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 no-
thing 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!