

WORKING AND BEING WORKED IN *OUR MUTUAL FRIEND*

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*O*ur *Mutual Friend* is the last novel Dickens finished, and it is tempting to read it as both climax and paradigm of his fiction: recognisable variants on character and situation exorcising the old obsessions of imprisonment in destitution, solitude and misprision; a text tilting at corruption and inflation of all kinds, bluster from fiscal to verbal, amongst MPs and bishops and their butlers; lawyers, brokers, moneylenders and schoolmasters; down to the rag-and-bone and resurrection men hovering between salvage and carrion – and then the exoskeletal society of trophy wives and marriageable daughters, sleeping partners or faithful helpmeets, mother-figures and little women.

Our Mutual Friend is Dickens's most powerful satire on society because the surge of indignation crests here, the breaking wave of his work. But of course this is the view of hindsight, not Dickens's intention while writing (either this novel or *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* five years later), nor of contemporary readers as the parts came out. How far this false teleology is from their experience is highlighted by the shock of the accident that threw both Dickens and the novel into jeopardy when the train he was travelling on with the manuscript on 9 June 1865 was derailed, causing several fatalities. Dickens scrambled to help survivors but he did not want publicity. Ellen Ternan was with him on the train, and the accident might have brought their secret liaison into the open. If not killed he might yet have been destroyed.

The devastating threat of exposure obliquely shadows the delicate poise of the unsuspected purpose and the constituted account in the productive economy of *Our Mutual Friend*, which Dickens describes in his Postscript: "To keep for a long time unsuspected, yet always working itself out, another purpose originating in [the] leading incident, and turning it to a pleasant and useful account at last, was at once the most interesting and the most difficult part of my design" (798). What I want to discuss is this high-tensile dynamic, where antipathies, or antipodes, may best be described not as recognisable components of the Dickens concoction, like a jigsaw awaiting completion, but rather as unstable elements at play in a force-field that includes writer and reader with the text. These "antipodes" are implicit in the transitive and intransitive aspects of the very word "work" – a double helix retraced by Henry James in his late novel *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) where the heroine Milly Theale inaugurates her career as both victim and mistress of her situation by recognising from Kate Croy that "the working and the worked were, in London [. . .] the parties to every relation [. . .] The worker in one connexion was the worked in

another; it was as broad as it was long – with the wheels of the system, as might be seen, wonderfully oiled” (169). James’s “system” is a Dickensian conceit – indeed it might recall or may even originate in the Reverend Chadband from *Bleak House*, whose conspicuous consumption of eatables and spewing forth of religiose hot air suggested “a good deal of train oil in his system” (304; ch. 19).

The recurrence of this well-oiled system figures social relations as an aspect of London’s exchange economy in the age of mechanical reproduction, but the title of *Our Mutual Friend* (in all three of its component parts) signals a more intimate contract, not merely of reciprocity but interdependence. Perhaps the dynamic is deeper still: an inwardness closer to Wordsworth’s Romantic fascination with the poise between self-assertion and tranquil passivity in the creative process of the mind “willing to work and to be wrought upon” (*Prelude* (1805) 13.100). Does *Our Mutual Friend* critique the operations of social exploitation from which the text itself is not exempt, tempting and toying with its readers? Or is it a parable, standing apart from what it shows, flouting realism and reverting to simpler modes?

The first words of “Julius Handford” (aka John Rokesmith, or John Harmon) – “I am lost” (32) – proclaim his readiness for a new self, to be “found” or “saved” (either antithetical to the “lost” soul). Identity is a dominant preoccupation in this tangle of disguised, disused and undiscovered tales and personalities; but the constitution of being can itself be construed as a negotiation of the antipodes of subjectivity and agency.

“Work” – as noun and verb; action and object; self-motivated or imposed – proves a powerful key to *Our Mutual Friend*. Through the dual aspects of its subjectivity and agency, at once polarised yet conjoined (as in any antipodean order of being), “work” both brings together and demands differentiation between assertion and acceptance, both within the text and in the construction and consumption of the text while the “account” is “working itself out.” Historical materialism, production and publishing are relevant concerns here, but so are questions of reader-response, and the currents of rhetorical and generic criticism which feed that process. Literary movements from Romanticism through Industrial “Realism” to Post-Industrial Aestheticism and Symbolism offer to chart the space within which these contradictory and mutually-informative processes seem possible. The position of the individual within such cultural evolutions provokes philosophical questions about the nature and power of the self, and about the viewpoint from which such concepts could be entertained. In a word: the dual aspect of activity and passivity in the term “work,” noun and verb, acts as an epitome of the complex dynamic operating in *Our Mutual Friend*. It is a term that demands to be taken apart but refuses to be dis-assembled that way; one that enacts the individual’s embroilment in cultural context, reiterated through the co-operation with textual process.

This is of course a preposterous claim for a short paper, and I don’t expect to demonstrate it beyond objection. Nor do I want to stay on the level of abstract

analysis, but simply to indicate that dimension as the context of specific observations. Dickens does not work in abstractions, though his specificity may provoke extrapolation. When he opens *Our Mutual Friend* "On the Look Out" by describing a boat with two figures in it floating on the Thames, the scene operates realistically, but it also generates a figurative reading, and that process is arguably more powerful than its product. The unreadable spectacle, approached through a negative inventory of attributes –

He had no net, hook, or line, and he could not be a fisherman; his boat had no cushion for a sitter, no paint, no inscription, no appliance beyond a rusty boathook and a coil of rope, and he could not be a waterman; his boat was too crazy and too small to take in cargo for delivery, and he could not be a lighterman or river-carrier; there was no clue to what he looked for (13)

– actually demonstrates in the tantalising oscillation between figuration and the obstruction of interpretation, something of what it might signify. This mysterious spectacle acts like the natural phenomenon which Coleridge in *Biographia Literaria* evokes so vividly: an insect called the water-boatman, whose alternating pulses of "active and passive motion" figures consciousness at work as the mind experiences itself in the act of thinking:

Most of my readers will have observed a small water-insect on the surface of rivulets which throws a cinque-spotted shadow fringed with prismatic colours on the sunny bottom of the brook; and will have noticed how the little animal wins its way up against the stream, by alternate pulses of active and passive motion, now resisting the current, and now yielding to it in order to gather strength and a momentary fulcrum for a further propulsion. This is no unapt emblem of the mind's self-experience in the act of thinking. (124; ch. 7)

Precise observation is what makes this "emblem" of self-consciousness work. In Dickens it is the way the "pulses" of "active and passive motion" are caught by the prose rhythms, building up and falling back, that do the job (to be fair, Coleridge also makes use of verbal music in the alliterative beat of his prose). It is not the image alone but the generation of the scene through phrasing and syntax, that creates the idea.

Dickens has two figures in his boat. Self-reflexive Romantic isolation gives way to a co-operative working model. It is a strange one, though: "The girl rowed, pulling a pair of sculls very easily; the man, with the rudder-lines slack in his hands, and his hands loose in his waistband, kept an eager look out" (13). The gender roles

are not what you might expect, nor the age balance. These inversions, together with the ambiguity of “sculls,” and the warning note in “slack” and “loose,” are not enough to foreground, but perhaps to prepare the ground, for a complex understanding of what is involved in work. Throughout *Our Mutual Friend*, things have to be worked out. No-one can function alone – John Harmon, Wrayburn and Headstone, even Silas Wegg demonstrate this – but in working relationships, a balance has to be struck between partnership and dominance – whether in marriage, the family, business, politics or even between reader and audience, as in contractual negotiations between Noddy Boffin and the ballad-vendor, “a literary man – with a wooden leg”:

“What do you think of the terms, Wegg?” Mr Boffin then demanded with unconcealed anxiety.

Silas, who had stimulated this anxiety by his hard reserve of manner, and who had begun to understand his man very well, replied with an air; as if he were saying something extraordinarily generous and great:

“Mr Boffin, I never bargain.”

“So I should have thought of you!” said Mr Boffin, admiringly.

“No, sir. I never did ’aggle and I never will ’aggle. Consequently I meet you at once, free and fair, with – Done, for double the money!” (59; bk. 1, ch. 5)

“Done” indeed. Though as the tale unfolds, the question of precisely who is doing what to whom and why grows harder, not easier, to answer. Book 2, Chapter 13, John Harmon’s “Solo and Duet,” puts paid to any notion of suspense as the novel’s central dynamic: the mystery doesn’t lie there; and the proliferation of parallel cases – most notably those of “T’other governor” and “T’otherest governor” with their parasite “Pardner” and “Lock-keeper” Rogue Riderhood, set against Harmon – such parallels complicate, rather than simplify, the movement of the work, and militate against any determined interpretation. The contradiction between gross machinery in plot and structure and subtler insights, both psychological and perhaps spiritual, in motivation, is one of the curious imbalances by which Dickens lays open the perversity of that “well-oiled system” which takes it for granted that “the worker and the worked were, in London, the parties to every relation.” The satire on the city reaches into the intricacies of those involved, not merely the complications of their relationships. This might imply a shift in perspective, from mapping superficiality to registering performativity in tracking phenomenal experience, and so engaging in a different kind of realism of representation. But what is the relationship between performativity and productivity? How is energy harnessed in fiction? What comes into play from page one of *Our Mutual Friend* is the inescapable implication – even contamination – of all parties, including writer and reader, in the working of the text,

which emerges less as a made thing than a process. That opening scene on the Thames is both a spectacle and an induction for the reader. It asks for an audience response, and it initiates co-operation with the “account” just starting out.

Gaffer Hexam and Lizzie are in the same boat, but their work is not the same: her task is rowing, while he watches the river for his prize. When Riderhood approaches, the job in hand occasions a dispute between the former partners which is as much metaphysical as forensic, over what is going on. Can you rob a dead man? The nature of the action, it seems, is not intrinsic but relative: work may be subject to its object. In the boatmen’s argy-bargy, the absolutes of life and death are set against the negotiability of money values. Ironically, the text will destabilise both securities, when this corpse is “resurrected” in John Harmon. The immediate outcome of the argument is an absolute break in relations: “We have worked together in time past, but we work together no more in time present nor yet future. Let go. Cast off!” (16). The two boats move apart.

“Work” in *Our Mutual Friend* involves all the elements at play in this opening stretch: action and patience, employment, co-operation, negotiation, exploitation. In the eyes of society, energy, opposed to idleness, moves from physical capacity to an ethical performance – though the text exposes this to question. Wrayburn is of course a terrible example: “Then idiots talk,” said Eugene, leaning back, folding his arms, smoking with his eyes shut, and speaking slightly through his nose, “of Energy. If there is a word in the dictionary under any letter from A to Z that I abominate, it is energy” (29; ch. 3).

But the contrary is no better. In Chapter 3 (Book 2), entitled, in ironic recall of *Hamlet* “A Piece of Work,” Hamlet’s lament: “What a piece of work is a man [. . .] and yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?” (2.2.304-9) – the masterpiece of creation atomised – is not irrelevant to *Our Mutual Friend*; but the satire on this “piece of work” is even more bitter: the phrase means no more than “what a palaver,” when Veneering decides to run for Parliament. On his behalf, Lady Tippins “really does work, and work the horses too; for she clatters about town all day” to assure all her acquaintances that “we are carrying on this little farce to keep up appearances, and isn’t it refreshing!” (248).

What Tippins is after, for Veneering, is “names”; and what *he’s* after is “a couple of initials after his name.” Names and initials dance through this text distractingly, often divorced from identity or meaning – as when Riderhood wants “to be took down” in pen and ink according to “the obligations of a Alfred David” (151; bk. 1, ch. 12). Wrayburn deals in initials: reducing Energy to an item in the alphabet “from A to Z,” and transposing “my respected father” to MRF: surely a wry Dickensian twist on OMF? Fascination Fledgeby, according to a savage narrator, is an “Ass who sees nothing written on the face of the earth and sky but the three letters L. S. D.” (269; bk. 2, ch. 5). The language of economic exchange inscribes “That mysterious paper currency which circulates in London when the wind blows” (147; bk.1 ch.12). Its discourse uses initials as a cut price indicator,

much as Lammle's friends transact business "in rushes and snatches" via an international currency of elliptical excess:

There were friends who seemed to be always coming and going across the Channel, on errands about the Bourse, and Greek and Spanish and India and Mexican and par and premium and discount and three quarters and seven eighths. [. . .] They all spoke of sums of money, and only mentioned the sums and left the money to be understood; as "five and forty thousand Tom," or "Two hundred and twenty-two on every individual share in the lot, Joe." (260; bk. 2, ch. 4)

The traffic in shares is lambasted (in Book 1, Chapter 10, "A Marriage Contract") as the shibboleth of society: "Perhaps he never of himself achieved success in anything, never originated anything, never produced anything? Sufficient answer to all; Shares" (118). The barren business of "Stock Exchange" is lampooned in the account of rampant inflation in the orphan market when Mrs Boffin seeks a child to care for: "Counterfeit stock got into circulation. Parents boldly represented themselves as dead, and brought their orphans with them. Genuine orphan-stock was surreptitiously withdrawn from the market" (195; bk. 1, ch. 16). For Dickens shares are not shared but abstracted meanly from "our mutual" interest. Though a "mutual understanding" – as that between the perfectly mismatched Alfred and Sophronia Lammle – may be founded on deception and subject to misconstruction. Their enterprise, exemplary in performativity, is empty of productivity: the "business of romance" not so much a fiction as a lie.

Which brings us back to Dickens's "design." How do the energies of performativity and productivity function in the writer's work? *Our Mutual Friend* exhibits Dickens's customary preoccupation with language, from the loose papers of the London streets to the science of Mr Venus, who tells Wegg: "If you was brought here loose in a bag to be articulated, I'd name your smallest bones blindfold equally with your largest, as fast as I could pick 'em out, and I'd sort 'em all, and sort your vertebrae, in a manner that would equally surprise and charm you" (89; bk. 1, ch. 7). A bag of bones might seem unpromising, but articulacy yearns for an audience to "surprise and charm." The writer might echo Noddy Boffin: "But I want some reading – some fine bold reading [. . .]. How can I get that reading?" (58; bk. 1, ch. 5). If Wegg is a bad reader, Sloppy, "is a beautiful reader of a newspaper. He do the Police in different voices" (198; bk. 1, ch. 16). Wordsworth reports Coleridge as holding that "Every Author, as far as he is great and at the same time *original*, has had the task of *creating* the taste by which he is to be enjoyed" ("Essay" 3: 80). Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* is peopled with readers as it is with texts. While the plotters are entangled in their own schemes, the patient have only to wait for the design to unfold, "turning it to a pleasant and useful account at last."

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