Sketches By Boz

IT IS generally assumed that Charles Dickens became famous, practically overnight, with *The Pickwick Papers*; and yet the true, first engine of his reputation was his earliest journalistic sketches and stories. At the time he wrote the first of these, 'Mr Minns and His Cousin', he was only twenty-one years old, unknown to name and fame, a short-hand reporter in the parliamentary press gallery of the House of Commons. By the time a second volume of those sketches had been published three years later, in 1836, he was arguably the most famous and successful novelist in England. *Sketches By Boz* marks, therefore, the extraordinary *rite de passage* of a writer who was to dominate the nineteenth century.

How did it begin? He had written that first story as a sort of exercise: it concerns the misadventures of a family too intent upon receiving a legacy from a relation and, although it is essentially a farce very much of the kind Dickens would himself have seen on the stage, it shows the care and assiduity of a young man intent on proving himself to be a writer. He transcribed a fair copy in neat and legible long-hand, and then put it through the letter-box of an obscure periodical entitled the *Monthly Magazine*. That journal has therefore the honour of being the first to print the work of Charles Dickens (albeit anonymously) and, when Dickens later purchased a copy and saw his story in all the glory of letterpress, '. . . my eyes were so dimmed with joy and pride that they could not bear the street'. So he escaped into the relative seclusion of Westminster Hall in order to understand his own new sense of himself as a published writer. It was a turning point in his life,

for it was now that he discovered his vocation – all the ambition which he had nourished through a traumatic childhood, through the drudgery of work in a blacking factory, through the humiliation of his father's incarceration for debt in the Marshalsea Prison, was about to be released in one of the most animated, inventive and energetic periods of his life.

He wrote another eight stories for the *Monthly Magazine*, most of them of a theatrical or farcical nature, but already he was looking ahead to a series of sketches which he wanted to call 'The Parish' and also to a 'proposed Novel'. It is rare for a young writer to have such purpose and direction but, as is so often the case, external circumstances began to match his own internal self-confidence: in 1834, just one year after the publication of his first story, he was employed as a parliamentary journalist, reporter and theatre reviewer on the *Morning Chronicle*. He rapidly attained a certain eminence among his journalistic contemporaries – one of the aspects of Dickens's genius lying in the evident fact that whatever he did he did *well* – but, more importantly, he was soon writing sketches of a descriptive and social nature for that newspaper. Even as he travelled all over the country to attend election meetings, even as he visited the theatres of the metropolis to see the latest melodrama or burletta, he was observing everything around him and widening his range. That is why, late in the same year, he found his most enduring theme in a series entitled 'Sketches of London' which he published in the *Evening Chronicle* – this was a tri-weekly offshoot of the *Morning Chronicle*, and was edited by a certain George Hogarth, whose daughter was in fact later to marry the young and rising author.

Everything was coming together, therefore, as Dickens was engaged in the most pressing and formative stage in any writer's development: he was learning about the resources and possibilities of his own style, literally finding out about his own creativity as he went along. The sketches he wrote for both the morning and evening editions of the *Chronicle* were

couched in a very different tone from his more stylised and more conventional stories: they were filled with precise observation and with urban detail, and they tended to be written in a much more impassioned manner; where the stories had been enlivened by ironical and sometimes acidic wit, the sketches are both more benign and more purposeful. In the stories he is transfiguring the world in the light of his own theatrical preoccupations: in the sketches he is more concerned with interpreting it. And so he worked on, often writing until dawn after spending the larger part of the night transcribing parliamentary speeches in short-hand, sometimes ill and almost always exhausted. He was at the same time courting Catherine Hogarth, and yet he never allowed his amatory preoccupations to interfere with his real work: he knew what it was necessary to do in order to achieve the fame he so assiduously sought. He never gave up.

Within a relatively short period, his efforts were rewarded. His stories and sketches had already been favourably received (he even achieved the unwelcome distinction of being 'pirated' by periodicals in the United States) and, in the autumn of 1835, he was approached by a publisher with the idea of collecting his various journalistic works into a two-volume set – with engravings by George Cruikshank, the most famous illustrator of his day. It was to be entitled *Sketches By Boz*, after the pseudonym which Dickens had given himself the year before. Of course Dickens accepted the offer; it was what he had always wanted, and he was soon editing and amending these occasional pieces in order to render them fit for publication in more permanent form. That is why the essays and stories in modern editions are not quite as they were originally written: there were in fact several editions of the *Sketches* during Dickens's lifetime, and he took the opportunity of revising them in accordance with the demands of the time as well as of his own changing taste. He removed topical allusions, softened the occasional harshness and amended the more tasteless jokes. And yet one thing did not change: they were a great success on

their first appearance, and they have remained so ever since.

Yet what kind of success was it, that has lasted so long? What accounts for that strange energy which seems to vibrate through them, and which makes them so much a record of Dickens's own momentum through the world at this triumphal period of his life? He was, for one thing, working very close to home; he was working very close to his own experience, in other words, and finding there the first lightning rod of his genius. Many of his stories and sketches, for example, take as their theme the vanities and hypocrisies of semi-genteel social life or the perils involved in trying to clamber across the ordinarily well-determined class boundaries: these were precisely the problems which beset him and his frequently impoverished family. But, more strikingly, he was ready to use material which simply, to use Mr Micawber's famous phrase, 'turned up'. One example may suffice. His father, John Dickens, was placed in a detention house for debtors on one of the many occasions when he could not pay for what he had so readily purchased or borrowed: his son went to great lengths to release him from his unfortunate circumstances, but then only two months later used the same scene and setting for 'A Passage in the Life of Mr Watkins Tottle'. He was grabbing almost blindly at the material which was closest to hand: this may have been because he was in urgent need of ideas and stories for what was fast becoming routinely hard labour but, perhaps most importantly, it suggests the creative self-confidence of a writer who knew that in such scenes and among such circumstances he had found his true theme.

Indeed in this earliest volume of Dickens's published work there can be seen in embryo almost all of the novelist's more mature characteristics. There is first of all the comedy; there is no funnier writer in English than Dickens, and in many of the urban sketches, as well as in most of the stories, there is that sharp and sometimes even hysterical humour which is so typical of him. There is the comedy of shiftless street life – 'Niver mind . . . niver mind; *you* go home, and, ven you're

quite sober, mend your stockings' – and the comedy of domestic existence. But there are more specific resemblances with his later work. In one of the first stories, 'The Bloomsbury Christening', first published in April 1834, Dickens evokes an early version of Ebenezer Scrooge in a certain Nicodemus Dumps as well as an embryonic happy family of appropriately Dickensian nature in the Kitterbells. But it is not only the comedy of his mature novels which is prefigured in these sketches: there are also the same great waves of pathos and of melancholy. So it is that, at one point in his description of Christmas time, he alludes to the fact that 'One little seat may be empty . . .' and raises the early ghost of Tiny Tim. And that is the most important characteristic of Dickens's writing from the beginning: where there is comedy there is also sorrow, where there is farce there is also pathos. They come to meet us in a thousand shapes, in that veritable stage army of characters which populates Dickens's imagination – in the simpering young women and acid-visaged old ones, in the priggish men and the oafish men, in the wide-awake children of the streets and in pathetic orphans, in the reckless and the cowardly, the shabby genteel and the virtuous poor. And this is the most extraordinary thing of all – at the age of twenty-one and twenty-two Dickens was already creating the world which would live for ever in his fictions.

At the time it was described as a world of 'every-day life' and 'every-day people', which on one level was true enough – even if the full force of that truth may now escape us. For the salient point is that the great success of these stories and sketches sprang from the fact that, for the first time in English fiction and English journalism, the morals and manners of what we might term the 'lower-middle-class' had been brought brilliantly to life. Whether it is the clerk struggling to maintain a large and growing family, whether it is the householder living in Poplar with marigolds in his garden and 'Beware of the Dog' hanging on an adjacent gate, a whole class of English social life was being explored. Dickens's 'startling fidelity' –

that was how one newspaper review described it. And yet it went further than the transcription of one class, however 'startling' that might seem, since Dickens observed and remembered everything. He heard the voices in the London streets and transcribed them directly, down to the employment of the 'w' instead of the 'v'; to read these urban sketches is to eavesdrop upon a now forgotten race. In addition he *saw* directly in front of him whatever he described – this was the claim he made throughout his writing life, and we can see its workings here in the graphic and immediate detail of the sketches themselves, even in the smallest trifle, like that 'solemn lifting of the little finger of the right hand' with which London cab-drivers greeted each other.

How are we to visualise Dickens himself in the midst of all this activity? He was a young man, smartly and colourfully dressed in the latest fashion, with long dark hair, and dark, lustrous eyes. He is a wanderer, and one who can never resist joining a crowd and watching what is *going on*. He cannot observe a scene without imaginatively participating in it; he cannot see characters without seeming to be almost literally possessed by their emotions. For him a thought becomes an impression, an impression an hallucinatory reality. He perfectly understood the vigour and disorder of the city, therefore, and indeed he has so much energy that he is able to live through a thousand imagined existences and incidents. He wanders through Vauxhall Gardens, or the Seven Dials; he visits Greenwich, or Newgate. He listens to the conversations of solemn men in public houses, and then walks through Monmouth Street and meditates upon the lost features of those who once inhabited the second-hand clothes on sale there. And what are the subjects that move him? The condemned men in prison, the poor, the vagrants, the outcasts, the forgotten children – forgotten as he once had been when he worked in the blacking factory of Hungerford Stairs . . .

That is the other aspect of the sketches and stories, and one which may in large part account for their power still to move

us. For it is in these earliest writings that Dickens, as if by instinct, reworks the entire course of his life up to this point. In essays such as 'Doctor's Commons' and 'A Parliamentary Sketch' he provides some evidence of his own work as a shorthand reporter, for example, just as in 'Private Theatres' he takes us on a tour of the urban entertainments which amused him as a youth. But there are darker shadows, also, and harsher tones – in 'The Streets', he recollects his own observations of London when he seemed to have been cast away into its very depths. He recalls what it is like to be poor amidst the prosperity of others, to be houseless in front of the homes of the more fortunate, to be alone in a city filled with crowds. In fact there are stories here which are tragic in their intensity, and if there is one line which seems to echo through all of Dickens's novels it is that of the small child: 'Mother! dear, dear mother, bury me in the open fields – anywhere but in these dreadful streets . . . they have killed me.' Here, then, are the very beginnings of his genius; it is recognisably and memorably the world of the 1830s but it is also Dickens's own private world, filled with characters and incidents and phrases which will survive as long as the English language itself survives.