

Stardust, Modernity, and the Dickensian Brand

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In an essay to be published during 2012, Florian Schweizer, the Project Director of the international Dickens bicentenary celebrations, asks: ‘why are we commemorating Dickens, what is our connection with this quintessentially Victorian writer, and what is it about Dickens that still appeals to people around the world?’¹ If the evidence of the Charles Dickens Museum’s visitors’ book is anything to go by, in the popular imagination at least, ‘our connection’ with Dickens is rooted in nostalgia, an emotionally infused view of the past which serves a present need for feelings of wholeness, belief, and simplicity. ‘Just what you romanticize about all things English’ (7 November 2005), commented an Australian tourist. ‘Charmingly old-fashioned museum’, comments another, ‘very pleased to note there is little in the way of modern touches. Excellent!’ (27 November 2005). For the general public, the image of a bearded Dickens has become synonymous not only with the Victorian period but with the amorphous ‘past’, and specifically with the English past. The heritage industry typically fosters a sense of the Victorian past as different, as ‘Other’, but also a sense of organic emotional connection, of roots, and of belonging.

The challenge for the organizers of Dickens 2012 events and exhibitions has been not only to determine the nature of Dickens’s appeal today, but also to rethink the nature of public commemoration. Typically, commemoration is not just an act of remembrance; it involves veneration, the idea of value inhering in an emotional yet hierarchical relationship between the past and the present. A central problem for bicentenary organizers is that Dickens has already been commemorated on a large scale — several times. At his death, the nation defied the express wish of his will that he was not to be made ‘the subject of any monument, memorial or testimonial whatever’ and should be buried in ‘an inexpensive, unostentatious, and strictly private manner’, by burying him in Poets’ Corner, Westminster Abbey, where his birthday was commemorated on 7 February 2012.² At the centenary of his birth in 1912, reverence was evident in the tone of the centenary tributes, which stressed the serious and beneficial social and political uses to which Dickens put his benevolent compassion. In 1970, on the centenary of his death, though a creeping emphasis on a more modern Dickens is evident in a key collection like the excellent special issue of the *Dickensian*, *Dickens and Fame*, edited by Michael Slater, there is still the sense of celebrating a cheerful, ‘Christmassy’, Victorian Dickens, the

deserving object of widespread adulation. At previous significant commemorations, his affair with Ellen Ternan, for example, was swept firmly under the carpet in contrast to the 2011 exhibition at Condetto, organized as a precursor to the bicentenary, which made visible his ‘love-nest’ with her.³ Previously, moreover, technology did not enable a globally coordinated programme of commemoration.

Coordinators of Dickens 2012 have had to think globally but they have also had to think differently. Dickens habitually commands the widespread visibility and veneration that most other writers cannot achieve, even in ‘their’ key years of commemoration — we only need think of the relative invisibility of the Thackeray 2011 bicentenary, for example. Thus in 2012, the year of the British Olympics as well as of the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee, how was Dickens to compete for attention when he is already so much a part of the cultural oxygen? The answer, it seems, has been to combine veneration with more inclusive, accessible, and ‘modern’ forms of celebration which strip our connection with Dickens of its hierarchical and nostalgic Otherness. Thus, the image of Dickens chosen for the 2012 ‘campaign’ is of the younger Dickens, without his beard: the *Nickleby* portrait by Daniel Maclise, owned by Tate Britain and on display at the National Portrait Gallery. The biggest exhibition of the year is the Museum of London’s stunning ‘Dickens and London’, which emphasizes the urban Dickens, and new Dickens developments are everywhere visible on screen (TV, film, and online). All this without mentioning Dickensian hip-hop happenings.

It is important to understand that this emphasis on Dickens’s modernity is not a reinvention; it foregrounds qualities inherent in his work and vision, key to his cultural longevity, but long repressed by the heritage industry which has tended to fossilize an image of Dickens in a version of the Victorian past conceived simply as ‘Other’. Yet unlike the other major literary writers prominent in the heritage industry — Shakespeare, Austen, the Brontës, to mention the most obvious names — Dickens was an urban writer. Dickens’s connection to Britain’s capital city London is brilliantly captured in the ‘Dickens and London’ exhibition (curated by Alex Werner), which does not oppose Dickens’s modernity to more traditional celebrations of authorship but shows how, in Dickens’s case, the two are connected. Thus, the most memorable exhibits, for me, were first, the stunning imposition of a reading of Dickens’s essay ‘Night Walks’ over a specially commissioned short documentary film capturing diverse scenes from modern London, shot by William Raban; second, the obsessively overwritten manuscripts of

Dickens's novels; and third, an animated, surreal, often comical version of Robert W. Buss's famous painting *Dickens's Dream* (1870). Also striking in the exhibition content is Luke Fildes's painting *Applicants for Admission to a Casual Ward* (1874), on loan from Royal Holloway, which evokes the suffering and distress of the capital's homeless.

Some press attention has focused on Dickens's relevance to 'austerity Britain', one piece even focusing on what Dickens would have made of the St Paul's protests about global capitalism.⁴ This is a new variation on an established facet of the Dickens brand: Dickens the social reformer. The Dickens who captured the alienation of the 'houseless wanderer' in a 'great city' in 'Night Walks' is not so familiar to the public: the Dickens who experienced the problems of modernity — alienation, restlessness, *weltschmerz* or world weariness, loss of the real — rather than solved them, unable to heal or integrate himself, let alone the society he inhabited.⁵ Yet Dickens's cultural prominence today has in no small part been enabled by this modernity. It is no accident that in his work on modernity and the flâneur, Walter Benjamin on more than one occasion quoted Dickens's articulation of his creative need for crowds.⁶ Dickens describes such streets as his 'magic lantern': 'My figures seem disposed to stagnate without crowds about them', he wrote (30 August 1846).⁷ 'The absence of any accessible streets continues to worry me [...]. It is quite a little mental phenomenon [...] at night I want them beyond description. I don't seem able to get rid of my spectres unless I can lose them in crowds' (20[?] September 1846).⁸ This 'mental phenomenon' in Dickens was contemporaneous with the cultural phenomenon which was the emergence of a mass cultural marketplace; Dickens was one of the first to figure that public as a vast crowd rather than a select coterie. His unprecedented celebrity was both a cause and an effect of his unique sensitivity to that central problem of mass modernity, the relationship between the individual and the crowd.

Dickens was not a flâneur, but neither did he experience that straightforwardly wholehearted connection with 'the crowd' on which the familiar, popular images of the cheerful or the reformist Dickens are based. Indeed, writing about 'Night Walks', Joyce Carol Oates claims that 'No one has captured the romance of desolation, the ecstasy of near-madness, more forcibly than Dickens, so wrongly interpreted as a dispenser of popular, softhearted tales'.⁹ Oates may be right about 'Night Walks', but like many commentators, she is mistaken to feel that she has to make a choice between one aspect of Dickens's 'brand' and another. 'Night Walks' does contain a key to Schweizer's questions, 'what is our connection with this quintessentially Victorian writer, and what is

it about Dickens that still appeals to people around the world?', but the key is not simply its modernity. It is the emotional dialectic central to the essay between loneliness and the oft-repeated term 'company'. Dickens's work is saturated with loneliness, with the fear of detachment, but because of that, it invests in 'company', willing belief in community, and communion. Even in 'Night Walks', he claims that though his 'principal object' in his 'fair amateur experience of houselessness' was to 'get through the night', this brought him 'into sympathetic relations with people who have no other object every night in the year'.¹⁰ Dickens appreciated that he was writing in 'the age of mechanical reproduction', to quote Benjamin, and that this age created a need for emotional community, for moral and spiritual values, for intimacy.¹¹ It is perhaps no accident that *A Christmas Carol* has been Dickens's most influential and commercially successful text. It perfectly captures (and indeed critiques) a central dialectic in Dickens: a 'Victorian' emphasis on family, sympathy, and community grows out of the emotional needs of urban, capitalist 'modern' society for an affective sense of roots and history — for heritage, if we want to use that term, or a sense of the past channelled by emotional will.

Aesthetic and economic reasons play their part in the story of Dickens's continued appeal, but affectively, the dialectic between alienation and solace is key. What is impressive about the bicentenary celebrations is the extent to which they have captured mutually reinforcing aspects of Dickens's vision and legacy, playing up his modernity without sacrificing his role as a writer of 'popular, softhearted tales', his humour, his reformist bent, or his commitment to the dignity of literature and its traditions, symbolized by the remarkable spectacle of his manuscripts. Alongside the dark clothes and drably Victorian settings typical of adaptations and public evocations of the 'Dickensian', moreover, there has also been a new element: stardust. Where Slater's 1970 volume critically analysed Dickens's fame, the Dickens 2012 programme ostentatiously celebrates it. The Westminster Abbey service and the Royal reception held by the Queen at Buckingham Palace on 14 February celebrate his place in the 'establishment', the BBC Dickens season his place in the small screen establishment, and the BFI Dickens programme his place in the history of film. But what was striking at the launch of the 'Dickens and London' exhibition was the ability of Dickens to attract a host of champagne-sipping glitterati from across the worlds of stage, screen, the media, politics, and least prominently, academia. It would be easy and indeed valid to raise an eyebrow at the contrast between the Fildes painting of the homeless and the viewers of that painting,

to contrast the guests at the launch to the ‘houseless’ (to use Dickens’s term) on the streets of London — ‘two nations’ could inevitably be one headline. But Dickens’s legacy has been enabled in no small part by his ability to break down traditional distinctions between literature and the media, page and screen, celebrity and authorship. So there is something enabling and forward-looking about the willingness of the heritage industry in 2012 to acknowledge and even foreground Dickens’s place not just in literary culture but in the wider mass culture that has evolved in the last two hundred years.

¹ To be published in *Dickens and Modernity*, ed. by Juliet John, *Essays and Studies*, 65 (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2012).

² ‘Charles Dickens’s Last Will and Codicil’ [12 May 1869 and 2 June 1870] in *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Madeline House and Graham Storey, 12 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965–2002), XII, 730–33 (732).

³ The exhibition, ‘Charles Dickens, The Inimitable’ at the Château d’Hardelot, ran until October 2011.

⁴ Ed Davey, ‘What would Dickens make of the “modern” malaise?’, *BBC News London* <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-15864902>> [accessed 27 April 2012].

⁵ [Charles Dickens], ‘The Uncommercial Traveller: Night Walks’, *All the Year Round* (21 July 1860), repr. in *The Dent Uniform Edition of Dickens’ Journalism*, ed. by Michael Slater and John Drew, 4 vols (London: Dent, 2000), IV: *The Uncommercial Traveller and Other Papers, 1859–70*, 148–57 (157, 150).

⁶ See, for example, Benjamin’s ‘The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire’ (1938), in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, and trans. by Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, and others, 4 vols (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2002), IV: *1938–40*, 3–92; and *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), pp. 3–92. Benjamin is particularly interested in Baudelaire’s vision of ‘the man of the crowd’, or flâneur, which differs from Poe’s model, and in my view, that of Dickens.

⁷ *Letters*, IV, 612–13 (emphasis in original).

⁸ *Letters*, IV, 622.

⁹ Joyce Carol Oates, ‘To Invigorate Literary Mind, Start Moving Literary Feet’, *Ontario Review*, 1999 (see <<http://grammar.about.com/od/classicessays/a/nightwalks.htm>> [accessed 27 April 2012]).

¹⁰ Dickens, ‘Night Walks’, p. 150.

¹¹ This phrase is taken from Benjamin’s the familiar translation of the title of his essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ (1935), more recently translated by Jephcott, Eiland, and others as ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility’ (second version, 1936), in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, ed. by Eiland and Jennings, III: *1935–38*, 101–33.