

"CHARLES DICKENS AS ESSAYIST IN
THE UNCOMMERCIAL TRAVELLER."

By Keith Lloyd Barrett

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Departement of English
McGill University
Montreal, P.Q.

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Author: Keith Lloyd Barrett.

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Summary

A brief introduction seeks to justify the choice of subject matter for the paper. The remainder of the paper consists of four chapters. As so little is known generally about the essays, the first chapter deals with their early history and Dickens's magazine, All the Year Round, in which they first appeared.

The other chapters deal with the topics of the essays, their form or structure, and the elements of Dickens's style, together with the overall tone of the essays. They study the wide range of subject matter, the skilful variations of form, the modulations of tone, and the pleasing style that stems from the clever use of a formidable assortment of stylistic elements, and try to assess the literary merit of the essays.

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INTRODUCTION

The Uncommercial Traveller does not appear on a large number of the lists that reputedly contain all the major works of Charles Dickens. None omits Sketches by Boz, which first brought the author to the attention of the public as a writer of considerable promise. It deserves the popularity that it enjoys, but the relative obscurity of the Uncommercial Traveller seems inexplicable, since it was written by a more mature Dickens and contains many essays that are, at least, as good as the best in Sketches by Boz. Admirers of Dickens, as yet unacquainted with this work, will, on acquaintance, almost certainly be puzzled by the scant attention given to it in recent times.

Although Forster devotes little space to the Uncommercial Traveller, his comments on it are favourable and he writes with enthusiasm of two essays in particular. In referring to "Tramps" and "Shy Neighbourhoods," he writes, "For delightful observation both of country and town, for the wit that finds analogies between remote and familiar things, and for humorous personal sketches and experience, these are perfect of their kind."¹

Mary Pendered, who thinks highly of the literary merits of the book, persuasively suggests a reason for students of

¹John Forster, Life of Dickens (London, 1966), II, 232.

Dickens to read the book:

I am of the opinion that the mere casual reader of Dickens is simply entertained by his story and the actors in it. He does not recognise, behind their superb conception, the masterly art and magic colouring of their background.

Thus, when we get away from his characters, and the drama in which they are involved, we are, perhaps, able to give more attention to his other great qualities as a writer and appreciate more clearly where his necromantic powers lay.²

Forster points out that Dickens relied considerably on experiences from his own life for the material of the book. As a result the reader often gets intimate glimpses of Dickens that can be of assistance when he returns to the novels. Literary considerations apart, the Uncommercial Traveller still offers fruitful reading. Throughout his career Dickens directed much of his attention to existing social evils and the means of correcting them. Many of the essays centre on these concerns, and though the literary quality of some of the work suffers as a result, the reader can hardly avoid experiencing the impact that derives from viewing the less fortunate segment of Victorian society through the eyes of a sympathetic, acutely observant, and talented writer.

Very few critics deal with the Uncommercial Traveller, and those who do usually restrict themselves to a few favourable comments. It is because of this neglect of what is essentially

²"The Firm of Human Interest Brothers," Dickensian, XXXIII (Summer, 1937), 245. Earlier issues of the Dickensian carried the season of publication whereas more recent ones carry the month. The footnotes will follow the same pattern.

a fine series of essays that I feel justified in regarding them as eminently suitable for consideration in this paper.

I

In view of the widespread ignorance surrounding the very existence of the Uncommercial Traveller, it seems necessary to give an account of the background of the work, as a prelude to the discussion of it in critical terms.

The origin of the book is closely involved with the weekly magazine, All the Year Round, because the articles contained in the book were first written as contributions to the magazine. The magazine owed its creation to a rift between Dickens and his publishers, Bradbury and Evans. The rift stemmed from the bitterness Dickens felt about the exclusion from Punch magazine of a statement that he had made concerning his separation from his wife. The two men were the publishers of Punch, and so Dickens regarded the omission as an act of betrayal by men who had been friends as well as business partners. He decided, therefore, that he would discontinue all associations with the pair.

Bradbury and Evans had been co-producers with Dickens of the weekly publication, Household Words, and as proof of his intentions Dickens asked, through John Forster, that the two men sell their quarter share of the venture to him. Since the magazine was highly successful they refused and made considerable efforts to placate Dickens. Dickens maintained his position and in an effort to make the position of Bradbury and Evans untenable he announced his intention to establish a rival magazine of similar

format. Most of the staff of Household Words, including William Wills, the general manager, indicated their intention to go along with Dickens. Bradbury and Evans were aware that if Dickens carried through his plan Household Words would flop financially and so they took legal action in an attempt to restrain him. In March of 1859 judgment was handed down to the effect that the property should be sold by public auction and appropriate division made of the proceeds. By secretly arranging for Forster and another friend of his to bid separately on his behalf, Dickens disguised his efforts to acquire the property, and so managed to acquire it for a very reasonable price.¹

Dickens attached considerable importance to the choice of titles for his writings and he made no exception with regard to the proposed new magazine. Several possible titles were considered and rejected by Dickens before he thought of one that seemed satisfactory. Forster pointed out, however, that the title would strike the public as being ludicrously inappropriate in view of his recent, well-publicised separation from his wife. Rather reluctantly Dickens conceded that Household Harmony would not be suitable under the circumstances.

Forster, who mentions the incident in his biography of Dickens, relates the circumstances surrounding the eventual

¹Mentioned by Edgar Johnson in Charles Dickens His Tragedy and Triumph (Boston, 1952), II, 945.

choice of a title by Dickens:

Still the great want was the line from Shakespeare, which at last exultingly he sent on 28 January. 'I am dining early, before reading, and literally with my mouth full. But I have just hit upon a name that I think really an admirable one—especially with the quotation before it, in the place where our present H.W. stands. "The story of our lives, from year to year."—Shakespeare.

All the Year Round.
A weekly journal conducted by C.D."²

The first issue of the magazine appeared on April 30, 1859. It contained, as personal contributions by Dickens, the initial instalment of Tale of Two Cities and a short piece, "The Poor Man and His Beer." After the last installment of the novel appeared in November of the same year, a serialised version of Woman in White by Wilkie Collins started its run. All contributions to the magazine's predecessor had been published anonymously, but here the feature writers were acknowledged. Subsequently, two other works of Collins, No Name and Moonstone, made their initial appearance in the magazine, and other prominent writers of the time, such as Lord Lytton and Charles Lever, contributed serialised works. Dickens also offered the public its first look at Great Expectations through the magazine. He had planned to bring it out in book form, but a sag in the circulation of the magazine forced him to reconsider.

Apart from the two novels, Dickens's contributions to the magazine consisted of miscellaneous shorter pieces, as well

²Life of Dickens, II, 228.

as annual Christmas stories, a feature that had been extremely popular in the earlier magazine. Among the more popular of the shorter items was the series of essays that he wrote under the guise of the Uncommercial Traveller.

Despite the pseudonym that Dickens adopted, he was undoubtedly appreciative of the financial benefits that accrued from the popularity of the series. He continued the series far longer than he had originally planned because of his realisation that it helped to boost the sales of the magazine. His title is justified, however, by virtue of his genuine concern for the underprivileged members of society whose plight and needs he championed in many of the essays. Dickens's combination of business acumen and philanthropic inclinations were probably fully appreciated by the man who Dickens reputedly admired enough to use as the model for the title that he adopted.

A contemporary of Dickens, George Moore pursued a successful career as a commercial traveller, and when Dickens first became acquainted with him he was an executive of the "Guild of Commercial Travellers." Men engaged in his occupation were generally regarded as being primarily concerned with their own material interests, but Moore, along with his associates in the guild, had done so much to assist the needy that Dickens was moved to express his admiration in glowing terms. In a speech delivered at a banquet of the "Guild of Commercial Travellers," Dickens referred to

Moore as "a synonym for integrity, enterprise, public spirit and benevolence."³ The particular basis for the compliment by Dickens was the prominent role played by Moore in establishing and running the Royal Commercial Schools. The idea for such a school, which would care for and educate the needy children of commercial travellers who had died or who were unable to work, originated with another commercial traveller, John Guffley, but Moore was the driving force behind the scheme.

The first school opened at Wanstead in Essex, but the demands for entrance increased rapidly, necessitating a move to more spacious quarters at Pinner in Middlesex during 1855. Even these new accommodations were soon taxed to the limit, and regular alterations and additions had to be made. Eventually the school had a maximum capacity of four hundred. Dickens admired the humane manner in which the children were treated, and after a visit to Pinner he remarked that the youngsters were as "healthy, cheerful, easy, and rational, under a system of moral restraint far better than all the physical force that ever crushed a timid nature, and never bent a stubborn one."⁴ He also showed his appreciation by taking time out from his busy schedule to preside at several annual banquets of the guild.

³Quoted by W.H.Drayton, "The Uncommercial Traveller and the Royal Commercial Travellers' Schools," Dickensian, LVIII (May, 1961), 118-120.

⁴Ibid., p.118.

An anonymous correspondent of the Pictorial World wrote:

"That hater and staunch opponent of all shams—Charles Dickens—took an active interest in these schools, and several times presided at the anniversary dinners; indeed he adopted his title The Uncommercial Traveller from the fact of his connection with the friends of this institution."⁵ Forster, however, states specifically that Moore provided the inspiration for the title. The latter opinion receives support from a passage in a letter that Dickens wrote to Moore. Dickens was replying to an invitation to chair the 1859 festival banquet of the guild, and said in part, "I am so much occupied that I believe nothing less than your note would have induced me to undertake the chairmanship."⁶

Regardless of the correct view it can be safely assumed that Dickens saw a sufficiently close analogy between what Moore and the other commercial travellers were doing and his own aims in writing the articles to justify his choice of a title. In one of his speeches to a gathering of commercial travellers, he said:

Gentlemen, we should remember tonight that we are all travellers, and that every round we take converges nearer to our home; that all our little journeys bring us together to one certain end; and that the good that we do, and the virtues that we show, and particularly the children that we rear, survive us through the long and unknown perspective of time.⁷

⁵The letter appeared in the issue of November 2, 1878, and is cited in the article by Drayton.

⁶Drayton, p. 118.

⁷Ibid., p. 118.

Dickens used the metaphor of life as a journey to identify himself with his audience of commercial travellers. Despite the fact that their occupation was usually associated with material self-interest, these men had shown an uncommon concern for their less fortunate fellow-travellers. Dickens expected to benefit financially from writing the series of articles, but he was also prompted by the same altruism that had induced the commercial travellers to engage in charitable activities. Many of the articles reveal the considerable pains Dickens took to acquaint himself with the problems of the needy and the powerful advocacy he exercised on their behalf. The means were different but Dickens shows in the Uncommercial Traveller that, like Moore and his associates, he did enough for his less favoured fellow-men to warrant having the emphasis placed on the uncommercial aspect of his travels.

The first article by Dickens under his title of the Uncommercial Traveller appeared in All the Year Round on April 21, 1860. Dickens had apparently indicated to the magazine's subscribers that the series would commence in April, and a letter to Wills, dated March 28, 1860, reveals how anxious he was to honour the commitment. In part, he says, "There is not a hope of my doing the "Uncommercial" in time for Saturday's American Mail"⁸. . . . The

⁸ An American firm paid Dickens and his partner, Wills, 1000 annually for the rights to publish an American issue of All the Year Round.

"Uncommercial" being announced, I am very unwilling to postpone it as to England. Can we make up the No. without it, for America, and afterwards re-make it up, with it, for this country?"⁹

During 1860 a total of seventeen papers in the series appeared in All the Year Round. The response to the series was encouraging enough for Dickens to publish them in book form in December of the same year, with the following preface, "These papers have been received with very great favour by the Public, and are here reprinted in a convenient form. The series is, for the time, complete; but it is the Uncommercial Traveller's intention to take to the road again before winter sets in."¹⁰

The author kept his promise "to take to the road again," for further papers by the Uncommercial Traveller appeared in All the Year Round, and in 1866 a second edition of the book was published, containing eleven articles that had not been in the previous edition. Between 1866 and 1869 Dickens completed the last nine papers, and also made changes in some of the earlier ones. The "Illustrated Library Edition" appeared posthumously in 1875 and carried the entire series, except "A Fly-Leaf in a Life," which was one of the last papers he had written. The distinction of carrying the complete series of thirty seven papers goes to the "Gads-hill Edition" of 1890.

⁹From one of Dickens's letters to Wills, included by R.C. Lehmann in Charles Dickens as Editor (London, 1912), p. 276.

¹⁰Charles Dickens, "Preface to the 1st. Edition of the Uncommercial Traveller."

We have the author's own words to attest to the popularity of the papers in his own time, and the fact that four editions of the collected papers appeared between 1860 and 1890 substantiates his statement. Much of the appeal may have stemmed from the topical nature of some of the issues with which they are concerned, but many of the articles are on topics that have enduring appeal, and besides, even in dealing with the problems peculiar to his time, Dickens never entirely subordinated his literary talents to his interest in social ills.

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II

When Dickens wrote the series of essays composing the Uncommercial Traveller he was approaching fifty and already had behind him a broad range of experiences in various countries, and at different social levels. As a result he had far more than the normal range of possibilities available to him in the choice of topics for his essays. The choices he made were, no doubt, influenced to a large extent by the readership to which he addressed himself. Regardless of the extent of this influence, however, his choice of subject matter and his treatment of it must have reflected his own concerns and attitudes. It follows that an examination of the essays from this point of view can afford valuable insights into the kind of person he was.

The contents of the essays provide further opportunities for expanding this knowledge. In the case of the novels the characters form a buffer between Dickens and his readers, and it is very difficult to determine to what extent any of the characters represent his own attitudes. In the essays he speaks directly to his readers. Although the degree of intimacy varies with the nature of the topic he is discussing, all of them are personal to some degree and he invites the readers to share his experiences, his moods, and his most private thoughts. He also advances opinions that reveal a range of feelings from admiration to rank disgust. In such circumstances readers can hardly help gaining a

greater knowledge and understanding of the author.

The essays offer more than this increased understanding of the author. They provide shrewd glimpses of facets of life in an important historical period, by a writer whose perspective is sharply focused. The result of this focus is a sympathetic recognition of the people involved as participants in the life of an age that relates more meaningfully to our own times.

At this point certain limitations of the usefulness of the essay in the respects that have been mentioned need to be noted. The essay, because of its restricted length, cannot treat any topic with the same exhaustiveness as some other literary genres. No one essay can offer a comprehensive knowledge of the author's position on a major issue. This drawback is somewhat mitigated in the Uncommercial Traveller by the fact that Dickens deals with some of his chief concerns in a number of essays.

The term 'essay' implies an attempt or trial, and very often the views expressed by the essayist constitute initial impressions that could conceivably undergo later revision. Since, however, the essays of this series are the products of Dickens in his most mature period, the views they express are likely to have been far less susceptible to modification than had they been written at an earlier stage. In any case, even as records of the author's views at a certain point in time, they would still be valuable.

In one of the essays in the Uncommercial Traveller, "On an Amateur Beat," Dickens refers to the often predetermined routes that he followed on his walks about London as his beats. The comprehensive territory covered by these beats provides the background material for the majority of the essays in the series. Although Dickens was primarily interested in the human activities around him, his sharp eyes missed very little even beyond the human, with the result that the essays also include delightful observations on places and animals. Mary Dickins, no doubt prompted by the detailed picture of a portion of life in Victorian London that the essays offer, says:

. . . . Dickens, who had escaped the squalor of life in the poorer part of London, found that he could write with most ease when he could steep himself again in the atmosphere of those early days; the world of his imagination and London were one and the same thing, and in that sense Dickens loved his London and immortalised it.¹

The London that Dickens immortalises in the essays was not familiar to the aristocracy or the wealthy, but Dickens had become acquainted with it early in life because of poverty. It is the London of struggling lawyers in dusty chambers; of a pair of young doctors sacrificing their lives in the service of sick children; of pimps and prostitutes using every ruse to separate sailors from their earnings; and of poverty so acute that

¹"Dickens Self-Revealed," Dickensian, XLII (June, 1946), 132.

a woman can say, "The rent is hard upon us. It's rose upon us too, now,—sixpence a week,—on account of these new changes in the law, about the rates. We are a week behind; the landlord's been shaking and rattling at that door frightfully; he says he'll turn us out. I don't know what's to come of it."² The London that Dickens writes about in the essays is a world in which people are differentiated by age, occupations, idiosyncrasies of appearance and personality, and a variety of other means, but they are all linked by the common bond of poverty or near-poverty.

Much of the fascination of the essays on London stems not only from the apparent imaginative powers of Dickens, but also from the fact that many of the characters he describes are essentially fascinating. Mary Dickins remarks that the English of Dickens's time were a people "whose history was scarcely less astonishing than that of the Elizabethans."³ The people whose lives Dickens describes and interprets are a part of that history, and in the Uncommercial Traveller they emerge as very real beings responding to life in a multiplicity of ways, all understandably human.

London probably exercised a greater influence on the imagination of Dickens than any other place, but a glance through

²Uncommercial Traveller, p. 379. This and subsequent references to the text are derived from the Centenary Edition (London, 1911).

³"Dickens Self-Revealed," p. 132.

the essays indicates that various other places attracted his attention and stimulated his imagination. Six of the essays are on topics that can be identified with locations in parts of Britain outside of London. "Tramps" suggests Dickens's wide-ranging knowledge of the country, since it deals with an assortment of itinerant workers and beggars that he encounters in different parts of the country. The article is somewhat reminiscent of the Elizabethan rogue literature that Harman, Greene, Dekker, and many less well-known writers produced.

The first essay of the series, "Shipwreck," gives a brief description of a small town on the Welsh coast that provides an appropriate setting for the sombre details that follow. Dickens spent seven years of his childhood at Chatham and the town, situated on the estuary of the Medway, figures prominently in two of the essays. In "Chatham Dockyard" he clearly identifies the town, but in the other he uses the name Dullborough, also the title of the essay, to disguise its identity. The name is used with similar intentions in Sketches by Boz. A seaside resort town is similarly disguised as Namelesston, most likely because of the extremely unflattering description of one of its restaurants.

Nostalgia for the stage-coaches, which were rapidly being driven out of existence by the railroads, probably impelled Dickens to visit a decaying town that had flourished in the heyday of the stage-coaches. The trip prompted "An Old Stage-Coaching

House," in which he uses a number of incidents to convey the impression of a town rapidly deteriorating.

W.J. Carlton marshalls ample evidence to support his opinion that Newbury is the town described in the essay.⁴ In a letter published in the following issue of the Dickensian, Pansy Pakenham challenges the theory on the grounds that Dickens more likely created a composite from his impressions of several towns that had been affected by the decline of the stage-coaching business. Her view does not seem convincing, particularly as available evidence suggests that the essays describe specific experiences of the author, and that Dickens took liberties with facts only to the extent necessary for disguising identities, or protecting persons that he mentioned from possible repercussions.⁵ In any case Miss Pakenham shows a lack of confidence in her theory by proposing Beaconsfield as a more likely choice, if Dickens did have a specific place in mind.

Dickens travelled extensively in Europe, and some of the essays reflect the fact. "Travelling Abroad" describes a journey by coach and by mule through France and the Swiss Alps. At the end the reader discovers that the trip is a fanciful daydream conjured up by Dickens while he cosily relaxes in one of the lux-

⁴"Dickens's 'Old Stage-Coaching House'," Dickensian, LIV (January, 1958), 13-20.

⁵One such instance, involving "A Small Star in the East," is cited later in this chapter.

urious coaches that he has gone to inspect on behalf of a friend. Still, the intimate knowledge of the geographical features and the people, which the article reveals, could only have stemmed from first-hand acquaintance, and the essay is as engaging as any on the subject of travel.

"In the French-Flemish Country" is another essay that draws its material from the author's European travels. In a few deft sentences Dickens catches the atmosphere of the flat countryside and then turns his attention to the simple modes of entertainment enjoyed by the people. He relates also, two highly comical incidents involving a troupe of itinerant entertainers whom he encounters during his visit. "The Italian Prisoner" highlights the gratitude of a former political prisoner towards his English benefactor. In the process of dealing with his chief issue Dickens touches briefly on Italian politics and also provides an interesting account of the problems a traveller can encounter in journeying through Europe, especially when he is accompanied by a suspiciously huge wine cask. Both "The Calais Night Mail" and "Medicine Men of Civilisation" also make incidental use of Dickens's experiences.

Although Dickens went on a number of lecture tours in North America, those travels did not provide a major topic for any of the essays. A few essays, however, contain references that indicate his familiarity with America. In "Wapping Workhouse,"

he mentions a cheerful widow in her nineties, who seems strikingly out of place in the company of the other occupants of a ward for elderly women, and he reflects that, "At Boston, in the State of Massachusetts, this poor creature would have been tended in her own room, and would have had her life assimilated to a comfortable life out of doors" (p. 30). "Aboard Ship" deals mainly with a voyage between New York and Liverpool, but it starts with the random musings of Dickens as he stands on the ship's deck watching the preparations for departure. In the course of his reverie he thinks back to the wetness of the past New England spring and wonders at the North American passion for flowers.

The only title that suggests prime concern with a feature of American life turns out to be very misleading. The essay, titled "The Boiled Beef of New England," has nothing to do with the cuisine of New Englanders. The article deals with the traditional tendency of the upper classes in England to treat the working class with condescending paternalism, and gives an account of the author's visit to a well-run canteen, one of a chain that workers had been allowed to operate on their own. He sees these places as symbols of change in the paternalistic attitude, hence the New England of the title. (The only things American mentioned in the article are the stoves used in the canteen).

Like most landlubbers, Dickens appears to have found sea voyages an extremely unsettling experience, yet he creates out of his misery two powerful essays in the series, "Aboard Ship" and "The Calais Night Mail." Ports afforded a more comfortable vantage point from which the author could indulge the associations that the sea had for him. Ronald Rigg refers to one of these associations, "Throughout his life Dickens was fascinated by what ports and roadsteads revealed to him of the results of man's heroic contest with the sea."⁶ The statement has support in "Poor Mercantile Jack," where Dickens refers to the hardships and dangers that sailors face, and it is his admiration for the invaluable functions that they serve under such circumstances that prompts the investigation into the ways in which they are exploited ashore, which he relates in the article.

The sea represented a link with the exotic, far-away places of his early reading, and so in "Bound for the Great Salt Lake," he says, "Possibly the parrots don't know, possibly they do, that Down by the Docks is the road to the Pacific Ocean, with its lovely islands, where the savage girls plait flowers, and the savage boys carve cocoa-nut shells, and the grim blind idols muse in their shady groves to exactly the same purpose as the priests and chiefs" (p. 259). But Dickens also saw the sea in more practical

⁶"The Fascination of the Sea," Dickensian, XL (March, 1944), 91.

terms as an encircling barrier which the British navy effectively used to protect the country, and "Chatham Dockyard" reveals his interest in the processes involved in building the ships that were to become part of that gallant navy.

Most of the essays contain material that directly relates to particular places, but there are four in which the location has hardly any relevance. "Nurse's Stories" recalls the horrifying stories related by a childhood nurse, and the enduring effect that they had. It evokes the feelings of a young listener with convincing realism, as any of its readers who has ever been a captive audience for similar tales can attest. "Mr. Barlow" also draws on the author's childhood memories, calling to mind the intense dislike Dickens developed for Barlow, the priggish, omniscient tutor in a series of boys' novels. The writer of these books apparently intended the precepts expounded through Barlow to be guides to young readers, but Dickens explains how Barlow's humorless moralising repelled him and caused him, even as an adult, to dislike anyone whose manner appeared similar.

The past also informs "Birthday Celebrations" as Dickens selects unpleasant experiences from it to demonstrate the basis for his apprehensions about birthday celebrations. The last of this set of essays, "A Fly-Leaf in a Life," refers to an illness of the author, and cites instances of the unsolicited and irritating advice inflicted on him during that period.

As implied earlier, the essays cannot be expected to provide a definitive account of Dickens's position on any issues that may receive attention, but they do make a worthwhile contribution towards indicating his inclinations. A subject that concerned him immensely was the care of those who for various reasons could not support themselves. Consequently, some of the essays deal with conditions in workhouses, alms-houses, and hospitals.

"Wapping Workhouse" describes one of these institutions, and reveals some of Dickens's views on the state of the buildings and the occupants, and the service provided for these poor people. Recognising the need for cheerful surroundings, he comments disapprovingly on the dilapidated condition of some buildings, both inside and outside. He also bemoans the fact that private rooms are not available for the inmates, so that the more depressed will not have a baneful effect on others. He is practical enough to realise that want of money contributed to these shortcomings. Workhouses generally relied on the income from the Poor Rates for their upkeep, and Dickens states that the inequitable assessment of the rates in different parishes overburdens some and bears too lightly on many of the wealthier ones. He illustrates what he has in mind by pointing out that "One poor parish in this very Union is rated to the amount of Five and Sixpence in the pound, at the very same time when the rich parish of St. George's is rated at about Sevenpence in the pound, Paddington at

about Tenpence" (pp. 30-31).

Dickens notes a number of cases in which the poor seem to take for granted the benefits they receive and react with seeming ungratefulness to the efforts being made on their behalf. One instance occurs in "A Small Star in the East," where he makes this comment, "When the hospital was first opened, in January of the present year, the people could not possibly conceive but that somebody paid for the services rendered there; and were disposed to claim them as rights, and to find fault if out of temper" (p. 383). A similar attitude exists among the people he describes in "Titbull's Alms-Houses." They live in a collection of two-room houses and appear reasonably well cared for; yet they spend most of their time complaining of the rights allegedly denied them by the authorities, to whom they always refer as "the gentlemen who administer the place."

All the instances that Dickens cites occur where governmental institutions are, either fully or in part, responsible for the services. Dickens recognises an important element in these arrangements. The benefits are passed on in an impersonal manner that precludes any warmth of response, and fails to take into account the strong need of these people to be treated as individuals. This possibly explains why Dickens tends to show far more enthusiasm for the charitable activities of philanthropic groups or individuals that involve close personal relationships with those be-

ing assisted. The unstinted admiration that he had for the efforts of the Guild of Commercial Travellers has already been mentioned in this paper, and in "A Small Star in the East" he exhibits as much enthusiasm for the work being done by a dedicated young couple.

Dickens starts by telling that, on a walk through the Ratcliff district of eastern London, he impulsively visits the homes of some extremely poor residents. Afterwards, as he continues his walk, he notices a sign indicating the East London Childrens' Hospital and decides to pay a visit. He discovers that the hospital has been established solely through the efforts of a young doctor and his wife, who has also had some medical training. The members of the hospital's staff could earn much better salaries elsewhere, but they are impelled to stay because of the satisfying nature of their work, and the inspiring example of the doctor and his wife.

Although Dickens admires the financial sacrifices that the couple makes, he is even more impressed by the almost total devotion of their time to the welfare of the youngsters. Apart from the usual professional services, they spend their time decorating the wards and doing almost everything else possible to make the children feel wanted and loved. Even after the young patients are sent home the couple maintain interest in them, frequently inviting them in for visits. It is this kind of warm personal relationship that Dickens finds sadly lacking in many of the institutions that he visits.

George Young provides background information on "A Small Star in the East" that shows the kind of situation in which Dickens took liberties with the facts that occasion the essays.⁷ According to Young, Dickens did not make the trip to Ratscliff impulsively, as he suggests in the essay. Dickens was invited by Dr. Nathaniel Heckford to see for himself the abominable conditions that existed in that district of London. Heckford, who was twenty six years old at the time and is the doctor mentioned in Dickens's article, felt that if Dickens were to write an article on conditions in the area something would be done to ameliorate them. Dickens wrote the article, but to ensure that Heckford would not be criticised for having arranged the visit he made it appear that he had visited the area by chance.

The poor whom Dickens admires most are those who, despite the handicaps they face, struggle along bravely, honestly, and cheerfully. After describing the abject poverty in which one family lives, he comments on the "cheery helpfulness of the wife" (p. 377), and later in the same article notes that none of the very needy families that he visits asks him for money. He shows similar appreciation for the discharged soldiers in "The Great Tasmania's Cargo" who, despite being badly treated and impoverished, remain cheerful and uncomplaining.

Those who shirk work, those who whine about their

⁷"A Small Star in the East ("In Three Twinkles"), Dickensian, XXX (Autumn, 1934), 287-291.

lot, and those who violate the laws come in for far less favourable treatment. The tone of "Tramps" reveals a marked degree of testiness as Dickens describes the able-bodied types who eschew any form of work, depending solely on what they can get by begging or, in some instances, stealing. This is how he describes one type of tramps:

He has no occupation whatever, this order of tramp, and has no object whatever in going anywhere. He will sometimes call himself a brickmaker, or a sawyer, but only when he takes an imaginative flight. He generally represents himself, in a vague way, as looking out for a job of work; but he never did work, he never does, and he never will. (p. 123).

The same disapproving tone characterises the treatment of the lawless types in "The Ruffian." In fact the air of indignation is so pronounced and the condemnation so unqualified that Dickens seems unwilling to seek beneath the surface that irritates him for the circumstances that have helped to create this problem. For once he sounds like a contemporary extremist exponent of 'law and order,' as he says:

But we are all of us powerless against the Ruffian, because to the law, and it is his only trade, by superior force and by violence, to defy it. Moreover, we are constantly admonished from high places (like so many Sunday-school children out for a holiday of buns and milk-and-water) that we are not to take the law into our own hands, but are to hand our defence over to it. It is clear that the common enemy to be punished and exterminated first of all is the Ruffian (p. 359).

It is the difference in Dickens's attitude towards those who unquestioningly accept their condition, and those who do not, that partially provides the grounds on which James Fisher

challenges his reputation as a social reformer. Referring to the social injustices that existed in England during Dickens's time, he says:

But the terrible thing about it all was that men had come to regard these evils as part and parcel of their lot and therefore unchangeable, and things are in a perilous state when this is the attitude to the evils of life. And in this connection, the crux of the question is: Did Dickens's attitude to social questions tend to alter this hopeless outlook?"⁸

Fisher proceeds to answer the question negatively, but the evidence from the Uncommercial Traveller suggests that an unqualified 'no' is unfair to Dickens. It is true that the book provides no indication that Dickens questions the rightness of the existing social structure. While, for example, he advocates better educational facilities for poor children it is clear that he does not envisage for them an education beyond the needs of their social class. He bemoans the health hazards attached to working in the lead-mills, but sees it as an unfortunate necessity for some workers. One is left with the impression that Dickens wished to see the conditions under which the poor struggled improved within the existing social framework, and it can be argued that many of the injustices that he cites were concomitants of such a social structure. Under the circumstances many of Dickens's suggestions for improving conditions could be no more than palliatives.

Yet, while this has to be regarded as a big question

⁸"Reform as a Dickens Background," Dickensian, XXXIII (Summer, 1937), .

mark against the reputation of Dickens as a social reformer, it does not cancel out his contributions, even within the context of the terms laid down by Fisher. Regardless of the validity of the grounds on which Dickens built his optimism, the fact remains that he did not accept the evils that beset the lower strata of society as unalterable, nor their outlook as eternally hopeless. Admittedly Dickens's prime concern was for the economic betterment of the poor. Even his advocacy of better education and greater responsibility for the working-class tied in with this concern. His voice was an influential one, however, and to the extent that he may have helped to effect progress in those two areas he contributed, perhaps unwittingly, to social reform, because education and increased responsibility have been, in modern times, the supports on which the masses have based their drive towards greater mobility in society.

Although Dickens shows no signs, in the essays, of wishing to have a more democratic educational system, he has sound ideas concerning the subject of education. On several occasions he condemns the 'Gradgrind attitude' that permeates the educational system. Far too much importance, he feels, is attached to the utilitarian value of learning, and he attributes this failing to "a shyness in admitting that human nature when at leisure has any desire to be relieved and diverted; and a furtive sliding in of any poor make-weight piece of amusement, shamefaced-

ly and edgewise" (p. 143).

He does not share this shyness and in "The Short-Timers" speaks glowingly of a school where efforts are made to ensure that the pupils enjoy their studies. He comments, too, on the concessions made to the limited concentration span of youngsters. The length of each class period is shorter than in most other schools, and subjects requiring great mental effort are alternated with others that are less demanding in this respect. He finds particular satisfaction in the fact that, despite the very congenial and relaxed atmosphere of the school, the children have been reputedly learning at a faster rate than those in other schools with the same social background and in the same age group. In an age when educationists did not generally believe in 'sparing the rod,' it is refreshing to note Dickens's insistence that a system of moral restraint was far more effective than any amount of physical force. Although Dickens apparently did not have any comprehensive theory for effecting changes in the society, insights such as this must have helped to make his essays contribute in a meaningful way to its betterment.

The essays indicate that Dickens had a high opinion of the precepts of Christianity, but regarded much of the ritual of the church as irrelevant and, often, distractions from the real intent of Christ's teachings. The clergyman of "The Shipwreck" draws praise from Dickens because his disregard for denomina-

tional distinctions while performing acts of mercy, reveals the kindness of the true Christian. Possibly because of the value that Dickens attaches to example, rather than rhetoric, he prefers preachers to have an unaffected and reverential delivery.

He describes a visit to a religious service in "Two Views of a Cheap Theatre," and expresses opinions on the role he thinks religion should play in the lives of working-class people. He feels that these people are starved for entertainment and suggests the church should help fill this need by making the services as enjoyable as possible. The church then stands a better chance of attracting these people for whose spiritual welfare it professes concern. Dickens argues that the ministers can do a great deal to increase the appeal of services by merely reading the many simply told, yet interesting and appealing, stories from the bible, instead of using brief passages as launching pads for long moralising and rhetorical flights that only befuddle and bore listeners. "City of London Churches" affords glimpses of the sparse attendance at services, which has resulted from the failure of the church to cater to the people's need for entertainment. Dickens paints a bleak picture of decaying churches that provide an appropriate setting for funereal rituals that evoke images of oppressive despair, instead of the reassuring hope so necessary for people whose daily existence offers little of it.

Dickens was an admirer of the theatre, who wrote a

number of plays and frequently acted in amateur productions, so it is not surprising that several of the essays contain references to theatrical performances. In "Two Views of a Cheap Theatre," Dickens writes of a visit to the Britannia, a huge theatre catering primarily to working-class audiences. On Sundays, religious services, such as one he describes in the same essay, were held there. Dickens does not visit the Britannia to satisfy his own dramatic taste. He goes with the intention of seeing the type of programme put on for the lower-class audience and of observing their response to it. The offering for the night consists of a pantomime, featuring such characters as the Spirit of Liberty and the Four Quarters of the World, and a melodrama in which Vice and Virtue are embodied in strongly contrasting terms. It is all cliché-ridden and unsophisticated stuff, but apparently well-suited to the taste of the audience, which strongly identifies with the 'good' characters and applauds heartily when the 'evil' ones meet their inevitable discomfiture. For Dickens the important thing is that the audience of working-class people should gain a brief respite from its everyday cares, and if the dramatic fare served it satisfies the need then the quality of the fare is incidental.

Dickens repeatedly expresses dislike for the tendency of many people in Victorian England to moralise on practically every issue, and he reveals particular aversion to the prevalence of this tendency in the theatre. A comedy that he attends in Lon-

don, occasions this comment:

As the characters were lifelike (and consequently not improving), and as they went upon their several ways and designs without personally addressing themselves to me, I felt rather confident of coming through it without being regarded as Tommy, the more so, as we were clearly getting close to the end. But I deceived myself. All of a sudden, àpropos of nothing, everybody concerned came to a check and halt, advanced to the foot-lights in a general rally to take dead aim at me, and brought me down with a moral homily . . . (p. 400).

The crude, bumbling efforts of some amateur groups and third-rate professional troupes provide Dickens with material for humorous passages in some of the essays. The passage in which he describes a performance by a group of performers touring the French-Flemish region achieves a particularly comic effect. Yet, despite the fun Dickens pokes at such crude performances, he seems to prefer their unpretentious attempts at entertainment to the moralising posture of far more competently produced ones.

It would be a grave omission, if for no other reason than the amount of attention the subject receives in the essays, to end the chapter without referring to Dickens's concern with the poor eating facilities available to the British public. The atmosphere, service, and quality of food, in a wide range of eating places come in for generally uncomplimentary treatment. The patriotic Dickens finds it especially galling that these places suffer badly by comparison with their European counterparts. Some of his more sarcastic sallies are directed at these places, and his irritation stems in part from the conviction that a measure

of concern for the public on the part of the owners could cause them to easily rectify many of the distasteful features.

This chapter has not exhausted the range of topics that the essays cover. Enough has been dealt with, however, to convey an idea of the scope of Dickens's interests and concerns that they reflect, and to indicate that it is sufficiently wide to engage the interest of a variety of readers.

III

Critics of the essay, such as F.H. Pritchard, W.H. Hudson, and B.R. Mullik, find it far easier to explain what the essay is not than to define it in terms that can accomodate all the writings that lay claim to the title. Most critics circumvent the problem by concentrating their attention on what is termed the personal essay. This type of essay is distinguished from others by its extremely intimate tone and its bland urbanity. The critics who restrict their attention to the personal essay do not deny the existence of other types of essays; they simply prefer to deal almost exclusively with a particular type that they have been able to contain within certain limits, and which they regard as the most satisfying from a purely literary standpoint.

Owing to the absence of formal rules governing the structure of the essay, the essayist has considerable latitude in deciding how he will introduce, develop, and conclude his work. This does not mean, however, that he is free of all restraints. The essayist recognises that the kind of topic on which he writes, his intentions in writing about it, and the type of effect he hopes to achieve, will have some influence on the form that he gives to his essays. He also appreciates that by varying the structural mould in which he casts his material he considerably reduces the risk of his essays being monotonous. This last point is of particular pertinence in a series such as the Uncommercial Traveller,

which is the work of a single essayist. The series offers proof that Dickens fully appreciated the significance of structure in writing the essays. He shapes the essays in a variety of ways, and even in those sharing a similar basic structure some degree of differentiation is often apparent.

Dickens tends far more towards a descriptive style, rather than the argumentative style of an essayist like Swift. The dissimilarities in the structural forms favoured by these two writers can be partially attributed to this fact. Many of Swift's essays have a radial structure. In an essay of this type there is a central thesis or theme that is developed. Various arguments or illustrative incidents are all linked to the central theme to assist its development. In "A Modest Proposal," for instance, the central thesis is Swift's seemingly outrageous proposal that the majority of the children of the poor people of Ireland should be slaughtered at the age of one, and the carcasses be sold to the wealthy. In the development of his thesis Swift employs supporting arguments that permit him at the same time to attack the ruthless exploitation of Ireland by the English settlers.

The neat linking of the clever supporting arguments to the central thesis underlines the highly logical approach of Swift. Dickens shows a preference for forms that permit him to

pursue a more leisurely and less intellectually dictated course, although he is no less certain of his direction. In a few instances he displays the ability to develop effective arguments but generally he relies on illustrative examples to make his points.

Since so much of the material in the essays is of a descriptive nature, it is not surprising that many of them follow a linear development. A chronological sequence can be traced through those essays, even though the sequence may be temporarily interrupted for some reason. One way in which Dickens modulates the basic chronological progression is by means of flashbacks. In "Dulborough" he alternates between the description of a return visit to his childhood home and the recall of events from his earlier life there, induced by people and landmarks that he recognises from the past. In "The Shipwreck," Dickens uses the same technique, but with an apt variation. There, he wishes to deal with one event of the recent past and so uses a single extended flashback—actually a reconstruction of the shipwreck on the basis of information from various sources—to establish the link between that event and his later visit.

The digressions that frequently halt the chronological progression of many of the essays sometimes appear, at first glance, to be irrelevant. On closer examination, however, one realises that they are not random insertions put in as padding. They are the literary demonstration of Dickens's awareness that

even when one is preoccupied with a particular concern his mind tends to conjure up various associational images. By occasionally inserting examples of these errant activities of his mind, Dickens conveys an impression of almost total informality and casualness. The impression can be misleading, since he must have devoted considerable thought to determining when it would be most appropriate to introduce such digressions, and also to decide which, among the many digressive associations his mind made, should be selected for inclusion.

Sometimes the associational basis for the digression is fairly obvious. As Dickens strolls by the Debtors' Door of Newgate prison on one of his night walks he reflects on past occupants of that infamous prison:

In the days of the uttering of forged one-pound notes by people tempted up from the country, how many hundreds of wretched creatures of both sexes—many quite innocent—swung out of a pitiless and inconsistent world, with the tower of yonder Christian church of Saint Sepulchre monstrously before their eyes! Is there any haunting of the Bank Parlour, by the remorseful souls of old directors, in the nights of these later days, I wonder, or is it as quiet as this degenerate Aeldama of an Old Bailey?" (pp. 152-153).

The same apparent basis for the digression can be seen in "Some Recollections of Mortality" where Dickens tells of one of his visits to the Morgue in Paris. Not surprisingly, the sight of the corpses leads him to think of earlier occasions on which he had viewed the dead, and he ends up recalling the good turn he had done for the young mother accused of murdering her

infant, whose lifeless body he had been compelled to view.

The link that Dickens establishes between 'the City' (the business centre of London), and cemeteries in "The City of the Absent," is not as readily apparent. It takes some time for the reader to realize that the connection depends on Dickens's fanciful analogy between 'the City' as the domain of those who depart for homes elsewhere at the end of the working day, and the cemeteries as the domain of people who have also departed, even though on a rather different basis.

Dickens develops nine of the essays by stating theses that he sets out to justify. Dickens attaches this deductive technique to a descriptive style and relies more on illustrative incidents than on arguments to support his theses. These essays cannot be regarded as having radial structures since the various illustrations tend to be linked sequentially rather than being each directly attached to the thesis. As a result the reader is not regularly reminded of the theses being developed, but the apt choice of illustrations ensures that they are amply justified.

In "Chambers" Dickens sets out to prove his statement that Gray's Inn is "one of the most depressing institutions in brick and mortar, known to the children of men" (p. 162). He does so by first of all describing the grimy conditions that exist in some Chambers that he has recently visited. The purpose of this illus-

tration is to establish the physical aspect of the depressing atmosphere of Gray's Inn. He then relates four anecdotes pertaining to men who had spent parts of their lives in chambers of the institution. These anecdotes, by focusing on the arid, lonely lives led by the occupants, underline the other aspect of the depression to which Dickens refers.

It is the faultless choice of illustrative material to support his theses that enables Dickens to be effective without relying heavily on carefully developed arguments. Many of the illustrations have the additional value of being fascinating enough to be readable even outside the context of their illustrative function.

One of the anecdotes from "Chambers" demonstrates these qualities:

. . . . there was a certain elderly gentleman who lived in a court of the Temple, and was a great judge and lover of port wine. Every day he dined at his club and drank his bottle or two of port wine, and every night came home to the Temple and went to bed in his lonely chambers. This had gone on for many years without variation, when one night he had a fit on coming home and fell and cut his head deep, but partly recovered and groped about in the dark to find the door. When he was afterwards discovered, dead, it was clearly established by the marks of his hands about the room that he must have done so. Now, this chanced on the night of Christmas Eve, and over him lived a young fellow who had sisters and young country friends, and who gave them a little party that night, in the course of which they played at Blindman's Buff. They played that game, for their greater sport, by the light of the fire only; and once, when they were all quietly rustling and stealing about, and the blindman was trying to pick out the prettiest sister (for which I am far from blaming him), somebody cried, Hark! The man below must be playing Blindman's Buff by himself tonight! They listened, and they heard sounds of some one falling about and stumbling against furniture, and they all laughed at the conceit, and went on with their play, more light-hearted and merry than ever. Thus,

those two so different games of life and death were played out together, blindfolded, in the two sets of chambers (pp. 167-168).

Dickens starts "A Plea for Total Abstinence" with an incident that provides the base on which he develops his thesis. The essay is the only one of the series in which Dickens uses this inductive approach. He has good reason for using it in this instance since he wishes to make his ingenious development of the thesis the central interest of the essay. Dickens commences with an account of a parade of teetotalers and leisurely leads up to the feature of the parade that he intends to exploit for his thesis. Having mentioned that some of the riders in the parade impose excessive burdens on their mounts, Dickens turns to the development of his argument:

Now I have always held that there may be, and that there unquestionably is, such a thing as use without abuse, and that therefore the total abolitionists are irrational and wrong-headed. But the procession completely converted me. For so large a number of the people using draught-horses in it were so clearly unable to use them without abusing them, that I perceived total abstinence from horseflesh to be the only remedy of which the case admitted. As it is all one to teetotalers whether you take half a pint of beer or half a gallon, so it was all one here whether the beast of burden were a pony or a cart-horse. Indeed, my case had the special strength that the half-pint quadruped underwent as much suffering as the half-gallon quadruped This procession comprised many persons . . . who were merciful to the dumb beasts that drew them, and did not overcharge their strength. What is to be done with those unoffending persons? . . . Manifestly, in strict accordance with teetotal doctrines, THEY must come in too, and take the total abstinence from horseflesh pledge Teetotal mathematics demon-

strate that the less includes the greater; that the guilty include the innocent, the blind the seeing, the deaf the hearing, the dumb the speaking, the drunken the sober. If any of the moderate users of draught-cattle in question should deem that there is any gentle violence done to their reason by these elements of logic, they are invited to come out of the procession next Whitsuntide, and look at it from my window (pp. 420-421).

Dickens uses a system of classification in three of the essays as a way of organizing their subject matter and unifying them. The nature of the topics discussed in those essays makes them well-suited to such an approach. "Refreshments for Travellers" explores the kinds of eating facilities available to the travelling public. Since the places cater to a wide social range they are easily categorised in terms of the sort of public they serve. In "Arcadian London" Dickens takes a look at the people who remain in London while the more affluent go off for the autumn holidays. Dickens creates prototypes out of some of these people and extracts humour from the ways in which they react to their temporary freedom from the inhibitory presence of their employers. In one passage Dickens writes:

In secluded corners of the place of my seclusion, there are little shops withdrawn from public curiosity, and never two together, where servants' perquisites are bought. The cook may dispose of grease at these modest and convenient marts; the butler, of bottles; the valet and lady's maid, of clothes; most servants, indeed, of most things they may happen to lay hold of. I have been told that in sterner times loving correspondence, otherwise interdicted, may be maintained by letter through the agency of some of these useful establishments. In the Arcadian autumn, no such device is necessary. Everybody loves, and openly and blamelessly loves. My landlord's young man loves the whole of one side of the way of Old Bond-street, and is beloved several doors up New Bond-street besides. I never look out of window but I see kissing of hands going

on all around me. It is the morning custom to glide from shop to shop and exchange tender sentiments; it is the evening custom for couples to stand hand in hand at house doors, or roam, linked in that flowery manner, through the unpeopled streets. There is nothing else to do but love; and what there is to do, is done (pp. 196-197).

"Tramps" is reminiscent of some of the articles produced by the writers of Elizabethan "rogue" literature. This type of literature had wide popular appeal during the latter part of the sixteenth century and the earlier part of the seventeenth century. The articles appeared in pamphlets that sold for as little as a penny each, and it is a measure of the popularity of this literature that the distributors of the pamphlets could afford to pay enough for articles to attract writers of the stature of Greene and Dekker. The model that most of the writers aped extensively was "A Caveat for Common Cursitors," written by Harman. Harman was a country magistrate for many years and in that capacity he had ample opportunities for learning about the various types of vagabonds, who presented a particularly serious problem in England during his time. Dickens' article, like that by Harman, concentrates on the vagabonds found in rural areas, and there is marked similarity in the tone of both articles. A major difference between the two articles is that Harman's ~~concentrates exclusively~~ on the unemployed, and Dickens's broadens its scope to include itinerant workers.

It has not been possible to establish whether or not

Dickens was acquainted either with Harman's article or with the body of Elizabethan rogue literature. His knowledgeable allusion to criminals of an earlier period, in "Night Walks," suggests familiarity with some rogue literature. It is not unlikely that this familiarity could have embraced the rogue literature of the Elizabethan period.

Two of the essays rely for their form on the use made of contrast. The first essay of the series commences, "Allow me to introduce myself—first negatively" (p. 1). Dickens then proceeds to list the activities, commonly associated with commercial travellers, with which his readers should not identify him. The second part of the essay, in direct contrast to the first, clearly indicates his anticipated activities as the Uncommercial Traveller. Pendered, commenting on the essay, suggests that Dickens sets it up in that manner merely as a means of padding his limited material.¹ The criticism seems an unfair one. By setting up the essay as he does Dickens manages to make a more striking distinction between his proposed activities and those of commercial travellers in their professional role. It seems fitting that the initial essay of the series should develop the contrast implicit in his title.

¹"The Firm of Human Interest Brothers," pp. 245-251.

Dickens also makes use of contrast in shaping "Shipwreck." In the first part of the essay he emphasises the tranquility of the scene of the shipwreck at the time of his visit. He starts by saying, "Never had I seen a year going out, or going on, under quieter circumstances. Eighteen hundred and fifty-nine had but another day to live, and truly its end was Peace on that sea-shore that morning (p. 3). He goes on to sketch a more detailed picture of the idyllic scene that he outlines in the opening paragraph, and then with dramatic abruptness he starts to sketch a sombre picture of the same setting. He mentions, in the vein of the initial section of the essay, a slight obstruction in the water quite close to him and then he continues:

O reader, haply turning this page by the fireside at Home, and hearing the night wind rumble in the chimney, that slight obstruction was the uppermost fragment of the Wreck of the Royal Charter, Australian trader and passenger ship, Homeward bound, that struck here on the terrible morning of the twenty-sixth of this October, broke into three parts, went down with her treasure of at least five hundred human lives, and has never stirred since! (p. 4)

Although this passage and the remainder of the essay paint a grim enough picture, the impact is even more staggering because of the initial contrast that Dickens sets up.

In "Aboard Ship" Dickens manages to adapt a radial structure to an essay that is essentially descriptive. His chief concern in the essay is to make the reader aware of the extent to which his consciousness is dominated by the sound of the ship's screws during an Atlantic crossing. All the incidents that Dickens

relates converge on this point, so that he actually creates a structural parallel to his experience. The advantage of the radial arrangement in this instance is that it enables Dickens to keep directing the reader's attention to his main purpose while offering a comprehensive view of the activities aboard the vessel.

Although "The Italian Prisoner" is one of the most interesting pieces in the series, it actually hardly qualifies as an essay. It narrates the unselfish efforts of an English gentleman to obtain the release of a political prisoner, Dickens's meeting with the former prisoner, and his subsequent problems in carrying home the huge cask of wine that the grateful Italian sends for his benefactor. Dickens develops this nucleus into a fascinating whole, but it would be more aptly described as a tale than as an essay. In writing this piece Dickens appears to have had no intentions beyond converting an interesting experience into a well told story.

Dickens did not allow form to encase the essays in a rigid mould. It is obvious that his main interests were to entertain and to influence his readers, and so form has a subordinate role. The unexpected, or the different, can stimulate and maintain interest and thereby increase the chances for influence to be exercised. This is, perhaps, the main advantage of the flexibility that Dickens achieves in shaping and developing the essays.

IV

George Gissing remarks that Sketches by Boz, while providing ample evidence of the promise that Dickens later fulfilled, reveals its author's immaturity. He refers particularly to the somewhat unambitious range of topics in the series and also to Dickens's prose style. He elaborates his comment on style by noting qualities to be found in the later writings of Dickens that are either lacking or poorly handled in Sketches by Boz, mentioning specifically picturesque suggestiveness, the peculiarly Dickensian strain of fancy, melodramatic effects, and playful tenderness. The last two qualities, he adds, lend considerable power to much of Dickens's work although at times they become handicaps.¹

While the observations cited above seem to be valid as regards Sketches by Boz, they would be invalid if made concerning the Uncommercial Traveller. By the time Dickens started the series of essays that it contains he had acquired the experience and the imaginative vision that enabled him to handle an ambitious range of topics with assurance. In addition, he had achieved the mastery of style that allowed him to use a considerable number of stylistic techniques effectively. Most of the qualities that characterize the style of Dickens's novels can be found in the series although it is often modified to suit the essay form.

¹The Immortal Dickens (London, 1925).

In the Uncommercial Traveller Dickens displays great skill in investing a wealth of trivial details with interest. Mary Pendered comments on this talent:

But the faculty of noticing is a necessity to the artist in any genre and without it no really creative work can be done.

I need not say that Dickens possessed this faculty in the highest degree. Nothing ever escaped his ever-watchful eyes and ears--and, I may say nose, if a watchful nose be possible. It was through this noticing faculty that Dickens was able to store his mind with a thousand images of things seen and things related to each other. Every image called up another and that is what makes his writing so fertile in description, and so rich in the art of invoking visions in other minds.²

The only part of this commendation that appears debatable is the reference to Dickens's nose. In one of the essays Dickens indicates that, "My sense of smell, without being particularly delicate, has been so offended in some of the commoner places of public resort, that I have often been obliged to leave them when I have made an uncommercial journey expressly to look on" (p. 35). The evidence from the essays tends to support Dickens's admission that his sense of smell was not particularly delicate. Many of the areas of London that Dickens writes about must have been redolent with smells, yet only in "City of London Churches" does Dickens fully utilise his nose to complement his eyes and ears in capturing the atmosphere of the places that he describes. In this instance Dickens crowds together a collection of impressions that evokes the dominating smells of various churches:

²"The Firm of Human Interest Brothers," p. 245.

But, in other cases, rot and mildew and dead citizens formed the uppermost scent, while, infused into it in a dreamy way not at all displeasing, was the staple character of the neighbourhood. In the churches about Mark Lane, for example, there was a dry whiff of wheat; and I accidentally struck an airy sample of barley out of an aged hassock in one of them. From Rood Lane to Tower Street, and thereabouts, there was often a subtle flavour of wine: sometimes of tea. One church near Mincing Lane smelt like a druggist's drawer. Behind the Monument the service had a flavour of damaged oranges, which a little further down towards the river, tempered into herrings and gradually toned into the cosmopolitan blast of fish. In one church, the exact counterpart of the church in the Rake's Progress where the hero is being married to the horrible old lady, there was no specialty of atmosphere, until the organ shook a perfume of hides all over us from the adjacent warehouse (p. 107).

Dickens's usual preference for visual details is apparent when he writes about eating places. He draws on a wide range of images to describe the generally poor food served in such places but rarely makes reference to the smells. This is how he describes the food in one restaurant:

Count up your injuries, in its side-dishes of ailing sweetbreads in white poultices, of apothecaries' powders in rice for curry, of pale stewed bits of calf ineffectually relying for an adventitious interest on forcemeat balls. You have had experience of the old-established Bull's Head stringy fowls, with lower extremities like wooden legs, sticking up out of the dish; of its cannibalistic boiled mutton, gushing horribly among its capers when carved; of its little dishes of pastry—roofs of spermaceti ointment, erected over half an apple or four gooseberries (p. 69).

The essays also indicate Dickens's keen ear for sounds, whether of daily life in noisy London, of a visit to the tranquil countryside, or of sailing the open seas. "Aboard Ship" relies for much of its effect on the imaginative ways in which Dickens evokes the all-pervasive sound of the ship's screws, even in "the dead water-gurgling waste of the night" (p. 363). In "Chatham Dockyard"

one notes the appreciatively discriminating ear of Dickens as he refers to the sounds he hears as he lies by the river; "the splash and flop of the tide, the ripple at my feet, the clinking windlass afar off, or the humming steam-ship paddles farther away yet (p. 303).

While Dickens can crowd details together to achieve his effect, he is also capable of using a single, tiny detail to convey an impression in convincing fashion. A good example of this talent occurs in "Travelling Abroad," where he describes a corpse that he views at the Morgue in Paris. The description is limited to a very brief passage, but Dickens's sharp eye for significant detail enables him to create a lasting impression of "an old gray man lying all alone on his cold bed, with a tap of water turned on over his gray hair, and running drip, drip, drip, down his wretched face until it got to the corner of his mouth, where it took a turn, and made him look sly" (p. 76).

Dickens seizes on a single detail, hardly humorous in itself, and by referring to it repeatedly manages to invest it with a comical quality. In writing about a troupe of performers Dickens uses the fact that almost all the members of the group are extremely fat as the basis for his comic treatment. He refers to one collecting money from the audience as "a stout gentleman imperfectly repressed by a belt" (p. 317), and proceeds to describe other male members of the troupe in identical fashion. Having extracted maxi-

mum effect from the repetition of the phrase, Dickens introduces a variation by referring to a particularly fat member as "a stout lady irrepressible by any means" (p. 318).

Probably the best instance of the clever use Dickens makes of repetition occurs in "Nurse's Stories." There he relates in detail one of the stories told to him by a childhood nurse. The story is about a young shipwright named Chips, who bartered his soul to the Devil for "an iron pot and a bushel of tenpenny nails and half a ton of copper and a rat that could speak" (p. 180). At regular intervals the flow of the narrative is interrupted by the refrain:

A Lemon has pips,
And a Yard has ships,
And I'll have Chips (p. 181).

The words are supposed to have been uttered to Chips by the Devil or, on occasion, by the rat that had been a part of the bargain. The catchy jingle, which rhymes in a way likely to appeal readily to a child, seems inconsequential but taken in the context of the story it serves an important function. With each repetition it acquires a more ominous quality as the development of the story suggests more and more clearly the inevitability of the fate it predicts for Chips. One can appreciate how the rhythmic pattern that it establishes could have a spellbound child anticipating its recurrence with a mixture of eagerness and apprehension.

Dickens displays exceptional talent for recapturing

the moods of childhood. It is this talent that imbues many of the essays with a nostalgic quality. Dickens offers a clue to the basis of his regard for the memories of his youth when he says, in concluding "Dullborough Town," "All my early readings and early imaginations dated from this place, and I took them away so full of innocent construction and guileless belief, and I brought them back so worn and torn, so much the wiser and so much the worse" (p. 148).

Despite Dickens's concern for the loss of the guilelessness and innocence of his youth, there is one aspect of his style that at first glance suggests an almost child-like way of viewing reality. Very often in sketching pictures children display a tendency to exaggerate the features that interest them most. Something of this inclination shows in the way Dickens focuses on a particular feature or quality so that it becomes disproportionately magnified. Whereas, however, the caricatures produced by children are unconscious reflections of their naive view of reality, those of Dickens are deliberate distortions designed to achieve calculated effects. The restricted length of the essays permits Dickens few opportunities for full-scale descriptions, but by exaggerating those features that have relevance to his immediate intentions Dickens manages to create striking impressions with a minimum of words.

In "Arcadian London" he deals, among other things, with the vacation time phenomenon of caretakers who move into the tem-

porarily deserted homes at nights. Since his interest is more in the custom than in the people, Dickens describes the daughter of two caretakers as, "their daughter, . . . who has also a bed, and smells of it, and carries it about the earth at dusk and hides it in deserted houses" (p. 190). When, in "City of London Churches," Dickens describes the beadle of a church that he visits, it is with an eye to fitting him into the depressingly dark and mouldy setting. The result is that he clearly exaggerates, as he writes, "A rope comes through the beamed roof, and a man in the corner pulls it and clashes the bell—a whity-brown man, whose clothes were once black—a man with flue on him, and cobweb" (pp. 99-100).

Dickens makes considerable use of exaggeration as a device for creating humorous effects. In one instance he refers to "a dog in a back street in the neighbourhood of Walworth, who has greatly distinguished himself in the minor drama, and who takes his portrait with him when he makes an engagement, for the illustration of the play-bill" (p. 114). Dickens uses the device to achieve particularly funny results in "On an Amateur Beat." He sets the stage for the humorous sequel by creating a caricature of an old woman he encounters on one of his walks. She emerges as such a ludicrous figure that the subsequent account of a wandering mongrel's reaction to her is both believable and funny:

He stops, pricks his ears higher, makes a slight point, stares, utters a short, low growl, and glistens at the nose,—as I conceive with terror. The bundle continuing to approach, he barks, turns tail,

and is about to fly, when, arguing with himself that flight is not becoming in a dog, he turns, and once more faces the advancing heap of clothes. After much hesitation, it occurs to him that there may be a face in it somewhere. Desperately resolving to undertake the adventure, and pursue the inquiry, he goes slowly up to the bundle, goes slowly round it, and coming at length upon the human countenance down there where never human countenance should be, gives a yelp of horror, and flies for the East India Docks (pp. 407-408).

Very often Dickens employs metaphors to suggest the sensations or impressions that he experiences. In many instances the metaphors are used to convey an idea of the ways in which Dickens's hyper-active imagination exaggerates situations. Thus, when describing a crossing of the English Channel, Dickens refers to himself as "a whirling shuttlecock between a fiery battledoor of a lighthouse on the French coast and a fiery battledoor of a lighthouse on the English coast" (p. 214), he more strongly reveals his apprehensions about being afloat by using metaphor rather than simile. Sometimes he manages a melodramatic effect by making a seemingly incredible statement that a subsequent remark clarifies. In the same essay from which the previous quotation comes, he writes of, "A stout wooden wedge driven in at my right temple and out at my left, a floating deposit of lukewarm oil in my throat, and a compression of the bridge of my nose in a blunt pair of pincers,—these are the personal sensations by which I know we are off, and by which I shall continue to know it until I am on the soil of France" (p. 213).

Dickens reveals the fertile range of his imagination through the variety and abundance of associative images that he

draws on to illustrate the essays. Dickens uses few similes in the essays, but those that he uses usually function effectively. Dickens generally bases his comparisons on things that are familiar enough to provide concrete images, but at the same time the similarities that he establishes are sufficiently unexpected and striking to engage the attention. Examples such as "a flat and cushiony nose, like the last new strawberry" (p. 112), and "an oval, resembling a tart from the pastrycook's" (p. 238), come to mind readily. Occasionally a simile seems to express a whimsical analogy as when the chimneys at Chatham Dockyard are compared to giants smoking tobacco.

In his brief critique of the Uncommercial Traveller, K.J. Fielding says, "The dark side of Dickens's later is sometimes exaggerated, but here it was almost unrelieved."³ Although Fielding magnifies the extent of the book's sombre atmosphere, it is true that many of the essays reflect the darkness of which he speaks. The selection of topics and the macabre and morbid images account for it. Some similes exploit the morbid images. Thus, one reads of "a large dark man whose disfigurement by water was in a frightful manner comic, and whose expression was that of a prize-fighter who had closed his eyelids under a heavy blow, but was going to open them, shake his head, and 'come up smiling'" (p. 76). Another equally morbid image constitutes the vehicle of a simile that starts, ". . . the river

³Charles Dickens (London, 1958), p. 169.

had an awful look, the buildings on the bank were muffled in black shrouds, and the reflected lights seemed to originate deep in the water, as if the spectres of suicides were holding them to show where they went down" (p. 151).

Dickens was fully aware of the streak that impelled him to seek out morbid and macabre experiences and to employ the images that they suggested to him in his writings. In "City of London Churches" he speaks of the "attraction of repulsion" that causes such experiences to fascinate him. In an earlier essay of the series he says, "Whenever I am at Paris, I am dragged by invisible force into the Morgue. I never want to go there, but am always pulled there. One Christmas Day, when I would rather have been anywhere else, I was attracted in" (p. 76).

Metaphors occur far more frequently in the essays than do similes. This may be due in part to the advantage they have over similes, particularly as regards extended comparisons, in economising on words. Dickens shows considerable liking for personifications and he even invests such things as doors and windows with human attributes. In one passage he refers to the doors and windows of a church as being exhausted, his intention being to create a striking parallel between the building and the lethargic priest and his equally lethargic congregation. "Night Walks" includes a sustained metaphor that likens London to a person bedding down. It starts: "The restlessness of a great city, and the way in which it tumbles

and tosses before it can get to sleep, formed one of the first entertainments offered to the contemplation of us houseless people" (p. 149). The metaphor is extended through several paragraphs in which Dickens goes on to describe the city falling asleep and occasionally stirring.

One of the most amusing essays in the series, "Shy Neighbourhoods," derives much of its humour from its humanized animals and in a number of instances reverses the normal relationship between people and animals. The following passage from the essay provides apt illustration:

We talk of men keeping dogs, but might often talk more expressively of dogs keeping men. I know a bull-dog in a shy corner of Hammer-smith who keeps a man. He keeps him up a yard, and makes him go to public-houses and lay wagers on him, and obliges him to lean against posts and look at him, and forces him to neglect work for him, and keeps him under rigid coercion (p. 116).

Dickens is not above exploiting puns to amuse his audience. To this end he quotes from the dialogue between a resident of an alms-house and himself:

"Maybe you're one of 'em?" said the old man, suspiciously.

"The trustees?"

"I wouldn't trust 'em myself," said the virulent old man (p. 341).

Sometimes Dickens plays on words with more serious-minded intentions. He uses it with telling effect in an attack on British politicians in which he first alludes to councils of savages sitting in circles to smoke and occasionally interrupt the silence with grunts.

He then proceeds to the purpose for which he introduced the allusion by saying; "It is better that an Assembly should do its utmost to envelop itself in smoke, than that it should direct its endeavours to enveloping the public in smoke" (p. 337). Occasionally, however, one has the impression that Dickens inserts a pun for no other reason than that he thinks it too clever to be wasted. This seems so when, referring to the fact that the ship he is about to visit bears the name Amazon, he writes that, "Her figurehead is not disfigured as those beauteous founders of the race of strong-minded women are fabled to have been, for the convenience of drawing the bow" (p. 259).

There are a few passages in the essays where Dickens tends to be verbose or to adopt a rather pretentious style, as when he writes, "Chilling fast, in the deadly tornadoes to which my upper and lower extremities are exposed, and subdued by the moral disadvantage at which I stand, I turn my disconsolate eyes on the refreshments that are to restore me" (p. 63). Usually, however, he avoids such pitfalls and employs a style that achieves gracefulness and strength through its simplicity and the felicitous choice of words. His diction and rhythm combined with his his talent for selecting the essentially interesting features of whatever he is describing, have created many passages of compelling beauty.

The picturesque suggestiveness that Gissing commends in some of Dickens's writings comes across strongly in passages

such as this one from "Travelling Abroad":

Alas! concurrent streams of time and water carried me down fast, and I came, on an exquisitely clear day, to the Lausanne shore of the Lake of Geneva, where I stood looking at the bright blue water, the flushed white mountains opposite, and the boats at my feet with their furred Mediterranean sails, showing like enormous magnifications of this goose-quill pen that is now in my hand (p. 85).

The language is simple, but the subtle use of "streams" both literally and figuratively, the selective description of the scene in which the aptly chosen adjectives are supplemented by the illuminating simile at the end, all contribute to making the passage most impressive.

Dickens is very adept at manipulating sentences skillfully to achieve special effects. He varies the length of his sentences to a considerable degree, and one has the impression that this stems from a carefully calculated design rather than chance. At times he inserts a very brief sentence between a number of much longer ones so as to focus greater attention on a point he wishes to emphasize. The technique has a sound psychological basis since the lone short sentence is more likely to catch the eye of the reader. When, in describing a typical ruffian, Dickens interrupts a sequence of long sentences to say briefly, "His hands are in his pockets" (p. 353), his aim is to underline the fact of the ruffian's natural inclination to idleness. The emphasis would not have been as effectively laid had he made the remark in one of the many long sentences in the paragraph.

Sometimes the short sentence signals a change of tempo.

In "Aboard Ship" Dickens, after using a series of long sentences to describe the overpowering effects of the ship's screws on the passengers, shifts to an account of the occasional moments of respite the passengers enjoy. Although the sentences in the second part of the passage are equally long, the transition from the first part is made by means of the short sentence, "Sometimes it [the screw] would appear subdued" (p. 366), that briefly slows the pace of the narration. Except in circumstances such as those cited, and in the dialogues, Dickens seldom uses very short sentences in the Uncommercial Traveller.

Dickens allows one sentence in "Tramps" to run on for more than twenty lines. Normally such a sentence would seem unnecessarily long, but it functions effectively in the context in which it occurs. Dickens, by using connectives where periods are normally called for, successfully mimics the breathless style of a glib beggar addressing himself to a potential benefactor. In "The Calais Night Mail" Dickens similarly links a series of sentences together by leaving out the usual periods. In this instance the intention is to use the device to suggest the rapid movement of the author's mind from one idea to another as he suffers through a mild bout of sea-sickness. In more orthodox grammatical fashion Dickens often builds complex sentences that retain clarity and avoid ambiguity through the generous use of colons, semi-colons, dashes, brackets, and commas. Sometimes the purpose appears to be to impress a picture

on the reader's mind by means of a cluster of details, but at other times it appears that Dickens expands the sentence so as to avoid even the slight break in tension that a period would cause. This seems to account for the following passage:

And as they stood in the leaden morning, stricken with pity, leaning hard against the wind, their breath and vision often failing as the sleet and spray rushed at them from the ever forming and dissolving mountains of sea, and as the wool which was a part of the vessel's cargo blew in with the salt foam and remained upon the land when the foam melted, they saw the ship's life-boat put off from one of the heaps of wreck; and first, there were three men in her, and in a moment she capsized, and there were but two; and again, she was struck by a vast mass of water, and there was but one; and again, she was thrown bottom upward, and that one, with his arm struck through the broken planks and waving as if for the help that could never reach him, went down into the deep (pp. 5-6).

The novels of Dickens will have acquainted readers with the Dickensian propensity for attaching expressive names to characters. This propensity is evident in the Uncommercial Traveller, and some of the names that Dickens confers on his parade of characters add touches of humour to the essays. This, however, is not the main function of the names. In the essays Dickens does not have sufficient space to describe those people who do not belong among his prime concerns. By naming individuals who are of no more than peripheral interest according to some trait that has relevance to his main interests, Dickens provides limited but useful information in the most concise possible manner.

When Dickens goes on a night tour of the places frequented by off-duty sailors in Liverpool his main interest is to see

how the men fare in those places. He goes in the company of a Superintendent of police and three constables. The names of the constables, Sharpeye, Quickear, and Trampfoot, have a slightly comical ring, but Dickens's choice of names for them hinges on the fact that they suggest the chief qualifications necessary on the waterfront beat. The names also allows Dickens to distinguish between the men in subsequent references with an economy of words not possible otherwise.

On occasion Dickens indulges his penchant for coining names unnecessarily. When he first refers to himself as Houselessness in "Night Walks," it seems a picturesque way of alluding to his tendency to wander about while most people are asleep. It cloyes with constant repetition, however, and one begins to question the continued use when 'I' seems adequate for identification.

The discussion of Dickens's style would be incomplete without reference to a feature that he himself styles his "creative speculation."⁴ The term designates Dickens's talent for making conjectures of a fanciful nature that he weaves into the fabric of some essays. The Uncommercial Traveller contains many examples of this distinctive feature of Dickens's style. In one of the essays Dickens interrupts his account of a night walk through London to relate the fanciful thoughts that pass through his mind as he passes

⁴In five of the essays in Sketches by Boz Dickens uses the term and provides examples.

a hospital for the insane:

Are not the sane and insane equal at night as the sane lie a-dreaming? Are not all of us outside this hospital, who dream, more or less in the condition of those inside it, every night of our lives? Are we not nightly persuaded, as they daily are, that we associate preposterously with kings and queens, emperors and empresses, and notabilities of all sorts? Do we not nightly jumble events and personages and times and places, as these do daily? Are we not sometimes troubled by our own sleeping inconsistencies, and do we not vexedly try to account for them or excuse them, just as these do sometimes in respect of their waking delusions? (pp. 154-155).

The speculation can be born of curiosity as he wonders aloud as to the likely background of an old man and the little girl with him, whom he encounters in his visits to an old church. Sometimes the fancies take a morbid turn as when he thinks of Westminster as, "fine gloomy society for another quarter of an hour; suggesting a wonderful procession of its dead among the dark arches and pillars, each century more amazed by the century following it than by all the centuries before" (p. 155). Whatever turn the fancies of Dickens take, however, they invariably interest not only because they reflect his most intimate thoughts but also because as products of his lively imagination they retain their vitality on paper, thanks to his gifted pen.

In writing of the Uncommercial Traveller, Fielding says, "Few of his [Dickens's] articles were ever mere journalism. If he were not so well-known as a novelist, he might have been recognized long ago as a great English essayist."⁵ Mary Dickins shares this

⁵Charles Dickens (London, 1958), p. 169.

high regard for Dickens as an essayist, because she rates the Uncommercial Traveller on a level with the "Essays of Elia."⁶

It is possible that the association of Dickens's essays with journalism might have prejudiced critics other than Una Pope-Hennessy, who refers to the essays of the Uncommercial Traveller as "stop-gaps for the magazine."⁷ It should be borne in mind, however, that outstanding essayists like Steele and Addison wrote for periodicals, and Dickens's Tale of Two Cities and Great Expectations were originally written in serialised form for his magazine, All the Year Round.

There is a more serious hindrance to the acceptance of Dickens as a major essayist, however. Pritchard reflects a widely held opinion when he says, in the introduction of an anthology of essays, "The man who is violently discontented with things as he finds them may preach stirring sermons, write exquisite sonnets, deliver inflammatory harangues, or turn pamphleteer; he will assuredly not write good essays."⁸ His definition of 'good essays' arbitrarily excludes many fine essays in the Uncommercial Traveller that derive much of their powerful effect from the impression they convey of strong emotions subjected to the disciplined control of Dickens's literary skills. One thinks, for example, of

⁶"Dickens Self-Revealed," p. 130.

⁷Charles Dickens (New York, 1946), p. 412.

⁸Essays of Today (London, 1925), p. xi.

"Medicine Men of Civilization," in which Dickens, despite strong views on the matter, uses a restrained approach in undercutting some honoured customs of Western society. The critic who considers strong feelings inhibitory to good essay writing can point, for support, to the occasional essay like "The Ruffian," in which Dickens undoubtedly allows his talent to be betrayed by his feelings.

Even if one accepts blandness and urbanity as essentials of good essays, several in the Uncommercial Traveller qualify. In essays like "Night Walks," "City of London Churches," "Shy Neighbourhoods," and "City of the Absent," to name only a part of the list, Dickens writes humorously, whimsically, playfully, and compassionately about people, animals, places, and things that attracted his ever alert attention.

Dickens has obvious faults in the essays. He sometimes moralizes heavily, even while condemning the tendency; he sometimes allows an evident pride in his power over words to lead him into verbosity, and he occasionally loses his sense of proportion because of apparent biases. There are others, too, but all the faults cannot outweigh his virtues as an essayist. Readers who go through a thoughtful reading of the Uncommercial Traveller can hardly do so without acquiring greater respect for Dickens as an essayist, and without wondering at his relative obscurity in that role.

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