

## CHAPTER 11

# Waiting, for Dickens

John Bowen, University of York

Perhaps because I have always had such a weak ego, always felt myself inferior to all others, in every situation ... the worst for me are waiters, since their role is so obviously to serve and be there to please.

(Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle: Book 6. The End*)

One day she entered a room where he was sitting with his eyes turned toward an open novel. She said 'Waiting'.

(Quentin Crisp, *The Naked Civil Servant*)

[H]is appearance ... was in all respects a great disappointment. It is a sort of mixture of the *waiter* and the actor, Frenchified in his dress to a degree quite disagreeable.

(John Tulloch on Dickens as a reader)

Waiters appear in all of Dickens's novels, in many of his letters, and often in his journalism. They condense, in their seemingly marginal presence and through their interactions with more 'major' characters, a great deal of Dickens's understanding of social relationships, particularly concerning questions of money, class, gentility, and power. They raise metaphysical questions too, for waiting (and the figure of the waiter in particular) has a distinctive relationship to

---

### How to cite this book chapter:

Bowen, J. 2020. Waiting, for Dickens. In: Bell, E. (ed.), *Dickens After Dickens*, pp. 215–232. York: White Rose University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22599/DickensAfterDickens.l>. Licence, apart from specified exceptions: CC BY-NC 4.0

time. It is no accident that the single most famous passage and example in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, a text deeply concerned with time and temporality, is about a waiter, whose 'movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid' (82). Sartre's waiter, it seems, is slightly out of time, a little ahead of where he should be. He is also, for Sartre, the epitome of bad faith, someone caught perpetually between authenticity and inauthenticity, between playing a role and being an authentic self. A waiter, ventriloquises Sartre, 'can be he only in the neutralised mode, as the actor is Hamlet, by mechanically making the *typical gestures* of my state' (83). The waiter is Sartre's archetypal modern person, typical of a generalised condition of inauthenticity, but he is also a worker, not a passer-by, friend, or acquaintance. And he does a particular kind of work – not in a factory or a mine, nor domestic work nor childcare, but a characteristic 'service' job of the modern economy, as performative as it is precarious, always waiting, never quite on time. In Sartre's description:

He comes toward the customers with a step a little too quick. He bends forward a little too eagerly; his voice, his eyes express an interest a little too solicitous for the order of the client. Finally there he returns, trying to imitate in his walk the inflexible stiffness of some kind of automaton while carrying his tray with the recklessness of a tight-rope walker, by putting it in a perpetually unstable, perpetually broken equilibrium which he perpetually reestablishes by a light movement of the arm and hand. All his behavior seems to us a game. (82)

Sartre sees the waiter as characterised by exaggeration and excess, akin to an automaton in his movements: unstable and vulnerable but also performative, playful, and theatrical. It is a surprisingly Dickensian moment to find in a lengthy mid-20th-century work of existential philosophy, but perhaps not so surprising, for Dickens too is interested in waiters and what we might learn from them about time, labour, and the performance of the self in the modern world.

It is often assumed that readers always come after texts: first there is writing, then publication, then reading. But many texts, including Dickens's, have a more complex relationship to the time of reading than this. Serial publication, for example, necessitates reading in instalments, hardwiring intervals of waiting – anticipation, endurance, distraction – into its structure. Reading, though, is not just a matter of waiting for the next novel or the next instalment, which we trust will appear on time and in place. For Dickens's work constantly incites us to be attentive readers, alive to every gesture and movement of his texts. Good readers wait *on* texts, carefully reading their signs, patiently attentive to their desires. Waiting on a text, though, is both motivated and undermined by waiting *for* the text: readers attend to texts in the hope of understanding their meanings through structures of motivated revelation over time. Such

meanings are necessarily deferred; texts never deliver the plenitude of meaning they promise but instead displace their readers along unfinalisable structures of linguistic difference. We cannot simply say that we come ‘after Dickens’ because his texts remain both ahead and behind us, displaced and displacing themselves and their readers, phoneme by phoneme, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, chapter by chapter, book by book, in processes and within structures that are not docile to conventional temporal ordering. We are destined to wait, in short, both on and for Dickens; his own work may be a helpful guide to how we might do so.

### My friend the waiter

From the beginning to the end of his writing life, Dickens was curious about, even fascinated by, waiters. In his fiction, journalism, and other writing there is a constant process and project of noticing their speech and behaviour. He portrayed them as sometimes intimidating, often touching, and usually very funny. This marks him out from many other writers of this period, to whom waiters, even more often than domestic servants, seem invisible or merely functional. Dickens, by contrast, was intrigued by waiters’ behaviour and the ways that their lives, personalities, pleasures, and pains were revealed in their work and language, in the expressiveness of their mannerisms, rituals, quirks, and resistances. He was interested in both what waiters had in common and how they were different from each other and from their customers. Much of his understanding of society – its power relations, its rituals, and its hospitality – is distilled in his waiter figures, who mediate so nakedly between social classes. Working people who must be at least minimally genteel in their conduct, waiters mediate class and other social differences, and repeatedly travel between the hot and dirty work of food production and its more-or-less elegant consumption. They help meet deep human needs – for food, drink, shelter, comfort – and do so for money. They serve anyone who can afford to pay and make sure that those who cannot pay do not get served. They are the gatekeepers and executives of modern hospitality, and they populate, enable, and enrich much of Dickens’s work.

In this chapter, I would like to explore what it means to wait, and what it means to be waited on, in Dickens’s writing. Waiting is rarely a matter just of service, a one-way street of simple distribution. For both customer and waiter have to wait, in their different, socially distinct, ways. They wait, both for each other (the customer to arrive, the waiter to take the order) and, then again, for whatever it is that each wants from the other: food, drink, money. This is not an equal exchange or one without hierarchy, by any means, but it is not simply a matter of domination either. Relations with waiters are often complex or conflicted in Dickens’s work, compactly alive with social nuance. One of the most brilliant chapters of G. K. Chesterton’s *Charles Dickens* is entitled ‘On

the alleged optimism of Dickens, which defends Dickens's 'vulgar optimism' (263) through distinguishing between good and bad kinds of it. The bad kind occurs, for Chesterton, when Dickens's

kindness to his characters is a careless and insolent kindness. He loses his real charity and adopts the charity of the Charity Organisation Society; the charity that is not kind, the charity that is puffed up, and that does behave itself unseemly. At the end of some of his stories he deals out his characters a kind of out-door relief. (266)

But there is a good kind of optimism in Dickens's work, writes Chesterton, and his defining example of it has a waiter at its heart. Dickens, he writes,

knew well that the greatest happiness that has been known since Eden is the happiness of the unhappy. ... Nothing that has ever been written about human delights, no Earthly Paradise, no Utopia has ever come so near the quick nerve of happiness as his descriptions of the rare extravagances of the poor; such an admirable description, for instance, as that of Kit Nubbles taking his family to the theatre. For he seizes on the real source of the whole pleasure; a holy fear. Kit tells the waiter to bring the beer. And the waiter, instead of saying, 'Did you address that language to me,' said, 'Pot of beer, sir; yes, sir.' That internal and quivering humility of Kit is the only way to enjoy life or banquets; and the fear of the waiter is the beginning of dining. (265–6)

Chesterton exemplifies and justifies Dickens's optimism by evoking a single representative scene from *The Old Curiosity Shop*. In it a poor family, consisting of Kit or Christopher Nubbles, his mother, and future wife, Barbara, find the 'quick nerve of happiness' in a feast of three dozen oysters and a pot of beer. What makes it so special and so important for Chesterton (and Kit) is that the order has been promptly brought to their table by a 'fierce gentleman with whiskers, who ... called him, him Christopher Nubbles, "sir"' (301). The waiter here represents for Chesterton a democratic deference, a sudden liberation for Kit and his family from their hard, working lives, a sudden surprising freedom from service, labour and fear.

Waiters are not always so prompt and helpful, though, and characters who share some of Kit's 'intense and quivering humility' not always so readily assuaged. Waiters often trouble the class vulnerabilities of those they wait on, and the 'fear of the waiter' seems almost omnipresent in Dickens's sympathetic characters. In *Great Expectations*, for example, shortly after Pip has moved to London and is living with Herbert Pocket, the two young men send out for 'a nice little dinner' to celebrate. It was, writes Pip, 'a very Lord Mayor's Feast', a 'delightful' event and a 'pleasure ... without alloy', but only, he adds, 'when the waiter was not there to watch me' (177).

The watching waiter is a repeated motif in Dickens's work. It is sometimes a disturbing or discomfiting gaze, as it was for Pip, but it can also be more distanced and enigmatic, as in *A Tale of Two Cities*:

Rounding his mouth and both his eyes, as he stepped backward from the table, the waiter shifted his napkin from his right arm to his left, dropped into a comfortable attitude, and stood surveying the guest while he ate and drank, as from an observatory or watchtower. According to the immemorial usage of waiters in all ages. (21)

There is a precision of social notation here, in Dickens's exact attention to the waiter's mouth, eyes, step, napkin, attitude, and gaze. The waiter seems to look from an imaginary observatory or watchtower, which resembles in some ways that of the panopticon which Michel Foucault deploys in *Discipline and Punish* as a privileged figure of modern disciplinary power (195–228). This waiter's gaze on Jarvis Lorry is not a panoptic one, though, for the viewer in this imaginary observatory or watchtower is a visible, particular individual, who is clearly subordinate and obedient. But such scenes of observation can, as with Pip's and Herbert's feast, evoke a similar disciplinary or subjectifying effect. It is, though, the relationship to *time* that is most striking about the waiter of *A Tale of Two Cities*. In the midst of an historical novel about the French Revolution, we are asked, in reading about the most disturbed and violent period of modern history, to notice such a tiny thing as the particular way a waiter looks, or fails to look, at his client. It is explicitly presented as essentially indifferent to time, a non-historical event: the waiter's gaze is an 'immemorial usage' that has existed 'in all ages.' It seems to exist outside history altogether, a moment of temporal arrest and strange calm in the bloody and busy events of the novel, for the waiter, for Lorry, and for the reader too.

A more complex, double or triple, play of gazes can be seen in the waiters who watch David Copperfield, who, as a child labourer at Murdstone and Grimby's bottle warehouse, went to eat one day 'carrying my own bread ... wrapped in a piece of paper, like a book' to 'a famous alomode beef-house near Drury Lane':

What the waiter thought of such a strange little apparition coming in all alone, I don't know; but I can see him now, staring at me as I ate my dinner, and bringing up the other waiter to look. I gave him a halfpenny for himself, and I wish he hadn't taken it. (130)

A poor worker stares at an even poorer child worker (who is an 'apparition,' not quite a phantom, not quite a person) and brings a third to look too. And all three, eating and staring respectively, are still being seen 'now' by the older narrating David, to whom the waiter's thoughts are profoundly enigmatic. In this world of small gestures, the final tiny gift of the halfpenny tip remains an uncertain one. Is it a matter of embarrassment or shame and, if so, why?

Dickens wrote ‘wish’ not ‘wished’, so the regret at the halfpenny must be David’s thought as he narrates the story. It is not that he *then* wished the waiter had not taken it (because he, the child, needed the money, for example) but *now*, as an adult, wishes he had not. Does he now think it was humiliating for the waiter to be tipped by a child? By such a poor child? Or that it was such a small amount that he must have been very poor to take it? Or that the system of deference such a tip represents is simply shaming all round?

But waiters do much more than gaze, both in life and in Dickens’s work. Socially and narratively confined, stuck almost invariably within a single episode in each novel, they often show a gift for maximising their impact, making the slightest gesture memorable or important, brilliant minimalists to a man (and, occasionally, woman). Like Dickens himself, they can do a great deal with very little: a cough, a look, a murmur. When Pumblechook, for example, denounces Pip’s ingratitude in front of the landlord and waiter towards the end of *Great Expectations*, the observing waiter is essential to both the suffering and comedy of the scene:

‘And yet,’ said Pumblechook, turning to the landlord and waiter, and pointing me out at arm’s length, ‘this is him as I ever sported with in his days of happy infancy! Tell me not it cannot be; I tell you this is him!’

A low murmur from the two replied. The waiter appeared to be particularly affected.

‘This is him,’ said Pumblechook, ‘as I have rode in my shay-cart. This is him as I have seen brought up by hand. This is him untoe the sister of which I was uncle by marriage, as her name was Georgiana M’ria from her own mother, let him deny it if he can!’

The waiter seemed convinced that I could not deny it, and that it gave the case a black look.

‘Young man,’ said Pumblechook, screwing his head at me in the old fashion, ‘you air a going to Joseph. What does it matter to me, you ask me, where you air a going? I say to you, Sir, you air a going to Joseph.’

The waiter coughed, as if he modestly invited me to get over that. (469–70)

There are three brilliantly realised deadpan reaction shots here, three-quarters of a century both before ‘dead-pan’ enters the language (*Oxford English Dictionary*) and since Alfred Hitchcock first used the term ‘reaction shot’ (Davy 9). They can thus be added to the repertoire of proto-filmic effects that Sergei Eisenstein showed in Dickens’s work (195–255). But language does things here that film cannot, capturing both the emptiness of Pumblechook’s rhetoric (‘this is him ... this is him ... This is him ... This is him ... This is him ...’) and the corresponding power of the waiter’s silences. It also allows the scene to be focalised through Pip, as the description of each little reaction achieves more and more with less: ‘the waiter ... appeared to be ... seemed convinced ... as if’:

four syllables diminish to three and then two, the writing as tactful, unassertive and exquisitely painful as the waiter's cough.

Waiters are not always so quiet, though, and there is often activity and aggression too, as we see in one of Dickens's funniest scenes, the meeting of David and 'the friendly waiter' in *David Copperfield*. It tells a tale, if we want to moralise it, of adult ruthlessness and selfishness towards a small child. This is a waiter at the maximum, not silent, deferential, or gazing, but actively, wittily and creatively asserting himself at a child's expense, by inventing more and more ways to eat as much of his food, take as much of his money, and frighten him, all in as polite, cheerful and friendly a manner as possible. The usual relations of power are inverted, and the customer – here the eight-year-old David – is at his most vulnerable. The waiter – 'a twinkling-eyed, pimple-faced man, with his hair standing upright all over his head' (53) – dominates the scene, constantly inventing new ways to fleece, frighten or shame the little boy.

'There's half a pint of ale for you. Will you have it now?'

I thanked him, and said, 'Yes.' Upon which he poured it out of a jug into a large tumbler, and held it up against the light, and made it look beautiful.

'My eye!' he said. 'It seems a good deal, don't it?'

'It does seem a good deal,' I answered with a smile. For it was quite delightful to me, to find him so pleasant ...

'There was a gentleman here, yesterday,' he said – 'a stout gentleman, by the name of Topsawyer – perhaps you know him?'

'No,' I said, 'I don't think –'

'In breeches and gaiters, broad-brimmed hat, grey coat, speckled choaker,' said the waiter.

'No,' I said bashfully, 'I haven't the pleasure –'

'He came in here,' said the waiter, looking at the light through the tumbler, 'ordered a glass of this ale – *would* order it – I told him not – drank it, and fell dead. It was too old for him. It oughtn't to be drawn; that's the fact.'

I was very much shocked to hear of this melancholy accident, and said I thought I had better have some water. (53)

The waiter, like Dickens himself, is both a born actor, who can make the ale 'look beautiful' against the light, and a born novelist in the precision of his detail and the vividness of his storytelling. He successively strips little David of his food and drink, charges him threepence to write a letter, tells him that at the school to which he is heading a boy of exactly the same age had his ribs broken, and then takes a shilling for a tip (54–5).

Dickens's two characters here come from groups of people – little boys, waiters – that most novelists rarely bother with, except as props or background to some more interesting adult action. It is a little masterpiece of storytelling with

everything recorded through the polite and innocent David's eyes, who still at the end thinks of the waiter as his 'friend'. David has just left his family forever (his mother and brother will be dead in a few chapters) and will shortly have to rely solely on his friends, so the words 'friend' and 'friendly' here carry a heavy charge. The waiter in many ways anticipates Steerforth, whom David is about to meet, and who will come to dominate him and, through his seduction of Emily, the plot of the book. Like the waiter, Steerforth professes friendship and then takes a good deal of David's money to provide food and drink, very little of which David himself gets to enjoy. With both characters – the waiter, Steerforth – we learn about the pains, pleasures, and uncertainties of what a 'friend' might be. They both form part of a story that is about a child's acts of trust, needs, and vulnerabilities, their scenes about the fulfilments and frustrations of adult appetite and desire, and the losses, shames, and bewilderments that go with them both.

But what do we learn of the waiter's point of view? Immediately before their encounter, David has been beaten by Murdstone 'as if he would have beaten me to death' (46) and sent away from his family home in disgrace. The school he goes to will be violent and abusive; his mother will die a little later. The waiter knows none of this. What does he see? A timid, even traumatised, child? A prosperous little bourgeois? We are not told. There is no sign of resentment on either side here, just a cheery fleecing, a joyful self-assertion, and witty self-dramatisation:

'If I hadn't a family, and that family hadn't the cowpock,' said the waiter, 'I wouldn't take a sixpence. If I didn't support a aged pairint, and a lovely sister,' – here the waiter was greatly agitated – 'I wouldn't take a farthing. If I had a good place, and was treated well here, I should beg acceptance of a trifle, instead of taking of it. But I live on broken wittles – and I sleep on the coals' – here the waiter burst into tears. (55)

We are not asked to decide, and have no way of knowing, how much, if any, of what the friendly waiter says about his life is true, how much or how little hardship lies behind this exuberant performance of misery that so successfully arouses the child's compassion.

### Waiting time

This chapter is not intended, though, to be merely a set of examples of how revealing waiters, as workers and as people, can be in Dickens's writing, however socially and fictionally marginal they might at first seem. Instead, I want to suggest that the kinds of social and temporal relationships we see in scenes of waiting have a wider resonance for us as readers and critics of Dickens. For thinking about literature is also a matter of waiting. We are waiting *on* and

waiting *for* Dickens, attending on him, perhaps hoping that, if we take enough care, he will arrive at last. For reading and criticism are forms of waiting and, like waiters' work, they are distinctive and strange activities, ubiquitous but also marginal in the modern world. Waiting and reading are both deeply constrained by social expectations but also carry potential transformations and latent revelations. They are encounters where relations of social power are played out, appetites and needs are met or frustrated, and pleasure given or withheld. Scenes of reading and of waiting are events or encounters that have the potential to be quite trivial on the one hand and surprising, defining or memorable on the other. Both also have an intimate and peculiar relation to time, one necessarily of expectation and delay. They are simultaneously intimate and impersonal, and often have questions of knowledge and secrecy at play within them. There is often a good deal of predictability – there's a text or a menu, the dishes have appeared before, there are always other readers – and yet no encounter is the same, each one singular, if not unique. Both waiting and being waited on, like reading and writing, are traversed by relations of power, often unpredictable, sometimes suddenly reversible. We wait on Dickens; he waits on us. Sometimes we get what we want, sometimes not, and sometimes in time, sometimes not.

Waiting is one of the apparently small things in life (small to the rich and powerful, but a job, calling, or way of life to those who have to do it) that carries with it the potential for much greater things. Waiting is, of course, one of the great themes of human thought, as in waiting for Godot, or God, or Lefty. It is essential to much religious thinking, particularly that of a messianic cast, and an important topic in a writer such as Kafka and philosophers such as Heidegger and Derrida. For Heidegger, waiting has a high ethical, ontological and epistemological privilege: 'We are,' states the Teacher in 'Conversation on a Country Path,' 'to do nothing but wait' (62). Waiters of the sort that Dickens wrote about bring such elevated concerns down to earth, but the great issues are rarely left totally behind: his waiters deal with appetite, desire, and need, with frustration and satisfaction, and they do so in time and with limited resources, through both managing and living with anticipation, expectation, anxiety, and fulfilment.

Waiters and scenes of waiting have, of course, great comic potential. Waiting is a very confined social role – bound tightly in both time and space, heavily constrained by the conventions of the job and the urgencies of getting food and drink to someone's mouth in a hurry. Two strangers meet, both often in a rush, in a situation where many things can go wrong. Both have to perform a role of a certain gentility, always a difficult thing to manage, particularly when one is stressed. Differences of class, gender, and age can all complicate things. The stakes in such meetings or exchanges seem simultaneously high (one's social status and identity seek confirmation and do not always find it) and low (it is just a meal or a drink). Waiting happens in spaces that are both public and private, and create relationships that are both intimate and distant, both personal

and impersonal. They mix leisure, moments when nothing much happens, with urgency, when someone arrives hungry and in a hurry, or a coach pulls in, or a train is about to depart. As those examples suggest, waiting has a symbiotic relationship with travel. As people travelled more and more in the 19th century, they required more and more people to wait for them in inns, taverns, coffee rooms, and hotels. And, like travel, waiting was something spread widely in the modern world, and by the transport revolutions of industrial capitalism.

Dickens's first book, *Sketches by Boz*, has a good number of waiters, often rather vulnerable or threatened figures, who struggle to control the unruly sociability of pre-Victorian England. 'The Streets – Night' characteristically witness a 'slight altercation when the form of paying the damage is proposed to be gone through by the waiter' (60). Uncle Bill in 'London Recreations' makes a 'splendid joke' by asking a waiter at a tea room for 'tea for four: bread and butter for forty' and then causes a 'loud explosion of mirth' by sticking 'a paper "pig-tail" on the waiter's collar' (98). In *Pickwick Papers*, it is Sam Weller – a 'boots', not a waiter – who has the kind of flourishing narrative centrality and witty life that the book's waiters conspicuously lack, their role often mainly to remind their customers and the reader of the cost of hospitality: as Alfred Jingle says to Pickwick, to warn him off a neighbouring inn: 'Wright's next house, dear – very dear – half-a-crown in the bill, if you look at the waiter –' (13).

Although they play a part in economic exchanges, enable travel across distances, and are vital to social reproduction, waiters are, for the most part, ignored or marginalised in more conventional and orthodoxly class-bound novels than those of Dickens. They are usually pushed to the margins of the lives of those they serve, and into functional and simple supporting roles in their plots. They have little if any power. They may be sometimes registered as hostile or incompetent, but their narrative space is almost unremittingly confined. They are passed by in many important novels, and restricted to a single brief mention, for example, in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*. An exception is Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, which has a number of powerful vignettes of conflicts with waiters, little battles of civility between the single, independent woman Lucy Snowe and the waiters she is forced to rely on in her travels:

Maintaining a very quiet manner towards this arrogant little maid, and subsequently observing the same towards the parsonic-looking, black-coated, white-neckclothed waiter, I got civility from them ere long. I believe at first they thought I was a servant; but in a little while they changed their minds, and hovered in a doubtful state between patronage and politeness. (56)

Lucy achieves this transformation in her treatment through the waiter's memory of her late father, whose status as a clergyman secures her gentility, so that after a 10-minute conversation,

A ready and obliging courtesy now replaced his former uncomfortably doubtful manner; henceforth I need no longer be at a loss for a civil answer to a sensible question. (58–9)

Lucy here secures a victory through assertion of her class status, through the naming of her father, that causes the restoration of a ‘civil’ and ‘sensible’ moral economy and class exchange, a world of reciprocal respect, grounded in a fundamental, mutually recognised, class difference and hierarchy.

In Dickens’s work, class relations are rarely so secure and there is thus a much more dynamic and doubtful set of interchanges between waiters and their clients. Whereas Lucy can marvel at ‘the sagacity evinced by waiters and chambermaids in proportioning the accommodation to the guest’ and wonder at how they can ‘tell at a glance that I, for instance, was an individual of no social significance, and little burdened by cash?’ (72), in Dickens’s work things are less certain, social performance less transparent. Dickens is fascinated by the gaps, disjunctions, failures, and discrepancies between what is intended or desired and what may happen. Pip, for example, goes to bed after his feast with Herbert to find that the waiter had at some point shoved ‘the boiled fowl into my bed in the next room’ so that ‘I found much of its parsley and butter in a state of congelation when I retired for the night’ (177). Performers themselves, waiters also make those that they serve acutely aware of the nature, failures, and vulnerability of social performance in general. This often entails a delicate social notation as when Pip and Estella wait for the coach to Richmond:

I requested a waiter ... to show us a private sitting-room. Upon that, he pulled out a napkin, as if it were a magic clue without which he couldn’t find the way upstairs, and led us to the black hole of the establishment: fitted up with a diminishing mirror (quite a superfluous article, considering the hole’s proportions), an anchovy sauce-cruet, and somebody’s pattens. (262)

Not quite comic, not quite magical, the waiter’s suggestive, superfluous gesture is as enigmatic as those of Miss Havisham. He is like a diminishing mirror to Pip’s and Estella’s failed romance, the magic clue of his napkin able to lead them only to a small ‘black hole’ with a few sparse, useless objects and a mirror that makes it seem yet smaller still.

In Dickens’s work it is almost invariably a male waiter, not a waitress. Indeed, there are only two occasions when the word ‘waitress’ is used in all his *oeuvre*: a passing reference to the waitress in a public house in Portugal Street in *Pickwick Papers* (693) and then Polly, a ‘bouncing young female of forty’, in the ‘Slap-bang’ (246) eating house favoured by Mr Smallweed and his friends in *Bleak House*:

Mr. Smallweed, compelling the attendance of the waitress with one hitch of his eyelash, instantly replies as follows: 'Four veals and hams is three, and four potatoes is three and four, and one summer cabbage is three and six, and three marrows is four and six, and six breads is five, and three Cheshires is five and three, and four pints of half-and-half is six and three, and four small rums is eight and three, and three Pollys is eight and six. Eight and six in half a sovereign, Polly, and eighteen-pence out!' (253)

In this remarkable social document and performance, which is also both an arithmetic and rhythmic triumph, we learn a lot about the price of marrows, bread, beer, rum, veal, ham, and potatoes in the mid-19th century. We learn about the tip too – of threepence on a bill of 8s 3d (almost exactly 3%). In Smallweed's characteristically instrumental and exploitative idiom, Polly here becomes a thing like a potato or a marrow, and if 'three Pollys' is threepence she is the same value as a portion of cheese, potato, or bread; when all three are put together she is worth more than a portion of cabbage and slightly less than one of marrow.

Perhaps the most compactly memorable waiter in all of Dickens's work appears early on in *Little Dorrit* after Arthur Clennam has returned to England for the first time in two decades. Clennam, about to visit his feared 'mother', finds himself on a melancholy day in a hotel nearby.

'Beg pardon, sir,' said a brisk waiter, rubbing the table. 'Wish see bed-room?'

'Yes. I have just made up my mind to do it.'

'Chaymaid!' cried the waiter. 'Gelen box num seven wish see room!'

'Stay!' said Clennam, rousing himself. 'I was not thinking of what I said; I answered mechanically. I am not going to sleep here. I am going home.'

'Deed, sir? Chaymaid! Gelen box num seven, not go sleep here, gome.' (42)

The waiter is 'brisk' and that briskness also includes his language, which is accelerated and abbreviated, with syllables and pronouns lost, and words compacted and fused together. 'Going home' contracts to the bleakly functional 'gome', and in 'Gelen' politeness is ungently crushed. We have here a nameless 'Chaymaid', a nameless waiter, Clennam a box number, with the room a mere 'room' and no more: a triply anonymous exchange. The speech of Dickens's working-class characters often has a deep semantic richness and suggestiveness, as when Sam Weller speaks of 'have-his-carcase' (510) for 'habeas corpus' or 'allybi' (408; Bowen, *Other Dickens* 65–8) for alibi. Here there is no such polysemy. 'Gelen' and 'Chaymaid' remain simple contractions; only 'num' for 'number' numbly suggests a numbness to this enumerated man. 'I answered

mechanically,' writes Clennam, as the machinic inhabits and empties out all speech and thought here, an automatism and diminishing repetition ('not go sleep here'), not so very far from the kind of embodied death wish that we will shortly see in the Clennam household itself.

### Christopher the waiter

So far the waiters that I have discussed have had relatively small roles, and show Dickens's brilliance in the creation of minor characters who, as Alex Woloch has shown, characteristically are both contained by and burst free of their narrative subordination (125–9). But in one Dickens text, the waiter – Christopher, from the 1862 Christmas number of *All the Year Round*, 'Somebody's Luggage' – is both central character and narrator. Strikingly, there had been no waiter in the first of Dickens's co-authored Christmas specials to feature an inn – The Holly Tree Inn, around which the 1854 *Household Words* Christmas number was built – despite the fact that there were chapters from the points of view of 'The Guest', 'The Ostler', 'The Boots', 'The Landlord', and 'The Barmaid', and Dickens in his original planning letter suggested one chapter might be called 'The Waiter' (*Letters* 7:714). But he made up for it with 'Somebody's Luggage', the single splendid occasion when a waiter both has narrative control and speaks at length in all of Dickens's *oeuvre*. Chesterton is one of the few critics to have noticed the story, but he calls it 'some of the best work that Dickens ever did' (Chesterton, *Criticisms* 141):

Dickens obviously knew enough about that waiter to have made him a running spring of joy throughout a whole novel; as the beadle is in *Oliver Twist*, or the undertaker in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Every touch of him tingles with truth, from the vague gallantry with which he asks, 'Would'st thou know, fair reader (if of the adorable female sex)' to the official severity with which he takes the chambermaid down, 'as many pegs as is desirable for the future comfort of all parties.' (143–4)

The story was written at a troubled time in Dickens's life, and it repeatedly and complexly plays with ideas and tropes of authorship, secrecy, and identity. He was delighted with its underlying idea, as can be seen in a letter he wrote to his closest friend, John Forster:

I have been at work with such a will, that I have done the opening and conclusion of the Christmas number. They are done in the character of a waiter, and I think are exceedingly droll. The thread on which the stories are to hang, is spun by this waiter, and is, purposely, very slight; but has, I fancy, a ridiculously comical and unexpected end. The waiter's

account of himself includes (I hope) everything you know about waiters, presented humorously. (*Letters* 10:126)

The underlying idea – refined and complicated in the telling – is that Christopher is persuaded to buy some pieces of luggage that had been left under the bed of the hotel at which he works. He sells the clothes, the umbrella, and other things, but then is left with a number of manuscripts. They turn out to be stories written and then abandoned by an unsuccessful author; the whole number is concerned with the question of their value, both economic and aesthetic. Christopher successfully arranges to have them published by ‘AYR’, *All the Year Round*, the magazine that Dickens edited and which, of course, did in fact first publish them. Its readers would thus read a story about a fictionalised process of writing, abandonment, discovery, submission, proof-reading, editing and publication of the very stories that they were reading.

The stories of ‘Somebody’s Luggage’ were, of course, written in part by Dickens and, as was usual with the Christmas numbers, partly by other authors, his fellow-contributors. Dickens divides and distributes himself complexly in this work, playing hide-and-seek with himself, his characters, and his readers. Not only the author of some stories, coordinator of all, and creator both of their fictional author and fictional coordinator, he also appears as a famous editor in Christopher’s account. Dickens self-deprecatingly removes or cuts down praise of himself – three footnotes each read ‘The remainder of this complimentary parenthesis editorially struck out’ (500) – but his power is undoubted; the story ends with Dickens-as-editor throwing the author’s messily corrected proofs on the fire. There are multiple self-divisions, self-aggrandisements, self-destructions, and self-deprecations at work here, as Dickens fictionally disperses himself in many roles, frames and stories, fictionally deleting himself, fictionally setting fire to his own writing.

‘Somebody’s Luggage’ is not only served up by a waiter; it is also a story about waiting: the stories themselves have to wait, abandoned, for six years before their discovery; the unnamed author repeatedly waits in vain for replies from booksellers and publishers; the inn and Christopher wait for the owner of the luggage to return and it seems almost until the end that he never will. Dickens’s contributions (the two frames narrated by Christopher and the stories called ‘His Boots’ and ‘His Brown Paper Parcel’) are full of secrets and family secrets in particular, with many hidden, lost, and divided identities (Bowen, ‘Bebelle’). They tell stories about neglected or abandoned children, about fictions that fail to appear in print, and destructive rivalries in art. It is all done with characteristic lightness, and without the heavy breathing that literary modernism might have brought to such metafictional play. But together they form a remarkable self-conscious foregrounding of questions of fiction, narration, and value, by Dickens, by Christopher, and by the unnamed author. And at its heart is a waiter, without whom none of these lost manuscripts, identities, self-divisions, secrets, and revelations would appear.

Dickens's first inset contribution, 'His Boots', is one of his more riddlingly enigmatic tales. It tells a story about a secret baby, and seems to have a strong autobiographical impulse behind it. Christopher was also a secret baby whose mother, as a waitress, could never admit to his existence. He was in consequence 'conveyed, by surreptitious means, into a pantry adjoining the Admiral Nelson, Civic and General Dining-Rooms' to be fed. It is a family story, and one that begins with the conflicts between familial obligations and professional waiting duties for both his parents. For his waiter father, 'all that part of his existence which was unconnected with open Waitering was kept a close secret, and was acknowledged by your mother to be a close secret' (453). Addressing himself, Christopher remembers how 'you and your mother flitted about the court, close secrets both of you, and would scarcely have confessed under torture that you knew your father, or that your father had ... kith or kin or chick or child' (453). This is what it means to be 'bred to ... born to' waitering (451). His parents cannot acknowledge him and so he is forced to 'receive by stealth' his mother's milk ('that healthful sustenance which is the pride and boast of the British female constitution') (451), repeatedly interrupted by his mother's waitressing work and saturated by the objects, shouts, smells, and stiflings of a waiting life. Addressing his infant self, Christopher tells him:

Under the combined influence of the smells of roast and boiled, and soup, and gas, and malt liquors, you partook of your earliest nourishment; your unwilling grandmother sitting prepared to catch you when your mother was called and dropped you; your grandmother's shawl ever ready to stifle your natural complainings; your innocent mind surrounded by uncongenial cruets, dirty plates, dish-covers, and cold gravy; your mother calling down the pipe for veals and porks, instead of soothing you with nursery rhymes. Under these untoward circumstances you were early weaned. (453)

Waiters' lives are full of other people's feeding, and this starts early for Christopher, who tells us how his breastfeeding was repeatedly interrupted and ended early by the demands of adults wanting to be fed. It is a kind of backstage scene, for 'a Waitress known to be married would ruin the best of businesses – it is the same as on the stage' (453), and a comic, sad story about stifling, complaining, interrupted breastfeeding, early enforced weaning, dirt, cold, untoward circumstances, and no nursery rhymes. His father, we learn, was an alcoholic, someone who cannot stop drinking.

The actual author of the stories, by contrast, is not much more than a cipher. He appears first in the form of the abandoned luggage and a bill mainly for alcohol, ink, paper, and messages to publishers: a kind of minimal literary archive. Separated too soon from the breast himself, Christopher carries out a kind of weaning of these writings, or brings them to parturition, for money. But publication is attended throughout by guilt. Once he has sold the manuscripts,

‘[t]he elasticity of my spirits departed. Fruitless was the bottle, whether wine or medicine. I had recourse to both, and the effect of both upon my system was witheringly lowering’ (493). In fact, it turns out to be a story, as quite often in Dickens, about unnecessary guilt, for the author is in fact delighted by Christopher’s success in placing or serving up his work. But the writer remains the same defeated figure who abandoned his manuscripts, still drinking, still seeking to publish his work, and still failing.

Waiting then becomes a remarkable suggestive trope in ‘Somebody’s Luggage’, the figure of the necessary intermediary, delay, enigma, weaning, cost, secrecy, silence, and suffering that lies between literary creation and the possibility of its publication and consumption. The ending in one way is a happy one, in which the author’s manuscripts, after his abandonment of them and repeated failures and delays, are finally brought into print through the partnership of Dickens and a waiter. But we do not forget the price that is paid: Christopher is a great Dickens survivor, like Magwitch and Oliver Twist, but seems to have no erotic or personal life away from his work, for all his jaunty energy. When the author praises him as ‘an instrument in the hands of Destiny’, Christopher shakes his head in a ‘melancholy’ way and replies, ‘Perhaps we all are’ (499). When he asks if Christopher ever has a holiday from waiting (so that he can read him his unpublished works), he replies, ‘Never! Not from the cradle to the grave’ (499). He can never wean himself away from waiting, and the story ends in flames, with the author’s heavily corrected and smudged proofs thrown by a laughing Dickens into the fire.

There is one bravura final waiting performance, or rather two performances, in Dickens’s work, from his last, unfinished novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. For Chesterton, Dickens ‘never did anything better’ (Chesterton, *Criticisms* 220). It is another scene, like that with Pip and Herbert Pocket, in which waiters bring food into the home, here to that of the lawyer Mr Grewgious, who is attended by his clerk, Bazzard, ‘accompanied by two waiters—an immoveable waiter, and a flying waiter’ (91). The flying waiter brings all the food, and lays the cloth ‘with amazing rapidity and dexterity’; the immovable waiter, ‘who had brought nothing, found fault with him’ (91). In turn, the flying waiter polishes glasses, and fetches the soup, made dish, joint, and poultry, but however hard he works ‘he was always reproached on his return by the immovable waiter’ (91). The meal continues until at the end:

by which time the flying waiter was severely blown, the immovable waiter gathered up the tablecloth under his arm with a grand air, and ... directed a valedictory glance towards Mr. Grewgious, conveying: ‘Let it be clearly understood between us that the reward is mine, and that Nil is the claim of this slave,’ and pushed the flying waiter before him out of the room.

It was like a highly-finished miniature painting representing My Lords of the Circumlocution Department, Commandership-in-Chief of

any sort, Government. It was quite an edifying little picture to be hung on the line in the National Gallery. (91)

As in ‘Somebody’s Luggage’, we have a waiterly moment of self-reference by Dickens but it is here not an allegory of authorship but of bureaucracy and politics. Dickens redeploys and revises the Circumlocution Office of *Little Dorrit*, not as the overarching and obstructive narrative presence of that novel but in second-order form. As Helen Small puts it, Dickens is ‘framing his own signature prose as a national exhibit or museum piece’ (263).

But Dickens does more than frame here; he also revises. The vignette of waiters transforms the Circumlocution Office from an extendedly drawn, socially embedded, aristocratic-dominated form of bureaucratic obstruction into a single brief episode, a compact painterly allegory of an essential division of labour, between those who do the work and those who do none. The latter group claim all the credit and find fault. The allegorising of the passage from *Drood* does not allow these to be individualised, particular waiters like Christopher or David Copperfield’s friend, but instead insists on their radically typical nature. They are a double act, a comic or satiric ‘turn’, standing out in the novel not through their suggestive individuality but through their socially and political representative force, as a pair. They stand not for the division of workers and managers exactly, nor workers and aristocrats, nor the poor and the rich, nor even labour and capital. Instead, Dickens miniatures and pictorialises his own work, to simultaneously reinforce and extend both the pessimism and radicalism of its social critique: the satiric target succinctly and effortlessly expands from ‘My Lords of the Circumlocution Department’ through ‘Commandership-in-Chief of any sort’ to the final, brutally dismissive, ‘Government’.

After the famous passage with the waiter in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre wonders about the reality of time. ‘If time is real,’ he writes, ‘even God will have to “wait for the sugar to dissolve”’(156). Somewhere between God and the waiter are readers of literature, whose times are always disconcerted, always uncertain, always a little forward or a little behind, too attentive or not attentive enough, always waiting for the sugar to dissolve. We might thus be, I want to suggest, not ‘after Dickens’ exactly, but waiting on and for Dickens, alternately and alternatively friendly, flying, immoveable, parsonical, bouncing, mechanical, neutralised, and tearful, like an automaton or a person who looks down from an observatory or watchtower, badly weaned.

### Works cited

- Bowen, John. *Other Dickens: Pickwick to Chuzzlewit*. Oxford UP, 2000.  
 ———. ‘Bebelle and “His Boots”’: Dickens, Ellen Ternan and the *Christmas Stories*. *Dickensian*, vol. 96, no. 3, issue 452, 2000, pp. 197–208.

- Brontë, Charlotte. *Villette*. Edited by Herbert Rosengarten and Margaret Smith. Oxford World's Classics, 1990.
- Chesterton, G. K. *Charles Dickens*. Methuen, 1906.
- . *Criticisms and Appreciations of the Works of Charles Dickens*. Introduced by Michael Slater. Everyman, 1992.
- Davy, Charles. *Footnotes to the Film*. Lovat Dickson, 1938.
- 'dead-pan, adj.' *OED Online*, Oxford UP, December 2018, [www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/47677](http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/47677). Accessed 6 Dec. 2018.
- Dickens, Charles. *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Edited by Norman Page. Penguin, 2000.
- . *Great Expectations*. Edited by Margaret Cardwell. Oxford World's Classics, 1994.
- . *A Tale of Two Cities*. Edited by Andrew Sanders. Oxford World's Classics, 1988.
- . *David Copperfield*. Edited by Nina Burgis. Oxford World's Classics, 1983.
- . *Dickens' Journalism: Sketches by Boz and other early papers 1833–39*. Edited by Michael Slater. Dent, 1994.
- . *Pickwick Papers*. Edited by James Kinsley. Oxford World's Classics, 1988.
- . *Bleak House*. Edited by George Ford and Sylvère Monod. Norton, 1977.
- . *Little Dorrit*. Edited by Stephen Wall and Helen Small. Penguin, 1998.
- . *The Letters of Charles Dickens, The Pilgrim Edition*, vol. 7, 1853–1855. Edited by Graham Storey, Kathleen Tillotson, and Angus Easson. Clarendon Press, 1993.
- . *The Letters of Charles Dickens, The Pilgrim Edition*, vol. 10, 1862–1864. Edited by Graham Storey. Clarendon Press, 1998.
- . 'Somebody's Luggage.' *The Christmas Stories*. Edited by Ruth Glancy. Everyman, 1996.
- . *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Edited by Margaret Cardwell. Oxford World's Classics, 1982.
- Eisenstein, Sergei. *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*. Edited by Jay Leyda. Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1949.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*. Penguin, 1979.
- Heidegger, Martin. 'Conversation on a Country Path about Thinking.' *Discourse on Thinking*. Translated by John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund. Harper, 1966, pp. 58–90.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. Translated by Hazel E. Barnes. Routledge, 2003.
- Small, Helen. 'Dispensing with Style.' *Dickens's Style*. Edited by Daniel Tyler. Cambridge UP, 2013, pp. 253–77.
- Woloch, Alex. *The One vs. The Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*. Princeton UP, 2003.