part of Dickens's opening description reads: 'It would have been difficult to imagine a bright fire blazing in the dull and darkened rooms, or to picture any gaiety of heart or revelry that the frowning walls shut in. It seemed a place where such things had been, but could be no more ...', Chap. xiii, p.4.

4. Chap. xxvi, p.82.

5. Chap. v., p.263.

as one who has got 'all his faculties about him - bottled up and corked down, if I may say so, somewhere or another.'<sup>1</sup> Most elaborate of all is Dickens's treatment of Sim's pretensions where the comic present is contrasted with the tragic future:

As certain liquors, confined in casks too cramped in their dimensions, will ferment, and fret, and chafe in their imprisonment, so the spiritual essence or soul of Mr. Tappertit would sometimes fume within that precious cask, his body, until, with great foam and froth and splutter, it would force a vent, and carry all before it.<sup>2</sup>

Sim himself threatens, 'I shall burst out one of these days and when I do what power can keep me down?'<sup>3</sup> and though we laugh at this we are surely meant to reconsider later.

Looked at in these terms the first half of the novel can be seen as a full preparation for a second half that grows naturally from it. Dickens insists upon this concept of natural growth through his repetition of an image<sup>4</sup> first introduced by Gashford as he looks out of the Maypole window and muses on the upheaval to come:

'More seed, more seed,' said Gashford as he closed the window, 'When will the harvest come!'<sup>5</sup>

Naturally enough the image reoccurs<sup>6</sup> most frequently at the end of the novel, and because the harvest of the second half has been one of violence it centres

1. Chap. xi, p.298.

2. Chap. iv, p.256.

3. Chap. viii, p.282.

4. As far as I am aware Dickens's use of this image in Barnaby has not been noted before.

5. Chap. xxxvi, p.144. In the Charles Dickens edition of the novel, 1868, p.171, Dickens emphasises the point by making the running title for the page 'More Seed for Sowing'.

mainly on the results of that violence. Hugh on the gallows curses 'that black tree of which I am the ripened fruit.'<sup>1</sup> Mr. Dennis looks upon the riots as a 'prosperous ripening for the gibbet', and to him 'the whole town appeared to have been ploughed, and sown, and nurtured by most genial weathers'; and a goodly harvest was at hand.'<sup>2</sup>

This image of natural growth is essential to the novel. In Carlyle's French Revolution, which Dickens had already read, History is specifically likened to a natural growth:

The oak tree <sup>grows</sup> silently, in the forest, a thousand years; only in the thousandth year, when the woodman arrives with his axe, is there heard an echoing through the solitudes; and the oak announces itself when, with far-sounding crash, it falls. How silent too was the planting of the acorn; scattered from the lap of some wandering wind!<sup>3</sup>

Barnaby Rudge is a historical novel, and to understand it we must understand Dickens's concept of history. Mrs. Tillotson has said of Barnaby that 'By reserving the history till <sup>later</sup> ~~later~~ Dickens conveys the irony of the common assumption that private lives are immune from public events.'<sup>4</sup> This is true; but there is, I think, a deeper irony in the novel: that private lives are the stuff of public events, that public events grow

1. Chap. lxxvi, p. 391.

2. Chap. lxx, p. 344.

3. French Revolution, 1837, Vol. I, p. 39.

4. Dickens at Work, cheap edition, 1968, p. 87.

naturally from an infinite number of private deeds. Viewed in this light, the five-year gap, which Johnson criticises, may be seen as complementary to the image of the harvest in that it points the relationship of the characters to the movement of History and allows what has been privately shown in the earlier part of the novel to be publicly reaped later.

I would suggest, however, that there is not a single but a dual concept of History in Barnaby Rudge. The first, of History as a movement, is carried on through the participation of leading characters in the riots. The second is one of History not so much as repeating itself but as eternally the same; that is that there are certain elements of Man's nature that form a constant amidst the change. The specific element that interests, or better fascinates, Dickens in Barnaby is the terrible strength and mindlessness of Man's capacity for violence.

As I have said the blood image pervades the first half of the novel. It should also be remembered that there are in fact two lapses of time: for Rudge's murder of Reuben Haredale has taken place twenty-two years before the book opens. This first interval complements the five-year gap in an obvious way: it allows Barnaby and Emma, in their different ways, the fruits of the crime, to grow up, and provides in the same way for Hugh, who is literally the fruit of Chester's misdeeds. But when we consider the mad, because motiveless, violence of Rudge's crime in conjunction with the frenzy of the riots - they are farther linked through Barnaby -, then we can see that Dickens is pointing the continuous presence of this violence by providing the later event with an earlier parallel. It says something for the complexity of the novel that one is a private and the other a public act.



The point is further emphasised by the repeated use of the same date and the appearance of what is at first thought to be a ghost but later turns out to be only too real. The evil in man is always with us and cannot be dismissed as a spectre, however terrifying.

If we look at the riots in this light, Dickens's emphasis on them is justified. They are not only the vortex of History into which all the characters are drawn, but also the great illustration of that insane violence which Dickens felt to be an inevitable part of Man's nature, and for which the earlier part of the novel, through Rudge, has prepared us. They are the result of both aspects of History, and if we feel that their predominance upsets the balance of the novel we should remember that 'the planting of the acorn' was 'silent' and that 'that the oak announces itself when, with far-sounding crash, it falls.' Dickens's own expression of this idea is given to Haredale at the end of the novel: 'We ~~note~~ the harvest more than the seed-time. You do so in me.'

## 2

If, as I have suggested, Barnaby Rudge is a carefully considered novel, then it is fair to assume that Dickens considered the part Gordon and Chester had to play in it with equal care. The evidence of the novel itself and, in Gordon's case, of Dickens's use of historical sources proves this to be so.

A great deal of critical discussion of Gordon has centred upon the historical figure, and especially upon his responsibility for the riots.

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1. Chap. lxxix, p. 398.

2. See, for example, F.A. Gibson's articles in the Dickensian: 'The Trial of Lord George Gordon', 1946, pp. 12-20; 'Gashford and Gordon', 1948, pp. 124-9; 'A Note on George Gordon', 1961, pp. 81-5.

This is worthy enough in itself, but the danger is that, in the search for the real Gordon, we lose sight of the character that Dickens presents in his novel. Forster, we know, criticised the sympathetic handling of Lord George, and Dickens's reply has perhaps been taken too lightly:

Say what you please of Gordon; he must have been at heart a kind man, and a lover of the despised and rejected, after his own fashion. He lived upon a small income, and always within it; was known to relieve the necessities of many people; exposed in his place the corrupt attempt of a minister to buy him out of Parliament; and did great charities in Newgate. He always spoke on the people's side, and tried against his muddled brains to expose the profligacy of both parties. 1

The defence, it should be noted, is of the historic Gordon rather than of the character as it appears in the novel. I am sure Dickens did sympathise with Gordon, but I am equally sure that the figure we are presented with in Barnaby is as he is because the novel demanded it rather than as a result of the author's sentimental pity.

In building up his picture of Lord George and the riots, Dickens had recourse to 'the best authorities of that time, such as they are'.<sup>2</sup> In these he would have found a considerable conflict of evidence, ranging from the outright condemnation of several of the witnesses at the trial<sup>3</sup> to the loyal support of Gordon's one-time secretary, Robert Watson.

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1. Nonesuch, i, 324 (3 June 1841).
  2. Barnaby Rudge, 1841, Preface, p.vi.
  3. In his Life of Lord George Gordon, 1795.

It is the way in which Dickens used this evidence that leads me to believe that he had a specific purpose in drawing Gordon as he did.

Of particular interest is the way in which Dickens employs and subtly adapts much of the evidence against Gordon. In Fanaticism and Treason, an anonymous pamphlet of 1780, there is an account of Gordon's attendance at a meeting of the Protestant Association:

On the day of the meeting, the Duchess of Gordon had not been dead but one short week ... The puritanical head of hair of the president; lank, without curl or powder - his mild, quiet, calm tone of voice (for that evening at least) - his deep mourning - the recollection of the recent cause of his mourning - an artful glance at the cause of it in the few words his lordship said: All these circumstances could not fail to effect such a meeting ... 1.

In the novel Gordon is introduced as follows:

The Lord ... was about the middle height, of a slender make, and sallow complexion, with an aquiline nose, and long hair of a reddish brown, combed perfectly straight and smooth about his ears, and slightly powdered, but without the faintest vestige of a curl. He was attired, under his great coat, in a full suit of black, quite free from any ornament, and of the most precise and sober cut. 2

There is no suggestion here that the dress might be worn for effect, and, indeed, the ostentatious reserve of the original is softened in Dickens's account. The 'deep mourning' becomes a 'full suit of black', and the hair 'without curl or powder' is in the novel 'slightly powdered but

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1. p. 26 .

2. Chap. xxxv, p. 136 .

without <sup>the faintest</sup> <sup>a</sup> vestige of 'curl'.

Even more telling is Dickens's use of the verbatim report by Joseph Gurney of Gordon's trial. This Dickens must have seen, as the protection note rejected by Gabriel is an exact copy of the one produced in evidence. Attacking Gordon's incitement of the mob, the Attorney General claimed that

...he recommended to this body, to twenty thousand men, the firm conduct of the Scotch, which consisted in the most violent insurrection and tumult that ever was known in that city ... Is a mob not able to take the hint? It would have been too much for the prisoner to have said, Gentleman go and pull down all the houses of the Roman Catholics; ... but it was Recollect what the Scotch did by their firm conduct; and he added, that he did not desire them to run any danger he was not ready to share with them, ... and was ready to go to the gallows for their cause ... 1

This was substantiated by a witness, John Carter M.P., who had heard Gordon ask the mob 'Would not you wish to be in the same state as they are in Scotland?', at which the mob had shouted 'Yes! Yes!' <sup>2</sup> and Gordon had replied 'Well! Well!' In Dickens's account, where the incident takes place earlier, the change is remarkable.

['When you warmed,' said the secretary, looking sharply at the other's downcast eyes, which brightened slowly as he spoke, 'when you warmed into that noble outbreak: when you told them that you were never of the luke-warm or the timid tribe, and bade them take heed that they were prepared to follow one who would lead them on, though to the very death; when you spoke of a hundred and twenty thousand men across the Scottish border who would take their own redress at any time, if it were not conceded: when you cried 'Perish the Pope and all his base adherents;

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1. Trial of Lord G. Gordon, 1780, Part I, p.10.

2. Part I, p.25.

the penal laws against them shall never be repealed while Englishmen have hearts and hands' - and waved your own and touched your sword; and when they cried 'No Popery!' and you cried 'Hurrah! not even if we wade in blood, No Popery! Lord George! Down with Papists - Vengeance on their heads;' when this was said and done, and a word from you, my lord, could raise or still the tumult - ah! then I felt what greatness was indeed, and thought, When was there ever power like this of Lord George Gordon's!'

'It's a great power. You're right. It's a great power!' he cried with sparkling eyes. 'But - dear Gashford - did I really say all that?'

'And how much more!' cried the secretary, looking upwards. 'Ah! how much more!'

'And I told them what you say, about the one hundred and forty thousand men in Scotland, did I!' he asked with evident delight. 'That was bold!' 1

It is clear from this that Gordon said nothing of the kind. He translated Gashford's a hundred and twenty thousand men into a hundred and forty thousand, a mistake he would presumably not have made had the speech been his. A later remark brings confirmation that the words were Gashford's own.

U Gashford - You moved them yesterday too. Oh yes! You did.'

[ 'I shone with a reflected light, my lord,' replied the humble secretary, laying his hand upon his heart. 'I did my best.' 2

A further piece of subtle rabble rousing is reported in the account of the trial. Gordon, in asking the mob to disperse from Westminster, had told them:

... his majesty ... is a gracious monarch, and when he hears that the people ten miles round ... are collecting; there is

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1. Chap. xxxv, p.138-9. A, omitted, 'No; not even if we wade in blood,' and they threw up their hats and cried'

2. Chap. xxxv, p.140.

no doubt that he will send his ministers private orders to repeal the bill ... the Scotch ... had no redress till they pulled down the 'Mass-houses'; Lord Weymouth sent official assurances, that the act would not be extended <sup>1</sup> to them, and why should they be any better off than you.'

Dickens uses the first half of the speech almost verbatim:

When the noise and exasperation were at their height, he came back once more, and told them that the alarm had gone forth for many miles round; that when the King heard of their assembling together in that great body, he had no doubt His Majesty would send down private orders to have their wishes complied with; ...

but continues:

and - with the manner of his speech as childish, irresolute, and uncertain as his matter - was proceeding further, when two gentlemen suddenly appeared at the door where he stood ... <sup>2</sup>

Finally the Attorney general referred to Gordon as 'the author of all these violent and disgraceful proceedings, to whom the whole is to be imputed' <sup>3</sup> whereas Gordon in prison becomes to Dickens 'the unhappy author of all'. <sup>4</sup> In addition John Grueby joins the vintner and Mr. Haredale 'On one condition, please, sir ... No evidence against my Lord - a misled man - a kind hearted man, sir, My Lord never intended this.' <sup>5</sup>

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1. Trial, Part I, p.23.
  2. Chap. xlix, p.221-222.
  3. Trial, Part I, p.9.
  4. Chap. lxxiii, p.367.
  5. Chap. lxvi, p.321.

It is not only the evidence against Gordon that Dickens adapts to his own purpose. Watson's Life, with its sympathetic defence of Lord George, clearly influenced Dickens considerably; but ~~there~~ again Dickens is highly selective in the evidence he chooses to include or omit. Dickens accepts Watson's statement that Lord George was a kind and generous man, and there are considerable parallels between his and Watson's final summing up of Gordon:

Many men with few<sup>4</sup> sympathies for the distressed and needy, with less abilities and harder hearts, have made a shining figure and left a brilliant fame. He had his mourners. The prisoners bemoaned his loss, and missed him; for though his means were not large his charity was great, and in bestowing alms among them he considered the necessities of all alike, and knew no distinction of sect or creed. There are wise men in the highways of the world who may learn something, even from this poor crazy Lord who died in Newgate. 1

Neuman was more beloved by his fellow prisoners than Lord George; he divided his substance with those who had no money, and did everything in his power to alleviate their distress. He clothed the naked, and fed the hungry; but his fortune was inadequate to relieve all their wants. 2

Despite the similarities here, the dissimilarity is even more considerable; for Dickens defends Gordon on quite other grounds than does Watson. To Dickens Gordon was 'this poor crazy Lord', and his behaviour is seen throughout as the result of what the author of Fanaticism and Treason called his 'wild but dangerous head'.<sup>3</sup> Watson, on the other hand, though admitting Gordon to be eccentric and, in his later conversion to Judaism,

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1. Chapter the Last, pp.416-7.

2. Robert Watson, Life, p.109.

3. p.24.

'unreasonable',<sup>1</sup> at no time suggests that he was mad. Both Dickens and Watson agree that Gordon never intended the atrocities of the riots. Watson imputes these to 'miscreants set on foot by French agents for at that time,<sup>(sic)</sup> France was governed by a perfidious king.'<sup>2</sup> The same charge is made by the author of Fanaticism and Treason,<sup>3</sup> but, strangely enough, Dickens mentions the possibility merely to dismiss it:

... a fresh alarm was engendered by its being whispered abroad that French money had been found on some of the rioters, and that the disturbances had been fomented by foreign powers who sought to compass the overthrow and ruin of England. This report, which was strengthened by the diffusion of anonymous hand-bills, but which, if it had any foundation at all, probably owed its origin to the circumstance of some few coins which were not English money having been swept into the pockets of the insurgents with other miscellaneous booty, and afterwards discovered on the prisoners of the dead bodies, - caused a great sensation; and men's minds being in that excited state when they are most apt to catch at any shadow of apprehension, was bruited about with much industry.<sup>4</sup>

An examination of Dickens's use of sources thus reveals a considerable degree of selection and omission, in itself evidence of the pains Dickens took with his novel. The subtle changes he made in the hostile evidence presented at the trial are particularly interesting, for to change the evidence is more significant than merely to ignore it: at the very least it shows close perusal and careful thought. Yet, as we have seen, Dickens in dismissing the popularly held suspicion of foreign intervention in the riots

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1. Life, p.77.

2. Life, p.22.

3. p.29. Many of the rioters, the author says were men 'either in the interest or the pay of America, France and Spain.'

4. Chap. lxxiii, p.362.



deliberately withholds from Gordon a powerful line of defence. On the other hand, the character of Gashford was clearly created to remove much of the responsibility for the riots from Lord George<sup>1</sup>. This complex and, at times, seemingly contradictory use of his sources, together with the careful planning that it implies, proves conclusively that the Gordon we are presented with in Barnaby is the Gordon Dickens intended to present and that this 'poor crazy Lord' is as he is because Dickens needs him so. Once we understand this we are nearer an understanding of Gordon's place in the novel.

The importance of this place is best appreciated through reference to the title figure and Johnson's claim that Barnaby has 'no organic connection'<sup>2</sup> with the plot. As Dickens's letter of May 1836<sup>3</sup> shows, the novel was originally to have been entitled Gabriel Varden, the Locksmith of London. Less than a year later, however the title had been changed and the 'idiot boy' and the Gordon riots are significantly brought together in the advertisement of April 1837 in Bentley's Miscellany for Barnaby Rudge, a Story of the Riots of London, 1780. The switch was made early and it was surely made with a purpose. Mr. Johnson, from his remarks on Barnaby, would say that this change was unnecessary. Here again to admit this is to admit a massive flaw in the power of the novelist. Are

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1. See F.A. Gibson, 'Gashford and Gordon', Dickensian, 1948, pp.124-9.

2. See p. 57, above.

3. See p. 57, above.

we really to believe that Dickens changed the title of his novel simply because he found the figure of an idiot <sup>boy</sup> ~~man~~ more attractive than that of a locksmith? Are we also to believe that he considered the novel for four years without finding any organic connection for its title figure? The answer of course lies in the novel itself, though one hardly has to search **far** for the reason why the title was changed. Even in its original form it seems certain that the novel would have featured the riots, fairly prominently. Gabriel Varden is a locksmith, and it is probable that the great scene of his defiance before Newgate was already envisaged. In addition Dickens tells us that

[No account of the Gordon Riots, having been ~~due~~ to my knowledge introduced into any Work of Fiction .... I was led to project this Tale. 1

How great a part the riots were to have had then we cannot know; but certainly, as Dickens considered his book, their place must have been increasingly important. If this is so, and if, as I have suggested, the emphasis in the riots is on the eternal insanity of man, then the change of title becomes obvious. Gabriel Varden has an important place in the novel as the representative of individual sanity and balance, but it is insanity that dominates Barnaby.

It is to emphasise, almost to isolate, Gordon's madness that Dickens selects his facts so carefully, creating the manipulators Gashford

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1. Barnaby Rudge, 1841, Preface p.v. Poe, perhaps piqued at the decreased importance of the mystery plot which he had solved, did not believe Dickens and insisted that the riots were an 'afterthought'. See his review of Barnaby, first published <sup>Magazine</sup> Graham's Review, New York, February 1842.

and Chester and softening the trial reports of Gordon's rabble-rousing, either by putting the words into Gashford's mouth <sup>r</sup> or lessening the effect by concentrating on the 'childish, irresolute, and uncertain' manner of Gordon's speech. In the same way he dismisses the suggestion of foreign intervention to highlight the 'infectious<sup>u</sup> madness' <sup>1</sup> of the mob. To have made anything of the suggestion would have been to weaken Dickens's essential point: that man's insanity is easily brought to the surface and that it needs only the likes of Chester and Gashford and no machiavellian foreign power to stir up this terrifying and mindless violence, a mindlessness so perfectly symbolized by Barnaby and 'this poor crazy Lord who died in Newgate'.

The link between Barnaby and Gordon is suggested in Dickens's first lengthy description of Lord George where 'his very bright large eye, which betrayed a restlessness of thought and purpose', his 'air of melancholy', 'lankness of cheek' and 'indefinable uneasiness' <sup>2</sup> remind us of Barnaby's 'large protruding eyes', 'restless looks', 'unsettled manner' and the 'something even plaintive in his wan and haggard aspect.' <sup>3</sup> Gordon, though unbalanced, is not an 'idiot' like Barnaby, and it is perhaps for this reason that Dickens's description of him reads like a softened version

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1. Chap. liii, p.242.

2. Chap. xxxv, p.136.

3. Chap. iii, p.251.

of his description of Barnaby. Without wishing to push the point too far it may also be for this reason that, while Barnaby's hair is red, Gordon's is a milder 'reddish brown'<sup>1</sup>

The relationship between the two is brought out most clearly at two key meetings, the first before the riots begin, the second after the attack on Haredale's house. In both of these their common insanity is pointed. In the first Gordon attempts to enlist Barnaby to his cause and Mrs. Rudge protests that 'He is not in his right senses':

'It is a bad sign of the wickedness of these times,' said Lord George, evading her touch, and colouring deeply, 'that those who cling to the truth and support the right cause, are set down as mad. Have you the heart to say this of your own son, unnatural mother!'

'I am astonished at you!' said Gashford, with a kind of meek severity. 'This is a very sad picture of female depravity.'

'He has surely no appearance,' said Lord George, glancing at Barnaby, and whispering in his secretary's ear, 'of being deranged? And even if he had, we must not construe any trifling peculiarity into madness. Which of us' - and here he turned red again - 'would be safe, if that were made the law!' 2

At the second interview the point is the same, though much more forcefully made:

'Have you ever seen this young man before?' his master asked, in a low voice.

'Twice, my Lord,' said John. 'I saw him in the crowd last night and Saturday.'

'Did - did it seem to you that his manner was at all wild, or strange?' Lord George demanded, faltering.

1. Chap. xxv, p.136.

2. Chap. xlvi, p.214.

'Mad,' said John, with emphatic brevity.

'And why do you think him mad, sir?' said his master, speaking in a peevish tone. 'Don't use that word too freely. Why do you think him mad?'

'My Lord,' John Grueby answered, 'look at his dress, look at his eyes, look at his restless way, hear him cry "No Popery!" Mad, my Lord'.

'So because one man dresses unlike another,' returned his angry master, glancing at himself, 'and happens to differ from other men in his carriage and manner, and to advocate a great cause which the corrupt and irreligious desert, he is to be accounted mad, is he?'

'Stark, staring, raving mad, my Lord,' returned the unmoved John. 1

Here they clearly stand for the madness of the mob; but their function is more complex than this. Between them they unite the two concepts of History, for, while they are swept away by the tide of events, they represent also the eternal insanity which those events bring to light. In addition they emphasise the irony of public and private in the novel: Barnaby, the most private of individuals, is dragged into the riots through his friendship for Hugh, while Lord George Gordon, very much the public man, feels himself to be 'called, and chosen'<sup>2</sup> by the people. Their effectiveness as symbols is due precisely to this duality. They are not only a part and in some senses a cause of the riots - Gordon is the 'unhappy author of all' and it is Barnaby's capture that brings about the attack on Newgate -, but in being swept away by them they remain, like so

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1. Chap. lvii, pp.267-8.

2. Chap. ~~xxxvi~~, p.143 .

many of the rioters, innocent of the consequences of their deeds. One of the most terrible aspects of this mass hysteria is that though many, like Chester, Dennis and Gashford, are drawn to the riots through <sup>s</sup> Sadism or hope for gain, the majority are involved through reasons for which they cannot be held responsible:

Through this vast throng, sprinkled doubtless here and there with honest zealots, but composed for the most part of the very scum and refuse of London, whose growth was fostered by bad criminal laws, bad prison regulations, and the worst conceivable police, ... 1

It was perfectly notorious to the assemblage that the largest body, which comprehended about two-thirds of the whole, was designed for the attack on Newgate. It comprehended all the rioters who had been conspicuous in any of their former proceedings; all those whom they recommended as daring hands and fit for the work; all those whose companions had been taken in the riots; and a great number of people who were relatives or friends of felons in jail. This last class included, not only the most desperate and utterly abandoned villains in London, but some who were comparatively innocent. There was more than one woman there, disguised in man's attire, and bent upon the rescue of a child or brother. There were the two sons of a man who lay under sentence of death, <sup>and</sup> who was to be executed along with three others, on the next day but one. There was a great party of boys whose fellow-pickpockets were in the prison; and at the skirts of all, a score of miserable women, outcasts from the world, seeking to release some other fallen creature as miserable as themselves, or moved by a general sympathy perhaps - God knows - with all who were without hope, and wretched. 2.

Both Barnaby and Gordon think they are supporting a great cause and it is this that makes them such easy tools for those cleverer than themselves. The greatest irony of all is that, in their tragic madness, the

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1. Chap. xlix, p.220.

2. Chap. lxiii, p.302.

events that they have witnessed do nothing to <sup>at</sup> shelter their belief.

'He's a coward, Grip, a coward!' cried Barnaby, putting the raven on the ground, and shouldering his staff, 'Let them come! Gordon for ever! Let them come!'

'Ay!' said Lord George, 'let them! Let us see who will venture to attack a power like ours; the solemn league of a whole people. This ~~is~~ a madman! You have said well, very well. I am proud to be a leader of such men as you.'

Barnaby's heart swelled within his bosom as he heard these words. He took Lord George's hand and carried it to his lips; patted his horse's crest, as if the affection and admiration he had conceived for the man extended to the animal he rode; then unfurled his flag, and proudly waving it, resumed his pacing up and down. <sup>1a</sup>

Gordon's blind faith in Barnaby and Barnaby's affection for Gordon are extremely touching, and it is a measure of Dickens's sympathy that he can see at the heart of their madness an essential innocence:

He, a poor idiot, caged in his narrow cell, was as much lifted up to God, while gazing on that mild light, as the freest and most favoured man in all the spacious city; and in his ill-remembered prayer, and in the fragment of the childish hymn, with which he sung and crooned himself asleep, there breathed as true a spirit as ever studied homily expressed, or old cathedral arches echoed. <sup>1</sup>

Many men with fewer sympathies for the distressed and needy, with less abilities and harder hearts, have made a shining figure and left a brilliant fame. He had his mourners. The prisoners bemoaned his loss, and missed him; for though his means were not large his charity was great, and in bestowing alms among them he considered the necessities of all alike, and knew no distinction of sect or creed. There are wise men

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1. Chap. lxxiii, p. 364. I would not claim that Dickens's insight is particularly well expressed here. Fortunately it is the insight rather than the expression that is under discussion.

1. a. Chap. lviii, p. 268.

in the highways of the world who may learn something,  
even from this poor crazy Lord who died in Newgate. 1.

It is to stress this innocence that Dickens allows Barnaby and Gordon only to meet away from the riots. It is significant that at the first meeting Gordon is attended by Gashford, the evil genius, and at the second by Grueby, who follows Gordon because he loves him. At the beginning he is a figurehead to be used; at the end, despite everything, he can still inspire love.

The private tragedy of the novel is largely Gordon's, for though mad he is noble, and it is on both his madness and nobility that Gashford works. In this he mirrors the tragedy of the book as a whole, a tragedy best expressed in Varden's rebuke to his wife:

'... recollect from this time that all good things  
perverted to evil purposes, are worse than those  
which are naturally bad.' 2.

The dark spirits raised by such misuse we see in the holocaust to which Dickens dedicates two hundred of his finest pages.

Hood criticised Dickens for 'calling the great Leader misled' and for 'sheltering the misdeeds of "this poor crazy Lord" under the plea of insanity.' 'It is a common, but dangerous error', he continues, 'to attribute all moral to mental obliquities - to mistake loose principles for unsettled reason - and to confound enthusiasm with fanaticism.'<sup>3</sup>

1. Chapter the Last, pp. 416-417.

2. Chap. li, p.234.

3. In a review of Barnaby, Athenaeum, 22 January 1842.



This is true enough, but as a criticism of Dickens's Gordon it is beside the point. The actual Gordon may have been, as Hood describes him, 'a pseudo saint, inspired by spiritual pride, a wild rage for notoriety, and eggregious vanity'. As I hope I have shown, however, Dickens's insistence upon his insanity is not simply the result of what Hood calls 'his usual charitable spirit' but is demanded by the novel.

More telling as a criticism of Dickens's Gordon is the judgement of the British Quarterly Review that as a character Gordon is 'a <sup>great</sup> <sup>ou</sup> through failure'.<sup>1</sup> Certainly in attempting to make Gordon's insanity convincing, Dickens was faced with one of the most difficult problems of his early writing career. Gordon was not only the most complex aristocrat Dickens had yet presented but among the most challenging of his early characters. Gordon's madness is not of a particularly dramatic sort. It is rather the irrationality of a dreamer easily led into believing that through his leadership these dreams are being fulfilled. As such it allows Dickens no opportunity for the easy effects a more strident form of madness would have presented. Above all it is the madness of a man who is an aristocrat and despite everything has to remain so. Faced with these problems Dickens's success, though not absolute, is remarkable.

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1. 'Collected Works of Charles Dickens', British Quarterly Review, January 1862. p. 142.

Gordon's specifically aristocratic virtues are well presented. Throughout he is gentle and courteous. His first words to Willet and Hugh, spoken with 'an air of authority' and 'a somewhat loud but not harsh or unpleasant voice' are exactly those of a man secure enough in his social position not to have to bully:

'Pray is this the London Road?'

'If you follow it right, it is,' replied Hugh roughly.

'Nay, brother,' said the same person, 'You're but a churlish Englishman, if Englishman you be - which I should much doubt but for your tongue. Your companions, I am sure, will answer me more civilly. How say you, friend?' 1

The tone of voice is right too, both for the irrational thinker - those who cannot moderate their thoughts often cannot moderate their voices - and for the aristocrat born to command.

Gashford later asks Willet for 'one excellent bed ... A bed that you are sure is well aired',<sup>2</sup> and Gordon's interjection is typically generous:

'Say, as to three beds ... for we shall want three if we stay, though my friend only speaks of one.'

This generosity of spirit is neatly pointed by the fact that Chester, with whom Gordon is contrasted, earlier asks Willet for a bed in almost exactly Gashford's words: 'I think you said you

1. Chap. xxxv, p.133.

2. Chap. xxv, p.134.

had a bed to spare?... See that it be well aired'.<sup>1</sup> It is a small point but cleverly sets Gashford and Chester, the selfish manipulators, apart from the selfless idealist.

Gordon's habit of calling everybody 'friend' is a particularly fine piece of insight on Dickens's part. Here again his social position allows him the luxury of addressing all men as if they were his equals. At the same time it is part of Gordon's muddled idealism to think the best of everyone and to assume that all good men must be friends to him and his cause.

Dickens is perhaps at his most acute in understanding that with Gordon's idealistic pursuit of right and justice goes a gnawing doubt that when <sup>at</sup> he is doing may be neither right nor just. Dickens understands perfectly that strange paradox of the well-meaning aristocrat: that, born to believe himself the guardian of the honourable and noble course, he has constantly to reassure himself that his course is honourable and noble. In Gordon, because one element is taken to extremes, so is the other.

'Did I move them, Gashford?' said Lord George.

'Move them, my lord! Move them! They cried to be led on against the Papists, they vowed a dreadful vengeance on their heads, they roared like men possessed - '

'But not by devils,' said his lord.

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1. Chap. x, p.245

'By devils! My lord! By angels.'

'Yes - oh surely - by angels, no doubt,' said Lord George, thrusting his hands into his pockets, taking them out again to bite his nails, and looking uncomfortably at the fire. 'Of course by angels - eh Gashford?'

'You do not doubt it, my lord?' said the secretary.

'No - No,' returned his lord. 'No. Why should I? I suppose it would be decidedly irreligious to doubt it - wouldn't it, Gashford? Though there certainly were,' he added, without waiting for an answer, 'some plaguy ill-looking characters among them.' 1

The external presentation of Gordon's self-doubt is not so successful. The nail-biting and blushing are overdone. Dickens seems afraid to let well alone and allow Gordon's character to emerge without excessive authorial promoting. This is a small flaw, however, in what is, within its limits, a successful portrait. Dickens concentrates on only a few elements of Gordon's character, but they are treated with considerable perception.

As I have said Dickens needed a sympathetic, unbalanced and essentially innocent Gordon in Barnaby. His treatment of him, therefore, cannot necessarily be taken as a sign of increasing sympathy with the upper classes. Yet the subtlety with which Dickens portrays Gordon's madness and the amount of sympathy he extends to him go beyond the simple demands of the novel. They are evidence both of Dickens's ability to understand the workings of Gordon's mind and of the compassion which increasingly resulted from this understanding. Looking forward one thinks particularly of the Hon. Mrs. Skewton. Dickens condemns her morally, but, having penetrated into her

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1. Chap. xxxv, p.138.

devious mind, he cannot withhold his sympathy for the physical decay and emotional desolation of her final scenes.<sup>1</sup> In the case of Lord George, Dickens started with an instinctive sympathy for a man who cared so passionately, if irrationally, about the underprivileged. Analysis of his delusions only increased this sympathy. The final encomium on Gordon is not essential to the novel. We know already that Gordon is kind and generous, and further details are unnecessary. It is however typical of Dickens and of vital importance in his future portrayal of members of the upper classes and of High Society in general. What the duel scene in Nicholas did for Lord Frederick, Barnaby Rudge as a whole did for Gordon: it made Dickens treat him as a human being. Dickens's response to this necessity may not be his finest portrait of an aristocrat, but it is certainly a key one. Having treated one aristocrat sympathetically in Barnaby, and having seen with his usual generosity that 'There are wise men in the highways, of the world who may learn something, even from this poor crazy Lord who died in Newgate', any future blanket or stereotyped assessment of the Aristocracy and High Society on Dickens's part was impossible.

## 3

Chester's part in Barnaby Rudge is as carefully planned as Gordon's. As with Lord George, the fact that he is a member of the upper class is demanded by the novel: Dickens clearly needed someone of his social standing

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1. For a fuller discussion of the point see Part <sup>W</sup> 70, Chap. 3 pp. 142-143, below

and history of refined deceit in the role of chief background manipulator. Chester's social status also aids the comparison Dickens makes between him and Gordon. His machinations, like those of Gashford, are intended to remove much of the blame from Gordon, and his calculating and selfish villainy contrasts with Gordon's muddled, irrational, but essentially generous notion of justice. Both contribute to the unleashing of the insanity in man, but while Chester knows exactly what he is doing the wretched Gordon does not. Chester is acting for his own good it must be remembered, whereas Gordon genuinely believes he is acting for others. This contrast is neatly pointed by the fact that Chester is seen amidst the comfort of his home and preparing for the selfish frivolity of 'fashionable society'. Gordon we only see at the Maypole, in the open air, or in prison.

The fact that we know a great deal about Chester's private life and almost nothing about Gordon's is of the first importance. If Gordon, the public figure who is seen only in connection with the riots, symbolizes the eternal insanity in man, then Chester represents the private wickedness which leads inevitably to the release of that insanity. This is seen most clearly when Chester's private and squalid seduction of a gypsy begets Hugh, the incarnation of lawless violence. Chester himself realizes how great can be the consequences of seemingly trivial private acts when, after learning that Hugh is his son, he reflects:

'So, she kept her word, ... and was constant to her threat! I would I had never seen that dark face of hers, - I might have read these consequences in it, from the first.' 1

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To emphasise the point Chester himself rows, during the novel's five year gap, from a private to a public man, aptly enough because of his past extravagance:

He wrote himself M.P. - but how? Why, thus, It was a proud family - more proud, indeed, than wealthy. He had stood in danger of arrest; of bailiffs, and a jail - a vulgar jail, to which the common people with small incomes went. Gentlemen of ancient houses have no privilege of exemption from such cruel laws - unless they are of one great house, and then they have. A proud man of his stock and kindred had the means of sending him there. He offered - not indeed to pay his debts, but to let him sit for a close borough until his own son came of age, which, if he lived, would come to pass in twenty years. It was quite as good as an Insolvent Act, and infinitely more genteel. So Sir John Chester was a Member of Parliament. 3.

Chester's use of Hugh further stresses the movement from private to public. In the first half of the novel we see Chester engaged in a purely private quarrel with Haredale, and Hugh is employed to impede the marriage of Edward and Emma. In the second half this quarrel is seen as Chester's private motive for encouraging the riots, and Hugh is used both for private revenge and public and political ends:

'This happens fortunately ... and promises well. Let me see. My relative and I, who are the most Protestant fellows in the world, give our worst wishes to the Roman Catholic cause; and to Saville, who introduces their bill, I have a personal objection besides; but as each of us has himself for the first article in his creed, we cannot commit

1. Chap. lxxv. p. 380.

2. Interestingly Dickens uses the prevailing image of natural growth here: describing Chester's knighthood he says that Chester 'knelt down a grub, and rose a butterfly,' Chap. xl, p.165.

3. Chap. xl. p.165.

ourselves by joining with a very extravagant man, such as this Gordon most undoubtedly is. Now, really, to foment his disturbances in secret, through the medium of such a very apt instrument as my savage friend here, may further our real ends; and to express at all becoming seasons, in moderate and polite terms, a disapprobation of his proceedings, though we agree with him in principle, will certainly be to gain a character for honesty and uprightness of purpose, which cannot fail to do us infinite service, and to raise us into some importance. Good! So much for public grounds. As to private considerations, I confess that if these vagabonds would make some riotous demonstration ... and would inflict some little chastisement on Hare-dale as a not inactive man among his sect, it would be extremely agreeable to my feelings, and would amuse me beyond measure. Good again! Perhaps better!'<sup>1</sup>

Apart from its importance as a complex blend of public and private motives, this passage with its subtle reasoning and devious argument provides the exact antithesis to Gordon's muddled and ingenuous utterances.

As a final instance of this progression from private to public, we may note that, just as Edward is sacrificed in the first half of Barnaby<sup>2</sup> for purely private reasons, in the second half Hugh<sup>3</sup> is allowed to go to the gallows because the true facts about his birth 'would make a noise abroad'.

Chester's treatment of his children is significant. In the whole of Barnaby there is only one satisfactory relationship between parent and child, that between Varden and Dolly; even Miggs is an 'orphling' with none but the famous bell-hander<sup>4</sup> to love her. In general these unnatural or non-existent relationships are used to reinforce the dark tone of the novel. In

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1. Chap. xl, p.168.

2. Because he will not obey his father and marry an heiress.

3. Chap. lxx, p.380.



Chester's case, Dickens's purpose is more specific. The tragedy of the riots, as I have said, lies partly in the perversion of good things to bad ends. So, on a more domestic level, Chester's ruthless attempts to exploit his children are examples of the same perversion. Hugh's very existence, indeed, is the result of the perversion of the natural relationship between man and woman. Hablot Browne's illustrations are interesting here. On two occasions we see the pictures in Chester's room: one <sup>1</sup> of the sacrifice of Isaac, and the other, entitled 'Nature', is of a mother and child <sup>2</sup>. Chester, however, does not withhold the knife, and he responds to the dictates of 'Nature' by disowning his legitimate son and consigning the natural child to the 'cursed tree'.

Chester's function in the novel is thus to stand in contrast to Gordon and to represent within himself two of the leading ideas in the novel: that private misdeeds are the stuff of public violence, and that the most tragic public violence results from the perversion of good things to bad ends.

Despite the importance of his part in Barnaby and the success with which he is integrated into its thematic scheme, Chester is not so successful a character as Gordon. Dickens's failure here stems from an underlying feeling, apparent also in his treatment of Sir Mulberry Hawk, that an upper-class villain can only be villainous in a limited number of ways. As a result Dickens stresses Chester's villainy not by loading him

1. Chap. xxxii, p. 118.

2. Chap. lxxv, p. 372.

with his own vices, but with what he considered to be with vices of High Society in general. Chester is eminently the 'Society' man and Dickens's criticism of the 'Society' he frequents is indistinguishable from his criticism of Chester:

How the accomplished gentleman spent the evening in the midst of a dazzling and brilliant circle; how he enchanted all those with whom he mingled by the grace of his deportment, the politeness of his manner, the vivacity of his conversation, and the sweetness of his voice; how it was observed in every corner, that Chester was a man of that happy disposition that nothing ruffled him, that he was one on whom the world's cares and errors sat lightly as his dress, and in whose smiling face a calm and tranquil mind was constantly reflected; how honest men, who by instinct knew him better, bowed down before him nevertheless, deferred to his every word, and courted his favourable notice, how people, who really had good in them, went with the stream, and fawned and flattered, and approved, and despised themselves while they did so, and yet had not the courage to resist; how, in short, he was one of those who are received and cherished in society (as the phrase is) by scores who individually would shrink from and be repelled by the object of their lavish regard; are things of course, which will suggest themselves. Matter so common-place needs but a passing glance, and there an end. 1

As <sup>15</sup> to be expected at this stage of his career, this is not Dickens's most penetrating criticism of 'Society'. The attack is directed at the hypocrisy and superficiality of 'Society', yet is itself superficial. The uncertainty of Dickens's touch is betrayed by the long-windedness of the passage, its reliance on weighty and often repetitive adjectives, the laboured irony of the final sentence and the use of the hackneyed trick of declining to elaborate on what has in fact already been over-stressed. How much more profoundly and economically did the later Dickens anatomise

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1. Chap. xxiv, p.69.

'Society' and its demands through Mrs. Merdle and her screeching parrot.

Dickens does seem in this passage that many individual members of 'Society' 'really had good in them', but, unlike characters in later novels, the good is inevitably swamped by the worship of surface elegance. So Chester as a doyen of 'Society' becomes a type of surface elegance, with the result that he appears more as a collection of stereotyped characteristics than as a character. There is no reason why he should not have been an elegant hypocrite; the trouble is that there is nothing individual in his elegant hypocrisy. Interestingly enough when Dickens enlarges on this aspect of Chester's character it is to comment on hypocrisy in general rather than upon Chester's brand of it:

Men who are thoroughly false and hollow, seldom try to hide those vices from themselves; and yet in the very act of avowing them, they lay claim to the virtues they feign most to despair. 'For,' say they, 'this is honesty, this is truth. All mankind are like us, but they have not the candour to avow it.' The more they affect to deny the existence of any sincerity in the world, the more they would be thought to possess it in its boldest shapes, and this is an unconscious compliment to Truth on the part of these philosophers, which will turn the laugh against them to the Day of Judgment. 1

The observation is true enough in itself, but it is an observation upon a phenomenon rather than a person.

Had Chester been of less importance in the novel these elements of stereotype would not have mattered so greatly. As it is they are repeated

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1. Chap. xxiii, p.62.

so often that Chester becomes little more than a placid smile and a languid drawl. 'My worthy creature,' says Chester when Hugh demands if he is going to speak to him, 'you are a little ruffled and out of humour. I'll wait till you're quite yourself again. I am in no hurry.'<sup>1</sup> It is not that we cannot believe that Chester would speak to Hugh like this, simply that we have had so much of this before, and are to have so much of it again, that the tone of voice comes to dominate the character and smother the personality beneath. This is a pity because Dickens has some acute remarks to make on what it means to be upper-class. The speech just quoted, for instance, is followed by the observation that

This behaviour had its intended effect. It humbled and abashed the man, and made him still more irresolute and uncertain. Hard words he could have returned, violence he would have repaid with interest; but this cool, complacent, contemptuous, self-possessed reception, caused him to feel his inferiority more completely than the most elaborate arguments. 2

Dickens does allow the mask to drop on two occasions, but we have had so much of the unruffled calm that the effect is lost. On both occasions Dickens seems alarmed at what he has done and is quick to re-establish the old Chester. After Chester's interview with Varden, in which he realizes that Hugh is his son, we are told that 'Sir John's face changed; and the smile gave place to a haggard and anxious expression, like that of a weary actor jaded by the performance of a difficult part.'<sup>3</sup>

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1. Chap. xxiii, p. 63.

2. Ibid.

3. Chap. lxxv, p. 380.

Had the chapter ended here it might have added a further dimension to Chester's character; but Dickens brings in the hairdresser who closes the chapter by seeing, as he naturally would, 'the same imperturbable, fascinating, elegant gentleman he had seen yesterday, and many yesterdays, before.'<sup>1</sup> In the same way Chester at his death is allowed to look at Haredale 'with scorn and hatred ... but seeming to remember, even then, that this expression would distort his features after death, he tried to smile'.<sup>2</sup> It could be argued that in this last moment Dickens's portrait of Chester is at least consistent. This may be true; but the two glimpses we get of some genuine feeling in Chester only emphasise the fact that Dickens is consistent to a portrait that is basically stereotyped and unreal.

## 4

Barnaby Rudge can be seen, therefore, as a watershed in the development of Dickens's treatment of High Society. In its portrayal of Chester and his circle the novel is backward looking. In its ability to integrate upper-class characters into the thematic scheme of the novel and in its treatment of Gordon as an individual Barnaby looks forward to Dombey, Bleak House, Little Dorrit, and Our Mutual Friend. Certainly many of Dickens's criticisms of High Society in Barnaby are repeated throughout his career. In Our Mutual Friend Dickens still saw 'Society' as frivolous, self-centred

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1. Ibid.

2. Chap. lxxxix, p.415.

and hypocritical. In that novel, however, 'Society' is composed of living people and Dickens sees among<sup>9</sup> them individuals whose virtue is not swamped by its demands. It is Dickens's detailed and sympathetic study of Lord George Gordon that made possible such scenes as the final chapter of his last completed novel.

Of equal importance is the fact that the major theme of Barnaby concerns man in general. It is the capacity for violence latent in all men, not specific instances of evil among individual classes, that fascinates Dickens in this novel. Such a theme inevitably brought the privileged classes within the mainstream of human existence, rather than, as tends to happen in Nicholas, setting them apart as something totally alien to everyday life and genuine emotions. One cannot say how far Dickens was consciously aware of this as he wrote Barnaby. One can say, however, that in this treatment of a general theme lies the genesis of Dickens's subsequent attempts to see in the frailties of man the cause of the sickness of society; an attempt that is consciously made in his next novel, Martin Chuzzlewit.

## PART TWO

INTRODUCTION

The English Legislature is entirely repugnant to believe in 'new epochs.' The English Legislature does not occupy itself with epochs; has, indeed, other business to do than looking at the Time - Horologe and hearing it tick! Nevertheless new epochs do actually come; and with them new imperious peremptory necessities; so that even an English Legislature has to look up, and admit, though with reluctance, that the hour has struck. The hour having struck, let us not say 'impossible': - it will have to be possible! 'Contrary to the habits of Parliament, the habits of Government?' Yes: but did any Parliament or Government ever sit in a Year Forty-three before? One of the most original, unexampled years and epochs; in several respects, totally unlike any other! For Time, all-edacious and all feracious, does run on; and the Seven Sleepers, awakening hungry after a hundred years, find that it is not their old nurses who can now give them suck! 1

These words of Carlyle, written in 1843, express better than any of the prevailing spirit of the eighteen forties. They were, of course, written with precisely that intention. Past and Present is a key work in any study of the decade, for Carlyle was both a critic and a prophet. For him a mere dissection of the age was not enough: it was in fact only a preliminary to his programme for the future. It is not my purpose here to enter into the rights and wrongs of Carlyle's vision, though this itself will be discussed later. The importance of Past and Present to a study of Dickens's work, or indeed any literary production in the eighteen-forties, lies in Carlyle's grasp of the fact that the

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1. Past and Present, 1843, Book IV, Chap. iii, pp. 359-60.

decade was a historical watershed. Socially and economically times were changing. Carlyle is not alone in realising this, but he insists upon it with particular force. In addition he never allows himself to mistake change for progress. The challenge and dangers that such an epoch present are clear to him and he sees it as his duty above all to ensure that the 'new spirit of age' is directed along the right lines.

As I have said Carlyle, if he is the 'organ-voice', is not the only voice of the eighteen-forties, and most of what follows in this chapter is directly or indirectly concerned with the decade as one of change. Froude's famous statement that 'it was an era of new ideas, of swift if silent revolution' in which 'All round us, the intellectual lightships had broken from their moorings'<sup>1</sup> is the view of one looking back and charting not only a decade of upheaval but also the feeling of uncertainty that inevitably accompanied it. Carlyle, though dominant in his analysis of the problems of the eighteen-forties, is atypical in the clarity of his remedy. Certainly in the literature of the forties it is uncertainty which dominates. The problems, in the main, are clear; the solutions are not. The inevitable result is a continual striving for often unobtainable or contradictory answers, and any critic who attempts to do much more than chart the contradictions is, I think, deceiving himself.

The issue is further complicated by the fact that the eighteen-forties is a period not only of specific changes - the repeal of the Corn Laws and

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1. J.A.Froude, Carlyle's Life in London, 1884, Vol.I, pp.290-91.



the Factory Acts - but also of a complete upheaval in the character and pace of existence. The dilemma arises for those who advocate the first but find it hard to come to terms with the second. Thackeray provides an interesting example. In the following passage he is clearly laughing at Major Pendennis and his particular brand of Conservatism, for the Major represents Thackeray's special bugbears of social prejudice and snobbery:

'the breed is gone - there's no use for 'em; they're replaced by a parcel of damned cotton-spinners and utilitarians, and young sprigs of parsons with their hair combed down their backs. I'm getting old: they're getting past me: they laugh at us old boys,' thought old Pendennis. 1

Yet the Major is not an unsympathetic character - he is at least true to himself - and later Thackeray is to feel much the same sort of regret:

We elderly people have lived in that pre-railroad world, which has passed into limbo and vanished from under us. I tell you it was firm under our feet once, and not long ago. They have raised those railroad embankments up, and shut off the old world that was behind them. Climb up that bank on which irons are laid, and look to the other side - it is gone. There is no other side ... 2

The key lies, I think, in the sentence, 'I tell you it was firm under our feet once, and not long ago.' It is not reform or progress that sadden Thackeray, but the feeling that in the 'old world' at least one knew where one was, and even social abuse and injustice had a firm context. Thackeray

1. Pendennis, 1859, Vol. II, Chap. xxix, p. 292.
2. 'De Juventute' - First published, Cornhill Magazine, October 1860. (Quoted by Prof. Kathleen Tillotson in Novels of the Eighteen-Forties, Cheap Edition, 1962, p. 106. I am particularly <sup>interested</sup> in this section to Prof. Tillotson's discussion of the eighteen-forties as a period of change and uncertainty).

does not say so, but one gets the feeling that with this new and faster world and old values, the old idea of what is right and what is wrong, are somehow unable to cope.

For Dickens, as for Thackeray, the herald and symbol of the new world of <sup>the</sup> eighteen-forties is the Railway. Dombey and Son is pre-eminently a novel about change. Sol Gills, a wholly sympathetic character, echoes Major Pendennis in his reflections on time.

'As I said just now, the world has gone past me. I don't blame it; but I no longer understand it. Tradesmen are not the same, apprentices are not the same, business is not the same, business commodities are not the same. Seven-eighths of my sock is old-fashioned. I am an old-fashioned man in an old-fashioned shop, in a street that is not the same as I remember it. I have fallen behind the time, and am too old to catch it again. Even the noise it makes a long way ahead, confuses me.' 1

Dombey will be discussed fully in a later chapter. What is important to note here is the fact that, despite its preoccupation with change and the destruction of old values, Dombey is in some ways <sup>among</sup> ~~some~~ the least 'social' of Dickens's novels. There is little of what can be called specifically Dickensian social criticism. Education and Mercantilism come in for their share of attack, but it is a peripheral attack and does not dominate like that on the workhouses, prisons, chanceries, and circumlocution offices of earlier and later novels. Staggs Gardens, for instance, is no Tom-All-Alones, or Bleeding-Heart-Yard, nor can the Charitable Grinders compare with Dotheboys Hall. Strangely enough this seems to me to be true of all Dickens's novels between Barnaby and Bleak House. This is so mainly

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1. Dombey and Son, 1848, Chap. iv. p. 29.

because Dickens intended it that way. The emphasis is on human rather than social failings. Martin Chuzzlewit is avowedly about selfishness and Dombey and Son is 'to do with pride what its predecessor had done' with that vice.<sup>1</sup> David Copperfield centres around an individual's development, and even David's sojourn <sup>at 'Murdstone and Grinby's'</sup> in the ~~blackening~~ factory is introduced primarily for that purpose. No character in any of the novels dies through want or cruelty, and disasters, when they do occur, are generally either the result of personal failings - Emily, Steerforth, Edith, Mercy Pecksniff - or are successfully overcome - Young Martin, Micawber, Walter Gay.<sup>2</sup> There are no Smikes, no Louisas and no Betty Higdens. Even Paul's death does not provide a real parallel to that of Little Nell.

Dickens's novels of the eighteen-forties are not only the least 'social' but also the most socially confined of his novels. As there is little abject poverty so there is little that has specifically to do with the Upper Classes. Yet the wind of change was blowing as much in Belgravia as in Seven Dials. As early as 1840 the radical Jerrold can feel the breeze and predict the future:

... we live in eventful times, in days of daring change, of most profane revolution. The Young Lord of the nineteenth century is a much less enviable person than the Young Lord of fifty years ago. If he be the firstborn, with all the advantages of that happy state, the task set him by the hard and grudging spirit of the age is far more irksome, far more difficult, than that conned by his grandfather. His title as a title has not the

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1. Forster, vi, 2 (Vol. II p. 309).

2. Alice in Dombey comes nearest to death through want and cruelty; but her tragedy is partly the result of her own failings, and what injustice there is is personal (Carker's) rather than social.

weight it had; it has lost, too, something of music of its ring upon the leathern ears of a utilitarian generation. Hard times for Young Lords, when they may not leisurely saunter along the path of worldly honour, lest their heels be wounded by the advancing toes of the viler orders! 1

But on the face of it, it would be hard to see that Cousin Feenix and the Hon. Mrs. Skewton have any relevance here.

Yet Barnaby and Nicholas Nickleby cover almost the whole of the social spectrum. So too does Bleak House. As I have shown earlier, the former novels mark a decisive step forward in Dickens's treatment of the Aristocracy and his understanding of them as individuals. By Bleak House High Society has been integrated into Dickens's view of society as a whole. What then of the years between? Clearly any reader of Barnaby and Bleak House can see the eighteen-forties as the decade in which Dickens's genius matured, and his artistic development can be clearly traced in the novels of this period. What is more difficult to follow is the maturing of Dickens as a critic of society in general and High Society in particular - the transition from the fragmented viewpoint of Barnaby Rudge to the total picture of Bleak House.

I have felt it necessary to dwell at such length on the problems noted above because it is essential to understand from the outset the particular difficulties that the eighteen-forties present both to the historian and the critic. The keynote is change and the prevailing spirit of the age uncertainty. From the uncertainty I have tried to extract those ideas and

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1. 'The Young Lord', Heads of the People, Vol. I, 1840, p.282.

experiences which most influenced the development of Dickens's treatment of High Society, and the chapters that follow will trace that development from <sup>1841</sup>eighteen-forty-one to <sup>1852</sup>eighteen-forty-two and include a brief analysis of Martin Chuzzlewit and the Christmas Books and full discussions of Dombey and Bleak House.

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CHAPTER 1

FROM BARNABY RUDGE TO BLEAK HOUSE

The period between the appearances of the final part of Barnaby Rudge and the first number of Dombey (27 November 1841 - October 1846) was dominated by agitation for the repeal of the Corn Laws. This was by no means a new phenomenon: Becky Sharp writing in the eighteen-tens can complain to Amelia that at Queens Crawley

... I had my choice of amusement between a volume of sermons, and a pamphlet on the ~~corn~~ laws, which Mr. Crawley had been reading before dinner. 1

The History of the various movements which led to final repeal in 1846 is tortuous and involved. The details of the lengthy political wrangling do not concern us here. Of real importance, however, are the motives which led to increased agitation in the early eighteen-forties and the social climate in which the argument took place.

Dissatisfaction with the Reform Bill of 1832 had been largely responsible for the abortive Chartist uprisings of 1839. In 1841 the Free-Traders, in order to woo mass support, adopted a platform of household suffrage and entered into an uneasy alliance with the more extreme Chartists. At a mass meeting in Leeds on 21 January 1841 a resolution was passed which makes clear the cause of the discontent:

That the great experiment made by means of the Reform Bill to improve the condition of the country, has failed to attain the end desired by the people;

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1. W.M. Thackeray, Vanity Fair, 1848, Chap. viii, p.70.

and a further Reform having therefore become necessary, it is the opinion of this meeting, that the united efforts of all Reformers ought to be directed to obtain such<sup>^</sup> further enlargements of the franchise as should make the interests of the representatives identical to<sup>with</sup> those of the whole country, and by this means secure a just government for all classes of the people. 1

The Reform Bill proved no political panacea, and the reformed parliament had done little or nothing to improve the material welfare of the people. Greville writing in 1842 points to the 'immense and continually increasing population, deep distress and privation, no adequate demand for labour, no demand for anything, no confidence, but an universal alarm, disquietude, and discontent.'<sup>2</sup> On the face of it there seems no reason why a merger of political and economic interests should not have been successful and why those who wished to attack the causes of 'disquietude', either by increasing the political power of the people or by decreasing the cost of imported goods, notably corn, should not have worked together. In practice the alliance failed completely, basically on a disagreement about method. The Anti-Corn-Law-League was successful largely because it pursued its end peacefully and responsibly and thus obtained wide support. Chartism, with its advocacy of violence, succeeded in alienating the middle-classes, and thus failed. There were of course outbreaks of rick-burning in support of the League but they were isolated and totally opposed to the official policy.

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1. Leeds Mercury, 23 January 1841.

2. Greville Memoirs, ed. L. Strachey and R. Fulford, 1938, Vol.V, p.48 (2 November 1842).

The main opposition to the League came, naturally enough, from the Tory Country Gentry who feared the competition of cheap imported corn. They were supported in the main by the Great Whig landowners who saw the Corn-Law agitation as a further encroachment upon aristocratic privilege. The League in its turn was supported by the manufacturers, partly for benevolent reasons but partly, also, it must be admitted, because they resented the power of the Aristocracy and felt that a lowering of the price of bread would enable them to lower wages. This last point was picked upon by many protectionists. The Earl of Hardwicke, for instance, declared in the debate on the Corn Bill (25 May 1846) that

He considered the party with whom he acted were protecting the poor against the ~~overwhelming~~ <sup>bearing</sup> influence of the manufacturers .... 1

The majority view on the Lords was probably best expressed by the Duke of Richmond who felt the Bill to be 'a measure likely to inflict a deadly blow upon British <sup>a</sup>Agriculture and the national greatness.'<sup>2</sup> It is tempting to substitute 'Aristocracy' and 'aristocratic' for 'Agriculture' and 'national', and such a substitution would perhaps give a truer insight into the real feelin<sup>g</sup>s of the noble lords. Ultimately the Lords accepted the Bill because they feared a dissolution if they threw it out and the return of an even more radical House of Commons. On 15 June 1846 the third reading of the Bill was passed by a show of hands without a division. As M. Halve<sup>y</sup> neatly puts it:

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1. Annual Register, 1846, p.86.

2. Annual Register, 1846, p.78.



1832

In ~~eighteen-thirty-two~~ the nobility had sacrificed much of its political to save its economic privileges. Now it sacrificed the most valuable of the latter to save what the Reform Act had left of the former. 1

In the event the repeal of the Corn Laws hit the morale of the Aristocracy harder than it hit their pocket, and this indeed proved to be the deadlier blow. From our point of view, the importance of the Anti-Corn-Law agitation of the early eighteen-forties lies in the successful and peaceful marshalling of public opinion against the power of the ruling class. It is in this victory of majority over minority interest that the real significance of the Corn Bill lies. By setting its face against the general will the Aristocracy succeeded only in proving its inability to control its own destiny and discarded also that pretence of benevolent protection in which its most valid claim to power lay.

One should notice also the confrontation between Industrialist and Aristocrat and the assertion of power by Carlyle's 'Millo-cra<sup>2</sup>cy.' Political industrialists are not peculiar to the eighteen-forties; but if we compare the futility of their campaign against the Orders in Council during the Peninsular War and their success with the Corn Bill ~~the~~ increase of political power is immediately apparent. If the Corn-Law agitation did not create, it at least clarified a situation in which the old distinctions between rich and poor no longer existed. The rich clearly were no longer

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1. History of the English People in the Nineteenth Century, Cheap edition, 1961 Vol. IV, p.136.

2. Past and Present 1843, Book III, Chap. vii, p.233.

one, and the Aristocracy was forced more and more to defend its position behind the fragile stockade of hereditary and class rather than the soldier entrenchment of wealth and privilege. Certainly in the long run the conflict of political interest resulted in a shift of real power from the Aristocrat to the industrialist.

It must be remembered that during the debate on the Corn Bill Dickens was more directly concerned with politics than at any other time in his life. His editorship of the Daily News was brief, but it covers the first discussion of the Bill, introduced at the opening of parliament on 19 January 1846. On January 21st the first number of the Daily News appeared, and a leader on the Corn Laws makes its position plain:

[The most significant movement of our times is the agitation which has now for several years been conducted by the NATIONAL ANTI-CORN-LAW LEAGUE. A few days, at most, will show whether it has done its work and gained its victory, or only reached a crisis when its strength will be tasked for the severity of a final struggle. But no continuance of resistance can render the result uncertain, or postpone it to any very remote period. All that resistance can do is further to develop the new power which has arisen, and, perhaps, enlarge the sphere of its influence. The League is not a creation of certain wealthy and discontented manufacturers; it is a symptom of the condition of society; a decisive symptom, indicating transition; and the legislative note of that transition will be the abolition of the Corn Laws. The wheels have revolved; the hands point to the hour, and the clock must strike. 1.

One notices the repetition of the clock image employed by Carlyle in the passage from Past and Present quoted above.<sup>2</sup> Like Carlyle, the Daily News sees the forties as a period of transition, 'the wheels have revolved,' and

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1. The leader was written by W.J. Fox. Dickens thought it excellent, though he made several alterations. See Nonesuch, i, 733 (21 January 1846).
  2. See p.94 above.

recognised the need for judicious change 'the clock must strike' It may seem strange for us to-day to see the simple removal of an import duty regarded as the final revolution of an historical wheel, but we misunderstand the character of the eighteen-forties if we underestimate its vital importance at the time. Apart from the immediate benefit to the poor the measure must have particularly appealed to Dickens as a recognition of 'the new power which has arisen'. Barnaby Rudge, as we have seen, was largely influenced by the Chartist riots and contains a grim warning against the wanton release of what Carlyle called 'the infernal element in <sup>m</sup>Man.'<sup>1</sup> In the Anti-Corn-Law movement Dickens saw the peaceful triumph of right and the will of the people. It must surely have <sup>c</sup>confirmed his faith, shaken by Chartism and the visit to America, in the future of democracy.

Agitation against the Corn Laws stemmed largely from discontent with the <sup>conditions</sup> of the working class. How appalling these conditions were had been made clear by the reports of various parliamentary commissions, in particular the Commission of Enquiry into the Employment of Children and the Factory Commission. In <sup>1842</sup>eighteen-forty-two Lord Ashley, introduced <sup>ing</sup>a bill for restraining the employment of women and children in mines and collieries, quoted extensively from the findings of the former commission. One sub-commissioner in particular had found <sup>in</sup>a colliery in the East of Scotland 'a little girl, only six years old, carrying <sup>1</sup>half a <sup>1</sup>~~hundred~~<sup>1</sup> <sup>1</sup>weight, and making regularly four-

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1. On Heroes and Hero Worship, 1841, 'Lecture Six' pp. 347-8.

teen long journeys<sup>1</sup> a day.<sup>1</sup> The next year Ashley introduced a further bill for the education of the working class, and, after detailing the poverty and crime in the cities, declared that while six hundred and four thousand, nine hundred and sixty-five pounds was spent annually on the punishment of crime 'The annual vote for education in all England was <sup>30,000 l</sup> ~~thirty thousand~~.'<sup>2</sup>

These public exposures of 'the condition of England' emphasised the emptiness of the hereditary lawmakers' claim to be the benevolent protectors of the people. Together with the Corn Law agitation the reports of the commissions showed how far cut off were the ruling class from the people they ruled. In addition these reports gave the middle class no excuse for turning a blind eye or professing ignorance of the situation.

Dickens himself knew the truth of many of the commissions' findings from his own experience, but they must have intensified his reforming zeal and increased his bitterness at the apathy and selfishness of the upper and middle classes in the face of such publicised misery. Significantly enough the all-out attack on selfishness in Martin is 'plotted and contrived' in eighteen-forty-two.

## 2

Without a clear understanding of the political hopes and interests of the eighteen-forties, and in particular those which centred round the repeal of the Corn-Laws - 'the legislative note

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1. Annual Register, 1842, p.166.

2. Annual Register, 1843, p.56.

of that transition will be the abolition of the Corn Laws' - it is impossible to understand fully the literature of the period.

If the repeal of the Corn Laws is the major legislative measure of the decade, then the major voice is Carlyle's.

The condition of England, on which many pamphlets are now in the course of publication, and many thoughts unpublished are going on in every reflective head, is justly regarded as one of the most ominous, and withal one of the strangest, ever seen in this world. England is full of wealth, of multifarious produce, supply for human want in every kind; yet England is dying of inanition. With unabated bounty the land of England blooms and grows; waving with yellow harvests; thick-studded with workshops, industrial implements, with fifteen millions of workers, understood to be the strongest, the cunningest and the willingest our Earth ever had; these men are here; the work they have done, the fruit they have realised is here, abundant, exuberant on every hand of us: and behold, some baleful fiat as of Enchantment has gone forth, saying, 'Touch it not, ye workers, ye master-workers, ye master-idlers; none of you can touch it, no man of you shall be the better for it; this is enchanted fruit!' On the poor workers such fiat falls first, in its rudest shape; but on the rich master-workers too it falls; neither can the rich master-idlers, nor any richest or highest man escape, but all are like to be brought low with it, and made 'poor' enough, in the money sense or a far fataller one. 1

Thus Carlyle begins Past and Present with its searching appraisal of the 'condition of England' and its devastating attack upon the Aristocracy. In Sartor Resartus Carlyle had reviled the 'master-idlers' for denying their responsibility and looking only to themselves; In Past and Present Carlyle makes clear what that responsibility is:

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1. Past and Present, Book I, Chap. pp. 1-2.

My lords and gentlemen, - why, it was you that were appointed, by the fact and by the theory of your position on the Earth, to 'make and administer Laws,' - that is to say, in a world such as ours, to guard against 'gluts;' against honest operatives, who had done their work, remaining unfed! I say, you were appointed to preside over the Distribution and Apportionment of the Wages of Work done; and to see well that there went no labourer without his hire, were it of money-coins, were it of hemp gallows-ropes: that function was yours, and from immemorial times has been; yours, and as yet no others. 1

The true Aristocrat is, or should be, no less than Carlyle's 'Hero' or great man. How far the present generation have fallen short, Carlyle is at pains to point out. Far from being true aristocrats, they merely play at it: they are in fact Dilettantes, and the god of 'Dilettantism' is even fouler than the other false god of the age, Mammon:

[To the 'Millo-crazy' (sic) so called, to the Working Aristocracy, steeped too deep in mere ignoble Mammonism, and as yet all unconscious of its noble destinies, as yet but an irrational or semi-rational giant, struggling to awake some soul in itself, - the world will have much to say, reproachfully, reprovably, admonishingly. But to the Idle Aristocracy, what will the world have to say? Things painful and not pleasant! 2

Carlyle's remedy is brutally straightforward:

When a world, not yet doomed for death, is rushing down to ever-deeper Baseness and Confusion, it is a dire necessity of Nature's to bring in her ARISTOCRACIES, her BEST, even by forcible methods. When their descendants or representatives cease entirely to be the Best, Nature's poor world will very soon rush down again to Baseness; and it becomes a dire necessity of Nature's to cast them out. Hence French Revolutions, Five-point Charters, Democracies,

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1. Book III, Chap. vii, p.231.

2. Book III, Chap. vii, p.233.

and a mournful list of Etceteras,<sup>in</sup> these our afflicted times. 1

The alternative, as the opening of Past and Present makes clear, is a chaos that will ultimately envelop worker and aristocrat alike.

Carlyle was certainly no leveller. His aim was to replace a false by a true Aristocracy. It has been fashionable to deride Carlyle's concept of heroism as pseudo-Fascism. This is unfair, for it disregards the spiritual nature of Carlyle's hero and the latent heroism in us all.

In all this wild revolutionary work, from ~~the~~ Protestantism downwards, I see the blessedest result preparing itself; not abolition of Hero-worship, but rather what I would call a whole World of Heroes. If Hero means sincere man, why may not every one of us be a Hero? A world all sincere, a believing world: the like has been; the like will again be, - cannot help being. That were the right sort of Worshippers for Heroes: never could the truly Better be so revered<sup>nc</sup> as where all were True and Good! 2

The judgement is mistaken also in that it forgets the historical context in which Carlyle was writing. Social reform is not necessarily social revolution, and few in the eighteen-forties thought in terms of a radical change in the structure of society. The Daily News, whose principles, it tells us, 'will be the Principles of Progress and Improvement'<sup>3</sup>, announces in its second editorial:

... We believe in the fundamental principle on which the structure of our English Government rests, however, in practice outraged, - that the wealth, the security, and the just influence of the Aristocracy are not necessarily hostile to the comfort and happiness of the People. We want to turn this principle into a practical truth. 4

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1. Book III, Chap. xiii, p.288.

2. On Heroes and Hero-Worship, 1841, 'Lecture Four', p.206.

3. 21 January 1846.

4. 22 January 1846.

Even John Barton, for all that he is driven to murder, wants no more than he is entitled to:

'I don't want money, child! D--n their charity and their money! I want work, and it is my right. I want work.' <sup>1</sup>

In Mary Barton, Mrs. Gaskell's aim is to demonstrate the problems of the working classes rather than to provide a solution. It is this, I think, that makes it the most successful of the 'condition of England' novels of the eighteen-forties. Carlyle, in the opening paragraph of Chartism had called for 'speech and articulate inquiry' about 'the condition and disposition of the Working Classes', <sup>2</sup> and Mrs. Gaskell attempts nothing more. Disraeli, on the other hand, would penetrate deeper into primary causes and ultimate solutions. In Coningsby it is the political structure of the country that is at fault, in Sybil, the social. The sub-title 'The Two Nations' became a byword and certainly helped to pinpoint the vast gulf that existed between the governors and the governed. Sybil at first rejects Egremont because she feels this gulf to be 'utterly impassable.' <sup>3</sup> When she finally marries him no real reconciliation between classes is made, for Sybil is herself an aristocrat and we see her later in Tancred neatly assimilated into High Society. Disraeli's final word is a challenge rather than a solution:

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1. Mary Barton, 1848, Vol. I, Chap. x, p. 178.
  2. Chartism, 1840. Second Edition, Chap. i, p. 1.
  3. Sybil, Book VI, Chap. viii, Vol. 2, p. 246.



That we may live to see England once more possess a free Monarchy and a privileged and prosperous People, is my prayer; that these great consequences can only be brought about by the energy and devotion of our Youth is my persuasion. We live in an age when to be young and to be indifferent can be no longer synonymous. We must prepare for the coming hour. The claims of the Future are represented by suffering millions; and the Youth of a Nation are the trustees of Posterity. 1

In Tancred Man's lack of faith is seen as the root cause of the social malaise. The hero sets out to find God in the Holy Land and preaches to the natives - in this case the Emir Fakredeem - in orthodox Carlylean terms:

... we live in a different age; there are popular sympathies, however imperfect, to appeal to; we must recur to the high primeval practice, and address nations now as the heroes, and prophets, and legislators of antiquity. If you wish to free your country, and make the Syrians a nation, it is not to be done by sending secret envoys to Paris or London, cities themselves which are perhaps doomed to fall; you must act like Moses and Mahomet. 2

The 'New Crusade' is inconclusive, and, unlike the first two parts of the trilogy, Tancred does not even end in a challenge. It is easy to criticise Disraeli for the diffuseness of his argument and his failure to produce practical answers. Certainly he tried to do too much: In Sybil for instance, the different elements of Roman a thèse, love story and comedy of manners are awkwardly blended. What matters, of course, is that the attempt at 'articulate inquiry' is made at all. The value of the novels, and especially Sybil, lies not so much in abstract speculation as in specific detail. It is passages like the following that give Sybil life and make a real contribution

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1. Sybil, Book VI, Chap. xiii, Vol. 3, p. 326.

2. Tancred, Bodley Head, 1927, Book IV, Chap. iii, p. 349.

to the social discussion of the eighteenth-forties.'

'The people will never have their rights,' said the stranger, 'until they learn their power. Suppose instead of sticking out and playing, fifty of your families were to live under one roof. You would live better than you live now; you would feed more fully, and be lodged and clothed more comfortably, and you might save half the amount of your wages; you would become capitalists; you might yourselves hire your mines and pits from the owners, and pay them a better rent than they now obtain, and yet yourselves gain more and work less'.

'Sir,' said Mr. Nixon, taking his pipe from his mouth, and sending forth a volume of smoke, 'You speak like a book.'

'It is the principle of association,' said the stranger; 'the want of the age.'

'Sir,' said Mr. Nixon, 'this here age wants a great deal, but what it principally wants is to have its wages paid in the current coin of the realm.' 1

Inevitably an age so concerned with social right and wrong is also an age of class tension. I have already mentioned the complex antipathies between worker, industrialist and aristocrat pinpointed by the Corn-law agitation. Disraeli and Carlyle openly declare war on the thoughtless rich and Mrs. Gaskell, though less violent, is equally telling:

'Thou never could abide the gentlefolk,' said Wilson, half amused at his friend's vehemence. // 'And what good have they ever done me that I should like them?' asked Barton, the latent fire lighting up his eye: '... Don't think to come over me with the old tale, that the rich know nothing of the trials of the poor. I say, if they don't know, they ought to know. We are their slaves as long as we can work; we pile up their fortunes with the sweat of our brows; and yet we are to live as separate as if we were in two worlds;... 2

Naturally for anyone detailing the distress of the governed the blame must fall first on those who govern. Equally for the propagandist the blame must not only fall but manifestly be seen to fall. In a simple case of 'Haves'

1. Sybil, Book III, Chap.i, Vol.2, pp. 14-15.

2. Mary Barton, Vol.I, Chap.i, pp.10-11.

and 'Have-Nots' class rivalries are blatantly obvious. What is interesting, I think, is the way in which these rivalries permeate those novels which have no specific social purpose. Jane Austen is a pioneer here. The conversations between Emma and Miss Bates fairly crackle with class distinction, and pride and prejudice form the staple of her domestic drama. It is, of course, an eternal theme, but in the forties, it is handled with the special urgency of an epoch in which the class structure was being visibly altered and class rivalries were openly discussed. Agnes Grey may seem an unlikely novel to cite; Anne Brontë is among the most withdrawn of our novelists, and Agnes is no Jane Eyre defending not only her class but her man against the menaces of Blanche Ingram. Yet beneath the calm surface there is deep resentment:

The servants, seeing in what little estimation the governess was held by both parents and children, regulated their behaviour by the same standard. I have frequently stood up for them, at the risk of some injury to myself, against the tyranny and injustice of their young masters and mistresses; and I always endeavoured to give them as little trouble as possible; but they entirely neglected my comfort, despised my requests, and slighted my directions. All servants, I am convinced, would not have done so; but domestics in general, being ignorant, and little accustomed to reason and reflection, are too easily corrupted by the carelessness and bad example of those above them; and these, I think, were not of the best order to begin with. 1

In the same novel Miss Murray is dissected with frightening precision and not a little malice:

'Miss Grey,' said she, one evening, a month before the all-important day, as I was perusing a long and extremely interesting letter of my sister's which I had just glanced at,

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1. Agnes Grey, 1847, Chap. vii, p.127.

in the morning, to see that it contained no very bad news, and kept it till now, unable <sup>to</sup> find a quiet moment for reading it. 'Miss Grey, do put away that dull, stupid letter, and listen to me!' 'I'm sure my talk must be far more amusing than that.'

[She seated herself on the low stool at my feet; and I, suppressing a sigh of vexation, began to fold up the epistle.

'You should tell the good people at home not to bore you with such long letters,' said she; 'and above all, do bid them write on proper note-paper, and not on those great vulgar sheets! You should see the charming little lady-like notes mamma writes to her friends.' 1

It is noticeable that Anne Brontë's attack upon Miss Murray is directed against the thoughtlessness of self-centred triviality of her existence. There is a complete lack of feeling for others in her assumption that Agnes' letter from home must be 'dull', and the shallowness of her approach to life is betrayed by her preference for 'the charming little notes mamma writes' to 'those great vulgar sheets.' If, as I have said, the stereotyped posturings of the social elite are the domestic counterpart of the mouthings of the political Aristocracy,<sup>2</sup> then the above passages provide an interesting complement to the weightier battles of Carlyle and Disraeli. All three picture an upper class incapable of fulfilling any useful function. Indeed, as Miss Brontë clearly sees, the world of fashion is not merely a manifestation of the absence of any social concern among the upper class, but positively harmful in its tendency to corrupt the 'servants'.

Thus this general discussion of both the literature and politics of the eighteen-forties may be seen to emphasise a single point: in a decade of change the privileged class had become an anachronism, unfitted and more

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1. Agnes Grey, Chap. viii, p.131.

2. See p. 12 above.

seriously, unwilling to deal with the problems that such a decade presented. The agitation against the Corn Laws had shown that the interests of the ruling class were directly opposed to those of the people, and the repeal of those Laws had made it clear that hereditary power was in decline. It is hardly surprising that such an institution, seemingly politically doomed and openly socially unconcerned, should fall into contempt. Certainly it was a contempt that Dickens shared and which he publicly declared in the Coodle and Doodle episodes in Bleak House. In that novel, as later in Little Dorrit, Dickens had to say to 'the Idle Aristocracy' many things 'painful and not pleasant!'

## 3

The discussion so far has centred around the 'New Spirit of the Age' and its expression in the literature and politics of the eighteen-forties. It is now necessary to turn from the general issues that dominated this stage of Dickens's career to more specific influences upon his treatment of High Society.

As we have seen the popularity of the silver-fork novel began to decline in the eighteen-thirties, and in the eighteen-forties this process continues. If we look at the advertisements for new publications in Bentley's Miscellany between July and December 1843 we find the fashionable novel easily outnumbered by its historical and oriental rivals. Six are listed, including, needless to say, a new work by Mrs. Gore. For the corresponding period in 1845 only three are advertised of which two 'new publications' had already been announced in 1843. This certainly suggests falling sales though it was by no means the end of the genre. In 'Punch's Prize Novelists', Thackeray

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can still make capital out of the excesses of Mrs. Gore, and as late as eighteen-fifty-six, Cuthbert Bede produced his burlesque 'Mammons Marriage by Mrs. Bore, Authoress of Mammon & Salmon, Mothers and Grand-mothers, Peers and Peris, etc.' Thackeray's piece is well known, and Bede's deserves quotation as among the last of a <sup>single</sup> line that includes, it must be remembered, a Dickensian contribution in Nicholas Nickleby.

'We shall soon know who your fair incognito, is, mon cher Fantail,' said Lord Alfred, 'Perchance the sole daughter of the house and heart of the nouveau riche, or the beloved offspring of a knighted mill-owner!' cried Jekyll Jones, gaily.

The Marquis of Fantail did not make any observation; but that the arrow of wit wrankled in his manly bosom, was evident from the spasm of agony that shot across his noble features. 'Alas! If she should be as Jekyll says!' he thought, 'But no; the seal of aristocracy is stamped on her brow!'

'Now for it!' said Lord Alfred.

'The Duchess of Ditchwater and the Lady Alexandrina Coldstream,' was proclaimed, in a loud voice, by an Apollo Belvidere in livery.

'Thank Heaven!' said the Marquis, '~~she~~ <sup>2</sup> is no plebian!'

Though this was written after the period under discussion the mode of attack does not vary. The objects are still the snobbery and triviality of upper class existence. The social implications of this triviality have already been discussed. It is interesting to note that it is not only the Carlyles and Cuthbert Bedes, at different ends of the literary scale, who pinpoint aristocratic frivolity. The criticism was voiced at all levels, and two further

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1. Punch, Vol. III, pp. 237<sup>-8</sup>, 247, 257-8 (June 1847).  
 2. Shilling Book of Beauty, 1856, p. 12.

examples should give some idea of the variety of the criticism and the criticism. The first is by a visitor, 'an American.' The subject is Almack's:

... here the great, or rather the favoured ones, become accustomed to each other's society; and there being no other enterprise on earth worthy the attention of the English aristocracy, they, like wise men, have created this <sup>object of</sup> ambition to prevent their noble faculties from rusting out in the coarse and trivial pursuits of ordinary life. 1

The second comes from Lady Blessington who, if she was a somewhat discredited member of High Society, at least knew what she was talking about:

How dull it is to sit all day,  
With nought on earth to do,  
But think of concerts, balls or routes,  
All evening to go to.  
Perplexed between a robe of pink,  
Or blue celeste, or white,  
Or visits one is forced to pay,  
Or little notes to write.

...                    ...                    ...

And know that each succeeding day  
Will dull be as the rest. 2

It is not surprising that, against so broad-based an attack, the silver-fork novel found it hard to maintain its position. Nor can the Aristocracy, fighting for their political lives, have much appreciated novels that showed them in such an imbecile light.

Further pressure came from the popular weeklies who took up the tradition in their own particular way. The field of cheap fiction during this period is vast and largely uncharted. Major contributions have been made by

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1. 'Almack's', Bentley's Miscellany, December 1841. p. 642
  2. 'Soliloquy of a Modern Fine Lady,' Keepsake, 1845, pp. 185-6.

Dr. Dalziel and Dr. James.<sup>1</sup> Dr. James throughout is concerned with demonstrating the wide range of the penny magazine, while Miss Dalziel specifically warns against a blanket assessment of the fictional 'penny dreadfuls.'<sup>2</sup> Certainly the range is wide, but even in the best of the weeklies the sheer amount of writing the contributors had to do and the audience at which they aimed were hardly conducive to literary excellence. The results are stereotyped situations and forced emotions. Class rivalries are not as in Disraeli or Anne Brontë matters for serious discussion or delicate dissection. Aristocrats are bad and the lower classes are good, and as Louis James has pointed out the situation is utilised for its sensational rather than its political value.<sup>3</sup> The archetypal situation is the meeting between the honest worker and the blasé fashionable. The issue is dramatic but pathetically inconclusive. In the following extract from Thomas Prest's Vice and its Victim Henry, 'a rustic lover'<sup>4</sup> meets the scheming partner of the man who has stolen his intended:

'Aye,' ejaculated Henry, in a tone of bitter sarcasm, 'thou art merry, Captain Beaufort; do doubt you have good cause for mirth. The devil and his imps, they say, do ever exult at the downfall of innocence and virtue. Where is that accursed villain, thy base associate in crime?'

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1. M. Dalziel, Popular Fiction One Hundred Years Ago, 1957; L. James, Fiction for the Working Man, 1963.
  2. Op.cit., pp.15-16.
  3. Op.cit., p.102.
  4. T.P. Prest, Vice and its Victim,<sup>2</sup> 1850, Chap. ii, p.6.



'You are excited, my dear fellow,' replied the Captain with the greatest coolness and composure; 'pr'ythee keep your temper - be cool - be cool. To be sure, it is devilish provoking to be jilted by the little divinities but <sup>thun</sup> you know, my dear fellow, women are as plentiful as blackberries.'

'Taunting devil!' exclaimed Henry passionately. 'I will no longer tamely brook thy unmanly insolence. Brutal ruffian, thus do I resent it!'

With these words he dealt the London exquisite, and abandoned libertine, a violent blow, which felled him to the ground... 1

This may have brought a thrill of satisfaction to the working-class male but it is hardly a profound contribution to what was after all a central problem of the age. Nor indeed is the endlessly repeated picture of the vile seducer gloating over his prize, so obviously drawn from the stereotypes of theatrical melodrama:

'I have triumphed,' he exclaimed, 'my hopes, my wishes are realised. She is mine - mine!' 2

Even when the Aristocracy are the only subject, the writing is ludicrously strained. This is from Mrs. Smerdon who poured a torrent of words into the pages of the London Pioneer:

At the furthest extremity of the room sat a lady clad in the solemn garb of widowhood. One hand hung listlessly over a harp that was placed before her, while, with the other, she fondled a beautiful child of about three years of age, who leant against her knee. On this figure the eye of the stranger rested with a deep and earnest gaze. Softly he approached: he placed his hand gently on her shoulder. The lady started from her seat, and, uttering a wild and hysteric shriek, threw herself into his arms; then, suddenly extricating herself from his grasp, 'Why came you here?' she said, in a proud and haughty tone; 'Why came you here my Lord?' 3

1. Chap. vi, p.13.

2. Chap. vi, p.15.

3. 'The Daughter of the Brigand,' London Pioneer, 21 May 1846.

The London Pioneer prided itself on being a magazine of 'amusement and utility' of which the title page lists forty-six categories ranging from 'Novels, Tales' to 'Jests, Repartees', from 'Domestic Economy' to 'Self Culture', from 'Morals' and 'Manners' to 'Philosophy'. In Mrs. Smerdon's case the morality is as trite as the description.

O, Fashion! fashion! what a cold and heartless thing thou art!  
 Become thy votary, the best feelings of our hearts must be  
 disguised: we should blush at being discovered dropping the  
 tear of sympathy at another's woe. 1

The above illustration represents what seems to me to be the norm of penny fiction. There were of course more lurid examples, notably The Sunday Chronicle, which advertised itself as follows:

Each number contains Tales of the most Absorbing Interest, and which absolutely rivet the attention of the reader with a species of galvanic force. These tales are replete with MYSTERY, HORROR, LOVE AND SEDUCTION. 2

What it lacks in refinement it certainly makes up for in imagination. Included among its items<sup>s</sup> is 'A true and faithful account of an amour of his Royal Highness Prince Albert' in which the Prince remarks, somewhat out of character one feels:

'Had the Queen of England been a hundred years old and as ugly as a she-goat I should have jumped at the offer.' 3

The danger of this kind of fiction, whether it be Prest or the Sunday Chronicle, is that it distorts the issue. Its importance from Dickens' point of view is that this obvious distortion must have made him re-think his own position.

1. Ibid.

2. Sunday Chronicle, 11 April 1841.

3. 18 April 1841.

Certainly he read and disapproved of much cheap fiction. Household Words was a direct attempt to improve the quality of popular reading.

Some tillers of the field into which we now come, have been before us, and some are here whose high usefulness we readily acknowledge, and whose company it is an honour to joint. But, there are others here - Bastards of the Mountain, dragged fringes on the Red Cap, Pandars to the basest passions of the lowest natures - whose existence is a national reproach. And these, we should consider it our highest service to displace. 1

The attack was widely seconded, notably by Fanny Mayne in her pamphlet 'The Perilous Nature of the Penny Periodical Press.' The figures she quotes are astounding:

The circulation of pernicious publications is immense. In 1845 ~~eighteen-forty-five~~ it was calculated from London alone there was a yearly circulation of stamped and unstamped newspapers and serials of a decidedly pernicious character to the extent of 28,862,600! 2

and it is not surprising that with such a circulation she felt the Penny Press to be perilous indeed:

While the ill-disposed and evil-feeling part of the community are using the cheap press to <sup>inoculate</sup> all manners of lawlessness, and to advocate the upsetting of all our time-honoured institutions, there are scarcely any cheap periodicals that 'write up' submission to the powers that be; and that it is the wisdom, as well as the duty, of all in every situation in life, to 'Honour the Queen, and all who are put in authority under her;' that advocate, in short, patriotism, loyalty, and submission, as Christian virtues and duties. 3

Interestingly enough Household Words is a main offender:

Mr. Dickens's "Household Words" for instance, which though it is not exactly a penny work, yet is <sup>US</sup> equally spoken of in the category of the cheap periodical press; though it stands apart from the others, by reason of the

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1. 'A Preliminary Word,' Household Words, 30 March 1850.

2. 'The Perilous Nature of the Penny Periodical Press', 1851, p.8.

3. p.3-4

great talents of the author. While we give all honour to that talent, and to the many flashes of good natural and moral feeling that emanate from his pen, yet, we venture to say that there is scarcely a work in the land that tends <sup>more</sup> to separate class from class, or to make the poor man feel that he is oppressed and overborne by the rich, and that the laws and institutions, and authorities of the country are against him and for them, than Mr. Dickens's "Household Words". 1

The attack is on its politics rather than its qualities, yet though we may disagree about Dickens's weekly, when she points to the 'him' and 'them' Miss Mayne is emphasising the greatest danger of cheap fiction, its tendency to excessive simplification, and, therefore, distortion, of the problem.

The real answer to Miss Mayne's attack on Dickens is Bleak House. This will be treated in a later chapter, but I would like to close my remarks on the cheap press by discussing a curious link between Bleak House and at least one weekly. The comparison will I hope make clear something of Dickens's artistic <sup>c</sup>reaction to the Penny Press.

Reynolds' Weekly Miscellany was among the best and most successful of the cheaper weeklies. Its editor, G.M.W. Reynolds was both a prolific writer and an ardent radical. His Miscellany has a definite political purpose and is full of jibes like the following:

There had been a levee at St. James's Palace that day, - one of those trumpery and nauseating scenes which form the delight of a frivolous, vain, and ostentatious aristocracy ... 2

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1. p.10. fn.

2. 'The Seamstress,' Reynolds' Weekly Miscellany, 4 May 1850.

This comes from his own story 'The Seamstress' serialised in the Miscellany between 23 March and 10 August 1850. The plot is simple: a young seamstress, Virginia Mordant, falls in love with the young Marquis of Acres. Her love is returned, but marriage is of course socially unthinkable until Virginia turns out to be the long-lost daughter of the Marquis' haughty step-mother, the Duchess of Bellamont. The Duchess, it transpires, had fallen unsuitably in love with a penniless Lieutenant in her youth and had been forced to disown the child at birth. The similarity between this and the Esther - Lady Dedlock plot in Bleak House is obvious. When we add the Duchess' fiendishly jealous French 'dame de chambre', who wishes the Marquis for herself, the points of contact are surprising. It must be admitted that lost heirs are common in the popular fiction of this time, but to find one linked with a jealous French maid and a young Lieutenant does suggest at least a possible source for Dickens's plot. There is also a pursuit, though in this case it is Virginia who flies, tricked into believing that the Marquis no longer loves her. The Duchess follows her daughter and arrives just in time to catch the failing girl in her arms before she dies. Whether Dickens knew and used this particular story cannot be proved nor ultimately does it matter. What can be stated with certainty is that Dickens was not averse to utilising many of the elements of popular fiction. It is the way he used them that is important; for <sup>See Heister</sup> ~~Lord~~ and Lady Dedlock, unlike the Duke and Duchess of Bellamont, are not cyphers but people, and the Esther plot is not gratuitous sensationalism but an integral part of the

complex structure of the book.

The cheap press can thus throw light on the development of Dickens's attitude to the Aristocracy in the eighteen-forties. By presenting a grossly simplified, and thus distorted, view of class hostilities it must have increased Dickens's sense of the real complexity of the issue. The evidence of Dickens's work in the eighteen-forties, with its growing tendency to see society whole rather than in easily analysable fragments, bears this out. A comparison of the use made by Dickens and Reynolds of popular story lines shows how far more penetrating, subtle and essentially serious was Dickens's<sup>5</sup> approach. Reynolds' attitude to the Aristocracy, as witnessed by the remark quoted above, is facile and trite. The 'fashionable' scenes in Bleak House, as my chapter on that novel will<sup>1</sup> demonstrate, not only treat the ruling class within the context of society as a whole, but, for all the bitterness of the attack, show a deep understanding and often sympathy for the individual aristocrats.

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At the other end of the journalistic scale, the weekly that most clearly influenced Dickens was Punch. This first appeared in 1841 (17 July) and was the direct successor of Figaro in London. Among the contributors <sup>etc</sup> was Jerrold, Thackeray, and the ex-editor of Figaro, Gilbert A'Beckett.

Apart from the personal links, Punch and Dickens shared the same printer, Bradbury and Evans, and it is fair to assume that Dickens would have read every number when he was in England. Certainly

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1. See Chap.4, below, *passim*.

Punch was quick to take up Dickens's characters: Mrs. Gamp appears in several cartoons and Peel is satirized as a 'Political Pecksniff.'<sup>1</sup> Dickens himself was later to declare to Miss Coutts

I have no influence whatsoever with that Potentate save as may lie in its being owned by my printers, and in my having a personal knowledge of some of its principal contributors. 2

and on occasions he expressed disapproval: the offenders here are Thackeray's burlesques in 'Punch's Prize Novelists':

... in reference to his imitations in Punch ... I had a strong opinion of my own ... it was that they did no honour [sic] to literature or literary men, and should be left to very inferior and miserable hands: which I desired Thackeray to know. 3

But if he criticised particulars, Dickens was certainly in agreement with Punch's general policy. This was to continue the radical traditions of Figaro in London, though as a larger and more expensive production Punch had more room for serious discussion. The hand of A'Beckett is obvious, however, and many of its jibes are pure Figaro:

LORD LONDONDERRY, in a letter to Colonel Fitzroy, begs of the gallant member to 'go the whole hog'. This is natural advice from a thorough bore like his lordship. 4

The Aristocracy came in for a severe battering, and apart from the eternal Lord Londonderry, Punch found fruitful material in the more fatuous utterances of 'Young England.' The following extract

1. Punch, Vol.VII, p.25 (13 July 1844).
2. Nonesuch, i, 772 (25 July 1846).
3. Nonesuch, ii, 29 (9 June 1847).
4. Punch, Vol.I, p.12 (17 July 1841).

from Lord John Manners' England's Trust, and Other Poems was met with justifiable derision.

Though I could bear to view our crowded towns  
Sink into hamlets, or unpeopled downs ...  
Let wealth and commerce, laws and learning die,  
But leave us still our old Nobility! 1

And now, with every wished respect for the ancient aristocracy of England, we must own ~~that~~ we were not aware of its surpassing worth in comparison with wealth and commerce, laws and learning. We were evidently in darkness. Yes; put all the wealth of Britain - all the labours of its law-makers - all the inspiration, as bequeathed in books to us, of its God-gifted men into one scale, and clap an Earl's coronet into the other, and that little ornament shall make all things else kick the beam; that is, when the balance shall be held by the pure and just hands of-Young England! 2

Like Figaro, Punch attacks not only High Society but those who pander to it. The Court Circular, for instance is ruthlessly burlesqued:

On Thursday last the Lady of Paddy Green, personally attended to the laundry; a fortnight's wash took place, when Mrs. Briggs, the charwoman, was in waiting. Mrs. P. Greene, with her accustomed liberality, sent out<sup>10</sup> a quarter of gin and a quarter of an ounce of brown rapee. 3

The prime butt is the Morning Post. Characterised as 'Jenkins' its snobbery and wide-eyed adulation of the 'Beau Monde' are constantly ridiculed. Often, indeed, Punch has only to quote 'the head of the aristocracy of footmen'<sup>4</sup> to make its point. From many possible examples I have chosen the following as a good instance, both of the

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1. Lord John Manners, England's Trust and Other Poems, 1841, pp.23-24.

2. Punch, Vol.VI, p.241 (8 June 1844).

3. Punch, Vol.I, p.255 (11 December 1841).

4. Punch, Vol.IV, p.229 (June 10 1843).



sycophantic awfulness of the Morning Post and of Punch's vigour in attack:

THE <sup>TING</sup> PRINCE OF MECKLENBURG-STRELITZ has received a wife, and moreover, 3,000l. per annum from the pockets of English men. JENKINS was present at the ceremony. He was somehow smuggled into the Royal Chapel, and stood hidden in a corner, hidden by a huge bouquet, quite another Cupid among the roses. Let us, however, proceed to give the 'feelings' of JENKINS; merely promising that we should very much like to see JENKINS, when he feels 'proud, elated and deeply moved.'

(He says -

'We felt alternately proud, elated and deeply moved during the ceremony as in turn we cast a glance at the illustrious witnesses to the solemnity. There was our gracious Queen, beaming with youth and beauty, through which is ever discernable the eagle glance and imposing air of command so well suited to her high station. Next to the Queen the Royal Consort, one of the handsomest Princes of the age, in whom the spirit of youth is so remarkable, tempered by the judgement and wisdom of age. THE QUEEN ADELADE, LIVING MODEL OF EVERY VIRTUE WHICH CAN ADORN A WOMAN, EITHER IN PRIVATE LIFE OR ON A THRONE.'

So far The Morning Post. What says (Perhaps?) an equal authority, The Times?

THE QUEEN DOWAGER WAS PREVENTED FROM BEING PRESENT AT THE CEREMONY IN CONSEQUENCE OF INDISPOSITION.

Ha, JENKINS! This comes of writing copy before the event. But JENKINS is the fellow for seeing the 'Spanish Fleet' even when 'tis not in sight' 1

Snobbery was a favourite theme in the Punch of the eighteen-forties. The classic example is Thackeray's 'Book of Snobs', which appeared from 28 February 1846 to 27 February 1847. As Thackeray makes clear snobbery is a widespread disease:

Snobbishness is like Death in a quotation from Horace, which I hope you never have heard, 'beating with equal foot at poor men's doors, and kicking at the gates of

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1. Punch, Vol.V, p.13 (8 July, 1843).

Emperors.' It is a great mistake to judge of Snobs lightly, and think they exist among the lower classes merely. An immense percentage of Snobs I believe is to be found in every rank of this mortal life. 1

The blame lies squarely on the class-structure of society, where success is measured by the social position of oneself and one's acquaintance:

[How can we help Snobbishness, with such a prodigious national institution erected for its worship? How can we help cringing to Lords? Flesh and blood can't do otherwise. What man can withstand this prodigious temptation? Inspired by what is called a noble emulation, some people grasp at honours and win them; others, too weak or mean, blindly admire and grovel before those who have gained them; others, not being able to acquire them, furiously hate, abuse, and envy. There are only a few bland and not-in-the-least conceited philosophers, who can behold the state of society, viz., Toadyism, organised: ... SNOBBISHNESS, in a word, perpetuated, and mark the phenomenon calmly. 2

In view of this the Aristocracy cannot be blamed for their condescending attitude to the 'other ranks':

[If you, who are a person of the middle ranks of life, are a Snob - you whom nobody flatters particularly; you who have no toadies; you whom no cringing flunkeys or shopmen bow out of doors; you whom the policeman tells to move on; you who are jostled in the crowd of this world, and amongst the Snobs our bretheren: consider how much harder it is for a man to escape who has not your advantages, and is all his life long subject to adulation ... 3

It is significant that such a work should have been produced in the eighteen-forties. We are in fact back in the world of the

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1. 'Prefatory Remarks,' Punch, Vol.X, p.101 (28 February 1846).
  2. Chap.iii, Punch, Vol.x, p.125 (21 March 1846).
  3. Chap. v, Punch, Vol.x, p.147 (4 April 1846)'

'Haves' and 'Have-nots', among the class rivalries detailed above. The basis of Snobbery is the wish to be and appear more than you are. At the same time it is the desire to maintain the position that you hold. Thackeray's recognition of the universal nature of snobbery points to an important development in the thinking of the eighteen-forties. Once one freely admits a general desire to encroach upon the class above and defend oneself from the class below, then it is society as a whole that is to blame for its problems, and not one particular section of it. Justice and equality are hard to obtain in the context of a social rat-race. By the fifties Dickens clearly saw this as the major evil:

I am hourly strengthened in my old belief that our political aristocracy and our tuft-hunting are the death of England.<sup>1</sup>

Snobbery and 'tuft-hunting' clearly imply a society with ample opportunities for these pursuits; one does not, after all, try to better oneself and one's acquaintances if there is no chance. The surest guarantee for success here is the possession of money. I do not wish to suggest that wealth as a social power was a new phenomenon in the eighteen-forties, but certainly in that decade, as the political power of the Aristocracy visibly declined, so the possibility of social access, at least to its lower ranks, increased. More importantly the social power of money was openly recognised. It is a major theme in Thackeray's novels and the classic case is that of the delightfully vulgar Lady Clavering who is 'took up'<sup>2</sup> socially because 'the legend in London, upon her Ladyship's arrival in the polite metropolis, was, that her fortune was <sup>enormous</sup> ~~immense~~.'<sup>3</sup> Thackeray's analysis of this is masterly:

Under the title of the Begum, Lady Clavering's fame began to spread in London before she herself descended upon the Capital,

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1. Nonesuch, ii, 622 (3 February 1855).
  2. W.M.Thackeray, Pendennis, 1849, Vol. I, Chap. xxxviii, p.373.
  3. Vol.I, Chap. xxxviii, pp. 368-9.

and as it has been the boast of Delome<sup>e</sup>, and Blackstone, and all panegyrist of the British Constitution, that we admit into our aristocracy merit of every kind, and that the lowliest-born man, if he but deserve it, may wear the robes of a peer, and sit alongside of a Cavendish or a Stanley: So it ought to be the boast of our good society, ~~that~~ haughty though it be, naturally jealous of its privileges, and careful who shall be admitted into its circle, yet if an individual be but rich enough, all barriers are instantly removed, and he or she is welcomed, as from her wealth he merits to be (sic). This fact shows our British independence and honest feeling - our higher orders are not such mere haughty aristocrats as the ignorant represent them: on the contrary, if a man have money they will hold out their hands to him, eat his dinners, dance at his balls, marry his daughters, or give their own lovely girls to his sons, as affably, as your commonest roturier would do. 1

The loci classici in Dickens's works are Dombey, Mardle, and the Boffins, where with increasing bitterness Dickens points the fact that High Society 'if a man have money ... will hold out their hands to him.' 2

The growing power of wealth in the eighteen-forties will be dealt with more fully in the chapter on Dombey and Son 3 but it would have been wrong to leave a discussion of the background to Dickens's development <sup>in</sup> to this decade without mentioning an element which was helping to blur traditional social distinctions. Along with the political upheaval of the eighteen-forties, money was one of the factors that began to make accepted ideas of the perogatives of the upper class another of the lightships that 'had broken from thier moorings.'

## 5

This chapter up to now has been concerned with charting some of the major influences of the development of Dickens's attitude towards High

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1. Vo. I, Chap. xxxviii, pp. 368-9.

2. See Chaps. 3, 4 and 5 below.

3. See Chap. 3, below, pp. 174-180.

Society in the eighteen-forties. To discuss the various elements properly it has been necessary to isolate them. The inevitable result is a fragmentary picture. It would be pleasant to be able to fit the pieces together into a neat generalisation. In an age of change and its corollary, vigorous discussion, this is not possible. Indeed it is this impossibility that I wish to stress. What emerges is the fact that the condition of England in the eighteen-forties allowed of no simple solution. Carlyle attacks the Aristocracy as outmoded and useless; but this demand for great men is in fact a recognition of a failing in society as a whole. In Disraeli's 'Two Nations' the Bishop of Wodgate is no better than Lord Marney, and Egremont possesses virtues, noticeably flexibility, unknown to Stephen Morley. The existence of a universal malaise becomes apparent in the eighteen-forties, and certainly in the next decade Dickens's exasperation with the state of the country is directed at the people as a whole and not at one section of it:

What with teaching ~~the~~ people to 'keep in their state-  
ments', what with bringing up the soul and body of the  
land to be a good child, or to go to the beer-shop, to  
go a-poaching and to go to the devil; what with having  
no such thing as a middle class (for though we are  
perpetually bragging of it as our safety, it is nothing  
but a poor fringe on the mantle of the upper); what with  
flunkyism, toadyism, letting the most contemptible lords  
come in for all manner of places, reading the Court  
Circular for the New Testament, I do reluctantly believe  
that the English people are habitually consenting parties  
to the miserable imbecility into which we have fallen,  
and never will help themselves out of it. Who is to do  
it, if anybody is, God knows. But at present we are on  
the down-hill road to being conquered, and the people  
WILL be content to bear it, sing 'Rule Britannia,' and

WILL NOT be saved. 1

As I have suggested in Part One, in the period up to Barnaby Dickens moved progressively away from a stock assessment of the Aristocracy. He began to see them as individuals rather than as a single entity. At that stage of his career this was largely the result of Dickens's artistic integrity; he was 'par excellence' the creator of individuals. In the forties this instinctive insight became open recognition. Nor is Dickens alone in realising that a Lord's a Man for a' that. Writing in the Heads of <sup>the</sup> People both Thackeray and E. Chatfield are at pains to point out the essential sameness of aristocrat and artizan:

[We beg to inform those unfortunate people who have never yet had the chance of seeing a lord, that there are various kinds: tall lords and short lords - handsome and ugly - amiable and irritable - clever and stupid - in short, varying like men of common clay... 2

And Thackeray makes

... that humiliating confession, that lords and ladies are personally unknown to him; ... But he hath heard it whispered, from pretty good authority, that the manners and customs of these men and women resemble, in no considerable degree, the habits and usages of other men and women, whose names are unrecorded by Debrett. 3

It is Dickens's increasing awareness of aristocratic individuality and the complexity of the social problems that I wish now to trace through the years between Barnaby Rudge and Dombey and Son.

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1. Nonesuch, ii, 695 (4 October 1855).
  2. E. Chatfield, 'The Old Lord,' Heads of People, Vol. I, 1840, p. 75.
  3. W.M. Thackeray, 'The Fashionable Authoress', Heads of the People, Vol. II, 1841, p. 78.

The eighteen-forties saw considerable enlarging of Dickens's aristocratic acquaintance. His letters are scattered with noble names, most of them far more respectable than that of Lady Blessington to whose Keepsake he contributed. Many of considerable social and political importance became close personal friends. Chief among these was Lord Mulgrave whom Dickens met on the voyage to America and found 'a good 'un to go.'<sup>1</sup> They acted together in Montreal and after Dickens's return to England he was introduced to Mulgrave's father, the Marquis of Normanby, himself a novelist in his youth. Normanby was a distinguished statesman; he became Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in 1838 and was successively Colonial Secretary and Home Secretary in Lord Melbourne's administration. Dickens got to know him well - 'I dined with Lord Normanby on Sunday last'<sup>2</sup> - and Normanby presided over the farewell dinner to Dickens before his departure to Italy in July 1844.<sup>3</sup> Dombey and Son was later dedicated to the Marchioness of Normanby. Besides being an eminent Statesman, Lord Normanby was something of a socialite. His name appears daily in the list of callers to enquire after the Queen's health after the birth of her daughter in May 1846. On 29 May of that year he attends an exclusive ball at the Austrian embassy and the next day appears at a Fete given for the Duke of Devonshire.<sup>4</sup> It says something for his energy that he found time for all this as well as being a

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1. Nonesuch, i, 373 (17 January 1842).

2. Nonesuch, i, 819, (2 December 1846).

3. See Forster, iv, 3 (Vol. II, p. 86).

4. See 'Court Circular', Morning Post, 29, 30, 31 May 1846; 1 June 1846.

statesman, writer and friend of literary men. In the Normannies Dickens<sup>1</sup> certainly had friends in high places, as also in 'the frank and hearty' Lord Nugent whom he entertained at Devonshire Terrace and who was no less than the younger brother of the Duke of Buckingham.

Naturally enough Dickens was drawn particularly to those members of the Aristocracy who shared his dedication to social reform. The obvious example is Lord Ashley, later Earl of Shaftesbury, whom both Dickens and Carlyle<sup>2</sup> 'honoured'. A later friend was Lord Morpeth, and<sup>3</sup> ardent supporter of the Anti-Corn-Law League. In 1843 he contributed to Dickens's fund for the children of the dead actor Elton, and Dickens's letter of thanks is clearly sincere:

I have long esteemed you and been your distant but very truthful admirer; and trust that it is a real pleasure and happiness to me to anticipate the time when we shall have a nearer intercourse. <sup>3</sup>

By November 1845 they had met, and Dickens writes of his 'pleasure in seeing you the other day' and continues:

I shall consider all opportunities of becoming better known to you among the most fortunate and desirable occasions of my life. And that I am with your conviction about the probability of our liking each other, and, as Lord Lyndhurst might say, with 'something more.' <sup>4</sup>

Even Punch approved to the extent of calling him 'Nature's nobleman'.<sup>5</sup>

1. Forster, vi, 6 (Vol. II p.441).

2. Nonesuch, i, 352 (13 September 1841), and Past and Present, Book IV, Chap. vi, p.381.

3. Nonesuch i, 531 (3 August 1843).

4. Nonesuch ix, 723 (28 November 1845).

5. Punch, Vol. X p.240 (10 May 1846).



Morpeth later became Seventh Earl of Carlisle and must have shown Dickens that a lengthy pedigree does not necessarily mean a narrow mind. M. Halévy chooses to dismiss him as 'eccentric',<sup>1</sup> but he was clearly a practical eccentric. In the debate on the Corn Bill the Annual Register reports him as saying:

...That he had lived two years in the heart of the<sup>an</sup> agricultural district; and that circumstance had led him to the conclusion, that the protection, which you profess to preserve for the benefit of the farmer and the agricultural labourer, was nothing but a misnomer and a positive injury to both. 2

But most important of all was Dickens long association with Miss, Later Baroness, Burdett-Coutts. Her name united the wealth of her grandfather, the Banker Thomas Coutts, and the social position of her father, the radical Sir Francis Burdett. Dickens had probably first met her when a young man at the house of the Banker Edward Marjoribanks. Though Miss Coutts moved in the best circles she shared Dickens's social idealism and used her vast fortunes to a variety of charitable ends. In 1847 she and Dickens founded an asylum for the rehabilitation of prostitutes. This is first referred to in a letter of 26 May 1846<sup>3</sup> and one is amazed by the detail of Dickens's plan. This first enthusiasm never failed and in letter after letter Dickens enters into the minute problems of the day-to-day running of the home.

The results of this closer association with the upper class are clear enough. Leaving the novels aside, Dickens's pronouncements on individual members of High Society in the eighteen-forties are noticeable for their

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1. E. Halévy, op.cit., Vol.IV, p.158.

2. Annual Register, 1846, p.48.

3. Nonesuch, i, 749 - 754.

impartiality and will<sup>n</sup>igness to judge each case on its merits. Dickens is always ready to attack where attack was necessary. In the Morning Chronicle of 20 October 1842 Dickens turn<sup>ed</sup> on the Marquis of Londonderry for his opposition to Lord Ashley's Mines and Collieries Bill.

On reference to the debate of the first of August, it will be found that the noble Marqu<sup>ess</sup> and elegant author, expressed himself to this effect:- "For his part, if an inspector came to him and asked permission to inspect his works, he should say, 'get down how you can; ~~and~~ when you get down, you may get back how you can'" - which speech, and which reference, are at once tasteful, generous, pleasant, and whimsical.

Lord Londonderry had addressed an open letter to Lord Ashley on the report of the Colliery Commission. Dickens quotes the passages that particularly give offence. Londonderry abuses those who;

'led astray by false reports ... forget that men are not all born to read and write, but that they must obtain, by the sweat of their brows the food for the mouth as well as the mind.'

and calls the report 'absurd and exaggerated':

'Up to the age of ten allows sufficient time to acquire the rudiments of education on which to build in future when occasion may require.'

Dickens counters by ridiculing the Marquis' English:

[That all men are not born to read and write, is a very wise and profound remark. It is full of truth. There be Lords who are not born to write one correct sentence in the language of the country they have represented abroad, and who, if they be born to read at all, are born to be never the better for it.

and when Lord Londonderry claims that the report lacks 'creditable and proper evidence,' Dickens finishes him off in typical style:

To this piece of writing, however, we cannot award the praise of originality. Both Winifred Jenkins and Mrs. Malaprop use 'creditable' for credible. So do hackney coachmen frequently, and costermongers, always.

On the other hand, when the Duke of Richmond got into trouble with Punch, Dickens rallied to his support. The main cause of the trouble was the Duke's presidency of the Agricultural Protection Society. On 10 January 1845, Punch printed a parody of a society circular:

I am directed by his Grace, the excellent and unflinching President of the Agricultural Protection Society, to inform you that the present awful state of affairs requires an early meeting; say, the 12th<sup>th</sup> January. You will remember that, on a memorable occasion, his Grace threatened, on certain provocation being given, to turn out SIR ROBERT PEEL. His Grace is quite ready to keep his word! Backed and strengthened by the 'agricultural mind,' his Grace looks forward to the place of Premier with the liveliest satisfaction. 1

The actual circular had appeared in the Morning Post of 24 December 1845. Though long, it is worth quoting in full for it points the considerable distortion of Punch's version.

Sir, I am directed by his Grace, the President of the Agricultural Protection Society to inform you that, in the present position of affairs in regard to the agricultural interest, it is most desirable that every chairman or vice-chairman of a local association, who can possibly be present at the next meeting of the general committee of the Central Society, on Tuesday, the 6th of January, should attend on that occasion. I am further instructed to add, on the part of the committee, their earnest hopes that the country associates will not relax in those

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1. 'The Richmond War <sup>Trump</sup> ~~Thrum~~', Punch, Vol.X, p.31.

exertions already recommended to them by the Central Society in regard to memorials and petitions to the Queen and the Parliament, in as much as there is every reason to believe that the necessity for exertion has by no means abated, but has on the contrary, very materially increased. I also beg to inform you that the President has considered it necessary (in exercise of the power vested in his Grace by its by-laws) to call a special general meeting of the Society, and that such meetings will take place at No.17 Old Bond Street, on Monday<sup>12th</sup> January at one o'clock.

The parody was followed by further attacks on Richmond and it is thought that Miss Coutts asked Dickens if he could stop them.<sup>1</sup>

His reply is a model of fairness:

You may guess how powerful my influence is, when I tell you that during my Stage Management of the amateur play ... I spoke to the gentleman most prominent among them, about that very Duke - more than once - and said that I believed him to be an excellent creature. That I had myself received the most remarkable courtesy from him, and that I knew that in his treatment of his Governess, and of others about him, he was a bright example to three fourths of the middle-classes. The gentleman to whom I spoke, laughed about it, and said that there was no ill nature in their jokes at his expense, and that they merely jested at peculiarities of speech and manner that were generally notorious. After this conversation, or about the same time, however, the Duke happened to make a very unfortunate and apparently unfeeling speech, about the diseased potatoes. This, Punch resented and took in great dudgeon. Between ourselves, I really hardly know how they could have done otherwise, for it was especially ill-chosen and ill-timed. But both on the occasions to which I have referred, and since, I have championed him strongly, and in the same quarter. 2

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1. The letter from Miss Coutts does not survive and Dickens himself does not mention which Duke he is talking about. However, the reference to the 'unfeeling speech about the diseased potatoes' and the number of attacks directed by Punch against Richmond makes the identification almost certain. The matter is at present under review by the editors of the Pilgrim Letters.
  2. Nonesuch, i.772-3(25 July 1846).

The 'unfortunate and apparently unfeeling speech' is almost certainly that made by the Duke of Richmond at a dinner at Steyn-  
ing on 8 December 1845. Discussing the potato famine, the Duke  
remarked:

that the crop of potatoes at Lisbon was never better  
than this year; and if there should be a failure in  
this country, there would be no difficulty in bring-  
ing potatoes from that country to this at a price  
which, if beyond the labourers' means, the landowners  
ought to pay for. 1

If Dickens <sup>5</sup> referring to this speech then his choice of words -  
'unfortunate and apparently unfeeling' - is extraordinarily apt and  
fair, for the Duke's suggestion is not as callous as it first appears.  
His belief that the Landowners ought to pay for the import of potat-  
oes from Lisbon, if a little naive, is not ungenerous. Whether  
Dickens was referring to Richmond or not, the point of his letter is  
clear enough: Dickens in his eagerness to be fair, is only too will-  
ing to defend the personal qualities of a man to whose political  
opinions he was radically opposed.

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The highlight of Dickens's personal experience during this period  
was his first trip to America. This trip was to have a profound  
effect on his social thinking. He went with high hopes and a defin-  
ite predisposition in favour of those who had received his work so  
enthusiastically:

To think that I have awakened a fellow-feeling and  
sympathy with the creatures of many thoughtful hours

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1. See Times, 10 December 1845. I am indebted to the editors of the  
Pilgrim Letters for this reference. Until their researches the  
Duke's speech had been untraced.

among the vast solitudes in which you dwell, is a source of the purest delight and pride to me; and believe me that your expressions of affectionate remembrance and approval, sounding from the green forest on the banks of the Mississippi, sank deeper into my heart and gratify it more than all the honorary distinctions that all the courts in Europe could confer. 1

The copyright question aside, the outcome of his trip was total disillusionment:

This is not the republic that I came to see; this is not the republic of my imagination. I definitely prefer a liberal monarchy - even with its sickening accompaniments of court circulars - to such a government as this. The more I think of its use and strength, the poorer and more trifling in a thousand aspects it appears in my eyes. In everything of which it has made a boast - excepting its education of the people and its care for poor children - it sinks immeasurably below the level I had placed upon it; and England, even England, bad and faulty as the old land is, and miserable as millions of her people are, rises in comparison. Freedom of opinions! Where is it? I see a press more mean, and paltry, and silly, and disgraceful than any country I ever knew. If that is its standard, here it is ... the man who comes to this country a Radical and goes home again with his opinions unchanged, must be a Radical on reason, sympathy, and reflection, and one who has so well considered the subject that he has no chance of wavering. 2

The democratic Utopia turned out to be the home of bigotry, injustice and prejudice, the very antithesis of what he expected.

In American Notes with restraint and in Martin Chuzzlewit without it, he attacks the naivety, narrow mindedness and corruption of the Americans. Eden becomes the type of that corruption and Martin's disappointment is Dickens's own:

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1. Nonesuch, i, 301 (23 February 1841).
  2. Martin Chuzzlewit, 1844, Chap. xxiii, p. 284.  
Nonesuch, i, 413-4 (22 March 1841)

[As they proceeded further on their track, and came more and more towards their journey's end, the monotonous desolation of the scene increased to that degree, that for any redeeming feature it presented to their eyes, they might have entered, into the body, on the grim domains of Giant Despair. A flat morass, bestrewn <sup>with</sup> fallen timber; a marsh on which the good growth of the earth seemed to have been wrecked and cast away, that from its decomposing ashes vile and ugly things might arise; where the very trees took the aspect of huge weeds, begotten of the slime from which they sprung, by the hot sun that burns them up; where fatal maladies, seeking whom they might infect, come forth, at night, in misty shapes, and creeping out upon the water, hunted them like spectres until day; where even the blessed sun, shining down on festering elements of corruption and disease, became a horror; this was the realm of Hope through which they moved. 1

In America Dickens saw the anarchy against which he had warned in Barnaby become reality, and in Martin Chuzzlewit, Colonel Chollop with his 'tickler' is presented as the personification of licensed violence.

That England, with all its faults rose 'in comparison' we have already seen. In America Dickens was made aware of the dangers of a society which without any leaders, however undivinely appointed, is free to go in any direction it pleases. His stays in Italy and Switzerland only confirmed, though in a different way, that the situation in England, if not perfect, was by no means the worst possible. In comparison with the Italian and Swiss, the English Aristocracy must have appeared models of virtue:

What would I give that you should see the lazzaroni as they really are - mere squalid, abject, miserable animals for vermin to batten on; slouching, slinking, ugly, shabby, scavenging scarecrows! And oh the raffish counts

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1. Martin Chuzzlewit, 1844, Chap. xxiii, p.284.

and more than doubtful countesses, the noodles and the blacklegs, the good society! 1

... you have no conception of the preposterous, insolent little aristocracy of Geneva: the most ridiculous caricature the fancy can suggest of what we know in England. 2

Though we must not underestimate the importance of Dickens's American and Continental experiences it must be emphasised that they influenced the quality rather than the direction of his social thinking. They did not make Dickens any less a social reformer but they gave him a clearer idea of the problems involved. The heartless and the vain like Sir Joseph and Lady Bowley in The Chimes are still to be pilloried, but Dickens is better equipped to see that heartlessness and vanity are not peculiar to their class. Martin Chuzzlewit, though it is not among the most obviously 'social' of Dickens's novels, illustrates precisely this tendency in its portrayal of the universal nature of selfishness.

Martin Chuzzlewit and the Christmas Books will be discussed more fully in the next chapter. My concern in this chapter has been <sup>with</sup> ~~in~~ the background, literary and social, to the development of Dickens's treatment of High Society in the eighteen-forties.

As we have seen, the decade is one of change and therefore of contradictions. From Dickens's point of view, however, the political and social discussions of the forties, both literary and parliamentary, must have clarified his belief that the ruling class, with

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1. Nonesuch, i. 658 (11 February 1845).

2. Nonesuch, i. 798 (11 October 1846).



its claim to benevolent patronage, was a sham, and the frivolity of its 'social' life a scandal. At the same time Dickens could see that the apathy of the middle class was equally scandalous and that the ills of Society were traceable as much to an indifference to others inherent in all men as to an outdated hereditary ruling class. In addition, Dickens's own increasing acquaintance among the upper class showed him that a baronet is not a priori bad and that good and evil exist in all classes alike. Finally the stays abroad made it clear that other political systems and other aristocracies could be worse than those at home. This, combined with a natural reaction against the facile social comment of the penny press, must have given him a truer sense of the real complexity of the situation.

It is for these reasons, I think, that in Martin Dickens moved from castigation of specific social abuses to an analysis of one universal vice. It is for these reasons also that there are no more Sir Mulberry Hawks or Chesters in Dickens's novels. From Barnaby on, however, much as Dickens despised the Aristocracy as an institution, he is always fair to individual aristocrats. Equally when members of the upper class are pilloried it is for failing in their social duty, and the same attack is made against individuals in every class. Sir Mulberry's vices are seen in isolation and no attempt is made to relate them to society as a whole; in Bleak House the manoeuverings of the Coodle and Doodle are part of a complex social pattern.

CHAPTER TWOMartin and the Christmas Books

The main subject of this Chapter, Martin Chuzzlewit, is, as I have said, more socially confined than most of Dickens's novels. Despite the impression of inclusiveness given by the amount of movement in the novel and its wide geographical range, the picture of society is limited to Mrs. Gamp at one end of the scale and the brass-and-copper founder at the other. This spectrum might be considered wide enough, but in comparison with say Bleak House, Little Dorrit or Nicholas Nickleby, it is decidedly restricted. Further, Dickens is not concerned in Martin Chuzzlewit with attacking specific social abuse. Much the same could be said of the Christmas Books; though The Chimes is an obvious exception and also touches on more social levels than Martin. There are of course peripheral attacks - no Dickens novel could be without them - and one can instance the remarks on slavery in Martin Chuzzlewit, the figures of Ignorance and Want in a Christmas Carol, and the ragged child in The Haunted Man. Nevertheless these are of secondary importance in a series of works whose primary subject matter is personal rather than social morality.

It would appear, therefore, that these books can contribute little to our understand<sup>ing</sup> of Dickens's development as a critic

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of High Society. Yet Martin especially is a key work in this development. Its importance lies in Dickens's concentration upon the moral nature of Mankind rather upon the moral failings of specific individuals or classes. As I have suggested in an earlier chapter, the first move in this direction is made in Barnaby. In Martin the aim is specific and deliberate: the novel is to show 'more or less by every person introduced, the number and variety of humours and vices that have their root in selfishness.'<sup>1</sup> In the Preface to the first edition of the novel<sup>2</sup> Dickens makes clear the reason for his choice:

[I set out, on this journey which is now concluded; with the design of exhibiting, in various aspects, the commonest of all the vices.

In the sense, therefore, that selfishness is common to all men, the social range of the novel could not be wider. In the same way the Christmas Books with their insistence upon benevolence and general worthiness, are equally applicable to all classes of society.

It is interesting to note that while we may find a lack of social range in Martin Chuzzlewit, at least one contemporary reviewer disagreed. Dickens's novels, he says

.... possess the unusual credit of exposing the foibles of all classes alike, having moreover a decidedly moral tendency, in teaching some useful lesson ... Like a sensible man, he does not merely catch the foibles and follies of the great and wealthy, but exposes even the professional delinquencies, foibles of a monthly nurse.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Forster, iv, 1. (Vol. II, p.24).

2. London, 1844, p.vii.

3. Monthly Review, September 1844. pp. 137-145

It is hard to see Dickens catching very firmly 'the foibles and follies of the great and wealthy' in Martin Chuzzlewit. The reviewer is presumably referring to Ruth Pinch's employers, the awful snobbery of the Norris family and the scene in which Jonas is lured by Pip and Wolf's anecdotes of their aristocratic acquaintances. His first sentence, however, states precisely the importance of the novel in this study: Martin Chuzzlewit does indeed have a 'decidedly moral tendency' and its lesson, like that of the Christmas Books, is directed at 'all classes alike.' In this it is Dickens's first real attempt to dig beneath the surface of Society and unearth in man's own viciousness the causes of Society's ills.

Interestingly enough one can show how deliberately Dickens was widening his horizons here. The Punch of 18 September 1841 carries the following article by Jerrold:

The Corn Laws and Christianity.

(On Dr. Chalmer's suggestion that the cure for social evil is universal Christian education.)

We perfectly agree with the reverend doctor. Instead of shipping missionaries to Africa, let us keep these Christian sages at home for the instruction of the English Aristocracy. When we consider the benighted condition of the elegant savages of the western squares, - when we reflect upon the dreadful scepticism abounding in Park Lane, Mayfair, Portland Place and its vicinity, - when we contemplate the abominable idols which these unhappy natives worship in their ignorance, - when we know that every thought, every act of their mispent life is dedicated to a false religion, when they make hourly and daily sacrifice to that brazen Serpent!

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## S E L F !

When they offer up the poor man's sweat to the abomination, - when they lay before it the crippled child of the factory, - when they take from life its bloom and dignity, and degrading human nature to mere brute breathing, make offering of its wretchedness as the most savoury morsel, to the perpetual craving of their insatiate god - when we consider all the 'manifold sins and wickedness' of barbarians in purple and fine linen, of these paper savages 'whose eyes are red with wine and whose teeth white with milk,' - we do earnestly hope that the suggestion of Dr. Chalmers will be carried into immediate practical effect, and that Missionaries, preaching true Christianity, will be sent among the rich and benighted people of this country, - so that the poor may believe that the Scriptures are something more than printed paper, seeing their glorious effect in the awakened hearts of those who, in the arrogance of their old idolatry, called themselves their betters.<sup>1</sup>

At this time Dickens was bringing Barnaby to a close and beginning to think seriously about his new novel. In October 1841 he addresses the readers of Master Humphrey's Clock as follows :

.... I have, after long consideration, and with special reference to the next new tale I bear in mind, arrived at the conclusion that it will be better to abandon this scheme of publication in favour of our old and well-tried plan, which has only twelve gaps in a year, instead of fifty-two....

On the First of November, Eighteen Hundred and Forty Two, I propose, if it pleases God, to commence my new book in monthly parts, under the old green cover, in the old size and form, and at the old price.

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1. Vol. I, p.114.

It is not until November of 1842 that Dickens is 'plotting and contriving a new book,'<sup>1</sup> but we have Forster's word for it that the notion of taking Pecksniff for a type of character was really the origin of the book; 'the design being to show, more or less by every person introduced, the number and variety of humours and vices that have their root in selfishness.'<sup>2</sup>

It seems unlikely that Jerrold's article with its dramatic heightening of 'SELF', did not influence Dickens at a time when the project and form of a new novel were clearly in his mind.

The point of course is that for Jerrold selfishness is an aristocratic vice, for Dickens it is universal:

'Heaven help us we have much to answer for!  
Oh self, self, self! Every man for himself,  
and no creature for me! Universal self! was  
there nothing of its shadow in these reflections,  
and in the history of Martin Chuzzlewit, on his  
own showing?'<sup>3</sup>

Jerrold knew Dickens well, and his influence on Martin Chuzzlewit can I think be further evidenced. From July 1842 he produced a series of 'Punch's Letters to His Son,' setting out the qualities, or lack of them, needed for success in 'Society'. Particularly interesting is the letter on 'The Necessity of Hypocrisy' which appeared in early October 1842:

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1. Nonesuch, i, 487 (12 November 1842).
  2. Forster, iv, i (Vol. II, p.24).
  3. Martin Chuzzlewit, 1844, Chap. iii, p.32.

[My son, never see the meanness<sup>25</sup> of mankind. Let men hedge, and shirk, and shift, and lie, and with faces of unwrinkled adamant tell the most monstrous falsehoods - either in their self-glorification, or to disguise some habitual paltiness, still never detect the untruth, never lay your finger on the patch they have so bunglingly sewed upon their moral coat, but let them depart with the most religious persuasion that they have triumphantly bamboozled you. <sup>1</sup>

Dickens, as we have seen, began to 'plot and contrive' Martin in November, and must have been affected by this letter, as indeed by the whole expose of Man's depravity. Jerrold's criticism is directed against those at the top of society. If Dickens was influenced by his attack on the selfishness of the aristocracy then it says something for his breadth of vision and the maturity of his social thinking that in isolating the vice he did not confine himself to the class.

## 2

Love of self, as Old Martin is to complain<sup>2</sup> is 'universal' in this novel. Part of Dickens's purpose is to show that it is universal outside it as well. Pecksniff, in one of his homilies to his daughter, asserts that 'There is nothing personal in morality', and like him Dickens surely means his subject to be 'mankind in general, the human race considered as a body and not as individuals.'<sup>3</sup>

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1. Punch, Vol.III, p.149.

2. Chap. iii, p.32.

3. Chap. ii.p. 11.

In the first chapter, Dickens makes it clear that we are to regard the world of Martin Chuzzlewit as the World at large :

This history, having, to its own perfect satisfaction, (and, consequently) <sup>to</sup> the full contentment of all its readers,) proved the Chuzzlewits to have had an origin, and to have been at one time or other of an importance which cannot fail to render them highly improving and acceptable acquaintance to all right-minded individuals, may now proceed in earnest with its task. And having shown that they must have had, by reason of their ancient birth, a pretty large share in the foundation and increase of the human family, it will one day become its province to submit, that such of its members as shall be introduced in these pages, have still many counterparts and prototypes in the Great World about us.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed the Chuzzlewit family are in some senses the human family and it is perhaps for this reason that Dickens was prompted to give an outline of their past history. Throughout the novel we are continually reminded of the universal application of Dickens's lesson. Out of many possible examples, three, I hope will be enough both to illustrate the point and to show that these reminders are intentional.

'I hope you acquit me of intending or foreseeing the termination of our visit (to the Norrises). But I scarcely need to ask you that.'

'Scarcely indeed,' said Martin, 'I am the more beholden to you for your kindness, when I find what kind of stuff the good citizens here are made of.'

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1. Chap. i, p. 5.



'I reckon,' his friend returned, 'that they are made of pretty much the same stuff as other folks, if they would but own it, and not set up on false pretences.'

'In good faith, that's true,' said Martin.

'I dare say,' resumed his friend, 'you might have such a scene as that in an English comedy, and not detect any gross improbability or anomaly in the matter of it?'<sup>1</sup>

'If I have had, indirectly, any act or part in the fate of that unhappy man (Tigg), by putting means, however small, within his reach; heaven forgive me! I might have known<sup>perhaps,</sup> that he would misuse money;... and that sown by his own hands it could engender mischief only...'

'Beggin' you pardon, Sir,' said Mr. Tapley... 'There's a surprising number of men, Sir, who as long as they've only got their own shoes and stockings to depend on, will walk downhill, along the gutters quiet enough. But set any of 'em up with a coach and horses, Sir, and its wonderful what a knowledge of drivin' he'll show, and how he'll fill his vehicle with passengers, and start off in the middle of the road, neck or nothin', to the Devil! Bless your heart, Sir, there's ever so many Tiggs a passing this here Temple-gate any hour in the day, that only want a chance to turn out full-blown Montagues every one!'<sup>2</sup>

[Oh! Tom's blood was rising; mind that, perhaps the Boar's Head had something to do with it, but certainly the footman had. So had the sight of his pretty sister - a great deal to do with it. Tom could bear a great deal of himself, but he was proud of her, and pride is a sensitive thing. He began to think 'There are more Pecksniff's than one, perhaps,' and by all the pins and needles that run up and down in angry veins, Tom was in a most unusual tingle all at once.<sup>3</sup>

The first two instances are deliberately choric and the third achieves its force by coming from Tom Punch who remains Dickens's moral constant throughout the novel.

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1. Chap. xvii, p.220.
  2. Chap. lii, p.602.
  3. Chap. xxxvi, p.428.

I have stressed the general nature of Dickens's attack upon selfishness because the attempt to see Society as a whole rather than as 'us' and 'them' is a major feature both of Martin Chuzzlewit and of Dickens's artistic development during the eighteen-forties. Equally significant, I would suggest, is his choice of vice. The social upheavals of the period have already been discussed,<sup>1</sup> and, as has been pointed out, the decade is particularly notable for the emergence of an open and far from one-sided class rivalry. The Aristocracy and landed gentry had been forced onto <sup>the</sup> defensive while the lower classes could at least attack with hope. As I have said, the instincts of self-preservation and self-advancement are the essence of such a class struggle. Jerrold attacks the selfishness of the Aristocracy alone, but ultimately the class struggle is built on the selfishness of the individual; the majority of people, after all, support a cause because they want something for themselves. It would of course be nonsense to suggest that Dickens considered the working class selfish in demanding their rights. What is clear, however, is that any movement in which the instincts of self-preservation and self-advancement are so clearly involved can easily degenerate into a case of every man for himself. At the very least such a decade

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1. See preceding chapter.

as the eighteen-forties must have emphasised the essential selfishness of man. Dickens's awareness of this is apparent throughout his social scale in Martin, from the brass-and-copper founder's treatment of Ruth<sup>1</sup> to Betsy Prig's 'You'll want his piller'.<sup>2</sup>

Snobbery, the desire to seem more than you are, is a natural corollary of the class struggle. Once again Pecksniff is the key figure here. That he is a snob we know from his dealings with Tigg<sup>3</sup> and his visit to Ruth Finch's employers.<sup>4</sup> Closely linked with Pecksniff's snobbery is his hypocrisy, itself a form of outward show. Both find expression in his language. Several critics have pointed to the fantastic imagery in the speech of Pecksniff and Mrs. Gamp<sup>5</sup> and have seen it as a parallel to the ostentation of the reincarnated Tigg. In this aspect at least both ends of the social scale meet; Mrs. Gamp not only uses her fantasies to glorify herself but is also something of a snob. Mrs. Harris, we may recall,

'.....wouldn't demean herself to look at you (Betsy Prig), and often has she said, when I have made mention of your name, which, to my sinful sorrow, I have done, "What, Sairey Gamp! debase yourself to her!" Go along with you!'<sup>6</sup>

1. Chap. xxxvi.

2. Chap. xxv, p.310.

3. See especially Chap. xliv.

4. Chap. ix, pp. 102-106.

5. See for example, J. Hillis Miller, Charles Dickens : the World of his Novels, 1958, p.131.

6. Chap. xlix, p.565.

The brass-and-copper founder also has a penchant for the grandiloquent phrase - 'What results obtrude themselves upon me as flowing from the weakness of character on the part of Miss Pinch!' - and requires his daughter to be not only 'genteel in her deportment... and politely distant to her inferiors in society' but 'choice in her expressions' as well.<sup>1</sup> Even Jonas is not immune to this blandishment of Pip and Wolf in whose stories 'lords were as plentiful as oaths; and even the Blood Royal ran in the muddy channel of their personal recollections.'<sup>2</sup>

In the land of liberty and equality, which causes Martin as it had caused Dickens so much disappointment, things are no better. Martin is taken by Mr. Bevan to visit the Norrises and finds that they know 'all the great dukes, lords, viscounts, marquesses, duchesses, knights and baronets quite affectionately.'<sup>3</sup> So long as Martin can go through the motions of polite chat about their aristocratic acquaintance he is perfectly acceptable; though he finds it

....rather strange, and in some sort inconsistent, that during the whole of these narrations, and in the very meridian of their enjoyment thereof, both Mr. Norris the father, and Mr. Norris Junior, the son (who corresponded, every post, with four members of the English Peerage), enlarged upon the inestimable advantage of having no such arbitrary distinctions in that enlightened land, where there were no noblemen

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1. Chap. xxxvi, p.429.
  2. Chap. xxviii, p.340.
  3. Chap. xvii, p.216.

but nature's noblemen, and all society was based on one broad level of brotherly love and natural equality.<sup>1</sup>

The inconsistency noted by Martin is clearly shown up when the Norrises discover that he has come over in the steerage:

A deathlike stillness fell upon the Norrises. If this story should get wind, their country relation had, by his imprudence, forever disgraced them. They were the bright particular stars of an exalted New York sphere. There were other fashionable spheres above them, and other fashionable spheres below, and none of the stars in any one of these spheres had anything to say to the stars in any other of these spheres. But, through all the spheres it would go forth, that the Norrises, deceived by gentlemanly manners and appearances, had, falling from their high estate, "received" a dollarless and unknown man. O guardian eagle of the pure Republic, had they lived for this!<sup>2</sup>

American society is in fact as much dominated by snobbery and class rivalry as the English. Yet though this scene is part of a bitter attack upon America, and though we know that after Dickens's experiences there England 'rose in comparison',<sup>3</sup> we are not allowed the luxury of complacence. Mr. Bevan's remark quoted above points the universal moral of the episode :

'I dare say,' resumed his friend 'you might have such a scene in an English comedy and not detect any gross improbability or anomaly in the matter of it'<sup>4</sup>

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1. Ibid.
  2. Chap. xvii, pp. 219-220.
  3. Nonesuch, i, 413 (22 March 1842).
  4. Chap. xvii, p.291.

In America, however, Dickens does witness the darkest manifestation of class welfare 'that most hideous blot and foul disgrace - Slavery.'<sup>1</sup> American Notes, in other matters far milder in its criticism than Martin, illustrates clearly the strength of Dickens's revulsion.

We stopped to dine at Baltimore, and being now in Maryland were waited on, for the first time, by slaves. The sensation of exacting any service from human creatures who are bought and sold, and being, for the time, a party as it were to their condition, is not an enviable one. The institution exists, perhaps, in its least repulsive and most mitigated form in such a town as this; but it is Slavery; and though I was, with respect to it, an innocent man, its presence filled me with a sense of shame and self-reproach.<sup>2</sup>

Apart from Dickens's particular horror of slavery, the passage shows clearly his intense involvement in the cause of human rights. Though merely a visitor he feels himself 'a party...to their condition' and is filled 'with a sense of shame and self-reproach.' This last phrase provides, I think, the key to the determination with which Dickens pursued his lifelong campaign against injustice. He felt, far more keenly than most of us, his own responsibility for wrongs which he had by no means occasioned. His weapon was his pen and there is no doubt that for him the artistic and propagandist elements of literature went hand in hand.

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1. American Notes, 1842, Vol.I, Chap.iii, p.59.

2. Vol.I, Chap. viii, p.277.

Certainly in American Notes Dickens did not betray his trust, and the burning sincerity of his attack of<sup>n</sup> slavery is highlighted by its being given a chapter to itself. For the most part, and it is a stroke of propagandist genius, Dickens is content to present a catalogue of punishments meted out to recalcitrant slaves. In the introductory section of the chapter, however, Dickens discusses the various classes that defend slavery and reserves his special scorn for 'the miserable aristocracy spawned of a false republic!':

The third, and not the least numerous or influential, is composed of all that delicate gentility which cannot bear a superior, and cannot brook an~~x~~ equal; of that class whose Republicanism means, 'I will not tolerate a man above me: and of those below, none must approach too near;' whose pride, in a land where voluntary servitude is shunned as a disgrace, must be ministered to by slaves; and whose inalienable rights can only have their growth in negro wrongs.<sup>1</sup>

That this is selfishness in its darkest form hardly needs to be pointed out. It is present throughout the American scenes in Martin Chuzzlewit, particularly in the dealings of the Watertoast Society<sup>2</sup> and provides a grim undertow to the novel as a whole.

Dickens's American experiences modified his social thinking in several ways, giving him a clearer understanding

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1. Vol. II, Chap. ix, p.250-251.

2. See especially Chap. xxi, p.272.

both of the dangers of too much liberty and of the value of traditional institutions. Yet, as I have said, Dickens allows neither us nor himself to be complacent. I shall discuss The Chimes in detail later, but it seems to me to show clearly the other side of the American coin. If England 'rose' in comparison to much of what Dickens saw in the United States, he certainly found much food for thought in reflection upon the overt slavery there and the virtual slavery at home.

## 3

Just as selfishness as a vice is common to all levels of society, so the blame for the unhappy state of society cannot be attached to one class alone. Dickens is aware that those in the higher reaches of society are most culpable because they have the greater opportunity to set matters right. His attack, however, is not ex<sup>c</sup>clusive. The concept of the family is important here. Old Martin as the head of the family is seen as largely responsible for its failings:

'The curse of our house,' said the old man looking kindly down upon her, 'has been love of self; has ever been love of self. How often have I said so, when I never knew that I had wrought it upon others!' 1

In the same way, when we turn to the human family that is society, it is the heads of it that are primarily to blame!

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1. Chap. lii, p.600.



'No, my good sir,' said Mr. Pecksniff, firmly, 'No. But I have a duty to discharge which I owe to society; and it shall be discharged, my friend, at any cost!'

Oh late-remembered, much-forgotten, mouthing, braggart duty, always owed, and seldom paid in any other coin than punishment and wrath, when will mankind begin to know thee! When will men acknowledge thee in thy neglected cradle, and thy stunted youth, and not begin their recognition in thy sinful manhood and thy desolate old age! Oh ermined Judge whose duty to society is now to doom the ragged criminal to punishment and death, hadst thou never, Man, a duty to discharge in barring up the hundred open gates that wooed him to the felon's dock, and throwing but ajar the portals to a decent life! Oh, prelate, prelate, whose duty to society it is to mourn in melancholy phrase ~~that~~ sad degeneracy of these bad times, in which thy lot of honours has been cast, did nothing go before thy elevation to the lofty seat, from which thou dealest out thy homilies to other tarriers for dead men's shoes, whose duty to society has not begun! Oh magistrate, so rare a country gentleman and brave a squire, had you no duty to society, before the ricks were blazing and the mob were mad; or did it spring up armed and booted from the earth, a corps of yeomanry, full-grown!<sup>1</sup>

We should note, however, that it is Mr. Pecksniff who brings up the question of 'duty to society.' Responsibility for the state of society may lie most notably with those who lead it, but it is ultimately the responsibility of us all. Dickens's preface to the 1867 edition makes this clear:

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1. Chap. xxxi, p.374.

...nothing is more common in real life than a want of profitable reflection on the causes of many vices and crimes that awaken general horror. What is substantially true of families in this respect, is true of a whole commonwealth. As we sow, we reap. Let the reader go into the children's side of any prison in England, or, I grieve to add, of many workhouses, and judge whether those are monsters who disgrace our streets, people our hulks and penitentiaries, and overcrowd our penal colonies, or are creatures whom we have deliberately suffered to be bred for misery and ruin.<sup>1</sup>

Social institutions may be faulty, but it is 'we' in our selfishness who have 'deliberately suffered' them.

Society in Martin Chuzzlewit is seen as corrupt and selfish at all levels. Dickens's remedy lies, as it lay throughout his life, in solid individual worth and selfless benevolence. It is here that the relevance of the Christmas Books is most clearly seen. Scrooge in his selfish pursuit of wealth can inquire callously, 'Are there no prisons?... And the Union workhouses?....Are they still in operation?'<sup>2</sup> Redeemed he is a model of generosity and good deeds. In The Cricket on the Hearth the humble virtue of John the Carter and his wife is set against the grasping meanness of Tackleton, while in The Haunted Man Milly Swidger is not only superhumanly but magically good. Dickens's creed is probably best expressed in The Battle of Life, a story which he dearly longed to turn into a full-scale novel:<sup>3</sup>

1. Charles Dickens edition, 1867, p.vi.

2. Christmas Carol, 1843, Stave I, pp.12-13.

3. See Nonesuch, ii, 78, for a letter to Lytton of 10 April 1848.

'I believe, Mr. Snitchey,' said Alfred, 'there are quiet victories and struggles, great sacrifices of self, and noble acts of heroism, in it (Life) - even in many of its apparent lightnesses and contradictions - not the less difficult to achieve, because they have no earthly chronicle or audience; done every day in nooks and corners, and in little households, and in men's and women's hearts - anyone of which might reconcile the sternest men to such a world, and fill him with belief and hope in it, though two-fourths of its people were at war, and another fourth at law;'<sup>1</sup>

For myself I am relieved that Dickens did not attempt a longer version. I can hardly believe that he would have said more than is said already, and I imagine that most people are content to have it as it is, a pretty and mercifully short morality.

In Martin Chuzzlewit the main burden of virtue's cross falls on Tom Pinch. He is contrasted early in the novel with Martin and Pecksniff and in the second half his 'domestic economy' alternates with the Jonas-Tigg plot. At one stage he is specifically seen as an antidote to the dominant corruption. His 'sweet temper' and 'tenderness', we are told, 'might have purified the air, though Temple Bar had been, as in the golden days gone by, embellished with a row of rotting human heads.'<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately we tend to allow Dickens's sentimentality to blind us to Pinch's thematic

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1. The Battle of Life, 1846, 'Part the First', p.35.

2. Chap. xlv, p.516.

importance in the novel. Most people today find him sickly beyond endurance - for me he is harder to take than Little Nell - but that readers in Dickens's own time did not consider him so is witnessed by the Athenaeum reviewer who thought him 'capital, in more senses than one the best creature in the book.' This writer had probably a clearer idea than we do of Dickens's intentions and of the contrasts he was trying to make when he remarked later of Mrs. Gamp, 'there are not many things so living in fiction as this nightmare.'<sup>1</sup>

A world peopled by Tom Pinches would, I think, have bored Dickens to distraction; but there is no doubt that it would be a better world, and, all the sentimental gush apart, I do not see that it is terribly naïve to say so. At least Dickens saw in Martin Chuzzlewit what many more highly regarded sociologists have never seen, that Utopia is not to be achieved by the mere sweeping away of institutions but by the greater goodness of man.

## 4

Dickens's next completed work after Martin Chuzzlewit was The Chimes. Although it reflects many of the attitudes

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1. Athenaeum, 20 July 1844.

and interests apparent in Martin, The Chimes raises particular questions of its own and is therefore best discussed separately.

The major points of contact are obvious enough. Dickens is looking at society as a whole, and over a wider range than in Martin, and seeing much the same faults at all levels. Sir Joseph Bowley and Tugby, for instance, are distinguishable only by the refinement or lack of it of their language :

'There is a cheque book by the side of Mr. Fish. I allow nothing to be carried into the New Year. Every description of account is settled in this house at the close of the old one.'<sup>1</sup>

'This is the last night of the Old Year; and I won't carry ill-blood and quarrelings and disturbances into the New One, to please you nor anybody else,' said Tugby, who was quite a retail friend and father. 'I wonder you an't ashamed of yourself, to carry such practices into a New Year. If you haven't any business in the world, but to be always giving way, and always making disturbances between man and wife, you'd better be out of it.'<sup>2</sup>

Unlike Martin, however, The Chimes does not concern itself with tracing the ills of society back to the moral failings of Man. Its purpose is more obviously 'social' and propagandist; to display the present state of society and in particular the gulf that exists between the rulers and the ruled. As in Martin the responsibility belongs to all who 'suffer' such a gulf to endure - Trotty, for example is

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1. The Chimes, 1845, 'The Second Quarter' p.56.

2. 'The Fourth Quarter' p.162.

condemned for accepting the status quo without question - but primarily it rests with those who lead society - the Bowleys, Filers, Cutes, and red-faced extollers of the 'good old times'. Dr. Slater has discussed in great detail the various types of social theorist exposed here,<sup>1</sup> and he is particularly good on Dickens's modelling of Alderman Cute on the contemporary magistrate Sir Peter Laurie. As he points out none of these figures are villains, merely disastrously misguided. I would add that they are also extremely selfish. Their theories are based on a complete inability to understand the real situation of the poor, and as we have seen in Martin this kind of thoughtlessness can be the most insidious aspect of 'self'. Alderman~~z~~ Cute, who aims to 'put down' the 'cant in vogue about Starvation',<sup>2</sup> is the most callous in this respect, probably because Dickens was making a personal attack; but there is hardly any more hope for a remedy in Filer's statistics or Bowley's skittles.

Bowley, like Cute, is modelled on contemporary figures, probably the Dukes of Buckingham and Richmond, both of whom prided themselves on their protection of the working-man. The hypocrisy of such a pose was one that incensed Dickens throughout his life, as indeed did all statements, whether

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1. Michael Slater, 'The Chimes; its Materials, Making and Public Reception,' unpublished D.Phil. thesis, Oxford, 1965.

2. 'First Quarter', p.39.

philanthropical, religious or moral, unleavened by action. In this instance Dickens was not alone in his condemnation. On 13 January 1844, the Economist reprinted from the Liverpool Mercury the following attack on the specious benevolence of the aristocracy :

Take the first smock-frocked labourer one meets as a specimen of 'a bold peasantry, their country's pride,' see what a being mentally and physically, the government of the oligarchy has made him.... Consider the irony of the Duke of Richmond, and grandees, who have reduced the man to this state, drinking his health at agricultural dinners as the pride and mainstay of the country.

There is also something in Sir Joseph and Lady Bowley of the Young England philosophy. Lady Bowley's song for the workers<sup>1</sup> and the rustic crafts that Will Fern complains about are direct satires on the movement in general and on the writings of Lord John Manners in particular. Dickens had intended to include a 'Young England Gentleman' in his gallery of social theorists but cut him out at Forster's suggestion.<sup>2</sup> The deleted passages can be seen in the original manuscript and show that Dickens was primarily interested in the ludicrous lack of realism in their social programme :

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1. 'The Second Quarter', p.63.

2. See Forster, iv. 5, i, 632, (October 1864). 'As you dislike the Young England gentleman I shall knock him out, and replace him by a man....who recognises no virtue in anything but the good old times, and talks of these parrot-like, whatever the matter is.' Many of the same points, however, are made through the 'red-faced gentleman' and his praise of what Dickens, in a political squib of 1843, had called 'the fine old English Tory times.' See Forster ii, 12 (Vol.I, p.253-4).

'The fires of Smithfield by whoever lighted; and the kindlers were of no one class: were at best associated with the glowing and the picturesque!' observed the other. 'They have been quenched in Pig-markets and this' - meaning Trotty again, 'is the degraded actuality that has sprung up from among the steaming swine. Restore' said the youngish sort of gentleman, 'the Good Old Times, the Grand Old Times, the Great Old Times! Raise up this trodden worm into a man by the mysterious but certain agency (it has always been so) of stained glass windows and enormous candlesticks' - he languished for a moment here, as contemplating his own face in a bright silver one. 'Then his regeneration is accomplished. Until then, Behold him!' <sup>1</sup>

Dickens does indeed ask us to 'Behold him', and shows us Trotty poor, badly clothed and half-starved. Money, food and clothes are the basic needs of the working man, and they are needs which all the theories in the world are inadequate to fulfil. The leaders of society 'behold' but do not see. It is this failure to understand, or, indeed to try to understand, that Dickens attacks in The Chimes. Yet Dr. Slater's point, that these men are not villains, is well taken. Sir Joseph Bowley is not a Sir Mulberry Hawk or a Chester; but then he is not a stage aristocrat. Sir Joseph may not be a wicked man, but his effect on society is far more harmful than that of a whole grouse-moor of bad baronets. The melo-dramatic archetype has matured in Dickens's work into the far more dangerous actuality. I have no doubt that

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1. M.S. p.14.



the Dukes of Richmond and Buckingham sincerely believed themselves to be the 'fathers and friends' of the poor. What Dickens is saying in The Chimes is that the aristocracy cannot begin to alleviate suffering which they do not comprehend.

The Chimes thus presents a contrast between the actual and the theoretical, between the state of society and the proposals for its improvement. Martin Chuzzlewit takes a broader but not a contradictory view of Man in general. Both mark a step forward in Dickens's social thinking and in his treatment of the ruling class. Dickens is not in these works, and never became, a lover of the aristocracy as an institution; but his is neither the blind criticism of an instant leveller nor the irrelevant castigation of noble vice. He proposes in Martin what he knew from his own acquaintance, that all classes of men are essentially the same. In ~~The~~ Chimes the aristocracy and their satellites are not characterised as essentially vicious but as failing in what Hannah More had seen as their first duty, the genuine understand<sup>ing</sup> and effective alleviation of the lot of those less fortunate than themselves. It is to this failure that Dickens is to return with such effect in Bleak House, Little Dorrit, and Our Mutual Friend.

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CHAPTER THREE

Dombey and Son

No one to-day, I imagine, would dispute the fact that Dombey and Son is a more closely worked novel than Martin Chuzzlewit. The 'stock' of the Dombeyan soup was prepared in advance,<sup>1</sup> and though Dickens certainly changed his mind during composition, notably in allowing Edith to survive, the result of this careful pre-planning is a novel of far greater structural and thematic complexity than any he had written before. To compare Martin and Dombey is to be struck by the latter's increased awareness of its own aims and the precision and psychological penetration with which they are carried out; the illustrations of young Martin's selfishness, for example, are superficial in comparison with the detailed analysis of Dombey's pride.

Dickens's letters, especially during the writing of the early numbers of Dombey, give ample evidence of a new concern with structure and his efforts to restrain himself 'from launching into extravagances in the height of my enjoyment'.<sup>2</sup> As a consequence there are no Pecksniffs and Mrs. Gamps to upset the balance of the novel and by their superb energy vitiate its moral purpose. Indeed characters in whom the earlier Dickens would have revelled, Mrs. Mac-Stinger, the Rev. Melchisedech Howler and the Game Chicken, are kept firmly in their place, and Howler, at least, is little more than an imaginative name. Dombey and Son is thus far more of a creative piece than its

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1. See Nonesuch, *ix*, 770-772, for a letter of 25 July 1846, giving a general outline of the plot.

2. Nonesuch, *ix*, 782 (30 August 1846).

predecessor and because of this presents a more realistic picture of society. There are melodramatic and unlikely moments in the novel, but, despite these, the world of Dombey is one which the reader immediately recognizes and with which he can readily identify.

This is strikingly true of the novel's two undoubted aristocrats, Cousin Feenix, who is a lord, and his aunt (by blood and not by marriage, it must be remembered), the Hon. Mrs. Skewton. Both, especially in their speech mannerisms, have something of the earlier Dickens 'character', but the similarity is no more than skin deep. In the earlier 'characters' surface display is all; with Feenix and Mrs. Skewton the verbal peculiarities are merely a part of the complete personality. In the latter's case, indeed, they reflect it. These points will be discussed in detail later, but it is perhaps worth mentioning here that Mrs. Skewton's inability to remember names - 'seclusion and contemplation are my what's-his-name'<sup>1</sup> - is both a hint of her mental decay and a part of her elaborate attempt to disguise the worldliness of her own nature. In addition both Cousin Feenix and Mrs. Skewton have an important part to play in the thematic development of the novel. In sections 3 and 4 of this chapter I hope to show that this part is larger than has been generally imagined.

The increased realism and precision of Dickens's writing in Dombey and Son is also noticeable in his greater understanding of class

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1. Chap. xxi, p. 205.

distinctions. The niceties of social status among the upper classes were more Thackeray's province than Dickens's, but in his placing of Mr. Dombey in particular Dickens draws as fine a line as any in Pendennis. The merchant-prince of the eighteen-forties occupied an ambiguous and changing social position. Wooed for his money and despised for the means by which he got it, he had the entrée into the best society so long as the leaders of the best society felt he could be useful to them. Dickens's finished portrait of the type is Merdle in Little Dorrit. Dombey, if he has not the advantage of Merdle's seemingly inexhaustible wealth, can boast a more respectable pedigree. Certainly he is more at home with his money than Mr. Merdle. This is partly because his wealth, at least at the beginning of the novel, is genuine and not a fraud, but it is also attributable to the fact that Dombey, unlike Merdle, was born to riches. In this sense he is Merdle's social superior; yet, as Mrs. Skewton's 'At Home' shows, he is not happy in 'polite' society.<sup>1</sup>

The increasing social and political power of money in the eighteen-forties will be more fully examined in the following section. Here again I hope to show that Dickens's portrait of Dombey the financier is not only that of a typical figure of the decade but is also successfully integrated into both the thematic structure of the novel and its picture of society as a whole.

From the point of view of this thesis one other aspect of the novel is of particular relevance, for it seems to me that Dombey and Son

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1. For a full discussion of this point, see pp. 180-181 below.

displays a new kind of class-consciousness. In earlier novels there is much justifiable indignation about the gulf between rich and poor, between the 'Haves' and 'Have Nots'; but when the two come into contact, as with Tom Pinch and the brass-and-copper-founder, we do not feel an essential difference in class.<sup>1</sup> In this instance we dislike the rich man because he is a snob and unkind to Ruth and we admire Tom for standing up to him. The battle, however, is basically that between right, which happens to be humble and poor, and wrong, which happens to be rich and powerful. There is none of that awareness of class that is so apparent in Emma's exchanges with Miss Bates or in Mr. Bennet's treatment of his wife. Even the scene between Trotty Veck and Sir Joseph Bowley in The Chimes<sup>2</sup> is centred on a moral and financial antithesis, and there is none of that terrible embarrassment in the meeting of different classes which Jane Austen so finely portrays. In Dombey and Son on the other hand, when Captain Cuttle accompanies Walter to ask Mr. Dombey for money we do feel exactly that embarrassment. In this case since Captain Cuttle is oblivious of social status, our blushes are reserved for Walter. He instinctively recognizes the social incongruity of such a meeting, and Dickens makes the point with considerable perception and restraint:

If<sup>he</sup> application must be made to Mr. Dombey at all, which was awful to think of, Walter felt<sup>they</sup> he would rather prefer it alone and unassisted, than backed by the personal influence of Captain Cuttle, to which he hardly thought

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1. See Martin Chuzzlewit, Chap. xxxvi, pp. 428-431.

2. See The Chimes, The Second Quarter, pp. 54-67.

Mr. Dombey would attach much weight. But as the Captain appeared to be of quite another opinion, and was bent upon it, and as his friendship was too zealous and serious to be trifled with by one so much younger than himself, he forbore to hint the least objection. Cuttle, therefore, taking a hurried leave of Solomon Gills, and returning the ready money, the teaspoons, the sugar-tongs, and the silver watch, to his pocket with a view, as Walter thought, with horror, to making a gorgeous impression on Mr. Dombey - bore him off to the coach-office, without a minute's delay...1

In the scene which follows, we are doubtless meant to admire Cuttle's disregard of class barriers, and compare it favourably with Mr. Dombey's pride in his social position. What matters is that Dickens saw that these barriers existed and that they were of subtler construction than a simple difference in financial status. In making Walter the focus of our embarrassed sympathy Dickens adds an extra dimension to his favourite comparison between the worthy poor and the purse-proud rich. The greater realism of this scene is further evidenced by the fact that Dombey is not a cardboard tyrant but a personality known to the reader in depth.

This more detailed awareness of class distinctions, both in the placing of Mr. Dombey and in scenes like that discussed above, is one aspect of what I mean by the greater precision of Dickens's writing in Dombey and Son. In Dickens's treatment of High Society it is an important step forward, for it gives to later portraits, particularly Sir Leicester, Mrs. Gowan and the Barnacles, a credibility and concreteness that his

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1. Chap. ix, p.88.

first attempts so clearly lack. In the overall picture of Dickens's artistic development it is but one example of the finer and more subtle brushwork that increasingly replaced the bold strokes of his early novels.

I have stressed this increased social awareness at the outset because it forms a useful point of reference for all I wish to say in the rest of this chapter. If greater attention to structure and detail is largely responsible for the artistic achievement of the novel, so Dickens's success with *Mrs. Skewton*, *Cousin Feenix* and *Mr. Dombey* are largely the outcome of greater attention to the structure and detailed working of society. As I hope this chapter will show, the overall quality of the novel and of its picture of High Society are the result of a combination of the two.

## 2

If Dombey and Son is admittedly about pride,<sup>1</sup> it is more specifically about what Dickens calls Dombey's 'insolence of wealth'.<sup>2</sup> In the wealthy merchant of the eighteen-forties such insolence, if not very attractive, is at least understandable. Bagehot may have been right<sup>3</sup> in later assertion that 'money alone will not buy "London Society"',<sup>3</sup> but there is no doubt that the power of the merchant-princes increased considerably during the decade and that polite society was prepared to court, even if it despised, the very wealthy. The Eclectic Review of

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1. Forster, vi,2 (Vol. II, p.309).

2. Chap. xi, p. 106.

3. The English Constitution, 1867, No.v, p.120.

December, 1847, discussing the financial crisis of that autumn, remarks that

With that habitual reverence for wealth, which is now a distinguishing national characteristic, we have humbled ourselves before these merchant-princes ... The leading spirits of the age have flattered and worshipped the great bubbles that have now burst. They were honoured as the great men of the greatest city in the world. They decided elections, gave the tone to public opinion, and influenced the fate of ministers and of nations. War and peace were in a great measure dependent on them.

Dickens is vague about Dombey's exact status in the City, though presumably he does not wield quite this amount of power. At a slightly lower level, however, we do see the 'flattery and worship' in action. 'No one,' says Mrs. Skewton, 'can be a stranger ... to Mr. Dombey's immense influence',<sup>1</sup> and that influence is certainly enough to attract the attention of a border-line aristocrat and, presumably, Tory Member of Parliament, Sir Barnet Skettles:

'And what is your name, my pale child?' said Lady Skettles. 'Dombey,' answered Paul.

Sir Barnet Skettles immediately interposed, and said that he had had the honour of meeting Paul's father at a public dinner, and that he hoped he was very well. Then Paul heard him say to Lady Skettles, 'City - very rich - most respectable - Doctor mentioned it.' And then he said to Paul, 'Will you tell your good Papa that Sir Barnet Skettles rejoiced to hear that he was very well, and sent him his best compliments?'

'Yes, Sir,' answered Paul.

'That is my brave boy,' said Sir Barnet Skettles. 'Barnet,' to Master Skettles, ... 'this is a young gentleman you ought to know. This is a young gentleman you may know, Barnet,'<sup>2</sup> said Sir Barnet Skettles, with an emphasis on the permission.

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1. Chap. xxi, p.205.

2. Chap. xiv, p.141.



One gets the impression from this conversation and more especially from Florence's subsequent visit to the Skettles that Dickens intended to do more with the family. The cover design, which appeared on every monthly instalment of the novel, may be some clue to Dickens's unfulfilled intentions. The top right hand corner is made up of a representation of Dombey's marriage to Edith and a scene in parliament. That the figure addressing parliament is Dombey himself is evident both from its stance and the distinctive swept-back hairstyle. The cover design as a whole depicts Dombey's rise and fall, and these two sketches are presumably intended to show him at the zenith of his fortunes. Marriage to Edith ensures his social acceptability, and a place in parliament would have been proof of the political power that wealth can achieve. Together they were the accepted method by which a rich merchant procured full membership of High Society. It is not impossible, and the presence of the Court Guide in the cover design supports the suggestion, that Dickens intended to crown Dombey's career with a title. It must be stressed that the cover-design is the only evidence we have of Dombey's intended parliamentary career. However, we know that Dickens considered the cover of Dombey 'very good,'<sup>1</sup> and later spoke of it as 'shadowing out [the] drift and bearing' of the story.<sup>2</sup>

Had Dickens fulfilled his parliamentary intention for Dombey, Sir Barnet Skettles's role in the novel would clearly have been much greater.

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1. Nonesuch, i,787 (September 1846).

2. Nonesuch, 1,806 (29 October 1846).

It is interesting to note that in this case Sir Barnet would have provided a neat parallel to Major Bagstock whose job it is to introduce Dombey into polite society. Dickens seems to be preparing for this when he tells us that 'Sir Barnet's object in life was constantly to extend the range of his acquaintance' and continues:

Sir Barnet was proud of making people acquainted with people. He liked the thing for its own sake, and it advanced his favourite object too. For example, if Sir Barnet had the good fortune to get hold of a raw recruit, or a country gentleman, and ensnared him to his hospitable villa, Sir Barnet would say to him, on the morning after his arrival, 'Now, my dear sir, is there anybody you would like to know? Who is there you would wish to meet?' 1

The description of Sir Barnet's penchant for 'making people acquainted with people' is surely too elaborate to have had no purpose other than that of placing the baronet for us. As the novel stands, however, the Skettles do little more than help define Dombey's social status and hint at his political potential.

On the Major, however, to whom 'Dombey, Sir, was a man to be known',<sup>2</sup> the onus of defining and improving Dombey's social status largely falls. If he is not the most endearing type of English gentleman, Bagstock is a gentleman nonetheless. Dombey recognizes him as such, and is glad, after reference to the army lists,<sup>3</sup> to be initiated by him into Leamington 'Society'. That the retired army man was a common figure in the fringe of

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1. (Chap. xxiv, p. 242).

2. Chap. x, p. 38.

3. Chap. x, p. 91.

London 'Society' is evidenced by Thackeray's 'Military Snobs', especially Captain Bull who 'passes the season in London, sponging for dinners and sleeping in a garret near his <sup>1</sup> Club', and the plethoric Colonel at Boulogne who bullies the waiters and whom nothing moves 'except when a very great man comes his way, and then the rigid, proud, self-confident, inflexible British Snob can be as humble as a flunkey, and as supple as a harlequin.'<sup>2</sup> These sketches appeared in Punch during the September of 1846. The second number of Dombey, in which Major Bagstock makes his first appearance, had already been written though not published. Thackeray's sketches may have influenced Dickens's later treatment of the Major, but the startling similarities between these independently conceived figures, 'so insolent, so stupid, so gentlemanlike',<sup>3</sup> show that both were working from a common and easily recognizable source. In Major Pendennis Thackeray was to treat the type with far more humanity, subtlety and understanding than perhaps Dickens could ever have brought to it. The achievement in Dombey and Son, however, is no mean one, for it bears witness to Dickens's more detailed awareness of the workings of High Society. The Major is enough above Dombey in the social scale to make the latter's acceptance of his friendship credible. At the same time he is not so far above as to make his wooing of Dombey unlikely. Dickens could hardly have chosen a better type, impoverished

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1. Punch, Vol. XI, p. 105 (12 September 1846).

2. Punch, Vol. XI, p. 115 (19 September 1846).

3. Ibid. Thackeray's Colonel is an exact physical parallel of Dickens's viz: 'He came down and seated himself at the breakfast-table, with a surly scowl on his salmon-coloured bloodshot face, strangling in a tight, cross-barrel cravat;'

but well connected, to serve the dual function of pandering to Dombey's pride and easing him into polite society. It is on the backs of people like the Major that the socially ambitious rich begin their climb.

The attitude of Sir Barnet and Major Bagstock shows clearly that for a wealthy merchant of the eighteen-forties riches could be a means to a rise in social status. In fact, Fraser's Magazine, influenced no doubt by Carlyle's meritocrats, felt compelled to include the merchant-princes in its definition of the aristocracy:

By the aristocracy, we mean, for our present purpose, those who have been usually designated by that name; that is to say, the nobility, the landowners, and those other members of the general community, who are linked to the state by special and recognized ties, other than the payment of taxes, the exercise of the franchise, or general obedience to the laws. Nor do we desire to exclude from that general term the more exalted members of the commercial classes, the "merchant-princes" of London, or Liverpool, or those manufacturers whose gigantic operations, and the enormous numbers of their fellow-men to whom they give employment, may, in a more liberal, and perhaps a more prospective reading of the term, entitle them to be considered as in one sense members of the aristocratic body. 1

So original and revolutionary a definition could hardly expect general acceptance. Blackwood's, for instance specifically denies the merchant class any place in the aristocracy:

By an aristocracy we mean the deposition of political power in the hands of men of leisure and education, as opposed to the tendency of the Reform Bill, to transfer the governing functions to the 'practical' men of the trading and moneyed interests. 2

The significance of these statements lies in the very fact that they contradict each other. They start, it is true, from different points of reference, but they are evidence of the social no-man's-land occupied

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1. 'The Aristocracy of Rank', Fraser's, August 1846.  
2. 'The Laws of Land', Blackwood's, July 1848.

by the 'trading and moneyed interests' and the uncertainty that surrounded the class-structure as a whole. Nothing could be more typical of the doubts and contradictions of the eighteen-forties than the need to define such old-established terms as 'aristocracy'.

The ambiguity of Mr. Dombey's social position is well described by Dickens. Within his own circle his behaviour and language are that of the typical, haughty aristocrat:

'Mrs. Dombey,' he said, entering, 'I must beg leave to have a few words with you.'

'Tomorrow,' she replied.

'There is no time like the present, Madam,' he returned.

'You mistake your own position. I am used to choose my own times; not to have them chosen for me. I think you scarcely understand who and what I am, Mrs. Dombey' 1

'You leave this house, Richards, for taking my son - my son!' said Mr. Dombey, emphatically repeating these two words, 'into haunts and into society which are not to be thought of without a shudder.' 2

Flattery and subservience Dombey takes as his due, and his self-esteem is so great that he disdains the advantages of wealthy god-parents for Paul:

'Godfathers, of course,' continued Mrs. Chick, 'are important in point of connexion and influence.'

'I don't know why they should be, to my son,' said Mr. Dombey very coldly.\* 3

It must be emphasised, however, that this overbearing self-confidence functions only at his own social level. Faced with Mrs. Skewton's 'Society' friends he is for the first time in the novel at a social loss:

1. Chap. xl, p. 399.

2. Chap. vi, p. 60.

3. Chap. v, p. 24.

... as she (Florence) sat apart ... she felt how little part her father had in what was going on, and saw, with pain, how ill at ease he seemed to be, and how little regarded he was as he lingered about near the door ... 1

This passage is significant for it partly explains the tragedy of Dombey's second marriage. The struggle between Edith and Dombey is not simply a struggle between two proud people but between two kinds of pride. Edith's is the uncompromising pride of birth and breeding - 'You insist! To me!'<sup>2</sup> - Dombey's the pride of wealth. The first, though seemingly more tenuous, is in fact the strongest of the two for it needs nothing further to sustain it; the second is founded on the possession of money and cannot exist without it. The proof of this, of course, is Dombey's financial failure; though ironically enough this failure points the admirable and genuine aspect of his pride; as Mr. Morfin explains to Harriet:

'He is a gentleman of high honour and integrity. Any man in his position could, and many a man in his position would, have saved himself, by making terms which would have been very slightly, almost insensibly, increased the losses of those who had dealings with him, and left him a remnant to live upon. But he is resolved on payment to the last farthing of his means ... His pride shows well in this.' 3

The ambiguity of Dombey's social position is mirrored by the uncertainty of the commodity on which that position rests, his wealth. If at the height of his career, his marriage to Edith, he is a typical figure

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1. Chap. xxxvi, p. 366.
  2. Chap. xl, p. 400.
  3. Chap. lviii, p. 581.

of the decade, he is also in his fall a very topical one. 'The decay and downfall of the house, and the bankruptcy of Dombey' are outlined in the letter of 25 July, 18<sup>4</sup>56 and may possibly have been suggested by the financial crisis of 1845. Certainly the far more serious crisis of 1847 must have influenced Dickens when he came to write the last numbers of Dombey. At the very least it provided telling proof of the book's central thesis that pride of wealth is based on the most doubtful foundation. The specific causes of the crisis are not my subject here but the crashes of October and November 1847 included some of the leading houses of the city; by 15th November

... the number was not less than one hundred and thirty considerable houses engaged in the East and West India trade, and in the trade with Mauritius. ... Several of them were merchant-princes who had dealing with all the world. Many were considered very wealthy; almost all were of a highly respectable standing. 1

Not least among the bankrupts were the Governor and three directors of the Bank of England.<sup>2</sup>

In general the crashes were the result of excessive speculation, especially in railways, and insufficient capital, <sup>5</sup> at the Eclectic Review commented acidly, 'several of the leading houses had been for years embarrassed, and even insolvent. Some of these were as deficient in capital, and as reckless in their conduct, as mere adventurers.'<sup>3</sup>

This state of affairs is clearly reflected in the fall of the House

1. Eclectic Review, December 1847.
2. Annual Register, 1847, Chron., p.155.
3. loc. cit.

of Dombey, though in this instance it is the 'adventurer' Carker rather than Dombey himself who is to blame:

'That he has abused his trust in many ways,' said Mr. Morfin; 'that he has oftener dealt and speculated to advantage for himself, than for the House he represented; that he has led the House on, to prodigious ventures, often resulting in enormous losses; ... will not perhaps surprise you now. Undertakings have been entered on, to swell the reputation of the House for vast resources, and to exhibit it in magnificent contrast to other merchants' houses, of which it requires a steady head to contemplate the possibly - a few disastrous changes of affairs might render them <sup>the</sup> probably - ruinous consequences.' 1

By throwing the responsibility for the crash directly onto Carker, Dickens is in fact making two points about Dombey himself. On the credit side he emphasises the honesty of Dombey's own dealings and his honourable conduct in paying his debts; on the debit side he exposes the vanity of his trust in the power of money. Dombey is so confident in his own position that he does not dream that Carker will dare to cheat him; but money which has not saved his son or bought the affection and respect of his wife cannot buy the loyalty of his subordinate. If anything it is merely an invitation to disloyalty.

The foundations of Dombey's pride, his wealth and social status, are thus seen as essentially insecure. In demonstrating this Dickens certainly displays a new understanding of how society, and particularly High Society, works. His analysis, however goes further than this, for Dickens uses it to reinforce the moral judgement he makes on his hero.

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1. Chap. liii p.532.



Dombey's is a false pride not simply because pride is of its nature false but because in this instance it is seen to be falsely based. In the final scenes of the novel only Dombey's integrity and love for Florence are seen to be genuine, and, as Dickens is to show, these are qualities that cut across all social and financial barriers.

## 3

That pride of wealth is essentially a false pride based on a false commodity is of vital importance in a book whose thematic structure is based on the simple opposition of true and false.

This basic opposition may be simple, but Dickens's elaboration of his theme is highly complex. All the major characters introduced, not least Cousin Feenix and Mrs. Skewton, add something to the thematic development of the novel. That Dickens should use his aristocrats in this way is a result of the conscious attempt to see Society whole, first noted in Martin Chuzzlewit. The skill with which they are employed, however, marks a considerable advance on the earlier novel. After a brief discussion of the thematic structure of Dombey, I hope to show how great this advance was.

The central antithesis of true and false is elaborated in several ways, most notably in the struggle between Dombey's financial 'head' and Florence's feeling heart. The inadequacies of Florence, she is rather a predicament than a person, tend to blind us to her thematic importance in the novel. She is the focus of opposition to the Dombey ethic and we are surely intended to measure the moral worth of the other characters by their attitude towards

her. As regards the overall structure of Dombey, Florence and her father may be seen as standing at the apex of a triangle which broadens down to include all the characters and thematic strands in the novel.

Unlike his daughter, who loves and is loved instinctively, Dombey attempts to see life in the terms of a business deal. The classic instance is his hiring of Polly Toodle:

'It is not at all in this bargain that you need become attached to my child, or that my child need become attached to you. I don't expect or desire anything of the kind. Quite the reverse. When you go away from here, you will have concluded what is a mere matter of bargain and sale, hiring and letting; and will stay away. The child will cease to remember you; and you will cease, if you please to remember the child.' 1

The irony is clear enough: whatever Dombey pays Polly he cannot denaturalize the act of suckling a child, cannot divest it of the instinctive affection which is to reassert itself in the dying Paul's wish to see his old nurse. In a sense, by buying Polly, Dombey can buy life for his son, but he cannot buy the kind of life he would wish his son's to be or buy off the objects of his son's affection.

The impossibility of running one's life on business lines is made clear by the events of the novel and is neatly pointed near its close in Mr. Morfin's remark to Harriet that

'... the distractions of death, courtship, marriage and domestic unhappiness, have left us no head but your brother for this long, long time.' 2

1. Chap. ii, p.12.

2. Chap. liii, p.531.

It is not simply that 'death, courtship, marriage' etc. show up the inadequacies of Mr. Dombey's approach to life, they go further and bring ruin to the place where his creed should properly function, the business itself.

This complex interplay between head and heart is ironically suggested in the title, both in the fact that 'Dombey and Son ... is indeed a daughter ... after all'<sup>1</sup> and in its contrasting emotional and commercial connotations. The death of Paul is in one sense Dombey's regard<sup>w</sup> for regarding his son as a financial prospect.

The 'bargain' with Polly also exposes the artificiality of the social barriers which Dombey tries so hard to maintain. For all his wealth and assumption of social superiority Dombey cannot avoid Paul's contact with the lower orders, and in this case the love and life that the lower orders have to offer are seen as far more powerful than anything in Dombey's cash cult. Indeed in contrast to Mr. Dombey's insistence on rank and wealth, the Florence group in the novel show not only the dominance of natural feeling but also a complete lack of class prejudice. Cuttle and Toots have no sense of class at all and Walter and Florence overcome the difference in their social status by marriage. The Dombey group, on the other hand, particularly Carker, Mrs. Skewton and Dombey himself, are obsessed by financial and social advancement. The rewards of this, to Dickens, abhorrent obsession are nicely graded to accord with individual

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1. Chap. lix, p.600.

guilt: Carker is mangled by a train; Mrs. Skewton ends in paralysis and death, and Dombey is left a financial and emotional ruin. The novel's other important self-seeker, Major Bagstock, because he plays for lower stakes, is dismissed with nothing but the ridicule of his club.

This linking of wealth and rank, and the varying attitudes towards them, with the novel's central head-heart antithesis is a further example of the artistic advance noted above in Dickens's treatment of Mr. Dombey. Society that had been seen in a new way in Martin Chuzzlewit is used in a new way in Dombey and Son. In Dombey Dickens certainly sees society whole, sees its vices and virtues present at all levels, but he also uses the structure of society, with its attendant struggles for social and financial advancement and class jealousies, as a measure of his characters' moral worth. Those who go along with the social tide where rank and money dominate are to be condemned, those who do not are to be admired. Yet this basic pattern is complicated by the fact that social rank is no indication of the moral group into which a character will fall. Florence is after all - and it is easy to forget - the social equal of her father. At the other end of the social scale, Polly Toodle and Good Mrs. Brown, though of the same class, occupy opposing moral camps. This is equally true of Cousin Feenix and Mrs. Skewton. On the former Chesterton<sup>1</sup> based his defence of Dickens's ability to portray a gentleman, and though

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1. See introduction to Dombey and Son, Everyman's Library, 1907. pp. xiii-xv.

I would not quarrel with his argument I would suggest that Mrs. Skewton is the finer achievement of the two. Together they provide an aristocratic parallel to the central conflicts in the novel; but Mrs. Skewton is given more to do and as a result hers is the more complete and complex portrait. The following analysis of her function in the novel will demonstrate how important a part she plays in its moral and structural pattern.

Mrs. Skewton is above all a living embodiment of the conflict between head and heart. 'Heart', indeed, is her favourite word; even in Mr. Dombey she observes 'an amount of Heart' that is 'excessively refreshing'.<sup>1</sup> The world, she claims

'... is a false place: full of withering conventionalities: where Nature is but little regarded, and where the music of the heart, and the gushing of the soul, and all that sort of thing, which is so truly poetical, is seldom heard ...' <sup>2</sup>

The moral point, of course, is that with her as with Mr. Dombey, in whom she ironically discovers a soul mate, it is the financial head that dominates. She has sold her daughter<sup>5</sup> once to a potentially rich husband who dies before coming into his fortune. Since then Edith in her own words has been 'hawked and vended here and there, until the last grain of self-respect is dead within me, and I loathe myself'.<sup>3</sup>

The parallel with Mr. Dombey is taken further through Mrs. Skewton's insistence upon Nature. Here again she attributes to Mr. Dombey the quality

1. Chap. xxvi p. 261.

2. <sup>Chap. xxvi,</sup> *ibid.* p. 260.

3. Chap. xxvii, p. 280.

which she protests - 'Nature intended me for an Arcadian .../ Cows  
 are my passion'<sup>1</sup> <sup>2</sup> but does not possess: 'Mr. Dombey is devoted to  
 Nature, I trust?' Her efforts to find an advantageous match for  
 Edith only succeed, however, in crushing her daughter's natural  
 affection. Like Mr. Dombey with Paul she sees the love that basically  
 she craves turned towards Florence.

'Where is Mrs. Dombey?' she would say to her maid  
 'Gone out, Ma'am.'  
 'Gone out! Does she go out to shun her mama, Flowers?'  
 'La bless you, no Ma'am. Mrs. Dombey has only gone out  
 for a ride with Miss Florence.'  
 'Miss Florence. Who's Miss Florence? Don't tell me about  
 Miss Florence. What's Miss Florence to her, compared  
 to me?' 3

The answer to her question is that Florence represents the standard of  
 natural feeling in the novel, a fact which is pointed by Edith's protest:

'Oh mother, mother, if you had but left me to my natural  
 heart when I too was a girl - a younger girl than Florence  
 - how different I might have been!' 4

Cleopatra's success as a character, however, does not depend simply  
 on the thematic relevance of what she says and does. Her attempts to  
 deny her own nature not only reinforce the moral conflicts in the novel  
 but are also psychologically convincing. Dickens remarks acutely of  
 Mr. Dombey in the letter of 25 July 1846 that 'the sense of injustice  
 [towards Florence], which you may be sure has never left him, will have at  
 least a gentler office than that of only making him more harshly unjust.'

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1. Chap. xxi p.205.

2. Chap. xxi, p.204.

3. Chap. xxxvii, p.376.

4. Chap. xxx, p.307.

The same kind of process is observable in Mrs. Skewton, for the more mercenary she becomes the more ingenuous she professes to be. Even when she is alone with the Major the pose is not dropped:

['Shall we marry him to Edith Granger, Ma'am?' chuckled the Major hoarsely.  
 'Mysterious creature!' returned Cleopatra, bringing her fan to bear upon the Major's nose. 'How can we marry him?'  
 'Shall we marry him to Edith Granger, Ma'am, I say?' chuckled the Major again.  
 Mrs. Skewton returned no answer in words, but smiled upon the Major with so much archness and vivacity, that that gallant officer considering himself challenged, would have imprinted a kiss on her extremely red lips, but for her interposing the fan with a very winning and juvenile dexterity ...  
 'Dombey, Ma'am,' said the Major, 'is a great catch.'  
 'Oh, mercenary wretch!' cried Cleopatra, with a little shriek, 'I am shocked.' 1

When Edith refuses to allow her to take Florence home with her after the wedding, the matter and violence of her reply, though they attempt to justify it, display a recognition of her guilt:

['And am I to be told to-night, after all my pains and labour, and when you are going, through me, to be rendered independent,' her mother almost shrieked in her passion, while her palsied head shook like a leaf. 'that there is corruption and contagion in me, and that I am not fit company for a girl! What are you pray? What are you?' 2

Finally in her sickness, amidst her self-justification, Edith's charge still haunts her:

'The parent I have been to you, Edith: making you a companion from your cradle! And when you neglect me, and have no more natural affection for me than if I

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1. Chap. xxvi, p. 262.

2. Chap. xxx, p. 307.

was a stranger - not a twentieth part of the affection that you have for Florence - but I am only your mother, and should correct her in a day! - you reproach me with its being my own fault.' 1

Mrs. Skewton's dying words, 'For I nursed you!' 2 are ironically enough both a final self-justification and a recognition of the true and natural bond between them which the whole business of her life has destroyed.

Dickens's use of Mrs. Skewton extends further than this; apart from her attempts to conceal her true nature, both from the world and herself, she tries also to conquer Time. When we first see her she is presented as an uneasy amalgam of youth and age:

[The discrepancy between Mrs. Skewton's fresh enthusiasm of words, and forlornly faded manner, was hardly less observable than that between her age, which was about seventy, and her dress, which would have been youthful for twenty-seven. 3

Cleopatra is attended by two servants, aptly named Flowers and Withers, and though at first the effect is comic it later takes on a grim pathos:

[The maid who should have been a skeleton, then re-appeared, and giving one arm to her mistress, who appeared to have taken off her manner with her charms, and to have put on paralysis with her flannel gown, collected the ashes of Cleopatra and carried them away in the other, ready for tomorrow's revivification. 4

Here again Dickens is true to his declaration that 'all I have written is point.' 5 Cleopatra tries to cover up the workings of Time as she

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1. Chap. xxxvii, p. 377.

2. Chap. xli, p. 415.

3. Chap. xxi, p. 204.

4. Chap. xxvii, p. 281.

5. Nonesuch, i, 820 (6 December 1846).



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tries to cover up her own nature; 'We are so dreadfully artificial' she lisps in one of her more languid moments, and the falseness of her language and dress are fitting adornments to what Dickens considers the falseness of her and Mr. Dombey's creed.

As with her language, Cleopatra's battle against Time contributes both to the thematic structure of the novel and to our acceptance of her as a credible personality. True to form, as she becomes more hideous and infirm so she becomes more outlandishly juvenile in her dress:

But she was youthful, very youthful still; and in her youthfulness appeared at breakfast, before going away, in a new bonnet made express, and a travelling robe that was embroidered and braided like an old baby's. It was not easy to put her into a fly-away bonnet now, or to keep the bonnet in <sup>its</sup> place on the back of her poor nodding head, when it was got on. 2

Some may find this study of a life devoted to deception a little grotesque. I would not deny this, but would suggest that nonetheless the portrait is convincing, not the least because Dickens is too great an artist to deny her our sympathy. Unlike Mr. Dombey she has no Florence to reclaim her, and there is something very touching in the picture of this moral and physical ruin clinging to the daughter she has formed yet whose very presence terrifies her by its unspoken condemnation:

[ But, sometimes, when Edith went nearer to her, and bending down her stately head, put her cold cheek to hers, the mother would draw back as if she were afraid of her, and

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1. Chap. xxi, p. 205 .

2. Chap. xl, p.405 .

would fall into a fit of trembling, and cry out that there was a wandering in her wits. And sometimes she would entreat her, with humility, to sit down on the chair beside her bed, and would look at her (as she sat there brooding) with a face that even the rose-coloured curtains could not make otherwise than scared and wild. 1

Dickens was acute enough to see that the death of those who are afraid to repent is perhaps the most terrible of all.

From the point of view of the thematic structure of the novel, the conflict between youth and age in Mrs. Skewton parallels a major conflict in Dombey and Son as a whole, the conflict between the old world and the new. The dividing line came in the eighteen-forties with the expansion of the railways, and in Dombey the change is symbolized by 'The Train'<sup>2</sup> which tears up Polly Toodle's home and sets a pace with which Sol Gills cannot compete:

'As I said just now, the world has gone past me. I don't blame it; but I no longer understand it. Tradesmen are not the same as they used to be, apprentices are not the same, business is not the same, ^ Seven-eights of my stock is old-fashioned. I am an old-fashioned man in an old-fashioned shop, in a street that is not the same as I remember it. I have fallen behind the times, and am too old to catch it again. Even the noise it makes a long way ahead, confuses me.' 3

In this new world there is no time for the 'old-fashioned' virtues of Gills and Cuttle. Sentiment, as the destruction of Staggs Gardens shows, is not to be tolerated, and it is the Carkers who seem

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1. Chap. xxxvii, p.377.  
2. Dombey and Son, Charles Dickens edition, 1867, Chap. xx (Running title),p.175.  
3. Chap. iv, p. 29. ^ , omitted, 'business commodities are not the same.'

destined to succeed. Significantly it is only Dombey, Bagstock and Carker who are actually seen travelling by railway, and the results of these journeys are Dickens's judgement on the heartless mercantilism of the new world. Dombey's trip to Leamington, where he meets Edith, is the beginning of his downfall, and in Carker's horrible death the Dombey ethic, when taken to extremes, is seen as ultimately self-destructive. The railway in its ruthless power well symbolizes a world of self-advancement in which one has no sympathy for others and can therefore expect none in return.

Set against the temporal power of the railways is the eternal message of the waves. The sea in Dombey and Son is only half successful as a symbol, largely because it is asked to do too much. It stands for death, the after life and, in the case of Walter, Gills and Dombey, regeneration. Basically, however, it represents the unchanging values of 'that invisible region, far away'.<sup>1</sup> It is these values, as I have said, that the railway world destroys and to which Florence and her friends instinctively cling. It is only when Mr. Dombey has been fully reclaimed that he can hear the waves and drink the 'last bottle of the old Madeira', 'hoary with dust and cobwebs',<sup>2</sup>

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1. Chap. viii, p.79.

2. Chap. lxii, p.620 The old Madeira, which is opened only when Florence is re-united with her father, is the true symbolic antithesis of the railway in the novel. It stands quite simply, and credibly, for the values of age and maturity, and seems to me among the best of Dickens early attempts at symbolism.

Paul in his communion with the waves not only recognizes these values but is in himself a perfect representative of the conflict between the old and the new:

They were the strangest pair at such a time that ever firelight shone upon. Mr. Dombey so erect and solemn, gazing at the blaze; his little image, with an old, old, face, peering into the red perspective with the fixed and rapt attention of a sage. 1

Though a child, Paul is repeatedly referred to as 'old-fashioned'. His death and his devastatingly simple question 'Papa! what's money ... what can it do?'<sup>2</sup> are the judgement of the old world upon the new. In the same way Mrs. Skewton's paralysis is an ironic comment upon the impossibility of combining the two. One has to opt, Dickens seems to say, for one or the other.

Cleopatra's relationship with Edith provides a grim commentary on what Mr. Dombey might have done to Paul. It is the novel's completest illustration of the effects of one self-seeking generation upon another. Yet Dickens is at pains to point out that Cleopatras are not to be found in High Society alone. 'Pains' is perhaps the operative word, for the comparison between <sup>the</sup> Mrs. Skewton - Edith and the Mrs. Brown - Alice relationships is forced beyond the limit. It is symptomatic of Dickens's concern for structural tightness in Dombey and Son - and indeed

1. Chap. viii, pp.66-7.

2. Chap. viii, p.67.

proof by comparison of the enormous success of the rest of the novel - that he went to the lengths of making Alice Marwood Carker's ex-mistress and Edith's illegitimate cousin. Such zealousness is unnecessary for the point is made clearly enough in the conversations between mothers and daughters, in the chapter title, 'Another Mother and Daughter'<sup>1</sup>, and finally by Dickens himself:

[Were this miserable mother, and this miserable daughter, only the reduction to their lowest grade, of certain social vices sometimes prevailing higher up? In this round world of many circles within circles, do we make a weary journey from the high grade to the low, to find at last that they lie close together, that the two extremes touch, and that our journey's end is but our starting-place? Allowing for great difference of stuff and texture, was the pattern of this woof repeated among gentle blood at all?

↳ Say, Edith Dombey! and Cleopatra, best of mothers, let us have your testimony! 2

The contrived meeting between the two pairs at Brighton is perhaps unnecessary emphasis, though the scene is effective enough and does demonstrate an affinity between the two mothers which is independent of difference in class.

What is important of course is not that Dickens laboured the point, but that he made the point at all. Indeed his very insistence is proof of the importance he attached to it. Once again we are aware of the greater concreteness of Dickens writing in this novel, for Dombey and Son demonstrates what Martin Chuzzlewit suggests, that the vices of man are common to all classes of society. This is especially so in that

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1. Chap. xxxiv, p. 343.

2. Chap. xxxiv, p. 352.

Mrs. Skewton's failings, artificiality, hypocrisy and ruthless self-seeking, were those particularly associated with the aristocracy; yet Good Mrs. Brown's exploitation of her daughter differs only in 'stuff and texture' from the operation of the marriage market.

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If Mrs. Skewton embodies several aristocratic vices, Cousin Feenix enshrines at least one aristocratic virtue. For all his bumbling rhetoric and silly-ass manner he is a gentleman, and, as John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson have said, 'his gentility is at last revealed as the genuine article.'<sup>1</sup> They refer of course to his insistence that Edith reveal the truth about her relationship with Carker 'not for the honour of the family ... but because it is wrong, and not right.'<sup>2</sup> The problem here lies in the fact that Dickens had originally intended Edith to become Carker's mistress and ultimately die. It was only three weeks before Number XVII went to press that Dickens, on Jeffrey's suggestion, decided to conclude the number with 'a tremendous scene of her undeceiving Carker, and giving him to know that she never meant that.'<sup>3</sup> Had Dickens stuck to his original intention here Edith would presumably have died repentant with Florence at her bedside, thus 'matching Harriet, whose main function is to attend Alice's and forgive.'<sup>4</sup> The difficulty is to see what chance Dickens would then have had to reveal Cousin Feenix's

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1. Dickens at Work, Cheap edition, 1968, p.112.  
2. Chap. lxi, p.618. This is spoken 'with a real and genuine earnestness shining through the levity of his manner and his slipshod speech'.  
3. Nonesuch, ii, p.63 (21 December 1847).  
4. Butt and Tillotson, op.cit. p.106.

gentility as genuine. He could conceivably have conducted Florence to the dying Edith, but as her guilt would then have been a foregone conclusion there would have been little call for his insistence on Edith's confession. One has to decide, therefore, whether Dickens, in using Cousin Feenix as he did, reclaimed him as an after-thought and thus changed his character, or whether Feenix's earlier appearances, before the change of plan was devised, make him the logical defender of the honourable course. I think it can be shown that they do.

Feenix's speech at the wedding of Edith and Dombey is largely used by Dickens to point the true nature of the match. The repeated references to 'my honourable friend Dombey' and 'my lovely and accomplished relative' who 'possesses every requisite to make a man happy'<sup>1</sup> are clearly ironical comment on Dickens's part. There is no suggestion, however, that Feenix intends any irony and his later disastrous anecdote at the 'At Home'<sup>2</sup> shows that he at least believes the marriage to be successful. This may be fatuous blindness on his part but it is honourable blindness; a gentleman himself, he cannot see the baser motives of others less honest than he is. It would never occur to him that a 'female relative' of his could, like the heroine of his story, be 'regularly bought'.<sup>3</sup> When

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1. Chap. xxxi, pp. 317-318.

2. Chap. xxxvi, p. 365.

3. Ibid.

Edith elopes with Carker, Feenix is full of what, despite the verbal convolutions, is genuine 'astonishment and regret'.<sup>1</sup> Like a gentleman he does the right thing and 'comes from Baden Baden, purposely to talk' to Dombey.<sup>2</sup> What he says on this occasion is proof enough of the genuine gentility beneath the woolly verbiage:

'But while I must, rather peremptorily, request my friend Dombey not to criminate my lovely and accomplished relative until her criminality is perfectly established, I beg to assure my friend Dombey that the family I represent, and which is now almost extint (devlish sad reflection for a man), will interpose no obstacle in his way, and will be happy to assent to any honourable course of proceeding, with a view to the future, that he may point out.'<sup>3</sup>

In nothing is Cousin Feenix more of a gentleman than in his desire to take the 'honourable course' and his refusal to condemn Edith out of hand.

In his genuine honesty Cousin Feenix provides an obvious contrast to Mrs. Skewton; and this contrast is emphasised by the fact that on the surface they seem very much the same. Like his aunt, Feenix tries unsuccessfully to ward off the effects of Time:

Cousin Feenix was a man about town, forty years ago; but he is still so juvenile in figure and in manner, and so well got up, that strangers are amazed when they discover latent wrinkles in his lordship's face, and crows' feet in his eyes: and first observe him, not exactly certain, when he walks across a room, of going quite straight to where he wants to go. <sup>4</sup>

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1. Chap. li, p. 509.

2. Chap. li, p. 508.

3. Chap. li, p. 509.

4. Chap. xxxi, p. 311.



And like his aunt he is not averse to leavening the family gentility with a little hard cash; for as he says 'when we do get a rich city fellow into the family, let us show him some attention'.<sup>1</sup> But there is an essential difference: Feenix's vanity is harmless and not the outward manifestation of hypocrisy; his pleasure at Edith's marriage is the grateful acceptance of a lucky chance and not Mrs. Skewton's gloating over a business deal successfully carried out. He believes, after all, that the couple will be happy, whereas Mrs. Skewton knows that they will not.

With his sense of honour and his old-fashioned ways - he is interestingly enough the only character in the novel besides Sol Gills who wears a wig - Cousin Feenix is clearly of the Florence party, though possibly 'without knowing it'. His constant references to the old days, 'when the order of parliamentary proceedings was perhaps better observed than it is now,'<sup>2</sup> reinforce his old-world virtue, and his exile in Baden Baden stresses his isolation from the financial and social rat-race of London. Cousin Feenix's function in Dombey and Son is not so complex as Mrs. Skewton's but his rambling honesty provides an effective counter-balance to her dishonest ramblings. If Mrs. Brown shows the social prevalence of Mrs. Skewton's vices, Cousin Feenix is Dickens's proof of Lord Tolloller's contention that

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1. Chap. xxxi, p.314.

2. Chap. xxxi, p.317.

Hearts just as pure and fair  
 Can beat in Belgrave Square,  
 As in the lowly air  
 Of Seven Dials.

To show that Cousin Feenix has a place in the thematic structure of the novel is to show only Dickens's success in integrating the aristocracy into his overall picture of society. It is not to show his success in creating a convincing aristocrat. Chesterton, to whom Feenix was 'of that divine order in Dickens's creation which can no more be described and criticised than old wine,' 'is so good on Dickens's 'startling ... penetration'<sup>1</sup> here, and also so much nearer in time to the Feenix type, that it is tempting to quote him in toto. The passage is too long for this, but one extract must be given, for in its perceptiveness and historical authority it is unlikely to be bettered. Chesterton concedes that Dickens, not being a born aristocrat, could not describe the aristocracy from <sup>the</sup> inside:

He described them, in short (and this we may freely concede), from the outside, as he described any other oddity or special trade. But when it comes to saying that he did not describe them well, then that is quite another matter, and that I should emphatically deny ... Cousin Feenix has really many of the main points of the class that govern England. Take, for an instance, his hazy notion that he is in a world where everybody knows everybody; whenever he mentions a man, it is a man "with whom my friend Dombey is no doubt acquainted." That pierces to the very helpless soul of the aristocracy.

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1. Introduction to Dombey and Son, Everyman's Library, 1907, p.xii and xiv.

Take again that stupendous gravity with which he leads up to a joke. That is the very soul of the House of Commons and the Cabinet, of the high-class English politics, where a joke is always enjoyed solemnly. Take his insistence upon the technique of Parliament, his regrets for the time when the rules of debate were perhaps better observed than they are now. Take that wonderful mixture in him (which is the real human virtue of our aristocracy) of a fair amount of personal modesty with an innocent assumption of rank. Of a man who said all these genteel foibles so clearly it is absurd merely to say without further explanation that he could not describe a gentleman. Let us confine ourselves to saying that he could not describe a gentleman as gentlemen like to be described. 1

Cousin Feenix's honour has been mentioned above - it is of course the starting point of Chesterton's defence - as <sup>w</sup>has his belief that all men are as honourable as he. To Chesterton's analysis I would add, therefore, only two details: in the first place Cousin Feenix's typically aristocratic understatement of those things he considers really important - 'when a duty divolves upon an Englishman, he is bound to get out of it, in my opinion, in the best way he can'<sup>2</sup> - and secondly that disarming embarrassment that overcomes a gentleman when he knows he is doing the right thing:

'... feeling, when the deceased person, was, in point of fact, destroyed in a devilish horrible manner, that her [Edith's] position was a very painful one - and feeling besides that our family had been a little to blame in not paying more attention to her, and that we are a careless family - and also that my aunt, though a devilish lively woman, had perhaps not been the very best of mothers - I took the liberty of seeking her in France, and

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1. Op.cit. pp. xiv-xv.

2. Chap. xxxi, p. 317.

offering her such protection as a man very much out at elbows could offer. Upon which occasion, my lovely and accomplished relative did me the honour to **express** that she believed I was, in my way, a devilish good sort of fellow; and that therefore she put herself under my protection. Which in a point of fact I understood to be a kind thing on the part of my lovely and accomplished relative, as I am getting extremely **shaky**<sup>stiff</sup>, and have derived great comfort from her solicitude.' 1

That Dombey and Son is a key novel in the study of Dickens's artistic development has now become something of a critical truism. It is the first of his full-scale works in which we have both proof of extensive pre-planning and proof of the pudding, as it were, in the final result. The only danger is that we should see Dombey as a creative 'happening' rather than as the culmination of a gradual process. Certainly as far as Dickens's treatment of High Society is concerned, the success of Dombey is the logical outcome of earlier experiments. As far back as Nicholas Nickleby Dickens had attempted to portray all levels of society; indeed even Pickwick ranges from the Bath scenes to the debtor's prison. In Nickleby Dickens is as yet too hide-bound by convention, particularly theatrical convention, and simple lack of personal experience to create a convincing aristocrat. He does, however, make an important distinction between Sir Mulberry Hawk and Lord Verisopht, a distinction that he is to repeat with Gordon and Chester. Dickens's sympathetic portrait of Gordon is partly due to

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1. Chap. <sup>lxi</sup> ~~xxxi~~, p. 617.

the demands of the novel but partly also to his own interpretation of the conflicting historical evidence. It seems likely, for instance, that Gashford, for whom there is no real historical evidence, was invented by Dickens simply to remove the blame from Gordon. In that Gordon is linked in his madness to Barnaby and the rioters there are also the beginnings of an attempt to see society, or more correctly mankind, as a whole. In Martin Chuzzlewit the moral is specifically applied to all classes of society, through the aristocracy and the lowest classes are included by implication rather than demonstration. As I hope this chapter has shown, Dombey and Son builds upon all these elements and succeeds furthermore in portraying aristocrats who are not only convincing in themselves but also an integral part of the thematic and moral structure of the novel.

CHAPTER FOURBleak House

Nearly four years separate the appearance of the final number of Dombey and Son (April 1848) and the publication of the first number of Bleak House (March 1852). The intervening novel, David Copperfield, while of considerable importance in Dickens's development both as a man and a writer, has little to offer the student of Dickens's treatment of High Society. Indeed, apart from spasmodic forays into the problems of model prisons and prostitution, the book's centre of interest is personal rather than social. The effect of upbringing, both at home and at school, upon the growing individual seems to me to be the novel's main theme, and with this is coupled a complex discussion of personal relationships, particularly marriage. One must not of course underestimate the psychological importance to Dickens himself of David Copperfield. It was, he declared, his 'favourite child',<sup>1</sup> and it clearly helped to lay the ghosts of his own past. In this at least David Copperfield is relevant to any study of Bleak House, for the confident approach to this latter novel, by far the most ambitious he had yet attempted, must surely be seen as a direct result of the inner peace achieved through the autobiographical revelations of David. There can be no doubt that Dickens needed to write a novel like David Copperfield, with its subtle mingling of fact and fiction, in order to overcome his strong sense of shame for the circumstances of his own childhood. Having done so, in what is the most introverted of his novels,

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1. David Copperfield, Preface to Charles Dickens Edition, 1868 p.xiii.

- 2 -

Dickens could again turn his attention outwards to the examination of society as a whole.

Bleak House must be seen, therefore, as the logical successor to not only the thematic concerns and structural methods of Dombey and Son but also the emotional catharsis of David Copperfield. It is important to realise, however, that Dickens's coming to terms with himself through the writing of Copperfield is not matched by any corresponding acceptance of society. Indeed precisely the opposite is the case; the facing of his own private humiliations and fears, far from making Dickens complacent, only freed him to attack the ills of society with greater penetration and ferocity. This increase in ferocity is perhaps the most startling development of the years between Dombey and Bleak House, for the whole tenor of Dickens's career during this period might well have tended towards a comfortable acceptance of society. In particular the success of Dombey placed him beyond financial worry<sup>1</sup>, and this worldly security was accompanied by increased social success and the considerable extension of his acquaintance with High Society. The theatrical excursions of late 1850 and 1851 and the proposed Guild of Literature and Art increased Dickens's intimacy with Bulwer Lytton and were the cause of his

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1. See Nonesuch, ii, 102 for a letter of 17 June 1848 in which Dickens states that, though 'not rich', he has 'got by some few thousand pounds, ..... ahead of the world'.

- 3 -

most illustrious aristocratic friendship, that with the Duke of Devonshire.<sup>1</sup> William Spencer Cavendish, the 6th Duke, could claim among his ancestors Sir John Cavendish, Chief Justice of the Court of the King's Bench as far back as 1366. The dukedom had been created in 1694 for the services of William Cavendish, 4th Earl of Devonshire, to William III. Dickens' own 'excellent duke' was more a man of letters than of politics, and though as a great whig Landowner he attended the House of Lords there is no record of him speaking on any of the major political crises of his time.<sup>2</sup> His reputation as a bibliophile and a patron of the arts encouraged Dickens, who did not know him well, to request the use of Devonshire House for the first performance of Bulwer's comedy Not so Bad as we Seem, which was to be produced to raise money for the Guild.<sup>3</sup> Within two hours the Duke sent the following 'princely'<sup>4</sup> reply:

Dear Sir,

I have read with very great interest the prospectus of the new endowment which you have confided to my perusal.

Your manner of doing so is a proof that I am honoured by your goodwill and approbation.

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1. Dickens had met the Duke of Devonshire before 1851; probably during his association with Paxton over the Daily News. Up to the production of Not so Bad as we Seem, however, their acquaintance, as the Duke's letter shows had 'been only one of crowded rooms'. Violet Markham in Paxton and the Bachelor Duke, 1935, p.172, states that 'through Paxton, Dickens and the Punch group made the acquaintance of the Duke of Devonshire', but gives no documentary evidence.
  2. See Dictionary of National Biography, 1887, Vol IX, p.376, and Burke's Peerage, Baronage and Knightage, 104th ed., 1967, p.748.
  3. Nonesuch, ii, 275-6 (4 March 1851).
  4. Nonesuch, ii, 277 (4 March 1851).



- 4 -

I am truly happy to offer you my earnest and sincere co-operation. My services, my house, and my subscription will be at your orders. And I beg you to let me see you before long, not merely to converse upon this subject, but because I have long had the greatest wish to improve our acquaintance, which has, as yet, been only one of crowded rooms.<sup>1</sup>

The first performance, on 16 May 1851, was attended by the Queen and Court and was a glittering success. During rehearsals, however, the Duke became more to Dickens than a patron. On 14 April, while preparations for the play were in progress, Dickens's youngest child, Dora, died, and his reply to the Duke's letter of condolence is proof of sincere friendship and attachment :

My Dear Lord Duke,

I am deeply sensible of your sympathy. From my heart I thank you for it, and return your friendship. I am going to take my poor little pet to Highgate this morning, and could never feel your tenderness more acutely than now. Ever believe me - your faithful and attached.<sup>2</sup>

This friendship never altered, and in October 1852 we find Dickens reaffirming his esteem in a letter thanking the Duke for the gift of a portrait of himself, 'such a welcome and delightful reminder of one whom I hold in the highest esteem and gratitude.'<sup>3</sup>

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1. Ibid. Quoted by Dickens in a letter to Lytton.

2. Nonesuch, ii, 299 (17 April 1851).

3. Nonesuch, ii, 425 (29 October 1852).

By April 1853 they were on such easy terms that Dickens could write to ask if he might include a friend who was staying with them in his acceptance of an invitation to dine with the Duke.<sup>1</sup>

Dickens's recognition of particularly aristocratic virtues is clear in his portrait of Cousin Feenix in Dombey and must have been strengthened by friendship with a man like the Duke of Devonshire. Full tribute is paid to the 'honourable manly side of that [aristocratic] pride'<sup>2</sup> in Bleak House, but that novel, though it clearly reflects a greater knowledge of the aristocrat as an individual, is more outspoken than ever before about the Aristocracy as an institution. Certainly the Aristocracy is only a part of the general criticism of society in Bleak House, but it is interesting to note that Dickens launches his most virulent attack upon it at a time when he might have been supposed to be most sympathetic towards it. Once again we are made aware of Dickens's special ability to separate appreciation of the individual from condemnation of the institution he represents. This is apparent throughout the whole of Bleak House, where even the head of the detested Chancery is admitted to be 'affable and polite'.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Nonesuch, ii, 457 (17 April 1853),

2. Nonesuch, ii, 303 (28 April 1851). Dickens is referring to the character of the Duke of Lytton's Not so Bad as we Seem.

3. Bleak House, 1853 Chap. iii, p.23.

If Dickens's portrait of High Society, and especially Sir Leicester, in Bleak House is both sharpened and qualified, by his personal experience during these years, it must be recognised that it is in essence the natural outcome of developments that can be traced as far back as the pictures of and distinctions between Sir Mulberry Hawk and Lord Verisopht in Nicholas Nickleby. The same is true of his attacks upon society as a whole; though here again one can point to particular events of these years that must have confirmed Dickens in his belief that his social analysis was on the right lines. Above all Dickens's editorship of Household Words must have given him a more detailed knowledge of the ills of society. The first number appeared on 30 March 1850, and from the start Household Words showed its concern for social problems. Many of the articles are extremely detailed, providing the hard facts of the situation in much the same way as the Commissioners' reports had done in the early eighteen-forties. Several of the issues raised in Household Words reappear in Bleak House, in particular those of public health and the appalling ignorance of the poor.<sup>1</sup> As John Butt has shown<sup>2</sup> these were issues of wide contemporary interest, and his excellent chapter on Bleak House makes clear how deeply Dickens was involved in the social discussion of the time.<sup>3</sup> Butt's work

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1. See, for example, 'Health by Act of Parliament' and 'Feed my Lambs', Household Words, 10 August 1850 and 30 August 1851.
  2. Dickens at Work, Cheap edition, 1968, pp 177 - 200.
  3. How deeply involved has recently been emphasised by K.J. Fielding and Alec W. Brice in two interesting articles on 'Charles Dickens on 'The Exclusion of Evidence' ', Dickensian September 1968 pp.132 - 140 and January 1969 pp.35 - 41. These suggest that Dickens may have written the article 'Exclusion of Evidence', Examiner, 12 January 1851, which reports on the evidence of George Ruby, the original of Jo. Fielding and Brice also suggest that Dickens may have had a hand in two further articles 'An Edifying Examination', Examiner (no date given) and a report in the Household Narrative of March 1852, both of which fill in further details of Jo's character.

is readily accessible, and it is unnecessary to reiterate the main points of his discussion here. Since my concern, however, is primarily with Dickens's general view of society, it is impossible to avoid repeating one of his quotations from Carlyle's Latter-Day Pamphlets or to deny his assertion that Carlyle's diagnosis was 'in general terms ... the diagnosis [Dickens] accepted of the troubles of mid-Victorian England.'<sup>1</sup> Carlyle's eight pamphlets were published at monthly intervals (apart from No's 3 and 4, published on 1st and 15th April respectively) between 1st February and 1st August, 1850. They provide ample confirmation of Dickens's belief, first apparent in Martin, that the 'Condition of England' was due to a universal malaise affecting all classes :

'The terrible anarchies of these years,' says Crabbe, in his Radiator, 'are brought upon us by a necessity too visible. By the crime of Kings, - alas, yes; but by that of Peoples too. Not by the crime of one class, but by the fatal obscuration, and all but obliteration of the sense of Right and Wrong in the minds and practices of every class.'<sup>2</sup>

Of particular interest too is Carlyle's assertion, quoted by Butt, that 'the deranged condition of our affairs' affects not only the poor but the rich as well :

.....the heavy miseries pressing, in their rudest shape, on the great dumb inarticulate class, and from this, by a sure law, spreading upwards, in a less palpable but not less certain and perhaps still more fatal shape on all classes to the very highest, are admitted everywhere to be great, increasing the now almost unendurable.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Op. cit., p. 178 - 179.

2. 'Model Prisons', March 1850, p.40.

3. Op. cit. p.1.

The general relevance of these remarks to Bleak House is obvious enough, and Dickens's translation of them into novel form will be discussed in detail in the following sections. They are, as I have said, the confirmation of opinions already held by Dickens rather than the cause of any new departure in his thinking. In the same way Dickens's more detailed knowledge of social problems strengthened rather than altered his viewpoint. This is equally true of the extension of his aristocratic acquaintance ~~and Dickens's aristocratic acquaintance~~; and the fact is manifest throughout Bleak House.

It is easy to allow the intervention of David Copperfield to blind us to the basic continuity between Bleak House and Dombey. As I hope this brief discussion has shown, Dickens's development between the two novels was largely in the direction of greater self-knowledge and, in his treatment of society and High Society, of greater familiarity with his subject. The superiority of Bleak House over Dombey stems largely from the increased confidence that such developments must necessarily bring with them, a confidence further augmented by authoritative support for his ideas from such a man as Carlyle. As I have suggested Bleak House is perhaps chiefly remarkable for the fact that greater confidence and self-knowledge, combined with a secure social and financial status, did not bring complacency but the very opposite. It is, I think, one of the outstanding facets of Dickens's genius that personal success only clarified and deepened his analysis of social ills.

It is but a glimpse of the world of fashion that we want on this same miry afternoon. It is not so unlike the Court of Chancery, but that we may pass from the one to the other, as the crow flies. Both the world of fashion and the Court of Chancery are things of precedent and usage; over-sleeping Rip Van Winkles, who have played at strange games through a deal of thundery weather; sleeping beauties, whom the Knight will wake one day, when all the stopped spits in the kitchen shall begin to turn prodigiously.<sup>1</sup>

The fog with which Bleak House begins is of course a symbol both of the mysteries the book is to unravel and the suffocating indecision of the Court of Chancery. Yet, as the novel is to show, the muddled thinking and reliance upon precedent that characterise Chancery are endemic to society as a whole. This is especially so of the leaders of society, 'the world of fashion', who, because of their greater power to do something about the condition of the country, are, like Chancery, particularly virulently attacked by Dickens for doing nothing. The opening paragraph of Chapter ii, quoted above, makes clear the link between the two pillars of the British Constitution, the Law and the hereditary Aristocracy. Both are 'things of precedent and usage' who have, like the guests of Chesney Wold, 'found out the perpetual stoppage.'<sup>2</sup>

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1. Chap. ii, pp. 5 - 6.

2. Chap. xii, p.112 .

Both are more concerned with the past than the present, so that Sir Leicester reflects on the greatness of the Dedlock ancestors in the same way as Conversation Kenge praises the endless case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce as 'a monument of Chancery practice'.<sup>1</sup>

That Dickens intended the connection not to be missed is clear both from the opening paragraph of Chapter ii and from the complementary titles of the first two chapters, 'In Chancery' and 'In Fashion'. The original title of the latter was 'In the Fashionable World' and was changed to emphasise the link. Indeed as H.P. Sucksmith has shown,<sup>2</sup> Chapter ii was written only after the completion of the other three chapters of No. I. These chapters are numbered i, ii and iii (ii and iii later changed to iii and iv) and paginated consecutively, while the pages of the present Chapter ii are lettered A, B, C, D, E. I suspect that Dickens intended to start No. 2 with the present chapter ii, thus beginning his first two numbers<sup>5</sup> with the dominant institutions in the novel. The most obvious reason for Dickens's decision to include the present Chapter ii in No. I is not given by Sucksmith. There is so much deletion and rewriting in the first three chapters that they cover 32 sheets, Dickens's usual amount per number. On re-reading, Dickens must have found that what he thought to be a full number was in fact considerably underwritten, and therefore

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1. Chap. iii, p.14 .

2. 'Dickens at Work on Bleak House', Nottingham Renaissance and Modern Studies, 1965, pp. 47 - 85.

decided to include the intended first chapter of No. 2. Once this decision was made Dickens was in no doubt as to where to place it in No. 1, and the present Chapter ii is so numbered from the outset. This is surely because Dickens wished to maintain the link between Chancery and Fashion and was forced to do so by juxtaposing the two chapters rather than by highlighting them at the beginning of his first two numbers.

The change is significant, for it shows the care Dickens took to emphasise the link between Chancery and Fashion and the importance he attached to his picture of High Society.<sup>1</sup> No-one can doubt the rightness of the decision, for it allows Dickens to begin his novel with a presentation of the two institutions which, because of their power, are most to be blamed for the social and legal misery that Bleak House is to portray. There is also in my view a great deal to be said for the fact that the change allows Dickens to present Lady Dedlock before her daughter, thus adding considerable ironic point to the description of Esther's supposedly orphaned childhood which begins the present Chapter iii.

This connection between Chancery and Fashion is stressed from the beginning, not simply because these are the dominant institutions in the book,

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1. The sheer amount of High Society in the novel is further evidence of this. Nearly a third of the book, twenty-one chapters out of sixty-seven, deals specifically with the Dealkocks, and their part in the plot is mentioned in a further twenty-three.



but because the whole novel is constructed around a complex series of interconnections. The plot itself is concerned with revealing relationships between people who apparently have nothing to do with each other. These may be blood relationships, as in the case of Lady Dedlock, Esther and Miss Barbary, or ties of fate like those which bind together Lady Dedlock and Jo. On one level these surprise relationships are part of Dickens view of the way of the world. The coming together of unlikely people, Dickens says, may be strange but it is a fact of life :

What connexion can there be, between the place in Lincolnshire, the house in town, the Mercury in powder, and the whereabouts of Jo the outlaw with the broom, who had that distant ray of light upon him when he swept the churchyard - step? What connexion can there have been between many people in the innumerable histories of this world, who, from opposite sides of great gulfs, have, nevertheless, been very curiously brought together! <sup>1</sup>

Dickens's answer to his own question is, as I have suggested, on one level the chances of life. On another level, however, Dickens's answer would be that all men, whether they come in to actual contact with one another or not, are inextricably linked. The element that binds them is the society in which they must all live. In Bleak House Dickens shows this society to be sick, and sees like Carlyle that it has been made so 'by the crime of Kings -

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1. Chap. xvi, p.156. This is of course one of the leading ideas in Little Dorrit.

alas, yes; but by that of Peoples too.' Also like Carlyle, Dickens sees that if all classes are responsible for the state of society then no class can escape the inevitable consequences. Tom-All-Alone's may be the greatest sufferer from the social sickness, but

← There is not a drop of Tom's corrupted blood but propagates infection and contagion somewhere. It shall pollute, this very night, the choice stream (in which chemists on analyses would find the genuine nobility) of a Norman house, and his Grace shall not be able to say Nay to the infamous alliance. There is not an atom of Tom's slime, not a cubic inch of pestilential gas in which he lives, not one obscenity or degradation about him, not an ignorance, not a wickedness, not a brutality of his committing, but shall work its retribution, through every order of society, up to the proudest of the proud, and to the highest of the high. Verily, what with tainting, plundering, and spoiling, Tom has his revenge. <sup>1</sup>

Like Carlyle's typhoid<sup>us</sup> widow in Past and Present,<sup>2</sup> Tom-All-Alone's punishes society for its neglect. The most notable illustration of this in the novel is the occasion on which Jo, at the lowest end of the social scale, gives smallpox to the daughter of Lady Dedlock who 'for years, now... has been at the centre of the fashionable intelligence, and at the top of the fashionable tree'.<sup>3</sup>

The plot, therefore, in its progressive revelations of relationship serves two functions. First it maintains the interest and curiosity of

1. Chap. xlvi, p.443.

2. Book III, Chap. ii, p.201-2. See also IV, i, p.322 for Carlyle's second reference to the subject, 'Irish Widows proving their relationship by typhus fever'.

3. Chap. ii, p. 7.

the reader, which after all, and despite modern developments, is what a plot is for, and secondly it mirrors the thematic structure of the novel by providing on the narrative level examples of the essential oneness of all men.

The following sections will attempt to deal with the portrait of the Aristocracy in Bleak House in the light of its inevitable connection with all classes of society. Clearly High Society in its position of power and privilege has crimes peculiarly its own, though even here the difference is one of degree rather than kind. With reference to the narrative and thematic structure of the novel I hope to show that Dickens, although he may single out High Society for some special attacks, is concerned more with the kind than the degree.

It is not a large world. Relatively even to this world of ours, which has its limits too ... it is a very little speck. There is much good in it; there are many good and true people in it; it has its appointed place. But the evil of it is, that it is a world wrapped up in too much jeweller's cotton and fine wool, and cannot hear the rushing of the larger worlds, and cannot see them as they circle round the sun. It is a deadened world, and its growth is sometimes unhealthy for want of air.<sup>1</sup>

By the time Dickens came to write Bleak House, he was fully aware of the distinction between the fashionable world and individual members of it. Like all group<sup>s</sup>, High Society is a mixture of good and bad, yet Dickens saw clearly that for all the 'many good and true people in it' the fashionable world was essentially a 'deadened world', living in the past and largely irrelevant to the present. The Aristocrats of Bleak House will be dealt with as individuals in a later section of this chapter; my concern here is with the Aristocracy as an institution.

Dickens's attack upon High Society in Bleak House is mainly concerned with two aspects of it, the 'social', fashionable aspect and the political. In a sense the attack upon both is the same; the glitter of the fashionable world is as much out of touch with the real needs of society as the

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1) Chap. ii, p.6.

politicians who are supposed to rule it. Indeed, how can the rulers of society, drawn as they are from the fashionable world, possibly 'hear the rushing of the larger worlds'? Cut off as they are, even their intermittent concern with social problems is superficial, no more than political and social dandyism. It may not be the Regency dandyism of dress but

... is there Dandyism in the brilliant and distinguished circle notwithstanding, Dandyism of a more mischievous sort, that has got below the surface and is doing less harmless things than jack-towelling itself and stopping its own digestion, to which no rational person need particularly object?

Why, yes. It cannot be disguised. There are, at Chesney Wold this January week, some ladies and gentlemen of the newest fashion, who have set up a Dandyism - in Religion, for instance. Who, in mere lacksadaisical want of an emotion, have agreed upon a little dandy talk about the Vulgar wanting faith in things in general; meaning, in things that have been tried and found wanting, as though a low fellow should unaccountably lose faith in a bad shilling, after finding it out! Who would make the Vulgar very picturesque and faithful, by putting back the hands upon the Clock of Time, and cancelling a few hundred years of history.<sup>1</sup>

The irony of 'ladies and gentleman of the newest fashion' is obvious enough, for the new fashion is but the old 'writ large', the eternal aristocratic fashion of nostalgia for the past and the attempt in the present to put the clock back or at least maintain the status quo. So with the politicians, though there may be minor differences of opinion, 'nobody is in question but Boodle and his retinue, and Buffy and his retinue'.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Chap. xii, p.112.

2. Chap. xii, p.113.

The great families that have always ruled must continue to rule and 'Boodle and Buffy, their followers and families, their heirs, executors, administrators, and assigns, are the born first-actors, managers, and leaders, and no others can appear upon the scene for ever and ever.'<sup>1</sup> To countenance change is to open the floodgates to anarchy.

The main point, of course, is that High Society, both in its fashionable and political aspects, is extremely self-centred. Sir Leicester contemplates his own greatness<sup>2</sup> and is of the opinion that 'the world might get on without hills, but would be done up without Dedlocks.'<sup>3</sup> Yet the aristocratic world, for all its self-congratulation, is essentially parasitic. Its wealth is drawn from the labour of those for whom it does not care, and, not content with bleeding the poor, it demands even more. This is particularly so of its poor relations as typified by the Dedlock cousins :

There is likewise the Honorable Bon Stables, who can make warm mashes with the skill of a veterinary surgeon, and is a better shot than most gamekeepers. He has been for some time particularly desirous to serve his country in a post of good emoluments, unaccompanied by any trouble or responsibility. In a well-regulated body politic, this natural desire on the part of a spirited young gentleman so highly connected, would be speedily recognised; but somehow William Buffy found when he came in, that these were not times in which he could manage that little matter, either; and this was the second indication Sir Leicester Dedlock had conveyed to him, that the country was going to pieces.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Ibid.

2. Chap. xii, p.108.

3. Chap. ii, p.7.

4. Chap. xxviii, p.276-6.

Dickens's criticism does not rest here, however, for High Society finds its supporters and imitators among all classes. The appalling toadyism of the Waterbrooks in David Copperfield with their reverence of 'Blood'<sup>1</sup> is crystallised in Bleak House into 'the fashionable intelligence'. Wherever Lady Dedlock goes she is 'hotly pursued by the fashionable intelligence,'<sup>2</sup> and when Sir Leicester and Lady Dedlock return from Paris the fashionable intelligence 'communicates the glad tidings to a benighted England':<sup>3</sup>

It has also found out, that they will entertain a brilliant and distinguished circle of the élite of the beau monde (the fashionable intelligence is weak in English, but a giant-refreshed in French), at the<sup>4</sup> ancient and hospitable family seat in Lincolnshire.

The joke is a good one, but the point is serious. The fashionable intelligence concerns itself only with trivia, 'it knows all fashionable things. To know things otherwise, were to be unfashionable.'<sup>5</sup> By pandaring to the self-centredness of the upper classes the fashionable intelligence compounds the felony and cuts itself and its readers off from the realities of life. The suggestion is that if it is 'unfashionable' to be aware of anything but the doings of the aristocracy, Tom-All-Alone's for example, then what hope is there for a remedy.

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1. David Copperfield, Chap. xxv, p. 263.
  2. Chap. ii, p.7.
  3. Chap. xii, p.107.
  4. Chap. xii, p.107.
  5. Chap. ii, p.6.

The best example of the kind of reader for whom the fashionable intelligence is catering is Tony Jobling. He is 'naturally aristocratic by taste'<sup>1</sup> and seeks to disguise the squalor of his room with pictures from 'that truly national work, The Divinities of Albion, or Galaxy Gallery of British Beauty',<sup>2</sup> among them a portrait of Lady Dedlock. Ironically the room is that where the lover of the real rather than the fashionable Lady Dedlock died. Equally at other levels of society the doings of the fashionable world are followed and imitated. Old Turveydrop in his padded unreality, 'like nothing in the world but a model of Deportment',<sup>3</sup> is a grim parody of the artificiality of the fashionable world, particularly Sir Leicester.<sup>4</sup> Like Sir Leicester he lives entirely in the past and even echoes his strictures on the floodgates of a 'levelling age' with the remark that 'We have degenerated ... A levelling age is not favourable to Deportment. It develops vulgarity.'<sup>5</sup> Further up the social scale those on the fringes of High Society slavishly follow their superiors. When Lady Dedlock's disappearance becomes fashionable gossip

... people who know nothing and ever did know nothing about her, think it essential to their reputation to pretend that she is their topic too; and to retail her at second-hand with the last new word and the last new manner, and the last new drawl, and the last new polite indifference, and all the rest of it, all at second-hand but considered equal to new, in inferior systems and to fainter stars.<sup>6</sup>

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1. Chap. lxiv, p.612 .

2. Chap. xx, p.202 .

3. Chap. xiv, p.135 .

4. See Blount, T., 'Sir Leicester Dedlock and "Deportment" Turveydrop',

5. Chap. xiv, p.137 .

N.C.F., xxi, pp. 149 - 165 .

6. Chap. lviii, p.559 .



[Apart from those who pander to the Aristocracy by imitation there is a large class who uphold High Society by serving it. These are in themselves parasites, living off the whims of the fashionable, and with their own financial interest in standing against social change. Lady Dedlock

... supposes herself to be an inscrutable Being, quite out of the reach and ken of ordinary mortals - seeing herself in the glass, where indeed she looks so. Yet, every dim little star revolving about her, from her maid to the manager of the Italian Opera, knows her weaknesses, prejudices, follies, haughtinesses, and caprices; and lives upon as accurate a calculation and as nice a measure of her moral nature, as her dressmaker takes of her physical proportions. Is a new dress, a new custom, a new singer, a new dancer, a new form of jewellery, a new dwarf or giant, a new chapel, a new anything, to be set up? There are deferential people, in a dozen callings, whom my Lady Dedlock suspects of nothing but prostration before her, who can tell you how to manage her as if she were a baby; who do nothing more but nurse her all their lives; who, humbly affecting to follow with profound subservience, lead her and her whole troop after them ...<sup>1</sup>

The most sinister of these parasites upon the great is Tulkinghorn who 'is reputed to have made <sup>good</sup> ~~great~~ thrift out of aristocratic marriage settlements and aristocratic wills, and to be very rich.'<sup>2</sup> Yet at the other end of the moral scale, the admirable Mrs. Rouncewell, though she has a reservation about 'my Lady's' affability, has no doubt of the loyalty and respect she owes her or her inherent superiority :

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1. Chap. ii, p.8.

2. Chap. ii, p.8.

That evening, in the housekeeper's room, Rosa can do nothing but murmur Lady Dedlock's praises. She is so affable, so graceful, so beautiful, so elegant; has such a sweet voice, and such a thrilling touch, that Rosa can feel it yet! Mrs. Rouncewell confirms all this, not without personal pride, reserving only the one point of affability. Mrs. Rouncewell is not quite sure as to that. Heaven forbid that she should say a syllable in dispraise of any member of that excellent family; above all, of my Lady, whom the whole world admires; but if my Lady would only be 'a little more free,' not quite so cold and distant, Mrs. Rouncewell thinks she would be more affable.

' 'Tis almost a pity,' Mrs. Rouncewell adds - only 'almost', because it borders on impiety to suppose that anything could be better than it is, in such an express dispensation as the Dedlock affairs; 'that my Lady has no family.' <sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Rouncewell's recognition of a fault in her mistress only emphasises the genuineness of her loyalty; and the genuineness of her loyalty points the good qualities of the Dedlocks themselves. In thus describing the relationship between them, Dickens recognizes the fact that the bond between servant and served, protector and protected, can be of real value, bespeaking 'high worth on two sides'.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, however, Mrs. Rouncewell's own sincerity and integrity serve to show up the falseness of most of the fashionable world and its toadies.

The basic unity of all classes of society, however, lies far deeper than a general desire to maintain the fashionable myth. The vices of the Aristocracy, selfishness, vanity, nostalgia for the past and inability to see the present, are by no means their peculiar property. There is as

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1. Chap. xii, p.110.

2. Chap. xxviii, p.279.

much Dandyism in the philanthropy of Mrs. Pardiggle and Mrs. Jellyby as in all the political and social waffle at Chesney Wold. If Sir Leicester can see only his own greatness, Mrs. Jellyby can see only Borrioboola - Gha and is blind to the miseries of her own home. Mrs. Pardiggle, faced with the squalor of the brickmakers' hovel, does nothing to relieve their distress but deliver religious tracts. The wretched Jo is moved on because there is no one to care for him; 'he is not softened by distance and unfamiliarity; he is not a genuine foreign-grown savage; he is the ordinary home-made article', and therefore 'there is nothing interesting' about him.<sup>1</sup> Tom-All-Alone's, one of the proposed titles for the novel,<sup>2</sup> stands in its filthy decay as a terrible reproof to a whole society which, no less than the fashionables at Chesney Wold, has 'agreed\ to put a smooth glaze on the world, and to keep down all its realities.'<sup>3</sup>

A major link between the fashionable world and the rest of society is made through Chancery, which with its endless verbiage, precedent and usage is as dead a world as that of High Society. Not only are all the major characters in the book, from Jo to Lady Dedlock, involved in the

1. Chap. xlvii, p.452.
2. I am aware of George H. Ford's recent article 'The Titles for Bleak House', Dickensian, May 1969, pp. 84-89 in which he suggests that Tom-All-Alone's was the original name for B. Jarndyce's house. This is certainly possible, though for reasons given on p.231 below, I do not think it probable. In any case it does not affect my interpretation of Tom's as we find it in the novel Dickens actually wrote.
3. Chap. xii, p.112.

toils of Jarndyce and Jarndyce, but the ethics of Chancery are in many instances an exact parallel to those of the fashionable world. Like High Society, Chancery is parasitic, preying on its clients as Mr. Vholes preys on Richard Carstone. Like High Society, Chancery is self-centred and self-congratulatory :

'Kenge,' said my guardian, 'if all the flourishing wealth that the suit brought into this vile court of Chancery could fall to my two young cousins, I should be well contented. But do you ask me to believe that any good is to come of Jarndyce and Jarndyce?'

'Oh, really, Mr. Jarndyce! Prejudice, prejudice. My dear sir, this is a very great country, a very great country. Its system of equity is a very great system, a very great system. Really, really!'<sup>1</sup>

Like High Society, Chancery is oblivious of reality: Gridley, the ruined suitor from Shropshire 'can by no means be made to understand that the Chancellor is legally ignorant of his existence after making it desolate for a quarter of a century.'<sup>2</sup>

Linked to the ethics of High Society through the parallel with Chancery are all those who gain their living from the law, from Young Smallweed and Guppy through Vholes and Kenge to the Lord Chancellor himself. All, like the servants of fashion, have an interest in maintaining the status quo. All 'in Chancery' like those 'in Fashion' live in a world that is constituted for their own benefit and that of nobody else.

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1. Chap. lxii, p.599 .

2. Chap. i, p.3.

As Jo and Tom-All-Alone's are the visible result of the selfishness of Society and its leaders, so Gridley, Carstone and Miss Flite (who has literally flown amiss in coming to Chancery) are the victims of the selfishness of the law.

Set slightly apart from these are those characters who, while members neither of fashionable society nor the law, display the same moral character; the Smallweeds, as rapacious as any Vholes; Chadband, linked through his wife to Miss Barbary and Lady Dedlock, and seeing in Jo nothing but an opportunity for specious eloquence; and Krook, hoarding rubbish as Tulkinghorn hoards the secrets of the great and calling his shop 'Chancery' :

'You see I have so many things here ... of so many kinds, and all, as the neighbours think (but they know nothing), wasting away and going to rack and ruin, ~~and that~~ that's why they have given me and my place a christening. And I have so many old parchments<sup>s</sup> and papers in my stock. And I have a liking for rust and must and cobwebs. And all's fish that comes to my net. And I can't ~~for~~<sup>at</sup> bear to part with anything I once lay hold of ... or to alter anything, or to have any sweeping, nor scouring, nor cleaning, nor repairing going on about me, That's why I've got the ill name of Chancery.'<sup>1</sup>

Krook's shop 'wasting away and going to rack and ruin' is not a symbol of Chancery alone but of society as a whole. From Chesney Wold to Tom-All-Alone's, society, like anything that has come to a halt, is seen to be decaying. The step on the Ghost's Walk that 'walks down'<sup>2</sup>

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1. Chap.v, p.37.

2. Chap. lviii, p.560.

Lady Dedlock will walk down the whole of the fashionable world :

... there is perhaps more dandyism at Chesney Wold than the brilliant and distinguished circle will find good for itself in the long run. For it is, even with the stillest and politest circles, as with the circle the necromancer draws round him - very strange appearances may be seen in active motion outside. With this difference; that, being realities and not phantoms, there is the greater danger of their breaking in.<sup>1</sup>

The enchanted circle of High Society is doomed to extinction through its own inertia. It is as powerless to ward off progress as Chesney Wold is to withstand the incessant rain. The 'place' in Lincolnshire is seen from the very beginning in terms of death and decay. 'An arch of the bridge in the park has been sapped and sopped away. The adjacent low-lying ground, for half a mile in breadth, is a stagnant river, with melancholy trees for islands in it,' and 'On Sundays, the little church in the park is mouldy; the oaken pulpit breaks out into a cold sweat; and there is a general smell and taste as of the ancient Dedlocks in their graves.'<sup>2</sup> The irony of living in the past is that one may come to be like it, dead. Chesney Wold can be brightened for a moment by sun and 'company' and 'On Sunday the chill little church is almost warmed by so much gallant company';<sup>3</sup> but it is only 'almost warmed'. In a startling image Dickens places 'the

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1. Chap. xii, p.113.

2. Chap. ii, p.6.

3. Chap. xii, p.112.

entire collection of faces that have come to pass a January week or two at Chesney Wold, and which the fashionable intelligence, a mighty hunter before the Lord, hunts with a keen scent, from their breaking cover at the Court of St. James's to their being run down to Death.<sup>1</sup> By the end of the novel even these moments of dubious relief are denied Chesney Wold, and it becomes :

... a vast blank of overgrown house looking out upon trees, sighing, wringing their hands, bowing their heads, and casting their tears upon the window-panes in monotonous depression. A labyrinth of grandeur, less the property of an old family of human beings and their ghostly likenesses, than of an old family of echoings and thunderings which start out of their hundred graves at every sound, and go resounding through the building.<sup>2</sup>

The sense of corruption and decay runs throughout society from Tom-All-Alone's, its ultimate expression, to Krook's shop, Vholes mouldering chambers with a desk that sounds like a coffin,<sup>3</sup> Skimpole's house and finally Chesney Wold. The link between the last, with its low-lying ground's stagnant river', and 'the stagnant channel of mud'<sup>4</sup> that is the main street of Tom-All-Alone's is clear enough. Even closer is the comparison between Chesney Wold and the brickmaker's house whose garden grows 'nothing but stagnant pools' and where 'Here and there, an old tub was set to catch the droppings of rain-water.'<sup>5</sup>

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1. Ibid.

2. Chap. lxvi, p.621 .

3. Chap. xxxix, p.388.

4. Chap. xlvi, p.443.

5. Chap. viii, p.75 .

At Chesney Wold, we remember, 'The vases on the stone terrace in the foreground catch the rain all day.'<sup>1</sup>

Tom-All-Along's, therefore, is not only a symbol of society's neglect but, like Krook's death by spontaneous combustion, an image of its destruction. This double significance is a superb piece of economy on Dickens's part. One cannot wonder that he considered Tom-All-Along's as a title for the novel, for it contains within it the essence of Dickens's argument: To neglect one's social duties and live in selfish isolation is to be inactive; to be inactive is to decay, and to decay is to fall to the level of those one has neglected. Tom-All-Along's, the result of the social disease of negligence, must necessarily be itself diseased; and as the disease has swept from the top downwards so it will sweep again from the bottom up :

That no man can estimate the amount of mischief grown in dirt, - that no man can say the evil stops here or stops there, either in its moral or physical effects, or can deny that it begins in the cradle and is not at rest in the miserable grave, is as certain as it is that the air from Gin Lane will be carried by an easterly wind into Mayfair, or that the furious pestilence raging in St. Giles's no mortal list of lady patronesses can keep out of Almack's'.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Chap. ii, p.6.

2. The Speeches of Charles Dickens, ed. R.H. Shepherd, 1884, p.127. Dickens was proposing 'The Board of Health' at a dinner for friends and members of the Sanitary Association at Gore House, 10 May 1851.



The narrative structure of Bleak House serves, as I have already suggested, to reinforce the thematic structure discussed above. The dominant features here are the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce and the story of Lady Dedlock. Chancery, apart from paralleling High Society in its antiquated procedure, stresses the essential oneness of society by drawing into the great cause all the major characters in the novel. Jo is drawn in, both by living in Tom-All-Along's, which is 'in Chancery', and by his contact with Hawdon and Lady Dedlock. By a still more complicated process the Bagnets are included through their friendship with George, who has a specimen of Hawdon's writing which Tulkinghorn wants because Hawdon copied an affidavit in Jarndyce and Jarndyce which Lady Dedlock recognises. This kind of 'this is the house that Jack built' plotting may seem slightly ludicrous when stated so badly, but the fact is that Dickens has managed it so well that in reading the novel one is not struck by any excessive manipulation. Only Boythorne's broken engagement to Miss Barbary jars slightly, and even this is justifiable on the grounds that it is an example of the far-reaching effects of Lady Dedlock's past.

Chancery, with its complete lack of concern for the disappointed suitors, mirrors society's neglect of Tom-All-Along's, and Richard's death is both a condemnation of 'the system' and, like Krook's, an image

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of its end. Richard dies by a kind of emotional spontaneous combustion, self-consumed by a fanaticism of which Chancery is the cause. In the same way the fate of Lady Dedlock foreshadows, in individual terms, the fate of High Society as a whole. As High Society, through living in the past, is to be destroyed so Lady Dedlock's own past destroys her.

Lady Dedlock's fall 'out of heigh degree/into miserie'<sup>1</sup> is the most classically tragic of all Dickens's tragedies. The pride that conceals the fatal mistake is definitely Aristotelian, and it is, I think, fitting that Dickens should have chosen the traditional grand manner for his most aristocratic heroine. Even Lady Dedlock's internal struggle between love for Esther and the honour of her husband is classical in nature and is emphasised by her name, Honoria. These echoes of great tragedies serve two functions in Bleak House: on the one hand they emphasise the power of the past, and on the other they give dignity to the fate not only of the Lady herself but of the order she represents.

The fall of Lady Dedlock, however, involves more than a simple foreshadowing of aristocratic doom. Her progress from 'heigh degree' to 'miserie' stresses the essential unity of society by bringing Lady Dedlock increasingly out of her enchanted circle and making her face the reality of her situation. By her love affair with Hawdon and the birth of a child Lady Dedlock has proved that she is not apart from ordinary mortals, and

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1. Chaucer, 'Monks Tale', 1.88.

this fact becomes successively clear<sup>cr</sup> throughout the novel. It is first suggested when she borrows her maid's dress to visit Hawdon's grave and having done so is further dependent on Jo to lead her there. Ironically enough the next time 'my Lady Dedlock' (Dickens's constant formality is surely significant) visits the burial-ground it is to die,<sup>1</sup> and in the clothes of a far poorer woman, Jennyn, who like Lady Dedlock has lost her child. The presence of Esther throughout the novel is a constant reminder that Lady Dedlock, despite her frigid facade, shares in the common humanity of the rest of mankind. That Dickens deliberately intended to emphasise this point can be shown from the presence of her portrait on the wall of the room where her lover died. As a study of the number plans reveals this was a premeditated step. The incident takes place in No. 7 and the number plan for No. 6 has the 'memo for the future', 'Tony Jobling in his lodging, mistaken for the dead lodger. Has Lady Dedlock's picture among the Galaxy Gallery.' The incident of Jobling being mistaken for the dead lodger was never written, but the significance of Lady Dedlock's portrait is clear enough.

At the end of the novel Lady Dedlock is literally united with the commonest of humanity through her death on the steps of a pauper's grave-yard. The disease in society, which Jo symbolically carried into the

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1. The similarity between the two visits is intentional. Dickens's notes for Chapter Sixteen have 'Shadowing forth of Lady Dedlock at the Churchyard'. Since Lady Dedlock visits the churchyard in this chapter the 'shadowing forth' must be of her second and final visit.

country, draws her to its heart. Like the rest of the characters who die in Bleak House (saving only Miss Barbary and Jenny's child, in any case an exile from the city) she dies in London, the centre of corruption in the novel. After years of effort to maintain her aristocratic poise, reality overcomes her and she breaks in a moment, in her own way as much a victim of the fashionable world as Jo.

Dickens's treatment of High Society in Bleak House is thus fully integrated into the thematic and narrative structure of the novel. The portrait of the fashionable world, as indeed of society as a whole, is neither flattering nor optimistic. As an institution the Aristocracy is deservedly doomed. Yet if we look at the individual aristocrats we find that Dickens fully elaborated both halves of his original statement that, though the fashionable world is a 'deadened' world, 'there is much good in it; there are many good and true people in it.' Certainly Bleak House contains no aristocratic saints; the satellite cousins are sketched in all their vacuous glory and both Sir Leicester and Lady Dedlock are far from faultless. Indeed it is a relief to find that they are not saints and that Dickens has paid his aristocrats the compliment of treating them as real people, a compound of both vice and virtue. This is particularly true of Sir Leicester and Lady Dedlock, though even the debilitated cousin, the ultimate in centuries of interbreeding, is unforgettably real with his marvellous 'zample - far better hang wrong fler than no fler.'<sup>1</sup> It is one of the best examples of Dickens's extraordinary ability to place a character not with a page of description but a snatch of dialogue.

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1. Chap. liii, p.509.

At the beginning of Bleak House, Lady Dedlock is very much the typical aristocrat of the silver-fork novel and its cheap imitations in the penny press.<sup>1</sup> As befits one 'at the centre of the fashionable intelligence, and at the top of the fashionable tree' she has her portrait printed in 'that truly national work 'The Divinities of Albion or the Galaxy Gallery of British Beauty' '. Dickens is almost certainly referring her<sup>e</sup> to Heath's Book of Beauty, which was edited by the Countess of Blessington. This was published annually from 1833 to 1849, for the last two years under the changed title of The Book of Beauty, or Regal Gallery. The book contained stories, usually with fanciful illustrations of the heroines, and portraits of the aristocratic beauties of the day facing short poems extolling their charms. I can find no reference to the 'Divinities of Albion', though the volume for 1839 contains a poem by Disraeli extolling 'Albion's Beauty'.<sup>2</sup> Certainly the whole tone of the book is extremely nationalistic as in, for example, the following stanza from a poem by the Countess of Blessington on Lady Fanny Cooper:

Thine is England's Beauty, -  
Where besides, doth rose  
Such a glow of brightness  
On a cheek disclose.<sup>3</sup>

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1. For a full discussion of this see Part Two, Chap. I, above.
  2. Op.cit., p.16. Unfortunately the British Museum does not now possess any volumes after 1839, though volumes up to 1849 are catalogued.
  3. Op. cit., p.129.

The lady to whom Disraeli's poem is addressed, Viscountess Mahon, is pictured on a terrace, by far the most popular venue for aristocratic portraits; and of Lady Dedlock's portrait we are told that 'she is represented on a terrace, with a pedestal upon the terrace, and a vase upon the pedestal, and her shawl upon the vase, and a prodigious piece of fur upon the shawl, and her arm on the prodigious piece of fur, and a bracelet on her arm.'<sup>1</sup> Here again I cannot find an exact replica of this portrait in the Book of Beauty, though one of Miss Lethbridge in the 1838 volume<sup>2</sup> is fairly close, and provides a good example of the kind of portrait Dickens was thinking of.<sup>3</sup>

Equally typical is Lady Dedlock's story. Mention has been made in an earlier chapter of the parallels between Bleak House and Reynolds's Seamstress,<sup>4</sup> and though one would not suggest any plagiarism on Dickens's part it is clear that he drew for the Lady Dedlock plot on a theme common to the popular fiction of the time.

What we may call these traditional elements in the portrait of Lady Dedlock serve to build up the reader's impression of her as an archetypal aristocrat. The effect of this is two fold. In the first place it emphasises how stereotyped the fashionable world has become, and in the second it increases our sense of shock at Lady Dedlock's fall.

1. Chap. xxxii, p. 315 .
2. Op. cit., facing p.89.
3. See Appendix A, p.275 , below .
4. See Part Two, Chap, 4, above .

This is not simply shock at the nature of her fall but shock also at the underlying humanity her fall reveals. Indeed the whole artificiality of the fashionable world sets off the genuineness of Sir Leicester and his wife. It is to stress this contrast that every significant move they make is prefaced by a reference to the 'fashionable intelligence'. For example, Chapter Sixteen in which Lady Dedlock visits Hawdon's grave, her first significant move out of the Aristocratic rut, begins as follows :

My Lady Dedlock is restless, very restless. The astonished fashionable intelligence hardly knows where to have her. To-day, she is at Chesney Wold; yesterday, she was at her house in town; tomorrow, she may be abroad, for anything the fashionable intelligence can with confidence predict.<sup>1</sup>

The continuous counterpoint between the artificial and the real is most movingly effective at the beginning of Chapter Fifty-eight, when, with Sir Leicester prostrate with grief and Lady Dedlock wandering to her death, Dickens gives us the reactions of the fashionable world.

It is given out that my Lady has gone down into Lincolnshire, but is expected to return presently.

Rumour, busy overmuch, <sup>however,</sup> will not go down into Lincolnshire. It persists in flitting and chattering about town. It knows that that poor unfortunate man, Sir Leicester, has been sadly used. It hears, my dear child, all sorts of shocking things. It makes the world of five miles round, quite merry. Not to know that there is something wrong at the Dedlocks' is to augur yourself unknown. One of the peachy-cheeked charmers with the skeleton throats, is already apprised of all the principle circumstances that will come out before the Lords, on Sir Leicester's application for a bill of divorce.<sup>2</sup>

1. Chap. xvi, p.155 .

2. Chap. lviii, p.557 ~ 8



All this when in the preceding chapter Sir Leicester has scrawled pathetically on his slate 'Full forgiveness. Find -.'<sup>1</sup>

This counterpoint is perhaps Dickens's finest achievement in his portrait of Lady Dedlock. Certainly some other revelations of her humanity border on the melodramatic. The contrast between the haughty my lady sitting before the fire with her handscreen (significantly 'more beautiful than useful')<sup>2</sup> and 'the wild figure on its knees' crying 'O my child, my child! Not dead in the first hours of her life, as my cruel sister told me; but sternly nurtured by her, after she had renounced me and my name!'<sup>3</sup> seems forced to modern tastes. Few, however would doubt the effectiveness of her scenes with Rosa or the fine<sup>e</sup> touch right at the beginning where

My Lady Dedlock (who is childless), looking out in the early twilight from her boudoir at the keeper's lodge, and seeing the light of a fire upon the latticed panes, and smoke rising from the chimney, and a child, chased by a woman, running out into the rain to meet the shining figure of a wrapped-up man coming through the gate, has been put quite out of temper.<sup>4</sup>

One might almost begin a critique of Bleak House by quoting this passage, it foreshadows so many of the themes of the novel. In particular one notices the effect of the child on Lady Dedlock and also on the ever-present rain. The child's simple love, it is suggested, can conquer the rain; and its father, though soaking wet, appears not 'sapped and sopped'

1. Chap. lvi, p.541.
2. Chap. ii, p.10.
3. Chap. xxix, p.288.
4. Chap. ii, p.6.

but 'shining'. Certainly the novel's pervading atmosphere of doom and corruption is overcome, if it is overcome at all, by the love of people like Esther, Woodcourt and Jarndyce. It is interesting to note also that the aside 'who is childless' was an afterthought on Dickens's part.<sup>1</sup> Presumably Dickens felt that the point of 'is put quite out of temper' would be missed otherwise. I am not convinced that this is so, and addicts of detective novels would certainly consider it an underhand trick. It is possible, however, that Dickens intended his aside to emphasise the contrast between the cold Lady Dedlock, who has no children by her present marriage, and the woman, Honoria, Esther's mother. Certainly we only learn Lady Dedlock's christian name at the moment when the existence of her letter to Hawdon is disclosed to Sir Leicester by the Smallweeds, and her fate is sealed.<sup>2</sup>

The final scenes after Lady Dedlock has left 'the house in town' are finely handled, largely because we do not see Lady Dedlock herself. Esther's pursuit of her mother and the cut back to the honourably forgiving Sir Leicester maintain the tension while at the same time allowing the reader to imagine the plight of the distraught woman as she travels through the snow and ensuing thaw, an image of her own emotional state.

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1. See H.P. Sucksmith, *op.cit.* p.65, who notes this fact.

2. Chap. liv, p.518.

The treatment is so right that it is hard to see how it could have been done otherwise. An actual picture of the wandering Lady Dedlock could only have been repetitive, though the earlier Dickens would have revelled in it. In addition psychology demands no lengthy portrayal of Lady Dedlock's mental state; the ground has been laid from the first moment of her being put 'out of temper' and a woman with her enormous powers of self-control would break in a moment and 'die of terror and my conscience'.<sup>1</sup> Anyone who has ever concealed a crime, however small, must know of the peculiar fear that accompanies remorse of conscience.

The weakest part of the whole Lady Dedlock plot lies not in herself but in what Johnson calls Mr. Tulkinghorn's 'almost purposeless malignance'.<sup>2</sup> Dickens does his best to justify this. Tulkinghorn's 'calling is the acquisition of secrets, and the holding possession of such power as they give him.'<sup>3</sup> When he has revealed to Lady Dedlock that he knows her story, Dickens suggests that 'Perhaps there is a rather increased sense of power upon him, as he loosely grasps one of his veinous wrists with his other hand.'<sup>4</sup> When he is confronted by Lady Dedlock in his tower room, 'His jealous glance' as she walks to the window 'betrays an instant's misgiving that she may have it in her thoughts

1. Chap. lix, p.573.

2. Edgar Johnson, Charles Dickens, vol ii, p.765.

3. Chap. xxxvi, p.359.

4. Chap. xli, p.405.

to leap over, and dashing against ledge and cornice, strike her life out upon the terrace below.'<sup>1</sup> But the nearest we get to a reason why he particularly pursues Lady Dedlock is again only a suggestion :

It may be that he pursues her doggedly and steadily, with no touch of compunction, remorse, or pity. It may be that her beauty, and all the state and brilliance surrounding her, only gives him the greater zest for what he is set upon, and makes him the more inflexible in it. Whether he be cold and cruel, whether immovable in what he has made his duty, whether absorbed in love of power, whether determined to have nothing hidden from him in ground where he has burrowed among secrets all his life, whether he in his heart despises the splendour of which he is a distant beam, whether he is always treasuring up slights and offences in the affability of his gorgeous clients - whether he be any of this, or all of this, it may be that my Lady had better have five thousand pairs of fashionable eyes upon her, in distrustful vigilance, than the two eyes of this rusty lawyer ...<sup>2</sup>

Despite all this it is hard to see why, after his assertion that 'The sole consideration in this unhappy case is Sir Leicester,'<sup>3</sup> he should consider breaking the truth to him. It may be that he intends to keep Lady Dedlock eternally on the rack; but if this is the case his reason for deciding to disclose the secret, that Lady Dedlock's dismissal of Rosa will cause gossip, is impossibly weak. Far better is the actual revelation through the Smallweed group, a further example of the novel's complicated web of interrelationships, and telling proof that even Tulkinghorn cannot live in isolation and keep his secrets to himself.

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1. Chap. xli, p.408 .

2. Chap. xxix, p.283.

3. Chap. xli, p.408 .

Whether one considers Dickens successful or not in providing motive and purpose for Tulkinghorn's malignance, his delaying tactics are essential to Dickens's portrait of Lady Dedlock. They increase the length of time during which she must harbour her guilty secret and live with her fear of betrayal, and thus make her final breakdown both inevitable and psychologically true. It is a pity, however, that Dickens did not handle this delay more convincingly.

One last point should be mentioned, the fact that Dickens never doubts for a moment that Esther's birth is a stain on Lady Dedlock's character. After all, when she marries Sir Leicester she believes her child to be dead. Yet the fact of having had an illegitimate child at all haunts her throughout her married life. It is an interesting pointer to the change in moral standards that one cannot imagine the proudest modern Lady being conscience-stricken to death in such circumstances.

Sir Leicester Dedlock is a less complex character than his wife; though Dickens's sympathy for him, especially in the final scenes, comes as more of a surprise than does the sympathy accorded to Lady Dedlock. Dickens's treatment of him is highly original. Sir Leicester is summed up at the beginning, much in Jane Austen's manner, as 'an honourable, obstinate, high-spirited, intensely prejudiced, perfectly unreasonable man',<sup>1</sup> and though Dickens does not depart from this evaluation the full significance of some of these adjectives is not immediately revealed.

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1. Chap. ii, p.7.

Sir Leicester's contemplation of his own greatness, his pride in his family and traditions, his intense conservatism, even to the point of countenancing the time-honoured method of political bribery, and his fear of the Wat Tyler element in society are ample proof of his obstinacy, prejudice and unreasonableness. His outraged response on learning that his candidate in Rouncewell's constituency has been beaten is a perfect example of narrow-minded upper class thinking and woolly upper class rhetoric.

'Then upon my honour,' says Sir Leicester, after a terrific pause, during which he has been heard to snort and felt to stare; 'then upon my honour, upon my life, upon my reputation and principles, the floodgates of society are burst open, and the waters have - a - obliterated the landmarks of the framework of the cohesion by which things are held together! ' 1

These elements in Sir Leicester's character are, as has been shown, perfectly integrated into the novel's thematic pattern. They are also, in my opinion, typical of a type that has by no means died out. G.K. Chesterton, comparing Cousin Feenix with Sir Leicester, claims that

Cousin Feenix is a much better sketch of the essentially decent and chivalrous aristocrat than Sir Leicester Dedlock. Both of the men are, if you will, fools, as both are honourable gentlemen. But if one may attempt a classification among fools, Sir Leicester Dedlock is a stupid fool, while Cousin Feenix is a silly fool - which is much better.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Chap. xl, p.403.

2. Dombey and Son, preface to E.L. edition, 1907, p. xiii.

Chesterton's own rhetoric runs away with his logic here. One may agree with his distinctions and find Cousin Feenix a nicer, though I doubt a better, man than Sir Leicester, but this has nothing to do with one being a 'better sketch' than the other. The comparison is interesting, however, for the fact that both are called upon to attest to their honour by pardoning a fallen relative. In this Sir Leicester's honour is as much 'the genuine article' as Cousin Feenix's, and nothing could be more generous and sincere than Dickens' tribute :

His noble earnestness, his fidelity, his gallant shielding of her, his generous conquest of his own wrong and his own pride for her sake, are simply honourable, manly, and true. Nothing less worthy can be seen through the lustre of such qualities in the commonest mechanic, nothing less worthy can be seen in the best-born gentleman. In such a light both aspire alike, both rise alike, both children of the dust shine equally.<sup>1</sup>

If one were to choose the passage that best expresses the essence of Dickens's philosophy this might well be it.

Dickens's treatment of Sir Leicester throughout the novel is a preparation for this moment. His sense of honour is demonstrated in his kindness to his poor relations, his treatment of his wife, and most of all in his dealing with Ironmaster. Rouncewell, the representative of the new meritocratic society, stands for everything Sir Leicester detests, 'the obliteration of landmarks, and opening of floodgates, and cracking of the framework of society'<sup>2</sup> - His son is significantly called Watt, - ,

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1. Chap. lviii, p.564.

2. Chap. xxviii, p.282.

yet Sir Leicester freely admits that Rouncewell requests an interview with the Dedlocks ' "in a very becoming note;" "Sir Leicester, with his habitual regard to truth, dwells upon it; "I am bound to say in a very becoming and well expressed note" '.<sup>1</sup> Rouncewell, the determined, industrious, self-made man, certainly embodies qualities that Dickens admired; though in his next novel, Hard Times, Dickens was to show in Bounderby these virtues turned to vices. Even in Bleak House right is not entirely on Rouncewell's side. When Lady Dedlock confirms the Ironmaster's good opinion of Rosa, he replies, 'I am happy, Lady Dedlock, that you say so, and I need no comment on the value to me of your kind opinion of her.' Sir Leicester thinks this 'a little too glib',<sup>2</sup> and he is right. Also it is hardly polite of Rouncewell to suggest to the Dedlocks, as it would be hardly polite to suggest to anyone's face, that their home is not good enough for his son's intended. The irony of this is that the Ironmaster is in his way as great a snob as Sir Leicester - Rosa is to be sent to be 'finished' before she can marry Watt because Rouncewell does not 'regard the village-school as teaching everything desirable to be known by my son's wife'.<sup>3</sup> Despite all this, Sir Leicester remains true to his sense of honour and love of truth and when Rouncewell asserts that his mother's loyalty to Chesney Wold 'bespeaks high worth on two sides; on the great side assuredly; on the small one, no less assuredly',

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1. Chap. xxviii, p.277.

2. Chap. xxviii, p.278.

3. Chap. xxviii, p.280.



Sir Leicester snorts a little to hear the law laid down in this way; but in his honour and love of truth, he freely, though silently, admits the justice of the ironmaster's proposition.<sup>1</sup>

After the interview has come to a politely stormy conclusion, Sir Leicester is too much a gentleman not to offer Rouncewell 'the hospitality of Chesney Wold, for tonight at least.'

Despite the fact that Sir Leicester's 'full forgiveness' is not out of character and is prepared for by Dickens, the reader does not fully foresee it. It is a genuine psychological surprise and forces us to rethink our estimate of Sir Leicester's character. Dickens is true to his preliminary summing-up of Sir Leicester; but it is not until the end that we realise him to be 'honourable' and 'high-spirited' in the finest sense of those words.

To return to Chesterton's comparison between Sir Leicester and Cousin Feenix, Sir Leicester's pardoning of his wife displays one quality that we are not shown in Cousin Feenix, devoted love. Even in Lady Dedlock's disgrace it is of her rather than himself that Sir Leicester thinks :

It is she whom he has loved, admired, honoured, and set up for all the world to respect. It is she, who, at the core of all the constrained formalities and conventionalities of his life, has been a stock of living tenderness and love, susceptible as nothing else is of being struck with the agony he feels. He sees her, almost to the exclusion of himself; and cannot bear to look upon her cast down from the high place she has graced so well.

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1. Chap. xxviii, p.279.

And, even to the point of sinking on the ground, oblivious of his suffering, he can yet pronounce her name with something like distinctness in the midst of those intrusive sounds, and in a tone of mourning and compassion rather than reproach.<sup>1</sup>

The key phrase here is 'at the core of all the constrained formalities and conventionalities of his life'; for, as in the case of Lady Dedlock, it is precisely this contrast between 'the conventionalities of his life' and Sir Leicester's genuine feeling that Dickens wishes to stress. The way in which Dickens emphasises this contrast by prefacing the picture of the prostrate Sir Leicester with the heartless gossip of the 'fashionable intelligence' has already been noted. In the same way Dickens's 'My Lady Dedlock' is paralleled by Bucket's 'Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet'<sup>2</sup> to point the comparison between the 'constrained formality' of High Society and the reality that is revealed when the 'necromancer's circle' is broken.

The humanity that is to be revealed in Sir Leicester and Lady Dedlock is set off above all by the Coodling and Doodling of their aristocratic house parties and by the parasitic cousins. Yet even the cousins are not condemned out of hand - In a brilliant stroke Dickens shows them to be as much a victim of their own world as Lady Dedlock or Jo :

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1. Chap. liv, p.527.

2. Chap. liv, passim.

The rest of the cousins are ladies and gentleman of various ages and capacities; the major part, amiable and sensible, and likely to have done well enough in life if they could have overcome their cousinship; as it is, they are all a little worsted by it, and lounge in purposeless and listless paths, and seem to be quite as much at a loss how to dispose of themselves, as anybody else can be how to dispose of them.<sup>1</sup>

Among the individuals the 'debilitated cousin' has already been discussed. Of the other two, the aptly named Hon. Bob Stables, with his horsey jokes, is little more than a vignette, a return to the manner of Lord Peter in 'The Great Winglebury Duel'. He does allow Dickens a neat dig at the aristocracy at its most assinine, and his comment on Lady Dedlock's flight adds substance to the picture of the fashionable intelligence and its thoughtless cruelty :

This sparkling sally is to the effect that, although he always knew she was the best groomed woman in the stud, he had no idea she was a bolter. It is immensely received in turf-circles.<sup>2</sup>

Volumnia is more fully described. In her aged youthfulness she is a paler imitation of Mrs. Skewton and shares many of her characteristics. Like Cleopatra she has her financial problems, and her assumed innocence conceals an equally mercenary nature. It is only when she finds 'a memorandum concerning herself, in the event of "anything happening" to her kinsmen' that she is compensated for 'an extensive course of reading' to the dying Sir Leicester and 'holds even the dragon Boredom at bay'.<sup>3</sup> Even her 'hideous old general' in Bath 'with the mouth too full of teeth'<sup>4</sup>

1. Chap. xxviii, p.276.

2. Chap. lviii, p.558 .

3. Chap. lxvi, pp. 620-1 .

4. Chap. lxvi, p.621 .

reminds one of Major Bagstock. For the most part, however, she is there to show the awful bleakness and artificiality of High Society and as an example of the vast network of parasitic relations and hangers-on that the fashionable world collects around it. Her name may be of some significance, perhaps to reinforce the classical echoes that surround the tragedy of Lady Dedlock, but more probably as a further instance of the contrast between empty pretence and reality in High Society - a noble name for a very ignoble person.

The above has shown, I hope, how well Dickens managed to integrate the fashionable world into his portrait of Society as a whole and how fairly he drew the distinction between the institution and its individual members. There remain the difficult problems of what future Dickens saw for society and in what way he would have had it changed. Johnson sees Krook's death by spontaneous combustion as an image not only of the fate of Chancery but of society in general.<sup>1</sup> Certainly the over-riding atmosphere of the novel is one of corruption and decay, and its title, Bleak House, offers little hope for society as at present constituted. On the other hand Dickens is a novelist and not a political theorist. Although he anatomises

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1. Op.cit., vol ii, p.782.

society he offers no concrete suggestion as to the constitutional changes he would make. To demand that he should have done so is to miss the point of the novel. In Bleak House Dickens paints a society selfish and predatory from top to bottom, where Miss Flite's birds are safer in captivity than released to the waiting claws of Lady Jane. As a remedy for this situation Dickens places his faith not in any particular political system - Dickens was in any case a life long enemy of systems - but in moral integrity. Men like Jarndyce can renovate Bleak House,<sup>1</sup> and Esther, whatever we may think of her self-deprecation, is one of the few effective characters in the novel. They may seem ineffectual buffers against the almost inevitable social doom suggested in the novel. Dickens does not deny this, but he has the clarity of vision to see that any future society has rests on people like these. This may not be a politician's answer, but I would suggest that Dickens's is both simpler and more profound. When all is said and done, it is the Ashleys of this world rather than the politicians who make society a better place.

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1. Chap. viii, p.68.

CHAPTER FIVE  
1853-1870

1.

Though Dickens's treatment of High Society in the period between Bleak House and his death lies outside the special interest of this thesis, it is clear that any discussion of its development must take account of the mature performance. If it does not such a discussion will lack perspective.

Though Hard Times, A Tale of Two Cities and Great Expectations will be referred to in this Chapter, the bulk of my material is drawn from Little Dorrit and Our Mutual Friend, for the fairly obvious reason that they contain Dickens's fullest discussion of High Society and its relationship to society as a whole. I do not intend a detailed analysis of these novels but merely propose to ask two questions: in what directions, if any, do Little Dorrit and Our Mutual Friend, mark a development in Dickens's treatment of High Society; and in what way do they reinforce points already made in this thesis. It is only by answering these questions that Dickens's early development can be compared with his mature achievement and the material of the preceding chapters be seen in its true perspective.

2.

It is but a glimpse of the world of fashion that we want on this same miry afternoon.<sup>1</sup>

'Society', said Mrs. Merdle, with another curve of her little finger, 'is so difficult to explain to young persons....',<sup>2</sup>

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1. Bleak House, Chap. ii.

2. Little Dorrit, 1857, Book I, Chap. xx, p.175 .

One of the most significant developments in Dickens's treatment of High Society between Bleak House and Little Dorrit lies in the simple substitution of 'Society' for the 'world of fashion.' The change once made is adhered to until the end of Dickens's writing career. The title of Bleak House, Chapter ii, 'In Fashion' becomes in Little Dorrit 'Moving in Society,'<sup>1</sup> and in Our Mutual Friend 'The Voice of Society.'<sup>2</sup> This is partly due to the fact that the 'Society' of the latter novels does not quite reach the level of Lady Dedlock's 'fashionable world.' More importantly, 'Society' itself was changing. Fraser's Magazine in 1846 had included in its definition of the aristocracy 'the more exalted members of the commercial classes' and 'those manufacturers with gigantic operations.'<sup>3</sup> Clearly by the 1850's such a definition was becoming unnecessary. Though the top levels of the aristocracy remained aloof, the spectrum of 'Society' had broadened to include the very wealthy. Dickens himself makes this clear in his portrait of Mr. Dombey whose power in the city ('No one can be a stranger to Mr. Dombey's immense influence')<sup>4</sup> brings him an upper-class wife and the acquaintance of fringe aristocrats like Sir Barnet Skettles. The upper class disliked these intruders but bowed to financial necessity. The ambivalence of their attitude is nicely caught in Dickens's picture of Mrs. Gowan and the considerations which lead her to 'resign herself to her inevitable fate' and make the best of her son's alliance with 'those people the Migglese':

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1. Book I, Chap. xx.
  2. Chapter the Last.
  3. 'The Aristocracy of Rank,' Fraser's, August, 1846.
  4. Dombey and Son, Chap. xxi, p.205.

Of these, the first may have been, that her son never <sup>had</sup> signified the smallest intention to ask her consent, or any mistrust of his ability to dispense with it; and second, that the pension bestowed upon her by a grateful country (and a Barnacle) would be freed from any little filial inroads, when her Henry should be married to the darling only child of a man in very easy circumstances; the third, that Henry's debts must clearly be paid down upon the altar-railing by his father-in-law.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, the Dowager finds grim satisfaction in the confirmation of her opinion of such marriages, 'that it never does.'<sup>2</sup> Essentially the attitude of the upper classes was one of fear that the new 'Society' might usurp their privileges and Mrs. Gowan having seen her son financially secure takes the first opportunity to break with his in-laws.<sup>3</sup> Poor Mrs. Meagles complains that Henry is living beyond his means to be met with the retort that having entrapped a well-connected husband for his daughter he should take the financial consequences. Mrs. Gowan concludes that

'It is in vain...for people to attempt to get on together who have such extremely different antecedents; who are jumbled against each other in this accidental, matrimonial sort of way; and who cannot look at the untoward circumstance which has shaken them together, in the same light. It never does.'<sup>4</sup>

With one blow Mrs. Gowan secures money for her son and guards her own position as a member of the upper class. Equally, Dickens saw that the Circumlocution Office with its nepotism and red tape was nothing but 'a politico diplomatico hocus pocus piece of machinery, for the assistance of the nobs in keeping off the snobs.'<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1857,</sup>

1. Little Dorrit, Book I, Chap. xxxiii, p.289.
2. Book II, Chap, viii, p.393.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Book I, Chap. x, p.84.



However, as the case of Merdle, and to a lesser extent that of Veneering and Boffin, shows, money has become the ruling force in 'Society'. Merdle is Dickens's supreme example of the power of wealth, but the attack is directed more against the society that accepts him than against the man himself :

All ~~the~~ people knew (or thought they knew) that he had made himself immensely rich; and, for that reason alone, prostrated themselves before him, more degradedly and less excusably than the darkest savage creeps out of his hole in the ground to propitiate, in some log or reptile, the Deity of his benighted soul. <sup>1</sup>

The attack, it must be noted, is levelled at 'all the people', not simply at 'Society'. Here Dickens's change from 'the world of fashion' to 'Society' has a thematic purpose. It makes clearer the point that Dickens has been urging since Martin Chuzzlewit, that the vices of society belong to all levels. By discarding 'the fashionable world' Dickens can more easily make 'Society' stand as an image of society as a whole.

Another important feature of the above quotation is its bitterness; and this bitterness is noticeable also in Dickens's description of the class war waged by the Circumlocution Office and Mrs. Gowan. The power of money and the class war are not new subjects in Dickens's novels. The former had been treated in Martin Chuzzlewit and Dombey and Son, and the latter is apparent both in the scenes between Edith and Mr. Dombey ('You insist! To me!')<sup>2</sup>

1. Book II, Chap, xii, p.417.

2. Dombey and Son, Chap. xl, p.400.

and in Sir Leicester's fear of 'the floodgates.' In Little Dorrit, however, the attacks on the Circumlocution Office and Mrs. Gowan with her awful 'Papa and Mama Meagles'<sup>1</sup> have an intensity that is almost brutal. The same is true of Our Mutual Friend with its pervading images of dust and filth. As a minor example one might note that Lady Tippins 'with an immense obtuse drab oblong face'<sup>2</sup> is treated with none of the pity that accompanies the death of her earliest counterpart, Mrs. Skewton. This increase in intensity, and the intensity of Dickens's bitterness amounts almost to despair, is the dominant feature of Dickens's later novels.

A glance at Dickens's letters and journalism of this period provides ample evidence of this increase in Dickens's bitterness at and despair of the state of society. In particular he had lost what little faith he had in the ruling classes and indeed in the parliamentary system :

I declared~~d~~ that as to all matters on the face of this teeming earth, it appears to me that the House Of Commons and Parliament altogether is become just the dreariest failure and nuisance that ever bothered this much bothered world. 3

I really am serious in thinking... that representative government is become altogether a failure with us, that the English gentilities and subserviencies render the people unfit for it, and that the whole thing has broken down since that great seventeenth-century time, and has no hope in it.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Little Dorrit, Book II, Chap. viii, passim.
  2. Our Mutual Friend, 1865, Book I, Chap. ii, Vol. I, p.8.
  3. Forster, xi 3 (Vol. III, p.460).
  4. Nonesuch, ii, 693 (30 September 1855). Dickens's political opinions, and indeed, his language, changed hardly at all. In a letter of 1 March 1857 he writes to Paxton 'I solemnly declare to you that direfully against my will, I have come to the conclusion that representative government is a failure among us.'

All in all, Dickens has 'no political faith or hope - not a grain.'<sup>1</sup>

Aristocratic insolence and incompetence he attacked constantly in Household Words. The chief objects of his attack are red tape and humbug, and the two are neatly blended in one of the 'Tales of the Thousand and One Humbugs', 'The <sup>Story</sup> Tales of Scarli Tapa and the Forty Thieves.'<sup>2</sup> Red Tape is also the subject of attack in the 'Story of Prince Bull' and his fairy godmother, the Fairy Tape :

She was a Fairy, this Tape, and was bright red all over. She was disgustingly prim and formal, and could never bend herself a hair's breadth this way or that way, out of her naturally crooked shape. But, she was very potent in her wicked art. She could stop the fastest thing in the world, change the strongest thing into the weakest, and the most useful into the most useless. To do this she only had to put her cold hand upon it, and repeat her own name, Tape. Then it withered away.<sup>3</sup>

Yet Dickens despairs not only of the ruling class but of the people as a whole. 'The fault is our own 'he writes in 'The Toady Tree'<sup>4</sup>, and is largely due 'to the facility with which we have permitted electioneering lords and gentlemen to think for us.'<sup>5</sup> He is of the opinion that 'Our Political aristocracy and our tuft hunting are the death of England' and that the people only 'sing "Rule Britannia" and WILL NOT be saved.'<sup>6</sup> Dickens' whole attitude at this time is perhaps best summed up in a letter to Layard of 10 April 1855 :

1. Nonesuch, ii, 694 (4 October 1855).
2. Household Words, 5 May 1855.
3. Household Words, 17 February 1855.
4. Household Words, 26 May 1855.
5. 'Insularities,' Household Words, 19 January 1856.
6. Nonesuch, ii, 622 (3 February 1855) and ii, 695 (4 October 1855).

There is nothing in the present time at once so galling and so alarming to me as the alienation of the people from their own public affairs. I have no difficulty in understanding it. They have had so little to do with the game through all these years of Parliamentary Reform, that they have sullenly laid down their cards, and taken to looking on. The players who are left at the table do not see beyond it, conceive that the gain and loss and all the interest of the play are in their hands, and will never be wiser until they and the table and the lights and the money are all overturned together. And I believe the discontent to be so much the worse for smouldering, instead of blazing openly, that it is extremely like the general mind of France before the breaking out of the First Revolution, and is in danger of being turned by any one of a thousand accidents - a bad harvest - the last strain too much of aristocratic insolence or incapacity - a defeat abroad - a mere chance at home - into such a devil of a conflagration as never has been beheld since.

Meanwhile, all our English tuft-hunting, toad-eating, and other manifestations of accursed gentility, ARE expressing themselves every day. So, every day, the disgusted millions with this unnatural gloom and calm upon them are confirmed and hardened in the very worst of moods. Finally, round all this is an atmosphere of poverty, hunger, and ignorant desperation, of the mere existence of which, perhaps not one man in a thousand of those not actually enveloped in it, through the whole extent of this country, has the least idea.

It seems to me an absolute impossibility to direct the spirit of the people at this pass, until it shows itself. If they would begin to bestir themselves in the vigorous national manner - if they would appear in political reunion - array themselves peacefully, but in vast numbers, against a system, that they know to be rotten altogether - make themselves heard like the Sea all round this island - I for one should be in such a movement, heart and soul, and should think it a duty of the plainest kind to go along with it (and try and guide it), by all possible means. But you can no more help a people who do not help themselves than you can help a man who does not help himself. And until the people can be got up from their lethargy which is an awful symptom of the advanced state of their disease, I know of nothing that can be done beyond keeping their wrongs continually before them. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> None such

1. Letters, ii, 651-2 (10 April 1855).

The attack is comprehensive: the rulers have no care for the ruled and the ruled respond with sullen apathy. As Dickens saw, this is the most dangerous situation of all, for the slightest incident can turn smouldering despair into blazing revolution. Certainly Dickens is in favour of 'the table and the lights and the money' being 'all over-turned together', but he wishes it done peaceably. Ultimately a healthy society can only be achieved through the goodwill and activities of ruled and rulers alike, and if Dickens has no faith in the goodwill of the rulers he has little more in the activity of the ruled. As a blanket condemnation of society, the letter is a terrible indictment of a governing class who have allowed such a situation to arise and a People who have done nothing to prevent it but 'have sullenly laid down their cards.'

The warning against 'such a devil of a conflagration as never has been beheld since', is inherent in Dickens's treatment of Jo in Bleak House and is repeated in Our Mutual Friend :

My lords and gentlemen and honourable boards, when you in the course of your dust-shovelling and cinder-raking have piled up a mountain of pretentious failure, you must off with your honourable coats for the removal of it, and fall to the work with the power of all the queen's horses and all the queen's men, or it will come rushing down and bury us alive.<sup>1</sup>

In this context we may see A Tale of Two Cities as a tract for the times, an awful warning drawn from historical example. In Little Dorrit, as I shall suggest later, Merdle's suicide becomes an image of the fate of the whole of society.

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1. Our Mutual Friend, Book III, Chap. viii, Vol. II, p.65.

The picture is a grim one. Aristocratic insolence, indifference and lack of understanding, which had been one of the leading themes of Bleak House are treated with a new bitterness in Little Dorrit and the 'Society' chapters of Our Mutual Friend. But Dickens's despair is more far-reaching than this; the People too 'Sing "Rule Brit<sup>n</sup>ania" and will not be saved'. In a sense the two developments discussed in this section are complementary. The increased intensity of Dickens's vision and the fate he foresaw for society as a whole demanded that he should clarify the link between the 'fashionable world' and the other classes. The switch from 'fashion' to 'Society' is a simple one, but it achieves this end perfectly. The capital 'S' maintains the class distinction but the word society points the fact that all are joined in a rat race to destruction.

Reference to the later novels strongly reinforces two major arguments of my thesis; Dickens's understanding of the oneness of society and his fairness in distinguishing the individual aristocrat from the aristocracy as an institution. In Little Dorrit and Our Mutual Friend the unity of society is demonstrated largely through the use of symbols. The Prison dominates Little Dorrit. For Mrs. Clenham in her room 'the world has narrowed to these dimensions',<sup>1</sup> and like Old Dorrit, who cannot shake off the prison stain, she breaks out of her self-imposed prison only to make straight for the Marshalsea. The Circumlocution Office not only imprisons society in a mass of red tape but is itself a prison for its employees. Finally 'Society' is a prison, its demands symbolised by Mrs. Merdle's screeching parrot who perches significantly on the outside of a golden cage. In Mrs. Merdle's own words :

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1. Little Dorrit, Book I, Chap. iii, p.25.

'Society suppresses us and dominates us - Bird, be quiet!' The parrot had broken into a violent fit of laughter, after twisting divers bars of his cage with his crooked bill, and licking them with his black tongue.<sup>1</sup>

In Our Mutual Friend, from the great mounds of Harmony Jail to Miss Peecher's 'little dusty bit of garden', the dust is all pervasive. The world is dominated by 'money, money, money',<sup>2</sup> and money is no more than dust and filth. The 'Society' chapters are dominated by money, particularly Veneering's, and even poor little Twemlow is caught up in a bad debt. As in Little Dorrit, 'Society' in Our Mutual Friend is an image of society as a whole, and its voice is the voice of all men. The majority like the Contractor reduce all things<sup>to</sup> 'a question of beefsteaks and porter',<sup>3a</sup> and only a few, like Twemlow and Mortimer, speak up for higher values.

The symbolism of the later novels has received a critical battering in the last few years, particularly from the United States, and enough has been said above to justify my point. Dickens's use of symbols to emphasise the oneness of society is indeed almost self-evident, and a less obvious and discussed example of his technique is to be found in his treatment of Merdle.

Merdle is a central character in Little Dorrit. He is a prisoner both of his own villainy and of society. In a sense he is a creation of society, a necessary result of its greed. At all social levels men are prepared to 'prostrate themselves' before his wealth. Lord Decimus countenances his investment schemes and in Bleeding Heart Yard it is 'Merdle, Merdle, Merdle. Always Merdle'.<sup>3</sup> That society is to blame for his existence is emphasised

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1. Book I, Chap. xx, p.175.

2. Our Mutual Friend, Chap, xviii Book 3, Chap. xv, Vol.2, p.135.

3. Little Dorrit, Book II, chap. xiii, p.436.

2.a. Our Mutual Friend, Chapter the last, Vol. 2, p.305.

by Dickens in the investment episodes. In their desire for money men lose all reason :

There never was, there never had been, there never again should be, such a man as Mr. Merdle. Nobody, as aforesaid, knew what he had done; but everybody knew him to be the greatest that had appeared.<sup>1</sup>

and in a telling paragraph Dickens compares this mad pursuit of wealth to a plague.

Of whom Mr. Panks had taken the prevalent disease, he could not more have told than if he had unconsciously taken a fever. Bred at first, as many physical diseases are, in the wickedness of men, and then disseminated in their ignorance, these epidemics, after a period, get communicated to many sufferers who are neither ignorant nor wicked. Mr. Panks might, or might not, have caught the illness himself from a subject of this class; but, in this category he appeared before Clenham, and the infection he threw off was all the more virulent.<sup>2</sup>

The clinical tone serves only to increase the force of the passage and heighten our sense of inevitable doom, and Mr. Merdle in his death becomes a symbol of the sickness and ultimate fate of society. The passage, though long, is worth quoting, for it shows clearly the savage intensity of Dickens's writing at this time. It emphasises also Dickens's point that, for all the aristocratic insistence on pedigree, money is the ruling force at all levels of society. Finally it repeats the lesson of Dombey; that any set of values based on wealth is ultimately false.

Numbers of men in every profession and trade would be blighted by this insolvency; old people who had been in easy circumstances all their lives would have no place of repentance for their trust in him but the workhouse; legions of women and children would have their whole future desolated by the hand of this mighty scoundrel. Every partaker of his magnificent feasts would be seen to have been a sharer in the plunder of innumerable homes; every servile worshipper of riches who had helped to set him on his pedestal, would have done better to worship the Devil point-blank. So, the talk, lashed louder

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1. Book II Chap. xiii, p.428.  
2. Book II Chap. xiii, p.437.



and higher by confirmation on confirmation, and by edition after edition of the evening papers, swelled into such a roar when night came, as might have bough<sup>t</sup> one to believe that a solitary watcher on the gallery above the Dome of St. Paul's would have perceived the night air to be laden with a heavy muttering of the name of Merdle, coupled with every form of execration.

For by that time it was known that the late Mr. Merdle's complaint had been, simply, Forgery and Robbery. He, the uncouth object of wide-spread adulation, the sitter at great men's feasts, the roc's egg of great ladies' assemblies, the subduer of exclusiveness, the leveller of pride, the patron of patrons, the bargain driver with a Minister for Lordships of the Circumlocution Office, the recipient of more acknowledgement within some ten or fifteen years, at most, than had been bestowed in England upon all peaceful public benefactors, and upon all the leaders of all the Arts and Sciences, with all their works to testify for them, during two centuries at least - he, the shining wonder, the new constellation to be followed by the wise men bringing gifts, until it stopped over certain carrion at the bottom of a bath and disappeared - was simply the greatest Forger and the greatest Thief that ever cheated the gallows.<sup>1</sup>

The essential point that Dickens is making here, and this is especially emphasised in the 'Society' chapters of Little Dorrit and Our Mutual Friend, is that man should be taken for what he is rather than for what he has. Men like Veneering and Merdle may change their 'accidents' through wealth but their 'substance' remains the same. It is society who are to blame if, armed with a set of false values, they wish to transform the latter as well. This idea is neatly pointed in Great Expectations. Pip's expectations, inevitably false ones, gain him a place in 'Society', but, because of the first person narrative, the reader knows the character behind the expectations. For 'Society' Pip ceases to be of value when his expectations are lost; for the reader his worth only increases.

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1. Book II, Chap. xxv, p.537.

Despite the bitterness of much of Dickens's later work, the scrupulous fairness towards individual worth remains. Whatever he thought of the aristocracy as an institution he treated individual aristocrats on their merits. In August 1854, Lord Seymour, former Chief Commissioner for Public Works, chose to joke in Parliament about the cholera epidemic then raging, claiming it as a fiction of the Board of Health to keep itself in existence. The joke apparently was well received, and Dickens pursues Seymour and his laughing colleagues through a series of ferocious articles in Household Words.<sup>1</sup> A speech made at the end of his life, however, shows how great was his attachment and admiration for those members of the aristocracy who deserved them. Dickens is countering 'a most singular charge preferred against me by my old friend Lord Houghton, that I have been somewhat unconscious of the merits of the House of Lords.' The flippant manner of his reply does not mask its sincerity :

Now, ladies and gentlemen, seeing that I have had some few not altogether obscure or unknown personal friends in that assembly; seeing that I had some little association with, and knowledge of, a certain obscure peer lately known in England by the name of Lord Brougham; seeing that I regard with some admiration and affection another obscure peer wholly unknown in literary circles, Lord Lytton; seeing also that I have had for some years some slight admiration of the extraordinary judicial properties and amazingly acute mind of a certain Lord Chief Justice popularly known by the name of Cockburn; and also seeing that there is no man in England whom I respect more in his public capacity, whom I love more in his private capacity, or from whom I have received more remarkable proofs of his honour and love of literature than another obscure nobleman than Lord Russell;... I was rather amazed by my noble friend's accusation.<sup>2</sup>

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1. See 'It is not Generally Known, Household Words, 2 September 1854, which attacks Seymour's 'well timed joke ... so neatly made upon the greatest misery and direst calamity that human nature can endure.' Also 'To Working Men' and 'A Home Question, Household Words, 7 October and 11 November 1854.
  2. Speeches of Charles Dickens, ed. R.H. Shepherd, 1884, pp.290-291. Dickens was replying to his 'health' proposed at a banquet held in his honour at St. George's Hall, Liverpool, on 10 April 1869.

One notices, however, that Dickens is not really defending his attitude to the House of Lords but to particular members of it.

In the novels of this period Dickens certainly saw the aristocracy as proud, reactionary and indifferent to the suffering of the poor. The 'Society' and Circumlocution chapters of Little Dorrit were intended as Forster tells us as 'parts of one satire levelled against prevailing political and social vices.'<sup>1</sup> But they are only parts, and lower down the social scale Casby is as callous as any member of the ruling class. In Hard Times Bounderby is as indifferent to the poor as Lord Decimus, and the Podsnappery of Our Mutual Friend is seen as the prevailing attitude of the 'haves' to the 'have-nots'. Certainly the ruling class receive the greatest share of the blame since they have the greatest opportunity to set matters right, But Dickens is in no doubt that ~~the~~ he is living in a society completely dominated by selfishness and greed.

Perhaps the most telling attack upon High Society lies in the very contrast of 'Society' and society. The rich in their indifference have created for themselves a modus vivendi 'Society' which is irrelevant to and indeed entirely incompatible with the needs of society as a whole. Like the Circumlocution Office 'Society' may be seen as a 'hocus pocus piece of machinery, for the assistance of the nobs in keeping off the snobs'.<sup>2</sup> Thus the hideously sumptuous

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1. Forster, viii, I (Vol.III, p.136). See also Dickens's own statement that 'Society, the Circumlocution Office, and Mr. Gowan, are of course, three parts of one idea and design.' (Nonesuch, ii,766). Nonesuch dates the letter April 1856, though Forster says that Dickens wrote it 'while engaged on the 6th No.' (Vol.III,p.136) That this was completed by 6 March is evidenced by a letter to Wills of that date stating that Little Dorrit 'has completed her sixth' (ii,749).
  2. Little Dorrit, Book II, Chap.x. p. 84

Veneering dinners are contrasted with the struggle of the working poor. They are contrasted also with the normal functioning of human emotions, for above all 'Society' lacks heart. The two choric chapters in Our Mutual Friend, 'A Social Chorus'<sup>1</sup> and 'The Voice of Society'<sup>2</sup> are placed after the engagement of Bella and Rokesmith and the marriage of Eugene and Lizzie. There is evidence for the deliberate placing of the first of these in the number plans. The plan for No. 14 has 'And the chorus? Next Time.'<sup>3</sup> Since Bella's flight from the Boffins and engagement to Rokesmith occur in No. 15 it is clear that Dickens wished to place this particular example of social callousness immediately after rather than before Bella's genuine display of heart. This contrast between 'social' heartlessness and honest emotion is emphasised both in Our Mutual Friend and Little Dorrit by sending into 'Society' characters whom the reader admires. Little Dorrit unwillingly and Bella willingly enter 'Society' and both retire disgusted, Bella symbolically leaving behind her dresses.<sup>4</sup> Mrs. Boffin is 'a high-flyer at Fashion'<sup>5</sup> but she and her husband remain in their honest goodness 'a hopelessly Unfashionable pair.'<sup>6</sup>

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1. Book III, Chap. xvii.

2. Chapter the Last.

3. The number plans for Our Mutual Friend are reproduced by Ernest Boll in 'The Plotting of Our Mutual Friend, Modern Philology, xlii, pp.96-122.

4. This technique is also charmingly employed in 'Going into Society,' the Christmas No. for 1858.

5. Our Mutual Friend, Book I, Chap. v, Vol.I, p.42.

6. Book I, Chap. ix, Vol. I, p.76.

From the point of view of this thesis the most startling event in all of Dickens's novels is the marriage of Eugene and Lizzie. Eugene, with his languid indifference to life and his contempt for the 'schoolmaster', Headstone, is a typical example of the younger son of upper-class parents who cannot support him and yet have left him unfitted to earn his own living. Despite his relative poverty Eugene is clearly a 'gentleman' and socially at ease. His marriage to Lizzie is therefore a challenge to 'Society', a challenge which 'Society' does not so much meet as Podsnap-like sweep behind it. Despite all its sweeping, however, 'Society's' reaction is basically one of fear that its protective bastions are being pulled down. When Mortimer tells Lady Tippins that Lizzie graced the marriage ceremony, her reply reveals a note of hysteria:

'Graced it! Take care of me if I faint, Veneering. He means to tell us, that a horrid female waterman is graceful!' <sup>1</sup>

Dickens's point is clear: that Lizzie possesses the aristocratic virtue of grace only makes the matter worse.

Eugene's marriage to Lizzie is an example also of Dickens's recognition of the fact that individual aristocrats can be human. Eugene, squandering his talent and torturing Bradley Headstone,

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1. Chapter the Last, Vol. II, p.303.

is not entirely likeable but he is treated sympathetically. Like the Dedlock cousins he is seen as a prisoner of his social status and upbringing, and his behaviour is thus accounted for :

'... you really have done wonders for me, Mortimer, in easing my money-perplexities, and with such a guardian and steward beside me as the preserver of my life... the little that I can call my own will be more than it has ever been. It need be more, for you know what it has always been in my hands. Nothing'.

'Worse than nothing. I fancy, Eugene. My own small income (I devoutly wish that my grandfather had left it to the Ocean rather than <sup>to</sup> me!) has been an effective Something, in the way of preventing me from turning to at Anything. And I think yours has been much the same.'<sup>1</sup>

Eugene and Mortimer are in some ways the most interesting of Dickens's socially privileged, for they show how suffocating their social status can be and what an effort is required to break the bonds imposed by 'Society'. One cannot over-emphasise the importance of Dickens's understanding here. Eugene and Mortimer in their cultured idleness are representatives of a type with which he could have had no instinctive sympathy, the very antithesis in fact of Dickens himself. That he could see them as victims of their upbringing and social status is indicative both of the enormous breadth of Dickens's sympathy and of a far keener penetration into the nature and

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1. Book IV, Chap. xvi, Vol. II, p. 301.

working of High Society than has been generally supposed.

Apart from Eugene and Mortimer the burden of aristocratic virtue is borne by Twemlow and, surprisingly, M.R.F., whose kindly reception of Lizzie is as much of a shock as Sir Leicester's forgiveness of Lady Dedlock.

That there are four human beings among the upper classes of Our Mutual Friend is a sign of a slight softening on Dickens's part from the unrelieved satire of Little Dorrit. Alone among Dickens's novels in which the upper class feature prominently Little Dorrit has no sympathetic aristocrat. Nevertheless, 'Society' in general is treated in both novels with equal savagery. As I have said this increase of intensity is the keynote of Dickens's later novels. None of the points Dickens makes about High Society are new, nor is his understanding of the essential similarity between all classes of society. His method of linking the various classes through symbolism and moral parallels had matured in Bleak House and what we find in the later novels is a refinement rather than a change in technique. Dickens's basic attitude towards High Society, and indeed Society in general, is the same in later novels as in Bleak House. It is the despairing bitterness of his attack that is new :

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And now, in the blooming summer days, behold Mr. and Mrs. Boffin established in the eminently aristocratic family mansion, and behold all manner of crawling, creeping, fluttering, and buzzing creatures attracted by the gold dust of the Golden Dustman.<sup>1</sup>

And the chapter, of which this is the first paragraph, is entitled 'A Dismal Swamp'.

Savage and despairing of a remedy Dickens's indictment of 'Society' may be in the later novels. Certainly he saw an upper class frivolous, indifferent, and reactionary, and the other classes all too willing to toady to its whims and copy its vices. In his journalism, in *Merdle*, and above all in the Tale of Two Cities he warns against what such a situation can lead to. It must not be forgotten, however, that the last words of the last chapter of Dickens's last completed novel are Twemlow's superb defence of the gentlemanly code :

Twemlow has the air of being ill at ease, as he takes his hand from his forehead and replies.

'I am disposed to think,' says he, 'that this is a question of the feelings of ~~the~~ gentleman.'

A gentleman can have no feelings who contracts such a marriage,' flushes Podsnap.

'Pardon me, Sir,' says Twemlow, rather less mildly than usual, 'I don't agree with you, if this gentleman's feeling of gratitude, of respect, of admiration, and affection, induced him (as I presume they did) to marry this lady - '

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1. Book I, Chap.xvii, Vol.I,p.157.



'This lady!' echoes Podsnap.

'Sir', returns Twemlow, with his wristbands bristling a little, 'you repeat the word; I repeat the word. This lady. What else would you call her, if the gentleman were present?'

This being something in the nature of a poser for Podsnap, he merely waves it away with a speechless wave.

'I say', resumes Twemlow, 'if such feelings on the part of this gentleman, induced this gentleman to marry this lady, I think he is the greater <sup>gentleman</sup> for the action, and makes her the greater lady. I beg to say that when I use the word, gentleman, I use it in the sense in which the degree may be attained by any man. The feelings of a gentleman I hold sacred, and I confess I am not comfortable when they are made the subject of sport or general discussion.'

'I should like to know,' sneers Podsnap, 'whether your noble relation would be of your opinion.'

'Mr. Podsnap,' retorts Twemlow, 'permit me. He might be, or he might not be. I cannot say. But I could not allow even him to dictate to me on a point of great delicacy, on which I feel very strongly.' 1

Dickens's faith in the individual was unshakeable. Twemlow, Amy Dorrit, the Boffins and their like are not much to set against Podsnappery and Merdledom, but it is clear from the above that Dickens's despair of the future of 'Society' and society was far from absolute.

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1. Chapter the Last, Vol. II, pp. 305 - 306.

### CONCLUSION

The object of this thesis has been to trace the development of Dickens's treatment of High Society up to its maturity in Bleak House. The main conclusions to be drawn from this study are as follows: first, that as Dickens got to know High Society better and became friends with individual members of it, so he ~~grows~~<sup>grew</sup> to understand clearly the composition of High Society and to realize that there were 'many good and true people in it'; secondly, that this development was largely due to Dickens's instinct for discriminating between the institution and the individual, an instinct which later became a conscious endeavour; thirdly, that along with this development went an increasing awareness of High Society, not as something cut off from everyday life and emotions, but as part of society in general and equally prone to the vices and virtues of man; fourthly, that from the artistic point of view, as his knowledge and understanding of High Society increased, so he became more successful, not only at portraying members of the upper class, but at integrating them and High Society into the overall plan of his novels.

It must be remembered, however, that Dickens was a reformer and that he saw society as something desperately in need of reform. He saw also that that reform must start at the top. Dickens's contempt for High Society's frivolity, selfishness and total lack of concern for the people

it was supposed to lead and rule never left him. His despair of the effectiveness of the ruling class markedly deepened throughout his writing career, and he both hoped for and foresaw the day when High Society 'being incapable of reforming itself ... will have to submit to be reformed by others off the face of the earth.'<sup>1</sup> But to see through High Society and display its glaring faults is only to reveal the truth. To reveal the truth, especially when the revelation is based on so clear an understanding of High Society and so generous an appreciation of the worth of individual members of it, is surely to be neither ignorant nor 'unjust'.<sup>2</sup> I hope this thesis has shown how great an error the critics of Dickens's treatment of High Society have made.

1. Nonesuch, i, 588-589 (March 1844)

2. 'The Collected Works of Charles Dickens', British Quarterly Review, January 1862.

APPENDIX ALady Dedlock and the 'Galaxy Gallery'

The illustration overleaf was found after the Chapter on Bleak House had been typed. It comes from the English Annual, 1838, facing p.35, and is closer to Dickens's description of Lady Dedlock's portrait than that of Miss Lethbridge mentioned in the text of the Thesis, p.238. Unfortunately the quality of the reproduction masks the fact that the lady is standing on a terrace. I have included the illustration, not because I would claim it to be the original of Dickens's description, but because it is a good example of the kind of 'Annual' portrait that Dickens must have had in mind as he was writing.



*Mrs Dundas*

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## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

(This Bibliography lists mainly those works mentioned in the body of the thesis. Where works not so mentioned are listed, it is because they have been of particular importance in providing background material and/or in giving the feel of the period. The lists of Contemporary Works, Periodicals and Works of Dickens Criticism run the greatest risk of becoming top-heavy, and in these cases I have been especially selective.

The date given after each work is, except where otherwise stated, that of the first edition)

1. Dickens's Worksi Manuscripts

The Chimes, 1844

Bleak House, published March 1852 - September 1853

ii Letters and Speeches

Letters of Charles Dickens, ed. W. Dexter, Nonesuch edition, 1938.

Letters of Charles Dickens, ed. M. House and G. Storey, Pilgrim edition, Vol. I, 1965.

Letters of Charles Dickens to Angela Burdett-Coutts, ed. E. Johnson, 1953.

Speeches of Charles Dickens, ed. R. H. Shepherd, 1884

Speeches of Charles Dickens, ed. K. Fielding, 1960

iii. Works of Fiction and Sketches

(In applicable cases the dates given are those of the publication of the first and last part with the date of the first edition in volume form in parenthesis.)

Sketches by 'Boz', 1st Series, 1836

Sketches by 'Boz', 2nd Series, 1837

Pickwick Papers, April 1836 - November 1837 (1837)

Oliver Twist, In Bentley's Miscellany, February 1837 - April 1839 (1838)

Nicholas Nickleby, April 1838 - October 1839 (1839)

Master Humphrey's Clock, 4 April 1840 - 27 November 1841. This weekly periodical included:

a) The Old Curiosity Shop, 25 April 1840 - 31 January 1841 (1841)

b) Barnaby Rudge, 13 February 1841 - 27 November 1841 (1841)

Barnaby Rudge, Charles Dickens edition, 1868

Martin Chuzzlewit, January 1843 - July 1844 (1844)

Martin Chuzzlewit, Charles Dickens edition, 1867.

A Christmas Carol, 1843

The Chimes, 1844

The Cricket on the Hearth, 1845

Dombey and Son, October 1846 - April 1848 (1848)

Dombey and Son, Charles Dickens edition, 1867

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The Battle of Life, 1846

The Haunted Man, 1848

David Copperfield, May 1849 - November 1850 (1850)

David Copperfield, Charles Dickens edition, 1867

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Hard Times, In Household Words, 1 April 1854 - 12 August 1854 (1854)

Little Dorrit, December 1855 - June 1857 (1857)

A Tale of Two Cities, In All the Year Round, 30 April 1859 -  
26 November 1859 (1859)

Great Expectations, In All the Year Round, 1 December 1860 -  
3 August 1861.

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Our Mutual Friend, May 1864 - November 1865 (1865)

Edwin Drood, April 1870 - September 1870. Uncompleted, only six of  
the proposed twelve parts being finished by Dickens before his death  
on 9 June 1870.

#### iv. Books of Travel

American Notes, 1842

Pictures from Italy, 1846. <sup>Part</sup> first published in the Daily News as  
'Travelling Letters', 21 January 1846 - 2 March 1846.

The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices, in collaboration with  
Wilkie Collins, first published in Household Words, 3 October 1857 -  
31 October 1857.



v. Periodicals under Dickens's Editorship

Bentley's Miscellany, January 1837 - February 1839

Daily News, 21 January 1846 - 9 February 1846.

Household Words, March 30 1850 - May 28 1859

All the Year Round, April 30 1859 - Dickens's death.

vi. Collections from these Periodicals

Reprinted Pieces, articles contributed to Household Words, 1858.

The Uncommercial Traveller, essays from All the Year Round:

- a) 1st edition, seventeen papers, 1861
- b) 2nd edition, eleven additional papers, 1868
- c) Illustrated Library edition, eight further papers, 1875
- d) Gadshill edition, one further paper making thirty-seven in all, 1890.

Christmas Stories, contributed to the Christmas numbers of Household Words and All the Year Round, often in collaboration with Wilkie Collins or in conjunction with other regular contributors, 1850 - 1867. I have used the 'New Oxford Illustrated Dickens' edition, 1954.

Miscellaneous Papers, including many of Dickens's articles contributed to Household Words and All the Year Round not collected elsewhere, 1908.

vii. Dramatic Works

The Village Coquettes, libretto for comic opera, 1836

The Strange Gentleman, comic burletta, 1837

Is she his Wife? or Something Singular, comic burletta, 1837

viii. Miscellaneous

The Memoirs of Grimaldi, edited by Dickens, 1837

The Pic-Nic Papers, edited for charity, 1838

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- a) 'Sketches of Young Gentlemen', first published 1838
- b) 'Sketches of Young Couples', first published 1840.
- c) 'The Mudfog and other Sketches', drawn from Bentley's Miscellany.

The Uncommercial Traveller and Reprinted Pieces, 'New Oxford Illustrated Dickens' edition, 1958. Apart from the collections apparent in the title, this volume also includes.

- a) 'Sunday under Three Heads', first issued in wrappers, 1836.
- b) 'The Lamplighter', originally written as a farce but never acted. It first appeared in its present form in The Picnic Papers, 1841 edition.
- c) 'To be Read at Dusk', first appeared in The Keepsake, 1852.
- d) 'Hunted Down', first appeared in the New York Ledger, 1859
- e) 'Holiday Romance for Our Young Folks', Boston, Mass., January, March, April, May, 1869.
- f) 'George Silverman's Explanation', first published in the New Atlantic Monthly, 1868.

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- Miller, J. Hillis, Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels, 1958
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- Poe, Edgar Alan, 'Barnaby Rudge', Graham's Magazine, February, 1842 pp.124-129.
- Slater, Michael, 'The Chimes, its Material, Making and Public Reception' '~~The Chimes; its Materials, Making and Public Reception~~', unpublished D.Phil. thesis, Oxford, 1965.
- Sucksmith, H.P. 'Dickens at Work on Bleak House', Nottingham Renaissance and Modern Studies, 1965, pp.47-85.
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3. Contemporary Works of Particular Relevancei. Fiction

- |                               |   |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Brontë, Anne,                 | <u>Agnes Grey</u> , 1847  |
| Brontë, Charlotte,            | <u>Jane Eyre</u> , 1847   |
| Bulwer Lytton, Edward,        | <u>Falkland</u> , 1827  |
|                               | <u>Pelham</u> , 1828  |
| Disraeli, Benjamin,           | <u>Henrietta Temple</u> , 1837  |
|                               | <u>Coningsby</u> , 1843   |
|                               | <u>Sybil</u> , 1845   |
|                               | <u>Tancred</u> , Bodley Head, 1927. 1st edition not readily attainable.                                 |
|                               | <u>Lothair</u> , Collected edition of Disraeli's works, Vol. I, 1870. Particularly for General Preface. |
| Eliot, George                 | <u>Middlemarch</u> , 1871-72  |
| Gaskell, Mrs. Elizabeth,      | <u>Mary Barton</u> , 1848   |
|                               | <u>Ruth</u> , 1853  |
| Gore, Mrs. Catherine,         | <u>Cecil</u> , 1841   |
| Prest, Thomas Peckett,        | <u>Vice and its Victim</u> , 1850 ?   |
| Thackeray, William Makepeace, | <u>Barry Lyndon</u> , 1844  |
|                               | <u>Vanity Fair</u> , 1848   |
|                               | <u>Pendennis</u> , 1849, 1850   |
|                               | <u>Henry Esmond</u> , 1852  |
|                               | <u>The Newcomers</u> , 1855   |
|                               | <u>The Virginians</u> , 1859  |

## ii. Other Contemporary Works, Excluding Drama and Annuals.

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- Blewitt, Reginald, The Court of Chancery, 1827
- Carlyle, Thomas, Sartor Resartus, 1834
- The French Revolution, 1837
- Chartism, 2nd edition, 1840
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- Past and Present, 1843
- Latter Day Pamphlets, 1850
- Harte, Francis Bret, Condensed Novels, 1870
- Horne, Richard, New Spirit of the Age, 1844
- Jerrold, Douglas, ed. Heads of the People, Vol. I, 1840,  
Vol. II, 1841
- Manners, Lord John, England's Trust and Other Poems, 1841

iii. Annuals

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English Annual, 1838

Heath's Book of Beauty, ed. Countess of Blessington, 1835-  
1839

Keepsake, ed. Countess of Blessington, 1840 - 1846

iv. Drama

- Boucicault, Dion, London Assurance, 1841
- Bulwer Lytton, Edward, Money, 1840
- Jerrold, Douglas, The Golden Calf, in 'Cumberland';  
Minor Theatre', Vol. IX, 1835

- Marston, John Westland, Dramatic and Poetical Works of John Westland Martson, 2 Vols., 1876, Particularly Vol.I for The Patricians Daughter and Preface.
- Robertson, T.W. Caste, 1867

4. Periodicals

(In general only years of dates mentioned in the thesis are given. A wide Time span indicates either, as in the case of Punch, for instance, that the periodical is of considerable importance and has been widely consulted, or, as in the case of the New Monthly Belle's Assemblée, that it has been freely dipped into to get the feel of the genre.)

Athenaeum, 1842, 1845.

Bell's Life in London, 1835, 1836

Bentley's Miscellany, 1837-1841

Blackwood's Magazine, 1848

British Quarterly Review, 1862

Cornhill Magazine, 1860

Daily News, 21 January 1846 - 9 February 1846

Eclectic Review, 1847

Edinburgh Review, 1857

Evening Chronicle, 1835, 1836

Examiner, 1812, 1851

Figaro in London, 1832-1839

Fraser's Magazine, 1846

Leeds Mercury, 23 January 1841

London Journal, 1840 - 1845

London Pioneer, 1846  
Monthly Review, 1845  
Morning Chronicle, 1835, 1836, 1842  
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New Monthly Belles Assemblée, 1840-1845  
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Reynolds's Weekly Miscellany, 1850  
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1955.  
Vol.II, 'The Age of Wisdom',  
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edition, 1961



6. Historical Background to the Periodi. Works of Reference

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Dictionary of National Biography, Vol. IX, 1887.

ii. Other Works

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Lord Shaftesbury, 3rd edition, 1925

Houghton, W.

The Victorian Frame of Mind, Cheap edition.

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The Dickens World, 1941

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- Moore, Hannah, Thoughts on the Importance of the GREAT to General Society, 1788
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- Tomkins, Isaac (Pseud. Lord Brougham), Thoughts on the Aristocracy of England, 1835.
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- Young, G.M. Portrait of an Age, 2nd edition, 1953
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