

Charles Dickens: A Life Defined by Writing

Michael Slater. New Haven: Yale UP, 2009. 720pp.
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The Great Charles Dickens Scandal

Michael Slater. New Haven: Yale UP, 2012. 232pp.
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The rationale for reviewing these two books together is that they both belong to the same prodigious creative effort, and represent a kind of summing up of a lifetime's devoted study of Charles Dickens. 'No living person is a greater authority on the life and works of Charles Dickens than Michael Slater' writes Claire Tomalin in a puff on the back of the former, but I think one might go further and say that with the possible exception of the book's dedicatee Kathleen Tillotson no one has *ever* known more about Dickens than Slater does. So much indeed, that, as I understand it, the first book grew like Topsy in the process of writing, so that the manuscript was eventually delivered to the publisher five years after the passing of its original deadline. In the meantime, I think, there had been negotiations concerning the possibility of issuing the originally contracted biography in two volumes. Yale apparently decided against this option, but instead awarded Slater a second contract for another book, presumably in part in order to incorporate some of the material that might have gone into a two-volume version of the original work – i.e. more about his relationship with Ellen Ternan.

This thumbnail sketch of part of the publication history of these books should not be taken as anything like authoritative – it is based on hearsay and the occasional word of mouth from the author himself. But I shall proceed here in the assumption that it is not completely mistaken, in order to explore the two books in relation to each other. They are both of outstanding quality, but surprisingly different from each other in ways that make me inclined to speculate a little on what the whole achievement might have looked like had it in fact appeared as one single publication.

This will inevitably involve a revisiting of the biography published in 2009 – I hope not an entirely useless one, even though it is by now already established as a classic of Dickens studies. 'A Life Defined by Writing' is the implicit subtitle of the book, and it describes very accurately its major focus. A million nuggets of information, many of them probably new even to seasoned Dickensians, are assembled to provide the most detailed and comprehensive picture we have of the writer in harness, as Slater assiduously follows his mentor Tillotson in tracking 'Dickens at Work'. Worlds can frequently be seen in grains of sand, causing the reader to stop from time to time in a kind of daze of admiration to consider the many vistas opened up by Slater's powerful grasp of relevant scholarship and gift for apt quotation. This is not perhaps a book that many will read uninterruptedly from cover to cover; its weight and encyclopaedic scope, at least as far as Dickens the writer is concerned, seems to demand more leisurely digestion. But its meatiness also ensures that scholars are already returning to it over and again to unpack the manifold clusters of facts assembled to illuminate and enhance understanding of virtually every item, great or small, in Dickens's *oeuvre*.

Of course the division between Dickens the writer and Dickens the man who lived his life outside of writing cannot be an absolute one, and Slater does not try to make it so in this first book. There is detailed coverage of virtually every aspect of Dickens's life, but the principle that governs examination of the lived life is much more selective than that which informs the scrutiny of his writing career. Thus there is ample discussion of Dickens's two visits to America, but rather less about his two visits to Italy, equally lengthy and arguably at least as important. Selection of course cannot satisfy everyone, and in the nature of things every reader will probably wish there were more about her or his favourite hobbyhorse of the moment. I for instance would have liked more about Dickens and his 'young men' - the writers attached to *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* - Collins of course most especially, but also lesser figures like Percy Fitzgerald, here little more than a name.

Which may bring us to rather deeper questions about the book. The Tillotsonian method deployed here can perhaps be characterised as agglutinative, garnering harvests of factual material across a surface rather than attempting at many points to penetrate a great deal beneath it, to take a concentrated look at motive and psychic causation, impulse, obsession. It tends in fact to underplay psychology, and despite a general tone of good-natured bonhomie there are occasional tart reflections in Slater's book on biographers who succumb to the temptation to construct in-depth theoretical accounts of Dickens's behaviour as a writer and a man, with the implication sometimes that such approaches may indicate a lack of due respect for a writer of such genius.

Be that as it may, I think there are moments in this book where - notwithstanding the hugely successful concentration on Dickens's writing praxis - the reader might legitimately 'ask for more' in the matter of explanatory speculation or hypothesis about the hidden springs of Dickens's creativity. I for one am not wholly convinced, for instance, by Slater's coolness towards psychological accounts of Dickens's public readings (as espoused in the past by Edmund Wilson or Edgar Johnson), and his view that 'it is hardly surprising that he should have looked more to the platform than to the study to maximise his income' (542)? Even granting that money mattered to Dickens, the fact that these readings seem to have reduced Dickens's creative output so considerably might well have urged a deeper approach in a book essentially focussed on the paramount importance of his writing career.

And then of course there is the matter of Dickens and Ellen Ternan. Slater anticipates Lilian Nayder in her excellent biography of Catherine Dickens by describing their relationship as the product of 'what we should today term a mid-life crisis' (346) - a very intense one, indeed, involving complete estrangement from the Hogarth family and many hitherto friends, the violent and absolute repudiation of the wife who had borne him ten children, and the taking of all the younger ones into the care of himself and his sister-in-law Georgina for the rest of the novelist's life. But is this all to be taken as the product of a desire to enter a platonic relationship with a girl who reminded him of Mary Hogarth? Slater, who had seemed hitherto to belong in the Ackroyd/Wagenknecht camp of believers in this hypothesis, now appears more open to the possibility of ordinary sexual intimacy between the two. But he still sits on the fence rather, insisting too on the

absence of any absolute proof in the question, despite Lucinda Hawksley's rhetorical question, in her biography of Dickens's daughter Kate, about the level of proof that can reasonably be expected in a case where both parties are determined to hush up the nature of their relationship. So that one may perhaps wonder whether hedging one's bets is quite the best strategy for a Dickens biographer on this important point, even in a book that focusses principally upon the writerly life. It is one where I feel Slater in his first book holds fire a little, intending presumably to incorporate fuller discussion into the second.

The last words of Slater's book, about 'a darker, more turbulent, and altogether more complex figure' who began to emerge in the 1930s with the Ellen Ternan revelations, together with the assertion that 'that, as the saying goes, is another story' (623) seems to support this hunch. But whether it really *is* another story, for me, is moot – isn't it also an essential part of the main story about the writer as writer? There are moments in the biography of 2009 where one feels that these constraints and limitations – imposed by publisher or author or both – tend to shunt the book down a particular line which is not quite an absolute trunk route. Slater's first book can be seen primarily as the great Dickens biography of an age of information, and somewhat less as a masterpiece of in-depth criticism and understanding. To be sure it contains innumerable moments of perception and insight, but these often concern *details* of the life and work. The overall conception of Dickens's life as one 'defined by writing' is unimpeachable – one that is nobly realised and sustained through more than 600 pages – but perhaps the inclusion *here* of deeper consideration of 'the darker, more turbulent, and altogether more complex figure' of most modern conceptions of Dickens might have lent this biography yet more authority than it has already attained. But even as things stand, it certainly knocks most recent competition out of the water.

To turn from it to *The Great Charles Dickens Scandal* is to experience some degree of surprise. Equally authoritative and inexhaustive in its scholarship, the latter book wears its learning altogether more lightly. Its narrative line is largely unclogged, as it provides a thoroughly enjoyable, 'unputdownable' account of the history of the 'scandal mongering' (to adopt Edward Wagenknecht's term) that has obsessed Dickens scholarship in recent decades, in the process of which this reader at least learns a great deal of which he had previously been unaware.

Perhaps the major surprise is the extent of contemporary gossip and innuendo about Dickens and Ellen Ternan. Far more people than I had ever imagined seem to have known at least about the existence of this relationship, even if the inferences drawn about its nature were often founded on very little substantial evidence. One understands a little more the extent of Dickens's paranoia about references to himself and Ellen in the press, in letters and conversation, and the elaborate devices he employed – assuming disguises, using false names, writing in code, etc – in order to protect his secret, whatever precisely it was.

Then in a second phase Slater details the lengths to which the principal official custodians of the Dickens legacy – Forster on the one hand, and Georgina his sister-in-law and Mamie his daughter on the other – were prepared to go to in order to hush up the ghastly

secret of Dickens's life with Ellen. The very fact that they exercised themselves so vigorously to keep the lid on things might in itself seem to indicate that there was indeed something rather significant to hide. A child, Henry Fielding Dickens thought when Ellen's son Geoffrey Robinson confronted him in 1928, asking was Ellen Dickens's mistress, and receiving the reply "unfortunately yes" and the information that 'there was a boy but it died (154-55). Scrupulously presenting all the evidence to hand, Slater does not flinch here from passing almost entirely into the Tomalin camp of believers in the sexual nature of the liaison, avowing that 'I would guess that the number of those who still believe that Dickens's relationship with Ellen was indeed Platonic is not large' (186).

For enter at this point in the story the pantomime villain, in the shape of Canon Benham, the priest who spilled the beans about Ellen to the biographer Thomas Wright. He told Wright that Ellen had confessed to him that she and Dickens were lovers, and that 'she loathed the very thought of the intimacy' (76) What treachery on the part of a priest to betray the secrets of the confessional! Slater almost seems to join the chorus of outrage at Benham's conduct, for it's all good clean fun now in the cause of an excellent narrative.

But I do not mean to suggest that the utter readability of the second book involves any lack of depth and penetration. On the contrary, like the first, it again fairly bristles with insights, of which I shall select just one. Commenting on Ada Nisbet's pioneering use of an 1863 letter from Dickens about his being overwhelmingly moved at a performance in Paris of Gounod's *Faust*, he remarks that she doesn't quote enough of it. Had she done so, we might have seen corroboration of the crucial role of jewellery in Dickens's courtship of Ellen (Mrs. Dickens is said to have become aware of the relationship when jewels intended for Ellen were delivered to her by mistake) in 'the piquant detail that the point in the opera at which Dickens broke down was the one at which the heroine Marguerite is seduced by the superb jewels left for her as bait by Faust and Mephistopheles' (118). Here, I feel, a piercing shaft of light is shone upon Dickens's inner unease about Ellen.

Nevertheless, the effect of the two works taken together to form an imaginary whole, as the French say, is that *on reste un peu sur son faim*. These are two wonderful, indispensable books, which nonetheless don't quite add up to deliver the whole definitive Dickens biography that Michael Slater might have given us. I shall cherish them both in their different ways, but they fit rather oddly together.

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