THE SECRET OF DICKENS

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By

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To

My Friend,

FREDERICK CARTER JANVRIN,

Whose unbounded faith in the valour,
prowess and ultimate supremacy
of our race has been an
uplifting influence and a
perpetual inspiration
during four dreary
years of
war.

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PREFACE.

THE task that I have set myself to perform in the following pages is one that I realise to be beyond my strength. Perhaps no living critic is quite adequate to its complete discharge. Yet, for reasons that I shall presently set forth, it appears to me of paramount importance that an attempt should be made.

At first sight, it may, indeed, seem little short of fatuous to assert that, during momentous days such as these in which we are now living, literature and literary art and criticism have claims upon our attention such as they never had before. The nation has just emerged, bloody and victorious, from the most ghastly war that has ever been waged, every hour of which brought not only its tale of triumph and terror, of heroism and endurance—but also of desolation, of misery, of all the unspeakable agonies, all the incurable ills that from day to day were inflicted upon the human race. For four and a half years we have endured the ghastly miasma of the world tottering upon its foundations and tumbling to ruins; of our ideals and our dreams being shattered and cast into oblivion; of our vast and intricate structure of civilisation being trampled under-foot by the iron heel of War. All this, and much more that need not be reiterated, have we endured, cheering ourselves during all this long and gloomy night-time, with the thought that—

"... *Night comes that day may break.*
Each into each dies, each of each is born:
Day past is night, shall night past not be morn?"

And now the night is over and done, and the glorious dawntide of our dreams is at hand. The realisation has been growing upon us that the day that is being ushered in is not one of ease and relaxation after our struggle. It marks but the beginning of new struggles—different and perhaps even greater than the Titanic contest with Prussianism. The days that are coming will present to

the nation infinite problems, infinite difficulties, all of which must be courageously envisaged and overcome if we are to reap any of those benefits which nearly four and a half years of warfare have placed within our reach. The present is a time, it may be urged, for action not words, for deeds not books (and most certainly not books of literary criticism); we should all of us be in the Council Chamber, on the platform, or in the school, taking some active part in the building of the New Utopia that the veils of futurity hide from our eyes. The library may well be shut up and left to care for itself; no one need even trouble to flick the dust from the volumes on its shelves.

This may perhaps seem superficially a very just and reasonable conclusion; but surely a moment's consideration will show it to be entirely specious and unjustifiable. I think we shall find, if we refer the matter to the verdict of history, that nations have often attained to the apex of their literary achievements simultaneously with, or possibly immediately consequent upon, a period of great military enthusiasm. Art (and in particular literary art) "will "not," as Mr. Edmund Gosse has pointed out, "be found "to be a stream of uniform breadth, depth and swiftness. "It rather resembles a picturesque river, diversified in its "aspect as it glides along; now feeble and narrow, now "broad and swelling; sometimes like the Arcadian river "of Alphaeus, disappearing altogether from view, then "re-appearing, and yet flowing ceaselessly." The simile that Mr. Gosse has here adopted applies remarkably aptly to the point I wish to make. Often in the varied and many-sided annals of history one comes upon a period seemingly devoid of every vestige of Art or of literary and artistic endeavour; without one bard to hymn a nation's glorious deeds, or one painter or sculptor to portray its valorous heroisms. And suddenly the Alphaeus bursts into view: the latent powers of Art break out into expres-

sion; and perhaps a glorious galaxy of painters, sculptors, and writers launches a new and great literary era on to the ocean of history.

And the causes that are to account for these sudden outbursts of Art,—where are they to be found? What is the hand that draws the bolt, and sets free the pent-up emotions of man from out the prison-house of the human heart? How shall we account for the Athens of Pericles, the Rome of Augustus, the England of Elizabeth, the "Romantic Revival," the great literary and artistic renascence that the discerning can see coming into being during the present days? It is the pages of history—that realm of the strange and the anomalous—that yield us sure reply. The words of Ruskin spring to mind: "No great art ever yet rose on earth but "among a nation of soldiers." It might naturally be thought that the time when men are engaged in the waging of war would be the most unsuitable for the production or for the assimilation of Art in any form; their ears would be numbed for music by the clang of sabres or the roar of artillery; their eyes would be blind to the sublime in the welter of blood and carnage around them; the fair frail shapes of beauty would fade away in the face of the grim realities of the battlefield. But this I maintain, and I think justly, is not the case. Consider, for example, the age of Elizabeth. The great literary *coteries* that have made that epoch so glorious sprang into existence while England was engaged in a life and death struggle with her deadly enemy, Spain. And all the time that it was flourishing, England was full of war and of military and naval activity. No doubt the fall of Constantinople in 1453 was a primary cause of the Elizabethan age; but it was the Spanish Armada in 1588 that made it possible. A similar picture is presented to the eye by Periclean Athens and Augustan Rome. The French Revolution and the

Napoleonic Wars were important—even essential—factors in the "Romantic Revival"; Shelley and Dickens are of the Revolution, just as Robespierre and Napoleon are of it. "Slaughter is God's daughter," said Coleridge; and twin-born with her is Art, and all the noble and outward expressions of Man's soul. For, as Nietzsche truly remarked, "Only where there are graves can there be "resurrections."

Of the present epoch I need say little; the facts speak for themselves. The demand for literature all through the war, and at the present time, is clamorous. It may be—it doubtless is—a matter of extreme difficulty to produce books to-day, but never was it so easy to sell them. Never were they so eagerly read. Never were the public so keen to find distraction in their pages. War, which tries men's souls like nothing else, has left them with a fierce longing to escape to another world—a world that they feel unconsciously to be more real, more permanent, than that in which they are day by day engaged. Many there are who find an outlet for their instinctive desires and cravings along the perhaps hitherto unexplored paths of literary creation; while others—an infinitely greater number—turn, with true intuition, to the world of books to keep them in touch, if only for a brief half-hour, with the permanent realities of life and of human nature. So accustomed have we grown to the grim panoply of warfare and all the stern actualities that it drags in its train, that our minds have become dulled to the perception of those larger and deeper realities of life, and of those everlasting battle-fields of the spirit and of the life, that are just as tangible as those upon which Germany has been defeated.

But I have another and a deeper reason for maintaining that the appearance of this volume, whatever its demerits, is not untimely, in so far as it is literature with which it deals. During the war we were often told, and quite truly,

that the struggle in which we were engaged was, in reality, not between one group of powers and another, each intent on the other's humiliation and destruction. It was, we were warned—I use the word advisedly—a conflict between two civilisations, two philosophies, each with antithetical conceptions of the State, the Individual, and the soul of man. Now that we stand panting and victorious after the fray, it seems to me of essential importance that we should not lose our appreciation of this basic difference. Our perception of the quality of that which we have fought and conquered must not be lost in our wonder at, I had almost said our respect for, its strength and magnitude. Quite recently a man, whose opinions certainly deserve respect, remarked to the present writer, *à propos* of the present situation: "It's the old tale of Greece and "Rome. Have we defeated Prussianism really, or have "we, by enveloping ourselves with it, hidden from ourselves "the true state of affairs? It's at least questionable." There is, indeed, a real danger that, having defeated Prussia, we shall imitate her, and thus suffer at her hands the only real reverse that she has ever been able to inflict upon us. It is, therefore, of primary concern, that in this hour of victory we should strive to keep unblurred before us, not merely the material aims which we set out to achieve and which we have achieved, but also the inspiring spirit behind it all, which was what Prussia really challenged in 1914. We must not lose our souls, even in the fire and joy of victory. Rather this hour of triumph should be made doubly precious to our children, because in it not only did we vindicate, but we realised, our very selves. Hence it is manifest, I think, that English literature has for us now a compelling interest and an attraction that it never before possessed; and therefore this new book of mine follows, not inappropriately, on my other works on Dickens.

My task in the present volume is at once extremely simple

and profoundly important. It is to trace, first, the influence of that splendid outpouring and magnificent manifestation of the soul of man on Dickens himself, and, secondly, to make clear in what manner Dickens has himself reacted on English literature—recasting its modes, revitalising its energies, and reinfusing, with the freshness and vigour of his own spirit, its drooping phases and declining moments. The greatest genius since Shakespeare has exercised an incalculable influence over English literature during the Victorian era. If we appraise that influence correctly, we shall, I believe, have captured all that is best, all that is most virile and arresting, in England to-day; we shall have attained to the apotheosis of the greatness of England, and shall have seen ourselves at our best and at our worst; we shall have looked upon our faults and our radiant possibilities.

I hope, however, in the following pages to do something more than this. I desire to reinfuse British patriotism with a spirit entirely and radically antithetical to Prussianism. Socrates was put to death in a spasm of patriotic fervour which was tinctured with the same kind of Kaiserism that was exemplified in the German autocrat, Wilhelm II. The mission of the philosopher of old was regarded as a deliberate attempt to divert the mind of the young from the war with Sparta. He was charged with contaminating the lofty philosophy of his time with those commonplaces of thought which were beneath the contempt of the literary and dialectic *élite*, and opposed to the needs of the time. Posterity disagrees. We now realise that through Literature and democratic culture we release and recreate a spirit which might otherwise become stunted by the Procrustean methods of a tyrannical autocracy. By this means we convey to our fellows that virtue and elasticity which are part of the virility of the life universal.

In summoning the public interest once more to the

greatest novelist of modern times, I feel that I am doing the specific work of our Western civilisation against the hated reactionaries of Germany. For out of our distinctive English fiction and its criticism there inevitably emerge those incentives for action and ethical conduct which will, in the end, bring spiritual victory to the nation in as sure and decisive a manner as our victory of arms has been achieved. Any study of Dickens means a spiritual arming of the people for Democracy. His multitudinous portraitures of the common man, his delineations of the common soul, his revelations of the common heart, constitute, *in totô*, the most powerful vision of Democracy that was ever conceived. They represent the actual escape of the forces of Democracy into new areas of life and self-realisation. These portraitures, these stories, become in substance faithful labours towards the sincerest exposition of the democratic idea. They make up in picturesque and vivid detail its huge inspiring canvas. They incite in the hearts of its millions the mysterious unities of its collective vision. They gather the scattered cries of humanity into one voice; and in Dickens's day that voice was as a mighty wind from the heavens that shook the Book of Literature, and surged, a cleansing and purging breeze, through the souls of men. And at once issues forth a new Criticism and Revelation of Life; and the picture of a mysterious Hand appears, pointing the way to renewed human effort and high destiny.

Out of a fabulous story
We fashion an empire's glory;
One man with a dream, at pleasure,
Shall go forth and conquer a crown;
And three with a song's new measure
Can trample a Kingdom down.

W. Walter Crotch.

London, November, 1918.

CHAPTER I.

THE ENGLISH NOTE IN LITERATURE

I

THE ENGLISH NOTE IN LITERATURE

Chief in thy generation born of men
Whom English praise acclaimed as English-born,
With eyes that matched the world-wide eyes of morn
For gleam of tears and laughter, tenderest then
When thoughts of children warmed their light, or when
Reverence of age with love and labour worn,
Or god-like pity fired with god-like scorn,
Shot through them flame that winged thy swift live pen:
Where stars and suns that we behold not burn,
Higher even than here, though highest was here thy place,
Love sees thy spirit laugh and break and shine
With Shakespeare and the soft bright soul of Sterne
And Fielding's kindliest might and Goldsmith's grace;
Scarce one more loved or worthier love than thine.

ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE.

LITERATURE to thousands to-day is a closed book. To some of the ablest brains and most vibrant natures, its influence, even on themselves, is utterly unsuspected. Now, as in the days of Carlyle, the mass of men have a strange contempt for ideas. Carlyle once pictured the French *noblesse* as exclaiming: "Rousseau, pooh!—he is a man of ideas—what "do they matter?" "And," Carlyle adds, with his own inimitably caustic logic, "the next edition of Rousseau's "works was bound in these nobles' skins!" It can be granted as an incontrovertible fact that the world is dominated by Ideas. Conduct may be nine parts of life, as Matthew Arnold taught us, but it is the remaining tenth part that determines and colours the whole. Unconsciously—automatically almost—the ideas, the inspirations that we have received, the impressions and thought-forms that have been left on our minds by literature, which shape and

determine, first, our outlook on life, our mental assumptions and intuitions, and, secondly, to a large extent, our resultant actions. Even though the man in the street does not realise this of himself, it holds good none the less. The vague thoughts, the aspirations and the sympathies that the commonest and most uninspired story excites to-day are hardened into definite concrete action to-morrow.

We have lately seen an appalling example, on a scale that seems almost unimaginable in its vastness, of the decay that can set in among a people, through the intellectual atmosphere which it inhales day by day. Forty—thirty years ago—it is really worth recalling—Germany was the most widely admired nation on the face of the earth. Mr. Charles Lowe, who may be cited as a representative English publicist, referred to her as "the friend and ally "of the English people, in the vanguard of the march of "civilisation." Carlyle rejoiced at the victory of "humble "God-fearing Germany." The thoroughness, the assiduous and unremitting devotion to duty, the efficiency and the patience of the Teuton, were characteristics we were all taught to admire and emulate.* To-day, Germany is a pariah among the nations; the change in her aims, her methods of life, and in her whole spiritual atmosphere and outlook is as marked as the difference of feeling that she excites in the hearts of the spectators of her moral decadence. To what is the spiritual decay of the German due, if not to the virus of modern German literature? Professor Hugo Munsterburg, in his *Social Studies of To-day*, says: "The visitor who strolls through the streets "and looks over the display in the windows of the number-"less book-stores, is surprised at the abundance of books "on sexual questions. It seems as if all Germany had

* But read the masterly analysis of race-culture by the Right Hon. J. M. Robertson, entitled *The Germans*.

"nothing else in mind but love-making and love-giving and "love-abusing." Goethe, Schiller, Lessing, and Klopstock are to-day unread in the Fatherland. The grave, serious Teuton, a trifle heavy and hyper-sentimentalised, has disappeared with the great masters of the last century, and we find instead men whose atrocities in Belgium and elsewhere answer exactly to the description of Neitzsche's "blond beasts avid for blood and slaughter." We have only to glance at the morbidities of modern German literature to realise how fatal to the soul of the people they have proved. The novels of Tovote, of Herman Bahr and Conradi, and the work of dramatists of the stamp of Wedekin, together with the "literature of Perversion" which has sprung up in Germany, illustrate all too clearly the truth of Max Nordau's declaration to the effect that "the systematic excitation of lasciviousness causes grave "injury to the mental and physical health of individuals, ". . . . and a society made up of these over-stimulated "units, without self-control, discipline and shame, marches "to its certain destruction."

I am far from suggesting that there is imminent in English literature any movement such as we have seen at work in Germany. The novel and the drama, the newspaper and the essay, are free from the taint of moral depravity. But are we in no danger of one of the primary antecedents of that stage? Recently, Mr. Henry Arthur Jones, that earnest student of the drama, pointed out that licentiousness on the stage was often preceded by intellectual debility. Lack of adequate *motif*, of genuine inspiration, of real power and insight, it has been justly asserted, in the past drove both the dramatist and the actor to descend to suggestiveness in order to sustain or excite the interest of their audience. It seems, indeed, painfully obvious to me that he who attempts to make a thorough and impartial survey of English literature at its

present stage of development must find himself confronted with a real menace in this direction. If we regard some of the excrescences of what may be here conveniently called "high-class literature," we shall find that the inability to handle great themes and to depict the master-passions of the human heart has driven some of the most skilled practitioners to rely upon the erotic for their effects, to an extent that does actually tend to suggest some of the degeneracy of the modern German novel. On the other hand, if we turn to popular literature, to the serial, for instance—which at its best, in the hands of Wilkie Collins and Charles Reade, was a great and inspiring art-form—we shall be confronted for the most part with a mass of ebullient banality, whose only claim on our forgiveness can be that it is speedily forgotten. It is true, of course, that the extensive publication of cheap classics, comprising supreme literary achievements at prices which bring them within the reach of everybody, is a feature of present day publishing, the importance of which can scarcely be adequately estimated. But against this must be set, I fear, the fact that a large amount of modern fiction, especially in the serial form, has reached a degree of puerility, which is almost always the precursor of the unclean and the erotic. If it be true, as George Meredith has told us, that whatever is deeply conceived cannot be immoral, equally certain it is that the banal, the trivial and the anæmic in literature are the surest forerunners of a species of unnaturally stimulating literary immorality.

It is this fact that encourages me to turn again to Charles Dickens as the pivot of that literary revival, which from a popular point of view is so necessary. For Dickens, whatever else may be said for or against him, remains essentially a great *clean* popular author. The sale of his books at the present time runs into hundreds of thousands of copies a year. "The lord of laughter and of tears" has still the

power to move the great mass of mankind, to appeal irresistibly to the man in the street, just as to his brother of the clubs. Those of us whose business or pleasure it is to watch these things know, for example, that the men at the Front clamoured for Dickens. And surely this is but natural, since it is of their prototypes that he writes,—of Sam Weller and of Mark Tapley—of men who are bone of their bone and flesh of their flesh. Dickens, moreover, is in constant demand at all the libraries. This age has witnessed the passing of the popularity of many great writers. Scott is largely unread; Thackeray is scandalously neglected; it is the magic of the Brontës' personalities, rather than the genius of their works, that keeps them before the literary public. It was quite recently that I heard a girl of seventeen express surprise on hearing the name of Mrs. Gaskell! *Cranford* was unknown to her; and probably to her, and to thousands of others like her, many of the masterpieces of the great Victorians are similarly unknown. Almost alone among them all, Dickens commands recognition. The great literary force of his period—a period that has long passed us by—he is read to-day by more unliterary, not to say unlettered, men and women than is any other author who ever put pen to paper. Sir Walter Scott once asserted that "we shall never learn to respect our real calling and "destiny until we have taught ourselves to consider every-"thing as moonshine compared with the education of the "heart." If this be so, then, indeed, this essay, which will be in part directed towards a discovery of the secret of Dickens, and of his extraordinary and lasting power and popularity, will not have been written in vain.

In particular, I am emboldened to hope that this new study of the novelist may safeguard us, not only against the perils of literary vacuity, which surely cannot exist under the influence of his acute and merciless satire, but from a more sinister and scarcely less real danger, from

which he, I feel persuaded, can redeem us. Our literature, like our thoughts and like our politics, is in peril of becoming denationalised, of losing its essentially English characteristics, of becoming cosmopolitan, and, therefore, anæmic and soulless. I am not suggesting that a great piece of literature may not excite wonder and applause in every part of the world, irrespective of country or climate. It is possible for an Englishman to be thrilled by Tolstoy's *Resurrection;* but he realises all the time that he is reading about men and women who are Russians. Had they been "internationalists," and therefore not at all typical of that country of blinding snow and of half-frozen nature, then it would have been useless to write of them. They would have been as unreal as John Browdie would have appeared had Dickens first declared that he was a Yorkshireman, and then gone on to merge him in that symbolic human, the man in the street, who might be an Irishman or Cockney.

There can be no doubt, however, that the average novel of to-day has, to say the least, tendencies that are basically alien to our deepest instincts. One has only to call to mind Mr. Compton Mackenzie's *Sinister Street*, and Mr. Maxwell's *The Devil's Garden*, or to reflect on Mr. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, Mr. Fletcher's *The Threshing Floor*, or Mr. Hubert Wales's *The Yoke*, to recall characters and scenes that seem imbued with an entirely foreign and exotic colouring—a strange and unfamiliar tinge, as it were, of the unreal and unsuspected issues of Life. It is not that the books that I have cited are written around incidents of sex interest. There are a good many incidents of that description in Fielding and Smollett. But no one who reads these authors feels as if he had been perusing the work of a foreign writer. Tom Jones at the inn behaved pretty much as most Englishmen would have behaved in the Eighteenth Century. But the hero of *Sinister Street* is hardly to be recognised as a man and a brother. Michael

Fane seems to the reader a strange and alien personality, moving in what must appear to the average English reader an almost unnatural atmosphere of the *rococo* and the exotic. And it is here that it seems to me that Dickens has a perennial and insistent value, in that whatever else he was, he ever remained English to the core.

Let me not be mistaken in my argument. As I have elsewhere said, Dickens was English without insularity. And I am far from contending for any literary or artistic principle that makes for insularity. Tennyson was English *and* insular, as compared with Browning, who was emphatically English without Tennyson's special patriotism or his tinge of national prejudice. Browning lived in Italy, and mainly achieved his life's work there. His poetic *scena* was of many lands, but more frequently and more vividly it is arched with the indigo skies and carpeted with the rich hues of Italy. His passionate seizures of colour and form were stimulated by her natural flora and fauna, and by the art-structures and relics of his adopted country. *The Ring and the Book* is redolent of the life of Rome, its streets and *palazzas*, its teeming people and bizarre personages. But in addition it encircles the common heart of humanity, with all its perplexities, its passions, its tragedies, its hopes, its fears, and its ambitions. Although his characters sometimes belong to mediæval Italy, he is here, as always, the passionate analyst of our common human nature.

Ibsen voluntarily exiled himself from his beloved Norway, and in a strange land deliberately set himself the task of recreating his country's literature. It was in Italy that he wrote his tragic poem-play *Brand*. He nevertheless remained always the strong austere Norwegian. The chill spirit of the North held him in its glacier-like grip, bearing the rugged prominences of his stern thought; but his humanities strike the grim cold human deeps of universality.

All is in chill correspondence with the scenic grandeur of the glacier-cut fiord and the snow-peaked heights of his native land. While Browning saturated himself with historic Italy and its art-world, Ibsen remained suspended reminiscently in the severe altitudes of mind which are as peculiarly Norwegian as are the local atmospheres and environments which he gave to the scenery of his plays. "Never have I seen home so near by, as precisely from a "distance and in absence," he once said in a lecture at Christiania. He was the rigorous imperturbable surgeon of the human soul, and could

Sprinkle horror in your blood—
Smite you with the scourge of deathly stress . . . .

—but nevertheless he makes the reader of any climate or any country feel those tragic crises that are common to the soul of every man; and he compels one to the realisation of the moving spectacle of all human life.

Yet again, Whitman was American of the Americans; but he sang of man the comrade, and of the commonwealth of mankind, in a breadth of utterance that was cosmopolitan. He had Carlyle's own world-philosophy, without his crabbed particularities and severities. He belonged to the Universal, and beheld the vision of Man emerging out of the cosmic strife as the life-content of an evolving universe, destined to cohere in the communitary life of comrades;—

One's self I sing, a simple separate person;
Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-masse . . .
Of life immense in passion, pulse and power;
Cheerful, for freest action formed under laws divine.

Dickens, like Wordsworth, Mazzini, and Shelley, rose upon that great tidal-wave of universal feeling and fraternity, which the upheaval of the French Revolution crashed upon the shores of the Western world. It submerged the hide-bound sentiments of isolate patriotisms deep in its raging waters. It deflected all great minds

from the narrow trifles of insular predispositions and prejudices to the recognition of an universal common weal and common woe. It evoked visions of man in his affinities of higher nature and profound destiny. All great artistic spirits come to realise that they belong to no particular country, but to some great future of humanity in which cleavages of patriotic emotion become merged in the moral unities of struggle and freedom, of beauty, of brotherhood and reason. They become patriots of humanity and citizens of the world. Dickens shared this breadth of view and accomplished much of his work in sympathetic contact with the people of Italy, France, and Switzerland, whence he drew many of his finest life-portraits. Like all great artists, he lived in an art-world of ideas which is confined by no ordinary national boundaries, but is held in the bonds of its own ideals and humanities. And if we inquire what it is that makes him essentially English, we come just to those qualities which made Browning English, despite his saturation in things Italian. Stopford Brooke says of Browning: "All the same, he was himself woven of England "even more than Italy. The English elements in his char- "acter and work are more than Italian. His intellect was "English, and had English faults as well as English "excellences. His optimism was English; his steadfast "fighting quality, his unyielding energy, his directness, his "desire to get to the root of things, were English. His "religion was the excellent compromise, or rather balance, "of dogma, practice and spirituality which laymen make "for their own life. His bold sense of personal freedom "was English. His constancy to his theories, whether of "faith or art, was English. . . . ."

Why do I thus so freely and specially quote these words with reference to Browning, who himself, it must be remembered, was one of the Forster Circle with Dickens in the time of their hot and ardent youth? Does not every student

of Dickens at once see that these words apply with startling appropriateness to Dickens himself, who was a passionate admirer of Browning, and as a writer of fiction was fundamentally at one with Browning's realistic art-principles, his humour, and his knowledge of the common heart of mankind?

Let us take another point of view. If we seek for that vital quality of Dickens's work which marks it off as English, which strikes unmistakably the characteristically English note, and flows as the life-blood of English fiction down through the lineage of its representative authors, we come inevitably to that moral quality upon which Taine so readily and penetratingly placed his analytical finger. Taine passed upon Dickens some of the highest encomiums which could proceed from higher critical circles. He possessed an experience of literature that was Continental, and his knowledge of that which was specifically English was admittedly great. His severities were sufficiently well met by Forster; and his appreciations were as gratefully and intelligently recognised by him. Taine leaned overmuch to the French doctrine that an artist should be regarded as an isolate and inviolate craftsman; unrelated to his compeers or compatriots; a law unto himself; to be regarded as working independently of the moral atmosphere of his time and of the art-influences of either his precursors or his contemporaries. In a personal sense this is true. But the most creative and original artist cannot be left unrelated or unclassed by intelligent criticism. In these ordered and scientific days an artist so considered would be regarded as an anachronism—a sport, a freak—something like the find of a biologist who is bewildered in his attempt to relate his specimen to its natural order. I imagine that literary criticism falls short of its purpose if it does not at least reveal by analysis or synthesis the nature, order, and sequence of literary effects. It should be something more

than the discovery of those impressions proceeding merely from the actualities of *life*. It should become something still more than the verbal statement in choice terms of the issues of mental impressions as they emanate from *books*. It should, I think, establish intelligent and intelligible currents of thought throughout the areas of its manifestation, and determine their *morale* as a constant progress. Criticism of literature should properly determine, amongst other things, its *rationale* as an evolution. If this be done not only are the laws of art-phenomena realised, but beauty and ugliness are seen to possess an immutable relation to good and evil. In fine, moral issues become an essential in the laws of Art and as necessary as beauty and sublimity.

Taine's chief point against Dickens as an artist was, that he was unable to work without that disregard for morality which was a primary characteristic of French art. But despite what was, to him, an outstanding defect, we find him obliged to discount the severity of his impeachment by a single sweeping admission. And in granting this he becomes scientific. He shows the relation of the peculiar genius of Dickens to the compelling pressure of his environment as an Englishman. The type of artistry which he represents was distinctively English. It was admittedly individual, creative, self-evolved; but it was also national. His portraitures, his themes, his views of life, all evinced an unique domestic purism undiscoverable anywhere except in England. His nearest kinsman is Hugo. That Dickens's genius partakes of no slavish concession to convention is admitted. That it was genuinely creative and revolutionary could but he recognised. But it was nevertheless coloured with that inevitable quality which belongs to all English art. Inherent in it are certain moral proprieties and amenities which are unconsciously, but peculiarly, English. This is the point I especially desire to emphasise in this chapter. For it is true.

Without, therefore, adverting further to other general features of Taine's criticism,* it may be interesting briefly to illustrate the truth of this just impeachment as it concerns English fiction in general.

One of the fixed and distinctive phases of all Dickens's work which I have always emphasised is that mood in which Maeterlinck presents us with *The Blue Bird*—the outlook of the Child; not of course in the azure colours and fairy-like idealisms which constitute the dramatic atmosphere in which the great Belgian's children disport and prattle as in a world of Arcadian beauty; yet, nevertheless, in certain of its cardinal *motifs* and some of its elements of higher purpose, and certainly in all its simplicity and purity, does it accord with Dickens's presentment of every-day life. In this child-drama Maeterlinck achieved the superb task of presenting the elements of good and evil in such a manner as to leave no shock of pain or shadow of darkness, no imprint of scar or moral hurt, upon the virgin powers and receptivities of the child. Every kind of beauty and ugliness, of shadow and sunshine, of grace and grossness, of good and evil, comes to it. Every kind of evil is present, although nascent. The child looks on all, for it is not blind. It receives the impact of each thing and each element which the world has to give it. And all is given and received in such measure as its own nature may absorb and adapt itself to, and no more.

In this play of external influences around the child, and in the interplay and exchange of ideas within it, there is revealed all the child's own level of activities—it lives and moves in just its own world of emotions, desires, and intelligence. An atmosphere of naïve wonder, questioning and attainment is dominant. The children absorb the red-

* Except, perhaps, to point out that he quite failed to get into focus Dickens's humour, or to place or recognise it at all as an element in English fiction.

ness of roses, the animation of gardens, the awe of woods, the fear of strange inhabitants, the solemnity and dangers of the night, the grim appearances and austerities of churchyards, the love and security of home and friends, the doubts and fears of enemies. In Maeterlinck's children, all nature and the whole universe of things realise and achieve themselves—and all upon the child's minature scale and plane of life, and through his limited and quiveringly sensitive moral measures. Forms, colours, sounds, and scents (all of which are embodied in common things), and the peoples they meet, are what they make them. They know them only as they reach them through the avenues of their child-sense.

I have contended, as I have said, that this outlook of the child and its omniscient world of being was always with Dickens.* In the ethical sense of the word he saw with the eyes of a child. He portrays the child-nature and the child-consciousness. He constantly relates his best characters with their own childhood. He shows everywhere that he believes that an immense moral force for good resides in its retrospective influences. He directs his appeals to the child-nature which he is positive resides in all of us, even in the grossest characters. He teaches that in all such appeals lies the power of personal reform and personal regeneration. They are the fulcra of his social teachings. He frequently shows the application of these principles to the treatment of the lowest and most perverted types of human character—those that are even perverted by idiocy, imbecility, eccentricity, crime, or fantastic misanthropies. Everywhere he shows us how all types of men and women may become subjected to redemptive and rejuvenating influences springing from the region of child-life and its humanities. Society itself may be cleansed by its purifying stream. And all this because the presence and

* See Ch. I. *Pageant of Dickens.*

the power of his own childhood exercised to the last a dominant and determining influence over himself. It was this outlook on life at its beginnings which segregates Dickens from all other writers of his time. It constitutes his peculiar genius. It inspired his peculiar method of working. It enshrined his whole presentment of life and character. It was at the root of his reaction against the verbal license and the coarseness of Smollett and Fielding, and the vogue of the pornographic which passed on from the Eighteenth Century. It was at the root of his reaction against the romantic delineation of crime, and the general atmosphere of license and licentiousness in the manners, conduct, and morality which were projected from the bad old times of the previous century into the early Victorian Era. His great object was to help to sweeten and lighten this atmosphere of his own time ; and he used the Child as a medium of Art and ethical appeal. And while he shrank from presenting no kind of evil or grossness which appeared in life, it is so rendered that, like Maeterlinck's children in *The Blue Bird*, it becomes real to us in the measure of our capacity to apprehend it. Thus it is that a child can look upon the picture of Sikes and Nancy, or Fagin's foul kitchen of young thieves, without contamination. A young girl can look upon the ugly overtures of Quilp to the pure-souled Little Nell without that complete revelation of his evil nature that is given to adults. The coarseness, grossness and the evils of life in all their grim reality are presented in such form as to increase the moral stature of even the young and delicate-minded. They are so enshrined in a moral atmosphere as to constitute a pathetic ordeal of purification according to the degree of our insight. Those who read Dickens critically can always feel the tender strength of this great moral gift. This is the gravamen of Taine's charge against Dickens which I unreservedly accept.

I would remind my readers that in this chapter I would fain strike the distinctive note of English literature; or rather perhaps, grope for its common chord as it resounds through fiction. For only by this process can we realise Dickens's true relationship to both, a subject I propose to essay in another chapter. So far I think Taine hits the mark from one standpoint, for we get a glimpse of Dickens's ethical purpose, as well as of that important art-medium through which he worked. Both purpose and art are, I think, stamped indelibly with a strong moral characteristic.

It was the late Henry James who was disposed to set these two principles of ethical purpose and art in antithesis. "I should put the case differently," he says, in disputing Daudet's contention that the novel is to entertain merely. "I should say that the main object of the novel is to "represent life. I cannot understand *any other motive* for "combining imaginary incidents, and I do not perceive "*any other measure of the value of such combinations.*" (The italics are mine.) We know well this great novelist's genius as pure artist. We also know well his tendency to adhere rigidly to the formal rules of Art. We have felt his miraculous power of producing impalpable atmospheres of illusion and glitter in life, which embodied all those translucent qualities of form, colour and beauty that we see in Turner's pictures. But surely beauty and sublimity can but realise their body and reality in ethical purpose. The old argument against the "novel with a purpose" is gone for ever. It seems to me inherent in the nature of any art or craft, whether of the pen, brush, or chisel, that it should embody ethical quality. It may be true that the insistent prominence of any ethical idea affects the symmetry of the product. The factitious emphasis of a moral, or the partisan urgency of an idea, is truly nauseous to the discriminating mind. The Lucretian *proprii sermonis*

egestas is an essential to a well-balanced work of art. All such ideas should remain nascent beneath the overlaying artistry of the work itself. This applies equally to a novel. Nevertheless the thing created assumes *per se* a certain ethical link between the artist and those to whom he appeals; for the effect and the success of his work seem to me to inhere in a certain ethical harmony and congruity which belong to human life. It is part of the material in which he works. More especially is this seen in fiction. Every novelist who achieves something more than a mere narrative of adventure works in a medium of ethical ideas, and their extension out into the atmosphere of life and conduct of his readers presupposes a general harmony between him and his readers. Upon this depends his effects and his success. He deals with men and women in the intimate relationships of life, in which the ethical element is inseparable, otherwise how could his art become legitimately a reflection of life, "a mirror held up to nature"? It seems to me that so vital and so intrinsic is the ethical element or motive in the work of the novelist, that unless there be soundness and delicacy of moral judgment in combination with other qualities, the work artistically fails in its effect.

We in our day could not of course endure the moral insistencies and iterations of Samuel Richardson, any more than we could tolerate his prolixity or his literary egoisms. Yet I think we must get back to this Eighteenth Century novelist in tracing to its source the cardinal spirit of fiction which I seek, and which I desire to fix as distinctively English in its quality. We are able to do this with a fair degree of certainty. Richardson was the contemporary of Fielding. Although he is not in our own day so popular, his historical importance as an influence in the inner circle of fiction is much greater than is generally known. He and the author of *Tom Jones* were much more than mere con-

temporaries, each passively pursuing his creative work in detached activity and enthusiasm. They were professional rivals in literature, each desperately in earnest in promoting his own literary evangel. They were more than this even: they were hot controversialists in the structure, style, and art-themes of the novel. And finally, they were bitter personal enemies, and as antipathetic in their private dispositions as were Byron and Tennyson. Both have been described as the father of the modern English novel, and the seminal powers of each have had a large share in impregnating the vital features of the long line and lineage of fiction stretching down through the years to our own day. But it must be conceded that the honours of paternity rest mainly with Richardson; not merely because the ethical purpose of the novel which originated in him persists still in its more scientific and artistic phases. For it was he who deliberately and of set purpose deflected the subject-matter of fiction to man in his domestic life and portraiture; and it was he who first focussed the highest power of the novelist upon the virtues and vices of the human breast. From him is derived that particularly English *trait* of sympathetic examination into the struggles and impulses of the human mind towards personal perfection. It was he who first devoted the novel to the simple joys of the imagination in its enthusiasm of devolpment and virtuous achievement. It was he who first conceived its primary object as the revelation of the tragic crises and triumphs of the human heart. Without doubt Richardson was superb in his power to scan the innermost recesses of the mind of man, and especially the female mind; and although Samuel Johnson, his friend and contemporary, who received many benevolences at his hand, had much to say in adverse criticism, he once remarked that there was more knowledge of the human heart in a page of Richardson than there was in all Fielding. His heroines

like Clarissa Harlowe may be unimaginable prodigies of virtue, as those of Dryden were of courage. His men, like Sir Charles Grandison, may be "faultless monsters" of rectitude, as Wycherley's were monumental *figurantes* in vice. His themes of virtue and strict probity may by some be regarded as swollen homilies, his pictures of manners but the reflection of Eighteenth Century elegance, punctilio, and self-sufficient egoisms in the upper classes. But while Fielding may be affirmed to be the first to deflect the novel from the adventurous romance of knight-errantry, gallantry, intrigue, or enchantment into the adventurous romance of real everyday life of the Eighteenth Century, Richardson penetrated to the inner life and impulses which underlay the coarse, rugged, and Bohemian freedom of English manners in his day. While Fielding reflected all that savoured of licence and even licentiousness in character, Richardson reflected all that was restrained and refined, and of strict probity and virtue; and all this *in conflict with the prevailing evil and vice* which infested society to its lowest strata and threatened to destroy the social fabric. If Richardson's outlook did not extend further than personal regeneration it was at least vigorously and incisively devoted to it. If Fielding's stories embody little more than witty and entertaining narrative and definite portraiture of character and life, as scholar and lawyer his social outlook was perhaps broader, and in his capacity as magistrate and public man he made some attempts at least at social reform. But his impetuosity and his impulsive character yielded little result in this direction, and was in contrast with the dignity, constancy, and stability of Richardson's disposition. Richardson pursued steadily his tranquil task of transfusing moral blood into the fibre of human nature in its personal aspects. It must be conceded that his efforts form powerful tributary streams of purity to the slowly gathering awakening of the English

people. He was the clarifier of the crude vigour of the English spirit which Fielding evoked. Both these great Englishmen reflect the English genius of their century. Both conveyed large portions of their own strenuous and thoroughly national character to their work. Both were imbued with that peculiarly English spirit of initiation, experiment, and adventure in literature, as these qualities were being displayed in commerce and world-intercourse. Both sagaciously regarded their own work as something entirely new, creative, and reactionary. Both were distinctly English in their determination to reveal through the medium of fiction the *traits* of character and incident of their own time and the episodic phenomena peculiar to their own country. In all this both displayed the English instinct for progressive advance in literature. Finally, both tapped fresh sources for art in *belles lettres*, which have yielded the innumerable modern streams of English fiction. These have diverged over the whole watershed of literature, assimilating its vast accumulations of knowledge, and giving back what was received in ameliorative humanitarian and democratic purpose.

It is obvious in connection with the argument I am developing, that it was from sources peculiarly English that Dickens derived his inspiration. Mr. Bernard Shaw, himself one of the most sincere and discriminating of Dickensians, who acclaimed the greatness of our author during the brief but decided period of his decline, has perpetrated the amazing and unhappy statement that Dickens had no sources of artistic inspiration whatever. "Dickens," he says, in the course of an eloquent tribute, "was one of "the greatest writers who ever lived; an astounding man "considering the barbarous ignorance of his period which "left him as untouched by art and philosophy as a cave "man. Compared to Goethe, he is almost a savage."

Although at first sight this is an amazing statement,

there is perhaps a grain of truth in it. If we consider the condition of English fiction at the time of his emergence into fame, we shall find that, despite the splendid galaxy of talent and genius which it comprised, it was still in a state of becoming, as I have said in another work, "sick of a palsy."* Save for Scott, the novel, as we know it to-day, was non-existent for the mass. Jane Austen was not read as she should have been; and however high her genius may be rated to-day by competent critics, her characters, it must be admitted, are drawn from the genteel class, and the servants of that class—the class that, at the period I am mentioning, dominated literature, as indeed they dominated everything.

The philosophers of German transcendentalism were as yet unread; Miss Mitford was supposed to rank amongst the greatest of our tragedians for her *Foscari* and *Rienzi*, while her really admirable sketches in *Our Village* were as unknown as Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* was still popular. There were, or rather there had been, great poets; but so far as the mass of the people were concerned, most of their outpourings left them, their lives, thoughts, and aspirations absolutely untouched. We may say, indeed, that there were only two potent literary influences at work in England —potent in the sense that they reacted almost immediately on the thought of the time. They had both emanated from men of undoubted genius, who demand consideration at our hands. The first, Lord Byron, practically dominated literature till Dickens appeared. The other, Percy Bysshe Shelley, came within an ace of doing so some years later, and would, I believe, but for the advent of Dickens, have exercised an influence over his fellow countrymen such as no other poet or man of letters has ever wielded.

* "*The Soul of Dickens.*" (Chapman & Hall.) This was because it had yet to become re-inforced with a real, virile humour and a full-blooded humanism.

At the time of which I write Byron was a symbolical literary figure of his age. Like Oscar Wilde, he was typical of an eddy of personal degeneracy infesting his own individual output and the main literary stream of the age. Byron's vogue was extraordinary. The quality of his work, like that of Wilde, was of a nature that compelled admiration from men, who, veritable philistines, had never so much as dipped into a volume of poems or even read a page of Shakespeare. Its breeziness, its virility, its pungent and convincing satire, all these won an audience for him that his aristocratic spirit—or rather his self-contemplative pose—would never have commanded. "You swagger a great deal," a friend of his once said to the great man, "but after all, what have you done?"—"I "will tell you one thing I accomplished," was the answer. "I sold two thousand copies of a poem one morning. "Nobody else has ever done that in England." A true retort; but, unfortunately, while Byron was read for his original and vigorous verse, he is remembered for his cultivated vices and his egoistic attitudinising towards the universe and life. Young men wore Byronic collars, cultivated long hair, and adopted a gloomy atmosphere of morbid sinfulness that was only redeemed from viciousness by reason of its egregious and apeing absurdity. Young ladies, who could not profess to emulate the poet's sensuality, strove desperately to affect the distinguished melancholy which he proclaimed as following on his indulgences. Macaulay has left on record the best criticism of Byron's attitude towards life, which admirably exposes its compact of inconsistencies. "It is a blend," he says, "of "misanthrope and voluptuousness which enjoins you to "hate your neighbour and to love your neighbour's wife "with equal fervour." Thackeray shared the same view. "Give me a fresh, dewy, healthy rose out of Somersetshire; "not one of those superb, tawdry, unwholesome exotics

"which are only good to make poems about . . . . . Lord "Byron wrote more cant of this sort than any poet I know "of. Think of 'the peasant girls with dark blue eyes' of "the Rhine—the brown-faced, flat-nosed, thick-lipped, "dirty wenches! Think of 'filling high a cup of Samian "wine'; small beer is nectar compared to it, and Byron "himself always drank gin. The man *never* wrote from "his heart. He got up rapture and enthusiasm with an "eye to the public. . . . Our native bard! *Mon Dieu!* "*He* Shakespeare's, Milton's, Keats', Scott's native bard! "Well, woe be to the man who denies the public gods." Manfred, Childe Harold, and all the thin disguises which Byron adopted to cloak his own fretful and tortured personality, bear the stamp of genius in their execution, and the same cardinal fatuity in their conception. It is more than probable that Byron would himself have outgrown what was probably only a transition phase of his life had he not perished at Missolonghi, when Sir Walter Scott exclaimed: "It is as though the sun has gone out!"—and the boy Tennyson carved on a rock the words "Byron "is dead," and related later on that "the whole world "seemed darkened to me."

It is quite certain that the British public, whom he influenced very profoundly at the time, very quickly outgrew his mood. Ten years after *Pickwick*, the Byronic *dementia* had passed, and the only poem that was read with any assiduity was *Don Juan*, which had achieved the reputation of being exceedingly immoral.

Very different was the influence which Shelley was then exerting upon the mind of the rising generation. Incomparably greater than Byron as a poet—his lyrics are amongst the finest in the whole range of English literature—he had, indeed, neither the vogue nor the following that the great satirist so easily acquired. But his influence cut far deeper and lasted far longer. Indeed, it abides with us to this

very day. There have been roughly three views of Shelley, of which only one has any permanent value. The first could not in the nature of things last long. He was, so his contemporaries thought, one of the most abandoned and baleful men of genius ever sent to afflict the race. The very beauty and artistry of his verse added merely to the awe that his doctrines excited. The period during which he first startled the consciousness of John Bull, then vainly trying to recover from the shock consequent upon the French Revolution, was rich in horror and surprises for the middle-class mind. None, however, produced quite the same transports of alarm and consternation that poor Shelley succeeded in rousing. He was an athiest (or rather he had been), a free lover, a vegetarian, and a Republican. He did not believe in the law of entail, and advocated a free Press, a separate Parliament for Ireland, and other inconceivable innovations. In the eldest son of a baronet these beliefs were unpardonable, and Shelley became the most hated and the most feared man in all England; at one time in his life he could not appear in public without incurring the risk of being assaulted. This mood passed. It was found that marriage did not disappear because a poet wrote beautiful verse against it. People still attended Divine Service, despite Shelley's invitation to write the "impious name of God in the dust." Gradually opinion swung round to the opposite pole. Shelley, people began to admit, was a great poet, whose lyrical praise of nature was almost unmatched; and for the rest he was an inspired crank, and had not greatly influenced anyone. As Matthew Arnold put it, "He was a beautiful but ineffectual angel, "beating his luminous wings in the void!"

The third view was expressed with admirable clearness by the late Mr. Cecil Chesterton, in the course of a memorable lecture to the Fabian Society, in which he traced the growing influence of Shelley, upon all he held in most

repugnance in modern England. Pacificism,* vegetarianism, the neo-Buddhist concept of life, the adoption of a supremely unconventional and indeed irresponsible view towards the institution of marriage, the hatred of force and of the shedding of blood, even in a just cause, the derision of nationality, and the acceptance of a cosmopolitan view of mankind,—all these things, he pointed out, were voiced with matchless force and eloquence in Shelley's verses, and it was Shelley who first introduced them to the British public. Mr. Chesterton, it is only fair to say, refused to give any countenance to the vicious attacks upon Shelley's moral character, while rendering a discerning tribute to the inspiration and compelling force of his poetry.

These, then, were typical of the dominant forces in English Literature, when young Charles Dickens, despairing of finding an opening as an actor on terms that would bring him a respectable maintenance, decided, as a second best, to storm life through literature. That Shelley could influence, even lightly, a man of the vigorous nature, the fine animal spirits, and the intense avidity for colour and experience that marked Dickens all his life, and especially at this period, is unthinkable. But the Byronic distemper was not to pass him, for it is very distinctly traceable in the first book that he planned. That book, it is not usually known, was not *Pickwick*, but almost certainly the semi-romantic, semi-historical study, *Barnaby Rudge*, although it did not appear in its final form until after *Nicholas Nickleby* and the *Old Curiosity Shop*.

It is well worth while to pause here and summarise the

* Shelley's profound pacificism is expressed very clearly in the poem, *The Masque of Anarchy*, in which he recommends the democracy of Great Britain to assemble on a vast plain, there to be shot down without resistance. The subsequent moral effect of the massacre would, he indicates, fully justify the expediency of the tactics, and the triumph of the working classes would be assured.

evidence on this head. *Pickwick* was commissioned from the author on "a certain memorable day in the early part "of 1836" (Kitton). The negotiations with Chapman and Hall, indeed, dated back to 1835, as Dickens's letters to Catherine Hogarth show. But, so far back as 1834, two years previously, Dickens, writing to his friend, Kolle, referred to "my proposed novel"—a work that, it is obvious from the context, he had already discussed with Kolle. What was this novel? Before Chapman and Hall had commissioned *Pickwick*, Macrone the publisher was advertising *Gabriel Vardon, the Locksmith of London*, as a new novel by "Boz." That new novel then was certainly conceived, and most probably partly written (at all events one of its central characters was selected) before Chapman and Hall suggested *Pickwick* to the author. Most probably it was the novel Dickens referred to in his communication to Kolle, and in any case, its source of inspiration dates back to the pre-Pickwickian period. Its inspiration is essentially Byronic. The work is, save for one or two characteristic touches of Dickens's own peculiar genius, an echo of *Rookwood*, whose author, Harrison Ainsworth, was almost the first literary friend of any considerable standing that "Boz" met.* Superficially the men were not dissimilar. Those were the days when, in the April of his young life, Dickens, precocious, daring and adventurous, was wooing the young romantic and coquettish Maria Beadnell; when, despite the lack of means that periodically affected the Dickens houshold and himself, he used to hire

* "In 1836" (says Mr. Cuming Walters) "the friendship between "Ainsworth and Dickens was a close one. . . . .In 1838 Ainsworth "was referring to Forster as 'Dickens's most intimate friend, as "'well as mine.' Ainsworth was godfather to the son, whom "Dickens named, after his great predecessor, Henry Fielding. "Later, alas, the friendships ended in some bitterness—hence "perhaps the sparse references to Ainsworth in Forster's *Life*. He "did not attend Dickens's funeral."

a nag of a Sunday morning for a dash up to Hampstead, and when his waistcoasts and his curls and his rings, to say nothing of his eyes—those wonderful eyes that Lawrence and Maclise depicted a year or so later—turned the head of half the girls in Camden Town.* Perhaps it is not very surprising, therefore, that Dickens's first essay in fiction should bear the stamp of the semi-romantic, sentimentalised Byronic villain, of which Ainsworth had caught the full flavour. Sir John Chester and Hugh, Haredale and Rudge —the only serious studies that the book contains, are all redolent of that doubtful school of pesudo-romanticism whose influence tinged Dickens even to the last. Steerforth, Dombey, John Jasper, even Bradley Headstone, smack strongly of that tortured, semi-theatrical villainy, which Byron made everybody think was strength, when it was not even genuine wickedness. The very figure of Barnaby himself, with his raven, and his idiocy, and its semi-insane, semi-pathetic surrender to fate, is only saved from being thoroughly Byronic by its logical application of the theory to its final end. But the book is redeemed, as much else of Dickens is often redeemed, by the minor characterisation, which, carelessly attempted, is yet so vigorous and arresting that it makes even the serious characters real. The sketches of old Joe Willett, of Mrs. Vardon, of Dennis the hangman, are so vibrant and life-like that they give reality even to the gloomy Haredale and to the tiresome and preposterous Chester. Above all, there is the immortal caricature of Simon Tappertit, who makes not only the characters, but the whole period, live. The book is remarkable in that it gives us the first, and in some respects the finest, example of a capacity that Dickens shared with Shakespeare; the capacity to make a crowd speak, move, and act, so that we not only see it, but become a part of

* The whole spirit of the thing is exquisitely depicted in "Horatio Sparkins" in *Sketches by Boz.*

itself, feel its emotions, share in its excess, partake of its very fierceness and brutality. If *Barnaby Rudge* had given us nothing but the march of the mob on Newgate, it would have been worth writing, and would still be read to-day.

Yet when we compare the book with that which next followed it from the pen of the author, we are faced with a gulf that seems immeasurable. "The book, *Pickwick*," says Mr. G. K. Chesterton, "originated on the suggestion "of a publisher as many more good books have done than "the arrogance of the man of letters is commonly inclined "to admit. Very much is said in our time about Apollo "and Admetus and the impossibility of asking genius to "work within prescribed limits or assist an alien design. "But, after all, as a matter of fact, some of the greatest "geniuses have done it, from Shakespeare botching up bad "comedies and dramatising bad novels, down to Dickens "writing a masterpiece as the mere framework for a Mr. "Seymour's sketches." And the arrangement had this advantage: it left Dickens free—free to write without order, plan, or model, so that he instinctively reverted, not to imitate, but to re-produce and to re-vitalise the great examples of the English stories, which, as we know, he knew by heart. Dickens, as a child at Chatham, and later as a young student at the British Museum (his ticket for the Reading Room was taken out on his eighteenth birthday, the first day possible for him to obtain it), had read certain authors perpetually and voraciously. Fielding and Shakespeare, Smollett and Defoe,* Sterne and Goldsmith—he was permeated with the works of these men to saturation point. Richardson's *Pamela*, *Grandison*, and *Clarissa Harlowe*, with Hazlitt's humanistic studies of the Eighteenth Century novelists and comic writers, all were to be found upon his bookshelves. And dissimilar as they all are in

* Dickens read and re-read Defoe constantly through life.

many respects, their works have this in common with each other and his own. The English note in literature rings clear through them all. We may say, indeed, that the peculiar inspiration of Dickens goes even further back—back to Chaucer himself. For if we desire to track the course of modern English fiction to its real source as a reflection of life and a portrayal of real men and women, we must get back to the *Canterbury Tales*. Like Dickens, cheerful Chaucer loved a hostelry as being the *rendezvous* of varied folk in the Bohemian intercourses of travel along the open road of pilgrimage. In the *Tales* we seem to feel all the Pickwickian atmosphere of the hearth and the hostelry, the feasts and the story-telling, the vision of Merrie England when the knight and the maid, the palmer and the ploughman, the physician and the clerk, the herbalist and the haberdasher, the weaver and the dyer, the lawyer and the pardoner, all travelled the same high road—taking rest, refreshment, and sociability out of life as Dickens's folk did in his day. Becket's shrine is past, but the open road goes on. The Tabard Inn of Southwark is changed, but the stream of teeming folk keeps moving by for ever! Like Geoffrey Chaucer, Dickens brings them all across his stage—and with all the trappings and singularities of body and soul so accentuated by art as to mark them off with convincing and impressive reality.

In groping so far over the keyboard of English fiction I think that we may say that our common chord rings fairly out. Combined of several specific notes as it emerges and rolls down the years, it is not easy perhaps to determine its precise qualities. But it is impossible to mistake the high-sounding harmony, the infectious and buoyant spirit. There is something in it which makes the Englishman fond of the open country, the broad highway, the hostelries comfortably recessed on the road side, the laughter and jests of the common people, the English Home as the

seat and centre of the human comedy and drama, the common heart as its object of questioning and ministry. That something finds its expression in Dickens. Its dominant note echoes down through the years and reverberates in him. It may not be easy to isolate it or to define it. But its oracular centre is in Shakespeare; it resounds in Chaucer; its audacious and adventurous spirit is in Fielding and Smollett; its moral rectitude is in Richardson, Samuel Johnson and Mrs. Inchbald; its romantic ardour and imagery is in Horace Walpole, Mrs. Radcliffe, Clara Reeve, and Scott; its note of sadness and of the nocturne is in Miss Mitford; its polished and picturesque domesticity is in Oliver Goldsmith and Jane Austen; its tender meliorism is in George Eliot; its skilled vivacity and humanism are in Dickens; its exultant buoyancy is in *Pickwick*. Here it rang out so loud and joyous that every Englishman stopped to listen to it. "Well, thank God "*Pickwick* will be out in ten days anyway," said a man not far from death, who had learnt much of his sins from a solemn clergyman, then withdrawing after administering ghostly consolation. Men left their businesses, suffered their letters to remain unopened, put off engagements, to con its pages. Everywhere the current number was eagerly seized and avidly read. The banal England, sick of Byronic melancholy, bemused with revolutionary *dementia*, caught at it, laughed over Mr. Pickwick in the open, revelled in Sam Weller; and, scanning the sunshine, and sniffing the keen, fresh air, men felt that life was worth living after all!

CHAPTER II

THE RESURRECTION OF THE NOVEL

II

THE RESURRECTION OF THE NOVEL

"And then his never failing good humour, and amiability! "He was ever ready with a pleasant jest. It was a delightful "thing to watch in that marvellously expressive face, as I "often did, 'the kindly engendure' of one of his lively conceits. "He would 'rally' a friend in the pleasantest, most waggish "fashion, taking stock of some little failing or peculiarity, but "with a delightful and airily light touch. . . . . First, the "sparkling, ever-searching eyes began to rove about and "twinkle; some humorous quip was occurring to him. Then "you saw it descending to his deeply-furrowed cheeks, where "all the muscles, the very 'cordage of his face' (as was said "of, or by, Macklin) seemed to quiver, to relax and light up "with internal enjoyment. Then it passed still farther down- "wards, stole under his rather grizzled moustaches when the "muscles round the mouth set to work in their turn; and "finally, thus heralded, came the quip itself in a burst of "joyous laughter! Delightful being! He enjoyed the "detection of any little equalities. Indeed:

'A merrier man
Within the limits of becoming mirth,
I never spent an hour's talk withal.
His eye begets occasion for his tongue;
For every object that the one doth catch,
The other turns to a mirth-moving jest!'

"Here the bard has assuredly drawn his portrait."

PERCY FITZGERALD.*

§ 1.

PERIODS of great literature do not necessarily coincide with the reigns of prominent rulers. The term Victorian, like that of Elizabethan, Augustan, and Periclean, becomes a mere term of chronological convenience rather than a term of connotative significance or limitation in literature. The influence of the reigning monarch is for all practical pur-

* The Bookman, Dickens Number., Hodder & Stoughton.

poses generally *nil*; unless it be that the accession of Queen Victoria, in the purity and bloom of her adolescence, may be said to be symbolic or significant of the rise of that purism and the movement of that humanity which constituted the reaction from both eighteenth-century coarseness and indelicacy and its Caroline culmination. The year 1837, however, may be brought to the literary memory and association by the mention of a few great names which carry over the formal dignity of the early Hanoverian into the quickening spirit of the Victorian literature. That year saw Landor, De Quincey, Leigh Hunt, Isaac D'Israeli, Hallam, Southey, Wordsworth, and some others of light and leading well in the public gaze. Landor and De Quincey were amongst those of pre-eminent rank. Of the young Queen's first Poets Laureate, Southey closed his literary energies in her first year with the final edition of his poems; and the year 1843 saw Wordsworth wearing his laurels as a veteran, symbolising in his personality and his humanities that return to nature and the common life which contrasts so strongly with Pope's previous reign of artificiality and formalism. The year of accession also gave us Lockhart's *Life of Scott* and Landor's *Pentameron*, the great romancist dying the previous year. His death was followed by Thackeray's established position in literature, and soon there appeared *Titmarsh* and the *Yellow Plush Papers*. It was this year which also saw Carlyle's *French Revolution*; Dickens's *Pickwick Papers*; Browning's *Strafford*; and Macaulay's *Essay on Bacon*. In this year, also, Swinburne was born, and Meredith was already emerging. The time was big with coming men who reflected the restless revolutionary spirit. Carlyle was forty-two. But for the vagaries of tragic chance Byron would have been forty-nine, and Shelley would have seen Keats face to face in their forties. Both had been dead some twenty years.

These data of the literary phase indicate the impossibility

of any clean-cut severance of its historic unfolding. The field was curiously clearing for the rise of the young generation, and the new spirit had already been signalled by Cowper, Gray, Blake, and Chatterton in poetry, by Charlotte Smith, Richard Cumberland, Maria Edgeworth, Fanny Burney, and Jane Austen in fiction. Hazlitt had been dead seven years. His criticism of the old novelists, like Scott's, was marked by enthusiastic recognition of the birth of the new spirit which had been handed down from Richardson.

I briefly adverted in the last chapter to Shakespeare as the oracular centre of the characteristic English Spirit. To him, and to the Elizabethan period generally, must be referred all that which vitally persists in the modern, and all that which shows unmistakable promise of survival and permanence over what is weak and decadent. In Shakespeare the Man, as well as in his incomparable delineations of English character, we get always those outstanding traits which appeal to us with dramatic force as part of our own kinship and race-nature. What springs at once to the mind in the present war-period is the invincible spirit of Henry V. and Agincourt—the spirit of patriotism which was the inalienable birthright of every true-born Englishman who met and repulsed the Armada, even as he has been repelling the enemy in poor befouled France.

Again, if genius be the art of taking infinite pains and devoting infinite industry and thrifty purpose to personal advancement, then Shakespeare, the man, certainly reflects it. Ben Jonson testifies to his being "indeed honest and "of an open and free nature." Through him we know also that he embodied in his heart of hearts all that partakes of the mood and attitude towards life, which is of the gentleman, gentle and generous,—

> "*This figure that thou here seest put.*
> *It was for gentle Shakespeare cut.*"

That he was temperate and self-restrained we know, too, from Beeston the actor: "The more to be admired that he "was not a company-man: would not be debauched; and "if invited to, writ: he was in paine." Beyond all, he was English in being a competent man of affairs; and in all that he strove for and accomplished in his dramas, he loved to depict his heroes in their relation to the practical tasks and achievements of life. We marvel at the wit and intellectual subtlety of Richard III. and the exquisite villainy of Iago, but the irony of each of their careers showed that the great dramatist of life valued something beyond this. The whole Shakespearean world of tragedy reflects discourse upon a single specific English trait—the square facing of affairs and the business of life with energy, will, purpose, and in the practical spirit. Here are many pictures of the tragedy of failure and the pathos of incompetence. We frequently witness the fall of robust, intellectual, or artistic souls through lack of this quality. Macbeth's valour and soldier-like characteristics are quelled into inaction and impotence by a swollen ambition and a quailing fear which debilitate the will to achieve. The artistic and high-souled nature of Hamlet tends inwards to a tragic centre of introspection. In *Julius Cæsar* Mark Antony looked outwards in all honour and unselfish aspiration; but he fell short of that practical insight into human motives, which safeguards honourable ambition and sure attainment. The Shakespearean plays of English history develop the same theme. While Henry VI. presents a picture of the pathetic in impotent saintliness, Henry IV. achieves in a spirit of honourable adhesion to the dictates of duty and civic service. And the Shakespearean women are the remarkable counterpart in femininity of this masculine English topic. Portia and Lady Macbeth exhibit the same energy of practical purpose, but to what a different end! The power of practical insight is an inherent part of Shakespeare's

women, combined as it is with womanly graces and virtues. This is well seen in Rosalind, Imogen, Miranda, Beatrice, and Viola. And as in all the tragedies and histories there lie implicit the lessons of honour, sympathy, generosity, and service, so in Shakespeare's women are embodied the direct human expression of the same English graces and virtues. Their part is to point, like Othello's wife, to the masculine qualities. They therefore have no place in their hearts for the *dilettante*, the luxurious, the idle, the self-seeking. In all their loves there is seen the frank worship of the heroic and the strong. In all their gaieties and their humour there is revealed an emphasis of admiration for masculine qualities that are distinctly English. What is *Love's Labour Lost* but this? As Professor Dowden says: "It is a dramatic "plea on behalf of nature and commonsense, against all "that is unreal and unaffected. It maintains, in a gay and "witty fashion, the superiority of life as a means of "education over books . . . . and, while maintaining this, "it also asserts that we must not educate ourselves only "by the mirthful and the pleasant in the world, but we "must recognise sorrow, and that we cannot be rightly "glad without being grave and earnest." I think this at once strikes the dominant note of Charles Dickens's labours.

Finally, there are broad features of Shakespeare's English genius which impress us as distinctive of his period, while they are emphatically national. They convey, with a sense of distance, their Sphinx-like integrity. But they are separated from us by a depression of subsequent literary developments. Nevertheless, their outstanding contours and qualities are now never lost to sight. In these features of the Elizabethan we recognise the lineaments of the Modern, notwithstanding that the two are almost isolated in their apartness. There is an interregnum of the transcendental, the romantic, the *bizarre*. The realism of Shakespeare as the superlative and practical Englishman is

here held in solution by the super-imaginative. But looking back to him we see the whole towering, complex machinery of human passion, the moving spectacle of its phantasmagoria, its imminent art-purposes, and its external art-forms, precisely as they reappear in the best modern poetry, drama, and fiction. There is the same inexhaustable interplay of the outer and inner life of the soul; the same revelation of the springs of human action and moral order; the same varied portraiture of realistic English character; the same surface-ripple of humour, of mirth and satire; the same sense of haunting sin and evil; the same conception of artistic as well as æsthetic and ethical proportion in life; the same elasticity and range of human experience, with the malign or ironic adjustment and correction of human inequalities; the same hold upon our sympathy and our sense of poetic justice; the same revelation, in fine, of that profound force in life which tends to equilibrium in the moral world, which resists all departure from the normal, and metes out retributive punishments to all violations of ethical proportion. It is strange that these outstanding qualities of the Elizabethan age should have slowly suffered decline. To track fully their subsidence and reappearance in the strata of literary layers would take me too far from my present task. But in linking up Dickens with the primitive robust realism and humanities it seems useful and pertinent sketchily to amplify here the points of the last chapter.

§ 2.

In my endeavour there to ring out the specific English note in literature, or rather in fiction, we compulsorily confined our quest to eighteenth-century novels. There in the mid-stage of grossness and slag, we discovered the seeds of a germinating humanism. To trace fully its reinforcing influence down to the modern novel, and to show in detail its emergence in ethical purpose, would unduly inflate the

present chapter. Richardson, Fielding, Smollett, and the eighteenth-century school had, we found, well caught its English spirit. Richardson alone had struck a new ethical note in its presentment. Comparison with the French school would, perhaps, the better bring out the dominant features of our own. A similar development of moral tone was there discernible. We had absorbed into the coarse congruities of that time fiction like Le Sage's *Gil Blas* and *Le Diable Boiteux*.

Such as these had already passed into the currents of English fiction of the comic and adventurous school of Fielding. What Richardson did for England by the creation of *Clarissa Harlowe*, Marivaux and Madame La Fayette did for France. In fact, it is probable that the former's *Marianne* inspired Richardson's *Pamela*, and was equally distinguished and marked off by its attempt at analysis of character to a set moral purpose and effect. The introduction of the French novel into the vogue of English fiction at this period, coupled with the spread of Oriental tales (some with a "moral" adornment, some with a sensuous colour), all contributed to the rank growth of a vitality and variation after Richardson's time.

The stimulating marvels of Horace Walpole, Mrs. Radcliffe, and Clara Reeve, of the supernatural school, continued to vie with the school of Fielding, which had somewhat sobered down in Richard Cumberland's *Henry*. But while this was intended to exhibit, like Richardson's stories, "virtue triumphant over the most tempting allurements," it was over-tinged with Fielding's licence and indelicacy. Cumberland's plays, however, redeemed this quality and distinctly ranged on the side of the school of "ethical "purpose." They were written in view of the stage as a medium of moral improvement. They had faults, but according to Dr. Vincent, the contemporary Dean of Westminster, "they were not the faults of grossness." The

extremes of treatment in these primitive and contrasting schools of fiction—the moral, the romantic, and the comic—toned down in the taste for the moving historical romance and the pure domestic tale.

Oliver Goldsmith and Jane Austen may be regarded as the legitimate successors of Richardson, as Scott, Lytton, and Ainsworth fixed in all its dignity and entrancing interest the historical romance. But in Goldsmith and Miss Austen fiction clearly recurred to its original domestic tone as initiated by Richardson. And in so doing it established once and for all that outlook on humanity which has passed on to the present time. The *Vicar of Wakefield* at once recalls the picture of rural domesticity in all its pristine simplicity and *naïve* chasteness; while Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion* present superb canvasses of delicate outline and delicious faithfulness to the homely yet common-place refinements of middle and upper-class life, with their broken threads, their pathetic failures, their quiet virtues, their petty strifes. We have Scott's opinion that they were in their way perfect; rendered in exquisite form and in a medium of delicately involuted feeling, with a lightsome but pungent ridicule. To such pictures the Brontës superadded colour and boldness, with dashes of tragic awe; Thackeray injected a choicer satire; and finally Dickens brought a luxuriant humour and a more tender insight.

Thus the modern critical development of the novel ran, with its correlative critical taste. Thus emerged for good and all the convention that the English Home was henceforth to become the seat and centre of the human comedy and tragedy; the common heart its chief object of sympathetic questioning and ministry. But up to the time of Jane Austen there was not to appear that extension of the humanising spirit into the larger realm of social affairs and social reconstruction. Man the Individual was not yet

discovered as Man the Community. It was left to George Eliot to strike this English note into its full-toned harmony and common chord. And here the "ethical purpose" of the novel not merely became suffused with her working philosophy of Meliorism, but it was applied with all its expanding force, and her own tender sympathy and polished art, to the common people as well as to the superior person. And with George Eliot comes Charles Dickens to a still lower plane of the common life of the people.

The most immediate, and, perhaps, the most important, result of the impact of Dickens upon the literature, the thought, and the journalism of his day, was to shock some of them into a yet deeper sense of reality: into a recognition of the real issues, the dangers and wonders of an age that was then unfolding itself before them—an age that was to some extent to prove the most adventurous and remarkable we had achieved, and to include, both from an industrial and a social point of view, triumphs which, despite exaggeration and undiscerning praise, must still take rank as among the most stupendous that our history has to record.

§ 3.

What was it that influenced Dickens to penetrate to a more profound sense of sympathy and a greater breadth of humanity than his precursors? We know that he not merely brought his natural powers and his native genius to bear upon the common people, but their very dregs—their maimed, their stricken, their demented, their criminal—all were swept within the range of his sympathetic spirit and became the prime materials of his creative art. What was it, then, that impelled him to go further than his literary predecessors, whom in some respects he was like, and in others so utterly unlike? Born in 1812, twenty-five years before the accession of Queen Victoria to the throne, he lived through exceedingly stressful and strenuous times.

Knowledge was beginning to be literally poured out upon an energetic and responsive people, palpitating with the eager life of an era of expansion, buoyant with hope and vigorous with visions of a Golden Age. Nowhere is this quickening movement better reflected than in Tennyson's *Locksley Hall*. New views and vistas of Nature and human nature were being opened forth and man's new place in the universe and in national life was becoming realised. Formerly a veil of imagery, mystery, and romanticism had screened the outlook. But the phenomenon of life was yielding new problems and new ideals to a people vigorously energising with the stimulating spirit of inquiry and confidence. The Darwins, Wallaces, Huxleys, and Lyells of science were in an ecstasy of new speculations. In economics, the Benthams and the Mills were expounding new and startling views of liberty and right. The Ruskins and Morrises of the time were humanising and democratising Art, and, with Carlyle, were developing a new *morale*. History was passing out of the toy box and puppet stage into the scientific, bringing broad and beneficent perspectives of human progress in a matrix of law and orderly sequence. Poetry was passing out of the pedagogic and *dilettante* stages into the completely humanist. Religion was beginning to see the true purity and saintliness of cherishing things in proportion to their practical proximity to life rather than their transcendental remoteness. The search for beauty and holiness and reverence was deflected more to the common and the mundane. The sanctities and sanctions of the supernatural were tending to be held in solution. The early Victorian period was one of scientific enquiry and scepticism; and the poems of Tennyson became its faithful reflection.

In all these literary, philosophical, artistic, and economic activities, the factor of social rivalries or competitions, the general clash of judgments, and the reverberations of

thought-conflicts, all became deflected to that plane of human interests which we call Politics. And the clamour for adjustments, emerging from this underlying surge of antagonisms, was tinctured with sub-angers and bitterness; surcharged with self-regarding urgencies to subserve survival in a world of class-conscious strife. In it all Dickens saw Society as a reservoir of seething resentments; with a floating scum of the idle and luxuriant, and a sunken residuum of the failures, the work-worn, the broken, the vicious, and the diseased. He saw unerringly our futile social state with its wrongs, its fatuous attempts to promote even decent and orderly compromises of right, justice, and freedom. And, like many great souls before him in the history of humanity, he had visions of *another way*, and gave himself to a new task—the establishment of peace instead of strife, of beauty instead of ugliness, of insight and good will in the place of error and self-seeking. His revelation came to him by no transcendental or supernormal medium. It came to him in the simple everyday World of the Commonplace. There was for him a plane of human interest and effort in which we were all one and homogeneous. There was one solitary vantage-ground and view-point from which all gazed longingly with the same eyes upon the same Promised Land. Despite class pride and the play of petty vanities of caste, despite the patronising pose of the power-holding classes and the corresponding menace and resentment of the lower orders, there was a common average and level of human nature sufficiently sensitive and responsive to a single direct appeal. Beneath the trappings, the millinery, and the cant of class, beneath the grossness and even the vicious qualities of the "under-dog," there was for Dickens the common human nature of the Ordinary Man. He saw this, and determined to appeal to it. He saw that beneath the common clay of our poor earthenware lay immanent the Common Soul. In

its central place beats the common heart. The arena of its drama and comedy is the Commonplace. Into this temple of being he forced an entry. His precursors had but reached to its outer walls, or at most stepped into its portico. Once within he became the High Priest of the Common People. None had realised the enormous range of new material for romance. Hazlitt had himself bemoaned but a decade or so before the exhaustion of the sources for storybuilding.* Dickens at once had a vision of a new life to unfold. He became the Romancist of the Commonplace. It was in this that he differed so markedly from his predecessors in fiction. With resemblances which were sufficient to place him in a category of writers whose ethical purpose was clear, how utterly unlike were his methods and special genius!

This difference was one which was inevitably derived from the momentous upheavals and bewildering happenings of his period. Some similiarity there is, perhaps, with the state of tension of our own time, and with our state of heart. This tension was then precipitating new and startling changes of outlook at the very heart of life. America had achieved her independence, and the warring and jarring elements of her life were fast focussing around the higher conceptions of a democratic order that was reflected in the magnificent symmetry, artistry and the logical integrity of the idealisms of de Toqueville. The perturbations of the Napoleonic Wars were hurrying to their climax at Waterloo about the time when Dickens emerged from the womb of time. The motley and ragged remnants of the morals, the manners, and the crude intellect of the Hanoverians achieved their replica and reflection in the doddering figure of George III.

* "Have we no materials for romance in England? Must we look "to Scotland for a supply of whatever is original and striking in "this kind? And we answer 'Yes.' Every foot of soil is with us "worked up . . . ." *Spirit of the Age* on Sir Walter Scott.

and the weak, luxurious inanities of the Prince Regent. There was no strong and coherent lead possible from above; and the peace of Waterloo brought little relief from the stress and disturbance of war-rigours and their aftermath. The landed interest came out on top. Their monopolies had drained the people dry through inflated prices and the swollen gains of the agricultural class. The subsequent stresses of many vexed questions of food, suffrage, the Irish time-honoured troubles, Popery, labour, Colonial slavery, poor law and efforts for municipal reform—all these accentuated the perturbations of the time. The paroxysms of the struggle with France, the war with America, trouble with Canada, China, Afganistan, Spain, South Africa, the Crimea, the Indian Mutiny—all tended, about Dickens's period, to transform the country into a maëlstrom of tumultuous antagonisms and sentiments, which swirled and eddied around the rocky prominences of the political and social arena. The violent and alarming nature of domestic troubles culminated intermittently in riots and disorders, the magnitude of which attained the intensity of "Peterloo," or the Manchester Massacre. This disordered state of affairs passed on from the bloody continental phases of the Napoleonic Wars to the disturbances of 1848, which did not fail to move sympathetically our own islands. In fine, the retrospect alone was, for Dickens in his early manhood, an outlook on a veritable Valley of Armageddon. And his whole career was largely punctuated, either with some of the actual disturbances we have named or their aftermath. The result was that his atmosphere was surcharged with war-lore and the war-spirit. From his childhood at the great naval depôt at Chatham he became familiarised with stirring stories of British exploits by sea and land. It was clearly a time when the whole Western world was passing through the penumbra of a life of stress and rivalries. In varying degrees of intensity our own islands were affected

both in their home and national relationships. It was an age of progress and self-realisation. All were more or less affected by the pangs of rebirth. While yet a lad, Charles himself experienced the rigours of family poverty, probably as part and lot of the greater perturbations of his time. When he was only 18 years old he witnessed the reflection of the national strifes in the House, as Parliamentary Reporter for the Press. Through literature he waded knee-deep in the revolutionary themes of the Carlyles, the Mazzinis, the Landors, and the Shelleys. The anti-militarist spirit, however, always possessed him. And the revolutionary spirit assumed within him phases of the social and the personal, rather than the political or philosophical. He ministered rather to the pacific and humanitarian instincts of the common people. The stunted and indifferent populations of the abyss he studied first-hand, and came to know them well. With the struggling middle and lower-middle classes he was always in full sympathy. Even from the aristocratic Sir Leicester Dedlocks and the plutocratic Dombeys he could not withhold his tender solicitation. They represented, generally, purblind types, susceptible to probationary processes of the personal life leading to moral awakening. He represented them thus in his books. His satires upon the Barnacles, the Foodles and Boodles of his day were intended as pungent and purging courses stealthily motived by the same humanitarian principles. And the irridescent flame of his humour warmed and chastened the common heart of man for self-examination and a deeper knowledge of the realities of human character. All this could not fail to raise both the individual and the communal life of the period to a higher level of feeling, sympathy, and conduct. In this quickening atmosphere we may watch the urge of the spirit of Charles Dickens, and the final emergence of the novel, arrayed in its new raiment and endowed with its new ministry.

CHAPTER III.

THE EXALTATION OF THE FORLORN

III

THE EXALTATION OF THE FORLORN

". . . . Sam Weller introduces the more serious tone of "Pickwick. He introduces something which it was the chief "business of Dickens to preach throughout his life—something "which he never preached so well as when he preached it "unconsciously. Sam Weller introduces the English people. "Sam Weller is the great symbol in English literature of the "populace peculiar to England. His incessant stream of sane "nonsense is a wonderful achievement of Dickens; but it is "no great falsification of the incessant stream of sane nonsense "as it really exists amongst the English poor. The English "poor live in one atmosphere of humour, they think in "humour."

G. K. CHESTERTON.*

"They" (the poor) "were not his clients, whose cause he "pleaded with such pathos and humour and on whose side he "got the laughter and the tears of all the world, but in sort "his very self."

FORSTER'S *Life of Dickens.*

§ 1.

SO far as the literary personalities of the pre-Dickens era are concerned, the promise and the peril of the Victorian period had not completely revealed itself to them. It seemed largely "a legend emptied of concern." They were as much detached and removed from the coming activities of the time as if they had been analytical chemists, absorbed in the laboratory, or for the matter of that, stockbrokers obsessed with the rise and fall of the markets, and oblivious, or almost oblivious, of the events of the day. Literature was as yet largely formal and classic, a technical art, and above all a genteel occupation, whose practitioners could hardly be expected to concern themselves with the ordinary

* *Criticisms and Appreciations of Dickens.* (Dent.)

sublunary affairs of life. "I have the greatest respect for "religion," said the courtly Lord Melbourne (who typifies many of the limitations of the period), "and especially for "the Established Church, but when it comes to applying "its teachings to every day, why, damme, I say it's going "too far!" And of the age of which I am writing this held good, not only of religion, but of literature. In its best phases, it was more concerned with the idealisms of life than with the commonplace affairs of this world.

Dickens has himself left for us an irresistable cameo depicting this attitude towards the universe :—*

"Have you breakfasted this morning, Mr. Jack?" said the Doctor.

"I hardly ever take breakfast, sir," he replied, his head thrown back in an easy chair. "I find it bores "me."

"Is there any news to-day?" inquired the Doctor.

"Nothing at all, sir," replied Mr. Maldon. "There's "an account about the people being hungry and dis-"contented down in the North, but they are always "being hungry and discontented somewhere."

The doctor looked grave, and said, as though he wished to change the subject, "Then there's no news "at all; and no news, they say, is good news."

"There's a long statement in the paper, sir, about a "murder," observed Mr. Maldon. "But somebody is "always being murdered, and I didn't read it."

"A display of indifference," Dickens goes on to say, "to all the actions and passions of mankind was not "supposed to be such a distinguished quality at that "time, I think, as I have observed it to be considered "since. I have known it very fashionable indeed. I

* The speaker is dear old Doctor Strong of *David Copperfield*—one of the few schoolmasters, by the way, whom Dickens depicts sympathetically.

"have seen it displayed with such success, that I have "encountered some fine ladies and gentlemen who "might as well have been born caterpillars. Perhaps "it impressed me the more then, because it was new to "me, but it certainly did not tend to exalt my opinion "of or to strengthen my confidence in Mr. Jack "Maldon."

The average *littérateur* of the period would have been startled had he been asked to describe a workman's dinner, or to sketch the daily life of a miner. He would almost certainly have known his Horace and his Euripides, and would have shrunk from a false quantity with the same fastidious horror that he displayed on entering a low neighbourhood. But there is really little difference between the young boor depicted for us in Copperfield and the literary man of the day. He was an ænemic scholar, who knew indeed, "the glory that was Greece, and the grandeur that was Rome," but he was indifferent to the spirit of his own country and his own age.* The effect of this attitude of carefully calculated ignorance and indifference was jealously, preserved as though it had been a rare quality, rather than a cardinal blemish. One of the most acute observers of the Nineteenth Century has left us his impression. "The reason "why so few good books are written," said Walter Bagehot, "is that so few people that can write know any-"thing. In general an author has always lived in a room, "has read books, has cultivated science, is acquainted with "the style and sentiments of the best authors, but he is out

* In Dickens's day the old classical, pedagogic, and antiquarian spirit in literature found at least one powerful critic in Henry Thomas Buckle, for which the reader may refer to his *History of Civilisation*. George Eliot's essay on Young's *Night Thoughts* also compares the classical attitude of mind with that of the scientific and humanist. Huxley's *Essays* everywhere express this new nineteenth-century temper in its cultural and educational aspects, *e.g.*, "A Liberal Education, and Where to Find It."

"of the way of employing his own eyes and ears. He has "nothing to hear and nothing to see. His life is a "vacuum." And he instances Southey, to exemplify this deficiency:—

> "The mental habits of Robert Southey, which were "so extensively praised in the public journals, are the "type of literary existence, just as the praise bestowed "on them shows the admiration excited by them among "literary people. He wrote poetry (as if anybody could) "before breakfast. He wrote history until dinner; he "corrected proof-sheets between dinner and tea; he "wrote an essay for the 'Quarterly' afterwards; and, "after supper, by way of relaxation, composed the "'Doctor'—a lengthy and elaborate jest . . . Southey "had no events, no experiences. His wife kept house "and allowed him pocket-money, just as if he had been "a German Professor devoted to accounts, tobacco, "and the date of Horace's amours."*

Little, indeed, was left to high literature, or rather to many of the literary men of the day, but a fastidious conservatism that recoiled from all the live issues which swayed men's minds, or engaged the thoughts of their generation. When we come to consider the enormous influence and the tremendous incentive that literature was soon to give to the aspirations, hopes, and aims of the coming generation, we shall begin to realise the immensity of the service that, in those early days of his career, Dickens rendered to civilisation. I may, indeed, be pardoned if I stay for a moment to quote from Thomas Carlyle his description of "The Hero as Man of Letters," and invite the reader to contrast it with the actuality as presented to us by Bagehot:—

* Southey, it may be remembered, was the critic who endeavoured to dissuade Charlotte Brontë from writing, on the ground that literature was not a fit calling for a woman!

"... Since it is the spiritual always that deter-
"mines the material, this Same Man of Letters Hero
"must be regarded as our most important modern
"person. He, such as he may be, is the soul of all.
"What he teaches, the whole world will do or make.
"... He that can write a true book, to persuade
"England, is not he the Bishops, the Archbishops, the
"Primate of England and of all England? .... he
"who sings, or says, or, in any way, brings home to
"our heart the noble feelings, doings, darings, and
"endurances of a brother man; he has verily
"touched our hearts with a live coal *from the altar.*
"... Literature is our Parliament, too. Who-
"ever can speak, speaking now to the whole nation,
"becomes a power, a branch of Government, with
"inalienable weight in law-making, in all acts of
"authority."

This, it is important to note, appeared after the influence of Dickens had regalvanised the literature of the day. He was himself saved from the pose, as from the indifference, that I have described, not merely by the robust common sense which characterised his outlook on life: not only by the ardour of his genius, but by that avidity for experience, that hunger for colour, which characterised him as a man, and which would have made the life of the poet Southey for ever impossible to one of his restless and almost tumultuous temperament. Perpetually he craved for new environment to stimulate his imagination; and much of his finest work, with its meticulous elaboration and extra-ordinary wealth of detail, becomes almost a self-torment to him. "Wild ideas are upon me," he wrote to Forster, "of going to Paris, Rouen, Switzerland, and writing the "remaining two-thirds of the next number, aloft in some "queer inn-room." Assuredly, Southey's life would not have suited Dickens, the pugnacious Editor of *Household*

Words, the militant and most successful reformer, who became, as the late Lord James of Hereford well said, "One of the best public servants England ever had"* and who throughout his life was one of the most active men of his day.

§ 2.

But over and above his genius and his temperament, Dickens was saved from the pose of superiority to life by a factor almost as potent—by his education. There has been so much that is false and misleading written and said of the novelist's early upbringing, and still more of the particularly severe but very favourable training that he received for the art he practised, that it is well I should touch upon this point. Dickens notwithstanding, there is unfortunately still left in England too much of that particular kind of snobbery which reveres education of the classis or the *beau monde* type. It is of that disdainful temper which will still discounts a man even of such originality and force as Dickens.† It condescends to admit with a shrug that his conclusions are those of a man gifted and clever indeed; but, after all, he is but one of the

* The tribute that Mr. Percy Fitzgerald adds in his admirable *Life of Charles Dickens* is so apposite that I cannot forebear from quoting it: "Not all the talkers in or out of Parliament—the "agitators, faddists and reformers, professionals or other—have "ever produced such results as he did by a story—a single stroke. "It was instantaneous. He wrote, and down toppled the monstrous "Juggernaut. He extended his reforms to persons. Was an "eccentric Judge a great hardship to suitors? Dickens brings him "on in *Bardell v. Pickwick*, and he has to retire. So with Lang, "the tyrannical magistrate, who had to vanish also, and so with "others."

† This note of absurd detraction is very evident in the generally admirable *Literature of the Victorian Era* by Professor Walker, where it is not obscurely hinted that Dickens was "no gentleman" because he earned money by giving readings.

'oi polloi, who had not experienced the "cultured" influence of the Varsity and could not, therefore, appreciate the finer side of things. I heard this view expressed lately from the lips of a man of some reputation, who held that Thackeray must, of course, have been a greater writer than "Boz," because he had received the inestimable blessing of an academic education. Much the same folly haunts the vulgar minds of those who cannot conceive that Shakespeare, "a village lout, and an actor person," wrote *Hamlet;* but who find it quite easy to believe that Francis Bacon (Lord Verulam) had little difficulty in turning out that, and other plays, in between his other literary, legal, and political pursuits. On the essential absurdity of this view I need not dwell. Men of genius will always educate themselves.* Peter the Great founded an Empire when he could barely spell. Arkwright, the inventor of the spinning-jenny, taught himself his letters at forty, after he had made a fortune and revolutionised an industry. The man who observes and remembers is the man whom we must call educated, if the word is to have any real value or significance at all. "Depend upon it, sir," said Dr. Johnson, one of the few scholars who was also a realist, "some men will "see more in the coach to Hampstead than others will "notice on the Grand Tour of Europe."

So much is obvious and does not need labouring. But when we come to consider the question of Dickens and his education, we are driven to the conclusion that, so far from being hampered by deficiencies of education, he enjoyed—or perhaps I should say, suffered—one of extraordinary rigour indeed, but of unequalled value, that left him peculiarly fitted for the work that he was to take in hand.

* Dryden remarked of Shakespeare: "When he describes any-"thing, you more than see it, you feel it too. Those who accuse "him to have wanted learning, give him the greater commendation; "he was naturally learned, he needed not the spectacles of books "to read Nature; he looked inwards and found her there."

Mr. G. K. Chesterton has lent the weight of his authority to the view that Dickens had no proper kind of education at all; and, as we have seen, Mr. Shaw thinks his culture inferior to that of a cave-man. But what are the facts? They are well worth noting if we are to understand, and adequately to appraise, the effect of his personality on literature. The first glimpse we have of Dickens in his boyhood—indeed, the only authentic glimpse at first hand—is that given us by his old nurse at Chatham, who described him as a child, poring for hours over books.* He had learnt to read almost instinctively, one gathers, under the loving tuition of his mother and aunt. He left the volumes that he revelled in,† Fielding, Goldsmith, *The Arabian Nights*, Defoe, and Shakespeare—only to re-enact their favourite scenes with his sister, Fanny. At Chatham, where he later went to the school of the Reverend Mr. Giles, he stayed long enough to be remembered years after as "The Inimitable." From there he repaired, of course, to London and Bayham Street. In those days (clouded but brief) as in the briefer period of the Marshalsea and the blacking warehouse, his education was, we know, suspended. But it was renewed a little later at Wellington House Academy in the Camden Road, where young Dickens took a prize for Latin, and learnt his Horace and Virgil. He was assisted in acquiring the rudiments of that language by his mother. At fifteen, Dickens was

* Langton's *Childhood and Youth of Charles Dickens.*

† It is perhaps worth pointing out that Fielding, the god of Dickens's literary idolatry, was himself a close friend of the great Hogarth, an artist whom Dickens intensely appreciated. It is not very difficult to find qualities of strong resemblance between the creator of *Oliver Twist* and *Barnaby Rudge* and the great moralist and satirist, who painted for us the *March to Finchley*,—some of the scenes of which, it has always seemed to me, might have been drawn by "Boz" himself.

employed by day at Ellis and Blackmore's the solicitors, while in his evenings he succeeded in getting small parts to act at some of the local theatres. It may be said that he was over-young for legal work. But the training of a lawyer's office demands of an articled clerk a fee of about £200. We may doubt if many of the youths who undergo its rigours could carry so much away from the ordeal as did young Dickens. A year or so later he was reading assiduously at the British Museum in the morning, and taking shorthand notes of the leading speakers in Parliament, or at the Bar, during the afternoon and at night—an experience, by the way, that imbued him with a lively contempt, that lasted all his life, for both institutions. Granted that at twenty-four, when he ceased to be a reporter, his powers and his physique had been severely overtaxed, one may doubt whether he could have served an apprenticeship to literature and to life so varied, so absorbing, or, if I may use the word, so intensive. Supposing that he had been born with the same genius and natural endowments, and had been sent, first, to a gentlemanly public school, and, secondly, to Oxford, the question *does* arise whether he would so soon have startled the world with Pickwick and the Marchioness, Buzfuz, and Squeers. Would Dick Swiveller, or Sikes, or Fagin, have made their appearance so soon, or, indeed, at all? Would the academic honours that he would have won at the Varsity—where, as Macaulay put it, "so many Senior "Wranglers live on to become juniors in life"—would they have been quite an adequate compensation for the astonishing range of observation, the extraordinary knowledge of men, the intimate acquaintance with the lives of the people that his real training gave him? Which, I wonder, should we have talked to first: the young Mr. Dickens who had seen, known, and done all these things, or the young Mr. Dickens, just down from Oxford,

and who, we may take it, would know the classics rather better than life?

§ 3.

Here I should like to mention that it seems to me that one very important by-product of Dickens's early youth and upbringing, or rather its effect upon the novel, has scarcely been adequately noticed. That he wrote of London with an intimacy and a freshness which neither novelist nor poet had till then attempted has often been said. But perhaps we do not realise how profoundly this re-acted on the life and consciousness of the City. *Dickens discovered London*; and we may take it that the many novelists who later learnt to draw their inspiration from its ever-changing scenes and varying moods, its mean streets and simple homes (notably Walter Besant and Arthur Morrison), were writing directly under his influence. It is an influence apparent on every one of their pages. The movement of the 'eighties and 'nineties, whose force now is spent, which aimed at a nobler City, freed from slums, and beautified in its exterior, with wider streets, nobler parks, fresh air and free sunshine, owned nearly all its vitality to the novelists. Writing of its life in the shadows they quickened our sympathy with the men and women whom London consumed. And such writers derived their inspiration from the man who learnt to love its unlovely streets while yet a boy, and who led us through them later with his magic pen. For Dickens not merely depicted London; he absorbed it. So impregnated was he with both its psychology and the vision of its external features that it saturates us with every book of his that we read. He carried it always about with him. It was ingrained in his whole nature. We recall that when approaching Rome on his tour in Italy he could but liken the panoramic presentment of the Eternal City, with its own prominent dome, to nothing rather than

London—heresy, as he thought the comparison was.*

The dominant sense of the City with its pulsing life, and the vigour of its human will in ever-energising movement, was with Dickens as it was with Browning. To both it is "life's first native source"—the very place for a dramatic poet or novelist to have lived in. A tangle of life's myriad threads, a plexus and organism of bonded lives, it is at once graphic and incomprehensible, legible and mysterious, oracular and obscure, capricious and cyclical, prankish and reflective, complex and tumultuous, yet vastly arrayed and ordered; rapid as Niagara, "made up of the intensest "life!" No wonder that both Browning and Dickens were uncompromising realists. Both embody the *bizarre* qualities of its teeming streets and peoples as the very warp and woof of their writings. Each—

"*Walked and tapped the pavement with his cane,*
Scenting the world, looking it full in the face."

If the passionate nature of Italy fused and coalesced in Browning with the energising thought and humanity of London, so did southern sensitiveness and ardour blend in Dickens with the Londonesque. Both penetrated to the soul-life of the humblest and vilest, as well as of the greatest and the sublimest of individuals. Both saw them vividly in all the intimacies of their walled-in environment of mean and magnificent streets. Both saw the place of failure in their lives, the need and use of cheerful hope and ambition, the proper balance of good and evil in the destiny of souls.

§ 4.

Reverting to our main theme, one thing, however, is perfectly certain, the Mr. Dickens from the Varsity would never have written either of the poor, or of public questions generally, as did "Boz," for the simple and sufficient reason that such education as the real Dickens escaped is

* *Italian Sketches.*

essentially based on class-ignorance and class-prejudice; and we may say with certainty that to the same extent to which it had impressed his mind it would also have warped his power and distorted his vision. If there is one great lesson that Dickens taught us, it is to look for capacity, character, reserve, and energy—in fact, for the essential qualities of our race—in simple, often ungainly and grotesque folks. The Mr. Dickens of the police courts and the solicitor's office, was trained in the habit of looking into the heart of things and getting below appearances. He would probably have distrusted an ultra-well-dressed man. He would have instantly detected, as much by reason of his training, as of his astonishing power of observation, the sort of adventurer to whom the young man from the Varsity so easily falls a victim. I am not suggesting that even an academic education could have made Dickens into a gaby and a dupe. But it might well have left him, not only with exaggerated ideas of the sanctity and sufficiency of Parliament and the Bar and all the big-wigs—things which he saw with his own eyes and satirised mercilessly—but with a false association of ideas, and a false standard of men and classes.

There is no use in burking the fact that our modern education, as in his day, does much to encourage that class-insularity and helplessness, which has become a kind of religion with most men who aspire to be described as "educated." It was said of Dickens that he never drew a gentleman. It might be said with more truth of a great many of his fellow-countrymen that they *never saw through one*. He portrayed more than one educated prig and more than one degenerate type of gentleman-barrister. "A man may "smile and smile and be a villain." How many "educated" people in England really believe that a man can answer to that description, who carries himself well and has a polite bearing? Somebody once asserted that the

complete equipment of a financier consisted in a well-fitting frock coat and a perfect Lincoln and Bennett. Given these, and the qualities of Montague Tigg, and the adventurer could, even in the City of London, conquer, no matter how far-fetched a project he advanced. But let a workman, rough, inarticulate, but with a genuine discovery or invention, essay to open the magic gates of finance, and we can all imagine the incredulity that he would excite. Sir Walter Besant, one of the finest novelists of the Victorian Era, once remarked that England was divided into two classes of men: those who wore clean collars, and those who did not.* This is very largely true. The word "workman" still serves as an invidious description in a community that without constant and unremitting labour would perish in a fortnight. Even the war, the most tremendous catastrophe we have ever experienced, threatening our very destinies as a race, has not by any means obliterated this sense of class-distinction. We all remember how, in the early days of the struggle, special battalions were raised from which people of low birth and rude habits were excluded: and the writer remembers very vividly "an oiled and curled Assyrian bull" explaining to him that he (the bull) could not join the forces in the ordinary way because it would be quite impossible to "know" some of the people with whom one would have to associate. If that feeling is still prevalent to-day, it was paramount during the period of which I write. Class-divisions not merely endured, but they ruled everything. The workman was regarded with something akin to the horror that Caliban inspired in Prospero, and his emergence as a factor in the life of the nation was held in polite society, where novels most did

* Besant and Professor Skeat were the successful competitors in the examination paper on *Pickwick* set by Mr. C. S. Calverley, when a lecturer at Christ's College, Cambridge.

circulate, as a calamity that only disgraceful statesmanship should ever have permitted. It was held to be the bounden duty of every right-minded member of the "lower classes" ever to have on his lips the dutiful prayer:

"God bless the Squire and his relations,
And keep us in our proper stations!"

A favourite topic at the tea-tables of the great was how the "masses" could be kept down, and why they had ever been permitted to emerge from the Cimmerian darkness and obscurity in which it was supposed, in some golden age of the past Fate had immersed them. Their approaching triumph spelt ruin to the nation and ought to have been avoided at all costs. We have only to re-read in *Little Dorrit* the mincing delicacies of depreciation from the lofty Barnacles and "Noble Refrigerators" of the period, to realise this. The mob had to be kept down. There was a certain class of literature which contrived to do its best towards that end by never alluding to anything so vulgar. It was thought inappropriate, indeed, if the fictionist, intent on popularity, drew his characters from anyone but people of rank. For while the middle-classes dreaded the people (whom they had not then learnt to beguile by the "low geniality" and the sophistries of the platform), the aristocracy themselves had not yet discovered the utility of making money out of them. Even the middle-classes were inclined to think, with Sir Leicester Dedlock, that the flood-gates would soon be opened and that an avalanche would threaten society.

It is easy to realise how this temper and outlook reacted on literature. It became narrow, artificial, and devitalised, almost without prestige or influence. It was regarded merely as an escape from the sordid environment and depressing surroundings which the rise of the manufacturing classes and the vast artisan class had brought about. Romance, such as it was, found its expression in stories

of the past—of highwaymen, feudal barons, and imaginary mediæval sovereigns, with vast wealth and vices that were terrifying and tedious. Broadcloth and the greater romance—that of the age and of the day in which the writer himself lived—passed by disregarded and unobserved.

§ 5.

The effect of the triumph of *Pickwick*, followed after short intervals by *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby*, was inevitable and permanent. First, Romance—the Romance of Harrison Ainsworth and G. W. M. Reynolds—was discounted. Realism re-entered into its own storytelling; and from that day onward fiction began to assume an importance and a vitality which it had never before possessed. It is not too much to say that the novel with a purpose dates from the days when the portrayal of Squeers and Dotheboys Hall rendered the horrors of the Yorkshire schools impossible; while the depiction of Fagin, and his school of juvenile criminals, led, as we know, almost immediately to protective legislation for the young. But far more important than these two reforms was the fact that fresh ground had been broken and that a new era of authority had opened for the novelist. From that moment the novel has been a force in English literature; from that moment it has retained its real, didactic, and educational value.

Dickens, himself, it may be recalled, dated its rise from the ascendancy of Shakespeare. In a remarkable speech to the members of the Garrick Club, in celebration of the birth of the Bard, he declared that that occasion also marked the birthday of the English novel. "Every writer of "fiction," he said, "although he may not adopt the "dramatic form, writes in effect for the stage. He may "never write plays, but the truth and passion that are in

"him must be more or less reflected in the great mirror "which he holds up to nature."

If this be true, then assuredly we must date the re-birth of the novel from the entry of Dickens into literature and to his insistent demand for that truth and realism which is the very breath of its nostrils. We may realise the truth of this contention if we read the remarkable preface which Dickens contributed to the second edition of *Oliver Twist*, and which I elsewhere quoted at length.* In that great philippic he insisted that the question which a novelist should and must ask of himself was, "Is it True?" It mattered not, he said, whether the pictures he drew, the characters he dramatised, the themes he illustrated, were distasteful or pleasing; genteel, or touched with horror; harrowing, even, to the soul. There was but one criterion for the novelist, and there was, and must be, no limit to his range, no bound put to his scope by class prejudice and sectional interests. Truth alone must be his lodestar; and in a memorable passage, which became the charter of the novelist henceforth, he declared that, cost him what it might, he would persist in its depiction. We know the effect upon his own fortunes. The young man, unknown and unfriended, who dropped his first contribution into a letter-box in a dark court off Fleet Street and saw his first work in type with tumultuous delight, soon commanded a following such as no other author in England had achieved. And wonderful to relate, this was not long after he had attained his majority.

The first storm of detraction over, when the assaults of the obscurantists of the *Quarterly Review*, who objected to the portrayal of low life, had been successfully repelled, a flood of books—some novels, some sketches, a few semi-

* *The Soul of Dickens.* Ch. III.: "The First of the Realists." (Chapman & Hall.)

historical—made their appearance, all dealing with the tragedies of the poor, with the outcasts of life and of literature, with the grim realities of life. A new epoch was thus opened for literature; the dawn of a new era had arrived. As Mr. Richard Whiteing has well put it: "Willy-"nilly, every writer of fiction who touched the time of "Dickens owes something to his influence. He swung us "round into the sense of our real subject, the uncom-"memorated million, and our real patron that million itself. "He wrote for the average man, and that man in his "multiplex personality surged up to him in gratitude and "admiration like a people acclaiming its chief. The "democratic movement in literature had come to town."

Of these earlier works of Dickens, *Oliver Twist* was, as we have seen, received with a howl of rage and detraction from the aristocratic organs in the Press. Yet it achieved immediate results of an almost sensational character, and left indelible and enduring marks on English literature. It may be said, indeed, that *Oliver Twist* opens a new chapter, not only in literature, but in national thought. It affected profoundly the whole trend of our civilisation in respect of one of its most vital problems. Mr. Bernard Shaw has described Dickens's most interesting and really revolutionary work as commencing with the sombre, almost Rembrandtesque exposure of our industrial horrors. In *Hard Times* are silhouetted the figures of Stephen Blackpool and Bounderby—Mammon and its victim—against a dark, repellent background, lit up only by the red glare of the forges and furnaces, in which men as well as coal were being consumed. But looking back on the whole of the Dickens panorama one is not sure that little Oliver Twist was not the central and compelling power in a revolution that has been one of the most amazing in our history, and that has changed for ever our whole conception of the child, of the duty of the State and of humanity towards it. It

was a daring, almost a hopeless project to take as hero of a story—a workhouse brat, a come-by-chance child, as people thought, and to lead him through every possible defilement, inflicting on him almost every possible injury, while allowing him to remain unpolluted through it all. From the point-of-view of characterisation, it may be questioned whether Oliver is a success. The absorbing interest he excites may be due more to the dramatic contrast between the unstained innocence of the helpless waif and the vileness of his upbringing, than to any attractions which his monotonous goodness and almost sickly virtue, excites. It might be argued that in this, as in other respects, Dickens's pathos is more effective when set out with humour, or touched by satire, than when it makes a direct appeal.* Perhaps the Artful Dodger, who is a splendid sample of a boy spoilt by a vicious upbringing, or Noah Claypole, who is its hypocritical product, are both more realistic figures. There may be more effective human arguments in bringing home to us the tragedy of neglected boyhood. But it is in the idea—daring, as I have said, and seemingly hopeless,

* I am aware, of course, that in saying this I run counter to several distinguished authorities. As Mr. Walker reminds us in his *Literature of the Victorian Era,* Macaulay shed tears over Florence Dombey. Jeffrey wrote to Dickens that he had cried and sobbed over the death of Paul and felt his heart purified by the tears . . . . Thackeray was almost as much overcome . . . . America was, if possible, more enthusiastic than England, and Bret Harte bears testimony to the power of the story of Little Nell over the rough miners of California. Personally, however, I incline to the view which Mr. Walker also quotes from George Eliot, who says that Dickens "scarcely ever passes from the "humorous and external to the emotional and tragic without "becoming as transcendent in his unreality as he was a moment "before in his artistic truthfulness." This view, however, is not the whole truth, for Dickens had a mastery of horror, and could as easily and as naturally excite it in his readers, as the sense of humour. Never was he better than when he, in the alembic of his genius, blended the two.

but yet magical in its compelling force—that *Oliver Twist* must be counted a great success. Of its effect on legislature and in arousing the torpid conscience of the nation to the cruel fate it thrusts upon the children of the poor, I need not now speak. But its effect upon the novel ought to be pointed out. That Dickens's instinct was sound in writing of *The Parish Boy's Progress* the future showed. He had introduced a new figure, a new force into the novel. From thenceforth, novelists recognised that they had here something that struck a chord, vibrant, and resounding, which would move the dullest and hardest of their readers to a sense of pity and compassion. From thenceforth the neglected child has appeared and re-appeared constantly in fiction, seldom without adding something to our sympathies, seldom without quickening that which it is the chief aim of literature to arouse. Unchecked by the dictates of humanity, our material wealth, our social hopes, our possibilities as embodied in Acts of Parliament or mere political changes, are vain and futile things. In a previous essay,* I have traced the influence of Dickens as a child emancipator, and showed how he led us from the Murdstone conception of childhood to something like his very own. Here I am concerned only with literature, and chiefly with the novel; and, so long as the influence of Dickens was paramount, it was remarkable to find that the claims of childhood were illumined for us again and again in the novel, nearly always to our delight, nearly always to our profit, if we do but reckon deeper and livelier emotions, truer and swifter instincts, as a gain.

I could give innumerable instances where, since *Oliver Twist*, the psychology of a child has been made the *motif* of a book that has held its elders fascinated and left them with a new vision, perhaps a new heart. Perhaps I might take two widely different examples. One is a short story,

* *Charles Dickens: Social Reformer.* (Chapman & Hall.)

but little known—Mr. Rudyard Kipling's *Baa Baa Black Sheep*—wherein the spirit of Dickens is very plainly discernible; and the other, one of the most popular books of the Nineteenth Century, not perhaps remarkable for high artistic qualities, but still a notable instance of the presence and theme that Dickens really discovered. That other is *Little Lord Fauntleroy*. In dealing with an artist and his influence on thought and literature, it is especially desirable that we should regard the atmosphere he creates. That Dickens was supreme as a creator and delineator of childhood has been before now pointed out; but perhaps it has not been adequately understood that in thus introducing the child into literature—and especially the down-trodden, neglected and forlorn child of the thieves' kitchen and the slums—he has effected a change of atmosphere that can scarcely be computed.

From a merely journalistic point of view, *Nicholas Nickleby*, with its epoch-making exposure of the Yorkshire schools, was more fruitful of immediate results even than *Oliver Twist*; and it is to be noted that the particular form of realism in which Dickens here indulged was received in a very different spirit from that which so resented his criticisms of the barbarities and cruel inefficiency of workhouse administration. In the one case, the "white-waistcoated old gentlemen" of the middle-classes found themselves condemned for their treatment of the waifs and outcasts of society—wretches, said the *Quarterly Review*, who were the dregs of society, dragged up in vice and wretchedness "to perish on the Newgate drop," and who ought not to find any place in the pages of the novelist. But the victims of Squeers were, in some cases, themselves the sons of fairly well-to-do people; and the middle-class rallied to Dickens's support because they felt that the school-fees they had paid to Squeers and his kind had been swindled out of their pockets by false pretences. The

appeal of *Oliver Twist* was deeper and quite different. It was a direct appeal to the humanity and compassion of the whole of mankind, who felt in the spectacle of Oliver Twist "asking for more" an emotion that they could not gainsay. "The whole tragedy of the incident," says Mr. G. K. Chesterton very finely, "is that Oliver is pathetic because "he is an optimist . . . . he expects the universe to be "kind to him!" That was the force of the episode—a little child, confronting as it were, all the organised forces of the Poor Law, and confounding them with the simple and human request that he, being hungry, might have enough to eat! Dickens might, and did, depict Oliver as beaten, tortured, and cruelly ill-treated. But nothing moved the public like that simple incident, so easily related, so powerful in its effects. Oliver being taught to pick pockets in Fagin's Thieves' Kitchen was no doubt very deplorable, and one might have said more harrowing. But Fagin, Jew and monster as he was, saw that his pupils were fed, and the depravity of these surroundings have become blurred and forgotten. Oliver's petition has passed into a proverb. There was not a mother with a heart in England, who did not feel, as she read the story, that she wished to take Oliver in her arms, and to beat the Workhouse Master for refusing him.

All these earlier works of Dickens bear the impress of the romantic atmosphere that had enveloped literature at the time, and from which Dickens was to rescue it. *The Old Curiosity Shop*, with its *bizarre* Ainsworthian setting, from which the grandfather of Little Nell, and Nell herself set out on their immortal journey; *Barnaby Rudge*, with its background of gloom and mystery, personified in the forbidding Chester and the intolerable Haredale; Oliver Twist, with the gratuitous enigma of his birth, and the inexplicable but villainous Monks pursuing him, and Ralph Nickleby, hugging the origin and reproach of Smike to his bosom,

until his nature become rancorous, but so baffling in its wickedness as to be positively mystifying—these may all be traced to the dying influence of that school of romance, which found its strongest expression in Ainsworth, and perhaps Lord Byron, and whose dregs may still be drunk at the fountains of G. P. R. James and G. W. M. Reynolds. But through it all, the genius of Dickens was struggling manfully. Little Nell and her grandfather introduced us to Mrs. Jarley and her waxworks, to Short and Codling. Simon Tappertit, that superb creation, relieved the gloom of *Barnaby Rudge*; and Mr. Vincent Crummles and the Kenwigs, to say nothing of Mrs. Nickleby herself, redeemed a book (whose principal characters were sometimes both tedious and unconvincing), infusing it with the vigour of reality and genius. The journey of Little Nell through England, with its matchless sketches of the life of the countryside, its beautiful glimpses of the green lanes, and its not less delightful sketches of the strollers and vagabonds,* is among the best things found in Dickens, and in all literature. For their equal we must go back to the greenwood of Shakespeare and listen to the quips of Touchstone, or march with Jones and Partridge under the silver moon, past the beautiful fields of Somerset on to London with its golden promise. In all these, we see manifestations of the real Dickens, of the Dickens that best expressed itself in his earlier work of *Pickwick*. It should be noted, however, that the animating idea of the Ainsworth school of romance never quite left Dickens. But the appeal to our sense of the mystery of evil, to our susceptibilities of

* One may judge of the supreme effect of these sketches on the sophisticated minds of that artificial age by an interesting extract, quoted by Mr. Kitton, from the diary of Catherine Fox. "He (Dickens) forces the sympathies of all into unwonted channels and "teaches us that Punch and Judy men, beggar children, and daft "old men are also of our species, and are not more than our-"selves, removed from the sphere of the heroic."

awe or even of horror, all of which lurk in the recesses of man's common nature; and the reality of the fate which pursues men and strikes at them through their lives;—these supreme motives of his art we may find exhibited in his works with a force and a clarity that few but Shakespeare have equalled. It is in the later development of his genius that we must look for these explorations of the soul of man. The death of Krook, the recovery of Rogue Riderhood, the end of Jonas—these, indeed, plucked as they are from the actual warp of life itself, leave us with a real sense of tragedy, perhaps even of terror at the destinies that Fate decrees for man.

§ 6.

But let us turn back to the effect that Dickens's work had at this period on the literature of the day. It was, as I have said, almost instantaneous in directing attention to phases of life that had hitherto been *taboo*.

My friend, Mr. B. W. Matz, has admirably described the reason of Dickens's success in handling these themes, which no other novelist of his day had attempted. "He "did not talk and preach and rant about these evils with "the hyperbole of the agitator. He drew pictures of the "state of things they involved, created real characters— "evil characters at times—set in an environment typical "both of the class affected and the class affecting. There "the reader saw for himself, nay, lived through it all "himself." No doubt we have here also a cardinal cause of Dickens's success as a social explorer; for he was a man whose genius lent itself peculiarly to the task of revealing to his complacent generation the horrors of the crude, imperfect, and dehumanised civilisation that they accepted with smug contentment.

But I am not sure that Dickens was not at his best when the satiric mood of his humour pulsed through these

probings of the common heart and these thrusts at the evils of our social life. His humour was part and lot of his native mental pitch and tone, as was Le Sage's, Fielding's, and Thackeray's. But it differed from all three in being distinctly dual or compound in its character. Like Le Sage, he could contemplate life in the spirit of comedy and of invincible good temper. But he often used humour as the lure to the pathetic. Like Thackeray, he could scathe both the foibles of man and the failings of his institutions with bland cynicisms. But he could also shake and shatter with the more wilful and masterful force of his satire. There is something grimly satirical in the rigorous contrast of the spiritual austerities of Mrs. Clennam and her appetite for wine and oysters. With a still more powerful ray of satiric light he reveals the falsities of the cunning harpy Christopher Caseby, the benignant Patriarch of Bleeding Heart Yard. From his shining and tranquil exterior there emerge the counterfeit presentments of rare wisdom and the choicest virtue and charity. But in the delicately malign light of the comic spirit which Dickens casts upon him, we smile as he stealthily and unconsciously treads his way, for we know him for what he really is. It is the same in cases where the heart is worn upon the sleeve in ostentatious display, crying for the world's admiration. The cant of the pseudo-artistic Bohemianism of Skimpole and Henry Gowan is shown in mild and genial caricature. Dickens's humour is unique inasmuch as it assumes a form varying from the dispassionate and detached to that which enfolds and at times conceals a pathetic appeal, or to that which breaks out into a mordant satire under which the fondest vanities and the most complacent conventions become idle and fatuous things. Alone, perhaps, among English writers, he fell naturally and easily into the habit of satirising, not merely opinions and institutions, but men themselves. The Circumlocution

Office, the absurdities of Mrs. Jellaby's mission to the heathen of Borrioboola Gha, the exposure of the Court of Chancery in *Bleak House*, and the trial scene in *Pickwick*, great as these are, do not exhaust his triumphs in satirisation. Bounderby is a satire; so is Gradgrind; so, too, are Micawber and Veneering. We are accustomed to think of Dickens as a caricaturist, as a man who got his effects by exaggerating some trick of manner, some physical peculiarity, some strange habit of the body, which lends itself easily to comic treatment. He was much greater than this. His satire of men raised this form of humour to the spiritual plane, and was all the more effective, because we laughed at the very deformity of soul that he brought home to us. And it is in this respect that Dickens's presentation, not only of the poor, but of the essential types of classes, on whom the real strength of the nation rests, was so supremely convincing. The poor, the unpretentious, the really worthy and important classes in the nation, are the only people to whom irony and satire come naturally. Those people who have absorbed themselves merely in the making of money, when they possess a sense of humour, almost invariably subject its exercise to the severest discipline. The men who are detached from politics, from religion, from philanthropy, and, to a large extent, from the conduct of the very industries they maintain, view these things impartially, and, for the most part, easily see through their pretentious insufficiency. The rhetoric and recrimination of wordy politicians, of "Do-Nothing" and "Rigmarole," each promising his class a new world, and each incapable of getting to grips with the real problems that go to make up this sorry scheme of present day makeshifts and futilities; the exhortations and rebukes of divines, who have not a tithe of their long-suffering virtue and cheery endurance; the patronising ignorance of interfering faddists and philanthropists, often themselves incapable of realising

happiness save by persecuting others; all these, though the poor suffer them gladly, are understood clearly enough to be rated at their proper value; their outpourings are held in very scant respect, as serving their best purpose in that they add a little more to the common stock of the world's gaiety. And it was in this very ebullient good humour and high spirits that Dickens found his inspiration as realist and humanist.

For side by side with this contempt of the pretentious and the futile, he had, as the lowly have, a natural and wholesome appreciation of the good things of life. Like them, he delighted in the open country, in fellowship, in the joy of a carouse with friends, in sport and play of all descriptions. He had their love of adventure and their high spirits, together with their capacity for hard, dogged work. Their sense of colour and of pageantry was his also. Their insistence upon sentiment, and especially upon the domestic sentiments that circle round the home and the fireside, these he has elaborated and portrayed again and again in his novels. Perhaps it was well that he remained unsophisticated by the "education" of the day, unpolluted by the empty and profitless philosophy, whose absence from his training Mr. Shaw so laments. For he was able to look upon the world with eyes unclouded by the "doubts, disputes, distractions, fears" that led Goethe, "the physician of the iron age," to turn from life like a sick man. The shadow of the gloomy and introspective dreamer, and the grossness of the decadent, cast no spell upon him. Had he met either he would have thought them an excellent joke, and made us all laugh at them; and it is perhaps notable that the decadents only became a force during the brief period of his temporary decline. The vapourings that are outpoured to-day by some of the sallow philosophers of the Café Royal concerning the vulgarity of the herd, are now exercising several of the sixpenny weeklies. How Dickens

would have ridiculed them and their dreary, attitudinising authors! Boredom, *ennui*, the exhaustion of men who have found life as tedious and as stagnant as are their own complainings—he was as free from these as are the mass of common men to-day. Verily Forster was right when he declared that the poor were not his clients, on whose behalf he won the laughter and applause of all the world, but, indeed, his very self!

CHAPTER IV.

DICKENS THE HUMANIST

IV

DICKENS THE HUMANIST

"God help the poor, who in lone valleys dwell,
Or by far hills, where whin and heather grow;
Theirs is a story sad indeed to tell;
Yet little cares the world, and less 'twould know
About the toil and want men undergo.
The wearying loom doth call them up at morn;
They work till worn-out nature sinks to sleep;
They taste but are not fed. The snow drifts deep
Around the fireless cot, and blocks the door;
The night-storm howls a dirge across the moor,
And shall they perish thus oppressed and lorn?
Shall toil and famine, hopeless, still be borne?
No! God will yet arise and help the poor!"

SAMUEL BAMFORD.

"Human sympathy was at the heart of everything Dickens wrote. It was the secret of the hope that his books might help to make people better, and it so guarded them from evil that there is scarcely a page of the thousands he has written which might not be put into the hands of a little child."

FORSTER'S *Life of Dickens.*

§ 1.

IT was perhaps almost inevitable that the author, whose works were to give the first outward and visible sign of the transformation which Dickens had wrought on literature, should be a woman, whom he had at that time not seen. I refer to Mrs. Gaskell, one of the great artists of the Nineteenth Century, and a writer who derived her earliest inspiration from Dickens himself, and for whose genius she always cherished a profound veneration. Later the association between Mrs. Gaskell and Dickens became, if not close, at least friendly and sympathetic; and when *Household Words* was launched, its Editor rejoiced at the fact that the authoress of *Cranford* was to remain a contributor to

its pages. Forster's *Life* recalls more than one appreciative reference to the genius and charm of her writings; and at the famous *Copperfield* dinner, when Dickens's closest friends were asked to celebrate the completion of his darling novel, Mrs. Gaskell was among the company invited. Yet at the time that that lady achieved her earliest successes, the two were complete strangers, though, as I hope to show, the influence of Dickens was the most potent factor in the works by which she enriched the literature and enlarged the narrow sympathies of the age in which they both lived.

That Dickens re-acted on his age and time more by the influence of his works than of his personality, ought not to cause us any surprise. It is quite true that he took a personal and an active part in and through the inspiration of his friends and associates. The part he played in helping Hood to that wonderful effort, *The Song of the Shirt*, is too well known to need repetition. His personal inspiration was again obvious in some of the earlier works of Douglas Jerrold, and in the great though now neglected achievement of the Brothers Mayhew on the life and labour of the London poor—a work marked by extraordinary industry and grasp of detail, and by a sympathy and insight worthy of Dickens himself. But after all, the influence of a great artist must necessarily extend far beyond his own personality. The service that Dickens rendered to literature consists in the fact that he created a moral and intellectual atmosphere which rendered it possible for other artists, not less sensitive, though perhaps less virile and less robust than himself, to write of life and of the current happenings as he did. They could not have ventured upon it but for his virile and pugnacious genius.

A great addition to the literature of England was, at the time Dickens burst upon the firmament, something that we may now see to have been quite inevitable. Colossal events had stirred the human consciousness to an extent that is

almost incalculable. The rise of the great American Republic followed by the extraordinary uprising of the French democracy, had gone far to create a new Europe and a new world. The supporters of the old *régime* felt dazed and helpless, and could utter only inarticulate and feeble protests. The long struggle with Napoleon had diverted attention from the significance of the new ideas, and had prevented men discerning the almost visible change which the structure of civilisation was undergoing before their very eyes. But, that war concluded, and its immediate results of lassitude and enfeeblement having passed, then inevitably the new spirit born in man of events that had re-shaped the world sought expression. The conclusion of the war found two great alterations effected in England, and many others threatened. It found the middle-classes practically emancipated from their subservience to the landed gentry, and virtually in control of the destinies of England; and it found their women restless and dissatisfied with the position that had been forced on them under the dying *régime*. The nation resolved to adventure upon new phases of life, to explore fresh avenues, and, above all, to employ outside the home the mental activities which had lain dormant for centuries. The work of Mary Godwin, and other early pioneers of what came to be known as women's rights, was not perhaps so much responsible for this as was the spread of culture and education among the middle-classes. The library was at last open to women, and intellectual pursuits achieved a vogue and authority, and won a recognition of their value and importance, that, in the old days of Squire Weston, when feudalism and fox-hunting were still predominant over England, they never reached. Hence we find that Charlotte Brontë, in essentials an old-fashioned woman, writing to her friend Mrs. Gaskell, declared that "If there be a natural unfitness in women for men's employ-"ment, there is no need to make laws on the subject; leave

"all careers open; let women try; those who ought to "succeed will succeed, or, at least, will have a fair chance." Hence we find that the women, moved by the ferment of ideas, were not disposed to lead lives of uniform dulness, untouched by the happenings in the great world outside. They were not content to resign themselves and their destinies to the unquestioning control of authority, now to accept as eternal an order of things that even then was passing away. The period was one of change, of restlessness, of innovation, and of optimism—often blind and unreasoning, but still robust and sincere. Inevitably it bade fair to become one also of great literary activity. The form and the spirit of that activity were determined very largely by the earlier efforts of Dickens, the first, as he was the most virile and creative, of the great Victorians.

The earliest trace of Dickens's influence was to be detected in the appearance in 1848, some ten years later than *Pickwick*, of a new and very distinctive authoress, in the person of Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell.

Before we come to the peculiar qualities that mark Mrs. Gaskell's work, it is perhaps just as well that we should glance cursorily at the fascinating personality of the woman whom Dickens so profoundly influenced. It was no mere coincidence that she, who was the first author to be touched by his work, outside the sphere of his personal acquaintance, was, to use a perhaps invidious epithet, a womanly woman. She affords, as we shall see, as agreeable and as sharp a contrast to the erotic lady-novelist of a later period—to the Ouida of the 'seventies, and to the neurotic peculiarities of Ouida's successors—as it is possible to find. One may, indeed, detect a very marked divergence also, alike in her temperament and in her outlook on life, from both of her great contemporaries, George Eliot and Charlotte Brontë, "a distinctive quality of her own." As Mr. A. W. Ward remarks in his preface to her works: "It

"may be called a literary quality, because alike in her "graver and her gayer moods, she was able to give "literary expression to it—that is her sweet serenity of "soul." Georges Sand, the great French novelist, remarked only a few months before her death to Lord Houghton, "Mrs. Gaskell has done what neither I nor "other female writers in France can accomplish, she has "written novels which excite the deepest interest in men of "the world and yet which every girl will be the better for "reading." Her strength as an artist and her power as a student of life lay in the wholesome and beautiful happiness that makes her own one of the most fragrant in the whole history of literature. The wife of an Unitarian Minister in Manchester, a Professor of English History and Literature in the same city, her home became not only a literary centre and focus of stimulating thought and artistic effort in all directions, but a fount of active ministry and of constant unremitting service to the poor and the unfriended. In her *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, she quotes the passage in which Forster records the scene after Goldsmith's death at his chambers in the Temple: "The staircase of Brick Court is "said to have been filled with mourners the reverse of "domestic; women without a home, without domesticity of "any kind, with no friend but him they had come to weep "for; outcasts of that great solitary but wicked City to "whom he had never forgotten to be kind and charitable."

Mrs. Gaskell says these words came into her mind when she read of her friend's funeral, but they are suggested also by her own life. It was among the poor, the suffering, and the outcasts of that other city that Mrs. Gaskell worked with a humility, a charm, and a patience that won for her the love and devotion of nearly all with whom she came in contact. "She describes somewhere," says Mr. Ward, "how she used to accompany her husband on his drives to "preachings in the towns near Manchester . . . . and while

"ready to devote some of her leisure to teaching, she was "from the first eager to take part in works of charity; "for her heart was always full of fervent sympathy with "affliction. It is not, however, generally known that it was "the nearer acquaintance which she thus gained with the "homes of the poor, and the circumstance that Mr. Gaskell "was specially attracted by poets and poetry which treated "such subjects, and frequently lectured about it to popular "audiences, which suggested an extremely interesting "literary collaboration between husband and wife." The happiness of her life overflowed naturally to relieve the sufferings of others, and she became the constant associate of all who laboured and were heavy-laden. Originally her intention as regards literature was to write sketches among the poor in the manner of Crabbe "but in a more seeing "beauty of spirit." It was the works of Dickens, and the profound influence he exercised over her in her early days of literary achievement, that led to the abandonment of this scheme and caused her to project the novels which instantly won celebrity. She wrote of the poor, and especially of the women of the poor, their sorrows and privations, if not with the same exuberant buoyancy as Dickens, yet with a humour that was often softer and more penetrating than his own, with a sympathy and an insight as sure, and with a compelling force that made the sorrows and the joys of the Manchester operatives, the pathos of their lives and the simple-heartedness of their pleasures, felt throughout England.

Mrs. Gaskell possesses that quality that makes all her books live where so many other works, though great in many ways, are forgotten. There is the stamp of her personality —gracious, kindly, yet always strong and reliant. No one can read *Mary Barton*, for instance, without realising that the scenes depicted therein were not merely the casual observances of the story-writer, but that her characters were real and living people, and that she entered herself into

the lives, into the souls, of those whom she portrayed so convincingly. Her characters are real, live, human. They stand out from her pages as do the characters in a Shakespearian drama. There are few more moving scenes in fiction than that depicting the death of Barton's wife, and few scenes that make one realise how profoundly sympathetic was Mrs. Gaskell towards her own sex, and how real an understanding she had of their daily lives and cares.

A sad story in many respects, *Mary Barton* is illumined with touches of that wonderful devotion to duty, and to one another, which both Dickens and Mrs. Gaskell knew to be the true qualities of the poor. They took no pains to understand them, for they felt, lived, acted their very lives. Mrs. Gaskell *knew* her characters, and they are as much alive to-day as when she drew them. The essential conditions of their lives are better without doubt, but the characteristics remain. What improvement has been effected is due to much of the tender and sympathetic depiction of their joys and sorrows, their hopes and surrenders, which Dickens and Mrs. Gaskell taught us to feel, as perhaps no other authors have done.*

There are passages and descriptions in *Mary Barton* not surpassed by Dickens himself.† We may well contemplate

* Perhaps an exception should be made for the earlier works of George Gissing, who in *The Nether World* and *Demos* seems to me to be under as deep an obligation to Mrs. Gaskell as he was to Dickens, whose buoyancy of spirit and ebullient humour he woefully lacked.

† Mr. A. W. Ward observes in the preface I have quoted : "The influence of Dickens was, as I have said, strong upon her "during a considerable part of her literary life, but she never "succumbed to it, and it was only by a quite exceptional accident "that she may once or twice have fallen into one of his tricks of "style." Mrs. Gaskell's style was her own, like that of every great writer of prose, but that the strong influence of Dickens (whose intimate literary and journalistic association with her is well known) profoundly affected her artistic methods and impulses cannot, I think, be doubted.

the spirit in which the portraits in this story were conceived —so simple, so sympathetic, and so convincing in their direct appeal. We may contrast them with the general attitude towards labour of George Eliot, whose writings on the poor and on the workman, and still more upon the problems which they typify, were influenced by an attitude which was shared even by Dickens. The appeal for humanity and to humanity, the recognition of its plain, simple rights as they are expressed in terms of the commonplace, appear at times neither so insistent nor so wholehearted as in the writings of Mrs. Gaskell. George Eliot wrote of the middle-class, and especially of the middle-class intellectual, with insight and convincing power. Had she and Dickens grappled with the problems of labour and machinery, in their bearing upon the welfare of mankind and in their pure economic aspects as we have to-day, they would have remained free from blemishes from which our better informed modern sense of practical social adjustment saves us. The rather unhappy sequel seems to be that both their great gifts appeared to be sometimes exercised in withholding their loyalty to principles of democracy and the democratic movement of the time, upon a platform which was nominally and, indeed, vociferously democratic. There is a rather glaring instance of this in *Felix Holt*, and we can fairly pair it with another in *Hard Times*. In the former, a rough mob orator, speaking with his sleeves turned up, gives a very faithfully condensed and really masterly statement of the case for extending the franchise to his class. The speech is a model of simple directness and of clear lucid reasoning.

§ 2.

We, to-day, get the same sense of affront and disappointment in Charles Dickens, when some practical political problem peeps out—which is very rarely—affecting labour.

It is not easy for any of us always patiently to withstand the tone of arrogant exclusiveness and aggressive assumption which characterises some of the oracular utterances of the demagogue. They are apt to provoke in us the chronic antagonistic temper. Dickens, like George Eliot, puts no words in the mouth of the good Stephen Blackpool which can adequately answer the justly-provoked restlessness of his time. Neither he nor his contemporary was so much concerned with settling the urgencies of any specific labour question—at all events in the story; although as promoters of a new humanity they were at one. Felix Holt propounds the Spencerian *dictum* that abrupt transitions by revolutionary means are to be shunned as dangerous, and that platform swaggerers "bring us nothing but the ocean to "make our broth with." And Dickens's gentle satire of the Slackbridge demagogy tends towards much the same thing, pointing the while to the pathetic dislocations of domestic life and the chaotic issues of economic strifes. Stephen Blackpool, simple and sympathetic soul, admits in candour that all is muddle. His words to Bounderby, the mill-owner, his master, at the crisis of the strike, reflect Dickens's feelings rather than any intellectual attitude. But they are the sum and substance of that humanitarian spirit which is necessary to any approach to practical solutions. "Sir," says Stephen, "I canna wi' my little "learning an' my common way tell the genelman what will "better all this—though some working-men o' this town "could, above my powers—but I can tell him what I know "will never do't. The strong hand will never do't. Victory "and triumph will never do't. Agreeing fur to mak' one "side unnat'rally awlus and for ever right, and toother "side unnat'rally awlus and for ever wrong will never, never "do't. Nor yet lettin' alone will never do't. . . . . Nor "not drawin' nigh to folk, wi' kindness and patience an' "cheery ways, that so draws nigh to one another in their

"monny troubles, and so cherishes one another in their "distresses wi' what they need themseln . . . . will never "do't till the Sun turns to ice. Most of aw, ratin' 'em "as so much power and reg'latin' 'em as if they was figures "in a soom: wi'out loves and likens, wi'out memories and "inclinations, wi'out souls to weary and souls to hope . . . . "this will never do't sir, till God's work is onmade."

While George Eliot leaned over much to the current Ruskinian and Carlylean doctrine that social progress depends upon the delegation of guiding power to the aristocrat of talent "according to the truest principles mankind "is in possession of," Dickens was mainly concerned in creating the preliminary humanistic atmosphere so necessary to any real solution of economic problems. Moreover, he distinctly threw doubt upon the beneficent "great man "theory" in his picture of Bounderby—a type of self-made over-blown mediocrity which the Individualism of the time would obviously inflict upon society. *Felix Holt*, as a contribution to definite political solutions, is admittedly a failure. And so is *Hard Times*. Both fail, in my judgment, to represent the highest intellectual outlook attainable; at a period, too, when so many sincere and capable minds earnestly pondered the social problem. At this distance of time we can see that this problem was really pivoted upon Mill, whose individualistic economics were being modified with every new edition of his *Principles*, by supplementary sections upon labour, and by a wider and more collectivist outlook; and who finally declared in his Autobiography that his ideal of ultimate improvement went far beyond Democracy, and would class him decidedly under the general designation of Socialist.*

George Eliot's remarkable limitations and even more remarkable powers did not prevent Mrs. Gaskell from securing a public peculiarly her own, nor from exercising an

* *Autobiography* Chapter VI.

influence over the minds of her contemporaries, all the more powerful because they were largely unconscious of it, and were gently guided to a fresh world of new hopes and aspirations. Synchronising with her ascendancy, a new force entered literature—more virile, more immediately arresting, though hardly so penetrating in its influence, and perhaps not so abiding as that of the gentle lady whose *Cranford* remains a distinct asset of English literature.

§ 3.

It was by *Alton Locke*, the novel which Carlyle, though he pronounced it crude, yet hailed as showing rare promise, that Charles Kingsley achieved an almost unique position in the literary affections of his fellow-countrymen. It was with great difficulty that its author found any publisher bold enough to issue it to the Press, and it was only when the sage of Chelsea urged it on Messrs. Chapman and Hall that at last the book was given to the public. Like Dickens's earlier works, it was received at first with fierce howls of detraction and vehement abuse; for, like *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby*, it comprised sketches and portraits of the underworld marked by the same uncompromising fidelity of depiction and ruthlessness of execution. *Alton Locke* is in fact the lineal descendant—if one book can be said to have sprung from the loins of another—of those efforts of Dickens of which I have written. The compelling humour of the master, his ebullient satire—these, indeed, are absent; but that faculty of realistic observation which Dickens initiated for his age is exhibited in almost every line of the book. "I found in it," says Carlyle, "abundance, nay exuberance of generous zeal; headlong "impetuosity of determination towards the manful side on "all manner of questions; snatches of excellent poetic descrip-"tion, occasional sunbursts of noble insight; everywhere "a certain wild intensity which holds the reader fast as by a

"spell; these surely are good qualities and pregnant omens "in a man of your seniority in the regiment! At the same "time, I am bound to say, the book is definable as crude, "by no manner of means the best we expect of you—if you "will resolutely temper your fire. But to make the malt "sweet, the fire should and must be slow; so says the "proverb, and now, as before, I include all duties for you "under that one!" The letter, apart from its intrinsic interest, is of great importance, for Carlyle was not only Kingsley's literary sponsor, but his guide, philosopher, and friend in matters literary. The *Miscellanies* and Carlyle's *Past and Present*, Kingsley once averred, placed him under a still deeper debt to their author—"that old Hebrew "prophet who goes to Prince and Beggar and says, if you "do this or that you shall go to hell—not the hell that "priests talk of—but a hell on this earth." Again we find him writing to Thomas Cooper, the Chartist, to say "I cannot express what I personally owe to that man's "writings." This close association between Carlyle and Kingsley helps us to understand the marked resemblance between the spirit that animated *Oliver Twist*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, and *The Old Curiosity Shop*, for, as is well-known, Carlyle and Dickens re-acted on each other to an extent that was quite extraordinary. "It is almost thirty years," Carlyle wrote to Forster, when Dickens lay dead, "since my "acquaintance with him began, and on my side I may say "every new meeting ripened it into more and more clear "discernment of his rare and great worth as a brother "man; a most cordial, sincere, clear-sighted, quietly "decisive, just and loving man; till at length he had grown "to such recognition with me as I have rarely had for any "man of my time. This I can tell you three, for it is true "and will be welcome to you: to others less concerned I "had as soon *not* speak on such a subject. . . . It is an "event world wide; a *unique* of talents suddenly extinct,

"and has eclipsed we, too, may say 'the harmless gaiety "'of nations.' No death since 1866 has fallen on me with "such a stroke. No literary man's hitherto ever did. The "good, the gentle, high gifted, ever friendly, noble Dickens "—every inch of him an Honest Man."

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§ 4.

I must here hasten to the conclusion of the present chapter by summarising the course of the humanitarian spirit in fiction, and bringing into focus that remarkably enhanced and vital phase which Dickens conspicuously contributed to it.

When we regard closely the era of general literature, out of which came the Richardson novels and their devotion to the searching of the individual spirit, we cannot be surprised that its softening nature and tender tone should first and most conspicuously affect the feminine mind. Richardson's literary *penchant* drew to him a large bevy of female admirers and correspondents, even before he produced a book at all, which was not until he was fifty years old. Certain of these correspondents he never saw, they remained *incognito*, as of a class of high-life above the social status of a man of business. Others afterwards entered into the social intimacies of his private life, which intermittently assumed a sort of moral or intellectual *salon*, wthout its French brilliancies and gaieties, and without the light cant of its art, or the affectations of its *belles-lettres* tone. It was undoubtedly the huge mass of correspondence with women of literary taste which provided him with a great deal of material for his novels. It evoked in him a direct first-hand interest in the study of the feminine character; it moreover provided a medium of acquaintance with its inmost intimacies and involutions, such as rarely enter into the privileges of any writer.

But perhaps the most striking feature of his labours was not merely the initial impetus they gave to quite a new style of literary taste and criticism, but the subsequent development during the latter part of the Eighteenth Century of the woman novelist and critic. That this new cult took immediate root amongst women of his own circle is clear from the life and voluminous correspondence of Richardson, edited by Mrs. Barbauld,* "a name long dear," as Scott remarks, "to elegant literature." Scott himself was one of the first to recognise the special qualities fitting women for the work of fiction. His critical descriptions of his feminine precursors as well as of his contemporaries are marked by a cordial and appreciative tone. And his praise and admiration of Jane Austen, like that of Macaulay, was of the most unstinted character. Not long after his death we see women flooding literature with their productions.

But whether or not it be said that the feminine gender of fiction is derived from the Richardson period its distinctive spirit is just that which appeals to the feminine mind. There is a gender in books, one may say, which is as charactertistic of them as it is of human beings. The habitual reader may easily distinguish some works possessing unmistakeable maculine strength, and others, equally unmistakeable, by reason of their feminine grace, feeling, and tenderness. Generally speaking, the essay may be said to embody these latter qualities. Charles Lamb's *Essays of Elia* impress us infallibly with this idea when compared with Borrow's *Lavengro* and his descriptions of gipsy life. Scott's *Waverley Novels* and Jane Austen's books make another emphatic contrast in the characteristics of gender. But Charlotte Brontë's, like George Eliot's, convey, I think, a preponderant sense of the masculine. Nevertheless, there is, in the Brontës, a certain quality, diffusing the domestic, the human, and the ethical, which is distinctly feminine.

* Born 1743, died 1825.

It is this new element of *sensibility* which marks the encroachment of the feminine gender, so to speak, in the earliest English novelists, and which stands in strong contrast with the rugged loosely-linked adventure story of the Fielding and Smollett school. There was, in fact, an atmosphere which more decidedly fostered it. Before the Eighteenth Century had turned, the rich natural soil of emotion in fiction, dating from Richardson's time, had been slowly performing its task against the moral inertia, and the gross tone and manners of the period. It was devoted to human nature rather than the superficies of human life and character. One was the counterpart of the other. And in the background of general literature is discernible its source and influence. It was a period which was beginning to become affected by rationalist, ethical, and metaphysical schools of writers, represented by Locke, Butler, Berkeley, and Hume. Mrs. Barbauld was the rationalist wife of a rationalist Unitarian Minister. And Hume and Smollett,* by the way, present to our literary mind to-day a curious partnership in historical work, in which the latter's brilliancies of fiction evince little vital relationship and congruity with his historical work. It was an age, too, in which the gentle poet, Thomas Gray, suffused his period with those contemplations of life and death which we find in the *Elegy* and the *Progress of Poesy*. He was perhaps of the school of Milton rather than of the robust Elizabethan. But in art and the revolutionary spirit he was in a way both the Ruskin and the Browning of the eighteenth century; as his *Elegy* in its way is the counterpart of Tennyson's *In Memorian*. It is his interest in Italian art which reminds us of Browning. He evinced at any rate that first-hand interest in nature, and that whole-hearted respect and cognisance of a comprehensive human nature,

* It will be remembered that they were collaborators in a History of England.

which were soon to find their epiphany of inspiration in Cowper and Wordsworth. The moral ferment had already become quickened by Bishop Berkeley's philosophical idealism. His *Principles of Human Knowledge* and his fascinating dialogues on the dialectics and teachings of idealism had initiated a bold and impressive *morale*. (This was from 1710 to 1732). To this literary and rational atmosphere came later Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739) and the *Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1752). In the large British group of philosophical writers of this time, one may name the more familiar Adam Smith and his *Theory of the Moral Sentiments*; and Edmund Burke's *Nature of Society* and *Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. The last name will arouse associations of liberal and rationalist thought that belong more to the philosophy of progressive politics.

Such haphazard and quite informal selection of names will perhaps, for the present, sufficiently serve to indicate a background atmosphere of eighteenth-century thought, from which the growing body of popular and fictional writers drew their moral sustenance and their humanitarian and advanced views. And it is both a pleasant and a probable theory that the feminine mind was attracted by its humanistic tone and its moral disquisitions. However this may be, women held a remarkably prominent place in the *rôle* of early novelists; and in passing from eighteenth-century names like Fanny Burney (who was an actress and dramatic author as well as a novelist), the sad and serious Charlotte Smith, and Mrs. Radcliffe of romancist fame, we advance to the early Victorian Era, when women novelists at once enter into their natural birthright of equality, if not superiority, as fictionists. And the reason for this is inherent in their very woman-nature and mother-instinct. It fits the peculiar character of the work. In their hands the novel became what it intrinsically is, or

should be. As Mr. Chesterton puts it, "it is woman's "special function to exhaustively overhaul that part of "human existence which was always her province, or rather "her kingdom; the play of personalities in private." He rightly regards the key of the novelist's art as sympathy. And in seeking for those essential qualities which flowed into the novel from the past, we find that women had a very considerable share in the contributory stream of purified humanity which flowed directly into literature.

It is not my intention—for my space is for Dickens and his secret—to deal with the early Victorian women novelists so fully as one would like. That they were impressing their peculiar vigour and subtlety upon the literature of this period, and not merely in fiction, is so forcibly conveyed, that, in seeking for vital factors, we are faced with their presence and their influence at every turn. It was a time when their power was already becoming dynamic. Amongst all the urgencies of the social, philanthrophic, and literary currents of the time, so impressive were their powers that many leading thinkers amongst the men were clearing the intellectual highways where their encroachment tended to meet with resentments. Buckle, the historian, wrote and lectured especially upon the lofty powers of mind and emotion which emanated from their work and personality as tributary streams to the life and literature of the time. John Stuart Mill and George Henry Lewes measured their distinctive feminine qualities by the sublimest standards. Each of these spoke from personal intimacy; Buckle from his first-hand knowledge of Miss Sheriff, Mill of Miss Helen Taylor, and Lewes of Marian Evans. Without doubt George Eliot is an outstanding example of feminine acumen in intellectual and philosophical powers. Her tender humanity, even, is much more than simple or commonplace—it expands into the philosophical. Her humanity was in fact a religion; but it was not that of

Comte. And her popularity is co-extensive with twentieth century education. Like Dickens, she has become a classic.

It is a far cry from Fanny Burney to May Sinclair, the Brontës, the Oliphants, the Marian Evanses, and the Mrs. Gaskells of the Victorian period. There were literary moments in the days of the early Victorian women when the mere male seemed to be almost hidden. But if we desire to find the full emphasis of the humanising spirit in fiction as it flowed from women, I think we must seek it in George Eliot. In her stories like *Middlemarch* and *Adam Bede* is reflected English provincial life of the first half of the Nineteenth Century; as in Dickens is reflected London life of the same period. In breadth of canvas and in teeming variety of strongly-individualised figures both are similar. There are contrasts, but there are also *traits* in which they correspond. While there are contrasts in humour and in portraiture, there are congruities in human *motif* and the tender sympathetic spirit in the handling of the crudities and shortcomings of human nature. In the midst of multitudinous variety of characters, we receive from both the unmistakeable impress of a certain intertexture and interdependence of human lives—a sense of a common level of weal or woe which equalises and unites individual souls. Silas Marner, the humble weaver, and Dombey, the City magnate, are each subject to this newly-conceived moral order; breaches of which, we are shown, bring in their track both personal and social peril. To take the personal view, each of these types of character is treated in much the same way by both Dickens and George Eliot. The humble weaver and the haughty merchant through self-absorption are shrunken into the mere husk and shell of human beings. One is shrivelled in soul by avarice for gold; the other by avarice of self-pride. Both are passed through a purgatory of self-realisation and restored to the level of wholesome relations with their fellows. Dombey is merged

sympathetically in the undistinguished millions upon whom he looked down; Marner is merged sympathetically in the lives of those from whom he obstinately stood aloof. Both achieve personal salvation from petrifying aloofness in being restored to the common level of our simple affections and humanities. The convincing beauty and charm of detail in this domestic process we, for the moment, waive. What I would emphasise as belonging to the method and meaning of both Dickens and George Eliot, is the wider significance of their teaching. It is these humanities, in their aspect of being common to rich and poor alike, which diffuse life with a new and distinctly secular atmosphere. For in their full recognition and amplification rests a new religion of humanity by which man may intervene to save man. Both high and low are seen to be ignobly agonising for the attainment of some new and remote dispensation, while, here and now, true insight would achieve a remedy. Upon every man and woman is conferred a new nobility and sanctity, and a larger hope. Each is seen to hold an equal stake in life, with the duties common to its tenure. All are seen in an attitude of moral responsibility to each for the equalisation of the common burden, because all are placed in the bonded being of common lives and upon a common plane of communitary existence. In these conceptions are involved all the hopes of human happiness, progress, and destiny. In the face of this moral unity and equality all externals of caste and class fail to count. Nothing counts except—

The mystic stirring of a common life
Which makes the many one: fidelity
To the consecrating oath of our sponsor Fate
Made through our infant breath when we were born
The fellow-heirs of that small island, Life,
*Where we must dig, sow, and reap with brothers.**

* *The Spanish Gypsy*, by George Eliot.

This, I think, is briefly the upshot of the humanitarian ferment of the Victorian Era as it emerges in fiction and as it finds its emphasis in the writings of both George Eliot and Charles Dickens. Not merely Man the Individual is revealed, but Man the Community. Whatever differences in their art-methods there may be, whatever may be the respective measure or profundity of their philosophy of life, whatever may be the contrasts in their religious beliefs — and there are admittedly divergencies in all these points of view—they are at one in their faith in human nature despite its failures, and in their belief in the permanent value of every individual life. And here is unmistakeably rooted that comprehensive sympathy which holds a jealous and compassionate regard for the extreme tenuity and the perishable nature of those common qualities of the soul which are its most valuable possession. From hence also springs that tender solicitude of all men and women of genius and insight to cherish carefully every influence which seeks to safeguard the preservation of those common qualities of humanity in the protective bonds of corporate existence and the moral sanctions and sanctities of an universal brotherhood.

It was the specific discovery of these new battle-grounds of the spirit, as they lay immanent in the bosoms of the poorest and the humblest of human creatures, which must be credited to Charles Dickens. In the splendid achievement of utilising these materials for the expansion of a deeper and more intense humanity, George Eliot conspicuously shared. Both drew deep and powerful inspirations from the living realities of life and character; although in George Eliot's case she drank deeply at the fountains of philosophical literature. Each became the centre and focus of an influence which spread rapidly to the outer-most coasts of the Victorian consciousness; sweeping into the circle of its virile humanism types of men and especially women such as I have named. As we recall the shades of these

men and women we may well marvel at the spectacle of an infinite range of the human landscape which they have explored, and the release and expansion of the human spirit which their labours have achieved. Too few, perhaps, of these representative humanists of fiction remain with us as classics. But chief among them still in his abiding influence upon human nature is Charles Dickens.

V

THE TRIUMPH OF REALISM

CHAPTER V.

THE TRIUMPH OF REALISM

"Truth is on the March!"

EMILE ZOLA.

"It is not too much to say that Dickens could not only draw a character more accurately than any of the novelists of the nineteenth century, but could do it without pausing for a single sentence to be not merely impossible but outrageous in his unrestrained phantasy and fertility of imagination. No combination of phonography and cinematography could reproduce Micawber, Mrs. Sparsit and Silas Wegg from contemporary reality as vividly as Dickens. Yet their monstrous and side-splitting mental antics never for a moment come within a mile of any possible human utterance. That is what I call mastery; knowing exactly how to be unerringly true and serious whilst entertaining your reader with every trick, freak and sally that imagination and humour can conceive at their freest and wildest."

BERNARD SHAW.

"It is useless to discuss whether the conduct and character of the girl seem rational or material, probable or improbable, right or wrong. *It is true!*"

CHARLES DICKENS, IN DEFENCE OF "NANCY."

§ 1.

FROM the very beginnings of the novel the art of the fictionist has been primarily directed towards preserving in the body of the narrative an element of veracity and conviction. This would appear to be a mere truism; for in order to lead or lure the imagination and the interest of the reader, obviously there must be an appeal to the sense of national fitness and reality. But the full significance of the obvious is not always apparent. The growth of prose fiction, from the purely romantic or extravagantly imaginative, to the realistic, is to my mind rooted in this

perennial demand for "realism." Furthermore, I think it can be shown that the triumph of realism in modern literature is the triumph of humanism; that they are in fact synonymous terms, or, at all events, that they appear to become so in the world of modern art.

In tracing the origin and growth of the humanitarian principle in fiction, we had to get back to the days of Fielding, Richardson and Smollett. I think we shall find that in tracking down the beginnings of "realism" we shall have again to go over the same ground. Despite the powerful appeal to the imagination which we find in literature the further we go back, we can always see the corresponding appeal to the sense of reality. In all the play and interplay of motive and sentiment every device has been adopted to secure the illusion of reality. The more extravagant the calls made upon the imagination, the greater have been the powers of ingenuity in preserving the appearance of the actual and the real. Immanent in the episode and action of the story there is always the sophistical assumption of actual happening. The whole art of the novelist is in fact concentrated upon preserving this air of verisimilitude, and presenting all the circumstantial evidence of veracity and actual fact.

Le Sage has been regarded as the father of the modern novel for France. And in this he would antedate Richardson or Fielding. But, strictly speaking, the novel in its full-fledged style as an art-form can scarcely be said to have sprung from any single brain. Before the time of Le Sage there were the *Contes* of Boccaccio and La Fontaine, *et hoc genus omne*. These "Tales" may be considered part of the raw materials of the novel proper. With a more minute and realistic delineation of character, a more specific environment of manners, a linking together of episode, a spice of human nature or human sympathy, and you have the novel proper—of which *Gil Blas* was

perhaps the original example. But if Le Sage was the first of the novelists, he was also the first of the realists. For we have his own word for it that he merely desired to show life as it really was; to represent the idiosyncrasies of men and women as he really saw and knew them. He did this with an air of detachment and amused *insouciance* that was in itself delightful. Without the affectation or the airs of the superior person in letters, he looks out on the comedy of life in an invincible mood of good humour and dispassionate penetration. But there is little of that love which makes the world go round and the novel to circulate; no probing of the heart, no tampering with the nerve of tragedy, no subtle analyses of mind-movements or emotion, no railing at the evils or foibles of human nature. So complacent and unartificial is Le Sage in his general mood and attitude towards the life of his time, that Smollett criticises him for neglecting to stimulate that "generous "indignation which ought to animate the reader against the "sordid and vicious disposition of the world." But then Smollett himself was considerably lacking in that exquisitely cool, composed, and tolerantly amused attitude towards life which marks his compeer. He at one time claims him as his model, but he was lacking in his balance, his *sangfroid* and his philosophic calm. Smollett lampooned his contemporaries as if the whole world were at enmity with him. His attack on Fielding, while in his last illness, vied in petty malignity with that of Churchill on Hogarth. And, until *Humphrey Clinker* appeared in the very year of his death, his work was blemished by a cynicism which was barbed at the point, tinctured with gall, and feathered with undue contempt and vindictiveness. Furthermore it was too unsavoury, with its combination of sensibility and sensualism.

This scathing and ferocious Scot was as impetuously realistic in temperament as Carlyle; and yet, without any

relaxation of vigour or innate strength, he could display when he chose a genial humour of portraiture and a kindly humanity of spirit. His most striking gift was the power of outlining character in a few vigorous and bold strokes with the most convincing realism. His Matthew Bramble and Winifred Jenkins are admirable pieces of characterisation. And his Trunion, Bowling, Hatchway, and Pipes are remarkably faithful to life. In their broad humour and breeziness of ship-board scenery and wit, they appeal to us with all the relish and delightful expansiveness of the old-world life of the sea. Of Smollett, too, it might be said that he was the first to give us the vivid and effective picture of domestic interiors. Certainly the kitchen of an eighteenth century hostelry, for example, in the first chapter of *Sir Lancelot Greaves*, could scarcely be excelled for its impressive and happy realism, even by the superlative artist of the Maypole at Chigwell!

Fielding and Smollett were typical of a reaction to realism. They were typical, too, in the sense that the transition to a new method was semi-conscious, in that the idea of any deliberative or literal reflection of real life appears to have been absent. The veil of the inner temple was raised by Richardson. Nevertheless, this is, in my judgment, quite in accord with that phase of art which we know as realistic. In the case of Fielding, it would tend to preserve that pleasant temper of *sangfroid* with which Le Sage confronts life and letters, and which contrasts with the irritable and headlong passion of the rather ill-balanced Smollett. This fine frame of mind was all the more possible in its simple good humour and equanimity, in so far as the deeper sense of humanity and its problems had not as yet entered completely into life and letters. The zeal for realistic presentation was mainly concerned with the externals of reality rather than the underlying substance. It chiefly sought to preserve an atmosphere of *vraisemblance* and

credibility. The exteriors of character and human nature, rather than the more profound qualities of temperament, were its chief concern. In the case of Fielding we have the advantage of comparing definitely the principles of his art with his contemporaries, for he discussed them in his books. *Tom Jones* and *Joseph Andrews* embody them in oracular form and with characteristic irony and candour.

Amongst the superficial devices to preserve the illusion of veracity and realism, novelists of the period cast their narratives in the first person, or in the form of private and intimate correspondence; or they introduced the "story within the story." They were sometimes thrown into the form of personal adventures or "history"; the "memoirs" trick of reality was also frequently resorted to.* Or again, the romance was quarried and constructed from family archives; some secret manuscript was revealed out of the mysterious recesses of an ancestral castle, or "facts" were communicated through a family confidant, and so forth. While Fielding repudiated all these meretricious artifices of realism as artless and trivial, he is even more sophistical in such affectations of truth and verisimilitude than his precursors or contemporaries. So possessed is he with the zest of his inventiveness (for he boldly declares that his method is quite novel and all his own), that he expounds what he confidently affirms to be the real "realism" as he proceeds with his narrative, or, as he prefers to term it, his "History." For it is nothing less than the stark truth which he draws from the "theatre of nature," and which

* The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries were notable for the production of a large number of "Memoirs" like those of the Count de Grammont (1713). They *prima facie* bear all the marks of circumstantial veracity. They are also characterised by all the elegancies and *realism* of the *belles lettres* of the period. But generally they are vivacious and entertaining narratives comprising personal anecdote and scandal, tricked out in all the appearance of strict truth and actuality.

distinguishes his own writings from "those idle romances which are filled with monsters!" These chapters on the new novel-art, as he conceives it, are quite literary gems rendered as prologues to the several books into which his stories are divided. While they constitute an elegant and entertaining framework of pure literature they are given sometimes in a fine vein of irony. Indeed, their oracular and casuistic style of exposition is at times such as to evoke our sense of incongruity with the narrative. We need a pretty strong sense of humour to read them without criticism; and it is humour—our humour—which now and then bubbles faintly into tolerant derision at their lack of strict consonance with the elements and declared purpose of his story. But there is no gainsaying that he desires to realise the truth of fact—the parade of real personality and the pageant of real life—if these be only the real streets, highways, and countryside; the real residences and hostelries, the low kitchens, prisons and brothels; the crowd of shopkeepers, innkeepers, lackeys, footpads, sharpers, bullies, prostitutes, and pimps which heighten the realism of his atmospheres, just as they impart vigour, humour, and human nature to Hogarth's pictures. The extension of the areas of "low" life into which Fielding and Smollett passed for their characters provided material which considerably accentuated the element of "realism." But Fielding, I think, did not proceed to the lengths which Smollett did for "low" character. His apologies for the introduction of the "low" are both sincere and convincing. He admonishes us not to condemn a character as bad because it is not perfectly good. He likens the brevity of life to the brief hour of the actor on the stage, in which there is no scope for superlative magnitudes either of goodness or of evil. Moreover, a single wicked act constitutes a man no more a villain than a single villainous part on the stage makes him one. Upon the whole, he says, a man of candour and

understanding is never too hasty to condemn. He can censure a failing or a vice without rage against the guilty party. He may contemplate vice and grossness without contamination. And in a setting of humour his compassion may be evoked, as in a setting of tragedy his soul may be purged and purified. He saw no good purpose served in the portrayal of angelic perfection or diabolical depravity, and this not merely because the extremes of good and bad character he personally had never met in real life. They constitute in his judgment bad art-work, chiefly because their ethical effect is inferior. The contemplation of either extreme provokes us to such passion of abhorrence or shame as floods out all those tenderer emotions which may incite us to self-realisation and gently enthuse us with the courage of self-improvement. In either case we perceive a nature of which we partake. For none of us is wholly good or wholly bad. But the idyllic or the angelic we despair of ever attaining. And the diabolic and the depraved afflict us only with those uneasy sensations which gall with their odiousness, without evoking either the effort or the pleasure of edification. All this, and much more to the same ingenious effect, leads us to suspect that however sincere in his wish to reflect real life, Fielding possessed little appreciation of the subtle powers or the profound principles of the tragic, despite his classical scholarship and his admiration of Shakespeare. The more subtle use and elaboration of the tragic, which was Shakespeare's gift, he never achieved. But his gift of humour and his craft in the comic are quite unmistakable. And in a remarkably convincing way his idea of that form of art in fiction, which he so trumphantly declares to be his very own, embodies an ethical quality which at this early stage of its growth suggests at once the thought with which we opened this stage of our argument, namely, that the triumph of realism is the triumph of humanism. "If there be enough of good-

"ness in a character," says Fielding,* "to engage the "admiration and the affection of a well-disposed mind, "though there should appear some of those little blemishes, "*quas humana parum cavet natura*, they will raise our "compassion rather than our abhorrence. Indeed, nothing "can be of more moral use than the imperfections which "are seen in examples of this kind; since such form a kind "of surprise, that is more apt to affect and dwell upon our "minds, than the faults of very wicked and vicious persons. "The foibles and vices of men in whom there is a great "mixture of good, become more glaring objects, from the "virtues which contrast them and show their deformity; "and when we find such vices attended with their evil "consequences to our favourite characters, we are not only "taught to shun them for our own sake, but to hate them "for the mischiefs they have already brought on those we "love."

Contemporary critics of fashion stigmatised the products of the new school with the tyranny of the single epithet. They were disdainfully voted "low." This remains to some extent a tradition to this day. But it must be conceded that the condemnation was well met, by Fielding, at all events. The historical and critical value of these early writers may be seen in the fact that nevertheless they remain with us as classics. They are at least invaluable as *data* in the evolution of the novel. Fielding, for one, required no great effort of prescience to foresee precisely the kind of mud which would be thrown. And his "prologue" chapters exhibit ample force and ingenuity in meeting all adverse critics. Both he and Smollett possessed undoubted qualities of scholarship and creative genius; and although the bald, unsavoury features of some of their stories would not be tolerated from the modern novelists, it is the modern, like the school of Zola and Hugo, who redeem them by the

* Ch. I. Book X., *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling.*

higher purposive elements of humanitarian *motifs*. What renders the realism of certain of the present-day writers acceptable is that, instead of the comic or seemingly flippant setting of the eighteenth-century writers, we have a more serious background of scientific and philosophical questions relating to the main problem of evil in its biological and social phases. Fielding transmuted the romance of supernormal or magical motives into the romance of personal "adventure." The slender threads of the theme of love, and his deliberate approximation to the realisms of stage traditions through the medium of the comic, may be said to have brought his stories nearer the true form of the novel proper. His first exploit in the new form of prose fiction, *Joseph Andrews*, was perhaps unfortunate in being a somewhat lewd and caustic travesty of Richardson's *Pamela*. Joseph, as the male counterpart of the resistant virgin, comes dangerously near to those faultless monsters of romance which he so thoroughly detested! He declared that the novel should properly be a comic epic in prose. It should describe "not men but manners; not an individual but a species"; not the specific or microscopic particularities of the single being, but the colouring and "general "properties of large appearances." And morals, he stoutly contended, are better appealed to by wholesome laughter rather than by pious indignation. But, like his *Jonathan Wild*, the "history" or the "adventures" of the pursued male put too great a strain both upon his realism and his ironical sinews. And as for Joseph representing a *type* of any period—well, we must patiently await the advent of that delectable Eden reflected in the pure romance of Bulwer Lytton, *The Coming Race*; where the female is the positive force in human life; not merely the passive tempter of old, but the aggressive pursuer of the coy and inviolate male!

Howbeit it is hardly necessary to say that Fielding created many real convincing and entrancing types of

character. Although *Joseph Andrews* was the expression of a fierce and formidable antagonism to Richardson's style, it forthwith became the characteristic and determinate mould into which he poured all the virile energy of his distinctive genius—the art-form of his subsequent fiction. His attitude to life and criticism was always in the spirit of comedy. His demeanour was invincibly classical and boldly undaunted. Although tinged perhaps with the pedantic affectations of his age, it is relieved with a dexterous simplicity, a vein of scathing irony and a stream of ingenuous good humour. The realistic methods, which he initiated and consistently worked to, tended naturally to restrain the action of his stories well within the bounds of probability. Intricacy of plot, unnatural surprises, breathless episodes, hair-breadth adventures and catastrophic happenings play no visible part in his "histories." He never forsakes the lifelike for the impressive, and under the adroit skill of his craft, the romance of fiction generally assumes the reality of biography, and the probability of "history." He was the best type of that school of prose fictionists who yielded to the prevailing demand for a more genuine realism, and he dexterously formulated and defended its fundamental principles. In doing this he achieved something more than a tangible advance towards the structure of the true novel. He gave to the literary critic for all time the free gift of those principles which should govern his art and justify his existence.

§ 2.

In discussing the nature and origin of the element of realism in prose fiction, a double purpose is served. In addition to the interest and bearing of such a question upon the subject-matter of this chapter, is the fact that Dickens from his boyhood came under the influence of the eighteenth-century novelists. He explicitly tells us so. And

we know that in the sentimental and intellectual interest of his later life they always remained an influence. We know that the whole school of early fictionists rested upon his shelves, and doubtless became the prime influence of his early artistic evolution.

Those who knew him personally constantly tell us how frequently he revelled in talk upon the characters and the humourous episodes of the eighteenth-century fictionists. In these talks he conveyed the impression of being a remarkably well-read man in this old-world range of literature. He had evidently absorbed himself in such reading with profound sympathy and immense delight. In his conversations upon these topics he frequently recounted his impressions in that racy and original manner of his, setting forth character and incident in some new and amusing way, and lighting such reminiscences of his reading with his own brilliant fancy.

We, of course, know that the source of this attachment to the old fictionists was in his own *naïve* and impressionable childhood at Chatham. There, in a certain "blessed "room" in his father's house, he discovered, and read and re-read *Tom Jones*, *Roderick Random*, *Peregrine Pickle*, *Humphrey Clinker*. There also he discovered *The Vicar of Wakefield*, *Don Quixote*, *Gil Blas*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Arabian Nights*, *Tales of the Genii*, and others of these old classics. These all moved his imagination and haunted his fancy. Their heroes inspired him to act their parts, and recite their words; and he even, out of these boyhood's conceits, contrived a play. To revel thus in what was to him a wealth of literature was, in those days, his constant joy. And, as he says, whatever there was in such books which was likely to harm his innocence was not for him; it all left him untouched. "When I think of it," he says, "the picture always rises in my mind of a summer evening, "the boys at play in the churchyard, and I sitting on my

"bed reading as if for life. Every barn in the neighbour-"hood, every stone in the church, and every foot of the "churchyard had some association of its own in my mind "connected with these books, and some locality made "famous in them."

From this early reading, with its vivid impressions of actuality and realism, he no doubt received the germs of that habit of comparison and observation, and that outlook on character and life, with which we are so familiar in his stories. All his early books at least, are invigorated with the same picaresque element that characterises Fielding and Smollett. There is the perpetual travelling, the spirit of adventure, the changing scenes, the liveliness of inns and hostelries of the high road, the arrivals at strange towns. The drama of expeditions, the variety of character, the animation of adventure, are all characteristic of his first few stories, and carry unmistakably the impress of his early explorations in the old fiction of the previous century.

But the influence of the Fielding school over Dickens is not exclusively confined to the *Pickwick* type of story. Although it may be said to be rapidly refined down to the point of invisibility, yet as an authority upon certain matters, Fielding was on occasion still held in mind. Fielding followed the example of Cervantes and Le Sage in the interpolation of the short story; and although Dickens dropped this idea later, we may see its method and principle peep out as late as *Little Dorrit* (1854). At this time he discussed with Forster the propriety of his treatment of the character of Miss Wade. Although not a full-length portrait, it makes a fine study in female psychology, and is one to which Dickens devoted a deal of painstaking skill. In the chapter entitled "The History "of a Self-Tormentor" he appeared doubtful as to the form in which it presented itself. It seemed to him perhaps

too obtrusive, and was wedged in somewhat inconsequently towards the closing stages of the book. So, indeed, it is. But in introducing a feature of this sort, he desired to follow the method of Fielding and so to set the whole story of this woman's inner life as to make the blood of his book circulate through it, and render it compact with the *dénouement*. I agree with Forster that if so eligible a study of character could have been fixed in close relation with the whole plot, its success as a realistic piece of portraiture would have been much more certain. But my point here is that Dickens still exhibited, at any rate, a personal regard for Fielding's methods, in that all such obtrusions or asides should be in strict consonance with the course of the narrative.

Without here entering further into the question of the influence of Fielding, it may be noted that both he and Dickens have been criticised for the same defects of characterisation. Dickens's habit of emphasising certain odd singularities of character, of presenting his men and women with repetitive tricks and *traits* of manner, so frequently regarded as a mere mannerism of portraiture, has also been ascribed to Fielding.* But it is beyond all doubt that both artists could deftly hit off the whole inner nature of their characters by a few surface sketch-lines of delineation. What George Eliot or Meredith did by whole

* A familiar instance is of course Micawber. It is complained that he is always introduced in the same situation, always moved by the same sentiments, always articulate upon the same topics, always ebulliently brewing gin-punch and dispensing the same jollity, always crushed and rebounding, always confident of something turning up. Fielding has been often criticised for surcharging his characters with the same repetitive features and catchwords. Squire Western, Partridge, Nulliber, Adams, all make their *entré* with some of the same aspects of mannerism and uniformity. That this is a real fault is quite open to argument as I have elsewhere contended. See *Pageant of Dickens*. Ch. VII. "The Eccentrics."

paragraphs and pages of psychological description, Dickens and Fielding did with a few vivid touches of light and shade work on the surface. Fielding openly declared that the true art of portrayal was to embody qualities of the species in the individual; not merely to describe men and manners but to embody the common propensities of human nature in the single man.

Dickens followed this principle so effectively that his readers readily recognised themselves or their acquaintances in his books; and one of the preoccupations of his day was to mark his prototypes in the daily round and intercourse of life. The result was that scores of Pickwicks, Uriah Heaps, Captain Cuttles, Bob Cratchets, Dombeys, and Carkers, walked the ways, grew old, and one by one died. There are yet a few survivors left who at times get photographed in the pages of the *Dickensian*. But immortality descends upon them all; and with every fresh reader comes the resurrection.

§ 3.

The limits of this chapter compel me to take a flying leap over the whole intervening literary spaces and come at once to an outstanding personality of the Victorian period who reflects its strenuous and realistic temper, and who also perceptibly conveyed to Dickens certain aspects of his spirit and outlook.

The story of the friendship of Carlyle and Dickens to which I briefly referred in the last chapter is one of the most interesting in the annals of literature and may well be summarised here—fruitful as it was of literary influences and activities. It was of slow growth and re-acted profoundly on both men, and on their associates. Carlyle, it would seem, did not take particularly kindly at first to the new sun that had risen in the literary firmament,

to the heights which he himself had already climbed.* In time, he came to love Dickens, as perhaps he learned to love no other man. Carlyle, as his mother once said of him, was "gey ill to live with." Like Mr. Grewgious, he was an angular person and hard in the grain. We have all been made familiar with those personal faults of temperament, and of temper, that beset the man who "preached the gospel of silence in forty volumes," and whose sardonic bitterness made some of his friends regret that he did not practise the virtue more severely so far as his personal conversation was concerned. Carlyle's biographer has let very little escape him that his many admirers (I might say disciples), would be glad to forget. Yet how many of us, fretted with the noble melancholy and the inarticulate but generous rage that surged in poor Carlyle's breast, could come through the ordeal of so personal a record without incurring the suspicion of being sour and ill-tempered? "Man sees the act," it is written, "God the circumstances," and it is possible for the biographer, as for the stenographer, to record the hasty jibe and the reckless jape, while leaving unchronicled the trials

* In *Conversation and Correspondence with Carlyle,* by C. Gavan Duffy (*Contemporary Review,* July, 1892), some of Carlyle's characteristic private opinions are stated. Asked about Charles Dickens, he replied: Was there a character in his books which we met with in real life except Mrs. Nickleby? He read Thackeray over and over again, but was rarely tempted to return to Dickens. His theory of life was entirely wrong. He wanted the world buttered up and made soft and accommodating for people He had not written anything which helped to solve the problems of life. But he was worth something—one penny which it cost you a week to read him!

The "good, the gentle, high-gifted, ever-friendly, noble Dickens," as Carlyle afterwards spoke of him, knew his impetuous moody ways, and good-naturedly overlooked the girding at him in *Past and Present* as "Schnuspel the distinguished novelist," and many other similar petty cynicisms.

and troubles that had led the complex mind of the man involved into the mental tumult that thus found relief. Easier is it also to record the spoken word than the generous act or the intuitive kindness or deed of sympathy, that necessarily must escape the biographer turned reporter, as must also the great unuttered thoughts and trials. All one's amiable felicities and sympathies cannot be jotted down in a notebook or preserved for us in a gramaphone.* Just now it is especially fashionable to discount and sneer at the sage of Chelsea because he was the principal populariser of Germany, and of German thought, during a time, let us remember, when nine Englishmen out of ten were enthusiastic in their appreciation of German *Kultur* and German methods. But it was the old Germany, and the old type of German, solid, purposeful, and eminently practical, that he taught us to admire. From the Germany of yesterday, as typified by the ex-Kaiser, his boasts, his blasphemies and his achievements, Carlyle would have shrunk, even before the war had unmasked that once-admired monarch.

The fact is, for all that has been written in his detraction, both by foe and friend, Carlyle's soul was a noble one. As Mr. Ley has well said: "It is unchallengable that he was a "great and noble man, who suffered privations rather than "be untrue to himself, who would have died before he "would have lied or done a dishonest deed; a man who "believed unshakably in the innate goodness of human

* Harriet Martineau once passed the truest and most concise encomium upon Carlyle that could be granted to a stormy spirit so strongly in contrast with the tranquil and philosophic temperament which she herself possessed. "He may be" she admits, "himself the most curious opposition to himself; he may "be the greatest mannerist of his age while denouncing conven- "tionalism—the greatest talker while eulogising silence—the most "woeful complainer while glorifying fortitude . . . but he has "none the less infused into the mind of the English nation "sincerity, earnestness, healthfulness and courage."

"nature, and never feared to denounce evil wheresoever he "found it. On the surface, very 'difficult' dyspeptic that "he was, at heart he was a true Man."

At first—and indeed for long after their acquaintance—Carlyle was a little inclined to discount Dickens's work, much as he liked the man. When *Great Expectations* appeared—in monthly parts—the issue was put aside, as time could not be wasted on that "Pip nonsense." Later in the evening, as Forster tells us, it would be taken up and devoured amid "roars of laughter." The incident may serve to illustrate the progress of the friendship, and shows how Carlyle's dour suspicion and outer coolness gradually thawed before the genius and charm of "Boz," until he came to a full recognition of his worth and genius. From the first he liked him as a man. "He is a fine little "fellow, 'Boz,' he wrote after their meeting at the Stanleys. "Clear, blue, intelligent eyes that he arches amazingly, "large protrusive, rather loose mouth, a face of the most "extreme *mobility* which he shuttles about—eyebrows, eyes, "mouth and all—in a very singular manner while speaking. "Surmount them with a loose coil of common-coloured hair, "and set it on a small compact figure, very small and "dressed *à la* d'Orsay rather than well—this is Pickwick. "For the rest, a quiet, shrewd looking little fellow, who "seems to guess pretty well what he is and what others "are,"—perhaps the best pen-picture of Dickens ever drawn!

Forster, who was the trusted friend of so many diverse men, was at some pains to develop the acquaintance thus begun over the dinner-table. That they met often is a proof that Carlyle, fastidious and touchy in his personal friendships, as he was tolerant and just in his intellectual outlook (witness his tribute to Rousseau and Voltaire, men whose gospels he abhorred), soon thawed towards "Boz" to an extraordinary extent. Fitzgerald recalls a dinner

when, with Forster, Carlyle, and himself, Dickens "played "round the Sage as Garrick did Johnson—affectionately in "high good humour and wit, and, I could well see, much "pleasing the old lion." A little of this playfulness and high spirits seems to have touched even Carlyle, for at the *Copperfield* dinner we find him describing himself, greatly to Dickens's delight, "as a pore lone thing," *à la* Gummidge. When in 1860, Carlyle was at his lowest ebb of spirits, he could only be induced to leave his padded garret-room to meet the man whose society had a charm and an interest for him that none other possessed. We can see this plainly in the tribute to his friend's reading when, "to the complete upsetting of my evening habitudes and "spiritual composure," he was lead to become one of the audience. The episode is fully described in one of the letters of Thomas Woolner, the famous sculptor of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. He records how, on April 28th, 1863, "Mrs. Carlyle called upon me in the afternoon. She "wanted me to take tea at her house and go afterwards with "her husband to the Hanover Square Rooms to hear "Charles Dickens read, as she said Dickens had sent Carlyle "two tickets with an intimation that it would do him good "to hear a little reading. She was not strong enough to go "with him and he had made it a condition that she must "persuade me to go with him or he would not go himself. "I went to Chelsea, had tea and we took a cab to Hanover "Square. We found the room crowded and soon after we "were seated Charles Dickens appeared, I need scarcely "say amidst loud welcomes. He was the best reader I "ever heard and the changes of voice and manner suitable "to the various characters were so easy and natural they "appeared before the audience like veritable living beings. "But I must say with regret that the performance was a "terrible strain upon the reader's vital energies, as it was "clear that his whole mind was concentrated upon the long

"continuous effort. The reading was divided into two "parts of an hour each, with an interval for rest of ten "minutes. When the first part was over Dickens came and "took Carlyle away to an inner room, and in a minute or "two Carlyle came to fetch me 'to have some brandy and "water,' but I said I wanted no brandy and water; he "insisted that I must have some, and I went accordingly "within the room, the brandy soon appeared, and each "poured out a portion for himself, and Carlyle took his "glass and nodding to Dickens said: 'Charley, you carry "'a whole company of actors under your own hat.' The "second part of the reading was equally well done, and "Carlyle had nothing but praises to bestow upon it. . . . ."

On the intellectual, as distinguished from the personal, side, the union between the two grew firm and fast. At first Carlyle scorned *Pickwick* as the veriest trash. Soon, however, his attitude changed. *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations*, and *Hard Times* were books that aroused his fierce interest and enthusiasm. He became a devotee of "the lord of laughter and of tears," a partaker of that larger humanism, that more genial and more intimate compassion, as opposed to that stern judgment which marked *The French Revolution*—the book that supplied the ground for the *Tale of Two Cities*.

It is, therefore, not surprising that Dickens should have re-acted, through Carlyle, with immense effect on the young man whom, as we have seen, Carlyle so profoundly influenced.

But Carlyle and Dickens were united in a bond which no eruptive mannerism nor volcanic temper could rend asunder. That bond was one of literary conception and vocation. The outlook of each upon the troublous time was in certain fundamentals identical. Both realised that it had to be squarely faced and depicted in all its grim reality if any real good was to be effected. Both were determined to sail this

seething sea of unrest, each in his argosy, and each with his cargo of oil for the troubled waters. Emerson told Carlyle: "Our young men say yours is the only history "they have ever read." In absorbing his friend's *French Revolution* Dickens revelled in realism. There was never such a history for its penetration into the actualities of personal passion and idiosyncrasy. Such a history had indeed never before been written at all. It embodied the realisms of the prose fictionists from the beginning. Its form and manner had already appeared in the early "Memoirs" style of the French fictionists. The awe of its intimate humanities and inhumanities—all the tragic paraphernalia of its living reality—had been utilised in the art of literature, from Shakespeare onwards. It was in fact the method of the "realists" incarnated in real history. Carlyle wrote history in the study as Dickens would have reported it in the streets. Other historians handled the facts through second-hand *media*. He quarried the details of the Revolution from the very soil of France, soaked as it was with the blood of its victims. He wormed it from the very souls of its participators. He caught the tears as they sweated through the very façades of the buildings; he described the hoarse cries from their windows, the passion which went up from the streets. Other writers distilled from the written records a bland and reflective narrative; he held out the ragged and blood-stained documents themselves, as they were originally flaunted in the murky atmosphere, or trailed in the mud of the streets, or wrenched from the very hands of actors in the drama. The secret of his power was in this personal absorption alike in the individual passion and the tottering frenzy of the unregulated mob. It was in exact consonance with his style and temperament. Its volcanic character corresponded with his vehement nature. Its lurid spectacle evoked easily the vivid realistic counterpart whose panorama emerged from his

passionate intellect.

The continental wave of revolution crashed on these shores, and culminated in the menace of 1848 on Kennington Common. Ten years of Chartist agitation, to which Carlyle contributed his quota, had issued in the attempt to organise a revolutionary force of 100,000 armed men to march under the leadership of Feargus O'Conner from the Common to Westminster, to compel, by physical force if necessary, the acceptance of the People's Charter. The troops were kept wisely out of sight, but the enrolment of 150,000 London householders as special constables, coupled with a torrential downpour of rain upon the fated day, brought the whole affair to a fiasco. This event inspired another realistic piece of literature in the form of Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke*, in which the *contretemps* is vividly described. It would seem that the very passion of the period had precipitated fiction more completely into the realistic mood. Howbeit, we find Kingsley giving himself, in all the energy of his profound and passionate sympathy, to the new style of novel which the forceful example and initiative of Dickens had made possible.

§ 4.

It is curious that, so far as I can discover, Dickens and Kingsley never met. They had much in common. Of both it may be said that they were men of invincible courage and determination; and Kingsley had learnt from Carlyle and from Dickens that any view of literature which was not seriously didactic and purposeful, was a surrender to that idle dilettantism which all three men agreed was the unpardonable sin. Again, the fundamental outlook on life that both cherished had a rough but general correspondence, which necessarily rendered Kingsley peculiarly responsive to the artistic *motifs* of the older writer. They were both realists in the sense that both delighted in drawing their

characters and the surroundings of those characters with the same blunt uncompromising sincerity that Hogarth lavished on his canvas; and they were both of them more unconscious and disdainful of the class-divisions and feelings that then, just as at present, poisoned the literature and the thought of the age. There were other points of coincidence between the two, as regards both non-essentials and fundamentals. Both men were characterised by a robust common sense, a love of sport and of adventure. Both were emphatically open-air men, and both had a supreme, perhaps an exaggerated, confidence in the capacity and sagacity of their fellow-countrymen. I could without difficulty extract from their political confessions of faith pleas for that same Imperialism which is based largely on their abiding faith in the ability, the humanity, and the self-reliance of the Anglo-Saxon race. Both again had a distrust, based on their appreciation of realities, of Parliament, with its interminable debates and forensic futilities. Lastly, to take a common enthusiasm, both were strongly anti-puritan. The Vicar of Eversley, who taught his village boys to play cricket on Sunday afternoon, might himself well have penned that memorable declaration of the English Sunday, when Arthur Clennam listened to the bells that make the day hideous with their rasping appeals to "come to church—church—church."

Alton Locke and *Mary Barton* appeared a little more than a decade after *Dombey*—just long enough, we may conjecture with safety, to allow for the maturing of the new spirit in the minds of the writers of the period. Rather earlier—to be precise, in 1848—*Vanity Fair* was published, and Thackeray entered at once into his own. We know from the letter of his friend and admirer, Charlotte Brontë, that he was content to rank as the second greatest man of letters in England. That he came near to rivalling Dickens in some particulars, and, indeed,

that he out-distanced him altogether in others, cannot, I think be disputed. But, frankly, to me the controversy that has raged round the comparison between these two unique literary figures has always appeared a trifle over-emphasised. No one who reads the works of either author attentively can escape the conclusion that Thackeray was so much the creation of the older writer, that, had the latter never come to maturity, it is, to say the least, doubtful whether *Vanity Fair* or *Esmond* would ever have been given us. This is a bold claim, but let us look at the facts. The effect of Dickens's novels on Thackeray was incalculable. We may not agree with the latter's estimate of Dickens's pathos, but at least we must respect its sincerity. "When "he read the number of *Dombey* containing the death of "Paul, he put it in his pocket, went out and flung it down "before Mark Lemon at the *Punch* office exclaiming "excitedly: 'There's no writing against this; one hasn't "'an atom of chance. It's stupendous.'"

That was not the only tribute to the pathos of Charles Dickens which was offered by the man who lived to write the death of Colonel Newcome. We know, for instance, that he read "Boz" aloud to his children, and cried and laughed and cried again over the novels that were then appearing in monthly parts.

Thackeray was at this time living by contributing to various periodicals. He was spoken of as rather a good man to write papers of general interest for the magazines. He does not seem to have worked very seriously at the University, or to have taken life or literature very earnestly. After the 'Varsity he was for some time in Germany, and then, returning to England in 1831, he entered a lawyer's chambers to prepare for the Bar, a task he soon abandoned. His successor, it is said, found Thackeray's desk stuffed with sketches and caricatures, and for a long time we know he entertained the idea of achieving fame as an artist.

His first meeting with Dickens was when he called on the latter at Furnival's Inn, and asked for the commission to illustrate *Pickwick*. But neither Art nor the Bar held him for long. The money that he had inherited from his father was lost in a newspaper speculation, and he turned to journalism for a living—"a tall Cornish giant of a man," said Carlyle, "who is writing here for dear life." Thackeray's real journalistic career must have commenced in 1840 at the latest, and for many years he was content to continue contributing fugitive work to periodicals, some of which were equally fugitive themselves. If we care to read any of his earlier efforts we shall be hard put to it, I think, to find any marked trace in them of the great power which he displayed when, as a middle-aged man, he sat down to achieve fame as a novelist. *The Book of Snobs*, *The Memoirs of Mr. Charles J. Yellowplush*, and the *Ballads of Policeman X*—all very clever, all rather cynical, and all brightly written—bear, none of them, his stamp of genius, and they did not even win their author popularity. It was only when he issued *Vanity Fair*, in monthly parts, that his eminence rose to a commanding height, and he achieved the position of authority in the world of literature to which his genius certainly entitles him. But I do not hesitate to ascribe Thackeray's rise and devolpment to the strong influence which Dickens's art had upon him, and to the fact that, without Dickens's earlier efforts, the atmosphere in which the great cynic's genius unfolded itself would never have been created. The enlarged vision and the freer mental outlook that followed inevitably on the triumph of the man whom Thackeray always venerated, alone made his success possible. In saying this, I am not for one moment trying to detract from the greatness of the creator of Henry Esmond or of Rawdon Crawley; but genius, let us remember, is a delicate plant even when it appears to be a hardy perennial. Who can doubt the

cramped sympathies and artificially narrowed outlook of the man who wrote *The Book of Snobs*? Who does not rejoice in the ampler force and liberated energies of the immortal author of *Vanity Fair*? It is not merely the fact that the correspondence between certain scenes in Thackeray and Dickens are almost irresistible. Under this head Mr. Fitzgerald has accumulated a wealth of evidence that ought not to be disregarded; and to those who feel inclined to study in detail the various instances cited by him, I would commend the saying of George Bernard Shaw, to the effect that a certain way to achieve success to-day would be to transfer characters bodily out of Dickens and write of them in the manner of Molière. Whether or not this happened, it is obvious that the work of Dickens enabled Thackeray to find himself as a writer. In essentials, in their fundamental conception of life, the two men were the same. Save that it is done with defter art, Dickens himself might have written the famous passage in which Colonel Newcome, whose heart was as a little child's, stood in the presence of his Maker. I am not disputing that in certain respects Thackeray was the greater artist of the two. His mastery of great dramatic scenes; his management of delicate situations; his superior characterisation of women, and his sensitive taste, which eschewed crudity and exaggeration—in these, I think, he bears off the palm. On the other hand, I cannot find him the equal of Dickens either in creative capacity or in satire, or in that peculiar buoyancy and power of caricature which was Dickens's special gift from the gods. But the point is, that the grand *motif* underlying Thackeray's teachings was imbibed from Dickens. He left the Varsity and toiled long in Fleet Street, a cynical and sophisticated, though a kindly, man of the world; and it was not until the magic of Dickens released his soul that he was able to write sincerely of life, and bravely and fearlessly of men and things. He wrote

of them, indeed, from the opposite pole of society but with the same underlying conviction that animated the man who was at once his tutor and his rival; with a reverence for the simple and the unspoilt heart; with a scorn for the hollow and the pretentious; with a love, deep and abiding, for the unworldly, and a shrewd eye for the base and the unworthy, which pierced instantly through all mockery and pretence. Perhaps if his satire has a fault, it partakes, unlike Dickens's, a little of the keenness of the dissector. "Thackeray," wrote Charlotte Brontë, "likes to dissect "an ulcer or an aneurism; he has pleasure in putting his "cruel knife into quivering, living flesh." Perhaps the criticism is just. Yet who would forego Rawdon Crawley or Pendennis? If his satire stung, it was because it was true; but the very truth that he proclaimed would, I think, have never got itself uttered, had not the English public learnt to love satire from the hands of an even greater master.

§ 5.

But Dickens had one conquest greater even than Thackeray. His influence spread to an entirely new sphere, where it was destined to bring forth golden fruit. We know from Forster that his work, which was received here with wild applause and rejoicings, achieved in America an even more sensational success. His visit there led to a welcome that the great United States had never accorded to any foreigner since Lafayette. His letters speak of the "crowds pouring in and out the whole day; of the people "that line the streets when I go out; of the cheering when "I went to the theatre; of the copies of verses, letters "of congratulation, welcomes of all kinds, balls, dinners, "assemblies, without end." Dickens, in fact, had America at his feet, and, in the works of at least two of their greatest authors, the eminence of his genius was

soon felt. It would be a dull man indeed who did not discern the very spirit of the master in the romances of Nathaniel Hawthorne, with their fresh, almost childlike delight in the frank, unconscious charm of unspoilt natures —natures that have kept their simplicity, perhaps I might almost say their holiness, amid the jangle and the fret, the envy and the avarice, that lie around them. Not less discernible is Hawthorne's indebtedness to him in that early sense of horror which comes upon us in the pages of both with a force all the more compelling because of its swift suddenness ; and surely no other author knew better than Dickens himself how to show the corroding poison that fanaticism spreads through a nature naturally sweet and lovable. But for the greatest of Dickens's American triumphs we must turn to that consummate artist, who, alike in his wit and in his pathos, in his characterisation and his narratives, more nearly resembled him than any other writer who has yet appeared. "I have rarely known "him more honestly moved," says Forster, "than by the "two sketches, *The Luck of Roaring Camp* and *The "Outcasts of Poker Flat!*" Nor need we wonder at this. The gay *insouciance*, the boisterous good nature, the quiet sudden pathos, and above all, the mastery of the human heart that detects the pure gold of humanity lying beneath the outer dross—these features that made Bret Harte famous were Dickens's very own.

Dickens's influence, as we see it here operating on Mrs. Gaskell, on Kingsley, on Thackeray, on Hawthorne, and on Bret Harte, stamps him as the great humanist of his age. He had a supreme conviction of the value of the simple, human affections, and of the wholesome instincts of the ordinary man and woman. They were the background of his thought, the incentive of his immense purpose. The whole aim of his writings is to exalt the homely, practical sympathetic soul—the common man, the everyday woman.

To seek a word to describe this spirit, we can say of it only that it was humanism; with no particular cast-iron theory or system, no social, scientific or religious bias, but suffused with a deep sense, a real and passionate appreciation, of the value and significance of human life; with a profound recognition of the needs of man, and an imperative and transcendent sense of justice; a sense that left Dickens with no respite, and that inspired him to the last day of his life. It would not let him spare an abuse nor mitigate for an instant a censure. It rose in him clamorous and insistent and urged him to the attack again and again: now on the Poor Law; now on the neglect of the child; now on the law's delays; now on the cruelty of magistrates; now on the general attitude of a society callous to the poor.

Much more truly of Dickens than of Heine may it be said: "Let a sword be laid upon his grave; for he was "a steadfast warrior in the emancipation war of mankind."

CHAPTER VI

DICKENS AS REVOLUTIONIST

VI

DICKENS AS REVOLUTIONIST

"The essential value and truth of Dickens's writings have been unwisely lost sight of by many thoughtful persons, merely because he presents his truth with some colour of caricature. Unwisely, because Dickens's caricature though often gross is never mistaken. Allowing for his manner of telling them, the things he tells us are always true . . . . He is entirely right in his main drift and purpose in every book he has written, and all of them but especially *Hard Times* should be studied with close and earnest care by persons interested in social questions."

JOHN RUSKIN.

"To whom, then, is this wealth of England wealth? Who is it that it blesses; makes happier, wiser, beautifuller, in any way better? Who has got hold of it, to make it fetch and carry for him, like a true servant, not like a false mock-servant; to do him any real service whatsoever? As yet no one. We have more riches than any Nation ever had before; we have less good of them than any Nation ever had before. Our successful industry is hitherto unsuccessful; a strange success, if we stop here! In the midst of plethoric plenty, the people perish; with gold walls, and full barns, no man feels himself safe or satisfied. Workers, Master Workers, Unworkers, all men, come to a pause; stand fixed, and cannot farther. Fatal paralysis spreading inwards, from the extremities, in St. Ives workhouses, in Stockport cellars, through all limbs, as if towards the heart itself. Have we actually got enchanted, then; accursed by some god?"

THOMAS CARLYLE.

§ 1.

SO far as we have been able to trace them, we have seen that the humanistic elements of literature have advanced through processes of reaction and revolt. I think this has been made fairly clear, although we confined our view merely to those authors who appeared to have personally and directly affected Dickens. It was of the nature of a revolution, and as it advances to the Victorian

period, we may see that it was one principally of the mind and the heart. The external upheavals which convulsed the Continent affected the souls of the British, rather than their streets and highways. This mental revolution was not less slow or less stable than the cataclysm beyond the Channel. It was certainly the more potent. It issued forth in rapid processes of evolution rather than in bursts of external violence. These heightened processes of unfolding expressed themselves in every form of the nineteenth-century literature and in every category of individual and collective life. And in one of those categories of life we may find its spectacular reflection in fiction—the inner life of the people, the surge of new spiritual and social passion, the stir of a new spirit of questioning, the rhythmic movement of new and impassioned reflection.

The beginnings of the revolt were by no means contained within the pale of the modern. The transition from criticism to creation, from *dilettante* wit to humour and pathos, from the externalisms of character to the anatomy of the human soul, from the supernormal and imaginative to the veracious and the real, from the romanticism of the dumb centuries to the recognition of the realism of the contemporary, from the contemplation of the Past to the realisation of the Present—we have seen that all this in its incipience emerged in the days of Fielding and Richardson, of Le Sage and Marivaux. In this literary revolt there was a certain element of diffused scepticism which everywhere broke away from authority.* In fiction there may have been a more circumscribed range of human experience, a less profound knowledge of the human heart. But there were certainly the trenchant intellectual weapons of style and wit, keen observation, shrewd wisdom, graceful diction, and the outlook in the spirit of comedy. Bohemian freedom

* Cf. Buckle's *History of Civilisation*, Ch. VI.

was the natural exuberant accompaniment of the revolt and the intellectual reaction; a reaction which might be referred to that slightly earlier period which produced Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici*, the *Vulgar Errors*, and Boyle's *Sceptical Chymist*. But what is more to our point is that with the new outlook came not only the intellectual recognition of man in relation to the "theatre of nature," as Fielding termed it, but the recognition also of the rights of the emotions, the instincts and the passions of man, and, what is more significant later, those of the common man. These intimations of a new human nature involved a rational recognition of a widened sympathy between man and the world about him, with a vision, later, of a diffusion of the same sympathy as between man and man. Thus the romance of the marvellous becomes transmuted into the romance of humanity. The revolt, as we shall see, emerges finally in the novel-realism of the modern, and the humanitarianism which culminates in Charles Dickens. In this the revolution enters into its socio-literary phase. An illustration of this is seen in one of our author's most important efforts to reflect this phase in fiction.

If *Hard Times*, the novel that appeared as a serial in *Household Words*, during the very period when the circulation of that journal more than doubled, affords us few clues to the originals of Dickens's characters, and is singularly barren of any suggestions of those personal associations and inspirations which necessarily interest all his readers, but it has a wealth of other and even more precious material. It illustrates for us, as no other work of Dickens has yet done, the effect of the art, thought, and literature of his day upon the great novelist; and it shows that, though he was intensely conscious of, and responsive to, the various intellectual stimuli and economic movements of the age in which he lived, he was violently and

passionately opposed to some of them. *Hard Times* stamps Dickens as a revolutionary. In *Pickwick* and in his earlier works we see him as a man full of the joy of life, concerned to maintain and idealise some of the most ancient and the most wholesome things in the world. The love of sport, the delight in the open air, the joy of a feast among friends, all these moved him to some of the best descriptive writing in the English language. Indeed, on a cursory view, one might be tempted to say of *Pickwick* that it was the work not only of a Tory, but of a Tory of the school of Sir Leicester Dedlock, who hated factories and towns and smoke, and hard grinding business, and who believed romantically in an era that was rapidly passing away. In *Hard Times*, however, Dickens's attitude to life is entirely changed, and instead of giving us the story of a delightful ramble through a beautiful and enchanting England, he confines us to one town in England, and draws a picture of that town so sinister and oppressing as to make us recoil with a shudder. Yet, as a matter of actual fact, between Dickens the Revolutionist, in *Hard Times*, and Dickens the Conservative, in *Pickwick*, there is no gulf fixed at all. We, in this age, have become accustomed to think of a revolutionary as a man who is passionately in favour of a new order. *Res novas petit.* As a matter of actual fact, it would be much truer to say that the revolutionary is a man who is in favour of old things—things indispensable to the nature of man, which the ordinary child of Adam cannot do without and yet still remain wholesome and healthy.

If we study the matter, we shall find that this particular attitude of mind has been the cause of every revolution worth thinking of. People said that the Russian peasants would never organise a successful revolution because they were in the main conservatives; but it was found that under

the pressure of events that very conservatism led to the upheaval. Tsardom was intolerable in practice, however defensible in theory, so long as the vast bulk of the people of Russia were left undisturbed at work on their farms and with the power of managing their own village affairs. But when the war forced them into the towns, there to experience the corruption and oppression of the old *régime* at its worst, almost instantly there was an explosion, and the fabric that had endured, secure against the assaults of Nihilists and High-brows for two centuries, went down in a couple of days before the revolt of the peasants and the Cossacks. Similarly the story of the French Revolution becomes only credible from the same standpoint. The Encyclopædists and the Intellectuals, who followed Voltaire and Diderot in their efforts to create a new heaven and a new earth, would never have got a hold on the peasantry of France if the peasantry had not been driven from their old settled ways of life on the land to become unemployed labourers in the urban districts, and afterwards insurgents in the cities. Man revolts, not so much to get a new thing but to get back an old thing, which he requires and which he finds is indispensable to life. As with France and Russia, so with the revolution in thought, feeling, and ideas which Dickens initiated in the middle of those most Conservative and, at the same time, most artificial, unreal, and deadening conditions of mid-Victorian England—conditions which, to a very large extent, still obtain in England, though by now discredited and undermined.

Indeed, an outstanding blemish on Forster's *Life* of his friend is his treatment of this wonderful and arresting book, in some respects the most remarkable that Dickens ever penned, and the only one perhaps that is entirely free from those failures in characterisation that mar some of his other books. In every other masterpiece of Dickens we

perpetually find that, side by side with his supreme triumphs of characterisation, there are also some of his most doubtful successes. Little Nell's Grandfather, for instance, jostles Dick Swiveller. The rather exaggerated Uriah Heap detracts even from Micawber, vibrant and convincing as the latter is. Mr. Dombey nearly casts a spell over Captain Cuttle. The unreal, "the transient, and "embarrassed phantoms" of Dickens's fancy are set out in as much wealth of imagery and detail as are the most life-like of his creations. Now, it is a remarkable fact that *Hard Times* is entirely free from these particular blemishes. There is not to be found in its pages one single character that does not stand out vivid, arresting, and thoroughly alive. Even if they be exaggerated, or too pronounced in caricature, they awaken in us an immediate recognition of force and reality. Bounderby and Gradgrind, Mrs. Sparsit and young Bitzer, Sleary and Louisa, all these characters, from the circus-girl to the fashionable Harthouse, live. We can hear them all talking, can watch every one of them in the scenes Dickens uses to emphasise their characteristics. There is not a single dull, unreal, and uninspiring character in the book, and it is very remarkable indeed, therefore, that Forster should have been content to dismiss it in a couple of pages. This fact, together with the obvious reason for his doing so, form the most striking proof we have that, from one point of view, at all events (and that point of view the most important), he was not altogether an adequate interpreter or biographer of the great man who chose him for that task. Forster was a friend on whose loyalty and discretion Dickens knew he could rely to the uttermost; it is obvious that between the temperaments of the two friends there was that curious and indefinable affinity, which is all the stronger when it cannot be explained. Hence Dickens, conscious even when a young man that he had achieved a world-wide reputation, that

his life's story would have to be written, felt no hesitation whatever in revealing to his bosom friend all the secrets of his innermost life, and in indicating to him exactly how much of them should be disclosed to the world, and even when they should be disclosed. Charles Dickens's sensations and experiences, suffered during that period of his life when, as a child, he worked at the blacking factory, were not really revealed to the world until he was dead. His own children were kept unaware of this, and of some other chapters in his life. For this, Dickens had to thank the discretion and reticence of his confidant and biographer. But it is, to say the least, unfortunate that the man whom he selected was politically, not only wholly out of sympathy with his own point of view, but evidently quite unable to appreciate the immense forces that Dickens was setting in motion when he penned *Hard Times* and the works following its appearance. Forster was a Whig, kindly, amiable, profoundly lethargic; he was unable to realise that the mid-Victorian order of things was in its nature, not only very imperfect, but obviously transient.* The idea that the

* The horror of the average Whig for *Hard Times* with its arraignment of our industrial system is very aptly described by Mr. G. K. Chesterton in his *Criticisms and Appreciations*: "Macaulay's private comment on *Hard Times* runs, 'One or two' "'passages of exquisite pathos, and the rest sullen Socialism.' "That is not an unfair and certainly not a specially hostile "criticism, but it exactly shows how the book struck those "people who were mad on political liberty and dead about every-"thing else. Macaulay mistook for a new formula called Socialism "what was, in truth, only the old formula called political "democracy. He, and his Whigs, had so thoroughly mauled and "modified the original idea of Rousseau or Jefferson, that when "they saw it again they positively thought that it was something "quite new and eccentric. But the truth was that Dickens was "not a Socialist, but an unspoilt Liberal; he was not sullen; "nay, rather, he had remained strangely hopeful. They called "him a sullen Socialist only to disguise their astonishment at "finding still loose about the London streets a happy republican."

society in which he lived was essentially insecure and unbalanced, and that it could not in the nature of things endure very long, never occurred to him any more than its gross and palpable cruelties and injustices made any real impression on his mind. Forster typified the limitations and absurdities of the period of which he was the product. Progress had now reached its apex; the members of the old squirearchy, who had retarded trade and the advancement of the nation, had at length been put into their proper place, and were to be suffered to exist as the graceful survivors of a picturesque but uncommercial past. The cotton-lords and the coal-kings, together with Free Trade and an untaxed Press, had risen to usher in a new era; and, provided that the workman was kept not too severely in his place, and those troublesome Trade Unions were sat upon, everything would be for the best in the best of all possible worlds. Never before had there been such prosperity, such wealth, such resources; and even though here and there abuses remained to be justified, and a few individual wrongs called for rectification, it was essential that we should, while setting them right, have due regard to the claims which vested interests had upon our attention. That was the mid-Victorian view of life which Forster shared. It was exactly that conception of things which Dickens set out to destroy in the greatest and most realistic attempt ever made to depict the conditions of life in a manufacturing town; it is quite natural, therefore, that on Forster the art and address, the force and the insight, with which that attempt was made should have been wholly lost.

With much truer insight than Dickens's own biographer, Mr. Bernard Shaw describes *Hard Times* as the first really great work of Dickens—"the book," he says, "which was "the first of a series of exposures of our civilisation." This first exposure, it is interesting to note, took place almost

in the middle of the Nineteenth Century, when there was being fought out the battle between two diametrically opposed and bitterly hostile schools of thought—a battle which was destined to affect profoundly the lives, thoughts and conduct of the British race. The particular contribution that Dickens made to this discussion in *Hard Times* proved so powerful and suggestive that it is not too much to say that its effect endures to this day.

§ 2.

The theoretic question which Dickens discusses in *Hard Times* is one not only of profound and elemental importance, but it is a question which has still to be threshed out. For this we have to thank, not so much the political ineptitude and incompetence of nine-tenths of the human race, but rather the fact that it is in its nature insoluble. Mr. A. G. Gardiner has well observed that probably hundreds of years hence we shall find somewhere in the unexplored globe, two men sitting together by a camp fire in the wilds discussing some phase or aspect of the problem, whose very designation, academically expressed, was unsuspected of them. That designation we are familiar with under the somewhat misleading titles—(or should I say tags?)—of Individualism and Socialism. Should man be controlled and governed by the State, employed, disciplined, and protected by the general executive of the community, or should he say, with Herbert Spencer, "Govern me as little as "possible," and rely on his own conscience, his own aptitudes and gifts to make the most of the opportunities that life offers? It is not very difficult to understand how it came about that mid-Victorian England, the England that Dickens was attacking in *Hard Times*, unhesitatingly affirmed the second, or Individualistic position. Everything that was vital and assertive in Democracy seemed to make

the negation or the limitation of the State imperative. If we are to date Democracy from the French Revolution—surely the most convenient starting-point for the historical student—then one can hardly see how human thought could have evolved otherwise. The State appeared to the French peasant, as to the English artisan, a short-sighted and incompetent, but still very ruthless, tyrant, who oppressed trade, who opposed blindly and indiscriminately all developments of religious thought and emotion, and who, above all, put down political freedom with a clumsy but heavy hand. It issued *lettres de cachet*, and locked up the ablest men in Europe, sending Diderot to the Bastille, and Tom Paine to America. It interdicted trade, and smashed the printing press, and inevitably the *mot d'ordre* for the reformer of that period was to destroy, maim, discredit, and nullify that enemy of progress—the State. Carlyle, the greatest opponent of this particular reforming zeal, has a wonderful passage in his *Past and Present* in which, with the sympathy and insight of genius, he does full justice to the demands of the very school he was opposing. "*Laissez Faire*," he points out, "has still to be not merely correctly interpreted, "but correctly translated." It did not mean, as people vainly imagine, "Let us do nothing"; but rather, "Let "us to do"—do not be for ever hampering, restricting, punishing, and paralysing our activities. The people, in a word, by no means desired the passivity and acquiescence that has come, falsely as I think, to be associated with Individualism; they wanted to do things; to work out their own development; to trade, speak, write, and think for themselves, and they wanted to stop the State from unduly interfering with their free activities so long as they were directed to wholesome ends.

But how did Individualism work out in England? Speaking generally, it met with deplorable results. It found

its actual, concrete manifestation in the middle classes, the classes that it freed from the absurd limitations which the Tories, typified by Sir Leicester Dedlock, vainly tried to impose when faced with the rise of that new and vigorous order. Free Trade, and an urban population, meant cheap labour for the cotton-lords, the coal-kings, and the railway magnates. The days of the Squirearchy, of Church and State reigning supreme in the villages of England, were over and men flocked in millions to the towns where, instead of Sir Leicester Dedlock and the parson, they had Mr. Bounderby and all the chapels that Coketown boasted. Coketown, in fact, was typical of the new England:

> "Coketown with its brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but, as matters stood it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and to-morrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next.
>
> "These attributes of Coketown were in the main inseparable from the work by which it was sustained;

against them were to be set off, comforts of life which found their way all over the world, and elegancies of life which made, we will not ask how much of the fine lady, who could scarcely bear to hear the place mentioned. The rest of its features were voluntary and they were these.

"You saw nothing in Coketown but what was severely workful. If the members of a religious persuasion built a chapel there—as the members of eighteen religious persuasions had done—they made it a pious warehouse of red brick, and sometimes (but this only in highly ornamented examples) a bell in a bird-cage on the top of it. The solitary exception was the New Church; a stuccoed edifice with a square steeple over the door, terminating in four short pinnacles like florid wooden legs. All the public inscriptions in the town were painted alike, in severe characters of black and white. The jail might have been the infirmary, the infirmary might have been the jail, the town-hall might have been either, or both, or anything else, for anything that appeared to the contrary in the graces of their construction. Fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the material aspect of the town; fact, fact, fact everywhere in the immaterial. The M'Choakumchild school was all fact, and the school of design was all fact, and the relations between master and man were all fact, and everything was fact between the lying-in-hospital and the cemetery, and what you couldn't state in figures, or show to be purchasable in the cheapest market and saleable in the dearest, was not, and never should be, world without end, Amen."

But great was the wealth amassed, and great was the rejoicing that followed. Men had left the ruined country-side for the comparative freedom of the towns; had made

a real step forward in that "progress" which now began to be talked about as an ideal of the race; although, even then, men questioned the "freedom" which enabled the great cotton lords of the day to amass colossal fortunes by working men, women, and children almost all the hours that God sent. But the cotton-lord philosophy asserted that interference by the State had spelt, and must spell, ruin; and, at the time of which I write, that philosophy was supreme. It had found its justification in Malthus, who taught that the remedy for poverty lay in a limitation by Nature of the number of the poor. It found its political expression in the Individualism of Bentham, who uttered the misleading and dangerous phrase that the supreme law was "the greatest good for the greatest number"—a maxim that still leaves open the question of what is good and what is bad, and which would hold blameless, be it observed, a society whose prosperity rested on a remnant of slaves. In science it found its excuse, although it may be fallaciously, in the teachings of Darwin, who referred man with copious examples to the study of the lower animals, and whose immense industry and wealth of detail affirmed a view of evolution more rational and convincing in its humanity than the Individualists knew.* On the other hand, Herbert Spencer included even Man in his evolutionary *dictum* when he said: "A creature not energetic enough "to maintain itself must die." Under this intellectual dispensation, man and the current view of man became dehumanised. He ceased to be a live, sentient human being, and became a number, to be scheduled, catalogued, and observed much as were the insects. The same law, and the same evolution, governed both. Misery, crime,

* Compare Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid;* Introduction and Chapter I; also A. R. Wallace's *Darwinism,* and especially his *Sociology.*

misfortune, all the tragedies that made up the daily lives of thousands of toilers in the gloomy, squalid cities that sprang up all over England—these were inevitable, as statistics showed; and the great overshadowing tragedy of all, poverty—that was merely the effect of the deplorable failure of the race to commit suicide and to refuse to perpetuate its kind. The trifling accident that the poverty of Ireland grew with its lack of population seems never to have occurred to the disciples of limitation; and for the other ills, outside poverty, that flesh is heir to, statistics demonstrated that their recurrence was inevitable.

Perhaps it is not in *Hard Times*, but in another political tract that has become extraordinarily popular, that Dickens delivered the *coup de grâce* to the scientific theory that kept afloat this strange conglomeration of political and metaphysical misconceptions. Darwinism, first violently attacked, then widely applauded, and misunderstood both when it was attacked and denied, and when it was defended and accepted, had, of course, as its pivotal position the theory that evolution proceded by means of natural selection, the unfit being eliminated.* The chief practical outcome of its philosophy, as of Malthus, was that of "the "surplus population," an idea that found hearty acceptance by everybody except the populace themselves. And the reason lay not a little in the atmosphere that Dickens created, and in the value that he taught us to extend, not to the respectable and to the wealthy, the Pecksniffs and the Gradgrinds of our civilisation, but rather to delightful irresponsibles, such as Micawber and Swiveller, whose elimination, together with their qualities, from the race one

* I am of course aware that present-day evolutionists have developed social doctrines out of their theory that are distinctly ethical and humanitarian. They find their bases in Darwinism itself. But, the fact remains that the one-sided and purblind view was seized upon by the Individualism of the Victoria era.

felt would be a loss that not a thousand Bounderbys could replace. Among the masses I have always felt that there lingers the same ideas ever since I heard the Christmas Carol enacted at a popular hall; for when the ghost of Christmas Past asked Scrooge the inevitable question, "Who decides who are the surplus population?" the tornado of applause from all the popular parts of the house told me that the bottom was knocked out of that particular shibboleth. And, moreover, we hear very little about it in these days, even from those cousins of the Pardiggles, the Eugenists. That question killed the Malthusian system of philosophy so far as popular acceptance was concerned, because the only answer that could be given to it was the answer that the people would not have, namely, that in the main the matter was to be decided by the possession of means. Emphatically the wealthy could not be looked for among the surplus population. They must be found among the wealth producers, who under the order that Dickens exposed in *Hard Times*, starve when they have produced a glut of wealth. In fact, the chief defect of this system of thought and morals was that, as with other systems. it put its tenets first, and man last. That fact, indeed, was seized on by its two most eloquent and insistent opponents, Ruskin and Carlyle. "Your wealth," said Ruskin in a memorable passage, "Your wealth is really ill-th."

What was the use, he asked with unerring logic, of building up this vast reserve of bullion and of goods, if in the sequel the people lacked both? What was the value of the vast network of ugly choking manufacturing towns if it still left the mass of the people sunk in indigence with their national healthy craving for the execution of good work starved and blunted, and their lives as drab, squalid, and cheerless as the towns themselves? Carlyle hammered home the same point. He seized, with unerring instinct,

on the appearance of the unemployed workman as heralding the fall, and as showing the futility of the capitalist system, which, organised to produce, was producing men who were idle.

We know Carlyle's remedy for this state of affairs. The people, were, indeed, to realise the magnitude of the evil, but they were to have very little hand in putting it right. It was Democracy and Liberty that had brought things to this pass. To rely on the mob, to put one's faith in anarchy, to leave the people without discipline, control, or discretion in their lives: that, he insisted, was the cause of the evils that were bringing England to ruin. Democracy meant "Swarmery," and in passages, or, I should say, books, unmatched for irony and eloquence, Carlyle pleaded for the rule of the strong, for men who could control the crowd, who would shape the destinies of the race, and save England from the Rhetoricians and windbags that threatened to overwhelm her.

§ 3.

These, then, were the great formative influences in thought and politics at the time when Charles Dickens conceived the idea of dramatising their clash and conflict for his fellow-countrymen. It may be doubted if he ever wrote a novel with such earnestness and sincerity; never did he so discipline and subvert his art to the purpose which lay behind the fiction.* In form the book is a complete justification of the Carlylean gospel of Chaos; and it is certainly one of the most successful satires on the Individualists and the Utilitarians that their pedantic impossibilities ever excited. Yet if one were asked to say

* He had prepared the way in *The Chimes* and in parts of *Little Dorrit*. In *Nobody's Story* and other sketches we may see similar ideas.

which side of the controversy Dickens takes, the candid answer must be that he condemns both. The book is dedicated, indeed, to Carlyle, and his influence is traceable in every page. But it is obviously a corrective. Stephen Blackpool, the inarticulate, tragic, almost broken-hearted workman, who still contrives to lead his life, and discharge his task, with dignity and patience, might have been drawn by Carlyle himself. Not even that dour apostle of silence could have limned more bitter speeches of the Trade Union delegates with their purposeless declamations and futile talk. But, though the influence of Carlyle is there, Dickens's instinct for realism compelled him to transform the work into a scorching a satire of the Carlylean gospel of life as well as of the Benthamite. We have only to consider the wonderful creation of Bounderby, one of the most life-like and arresting characters he ever drew, to realise this.

Had Dickens intended *Hard Times* to be a glorification of the gospel according to the sage of Chelsea, he would have pictured him as being everything that worthy fancied himself to be, and nothing that he was. One can almost hear Dickens saying to his friend at the conclusion of the work, "Here, my dear Thomas, are the fruits of your "philosophy. Here, in this book, penned under your "influence, is a picture of the strong man who, you say, "should direct industry—Bounderby; look at him! He is "a braggart, a bully, a liar, who is only endurable if you "make fun of him, while in the background of his mind "is some of this hero-worship of the strong, silent man with "which you have been filling England, so that he is driven to "invent an imaginary boyhood and youth in order to live up "to the idea that you have inspired." And he, the strong man, who controls the destinies of Coketown, whose bank, whose business, and whose very name is writ all over the

town, what word has he for the poor, ignorant, heedless multitude that you say he should lead and guide and inspire?

Thus we find that Dickens, having weighed both systems in the balance, found both wanting; and perhaps in thus refusing to admit that life or politics can be contained in a formula, he was following the example and echoing the wisdom of the great moral genius whose majesty he frequently proclaimed, and who announced, centuries ago, with masterly simplicity that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.

It is this quality, instinct in Dickens, the quality of looking at life and of judging all institutions from the standpoint of the common man, from the normal, human, and therefore vital requirements of the individual, that at once ensures his wonderful success as a dramatiser of life, and lifts him to an ethical and political plane far above any other of the great Victorians. That "extraordinary "common sense, united to an extraordinary uncommon "sensibility" made, and makes him, at once the supreme witness for the common man, the great revolutionary who is insisting on the need for justice and for free development, not for the *intellectuals* and the high-brows, but for the average, wholesome, human son of Adam. It is this quality also that makes his work eternal. Sam Weller, Mark Tapley, the Marchioness, and Trabbs' boy, these take their place alongside the grave-diggers in *Hamlet* and the porter in *Macbeth*, and will move men to tears and laughter centuries hence, even as Shakespeare's characters do to-day. Can we claim the same of any of the other Victorians? Even outside Mayfair, and the clubs and the great families, Thackeray is lost. He could paint Society with a capital S, but the greater society, the human family, which comprises ostlers as well as earls, common thieves

as well as fine ladies, and clerks as well as merchants, these, for the most part, Thackeray passed by. They were atoms in a crowd that, for him, did not exist. But in Dickens "the hunger for humanity" was avid and constant, and gave his work at once an artistic and political value that far transcends any writer since Shakespeare. We get a curiously instructive glimpse of its value in this very book, *Hard Times*, in which he does not merely deal with the problem of divorce, but makes that problem live for us. The writer once heard that great Dickensian, Bernard Shaw, instance Ibsen and Tolstoy, two giants utterly dissimilar, as being united in the attack that the modern world has seen launched on marriage. It occurred to him at the time that it would have been more serviceable to the thesis of the lecturer had Shaw remembered Stephen Blackpool and *Hard Times*, rather than the *Kreutzer Sonata* and *The Doll's House*. For supreme as those works are, what, after all, do they show us? The chief actor in that marvellous essay in psychology which the Russian gave us was not suffering so much from the marriage laws as from a diseased state of mind and body, due largely to the fact that he was an aristocrat and had thus lost the wholesome corrective of having to work for his living. As for the woman in *The Doll's House*, who wrecked her life to realise herself, she surely recalls that passage in Carlyle, which tells man not to know himself but to find and do his work. One is reminded of the pregnant remark of Johnson, who was asked by Boswell his opinion of the lady who had, on the death of her beloved husband, immured herself in a tower for six months. "Sir," said that great humanist, "depend upon it, had she been a washerwoman "with six children she would not have done so." And in considering the two books named, works that do crystallise much of the modern attack upon marriage, one asks

inevitably if it is really worth while to overturn a deeply-rooted institution merely because it does not happen to suit the artificial requirements of an unimportant artificial class. But to Dickens's plea there is no such objection. Whilst all the writers of the past fifty years have based their arguments on the sufferings of the supersensitive and the diseased—people who find the obligations of marriage irksome only because all obligations would be irksome to them, Dickens states his case on the need of the common man, and, of course, he gains a verdict for us. We may weep over Pozdnisheff's wife, in *The Kreutzer Sonata*, we may despise the husband in *The Doll's House*, but we know that no law, no legislative reform, will heal the soul of one, or make the other anything but an intolerable sneak. Nora, had she been less of a fool, although a lovable, even an adorable fool, would have put her husband in his place in the first week of the honeymoon. She would have eaten her caramels openly, and told her egregious husband not to make an ass of himself when he objected, and she would have been too busily concerned with the facts of life to expect any miracles of such a person. These things are beyond legislative enactments. Statutes cannot alter them. No new marriage laws could make Helmer "a white man," or cleanse the tortured soul of Pozdnisheff's wife.

But with Stephen Blackpool, the poor persecuted workman, looking down on the figure of his drunken wife, one does realise that here is an intolerable situation that might be altered by giving him relief in law. And it is notable that now, when at last a reform of the Divorce Laws seems imminent, the demand for the change is made, and made at last effectively, in the numerous cases where common men, mere vulgar soldiers and workpeople, and not erotics and intellectuals, are their victims.

As with divorce, so with all other political reforms: with the poor law, with parliament, with housing, with personal

liberty. It was the common man, with whom Dickens was concerned.* It is the common man whom he presents to us. Primarily that distinction is his own, but if he owes it in any measure to other influences, that influence was Thomas Carlyle, the one man among his friends who may be said to have sensibly affected his political *Credo*.

Perhaps the matter ought to be made crystal-clear, though, save for the dust and heat that has enveloped the controversy, it would scarcely seem necessary. In setting forth this plea for marriage reform, Dickens was not

* *Hard Times* deals very effectively with another important problem from just this human standpoint—that of education. Indeed, now education is in the air, the chapters describing the M'Choakumchild system, that perfect satire on existing methods of State tuition, with their deadless routine and endless memorising of valueless facts, ought to be read with the greatest attention. For the generation who read the work, Dickens killed the Board School as effectually as he killed Dotheboy's Hall—that is, among people who cared for education. The notion that Bitzer is a superior person to Cissy Jupe : that the right way to educate children is on the method adopted by M'Choakumchild ; that fancy is to be deliberately suppressed and that education consists in getting children to memorise unimportant facts, this still obtains with admittedly deplorable results in the Board Schools of this country. But that the Board and County Schools are maintained with any enthusiasm, or through any serious belief in their efficacy, or for any reason except the dead weight of the authority that supports them and that compels, by constant persecution, fines and imprisonment, the attendance of their chief victims, the children, is, of course, obvious, otherwise we should not be conversant with the fact that there is an appalling shortage of teachers in them, due to the deplorable pay and really abominable conditions attaching to their employment. But among serious students of education, the M'Choakumchild system is naturally, hopelessly discredited ; and we are presented to-day with all manner of alternatives, some of them absurd enough, from the Kindergarten of Froebel to the inanities of Montessori. The admirable study of Professor Hughes on *Dickens and Education* ought to be read very carefully in connection with *Hard Times*, and in *Charles Dickens : Social Reformer*, I give a fuller amplification of the significance of his teaching in this connection.

arraigning himself against marriage; any more than in satirising the law, he was uttering a plea for anarchy. The law, of course, would be stronger, not weaker, the more, not the less admirable, if *Jarndyce v. Jarndyce*, or *Bardell v. Pickwick*, were rendered impossible. Similarly the institution of marriage would be a great deal more formidable if the case of Stephen Blackpool were made impossible.* This is obvious, of course, but it needs emphasising none the less, because there are, to put it mildly, a school of marriage reformers, who are resolved to reform it altogether; who are what Dickens was not, enemies of the institution itself, of the home and of the family, and who seize eagerly on such cases as Blackpool as an argument, not for sane and well-balanced reform, but rather for the abolition altogther of an institution that they hate, though through it the race has to a very large extent evolved. We have only to contrast some of the modern novels, advocating free and general promiscuity with the particular novel we are considering, to realise the immense difference between the large sanity and restraint with which Dickens treated the subject, and the wild, not to say indecent, mental inebriety which advocates, for instance, proposals so repugnant as the "visiting husband," or demands that the raising of the race shall be in future conducted on the principles of the stud-farm.

The fact is, as we ought to remember, that Dickens

* Few characters cost Dickens more in the way of emotional energy than Stephen Blackpool; witness his letter to Forster: "I have been looking forward through so many months, and sides "of paper, to this Stephen business that now—as usual—it being "over, I feel as if nothing in the world, in the way of intense and "violent rushing hither and thither could quite restore my "balance." This was penned at a time when Dickens's own domestic tragedy (quite different, as I need hardly say, from that dramatized in Blackpool's person) was approaching culmination in the catastrophe that nearly overwhelmed his life.

believed in marriage reform because he was in favour of, and not against, marriage and the home. Hence we must separate him very sharply indeed from authors like Suderman and Hauptmann, and his work from plays like *Magda*, and *The Doll's House*. So far as Ibsen is concerned, indeed, one may be inclined to doubt whether Mr. Bernard Shaw's declaration that he was an enemy of the home and marriage holds good. Like Dickens, he was a man of large sanity, and wide views, and I am inclined to think that if the choice lay between the home and the human stud-farm favoured by George Bernard Shaw, Ibsen would have declared for the former, and that he would have explained that his attacks upon it were designed for its reform and for its strengthening, not for its abolition.

The point is of extraordinary importance as regards *Hard Times*, for this reason. In Lousia Bounderby, Dickens created a new type of woman, and he gave us a new—a startlingly new—view of the home. It was new to Dickens's readers, and it was new to literature. In our time we are painfully familiar with fiction and the drama that insist on the truth of Mr. Shaw's apothegm that "home is the young girl's prison and the woman's work-house." But in Dickens's day the idea that home was a prison had not dawned on us. But the picture of the young girl slighted and misunderstood, her enthusiasms snubbed, her fine emotions and tender graces of feeling disregarded; the young girl who is spiritually starved, and driven at last to revolt against her father or husband—we, in our time, have lived to see the theme worn threadbare. But its original creative impulse came from the book that marked the turning-point of Dickens and of the Victorian period of literature; and that impulse reacted, as we shall see, with powerful effects on the literature of the day.

CHAPTER VII

THE NEW NOTE IN LITERATURE

VII

THE NEW NOTE IN LITERATURE

"I come no more to make you laugh,
Things now that bear a weighty and a serious brow,
We now present. Those that can pity here,
May, if they think well, let fall a tear;
The subject well deserves it."

SHAKESPEARE.

"God gave Charles Dickens a brief on behalf of all the suffering and misery in the world."

LORD SHAFTESBURY.

§ 1.

IN *Hard Times*, and, to an even greater extent, perhaps, in *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens developed a new *rôle* as novelist, and initiated an experiment that was absolutely new to English Literature. Hitherto we have found him, as in *Oliver Twist*, *Pickwick*, and *Nicholas Nickleby*, rousing compassion for the poor, writing of them, not merely as human beings, but as one who knew them, their thoughts, emotions and vicissitudes, with an intimacy that no one since Fielding or Goldsmith had achieved. Society found that the people of whom he wrote, though common and vulgar, were unconsciously interesting; and they read his works with avidity. So far, indeed, he had not arraigned society itself on their behalf. He had appealed, on behalf of the underworld, to our sympathy, to our compassion, to our humanity. Now he was to go further: he was to adopt an attitude of challenge and censure; he appealed, not to pity, but definitely and positively to our sense of justice, and in effect demanded, sometimes that our civilisation should be reconstructed altogether, or at other times that some particular abuse, effecting a special set of people, should be

rooted out and destroyed. He used the novel, in fact, as though it had been a sword—a sword drawn on the organised hypocrises of society and in the interest of the common man; against wealth, against privilege, against everything opposed to the development of the soul of man.

The experiment was a daring one. It required a degree of pugnacity and courage that we may look for in vain among authors of our own generation. We cannot, for instance, conceive Mr. Rudyard Kipling (no stranger himself to the influence of Dickens, as I shall presently show), employing language regarding the Poor Law such as Dickens habitually used. Hard things, indeed, Mr. Kipling has often said of his kind, and some of them true enough; Pacifists, Socialists ,Little Englanders—all manner of unpopular people, including, very properly, politicians, have come under his lash. But one's imagination boggles at the idea of the fierce and fearsome Mr. Kipling doing anything so indecorous as denouncing the Poor Law as "infamous." No, no, my masters, "even the muddied "oafs" would not court such a risk. Mr. Wells might do so, but then Mr. Wells impresses the man in the street as being a crank endowed with a certain streak of that queer thing, genius. Nobody thought Dickens a crank. Everybody took him seriously. Everybody realised that here was a new and great reforming, perhaps even a revolutionary, force, who placed society in the dock and indicted it; who did not spare the truth, nor mince his words. Everybody, I say, knew this and knew that Dickens was, to use a new and a bad phrase (whose very currency implies a certain moral debility), "out to make trouble." Everybody knew that he was, if I may say so, an agitator. Yet, strange to say, everybody read him.

We shall come presently to the fundamental reason for this singular and almost unique triumph of the artist over public inertia. First, let me pause a moment to emphasise

the immensity of the triumph itself. The function of the novel in the mid-Victorian period, just as the function of the novel to-day, was very well put by the Doctor in Wilkie Collins's *Armadale*. Now it should be noted, that from the point-of-view of mere trade (one to which Dickens was certainly keenly alive), the novelist, who ran full tilt against this current view of literature, stood a very good chance indeed of seeing his income grow small by degrees and beautifully less. "The dislike of the Nineteenth Century "to realism is the dislike of Caliban at seeing his face in "the glass. The dislike of the Nineteenth Century to "Romanticism is the dislike of Caliban at *not* seeing his "face in the glass." Allowing for the exaggeration that always marked the author of *Dorian Gray*, there is certainly a large amount of truth in the observation. But even Caliban could be made to respond to human influences, and was taught by Prospero "how to name the bigger light, "and how the less"; and the public, "that many-headed "beast," is generally answerable to the description of Shakespeare's "savage and deformed slave." Is it not a fact that those authors who perpetually gibe at public taste, who write, like Mr. Jepson, of "the men in the ruck," or, like others less known even than Mr. Jepson, of "the "herd"—are they not for the most part men who have failed to please the very readers whom they scorn and scold so vehemently? Is not their complaint one in reality of the sourness of grapes that are *beyond* their reach?

It seems to me that in this connection some words of Dickens's own are very apposite, as really penetrating to the very heart of the matter. The men who have so supreme a disdain of their fellows that they regard them as outside the pale of Art, and as being remote from its influences, cut off from culture, and sweetness and light, or truth, yet lay immense stress on the very qualities which, after all, cannot exist apart from mankind. "Men who are

"thoroughly false and hollow," says Dickens, "seldom "try to hide those vices from themselves, and yet in the "very act of avowing them they lay claim to the virtues "they claim most to despise. 'For,' say they, 'this is "'honesty, this is truth. All mankind are like us, but they "'have not the candour to avow it.' The more they affect "to deny the existence of any sincerity in the world, the "more they would be thought to possess it in its boldest "shape; and this is an unconscious compliment to truth "on the part of these philosophers, which will turn the "laugh against them, to the Day of Judgment." If we substitute art for truth—and really the subsitution is only one of terminology—we shall, I think, find that the *dictum* exactly applies to those philosophers who are perpetually railing at "the herd," and whose works "the herd" cruelly refuses to purchase!

But the matter has an importance altogether apart from decadents, because it brings before us one of those fundamental reasons for Dickens's success—as novelist, as man of action, and as journalist. Dickens believed in human nature: in its essential goodness and worth, and in the validity of the human intellect and the human judgment. He was, to use the word that best describes his attitude, though it has nowadays an unfortunate connotation—a democrat. He had a profound, permanent, and invincible confidence in the commonsense of the common man, and in the ability of the human mind to grasp, not only the essentials of thought, philosophy, and religion, but to respond instantly and naturally to the appeal which Art makes to the human soul. As that belief grew more general, so Dickens's hold on the British people increased. As it waned, so Dickens waned, and with him literature also.

Elsewhere in these pages I enter more fully into my reasons for holding that the secret of Dickens's popularity lay in the fact that he was always prepared to risk it.

For the moment let us notice that though the instinct which urged him thus to stake his all was sound, even from a business point-of-view, and though it was thoroughly justified by the sequel, still *the risk was there.* Courage, immense, purposeful and ebullient, was needed for Dickens to continue his crusades against society in the monthly parts in which his novels were issued. Courage, grim and tenacious, was necessary for him to refuse to return to the earlier method of *Pickwick*, the book which pleased everybody and offended none, and to give us instead Betty Higden's flight to escape from the mercies of Poor Law relief, or the madness of poor Miss Flite, caused through the Court of Chancery. The same sort of British courage was needed as was called for when he hazarded his immense popularity in America by refusing absolutely and definitely to remain silent (or even to mitigate his views) on the questions of International Copyright or the freedom of the negroes. In both cases his courage was justified. For the new kind of novel, that indicted society in the microcosm or the macrocosm, in detail or in the whole, soon won the sincerest form of flattery—imitation.

§ 2.

The first and the greatest of the imitators, a man of remarkable genius and power, whose neglect I have always held to be one of the tragedies of literature, was Charles Reade. His *Cloister and the Hearth* (one of the finest historical novels in our language) still finds many eager readers; but his other works, despite their almost unique qualities, are largely neglected. In saying this, let it not be thought that Reade does not merit attention. He demands the very closest. Though his genius is to-day under a temporary eclipse, it may well be that a little while hence we shall awake to find him famous once again. This has happened with greater writers than Charles Reade.

Shakespeare was for long neglected and almost unread. Fielding suffered a period of similar disparagement. Great literary influences are often tidal in their effect upon mankind. They ebb and flow, and their rise and fall give us valuable clues to the mental and moral characteristics of the period through which they pass.* Hence it will be well worth while if we trace the influence of Dickens on Reade and proceed to show how Reade reacted himself on public thought and imagination; later we will come to the causes of his decline.

First of all, it is very clear that, but for the experiment which Dickens initiated—the experiment of using the novel as a propagandist weapon, as a great Social Evangel, and a political gospel—Reade would never have emerged from his obscurity at all.

Charles Reade had no need fortunately to write for a living. The son of a well-to-do father, he was also a Fellow of his College at Oxford, and all through his life there is no evidence of that "eternal want of pence which "vexeth public men." But he felt intuitively and instinctively the desire to write: to write, first for the stage, later for the public. With his plays Reade (who has been described as the greatest master of narrative in the English language) had but a moderate and qualified success; and he returned, after many years to his original intention of achieving distinction through fiction.

It was in 1835 that he first began to make notes for his first novel. It was not until 1853 that the first novel was published, though in the meanwhile he had written serials with more or less success for some of the periodicals of the day. Reade suffered from what he described as a "poverty of invention." Characterisation, dramatic force, a mastery of sensational but convincing situations, these

* *Cf.* Preface, pp. x. and xi.

he had in abundance, but in the original creative power of improvisation he failed. His method of overcoming this difficulty was distinctly interesting. He was an assiduous student of the newspapers, and his cuttings therefrom used to adorn the walls of his writing room. Here was an account of a fire; there hung the latest report of a murder trial; beside it was a description of a fashionable wedding, and interspersed were the newspaper reports of railway accidents, tragedies of the street, or *bizarre* happenings of every sort. Still Reade had to find the connecting link, the *motif* that would string these things together. "The novel "with a purpose," invented by Dickens, came to his aid and rendered his success possible. For my own part, I have no doubt whatever as to Reade's genius and inspiration, but my readers ought to have the result of Mr. Walters' investigation before them.

It is very easy to see how this arrangement worked out in some of Reade's most notable novels—novels that, in their day, we should remember, had an immense vogue and an enormous influence. Written, like Dickens's, round some public question, it was easy for their author, first to collect his *data*, then to define his characters, and from both to build up stories that have rarely been equalled for *verve*, point, and dramatic effect. Mr. Walker, in his *Literature of the Victorian Era*, claims for Reade that among those "who illustrated the later developments of fiction he is "rivalled for power and genius only by Stevenson and "Meredith." And, though he goes on to discount the particular kind of novel by means of which Reade emerged from the chrysallis state into the sunshine of fame, which later gave us *The Cloister and the Hearth*, still, from my point of view, his novels with a purpose were by far the most virile and interesting of his output: excepting only the historical romance which took him sixteen years of hard

work to complete.* Of these novels, two of the most striking were *Hard Cash*, which Dickens published as a serial in *Household Words*, and *It is Never Too Late to Mend*. They were stamped with a power and insight that makes the temporary decline of Reade more than ever regrettable. They are charged throughout with that genius of indignation, with that unconscious and fundamental recognition of human life and dignity that Dickens restored to our literature. They have not more than a trace of the master's humour; but they show on almost every page that power of developing, suddenly and naturally, with startling force and clearness. Once looked upon, their impress remains on the consciousness of the spectator for ever. The best and most poignant scenes in *It is Never Too Late to Mend* are unforgettable. They are written deliberately for the purpose of exciting and inflaming public opinion against the abuses which had crept into the management of prisons.

We may trace the influence of Dickens on Reade not only in his masterly dramatic treatment, but also in the healthy contempt that he evinces for the sacrosanct officialdom, which, as Dickens first taught to novelists, could be made to furnish excellent material for the critical faculty inherent in most literary men. But Reade partakes also of "that "hunger of humanity" which colours alike Dickens's work and his philosophy; that true realism which we find in all great students and dramatisers of life from Shakespeare downwards.

It is Never Too Late to Mend is the life-story of a convict, a man one loves from the very first page that radiates his personality: a thief, a scoundrel, but a man of wit, insight, humour, and character, warped and vitiated by brutality and short-sighted unconcern in his youth, but

* Reade once compared himself to "my predecessor in "impatience, Job."

redeemed at last by love. His redemption comes not merely by the love of a woman, as natural and wholesome as it is convincing; there is also the love of one of those clergymen whom both Collins and Reade were fond of depicting—virile, aggressive, hard-working, and indomitable men, who have heard the cry of suffering, and whose lives are consecrated to its relief—men with more passion for humanity than even Dickens's Minor Canon Crisparkle, and more softened than Kingsley's Spiritual Guides, whose muscles seem sometimes to have developed at the expense of their faith.

It is not the least interesting point about Reade's and Collins's stories, and the many others that they helped to inspire, that they appeared as serials and were eagerly read by thousands and tens of thousands of all sorts and conditions of men. The effect of narratives written thus, by two men who were the real fathers of the English serial, ruthlessly exposing the hollowness, shams, and hypocrisies of the institutions under which the people lived, and in whose efficacy and value they cherished an almost blind and unreasoning belief—stories that were as far removed from the shoddy romantisism of G. W. M. Reynolds as the outpourings of Miss Ruby M. Ayres are to-day removed from the work of Reade himself—the effect of these masterpieces of sensational fiction, which yet carried conviction to all who had eyes to see and ears to hear, was necessarily of incalculable value both in forming a robust and intelligently critical view of current questions and inspiring the reader with that independence of thought and mind without which a people will surely die. It was not only on institutions that Reade and Collins poured fresh light; they revolutionised the current view of women. Here, again, they followed the lead of Dickens in *Hard Times*, who in Louisa had given so arresting a picture of a young girl in revolt. Not that she revolted against the home; it was

rather against the soulless reforms, the deadening restrictions that threatened that home itself, with its absence of mental freedom, its low and false view of woman and her capacities, its intolerant and captious veto on any activity on the part of her sex that was not directed and controlled by her male guides and sponsors. I believe that the influence of Reade and Collins in this respect upon the thought, the aspirations, and the general tendencies of the sex was enormous. To the impulse which they received from the study of Louisa was given a new vitality, which, reacting on the current novel, presented their generation with a new and fresh vision of English girlhood—fresh, strong, resourceful, but still womanly, with a woman's softness and a woman's love: with something of the primordial and archaic ruthlessness of energy that Ibsen told us lay in woman. But there was nothing, or little in common with the Ibsen woman. There was, for instance, nothing in common with Nora, who could not call her soul or her caramels her own till she left her husband and her children and went "out into the night." There was even less in common with the Lydia Languish of a past generation—Lydia of the vapours and the antimacassars!

The novels and serials of Charles Reade contain some admirable portraits of the English girl of the period, who, though in revolt against the constituted authority over her, is, one feels, true to herself and to her primal instincts. Perhaps Grace Carden in *Put Yourself in His Place* is the best elaboration of the thesis set for the period by Dickens in *Hard Times*. She is at all events one of the most lovable woman in English fiction; not Meredith nor Shakespeare himself drew for us a more convincing and a more irresistable portrait of the young girl, who has staked everything on the man she loves, and who wins her point against all the combined pressure of those home forces which in those

days, and perhaps to-day, make up the sum of life to thousands of her sex.

§ 3.

It was left to Wilkie Collins to show us the fiercer, I had almost said the darker, side of the revolt of the sex, and to popularise a type of heroine that a little later was to become almost the dominant figure in widely-read fiction. Dickens's association with Collins—"one of the dearest "and most intimate friends" of his life from 1852 onwards, says Forster—is too well-known to need more than passing mention here. Nor need I enter in detail here into a consideration of the profound effect which Collins and his influence had upon the later works of the greater artist. Wilkie Collins was the one man with whom Dickens was ever associated in collaboration. There can be no doubt that in the later novels, where his art is severely subordinated to the narrative, and where he depends to an unusual extent on the fascination which a mystery always has for the reading public, he leaned to Collins's methods. We know from Forster that, from the days of *Pickwick* onwards, he was peculiarly responsive to the charm and thrill of mysteries, especially those which arise from the entanglements of men and their destinies in a complex situation.* *Edwin Drood* and *Our Mutual Friend* are examples.

Again, that Dickens's art immensely stimulated and sharpened his friend's powers of observation, cannot be doubted by anyone who has encountered the delightful Captain Wragge and his wife in *No Name*. The Captain and his spouse are perhaps the best Dickensian characters outside Dickens. A whole volume, of a most interesting

* "This was his favourite theory as to the smallness of the world "and how things and persons the most unlikely to meet were "continually knocking up against each other."

character to all who value literature, might well be written around the literary relations of these two great men. But here, when I am more concerned to deal with broad outlines and deeper inspirations, rather than the *minutiæ* of craftsmanship, I want to direct attention to the remarkable revelations of womanhood that Collins—remembered to-day chiefly as a writer of clever detective stories—gave us in his novels. I cannot do so more effectually than by suggesting to my readers that they should study for themselves at least two of his most striking works, *No Name* and *A Modern Magdalene*—the latter is a work that is *par excellence* the novel of a revolution, the most moving, succinct, and picturesque indictment of our civilisation ever penned from the standpoint of true femininity, the femininity that consists of firm loyalty to the instincts of womanhood.

Charles Dickens's arraignment of society and its stultifying conventions was pre-eminently on behalf of women. His bold and direct criticisms of life not merely involved this; they were as deliberately and as distinctively aimed at the woman-sphere as were the later criticisms of Meredith. They may not have been conceived in the same vein of humour, nor always directed to the same *strata* of Society, nor governed by precisely the same point-of-view. They may not have been pointed with the same sort of explicitness to the same woman-themes. This was because the problems of women were in a state of rapid transition to new and specific shapes. But they were directed to the same primitive bonds which fettered the full life of women. They recognised conditions and conventions against which the woman may justly revolt. They stood for a distinct change in the ideal type of womanhood. They embodied the same humanistic and progressive spirit in its specific relation to woman. Those conventions and prejudices which caused Marian Evans to adopt a masculine *nom de plume*, and Charlotte Brontë and Mrs. Gaskell but timidly

to enter the arena of literature, Charles Dickens deliberately set himself to correct. The new urgency in the woman-sphere, which has culminated in our own day in all the complex and portentous problems which vex and rend the mind of the Twentieth Century, was beginning to perturb his period. That he was not blind to it all can clearly be seen by his readers. More than one type of the woman *intransigéant* he made the subject of his skilled craft. More than one type of the "woman-worker" he fashioned for our contemplation. The woman who had missed her true womanly *rôle* in life was the object of his special care and solicitude. Like Browning, his humanistic spirit yearned to minister to the failures of our social life. And where these failures were feminine he attacked their problem in a fashion which indicated a direct and beneficial interest in the cause of women. Where frailties of the feminine soul were rooted in personal weaknesses or perversities he plainly and candidly declares them. He sympathetically discusses the distinctive psychology of women, and diligently applies himself to amend and ameliorate their *moral*. He does more than this: he traces the trouble to causes that are social as well as personal; and where those causes lie deeper down in the conventions and institutions which blemish the social fabric, and mar the life of women, he boldly lays them bare to public challenge. Meanwhile, he always makes his appeal to our pathos, our humour, and our toleration in their behalf. In a word, he assumed a new, a definite, and a ministrant attitude towards women and the particular urgencies of their changing position and outlook. He clearly moved sympathetically to their new point of view:

> *"Sir, get you something of our purity,*
> *And we will of your strength: we ask no more.*
> *This is the sum of what seek we."**

* Meredith's *Ballad of Fair Ladies in Revolt*

Louisa Gadgrind and Edith Grainger were in their way types of the revolt of woman, no less than were Diana of the Crossways and Clara Middleton. They were the protagonists of that wider and equal freedom which is the soil of true love and the basis of perfect womanhood. And although the form of the rebellion which some of Dickens's women assumed was not, in essentials, quite all that of Meredith's *Fair Ladies in Revolt*, his gospel of emancipation is precisely the same. The controversial elements of the woman-question of his day may not be so intrusive in his novels as they became in Meredith's; yet the identity of their point of view is unmistakeable. The humour, too, may not be so delicately sublimated, but the sympathy and practical advocacy are the same. Meredith saw the real dangers of the revolt as Dickens before him saw; and both pleaded for solutions that were rooted in common-sense while based upon principles of sound progress. The lover of Dickens will readily recognise that the portrayer of Louisa Bounderby, Miss Wade, Miss Havisham, Estella, Rosa Dartle, stood in full view of the degenerate feminine soul which was in danger of feverishly fomenting universal sex-antagonism. Nor will they the less readily perceive that Meredith's lines completely express the same care and caution in the spirit with which he confronted the problem.

"Lady, there is a truth of settled laws
That down the past burns like a great watch-fire.
Let youth hail changeful mornings; but your cause
Whetting its edge to cut the race in two
Is felony: you forfeit the bright lyre,
*Much honour and much glory you!"**

Dickens's course was, therefore, clear and consistent from the first to last. Speaking in terms of military strategy, he took Society in flank. He attacked institutions such as Education, the Debtors' Prison, the Court of Chancery, and the whole range of Poor Law machinery, as they were

* *ibid.*

mercilessly grinding out the flotsam and jetsam of our social life. He also struck at the heart of those cramping conventions that are not only rooted in the domestic round, but which re-emerge in every walk of the life of woman. Like Meredith, Dickens carried the war into the heart of Society with the capital "*S.*" Each writer in his own way condemned the single but inclusive weakness of the Englishman—the worship of wealth and rank. Both taught that it was the snobbish interest in these, the mere superficialities of life, which overshadowed the hearth and the home. In their view, this weakness tended to blight the very soul of womanhood. Both winnowed anxiously and hopefully for those finer qualities of mind in Englishwomen, as well as in Englishmen, of the middle and working classes; the object being to resolve the problems of the coming age.* And the love of Meredith which possesses women is just the same as that which Dickens always commanded.

Yet ah! to hear anew those ladies cry,
"He who is for us, for him are we!"†

This brings me to a point which we occasionally hear urged against Dickens, that women are repelled because his portraitures of them so frequently are far from flattering. If this argument possesses any weight or logic, it should apply equally to men. Why are not men also similarly repelled—I mean, of course, on account of the repellant male portraits. Two at least of the keenest critics and admirers of Dickens fall into this error—an error of fact as well as of logic. Gissing was strangely inconsistent in his estimate of Dickens's portraiture of women. As to Mr. G. B. Shaw's view, which is similar, an examination of Dickens's main motives would, I venture to think, cause

* Compare, for example, *Harry Richmond, Rhoda Fleming, The Old Chartist, The Patriot Engineer, The Egoist, Diana of the Crossways.*

† *Ballad of Fair Ladies in Revolt.*

him to revise his opinions. Meanwhile, one fact at any rate I can present to all such critics who prematurely assume that Dickens's shrewish women are generally repellent to the female reader, and that is that the majority of the members of the Dickens Fellowship consists of women. And the first Dickens society ever formed—the All Round Dickens Club at Boston, U.S.A.—was started by a woman.* I believe this is entirely a women's association. Besides this, seventy per cent. of those who enter the Dickens Prize Competitions in *The Dickensian* are women. And the lectures and essays reported in that journal as being rendered in the numerous branches of the Dickens Fellowship are very largely by women. These facts alone constitute an index of the attractiveness which the great Victorian always possesses for women. I can vouch personally that in my experience women are enthusiastic readers and *students* of Dickens. They read and re-read him; they analyse him from every point of view—art, culture, morals, and the woman-problem. The general inference from one's personal experience seems irresistible. Women do, indeed, constitute a large proportion of the fervent admirers of Dickens.

I am, of course, aware that it is frequently and confidently asserted that Dickens could not portray a woman. I recall a serious charge against him by an authoress that he never portrayed an ideal mother. But then it is also asserted that he could not portray a gentleman; that, like his characterisation in general, his portraiture is not in consonance with the best art; it is mere mannerism and freakishness; that these weaknesses of portraiture apply more particularly to women, and so on. Now it seems to me that these animadversions are all of a piece. They are for the most part the outcome of mere individual taste and opinion. In my judgment they are not desmonstrable. That they do

* *The Dickensian*, Vol. IV. (1908) : p. 92.

not constitute any strong body of adverse feeling amongst women against Dickens seems self-evident. If women comprise the larger part of the novel-reading public—and we all think they do—it is certain that they meet with many types of repellent women in fiction. The best literature embodies such types. They are frequently the subject of the highest purposive art of the novelist.

But Dickens did not by any means confine his female characters to the shrewish wife like Mrs. Gargery and Mrs. Wilfer, to the man-hater like Miss Havisham or Rosa Dartle, or the pious malignant like Mrs. Clennam. The fact is, that there is a species of contumacious critic who loftily finds him especially open to adverse comment and even contempt, despite the enormous preponderance of his admirers. His women are without stature; quite commonplace in their Victorian ringlets, insipid in their domestic environment, and even "low" in their sympathies and tastes. There is a pervading and forced air of purism about them which savours of Mrs. Henry Wood's women. There is not even the dash of tranquil audacity which George Eliot evinced. "The woman with a past" was unknown to Dickens. She was too much for his conception of propriety in fiction. The piquant *ingénue* or the sparkling *soubrette* were not within his range. The modern woman resurgent was quite impossible to him. His tragic women were mere creatures of straw and sawdust—fit only for the limelight of melodrama. As for the female child, he merely uses her for stagey emphasis, and melts into mawkishness. And never once does he present us with an English matron, or delineate the soul of a good mother! Echoes of these plaints reach us to this day. They are chiefly the criticisms of the person saturated with the erotic and anæmic novel.

True to his particular genius, Dickens revolutionised the woman of fiction as he revolutionised every other phase of

fiction. In this he got down to the commonplace, and rendered it with entrancing interest. It was generally necessary that the Victorian heroine should be romantically recessed in the halo of an aristocratic home. It was imperative that she should irradiate the humble reader with the superlative charm of personal beauty and graciousness. There was also the inevitable background radiance of a delightful residence with a park. The personal "charm" was generally left as "an indefinable something." It rested upon the tranquil droop of an eyelid rather than the sympathetic curve of a disposition or the grace of the intelligence. She was sometimes a super-dressed victim of the aristocratic marriage-market, or a racy, tailor-made precocity of the aristocratic stables. Her "Ma" was a crinolined lady of indolent habit who read Martin Tupper's *Proverbial Philosophy*. She dispensed aristocratic etiquette and minced delicate and entrancing malignancies at four o'clock tea. Bevies of powdered and uniformed flunkies suavely manipulated imposing gatherings of superlative ladies and gentlemen of "blue blood." Dinners, suppers, balls and hunts added to the distinctive *haut ton* of the novel. The whole round and *personelle* of panoplied high life appeared conventionally necessary to render it attractive.

In all this the novel and its readers were both in danger of becoming surcharged with unmitigated and unmeasured snobbery, a probability which both Thackeray and Dickens realised. While the former penetrated the *camouflage* of this sort of life with the scorching flame of his cynical and sarcastic humour, Dickens deflected interest to quite another plane—the plane of the commonplace.

The range of characterisation in female delineation is in Dickens's stories all but comparable to that of his men. In diversity, in distinctiveness, in veracity, in masterly skill, in ethical point and purpose, in pathos and humour, it all

but equals it. The minor portraits, which are dashed off with subtle skill, make in their *ensemble* a striking gallery. In sheer fecundity no writer ever approached him. He stands undeniably alone. To review them critically, or to attempt a summary or analysis of their qualities or meaning in the purposive *schema* of their creator would require a separate volume. My purpose here is to press home the fact that Dickens can be distinctly seen to jeopardise his initial popularity by taking up every cause of the common people, which was struggling to the surface of articulation beneath the suffocating pressure of purblind prejudice and the paralysis of convention. This was a departure in novel work which Dickens not only himself initiated, but rendered feasible and possible to the new school of writers who rapidly proceeded to follow his lead. In this he diverged not one jot from the legitimate craft of the novelist. On the other hand, no sculptor in his *atelier* more cunningly adapted his new-found materials to his craft, no artificer in his workshop more assiduously contrived new tools for his work, no painter more enthusiastically compounded the newly-found ingredients for his art, no poet more fervently devised the structure of his thought-schemes or the architecture of his palace of ideals.

In this day, the new woman was restlessly expressing with the new man the urgencies of transition towards the larger life of freedom which had loomed into vision even before Dickens entered upon his newly-conceived task. But he sees two sharply divided classes of women—one class of the dim and dark underworld, and another class of the garish hues of artificial Society glitter. In the darksome walled-in spaces of the debtors' prison he pictures the struggling feminine soul passing from childhood in all its nascent purity, on through the budding promise of adolescence, anon plunging into the pangs and penalties of maternity—all in the fetid and blighting atmosphere of a

living sepulchre. Moving in and out of this noisome place is no woman of "stature," but one Little Dorrit, carrying the pathetic burden of the domestic task, and the daily sacrifice which her tender and affectionate disposition imposes upon her on behalf of her kith and kin. But the woman of "stature" is well within the circle of her daily tramps in the streets of London on behalf of her derelict relatives—one Mrs. Merdle, the Society wife of a City Midas. She is a woman of large proportions, with "a large "unfeeling bosom" and the mind of the parrot she pets.

It must be conceded that Dickens did not create faultless super-women of any type. The superlative personage of ideal nature or temperament he deliberately eschewed. He desired always to achieve reality. "Never fear, good "people of an envious turn of mind," he once said, "that "Art will consign Nature to oblivion."* His best women, like his best men, carried the natural defects of their characters. Indeed, often the best lessons conveyed by his men and women are rendered through negations of their better selves—the better self, sometimes, being largely absent in the delineation, yet nevertheless reflected all the brighter and stronger in the image evoked in our own minds. A good example of this is seen in the pathetic figure of Nancy, the paramour of Bill Sikes, the burglar. Beneath the rough exterior of her fallen state, there may be seen rugged qualities of a better nature, deftly drawn in sympathetic lines as only Dickens knew how to draw them. And again, in Tattycoram's passionate and perverse humours we see in contrast the warmer attachment to her benefactors, the Meagles, which in the end triumph over her vices. In the portrait of Miss Wade in the same story† we perhaps experience a heavier call upon our sympathy. A woman in scornful revolt against her social betters, she is a

* *Hard Times,* Bk. I., Ch. XI.

† *Little Dorrit.*

somewhat repellent study in the anatomy and psychology of hate. Her arrogant, self-sufficient, and self-contained nature sets her even against those whom she loves. In a paroxysm of pride and self-will she even jilts a sincere lover. She stifles good-will and all the homely affections in the convulsive egoisms of fancied affronts and wrongs. In damming up the natural streams of love she lets in the devastating floods of hate, and feeds her soul to its tormenting.

Miss Havisham* makes an even more tragic study of the blighted female soul. In her a more definite form of sex-hatred is depicted, which exhausts itself to the point of remorse in the fatuous promotion of an universal sex-antagonism. In the beautiful and young Estella, her *protégé* and innocent catspaw, is given a much more interesting and attractive figure. Her girlish yet disdainful and precocious flirtations with Pip, the young blacksmith, are set in a delightful side-light of comedy, which considerably relieves the tragic air of Miss Havisham's house, and its witch-cauldron of malignancies and darksome plans. The girl's ultimate escape from the wild "incantations" of her witch-like foster-mother is a pleasing and telling part of the story. The love-seed implanted in the heart of her adolescence has a tremendous struggle to rear its stem and flower out of the dark into the sunshine. But it succeeds, and Pip is ultimately the happy recipient of its adornment, despite the sinister designs of her foster-mother, Miss Havisham. This creature of perfervid emotional energy is quite an Ibsenic figure. Her fixed and insensate desire to wound or torture any individual of the male sex; her studied and life-long designs of revenge against man in general for the wrongs done her by her individual lover; her sombre residence of closely-shuttered and darkened rooms; the shadowed passage-ways and dilapidated garden; all are

* *Great Expectations.*

Ibsenic in their awesome *grotesquerie*. Such tragic types of delineation in female psychology would, when regarded alone, constitute perhaps a reason for repulsion. But so also would the tragic types of the women of Shakespeare such as Lady Macbeth. If they did not conform to the rules of Art which render evil characters attractive in the themes and *motifs* of which they are the central figures of dramatic display, they would become entirely repellent. As it is, they may be afflicted with every vice that can polute human nature; the hues and lineaments of their presentment may be diabolic; they may even remain entirely unrelieved and unmitigated by the contrasting presence of the humour or the virtues of other characters; yet Art may so serve its purpose as to present the history or the tragedy of their soul-life with profound interest. If this were not so, the criticism that has been sometimes urged against certain of Dickens's women could be urged against some of Shakespeare's. Such interest is of the nature of a process of moral edification, a spectacle of poetic justice, an ordeal or a discipline of purification, an ordered advance to climax and *dénouement*. I have elsewhere contended that Dickens conformed to such laws or principles of artistic workmanship in characterisation and plot, even as Shakespeare did;* and that he did so in regard to female characters like Mademoiselle Hortense, Mrs. Clennam, and Miss Havisham is unmistakable. As studies of evil or perverted phases of feminine human nature they may individually incite our resentment or even our abhorrence. But there is the modifying or contrasting presence of other personages of the story. These, with other ingredients of humour, of compassion and ethical purpose, tend to combine the whole picture into a spectacle of absorbing interest, moral purpose, and even spiritual purgation.

* *Pageant of Dickens*, Chapter V., "The Criminals."

This is, at all events, the case with the more tempered and restrained type of women like Edith Grainger and Louisa Gadgrind. Defects of character are here presented, but they are distinctly related to social or domestic conventions of education and marriage which Dickens can be clearly seen to attack. Nevertheless, as portraitures they convey the impression of marked individuality. Despite the critics, I contend that they are decidedly women of "stature." Both are the victims of circumstances against which they evince the strength to revolt strenuously. Both are equal to the achievement of the supreme effort of self-realisation in what constitutes their defective nature. And both are equal to the moral and intellectual strength which carries them ultimately above the influence of their surroundings. As examples of the feminine nature of a distinct period; as studies of the crises and calamities which peculiarly afflict the female soul in the struggle to expand its horizon, they will in my judgment bear comparison with any in prose fiction. There are stages in their career in which Dickens rises to the highest art of dramatic realism and dramatic climax. The scene in which Louisa returns to her father's roof* and reveals to him the inner suffering and the spiritual calamity to which his blind and obstinate shaping of her life has brought her, may be well paired with that other scene in which Edith Dombey confronts her mother with the real nature and origin of her own soul-tragedy.† Both represent the outcome of a slowly-gathering passion of resentment against the irony of an undeserved fate. Each represents a climax of just and open revolt; nevertheless, rendered by the artist with all dramatic propriety and restraint, and finely bent and harmonised to its true ethical purpose and counterpart.

Those who, like Taine, are constrained to reproach

* *Hard Times.* Ch. XII. Book II.

† *Dombey & Son.* Ch. XXVII.

Dickens for his strict probity and purism in the delineation of human frailty and its encompassing circumstance, may well contemplate both these women in their temptation to depart from the fidelity due to their marriage state. It is to my mind a study in the highest art of the novelist. Dickens by no means scrupled to handle such themes. Lady Dedlock alone makes a striking and elaborate picture of a woman "with a past." But in these two young wives, in whose fateful *present* he is weaving the elements of their tragedy, he exhibits a picture of delicate deftness and polished skill such as is to be found in the writings of none of his precursors. And in each case the picture is none the less impressive in its thrilling interest and its dramatic crises. In James Harthouse's attentions to Bounderby's young wife we are given a theme of illicit love which is frequently rendered in fiction as if it were a form of modern license that had come to be tolerated—tolerated, that is to say, both as a detail of real life as well as a subject of art-treatment. But we do not receive the impression that Dickens tolerates it in either sense. He quite boldly and naïvely pictures the details of a marriage which we feel is not only unsuitable but unsavoury. We see plainly that Louisa is not a free agent in the matter. She is morally and intellectually bound by the ideals of her father. But the sequel is scarcely anticipated, although it proceeds quite feasibly and naturally from the antecedent. None of the ordinary colours of licensed love in fiction mars the purity of Dickens's canvas. No excuse for the fall from probity passes. The passage from strict wifely integrity is slow and almost commonplace in its episode and movement. There is an almost imperceptible and *naïve* trend towards the climax so far as the young wife is concerned. The man is an adventurous interloper, although not the heartless or exquisite villain that Carker is in the affair of Edith Dombey. Yet we follow it all with breathless and com-

passionate interest, because it is endowed with its own particular spirit of detachment and dramatic power, its own peculiar genius of delicate intrigue, and its own particular interpretation of character—all the more simple and commonplace for its purely domestic lights and shadows and its homely humanities.

"Was ever woman in this humour woo'd?
Was ever woman in this humour won?"

And, I would add, was ever woman in this humour *saved?*

We enjoy the crowning satisfaction of witnessing the spectacle of a young wife, on the very brink of ruin, summoning her native force of heart and mind to effect her own release into the grace and freedom which are rightly hers, and to bring her purblind father to a revelation of the falseness and fatuity of his ideal. For we here once again perceive that Dickens is showing us the tragic effects of a blight which commenced in childhood, that period which was always the arena of his art and his teaching. Both Louisa and Edith are the children of self-absorbed parents, who have starved the hearts of their daughters of the common domestic affections. Their later education has completed the blight. The finer sentiments of culture, the poetry and imagination of the heart, the fervour of the simple humanities of life, have all been crowded out by the cold and calculated curricula of a lustreless intellect. The imagination, the special gift of the woman, has been deliberately stunted, is suppressed, and in its place is put the mercenary ideal of marriage and social status.

The crisis of self-recognition comes to both Louisa and Edith in much the same way. Each receives the impact of a sunny, gracious, affectionate, and flowery girlhood. Edith discovers in her love for her husband's daughter, Florence Dombey, the girl she should have been, the woman she might be. In the heart of Sissy Jupe, the daughter of a circus clown, Louisa eagerly saw mirrored the girl-nature

she had missed, the woman she so ardently desired to become. From this growing-point emanates the passion which ultimately possessed her to realise a wider and a nobler humanity than her utilitarian father, with all his pride and pedantry, had been able to disclose. To compass this, she felt, was to compass her own happiness and tranquility. In both Louisa and Edith this change is accomplished by no sudden or romantic transition. In the case of Edith, the story of the softening of her arrogant pride and her obstinate resentments, through her love of Florence, is told by a master of the minutest feeling and passion of the human heart. It is the same in the case of Louisa, who may, perhaps, be distinguished psychologically as an example of arrested development. In each case at the end, as in the steps and stage to the *dénouement*, all the fanciful trappings and extravagances of romance are eschewed. In their place are exhibited the genuine and casual vicissitudes of the spirit in its efforts towards perfection and serenity.

In such spectacles of the inner conflict, Dickens generally shows us the power of the simplest devotion to resolve the morbid and jaundiced humours of the soul. And there finally emerge triumphantly the joy and serenity of renunciation, the grace and sublimity of service, the fine influences of affection and friendship, the freedom and vigorous amplitudes of the spirit in the paths of love as opposed to the thraldom and miseries of pride and hate. It is from no mere caprice or vague predisposition that Dickens delineates women of blemished, repellent, or recalcitrant natures. They are the clay in which he deliberately designs his spiritual contrasts.

§ 4.

In presenting the problems of such examples of blighted womanhood, Dickens often leaves us to contemplate and complete the solution for ourselves. He was not always

dominated by the idea of a "happy ending." On the other hand, to carry the principle of moral retribution or poetic justice to tragic conclusions was generally repugnant to Dickens. His optimism and his sympathy were as a rule incapable of the remorseless *finale*. He appeared to think, or to feel, that retributive punishment does not serve its cathartic and purifying purpose if it is never to end. However this may be, we are not always shown the ultimate destiny of characters like Edith Dombey and Louisa Bounderby, whose fate has created a chasm, apparently unbridgeable, between them and their husbands; or of women like Miss Havisham and Miss Wade, who have isolated themselves from their fellows by convulsive self-will and hate. Such analyses of the simplest ingredients of human nature, in which we may distinguish so clearly and so usefully the outer life of action and the inner life of experience, possess for the onlooker the highest values, as well as the most entrancing interest.

The antithesis of the practical life of the world and the inner life of the soul has been brought to the service of the philosopher, the dramatist, and the fictionist on innumerable occasions. Solomon compares the man that ruleth his spirit with the man that taketh a city. Milton happily compares such a being with him who with honour, virtue, and merit ruleth as a king.

"*Yet he who reigns within himself, and rules*
Passions, desires and fears, is more than king."

And Thackeray points to the same inner kingdom for exploration and self-discipline: "Sir," says one of his characters, "a distinct universe walks about under your "hat and mine. . . . You and I are but a pair of infinite "isolations with some fellow-islands more or less near to "us. . . . ." Dickens's purpose is clearly to bring individuals in their fundamental aloneness nearer to one another, and to exhibit the real nature of the simplest bonds

of the heart, which may link them with their fellows in domestic felicity or social fellowship. In these studies he not only investigates human nature, but also society, with the view of finding adjustments in the growth and progress of both. We see that by turning his mirror of nature inwards upon ourselves, we may find fields for new enterprises. In exploring the arena of inherited notions, emotions, and passions, we may familiarise ourselves with new and strange dispositions of the mind, and discipline ourselves to the tranquil contemplation of its problems. By these means we may build up the fabric of our inner power, bending it to just and happy adaptations in society and its movements. In this enterprise we may not merely realise the meaning of progress for self, but for the larger "not-self" which environs us. Above and beyond all else, Dickens would have us see the dangers of this adventure. He exhibits in all its detail and importance the practical spectacle of that maxim which his friend Carlyle so characteristically amplified: "Man, know thyself, reform "thyself, and there will be one rascal the less!" But none more than he displayed the perils of self-anatomy.* The study of such types of women as we have so far been contemplating reveals for us unmistakably that, without the guiding power of our higher consciousness, which evolves out of the stress in the inner court of our being, it

> "... *Shall teach the will*
> *Dangerous secrets: for it tempts our powers,*
> *Knowing what must be thought and may be done,*
> *Into the depths of darkest purposes.*"

We may see these words of Shelley's equally well exemplified in what I consider to be another of Dickens's most profound and realistic studies of the darker side of the feminine nature. I refer to that sombre picture of Mrs.

* As I have indicated also in a study of *George Silverman*. See *Pageant of Dickens*, Ch. XI., "The Parsons."

Clennam in *Little Dorrit*. One could easily extend such examples; and not merely in the gallery of his female portraits, but also in that of the male. Sufficient may have been said to show that these illustrations of heart-starved or perverted femininity are so imbued with moral and dramatic intention as not only to justify their creation, but to warrant their being placed in the highest category of conscious artistry in characterisation and the play of practical and commonplace circumstance. And as for the background of ethical purpose, it goes without saying that moral teaching flows as easily and naturally from their contemplation as it flows from life itself.

But Dickens was not an adept at character-interpretation merely in the world of women. The motive of character-contrast is everywhere discernible in his stories. This principle of contrast was in fact the basic idea of his work, his art, and his philosophy. "Everything in our lives," he wrote in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, "whether of good or "evil, affects us most by contrast." His doctrine of good and evil is that not merely is our knowledge of the good derived from our knowledge of the evil, but the tendency towards the best is through the inevitable and necessary antithesis. "But for some trouble and sorrow we should "never know half the good there is about us," he again says in *The Haunted Man*. This is a story whose whole theme becomes a study in that problem of good and evil which has afflicted the world from the beginning. It was part of his philosophic temperament to recognise the contrasting factors in any phase of thought or life. He therefore generally sought for the truth and reality of things as existing somewhere between the two extremes. As artist he can be always seen using the principle of contrast and balance of effect. Thus it is that somewhere in the immediate proximity of his women of gloom, are those of radiant brightness. With every dark-minded Mrs. Clennam

is an angelic Amy Dorrit. Set forth against every arrogant and self-willed Edith Dombey is an affectionate and sympathetic Florence. Antagonising with Madame Defarge—in whom the avenging spirit of the French Revolution incarnates itself—is the gentle Lucie Manette and the faithful Miss Pross. Contrasting with every hard-favoured shrew like Mrs. Gargery is a patient and womanly Biddy. In the same house with the acidulous Miss Miggs is the sparkling and vivacious Dolly Varden. Against the dollish prettiness and pathetic ineptitudes of Dora Spenlow is set the gentle beauty, loyalty, and strength of Agnes Wickfield. Against the dishevelled personality and domestic disorder of Mrs. Jellaby and her inflated philanthropies, we constantly see the sweet, methodical household ministry of Esther Summerson in *Bleak House*. Side by side with the insipid, heartless and affected Pecksniff girls in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, is the thoroughly genuine, home-loving Ruth Pinch, a beautiful type of arch and dainty womanliness.

Those who know their Dickens will agree that his ideal is Woman the Ministrant. He delineated many varieties of the feminine nature, ranging from the sinister female griffin, Sally Brass, to the charming Ruth herself, or the more coquettish Dolly Varden, or 'Tilda Price, whom Frank Stone so finely reproduced in a drawing for *Nicholas Nickleby*. He could give us the woman of lean outline and sexless bosom, passion-worn with petty malignities, as if presaging the modern female Philistine; he could show us other types like Miss Podsnap, Rosa Bud, Mrs. Quilp, Miss Flite, helpless victims amongst human dragons. Or again, we find sardonic spinsters, like Miss Murdstone and Rose Dartle; or the cooing, middle-aged love-birds like Clarissa and Lavinia Spenlow, and the amiable Miss La Creevy, and Miss Tox. But he could sprinkle his stories with innumerable maidens and matrons of ardent, yet simple and amiable, *traits* of femininity: women who

irradiate the charm, the intelligent sympathies, the fine affections, the tonic *verve* and vigour, the very living presence of true womanliness; women who are gracious and tactful monitors of the domestic sphere; of moral suasion and maternal tenderness; yet, who, like Little Dorrit, are ready to set the judgment against the strongest affections; women of congenial responsiveness, who find their immediate place in the adroit and sympathetic guidance of any domestic emergency; women of the fostering, motherly spirit, watchful in the cause of those they love, cheerfully enduring in adversity, effervescing with joy and gratitude in prosperity; women, in fine, who embody all the congenial qualities of household treasures, with the placid sympathies of an Esther Summerson—she who swept the cobwebs off the sky of Poor Jo's roofless house, and whose ministrations were as readily given in a brickmaker's cottage as they were in good John Jarndyce's Bleak House,

Dickens loved to picture these concentrated attributes of the spirit of motherliness and womanliness. He limned them in both his most favoured maids and matrons. For him they were one and the same. He regarded the mother-spirit as an inalienable part of the female soul. Florence Dombey, so pathetically motherless herself, was more than sister to her little brother Paul. Amy Dorrit was the "Little Mother" of a considerable family—father, brother, sister, uncle, and Maggie the imbecile—all had a share of her sympathetic and tactful guidance in their welfare. And she makes the most beautiful picture of the feminine virtues that is to be found in all fiction. Clara Peggotty is the true "mother" of David Copperfield; while Mrs. Copperfield herself is a weak and pathetic semblance. Susan Nipper would have been an ordinary *soubrette*, piquant but caustic, if she had not faithfully mothered Florence Dombey. Even the mother-spirit of the clumsy Tilly Slowboy can be seen peeping through the humour of her fumbling solicitudes

in the care of Dot Peerybringle's baby. Lizzie Hexham's devotion to her young brother Charlie was rewarded by ingratitude and priggishness. And once again we are reminded of Dickens's *penchant* for contrasts in the case of Mrs. Joe Gargery, who brought her young brother Pip up "by hand," with no motherly equipment but a sour and shrewish temper. To get lower still in the ranks of the humble, we may pass with Esther Summerson into the lowly abode of Charlotte Neckett ("Charlie," for short), aged thirteen, of Bell Yard. The spectacle of this child-mother tending her orphan brother and sister was too much for John Jarndyce: "For God's sake look at this!" he ejaculated;—an orphan child, guileless, innocent of danger, confident in the friendly and guarding community of a Yard, smilingly and steadily fending and tending her babes as if she were only playing at "fathers and mothers," as children of the poor will do in the absence of parents at the factory, the public-house, or the music-hall.

It was Mark Rutherford who said of Little Nell and her Grandfather, that here was a new relationship hitherto undelineated in literature. Never, he thought, was character so subtly compounded: age and childhood so rich in contrast, yet so significant in unity. Nell, as we know, passed from the period of childhood to that of "little mother," and became her grandfather's guardian in his senile afflictions. The picture of this child teaching Kit Nubbles to write is characteristic of Dickens. Again, in the *Battle of Life*, is told surely one of the most delightful love-stories in all fiction. For what more charming picture is there in any novel than that of Marion and Grace, the motherless daughters of Dr. Jeddler the philosopher. They are the sunshine of his household, the elder one so steadfastly devoted and watchful over the younger, exemplifying, as Dickens says, "that great character of Mother, that "even in this shadow and faint reflection of it, purifies the

"heart and raises the exalted nature nearer to the angels."

A lady novelist, writing in *Temple Bar* for February, 1890, was astonished to discover that Dickens had failed to portray an ideal mother. She further discovered that this failure was shared by every other novelist of the Victorian period. She moreover confessed that she had herself unconsciously neglected to do so! Such a work of art, ideally speaking, was probably never achieved until Zola evolved his astounding matron Marianne in *Fécondité*, a book written entirely in a Surrey country-house, except for the latter pages, which were completed at the Queen's Hotel, Norwood.

Dickens, of course, produced many examples of motherhood—good, bad, and indifferent. But while he did not produce so superlative a Madonna of the species as Marianne, the mother-spirit was the constant theme of his whole work. The force of his innumerable contrasts may be said to be almost as compelling as Zola's single immense achievement. But then Dickens was not a Frenchman, or we could imagine that his patriotism and his art would have been quite equal to the task, especially had the population question so moved him as it did Zola. However, himself the fond father of a numerous family, he was eminently qualified to develop the theme of motherhood; and we may observe it emerging in one phase or another during his whole literary life, from the time of the publication of his earliest *Sketches of Young Couples*—unfortunately not nearly so well-known as his *Sketches by Boz*.

It would be perhaps tedious, even were it possible, to explore further his extensive gallery of mothers. The wrong sort of mother becomes an outstanding feature from its satiric colour. In Mrs. Pardiggle, for instance, we have a pronounced type, of that perverted class who desire to "mother" the parish. She sweeps into the homes of other people with her brood of ferocious and joyless brats like

a biting east-wind. Mrs. Jellaby, again, desires to "mother" at a greater distance and within an even more ambitious orbit. Nothing less than the black populations of Borrio-Boola-Gha will satisfy her expansive longings; and this while her own home and family are in a state of chill and cheerless chaos. On the other hand, what more homely and affectionate mothers are there than Mrs. Meagles, Mrs. Crisparkle, Mrs. Garland, Mrs. Polly Toodles, Mrs. Milly Swidger, Mrs. Rudge, Mrs. Tatterby, and the wife of the Reverend Frank Milvey—the latter the mother of a large family, and an ideal helpmate to a hard-working clergyman? We select from this brief haphazard list one from *The Haunted Man*—Mrs. Milly Swidger. This woman of humble life is portrayed as the very embodiment of perfect motherliness in its influence towards perfection in childhood. Here we see Dickens working through contrasts again. Milly is the personification of matronly sweetness, tranquility, and gentleness, as Mrs. Tatterby in the same story is of cheerful endurance. Milly is suffused with the memory of a brief motherhood. Mrs. Tatterby is chastened to cheerful fortitude and resignation in the present cares of a large family. Milly's child is dead, but the memory of her maternal joy endows her with a magnetic charm for children. As Dickens said of Lizzie Hexham, "she possesses a heart that never hardens, a temper that "never tires, and a touch that never hurts." Milly was in herself a whole garden of child-sympathies, flowering in the place where a tender bud of her own tried to blossom into fullness.

§ 5.

Dickens showed his supreme powers in revealing the highest virtues and affections of the human heart amongst the poor and lowly. One of the most quaint and pathetic of his "little mothers" is Jenny Wren—Fanny Cleavers

was her real name. Drawn from the very abyss of the London poor, she is invested with a rare and curious glow of fairy-like colour, and a picturesqueness reminiscent of Hans Andersen. "She is a child in years but a woman "in self-reliance," said Riah the Jew, who, in his gentle and unobtrusive way, rendered her some protection and assistance, as the poor can only help the poor. She is one whose precocity of mind and imagination springs from her invalidity of body; and there is a quaint charm and humour in her character as a doll's dressmaker. As the "person of the house," she exhibits an odd masterfulness of management, very necessary in the control of her "bad "child,"the drunken wastrel of a father. She is a creature of fanciful day-dreams, impulsive petulances, and confidences and womanly reservations; nevertheless, she was as deeply embowered in half-secret reserves of affection as her poor crooked body was embowered in golden hair. A girl who detested children when they mocked and vexed her, she was a fairy godmother in her little world of dolls, and the real personages who commanded her affection and concern. She possessed a curious power of divination in exposing the foibles of her "children." She knows "their tricks and their manners," and lays bare with scathing irony the inner motives overlaid by them. She knew the foibles of Eugene Wrayburn, briefless barrister and Bohemian, just as we know them. "I think," said he one day, "of setting up a doll, Miss Wren." "You had "better not," said she. "Why?" said he. "You are "sure to break it. All children do," said perky Jenny Wren. And, as we know, his waywardness and hesitation in love-making nearly brought him to this mishap.

Fanny Cleaver was one of Dickens's dream-children, of whom Charles Lamb spoke. And she might well have been a child of the fairy fancy of Hans Andersen himself, with whose views he was in such close sympathy, and

whom, it will be remembered, he once happily met. Jenny Wren, as Dickens tenderly nick-named her, represents a conspicuous example of his singular power of isolating a commonplace figure from the underworld of London life, and endowing it with features of rare and quaint humanity and fascinating interest. And yet, as Lamb said, although such creations come to us through innumerable phases of his imagination, at times often spiritualised and etherealised by his caressing fancy, yet they are real, living and true to life.

Jenny not merely plays a prominent part in the story; from the chair in which her doll-work and her lameness so constantly confine her, she controls destinies. As her hand deftly works, her ingenious imagination weaves curious day-dreams of satiric and pathetic humour. These are associated with the high-life she knows only through her dolls, and the sunshine, flowers, and singing birds which the poor of London never see. She revelled caressingly in her little world of joyous dream-children, as we know Dickens did himself. And he imbued this creature of his highest art with the same *traits*. Such is the significance of the curious symbolism which he imparts to her portrayal, that in a very happy and a very real way she becomes the fecund child-mother of dream-children, the embodiment of that spiritual essence which is the force with which she rules those people about her who are the objects of her affection. The scene in which she compels her "bad child"—her dissolute father—to turn out his pockets on a Saturday, and her remorse caused by the memories of her past "unmotherly" treatment of him, when she hears of his sudden and tragic death, are instances of that strange and compelling power in the patho-humorous portrayal of character which Dickens can always hold over us when handling the intimate life of the poor. The play of incident, or the display of the

lineaments of human nature, may be sometimes quaintly set, or even somewhat strained and inverted. With Dickens, comedy and pathos were forms of "poetic license." But the illusion of reality is made perfect through our own kindred knowledge of the real things as they exist in the common life. In contemplating his ideal presentations of life, we feel that that which transcends reality is made real by the power of the artist. The ideal or the ultra-human is rendered feasible by treatment. But in the main Dickens gives us pictures, not of the ideal human nature or the ideal circumstance, but emphatically those of the commonplace. His secret lies in this very treatment of the commonplace. For in it, all reality is reinforced by showing that, in the heart of the humblest of God's creatures, there is enshrined the beauty of holiness and the genuine and sublimest strivings of the human spirit. In achieving this, the highest pitch of realism, Dickens rang out a new note in Literature, which became vibrant throughout every highway and byway of the fiction which followed him.

CHAPTER VIII

DICKENS THE ARTIST

VIII

DICKENS THE ARTIST

"In his later writings he had been assiduously cultivating "this essential of his art, and here he brought it very nearly "to perfection. . . . . Look back from the last to the first page "and not even in the highest examples of this kind of elaborate "care will it be found that event leads more closely to event, "or that the separate incidents have been planned with a more "studied consideration of the bearing they are severally to have "on the general result."

FORSTER on *Bleak House*

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"His genius was his fellow feeling with his race; his mere "personality was never the bound or limit to his perceptions, "however strongly sometimes it might colour them."

FORSTER'S *Life*.

* * * * * *

". . . . Uncultured nature is there indeed; the intimations "of true heartfeeling, the glimmerings of higher feeling, all "are there; but everything still consistent and in harmony. . . ."

DEAN RAMSAY on *Bleak House*.

§ 1.

VERY few prominent men ever reached that degree of popularity to which Dickens attained in his own day. He seemed to be possessed of some intimate, magical power which attracted from his public every manifestation of feeling and admiration. From the peaks and prominences of a public so moved, there generally flows a profusion of oracular expression which assumes numerous artistic forms, like the display and waving of flags at a passing pageant. It was so with Dickens. His own artistic temperament exerted itself in so many forms—through his stories, his plays, his poems, his acting, his readings—as to elicit numerous and varied phenomena of what might be termed responsive artistic feeling. There

was, for instance, exhibited an amazing fertility of inspiration in musical, poetical, and picture production in which Dickens personally—his themes, his characters, his nomenclature—were made a central feature.

It will be remembered that his own immediate circle of friends largely comprised painters, actors, poets, and writers of the artistic spirit. His illustrators alone were not a few amongst his personal intimates, and one important factor in the popularity of the numerous editions of his stories was, without doubt, the illustrations, in which even Scott and Thackeray were lagging far behind him.

If the power of any artistic nature may be gauged by the breadth and range of its appeal, then Dickens certainly took the laurels in his own day and generation, and he holds them even to this. Anthony Trollope was as prone to criticise his technique as others amongst his compeers and the professional critics were; but as Trollope himself once said, "It is fatuous to condemn that as deficient in art "which has been so full of art as to captivate all men." Whether in his choice of words, his want of motive in the creation of character, or in any other lack of convention in rule of art, Trollope averred that, if the thing be done which was the aim of the artist, and done beyond the power of other artists to accomplish, the time for criticising the mode of doing it is gone by. Trollope was himself an old-fashioned stickler for certain ideas of technique, and this generous estimate of Dickens was not without its intellectual sacrifice.

But whatever deficiencies Dickens may really have exhibited from the strict point of view of a technical critic, it is certainly beyond cavil that his poetic and artistic nature was real enough to evoke the most enthusiastic response in his public, and the variety and prolixity of this response were astonishing. In music, rhyming, and poetry alone a considerable space could be devoted to mere enumeration.

The Dickensian songs, ballads, musical pieces, and dances which burst into vogue were amazing. Prose and verse, painting, engraving, etching, lectures, readings and recitings, panegyrics and orations, all went to swell the cloud of that responsive artistic and emotional utterance which Dickens's own artistic temperament evoked. And upon the mountain-like wave of his immense popularity, many an artistic argosy floated with its occupant to a tranquil haven of prosperity.

The pulse and heat of his poetic and contemplative nature can be felt in his stories as the monotone of a restless summer sea. He had no theory of life or the universe to propound, but, in the tender and reflective moods which here and there emerge to the surface, we perceive the desire of the impassioned imagination to realise the moving spectacle of life and to quicken its humanity. He did something more than construct the miniature world-order of his stories, or create their living denizens. He thought and worked, and strove in that miniature world, as amongst living souls. The children of his imagination were as real creatures with whom he lived in paternal care and sympathy. He tenderly governed and shaped their lives, now in gaiety and lightness, now in shadow and regret, and anon with pathos and tragedy. All this was in strict consonance with law and nature which rule the outer world. Could artist do more? He has been said to have exaggerated; it may be at once conceded. The artist claims his prerogative as the poet his license. The painter may lay on the colour as thickly as he pleases; so long as the pictures presents a harmonious and symmetrical whole, he still remains an artist. There may be enlarged presentments of character; he may magnify actions and their issues either in the light of comedy or tragedy; still he remains the artist, if in their enlargement all is given in just proportion. If everything is endued with balance, and well-

ordered as a miniature cosmos, all is well. If there is consonance between landscape and life, harmony in general atmosphere and colour, individuality in natural and human relationships, exaggeration melts and merges into artistic impressiveness. The picture is none the less telling and true.

There are recognised and legitimate limits, within which the artist may produce and realise his effects. Dickens rarely overstepped these, and his skill and craft have always been given their due share of fair recognition by the critics. He used both reality and romance; he compacted the ideal and the real; and in such combinations he violated no law, but heightened his effects and forced home both ethical and dramatic conclusions.

The fact is, the mere imitation or reproduction of nature falls short of art. Dickens's dramatic instinct told him this, without knowledge of that technique which he has sometimes been charged with lacking. He therefore added the magic touch which transfigures and idealises. As a single instance in comedy, we may name Micawber; in pathos, Little Nell; in tragi-comedy, Quilp; or in the purely tragic, Fagin and Sikes. In these we may at once see that it was Dickens's habit to detach his types from nature, whose fulness and fidelity he not merely reflects, but whose enlarged and concentrated qualities strangely address our souls with mysterious and significant attributes of universal life. They speak an universal language; what they say and do are rooted in our own every-day experience. They embrace *ourselves* within the sweep of their utterances; and within the orbit of their actions and their destinies we feel we have a strange part and lot. We partake of their heroic wrestlings and doings, we enter into the urgencies of their brightest or their bitterest days, we learn of their good and their evil, and weave the good into the warp and woof of our better self.

The striking quality of Dickens's characters is that they reflect *us* as well as our neighbours. We often thrill with glee at the ironic light which they cast upon others, although we frequently leave silent that which it casts upon ourselves! There is a story of a young friend of Meredith's who came to him in some trepidation of self-consciousness. Sir Willoughby Patterne in *The Egoist* had severely afflicted him. "This is too bad of you," he said to Meredith; "Willoughby is *me*." "No, my dear fellow," said Meredith; "*he is all of us*." And this is the effect and significance of Dickens' characters. He so idealises and transfigures the real individual chosen from life, as to create a being of expanded and universal attributes. The individual in particular, and human nature in general, are both represented. Being thus *created* they may be said to be immortal rather than human, Olympian rather than mortal, but none the less real and lifelike.

Sydney Carton may be justly said to belong to this category. In the humourous class we get a similar principle of characterisation represented in types like Pickwick, Micawber, Mrs. Gamp. These also take rank among the "immortals." They at least live to this day. Although convincingly real and true to type, when they are scrutinised too critically as real individuals we say they must be taken in "the Pickwickian sense." Dickens evidently intended Sydney Carton as a symbol of the triumph of good over evil. His tragic end is a consummation of self-sacrifice. To sink personal happiness in the cause of those he loved—to save even the life of his rival for very love of the pure soul of Lucie—where, we inevitably ask, is the man who could achieve it? Yet a combination of human weakness with an almost divine power of self-effacement, he is wrought with perfect and polished art in the living being we realise so vividly. Reality is indeed transfigured with impressive effect. We feel that Sydney Carton lives and stands alone

in all prose fiction; for he represents the universal truth that in every darkened mind there may be some inlet, through which a shaft of sunshine ultimately floods the soul with self-recognition and love; and that thus is generated such force of moral strength and purpose as may tend to the sublimest self-surrender.

§ 2.

And here again we touch the secret of Dickens's power. He compels us to realise the humour or the joy which may flash for us across the lake of life's waters, or to feel the winds of fate which may lash into the stormy waves of adversity, and evoke in us an effort of self-discipline. We experience these things through the life of our imagination; and such experience comes to us through the truth or the sublimity, the shadow or the tragedy, which, through art, are presented to us in the vivid and enlarged forms of real existences. While they transcend reality, they reflect it the more intensely. Their magnitude generates a subtle force which moves and shapes the soul, guides its conduct, beautifies its contours, helps to mould its upward tendency. In this way, I think, Dickens achieves the supreme function of art. He assists us to live not merely the life of our own individual experience, but to recognise that life which is ultra-individual, and embraces within its scope a spiritual relationship, the vision of which saves, it may be, society itself, with its web of bounded lives, from catastrophe, and promotes the elevation and the evolution of the race.

We thus need scarcely enquire what particular form of beauty that was which inspired Dickens, and which constituted the subtle material which he worked up, with hand and brain always concentrated upon creation. Like Ruskin, he was enamoured of that kind of beauty which may be described as moral beauty. Like Ruskin, too, he

stood for Naturalism as opposed to Classicism. Ruskin humanised and democratised Art; Dickens humanised and democratised fiction. Both brought everything in their work down to a common root in human life, passion, and hope. Each earnestly sought for that criterion and common denominator of art, which is expressible in terms of its spiritual effects in the life of the humblest workman and the poorest of God's creatures.

A certain affinity between these two influential Victorians is indicated by the critical interest which Ruskin took in Dickens's productions. For instance, he appeared to be moved at once by Dickens's first serious effort at his chosen line of work. He speaks of *Oliver Twist* as his greatest work; and this was brought out in 1837, when Dickens was only twenty-five years old. He further describes it as "an earnest and uncaricatured record of states of criminal "life, written with didactic purpose, full of the gravest "instruction, nor destitute of pathetic studies of noble "passion." While some, who were qualified to speak, tardily conceded the merit due to natural genius, Ruskin always frankly responded to what he doubtless recognised as affinity of motive and method. While Dickens's journalistic powers gave direction and distinctive form to the ideal he deliberately adopted, it was after *Pickwick* that he had yet to formulate and cultivate his methods of work. Readiness, penetration, accuracy and descriptive power were his native equipment. His knowledge of the poor, and his contact with the varied phases of English life and character, which his reporting and travelling days gave him, all carry the unmistakable impress of first-hand acquaintance. He knew well the characteristic phases of the life of the Metropolis, the domestic, the Bohemian, the life of the river, the flotsam and jetsam of the streets—all these he knew by direct observation, and the most adverse critic agreed that his power of unerringly sighting all the *minutiæ* of both

"still" and animated life was miraculous. But with labour *quâ* labour he may not perhaps be said to be so intimately acquainted. At all events, *Hard Times* (1854) leaves us with little or no satisfied conviction of first-hand contact with the life of the mill, the factory, or the mine; although there is always the same vivid appearance of reality and veracity, and every mark of power in dramatic presentment and purpose. Ruskin again speaks in the highest terms of his achievement as artist in this story, as I have previously shown.

Everywhere, at all times, he achieves his object where he desires to move the feelings of the greatest number. With the adeptness of the skilled craftsman, he always keeps an index finger upon the pulse of the man in the street, and his command of the common heart-beat of humanity rapidly became a highly trained faculty. His power of subtle suggestiveness and penetration on the planes of both pathos and humour is obvious from the first to the last. With the eye of a hawk he surveyed human nature from the heights, and swooped down at once upon any eccentric point or singularity of character, and used it with skill to reveal the inner life. This gift of photographic accuracy in outward delineation of both persons and environment has never been denied him. He possessed it in the most extraordinary degree of perfection, and used it, and realised its practical effects, with miraculous skill. The most simple and ordinary circumstances of our daily life, which produce in us little or no stimulus of emotion or attention, he reproduces in language that moves us with the novelty of heightened sensation and pleasure. The wind that agitates the trees or their autumnal leaves on the pathways, the rain that patters on the roof, or reflects the passing traffic in the pools of the streets, the aspect of houses, the gloom of the dark ways, or the night which imparts weird proportions to common objects of the sight, the confused

hum and murmurs of the Metropolis, all those common sights, sounds, and scenes of every-day occurrence, which remain unnoticed by the passer-by, created significant or mysterious impressions upon Dickens's sensitive nature.

These he makes us see and feel intensely to some definite and preconceived purpose. Similarly, he extracts from the passing pageant of humanity personages whom we daily see, and yet do not see, and compels us to recognise in them exceptional souls whose words, gestures, and actions convey new and strange significances, which impress themselves upon our attention with indelible vividness and inexpressible novelty and originality. This commonplace world of familiar sensations, feeling and sentiment, with the mere incident and stimuli of the daily round, all is reproduced and mirrored for us with a peculiarly heightened power and impressiveness. We may be but the semi-conscious victims of frustrated desire or jaded consciousness, a weary ache may afflict us, or the lassitude of exhaustion may possess us, nevertheless *this rehabilitation and reconstitution of the familiar* evokes in us a more intensive reaction to the every-day routine, until the face of nature changes for us, and the life of our fellows becomes surcharged with both mystery and novel meaning. We revel in the fruitful joy of an expanding vision of life. And this expansion is just the birth of a new culture. Nothing more nor less. With Charles Lamb, we are "in "love with this green earth; the face of the town and "country; the unspeakable rural solitudes and the sweet "security of streets. Sun, sky and breeze and solitary "walks, and summer holidays and the greenness of fields, "and the delicious juices of meats and fishes, and society, "and the cheerful glass, and the candlelight, and the fire-"side, and fireside conversations, and innocent vanities, "and jests, *and irony itself.*"

All these simple images of the commonplace re-enter our

being with reinforced beauty and stimulus, and ineffable freshness through the power of the artist. His own sensuous mechanism and poetic temperament become the instrument which sympathetically strikes into imagery, surprise and admiration the latent memories and perceptions of the mind, until we finally become filled with enthusiasm for his mellow optimism and his moral and intellectual outlook.

As constructional artist, I imagine, few will hesitate to grant him equal skill and merit, although here we perhaps touch upon debateable ground. We get at first sight a procession of the varied, the *bizarre* and grotesque, in which the eighteenth-century *penchant* for the picaresque forms a contributory factor. An air of *bonhomie* and humourous sympathy prevades, with tones and half-tones of satiric fancy. Blends of pathetic shades and the grim shadows of gloom and evil strike athwart the picture.

But upon close scrutiny we may discover the presence of ingredients of art which bind and connect all into an intelligible whole with the synoptic connectedness of a common theme, such as Marriage, the Child, Education, in *David Copperfield*; the play of character and ideas, such as those of religion, the spirit of persecution, the influence of the gallows on crime, all their violent reaction on the life of individuals, as in *Barnaby Rudge*. Similarly there may be revealed some main determining or enveloping action, like the French Revoluton in the *Tale of Two Cities*, or the Gordon Riots, in *Barnaby Rudge*. Some main motive runs through other stories revealing the grim realism of social institutions, like that of the Poor Law, in *Oliver Twist*, or Chancery Law, in *Bleak House*. Symbolic scenes and surroundings develop and emphasise a meaning, or strange and fanciful semblances are revealed of elemental significance between character and background, like the ghostly atmosphere of the *Christmas Stories*. All these things fuse the

component parts of life and circumstance into an architectural whole, in which men and women live and move and have their being and intimate relationships, with a faun of the comic genially looking on, or a gargoyle of evil or satiric omen leering over the scene, casting oblique shades of irony or humour, or hoodwinking into grim destiny as the miniature world of the artist's creation moves round.

For me there is scarcely a single canvas of Dickens which does not present unity of conception in all the conglomeration of character, episode, and movement. Space forbids separate treatment of the stories in detail as to their dramatic or artistic concordance, or their didactic features. In a previous Chapter I have endeavoured especially to describe certain qualities of Dickens's craft in terms of the recognised technique of the novel-art. I may, perhaps, suitably deal with one at least of his stories, which may provide the opportunity for bringing to general focus those resources in fine constructional workmanship which he undoubtedly possessed. Let us take *Bleak House*.

§ 3.

There are many circumstances that, as it were, conspire to lend to *Bleak House* an extraordinary interest to the student of Dickens; an interest, perhaps greater than the novel itself demands, remarkable as it is an instance of the peculiar genius which its author brought to bear upon the development of English fiction. In the first place, the book, not only contains one or two scenes of dramatic awe that are quite unmatched in the sweep of English literature, but it affords some of the most striking examples of that symbolism, which, in his middle and later period, Dickens began to affect as a part of his art and of which he became a consummate master. Secondly, it affords an unique illustration of the way in which he subordinated his genius for excrescence, and presents to the reader a story, simple

and tragic, but whose unfolding grows so naturally out of the events of the tale, that it needs a positive re-examination of the work to discover at what point each successive revelation has been brought home to the reader—to oneself! In that respect, as in others, its artistry is lifelike. Which of us, made aware of a new and startling circumstance in our own experience, can, without an effort, lay our memory on the one or two important links in the chain of evidence that lead up to the discovery?

But, it is perhaps in a third respect that *Bleak House* had its most important effect on the course and development of the English novel. Though, so far as I am aware, no one has yet detected the resemblance, there can be no doubt that we have in that work—one of the most popular, as Dickens himself announced in the original preface, that he had ever perused—at least three characters, not remarkable perhaps for subtlety or great analytical skill of depiction, but drawn so boldly and convincingly that they were destined to appear and reappear under all sorts of disguises, throughout the Nineteenth Century. We will come back presently to the characters in the book, which, partaking of higher qualities, could not in the nature of things find imitations. For the moment, it is well worth while to glance at three of the Dickens creations—I had almost said his commonplace creations—which were destined to become a part of the average novelist's stock-in-trade for at least half a century.

Take, first, Inspector Buckett of the Detective Force. Has it ever occurred to the reader that he was the fictional father of practically all the sleuths of the modern novel? Buckett was the original type, from which subsequently sprang all the innumerable pictures and sketches with which we are familiar of the strong, silent, shrewd observer, who, by a mere process of inductive reasoning, fixes the guilt of crimes, complicated and baffling in their origin, on

the guilty party. But there is this difference. Dickens's imitators never gave us a living man. They were out to depict a calculating machine. Dickens gave us a human being, and made him infinitely more convincing, more awesome, more terrifying in consequence. Let me give an illustration of what I mean. Buckett's grand discovery, that Hortense, the French maid, killed Mr. Tulkinghorn was *not* made by elaborate calculations, protracted observations, and all the rest of it. It was achieved by intuition. "I went "home," he tells Sir Leicester, relating the story of the detection of the crime, "I went home and found this young "woman having supper with my wife, Mrs. Buckett; she "had made a mighty show of being fond of Mrs. Buckett "from her first offering herself as our lodger, but that "night she made more than ever—in fact, over-did it. "Likewise she over-did her respect, and all that, for the "lamented memory of the deceased Mr. Tulkinghorn. By "the living Lord, it flashed upon me, as I sat opposite to "her at the table and saw her with a knife in her hand, "that she had done it." By that one stroke of genius Dickens achieves reality, as far removed from his imitators as their detectives are from the actuality.

Dickens's skill in depicting Buckett's peculiarities is mainly shown in the manner in which the mystery of Tulkinghorn's death is handled, and the reader led to believe that the proud, beautiful woman, whom the lawyer has been torturing for so long, is, and must be, his murderess. The touches that suggest this conclusion, and develop Buckett's character, are done with masterly restraint. "The doors "are thrown open and Lady Dedlock passes through the "hall. Still very pale, she is dressed in slight mourning, "and wears two beautiful bracelets. Either their beauty, "or the beauty of her arms, is particularly attractive to "Mr. Buckett. He looks at them with an eager eye and "rattles something in his pocket—halfpence perhaps." The

reader almost thinks he hears the snap of the handcuffs on those lovely arms!

Buckett's own personality is best suggested to us (it is often the case with Dickens's characters) by the description accorded him by another of the *dramatis personæ*. Volumnia, it will be remembered, asserted of him "that "charmingly horrible person is a perfect Blue Chamber." "Mildly studious," says his creator, "in his observation "of human nature, on the whole benignant philosopher "not to be disposed to be severe upon the follies of man-"kind, Mr. Buckett pervades a vast number of houses, and "strolls about an infinity of streets; to outward appearance "rather languishing for want of an object. He is in the "friendliest condition towards his species, and will drink "with most of them. He is free with his money, affable "in his manners, innocent in his conversation, but——."

There is the something of mystery, of majesty about the man that comes always from the consciousness of reserved strength. Only once in the story does it flare out, only once is Inspector Buckett of the Detective Force moved to anger. It is Grandfather Smallweed who provokes him.

"*You* want more painstaking and search-making? *You* "do? Do you see this hand, and do you think that I "don't know the right time to stretch it out, and put it "on the arm that fired that shot?" Such is the dread power of the man, and so terribly evident it is that he make no idle boast, that Mr. Smallweed begins to apologise.

Besides Buckett, the traditional detective of English fiction, is there no other popular "novel" character that we may recognise in *Bleak House* at a glance? I think so. I think that in Lady Dedlock we have the first appearance of "the woman with a past"; proud, beautiful, haughty, but living always in dread of discovery and disgrace. And here Dickens shows himself just a shade or

so more subtle than his imitators, for he lets us right into the secret of the psychology of such a woman, when he puts it down in black and white that Lady Dedlock was a coward. For all her address, her haughty bearing, and her unassailable manner, that is the stern cold fact. That her character has a certain dignity, a certain strength, I do not deny. But it is the strength of repression—of a nature intensely conscious of its own limitations, unable to venture or to take chances, and able to exist only when it is sheltered, flattered, and protected. Read Dickens's own description of the catastrophe: "Hunted, she flies. The "complication of her shame, her dread, remorse, and "misery, overwhelms her at its height; and even her "strength of self-reliance is overturned and whirled away, "like a leaf before a mighty wind."

It is obvious to everybody, who has troubled to follow the story—no easy matter, for the allurements of Dickens own genius often obscure its outline—that had Lady Dedlock chosen to remain and face the music, nothing would have happened. Her husband had forgiven her; her innocence of Tulkinghorn's murder had been already established, and the proof of her early intrigue had been purchased ere she died—died like a hunted wretch and outcast, she who had nothing to fear.

Yet a third figure in the story one recognises as an old friend in fiction—with us even unto this day—the young girl graduate of her life, whose emotions and experiences form the background of the story, and through whose clear unclouded vision we see the good and evil of the characters, and watch the development of the narrative. These three types, the detective, silent strong, masterful; the mysterious lady with the past, beautiful but peccant, and a trifle saturnine, and the frank young *ingénue*, these have served how many novelists, how many serial writers since *Bleak House* appeared?

§ 4.

Come we now to some of the minor, but, at the same time, greater characters of the story.

Of the finished studies Tulkinghorn is infinitely the most convincing. He is one of the subtlest, and one of the truest of Dickens's creations, in nothing more subtle than that we know him, when we meet him, to be a man, who is never likely to do anything that will in any faint measure compromise his respectability, and we know at the same time that he is thoroughly and utterly unscrupulous. Quite one of the best scenes in the book is when the eminent and courtly lawyer, Mr. Tulkinghorn, of the Fields, stands with Krook, the repulsive rag and bone dealer, by the death-bed of the poor wretch, Hawdon. There is little, very little in the room so pitiably bare, save a smell of opium and a portmanteau; a portmanteau that Tulkinghorn, the essence of respectability, tries to rifle—but has been forestalled by the astute Krook. At first flush, it seems overstrained that this pillar of society would stoop to such an action. Yet how perfectly it fits into the character: a character that you may meet any day in the Law Courts or Chancery Lane; in any place where "a man may smile "and smile and be a villain"—although a most respectable member of a most respectable profession.

Tulkinghorn's limitations are brought out with a force and clearness all the greater, because not a word is said about them. So long as he is dealing with the kind of person with whom he is familiar, with pompous Sir Leicester and his haughty wife; with George, the Sergeant; with Snagsby, the Stationer; and Smallweed, the money-lender, so long is his judgment faultless, and he knows precisely and exactly how far he may go with any of them. But the moment he meets an individual removed a little from the category of those whom he is accustomed to dominate, then he is undone. It was safe, quite safe, to

bully Sergeant George; safe, quite safe, to cajole Snagsby; safe, quite safe, to ensnare and torture Lady Dedlock. But Madamoiselle Hortense?—an observer less practised than he, but with more imagination, would have thought twice about rousing the devil in that woman of France, with her fierce eyes and cruel lips, and sallow, ruthless face. To Tulkinghorn, she is a discharged lady's-maid, who, if she prove objectionable, can be locked up by the Police; a mistake ever so natural to a man of his temperament—a mistake that cost him his life! Mr. Tulkinghorn was shot, like other tyrants, not because he was brutal, incapable, or unscrupulous, but merely because he could not discriminate.

But let us leave the characters for a moment and come to the story. It is soon told. Lady Dedlock has had an affair, some twenty years before it opens, with a Captain Hawdon, and a child has been born to her. She believes the child dead, for her sister, a beauty like herself, and like herself, too, proud, and, as she is, at heart a Puritan, has seized the baby, brought her up on the old iron plan, as a child of sin,—to die herself—one guessed of mortified pride,—when the said child is but nine years of age. So much for the Prologue, which the reader gathers only by slow degrees.

One day some decuments on the interminable Chancery suit of Jarndyce v. Jarndyce are being read to Sir Leicester and Lady Dedlock by the old and faithful family solicitor, Mr. Tulkinghorn. "Who copied that?" asks the lady swiftly, and faints. Mr. Tulkinghorn is curious; so curious that he goes next day to the Law Stationers who contracted for the work. It has been done by a new copyist, it appears, one Nemo, who works on night after night and "never wants sleep." He lives at a shop kept by one Krook, a dealer in rags and bottles—and much else. There Tulkinghorn finds him—dead; dead of opium, in a room bare of almost everything save a ragged old

portmanteau that Mr. Tulkinghorn stands by—"his "imperturbable face as inexpressive as his rusty clothes"—and never leaves; never leaves while he hears the doctor say that the dead man must have been a good figure when a youth and good looking; never leaves while he hears Snagsby the Stationer relate how "his wife was rather "took by something about this person"; never leaves while they wind their web of mystery round the dead man. But the portmanteau yields nothing when it is searched, for Krook, in the instant that Tulkinghorn left the room to rouse the house, had seized from it the little bundle of papers that henceforth bind the story together.

Now, Tulkinghorn is not the only strange caller at Snagsbys who is interested in Nemo. For Lady Dedlock, hearing from the lawyer of the death of the writer whose hand had interested her, makes enquiries also, and, by a fatal error, makes it in the dress of her French maid Hortense, with a view, of course, of hiding her identity.

Nemo, the erstwhile dandy of the Guards, came to have but one friend in his last extremity—"Poor Jo," the crossing sweeper, a creature a little more limited and ragged than the quaint-looking nondescript law writer, whom the children mocked when he ventured out. And Poor Jo shows Lady Dedlock (who tells him she is a servant) the place where Nemo lived and where he lies buried, and notices, when she gives him gold, that she has rare and wonderful rings on her hand, this servant! Observe now how the net is drawn closer and closer round Lady Dedlock. For Mr. Tulkinghorn, looking out of the window of his offices in Lincoln's Inn that morning, sees Jo walking quietly along, and, a pace or two in the rear, a woman, "She "should be an upper servant by her attire, yet in her "air and step . . . . she is a lady." And even Poor Jo when the "servant draws off her glove" notices "how "white and small her hand is, and what a jolly servant

"she must be to wear such sparkling rings."

From that moment the story really revolves around the struggle between Tulkinghorn, the lawyer, and Lady Dedlock; the one working with the subtlety and patience of the snake, who terrifies his victim before he strikes; the other, for all her grandeur and pride, as helpless and as terrified as that victim itself. Yet with such cleverness is the story evolved that there is no forcing of coincidences, no straining after effect. Ostensibly it revolves around the suit of Jarndyce v. Jarndyce—that most pungent of all Dickens's satires on the law—but the tragic theme of the woman's secret and her ruin is the real subject of the plot. The Chancery suit is used with exquisite skill to link up the case against Lady Dedlock, and to develop that part of the narrative which has reference to her own impending tragedy. Thus, a certain firm of lawyers in the Jarndyce suit, Messrs. Kenge and Carboy, have a young clerk by name Guppy, one of the most convincing and amusing of Dickens's minor creations. Kenge and Carboy act for one John Jarndyce, the philanthropist-hero of the book, who has adopted as his ward years ago a child by name Esther Summerson. When the book opens, Esther has just left school to take up her position as housekeeper in the Jarndyce household—Bleak House. Two young cousins of Mr. Jarndyce, victims, as he is, of the interminable Suit, that slowly absorbs the hope, life, vitality, and resources of all the litigants, by name Richard Carstone and Ada Jarndyce, are to live also in Bleak House, and very daintily and freshly are they presented to the reader, who once again tastes the infectious delight of which Dickens partook vicariously in a home where love and good fellowship were enshrined. The wretched suit, as we shall see, spoils even that. But first as to Mr. Guppy. It is he who meets Esther on her arrival in town. He falls in love, genuine love, with the fresh young face and the sweet young girl.

A little later he is being shown over the Dedlock Mansion in Lincolnshire and sees, hanging on the wall, Esther's counterfeit presentment in the portrait of its hostess.

Affection for Esther, a sense of romance and the mysterious, an eye to the main chance, and a desire to soften his *inamorata* to his addresses, causes Mr. Guppy to get to work.

Snagsby, the Law Stationer, has a wife, who is a devotee of the immortal Chadband and incidentally the best drawn picture of a jealous wife to be found in perhaps the whole of English literature. The Chadbands are on visiting terms with the Snagsbys, and Mr. Guppy learns that Mrs. Chadband—formerly a Miss Barbary—was Esther's nurse, and that Esther's name is not Summerson but Hawdon. Lady Dedlock has to learn from his lips that her child is not dead after all, "not dead in the first hours of her life, as "my cruel sister told me, but sternly nurtured by her, "after she had renounced me and my name." Later, Lady Dedlock meets Esther, who has vaguely but positively recognised her features, so strikingly like her aunt's. The two women sob together in the desolation of their distress, feeling in the love of the proud woman the affection that she has pined for during her years of bitter, lonely childhood. The mother, whose nature has been, as it were, frostbitten by the wound she has received, finds her daughter only to have to part from her after a few hours together.

But Mr. Tulkinghorn has been at work too. He has very quickly and discreetly pumped the Chadbands and the Snagsbys dry. He has had Poor Jo brought to him, and has confronted the boy with Lady Dedlock's maid, or ex-maid, Hortense, veiled, as Lady Dedlock was veiled on the day the lad showed her Hawdon's grave. "Yes, it is the "lady, for there's the veil, the bonnet, and the gownd. It "is her and it ain't her. It ain't her hand, nor yet her

"rings, nor yet her voice." So that is settled. Lady Dedlock has disguised herself as her maid—a fact that soon gets home to the Snagsby-Chadband detachment, and sets them on the *qui vive* also. Mrs. Chadband recognises in Lady Dedlock her old mistress's sister; and Mrs. Snagsby, who is none the less indomitable in unravelling clues, detects an intrigue on the part of her poor, down-trodden spouse, whom she accuses of being the father of Poor Jo! But Mr. Tulkinghorn of the Fields controls all these elements, and Mr. Tulkinghorn is getting on quite nicely with his clues against Lady Dedlock, save and except that he cannot get *positive* proof. He seeks for a specimen of Hawdon's handwriting, and one Smallweed, a money-lender of his acquaintance, who has had the Captain's paper in the old days for many thousands, inserts, at his instigation, an advertisement asking for information *re* the Captain. Among those who apply is the Captain's old Sergeant—Sergeant George, now with the Shooting Gallery in Soho. He is drawn into the net; borrows money, on his friend's acceptance, from Smallweed and his friend in the City, *alias* Melchisidech, *alias* Tulkinghorn. He cannot repay the interest or the loan, and to save his friend's home—for the present—parts with a letter, the only one he had from his beloved master. The writing is the same as on the deeds; Hawdon's identity is established—but Mr. Tulkinghorn still wants proof, the complete, crushing proof that the Captain and Lady Dedlock were the guilty parties of years ago.

Go back to Mr. Guppy for a moment. He is after that proof too. Not to crush Lady Dedlock, but to benefit Esther Summerson, and incidentally himself.

Here, we may pause for a moment to note at least one difference between Dickens and the crude Socialists, who have so often drawn on this story for material. Inevitably they would have depicted both of Lady Dedlock's tormentors

as trying to blackmail her. But neither Tulkinghorn or Guppy are after money. The latter wishes to ingratiate himself with Esther and her mother, and despite his grotesqueness and vulgarity, he is, with the shrewd psychological insight that marked Dickens, thoroughly loyal to both, though of course odious in his methods, as in his general idea of winning the affection of his *inamorata* by discovering her deepest and most cherished secret. Tulkinghorn acts as he does because of his love of power: "He is surrounded by a mysterious halo of family "confidences: of which he is known to be the silent "depository. There are noble Mausoleums rooted for "centuries in retired glades of parks, among the growing "timber and the fern, which perhaps held fewer noble "secrets than walk abroad among men, shut up in the "breast of Mr. Tulkinghorn."

But Mr. Guppy, without a tithe of the older man's acumen, or secrecy or power, comes near to succeeding where the other fails. He puts his friend the immortal Tony Weevil in as a lodger into the very room that Hawdon occupied, with a view to his gaining the confidence of Krook—Krook, who is suspected of great wealth and many secret possessions; Krook, who cannot read or write, but copies letters from documents and then has them interpreted to him. Weevil accordingly gains his confidence, and when Krook, among other things a dipsomaniac, spells out H-a-w-d-o-n from the bundle of letters which he has of his dead lodger (the letters which he has taken from the portmanteau in that instant when Tulkinghorn was off his guard) he and Guppy know they are on a rich prize.

On a certain midnight the packet is to be handed over to Guppy's friend, and Guppy thinks he will be the possessor of the incriminating letters which Honoria, Lady Dedlock, wrote to her Captain. And so they await Krook's signal from below.

Then follows a scene which, for sheer sense of horror, has never been surpassed in our language. It must be read in full to be adequately appreciated.

I suppose that nowhere else has Dickens, or any other writer, ever brought home to one so convincingly such a revulsion of feeling as in the death he depicts so easily, so naturally, and yet how horribly. We get that symbolism, which, as I have said, he developed with consummate skill in his later works. Krook, ending by spontaneous combustion, represents the logical working out of evil; just as is the death of Lady Dedlock and the collapse of the Chancery Suit. If the function of the moralist in fiction is to draw eternal lessons from the fleeting and the passing show of things, then is Krook's death one of the greatest enforcements, as it is certainly one of the greatest artistic triumphs, to be found in literature.

But to go back to the letters. They did not reach Guppy. They pass instead to Smallweed—for Mrs. Smallweed is Krook's heir. From thence they go to Tulkinghorn, whose proofs are now complete. Swifty he resolves to strike, taking a trifling incident for a pretext. He warns Lady Dedlock of his intention; and goes home to his Chambers that night determined to appraise Sir Leicester on the morrow.

Three people call on him that evening, all within a few minutes of each other. Sergeant George, to beg for a little more time; Lady Dedlock, to beg for mercy; and Mademoiselle Hortense, who having been used by Tulkinghorn, is now treated by him with contempt—and who shoots him dead with her own hand.

The first effect of Tulkinghorn's death is to ruin Lady Dedlock. He had been able to hold the Snagsbys and the Chadbands in check. Now that he is dead, they wait with their revelations on Sir Leicester. The shame of the exposure pierces through Lady Dedlock's pride. Her spirit is broken. She flies without seeing her husband, intending

to commit suicide. But that is not necessary. After a wild tramp into the country and back again, she dies from cold and exposure, as near as she can get to the grave of the only man she ever loved. Like many other women who appear so formidable, so irresistible and so imposing, her assumption of strength was but a cover for the weakness of her position, which revealed itself at the very first impact from outside, when she collapsed and perished. After a chase, which is admirably described, across the country, she is found by Buckett and her daughter, lying on the pavement—dead.

Lady Dedlock's death is followed by the collapse of the Chancery Suit—just as it was on the point of being determined. Among the papers found at Krook's was the final Will of one Tom Jarndyce, who had left it in his custody. It settled the estate on the father of Richard Carstone, who has quarrelled now with John Jarndyce, and has wrecked his life in the pursuit of the phantom fortune that has eluded two generations in the Courts. But the fortune is to be his at last, his and his young wife's, for Ada and he have married. To Court they all go to hear at last the final judgment, as they think; the judgment that will make poor Richard rich; to hear in actual fact: "that the whole estate "is found to have been absorbed in costs"; and that, at last, it lapses and melts away.

The scene that follows is the only one, as I think, in which Dickens ever reached the real heights of true pathos, and for that reason I quote it in full.

"It was a troubled dream?" said Richard, clasping both my guardian's hands eagerly.

"Nothing more, Rick; nothing more."

"And you, being a good man, can pass it as such, "and forgive and pity the dreamer, and be lenient and "encouraging when he wakes?"

"Indeed I can. What am I but another dreamer,

"Rick?"

"I will begin the world!" said Richard, with a light in his eyes.

My husband drew a little nearer towards Ada, and I saw him solemnly lift up his hand to warn my guardian.

"When shall I go from this place, to that pleasant "country where the old times are, where I shall have "strength to tell what Ada has been to me, where I "shall be able to recall my many faults and blind-"nesses, where I shall prepare myself to be a guide to "my unborn child?" said Richard.

"When shall I go?"

"Dear Rick, when you are strong enough," returned my guardian.

"Ada, my darling!"

He sought to raise himself a little. Allan raised him so that she could hold him on her bosom; which was what he wanted.

"I have done you many wrongs, my own. I have "fallen like a poor stray shadow on your way, I have "married you to poverty and trouble, I have scattered "your means to the winds. You will forgive me all "this, my Ada, before I begin the world?"

A smile irradiated his face, and she bent to kiss him. He slowly laid his face down upon her bosom, drew his arms closer round her neck, and with one parting sob began the world. Not this world, O, not this! The world that sets this right.

When all was still, at a late hour, poor crazed Miss Flite came weeping to me, and told me she had given her birds their liberty.

That then is the story. It ends in death, in tragedy, in sorrow, blank and unrelieved. The sparkling humour, the ebullient wit, the racy sarcasm and vivacity with which

it is written prevent one seeing that it is one of the saddest, one of the most mournful ever penned. It is the novel of Dickens's own middle age, of his period of disillusionment, when he found triumphs and achievements turned to dead sea fruit, with the bitterness of his own domestic discords, and in the clouds of misunderstandings and the miasma of broken hopes and tortured lives. It is in these same bitter clouds that the story evolves. From its first opening in the London fog, to its close in the thickness of the Lincolnshire mist, we see human nature thwarted, twisted and obscured, robbed of its true heritage of happiness, its very powers and strength turned to its own hurt and mischief by the vapours of false conventions, misunderstandings, and all the corroding and poisonous obstructions that will be with us to the end, one fears, "till the dawn 'come and shadows flee away." No other writer, save and except Ibsen, has taught this lesson so insistently as Dickens; the essential goodness and strength of human nature, the essential value and splendour of life, and the sacrifice of both to the Moloch of creeds and conventions that have their roots in the mistrust of man, and their fruits in the ruin and destruction of his soul. Had Lady Dedlock not been robbed of her child, she would have grown to proud and happy womanhood, and to have outlived any shame that her early amour might have left. Had the Court of Chancery settled its business on sane lines, young Richard Carstone would not have died of a broken heart. Krook, with his perverted ingenuity, poor Miss Flite, with her maddened soul, these and the others are but illustrations of the same lessons which the book forces on us, so tragic and so simple, showing us how the very pith of our nature may turn to poison; how our laughter may change to madness, and our hopes to those ashes that become only a monument of the dead selves of men whose souls have been destroyed.

EPILOGUE

EPILOGUE

IN bringing our inquiry to a close, and its gathered particulars to a summary or synthesis, we find that the Secret of Dickens is not simple, but compound. It is compound if only from the fact that the personal equation is not the sole element which has entered into our quest. To use the language of philosophy, both the self and the "not-self" are involved. For there is a vital and organic relationship between a literary man and his time. Both nature and human nature transfuse some distinctive influence or mood to his personality, assert some specific ascendency over his soul, or assume some commanding dominance over his mind and heart. Man is not merely an agent of nature; he is an integer thereof, and shares inevitably the organic attributes, the moods, and tenses of his environment.

It is part of the fond and familiar phrasing of the scientists that the evolving star-dust of the Universe has led up to Shakespeare. Emerson expanded this thought very prettily in his translucent language, when he conceived that the culminating phenomenon and expression of the cosmic force is the Writer, and that Nature everywhere reveals her intention to be reported. Every rock and river writes its hieroglyph and its record upon the earth's crust. Every living creature leaves its mark and signature somewhere in its hospitable strata. Every act of man inscribes itself upon the memory of his posterity. In the hierarchy of life, nature provides for her survival in the placid and powerful mind of man. The panorama of the seasons' round, and the changing phenomena of life and its cycles, make in their *ensemble* a spectacular drama in which man is both spectator and sharer; for in him is Nature's reflection and replica to her uttermost and nethermost act and deed.

Her final achievement is in man and his copious phonetic world, responsive to the external stimuli of outward and real things. From the mysterious central heart of Existence emerges a springtide of the spoken language and the written word—or, as Emerson puts it, the Stenographer, he "who sees connection where the multitude see frag-"ments, and who is impelled to exhibit the facts in ideal "order, and so supply an axis on which the frame of "things turns."

It has been with this general idea of the organic interrelationship of any great man with his natural surroundings, that I have endeavoured to evolve the real Secret of Charles Dickens. It has been my purpose to present him, as he appears to me, linked up with a specific stream of Art and Human Nature of which he was the culminating figure and exemplar. That stream we saw was characteristically English, and he its supreme representative and archetype for the Modern Era, as Shakespeare was for the Elizabethan period.

But we find also that he was more than English, even as Whitman was more than American, Ibsen more than Norwegian, Tolstoy and Turgeniev more than Russian. While all great fictionists, like all great poets and artists, live in their own specific stream of national sensibility and thought, their expansive spirit reaches out for sympathetic touch with all nature and human nature. This stream of sensibility, or the general current of thought, is for them neither bounded by national limits, nor conditioned by the ordinary measures of time and space. It takes its rise in the rich soil of the past; it penetrates into the deeps of the national life of the present; it stretches forward into the high hopes and aspirations of a majestic future. This is not merely the spirit of the artistic temperament, it is the spirit which properly belongs to the higher national consciousness. For it is this higher and deeper sense of

nationality which takes cognisance of the wider relationships and responsibilities to humanity and the race. Collectively we may rejoice in those deeper significances which underlie the superficialities of patriotic sentiment, when in moments of leisure or heightened feeling they are revealed to us. Individually we may gratefully and admiringly respond to the seer or the super-man of our native land, who, in the spirit of the individual triumphant, reflects our own instinctive and inarticulate yearnings for more ample unities in beauty and brotherhood. In rising to that spirit of a wider and more effective citizenship, we simply express a new and a high-born passion of patriotism. It more or less pervades the hearts of all, and it is true genius that strikes it into flame. It was in an age distinctive with Individualism that Charles Dickens expressed for us this form of it; and in doing this, he helped to prepare us, in this our own day and generation, for that splendid subordination of its newly-conceived powers to moral and spiritual purposes in the amelioration of the lot of mankind. The emotion of this new ideal extends our horizon to continents. Its conception has expanded to the idea of a world-peace.

We here at once touch one of those fundamental criteria of that force in a man which we conceive and admire as "greatness"; that his spoken word or written work appeals to mankind by virtue of its note of humanity, and not merely to Englishmen by virtue of its note of nationality. Dickens stood for a principle affecting the order of human life in general, which is, in its negative aspect, anti-Cæsarism, in whatever form that vile thing may raise its vizored visage or mailed fist—whether in the form of a ruthless self-assertion of Mammon, Class, or Militarism. It will always be found that whether a great man be great as poet, painter or musician, in philosophy, religion or letters, his power and his influence prevail just in that degree in which his work ignores the frontiers of

nationality or the distinctions of class, and makes its appeal to qualities common to all human life. Wagner belongs to the world, as even Germany has claimed that Shakespeare does. A discovery of science belongs to all scientific minds. Darwin and Wallace belong to no nationality as biologists, but to the world. Truth of feeling and truth of fact are such everywhere. Dickens's work is great in just that measure in which it partakes of the universal, the common, and the permanent in human nature.

All men, and more especially all women, are capable of a reaction which is responsive to the more noble things of human affection and imaginative thought. Dickens believed this profoundly. He also believed that given this condition of emotional stir, the power of right and rational apprehension follows easily and naturally. It is a law of cerebral activity that at the back of every intellectual act is emotional movement. "There are chords in the human "heart," Dickens once said, "strange and varying stirrings, "which are only struck by accident; which will remain "mute and senseless to appeals the most powerful, and "respond at last to the slightest casual touch."

That which is enduring and universal is that which most surely and directly moves us ardently and even passionately to love—love of home, love of country, love of the noble and the good, the true and the beautiful. "In the love of "Home, the love of Country has its rise," said Dickens, somewhere in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. It was his great and final purpose to elevate the soul of the people of his country. And he directed his appeal to all the finer feelings of the common life. In this newly-conceived task he saw that it matters not whether we be moved through that which is painful or joyful, terrible or sublime, tragic or comic. The range of our common feelings is obviously extensive. They are universal in their dual sensibility to good or evil; of never-ceasing activity in their striving and their

urgencies; of immortal joy in thought and memory; of expansive pleasure in imagination; purging and purifying in their flow, often pregnant with fate and destiny from their very simplicity and common-place character. That writer—be he poet or fictionist—who will be found to have exerted an extensive influence, and achieved a higher and more enduring work, is he who has devoted himself to the beautifying, even the glorifying, of the most simple and common loves or affections in the range of human feelings and propensities—the doings and the experiences of the every-day round. To endue these with simplicity, passion, beauty, or humour is to achieve breadth and depth of influence, power over the common heart, and endurance for all time. There have been those in all the Arts who have ministered to the love of the remote, the subtle, the metaphysical, the involved, the abstruse, the mystical, the terrible, the sensational, the complicated, the analytic. These all have their place in the play of thought and imagination of man. But it is the recovery of the natural, the recapture of the simple and the common in the world of every day feeling, fancy and action, which is the hall-mark of genius and the *imprimatur* of permanence.

> "*Would you have your songs endure?*
> *Build on the human heart! Why, to be sure*
> *Yours is one sort of heart—but I mean theirs,*
> *Ours, everyone's, the healthy heart one cares*
> *To build on! Central peace, mother of strength. . .*" *

In all this handling of his human material, Dickens always probed down even to the original, earthy and craggy stuff of humanity. The unique quality and force of his humour lay also in this revelation of the commonplace in its conjunction and contrast with the ideal or sublime things which underlay his realistic descriptions and delineations. Considered in the abstract, the quintessence of comedy lies in

* Browning: *Sordello:* Book II.

the sudden perception of a hiatus between the serious ideal assumed and the fictitious counterpart which is in course of being presented to the reader or spectator. The emotion of surprise at the discrepancy between the one and the other is given off in those pleasant ejaculations which we know as laughter. The reader of Dickens will easily recall examples of this peculiar disparity, characteristic of humour, between the thing implied and the thing represented. Micawber's grandiloquent mannerisms are ludicrously eloquent of a background of impending poverty that is ignored, but visibly present. The spirit of adventure and sport in the Pickwickians is removed by a blank chasm from the correct dignity and seriousness of a society of scientists. Sam Weller represents the imperturbable and Stoic philosophy of such a society incarnate in a Cockney. The Boodle and Foodle class of the "upper crust" are just the stalking automata of the ideal social personages they would fain show themselves to be in the eyes of an inferior world. The Chadbands and Honeythunders are miniature inflations of that Charity which is kind and gentle and which is not puffed up. And so we might continue.

Such examples of the Dickensian humour roughly serve to point those paradoxical elements of *congruity in contrast* which belong to all humour. But that form of it which is most characteristic of Dickens finds its true emphasis in the polished and delicate blend of the pathetic and the droll. In this, there is generally present a disparity between the sweeping largeness of some ideal and its Liliputian counterpart in the ordinary people and the experiences of the real life which he is presenting. One single instance may perhaps suffice to illustrate. We see it especially exemplified in the sublime picture of Little Dorrit mothering the clumsy half-witted Maggie. In the Daughter of the Marshalsea is embodied that tender mother-spirit which we have seen to be a theme of the Ideal frequently handled by Dickens.

Maggie is a "child" of twenty-eight years—a waif of the Borough slums. While the spirit of this gentle ministry at once fixes our earnest interest, the element of drollery evokes our smiles. We once again revert to this single instance from amongst hundreds of others, to make clear the specific medium of humour through which Dickens unfailingly evokes our intense concern and curiosity in the life and affairs of quite ordinary folk. In the fusion of the pathetic and the droll a world of human interest is lighted up; the soul is moved to a passion for humanity, as if we had indeed gazed upon its touching spectacle in all its living reality. This superlative power in the apt use of the commonplace affairs of humble life, the sordid realisms of the slums, in contrast with the beauty or the moral power of some background ideal of the Right and the True, belongs in a special way to Dickensian humour. It is just that form of it which Emerson defines in the abstract as being "remorseful to the conscience, tragic to the interest, "but droll to the intellect." It is that vital part of his Secret which I have, throughout these pages, endeavoured to unfold. It is that power which deliberately aims and achieves its ethical purpose through an appeal to the simplest and universal feelings and affections of us all, whether high or low, rich or poor. And it was the very grossness, sometimes the very ugliness and grotesqueness, as well as the tenacious hardness of the people and the circumstances which he handled—it was this, the coarser stuff of humanity, which formed the most convincing factor in his humour. "Man "is the only animal that laughs and weeps," says Hazlitt, "for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference "between what things are and what they ought to be. We "weep at what thwarts or exceeds our desires in serious "matters; we laugh at what only disappoints our expecta- "tions in trifles. We shed tears from sympathy with real "and necessary distress; as we burst into laughter from

"want of sympathy with that which is unreasonable. . . .
"To explain the nature of laughter and tears is to account
"for the condition of human life; for it is in a manner
"compounded of these two!"

In tracking through the earlier chapters that path along which the principles of Realism and Humanism entered into the evolution of the novel, from the days of the old schools of Fielding and Richardson, we found that the triumph of the one involved the triumph of the other. Now it seems clear that in the very humour of Dickens *we find a synthesis of both.* For in exhibiting the ludicrous or the droll through his characters and their attendant thoughts and circumstances, he compels us to take them all seriously. Herein we see that he possessed a genius which was equal to conceiving humour in the spirit of its highest function; and what is more, he possessed the power to realise it in all its practical effects in his stories. All this was a decided advance upon the old "comic" school, which, as we have gone to some length in showing, influenced him considerably. The cruder vigour and virility of the old English spirit he caught and worked up into the thing of moral beauty, purity and humanity, whose ideal we at least know to-day. And in rendering it possible to devote the novel to the poor of his country, he revealed also those secret recesses of the common soul, within whose inner court the conflicts of the spirit become, under his art treatment, a spectacle appealing to and uniting all struggling hearts; compared with which, as he once said, "fields of "battle are as nothing."

It may be urged against me that in the foregoing chapters I have plunged the man himself too deeply into his environment, and credited that with more than its due, to the detriment of his personality and its influence. I may have appeared to have distilled from his writings interpretations, designs and purposes not warranted by his achievements. I

may have appeared to have unduly exaggerated and over-appraised his values, his teachings, and his powers. If all this be so, I can only plead that literary criticism has done the same with Chaucer and Shakespeare; and has, moreover, justified itself by consistently expanding into greater moral force and more impressive art-effects the latent phases of genius. My hope is that I may, in some minor degree, do likewise for Dickens. For I do verily believe that the secret of his influence is that he attained to those higher altitudes of sympathetic outlook and spiritual insight which constitute all world-spirits of the race. Such great spirits of Art and Literature may be seen to possess some common quality which determines their outstanding influence over the race—whether that influence be effected through the drama, the epic, or the novel, through pictures, statues, operas, or symphonies. Humanists like Dante, Goethe, Shakespeare, Wagner, Burne-Jones, William Morris, Carlyle, Emerson, Ruskin, Browning, Meredith, Tolstoy, Hugo; all the great ones of Art have used it, and conceived it as something standing in direct and vital relation to life, and not as a mere decorative and detachable "extra" stuccoed over it. For them, Art is something real and human, with rootage at the very heart of life. The personal qualities common to all such outstanding men of influence are, I think, seen in their sympathetic absorption in the actual world of reality; in their passionate contemplation of our simple and universal human nature; in their ardour to demonstrate its unity in diversity, its *one-ness* in human affinity and destiny. There is a passion to adjust its antagonisms, to diffuse and equalise its burdens, to preserve the perishable attributes of the soul in the guarding commonwealths of moral, political, and social fellowship. Such men have used Art as "the wine-press of the human "soul." In this Legion of Humanity, Charles Dickens takes a place of unique merit, for the character of his

genius is two-fold. It is not merely on the side of his personal or artistic activities that he comes into prominence, but also in the way in which he reached down to a plane of new and original materials wherewith to work. Both in idiosyncracy, and in adapting new materials to his craft, he remains an outstanding figure. He may not, like Meredith, have apprehended existence with the subtle and wing-like spread of the intellect which marks that eminent poet and fictionist, but he possessed more of his temperamental optimism, and like him keenly recognised—

"*The issues known in us, our unsolved solved:*
That there with toil, Life climbs the self-same Tree."

Unlike Mr. Thomas Hardy, he saw no over-shadowing and ruthless World-Will impassively thwarting the aspirations and puny acts of man, but like him, he challenged the fixed formulæ and the conventional standards of the common things of life. He saw, as Mr. Hardy sees, the eternally adolescent passion and urge of the semi-conscious common folk. Like that severe realist, he also exercised a mastery over the uncanny, unfathomable awe which lurks somewhere in the alembic of the human nerves. It is true that Dickens did not share the inquisitive faculty of George Eliot for science, nor her vision of the philosophic issues of the Victorian period. But like her, and like Tolstoy, he was apprehensive of the sharp confrontation of the soul of man with the new scientific thought, and felt some qualms at the solemn possibilities arising out of the impact. All three eagerly sought to reinforce humanity against an inauspicious aftermath, by closer examination into our resources in the natural, simple, and secular humanities, and the amelioration of the appalling waste and failure in human life revealed by the formal and newly-tabulated conceptions of progress. In this work, all three may be regarded as examples of a reaction to the simplicity and purity of our mundane humanities as a home of refuge. But neither in the deep

earth-breath of Tolstoy, nor in the solemn call to the moralised humanism of George Eliot, magnificent as they are, do we find so ready a response from the masses as in Charles Dickens's buoyant, optimistic and tonic evangel. In this he consciously sounded and touched "the great "deeps of humanity," as he somewhere phrases it. And in the exaltation and reconsecration of our lowliest human nature, he points to the poor: "For it is a world of sacred "mysteries," he says in the *Battle of Life*, "and its "Creator only knows what lies beneath the surface of His "lightest image." In this, his optimism was also that of his friend Browning. He sought to show us that in their follies and failures—which are really ours, too—are grains of wisdom. And in picturing the new humanity which peeps over the expanding horizon, he helps us to see a good in evil, and a hope—

"*In ill-success; to sympathise, be proud*
Of their half-reasons, faint aspirings, dim
Struggles for truth, their poorest fallacies,
Their prejudices and fears and cares and doubts;
All with a touch of nobleness, despite
Their error, upward tending all, though weak."

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