

Stefan Welz / Elmar Schenkel (eds.)

Dickens on the Move

Travels and Transformations

Charles Dickens



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EDITION

Preface

„I have read the *Pickwickians* by Dickens“, Flaubert wrote to George Sand on 12th July 1872. “Do you know it? There are wonderful parts in it, but what a deficient sort of composition! It’s like that with all English writers, except for Walter Scott, they don’t have any idea of structure. For us Romans, this is insupportable.”

It is exactly this, however, which interests us today in Dickens: his apparent lack of form and elusiveness in terms of fixing characters, plots and settings. Or, to put it more positively, his flexibility (responding to both commercial needs and those of the readership), his sense of movement, is decisive, whether in his fictional characters or in himself. Ignoring the classical unities that had already been undermined by Shakespeare and his contemporaries, Dickens seems to continue a British tradition in which dynamism and movement are central.

This is why we decided to celebrate Dickens’s bicentenary in 2012 with lectures and essays on aspects relating to the author (and his characters and fictions) ‘on the move’. Obviously, we also wanted to point out his enormous topicality. Simply – the fact that he has reached the 21st century without the loss in stature of many other classic authors – implies that he is still (maybe even more so today than ever), speaks to us, whether we discuss the financial crises, pollution or, indeed, travel.

We asked our contributors to shed light on Dickens’s own movements in geographical terms. Where and how did he travel? Does this enrich our understanding of his works? How are France, the United States of America, or Italy represented? But Dickens is much more than a tourist; he also travels between the social classes and is able to do this due to his extreme empathy. In his works, the classes come into contact with each other and this makes ‘travel’ between them necessary, especially if the Victorian compromise is to be achieved. This kind of imaginary movement crosses fossils and stratifications produced by neglect and ignorance or hardheartedness. Legal systems collide with the needs of life and emotions, as in *Bleak House*. Commercialism and philanthropy are juxtaposed and clash with simplicity and innocence. And this movement also holds true for genres: Fairy tales permeate the city, the essay starts walking or reflects on its own nature, journalism informs the imagination and vice versa. And, everywhere, there is movement, motion between characters and readers, as they are appalled or mesmerised. In this sense, we should like to explore a fundamental aspect of Dickens’s work – the idea of movement – across classes and countries, characters and texts.

The present volume unites the contributions provided for a conference held by the English Department of Leipzig University in October 2012. The articles are separated into the three categories of Geography, Adaptation and Reception. Be it in a physical, imaginary or virtual sense, notions of space and time and change are fundamental to all of these categories. This provides the link to the narrative stage of Dickens's texts and biography where acts of movement, exchange, and transformation are perpetually performed. The first section, under the heading 'Geography', unites articles in which aspects of travel in Dickens's work and life provide central themes. The fields of the contributors' interest stretch out from the streets of London to the Mediterranean city of Marseilles, from Italy across the Atlantic Ocean to America, thus encompassing most of the scope of Dickens's actual travels.

In his article, **Elmar Schenkel** discovers London as the 'capital of walking' with famous practitioners and writers, such as John Gray, William Hazlitt, Robert Louis Stevenson, G.K. Chesterton and, most relevant in this context, Charles Dickens. Dickens walked along nocturnal streets, visited cemeteries and experienced the contradictory relationship of creativity and threat in the emerging English metropolis. Although an involuntary night bird, Dickens's insomnia fed his literary curiosity. The article draws on passages from texts such as *Sketches by Boz* (1836), *The Uncommercial Traveller* (1860) and uncollected texts in *Household Words*. Schenkel situates Dickens, his reflections and sources within a broader cultural context of night and sleep, the city and the journey, of walking and literary reflections on these topics.

Stefan Lampadius retraces Dickens's experiences of his first American journey from the controversial *American Notes* (1842). He is particularly interested in the genesis of Dickens's reformist ideals which increasingly came into conflict with the writer's first-hand experience of the New World. Dickens, who did not tire of visiting prisons and asylums, saw, in the beginning of his travel, America as a utopia. Over the course of the journey, contradictions and controversy gained the upper hand and the positive notion gave way to a dystopian view which dominates the travel account. Lampadius points out that Dickens's American travelogue shows the narrative transformation of his long-standing interest in reforming institutions and administration through a very opinionated form of travel writing. The article is enriched with much contextual information and draws on examples from contemporary cultural history.

Maria Fleischhack's scrutiny of *Little Dorrit* (1857) with its setting in England and the South reveals a link between architecture and character construction in this Dickensian novel. She convincingly proves that, in the text, geography is

used to reflect and define characters and that certain buildings correspond to mind sets and behaviours. This narrative practice bestows several layers of meaning to places and consequently to characters too. Since there are many more instances in which Dickens creates palimpsestic localities and identities it is justified to speak of it as a special narrative technique in his novels.

Stefan Welz reads Dickens's atypical travel book *Pictures from Italy* (1846) as an important step in the biography and literary career of the great Victorian writer. A contextualized evaluation of this long-neglected text elucidates three challenges which Dickens had to face when travelling south. A personal challenge resulted from shortcomings in his education and he had to cope with lingering elitist notions of the traditional Grand Tour. A more literary challenge can be seen in Dickens's dealing with the conventions of the literary genre of travel literature. Last but not least, in comparing Dickens's earlier American travel account with the Italian one, a cultural challenge becomes evident. Dickens returned from Italy as a gentleman-traveller who was ready to pursue his literary career in a self-assured way freed from some of his former complexes.

The second section, under the heading 'Adaptation', deals with recent transformations and re-writings of Dickens's texts – or material (as we might say these days). Such new texts, films or other media products are proof of Dickens's continued popularity and fascination. These qualities are deeply rooted in Dickens's practice of blending mass entertainment and moralistic claims. The gap between the original and the new product appears most often as a dimension of conflict and contradiction.

Franziska Burstyn analyzes Dickens's adaptations within the conflicting contexts of classic and mass media products. She examines two animated Disney films which are loosely adapted from Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and *A Christmas Carol* respectively. The emphasis in her article is placed on the question of how these literary sources have been made accessible to a younger audience. Therefore, Burstyn explores the relationship between Dickens's work and nineteenth century children's literature, which share similarities with regard to their portrayal of the Victorian child. She points out that the publication practices of Dickens's timeless classics were very attractive to a child audience and, later on, allowed for their integration into the expected conventions of Disney family entertainment. This perspective helps to explain Dickens's attractiveness for publishers of children's literature although he only rarely contributed to this genre in his time.

Franziska Kohlt dedicates her article to Dickens's fascination with Christmas – most popularly expressed in his *Christmas Carol in Prose* (1843). Her highly original reading relates this text to the Victorian scientific discourse on

other worlds and dimensions, theories of vision and cognition. The character of Scrooge undertaking a self-reflective journey through time serves as a central focus. The protagonist's relocation in time acts as a narrative device to trigger the process of self-exploration and reflection. In this way a re-evaluation of the traveller's relationship to his environment facilitates the self-improvement, which is the journey's ultimate goal. Scrooge is seen alongside other Victorian fantastic travellers to strange times and dimensions – such as those in Wells's *Time Machine*, Abbott's *Flatland* or Carroll's *Alice* novels – and within the literary tradition of cathartic dream-voyages. In *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens forges a link between the past and modernity, not only on a narrative and historical level, but also between the novel and its readers.

Luise Wolf investigates Richard Flanagan's novel *Wanting* (2009) in order to highlight postcolonial and Neo-Victorian issues. The Australian author sees Dickens as a problematic personality troubled by personal unhappiness and blows of destiny. All this becomes manifest in Dickens's acting in the Wilkie Collins play *The Frozen Deep*, which serves as a valve for his emotions. Over the course of the events depicted, Dickens becomes dangerously involved in his own narratives. Flanagan's novel confidently mixes fact and fiction. In telling Dickens's story alongside that of Mathinna, an Aborigine girl from Tasmania, *Wanting* follows a strategy of juxtaposition that can be found in many postcolonial novels. Such a paralleling reminds us of the deep interconnection of Britain and its former colonies and highlights the inequality inherent in this relationship. Linking Mathinna's fate with the biographies of George Augustus Robinson and governor Sir John Franklin, the Franklin Arctic expedition and Dickens's acting in a play about it, readers are invited to reconstruct a different course of history.

'Reception', in the sense of carrying meaning from one place to another, from one epoch to another, involves a change of chronological and spatial dimensions. These creative acts of dislocation are the focus of the final section of this compilation.

In her article, **Anna Wille** asks what sort of a man has Dickens been imagined to be and how does this colour the writing about his art? Her observations are centred around G. K. Chesterton's monograph on *Charles Dickens* (1906). In this oeuvre, not only do characters created by Dickens take on a peculiar new kind of life, but the historical Charles Dickens is moved far beyond the original texts he created, to become a character himself. Thinking about Chesterton's Dickens entails thinking about other people's versions of Dickens also. Thus, Wille sketches a small map showing some intersections between Dickens and Chesterton scholarship and beyond. Chesterton is weighed against other important Dickens critics

such as George Gissing, Edmund Wilson and George Orwell. Wille works out the differences in the way the idea of Dickens's unique character has been reflected in criticism and biography and to what extent this image is shaped by his mass appeal.

Luise Egbert's contribution pursues a twofold aim: Based on an analysis of Charles Dickens's novel *Oliver Twist* she investigates literary possibilities of the representation of 'poverty'. Here she reaches out from the historical debate eddying around the publication of the novel in 1838 to recent discussions on precarious lives and new poverty in a modern globalized world. In the second part of her article, Egbert shows how Dickens's theme of a poor, parentless child has travelled into the present. This is the case in Vikas Swarup's novel *Q & A* (2005) which was successfully adapted as the Oscar-winning film *Slumdog Millionaire* in 2008. The article confirms the fact that Dickens's topics still claim an increased attention in various fields of today's scholarship as well as in literature.

Dietmar Böhnke speaks about the very special and privileged relationship between Charles Dickens and the German publisher Christian Bernhard Tauchnitz and his famous Leipzig-based collection of works by English and American authors. Based on some recently discovered letters, Böhnke draws a vivid picture of an unusual friendship and reveals some biographical aspects which are often marginalized, or even forgotten, in representative Dickens biographies. Next to the description of the Tauchnitz enterprise and its international importance, Dickens's relationship with Germany is re-evaluated, including the little-known episode of sending his son Charles Dickens Jr. (better known as Charley) to Leipzig for almost two years in 1853-4.

Max Hübner sheds light on the relationship between Charles Dickens and New Zealand, although the novelist never set foot on the islands. Hübner claims that the perception and admiration for Dickens's works started simultaneously with the British settlement in the 1840s. The links are manifold and of a mutual nature since Dickens wrote articles about New Zealand and Australia for his magazines *All the Year Round* and *Household Words* while Dickens enthusiasts founded a Society in Auckland and, later on, established one of the most complete libraries in the world collecting Dickens's works and related material of scholarship. But the relationship of these countries is not purely historical. Contemporary literary adaptations, such as *Mister Pip*, Lloyd Jones's celebrated literary re-examination of *Great Expectations* of 2006, demonstrate an ongoing interest and inspiration although, in a postcolonial context, it has become much more critical than it had been in the beginning.

All in all, these essays not only show that Dickens himself was constantly on the move, but that he kept moving others as well. First of all, his characters, second, his readers, third, the creative people who turned his imaginative material

into other works or adapted it to other media, and last, but not least, the critics who had to adapt their theories and speculations vis-à-vis a constantly changing literary phenomenon that has been as evasive as Dickens has been surprisingly modern and even postmodern. By slightly altering what Hemingway said about the French capital – replace “Paris” by “Dickens” – we could say: If you are lucky enough to have read the works of Charles Dickens as a young person, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for Dickens is a moveable feast.

Elmar Schenkel

Stefan Welz