Introduction

Dermot Quinn

Charles Dickens brought out the best in G. K. Chesterton and so it is fitting that he should also bring out the best in *The Chesterton Review*. We are part of a triangular history that goes back at least to 1985 (when Father Ian Boyd invited Dr. Peter Hunt to edit a special issue of the journal devoted to Dickens) and in fact earlier than that (for Dickens has been appearing in these pages since Sylvère Monod wrote about him in 1977). Chestertonians cannot get enough of Dickens, the writer whose democratic imagination most resembles Chesterton's own. If Chesterton was "the man who discovered England" (as Margaret Canovan has described him) then Dickens was the man who helped him do so, showing him the character his country and countrymen in language of unparalleled power, brilliance, humour, and moral urgency. Chesterton repaid the debt many times over, rescuing Dickens from critical condescension while emulating him as a champion of ordinary men and women. "He was the last of the mythologists, and perhaps the greatest," Chesterton wrote in 1906. "He did not always manage to make his characters men, but he always managed, at the least, to make them gods." Even if we did not have the excuse of the 150th anniversary of Dickens's death, it would still be timely to devote another special issue of the *Review* to him. When Chesterton described Dickens, he seemed to be describing himself:

> Dickens stands first as a defiant monument of what happens when a great literary genius has a literary taste akin to that of the community. For this kinship was deep and spiritual. Dickens was not like our ordinary demagogues and journalists. Dickens did not write what the people wanted. He wanted what the people wanted …
> His power, then, lay in the fact that he expressed with an energy and brilliancy quite uncommon the things close to the common mind.

View of Geisler Mountains, Val di Funes, South Tyrol, Italy.

To the extent that Chesterton was a radical populist, he had Dickens in part to thank for it.

In another sense, this special issue of the *Review* is a Dickensian or, more precisely, a Pickwickian, volume. Chesterton likened that magnificent picaresque novel to an evening in which friends all fall "into their parts as in some delightful impromptu play." Our contributors, I hope, will prove equally good company. The play has not been entirely impromptu (editors still have *some* role to play) but the idea has been to bring people together whose contributions will sparkle all the more brightly in each other's company.

How, then, to summarise the conversation?

Professor Mark Knight examines Chesterton's encounter with Dickens, and his own encounter with both. The two encounters, he suggests, are unexpectedly and revealingly theological. The Chesterton of *Charles Dickens* prefigures the Chesterton of *Orthodoxy* published two years later. To read Chesterton properly, we must attune ourselves to an essentially religious project in which "local textual observations" are linked "to a larger theological schema." Chesterton the Democrat is also Chesterton the Christian. Religion is the key that unlocks the door. The sacramental imagination is at work early on.

Professor Eric Tippin offers one of those "local textual observations" of which Professor Knight speaks, with a brilliant close reading of Chesterton's use of chiasmus. This stylistic device, in which phrases are reversed and repeated, is not a decorative appendage to Chesterton's thought, Professor Tippin suggests, but is, rather, "the way in which he thinks." It is deployed to telling effect in *Charles Dickens* where it is used (as always in Chesterton) to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar. (This is another example of chiasmus, by the way.) Chesterton invites us to open our eyes and to see the world for the first time and chiasmus is one way—almost the best way—of doing so.

Professor Jonathan Farina provides a sparkling companion piece to Professor Tippin's article, exploring another side of the same question—that characteristically Chestertonian paradox of hiding in plain

sight. In *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens*, Chesterton explores how in each of the novels we detect a pervasive atmosphere "that is both obvious and somehow hidden because it is obvious." (It is no coincidence, perhaps, that we associate Dickens's London with fog, the mist that reveals as it conceals.) A thing can be so large that we cannot see it (or so small that we cannot see anything else). Being beside the point *is* the point, Professor Farina suggests. Dickens's most characteristic novel, you might say, is *Oblique House*.

Professor John Drew is afraid neither of the obvious nor of the obscure. In a wonderfully lively essay, he reminds us of what we know already—that Dickens, like Chesterton, was nothing if not a great journalist. But he also explores Dickens's system of shorthand—not, you might think, the most promising of subjects—finding in it a rich seam of interest, a clue, almost literally, to the working of Dickens's mind.

Professor Magdalena Merbilhaá Romo offers biography plain and simple. Dickens's life, she says, cannot be divorced from his times, and in a brief but engaging essay she provides both. She also proposes a way of seeing Dickens as a figure of hope.

Professor Dermot Quinn is interested in some combination of all of the above. Chesterton's discovery of Dickens as a radical populist is his theme, as is the idea that Chesterton has played an outsized part in the Dickens industry—of which, indeed, this special issue of *The Chesterton Review* is another example. But he also wants to explore how Chesterton's rehabilitation of Dickens was also a form of appropriation.

Paying tribute to the Chestertonian notion that tradition is the democracy of the dead, we conclude with an article by Peter Hunt that first appeared in these pages in 1981. Dr. Hunt was an outstanding scholar who did pioneering work on Chesterton and Dickens. In this fine essay, we can see how much he contributed to both fields. Those who follow him, in these pages and elsewhere, remain in his debt.