THE IMAGINED WORLD OF

Charles Dickens

MILDRED NEWCOMB

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Columbus
To my mother,
who never failed
to give me encouragement

and

To Jan and Kay,
who supported and sustained me
throughout the enterprise
This Proclamation rendered Mr. Inspector additionally studious, and caused him to stand meditating on river-stairs and causeways, and to go lurking about in boats, putting this and that together. But, according to the success with which you put this and that together, you get a woman and a fish apart, or a Mermaid in combination. And Mr. Inspector could turn out nothing better than a Mermaid, which no Judge and Jury would believe in (OMF, bk. I, ch. 3)

—Dickens on Research
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Preface

I would like especially to express my gratitude for guidance and assistance to Dr. Richard D. Altick, who initially suggested to me that I write my dissertation on Dickens and who has given me good advice and counsel ever since. His unflagging confidence in the study and his willingness to spend much time in reading and criticizing, as well as to assist the completion of the project in any way possible, have been invaluable.

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In addition, several other readers have given hours of reading and careful criticism, which I have heeded to the improvement of the manuscript. Dr. Benjamin T. Spencer (Emeritus) and Dr. Michael Kearns, both of the Ohio Wesleyan University English faculty, have astutely read and criticized selected chapters, for which I thank them. Finally, I wish to express special appreciation for the careful readings and suggestions of the two anonymous readers for the Ohio State University Press. I trust that they can see the difference their efforts have made.

In fact, in view of the contributions of all of these collaborators, I shudder to think what the manuscript would have been without them.

All citations from the novels and stories of Dickens refer to either the Clarendon or the Oxford Illustrated editions of his works. I have used the Clarendon Editions of David Copperfield (DC), Little Dorrit (LD), Martin Chuzzlewit (MC), and The Mystery of Edwin Drood (MED). The remainder of the novels are from the Oxford Illustrated Editions: Bleak House (BH), Dombey and Son (DS), Great Expectations (GE), Hard Times (HT), Nicholas Nickleby (NN), The Old Curi-
osity Shop (OCS), Our Mutual Friend (OMF), Oliver Twist (OT), and A Tale of Two Cities (T2C). References to the short stories are from the Oxford Illustrated volumes entitled Christmas Books and Christmas Stories and are identified in the text by story title. To preserve the circumstances of original publication, the titles of stories that originally appeared as books are underlined.

Chronological Listing of Dickens Works Used

1836–7 The Pickwick Papers
1837–9 Oliver Twist
1838–9 Nicholas Nickleby
1840–1 Master Humphrey’s Clock
1840 The Old Curiosity Shop
1841 Barnaby Rudge
1843 A Christmas Carol
1843–4 Martin Chuzzlewit
1846 The Battle of Life
1846–8 Dombey and Son
1848 The Haunted Man
1849–50 David Copperfield
1850 “A Christmas Tree”
1851 “What Christmas Is as We Grow Older”
1852 “The Poor Relation’s Story”
1852–3 Bleak House
1853 “Down with the Tide”
1853 “Nobody’s Story”
1854 Hard Times
1855–7 Little Dorrit
1859 A Tale of Two Cities
1859 “The Haunted House”
1860–1 Great Expectations
1864–5 Our Mutual Friend
1866 “Mugby Junction”
1870 The Mystery of Edwin Drood
Introduction

It is now just short of a half century since Edmund Wilson’s essay, “Dickens: The Two Scrooges,” touched off a profusion of studies examining some aspect of Dickens’s imagination. In 1977, Robert Newsom reported that by that time it had “become the favorite subject, explicit or implicit, of modern critical studies” (Dickens on the Romantic Side of Familiar Things. [New York: Columbia University Press, 1977], p. 47). Now, in 1989, I believe that I can most appropriately introduce the guiding principles of my own late entry into the field by reviewing such related critical literature, and by adding commentary on the contributions of those who have preceded me into print. It is therefore my purpose in this essay to attempt a modest review of this criticism in order to trace and evaluate major trends and developments during these 48 years, particularly as they bear upon The Imagined World of Charles Dickens.

As a matter of fact, I consider that a number of quite disparate investigations must be crowded into the tent under the general rubric of “Studies of Dickens’s Imagination.” Most critics have made little effort to define this Protean term, which slips easily into a number of guises, but have let its meaning develop as an offspring of the approaches they employ. Although I shall myself consistently differentiate between “imagination” and “fancy,” most critics use the terms almost interchangeably, though often with the suggestion that fancy is an exercise of the imagination rather than the imagination itself. Sometimes imagination is conceived as a faculty of the mind, sometimes as a way of processing phenomenal data, and sometimes as a repository of “imaginative” responses to such data that have produced an inner world of their own. I have relied upon all three concepts, with the weight of discussion falling obviously on the third.

I should like to produce a stipulative definition of imagination to clarify my own critical approaches and to point my discussion of other critics. The basic element in the controlling definition is the figurative image. This image creates a subjective interpretation of phenomena, which becomes a “felt experience” resulting from
some kind of momentary fusion, synthesis, or other accommodation of the two worlds of outer and inner perception (neither of which, for Dickens, can be ignored). The former, in Kantian terms, furnishes images extended in space; the latter adds extension in time. Through these interpretations of life experiences a “philosophy of life”/belief system/encompassing “myth”/Weltanschauung develops by which the perceiver lives, having personally defined the nature of “reality” in a phenomenal world. The studies I have included in this review concern themselves in some fashion with some or all of these aspects of the imagination.

All of the studies under review share with mine certain further characteristics. They all explore at length Dickens's detailed imagery, which is the most salient feature of his writing. More will be said of this imagery as we go along. Secondly, all accept without question the primacy of the literary text. One of the stable advances made in this period (thanks to the New Critics) is that even the most extraneously oriented of critics gives more than passing acknowledgment to the literary text. On the other hand, even the most textually oriented of critics (thanks to the later critical reactions against the excesses of those same New Critics) no longer attempts to divorce it from its biographical/historical context.

And, finally, all of the critics represented here grant a special power to language that lifts “literature” above “écriture” in these latter egalitarian and nihilistic days of language analysis (see Murray Krieger, “Literature vs. Écriture: Constructions and Deconstructions in Recent Critical Theory,” (Studies in the Literary Imagination, XII [1979], pp. 1–17). Most Dickens scholars have sought to account for the singular power and energy of his writing. John Gross, in a 1962 essay, observed that “no one has ever shown to the full why his language crackles with such electricity” (“Dickens: Some Recent Approaches,” in Dickens and the Twentieth Century. John Gross and Gabriel Pearson, eds. [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962], p. xv). His metaphor is perfect, and I believe his statement still holds, primarily because there is no one answer. But many partial answers appear in investigations of widely varying natures. Most of these studies locate the igniting spark in some combination of recognition and surprise produced in the reader’s imaginative responses. Most critics acknowledge the interrelationship of author, text, and reader. Some explain the electricity in terms of language’s tapping into the unconscious or prelingual experience commonly shared, culturally or universally, by author and
reader. Others find the charge in the creations of rhetoric—wit, irony, and so on. Few any longer indicate belief that language is making contact with unseen principalities and powers in any mystic sense, though for many of us the power of language continues to have “spiritual” significance.

Some of the studies under review are, like *The Imagined World*, what I would call “comprehensive.” Truly comprehensive studies, I should think, attempt to review some aspect of the Dickens imagination *in toto* after careful reading either of all of the Dickens novels or of a sufficient body of them to warrant generalization. Many of these carry their intent in their titles, which frequently read *The [Something] of Charles Dickens* or *Charles Dickens and [Something]*. “Imagination” and “World” appear variously combined in a number of titles, a fact which I found particularly frustrating in titling the present work. Comprehensive studies flourished in the two fertile decades from 1960 to 1980, turning around the hub of the centennial year. Other studies, however brief or limited, have also been significant. Whereas articles and books from 1939–59 laid foundations to be either developed or challenged, since 1980, the trend has been toward “small” studies that examine a very limited question or a single novel or story.

Although the Dickens imagination is so fertile and its products so overwhelmingly abundant, its limits are after all confined to a quite finite, if extensive, body of material for critics to respond to. We must all circle around the same geography in our explorations rather than set out to explore new lands. This fact both enriches and sets limits about what we will achieve. Despite all efforts to make an exact science of any literary criticism, it must, as Anatole France observed in *La Vie Littéraire* (1888), forever remain an art, like the “objects” it analyzes. If a poem or a poet sustains a relation to science, he wrote, “it is to one that is blended with art, that is intuitive, restless, forever unfinished.” While the best criticism works carefully and faithfully to its conclusions through the inductive process that has come to be called the “scientific method,” what is being studied is not comparable to the objects of science. With them, each technological advance—micro or macro—that extends our sense modalities brings into our phenomenal perception new knowledge about the “thing in itself,” which was there all the time but which we had no previous access to. In contrast, the object on the printed page has no existence beyond its phenomenal presence. If I labor this point, it is because I think that literary critics
sometimes forget it. If they learned long ago the futility of asking how many children Lady Macbeth had, they may still (as Garrett Stewart does in his generally excellent book, *The Trials of Imagination* [see “Bibliographical Essay”]) create for Little Nell an extended psychic life and then base conclusions on it. Where it exists, such extrapolation is a problem of Dickens criticism, though it has its own fascination.

A related problem attaches to deductive or “centripetal” conclusions, which may tell more about the belief systems of their authors than about Dickens. First, a critic so oriented seeks for evidence to support previously formed conclusions (and almost surely in the “God’s plenty” of a Dickens novel, one can find quotable scripture for conclusions that might greatly have surprised Dickens himself). I believe that this has to some degree particularly skewed the investigations of Marxist and psychoanalytic critics. The second horn of the dilemma is that sometimes critics have patiently and with brilliant results followed the inductive route through their analyses only to take a tremendous “leap of faith” to arrive at preordained conclusions.

A final “problem,” which has grown larger with the body of existing criticism itself, is the very natural tendency of critics to quote and react to the work of other critics. One result is an ever-increasing sophistication of language and concepts that may lead critics finally to talk only with each other. More destructive of good criticism is that some studies contain almost more references to other studies (the new version of overwhelming footnotes) than they do to Dickens—a phenomenon I have come to call the “critical fallacy” after the example of Bernard De Voto, who charged the fiction writers of the 1920s with the “literary fallacy”: basing novels more on other novels than upon life.

This essay, however, is intended as an appreciation of the good criticism coming out of the past fifty years, not as a cavil against its weaknesses. The best criticism, in my view, does not pretend to bring new knowledge to bear on the reading of Dickens, nor to make advances for others to build on as science does. Rather, it functions very much as “creative” literature itself does. Whereas the creation of felt experience in literature sends an active reader back to prelinguistic interpretations and therefore grants an opportunity to relive experience as if it were all new, so the best Dickens criticism sends the reader back to Dickens to read again as if for the first time.
Most critics, it turns out, assemble much the same data and try to answer similar questions. One encompassing question is how to categorize this writer who evades categorization. Although Dickens himself would probably turn “satirist” at the question thus put, he would equally probably fall to with enthusiasm if it were considered a problem of arriving at exactly the right name for himself: always a matter of supreme importance to him. Is he a symbolist, an allegorist, a realist, a social critic, a poet, a super-naturalist, a Bible-Christian, a humanist, an existentialist? All of these and many more names have been proposed, and most have been objected to with some argument of oversimplification or over-reading. Using Dickens’s (and Browning’s) own method of getting at the truth, perhaps if we surround him with enough names, we shall finally in some sense “have” him.

A second encompassing question inquires into the degree of conscious control Dickens exerted over his novels. The evidence points strongly in opposite directions, creating a continuum along which critics may stand. Particularly in early criticism, there seemed to be almost a consensus that Dickens’s achievements were a happy product of his simply letting the work write itself. Dickens himself, of course, frequently attested to the fact that he wrote what flowed to the point of his pen. Out of such evidence came belief in his art—or his artlessness—as the product of “unconscious” or “automatic” writing processes. This interpretation was aided by the obvious restrictions imposed by the very conditions of serial publication, which rendered total advance planning impossible. When the evidence came pouring in, particularly with the research of Butt and Tillotson (Dickens at Work [London: n.p., 1957]) into Dickens’s extensive habitual working plans, that he did indeed think out his novels with great care, the pendulum began to swing in the opposite direction. More recent critics credit even the “apprentice” novelist of Pickwick Papers with a degree of total control in which I simply cannot believe. Others are made uneasy by the subject of “the role of the unconscious mind in art,” and move quickly away from it. Surely some way must be found to reconcile the two equally compelling views.

No critic of Dickens’s imagination can long escape discussion of the metaphysical question: What is real? All of our critics begin with rejection of simple mimesis, the photographic imitation of external reality. If Dickens is a realistic novelist (and most if not all will agree that he is), he has to be so in some other sense. In coming
to grips with this question, we confront an imposing series of irreducible pairings: this “versus” that, or “between” this and that. It may well be that Dickens of all writers confronts the reader with the most formidable array of basic polarities; of dualities to be bridged only by the processes and unique powers of the imagination: fact/fancy, waking/sleeping, alive/dead, animate/inanimate, conscious/unconscious, sane/mad, the “actual”/dream or hallucination or fantasy or delusion. His ultimate dualisms are the age-old questions of good/evil, order/chaos, body/mind, appearance/reality. Or, in terms Dickens would never himself have used, phenomenal/noumenal. These questions have insistently invaded most studies of Dickens's imagination. The most ambitious study that directly addresses the question is John Romano’s instructive book, *Dickens and Reality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978 [see “Bibliographical Essay”]). The soundest analyses, I believe, conclude that the continued preservation of these polarities in some kind of balanced tension is a vital function of the imagination.

We come at last to the pivotal question whose answers provide the bases for dealing with all other questions: What do we make of the figurative imagery? The question demands attention because of three qualities that seem to define the Dickensian style. First, the characteristic repetitive imagery is too insistent to be ignored—repetitive, yet so varied in its manifestations that it conveys the impression of tremendous imaginative creativity rather than of limitation. Second, the piling up of detail, which produces not only the abundant feasts prepared for every possible occasion but also many a scene crowded with people and things, is a Dickens trademark. And, finally, the associational and analogical significance of much of Dickens's imagery has sent critics along still different lines of inquiry.

The three seminal essays most frequently cited from the first decade or so of our review chart directions for us to follow in assessing what critics have made of the figurative language. The first of these was written by Edmund Wilson, who pointed criticism in a psychoanalytic direction. “Edmund Wilson,” (wrote Lionel Trilling in his essay “Art and Neurosis,” *The Liberal Imagination* [New York: Viking Press, 1950]), “in his striking phrase, ‘the wound and the bow,’ has formulated for our time the idea of the characteristic sickness of the artist, which he represents by the figure of Philoctetes, the Greek warrior who was forced to live in isolation because of the disgusting odor of a suppurating wound and who yet had to be sought out by his countrymen because they had need of the
magically unerring bow he possessed” (p. 158). Wilson’s essay on Philoctetes (which gave him the title for his book) concluded the volume, which began with “Dickens: The Two Scrooges.” Wilson’s discussion in the latter essay describes the “wounds” creating the “suppurating” sore of Dickens’s “obsessions,” which in turn drew him in the direction of the criminal, the rebel, and the outlaw, and drove him into isolation from “normal” society. Later psychoanalytic criticism has itself departed from what Leonard Mannheim referred to in 1983 as Wilson’s “rather disingenuously set forth” study of Dickens. In pointing out that Wilson’s thesis led him to ignore the “ambivalence” between the attraction of the criminal/rebel and the love of law and order that balances Dickens’s outlook, he draws attention to the distortions early Freudian psychoanalysis invites when applied to literary artists. (Mannheim’s essay summarizing psychoanalytic criticism to that date is worth reviewing: “Dickens and Psychoanalysis: A Memoir,” Dickens Studies Annual, 11 [1983] pp. 335–45.)

While other critics might account for the repeated images in some other way, those psychoanalytically inclined who follow Wilson have, like him, continued to declare for them a psychopathic origin indicating mental abnormality. In addition, the language of psychoanalysis (“obsession,” etc.) has likewise influenced the thinking of many critics who would perhaps deny any psychoanalytic affiliations. When, for example, they describe Dickens’s extraordinarily vivid imagery as “hallucinatory” or “hypnagogic,” they carry on the myth of Dickens’s “abnormal” responses to sensory stimuli.

It is interesting, I think, to speculate in this vein on a treatment of the imagery that might well have been applied to Dickens, but which was largely bypassed, perhaps partly as a result of Wilson’s essay. This is the method of Caroline Spurgeon, who produced an engrossing study, Shakespeare’s Imagery and What It Tells Us (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1952), by retracing Shakespeare’s footsteps to observe what he would have observed in his surrounding world to make his associations and create his similes and metaphors. Spurgeon’s study may seem innocent and perhaps ingenuous beside the psychoanalytic probings, but who is to say that it is less valid?

Critics who are avowedly psychoanalytic have found further support for their views in the recurrent presence of dreams, dreaming, and dream-like states in Dickens’s works. Taken as projections from his unconscious, they invite efforts to understand the author,
both as man and writer, by putting together the dream images, the biographical facts, and a necessary measure of speculation to “diagnose” a patient who may not have existed. Sometimes these studies are quite illuminating, while others suffer from a complaint that has been diagnosed as the result of being written by people who know either too little about psychology or too little about literature.

The second seminal essay coming out of the 1940s is likewise psychologically oriented, but charts a different course for criticism to follow: Warrington Winters’s “Dickens and the Psychology of Dreams,” *PMLA* 63 (Sept. 1948), pp. 984–1006. This essay describes Dickens as himself a nineteenth-century psychologist fully aware of the phenomena about which he wrote and trying to grasp their significance. It presents him, not as a potential patient for Freud, but possibly as one of his forerunners—one of those to whom he might have been referring in later life when, on the occasion of his seventieth birthday, he said: “The poets and philosophers before me discovered the unconscious. What I discovered was the scientific method by which the unconscious can be studied.” (Quoted in Lionel Trilling, “Freud and Literature,” *The Liberal Imagination*, p. 32. By this time Freud himself had long since modified his views on the connection between art and neurosis.) Seen in this light, Dickens, with his careful observations, may well have been one of those writers who helped Freud formulate his theories, though I have not yet found direct reference to that influence.

Winters points out that earlier critics rejected any notion of Dickens as psychologist, quoting George Gissing, for instance, as typical of previous opinion: “Of psychology—a word unknown to Dickens—we, of course, have nothing; to ask for it is out of place” (*Charles Dickens*, [London: Blackwell and Son, Ltd., 1898]). (Long before, George Eliot’s famous comment in *The Natural History of German Life* [1857] had contributed to the widely held complementary view that Dickens lacked both interest in psychological matters and psychological content in his writing. While praising his gift for rendering “with the utmost power . . . the external traits of our town population,” she lamented that “if he could give us their psychological character—their conceptions of life, and their emotions—with the same truth as their idiom and manners, his books would be the greatest contribution Art has ever made to the awakening of social sympathies.”) Winters made abundantly clear that both views were spectacularly false, and later criticism has profitably extended his insights.
In my opinion, however, the question of influence or of applied psychology is much less important than a point made by Trilling in the previously quoted essay: “To pass from the reading of a great literary work to a treatise of academic psychology,” he writes, “is to pass from one order of perception to another, but the human nature of the Freudian psychology is exactly the stuff upon which the poet has always exercised his art” (p. 32). The definition of psychology has widened with this concept of “human nature” to include “normal” as well as “abnormal” psychic processing in the “stuff” to be considered as psychological. The fundamental links between psychology and literature have been forged in the matrix of their common source in language: poetic work and dream work involve remarkably similar processes. They further share a belief that the most important thing to comprehend about the human psyche is the process of development. The only thing worth writing about, Browning recorded in the preface to Sordello, is the development of the soul. Dickens shared this idea. So did Jung and the other myth psychologists (who might phrase it as the “search for the Great Man within” or as the “process of individuation”), as well as the “developmental psychologists,” who would call it “maturation,” or the process of “growing up.” Although some Dickens critics of other persuasions still shy nervously away from the whole field of psychological criticism, studies of the natural relationships between psychology and poetry can produce richly interactive insights.

A second critical interpretation of Dickens’s imagery finds a particular stimulus in the provocative terms of our third seminal essay, George Orwell’s “Charles Dickens” (Inside the Whale [London, 1940]). Although much of his discussion, as he explains in part V, has concentrated on Dickens’s “message,” which he acknowledges may have angered some readers, and although he continues to assert that “all art is propaganda” (p. 157), in the latter portions of the essay he tries to answer the question, “Why do I care about Dickens?” What is inimitable in Dickens? He concludes that “the thing that cannot be imitated is his fertility of invention, which is invention not so much of characters, still less of ‘situations,’ as of turns of phrase and concrete details. The outstanding, unmistakable mark of Dickens’s writing is the unnecessary detail” (p. 159, emphasis Orwell’s). The examination of this “unnecessary detail” continues to engage the attention of critics, who still employ Orwell’s term as a clue to Dickens’s unique quality. Their conclusions, of course, show why it was not unnecessary. Orwell concludes that its
aggregate force is to give us the “face” of Dickens himself: “the face of a man who is always fighting against something, but who fights in the open and is not frightened, the face of a man who is generously angry—in other words, of a nineteenth-century liberal, a free intelligence, a type hated with equal hatred by all the smelly little orthodoxies which are now contending for our souls” (p. 171).

Critics after Orwell have arrived at different conclusions dictated by the routes they have followed. To mention but two, Taylor Stoehr (see “Bibliographical Essay”) finds that Dickens's typical use of such rhetorical devices as anaphora and metonomy both orders and connects his details to produce active effects on characterization and plotting. In a quite different vein, Harry Marten (also see “Bibliographical Essay”) shows how the details assemble, by contiguity and composition, into a visual picture which, like the engravings of Hogarth, bursts with significance.

The final way of examining Dickens's imagery has its roots in traditional literary analysis, placing Dickens among those masters of rhetoric and style who employ virtuoso techniques to play the language like a finely tuned instrument. It is inconceivable that any critic of literature would exclude this way of looking at literature, whatever his other leanings. By and large, critics in this mode “hear” the language, which at other times they “see.” Their discussions of “voice” and “tone” further indicate the felt relationships between literature and music.

The intellectual quality of this approach is apparent, for the detection and appreciation of wit and irony require the resources of the mind, not the feelings. Most Dickens critics of this inclination are quick to point out, however, the radical difference between him and the “metaphysical poets” with their studied conceits. What language critics seem to admire most in Dickens is the natural spontaneity, life, and gusto of his language. Recent critics seem to agree that the particular nature and virtue of Dickens's imagery is a complex interplay of association (metonomy) and analogy (metaphor), which creates the wit and irony that spark the Dickens style.

Finally, with regard to the “Bibliographical Essay” at the end of this book, I must acknowledge a set of personal criteria for the evaluation of the selected studies. I chose most of the items because they had some immediate bearing on this study, although a few appear primarily because of the insistence of their titles. (Criticism I have actually used in formulating my discussions is acknowledged and documented in the text and in the endnotes.) Assessing the
various studies, I find that my agreements or arguments with their writers are traceable in part to harmony or lack of it between our perceptual and intellectual belief systems. I hope that I am not more easily satisfied with the evidence and lines of reasoning for judgments I agree with or more demanding and critical of those with which I disagree—but it may be so.

I believe that as critics we are all at our best when we are carefully tapping along some chosen vein of inquiry with the tools appropriate to our method; we are at our weakest when we stake out large claims for what we have discovered. In making those claims, we must also be prepared for the inevitable later “assayers” to tell us whether they think we have struck gold or pyrite. These comments are intended both as apologia and as a statement of expectation.