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***The Posthumous Papers of the
Pickwick Club and G.K.
Chesterton's View of Dickens'
Literary Greatness***

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INTRODUCTION

In 1948, the publication of *The Great Tradition* by Frank R. Leavis left a profound mark on the history of the British literary criticism. In his influential book Leavis indeed argued that Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad were undoubtedly the greatest of all English novelists, and gave many valuable arguments to sustain his choice. Surprisingly, Charles Dickens, whom many considered one of the greatest British authors of all times, possibly second only to William Shakespeare, was excluded. How was it possible? Why did Leavis exclude Dickens from the group of the greatest English novelists? Leavis defined greatness in literature on the basis of new literary criteria proposed by theorists such as E.M. Foster and Percy Lubbock. In particular, Leavis meant to investigate the literary merits of the novelists on the basis of their consciousness of the importance of literary forms, thereby paying more attention to formal organization and technical skills, and their literary “seriousness”:

The great novelists in that tradition [Austen, Eliot, Hardy, Conrad] are all very much concerned with ‘form’; they are all very original technically, having turned their genius to the working out of their own appropriate methods and procedures¹.

By acknowledging that Dickens with his comic spirit and “his melodramatic imagination”² was “at the other end of scale from sophistication”³, Leavis therefore found it inevitable not to rank him among the greatest English novelists, and consequently relegated him to the class of simple entertainers, instead of sophisticated geniuses. The only novel he appreciated was *Hard Times* in which, in Leavis’ opinion, Dickens actually managed to achieve formal sophistication, and artistic seriousness.

¹ F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1948, p. 7.

² Cf. P. Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination. Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (1976), New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1995., Later on, Peter Brooks instead argued that the melodramatic imagination was to be considered as one of Dickens’ literary qualities.

³ F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, cit., p. 18.

Although it is radical, Leavis' judgment must not however be considered as a final assessment. The history of literary criticism is indeed characterized by the continuous succession of ideas and theories, which are often radically different from one another, but none of them establishes the absolute truth. If, on the one hand, many theorists have indeed considered form and style much more important than the meaning similarly to Leavis; on the other hand, many others have rather put a strong emphasis on the message of the novel at the expense of stylistic merits. Consequently, if many literary critics have disregarded Dickens and his novels, many others have instead celebrated his masterpieces as some of the greatest works in the history of the English literature.

Among those who had admiringly written on Dickens before Leavis, Gilbert Keith Chesterton (29 May 1874, London – 14 June 1936, Beaconsfield) is surely one of the most influential critics. Differently from Leavis, he had indeed devoted most of his career to the praise of Dickens' literary greatness by publishing dozens of writings in which he celebrated him as the greatest of all English novelists. In particular, *Charles Dickens* (1906), *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens* (1911), and *The Victorian Age in Literature* (1913) are commonly considered his masterpieces of literary criticism which definitely ranked Chesterton with the major voices in Dickens studies. If indeed Leavis' ideas of literary greatness diverged consistently from the peculiar characteristics of Dickens' novels, Chesterton had on the contrary acknowledged that the very foundations of his view of greatness in literature were perfectly mirrored in the pages of Dickens' novels, triumphantly in *The Pickwick Papers*. It was indeed Chesterton's opinion that *The Pickwick Papers* was decidedly Dickens' greatest achievement.

Hence, this dissertation aims to explore Chesterton's view of Dickens' literary greatness. In particular, this study will be conducted through the discussion of the main arguments Chesterton used in his main critical writings. In this way, it will be possible to draw a connection between his criticism of Dickens and his more general view of greatness in literature. Then, through the analysis of some selected passages and important characters, this dissertation will argue that *The Pickwick Papers* perfectly embodies the very foundations of Chesterton's view of greatness in

literature against a critical tradition where too often what had appeared to Chesterton as the chief signs of Dickens' genius were instead considered as shortcomings. The work has been divided into two main parts, respectively partitioned in various chapters, to adequately follow a cohesive line of argument.

Part 1 will investigate Chesterton's view of greatness in literature, and his celebration of Dickens' literary merits. Besides exploring some biographical events in his life, chapter 1 will discuss some of Chesterton's writings which reveal his view of greatness in literature. Then, in chapter 2, we will discuss Chesterton's special position in the tradition of Dickens studies by focusing on his major critical masterpieces. Finally, and most importantly, the following three chapters will be devoted to the discussion of his main arguments in favour of Dickens' literary greatness.

Part 2 will be mainly focused on *The Pickwick Papers*. The discussion of some selected passages will be preceded by an overview of the literary criticism of the novel prior to Chesterton, and by a discourse on the intimate connection existing between Dickens himself and *The Pickwick Papers*, respectively in chapter 1 and 2. Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6 will be devoted to the analysis of some episodes and passages where the foundations of Chesterton's view of greatness in literature are richly and perfectly illustrated. From the close analysis of the passages other points of interest emerge in Dickens' first masterpiece, namely Dickens' satire together with his extraordinary capacity of fellow feeling.

PART 1

G.K. Chesterton: a Major Voice in Dickens Studies

INTRODUCTION

The amount of materials which deals with Dickens criticism is impressive. As a matter of fact, hundreds of editions of his novels, several collections of his letters, and a huge body of secondary source materials await anyone wishing to write or read about Dickens. All of this represents a special case in the British literary panorama since no other English author, except for Shakespeare, has ever received so much critical attention. Mazzeno describes Dickens phenomenon in these terms:

‘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 catalogue 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. [...] What he *hasn’t* been is ignored. No other English writer save Shakespeare has received so much attention.⁴

In this explanatory quotation it is evident that the literary criticism concerning Dickens has always swung rapidly from a position to another over the centuries. In fact, although he was definitely the best-selling novelist of the Victorian period and one of the best loved in the future generations of readers, Dickens did not always stand in the favour of literary critics. Since the publication

⁴ L. W. Mazzeno, *The Dickens Industry. Critical Perspectives, 1836-2005*, Rochester (New York), Camden House, 2011, p. 1.

of his first work *Sketches by Boz* in 1836, the critics have indeed divided into those who favourably celebrate his production, and those who derogatorily remark his deficiencies. Remarkably, this division became manifest as soon as Dickens' first novel *The Pickwick Papers* was published in 1837. The novel was indeed an enormous popular success among the masses and was extensively praised for its humour. In spite of this, critics like Richard Ford and John Wilson Croker published some negative reviews in the "Quarterly Review" in which they criticized Dickens for both his lack of a well-constructed plot and the depiction of scenes of low life. This was just the beginning of "a growing movement that would find Dickens deficient"⁵. In fact, while his success increased, favourable criticism diminished. In particular, the novels written after the publication of *David Copperfield* (1850), such as *Bleak House* (1853), *Hard Times* (1854), *Little Dorrit* (1857) and *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), mainly received harsh criticism. For instance, many critics lamented that Dickens had abandoned the typical humour which had characterised his earlier productions. Others, like Hippolyte Taine – one of the European leading critics – and George Eliot, criticised his tendency to avoid giving a psychological investigation of his characters' feelings and conceptions of life⁶. However, the worst negative attacks on Dickens were written by two young, valiant authors: James Fitzjames Stephen and Henry James. In their works, they indeed proposed some new standards for assessing novels, standards "by which Dickens' novels were to be judged and found wanting"⁷. The former, who was Virginia Woolf's uncle, published many essays and reviews for the "Saturday Review" and the "Edinburgh Review" in which he derides Dickens' inability to construct a valid, intriguing plot and round, complex characters⁸. He also harshly criticises Dickens for his allegedly exaggerated caricatures and his unsophisticated treatment of social problems. Of the same opinion was Henry James in his review of Dickens' novel *Our Mutual Friend* published in "The Nation". In fact, he outspokenly accuses Dickens of paying too much attention to the description of exaggerated caricatural features, rather than

⁵ Ibidem, p. 20.

⁶ Cf. P. Collins, *Dickens. The Critical Heritage*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971, pp. 337-343.

⁷ L. W. Mazzeno, *The Dickens Industry. Critical Perspectives, 1836-2005*, cit., p.20.

⁸ Cf. P. Collins, *Dickens. The Critical Heritage*, cit., pp. 344-349, 366-374, 408-412.

carefully examining the inner life of the characters which lies beneath their external appearances. He indeed points out that Dickens “has added nothing to our understanding of human character”, and although he “is a great observer and a great humorist”, “he is nothing of a philosopher”⁹.

These above-mentioned pieces of criticism were all published when Dickens was still alive. However, after the novelist’s death in 1870, negative criticism did not appease. As a matter of fact, while John Foster’s biography *Life of Charles Dickens* was vehemently defending Dickens’ literary merits, and many enthusiasts – known as Dickensians – were founding periodicals celebrating the novelist’s works, another important literary figure railed against Dickens: George Henry Lewes. George Eliot’s life partner indeed was one the utmost upholders of realism and complex characterization. Consequently, in 1872 he published *Dickens in Relation to Criticism* for the “Fortnightly Review” in which he attacks both the Dickensians for their exaggerated esteem of Dickens’ merits and the novelist himself for his creation of allegedly false characters. In particular, he points out that certainly Dickens’ characters are amazing and appealing, yet they are actually “unreal and impossible [...] speaking a language never heard in life”, and they hide “their falsity”¹⁰ behind the strong appeal they arouse in the readership.

Fortunately, at the turn of the century, there were the first signs of change in the critical esteem. As a matter of fact, three important authors wrote admiringly of Dickens: George Bernard Shaw, George Gissing, and Gilbert Keith Chesterton. These three authors paved the way to the modern, positive evaluation of Dickens as a literary genius. For what concerns George Bernard Shaw, although he did not agree with most of Chesterton’s ideas, he was anyway a great admirer of Dickens. Particularly, he was one of the first who re-evaluated the merits of Dickens’ later works, the so-called dark novels, by stressing the importance of their social commentary. In his 1913 introduction to *Hard Times*, he indeed points out that in this novel “we see Dickens with his eyes newly open and his conscience newly

⁹ H. James, *The Limitations of Dickens* (1865) in G.H. Ford and L.L. Lauriat (eds.), *The Dickens Critics*, New York, Cornell University Press, 1961, pp. 48-54, pp. 52-53.

¹⁰ G.H. Lewes, *Dickens in Relation to Criticism* (1872) in G.H. Ford and L.L. Lauriat (eds.), *The Dickens Critics*, cit., pp. 54-73, p. 61.

stricken by the discovery of the real state of England”¹¹. However, Shaw is not often ranked with the major critics of Dickens since most of his commentaries are scattered in the texts of the lectures he gave throughout his career, and therefore difficult to access. For this reason, it is Gissing who is generally considered the first authentic positive voice in Dickens criticism. Specifically, Gissing is extensively estimated since in his *Charles Dickens. A Critical Study*, published in 1898, he adopts a revolutionary approach in literary criticism. Mazzeno describes his innovative method as follows:

His study examines the novels as works of art, judging them not by ranking them against each other, [...] or against the work of other novelists, or by their ability to present some larger “approved” social message. Instead he examines the ways Dickens creates plots, draws his characters, structures his work to achieve effect, and develops his themes. He traces the development of Dickens’ artistic ability chronologically, noting places at which he seems to advance in his craft, and points where he falls back on conventions either to please his audience or to meet the deadlines of serial publication.¹²

In brief, Gissing praises all Dickens’ qualities, especially his humour, his creative power, his optimism, and his interest in the lower classes, yet he complains that Dickens lacked intellectualism in his novels. Against this negative assessment and many others put forth by other critics did react one of the major voices in Dickens studies: Gilbert Keith Chesterton. In the following decades, many other critics produced authoritative works which celebrated the novelist’s greatness such as George Orwell’s *Charles Dickens in Inside the Whale* (1940) and Edmund Wilson’s *The Two Scrooges in The Wound and the Bow* (1940), yet no one ever matched Chesterton’s criticism for the amount of arguments proposed in support of Dickens’ literary greatness. Chesterton indeed celebrated Dickens as a hero since he acknowledged that the ideas he himself professed during his whole literary career were mirrored in Dickens’ pages, triumphantly in *The Pickwick Papers*. Therefore,

¹¹ G.B. Shaw, *Introduction to Hard Times* (1913) in G.H. Ford and L.L. Lauriat (eds.), *The Dickens Critics*, cit., pp. 125-134, p. 126.

¹² L. W. Mazzeno, *The Dickens Industry. Critical Perspectives, 1836-2005*, cit., p. 43.

he published a great amount of books, essays and articles which are still nowadays considered some of the major masterpieces in Dickens studies. Part 1 of this dissertation is indeed devoted to the discussion of Chesterton's criticism of Dickens, and will take into consideration his arguments contained in three of his major works: *Charles Dickens* (1906), *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens* (1911), and *The Victorian Age in Literature* (1913).

However, before analysing in detail Chesterton's critical writings on Dickens, it might be useful to better discover the man behind the ideas. The first chapter of Part 1 is indeed meant to delineate the principal events in Chesterton's life and, at the same time, to present the main ideas and certainties he developed throughout his long, literary career, and which will re-appear in his criticism of Dickens. In fact, some ideas Chesterton developed in *The Defendant* (1901), *Twelve Types* (1902), *Heretics* (1905), *All Things Considered* (1908), *Orthodoxy* (1908), *George Bernard Shaw* (1909), and *A Short History of England* (1917) are fundamental for our study since they led him to consider Dickens as the best of the Victorian novelists and *The Pickwick Papers* as the best of his novels. Notably, Chesterton himself thought that his life was fundamental to correctly understand the development of his ideas, and, consequently, he dedicated the last days of his life to his *Autobiography*, which was published posthumously in 1936.

CHAPTER I

A Life Devoted to Literature: Chesterton's Main Ideas

Gilbert Keith Chesterton was born in Campden Hill, a residential area in west London between Kensington and Notting Hill, on 29th May 1874. His family was “a respectable, commercial middle-class family”¹³: his father, Edward Chesterton, ran a firm of estate agents founded by his grandfather, but he early retired due to a heart disease; while his mother, named Marie Grosjean, had Scot origins, but little is known about her relationship with her son. In fact, as Ker points out, “the greatest influence on the child came from his father”¹⁴. Unlike his uncle Sidney who was a fervent supporter of technological and economic progress, his father instead loved literature and old things. After his retirement from work, he dedicated himself to his hobbies, especially to one which nourished Chesterton's fantasy: the toy theatre. The paternal theatrical representations naturally developed in the son an exceptional love for anything which was a wonder and so Chesterton's love for the romance and fairy stories already began developing when very young. Apart from the influential role played by his father, another important figure for the child Chesterton was his younger brother Cecil. The two brothers indeed spent much time together playing and chatting.

Chesterton entered Colet Court, a public school which was a separated section of St. Paul's school, at the age of 9. This was a day school, so he never had to leave his family: “unlike generations of Englishmen of his class, Chesterton continued to enjoy the amenities of home and never endured abrupt separation from family life”¹⁵. This is really important since it caused his immature, dependent attitude which was to characterize his married life as many biographies stress. He ended school in 1892, but, despite his great literary qualities he had already shown

¹³ I.T. Ker, *G.K. Chesterton. A Biography*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 5.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

while running the “Debater”, a magazine for the “The Junior Debating Club” he himself had founded, he did not go to Oxford nor Cambridge, but to an art school: “in spite of his striking literary contributions to the “Debater”, neither his parents nor his teachers appear to have seen where his real talents lay”¹⁶. He therefore entered the Slade School of Art, but, unmotivated, his academic results were highly insufficient. However, being the Slade School a department of the University College of London, it anyway gave Chesterton the opportunity to attend lectures on English and French literature instead of art lessons. In this way, he could satisfy his love for old adventures and popular tales, and fell in love with an old popular, joyful world which had disappeared from the modern world. In addition, during this period, young Chesterton also delighted in writing some poems in which he already manifested the anti-dogmatic ideas which were to mark some of his future productions. More importantly, especially for the aim of this study, a book he read right in this period is worth mentioning:

In the following year [1893] he read a best-seller called *Merrie England*, a collection of articles on Socialism originally published in the *Clarion* newspaper by its founder and editor, Robert Blatchford. [...] Blatchford was influenced by William Morris and ‘idealised pre-industrial societies in which workers could be artists and craftsmen’. It is quite possible that the book influenced Chesterton’s own later idealization of the Middle Ages.¹⁷

However, during this period he also suffered from a psychological and spiritual crisis. As a matter of fact, along with his brother Cecil he mysteriously began experiencing the occult, especially the subjects of Sin and Devil. Nothing precise is known about this dark period, but one thing is certain: instead of undermining his love for humanity, wonders, and life, these encounters reinforced his liking for Christianity, especially for Jesus Christ and his preaching of equality between men. Precisely in this period, Chesterton indeed developed his “optimism” which was to be his antidote to the Victorian compromise and to modernism. Hence from this experience he came out with the strong intention to “write against the

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 21.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 24.

Decadents and the Pessimists who ruled the culture of the age”¹⁸. There, in 1896, his literary career did take an unexpected acceleration.

After a seasonal employment as a reviewer for the London publisher Redway, a publisher of occult literature, he moved to the prestigious publishing house of Fisher Unwin at the end of October 1896, and worked for it until 1902. In the meantime, he also worked as a freelance journalist for “The Speaker”, a radical weekly founded by some young Liberals, for which Chesterton wrote many articles and essays showing his main ideas which were to be later collected and re-published in his future works. In 1900, he published his first books *Greybeards at Play* and *The Wild Knight*, both collections of poems. Although they did not achieve popular success, they attracted the attention of the “Daily News” and Chesterton was hired and given a weekly column. From that moment, and for the next thirty years, he worked for this prestigious newspaper, and all his life was thus dedicated to literature. From that moment onwards, the literary genius of Chesterton produced over a hundred books including fiction – such as *The Man Who Was Thursday: a Nightmare* and the *Father Brown* series – and non-fiction works – including biographies and theological treatises. It would hence be impossible to condense the discussion of this huge literary production in a few pages; therefore, this dissertation will take into consideration only the works providing glimpses of some of Chesterton’s leading ideas which were to appear again in his criticism of Dickens and *The Pickwick Papers*.

Published in 1901, *The Defendant* is the first prose book produced by Chesterton and represents his vindication of the articles he wrote for the “Speaker”. In the first pages, he already puts forth an argument which will be fundamental in his criticism of Dickens: namely, what he calls “active optimism”. In fact, Chesterton recognizes in all contemporary literary production a strong tendency towards pessimism and nihilism. Against these modern beliefs, Chesterton hails optimism as the only effective way to achieve some changes since history has demonstrated that “the true revolutionaries were not the pessimists but the optimists

¹⁸ G.K. Chesterton, *Autobiography*, quoted in I.T. Ker, *G.K. Chesterton. A Biography*, cit., p. 35.

[...]”¹⁹. As regards this point, he will indeed praise Dickens precisely for his active optimism in his novels which contributed to the closure of some institutions. Furthermore, Chesterton recognizes optimism as a typical trait of the common people who, unlike the educated and intellectual, can still “*wonder at the world*”²⁰, thereby perceiving it as an interesting place full of attractive curiosities as if it were a romance. In this way, they always find something interesting in the world, and enjoy life consequently. This is one of the first examples of Chesterton’s defence of the common man which runs through all his production and makes him different from contemporary writers. Nietzsche’s theory of the ‘Superman’ was indeed impressing many of Chesterton’s contemporaries including George Bernard Shaw, Chesterton’s friendly literary enemy. Another important theme treated in *The Defendant*, is the justification of the positive value of the ‘grotesque’, an adjective often attributed to Dickens’ characters. In Chesterton’s opinion, the word ‘grotesque’ has often been misinterpreted and wrongly associated to something comical. On the contrary, Chesterton reevaluates the ‘grotesque’ by pointing out that the extravagance it implies is simply an exuberant liveliness rather than a horrible, deformed monstrosity. In this way, he will find a justification of Dickens’ characters: his grotesque is neither vulgar nor unrealistic; it only serves him to highlight some traits in order to make the characters more appealing and, consequently, unforgettable.

The second book of selected articles he published was *Twelve Types* in 1902 that, together with *G.F.Watts* published in 1904, are the last non-fiction works he wrote before a brief temporal parenthesis during which he first experimented with novels. In fact, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* – a futuristic novel set in an alternative reality – and *The Club of Queer Trades* – a book consisting of funny stories about the members of a club – were printed respectively in 1904 and 1905, yet they just enjoyed a limited success.

However, before the publication of his most important work for Dickens criticism, *Charles Dickens*, he published another significant non-fiction book in

¹⁹ I.T. Ker, *G.K. Chesterton. A Biography*, cit., p. 84.

²⁰ *Ivi.*

1905 in which he treated most of the themes which were to characterize his analysis of Dickens: *Heretics*. It is a collection of revised articles published for the “Daily Mail”, and some passages are useful for our study of Dickens and *The Pickwick Papers*. More specifically, he directs his attack against Carlyle and Shaw who, according to him, had a foolish worship both for modern progress and Nietzsche’s theory of the ‘Superman’, thereby denying the virtue of the common man. On the contrary, Chesterton points out that the most valuable and lovable man is actually the common man, he who is “the old beer-drinking, creed-making, fighting, failing, sensual, respectable man”²¹, and not the super-empowered, perfect, modern Superman. The common man can indeed still enjoy the old popular mirth and merry-making of which Chesterton laments the disappearance from the modern world. Most importantly, in Chesterton’s view, the common man is exactly the type of man Dickens’ humble characters embody, and who was first to appear triumphantly in *The Pickwick Papers*. As this dissertation will argue extensively, this is indeed one of the reasons why Dickens’ *The Pickwick Papers* is considered by Chesterton the best of the novelist’s books. Furthermore, Chesterton also gives some glimpses of his thought about the basic *seriousness* of laughter. In his opinion, comic jokes, especially those we inherit from the Middle Ages, can have a serious side since they can lead people to reflect on some existential questions such as human fallibility and mortality. With regard to the seriousness of the comedy, Chesterton also dedicates some pages of his introductory essay to *All Things Considered* (1908) to this important theme. In fact, he outspokenly maintains that “the more serious is the discussion the more grotesque should be its terms”²². Having a profound interest in the defence of the common man, Chesterton cannot indeed avoid praising the serious side of comic literature since he considers it full of “democratic sympathy”²³. Most remarkably, he claims that comic situations, differently from tragic ones, create equality among men, and he will reinforce this concept in his *Charles Dickens*. As a matter of fact, social equality attained through a literary “grotesque

²¹ G.K. Chesterton, *Heretics*, quoted in I.T. Ker, *G.K. Chesterton. A Biography*, cit., p. 152.

²² G.K. Chesterton, *All Things Considered*, quoted in I.T. Ker, *G.K. Chesterton. A Biography*, cit., p. 208.

²³ *Ivi*.

democracy”²⁴ will be one of his major arguments in favour of the literary greatness of *The Pickwick Papers*. He indeed repeatedly asserts that humour and grotesque, instead of scoffing or distancing the characters, serve to attract the readers’ attention to the great amount of outstanding individualities existing in the real world, and to *seriously* carrying on Dickens’ project of a literary democracy.

The next important book being worth mentioning for our analysis of Chesterton’s view of the literary greatness of Dickens is one of his most famous works: *Orthodoxy*. Published in 1908, the same year as *The Man Who Was Thursday*, it is Chesterton’s utmost appreciation of the Christian orthodoxy to which he converted in 1922 thanks to the influence of both the readings carried out throughout his whole career, and the motivation of his Christian wife Frances. For the themes treated, the book is generally considered a companion to *Heretics*, but it also allows us to have another look at Chesterton’s idea of democracy as well. As a matter of fact, Ker notices that in various passages of the book it is clear that “the only political system Chesterton can trust is democracy”²⁵. According to Chesterton, democracy, being profoundly and inherently Christian – “Christianity is akin to democracy”²⁶ – , is based on the principle that common men and ordinary things are more important and interesting than extraordinary things and noble people. Therefore, democracy treats *all* men equally without distinctions, and even encourages the humble to believe in their greatness differently from Nietzsche’s theory of the Superman which entails few over-empowered individuals elevating themselves over the others. As argued in the following chapters, Chesterton will indeed praise Dickens exactly for his creation of a literary democracy in his novels which outspokenly confirms his disinterested concern for each common person’s individuality. In a memorable passage of *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton thus underlines his faith in democracy:

²⁴ G.K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens* (1906), Kelly Bray (Cornwall), House of Stratus, 2008, p. 109.

²⁵ I.T. Ker, *G.K. Chesterton. A Biography*, cit., p. 223.

²⁶ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (1908), Chicago, Moody Publishers, 2009., p. 179.

I was brought up a Liberal, and have always believed in democracy, in the elementary liberal doctrine of a self-governing humanity. If any one finds the phrase vague or threadbare, I can only pause for a moment to explain that the principle of democracy, as I mean it, can be stated in two propositions. The first is this: that the things common to all men are more important than the things peculiar to any men. Ordinary things are more valuable than extraordinary things; nay, they are more extraordinary. Man is something more awful than men; something more strange. The sense of the miracle of humanity itself should be always more vivid to us than any marvels of power, intellect, art, or civilization. The mere man on two legs, as such, should be felt as something more heart-breaking than any music and more startling than any caricature. Death is more tragic even than death by starvation. Having a nose is more comic even than having a Norman nose.

This is the first principle of democracy: that the essential things in men are the things they hold in common, not the things they hold separately.²⁷

Now, as already pointed out, it is impossible to treat all the remarkable works the genius of Chesterton produced; consequently, the last books to be mentioned here for the aim of this dissertation are: *George Bernard Shaw*, written in 1909, and *A Short History of England* published in 1917. As the title suggests, the former is a critical study of his friendly literary enemy. As a matter of fact, in spite of a sincere friendship, Chesterton and Shaw disagreed in many ideas and, consequently, they opposed each other vehemently throughout their literary careers on various contrasting themes. Being an optimist, a democratic worshipper, a nostalgic of the old popular mirth, and a defender of the common man, Chesterton could not agree with Shaw's acclaim of Nietzsche's 'Superman' and his strong belief in the positive value of modern progress. For Chesterton, Shaw's system of ideas indeed represented all that he was fighting against in his works. This is the reason why, in *George Bernard Shaw*, Chesterton charges his literary colleague with "lack of interest in and enjoyment of the ordinary things of the common man"²⁸, and with "lack of democratic sentiment"²⁹. He also accuses him of being a disciple of both

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 72.

²⁸ I.T. Ker, *G.K. Chesterton. A Biography*, cit., p. 244.

²⁹ G.K. Chesterton, *George Bernard Shaw*, quoted in I.T. Ker, *G.K. Chesterton. A Biography*, cit., p. 245.

Schopenhauer's pessimism, plainly contrasting with Chesterton's inherent optimism, and Nietzsche's 'Superman', the very opposite of Chesterton's common man. Consequently, Shaw could not share his faith in democracy as Ker points out:

[...] as a disciple of Nietzsche, Shaw believed not in democracy but in Superman, which meant the 'incredibly caddish doctrine that the strength of the strong is admirable, but not the valour of the weak' [...] ³⁰.

Then, for what concerns *A Short History of England*, it is important for the aim of this dissertation since, as Ker underlines, "Chesterton's enthusiasm for the Middle Ages takes up commensurate space in his short history"³¹. Chesterton indeed considers the Middle Ages an epoch in which, in spite of harsh living conditions, hilarity, sense of community, merry-making, humour, optimism, and cheerfulness animated the British souls, and there were no signs of the widespread pessimism and ruthless competitions between people which characterize the modern age. It was an era of popular mirth where people enjoyed life. Unfortunately, this era had gone, yet, as Ker indicates, Chesterton points out that among the English people the tradition of old "Merry England had survived"³². As argued in the following paragraphs, Chesterton precisely considers Dickens the utmost exponent of 'Merry England' and *The Pickwick Papers* the perfect custodian of this old popular mirth.

After this short presentation of what Chesterton professed during his literary career, let us move to discuss his criticism of Dickens in particular. In fact, as said before, anyone approaching Dickens and his novels cannot disregard George Keith Chesterton's criticism of his works.

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 246.

³¹ I.T. Ker, *G.K. Chesterton. A Biography*, cit., p. 379.

³² Ibidem, p. 382.

CHAPTER II

A Major Voice in Dickens Studies

Published in 1906, *Charles Dickens* is certainly the most influential critical book Chesterton wrote on Dickens. This work indeed immediately ranked Chesterton as one of the major voices in Dickens studies. On the fundamental importance of this book, Ian Ker writes:

On 30 August 1906 *Charles Dickens*, the first of Chesterton's half-a-dozen or so great works, was published. It is his best critical study, one of the classics of English literary criticism, and a book that is widely considered the best criticism of Dickens ever written. Both realist and symbolist writers had reacted sharply against Dickens; Chesterton's unfashionable defence of him is also his finest tribute to the despised, recently departed Victorian era.³³

Similarly to those dedicated by Chesterton to Tolstoy, R.L. Stevenson, and G.B. Shaw, this is a "loosely organized biography"³⁴ which treats the main events of the author's life without going into details. Indeed, Chesterton's main aim was not to give a chronological account of the novelist's life, but to defend him "from his detractors and proclaim his importance in English letters and English life"³⁵ by critically commenting his works. He deeply felt that the author's greatness, along with the greatness of *The Pickwick Papers*, was indeed being besieged by the exponents of realism and symbolism who were proposing literary standards for evaluating a novel which devalued Dickens' actual merits. Most of the arguments which Chesterton put forth to argue in favour of Dickens' literary greatness are indeed contained in this work. The book was a revised and broadened edition of a short encomium he had written in collaboration with F.G. Kitton – one of the most

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 164.

³⁴ L. W. Mazzeno, *The Dickens Industry. Critical Perspectives, 1836-2005*, cit., p. 47.

³⁵ *Ivi*.

important Dickensians – three years before which had no success. On the contrary, *Charles Dickens* was immediately praised in the literary circles, especially among the Dickensians, and represented a landmark in Dickens studies. Regarding the extent of its importance for future studies, Mazzeno specifies: “For nearly half a century, Dickens lovers worldwide looked to Chesterton as their champion against those who would belittle the novelist’s accomplishments”³⁶. With the exception of Orwell’s essay in *Inside the Whale* and Edmund Wilson’s *The Two Scrooges*, no other book has ever played such a fundamental and influential role in assessing Dickens’ artistic genius.

After the enormous success of *Charles Dickens*, Chesterton published *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens* in 1911. It is a collection of introductions Chesterton wrote for some new editions of Dickens’ novels for the new Everyman Library. More importantly, the book contains an introduction written by Chesterton himself in which he re-proposes, re-affirms, and, above all, ameliorates some of his main ideas concerning Dickens’ novels he had already presented in *Charles Dickens*. The same is true for *The Victorian Age in Literature* which was published in 1913. Besides being the major voice in Dickens studies, Chesterton was also an authoritative critic of the whole Victorian period. As a matter of fact, the book is a kind of compendium, a comprehensive reflection on the Victorian period from the 1830s, when Queen Victoria was crowned, up to the latest decades and latest authors – such as Kipling and Wilde – of the century. In this way, Chesterton tries to comment on the major cultural and literary movements of the period such as Utilitarianism, Socialism, and Darwinism. Although this book does not precisely mention or talk about a specific novel, it anyway gives us some other glimpses of Chesterton’s view of Dickens once again.

However, what is really important for both *Charles Dickens, Appreciations and Criticisms* and *The Victorian Age in Literature* is that in these books Chesterton’s main ideas underlie his criticism of Dickens. In fact, the arguments used to argue in favour of Dickens’ literary greatness perfectly mirror Chesterton’s main thoughts concerning the defence of the common man, the establishment of a

³⁶ *Ivi*.

literary democracy, the active optimism, and the celebration of old “Merry England”. As underlined by Villari:

Dickens occupa in effetti nella sua visione [Chesterton's] un posto molto speciale. In lui trovano conferma tutti i principali assunti della posizione spesso eccentrica e volentieri polemica di Chesterton nel panorama culturale della sua epoca.³⁷

³⁷ E. Villari, *‘Era una folla, e una folla in rivolta’*. *Dickens nella visione di Chesterton*, in *Libri e lettori (tra autori e personaggi)*. *Studi in onore di Mariolina Bertini*, a cura di L. Dolfi e M.C. Ghidini (eds.), Parma, Nuova Editrice Berti, 2017, pp. 247-256, p. 249., (“Dickens actually plays a very special role in his [Chesterton's] vision. All the main assumptions of Chesterton's position, eccentric as they often are and outspokenly polemical in the contemporary cultural atmosphere of his age, were there to be found in his novels”, Villari's translation).

CHAPTER III

The Defence of the Common Man: a Funny Democracy

There is nothing better than beginning with a quotation to discuss Chesterton's celebration of Dickens' defence of the common man. In an opening passage of *Charles Dickens*, Chesterton strikingly points out that Dickens did have a "faith in democracy"³⁸. Now, modern readers well know the political implication of the term – namely, a political system where every citizen exercises his power of vote –, yet they might be surprised to find that the term can also be used when discussing a work of fiction. As a matter of fact, although novels always deal with fictional characters, novelists can somehow decide to vary the kind of interpersonal relationships existing among them. For instance, an author can create characters whose social ranks or living conditions create huge *inequality* among them; or, on the contrary, by adopting various literary devices, he can endeavour to create *equality* between the characters of the novel. The latter attempt is what we thus consider a *literary* democracy, and it is exactly what Chesterton recognizes in Dickens' works, triumphantly in *The Pickwick Papers*. Dickens indeed perceived that the modern world had become a place of socially-divided people where the social distance between the rich and the poor had been increasing. Therefore, he tried to re-create, at least fictionally, the equality among people which had been lost over time.

In Chesterton's opinion, a literary democracy maintains and shares the main characteristics of the political democracy, that is to say, an unrestricted interest for every individual. Everyone possesses his own characteristics which are not shared by anyone else, and, consequently, everyone's individuality is extremely interesting and appealing for the readers. Therefore, everybody is presented, every event is narrated, and every individual characteristic is described. In this way, the literary democracy treats all individualities *equally*. Interestingly, Dickens' concern for the

³⁸ G.K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens*, cit., p. 46.

individualities of so many characters, which drew the attention of Chesterton, was also underlined by later literary critics. For instance, Miller recognizes Dickens' creation of a great amount of unique individualities, and points out that in Dickens' novels every character possesses his "own unique peculiarity of appearance and manner"³⁹ which renders him/her unique in the novel. Dickens' desire was indeed to "investigate [...] on all the variety of the world"⁴⁰. In Miller's opinion, the result is thus the creation a fictional world which is "a swarming plurality of isolated centres of vitality, each endlessly asserting himself as himself"⁴¹. Of the same opinion is Edgar Johnson whose book reveals that the meticulous rendering of every character's details makes them lively individuals, more than monotonous, all-alike puppets⁴². However, fifty years before, Chesterton had already pointed out that all of this would not have been possible if Dickens had not possessed a powerful creative imagination which Chesterton praises not only for its *quality*, but also for its *quantity*. Not only the characters themselves with their marvellous and unique personalities amaze the readers, but also the fecundity with which Dickens worked stupefies us. There is no a single novel without an unforgettable character. If *The Pickwick Papers* had featured neither Mr. Pickwick, nor Sam Weller, nor even Tony Weller and the other Pickwickians, at least Jingle with his bizarre way of speaking and his irreverent attitude would have equally amazed millions of readers and made the characters and the novel memorable.

In the attempt at delineating what he means for literary democracy, Chesterton thus dedicates other pages of *Charles Dickens* to this topic. Specifically, in a striking passage, he presents tragedy and comedy as the two fundamental cores of the most important form of democracy: life. He states that, in real life, "all men are tragic" and "all men are comic"; in other words, in all the tragic and comic aspects of life "all men are manifestly and unmistakably *equal*"⁴³. As a matter of fact, Chesterton points out that no matter how high is the social rank, all the people in their lives are equally afraid to die, and equally funny when they make a comic

³⁹ J.H. Miller, *Charles Dickens. The World of His Novels*, London, Harvard University Press, 1958, p. 11.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p.6.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p.13.

⁴² Cf. E. Johnson, *Charles Dickens. His Tragedy and Triumph*, London, Victor Gollancz, 1953, p. 160.

⁴³ G.K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens*, cit., p. 106 (italics is mine).

goof. Interestingly, in his work he presents how nineteenth-century novelists tried to convey these concepts in literature. In fictional works, the tragic aspect is used to create equality by showing that “all men are equally sublime”, while the comic aspect is used to sustain, as argued for Dickens, that all men are equally interesting. Chesterton comments the use of comic and tragic aspects to create equality in fiction as follows:

These, I say, are two roots of democratic reality. But they have in more civilized literature, a more civilized embodiment or form. In literature such as that of the nineteenth century the two elements appear somewhat thus. Tragedy becomes a profound sense of human dignity. The other and jollier element becomes a delighted sense of human variety. The first supports equality by saying that all men are equally sublime. The second supports equality by saying that all men are equally interesting. In this democratic aspect of the interest and variety of all men, there is, of course, no democrat so great as Dickens. But in the other matter, in the idea of the dignity of all men, I repeat that there is no democrat so great as Scott.⁴⁴

Therefore, if on the one hand, Chesterton recognizes that in his novels Scott tried to create equality among the characters by *equally* elevating *all* of them, especially those coming from the lower classes, to the rank of the more noble – e.g. his humble characters can speak highly tragic words – ; on the other hand, he acknowledges that Dickens created equality by stressing, sometimes grotesquely and exaggeratedly, their *individualities*. In Chesterton’s opinion indeed “things can only be equal if they are entirely different”⁴⁵. Diversity pushes the readers to *equally* discover *all* the individualities, while similarity implicitly leads the readers to find who is better among the equal. Consequently, Scott’s sublime elevation of the characters to an equal noble status makes individuality disappear; on the contrary, Dickens’ concern for all the varieties makes individuality stand out and become interesting. In Chesterton’s words, Dickens’ literary democracy indeed “rested on the sense that all men were wildly interesting and wildly varied”⁴⁶. The great

⁴⁴ Ibidem, p. 107.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, p. 109.

⁴⁶ Ibidem, p. 108.

novelist was undoubtedly amazed by “the intoxicating variety of men”⁴⁷ living in the world: for Dickens, “all men are interesting”⁴⁸. This concern for all the individualities existing among the lower classes is therefore what primarily characterizes, in Chesterton’s opinion, Dickens’ literary democracy, and what marks the literary greatness of *The Pickwick Papers*. A kind of all-embracing democracy which renders Dickens unique in the British literary scene. Dickens’ achievement with his democratic aspect was so outstanding that it even drew Gissing’s attention. In his critical work on Dickens, he indeed proclaims that “Dickens opened the new era of democracy in letters”⁴⁹.

Dickens’ literary democracy, naturally, was primarily peopled by the lower classes. In fact, if we look at his novels, in particular at *The Pickwick Papers*, we notice that a large amount of unforgettable characters comes from the lower classes. Rather than for the pompous salons and noble dresses belonging to the upper classes, Chesterton points out that Dickens actually had an unbridled love for the ordinary things and ordinary people: “Dickens liked quite ordinary things; he merely made an extraordinary fuss about them”⁵⁰. In Chesterton’s opinion, Dickens indeed discovered that among the upper classes he could not find anything interesting nor anything appealing. Consequently, he directed his attention towards the poor among whom he knew he could find a wild variety of appealing individualities. As a matter of fact, all the great characters of his novels are “to be found where Dickens found them – among the poorer classes”⁵¹. The same concept is also sustained by Gissing, who claims that Dickens “sought for wonders amid the dreary life of common streets”⁵². And this is how Chesterton magnificently describes how Dickens’ concern was entirely directed towards private spheres and common people, rather than towards public spaces and public men:

⁴⁷ Ibidem, p. 109.

⁴⁸ Ibidem, p.13.

⁴⁹ G. Gissing, *Introduction to The Pickwick Papers* (1900), London, Meuthen, now in B.W. Watz (ed.), *The Immortal Dickens*, London, Palmer, 1925, pp. 42-61, p. 48.

⁵⁰ G.K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens*, cit., p. 56.

⁵¹ Ibidem, p. 111.

⁵² G. Gissing, *Charles Dickens. A Critical Study* (1898), London, Blackie and Sons, 1929, p. 25.

If we are to look for lessons, here at least is the last and deepest lesson of Dickens. It is in our own daily life that we are to look for the portents and the prodigies. [...] It is the utterly unknown people, who can grow in all directions like an exuberant tree. It is in poor interior lives that we find that people are too much themselves. It is in our private life that we find people intolerably individual, that we find them swelling into the enormous contours, and taking on the colours of caricature. Many of us live publicly with featureless public puppets, images of the small public abstractions. It is when we pass our private gate, and open our own secret door, that we step into the land of the giants.⁵³

Stressing that “it is in private life that we find the great characters”⁵⁴, Chesterton is manifestly arguing that Dickens’ novels, especially *The Pickwick Papers*, are the fictional embodiments of one of the arguments for which he fought throughout his whole literary career: the defence of the common man. In fact, as it is clear from the preceding quotation, Dickens found greatness among *all* ordinary people with common characteristics, rather than in *some* prodigious individuals. Therefore, in Dickens’ characters, remarkably in those of *The Pickwick Papers*, Chesterton does exactly find the antipodes of Nietzsche’s ‘Superman’ whom Shaw so much celebrates in his works, yet whom Chesterton fiercely criticizes in *George Bernard Shaw and Orthodoxy*⁵⁵. As for Dickens, Chesterton really believes that greatness is to be found in commonness, in the ordinariness. If we now think about how much Chesterton was concerned with the defence of the common man, we should not be surprised that in *Charles Dickens* he elects Dickens as the best of the Victorian novelists, and *The Pickwick Papers* as the best of his novels. In Dickens’ literary democracy, he indeed finds an unparalleled concern for the lower classes which is rendered through a tenacious defence and an unprecedented celebration of the common man. All things that naturally could do nothing but please Chesterton.

So far, this section has delineated Dickens’ literary democracy and its characteristics. However, it is now also useful to describe the stylistic devices

⁵³ G.K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens*, cit., pp. 113-114.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 111.

⁵⁵ Cf. G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, cit., pp. 59-63, 68-70, In chapter 3 Chesterton manages to reveal the “touch of suicidal mania” (p. 59) of Nietzsche’s philosophy whose main arguments were appreciated by Shaw. He indeed strikingly defines Nietzsche and Shaw’s philosophy “a pile of ingenuity, a pile of futility” (p.68).

through which, in Chesterton's opinion, this democratic aspect of *The Pickwick Papers* and other Dickens' novels is achieved. In the previous section, we argued that Dickens was concerned with creating appealing characters whose characteristics were so marked as to give life to many different individualities. To do so, Dickens forced himself to describe his characters as meticulously as possible by stressing all their details, even the most useless. For instance, let us take Tony Weller from *The Pickwick Papers* as an example. He is so meticulously described throughout the novel that we know everything about him: his red face, his pipe, his wit, the infinite number of objects hidden in his pockets, his fear of shrewish wives, his hatred of swindlers, his mistrust of the law, his fatherly affection for his son, his unsatisfactory appetite, and so on. Everything naturally contributes to delineate Tony's unforgettable individuality. Nevertheless, this huge accumulation of details led many critics to charge Dickens with caricatures and exaggeration. In other words, he was accused of creating characters whose exaggerated features often exceed the limits of likelihood. One of the fiercest attacks came directly from James Fitzjames Stephen. As a matter of fact, he wrote a review of *A Tale of Two Cities* in which, instead of commenting on the novel, he overtly attacks Dickens' style by accusing him of infecting "the literature of his country [England] with a disease"⁵⁶. He provocatively asserts that:

The higher pleasures which novels are capable of giving are those which are derived from the development of a skilfully constructed plot, or the careful and moderate delineation of character; and neither of these are to be found in Mr. Dickens' works. [...] The two main sources of his popularity are his power of working upon the feelings by the coarsest stimulants, and his power of setting common occurrences in a grotesque and unexpected light.⁵⁷

Of the same opinion was Henry James a decade later. Mazzeno perfectly summarizes his criticism as follows:

⁵⁶ J.F. Stephen, *Review of A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) in G.H. Ford and L.L. Lauriat (eds.), *The Dickens Critics*, cit., pp. 38-46, p. 39.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*. p. 41.

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 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.⁵⁸

For this reason, James outspokenly accuses Dickens of being “the greatest of superficial novelists”⁵⁹, and justifies his position by claiming that in his novels Dickens “created nothing but figures”⁶⁰. James’ negative criticism was so influential that his ideas were to feature again in twentieth-century criticism. As discussed in the introduction to this study, influenced by James’ arguments, in his authoritative work *The Great Tradition* Leavis did not effectively rank Dickens in the list of the greatest English-speaking novelists for his alleged lack of seriousness.

Obviously, Chesterton does not agree at all with their points of view. In *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens*, Chesterton strongly reacts against the alleged falsity of Dickens’ characters. In fact, in his opinion, although Dickens was an “ignorant man, ill-read in the past, and often confused in the present”, he was undoubtedly “great and true”⁶¹. Dickens did know and understand his society, and the characters he described and the events he related in his novels did possess life-like features. According to him, considering him a caricaturist is not correct; on the contrary, Chesterton defends Dickens’ meticulous description of the wild variety of individualities as follows:

Even supposing that Dickens did exaggerate the degree to which one man differs from another - that was at least an exaggeration upon the side of literature; it was

⁵⁸ L. W. Mazzeno, *The Dickens Industry. Critical Perspectives, 1836-2005*, cit., p.23.

⁵⁹ H. James, *The Limitations of Dickens* (1865), in G.H. Ford and L.L. Lauriat (eds.), *The Dickens Critics*, cit., p. 52.

⁶⁰ *Ivi.*

⁶¹ G.K. Chesterton, *Introduction to Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens*, London, J.M. Dent and Sons, 1911, pp. vii-xx, p. xv.

better than a mere attempt to reduce what is actually vivid and unmistakable to what is in comparison colourless and unnoticeable.⁶²

He maintains the same opinion also in *The Victorian Age in Literature*. Although Dickens did not receive a high education, this does not matter for Chesterton. He indeed points out that Dickens, having spent a large part of his childhood in the streets, well knows the people, how they behave, what they feel etc. For example, in *The Pickwick Papers* Jingle's nonsensical way of speaking may seem exaggerated, but this is not the case. One can be sure that in his youthful strolling Dickens saw many actors and charlatans in the streets speaking exactly like Jingle, and so reported them faithfully in his first novel years later. For Chesterton, Dickens indeed "had nothing except realities"⁶³ in his novels. The same is true when dealing with Sam Weller. Although his wit and promptness of reply might seem over-caricatured, Chesterton dismisses this option:

Sam Weller introduces the English people. Sam Weller is the great symbol in English literature of the populace peculiar to England. His incessant stream of sane nonsense is a wonderful achievement of Dickens: but it is not great falsification of the incessant stream of sane nonsense as it really exists among the English poor. [...] Dickens is accused of exaggeration and he is often guilty of exaggeration; but here he does not exaggerate. He merely symbolizes and sublimates like any other great artist. Sam Weller does not exaggerate the wit of London [...].⁶⁴

However, surprisingly, in *Charles Dickens* Chesterton acts differently in order to defend Dickens from the negative criticism. As a matter of fact, he actually takes the charges of caricature as proofs to argue in favour of Dickens' use of the serious side of humour. As already argued in the discussions of *The Defendant* and *All Things Considered*, Chesterton believes that humour can be *seriously* used to attract the readers' attention to this or that humble character, or to this or that harsh situation. In this way, by presenting *ordinary* characters and *common* events in a comic way, the author makes sure that they become *extraordinary* and *uncommon*,

⁶²Ibidem, p. xviii.

⁶³G.K. Chesterton, *The Victorian Age in Literature* (1913), London, Oxford University Press, 1966, p. 36.

⁶⁴G.K. Chesterton, *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens*, cit., pp. 21-22.

thus unforgettable for the readers. In this way, the readers will hardly forget them, and hopefully they will *seriously* consider them in the light of social reforms. Chesterton applies this concept also to Dickens' novels, especially when discussing *The Pickwick Papers* and its literary democracy. He indeed points out that the more Dickens marked the characters' individualities in the novel, the more they became comic, or better stated, grotesque. However, at the same time, the more they seemed grotesque, the more they became unforgettable. Furthermore, as previously argued, humour is also one of the two principal methods through which an author can achieve democracy in his works. In fact, if humour allowed him to create unforgettable comic characters, it is also true that humour offered Dickens a way to treat all these extraordinary individualities equally in his novels. By depicting several funny scenes, Dickens could indeed show that anyone, regardless of the social rank, is equally humorous when making a bloomer. Therefore, it becomes easier to understand why, in Chesterton's opinion, grotesque characters and comic situations are the essential literary devices in the *serious* project of a literary democracy. Chesterton indeed strongly claims that Dickens' "serious genius" was exactly his "comic genius"⁶⁵, since it served him to create his literary democracy. In her essay Villari underlines Chesterton's logic when he argues that "humour was his [Dickens'] medium"⁶⁶ to create equality:

La cifra stilistica peculiare al suo [Dickens'] sentimento della fondamentale uguaglianza degli uomini è infatti il comico. Se Scott li vedeva come tutti ugualmente importanti di fronte alla morte, lui li vedeva come tutti ugualmente buffi se il vento porta loro via il cappello, e devono corrervi dietro.⁶⁷

With regard to this point, Chesterton also points out that humour and wit are properly the basic characteristics of the British poetic temper. In *The Victorian Age in Literature* he indeed recognizes that from the earliest works up to the early

⁶⁵ G.K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens*, cit., p. 128.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, p.108.

⁶⁷ E. Villari, 'Era una folla, e una folla in rivolta'. *Dickens nella visione di Chesterton*, cit., p. 251., ("The stylistic hallmark which is peculiar to his [Dickens'] feeling of the fundamental equality between all men is indeed the comic. If Scott saw them as all equally important before death, he saw them as all equally funny if the wind blows off their hats, and they must run after them", Villari's translation).

nineteenth-century productions, most British authors have a tendency to produce works which are generally “common and comic”⁶⁸. Consequently, by recognizing Dickens as “the most English of our writers”, Chesterton admits that he could not create his literary democracy other than humorously: “No one but an Englishman could have described the democracy as consisting of free men, but yet of *funny* men”⁶⁹. In fact, it is Chesterton’s opinion that Dickens undoubtedly possessed the “*English* feeling of a grotesque democracy”⁷⁰, and his characters, especially those of *The Pickwick Papers*, plainly represented “the most humorous democracy in the world”. A wonderful, funny method to effectively defend the common man.

Last but not least, Chesterton asks himself why Dickens strove so much to create his funny, literary democracy in his novels. Chesterton replies to this question in *The Victorian Age in Literature*. He indeed dwells on the so-called “Victorian compromise”, that is to say, the moral contradiction which profoundly affected the Victorian period. He explains that, instead of finding a solution to the lower classes’ social problems, which had been increasing over the preceding decades, the rising wealthy middle classes preferred to sign an alliance, properly “an aristocratic compromise”⁷¹, with the upper classes. They began caring only about their appearances and to increase their wealth rather than committing themselves to ameliorate the social conditions. The dream of a philanthropic equality supported by the Romantics and William Cobbett’s democratic ideas was for the moment lost. However, Chesterton points out that against this unjust compromise did react a group of authors who were ready to assail this social injustice with the power of their pens. Chesterton lists both Carlyle and Ruskin in this group, but he believes that neither of them achieved the same results as Dickens. Chesterton indeed considers Dickens’ funny literary democracy the only valuable solution which can work as a *fictional* defence of the common man, and which actually was able to attain practical results in real life.

⁶⁸ G.K. Chesterton, *The Victorian Age in Literature*, cit., p. 2.

⁶⁹ G.K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens*, p. 129, (italics is mine).

⁷⁰ Ibidem, p. 109.

⁷¹ G.K. Chesterton, *The Victorian Age in Literature*, cit., p. 9.

CHAPTER IV

Active Optimism and “Vagueness of Discontent”: Dickens’ Special Struggle for the Oppressed

The major consequence of the widespread presence of humour in Dickens’ literary production is that it creates an underlying optimism which characterizes his narrative. For instance, in *The Pickwick Papers*, readers can perceive that whatever may happen to Pickwick and his faithful companions, they will always find a solution and will be happy. Similarly, whatever may happen to Sam Weller and his father or to Mr. Wardle and all the inhabitants of Dingley Dell, these humble, common characters will never come to a bad end. In many passages of the novel, after disastrous adventures or unpleasant discoveries, Dickens indeed underlines that “cheerfulness was again restored”⁷². Consequently, the characters’ mood is rarely affected by unfortunate events; on the contrary, they soon regain their typical optimism and good cheer. Naturally, in the modern world affected by the moral corruption of the aristocratic compromise, this insistence on optimism was judged inappropriate, and Dickens was consequently accused of “vulgar optimism”⁷³, or better stated, a tendency to make his characters happy at all costs. However, Chesterton does not agree with this criticism, and strongly argues in favour of Dickens’ optimism which, in his opinion, represents another sign of the novelist’s literary greatness. According to Chesterton, rather than creating a *vulgar* optimism, Dickens was actually able to achieve an *active* optimism; namely, not a groundless optimism which has an end in itself, but one which can effectively bring about changes in terms of social reforms. As earlier argued, Dickens’ primary aim was to assure the improvement of the conditions of the lower classes, but he did not want to achieve it by stressing their sufferings like those authors whom Chesterton calls “the pessimistic” reformers. On the contrary, he strongly believes that Dickens actually

⁷² C. Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers* (1837), ed. M. Wormald, London, Penguin, 2003, ch. 7, p. 97., hereafter referred to as *The Pickwick Papers*.

⁷³ G.K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens*, cit., p. 115.

behaved like an “optimistic” reformer. Rather than describing all the elements which oppress the lower classes, Chesterton argues that Dickens instead described all the elements which poverty and oppression cannot destroy. Chesterton delineates the different methods of the “pessimistic” and “optimistic” reformers as follows:

Out of the perennial contradiction arises the fact that there are always two types of the reformer. The first we may call for convenience the pessimistic, the second the optimistic reformer. One dwells upon the fact that souls are being lost; the other dwells upon the fact that they are worth saving. Both, of course, are [...] quite right, but they naturally tend to a difference of method, and sometimes to a difference of perception. The pessimistic reformer points out the good elements that oppression has destroyed; the optimistic reformer, with an ever fiercer joy, points out the good elements that it has not destroyed.⁷⁴

In this way, the optimistic reformer like Dickens “reforms much more completely than the pessimistic reformer”, and therefore “triumphs because he keeps alive in the human soul an invincible sense of the thing being worth doing, of the war being worth winning, of the people being worth their deliverance”⁷⁵. More specifically, in Chesterton’s opinion, the method of the optimistic reformer is to make things memorable; and the best way to make things memorable, as argued earlier, is to make readers laugh. Here again, the “seriousness” of Dickens’ humour for Chesterton stands out again. In fact, more than a realistic, gloomy, pessimistic description, laughter has the power to make readers experience a pleasant emotion which is hardly forgettable. In this way, laughter becomes a “weapon” for the novelist since it assures him that the things he is describing, the events he is narrating, and the characters he is picturing will always be impressed in the readers’ minds. This is also argued by Gissing in his critical study of Dickens: “Dickens had a weapon more efficacious than mere honest zeal. He could make people laugh; and once the crowd has laughed with you, it will not object to cry a little – nay, it will make good resolves, and sometimes carry them out”⁷⁶. That is to say, once readers

⁷⁴ Ibidem, p. 118.

⁷⁵ Ibidem, p. 119.

⁷⁶ G. Gissing, *Charles Dickens. A Critical Study*, cit., p. 7.

have read, enjoyed and remembered a humorous character like Mr. Bumble, they will also remember the workhouse in which he works and very likely they will do something to shut it down. Regarding exactly this example, Chesterton writes: “He [Dickens] gave everyone an interest in Mr. Bumble’s existence; and by the same act he gave everyone an interest in his destruction”⁷⁷. Hence Gissing recapitulates: “only because they [the readers] laughed with him so heartily, did multitudes of people turn to discussing the question his pages suggested”⁷⁸. As a matter of fact, Chesterton recognizes that Dickens’ optimistic, humorous “weapon” *did* bring about social reforms:

It was this happy dreamer, this vulgar optimist who alone of modern writers did really destroy some of the wrongs he hated and bring about some of the reforms he desired. Dickens did help to pull down the debtors’ prisons; and if he was too much of an optimist he was quite enough of a destroyer. [...] If Dickens was an optimist he was an uncommonly active and useful kind of optimist.⁷⁹

This is so true that even Dickens himself recognized that his novels had the power to generate social changes. In fact, in his *Preface* to the 1847 edition of *The Pickwick Papers* he acknowledges that his style, or better his optimism, contributed to the closure of the Fleet:

I have found it curious and interesting, looking over the sheets of this reprint, to mark what important social improvements have taken place about us, almost imperceptibly, even since they were originally written; [...] the laws relating to imprisonment for debt are altered; and Fleet Prison is pulled down!⁸⁰

Furthermore, it must not be forgotten that in his criticism of the novelist, Chesterton often points out that Dickens’ active optimism was the direct fruit of his discontent about the Victorian compromise and the other malaises of his time. In *The Victorian Age in Literature*, Chesterton tries to describe Dickens’ disapproval of the conditions of the lower classes with a brilliantly-invented metaphor:

⁷⁷ G.K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens*, cit., p. 122.

⁷⁸ G. Gissing, *Charles Dickens. A Critical Study*, cit., p. 158.

⁷⁹ G.K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens*, cit., p. 117-118.

⁸⁰ C. Dickens, *Preface to Cheap Edition* (1847), now in *The Pickwick Papers*, Appendix B, pp. 760-765, p.762.

Dickens was a mob – and a mob in revolt; he fought by the light of nature; he had not a theory, but a thirst. If anyone chooses to offer the cheap sarcasm that his thirst was largely a thirst for milk-punch, I am content to reply with complete gravity and entire contempt that in a sense this is perfectly true. His thirst was for things as humble, as human, as laughable as that daily bread for which we cry God.⁸¹

By describing him as a ‘mob’, Chesterton wants to point out that although Dickens did not have an actual proposal for a social reform, it rather seems that his novels spontaneously rose like waves against the social injustices by representing the whole popular discontent. Not exactly knowing the true origin of the social injustice, Dickens, exactly like a furious mob, is instinctively moved by an inward impetus, “a feeling-sick”⁸² that something is wrong, and, therefore, has to be defeated. His emotional receptiveness to social injustice was also pointed out years later by George Orwell. In fact, instead of considering it as a weakness, he considers the “vagueness of his [Dickens’] discontent”⁸³ one of the novelist’s greatest qualities for its being incredibly effective. According to Orwell, although Dickens does not know the actual reasons of popular discontent, he is endowed with an “emotional perception that something is wrong”⁸⁴; consequently, he does not attack this or that institution, but he actually sides with all the oppressed. Interestingly, Chesterton had already proposed this argument thirty years before Orwell. In this fight against social injustice, Chesterton indeed lines up Dickens with the poor, yet he affirms that the novelist’s humanitarianism exceeds social borders, and becomes an universal sympathy for all who suffer :

He had broad or universal sympathies in a sense totally unknown to the social reformers who wallow in such phrases. Dickens (unlike the social reformers) really did sympathize with every sort of victim of every sort of tyrant. He did truly pray for all who are desolate and oppressed. [...] He was the brotherhood of men,

⁸¹ G.K. Chesterton, *The Victorian Age in Literature*, cit., p.33.

⁸² *Ibidem*, p.34.

⁸³ G. Orwell, *Charles Dickens* (1940), in *Ibidem*, *Inside the Whale*, London, Gollancz, now in *Ibidem*, *A Collection of Essays*, San Diego, Harcourt & Company, 1981, pp. 48-104, p. 101.

⁸⁴ *Ivi*.

and knew it was a brotherhood in sin as well as in aspiration. And he was not only larger than the old factions he satirized: he was larger than any of our great social schools that have gone forward since he died.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ G.K. Chesterton, *The Victorian Age in Literature*, cit., pp. 52-53.

CHAPTER V

Old “Merry England”: Mirth and Merry-making as Essence of Englishness

Not only does Chesterton praise Dickens’ defence of the common man and his active optimism, but he also praises the novelist’s celebration of the old popular mirth. As already argued, in his writings Chesterton remarkably points out that the modern age is significantly different from the preceding seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. More precisely, he thinks that diffidence, insecurity, melancholy, misery etc. have substituted the exuberance, the mirth, the cheerfulness, and the innate optimism characterizing the preceding ages. In his words, in the modern world “joy itself became joyless”⁸⁶. Unlike other novelists, Dickens, in Chesterton’s opinion, was certainly one of the few who did perceive the decline of joy in the modern world.

In his childhood Dickens indeed spent some years in the Kentish countryside, between Chatham and Rochester. Here, in spite of his precarious health, he enjoyed the simple, warm happiness and cosy homeliness which only a small, rural world can provide, and never forgot this idyllic period. Tomalin explains:

Dickens looked back on the years in Chatham as the idyll of his life. He had the blessings of secure family, ideal landscape, river and town, good teaching and his small world was beginning to expand pleasurably around him⁸⁷.

In the Kentish countryside, he indeed had the opportunity to observe the lives of humble people closely and see how daily toil was not sufficient to ruin their innate good cheer. He could indeed appreciate all the merry-making, the funny jokes, the songs, the draughts of ale, the hot brandy which can only be found in the village inns and during local festivities. In addition, he was also fascinated by the

⁸⁶ G.K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens*, cit., p.3.

⁸⁷ C. Tomalin, *Charles Dickens. A Life*, London, Penguin, 2012, p. 15 .

merchants, the coaches taking people around, the acrobats, and the charlatans animating the white English roads. Together with this, due to his sickly health, he spent much time reading the eighteenth-century picaresque novels of Fielding, Smollett, and Cobbett's *Rural Rides* as well as Shakespeare's comedies and Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. All these works played an enormous influence on his youthful imagination. In the pages of these authors, in fact, he exactly recognized the mirth and good cheer which he used to see embodied in the humble people living with him in Chatham, and all of this was well impressed in his youthful mind. This is maintained also by Gissing:

To the boy Dickens, they [the picaresque novels] presented pictures of life as it was still going on about him; not much had altered; when he himself began to write fiction, his scenes, his characters, made a natural continuance of the stories told by Smollett, Fielding, Sterne and Goldsmith.⁸⁸

On the contrary, once his family moved to London he immediately understood that in the modern city, these things are lost. The mirth cannot inhabit a blacking warehouse, and good cheer cannot reside in a debtors' prison. It was as if the modern world had "come to be afraid of an eternity of joy"⁸⁹. Consequently, he became aware that actually it is only among the humble, common people that the gaiety and the cheerfulness narrated in the medieval literature, in Shakespeare's plays, and in the picaresque novels had been stored and preserved. These people indeed seemed not to be affected by the malaise of modern times as if they lived in another time, and in another place.

Therefore, Chesterton considers Dickens the only novelist who was capable of noticing that the lower classes were the last remnants of old, popular "Merry England"⁹⁰, that cheerful world which had been praised by Shakespeare, Chaucer, and the eighteenth-century picaresque novels for its not being touched by modern misery and depression, and of which Chesterton laments the disappearance from the modern world. Therefore, Chesterton acknowledges that Dickens was the only

⁸⁸ G. Gissing, *Charles Dickens. A Critical Study*, cit., p. 23.

⁸⁹ G.K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens*, cit., p. 39.

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 70.

author capable of embodying this old popular mirth in his works, manifestly in *The Pickwick Papers*. As a matter of fact, Chesterton explains that Dickens found it necessary for old “Merry England” to survive the attacks of the Victorian compromise and Mill’s Utilitarianism, and so he decided, in his first novel, to celebrate this world which was progressively disappearing. This is why, in *Charles Dickens* Chesterton points out that *The Pickwick Papers* stood out as the utmost, literary expression of old “Merry England”:

Upon him [Dickens] descended the real tradition of “Merry England”, and not upon the pallid mediaevalists who thought they were reviving it. The Pre-Raphaelites, the Gothicists, the admirers of the Middle Ages, had in their subtlety and sadness the spirit of the present day. Dickens had in his buffoonery and bravery the spirit of the Middle Ages. [...] It was he who had the things of Chaucer, the love of large jokes and long stories and brown ale and all the white roads of England. Like Chaucer he loved story within story, every man telling a tale. Like Chaucer he saw something openly comic in men’s motley trades. Sam Weller would have been a great gain to the Canterbury Pilgrimage and told an admirable story.⁹¹

The novel indeed abounds with inns, popular festivities, folkloristic rituals, draughts of ales, and continuous toasts. Wherever they go, Pickwick and his faithful companions are invited to dine together, and usually they end up being drunk. Furthermore, amid the crowded districts of London, an inn appears and inside it there are common people enthusiastically having fun together. According to Chesterton, the novel indeed contains “a maze of white roads, a map full of fantastic towns, thundering coaches, clamorous market places, uproarious inns, strange and swaggering figures”⁹² which perfectly represent old “Merry England”. Being Chesterton the major admirer of the old, medieval mirth, he could do nothing but consider Dickens’ interest for old “Merry England” as another proof of his literary greatness.

⁹¹ *Ivi.*

⁹² G.K Chesterton, *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens*, cit., p.16.

This conservation of the old, popular mirth in Dickens' *The Pickwick Papers* is so evident that many other critics argued in its favour. For instance, in his influential work, Gissing argues that while reading the picaresque novels in Chatham, Dickens found that, although set in another time, they truly represented scenes and characters he was surrounded by: "however great the changes of surface of life, England remains, and is likely to remain, the same at heart with the England of our eighteenth century novelists"⁹³. Consequently, Dickens decided to "store" old "Merry England" in his *The Pickwick Papers*. And this is noticed in even more modern criticism. In his influential book, Steven Marcus indeed assesses the importance of the picaresque novels for Dickens, and specifically points out that *The Pickwick Papers* plainly manifests all that Dickens had read and learnt about the old, popular merry-making outliving the Victorian compromise only among the lower classes⁹⁴.

While discussing Dickens and his relation to old "Merry England", Chesterton also finds important to delineate the inherent qualities and characteristics that the lower classes inherited directly from their medieval predecessors. He indeed affirms that although the Victorian compromise is pushing the higher classes to hide themselves behind façades, the poor still show characteristics which are undoubtedly and inherently English. In Chesterton's opinion, exactly like their medieval predecessors, the poor are essentially rowdy, bombastic, and boisterous thanks in particular to their love for gayety, irony, merry-making, and buffoonery. Characteristics which are undoubtedly more ordinary and popular rather than elegant and noble; consequently, Chesterton acknowledges that only the lower classes can authentically embody these qualities. They are properly the truest specimens of what Chesterton considers to be the most basic essence of the authentic English national spirit, the so-called Englishness. He also recognizes that not only in real life among the poor, but also in some fictional works this national spirit has been embodied. As a matter of fact, Chesterton is convinced that Englishness was plainly visible in the medieval romances and in the popular ballads as well as in the works of Chaucer,

⁹³ G. Gissing, *Charles Dickens. A Critical Study*, cit., p. 23.

⁹⁴ Cf. S. Marcus, *Dickens. From Pickwick to Dombey*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1965, p. 22.

Shakespeare, Johnson, Cobbett, and, above all, of Dickens. In *Appreciations and Criticisms*, he indeed traces a continuous thread which thematically unites Shakespeare and Dickens. He points out that, like Shakespeare in his plays, Dickens did possess at the heart of his novels a note which was essentially English: “in spite of deep and sometimes disastrous changes of national policy, that note is still unmistakable in Shakespeare, in Johnson and his friends, in Cobbett, in Dickens”⁹⁵. As the great bard’s wit and blank verse got the nearest to the true, national soul, in the same way, Dickens, by creating boisterous and humorous characters, created in his novels, especially in *The Pickwick Papers*, the most brilliant representations of Englishness. Having spent a long period among the lower classes and being himself an authentic Englishman, he knew well that mirth and merry-making were the typical characteristics of the poor, and, consequently, filled the pages of *The Pickwick Papers* with boisterous events and rowdy characters. The novel’s connection with the true Englishness was so plain that also Gissing reasonably points out that in the novel “it is all so English; whether in town or country, the life playing before us is peculiarly, vehemently, national. [...] we really breathe an authentic, English atmosphere”⁹⁶. This was also confirmed in broader terms in twentieth-century criticism, especially in Edgar Johnson’s modern study of Dickens in which he argues that the novel is truly and undeniably full of “actual sights and sounds and places of England”⁹⁷.

⁹⁵ G.K. Chesterton, *The Victorian Age in Literature*, cit., p. 1.

⁹⁶ G. Gissing, *Introduction to The Pickwick Papers*, cit., p.57.

⁹⁷ E. Johnson, *Charles Dickens. His Tragedy and Triumph*, cit., p. 173.

PART II

The Literary Greatness of *The Pickwick Papers*

INTRODUCTION

Impressively, Chesterton's view of greatness in literature can be applied to most of Dickens' novels. In his *Charles Dickens*, Chesterton indeed extensively analyses a large part of Dickens' production, and tries to indicate the strength and weakness of the novelist's works. Accordingly, he recognizes that the very foundations of his view of greatness in literature are manifestly mirrored in Dickens' novels. However, he significantly found it necessary to devote a whole chapter of his book to a single, extraordinary novel: *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*, better known as *The Pickwick Papers*. This fact should not surprise us. As a matter of fact, besides hailing Dickens as the best of the Victorian novelists, Chesterton also celebrates *The Pickwick Papers* as the best of the novelist's literary achievements. Although the book is Dickens' first complete novel – the previous *Sketches by Boz* is actually a collection of short stories – Chesterton is sure that none of Dickens' later novels equalled the greatness he achieved in *The Pickwick Papers*: “To the level of *The Pickwick Papers* it is doubtful if he ever afterwards rose”⁹⁸. It is indeed Chesterton's opinion that this novel must be definitely considered Dickens' absolute literary masterpiece for its being “something nobler than a novel”⁹⁹. With reference to this point, Mazzeno summarizes Chesterton's celebration of the novel:

For Chesterton, the greatest of Dickens' work was his first, *Pickwick Papers*. The rest are very good, even great, but nothing quite measures up to that original *tour de force* that set the reading abuzz and introduced a new form of writing into English – and world- literature.¹⁰⁰

Remarkably, the idea of Dickens as the best of the Victorian novelists, and *The Pickwick Papers* as his utmost masterpiece was also supported by later literary critics. If, on the one hand, Chesterton paved the way to the appreciation of the

⁹⁸ G.K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens*, cit., p.34.

⁹⁹ *Ivi.*

¹⁰⁰ L.W. Mazzeno, *The Dickens Industry. Critical Perspectives, 1836-2005*, cit., p. 48.

literary greatness of the novel, on the other hand, also later critics dedicated various pieces of criticism to the celebration of the novelist's first masterpiece. For instance, in the already-quoted essay *Charles Dickens*, tough for his personal, different reasons, George Orwell points out that Dickens' "greatest success is *The Pickwick Papers*"¹⁰¹. Another proof of the novelist's greatness is to be found in Edmund Wilson. He indeed was among the first in the twentieth-century to celebrate Dickens as the best of the Victorian authors. In the introduction to his essay *The Two Scrooges*, he plainly asserts that he completely shares Chesterton's point of view of the literary greatness of Dickens¹⁰². Two decades later Steven Marcus, in one of the most important studies published in the 1960s, again for other, personal reasons, recognizes *The Pickwick Papers* as the best novel in Dickens' production¹⁰³. Finally, in the 2000s Wormald acknowledges that it was exactly this great novel which led Dickens to go "beyond any conventional literary categories"¹⁰⁴.

However, for the aim of this dissertation, it must not be forgotten that Chesterton's positive criticism of Dickens is neither exclusively addressed to one single aspect of the author nor is limited to the chapter contained in his *Charles Dickens*. On the contrary, Chesterton's appreciation of Dickens' merits is to be found scattered throughout all his literary production and involves various sides of the novelist's greatness. As already stated in Part I, Chesterton indeed found many reasons for which *The Pickwick Papers* is to be considered the best of Dickens' novels. Part 2 of this dissertation is therefore devoted to the discussion of how some passages of *The Pickwick Papers* perfectly and richly illustrate Chesterton's view of greatness in literature. In other words, this part aims to show that Chesterton's ideas concerning Dickens' celebration of 'Old Merry England'; his defence of the common man through the creation of a funny, literary democracy; his active optimism as an effective expression for his social criticism; and other minor themes are triumphantly mirrored in some pages of the novel. By doing so, this dissertation will also re-assert the importance of the novel in Dickens' canon at the expense of a

¹⁰¹ G. Orwell, *Charles Dickens*, cit., p. 82.

¹⁰² Cf. E. Wilson, *The Two Scrooges* (1940), in *Ibidem*, *The Wound and the Bow. Seven Studies in Literature*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1941, pp. 1-104., pp. 3.

¹⁰³ Cf. S. Marcus, *Dickens. From Pickwick to Dombey*, cit., p. 17.

¹⁰⁴ M. Wormald, *Introduction to The Pickwick Papers*, in *The Pickwick Papers*, pp.xi-xxvii, p. xiii.

tradition of negative criticism which instead considered the novel a weak achievement in comparison with Dickens' later dark novels.

The starting point of Part 2 will hence be a brief discussion of the literary criticism of the novel written between its publication and Chesterton's *Charles Dickens* where, remarkably, some ideas which Chesterton developed to argue in favour of Dickens' greatness were already present.

CHAPTER I

The Pickwick Papers and the Literary Criticism Prior to Chesterton

On 31st March 1836 the publishing firm of Chapman and Hall started to publish a novel which was to change their business and the life of its author forever: *The Pickwick Papers* by Charles Dickens. The novel, priced at one shilling, was serialized monthly from March 1836 until November 1837 when it appeared in volume form. In spite of the initial, shaky start, the novel soon became a popular success: its circulation reached 40.000 copies every month and editions of the novel were published in English-speaking countries outside England, especially in the United States. Tomalin describes the range of the success in these terms:

From this moment [the publication] sales of the monthly numbers in their pale green wrappers rose steadily and soon spectacularly, and the critics vied with one another to praise it. The appearance of a fresh number of *Pickwick* soon became news, an event, something much more than literature. ‘Boz [Dickens’ pseudonym] has got the town by the ear,’ a critic said, and he spoke the truth. Each number sold for a shilling and they were passed from hand to hand, and butchers’ boys were seen reading them in the streets. Judges and politicians, the middle classes and the rich, bought them, read them and applauded; and the ordinary people saw that he was on their side, and they loved him for it. He did not ask them to think but showed them what he wanted them to see and hear. The names of his characters became common currency. [...] It was as though he was able to feed his history directly into the bloodstream of the nation, giving injections of laughter, pathos and melodrama, and making his readers feel he was a personal friend to each of them. Dickens knew he had triumphed [...].¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ C. Tomalin, *Charles Dickens. A Life*, cit., pp. 68-69.

Interestingly, not only did *The Pickwick Papers* achieve a phenomenal popular success, but it was also able to draw the attention of favourable critics, especially of authors of non-academic writings and reviewers who mainly worked for monthly magazines. As regards this point, Collins, one of the first to scholarly study the literary criticism of Dickens' works, points out that after the publication of the first number, most major periodicals paid the novel "lengthy and respectful attention"¹⁰⁶. As a matter of fact, monthly magazines such as the "Metropolitan Magazine", the "Athenaeum", the "Examiner", the "Metropolitan Magazine", the "London and Westminster Review", and the "Quarterly Review" published authoritative reviews which are still nowadays read and studied. Collins underlines that reviewers and commentators initially offered positive assessments of the novel well differing from the negative criticism which Dickens' later novels were to meet: "Reviewers discussed how far Dickens' comedy and his depiction of London life were original"¹⁰⁷. More particularly, most early pieces of criticism praised Dickens' skilful use of humour for its lack of the coarseness and vulgarity which had allegedly characterized the preceding comic tradition. An unsigned review published in the "Metropolitan Magazine" appeared shortly after the publication of the novel. Here already the spontaneous, overwhelming humour of the novel is exalted: "We know of no publication that is productive of more genuine amusement than these Pickwickian papers"¹⁰⁸. Always concerning the extraordinary use of humour, a letter from Miss Mary Russell Mitford is worth mentioning. She indeed celebrates the natural, side-shaking humour which has neither sexual puns nor vulgar expressions: "It is fun – London life – but without anything unpleasant: a lady might read it all *aloud*"¹⁰⁹. Besides this, other reviewers could not but admit that the novel still showed traces of the former comic, British literary tradition. Collins points out that the very first comments on the novel tried to explore Dickens' relation to the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century tradition and tried to assess the novelist's

¹⁰⁶ P. Collins, *Introduction to Dickens. The Critical Heritage*, cit., pp. 1-29., p. 5.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 28

¹⁰⁸ Anonymous, *Review*, "Metropolitan Magazine", vol. XVIII, January 1837, now in P. Collins, *Dickens. The Critical Heritage*, cit., pp. 30-32, p. 31.

¹⁰⁹ M.R. Mitford, *Miss Mary Russell Mitford on Pickwick Papers*, letter dated 30 June 1837, now in P. Collins, *Dickens, The Critical Heritage*, cit., pp. 35-36.

stature by presenting either the linguistic features he retained from the former authors or, on the contrary, the improvements he carried out in his first work¹¹⁰. A famous review from an anonymous author points out: “*The Pickwick Papers*, in fact, are made up of two pounds of Smollett, three ounces of Sterne, a handful of Hook, a dash of a grammatical Pierce Egan – incidents at pleasure, served with an original *sauce piquant*”¹¹¹. In addition, many comparisons between *The Pickwick Papers* and other novelists’ works were made. Frequently, Dickens’ novel was compared to Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, for the narration of picaresque adventures, to Wordsworth’s poems, for the concern for the humblest, and to Shakespeare, for the lively description of various individualities.

Interestingly, for what concerns the aim of this dissertation more appropriately, we can already find in this early criticism some ideas Chesterton was to develop in his writings to argue in favour of the literary greatness of the novel. It is as if the seeds of the greatest criticism ever written on Dickens had already been planted forty, fifty and even sixty years before. Certainly, it was Chesterton who definitely delivered the most complete celebration of Dickens’ funny democracy, his interest in the humble, interesting individualities, his defence of the common man, his active optimism, and his celebration of old ‘Merry England’. However, some hints at these topics can already be found in the earliest criticism of *The Pickwick Papers* which were being published almost contemporarily to the serialization of the novel. For instance, in the “Court Magazine” an anonymous author published *Some Thoughts on Arch-Waggery, and Especial, on the Genius of ‘Boz’* in 1837 in which Dickens’ meticulous description of the events and of all the interesting individualities abounding in the private sphere is celebrated:

His minute details exhibit an almost instinctive knowledge of human character in the classes he depicts, and of the accessories of small and every-day events. For example, his description of the surgeon waiting for the poor woman’s release in the workhouse, [...] of Sam Weller preparing to write his love-letter, [...] of the preliminaries to the proceedings of the Temperance Society [...] and the meeting

¹¹⁰ Cf. P. Collins, *Introduction to Dickens. The Critical Heritage*, cit., p. 6.

¹¹¹ Anonymous, *Review*, “Athenaeum”, December 1836, now in P. Collins, *Dickens. The Critical Heritage*. cit., pp. 32-33., p32.

of the opposite counsel in the court on the morning of Mr. Pickwick's trial [...] are such exact representations of trivial things, as, however inconsequential in themselves, afford at once a test of the author's skill, and a clue to his unprecedented success.¹¹²

The same concept is confirmed in another review published in the "National Magazine and Monthly Critic" some months later. The reviewer outspokenly defends the novel from the first attacks of few detractors, such as Abraham Hayward, who accused Dickens of creating all-alike characters not representing any real human beings: "Boz has been accused of not giving individuality to his characters – an accusation, we think, particularly unsound"¹¹³. This review also alludes to another of Dickens' great merits: his unlimited fellow feeling for all who suffer; that fellow feeling which was to lead Chesterton to celebrate the novelist's defence of the common man. Dickens' concern for the humblest is also praised by Thomas Henry Lister who wrote an excellent article on the novel in the "Edinburgh Review" after its publication in volume form. In a fundamental passage he underlines Dickens' interest in the conditions of the lower classes:

His works are chiefly pictures of humble life frequently the humblest. [...] One of the qualities we most admire in him is his comprehensive spirit of humanity. The tendency of his writings is to make us practically benevolent – to excite our sympathy in behalf of the aggrieved and suffering in all classes; and especially in those who are most removed from observation. [...] His humanity is plain, practical, and manly.¹¹⁴

Furthermore, we should not forget that both Lister and the anonymous author of the review in the "National Magazine" were among the first to argue in favour of the satire present in *The Pickwick Papers*. They indeed underline that in this novel Dickens first experimented with satire but without the creepy details and

¹¹² Anonymous, *Some Thoughts on Arch-Waggery, and especial, on the Genius of 'Boz'*, "Court Magazine", vol. X, April 1837, now in P. Collins, *Dickens. The Critical Heritage*. cit., pp. 33-35, p. 34.

¹¹³ Anonymous, *Review*, "National Magazine and Monthly Critic", vol. I, December 1837, now in P. Collins, *Dickens. The Critical Heritage*. cit., pp. 63-68, p. 65.

¹¹⁴ T.H. Lister, *Review*, "Edinburgh Review", vol. LXVIII, October 1838, now in P. Collins, *Dickens. The Critical Heritage*. cit., pp.71-77., p. 73.

disgusting descriptions which characterized the narrative of other contemporary novelists. However, the anonymous author explicitly points out that Dickens' satire is anyway "pointed enough to its purpose"¹¹⁵. In spite of its lack of bitterness, by simply emphasizing some memorable details, Dickens' satire can indeed bring before the readership things they would not notice otherwise. It is thus the reviewer's opinion that this kind of satire is "more powerful"¹¹⁶ than other kinds. In brief, in this positive assessment, we can already recognise the celebration of Dickens' revolutionary approach to social injustices which was to lead Chesterton to celebrate the novelist's active optimism and funny democracy nearly sixty years after. Finally, also Chesterton's praise of Dickens' celebration of old 'Merry England' in *The Pickwick Papers* is to be found in the early criticism. This time the text dates back to 1870 when Dickens died. The author, Arthur Locker, regrets the merry-making and the cheerfulness beautifully embodied in the humble characters of the novel. He indeed laments the disappearance from the modern world of this old popular mirth and denounces its substitution with ruthless competition and class-based resentment between people which the modern world brought into society. For this reason, he celebrates the novel for its preservation of the old, good days:

Apart from his humour, *Pickwick* must be to the young almost an antiquarian book, containing descriptions of bygone manners and customs, of which they have no personal knowledge. [...] But to us oldsters *Pickwick*, quite independent of its fun, recalls the England and the London of our youth, and thus conjures up a host of delightful recollections. [...] All that jolly, old-fashioned, simple sort of life, described in the pages of *Pickwick* has gone by forever.¹¹⁷

After the 1830s and until the publication of Chesterton's *Charles Dickens* in 1906, literary criticism began focusing mainly on Dickens later novels, and mainly negative comments were written on them. There was indeed the perception that Dickens had already produced his utmost masterpiece with his first novel, as

¹¹⁵ Anonymous, *Review*, "National Magazine and Monthly Critic", cit., p. 65.

¹¹⁶ *Ivi.*

¹¹⁷ A. Locker, *Charles Dickens*, "Graphic", 18 June 1870, now in P. Collins, *Dickens. The Critical Heritage*. cit., pp. 40-41 p. 41.

Mazzeno points out¹¹⁸. Abraham Hayward's prophecy in his review of *The Pickwick Papers* is a good example of it. In fact, besides praising the novelist's humour and use of popular slang, he also notices both a tendency towards repetition, especially in the creation of unique individualities, and a drying of Dickens' overwhelming humour in the last chapters of *The Pickwick Papers*. Consequently, Hayward wonders whether Dickens' literary genius will endure or will fade away quickly: "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 will come down like the stick"¹¹⁹. No prophecy has ever been more mistaken.

Finally, all things considered, the unparalleled celebration that Dickens' first novel enjoyed might be another reason – obviously along with the others argued in *Charles Dickens* – which implicitly pushed Chesterton to hail *The Pickwick Papers* as the best of the novelist's works. Besides that, there was a period in which also Dickens himself considered *The Pickwick Papers* as the best work he could possibly have written in his career:

I should never be so proud of any of them [his works], as I am of Pickwick, feeling as I do, that it has made its own way, and hoping, as I must own I hope, that long after my hand is withered as the pens it held, Pickwick will be found on many a dusty shelf with many a better book¹²⁰.

As a matter of fact, we know from biographical facts, most of them presented faithfully in John Foster's *The Life of Charles Dickens* (1st volume 1872; 2nd volume 1874), that the two-year period 1834-1836 was one of the happiest moments in Dickens' life, surely the happiest he had had since his troubled childhood. Consequently, in 1836 Dickens was exactly in that genuine good-cheer which allowed him to write the greatest of his "light" novels. The same logic can be applied to Dickens' "dark" masterpieces. *Bleak House* and *Hard Times* were indeed written when Dickens was suffering severely from his tough relation with his wife

¹¹⁸ Cf. L.W. Mazzeno, *The Dickens Industry. Critical Perspectives, 1836-2005*, cit., p.14.

¹¹⁹ A. Hayward, *Review*, "Quarterly Review", vol. LIX, October 1837, now in P. Collins, *Dickens. The Critical Heritage*. cit., pp. 56-62, p.62.

¹²⁰ C. Dickens, "Letter" to Chapman and Hall, 1836, quoted in P. Collins, *Introduction to Dickens. The Critical Heritage*, cit., p. 5.

and his mental instability, which was progressively deteriorating. Interestingly, as Wilson argued in *The Two Scrooges*, an author's production is often poorly discussed without considering the author's life, and this is certainly true of *The Pickwick Papers*¹²¹. Before going into details and analysing some specific passages of the novel to argue in favour of Chesterton's view of Dickens' literary greatness, it might be therefore interesting to investigate both the connection between the novel's origin and the novelist's life, and how actually Dickens the man and Dickens the artist cannot possibly be separated from his youthful masterpiece.

¹²¹ Cf. E. Wilson, *The Two Scrooges*, cit. pp. 9-14.

CHAPTER II

From Troubled Origin to Popular Success: *The Pickwick Papers* as a Turning Point in Dickens' Life

To trace the origin of *The Pickwick Papers*, we need to take a step back to 1833 when Dickens' literary career took an unexpected turn. After working as a clerk for some solicitors and learning shorthand, he began working as a parliamentary reporter for the "Mirror of Parliament", the "True Sun", and later the "Morning Chronicle". Unlike the preceding jobs which took him much time, working as a reporter allowed him much more space to dedicate himself to writing. He indeed began working on a comic sketch of London life which was published in the "Monthly Magazine" in 1833. In spite of its short length, the sketch was actually a "remarkable first effort"¹²² in which Dickens immediately showed his mastery of the comic dialogue. Few weeks later, a second sketch appeared in 1834 and favourably drew the attention of a wide readership. From that moment onwards, "sketch followed sketch, and in August 1834, he [Dickens] signed himself for the first time 'Boz', and under this name rose to fame"¹²³. Remarkably, while still working as a parliamentary reporter, he had his sketches collected and published with the title *Sketches by 'Boz', Illustrative of Every-day Life, and Every-day People* on 8th February 1836. For Dickens, as Tomalin explains, "1836 was to be an *annus mirabilis*"¹²⁴. As a matter of fact, shortly after the publication of the collection of his sketches, he was introduced to Messrs. William Hall and Edward Chapman, two young, ambitious publishers. They collaborated with Robert Seymour, a Londoner and an artist specialised in sporting scenes, and they needed a skilful author who could write sketches for the plates drawn by Seymour. Their original plan indeed envisaged a series of sketches about the comic adventures of the members of the

¹²² C. Tomalin, *Charles Dickens. A Life*, cit., p.49.

¹²³ Ibidem, p. 50.

¹²⁴ Ibidem, p. 51.

“Nimrod Sporting Club”. However, being an unparalleled literary genius, Dickens found it difficult to accept a pre-arranged project which did not leave space to his powerful imagination, and therefore “argued forcefully against the proposed subject, and, by implication, against being a subordinate collaborator”¹²⁵. As Wormald observes, he indeed “had already begun to fashion the Pickwick Club”¹²⁶ in his mind as soon as he was proposed the project, and, consequently, could hardly welcome the proposal without remonstrations. Of the same opinion is Tomalin who specifies that not only had Dickens already imagined another structure for the club, but he had already “had an idea for a comic character, Mr. Pickwick [...] with a group of younger friends with whom he sets off on modest travels through southern England”¹²⁷. Years later, in his 1847 Preface to *The Pickwick Papers* Dickens himself reveals that he did not agree with the original plan, and wished he would be given more freedom:

The idea propounded to me was that the monthly something should be a vehicle for certain plates to be executed by MR SEYMOUR, and there was a notion [...] that a ‘NIMROD CLUB’, the members of which were to go out shooting, fishing, and so forth, and getting themselves into difficulties through their want of dexterity, would be the best means of introducing these. I objected, on consideration, that although born and partly bred in the country I was no great sportsman, except in regard of all kinds of locomotion; that the idea was not novel, and had been already much used; that it would be infinitely better for the plates to arise naturally out of the text; and that I should like to take my own way, with a freer range of English scenes and people, and was afraid I should ultimately do so in any case, whatever course I might prescribe to myself at starting.¹²⁸

Nevertheless, at least at the beginning, Dickens had to conform himself to the original plan. For instance, Patten explains how the character of Winkle, a clumsy Pickwickian who believes himself a skilful sportsman, was deliberately created to

¹²⁵ R.L.Patten, *Introduction to Charles Dickens, The Pickwick Papers*, ed. R.L. Patten, London, Penguin, 1971, pp. 11-30, p. 12.

¹²⁶ M. Wormald, *Introduction to The Pickwick Papers*, pp. xi-xxviii, p.xii.

¹²⁷ C. Tomalin, *Charles Dickens. A Life*, cit., p. 63.

¹²⁸ C. Dickens, *Preface to Cheap Edition*, (1847), cit., Appendix B, pp. 760-765, p.761.

satisfy Seymour's requests¹²⁹. However, things were about to take an unexpected change. As a matter of fact, after producing the first seven plats, Seymour shot himself on April, 20th, due to a nervous breakdown from which he had been suffering for a while. Although this event was to give Dickens the freedom he wished, it almost caused him some legal problems. Convinced that her husband had personally written some parts of *The Pickwick Papers* or, at least, had first-hand contributed to the success the novel was enjoying, Seymour's widow charged Dickens of intellectual theft. Consequently, the novelist found himself compelled to reply to these accusations and wrote tens of letters in which he proclaimed himself innocent. Importantly, taking inspiration from this biographical episode, Chesterton takes the opportunity to celebrate the genius of Dickens and the literary greatness of *The Pickwick Papers* once again in his *Charles Dickens*. He indeed claims that it might even be true that Seymour suggested Dickens the idea of the Pickwick Club as well as the main characteristics of the main characters. However, in spite of this, Chesterton is convinced that "the greatness of Dickens and especially of *The Pickwick Papers* is not of a kind that could be affected by somebody else suggesting the first idea"¹³⁰. In Chesterton's opinion, whoever might have had the primary conception of the novel, but only Dickens and Dickens alone could create such a literary masterpiece. At that stage of his career he could create whatever characters and whatever incidents from whatever sources. Chesterton describes Dickens' huge creative power in a wonderful passage of literary criticism:

He had the energy which is prepared to write anything. He could have finished any man's tale. He could have breathed a mad life into any man's character. If it had been true that Seymour had planned out *Pickwick*, if Seymour had fixed the chapters and named and numbered the characters, his slave [Dickens] would have shown even in these shackles such a freedom as would have shaken the world. If Dickens had been forced to make his incidents out of a chapter in a child's reading-book, or the names in a scrap of newspaper, he would have turned them in ten pages into creatures of his own. Seymour, as I say, was in a manner right in

¹²⁹ Cf. R.L. Patten, *Introduction*, cit., p.14.

¹³⁰ G.K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens*, cit., p.33.

spirit. Dickens would at this time get his materials from anywhere, in the sense that he cared little what materials they were. He would not have stolen; but if he had stolen he would never have imitated. [...] To claim to have originated an idea of Dickens is like claiming to have contributed a glass of water to Niagara.¹³¹

Interestingly, the death of Seymour had anyway the effect of freeing Dickens from the literary constraints which the illustrator had imposed on him. As a matter of fact, Chapman and Hall granted him the leadership of the project and urged him to choose himself a new illustrator. Dickens' choice was initially R.W. Buss, but then he hired Hablot K. Browne, commonly known as 'Phiz' with whom Dickens signed an artistic partnerships which was to last for many more years. Importantly, from that moment onwards, Dickens completely took charge of the production of the novel, and "dictated all subjects and reviewed all designs, withholding approval until every detail satisfied him"¹³². Differently from before, the novel was finally under the control of the author, rather than illustrator. In this way, Dickens had the opportunity to ameliorate the quality of the novel with his genius. At the beginning, the novel indeed had a faltering start, as Patten explains: "*Pickwick* was not an overnight success. Of the early numbers, only fifty copies each were taken by provincial booksellers"¹³³. Wormald explains this initial lack of success. He points out that before Dickens completely takes charge of the project, the novel only presents stereotypical jokes, picaresque-like episodes, and hackneyed characters. In Wormald's opinion, this is largely due to Dickens' difficulty in getting away from the literary constraints to which he was subjected, and hence his inability to unleash his artistic creativity¹³⁴. Besides that, Wormald also explains that even the humour and the style, which were to become the most appealing characteristics of *The Pickwick Papers*, lacked powerful energy at the beginning. He indeed recognizes that "ludicrously exaggerated puns", aimless "free-wheeling humour", and "loosely connected assemblages of customary expressions and manners" manifestly limited

¹³¹ Ibidem, pp. 33-34.

¹³² R.L. Patten, *Introduction*, cit., p.16.

¹³³ Ibidem, p.15.

¹³⁴ Cf. M. Wormald, *Introduction*, cit., pp. xii-xvi.

the novel to conventional literary categories: “Samuel Pickwick is confined to a world of ageing stereotypes”¹³⁵. On the contrary, as soon as Dickens was free to express himself at his discretion, the quality of the novel immediately improved. It is again Wormald who points out that Dickens’ intervention rendered the characters and the episodes more “fresher and stranger, [...] more dynamic and unpredictable”¹³⁶ thereby pushing the novel beyond any conventional, pre-existing literary categories. Of the same opinion is Johnson whose comment on the novel clearly explains that, once left free, Dickens was able to “*irradiate* these stocks characters and stock situations with high-spirited fantasy”¹³⁷. In other words, Johnson affirms that once Dickens could express himself freely, then his literary genius was able to ameliorate and take to a higher level a novel that otherwise would likely have remained traditional. Moreover, also Edmund Wilson, in his fundamental work, agrees with this position. He indeed dedicates some pages of *The Two Scrooges* to explain that as soon as Dickens could diverge from the original plan, the novel showed a sudden, remarkable improvement¹³⁸. Naturally, all of this had already been noticed by Chesterton. As a matter of fact, in *The Great Gusto*, another fundamental essay he dedicated to Dickens’ novels, he affirms that Dickens possessed a “great gusto”¹³⁹; namely, an appreciation for everything belonging to the old, British literary tradition, yet with the capacity of retaining only its greatest aspects. By doing so, in Chesterton’s view, Dickens had the ability to enhance everything which tended to be conventional or stereotypical. According to Chesterton, this improvement of stock characters and situations is manifestly present in *The Pickwick Papers*, and triumphantly so in the character of Mr. Pickwick:

Dickens started with the stock characters, but he crowded the stage with superb supers who have nothing to do with the play, and who are the making of it. By the end the story is full of entirely new and original characters, and none more new

¹³⁵ Ibidem, pp. xviii-xix, (for all preceding quotations).

¹³⁶ Ibidem, p. xiv.

¹³⁷ E. Johnson, *Charles Dickens. His Tragedy and Triumph*, cit., p. 159.

¹³⁸ Cf. E. Wilson, *The Two Scrooges*, cit. p. 10.

¹³⁹ G.K. Chesterton, *The Great Gusto* (1932), in H.J. and Hugh Massingham (eds.), *The Great Victorians*, London, Nicholson and Watson, now in Dorothy Collins (ed.), *A Handful of Authors*, London, Sheed and Ward, 1953, pp. 45-55, p.55.

than Samuel Pickwick; who has somehow changed from a goggle-eyed old buffoon to a most mellow and well-matured old English merchant.¹⁴⁰

In brief, all these comments by authoritative voices lead us to understand why *The Pickwick Papers* is generally considered as a “testing ground” of Dickens’ abilities. First of all, as we have seen, the novel represents the first, true opportunity Dickens had to unleash his literary genius unrestrictedly. With regard to this point, in his introduction to the novel, Chesterton reminds his readers that the novel was the very first important commission Dickens had in his career, and so represented an outlet for his restless literary genius: “he was anxious to show all that was in him”¹⁴¹. As a matter of fact, Chesterton also specifies that the novel was truly the first opportunity Dickens had to test all his literary qualities, and experiment with topics and situations which were to characterize his future works. In other words, the novel represents a kind of artistic archetype which paved the way to his great, future works. For Chesterton, this of course represents another reason to consider *The Pickwick Papers* as the greatest of Dickens’ novels:

Pickwick is in Dickens’ career the mere mass of light before the creation of sun or moon. It is the splendid, shapeless substance of which all his stars were ultimately made. [...] *The Pickwick Papers* constitutes first and foremost a kind of wild promise, a pre-natal vision of all the children of Dickens. [...] It was a vision of the Dickens world.¹⁴²

However, the intimate connection between Dickens and *The Pickwick Papers* can also be linked to some biographical facts. As a matter of fact, literary critics have also considered the novel as Dickens’ fictional outlet for his inner turmoil. This vision of the novel has become prominent especially since the publication of Wilson’ essay *The Two Scrooges* in 1940. Wilson indeed offers a psychological interpretation of the novel by emphasizing the strict link existing between the episodes told in the novel and Dickens’ life. For Wilson, “it is necessary to see him

¹⁴⁰ Ibidem, p. 54.

¹⁴¹ G.K. Chesterton, *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens*, cit., p.17.

¹⁴² Ibidem, p 16.

[Dickens] as a man in order to appreciate him as a genius”¹⁴³. He therefore surveys Dickens’ life and points out that the years in which he worked in the blacking warehouse labelling bottles while his family lived in the Marshalsea Debtor’s prison profoundly affected him. Although in 1836 he was a completely different, older man, he still bore in his mind the sufferings he had underwent and, consequently, he wished to create a work which represented “an attempt to digest these early shocks and hardships, to explain them to himself, to justify himself in relation to them”¹⁴⁴. As a matter of fact, the novel represents Dickens’ attempt to completely overcome the turmoil and anguish which had marked his youth by picturing a hilarious world and funny characters. According to Edgar Johnson, the two-year period 1834-1836 was exactly when Dickens was first thoroughly happy in his life, and, consequently, translated his good cheer into the pages of *The Pickwick Papers* ¹⁴⁵. This had also been noticed by Gissing. He indeed points out that: “after *Pickwick*, he [Dickens] hardly again exhibited this perfect spontaneity of side-shaking merriment”¹⁴⁶. Finally, we should not forget that this vision of the novel as an outlet for Dickens’ good cheer acquires a deeper meaning when linked to Chesterton’s praise of old, Merry England in his *Charles Dickens*. Being Dickens willing to find an outlet for his good cheer, as already argued, he could do nothing better than to re-create old ‘Merry England’ in his novel to express his feelings. By preserving this old popular world in the pages of his *Pickwick Papers*, he indeed found an outlet for his inward joy for his being at last saved from the modern malaise.

¹⁴³ E. Wilson, *The Two Scrooges*, cit., p.9.

¹⁴⁴ Ibidem, p.8.

¹⁴⁵ Cf. E. Johnson, *Charles Dickens. His Tragedy and Triumph*. cit., p. 163.

¹⁴⁶ G. Gissing, *Introduction to The Pickwick Papers*, cit., p.51.

CHAPTER III

Manor Farm, Popular Festivities, and London Inns: the Triumph of Old “Merry England”

On the morning of 13th May 1827, a fat, elderly, bald gentleman wearing a pair of spectacles along with another fat, middle-aged man and two younger companions are about to set off on a trip. The starting point is Goswell Street in London; the destination is the Kentish countryside. The four men are Mr. Pickwick and his faithful Pickwickian companions – Mr. Tupman, Mr. Snodgrass, and Mr. Winkle – and the journey is the unforgettable Pickwickian tour. As a matter of fact, although the novel is mainly made up of disconnected episodes – except for Mrs. Bardell’s case against Pickwick – readers well know that the plot of the story is fundamentally the account of a journey. The Pickwickians are designated by The Pickwick Club of London to provide “accounts of their journeys and investigations, of their observations of characters and manners”¹⁴⁷ they will come across in their travel around England. This travel will lead the four members of the Club to visit some rural villages in the Kentish countryside, the urban areas surrounding London, some northern localities – such as Birmingham –, and even the western city of Bristol. All these places naturally are inhabited by rather different people with local customs and manners, yet it might be easily stated that the majority of the people Mr. Pickwick and his companions meet comes mostly from the lower classes. Consequently, this fictional journey represents the perfect occasion for Dickens to take the readers to places where old ‘Merry England’ has been preserved, and show them how the poor can still enjoy the old, popular merry-making.

First of all, it might be useful to point out that Dickens mainly works with the element of “contrast” in his novel. This literary device consists in juxtaposing completely different scenarios in order that either can stand out in the readers’ mind.

¹⁴⁷ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 1, p. 16.

For instance, by drawing some gloomy, dark places such as the Fleet, Dickens assures that the pleasant, lively places full of merry-making and joy stand out by contrast in the pages of the novel. According to Killham, Dickens will extensively re-use this technique in his later productions, but it is here in *The Pickwick Papers* that he first experimented with it¹⁴⁸. In particular, Dickens contrasts the beautiful descriptions of the Kentish villages and Mr. Wardle's Manor Farm with some glimpses of the misery in London, with the gloom of the industrial Birmingham, and with the dirtiness and mess of the clerks' offices. As already said, we should not forget that the Kentish countryside affectionately occupied a place in his heart since Dickens spent some time between Rochester and Chatham when he was a kid, and still a happy kid. This is the reason why, he deliberately places the cosiest place in the novel, Manor Farm, precisely in the Kentish countryside where the merry-making, cheerfulness, and homeliness of the inhabitants comfortably welcome the Pickwickians.

The good cheer existing outside London is indeed soon presented in the novel. The first instance appears in the first pages of the novel. While travelling on a coach in proximity to Chatham and Rochester on the first day of their journey, Mr. Pickwick indeed notes in his travel diary that the humble inhabitants of these villages endure the daily toil with an extraordinary serenity which cannot be ruined: "nothing (adds Mr. Pickwick) can exceed their good humour"¹⁴⁹. Some pages later, they arrive in Rochester and Mr. Pickwick is immediately impressed by the beauty of the rural village: "Bright and pleasant was the sky, balmy the air, and beautiful the appearance of every object around [...]. The scene was indeed one which might well have charmed a far less reflective mind [...]"¹⁵⁰. Even more appealing is the unparalleled beauty of Mr. Wardle's Manor Farm which is presented in the novel as if it were a marvellous exceptionality in the Kentish countryside, or, in other words, as a secluded, uncorrupted idyll. As a matter of fact, Mr. Wardle and his family merrily enjoy their daily-routines, spontaneously have fun together, and delight in

¹⁴⁸ Cf. J. Killham, *Pickwick. Dickens and the Art of Fiction*, in John Gross and Gabriel Pearson (eds.), *Dickens and the Twentieth-century*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966, pp. 35-47., p. 36.

¹⁴⁹ *The Pickwick Papers*, cit., ch. 2, p. 30.

¹⁵⁰ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch 5, p. 70.

various leisure outdoor activities. It really seems that Manor Farm is the best of all Kentish places as one of Mr. Wardle's visitors points out: "There ain't no a better o' ground in all Kent"¹⁵¹. Notably, the conceptualization of Manor Farm as an idyllic place is largely supported also in the twentieth-century criticism of the novel. For instance, Steven Marcus celebrates the novel for its achievement of literary transcendence, that is, "a representation of life which fulfils that vision of the ideal possibilities of human relations in community; a representation of life which extends our awareness of the limits of our humanity"¹⁵². In his opinion, Manor Farm represents the only place in the novel where these ideal possibilities are actually achieved¹⁵³. More definite is Barbara Hardy's comment some years later. Although she provides an overall negative assessment of the novel, she also agrees with the idyllic view of Manor Farm since she recognizes that its inhabitants are "enclosed in a magic circle and bear a charmed life"¹⁵⁴. Even more interesting is Lucas' view. He indeed points out that in the novel Dickens predominantly uses a "prescriptive" description – representation of life as it should be – rather than the "mimetic" description – representation of life as it is¹⁵⁵. This allows the author to make the idyll of Manor Farm triumph over social injustices in the end. All things considered, all these later observations therefore contribute to reinforce Chesterton's praise of the preservation of old 'Merry England' in the pages of *The Pickwick Papers*. As a matter of fact, living in this secluded, uncorrupted, happy idyll, Mr. Wardle and his family do not suffer from the modern malaise affecting the world. On the contrary, they still continue to enjoy the old popular mirth and merry-making. The cheerfulness and serenity of Manor Farm is immediately noticed by Mr. Pickwick and his companions when they reach Mr. Wardle's dwelling after a clumsy incident with some skittish horses. They are indeed warmly welcomed, carefully healed, abundantly given food, and invited to stay in the farm for some days. More than that, what really strikes Mr. Pickwick are both the signs of the wellness in the

¹⁵¹ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 6., p. 81.

¹⁵² S. Marcus, *Dickens. From Pickwick to Dombey*, cit., p. 17.

¹⁵³ Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 51.

¹⁵⁴ B. Hardy, *Pickwick Papers*, in *Ibidem, The Moral Art of Dickens. Essays*, London, The Athlone Press, 1970, pp. 81-98, p. 90.

¹⁵⁵ Cf. J. Lucas, *The Melancholy Man. A Study of Dickens' Novels*, Brighton, The Harvester Press, Barnes and Noble Books, 1980, p. 3.

inhabitants' appearances – Mr. Wardle is fat, his servant is equally fat, the visiting clergyman's wife is "a stout blooming old lady"¹⁵⁶, etc. – and the merry-making dominating in the atmosphere during the first night of their stay:

Meanwhile the round game proceeded right merrily. [...] Old Mr. Wardle was in the very height of his jollity; and he was *so* funny in his management of the board, and the old ladies were *so* sharp after their winnings, that the whole table was in a perpetual roar of merriment and laughter. There was one old lady who always had about half a dozen cards to pay for, at which everybody laughed, regularly every round; and when the old lady looked cross at having to pay, they laughed louder than ever; on which the old lady's face gradually brightened up, till at last she laughed louder than any of them. Then, when the spinster aunt got 'matrimony,' the young ladies laughed afresh, and the Spinster aunt seemed disposed to be pettish; till, feeling Mr. Tupman squeezing her hand under the table, *she* brightened up too, and looked rather knowing as if matrimony in reality were not quite so far off as some people thought for; whereupon everybody laughed again, and especially old Mr. Wardle, who enjoyed a joke as much as the youngest. As to Mr. Snodgrass, he did nothing but whisper poetical sentiments into his partner's ear, which made one old gentleman facetiously sly, about partnerships at cards and partnerships for life, and caused the aforesaid old gentleman to make some remarks thereupon, accompanied with divers winks and chuckles, which made the company very merry and the old gentleman's wife especially so. And Mr. Winkle came out with jokes which are very well known in town, but are not at all known in the country; and as everybody laughed at them very heartily, and said they were very capital, Mr. Winkle was in a state of great honour and glory. And the benevolent clergyman looked pleasantly on; for the happy faces which surrounded the table made the good old man feel happy too; and though the merriment was rather boisterous, still it came from the heart and not from the lips; and this is the right sort of merriment, after all. [...] Mr. Pickwick thought he had never felt so happy in his life.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 6, p. 70.

¹⁵⁷ *The Pickwick Papers* ch. 6, pp. 83-84.

What is important here is that Dickens underlines that the merriment “came from the heart”, and not from the surrounding circumstances, as if merry-making and mirth were actually intrinsic, inward characteristics of these humble people. This passage is therefore one of the most striking examples of Chesterton’s view of the common men as the last remnants of old ‘Merry England’ being preserved in the pages of *The Pickwick Papers*.

It is also important to notice that the joviality of Manor Farm and its inhabitants is effortlessly perceived by the readers thanks to, as earlier said in this chapter, Dickens’ use of contrast. The scenes of hilarity and merry-making indeed strikingly contrast with some glimpses Dickens gives of the misery of London and the dirtiness of other industrial cities. Remarkably, in this youthful masterpiece, Dickens’ main intention was primarily to narrate Mr. Pickwick’s funny adventures while celebrating the preservation of ‘Merry England’ among the lower classes, and not to criticize specific social injustices as he was to do in his later novels – e.g. *Bleak House*. However, Killham notices that as the novel progresses, Dickens’ exposure of real-life sufferings intensifies: “the impulse to expose abuses is strong and grows stronger”¹⁵⁸. Similarly Johnson specifies that Dickens’ denounce of social injustices is somehow hidden in the interpolated tales which alternate in the novel. In his opinion, they foreshadow Dickens’ future concern with various social problems in his darker novels¹⁵⁹. This is the reason why, it is in one of the interpolated tales - *The Old Man’s Tale about the Queer Client* - that we find a repulsive description of the misery of London told by old Jack Bamber, a customary client of an inn, which strikingly contrasts with the atmosphere of Manor Farm we have just presented:

The street is broad, the shops are spacious, the noise of passing vehicles, the footsteps of a perpetual stream of people - all the busy sounds of traffic, resound in it from morn to midnight; but the streets around are mean and close; poverty and debauchery lie festering in the crowded alleys; want and misfortune are pent up in

¹⁵⁸ J. Killham, *Pickwick. Dickens and the Art of Fiction*, cit., p. 40.

¹⁵⁹ Cf. E. Johnson, *Charles Dickens. His Tragedy and Triumph*, cit., pp. 163-164.

the narrow prison; an air of gloom and dreariness seems, in my eyes at least, to hang about the scene, and to impart to it a squalid and sickly hue.¹⁶⁰

Even more striking is the description of Birmingham. Approaching the end of the novel, Dickens manifestly provides an illustration of a place completely different from the idyllic Manor Farm. By presenting this gloomy atmosphere almost at the end of the story and right after Mr. Pickwick's release from prison, Dickens guarantees that the readers will surely appreciate and remember by contrast the popular mirth of Manor Farm. This is how the description of Birmingham contributes to make the cheerfulness of Manor Farm stand out:

It was quite dark when Mr. Pickwick roused himself sufficiently to look out of the window. The straggling cottages by the road-side, the dingy hue of every object visible, the murky atmosphere, the paths of cinders and brick-dust, the deep-red glow of furnace fires in the distance, the volumes of dense smoke issuing heavily forth from high toppling chimneys, blackening and obscuring everything around; the glare of distant lights, the ponderous wagons which toiled along the road, laden with clashing rods of iron, or piled with heavy goods—all betokened their rapid approach to the great working town of Birmingham. As they rattled through the narrow thoroughfares leading to the heart of the turmoil, the sights and sounds of earnest occupation struck more forcibly on the senses. The streets were thronged with working people. The hum of labour resounded from every house; lights gleamed from the long casement windows in the attic storeys, and the whirl of wheels and noise of machinery shook the trembling walls. The fires, whose lurid, sullen light had been visible for miles, blazed fiercely up, in the great works and factories of the town. The din of hammers, the rushing of steam, and the dead heavy clanking of engines, was the harsh music which arose from every quarter.¹⁶¹

In his attempt to celebrate old 'Merry England', Dickens also paid particular attention to describe local festivities and popular traditions. As a matter of fact, *The Pickwick Papers* abounds in scenes in which Mr. Pickwick and his faithful companions are invited to take part in traditional activities and local festivities

¹⁶⁰ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 21, p. 279.

¹⁶¹ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 49, p. 667.

where merry-making and mirth dominate. For instance, in chapter 7 they are invited to attend a cricket match between two villages, and they end up drinking, eating and having fun in a tavern where there is a “general hum of mirth”¹⁶². Then, they are also twice proposed to take part in rook-shooting, a popular, traditional sport during which they again end up being drunk after a boisterous picnic: “This constant succession of glasses produced considerable effect upon Mr. Pickwick; his countenance beamed with the most sunny smiles, laughter played around his lips, and good-humoured merriment twinkled in his eyes”¹⁶³. However, the most striking example of the popular merry-making of the humble is to be found in the Christmas festivity. The novel indeed dedicates a whole chapter to Christmas in which Mr. Pickwick and his companions are invited to Manor Farm to celebrate both the festivity and the wedding of Mr. Wardle’s daughter. Here Dickens insists on merry-making and describes many popular traditions which humble people carefully preserve: amusing card games, cheerful toasts, intimate cups of tea and coffee around the fireside, the ceremony of the ball, the charming banquet and the delicious dinner, kissing under the mistletoe, etc. Importantly, Dickens strongly emphasises the mirth and cheerfulness of Christmas which, in his opinion, can only be fully and truly enjoyed by the common men thanks to their popular traditions. Dickens celebrates the importance of Christmas for the humble as follows:

As brisk as bees, if not altogether as light as fairies, did the four Pickwickians assemble on the morning of the twenty-second day of December, in the year of grace in which these, their faithfully-recorded adventures, were undertaken and accomplished. Christmas was close at hand, in all his bluff and hearty honesty; it was the season of hospitality, merriment, and open-heartedness; the old year was preparing, like an ancient philosopher, to call his friends around him, and amidst the sound of feasting and revelry to pass gently and calmly away. Gay and merry was the time; and right gay and merry were at least four of the numerous hearts that were gladdened by its coming. And numerous indeed are the hearts to which Christmas brings a brief season of happiness and enjoyment. How many families, whose members have been dispersed and scattered far and wide, in the restless

¹⁶² *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 7., p. 104.

¹⁶³ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 19., pp. 253-254.

struggles of life, are then reunited, and meet once again in that happy state of companionship and mutual goodwill, which is a source of such pure and unalloyed delight; and one so incompatible with the cares and sorrows of the world, that the religious belief of the most civilised nations, and the rude traditions of the roughest savages, alike number it among the first joys of a future condition of existence, provided for the blessed and happy! How many old recollections, and how many dormant sympathies, does Christmas time awaken! We write these words now, many miles distant from the spot at which, year after year, we met on that day, a merry and joyous circle. Many of the hearts that throbbed so gaily then, have ceased to beat; many of the looks that shone so brightly then, have ceased to glow; the hands we grasped, have grown cold; the eyes we sought, have hid their lustre in the grave; and yet the old house, the room, the merry voices and smiling faces, the jest, the laugh, the most minute and trivial circumstances connected with those happy meetings, crowd upon our mind at each recurrence of the season, as if the last assemblage had been but yesterday! Happy, happy Christmas, that can win us back to the delusions of our childish days; that can recall to the old man the pleasures of his youth; that can transport the sailor and the traveller, thousands of miles away, back to his own fireside and his quiet home!¹⁶⁴

Once again, it is in *Charles Dickens* that Chesterton explains the importance of Christmas for Dickens. In the pages of his book he immediately links the festivity to the novelist's celebration of old 'Merry England'. Chesterton indeed recognizes Dickens' defence of Christmas as an attempt to defend the last remaining festivity which still preserves some of the old folkloric traditions directly deriving from the pagan Middle Ages: "in fighting for Christmas he was fighting for the old European festival, Pagan and Christian, for that trinity of eating, drinking and praying which to moderns appears irreverent"¹⁶⁵. He also underlines that Christmas was primarily and distinctively an English feast: "Christmas is, as I have said, one of the numberless old European feasts of which the essence is the combination of religion with merry-making. But among those feasts it is also especially and distinctively English [...]"¹⁶⁶. Finally, it should not be forgotten that Christmas and its connection to the old

¹⁶⁴ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 28, pp. 360-361.

¹⁶⁵ G.K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens*, cit., p. 70.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 71.

popular mirth had always occupied an important space in Chesterton's writings. He indeed celebrates the Christmas merry-making and Dickens' relation to it in some of his other works such as *A Short History of England*, *The Uses of Diversity*, *The Everlasting Man*, and even in a radio broadcast in 1931¹⁶⁷.

Interestingly, as with the descriptions of Manor Farm and Birmingham, Dickens tries to contrast completely different situations when treating the mirth of popular festivities as well. As a matter of fact, to the cheerfulness of the humble gathered in Manor Farm for Christmas, Dickens opposes by contrast another party, this time organised by aristocratic people. Chapter 15 tells of a fancy-dress party organised by Mrs. Leo Hunter, a wealthy middle-aged woman who delights in gathering well-known people at her parties. The atmosphere is completely different, and the four Pickwickians come across a scene far removed from the ordinariness and commonness of Manor Farm: "a scene of varied and delicious enchantment – a bewildering coruscation of beauty and talent – a lavish and prodigal display of hospitality [...]"¹⁶⁸. As a matter of fact, most guests come from the upper classes, are disguised in fancy dresses, and pretentiously talk about serious matters. To the spontaneous singing and the delicious dinner at Manor Farm, here Dickens opposes by contrast a band which "howled"¹⁶⁹ a hymn, and a meagre banquet which is egoistically eaten up rapidly by the first who come. Moreover, unlike what happens in the description of the Christmas party, Dickens never uses the word 'merriment' nor does he underline that Mr. Pickwick feels at ease. Remarkably, Dickens also repeatedly underlines that Dickens and his four companions uncomfortably wear their fancy dresses. For instance, Mr. Tupman's disguise is so exaggeratedly tight that Dickens emphasises: "never were such distortions as Mr. Tupman's frame underwent in his efforts to appear easy and grateful"¹⁷⁰. Significantly, the fact that the four Pickwickians are not at ease in their fancy dresses can metaphorically be interpreted as their not being at ease in the whole atmosphere of party. By doing so, Dickens may implicitly mean to underline that Mr. Pickwick and his companions

¹⁶⁷ Cf. I.T. Ker, *G.K. Chesterton. A Biography*, cit., pp. 381; 425; 521-523; 666.

¹⁶⁸ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 15, p. 202.

¹⁶⁹ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 16, p. 208.

¹⁷⁰ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 15, p. 206.

only feel at ease while surrounded by humble people and ordinary popular traditions, and not in the midst of lavish decorations and upper-class guests. Therefore, this passage underlines, once more, that Dickens found the merry-making and mirth of old 'Merry England' exclusively among the common men, rather than among the upper classes.

Another fundamental evidence of the widespread, old popular mirth in the novel is the strong presence of many inns. The list of inns in the novel is quite long, both located in the rural villages and surprisingly also in London: The White Hart Inn, The Grey's Inn, The Bull Inn, George and Vulture Tavern, The Lincoln's Inn, The Blue Boar, etc. In fact, Dickens, in his youthful wanderings in the London streets, had found out that the boisterous mirth of old 'Merry England' still existed even in the city, yet it was hidden inside the local inns frequented by the lower classes. In *The Pickwick Papers* he therefore presents the inns and their preservation of the old popular mirth as follows:

There are in London several old inns, once the headquarters of celebrated coaches in the days when coaches performed their journeys in a graver and more solemn manner than they do in these times; but which have now degenerated into little more than the abiding and booking-places of country wagons. The reader would look in vain for any of these ancient hostelries, among the Golden Crosses and Bull and Mouths, which rear their stately fronts in the improved streets of London. If he would light upon any of these old places, he must direct his steps to the obscurer quarters of the town, and there in some secluded nooks he will find several, still standing with a kind of gloomy sturdiness, amidst the modern innovations which surround them. In the Borough especially, there still remain some half-dozen old inns, which have preserved their external features unchanged, and which have escaped alike the rage for public improvement and the encroachments of private speculation. Great, rambling queer old places they are, with galleries, and passages, and staircases, wide enough and antiquated enough to furnish materials for a hundred ghost stories, supposing we should ever be reduced to the lamentable necessity of inventing any, and that the world should exist long

enough to exhaust the innumerable veracious legends connected with old London Bridge, and its adjacent neighbourhood on the Surrey side.¹⁷¹

In the course of the novel Mr. Pickwick and his companions spend much time in some inns where they boisterously have fun together and with other intimates. Scenes of drinking, eating, joking, chatting, struggling, discussing etc. alternate in the pages of *The Pickwick Papers*. For instance, in Ipswich Mr. Pickwick and Peter Magnus drink together at The Great White House; at The Blue Lion the Pickwickians delight in drinking brandy while the storm is raging outside and later boisterously celebrate the end of the cricket match; at The Marquis of Granby, Sam and his father taste many glasses of excellent ale; and many other illustrative examples can be found in the novel. Furthermore, it might be interesting to notice that two of the best specimens embodying old popular mirth in the novel, Sam Weller and Tony Weller, are significantly first found in two inns. As a matter of fact, we can symbolically interpret Dickens' decision to depict the Wellers' first appearances at some inns as a sign of his awareness that only in the midst of the old popular mirth still surviving in the inns, these boisterous humble characters might have shown up. Sam is indeed first introduced while blacking boots in the courtyard of The White Hart Inn in chapter 10, while his father's first appearance is in a London tavern engaged in drinking a great amount of brandy. Located in places in which the old popular mirth still survived in the city of London, in the course of the novel these two characters will contribute to prove that old 'Merry England' still existed among the humble, common, boisterous people.

In this chapter we have hence underlined the link between the common, humble people present in the novel and the survival of old 'Merry England' in modern times. Next chapter will be devoted to the discussion of some passages in the novel which fictionally embody two of the main forms of Dickens' celebration of the common man: his disinterested concern for every character's individuality and the importance he attaches to greatness in the private sphere.

¹⁷¹ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 10, p. 129.

CHAPTER IV

“All Men Are Interesting”: Dickens and the Common Man

Among Chesterton's observations on Dickens, the certainty that for him “all men are interesting” is surely one of the most striking. As a matter of fact, it undoubtedly paves the way to several reflections on the fictional contribution of Dickens' works to the defence of the common man. As already argued in Part 1, one of the fundamental ways through which, in Chesterton's opinion, Dickens contributed to defend the common man in his novels was indeed his interest for every ordinary individuality existing in the world. Accordingly, providing many meticulous descriptions of great humble characters, *The Pickwick Papers* is therefore the utmost expression of Dickens' disinterested concern for every common individual.

Now, to adequately argue in favour of the novel, it should not be considered inappropriate to symbolically consider Mr. Pickwick as the fictional alter-ego of Dickens himself. In Lucas' opinion, this logic can indeed be correct if we acknowledge that both Dickens and Mr. Pickwick have the same intentions¹⁷². If, on the one hand, Dickens' aim was to investigate all the common individualities existing in the humble world (Chapman and Hall wrote in the 1837 Preface of the novel: “the author's object in this work, was to place before the reader a constant succession of characters [...]”¹⁷³), Mr. Pickwick undoubtedly shares the intention of his creator. In fact, right at the beginning of the novel, as already said, we are told that Mr. Pickwick is designated to travel around the country to investigate, like Dickens, on the existing humble characters and popular manners. For instance, few pages after the beginning of the novel, Dickens immediately reveals Mr. Pickwick's

¹⁷² Cf. J. Lucas, *The Melancholy Man. A Study of Dickens' Novels*, cit., p. 2. Lucas admits Pickwick can occasionally be seen as Dickens' alter-ego.

¹⁷³E. Chapman, and William Hall, *Preface (1837) to The Pickwick Papers*, now in *The Pickwick Papers*, pp. 6-7, p. 6.

real intention when in the first conversation with Mr. Jingle, Mr. Pickwick defines himself “an observer of the human nature”¹⁷⁴. Besides that, Mr. Pickwick’s interest for the common world is also implicitly expressed by his actions in the novel. In several passages Mr. Pickwick significantly opens the windows of any lodgings he happens to be to observe his whereabouts, or symbolically cleans his spectacles to better observe the scenes around him. Clearly, these two gestures implicitly suggest the protagonist’s constant interest for the surrounding common world. Even more impressively, Mr. Pickwick’s intention is emblematically mirrored in the architecture of his apartment in London. It indeed significantly allows him to carefully scrutinize the multitudinousness of ordinary people strolling in the streets even when he is at home:

Mr. Pickwick’s apartments in Goswell Street, although on a limited scale, were not only of a very neat and comfortable description, but peculiarly adapted for the residence of a man of his genius and observation. His sitting room was the first floor front, his bedroom the second floor front; and thus, whether he were sitting at his desk in parlour, or standing before the dressing-glass in his dormitory, he had an equal opportunity of contemplating human nature in all the numerous phases it exhibits, in that not more populous than popular thoroughfare.¹⁷⁵

However, what definitely outlines Mr. Pickwick’s role as an investigator of all common individualities within the novel is his own final declaration after the announcement of the end of the Pickwick Club, and of his intention of moving to a newly-purchased residence. In these closing words, Mr. Pickwick summarizes what has been his role in the novel:

‘I shall never regret,’ said Mr. Pickwick in a low voice, ‘I shall never regret having devoted the greater part of two years to mixing with different varieties and shades of human character, frivolous as my pursuit of novelty may have appeared to many’.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁴ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 2., p. 26.

¹⁷⁵ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 12, pp. 158-159.

¹⁷⁶ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 56, p. 749.

Indeed, in the course of the novel, armed with a notebook and pushed by an insatiable desire to investigate the ordinary individualities of the world, Pickwick sets off on various trips accompanied by his faithful companions. During these trips, they come across tens of characters whose individualities are always meticulously described by Dickens. The novel indeed counts more or less 85 lively characters animating the various episodes; a huge number which did not actually prevent his literary genius from depicting every individuality as completely different from the others. To provide an example of Dickens' exceptional mastery of description, let us take for instance the meticulous depictions of the two medical students Benjamin Allen and Bob Sawyer:

Mr. Pickwick bowed to Bob Sawyer, and Bob Sawyer bowed to Mr. Pickwick. Bob and his very particular friend then applied themselves most assiduously to the eatables before them; and Mr. Pickwick had an opportunity of glancing at them both.

Mr. Benjamin Allen was a coarse, stout, thick-set young man, with black hair cut rather short, and a white face cut rather long. He was embellished with spectacles, and wore a white neckerchief. Below his single-breasted black surtout, which was buttoned up to his chin, appeared the usual number of pepper-and-salt coloured legs, terminating in a pair of imperfectly polished boots. Although his coat was short in the sleeves, it disclosed no vestige of a linen wristband; and although there was quite enough of his face to admit of the encroachment of a shirt collar, it was not graced by the smallest approach to that appendage. He presented, altogether, rather a mildewy appearance, and emitted a fragrant odour of full-flavoured Cubas.

Mr. Bob Sawyer [...] wore a pair of plaid trousers, and a large, rough, double-breasted waistcoat; out of doors, he carried a thick stick with a big top. He eschewed gloves, and looked, upon the whole, something like a dissipated Robinson Crusoe.¹⁷⁷

By taking into consideration this passage, it is interesting to notice that Dickens' descriptions are not limited to the sight, but involve other senses such as

¹⁷⁷ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 29, p. 392.

the smell as in this case. In addition, he also avails himself of references to particular elements such as literary quotations or hints at popular wisdom, so that the readers can better create an overall, imaginative representation of the character being described in his mind. Killham confirms this observation by pointing out that the strength of Dickens' descriptions largely depends on the capacity of his words to summon up highly-individualised images of the characters in the readers' minds¹⁷⁸. These mental images indeed allow the readers to fixedly bear in mind each single character's individuality throughout the whole novel, and not to confuse it with another one. By doing so, it is clear that Dickens managed to create hundreds of individualities in *The Pickwick Papers* which have no equals in any of his novels.

Dickens' concern for each single individuality is even more evident in his treatment of the humble characters which do not have a key role in the novel. It is exactly in the descriptions of these minor characters that Dickens proves to be equally interested in fully portraying as precisely as possible the features of these "invisible" individualities which would otherwise remain forgotten in the background. It is right in the careful treatment of these secondary humble characters that it becomes clear that Dickens sides with all common individuals in the novel. It is indeed thanks to his disinterested desire to celebrate every individuality that also minor characters such as the fat boy, Mrs. Bardell's son, Mr. Pott's wife, Rachel Wardle, Peter Magnus, Jack Hopkins, Angelo Cyrus Bantman, the jailer Tom Roker, Solomon Pell and so on are still nowadays affectionately remembered and appreciated by the readers. A striking example is the description of old Jack Bamber who briefly appears in the novel just to relate a short story, but whose remarkable individuality is hardly forgettable:

The individual to whom Lowten alluded, was a little, yellow, high-shouldered man, whose countenance, from his habit of stooping forward when silent, Mr. Pickwick had not observed before. He wondered though, when the old man raised his shrivelled face, and bent his bright grey eye upon him, with a keen inquiring look, that such remarkable features could have escaped his attention for a moment. There was a fixed grim smile perpetually on his countenance; he leaned his chin

¹⁷⁸ Cf. J. Killham, *Pickwick. Dickens and the Art of Fiction*, cit., p. 43.

on a long, skinny hand, with nails of extraordinary length; and as he inclined his head to one side, and looked keenly out from beneath his ragged grey eyebrows, there was a strange, wild slyness in his leer, quite repulsive to behold.¹⁷⁹

Remarkably, the description of Old Jack Bamber also proves that, for Dickens, things must not necessarily be beautiful to be interesting. In fact, without falsifying or lessening repulsive details, Dickens often created a multitude of hideous characters which are nonetheless equally attracting for the readers. Let us think, for example, about Quilp in *The Old Curiosity Shop* whose mischievous attitude and physical deformity render him a loathsome character, but, at the same time, make him unique and unforgettable.

Finally, it should not be forgotten that in his *Charles Dickens* Chesterton had also paid particular attention to the importance Dickens attaches to the greatness which is to be found in the private sphere. It is indeed his opinion that the novelist's greatest characters are to be found exactly in ordinary spheres, that is to say, among the most common people. For Dickens, as Chesterton points out, in the public sphere people must firmly adapt to rules of conduct and strict etiquettes depending on the circumstances thereby becoming fixed types: "[...] on that defined and lighted public stage men are of necessity forced to profess one set of accomplishments, to rise to one rigid standards"¹⁸⁰. In the private sphere, on the contrary, common people express themselves spontaneously and can freely manifest the various nuances of their characters. In this way, as already argued in Part 1, common, ordinary people become much more interesting. It is therefore Chesterton's opinion that Dickens' boundless concern for ordinariness truly represents another evidence of his defence of the common man in his works. And so, *The Pickwick Papers* richly illustrates Dickens' unprecedented celebration of commonness.

To better understand Dickens' praise of ordinariness, we can again consider Mr. Pickwick as the fictional alter-ego of the novelist. We indeed already know that Mr. Pickwick aims to investigate *all* the humble characters and popular manners which he comes across during his trip. However, that is not a hard task for him

¹⁷⁹ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 20., pp. 273-274.

¹⁸⁰ G.K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens*, cit., p. 114.

since, as some passages of the novel brilliantly illustrate, his scrutinizing gaze, like that of Dickens, is *mainly* attracted by ordinary and common things, rather than from extraordinary and uncommon exceptionalities. For instance, after being involved in the political elections at Eatanswill, hence in the public sphere, he is rather happy to find some peaceful serenity in a secluded, private inn with his humble friends: “it is pleasant to turn from contemplating the strife and turmoil of political existence, to the peaceful repose of private life”¹⁸¹. Quite interesting is the fact that also his faithful companions feel more attraction for ordinary things, rather than for uncommon exceptionalities. For instance, in chapter 14 they are described as “taking but little interest in public affairs”¹⁸². Another interesting passage is to be found in chapter 20, when, after his first meeting with the unscrupulous Dodson and Fogg – being lawyers they belong to the public sphere –, Pickwick is vehemently reproached by old Jack Bamber who reminds Pickwick that: “there’s romance enough at home without going half a mile for it”¹⁸³ thereby implicitly inviting him to find delight in simple pleasures and in the ordinariness of the private sphere. Interestingly, the word ‘romance’ reminds us of the quotation from Gissing already commented in Part I. In *Charles Dickens. A Critical Study* Gissing points out that in his novels Dickens did not look for extraordinary, public exceptionalities, yet ‘sought for wonders amid the dreary life of common streets’. Now, by appearing various times in the novel, the word ‘romance’ does effectively help Dickens to emphasize that Pickwick cannot see but wonders in the common world and in the ordinary characters. For instance, while hearing the story of Donna Christina and his father from Jingle, actually two ordinary individuals, he asks: “Will you allow me to note that little *romance* down, Sir?”¹⁸⁴. Or, when Pickwick meets the dismal man, and the man gives him a manuscript by stating that it contains “a leaf from the *romance* of real life”¹⁸⁵ which actually turns out to be a conventional story about a violent love between two common people. By using the term ‘romance’ when referring to common situations or ordinary people’s adventures, Dickens is therefore

¹⁸¹ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 14, p. 182.

¹⁸² *Ivi.*

¹⁸³ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 21., p. 275.

¹⁸⁴ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 2., p. 28. (italics is mine).

¹⁸⁵ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 5., p. 71. (italics is mine).

implicitly suggesting that for Pickwick what happens in the private sphere is much more interesting and attractive than what occurs in the public sphere.

After discussing Dickens' concern for every common individuality in *The Pickwick Papers*, next chapter will therefore treat another fundamental aspect, in Chesterton's vision, of Dickens' defence of the common man: his creation of a funny, literary democracy.

CHAPTER V

Dickens' Funny Democracy and Humanitarianism

The literary admiration which Chesterton felt for Dickens is unique. Figuratively, it can be compared to that of a man who is desperately in love with his beloved for its emotional attachment and longevity in time. In particular, what Chesterton profoundly admired of Dickens' qualities was his powerful use of humour, as argued in Part 1. This admiration lasted long after the publication of *Charles Dickens* in 1906. As a matter of fact, in 1932 Chesterton published a short essay called *The Great Gusto* in which he re-affirmed some of his main ideas concerning Dickens' literary greatness. Specifically, Chesterton again drew his readers' attention to Dickens' attempt to create a literary democracy as the best fictional way to defend the common man. In this essay he indeed vehemently re-affirms both that Dickens was "the one great Englishman who consciously devoted himself to democracy", and that his democracy fundamentally relied on humour: "if we call Dickens democratic, we must qualify it by saying that he is derisive democrat rather than the dignified democrat"¹⁸⁶. However, what really needs to be carefully taken into consideration is that in a passage of this essay Chesterton first uses *The Pickwick Papers* as an illustrative example of what he means for Dickens' creation of equality in his novels. As a matter of fact, although he does not specifically mention the concept of 'funny democracy' as in *Charles Dickens*, and his logic is more concerned with the master (Pickwick)-servant (Sam) relation¹⁸⁷, in the end he specifically deals with the humour of *The Pickwick Papers* in the light of its actual contribution to the creation of equality in the novel. The brief passage of *The Great Gusto* therefore invites us to enter the novel with the certainty that, as

¹⁸⁶ G.K. Chesterton, *The Great Gusto*, cit., p. 47. (for both quotations).

¹⁸⁷ Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 48.

argued by Chesterton, it does present some passages in which humour is used by Dickens to create his funny, literary democracy.

Fundamentally, Dickens' humour operates in two precise directions in the novel. First of all, Dickens primarily uses humour to level any possible social differences between his characters. To do so, he portrays each wealthy, upper-class character in the novel comically so that he appears as ordinary as any other common character. Secondly, he also avails himself of humour to derisively "show that the tyrant is undignified"¹⁸⁸; namely, any character which unjustly attributes itself some allegedly-superior qualities is again described in comic terms. In this way, through the derision of its self-attributed qualities, Dickens assures that the character is perceived as common as the others, and not as a superior instance of exceptionality standing out from ordinariness. This unprecedented use of humour therefore led Chesterton to celebrate Dickens' siding with the common man. In his attempt to level any differences, Chesterton could indeed find a fictional way to defeat the super-empowered, perfect individual which later on Nietzsche was to define as the 'Superman'.

We are hence presented two complementary uses of humour working on the same underlying principle Chesterton had celebrated in *Charles Dickens*: faced with comic situations, all men are equal. As already commented in Part 1, in *Charles Dickens* Chesterton indeed argues that 'all men are manifestly and unmistakably equal' when they find themselves meddled with whatever comic situations or are described in comic terms. To better understand Chesterton's logic, let us take for example the scene in which Mr. Pickwick is comically described as chasing after his flying cap:

There are very few moments in a man's existence when he experiences so much ludicrous distress, or meets with so little charitable commiseration, as when he is in pursuit of his own hat. A vast deal of coolness, and a peculiar degree of judgment, are requisite in catching a hat. A man must not be precipitate, or he runs over it; he must not rush into the opposite extreme, or he loses it altogether. The best way is to keep gently up with the object of pursuit, to be wary and cautious, to

¹⁸⁸ *Ivi.*

watch your opportunity well, get gradually before it, then make a rapid dive, seize it by the crown, and stick it firmly on your head; smiling pleasantly all the time, as if you thought it as good a joke as anybody else.¹⁸⁹

While reading this passage, Villari's comment on Dickens' funny democracy, discussed in Part I, echoes in our mind again: 'lui [Dickens] li vedeva tutti ugualmente buffi se il vento porta loro via il cappello, e devono corrervi dietro'¹⁹⁰. As a matter of fact, this passage perfectly exemplifies the deep sense of Dickens' use of humour to level differences. Remarkably, Dickens speaks in general terms by exclusively using 'a man'. In this way, we understand that his discourse does not limit to this or that character, yet includes anybody regardless of the social rank or self-attributed, presumed superior quality. Dickens is indeed implicitly suggesting that anyone, even a nobleman, would appear as funny as the humble Mr. Pickwick if he found himself in this embarrassing situation. All things considered, Dickens' funny democracy therefore entails the creation of a multitude of *equally* comic characters. And *The Pickwick Papers* proves to be the greatest, fictional embodiment of Dickens' funny democracy.

As a matter of fact, the novel offers many illuminating examples of Dickens' use of humour to create social equality, especially when we think about some of the wonderful individualities Dickens created. In particular, in the following passages we will deal with some characters who consider themselves superior to the common people for their social ranks or for self-attributed merits, yet whose alleged superiority is levelled by Dickens' humour. Their characteristics are indeed so comically exaggerated that the readers laugh at these ridiculous characters.

The first interesting example is Captain Boldwig, a ferocious, wealthy country squire who believes that he has the absolute, indisputable mastery over his territories. He really behaves like a king, and, along with his faithful servants, constantly guards his fields to "keep the common people out"¹⁹¹. Naturally, all of this is deliberately presented through exaggerated, comic details by Dickens. For

¹⁸⁹ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 4., pp. 62-63.

¹⁹⁰ Cf. Part 1, ch. III.

¹⁹¹ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 19., p. 255.

example, readers are immediately informed that Captain Boldwig possesses a large propriety only because actually one of his very distant relatives is a marquis. In this way, readers do not see Captain Boldwig as a powerful squire, but, on the contrary, understand he is only an old, fanatical bigot who has nothing to do but torment his careless neighbours. Consequently, they do not hold him in high esteem, but, on the contrary, laugh at him derisively. Humour is hence used by Dickens to level his alleged superiority. All of this is beautifully exemplified in the funny description Dickens gives of Captain Boldwig:

Captain Boldwig was a little fierce man in a stiff black neckerchief and blue surtout, who, when he did condescend to walk about his property, did it in company with a thick rattan stick with a brass ferrule, and a gardener and sub-gardener with meek faces, to whom (the gardeners, not the stick) Captain Boldwig gave his orders with all due grandeur and ferocity; for Captain Boldwig's wife's sister had married a marquis, and the captain's house was a villa, and his land 'grounds,' and it was all very high, and mighty, and great.¹⁹²

Another illustrative example is represented by Esquire George Nupkins, the local magistrate of Ipswich. Mr. Pickwick and the Pickwickians come into conflict with him when Ms. Witherfield reports Mr. Pickwick and Tupman to the justice for a presumed challenge to a duel. Immediately, Dickens humorously emphasises George Nupkins' exaggerated sense of authority and his groundless belief in his alleged superiority. For instance, although he is simply a local magistrate of a rural village, he wants his clerks to respectfully call him "your worship"¹⁹³. Moreover, he haughtily boasts his having subdued a violent rebellion in town when actually there were simply a few students who had thrown some objects against a greengrocer's showcase:

Mr. Nupkins was in a state of the utmost excitement and irritation, for there had been a rebellion in the town; all the day-scholars at the largest day-school had conspired to break the windows of an obnoxious apple-seller, and had hooted the

¹⁹² *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 19., p. 254.

¹⁹³ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 24., p. 319.

beadle and pelted the constabulary - an elderly gentleman in top-boots, who had been called out to repress the tumult, and who had been a peace-officer, man and boy, for half a century at least.¹⁹⁴

Even more strikingly, he boastfully claims that, accompanied by *only* sixty body guards, he even risked his life to avoid a banal animal fighting:

In Ipswich, ma'am! A duel in Ipswich!' said the magistrate, perfectly aghast at the notion. 'Impossible, ma'am; nothing of the kind can be contemplated in this town, I am persuaded. Bless my soul, ma'am, are you aware of the activity of our local magistracy? Do you happen to have heard, ma'am, that I rushed into a prize-ring on the fourth of May last, attended by *only* sixty special constables; and, at the hazard of falling a sacrifice to the angry passions of an infuriated multitude, prohibited a pugilistic contest between the Middlesex Dumpling and the Suffolk Bantam? [...].'¹⁹⁵

Not only do the magistrate's own words contribute to create his over-exaggerated description, but also the way Dickens describes his attitude gives the readers a sense that, instead of being a serious, skilful magistrate, Mr. Nupkins is actually a boastful mouth-breather. Let us look for example at how he is described: "In front of a *big* book-case, in a *big* chair, behind a *big* table, and before a *big* volume, sat Mr. Nupkins, looking a full seize *larger* than any one of them, big as they were"¹⁹⁶. Clearly, this deliberately over-constructed sense of magnitude hovering around Mr. Nupkins explicitly contrasts with the banality of the legal case brought against Pickwick. All of this produces the result that Mr. Nupkins' allegedly-superior social rank and his self-assigned merits are definitely ridiculed, and he is brought back to the ordinariness of the other characters. As with Captain Boldwig, Dickens' humour is thus able to level any kind of differences between the characters.

Last but not least example is the couple of medical students: Benjamin Allen and Bob Sawyer. Despite less striking than the representations of the two preceding

¹⁹⁴ *Ivi.*

¹⁹⁵ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 24., p. 320. (italics is mine).

¹⁹⁶ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 25., p. 329. (italics is mine).

characters, Dickens' treatment of these young students anyway contributes to show that in the novel anyone aspiring to be superior to the other ordinary characters is humorously ridicule. In their particular case, readers can indeed specifically appreciate that not only does Dickens' funny democracy level social ranks – as in the case of Captain Boldwig and Mr. Nupkins –, but also annihilates any kind of alleged superiority, moral as well as intellectual and attitudinal. As a matter of fact, as soon as they appear in the novel, the two students assume an air of superiority well manifested in their smug attitudes:

[...] that sort of slovenly smartness, and swaggering gait, which is peculiar to young gentlemen who smoke in the streets by day, shout and scream in the same by night, call waiters by their Christian names, and do various other acts and deeds of an equally facetious description.¹⁹⁷

Consequently, Dickens' humour immediately starts to deconstruct their self-admiration progressively. In the course of the novel, readers indeed understand that instead of “two worthies”¹⁹⁸, as the two students are first presented on their first appearance, they are simply two incompetent idlers, or in other words “a couple o' Sawbones”¹⁹⁹, as Sam Weller sarcastically calls them. First of all, Dickens sarcastically hints at their actual lack of knowledge and preparation in the medical science. After Mr. Pickwick fell into a hole in the ice while ice-skating, they bizarrely recommend him some glasses of punch, and point out that if the remedy had not worked, it would only be due to Mr. Pickwick's wrong dosage, and not to their weird advice:

Mr. Bob Sawyer very justly observed that there is nothing like hot punch in such cases: and that if even hot punch did fail to act as a preventive, it was merely because the patient fell into the vulgar error of not taking enough of it.²⁰⁰

Always in the attempt to deride their self-assigned superiority, Dickens also humorously gives the readers some glimpses of their idle lives, which have nothing

¹⁹⁷ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 30., p. 392.

¹⁹⁸ *Ivi.*

¹⁹⁹ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 30., p. 391.

²⁰⁰ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 30., p. 400.

to do with the splendour they have feigned on their first appearance. Indeed, few chapters after their first meeting, Bob Sawyer and Ben Allen invite the Pickwickians to their lodgings which actually turn out to be a dismal apartment in a impoverished area of London. Besides living in a wretched dwelling, the two students are not even able to pay the rent regularly and, consequently, are frequently harassed by their reproachful landlady who continuously keeps a close watch on them. Naturally, Dickens describes the relationship between the two youngsters and the landlady with humorous episodes which again show how their life is as ordinary as that of the other lower-class people. In addition to that, Dickens also shows the readers that there is nothing extraordinary in their job. As a matter of fact, instead of conducting medical researches or healing people, they run an unsuccessful surgery and, therefore, are forced to adopt some tricks to improve their income. Finally, their commonness is definitely re-established towards the end of the novel when Dickens' humour manifestly shows how they are boisterous and uproarious like all merry common English people. In doing so, Dickens also presents the two students as two of the best-exemplified specimens of Englishness in the novel. For example, in chapter 31, the landlady Mrs. Raddle outspokenly reproaches them for their idle life only devoted to boisterous parties thereby revealing their merry common personalities:

Do you suppose a hard-working and industrious woman as has lived in this street for twenty year [...] has nothing else to do but to work herself to death after a parcel of lazy idle fellars, that are always smoking and drinking, and lounging, when they ought to be glad to turn their hands to anything that would help 'em to pay their bills?²⁰¹

In addition to this scene, the novel illustrates many other episodes in which the two students drink heavily, so much so that they often get drunk, behave foolishly, or delight in organizing parties in their lodgings. A good example of their boisterous Englishness which levels them to the common national ordinariness is present in chapter 50. While they are accompanying Pickwick to Birmingham where

²⁰¹ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 31., pp. 419-420.

he is to meet Mr. Winkle's father, they, especially Bob Sawyer, uproariously amuse themselves with stupid pranks on the top of the coach with Sam Weller. This episode, set towards the end of the novel, definitely shows how humour has thus achieved to show how the two students are actually completely different from the two, boastful, snobbish 'worthies' we were first acquainted with. Their alleged superiority in respect of the other ordinary characters is thus levelled in this hilarious episode:

Mr. Bob Sawyer was seated, not in the dickey, but on the roof of the chaise, with his legs as far asunder as they would conveniently go, wearing Mr. Samuel Weller's hat on one side of his head, and bearing, in one hand, a most enormous sandwich, while, in the other, he supported a goodly-sized case-bottle, to both of which he applied himself with intense relish, varying the monotony of the occupation by an occasional howl, or the interchange of some lively badinage with any passing stranger. The crimson flag was carefully tied in an erect position to the rail of the dickey; and Mr. Samuel Weller, decorated with Bob Sawyer's hat, was seated in the centre thereof, discussing a twin sandwich, with an animated countenance, the expression of which betokened his entire and perfect approval of the whole arrangement.²⁰²

What is exquisitely Dickensian here is that, in the end, when they are free from their pretence to superiority, they are not "diminished" because they are actually much more lovable in their enjoyment of life together with Sam Weller.

Besides praising Dickens' funny, literary democracy, Chesterton also largely celebrates his humanitarianism as another evidence of Dickens' siding with the common man. As already commented in Part 1, in *The Victorian Age in Literature* Chesterton points out that Dickens felt an inward 'feeling-sick', a 'vagueness of discontent' as Orwell used to call it, which pushed him to care for all the oppressed. More precisely, in his criticism, Chesterton explains that Dickens' humanitarianism was so overwhelming that it exceeded any social borders to embrace *all* the suffering people. Naturally, in the light of Chesterton's praise of Dickens' fellow feeling, *The Pickwick Papers* is again to be considered the greatest of his novels.

²⁰² *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 49., pp. 662-663.

As a matter of fact, if we again consider Mr. Pickwick as the fictional alter-ego of Dickens, it becomes easier to see how the novel and mainly its main character, perfectly embody Dickens' concern for all human beings. Mr. Pickwick indeed plainly shares Dickens' passionate concern for all who suffer. A striking example of this is to be found already in one of the first chapters. In chapter 10, Dickens indeed immediately specifies that Mr. Pickwick possesses a boundless fellow feeling: "his note-book, blotted with the tears of sympathizing humanity, lies before us"²⁰³. Even more importantly, in the course of the novel Dickens often makes it clear that Pickwick strongly suffers when he is facing scenes of suffering or misery. In particular, when he is in the Fleet, Mr. Pickwick has the possibility to meet many suffering people, and, as a consequence, feels a strong pity for them: "my head aches with these scenes, and my heart too"²⁰⁴. Always while he is in prison, Mr. Pickwick is also the protagonist of a wonderful act of humanitarianism. Indeed, in the poor side of the debtors' prison he meets his old enemies Mr. Jingle and his companion Job Trotter. Instead of trying to revenge himself, he is on the contrary moved by his fellow feeling and helps them to get free from their wretched situation. However, for Mr. Pickwick's boundless humanitarianism this merciful act is not enough. Dickens indeed clarifies that, when leaving the prison, Mr. Pickwick inwardly perceives that something more must be done to help the miserable prisoners left behind: "In the crowd of wan emaciated faces, he saw not one which was not the happier for his sympathy and charity. [...] Alas! How many sad and unhappy beings had he left behind! And how many of them lie caged there, still!"²⁰⁵. Fortunately, these wretched individuals were not left alone in their anguish. As argued in Part 1, Dickens indeed did find a fictional way for his humanitarianism to be effective in real life, and in 1846 the Fleet was actually closed, and demolished.

Next chapter will hence consider some passages of *The Pickwick Papers* which richly illustrate both Dickens' satire, and his active optimism. To appropriately do so, we will shift our focus from Mr. Pickwick to Sam and Tony Weller, two of Dickens' literary monuments.

²⁰³ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 10., p. 142.

²⁰⁴ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 44., p. 610.

²⁰⁵ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 46, pp. 631-632.

CHAPTER VI

Satire and Active Optimism: the Roles of the Wellers in the Novel

When discussing Dickens' use of satire and active optimism in the novel, it is useful to shift our focus away from Mr. Pickwick, and turn our attention to two of Dickens' greatest characters: Sam Weller, Mr. Pickwick's exuberant, shrewd servant, and his father Tony Weller. This adjustment becomes necessary as a result of Mr. Pickwick's unexpected helplessness towards the harrowing, real-life sufferings he comes across in the Fleet. As a matter of fact, although Mr. Pickwick's optimism seems not to be affected by any disastrous adventures unfolding in the course of the novel, it strikingly begins to falter when faced with the misery oppressing the prisoners. Dickens does not conceal Mr. Pickwick's malaise: "There is no disguising the fact that Mr. Pickwick felt very low-spirited and uncomfortable [...]; he was alone in the coarse vulgar crowd, and felt the depression of spirit and sinking of heart [...]"²⁰⁶. Outside the prison, Mr. Pickwick is indeed only surrounded by common, affectionate people, and never confronts anything really painful or harrowing. The worst situations he has to face are simply embarrassing circumstances, avoidable misunderstandings, or ordinary brawls. On the contrary, in the Fleet Mr. Pickwick is first forced to endure the sight of the terrible sufferings of the prisoners, and unexpectedly his optimism ends up being defeated. Even more strikingly, Mr. Pickwick also proves to be neither able to protest against this dehumanizing institution, nor willing to find an effective solution for the prisoners' anguish. Once out of the Fleet, he indeed does nothing to publicly denounce the squalor existing in the debtors' prison; on the contrary, he just resolves to help his intimate friends, and then retires to the countryside to find a peaceful, secluded place.

²⁰⁶ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 40, pp. 549-550.

The fact that Mr. Pickwick's optimism and quickness of reaction are enfeebled by the Fleet prison is underlined by literary critics. In his analysis of the novel, John Lucas indeed points out that Mr. Pickwick's "personal goodness does well enough in the face of individual evils, but in the face of social evils it looks like pretty small beer"²⁰⁷. Of the same opinion is Steven Marcus. In some pages of his analysis he indeed re-affirms that Pickwick's benevolence cannot deal with cruel institutions or very wicked characters. As a consequence, Pickwick suffers severely from his powerlessness, and conveniently turns his gaze away from the sufferings of the prisoners²⁰⁸. J. Hillis Miller is even more extreme in his study. He maintains that Mr. Pickwick's temperament is so affected by the misery witnessed in the Fleet that his retirement to a newly-purchased dwelling in the peaceful countryside at the end of the novel might be interpreted as his definite withdrawal from the sufferings of the world²⁰⁹. Noticeably, all these critical considerations are actually grounded in a striking passage of the novel. After observing the extreme misery of the poor side of the debtors' prison, Pickwick significantly takes the resolute decision to retire to his cell since he can no longer stand the suffering around him:

From this spot, Mr. Pickwick wandered along all the galleries, up and down all the staircases, and once again round the whole area of the yard. The great body of the prison population appeared to be Mivins, and Smangle, and the parson, and the butcher, and the leg, over and over, and over again. There were the same squalor, the same turmoil and noise, the same general characteristics, in every corner; in the best and the worst alike. The whole place seemed restless and troubled; and the people were crowding and flitting to and fro, like the shadows in an uneasy dream. 'I have seen enough,' said Mr. Pickwick, as he threw himself into a chair in his little apartment. 'My head aches with these scenes, and my heart too. Henceforth I will be a prisoner in my own room.' And Mr. Pickwick steadfastly adhered to this determination. For three long months he remained shut up, all day; only stealing out at night to breathe the air, when the greater part of his fellow-prisoners were in bed or carousing in their rooms. His health was beginning to suffer from the

²⁰⁷ J. Lucas, *The Melancholy Man. A Study of Dickens' Novels*, cit., p. 13.

²⁰⁸ Cf. S. Marcus, *Dickens. From Pickwick to Dombey*, cit., p. 17.

²⁰⁹ Cf. J.H. Miller, *Charles Dickens. The World of His Novels*, cit., p. 31.

closeness of the confinement, but neither the often-repeated entreaties of Perker and his friends, nor the still more frequently-repeated warnings and admonitions of Mr. Samuel Weller, could induce him to alter one jot of his inflexible resolution.²¹⁰

It therefore becomes evident that Dickens strongly needs some other characters, whose optimism and spirit of reaction are much more effective, and are not to be affected by the surrounding circumstances, so that both his satire against social injustices and his active optimism can actually be given voice. This is the reason why the characters of Sam Weller and his father Tony Weller play a fundamental role in the novel.

First of all, these two characters fundamentally contribute to the satire of *The Pickwick Papers*. The fact that in his first novel Dickens effectively uses satire to address social problems should not surprise us. In his masterpiece of criticism, Gissing indeed admits that it was Dickens' habit to satirize various aspects of English life in all his novels: "his satire covers a great part of English life, public and private. Education, charity, religion, social morality in its broadest sense, society in its narrowest; legal procedure, the machinery of politics, and the forms of government"²¹¹. Wystan Auden is even more precise. He indeed overtly acknowledges that it is exactly in *The Pickwick Papers* that Dickens first experimented with a "satirical exposure"²¹² of a precise social problem. Similarly, John Killham confirms this argument in his study. He indeed admits that in *The Pickwick Papers*, as long as the story unfolds, the presence of an underlying satire becomes increasingly more evident²¹³. Finally we should not forget what we already stressed in Part 1 of this dissertation: that Chesterton himself largely praises Dickens for his spontaneously raising, like a 'mob in revolt', against whatever social injustices causing popular discontent.

Now, for what most specifically concerns the aim of this dissertation, it is important to underline that, by relying mainly on wit and sarcastic puns, satire

²¹⁰ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 44., p. 610.

²¹¹ G. Gissing, *Charles Dickens. A Critical Study*, cit., p. 107.

²¹² W.H. Auden, *Dingley Dell and the Fleet*, in Ibidem, *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays*, New York, Random House, 1962, pp. 407-428, p. 425.

²¹³ Cf. J. Killham, *Pickwick. Dickens and the Art of Fiction*, cit., p. 44.

largely depends on humour. Consequently, satire definitely involves what Chesterton defines as the *serious* side of comedy, that is to say, the possibility of using humour to treat serious matters. As a matter of fact, in Dickens' novels satire *seriously* exposes individual or social injustices to the readers by *humorously* drawing the readers' attention to this or that wicked character or merciless institution. And this is particularly true when we think about Dickens' satirical exposure of social injustices, especially in *The Pickwick Papers*, as Chesterton points out in his masterpiece *Charles Dickens*. As underlined in Part 1, Chesterton indeed recognizes that humour clearly represents a fictional 'weapon' for Dickens in his fight against social injustices²¹⁴. This is also confirmed by Victor S. Pritchett in *The Comic World of Dickens*. In his analysis of some comic episodes taken from various novels, he openly admits that Dickens rarely uses humour simply as a comic relief for the readers; on the contrary, he clarifies that many comic scenes in his novels are actually meant to express "the indignant, sermonizing, [...] revolutionary or murderous Dickens"²¹⁵.

Hence, the best 'weapon' Dickens does create in *The Pickwick Papers* is undoubtedly the Wellers' wit. Unlike most characters in the novel whose humour is just meant for fun, Sam's and Tony's wit on the contrary possesses a satirical nuance which some critics recognize in their speeches. It is Barbara Hardy who gives us the most striking confirmation of the satirical role of the Wellers. She indeed acknowledges that before the entry of the Wellers, comedy lacks a precise focus, and is just meant for pointless fun. On the contrary, once they appear, Sam and Tony do trigger the underlying satire of the novel through their constant use of sharp wit and sarcastic puns directed against social injustices²¹⁶. Another significant argument in favour of their contribution to the satire of the novel comes from Mark Wormald. He indeed points out that Samuel Weller significantly possesses the name

²¹⁴ Cf. Part 1, Ch. IV.

²¹⁵ V.S. Pritchett, *The Comic World of Dickens* (1949), in G.H. Ford and L.L. Lauriat (eds.), *The Dickens Critics*, cit., pp. 309-324, p. 309.

²¹⁶ Cf. B. Hardy, *Pickwick Papers*, cit., p. 87.

of the prophet Samuel, “the biblical index of wisdom”²¹⁷, thereby implicitly confirming that Sam’s wit often contains sharp truth.

Most remarkably, it is Dickens’ own words in the novel that effectively confirm the fact that the Wellers’ humour expresses something more than mere comical jokes. For example, while travelling in a coach, Sam and Tony sarcastically explain to Mr. Pickwick and Peter Magnus what is the real reason pushing solitary people to become turnpike keepers. Even if the reason they provide might sound weird to most readers (Tony affirms that turnpike keepers are all solitary people who have retired from the world “to reweuge themselves on mankind by takin’ tolls”²¹⁸ because of a disappointment they have met in their lives), Dickens assures his readership that all that Sam and Tony assert in the novel *does* possess “the inestimable charm of blending amusement with *instruction*”²¹⁹. In this way, Dickens makes it clear that behind their humour there is often a thorny truth. If we indeed think about the way they behave and talk in the novel, we understand that their humour implicitly reveals Dickens’ attack to social injustices. For instance, look how Sam sarcastically describes the misery of a lodging for poor in which he has allegedly slept:

‘And pray, Sam, what is the twopenny rope?’ inquired Mr. Pickwick.

‘The twopenny rope, sir,’ replied Mr. Weller, ‘is just a cheap lodgin’ house, where the beds is twopence a night.’

‘What do they call a bed a rope for?’ said Mr. Pickwick.

‘Bless your innocence, sir, that ain’t it,’ replied Sam. ‘Ven the lady and gen’l’m’n as keeps the hotel first begun business, they used to make the beds on the floor; but this wouldn’t do at no price, ‘cos instead o’ taking a moderate twopenn’orth o’ sleep, the lodgers used to lie there half the day. So now they has two ropes, ‘bout six foot apart, and three from the floor, which goes right down the room; and the beds are made of slips of coarse sacking, stretched across ‘em.’

‘Well,’ said Mr. Pickwick.

²¹⁷ M. Wormald, *Introduction to The Pickwick Papers*, cit. p. xxi.

²¹⁸ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 22., p. 295.

²¹⁹ *Ivi.* (italics is mine)

‘Well,’ said Mr. Weller, ‘the advantage o’ the plan’s obvious. At six o’clock every mornin’ they let go the ropes at one end, and down falls all the lodgers. Consequence is, that being thoroughly waked, they get up very quietly, and walk away!’²²⁰

This passage beautifully exemplifies how Dickens’ satire *seriously* operates through Sam’s wit in the novel. At the first reading, readers laugh heartily at the way Sam describes this weird lodging. But later, the terrible, haunting awareness that some poor people *do* sleep in such wretched places and *do* suffer from these terrible treatments daily remains in their minds. It is like drinking a delicious, yet too old bottle of wine: once you have finished and enjoyed the first delicious sip, the sour taste remains in your mouth. Sam’s *serious* humour functions the same way: once you have *laughed* with him, the disappointment for real-life sufferings *seriously* remain in your mind. Dickens thus assures that his readers inwardly become more inclined to welcome social improvements, and hopefully some of them will even try to carry them out in real life.

Similar examples of the way the Wellers’ humour contributes to Dickens’ satire are to be found scattered throughout the whole novel. For instance, the way Dickens talks about politics is also worth mentioning. As a matter of fact, working as a parliamentary reporter, Dickens observed that most British politicians adopt unfair, intriguing practices to obtain as many votes as possible, especially at local elections. He was so deeply struck by this fact that he strongly desired to outspokenly denounce these illegal scams in his first novel. He consequently availed himself of the effectiveness of the Wellers’ sharp wit. During the Eatanswill elections, Sam indeed sarcastically reveals to Mr. Pickwick, and thus to the readers, the subtle machineries of politics. For instance, in chapter 13, he humorously tells Mr. Pickwick about a bizarre commitment he was assigned to presumably get independent electors to vote, and about a ‘strange’ episode he witnessed at the preceding elections:

²²⁰ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 16., p. 213.

‘Fine, fresh, hearty fellows they seem,’ said Mr. Pickwick, glancing from the window.

‘Wery fresh,’ replied Sam; ‘me and the two waiters at the Peacock has been a-pumpin’ over the independent woters [those not belonging to any opposing faction] as supped there last night.’

‘Pumping over independent voters!’ exclaimed Mr. Pickwick.

‘Yes,’ said his attendant, ‘every man slept vere he fell down; we dragged ‘em out, one by one, this mornin’, and put ‘em under the pump, and they’re in reg’lar fine order now. Shillin’ a head the committee paid for that ‘ere job.’

‘Can such things be!’ exclaimed the astonished Mr. Pickwick.

‘Lord bless your heart, sir,’ said Sam, ‘why where was you half baptised?—that’s nothin’, that ain’t.’

‘Nothing?’ said Mr. Pickwick.

‘Nothin’ at all, Sir,’ replied his attendant. ‘The night afore the last day o’ the last election here, the opposite party bribed the barmaid at the “Town Arms”, to hocus the brandy-and-water of fourteen unpolled electors as was a-stoppin’ in the house.’

‘What do you mean by “hocussing” brandy-and-water?’ inquired Mr. Pickwick.

‘Puttin’ laud’num in it,’ replied Sam. ‘Blessed if she didn’t send ‘em all to sleep till twelve hours arter the election was over. They took one man up to the booth, in a truck, fast asleep, by way of experiment, but it was no go—they wouldn’t poll him; so they brought him back, and put him to bed again.’

‘*Strange practices*, these,’ said Mr. Pickwick; half speaking to himself and half addressing Sam.²²¹

What immediately strikes the readers is surely Mr. Pickwick’s absolute naivety of political scams which is beautifully expressed by the large use of exclamation and question marks. Being unaware of such tricks, Mr. Pickwick indeed continuously questions Sam who, surprised that his master does not know anything at all about these subtle machineries, humorously reveals what the ‘strange practices’ of politics are. It therefore becomes evident that Dickens is precisely using Sam’s humorous narration of the events to overtly expose these illegal scams

²²¹ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 13., pp. 173-174. (italics is mine).

to the readers. Strikingly, the fact that Sam seemingly knows much more than Mr. Pickwick completely reverses the master-servant relation. Unlike the traditional comic narratives, here it is no longer the master's wisdom which leads the clumsy servant to understand the world; on the contrary, it is exactly Sam's wit which makes Pickwick aware of the reality of things. It is therefore Sam's humour, and not Mr. Pickwick's wisdom, which actually turns out to be the voice of truth in the novel. Consequently, far from simply being a common servant, the character of Sam Weller definitely acquires a distinctively prominent role in the narrative. In his introduction to the novel, Chesterton indeed praises the overturning of the traditional master-servant relation as one of the most important innovations of *The Pickwick Papers*²²².

Another British institution which is subject to Dickens' satire in the novel is the legal system. As with politics, Dickens was well aware of the fraudulent machineries behind the British legal system since he also worked as a clerk for some solicitors for a brief period. During those years, he had the opportunity to observe how poor, humble people are the victims of unscrupulous exponents of the law, and tricked into paying exaggerated sums of money as the lawyers' fees. The most striking sub-plot in *The Pickwick Papers* indeed revolves around Mrs. Bardell's legal action against Mr. Pickwick, and his consequent resolution not to pay the legal costs. More precisely, the 'trial scene' in chapter 33 has always favourably drawn the critics' attention. Edgar Johnson was one of the first who manifestly celebrated the fundamental contribution of this scene to Dickens' satire in *The Pickwick Papers*. In his book *Charles Dickens. His Tragedy and Triumph*, Johnson indeed hails the 'trial scene' as the most effective, satirical scene of the novel²²³. As a matter of fact, in this episode Dickens plainly shows how ruthless lawyers manipulate testimonies, confuse the proofs, pester the deponents into confusion by posing disorienting questions, and lead the prosecuting attorney to take the wrong decision. Impressively, Dickens is so resolved to publicly denounce this fraudulent system that Sam's satirical humour no longer works implicitly hidden between the

²²² Cf. G.K. Chesterton, *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens*, cit., p. 22.

²²³ Cf. E. Johnson, *Charles Dickens. His Tragedy and Triumph*, cit., pp. 167-168.

lines, but outspokenly unmasks the scams with an incisiveness never used before in the novel. Once interrogated, Sam indeed does everything to reveal the machineries Dodson and Fogg adopted to trap Mr. Pickwick to the audience:

[Sam is asked to narrate his meeting with Mrs. Bardell and Mrs. Cluppins before the trial]: ‘Vith all the pleasure in life, sir,’ replied Sam. ‘Arter a few unimportant obseruations from the two wirtuous females as has been examined here to-day, the ladies gets into a very great state o’ admiration at the honourable conduct of Mr. Dodson and Fogg—they two gen’l’men as is settin’ near you now.’ This, of course, drew general attention to Dodson & Fogg, who looked as virtuous as possible.

‘The attorneys for the plaintiff,’ said Mr. Serjeant Buzfuz. ‘Well! They spoke in high praise of the honourable conduct of Messrs. Dodson and Fogg, the attorneys for the plaintiff, did they?’

‘Yes,’ said Sam, ‘they said what a verry gen’rous thing it was o’ them to have taken up the case on spec, and to *charge nothing* at all for costs, *unless they got ‘em out of Mr. Pickwick.*’

At this very unexpected reply, the spectators tittered again, and Dodson & Fogg, turning very red, leaned over to Serjeant Buzfuz, and in a hurried manner whispered something in his ear.²²⁴

Remarkably, his satirical words are so direct and clear-cut that readers no longer need a mental effort to search between the lines, and immediately laugh scornfully at this fraudulent conduct. In this scene, Sam’s satirical humour indeed achieves its maximum effectiveness, as John Lucas maintains in his book - “ [Sam’s] comic nature [...] defeats the enemy”²²⁵ - , and Dickens’ satire finally triumphs as never before in the novel. As a matter of fact, even if readers are profoundly shocked by the fact that even their idol is unjustly mistreated, and that he cannot actually do anything against this corrupt system, Dickens anyway manages to prove that laughter is the best way to beat social injustice. With the power of the satirical laughter, Sam indeed shows that it is always possible to ridicule any abuses

²²⁴ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 33, p. 465, (italics is mine).

²²⁵ J. Lucas, *The Melancholy Man. A Study of Dickens’ novels*, cit., p. 14.

and to overtly expose the underlying injustice even if everything may seem lost. It is true that Mr. Pickwick is condemned at the end of the trial, but Sam's humorous words make sure that readers will understand how the illegal scam has worked against Mr. Pickwick, and will surely remember that Pickwick is sent *unfairly* to prison. It is in a wonderful passage of literary criticism that Johnson summarizes the definite triumph of Dickens' satire at the expense of the corrupted legal system:

The sniggering scoundrelism of his foes has been exposed in a gleaming rain of ridicule. Trickery and stupidity combine to defeat the right, and nevertheless above their victory a triumphant derision soars to an annihilating vision of their moral meanness. Here, in truth, Dickens is one of the great humorists, freeing our imaginations from the bondage of respect for the sordid manipulations of the law with a laughter of ringing delight.²²⁶

In the novel, Sam and Tony Weller also personally contribute to the realization of Dickens' active optimism, namely, that kind of optimism able to bring about social reforms. As commented in Part 1, in his *Charles Dickens* Chesterton overtly defines Dickens as an optimistic reformer whose method is in illustrating all the elements which poverty and oppression cannot destroy. More specifically, in Chesterton's opinion, unlike the pessimistic, the optimistic reformer aims to describe lively individuals whose cheerfulness is not annihilated by bad events.

Now, if we indeed closely analyze the characters of Sam and Tony Weller, we cannot but admit that they are the perfect fictional embodiments of this method. As a matter of fact, unlike Mr. Pickwick whose mood is affected by the misery of the world, their innate cheerfulness and optimism are never spoiled. Illustratively, Mark Wormald describes Sam Weller as "hard-headed enough to engage in the world"²²⁷, without being harmed by its malaise. The novel indeed plainly illustrates in various passages how the optimism and good cheer of the Wellers are unaffected by the surrounding events. For instance, in a memorable passage, Sam significantly tells Mr. Pickwick how, despite all the jobs he had to change to earn his living, he still optimistically imagines he can become a privileged person one day, and how his

²²⁶ E. Johnson, *Charles Dickens. His Tragedy and Triumph*, cit., pp. 169-170.

²²⁷ M. Wormald, *Introduction to The Pickwick Papers*, cit., p. xxi.

father's good cheer cannot be ruined by his second wife's hysteria. By doing so, Sam implicitly reveals to Mr. Pickwick and the readers that optimism is definitely the Wellers' philosophy of life:

'I suppose you have hardly seen anything but chimney-pots and bricks and mortar all your life, Sam,' said Mr. Pickwick, smiling.

'I worn't always a boots, sir,' said Mr. Weller, with a shake of the head. 'I was a vaginer's boy, once.'

'When was that?' inquired Mr. Pickwick.

'When I was first pitched neck and crop into the world, to play at leap-frog with its troubles,' replied Sam. 'I was a carrier's boy at startin'; then a vaginer's, then a helper, then a boots. Now I'm a gen'l'm'n's servant. I shall be a gen'l'm'n myself one of these days, perhaps, with a pipe in my mouth, and a summer-house in the back-garden. Who knows? I shouldn't be surprised for one.'

'You are quite a philosopher, Sam,' said Mr. Pickwick.

'It runs in the family, I b'lieve, sir,' replied Mr. Weller. 'My father's wery much in that line now. If my mother-in-law blows him up, he whistles. She flies in a passion, and breaks his pipe; he steps out, and gets another. Then she screams wery loud, and falls into 'sterics; and he smokes wery comfortably till she comes to agin. *That's philosophy, Sir, ain't it?*'²²⁸

It is also rather illuminating that Sam's innate cheerfulness is not ruined even when he is in the Fleet. Incarcerated to be as close as possible to Mr. Pickwick, Sam does not retire to his cell to stay away from the prisoners' sufferings as Mr. Pickwick does. On the contrary, regardless of the fact that he is confined in a prison, he leisurely passes the whole day walking in the courtyard, drinking some glasses of wine, having fun with the other prisoners, reading newspapers, winking at girls etc. For Sam Weller, the misery of the Fleet cannot indeed affect his innate good cheer in any way:

First of all, he took a refreshing draught of the beer, and then he looked up at a window, and bestowed a platonic wink on a young lady who was peeling potatoes thereat. Then he opened the paper, and folded it so as to get the police reports

²²⁸ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 16, p. 212. (italics is mine).

outwards; and this being a vexatious and difficult thing to do, when there is any wind stirring, he took another draught of the beer when he had accomplished it. Then, he read two lines of the paper, and stopped short to look at a couple of men who were finishing a game at rackets, which, being concluded, he cried out ‘wery good,’ in an approving manner, and looked round upon the spectators, to ascertain whether their sentiments coincided with his own. This involved the necessity of looking up at the windows also; and as the young lady was still there, it was an act of common politeness to wink again, and to drink to her good health in dumb show, in another draught of the beer, which Sam did; and having frowned hideously upon a small boy who had noted this latter proceeding with open eyes, he threw one leg over the other, and, holding the newspaper in both hands, began to read in real earnest.²²⁹

Most strikingly, besides Sam and Tony Weller, Dickens also depicts many other humble individuals whose optimism is unalterable. It is exactly the optimism and good cheer characterizing the most miserable characters in *The Pickwick Papers* which indeed led Chesterton to celebrate Dickens’ optimistic method at the expense of Hardy’s or Gissing’s pessimistic outlooks. In the novel, the most significant examples of Dickens’ active optimism are indeed to be found in the pages devoted to the narration of the days Mr. Pickwick spends in the Fleet. Unlike other descriptions of prisons in other novels – as in *Oliver Twist* and in *Little Dorrit* –, in *The Pickwick Papers* Dickens keeps the most disgusting and unpleasant details in the background, and, on the contrary, attempts to emphasise the slightest glimpses of cheerfulness and optimism. As a matter of fact, except for a short description of the poor side of the prison, which strikes the readers for its hardness and for its conclusive, severe admonition – “This is no fiction.”²³⁰ –, the other shocking details are reduced to some brief hints at the dirtiness and mess abounding in the rooms and corridors:

²²⁹ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 44, p. 595.

²³⁰ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 41., p. 565.

[...] ‘Oh,’ replied Mr. Pickwick, looking down a dark and filthy staircase, which appeared to lead to a range of damp and gloomy stone vaults beneath the ground [...].

Mr. Pickwick had been eyeing the room, which was filthily dirty, and smelt intolerably close. There was no vestige of either carpet, curtain, or blind. There was not even a closet in it.²³¹

On the contrary, it really seems that, all things considered, most prisoners in the Fleet surprisingly spend the whole day amusing themselves. This is immediately noticed by Mr. Pickwick on the day of his arrival. As soon as he enters the prison, he is shocked by the leisured attitudes of most prisoners, and significantly exclaims: “ ‘It strikes me, Sam,’ said Mr. Pickwick, leaning over the iron-rail at the stair-head, ‘It strikes me, Sam, that imprisonment for debt is scarcely any punishment at all’ ”²³².

Boisterous cheerfulness is effectively what seems to dominate the atmosphere of the prison, instead of sadness and gloom. For example, let us think about Mr. Pickwick’s first roommates. They are three boisterous individuals who continuously delight in playing cards, telling fantastic tales, and drinking many alcoholics. Surprisingly, they do not represent some oddities. In his wandering through the prison, Mr. Pickwick indeed notices that mindless uproariousness is customary in the Fleet:

Mr. Pickwick peeped into them [rooms] as he passed along, with great curiosity and interest. Here, four or five great hulking fellows, just visible through a cloud of tobacco smoke, were engaged in noisy and riotous conversation over half-emptied pots of beer, or playing at all-fours with a very greasy pack of cards. In the adjoining room, some solitary tenant might be seen poring, by the light of a feeble tallow candle, over a bundle of soiled and tattered papers, yellow with dust and dropping to pieces from age, writing, [...] . And in a fourth, and a fifth, and a

²³¹ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 40, p. 544; ch. 41, p. 562.

²³² *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 40, p. 547.

sixth, and a seventh, the noise, and the beer, and the tobacco smoke, and the cards, all came over again in greater force than before.²³³

Even more striking is the fact that if one still possesses some money in the prison, one can even afford some privileges. Wystan H. Auden is one of the first who openly confirms that “for those with a little money [...], the Fleet Prison could seem a kind of Eden”²³⁴. Mr. Pickwick indeed soon understands that, as other prisoners, he can enjoy a privileged status. With the money which is left to him, Mr. Pickwick subleases a private cell from an impoverished Chancery prisoner, and adorns it with some furniture. In addition, he is even able to invite his faithful Pickwickians to his cell, and has a delicious supper with them:

[...] at three o'clock, Mr. Weller produced upon the little dining-table, a roast leg of mutton and an enormous meat-pie, with sundry dishes of vegetables, and pots of porter, which stood upon the chairs or the sofa bedstead, or where they could, everybody felt disposed to do justice to the meal, notwithstanding that the meat had been purchased, and dressed, and the pie made, and baked, at the prison cookery hard by. To these succeeded a bottle or two of very good wine, for which a messenger was dispatched by Mr. Pickwick to the Horn Coffee-house, in Doctors' Commons. The bottle or two, indeed, might be more properly described as a bottle or six, for by the time it was drunk, and tea over, the bell began to ring for strangers to withdraw.²³⁵

In short, Dickens gives the impression that for the majority of prisoners, life in prison continues as ordinarily as before. However, this impression should not mislead our interpretation of the literary greatness of the novel. As a matter of fact, Dickens was first and foremost a *popular* novelist, that is to say, a novelist siding with the oppressed. Therefore, the emphasis of the novel on cheerfulness and boisterousness of the prisoners must exclusively be interpreted as another proof of its literary greatness, and not as a nonsensical contradiction. In his *Charles Dickens*, Chesterton indeed acknowledges that one of Dickens' greatest merits was exactly

²³³ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 40, p. 547.

²³⁴ W.H. Auden, *Dingley Dell and the Fleet*, cit., p. 427.

²³⁵ *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 43, p. 591.

crowding the Fleet of living souls, instead of cadaverous, mortified individuals longing for death, as Gissing and other realist novelists did. Only by pointing out that even the most wretched in the novel preserve their cheerfulness even in the worst situations, Dickens effectively convinced his readerships that these lively individuals were worth saving. Only by stressing their liveliness outliving the surrounding misery, Dickens' optimism ultimately became *active*. In fact, although scenes of mirth and joviality surprisingly abound in the novel, they cannot nevertheless obscure the glimpses of sufferings readers can perceive from the pages. In this way, Dickens urges his readers to actively bring about social reforms in order that these living souls do not end up like the miserable Chancery prisoner who dies desolately alone at the end of chapter 43²³⁶. And in fact, as already argued in Part 1, *The Pickwick Papers* actively contributed to shut the Fleet and other debtors' prisons down. This is the reason why, in his *Charles Dickens*, Chesterton beautifully contrasts the actual effectiveness of Dickens' *active*, optimistic method with the pessimistic narrative of Gissing and Gorky with a significant, poignant argument:

Jesus Christ was destined to found a faith which made the rich poorer and the poor richer; but even when He was going to enrich them, He began with the phrase, "Blessed are the poor". The Gissings and the Gorkys say, as an universal literary motto, "Cursed are the poor." Among a million who have faintly followed Christ in this divine contradiction, Dickens stands out especially. He said, in all his reforming utterances, "Cure poverty;" but he said in all his actual descriptions, "Blessed are the poor." He described their happiness, and men rushed to remove their sorrow. He described them as human, and men resented the insults to their humanity. It is not difficult to see why, as I said at an earlier stage of this book, Dickens' denunciations have had so much more practical an effect than the denunciations of such a man as Gissing. Both agreed that the souls of the people were in a kind of prison. But Gissing said that the prison was full of dead souls. Dickens said that the prison was full of living souls. And the fiery cavalcade of rescuers felt that they had not come too late.²³⁷

²³⁶ Cf. *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 43, p. 594.

²³⁷ G.K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens*, cit., pp. 120-121.

All these wonderful passages from *The Pickwick Papers* therefore manifestly illustrate why Chesterton largely praised the greatness of Dickens' optimism. In his opinion, that kind of optimism was unique in the British literary panorama, and not even Dickens himself was able to equal it in his later novels. Hence Chesterton's belief that *The Pickwick Papers* was the greatest of Dickens' novels, the one which earned him "his deserved place at the head of English novelist past, present and presumably future as well"²³⁸.

²³⁸ L.W. Mazzeno, *The Dickens Industry. Critical Perspectives. 1836-2005*, cit., p. 48.

CONCLUSION

Similarly to Dickens', Chesterton's literary reputation was subject to hundreds of critical studies, essays, and articles which alternately delineated the strength and weakness of his arguments. Many scholars openly adhered to his positive view of Dickens' works, and echoed his arguments in their personal analyses; others, on the contrary, found his ideas obsolete in the light of new literary theories postulated in the following years, and consequently gave decidedly different portraits of Dickens. This study has however argued that, despite different opinions concerning his literary criticism, Chesterton can be positively considered one of the most authoritative voices in Dickens studies, and his arguments in particular can definitely be used for an accurate, scholarly analysis of one of Dickens' masterpieces, *The Pickwick Papers*. It was indeed Chesterton's opinion that this novel is decidedly Dickens' greatest achievement, the one which led him to hail Dickens as the greatest of all British novelists ever existed. Thanks to Chesterton's arguments, Dickens therefore emerges as a *democratic, popular, optimistic, satirical, nostalgic* novelist, and as a *great man* as well.

Chesterton's praise of Dickens' siding with the common man underlines his *democratic* spirit since Dickens strongly believed that it was possible to re-create, at least fictionally, the lost equality among all individuals. Through the discussion of the characters of Captain Boldwig, Esquire George Nupkins, and the two medical students Benjamin Allen and Bob Sawyer whose alleged superiority is *democratically* levelled by Dickens' humour, we have argued that in *The Pickwick Papers* he effectively managed to create a literary democracy crowded with *equally* funny characters.

Then, Chesterton's emphasis on the meticulous descriptions Dickens gives of each character in his novels makes him a *popular* novelist, mainly concerned with the *people*, as well. It has indeed been pointed out how Dickens undoubtedly possessed a disinterested concern for *all* the humble individuals existing in the

world. In particular, *The Pickwick Papers* is characterised by highly-individualised descriptions of each common character's individuality, especially of the characters playing a minor role. In this way, we have managed to argue that it was Dickens' intention to celebrate common, ordinary people whose existences had been drastically obscured in the preceding literary tradition. Dickens indeed believed that ordinary, humble people were much more interesting than public figures which are to be bound necessarily to strict etiquettes and rules of conduct. Consequently, this dissertation has also underlined the importance Dickens attached to the greatness which is to be found in private life.

At the same time, from the pages of this dissertation, Dickens also emerges a highly *optimistic* writer, that is to say, a strenuous upholder of the innate good and cheerfulness of people. We have indeed argued that most of his characters in *The Pickwick Papers*, such as the inhabitants of Manor Farm, the Wellers, and the prisoners in the Fleet above all, are not affected by the malaise haunting modern society, and are able to find delight in the simplest pleasures of life. Consequently, this study has investigated what Chesterton defined as Dickens' "active" optimism, namely, that kind of optimism which contributes to bring about social reforms. Dickens indeed *optimistically* believed that, unlike gloomy and disgusting details, lighter and humorous descriptions of miserable situations could implicitly push the readers to *actively* foster the amelioration of poor people's condition. So in *The Pickwick Papers* the most wretched characters surprisingly endure the most miserable situations without losing their innate cheerfulness and optimism. And actually the active optimism of the novel did prompt the rapid closure of the Fleet prison in 1846.

Furthermore, Chesterton's notion of '*serious* side of comedy', namely the possibility of using humour to treat *serious* matters, also enables us to consider Dickens as a *satirical* novelist as well. It has indeed been pointed out how in several passages of *The Pickwick Papers* Dickens availed himself of the Wellers' wit to satirize various aspects of English life. In fact, by *humorously* drawing the readers' attention to *serious* social injustices, such as illegal scams at local elections or

misbehaviours of fraudulent attorneys, Dickens managed to denounce them publicly to the readers.

Moreover, in the light of Chesterton's celebration of old 'Merry England', Dickens also proves to be a *nostalgic* writer, that is to say, devoted to the celebration of the old, happier days. We have indeed showed that Dickens understood that joy and mirth had disappeared from the modern world. Consequently, convinced that in the industrial society people were increasingly more depressed and alienated, he looked for the old mirth among those who still preserved it, namely the poor, and *nostalgically* managed to re-create this lost atmosphere in his novels, most successfully in *The Pickwick Papers*. It has thus been showed that the novel is crowded with boisterous characters animating uproarious episodes, and abounds in scenes of mirth and merry-making such as the Christmas festivity at Mr. Wardle's Manor Farm. In this way, we have definitely confirmed Chesterton's opinion that, in the "new, cold, illiberal morality" of the 19th-century world, Dickens was undoubtedly to be estimated as "the last cry of Merry England"²³⁹.

All things considered, this dissertation finally allows us to acknowledge that, thanks to his literary merits, Dickens is also to be esteemed as a *great man*. It is here indeed useful to specify that in *Charles Dickens*, not only does Chesterton hail Dickens as a great novelist, but he also praises him as a great man for his being the most brilliant embodiment in literature of "the wind of hope and humanity that was blowing"²⁴⁰ through the first part of the 19th century. In an epoch of renewed humanitarianism, moved by his innate fellow feeling, Dickens indeed looked carefully at the living conditions of the most wretched, and devoted to them the greatest space in his novels. It is indeed undeniable that his most miserable and humble characters are exactly the greatest creations in his novels. In Chesterton's opinion, Dickens indeed also turned out to be a *great man* precisely because he himself managed to make *all* his characters great in the eyes of his readers. In a memorable passage of *Charles Dickens*, Chesterton writes:

²³⁹ G.K. Chesterton, *Introduction to Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens*, cit. p. xx.

²⁴⁰ G.K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens*, cit., p. 4.

The spirit of the early century [19th century] produced great men, because it believed that men were great. It made strong men by encouraging weak men. Its education, its public habits, its rhetoric, were all addressed towards encouraging the greatness in everybody. And by encouraging the greatness in everybody, it naturally encouraged superlative greatness in some. [...] It was a world that encouraged anybody to be anything. And in England and literature its living expression was Dickens.

We shall consider Dickens in many other capacities, but let us put this one first. He was the voice in England of this humane intoxication and expansion, this encouraging of anybody to be anything. [...] No man *encouraged* his characters so much as Dickens. "I am an affectionate father," he says, "to every child of my fancy".²⁴¹

Furthermore, this dissertation also confirms some of Dickens' technical merits. The arguments of this study indeed induce us to appreciate Dickens as an *innovative* and *talented* novelist as well. His radical use of humour and huge creative power effectively never cease to amaze thousands of readers still nowadays. Remarkably, again starting from Chesterton's criticism, we have underlined how Dickens distanced himself from the coarseness of the preceding comic tradition. More precisely, it has been pointed out that he managed to use humour both to achieve serious goals, such as levelling differences between the characters or satirizing social injustices, and to create dozens of unforgettable characters. In fact, we have showed that by presenting *ordinary* people and *common* events in comic terms, Dickens managed to render them *extraordinary* and *uncommon*. For his considerable use of comic elements, Dickens was often charged with caricature and over-exaggeration; however, we have underlined that Chesterton did not doubt that Dickens' characters on the contrary realistically represented all facets of humanity existing in the world: "they are all equally ecstatic fulfillments of a separate line of development"²⁴². Dickens' characters are therefore to be considered *universal*, that is to say, universally appreciable in every age and in every place by everyone. They indeed brilliantly mirror all aspects of the human existence, from the most common

²⁴¹ *Ivi.*

²⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 109.

feelings, such as fear of death or a mother's love for his child, to the subtlest nuances of the human soul. As Sam Weller feels extremely excited when writing his valentine to Mary, so does everybody when first addressing his/her beloved.

Last but not least, this dissertation definitely proves that almost two centuries after the publication of *The Pickwick Papers*, Dickens' characters and episodes still amaze thousands of readers. Naturally, only thirty years after Dickens' death, Chesterton had already underlined the immortality of Dickens' novels. In *Charles Dickens* he affirmed that Victorian critics had wrongly considered Dickens as a novelist; on the contrary, he believed that Dickens was rather to be estimated as "a mythologist"²⁴³, especially when dealing with *The Pickwick Papers*. According to Chesterton, in his first novel Dickens had indeed been able to create everlasting characters and immortal episodes sharing "an air of endlessness"²⁴⁴ with the legendary myths about the ancient gods, and with the fairy tales²⁴⁵ of imaginary creatures typical of the folkloristic literature. Therefore, let us conclude this dissertation with a quotation from Chesterton in which he outspokenly celebrates the inexhaustible appeal of *The Pickwick Papers*, and expresses his wonder in front of the magical, astonishing power of Dickens' books:

All who love Dickens have a strange sense that he is really inexhaustible. It is this fantastic infinity that divides him even from the strongest and healthiest romantic artists of a later day—from Stevenson, for example. I have read *Treasure Island* twenty times; nevertheless I know it. But I do not really feel as if I knew all *Pickwick*; I have not so much read it twenty times as read in it a million times; and it almost seemed as if I always read something new. We of the true faith look at each other and understand; yes, *our master was a magician*. I believe the books are alive; I believe that leaves still grow in them, as leaves grow on the trees. I believe that this fairy library flourishes and increases like a fairy forest: but the world is listening to us, and we will put our hand upon our mouth.²⁴⁶

²⁴³ Ibidem, p. 38.

²⁴⁴ Ibidem, p. 37.

²⁴⁵ Cf. G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, cit., pp. 71-100, Fairy tales also occupy an important place in Chesterton's reflection on the Christian orthodoxy. In a memorable passage of *Orthodoxy*, he indeed writes: "[...] the things I believe most now, are the things called fairy tales", p. 76.

²⁴⁶ G.K. Chesterton, *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens*, cit., p. xx. (italics is mine).

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