Cultural changes in the middle of the nineteenth century were reflected in a shift of argument that gave increasing importance to experiences of the individual. No longer would discussions concerning the nature of ‘Being’ be carried out in the terms belonging to an earlier period, where young men such as the early Apostles were attracted to seek solidarity within their own group while hoping to serve the larger community as enlightened members of a given profession, even if this promised the advantage of relating them both to their fellow human beings and, possibly, to a moral framework authorized by the divine.\footnote{J. Beer, \textit{Post-Romantic Consciousness} © John Beer 2003}

With Darwinian assumptions increasingly setting animal life at the centre of attention the focus of Being itself shifted from concern with the divine to preoccupation with the physical and mental condition of single human beings, and the conflicts that might arise within them. The focus on consciousness (and its relation to Being), which is the overall theme here, was accordingly transposed from the public sphere to the private – where Thomas De Quincey had already been a pioneer in locating it.

Charles Dickens, whose public popularity, it will be argued, masked personal conflicts relevant to this shift of theme, offered a relevant case. Educated well outside the mainstream of academic life that had produced figures such as the Cambridge Apostles, he had at first sight little to do with the issues that concerned them. The social issues prominent in his writing could not ultimately be separated from theirs, however, as he discovered – both on a wider scale and within his own experience – discrepancies between the expectations of his contemporaries and pressures generated by his own unconscious impulses. Most notably, there was an implicit conflict between the lore of human affection that was cultivated by his middle-class audience as a reconciling factor to help
resolve human conflicts, and instinctive impulses – including those to violence that fascinated many readers. For much of his career the tension between them could be kept in place simply by dramatization, sometimes with separate characters representing the different kinds of force involved. One result was the frequently remarked difference between the sentimental effects produced by characters notable for their affectionate nature and the attractiveness of those behaving instinctively – even if that behaviour might be villainous.

Gradually, the problem became one less of dramatization than of personal involvement, as Dickens came to realize the degree to which he himself empathized with his own more instinctive characters. There was, in other words, a growing conflict between his consciousness as a novelist and what might be termed his own artistic Being, in all its mysterious creativity. The tension between the two increased steadily, so that it was never more manifest than in the mysteries left behind at the time of his sudden death in 1870. First and foremost, of course, as his readers recognized sorrowfully, was the missing completion of his last novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, which had reached no further than its twenty-third chapter – enough to present many complications of plot, but without showing how any of them would be resolved. Predictably, enthusiasts were soon at work to make good the omission: sequels and projected conclusions abounded. In subsequent years particular attention was naturally paid not only to Dickens’s surviving notes and drafts for the novel, but to the accounts of his plans offered by friends, including his biographer, John Forster, according to whom Dickens’s first idea for his new story, communicated in 1869, had been as follows:

Two people, boy and girl, or very young, going apart from one another, pledged to be married after many years – at the end of the book. The interest to arise out of the tracing of their separate ways, and the impossibility of telling what will be done with that impending fate.

That was in mid-July. On 6 August he wrote to say,

I laid aside the fancy I told you of, and have a very curious and new idea for my new story. Not a communicable idea (or the interest of the book would be gone), but a very strong one, but difficult to work.

Forster’s reminiscences concerning the novel’s gestation continued with a long account of the plot and a sketch of Dickens’s plan for the