

## SOME RECENT TENDENCIES IN CONTEMPORARY DICKENS CRITICISM

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In the present survey of recent tendencies in contemporary Dickens criticism the author's purpose is not to review all the numerous publications dealing with the works of Charles Dickens during the past thirty years, or to make it a survey of Dickensian bibliography. It is an attempt to bring into light the most important trends and tendencies in the recent interpretation of the works of Charles Dickens which resulted in making him at his centenary not only a classic, but also a topical writer of the second half of the 20th century. I purposely leave out of my discussion the most recent documentary studies (the now appearing *Letter of Dickens*, or the biographical details discussed by Angus Wilson in *The world of Charles Dickens* (1970)): what is intended here is not a review of the recently discovered biographical data concerning Dickens, but an attempt at placing him against the background of the world of modern ideas and critical trends.

At his death a hundred years ago Dickens was undoubtedly one of the most popular writers of his age rising to the rank of almost a "national institution". Adverse criticism was voiced only by a few people whose preference was for works such as those of Thackeray, Meredith or George Eliot which carried a larger amount of intellectualism and paid greater conscious attention to artistic detail.

The most important critic here is George Henry Lewes. His list of objections voiced in the essay *Dickens in relation to criticism* (1872) may be conveniently taken as reference for all the criticism of Dickens up to the nineteen-forties which either expressed agreement or disagreement with his opinions. Among Dickens' faults as a writer Lewes listed such points as: naivety in analysing social problems, lack of realism and psychological depth of characters, lack of conscious artistic form, sentimentalism, and the fact that because Dickens was self-educated his novels could say nothing to educated readers.

New developments in the field of the novel caused that more and more critics began to agree with the objections listed by Lewes and the last decade of the 19th century brought a definite dethronement of Dickens, however only among the critics; he was still popular among the reading public and there was a steady increase in the sale of his books. The opinion of literary critics was influenced on the one hand by new trends in the novel showing greater interest in philosophical, psychological and artistic problems, and on the other hand by an increasing awareness of the novel's being a conscious form of art; this awareness led to the formulation of the theory of the novel by Henry James. There was also a steady rise of interest in the Continental novel which in France and Russia was making new steps in the development of the genre.

In the first decades of the 20th century with the increasing dislike of everything Victorian Dickens was severely criticized, but never ignored. His importance to later novelists was now assumed as that of a corrective. Even if Dickens seemed a clumsy artist to the aesthetes, a fantast to the naturalists, and an obsolete writer to those seeking topicality, virtually all the important novelists were attracted by his work, to mention only a few names like G. B. Shaw (1914, 1921, 1937), who highly appraised Dickens as a social critic, George Gissing (1898), who saw Dickens as a great naturalist, and J. B. Priestley (1925), who appreciated Dickens' ability to draw comic characters.

The most important critic who staunchly stood in defense of Dickens was G. K. Chesterton (1906). He gave an interpretation of Dickens which has probably been more influential and widespread than any other and which continues to hover in the background whenever Dickens' novels are being discussed.

What kind of Dickens is Chesterton's Dickens? First of all, he is the Dickens who brings to mind Christmas with all its trimmings; it is the Dickens enjoyed by readers of the *Pickwick Papers* in 1837 and treasured by later generations. He is shown to be a great lover of humanity, comfortable, cosy and constantly cheerful. Chesterton's Dickens is the traditional Dickens; not an untrue one, we still would say after sixty years, but (as it will appear from the present survey of recent opinions) the early, young Dickens.

The most important feature of Chesterton's discussion is the stress he places on the novelist's connection with Santa Claus and Christmas, ignoring the impact of his later novels and giving no adequate consideration of Dickens' art. He does not attempt to answer Lewes and only says that Dickens' novels belong to a different category, and as such, should be judged according to different and older standards. Chesterton is disappointing because he does not look closely enough at Dickens' changing views, and sometimes exasperating because of his long digressions. Still, he was perceptive enough to suggest that unity in a novel be obtained not only by the unity of construction, but also by the unity of mood and atmosphere. The merit of this criticism lies

in its attempt to explain the lasting attraction which Dickens' novels have for the wide reading public. It does not, however, open new perspectives, or formulate the new century's attitude to the novelist.

The catalyst which switched Dickensian criticism unto a completely new track was Thomas Wright's (1935) discovery of the relationship between Dickens and the actress, Ellen Ternan. The clear and simple portrait of Dickens was suddenly clouded over, and a much more complex figure appeared: an individuality torn, restless and full of problems. In all later biographies emphasis is placed on Dickens' suffering under the mask of benignity, attention is paid to his obsessions, fears and inability to adjust himself to the English society of the mid-nineteenth century. Gradually there appears an increased interest in Dickens' vision of the world and man; Dickens becomes topical once again; he becomes, to use the term of young George Lukács, a "problem hero".

Dickens' place in the social and political setting of his age and the social sources of his outlook upon the world are dealt with mainly by Marxist criticism. Against this background, as presented by T. A. Jackson (1937), instead of the stereotype, sentimental Dickens, one sees him undergoing a tragic evolution. At the beginning of his career Dickens was full of faith and enthusiasm for the Reform Bill. He was definitely on the side of the radicals and shared their optimism. In his early novels he criticizes only individual evils of society and not the entire socio-political system. At this early stage of his career he believed that all the social problems could be solved, if people were kind and benevolent like Mr. Pickwick or the Cheeryble brothers.

The disappointment with his visit to the United States made the writer aware for the first time of the many complexities involving man's life in society. There is an increasing bitterness in his novels, especially in *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *Dombey and son*, and there are no Cheeryble brothers to appear just in time and solve all the problems.

Beginning with *Bleak house* Jackson sees a steady increase of bitterness with which Dickens now attacks the entire system of law and government. Dickens loses faith in benevolent characters long before the end of his career, but though, finally, he lost faith in existing society, he never became conscious of the proletariat and their importance, concludes Jackson. This inability to perceive forces which might be able to change the conditions of which Dickens profoundly disapproved is the reason, according to Jackson, of the bitterness in the later novels of the writer.

Arnold Kettle (1951: vol. I) in his essay dealing with *Oliver Twist* carries the Marxists viewpoint one step further. We are not moved, he says, by Dickens' descriptions of misery and squalor because they exist, but because we experience a feeling of common humanity and a kind of self-identification with the hero in his misery and struggles. When *Oliver Twist* asks for more we are

not moved because it is the voice of Oliver, but the voice of all the starving orphans in the world.

The world presented in *Oliver Twist* is one of poverty, oppression and death. The oppressed are degraded and corrupted by their life and become oppressors or criminals. The alternative is only death.

In dealing with *Our mutual friend* (1962) Kettle concentrates his attention on the complicated structure of the novel. The corruptive force in this novel is not money, but the bourgeois attitude to it. The real issue is not of money as such, but of values.

What Dickens stresses in *Our mutual friend* is that genuine emancipation involves the maintenance of one's moral independence. Lizzie, one of the main characters in the novel, "... refuses to be drawn into corruption, just as Jenny Wren and Mr. Riah and Mr. Venus do, and though the refusal costs each of them something, what is maintained is moral independence. These people, despite their poverty, decline to 'rise' by grasping 'opportunities' that will undermine their humanity". (1962 : 219). "Rising" is dangerous in the world of this novel because it means entering the sphere of the Podsnaps and Veneerings. Independence is incompatible either with "rising" or with the acceptance of the sort of charity which has bourgeois strings attached to it.

Though dealing mainly with the immediate aspect of Dickens' works, Kettle does not ignore the role of artistic devices for the message of the novels, such as e.g. the role of symbols. The two most concrete images in *Our mutual friend* are, according to him, the mounds of filth and the river. Their main relationship is that the filth of London (a huge dust-heap) pollutes the river and turns it into a flowing sewer of refuse. The river is the mainstream of corruption and wretchedness. In the novel, the filth is the actual filth of London, the wretchedness is poverty. Almost all the poor characters live near the river.

Between the mound and the river the complex dramas of the novel merge into one where the values of humanity struggle against those of Podsnapery. Kettle concludes that it is a class struggle in the profoundest sense.

Jack Lindsay, in his biography *Charles Dickens* (1950), attempts a summary of Dickens' achievement. Dickens begins in the pre-industrial world moving steadily towards the actual world of his times, consolidating his position by building up significant symbols that grasp the basic plight of man in society. These symbols, together with realistic depictions, develop until they attain their fullest meaning in *Bleak house*, *Little Dorrit*, *Our mutual friend*, *Great expectations* and *Edwin Drood*, that is, in all of Dickens' later literary output. Dickens' novels span the entire process of the formation of 19th century society, they explain the conflicts and tensions of this process.

Dickens gives full expression to the play of human forces caught in the gears of social development. How, then, asks Lindsay, did he manage to retain his popularity in the Victorian world? Lindsay's explanation is that

Dickens obtained union with his audience at a moment of transition. When he saw the other side of the "merry old England" depicted in *Pickwick*, he did not fail to write about it. At the same time his audience also felt the loss of peace and calm; they felt fear of a world not understood.

Here, again, Dickens was side by side with his readers; here lay also, according to Lindsay, the function of Dickens' sentimentality — an expression of the emotions of men at a difficult moment of loss. The social and artistic import of sentimentality was the means which put Dickens in immediate union with the people who felt lost and defenseless in an epoch of change.

It was more and more difficult for Dickens to write because of his actual antagonism to the major forces ruling mid-nineteenth century society. He spoke for a future in which the existing contradictions would be humanly resolved. He had to keep in union with the struggling human being, and yet had to speak in terms of a resolving unity which did not yet possess the means of actualizing itself. If he failed on either count — he failed as an artist and went bankrupt. In order to write powerfully Dickens had to remain true to himself, yet if he did not write according to the Victorian convention, he was threatened with the loss of audience. Among other things, this is the source of Dickens' restless struggle, his bitterness and dissatisfaction.

A revaluation of Dickens' novels is necessary because our age, like that of Dickens' is a "dark age of unrest" and Dickens is the master to show us how to utter the truth of the human condition, concludes Lindsay.

The turning point in the revaluation of Dickens' novels came in Edmund Wilson's essay *Dickens: The two Scrooges* (1941). In part, Wilson's interpretation was anticipated by G. B. Shaw and T. A. Jackson who insisted upon Dickens' importance as a social critic, but Wilson with the aid of later biographical data, goes further. He explores the root causes of Dickens' dissatisfaction as an individual and the complexities of his themes as a social critic. Wilson sees in Dickens a writer antagonistic to the Victorian age, who sought in the creation of his criminals and rebels an outlet for his own problems and conflicts.

The essay shows us a fresh portrait of Dickens and also presents a fresh approach to the novels. Wilson is aware, first of all, that Dickens was a great novelist rather than a political economist whose function is to make the reader share experiences through concrete persons and objects. Moreover, in Dickens' novels these persons and objects may also have symbolic functions.

Wilson's interpretations of *Bleak house*, *Little Dorrit* and *Our mutual friend* marks a turning-point in the discussion of Dickens' status. Later essays and critics have followed Wilson's lead contributing both to a better understanding of Dickens' views and to a well-founded, motivated appreciation of his merits as an artist.

For the purpose of this better understanding some of the later critics

attempt to draw parallels between Dickens and writers like Kafka or Dostoevsky. Once again, this is proof of Dickens' concordance with the problems of our present age. From the diaries of Franz Kafka and Mark Spilka's study *Dickens and Kafka* (1963) we know that Kafka was greatly influenced by Dickens' works, and that in writing *America*, he aimed at writing a "Dickensian" novel. Nor is this fact only an example of influence study, but shows that the most important motif in the works of both authors is man's helplessness in the face of the mechanism of law and government.

This can best be illustrated on the example of novels dealing with law and justice: Dickens' *Bleak house* and Kafka's *The trial*. Both novels carry the impression that everything is a veiled mystery, a sense of endlessly bewildering muddle from which none escape. There are situations with no solution, the heroes are imprisoned by the surrounding world. In Kafka's novels, death is the only means of escape for Joseph K. and K. Dickens' heroes continue to live, but each is closed up in his own prison.

Along with the fresh approach to Dickens' novels the critics view the theme of the prison as having deeper meaning than only criticism of a social evil on Dickens' part. Lionel Trilling (1961) views the symbol of the prison as the means by which the theme of *Little Dorrit* is presented. The author states that in this novel Dickens also anticipated Freud's essential theory of the neurosis: because Mrs. Clennam wronged old Dorrit causing his imprisonment, she will also remain chained to her invalid chair.

As for Dostoevsky Trilling sees a connection between Dickens' Blandois as an embodiment of evil and Smierdiakov in *The brothers Karamazov*.

The link between Dickens and Dostoevsky is further established by Robert Strange (1961) in his discussion of *Great expectations*. Pip's career can serve as a parable illustrating several religious paradoxes. Pip can gain only by losing all he has, only by being defiled can he be cleansed. The most important relationship in the novel is between Pip and Magwitch. In sympathizing with the criminal Pip assumes the latter's guilt. In suffering with him and loving the despised and rejected man can Pip find his true self. The final moral vision of the novel has to do with the nature of sin and guilt. Pip's development is complete when he learns to love the criminal and to accept his own implication in the common guilt of mankind.

In comparison with other writers of his times Dickens seems to be obsessed with guilt. *Great expectations* does not find its analogy in the novels of English or French contemporaries, but in the writings of the other guilt-tainted artist, Dostoevsky.

Edmund Wilson in the previously mentioned essay also makes a great case for Dickens as Dostoevsky's master. Wilson sees Dickens as a writer antagonistic to his age giving vent to his obsessions in his rebellious and criminal characters. The case is similar with Dostoevsky. This rebellion

against established values leads both authors to the interest with the problem of man's inner freedom, its results and limitations. The rejection of existing values as wrong ones causes man to be hindered by absolutely nothing, but at the same time man is left without guidance or anyone to tell him how to act. He is free to make his own choice and is, at the same time, compelled to make this choice. This dilemma is the same in the writings of 20th century existentialists; it appears with particular sharpness in decision to cross the borderline of crime. This is the case with Dickens in *The mystery of Edwin Drood* and with Dostoevsky in *Crime and punishment*.

Along with the revaluation of Dickens' novels there also comes a fresh application of new methods of criticism which concentrate around the problems of point of view, of metaphor and symbol and of their meaning in the interpretation of the novels. Another group of critics attempt to define the impact of psychology and sociology as applied to Dickens and his characters, analysing human relationships within a small group and then within society. The critics concerned with these problems are W. J. Harvey (1962), John Wain (1962), and J. Hillis Miller (1961).

W. J. Harvey concentrated his attention on two aspects of the complicated structure of *Bleak house*: the use of double narration and the use of coincidence. The double narration is Esther's story told in first person and the narration of the omniscient author.

Through her narrative Esther is idealized; we accept her on trust: the result is the static nature of her character, the essentials of which we quickly come to know. She does not serve as a catalyst of any action. Things are done to her or because of her rather than by her. We do not look at Esther, but through her at the teeming Dickensian world.

The omniscient author is like a camera lens giving us a panoramic view which then concentrates to Esther's single viewpoint thus giving the effect of pulsation, of contraction and widening.

By intertwining the two narratives Dickens compels us to assume a double vision of the world. On the one hand we and Esther are within; then again we and the omniscient author are outside. This double perspective forces the readers to make connections which are now more valid because the author forces us to make them.

Also coincidence plays a more important part here than in Dickens' other works. Several main factors combine to merge the various coincidences into the very fabric of the story. This merging is obtained by the above-discussed interlocking of twin narratives, by combining coincidence with some kind of at least partial explanation, sometimes by a full explanation as the result of plotting and, finally, by obliterating the pronounced feeling of coincidence through its use so frequent that it becomes almost natural. In the final analysis coincidence serves to express a truth about the real world: the fact that life

often blends the casual with the causal, that we are both free and determined.

At the heart of Dickens' work lie a number of profound intuitions entangled with a number of his private obsessions. Together, they express Dickens' vision of the universal human predicament or, we should rather say, the predicament of man in modern industrial society.

John Wain's discussion of Dickens' *Little Dorrit* leads us once more to the metaphor of the prison. The book's recurring idea is that 19th century England is a place where genuine happiness is impossible. It is a prison in which all the convicts are members of one family. Alternatively, it is a family which organizes its life after the fashion of a prison.

According to Wain, *Little Dorrit* sets out a vision of human society that includes nearly everything of importance and shows Dickens' most solid attempt at solving the specific problems of long fictional narrative.

J. Hillis Miller analyses in his discussion the relationships of people within a smaller group of society — within the family in Dickens' novel *Dombey and son*.

The real centre of the novel is the parent-child relation. *Dombey and son* is the last of Dickens' novels in which the establishment of satisfactory relations with one's parents can be an escape from isolation. The central problem faced by all the characters is how to break through the barriers separating them from the world and from other people. The protagonists differ from the other characters only in the completeness of their isolation. The only way to overcome it is non-rational, mysterious and expressed through the vague symbol of the sea.

True feeling derives from the divine sea and makes its qualities available to the human world. The human form of this spiritual force is spontaneous, non-rational, and everywhere the same. When shared this feeling puts characters in contact with one another in spite of the apparently unbreakable barriers between them and solves the fundamental problem of the novel. We may add that in its vagueness it is a rather escapist solution in full agreement with Dickens' gradual increase of pessimism as observed by all modern critics.

A. O. J. Cockshut (1962) in his discussion attempts to bring together the threads of the early and late works of Dickens. He finds in *Edwin Drood* once again the traditional early Dickensian setting. There are no prisons, dust heaps or rotting rivers. The novel seems to be a regression to the author's more superficial, early style. The evil associated with Jasper seems purely external. There is no sense of watching the portrayal of one's own vices.

At first glance the plot may give a similar impression. Dickens set out to produce the flavour of Eastern mystery choosing a ritual Hindu murder for his subject. But from the opening passages we can see that the story was to be not only an Eastern mystery. It was going to set the known and un-

know side by side, to reveal the value or decadence of English society by means of the intrusion of an alien and destructive force. The theme is the contrast of cultures and the split of minds that goes with it.

In this connection, Durdles, the stonemason appears as an important character. He is undoubtedly early Dickensian and could have stepped right out of the pages of *Nicholas Nickleby*. As a symbol of the decay of the cathedral, of the collapse of the civilization of a country town, he is comparable in his symbolic status to the river in *Our mutual friend*.

Jasper, however, is the prime example of the synthesis of the old and the new. He is an authentic split personality and not just a melodramatic hypocrite. In his person he draws together the story of clashing civilizations. Unfortunately, we cannot tell how Dickens would have solved the contradiction of motives, but we can see that a reconciliation of the two strains is not impossible. Dickens partly achieved at his death what Dostoevsky, learning from him, did: the total analysis of a murderer's soul.

The application of new critical methods in the revaluation of Dickens' works has thrown a new light on the problems of Dickens' art and after almost a hundred years has given an answer to the charges formulated against the author by George Henry Lewes.

What modern critics, however, seem to fail to appreciate is the underlying effect of Dickens' humour. One of the few exceptions is C. B. Cox (1968) who attempts to defend the humourous Dickens by saying that his comic characters and episodes demonstrate insight into man. The meaning of Dickens' comic art is that the great and virtuous man is often a fool. This is the case of Pickwick, as was the case of Don Quixote or Parson Adams. He is so absorbed with his own sense of values and ideals that he forgets that others are not moved by the same impulses. Pickwick is the most successful example of this type.

Dickens' treatment of this type of character introduces into his comedies a profound sense of the human predicament in the universe. We react to Pickwick in two contradictory ways. On the one hand he is absurd, yet on the other he is the symbol of the greatness of man. The contradictory feeling that there is both absurdity and glory in human experience is the unifying element in Dickens' work. The greatness of all of Dickens' caricatures is that their oddity hides something which is typical of all human experiences. At the same time the kindness and integrity of some of Dickens' characters demonstrates his faith in the value of human life.

The revaluation of Dickens' novels, be it subject matter or technique, has substituted the traditional portrait of Dickens, an old-fashioned philanthropist full of kindness and good-will, with the picture of a great and subtle artist, a man acutely aware of the moral complexities, whose works correspond so well with our own complicated age. This correspondence with different

ages, and different audiences is the best proof of the greatness and lasting value of Dickens' novels. The still appearing flow of publications which, according to the Times Literary Supplement, "exceed in number those for the centenary of Dickens' birth in 1812" provides another proof for the above conclusion.

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