Part II
Early Writing: Dickens
1847–1854
The late 1840s witnessed Wilkie preoccupied with his efforts to find patrons for his biographical tribute to his father. Letters to George Richmond, Robert Peel, Benjamin Disraeli, Alaric A. Watts and William Etty, among others, are chiefly concerned with this object. An important, lengthy letter [17 June 1850] to his father’s close American friend, the author R.H. Dana, ranges over a variety of topics such as the state of England, the lack of leadership in the country, Landseer’s popularity, Macaulay’s profits and reminiscences of earlier family tours to Italy and Wordsworth’s fear of cholera.

Wilkie’s letters to his mother, from his excursions in Paris, Normandy, Cornwall and elsewhere, continue to contain passages at once humorous and descriptive. Two other correspondents with whom letters are to continue over the years now emerge. His letters to Charles Ward demonstrate a pattern of using Ward as an intermediary between himself and his mother over his almost continuous youthful overspending. Letters to his fellow law student, Edward Pigott, are concerned with Wilkie’s journalism, his involvement with The Leader, and his views on religion and politics. By the early 1850s theatrical activities, with Wilkie involved in provincial repertory, become a focus of interest. The presence of Dickens emerges during Wilkie’s annual summer visits. On 20 November 1851 he is called to the bar with Pigott. A remark in a letter to his mother written from Dover [9 September 1852], where he is staying with Dickens is prophetic: “The sea air acts on me as if it was all distilled from laudanum.”

The beginning of 1853 sees Wilkie in a flurry of activity, reviewing plays and novels for The Leader. He writes of friendships with such artists as Millais, the success of his novel Basil and of French interest in his writings. However, one letter [25 June 1853] begins a recurring pattern in his letters of personal sickness and worry about his health; already he seems afflicted with a somewhat mysterious illness. He is “not strong enough to do more than ‘toddle’ out for no more than half an hour at a time with a stick” and his illness and long confinement “muddles [his] brain dreadfully”.

For the remainder of 1853 in letters written to his mother, Charles Ward, his brother and Edward Pigott, Wilkie is part of the Dickens circle. He writes of the pleasures of Dickens’ rented house in Boulogne and expostulates on the delights of being a sailor and sea voyages (“everyone is sick” on the Channel voyage, except Wilkie). Wilkie’s letters from Boulogne, Amiens, Switzerland and Italy complement Dickens’ letters written during the same period. His letters, especially to his mother, are exceedingly lengthy and contain detailed descriptions of places, people, scenery and events. Swiss people living in the mountain valleys are full of aberrations, “disease and deformity” and “many people [are] born idiots”. Material used in letters to his mother (for instance the crossing of the Simplon) are