Chips off the Block: Dickens’s Serialising Imitators

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My subject is serialisation; that is, the division of narrative into separately issued instalments, usually for commercial convenience but occasionally for art. Specifically, I am concerned with that mode of serialisation pioneered by Dickens in April 1836 with his first novel, and which he was still triumphantly practising in September 1870, the month of his death. A majority (nine) of his novels came out this way. The features of Dickensian serialisation can be given Bitzer-style as: ‘The new novel in twenty monthly, self-contained, illustrated parts, each 32 pages long, selling at one shilling, wrapped in an uniformly illustrated paper cover and accompanied by an advertiser.’

Extended discussions of Dickens invariably become meditations on his uniqueness. Although my announced subject is imitators and imitations the conclusion I shall arrive at is the usual one: that Dickens was the great inimitable. The novel in monthly parts proved a bow of Ulysses which apparently only one man could consistently draw and fire on target. Dickens himself called it ‘a very unusual form’ and for most writers that is what it remained. Only three major novelists used Dickensian serialisation for the bulk of their novels: Dickens (obviously), Thackeray and Lever. And of the three, Thackeray and Lever ultimately gave it up as unworkable. The yellow cover and the pink finally gave way to the all-conquering duck-egg green. In sum, the number of Victorian novels brought out in monthly numbers is tiny. Over the period 1837–70 an estimated 8–9,000 works of fiction were produced in England. At the beginning of this period (its boom time) there were at maximum some 15 part-issued shilling serials a year. The number settled down by the 1840s to around five. By the end of the 1860s, it had

dwindled to one or two. And by September 1870, there was only one.

Why, for everyone but Dickens, the novel in shilling monthly numbers should have proved so intractable is a question I shall try to answer here. The other main question addressed is why, against the tide of publishing progress, Dickens remained so happily wedded to the novel in numbers for 35 years (about ten years longer than he was happily married to his wife, Catherine).

The straight answer, of course, is that Dickens could make the novel in numbers pay handsomely, as others evidently couldn’t. But the fact is that Dickens could have made any form of publication pay. If he had inscribed his novels on marble tablets, Victorians would have fought each other to buy. More than any other novelist Dickens had a choice. This was a privilege of his pre-eminence. And for 35 years, his choice was curiously repetitive and apparently unimaginative. No other first-rank novelist of the mid-nineteenth century was as faithful to one mode of publication as Dickens. Where they weren’t forced into change or new fashion, they sought it; often as middle-aged people do, to escape their own sense of impending superannuation. Why didn’t Dickens? Why was a man otherwise so restless in literary and personal matters so automatic in his publishing practice?

I’ll leave these prefatory questions hanging. The central part of this essay will be a survey of the rise and fall of the novel in monthly numbers.

**ORIGINS**

The innovation of the Dickensian novel in numbers in April 1836 is wonderfully sudden. The *Pickwick Papers* emerged, fully formed, apparently from nowhere. Chapman & Hall (perhaps prodded by Robert Seymour, perhaps inspired by Jorrocks) had the idea in February. By the last day of March, the first serial part was on the bookstands. After a little tinkering with length and number of illustrations, by midsummer *Pickwick* had found the form that was to remain standard for the next 35 years.

Conventionally, the genesis of *Pickwick* has been seen as a kind of book-trade miracle, ‘phenomenon’ or, as Robert Patten puts it, an ‘accident’. But one can demystify its birth a little by uncovering