

Edmund Wilson's 'The Two Scrooges' Reconsidered*

TORU SASAKI

According to Lewis M. Dabney, Edmund Wilson's recent biographer, 'The Two Scrooges' is 'his most widely read literary essay'.¹ This comes as no surprise, for it is indeed a remarkable piece of writing. George Ford and Lauriat Lane, Jr in their selection of representative studies of Dickens in 1961 regarded it as 'undoubtedly the most important critical statement on Dickens of the last twenty-five years.'² Some fifty years later Paul Schlicke declared it to be 'unquestionably the most influential single study of Dickens of the 20th century.'³ There will be little dispute about these claims: the importance of Wilson's study in the history of Dickens criticism is firmly established. That being the case, I believe it is worth our while to scrutinize this celebrated essay once again, and bring its strength and weakness into sharp focus.

Wilson first broached his ideas about Dickens as a lecture in the summer school at the University of Chicago in 1939 (this is the reason why his essay is dedicated to the students there). He then published them in the form of three magazine articles; 'Dickens: the Two Scrooges' (*The New Republic*, March 4 and March 11, 1940), 'Dickens and the Marshalsea Prison' (*The Atlantic Monthly*, April 1940 and May 1940) and 'The Mystery of Edwin Drood' (*The New Republic*, April 8, 1940). Put together, they became a chapter called 'Dickens: the Two Scrooges' in *The Wound and the Bow: Seven Studies in Literature* (1941).⁴

This book as a whole has a running theme, which Wilson identified by reference to Sophocles's *Philoctetes*, where the eponymous hero, a Greek warrior, is, on his way to the Trojan War, bitten by a snake, and the wound begins to emit such a terrible stench that he is marooned on an island. Philoctetes, however, possesses the invincible bow which is necessary for the conquest of Troy. In the end he is persuaded to join the war again, kills Paris, and ensures victory for the Greeks. Wilson sees this story as a parable of artistic creation, suggesting that genius and some psychological wound are closely linked.⁵

'The Two Scrooges' is an application of this notion to Dickens. The 'wound'

in his case was the fact that at the age of twelve he had been sent to work in Warren's Blacking Factory,⁶ almost simultaneously with his father's imprisonment in the Marshalsea: 'these experiences produced in Charles Dickens a trauma from which he suffered all his life' (7).⁷ Wilson attempts to trace the effects of this trauma through the novelist's career. Here is a brief summary of his argument.

Dickens's dark obsessions, according to Wilson, make their presence felt even in the ostensibly comic *Pickwick Papers*, notably in one of the incorporated tales about 'The Queer Client', which deals with the revenge of a man put in the Marshalsea prison for debt. Even in the main story Mr Pickwick has to go to prison towards the end, and before the writing of this novel was finished, Dickens started a new story about an orphan born of a good family but consigned to a workhouse, which is virtually a prison. Wilson writes:

For the man of spirit whose childhood has been crushed by the cruelty of organized society, one of two attitudes is natural: that of the criminal or that of the rebel. Charles Dickens, in imagination, was to play the roles of both, and to continue up to his death to put into them all that was most passionate in his feeling (14).

In the early Dickens identification with the 'criminal', particularly 'the murderer', is noticeable, as can be observed in the powerful passages about the flight of Sikes, or Jonas Chuzzlewit's murder of Tigg Montague and its aftermath. The two themes involving the rebel and the criminal are combined in a peculiar way in *Barnaby Rudge*, the climax of which is the destruction of Newgate Prison by the mob, with Dickens apparently revelling in the event. In Dickens's middle period the identification with the rebel becomes predominant. This is seen in the increasing severity of his social criticism and the indictment of 'the self-important and moralizing middle class' (26). *Dombey and Son* is the first serious attempt at an anatomy of society—'always through the observed interrelations between highly individualized human beings rather than through political or economic analysis' (29). *Bleak House* realises 'this intention to

perfection' (29). *Little Dorrit* shows a new depth of psychological characterization and social criticism, reflecting Dickens's unhappy marriage and 'social maladjustment' (42). His gloomy view of society continues and deepens in *Great Expectations*, culminating in *Our Mutual Friend*, where the novelist shows his utter disillusion with middle class values as represented by Podsnap. Dickens always had difficulty in combining good and bad in one character, but he finally rose to the challenge in John Jasper. In *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, the social criticism disappears and psychological interest predominates. With the theme of 'the rebel' gone, the theme of 'the criminal', 'the murderer', is pursued to an unprecedented degree. But Dickens died leaving it unfinished, without resolving this confrontation between good and evil.

Such is Wilson's main argument. He believed that 'literary criticism ought to be . . . a history of man's idea and imaginings in the setting of the conditions which have shaped them'.⁸ Here his performance lived up to that ideal; he delved into the psychology of Dickens the man and connected it with the age that produced him, and at the same time provided a clear picture of his artistic development. Against the then prevalent view of Dickens as primarily a comic novelist, Wilson wanted to assert his significance as a serious social critic. Thus he was among the first fully to appreciate the later 'dark' novels. One of the most important of his contributions to Dickens criticism was the discussion of the novelist's symbolism at a far deeper level than ever attempted before; above all, his analysis of the prison symbol in *Little Dorrit*, which was truly epoch-making.⁹ We must remember that this novel was long regarded as a sad failure. In 1870, when Dickens died, the *Saturday Review* remarked in its obituary notice: 'With the single exception of *Little Dorrit* there is not one of his numerous stories that has not touches of the master-hand and strokes of indisputable genius'.¹⁰ This was very much the standard view for a long time, and even if there were some isolated defenders of it, such as George Gissing and Bernard Shaw, it was left to Wilson to demonstrate Dickens's artistic success in concrete details:

The main symbol here is the prison . . . but this symbol is developed in a way that takes it beyond the satirical application of the symbol of the fog in *Bleak*

House and gives it a significance more subjective. . . .

The Clennam house is a jail, and they are in prison too. So are the people in Bleeding Heart yard . . . ; so is Merdle . . . imprisoned . . . in the vast scaffolding of fraud he has contrived, who wanders about in his expensive house . . . afraid of his servants. . . .

[T]he Dorrits, accepted by Society, still find themselves in prison. The moral is driven home when old Dorrit, at a fashionable dinner, loses control of his wits and slips back into his character at the Marshalsea. . . . Arthur Clennam, ruined by the failure of Merdle, finally goes to the Marshalsea himself; and there at last he and Little Dorrit arrive at an understanding. . . . The whole book is much gloomier than *Bleak House*. . . . The murk of *Little Dorrit* permeates the souls of the people. . . .

[T]he fable is here presented from the point of view of imprisoning states of mind as much as from that of oppressive institutions. This is illustrated in a startling way by *The History of a Self-Tormentor*, which we find toward the end of the book. Here Dickens, with a remarkable pre-Freudian insight, gives a sort of case history of a woman imprisoned in a neurosis which has condemned her to the delusion that she can never be loved. (44-47)

This is brilliant literary criticism, and his elucidation of the prison symbolism has since become part of the critical consensus. In addition, the overall view of Dickens as a tormented genius, developed by Edgar Johnson's monumental biography, *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph* (1953), is still with us. Our idea of Dickens remains very much a creation of Wilson's. His argument, however, is not without its problems.

Wilson's keen biographical interest sometimes leads him to make a rather facile connection between life and art. This tendency is observable in his treatment of Ellen Ternan. Given that he was writing immediately after the explosion of the great scandal—Thomas Wright's *The Life of Charles Dickens* appeared in 1935 and Gladys Storey's *Dickens and Daughter* followed in 1939—it was natural that his view was

strongly affected by it. Eagerly swallowing Wright, Wilson argues that Dickens based his late heroines on Ternan. He admits the paucity of information about her, but observes: ‘We do, however, know something about what Dickens thought of her from the heroines in his last books who are derived from her’ (59). Estella is frigid, Bella (before conversion) is intent on money, therefore Ellen must be a person with these qualities—this is a typical Wilson move. In a similar fashion he speculates about Catherine Dickens: ‘Dickens’ terrible gallery of shrews who browbeat their amiable husbands suggests that she may have been a scold’ (39). Concerning such critical procedures of Wilson’s, Vladimir Nabokov wrote:

The method he favors is gleaning from my fiction what he supposes to be actual, ‘real-life’ impressions and then popping them back into my novels and considering my characters in that inept light—rather like the Shakespearian scholar who deduced Shakespeare’s mother from the plays and then discovered allusions to her in the very passages he had twisted to manufacture the lady.^{1 1}

Wilson was not always as crude as this, but he was prone to fall into the trap of the biographical fallacy.

As its title indicates, the core of Wilson’s essay lies in Dickens’s dualism, but his treatment of this central theme is curiously vague. It is first brought out as follows: ‘The world of the early Dickens is organized according to a dualism which is based . . . on the values of melodrama’ (51). There are bad people on one side, and good people on the other; comic characters here, ‘straight’ characters there, and so on. The only complexity Dickens was able to manage, in Wilson’s view, is to make a noxious character wholesome, and Scrooge is the prime example of this. Now he moves from the fictional world to its creator: ‘Scrooge represents a principle fundamental to the dynamics of Dickens’s world and derived from his own emotional constitution. It was not merely that his passion for the theater had given him a taste for melodramatic contrasts; it was rather that the lack of balance between the opposite impulses of his nature had stimulated an appetite for melodrama. For emotionally Dickens *was*

unstable' (51-52). It is this psychological feature that Wilson sees in both the novelist and the character:

Shall we ask what Scrooge would actually be like if we were to follow him beyond the frame of the story? Unquestionably he would relapse when the merriment was over—if not while it was still going on—into moroseness, vindictiveness, suspicion. He would, that is to say, reveal himself as the victim of a manic-depressive cycle, and a very uncomfortable person.^{1 2} (53)

Next, we are quickly back in the fictional world again: 'This dualism runs all through Dickens. There has always to be a good and a bad of everything. . . . Dickens' difficulty in his middle period, and indeed more or less to the end, is to get good and bad together in one character' (53-54). Then, after an interval, we hear about the theme in relation to *Edwin Drood*: 'The duality of high and low, rich and poor, has evidently here given place to the duality of good and evil' (82). This 'duality of high and low, rich and poor', however, has not been explained at all. We are left to presume that he means something about Dickens's social criticism and unease about his own class identity. In the discussion of these topics, we are not made aware that Wilson is treating them in connection with the dualism in question. Also we wonder what all this talk about dualism has to do with 'the rebel' and 'the criminal' themes (a point to which I shall return at the end).

This lack of clarity is related to the structural problem.^{1 3} As I have pointed out, Wilson's study is made of three magazine articles that were published separately. The essay as it stands now starts with what used to be 'Dickens and the Marshalsea Prison', which deals with the childhood trauma, the rebel/criminal theme, and the prison motif. Then it is followed by what were originally 'Dickens: the Two Scrooges' and 'The Mystery of Edwin Drood', these two mainly treating the dualism in Dickens, with the 'criminal' theme surfacing in the latter. In my view, the synthesis of the three is not entirely successful. Wilson's argument tries to follow Dickens's novels chronologically and trace his development, but after dealing with *Little Dorrit* (the end

point of ‘Dickens and the Marshalsea Prison’), it goes back to *A Christmas Carol* (the beginning of ‘The Two Scrooges’). The main topic of Dickens’s dualism is not mentioned at all in the first third; its discussion begins with the *Carol*, and then continues in the hazy fashion I have noted, until it comes to be the focus in the last third of the piece. Scrooge, though featuring in the title, appears to be sandwiched by the discussions of the rebel/criminal theme, having nothing to do with it himself.

The book version we have today contains some additions to the original articles, but these added materials are not the stronger parts of his essay; they include, for example, a notorious judgment of *David Copperfield* as ‘not one of Dickens’ deepest books’ and ‘something in the nature of a holiday’ (37). The hurried dismissal of this novel in one paragraph—‘David is too candid and simple to represent Dickens himself’ (37)—tells us where the critic’s most urgent concern is: it is as if the novel were not important because it does not reveal anything significant about the author.

‘The Two Scrooges’ is weakest in its conclusion. In dealing with a writer’s career, Wilson, like the good journalist that he was, tended to form it into a well-shaped story. For example, in ‘The Kipling That Nobody Read’, he notes that ‘It is striking that some of the most authentic of Kipling’s early stories should deal with children forsaken by their parents and the most poignant of his later ones with parents bereaved of their children’, thus suggesting a neat symmetry in the author’s creative life.¹⁴ Again, towards the end of ‘The Ambiguity of Henry James’ Wilson says that although the novelist was buried in America, ‘one occasionally finds references to him which assume that he was buried in England. . . . [E]ven Henry James’s death has been not without a suggestion of the equivocal’—a nice finish to the whole argument about ‘ambiguity’.¹⁵ A similar desire for a tidy ending (but with an unfortunate result) can be observed in ‘The Two Scrooges’. Here, the fact that Dickens was not able to complete *Edwin Drood* is seen as a reflection of the novelist’s inability to resolve his internal conflict:

But now the Dickens who had been cut off from society has discarded the theme of the rebel and is carrying the theme of the criminal, which has haunted him all

his life, to its logical development in his fiction. He is to explore the deep entanglement and conflict of the bad and the good in one man. . . .

The protest against the age has turned into a protest against self. In this last moment, the old hierarchy of England does enjoy a sort of triumph over the weary and debilitated Dickens, for it has made him accept its ruling that he is a creature irretrievably tainted; and the mercantile middle-class England has had its triumph, too. For the Victorian hypocrite—developing from Pecksniff, through Murdstone, through Headstone, to his final incarnation in Jasper—has finally come to present an insoluble moral problem which is identified with Dickens's own. . . .

In this last condemned cell of Dickens, the respectable half of the divided John Jasper was to be brought face to face with the other half. But this confrontation . . . was never, in fact, to take place. For Dickens in his moral confusion was never to dramatize himself completely, was not even in this final phase of his art to succeed in coming quite clear. He was to leave *Edwin Drood* half-finished, with the confession just around the corner. (81-85)

In this extract there are several problems. Wilson says 'Dickens had been cut off from society', but what basis is there for this judgment? To be sure, he has talked about the termination of Dickens's public readings, but immediately before the above quotation, he gives an account of the novelist's dinner engagement (among the guests was the Prince of Wales) two weeks before his death which he *kept* in spite of the 'neurotic foot' (81). Perhaps 'society' in a wider sense is meant? Even then, the discussion so far only touches upon Dickens's change of class allegiance in *Our Mutual Friend*—'Shrinking from Podsnap and Veneering, he falls back on that aristocracy he had so savagely attacked in his youth' (66)—which is an entirely different matter from social isolation. The fog becomes thicker when Wilson contends that in the 'protest against self' Dickens was defeated by 'the old hierarchy of England' and found himself 'irretrievably tainted'. Since shortly before the above passage he quotes Sir Henry Fielding Dickens's account of an occurrence at a Christmas party in 1869, the year

before Dickens's death—in the middle of a word-list game suddenly Dickens interjected the words, 'Warren's Blacking, 30, Strand' (80)—I suppose by the word, 'tainted', we are meant to remember the point made at the beginning of his essay: that Dickens's humiliation at the blacking factory was 'a trauma from which he suffered all his life'. John Gross's remark that 'Of all modern writings on Dickens, Edmund Wilson's essay . . . is the most dramatic'¹⁶ is true enough, but all these phrases here—'cut off from society', 'protest against self', 'the triumph of the old hierarchy of England', 'irretrievably tainted'—are close to being melodramatic exaggerations, and do not bear critical scrutiny. I cannot help feeling that they are introduced to satisfy Wilson's desire for a showy ending.

Using a theatrical metaphor himself, Wilson declares that 'Dickens in his moral confusion was never to dramatize himself completely' and that he did not 'succeed in coming quite clear'—'*not even in this final phase*'.¹⁷ This is puzzling, for twenty pages or so before, discussing *Our Mutual Friend*, he has said: 'Dickens has here distilled the mood of his later years, dramatized the tragic discrepancies of his character, delivered his final judgment on the whole Victorian exploit. . . . Dickens's line in his criticism of society is very clear in *Our Mutual Friend*, and it marks a new position on Dickens's part. . . . Dickens has come at last to despair utterly of the prospering middle class' (61-63). There seems to be a self-contradiction regarding whether or not Dickens managed to dramatise the discrepancies in his character. Presumably, Wilson is suggesting that Dickens was clear about his attack on the mercantile middle class in *Our Mutual Friend*, but that when he came to write *Edwin Drood* he was not certain as to where he was morally. This theory of Dickens's 'moral confusion', however, is not convincing.

Wilson wants to see Dickens identifying himself with Jasper: 'Jasper is, like Dickens, an artist. . . . Like Dickens he is a skilful magician. . . . Like Dickens he is an alien from another world; yet, like Dickens, he has made himself respected in the conventional English community' (83). If Jasper is 'a dual personality' (76), so is Dickens. One might follow Wilson this far. His next move is questionable. He argues that Jasper, a Thug, commits the murder in the name of the goddess Kali, so that

his act can be pardoned, even praised, in a morality that is different from that of Victorian England. Granted that one might draw from this a conclusion that Jasper is both innocent and wicked, but is this really an ‘insoluble moral problem’? More crucially, does this lead to a ‘moral confusion’ on the novelist’s part? Surely to create a morally ambiguous character and to be morally confused are two completely different things. Although it can be said that Dickens was in his imagination two persons, good and evil,¹⁸ there is no evidence that indicates his confusion between them: as Philip Collins observes, ‘throughout his fiction and journalism, Dickens regards murderers as unequivocally and entirely wicked men’.¹⁹ Collins also states that the alleged resemblance between Dickens and Jasper ‘does not strike [him] as impressive’ (312). Dickens may have had an unstable social identity up to the very end, but Wilson connects that with moral uncertainty in the novelist—this is where I have the strongest reservation about his argument.²⁰

In the assessment of ‘The Two Scrooges’, we ought not to reckon without Philip Collins, who has offered a most sustained and learned critique not only of Wilson’s reading of *Drood*, but his idea of Dickens as a whole.²¹ His magisterial book, *Dickens and Crime* (1962), which amply demonstrates the complexity (inconsistencies and contradictions included) of the novelist that appears in his opinion on public issues, was largely an attempt to redress the image of Dickens Wilson helped to create; ‘a Dickens increasingly clear-sighted in his radical opposition to the structure and ideology of his society’ (22). Several years later, in the anniversary issue of the *Dickensian*, ‘Dickens and Fame’, Collins had occasion to make his point succinctly:

The recurrent tendency in [Edgar] Johnson and in most American (and much British and other) discussion of Dickens is to exaggerate the extent and the clarity of his reaction against his time. Edmund Wilson gave the lead—taking a hint, no doubt, from Shaw (but then no-one should take such Irish statements literally). ‘Of all the great Victorian writers,’ wrote Wilson, ‘he was probably the most antagonistic to the Victorian Age itself.’ Dickens, heaven knows, is a remarkable writer, however one understands and judges him; but surely it should

have struck Wilson, and those who followed his lead, that it would have been more than remarkable—it would have been incredible—that an author so antagonistic to his age should have been the age’s darling for a third of a century, and then posthumously thereafter? However would he have got away with it?^{2 2}

Then Queen Victoria’s testimony is brought in: she ‘wasn’t clever’ but what she says ‘strikes something near the right note.’ At Dickens’s death the Queen records: ‘He is a very great loss. . . . He had a large loving mind and the strongest sympathy with the poorer classes. He felt sure that a better feeling, and much great union of classes would take place in time. And I pray earnestly it may.’^{2 3} Collins concludes: ‘People really antagonistic to their age don’t get that kind of concurrence from queens’ (155).

This is certainly a most forceful objection to Wilson’s important point. For the further consideration of this issue—our last point of examination—it is instructive to turn to George Orwell, whose equally famous study of Dickens was conceived exactly at the same time as Wilson’s.^{2 4} Interestingly, Orwell, too, regarded the novelist as a rebel, using the very same word: ‘even if Dickens was a bourgeois, he was certainly a subversive writer, a radical, one might truthfully say a rebel.’ And his thinking seems to go along the line of Collins’s criticism just quoted:

In *Oliver Twist*, *Hard Times*, *Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit*, Dickens attacked English institutions with a ferocity that has never since been approached. Yet he managed to do it without making himself hated, and, more than this, the very people he attacked have swallowed him so completely that he has become a national institution himself. . . . Dickens seems to have succeeded in attacking everybody and antagonizing nobody. Naturally this makes one wonder whether after all there was something unreal in his attack upon society. Where exactly does he stand, socially, morally, and politically?^{2 5}

Orwell answers this self-imposed question, first by pointing out what Dickens was not: namely, he was not a ‘proletarian’ writer; he was not a ‘revolutionary’ writer; he was not destructive in any sense. What he wanted was not social, but moral change (21-22). The central secret of the novelist’s popularity, in Orwell’s view, was his native generosity, his tendency to support underdogs. This type of mentality, he goes on, is one of the marks of western popular culture, like Mickey Mouse and Popeye. His conclusion runs as follows:

Nearly everyone, whatever his actual conduct may be, responds emotionally to the idea of human brotherhood. Dickens voiced a code which was and on the whole still is believed in, even by people who violate it. It is difficult otherwise to explain why he could be both read by working people (a thing that has happened to no other novelist of his stature) and buried in Westminster Abbey. (55)

This is how Dickens ‘got away with’ the attack on his age: so Orwell would have countered Collins’s objection to Wilson. As far as the idea of the novelist as rebel is concerned, Orwell may have been a touch shrewder than Wilson in seeing the matter in a highly generalised fashion: Dickens was broadly ‘in revolt against authority’; ‘his radicalism was only of the vaguest kind’ (54).²⁶

Certainly Wilson made too much of the novelist’s hostility towards his age. Collins’s criticism is just: ‘[Dickens’s] vision of capitalist society was less complete, coherent, and hostile than [Wilson] claims’ (*Dickens and Crime*, 308).²⁷ The keen journalist in Wilson was, I suspect, very much responsible for the stark, provocative view. He could have avoided this trap, however, by reading his own piece more carefully and following through its logic to the end. Earlier I have said we wonder—since it is never made clear—what all the talk about dualism has to do with ‘the rebel’ and ‘the criminal’ themes under discussion. If, as Wilson maintains, ‘This dualism runs all through Dickens [he means, we have seen, both the novels and the man]’, there is bound to be the ‘opposite impulse’ (51) of the ‘rebel’, which would be

related to the conservative side of the novelist. Then, the ‘two Scrooges’ one imagines in the logical extension of that might point to the kind of Dickens Collins has in mind. In this sense one might say Wilson’s argument is more perspicacious than the critic himself realised.

In spite of its problems, Edmund Wilson’s study remains a monumental achievement. It is well worth re-reading, or worth taking issue with. ‘I nag at [Wilson] in this way, not because I lack respect for him (on the contrary: I pore over him with continual delight and benefit)’, says Professor Collins (*Dickens and Crime*, 307)—my sentiments exactly.

*This article is based on a lecture given at the Annual Conference of the Dickens Fellowship in Amsterdam (July 2006). As it was also the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Haarlem Branch, I was asked, if possible, to turn my thoughts to ‘Dickens 50 years ago’. ‘The Two Scrooges’ is a little older than that, but I hoped—as Aunt Betsy says of the possibility of Mr Dick ever finishing his Memorial—‘it don’t signify’.

I wish to express my gratitude to Edward Costigan and Michael Slater for their helpful comments on an earlier draft.

¹ *Edmund Wilson: A Life in Literature* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 266.

² *The Dickens Critics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1961), 180.

³ *Oxford Reader’s Companion to Dickens*, ed. Paul Schlicke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 590.

⁴ Wilson afterwards made some minor alterations in the text of this essay (but no substantial revisions); see Note 17.

⁵ In the play there appears a character named Neoptolemus, whom Greeks send, with Odysseus, to persuade Philoctetes. According to Leon Edel, this figure ‘becomes a kind of archetypal critic’ in Wilson’s vision: see his ‘Introduction’ to Edmund Wilson, *The Twenties: From Notebooks and Diaries of the Period* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), xli.

⁶ Dabney speculates that Wilson ‘enters into young Dickens’s sense of abandonment at the blacking factory, drawing on his relationships with his own parents’ (*Edmund*

Wilson, 22).

⁷ This and the subsequent references to ‘The Two Scrooges’ are to *The Wound and the Bow: Seven Studies in Literature* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1997).

⁸ This is from the dedicatory words to Christian Gauss in *Axel’s Castle* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1931).

⁹ See Philip Collins, ‘*Little Dorrit*: the Prison and the Critics’, *TLS*, 18 April 1980, 445-46.

¹⁰ *Dickens: the Critical Heritage* ed. Philip Collins (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), 509.

¹¹ Originally a letter to the editor, *The New York Times Book Review*, 7 November 1971; reprinted in Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 218. Wilson’s other contribution to Dickens studies was to suggest to Nabokov, when there was a friendly relationship between them, that he teach *Bleak House* at Cornell. The Russian novelist’s highly interesting lecture can be read in his *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980).

¹² The idea of Dickens as manic-depressive was taken up by an eminent neurologist, W. Russell Brain, in his ‘Authors and Psychopaths’ *British Medical Journal* (December 24, 1949), 1427-32.

¹³ The structural problem is also noted in Janet Groth, *Edmund Wilson: A Critic for Our Time* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1989), which contains a useful chapter on ‘The Two Scrooges’.

¹⁴ *The Wound and the Bow*, 145.

¹⁵ *The Triple Thinkers: Twelve Essays on Literary Subjects* (1952; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), 140.

¹⁶ ‘Dickens: Some Recent Approaches’ in *Dickens and the Twentieth Century*, ed. John Gross and Gabriel Pearson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), ix.

¹⁷ The 1997 reprint I am quoting from is exactly the same as the 1978 Farrar Straus Giroux, or the 1970 Oxford University Press printing. In earlier printings—for example, the 1947 ‘New Printing with Corrections’ (OUP) and 1952 W. H. Allen ‘Revised Edition’—the text reads ‘never in this last phase’. In that case, it may just be possible to regard ‘this last phase’ as designating the period relating to *Drood* only. Then there is no contradiction involved. The phrase after the revision, ‘not even in this final phase’, seems to preclude such a possibility.

¹⁸ There is an extraordinary confirmation of this by Dickens himself, which recently surfaced. None other than Dostoevsky reports that ‘There were two people in him, he told me: one who feels as he ought to feel and one who feels the opposite.’ See Stephanie Harvey, ‘Dickens’s Villains: A Confession and a Suggestion’, *The Dickensian*, No. 458 (Winter 2002), 233.

¹⁹ *Dickens and Crime* (London: Macmillan, 1962), 305.

²⁰ More locally, I find Wilson in a muddle about Captain Hawdon, whom he conceives as ‘the reckless soldier, adored by his men, beloved by women, the image of the old life-loving England, whose epitaph Dickens is now writing.’ The Captain, he says, ‘has failed in that world, has perished as a friendless and penniless man, and has been buried in the pauper’s graveyard in one of the foulest quarters of London, but the loyalties felt for him by the living will endure and prove so strong after his death that they will pull that world apart’ (34-35). If by ‘the loyalties felt for him’ pulling ‘that world apart’ he means the actions of Lady Dedlock and George, he is surely overstating the case.

²¹ Not to be forgotten, either, is Q. D. Leavis’s intemperately expressed, yet not

wholly ill-judged remark on “amateur psychologists” led by Wilson. See her Note to the Preface, *Dickens: the Novelist* (1970; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 14-20.

^{2 2} *The Dickensian*, No. 361 (Spring 1970), 154-55. As Collins points out, Wilson owes much to Shaw. This is obvious and he would have been the first to admit it. But what about Chesterton? Rating Gissing higher, he has little time for Chesterton as a critic of Dickens (4), but the latter, in fact, seems to have anticipated some of his key notions. Of Dickens’s blacking factory days Chesterton says, ‘Those years may have given him many moral and mental wounds, from which he never recovered. But they gave him the key of the street’; he also notes ‘dualism in Dickens . . . constitutes the whole crux of his character’. See *Charles Dickens* (1906; London: Methuen, 1946), 35, 157.

^{2 3} Quoted from *Letters, 1862-78*, ed. G. E. Buckle, 1906, ii, 21.

^{2 4} As I have said, Wilson gave his Dickens lectures in 1939. Quite independently, across the Atlantic, Orwell wrote his essay that year, and published it in *Inside the Whale* (1940). They reviewed each other, however. Orwell (*The Observer*, 10 May 1942) buys the ‘Two Scrooges’ argument and says, ‘One is forced to believe in a sort of split personality’ of Dickens. He submits: ‘[Wilson] overstresses the element of symbolism in Dickens’s work and understresses the mechanical side of commercial story-writing. But this aside this is the best essay on Dickens that has appeared for some time.’ He does not forget to add that ‘Mr Wilson at times writes clumsily, even vulgarly’ (this has some truth, as we have seen). This review is reprinted in *The Complete Works of George Orwell Vol. 13, All Propaganda is Lies*, ed. Peter Davison (London: Secker and Warburg, 1998), 314-16. Wilson, in his turn (*The New Yorker*, 25 May 1946), says: Orwell’s study, though ‘original and interesting’, suffers from ‘a tendency to generalize about the first-rate writer . . . without following his development as an artist . . . and from a habit of taking complex personalities too much at their face value, of not getting inside them enough. Orwell does not see, for example, that Dickens was more attracted than repelled by horror and violence’. This review is reprinted in *From the Uncollected Edmund Wilson*, ed. Janet Groth and David Castronovo (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1995), 306-12.

^{2 5} ‘Charles Dickens’ in *The Complete Works of George Orwell Vol. 12, A Patriot After All*, 21.

^{2 6} One should remember, however, that, as Collins points out, in Dickens’s ‘inability to sympathise with established authority’ there is ‘the conspicuous exception of the New Police and, overseas, of those who resolutely disciplined the turbulent natives’ (*Dickens and Crime*, 47).

^{2 7} Sharp as it is, Collins’s criticism of Wilson in this book does not seem fair when he observes that ‘More of [Dickens’s] greatness resides in his comedy than Mr Wilson ever recognizes’ (308). Wilson was aware of the novelist’s comic genius; he was simply not dealing with it, for he says: ‘I shall make no attempt to discuss at length the humor of the early Dickens. This is the aspect of his work that is best known, the only aspect that some people know’ (13).

(Originally published in *The Dickensian* Vol. 104 Part 1 pp. 32-43.)