

A "HARE-OWING" EXPERIENCE

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"With Dickens we are not always conscious the magician is there; he has a tendency to behave like his rabbit."

--James Kincaid

W. H. Auden's *Academic Graffiti* (Faber & Faber, London 1971) upon first reading may appear to contain little else than slightly satirical examples of nonsense verse in the familiar tradition of Edward Lear. Its most obvious analogue would appear to be with T. S. Eliot's *Book of Practical Cats*, but just as at least one of Eliot's prime feline creations had a basis in 19th-century fiction, in the depiction of Conan Doyle's Professor Moriarty (namely his tom, Macavity, as "The Napoleon of Crime"), so it is permissible that Auden's lyrical sketches can have more meaning than at first meets the eye. Thus, consider No. 16:

Charles Dickens
Could find nothing to say to chickens,
But gossiping with rabbits
Became one of his habits.

Offhand, this playfulness appears to be no more than a pretty rough sketch for a possible wry put-down. Can it have any meaning otherwise? Let us see. Animal imagery in his novels is, to be sure, so commonplace as not to require further investigation here, but that in itself would scarcely account for a preference for rabbits over, say, chickens, at least if his Mrs. Chick, in his work, for example, would have anything to say on the matter.

The solution here proposed is that Auden is inadvertently hinting at the magicality of Dickens. The meaning of the ditty, then, is that although the novelist is obviously beyond the triviality of blarney or badinage and thereby is certainly not the trivial type ("Could find nothing to say to chickens"), he did upon occasion actually adopt the posture of the amateur conjuror and thus drew also literary hares from his own hat as it were. The familiar historical portrait by Filippo Sanjust, revealing him in silk top hat, would duly bear this out. All this can be said to be "owing" to a "hare"--hence my title!