

THE DICKENS INDUSTRY

Critical Perspectives, 1836-2005



Laurence W. Mazzeno

The Dickens Industry

*Studies in European and American Literature and Culture:
Literary Criticism in Perspective*

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Introduction

THE LITERARY SENSIBILITY of Charles Dickens is possibly the most amply documented literary sensibility in history.” So writes Jane Smiley, herself a popular novelist, on the first page of her critical biography *Charles Dickens* (2002). A cursory glance at any research library’s catalog would suggest Smiley is probably right. Books, articles, and reviews about Dickens and his work number in the thousands. For nearly two centuries he has been idolized and demonized. He has been cherished and dismissed. He has been taken to task for poor plotting and outrageous characterization, and held in awe for his ability to unite the disparate elements of the complex society about which he wrote. He has been celebrated as the upholder of Victorian values — and for being his age’s most severe critic. He has been classified as an unexplainable genius, and intensely psychoanalyzed to discover the hidden sources of his creative powers. He has been deconstructed, reevaluated from the perspectives of gender studies and New Historicism, and adapted for the movies and television. What he *hasn’t* been is ignored. No other English writer save Shakespeare has received so much attention. As a result, Lyn Pykett’s pithy admonition in her 2002 critical survey of Dickens sums up the present state of Dickens criticism: “The twenty-first century critic writing about the nineteenth-century novelist Charles Dickens,” she says, “must inevitably engage with that complex historical phenomenon, the Dickens industry” (2).

I have borrowed my title from Pykett and others who have used it before her because in *The Dickens Industry* I want to call attention to the significant critical business that has grown up around Dickens and his work. In this commentary on Dickens’s critical reputation during the past 170 years I am concerned with several large questions: How was Dickens perceived? How did perceptions change over time? What works were valued by the Victorians, by their children and grandchildren, and by the academic community and the general public throughout the twentieth century? What critical issues occupied the attention of those writing about Dickens during the past 170 years? And finally, what does criticism of Dickens tell us about his critics? The last question is the most intriguing, of course, for as Angus Wilson observed more than fifty years ago, “To analyze the changing reputation of an author who has commanded the respect of such an enormous variety of readers and the high regard of such a miscellaneous collection of serious critics must surely, I have always thought,

throw great light not only upon his own work but upon the nature of English literary taste in the last hundred years" (75). My hope is that by foregrounding the assumptions of critics who have written on Dickens and focusing on their methodologies I can provide insight in two directions simultaneously, both on Dickens as a writer *and* on the critics and their times.

The work of the Dickens critics has been made possible by the efforts of many scholars who have labored to provide reliable texts from which others can form critical judgments. I feel some obligation to mention a few of the more significant or representative efforts in this line, since I say little about them in my survey of criticism. First, there has never been a time when critics had difficulty finding a copy of a Dickens novel. Editions of his fiction began to appear long before Dickens died. Dickens personally supervised the production of some of these; his eldest son brought out a complete edition of the novels some years later. Between 1870 and 1950 dozens of "collected editions" were issued, often under the guidance of highly regarded writers such as Andrew Lang, George Gissing (although the edition he worked on was suspended before all the novels appeared), and G. K. Chesterton. As early as the late nineteenth century, trade publishers began turning out editions of individual novels for use in colleges and high schools. In the 1960s a group of British scholars secured an agreement with Oxford University Press to issue annotated editions of each of the novels. "The Clarendon Dickens" was intended by its editors "to present the text as Dickens meant his readers to see it, free from the corruptions that have taken place during a century and more" (*Bookseller* 1966). For the past half-century a team of respected Dickensians has been at work to fulfill the promises made in the original editors' prospectus.

Dickens's minor writings and his nonfiction have received similar treatment, and by 2004 usable, accurate editions of virtually everything Dickens wrote had become available to scholars and students. Notable among these projects are Kenneth Fielding's edition of Dickens's speeches (1960), Philip Collins's edition of the public readings (1975), Harry Stone's two-volume edition of Dickens's writings from *Household Words* (1969), and Michael Slater's four-volume *Dent Uniform Edition of Dickens's Journalism* (1996–2000). More specialized studies worth noting are Merle Bevington's *The Saturday Review 1855–1868* (1941), which includes a discussion of the treatment Dickens received from the magazine's reviewers (and some intriguing comments on the backlash from the magazine's readers to hostile commentaries), and Anne Lohrli's *Household Words: A Weekly Journal 1850–1859* (1973), an examination of the periodical Dickens edited for nearly a decade, which includes a compilation of the Table of Contents, indexes of article titles, and an essay on the journal's history.

Editions of Dickens's letters have been available since the 1890s. Among those published during the first half of the twentieth century, the most notable is Walter Dexter's *Letters of Charles Dickens* (1938), identified in Dickens circles as the Nonesuch Edition. In 1912 R. C. Lehmann collected letters between Dickens and Henry Willis, his sub-editor at *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, in *Charles Dickens as Editor*. In 1933 Flora Livingston edited Dickens's letters to Charles Lever, a writer and frequent contributor to *All the Year Round*. The novelist's letters to Angela Burdett-Coutts were published by Charles Osborne, Burdett-Coutts's private secretary, in 1932; a more scholarly volume was brought out by Edgar Johnson in 1953. In the 1950s a group of Dickens scholars led by Humphry House and Kathleen Tillotson developed an ambitious plan for a scholarly edition that would collect and annotate all known correspondence. The first volume of The Pilgrim Edition of Dickens's letters appeared in 1965, the twelfth and final one in 2002. House died in 1955 before serious work could begin on the project, but Tillotson was joined over the years by a distinguished group of colleagues including Graham Storey, Madeline House, K. J. Fielding, Angus Easson, Nina Burgess, and dozens of assistants. Even before the Pilgrim Edition had been completed, David Paroissien brought out *Selected Letters of Charles Dickens* in 1985, choosing letters that illustrate Dickens's personal life, social and political concerns, and work as a writer and editor.

Scholars have also been busy creating dictionaries, encyclopedias, and similar collections intended as guides to his work. These have been surprisingly popular: Gilbert Pierce's 1872 *Dickens Dictionary* was reissued several times well into the twentieth century, Thomas Fyfe's *Who's Who in Dickens* (1913) was popular enough to merit a second edition, and Alexander Philip and W. L. Gadd's *A Dickens Dictionary* (1909) not only went into a second edition in 1928, but was reprinted in 2002. Most provide brief plot summaries and lists of characters, while others like Mary Williams's *The Dickens Concordance* (1907) are limited to listing first appearances of characters and cataloging the works. When it comes to Dickens at least, such books were not simply historical anomalies fueled by the Victorians' mania for cataloging and classifying everything in their world. Publications such as Norman Page's *A Dickens Companion* (1984) and *A Dickens Chronology* (1988), Fred Levit's *A Dickens Glossary* (1990), Donald Hawes's *Who's Who in Dickens* (1997), and George Bynum and Wolfgang Mieder's *The Proverbial Dickens: An Introduction to Proverbs in the Works of Charles Dickens* (1997) attest to the continuing popularity (and marketability) of such books when Dickens is the subject. There are dozens of others, among them some quite useful guides such as *Dickens Dramatized* (1987), in which H. Philip Bolton provides a listing of dramatic performances (stage, radio, and television) based on Dickens's fiction. George Newlin's rather

imposing handbooks, *Every Thing in Dickens* (1996) and three volumes of *Everyone in Dickens* (1995), are among the first to be produced with the aid of a computer. Dickens biographer Fred Kaplan describes them in the foreword as supplanting all previous work of this kind.

Of greater academic value, perhaps, but certainly less compendious is the *Dickens Index* (1988), prepared by noted scholars Michael Slater, Nicholas Bentley, and Nina Burgis. This volume contains a listing of Dickens's works annotated with descriptions of themes, citations of literary allusions, a detailed chronology, and a bibliography of Dickens's writings. Other publications offering sophisticated commentary for students of Dickens are Paul Schlicke's *The Oxford Reader's Companion to Dickens* (1999) and its "competitor," John Jordan's *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens* (2001), both of which include the same kinds of summary work but also provide exceptionally good commentary on the critical tradition.

Anyone trying to gain some comprehensive understanding of critical perspectives on Dickens soon recognizes his or her debt to dozens of scholars who have taken on the painstaking and often thankless task of identifying and indexing the massive body of secondary source materials. Beginning in 1886 with the appearance of Frederic G. Kitton's *Dickensiana: A Bibliography of the Literature Relating to Charles Dickens and His Writings*, attempts have been made to catalog not only Dickens's corpus but also the thousands of reviews, notices, commentaries, articles, and books about him and his work. The Modern Language Association's annual *International Bibliography* has long been a convenient source for identifying criticism about Dickens; since the mid-1980s brief summaries are provided for entries. For more than thirty years the editors of *Dickens Studies Annual* have published an annual essay in which a noted Dickens scholar summarizes the most important work done in the previous year.

However, the sheer volume of critical materials makes the bibliographer's task a daunting one. J. Don Vann's "A Checklist of Dickens Criticism, 1963–1967" (1969) covers only five years and yet runs twenty-three pages of small type. Joseph Gold's *The Stature of Dickens: A Centenary Bibliography* (1971), admittedly not comprehensive, lists more than three thousand entries — and this was assembled before Dickens studies exploded during the last three decades of the century. In 1982, Alan M. Cohn and K. K. Collins published a continuation of Gold's work, *The Cumulated Dickens Checklist 1970–1979* containing more than three thousand entries for that ten-year period. Their work followed closely on the heels of John Fenstermaker's *Charles Dickens, 1940–1975* (1979), a guide to criticism of the novels and Christmas stories published during thirty-five years subsequent to the appearance of Edmund Wilson's "Dickens: The Two Scrooges," the work Fenstermaker considers the watershed

separating old ideas about Dickens from modern judgments. While more selective than Fenstermaker's work, R. C. Churchill's *A Bibliography of Dickensian Criticism 1836–1975* (1975) covers a longer time span and is lightly annotated, largely with Churchill's evaluation of individual entries. Duane DeVries's *General Studies of Charles Dickens and His Writings and Collected Editions of his Works: An Annotated Bibliography* (2004) provides brief summaries of approximately sixteen hundred works.

The magnitude of the task awaiting anyone wishing to read everything written about Dickens is suggested by Terri Hasseler's "Recent Dickens Studies: 2004" in the 2006 *Dickens Studies Annual*. This evaluative summary of a single year's work runs for nearly eighty pages — the size of a small monograph. Through the years, however, several scholars have written about the history of Dickens criticism — with varying degrees of success. Prominent among these studies are the entries in the Modern Language Association's two editions of *Victorian Fiction: A Guide to Research*, Ada Nisbet's in the 1964 volume and Philip Collins's in the 1978 revision. By far, however, the most influential study of Dickens's reception and reputation is George Ford's *Dickens and His Readers* (1955), a careful analysis of Dickens's reception among his contemporaries. Ford extends his study well into the twentieth century, providing some idea of the causes and impact on Dickens's reputation of what came to be known as The Reaction against the Victorians. Although Ford is most frequently cited as the authority on Dickens's reputation from 1836 until 1940, he was not the first to write an extended study on this issue. While not as comprehensive nor as scrupulously researched, Amy Cruse's *The Victorians and Their Reading* (1935) examines readers' reaction to novels published during the six decades of Victoria's reign. Irma Rantavaara's *Dickens in the Light of English Criticism* (1944) focuses on revisions in Dickens's reputation since the publication of John Forster's biography in the 1870s.

A number of highly credible studies have done much to extend Ford's work. Fred Boege's "Recent Criticism of Dickens" (1953) summarizes critical studies done in the 1930s and 1940s. In 1955 Edgar Johnson, whose *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph* (1952) had been hailed by many as the definitive biography of the novelist, contributed a brief essay to the *Victorian Newsletter* containing a broad assessment that describes the landscape of Dickens studies quite succinctly. "The seventy years of Dickens scholarship following his death were predominantly devoted to exploring the biographical data and filling in the outlines where Forster's great biography were scanty," he says, while "the amount of significant esthetic criticism and of attempted psychological or sociological interpretations" was "relatively small." By contrast, since 1940 "these endeavors have been of increasing importance" (4).

In 1962 four of the “big names” in Dickens studies — George Ford, Edgar Johnson, J. Hillis Miller, and Sylvère Monod — met at a symposium in Boston where they sketched out what they called the “four staves” of Dickens criticism as it then existed: *biographical* criticism, which conference moderator Noel Peyrouton called “the farthest advanced” at the time; *historical*, which aimed to “recreate or reconstruct” Dickens’s works in relation to the times in which they appeared and identify topical allusions or sources for his fiction; *psychological*, which Peyrouton describes as a technique used to examine Dickens’s characters, myths and symbols “outside of any particular historical context”; and *analytical*, “a neutral ground approach” that focuses on a study of the texts themselves in an attempt to establish definitive readings. Just a decade later, of course, a whole new wave of theoretical study would expand this list considerably.

During the 1960s and 1970s representative commentary from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century critics was made available to wider audiences of scholars and students in a number of anthologies. Some are discussed later in this book because they indicate the kinds of critical inquiry being valued at the time these anthologies were published. In 1970, Stephen Wall reprinted prefaces from various editions of the novels that appeared during Dickens’s lifetime in *Charles Dickens: A Critical Anthology*, supplementing Dickens’s own assessment of his work with commentary by Victorian and post-Victorian critics. While the selections from other critics are limited in Wall’s work, since 1971 those interested in learning first-hand what Dickens’s earliest critics thought of his work have been fortunate to have a generous representative sampling available in Philip Collins’s *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*. These excerpts are supplemented by Collins’s extensive and insightful critiques. Collins reprised this kind of work in *Dickens: Interviews and Recollections* (1981), two volumes of comments from men and women who knew Dickens. Kathryn Chittick’s *The Critical Reception of Charles Dickens 1833–1841* (1989) and *Dickens and the 1830s* (1990) supplement the work of Ford and Collins in examining that first decade during which Dickens established his reputation among his contemporaries.

An even larger selection of critical commentary is now available in *Charles Dickens: Critical Assessments* (1995), four volumes assembled and edited by Michael Hollington. Like Collins, Hollington provides an informative introduction; additionally, he collects criticism from sources outside England and America, and includes considerable material from the twentieth century. More limited in scope, Corinna Russell’s *Lives of Victorian Literary Figures I: Eliot, Dickens, and Tennyson by Their Contemporaries* (2003) contains excerpts of accounts of Dickens’s life and work by his contemporaries. Early in the twenty-first century essays by two authorities on Dickens and the Victorians provide further insights

into the history and status of Dickens's reputation: Frederick Karl's "Recent Dickens Studies" (2003), a review of late-twentieth and early twenty-first century commentaries, and Sylvère Monod's "Dickens Biography: Past, Present, and Future: An Outline of History" (2004), a retrospective on attempts to examine Dickens's life and career.

In *The Victorians: An Age in Retrospect* (2002), John Gardiner says "our sense of the range and depth of Dickens's vision has coalesced in the years since his death" (162). Gardiner traces briefly the trajectory of Dickens criticism through the twentieth century, pointing out how Dickens was first seen as an advocate for family and national values, then later as a subversive force undermining those same values. While the moderns rejected him because his novels did not fit their definition of what constituted good fiction, the general reading public continued to read and enjoy his works. After the Second World War Dickens was used to rally support for rebuilding London and England, literally as well as metaphorically. But by the 1970s, Gardiner says, he was once again celebrated for his radicalism. The "recognizably 'modern' Dickens" — the novelist celebrated throughout the latter half of the twentieth century — "took shape around the 1940s, the years in which a distinctive breakthrough was made in appreciating the artistry that underpinned his creative vision" (172). This he attributes to four factors: the development of psychological criticism, the professionalization of literary criticism as a discipline, the appearance of fresh insights into the novelist's life, and the "visualization" of Dickens's work in movies and on television.

In *The Dickens Industry* I expand on Gardiner's brief outline. Although my major focus is on the critical texts themselves, I have tried to follow Frederic Jameson's mandate to "always historicize," offering where appropriate some commentary on the historical, literary, or political context that shaped individual works. In keeping with the guidelines of the *Literary Criticism in Perspective* series, I have organized the work along chronological lines, although I have made no attempt to adhere to a strict time line, especially in the two chapters covering the last decades of the twentieth century. My desire is to indicate something of the "conversation" that has taken place among critics as one responds to the work of another. Of course, I make no pretense of providing a comprehensive bibliographic essay; a book of that sort would run considerably longer than this one. As a consequence, however, I have found little room to include discussions of technical issues or explications of individual passages, or entire novels. Even the casual reader of this volume will notice that books are privileged, while the large body of Dickens criticism existing in dozens of fine journals is given relatively little notice. Also, I have refrained from making any significant comment on the various adaptations of Dickens's work for the movies and television. I realize these are them-

selves interpretations and by extension criticisms of his work, but others have handled this task recently, and I see no need to repeat their work. Finally, if this book seems to be weighted toward more recent critical examination, I can say only that I do not wish to repeat the work of others who have covered the same ground in previous decades. What I hope to accomplish is to give *my* readers a sense of how Dickens has mattered to students and scholars of literature, and perhaps to the larger audience who still buy and read his books.

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1: The Dickens Phenomenon (1836–1870)

THE RECEPTION OF DICKENS'S WORK by his contemporaries has been the subject of several studies, the most significant among them George Ford's *Dickens and His Readers* (1955). Ford's influential and oft-quoted book has been supplemented by Philip Collins in his introduction to *Dickens: The Critical Heritage* (1971) and Kathryn Chittick in *The Critical Reception of Charles Dickens 1833–1841* (1989). As a consequence, the present brief summary is not intended to replace earlier scholarship, but instead to review trends in criticism that provide necessary background for understanding what happened later in Dickens studies.

As Chittick observes in her analysis of Dickens's earliest works, as soon as his first sketches started appearing, newspapers began to run brief notices and commentaries on their quality (47). Predictably, periodicals began carrying longer reviews of Dickens's work almost as soon as *Sketches by Boz* was in print. Dickens's initial reviewers were especially interested in characterization and verisimilitude, and not all of them were positive. The reviewer for the *Examiner* (1836) complained that Dickens relied too heavily on caricatures of Cockney figures, meliorating that criticism by remarking "this broad, common-place sort of thing is unworthy of the author" whose talents suggested he was capable of greater accomplishments (Chittick 61).¹ George Hogarth, Dickens's future father-in-law, went even farther in putting forward the notion that Dickens was destined to be more than a jocular entertainer. Writing in the *Morning Chronicle* (1836), Hogarth cited "A Visit to Newgate" as an example of Dickens's powers as a social commentator (Chittick 61). In a similar vein, an early reviewer wrote in the *Metropolitan Magazine* (1836) that Dickens provided "a perfect picture of the morals, manners, [and] habits of the greater portion of English society," and while the "succession of portraits does not reach higher than those of the best of the middle classes," Dickens does manage to portray "with a startling fidelity" the "lowest of the low" (Collins 30). A reviewer for the same journal writing about *Pickwick Papers* in 1837 claims "the renowned Mr. Pickwick" is "the legitimate successor to Don Quixote" (Collins 31). As the monthly numbers of Dickens's first remarkable comic novel emerged, the British reading public embraced the young novelist as *the* new voice in fiction.

During the first five years of his career Dickens was treated much like a rock star would be more than a hundred years later. Lionized by the

public, he became almost overnight one of the most talked-about figures in England. Reviewers were comparing him with Shakespeare, Fielding, Smollett, and Sterne, and speaking of him as the successor to Scott and Byron, writers who enjoyed immense popularity among the previous generation. In 1837, Charles Buller was already attempting to explain to readers of the *London and Westminster Review* the reasons for “a popularity extraordinary on account of its sudden growth, its vast extent, and the recognition which it has received from persons of the most refined taste, as well as from the great mass of the reading public” (Collins 52). Buller seems amazed to discover that Dickens’s “excellence appears indeed to lie in describing just what everybody sees every day” (Collins 53). But he offers some unsolicited advice to the young tyro, suggesting that he will not “leave some lasting monuments in our literature” without study, labor, or care (Collins 54).

Many were worried that Dickens would burn out too quickly. After all, at one time he was working on three novels simultaneously while trying to establish himself as a journal editor. In reviewing *Pickwick* and *Sketches by Boz* for the *Quarterly Review* (1837), Abraham Hayward wonders if Dickens can sustain his popularity. “The fact is, Mr. Dickens writes too often and too fast,” Hayward says. “If he persists much longer in this course, it requires no gift of prophecy to foretell his fate — he has risen like a rocket, and he will come down like the stick; but let him give his capacity fair play, and it is rich, vigorous, and versatile enough to insure him a high and enduring reputation” (Collins 62).

Surveying Dickens’s early work through *Nicholas Nickleby* for the *Edinburgh Review* (1838), Thomas Henry Lister calls Dickens “a very original writer” not likely to lose his popularity, because he has already become “the truest and most spirited delineator of English life, amongst the middle and lower classes, since the days of Smollett and Fielding” (Hollington 251). Curiously Lister finds Dickens’s forte is “less in drawing characters than in describing incidents” (Collins 75), but like so many of his Victorian contemporaries Lister believes a Dickens novel owes its success “not to its merits as a whole, but to the attractiveness of detached passages” (Collins 76). The idea that the parts are somehow greater than the whole would be championed by Dickens lovers for more than a century, until formalist critics found ways to describe the underlying principles unifying the novels. Lister, too, admonishes Dickens to go slower, avoid imitation, “keep nature steadily before his eyes,” and “check all disposition to exaggerate” (Collins 77).

Detractors appeared almost immediately, of course. Richard Ford rather snidely suggests in the *Quarterly Review* (1839) that Dickens writes best about the lower classes because he does not know the upper classes firsthand. He is also critical of Dickens’s ability to construct a plot. A year

later, the anonymous writer of “Charles Dickens and His Work” in *Fraser’s Magazine* (1840) claims his characters are not drawn from life. This writer identifies another of the issues that would become a bugbear for critics antithetical to Dickens’s work: serial publication. “The necessity of filling a certain quantity of pages per month imposed upon the writer a great temptation to amplify trifling ingredients, and well sentence after sentence with any sort of words that would occupy space.” While this writer likes much in Dickens, he confesses somewhat sadly, “we do not like this novel-writing by scraps against time” (Collins 90).

By 1840, however, some reviewers thought early predictions of Dickens’s great success were already being fulfilled. A notice in *Fraser’s Magazine* (1840) expresses amazement that Dickens has achieved such “extensive popularity” without resorting to “mean” or “unjustifiable panderings to public favour,” or to “the use of low arts of tricking, puffery, or pretence” (Collins 86). A reviewer in *Metropolitan Magazine* (1840) indicates another Victorian bias when he praises Dickens for “now performing most efficaciously the office of a moral teacher” (Collins 93). Although Thomas Hood faults Dickens for poor construction, he observes in his *Athenaeum* review of *Master Humphrey’s Clock* and *The Old Curiosity Shop* that, “We invariably rise from the perusal of his volumes in better humour with the world; for he gives us a cheerful view of human nature and paints good people with a relish that proves he has himself a belief in, and sympathy with, their goodness” (Hollington 287).

The British were not the only ones to love Dickens’s early works; Americans were equally effusive in their praise. The writer of “The Reception of Mr. Dickens” in *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* (1842) celebrates him as a social reformer. “We see that his mind is strongly possessed,” the writer says, “with a true sense of the unjust suffering, moral and physical, by which the mass of mankind are everywhere pressed down to the dust.” He goes on to “warn Wellington and Peel” and “Toryism in general, against this young writer” whose work is “calculated to hasten on the great crisis of the English Revolution (speed the hour!) far more effectively than any of the open assaults of Radicalism or Chartism” (Collins 117). The parenthetical ejaculation may suggest as much about the essayist as it does about Dickens, but the idea that the novelist wanted to change the world through his writings was fast catching on among contemporaries.

While Dickens was immensely popular among the masses, some among the more discerning, conservative elite expressed serious reservations about both his methods and his themes. The author of “Modern Novels” in the *Christian Remembrancer* (1842) thought Dickens was entering treacherous waters in his more recent novels. In these works aimed ostensibly at social reform, the writer asserts, Dickens is pandering to “the

popular will” by railing against “the privileged classes, recognized officials, ancient institutions, the laws and their administration” — a “proceeding the unfairness of which is fully equaled by its danger” (Collins 159). Similarly, John Wilson Croker, who had previously savaged both Keats and Tennyson, has some deprecatory comments to make about Dickens in his 1843 *Quarterly Review* article. “Dickens is, as everybody knows, the author of some popular stories published originally in periodical parts — remarkable as clever exhibitions of very low life.” But Croker expresses serious doubt “whether the power — or perhaps we should say the habits of his mind — are equal to any sustained exertion.” Additionally, the “continuous repetition of scenes of low life — though, as we have said, seldom *vulgarly* treated — becomes at last exceedingly tedious” (Collins 136). It should be remembered, however, that the latest Dickens book people were reading was *American Notes for General Circulation*, a polemic against America that brought howls of protest from critics on both sides of the Atlantic.

Criticism such as Croker’s did not seem to dampen the public’s zeal for Dickens’s work. A sense of early Victorians’ appreciation of him is apparent in R. H. Horne’s *A New Spirit of the Age* (1844), a three-volume collection of essays prepared by Horne (with the assistance of Elizabeth Barrett) to provide Victorian readers an introduction to the new voices in poetry and prose. The essay on Dickens occupies the first seventy-six pages of the first volume. A brief glance at Horne’s analysis reveals much about the aesthetic and moral expectations of the Victorians. Horne praises Dickens for his characterization, claiming he does not engage in caricature but instead offers an “inexhaustible variety and truth of character” (6). He applauds the young novelist for being able to deal with sordid subjects without becoming sordid, and for achieving verisimilitude without giving offense to even the most delicate reader. Recognizing that Dickens was somehow violating early Victorian conventions of fiction by writing about the lower classes, Horne explains the novelist’s high-minded motives in trying to bring attention to those in need. Aesthetically, Horne places Dickens in the class of writers to which Shakespeare had been assigned, calling him “instinctive” (57) — as opposed to refined, one would assume. Finally, Horne makes sure to praise Dickens for his strong spirit of Christian charity. Although at the time of this assessment Dickens had published only five novels, Horne was already predicting he would be the representative novelist of his age.

At the time Horne was writing, Dickens was actually scrambling to regain the high regard he had reached among readers with his early novels — and to make enough money to support his family and meet his professional obligations. The publication of *A Christmas Carol* in 1843 marked a new phase of Dickens’s relationship with his readers, and issued in a

form of fiction for which he would become equally famous, the Christmas story. Ironically, the story of Ebenezer Scrooge was not an immediate commercial success, but the tale soon took on a kind of mythic status, as the young W. M. Thackeray observed in an 1844 review for *Fraser's Magazine*: “Who can listen to objections regarding such a book as this?” (Collins 149). E. L. Blanchard echoed these sentiments in *Ainsworth Magazine*, asserting *A Christmas Carol* is “not to be talked about or written of according to ordinary rules” (Collins 143). Subsequent stories sold better but tended to be less well received. In writing about *The Cricket on the Hearth* the reviewer for *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal* (1846) suggests this “picture of humble life, contemplated in its poetic aspects and at its more romantic crises” shows Dickens is “in one sense, ambitious of becoming the Wordsworth of prose fiction” — though not quite there yet, as he remains “deficient in the profundity and stern power of that great master” (Hollington 320).

Despite some of the usual objections, the good reviews were probably welcome news to Dickens, as *Martin Chuzzlewit* was not universally loved by its first critics. The long assessment published in *North British Review*, probably by Thomas Cleghorn, finds Dickens declining in power: “no one can read even a single chapter of *Martin Chuzzlewit* without perceiving a very striking declension from the purity and unassuming excellence which marked his earlier compositions” (Collins 187). Of course, time would prove Dickens right; the novel eventually earned praise from numerous critics, and among its characters Sarah Gamp became one of Dickens's most memorable.

Although sales of Dickens's next novel, *Dombey and Son*, were quite good, the reviews were mixed. High praise such as that from the writer for the *Westminster Review* (1847), who proclaims “No other writer can approach Dickens in a perfect analysis of the mind of children” (Collins 225), were balanced by negative estimates such as those of *Blackwood's Magazine* reviewer John Eagles (1848), who dismisses the novel as Dickens's “greatest failure, as a whole” (Collins 231). Eagles even accuses Dickens of writing with the express, mischievous purpose to “decry, and bring into contempt as unfeeling, the higher classes” (Collins 230). A reviewer for *Macphail's Edinburgh Ecclesiastical Journal* (1849) takes a swipe at both Dickens and his readers, claiming the public “admire Mr. Dickens's humourous and pathetic pictures of life, however extravagantly drawn; and, though it be evident that now — exhausted and emptied — he is but reproducing, with some slight modifications, old sketches, he is still as popular as ever.” Unfortunately, the reviewer goes on to say, “his immense popularity has inspired him with a confidence which is rather presumptuous; and for some time back, he has sought to be the solemn teacher, as well as the lighthearted jester, of the age” (Collins 179–80).

Despite the carping about hasty writing and frustration at the lack of tightly structured plots, by mid-century some critics began admitting that Dickens had staying power. The American scholar Edwin P. Whipple, who wrote frequently about him, remarks in “Novels and Novelists: Charles Dickens” (1849) that “Dickens has an open sense for all the liberal influences of his time, and commonly surveys human nature from the position of charity and love” (Collins 239). Whipple also thinks Dickens represents the attitudes of his age: “The humanity, the wide-ranging and healthy sympathies, and especially, the recognition of the virtues which obtain among the poor and humble, so observable in the works of Dickens, are in a great degree characteristic of the age, and without them popularity can hardly be won in imaginative literature” (Collins 239). Writing about *David Copperfield*, the reviewer for *Fraser’s Magazine* (1850) remarks that “there is no single individual who, during the past fourteen years, has occupied so large a space in the thoughts of English folk as Charles Dickens,” adding that “innumerable reputations have flared up and gone out; but the name and fame of Charles Dickens have been exempt from all vicissitude” (Hollington 331). Of course not everyone saw either the novel or its author in such lofty terms. As Philip Collins wryly notes in his editorial commentary, “Few reviewers have prognosticated with such decisive erroneousness as the *Spectator’s* on *David Copperfield* — ‘likely to be less popular than many of the previous tales of Mr. Dickens, as well as rather more open to unfavourable criticism’” (Collins 242). To be fair, the remark may simply reflect the journal’s bias against Dickens rather than a considered judgment of the novel, and it was a decidedly minority opinion at the time. Collins says there was widespread agreement among the Victorians that *David Copperfield* was his masterpiece.

Inevitably, the appearance of *Vanity Fair* in 1847 sparked immediate comparisons between Thackeray and Dickens. In a lengthy essay in the *North British Review* (1851), later expanded in *British Novelists and Their Styles* (1859), David Masson claims both have given English prose “a fresh impulse” and “a new set of characteristics” (239). But Masson is quick to point out that, because both are yet living, the critical attention they are receiving at mid-century may not last; “a time will come,” he cautions, “when they shall have their settled places” (239). He seems to prefer Dickens over Thackeray not only because the former has greater range in his subject matter, but also — and perhaps more importantly — because he has a “genial, kindly, cheerful, and sentimental” outlook on life (249). This kind of comparison, made frequently during the remainder of the century, was eventually reduced to a kind of critical commonplace, aptly summarized by the nineteenth-century historian Justin McCarthy in *A History of Our Own Time* (1894): “Dickens set out on the literary theory that in life everything is better than it looks; Thackeray with the impres-

sion that it is worse” (I.638). Viewing Masson’s assessment historically, it is clear the Victorians valued novels for their ability to teach life lessons and make people feel good.

The novels written after *David Copperfield* were not as well received as Dickens’s earlier work. While there was always an occasional good review, the general belief among critics was that Dickens had run out of steam, and his creative juices had dried up. Of course, as Philip Collins remarks in the introduction to *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, “Throughout his career, the fatal decline of Dickens’s talent was confidently proclaimed,” though like those about Mark Twain, “reports of his literary demise were later discovered to have been greatly exaggerated” (10). But in 1853, when *Bleak House* was published, many critics were ready to pounce on Dickens for abandoning the humor of his early days for this grim portrait of English society. Some like George Brimley, who reviewed the novel for the *Spectator* (1853), found it simply bad: “*Bleak House* would be a heavy book to read through at once, as a properly constructed novel ought to be read. But we must plead guilty to having found it dull and wearisome as a serial” (Hollington 351). Others had mixed feelings. “In some respects,” the reviewer for *Bentley’s Miscellany* (1853) writes, it is “the worst of Mr. Dickens’s fictions, but, in many more, it is the best” (Collins 287). “There are *parts*,” he writes emphatically, “which, without hesitation, may be pronounced more powerful and more tender than anything that Dickens ever wrote — but the whole is disappointing” (Collins 288). Dickens’s friend and confidante John Forster, who frequently wrote glowing reviews of the novelist’s work, observes in the *Examiner* that, “The judgments on *Bleak House* are, in short, as various as judgments are apt to be upon a man whose failings it is thought a subtle test of criticism to discover, for the very reason that all the world admires and likes him, and his books are bought and read by everybody” (Collins 290). As for growing complaints that Dickens did not provide sufficient character development, Forster counters by saying, “They know little how much there is in any one man’s head or heart who expect to have every character in a tale laid bare before them as on a psychological dissecting table and demonstrated minutely” (Collins 292).

Shortly after *Bleak House* was published, James Augustine Stothert offered a rather caustic summary of the reasons for Dickens’s popularity — and his problems with critics — in an 1854 *Rambler* article. “Charles Dickens is, in fact, pre-eminently a man of the middle of the nineteenth century. He is at once the creation and the prophet of an age which loves benevolence without religion, the domestic virtues more than the heroic, the farcical more than the comic, and the extravagant more than the tragic.” He is, Stothert concludes, “the product of a restlessly observant but shallow era” (Hollington 357). Whether one liked him or not, how-

ever, it was hard to deny his influence. “It is scarcely conceivable,” writes Harriet Martineau, “that any one should, in our age of the world, exert a stronger social influence than Mr. Dickens has in his power” (Collins 235).

Dickens followed *Bleak House* with his shortest novel, *Hard Times*, and the critics chose to give it short shrift. Predictably, John Forster felt “its many beauties blind us, as they will blind other generations, to its few defects” (Collins 303), and John Ruskin recommended the novel be studied “with close and earnest care by persons interested in social questions” (Collins 314). However, a majority of critics were closer in their judgments to Richard Simpson of *The Rambler* (1854), who declared that “on the whole, the story is stale, flat, and unprofitable; a mere dull melodrama, in which character is caricature, sentiment tinsel, and moral (if any) unsound” (Collins 303). Even Edwin Whipple had some harsh things to say about Dickens’s sense of political economy displayed in the novel: “The fact that men like Carlyle, Ruskin, and Dickens can write economic nonsense without losing intellectual caste shows that the science of political economy, before its beneficent truths come to be generally admitted, must go through a long struggle with benevolent sophisms and benevolent passions” (Hollington 380).

Despite the growing trend in negative criticism, by the 1850s Dickens’s novels were being translated into a number of languages and he had a following on the Continent. Unfortunately, one of the leading European critics, Hippolyte Taine, thought him shallow. In a review essay in *Revue des Deux Mondes* (1856) Taine observes that “The imagination of Dickens is like that of monomaniacs.” Dickens “does not perceive great things,” Taine says; “he has vigour” but “does not attain beauty.” Further, his “inspiration is a feverish rapture, which does not select its objects.” On the other hand, Taine admits “there is no writer who knows better how to touch and melt; he makes us weep, absolutely shed tears.” But the novelist’s philosophical outlook is decidedly limited and simplistic. “The novels of Dickens,” Taine says, “can be reduced to one phrase, to wit: Be good, and love; there is genuine joy only in the emotions of the heart; sensibility is the whole man” (Collins 337–42). The French novelist Gustave Flaubert dismissed Dickens even more vigorously, calling him an “ignoramus! A giant of good fellows,” perhaps, but “second-rate.” The basis for this dismissal reveals something about Flaubert’s critical prejudices: “How little [Dickens] cares for art! Not once does he mention it” (Maurois 120).

Flaubert’s criterion for judging excellence was coming to be shared by a later generation of artists who placed new demands on the novel. Writing in 1856, George Eliot lamented that the English have at present “one great novelist who is gifted with the utmost power of rendering the external traits of our town population; and 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” (Collins 343). The theologian Peter Bayne’s critique of Dickens in *Essays in Biography and Criticism* (1857) is similar in its indictment of Dickens’s tendencies to stray too far from the tenets of realism in his fiction. Bayne admits Dickens has “a sympathy of extraordinary range” (385) for the poorer classes whose lot he wished to improve. While conceding Dickens’s ability to evoke emotional responses in his readers, however, Bayne suggests his aesthetic and moral principles are flawed. In Bayne’s view, Dickens has been willing to “dishonor” (353) his genius by resorting to caricature to please readers who were not interested in complex characterization. Tricks and mannerisms, Bayne laments, substitute for real character analysis.

Indeed, Eliot and Bayne were part of a growing movement that would find Dickens deficient in ways the early Victorians did not. As George Ford observes in *Dickens and His Readers*, beginning at mid-century “the seeds of revolution were being sown by gifted and perceptive readers of fiction” (155) who would apply new standards to their assessment of the novel — ones by which Dickens’s work would be judged and found wanting. An important voice among these revolutionaries was James Fitzjames Stephen, who at age twenty-six published his “theory of the novel” in an essay titled “The Relation of Novels to Life” (1855). That Stephen was brash and overly self-confident in his judgments of literature seems obvious in hindsight. (A lawyer by training, he gave up writing about literature later in his career.) Philip Collins calls Stephen’s tone “a blend of undergraduate iconoclasm, patrician contempt for the masses, and mandarin defence of cultural tradition against the inroads of commercial barbarians” (13). Small wonder that Stephen did not appreciate Dickens. He attacked Dickens’s methods and his choice of subjects in “License of Modern Novelists” (1857). But his harshest criticisms appeared in four essays written for the *Saturday Review*, a relatively new journal that devoted considerable space to literary matters. Ford describes Stephen’s series of hostile *Saturday Review* articles as “a head-on attack with a cudgel” (151). Stephen takes Dickens to task in “Mr. Dickens as a Politician” (1857) for his naïve approach to social reform, and ridicules him for his poor skills at construction — and his attack on the legal profession — in a review of *Little Dorrit* (1857). A year later, Stephen blasts away at Dickens again for his sentimentality, heavy-handed characterization, and general muddle-headedness in “Mr. Dickens” (1858) — a critique so savage that nearly seventy years later Albert Mordell would think it worthy of inclusion in his collection *Notorious Literary Attacks* (1926).

The vitriolic tone of Stephen’s criticism is nowhere better exemplified than in his review of *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859). Comparing this novel to an ill-prepared meal, Stephen says that in the *Tale* the discerning reader

“will have an opportunity of studying in its elements a system of cookery which procured for its ingenious inventor unparalleled popularity, and enabled him to infect the literature of his country with a disease” that corrupts long-accepted standards of literature. If one accepts the principles Dickens follows in writing novels, one can only conclude that “the principal results of a persistent devotion to literature are an incurable vulgarity of mind and of taste, and intolerable arrogance of temper” (Ford and Lane 39). Dickens cannot create a plausible plot or believable, complex characters. Instead, Stephen says, he achieves his popularity by “working upon the feelings by the coarsest stimulants” and “setting common occurrences in a grotesque and unexpected light” (41). As he does in earlier essays on Dickens, Stephen once again lambastes the novelist for his inaccurate portrayal of the workings of the law. In that observation, George Ford suggests, lies the real reason for Stephen’s visceral dislike of Dickens. Stephen thought the character of Tite Barnacle, head of the family that profits from the nefarious and Byzantine workings of the Circumlocution Office in *Little Dorrit*, was modeled on his father, Judge James Stephen. For that unforgivable sin, Dickens deserved to be punished. One might wonder, too, if that motivated other members of the distinguished Stephen family. Fitzjames’s younger brother Leslie wrote much about the novel as a genre but almost nothing about Dickens, and his 1885 *Dictionary of National Biography* article on Dickens offers only begrudging admiration for some of the novelist’s accomplishments while relishing his many limitations. The muted appreciation of Dickens offered by Leslie Stephen’s daughter Virginia Woolf in her 1925 essay on *David Copperfield* is only slightly more positive in its assessment of Dickens’s abilities.

All through the 1850s and 1860s the critics began to pile on, heaping scorn upon *Little Dorrit*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and *Our Mutual Friend*; only *Great Expectations* seemed to escape universal execration. William Forsyth complained in *Fraser’s Magazine* (1857) that Dickens continues to write “too much and too fast” and “seems to have no conception of a well-constructed plot.” Additionally, “his characters are all exaggerations. We doubt if there is one which, as he has drawn it, occurs in real life.” Worst of all is Dickens’s “habit of pushing an idea to the extreme.” In Forsyth’s opinion, “No man ever rode a metaphor harder than Mr. Dickens” (Collins 350–52). E. B. Hamley remonstrates with Dickens in *Blackwood’s Magazine* (1857), urging him to abandon his crusade for social reform. “As a humourist,” Hamley says, “we prefer Dickens to all living men — as artist, moralist, politician, philosopher, and ultra-philanthropist, we prefer many living men, women and children to Dickens” (Collins 358). Writing shortly thereafter, Walt Whitman applauded Hamley’s article for exposing “the degeneracy so evident” in Dickens’s later work (Collins 358). A *Saturday Review* critic finds his “bizarre and grotesque literary

taste, and the curious light under which he sees almost all the common things and the common events of life, drag him down, in his intervals of weakness, into the mire,” and his “attempts to portray or to caricature or to satirize the upper classes of society have always been ludicrous failures” (Collins 417).

Walter Bagehot’s assessment in the *National Review*, published in 1858 when Dickens was being pilloried for abandoning humor in favor of social criticism, is a bit more balanced. Conceding there is “no contemporary English writer” who can give pleasure simultaneously “to the servants as well as to the mistress, to the children as well as to the master” (Collins 390), Bagehot begins by laying out Dickens’s faults, which are many. His genius is “essentially irregular and unsymmetrical,” emerging from a “copious mind” that is not “harmonious” (Collins 391). He cannot reason, he cannot develop a good plot, he cannot write a love story. He can use sentiment to his own purposes, but tends to overuse it. What he excels in, Bagehot says, is his ability to portray city life and draw memorable characters. But Bagehot finds himself forced to admit Dickens’s most recent works represent a distinct falling off, a result of what Bagehot sees as the inherent “deficiency” in Dickens of the “masculine faculties” of “reasoning, understanding and firm far-seeing sagacity” (Collins 401).

Surprisingly, even the *Saturday Review* (161) allowed its anonymous critic to praise *Great Expectations*. “Mr. Dickens may be reasonably proud of these volumes,” the reviewer observes. “After a long series of his varied works — after passing under the cloud of *Little Dorrit* and *Bleak House* — he has written a story that is new, original, powerful, and very entertaining,” worthy of standing “beside *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *David Copperfield*” (Collins 427). Edwin Whipple comments in the *Atlantic Monthly* (1861) that in *Great Expectations* Dickens is able to gain control over his tendency toward the pathetic and the ideal to produce an “artistic creation” that demonstrates he “is now in the prime, and not in the decline of his great powers” (Collins 428–29). However, E. S. Dallas, an important Victorian critic, was less enthusiastic in his *Times* review. “*Great Expectations* is not, indeed, his best work,” he suggests, “but it is to be ranked among his happiest” (Collins 431).

Dallas also liked *Our Mutual Friend*, claiming in his *Times* review (1865) that the novel is “really one of his finest works, and one in which on occasion he even surpasses himself” (Collins 464). In the same review Dallas takes issue with those who praise *Pickwick Papers* as Dickens’s best work. Even though it remains funny on numerous readings, he says, “we refuse to measure a work of art by the amount of visible effect which it produces; and we are not going to quarrel with tragedy because it is less mirthful than comedy.” By contrast with this earlier work, Dallas says,

one of the “remarkable” aspects of *Our Mutual Friend* is “the immense amount of thought which it contains” (Collins 466).

Dallas was in a distinct minority in writing about Dickens’s last completed novel. The *Saturday Review* returned to its usual stand against Dickens, claiming *Our Mutual Friend* demonstrates once again that Dickens “has always been, and always will be, essentially a caricaturist” (Collins 461). To make matters worse, the reviewer goes on, in this novel the caricatures “are without either of Mr. Dickens’s characteristic excellences. They are not very witty or humorous.” Further, “the execution is coarse and clumsy, and the whole picture is redolent of ill-temper and fractiousness” (Collins 462). This reviewer admires Dickens for his “sincere hatred of that form of cant which implies that all English habits and institutions are the highest product of which civilization is capable,” and applauds his justifiable “abhorrence of much in the administration of the Poor Law.” But he feels Dickens exaggerates his case and thereby diminishes the effectiveness of his argument. “On the whole, this makes a very tedious performance, and the general verdict will probably be that *Our Mutual Friend* is very hard reading” (Collins 463). The reviewer for the *Westminster Review* (1866) suggested “the closer we look at Mr. Dickens’s characters, the more we detect the trickery of an artificer.” The novelist’s “whole art” is “founded upon false principles” (Collins 474). In this reviewer’s opinion, “true art has nothing to do with such ephemeral and local affairs as Poor Laws and Poor Law Boards; and whenever [Dickens] tries to serve such a double purpose, it is like an egg with two yolks, neither is ever hatched.” Certainly, he goes on, if Dickens “knows anything of human nature, he must know that the practical English mind is, as a rule, repelled by any advocacy in the shape of fiction” (Collins 476).

Certainly, however, the review most influential in shaping future opinion of Dickens’s artistry was that written by the young American expatriate Henry James, who was already making a name for himself in London literary circles. The publication of his assessment of *Our Mutual Friend* in the *Nation* (1865), written when he was just twenty-two years old, hints at a new standard for judging novels — what George Ford in *Dickens and His Readers* calls “the high aesthetic line” (199). Calling the novel the poorest of Dickens’s works and faulting it as lacking in inspiration, James criticizes Dickens for the rather cavalier organization of all of his novels and consistently failing to explore beneath the surface of reality. For the young aspiring critic and novelist, the first principle of great fiction is its ability to mirror society not by creating exaggerated caricatures but by carefully delineating the inner lives of people who appear, at least, to be real human beings with complex feelings and delicate sensibilities. Dickens is prone to focus on oddities of human nature, James says, rather than examine real people in everyday situations. The “truly great novelist”

sees no “alternatives,” no “oddities”; for such a writer, James says, “there is nothing outside of humanity. He cannot shirk it; it imposes itself upon him” (Ford and Lane 53). By contrast, Dickens is unable to write about humankind with any degree of insight because he lacks “the intellectual superiority” over his characters to “prosecute those generalities in which alone consists the real greatness of a work of art” (53). James calls Dickens “the greatest of superficial novelists,” stating that it would be “an offense against humanity to place Mr. Dickens among the greatest novelists” (52). In “The Art of Fiction,” written two decades later, James would articulate a theory of fiction that makes Dickens’s novels marginal: “the only reason for the existence of a novel,” he proclaims, “is that it does attempt to represent life” in all its complexities (Allen and Clark 543). Nevertheless, it is good to be reminded that James’s approach, while it might be appealing to certain readers, can also be a kind of straitjacket. No less an artist than James’s admirer and contemporary Edith Wharton observed that his “literary judgments had long been hampered by his increasing preoccupation with the structure of the novel, and his unwillingness to concede that the vital center (when there was any) could lie elsewhere.” It was impossible to convince him, she said, that “there might be merit in the work of writers apparently insensible to these sterner demands of the art” (323). Nonetheless, James and his disciples — among them Percy Lubbock, E. M. Forster, F. R. Leavis, and his wife Q. D. Leavis — would all find Dickens sorely deficient by the standards James had established for judging a novel’s value, and their opinion would hold sway in academic circles for more than half a century.²

Interestingly, James’s strictures were anticipated by the author of the *London Review* (1865) assessment of *Our Mutual Friend*, who claims to be “almost oppressed by the fullness of life which pervades the pages of this novel” (Hollington 422). The writer goes on in what can only be a direct rebuttal to James and others of the new generation of novel writers and readers: “We are prepared to hear from a certain class of critics who can tolerate nothing beyond the civilities of everyday life, and who seem to think that great passions are among those vulgar mistakes of nature to which novelists should be superior” (Collins 457).

Retrospectives written in the late 1860s suggest how critics on both sides of the Atlantic felt about the novelist who for thirty years had strode the literary landscape like a colossus. Writing in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1867, Edwin Whipple reflects on Dickens’s accomplishments while recognizing some of his pervasive limitations. “In the foundation of his character, Dickens agrees with the majority of well-meaning mankind. He has no paradoxes in morality to push, no scientific view of human nature to sustain, no philosophy of society to illustrate, no mission to accomplish.” On the other hand, “Nobody ever thinks of going to his writings for light