HISTORICAL STUDIES IN ENGLISH LITERATURE WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO DICKENS'S WORKS

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In reading English literature one of the outstanding difficulties that baffle us is its extensive detail of description with proper names, localities, and topical allusions. Being not always concerned with curious or antiquarian explorations, we are often at a loss to understand any literary fact satisfactorily if we cannot have an exact image of concrete objects and realities, familiar enough, we may suppose, to those who are to the manner born, by which the thing meant is minutely described. Such is particularly the case with the most English of English writers, such as Chaucer, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and Dickens. Here is a seemingly trivial instance taken from *The Cricket on the Hearth* (i):

> (Tackleton) "Caleb, come here! Who's that with the grey hair?"
> "I don't know, sir," returned Caleb, in a whisper. "Never see him before, in all my life. A beautiful figure for a nutcracker; quite a new model. With a screw-jaw opening down into his waistcoat, he'd be lovely."
> "Not ugly enough," said Tackleton.
> "Or for a fire-box, either," observed Caleb, in deep contemplation. "What a model! Unscrew his head to put the matches in, turn him heels up'ards for the light, and what a firebox for a gentleman's mantel-shelf just as he stands!"

A 'nutcracker' is here alluded to in order to illustrate the old gentleman's prominent nose and chin which nearly touch as the two pieces of metal do of which this instrument consists. Granted it is so, we shall have only a faint image of 'a screw-jaw opening

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down into his waistcoat.' More troublesome to us is a 'fire-box,' whose construction and use will not perhaps be exactly known unless we visit some museum or curiosity shop in which this obsolete article is preserved. In *The Old Curiosity Shop* (xlvii) we find another instance, also disappointing, of this word: 'He carried in his pocket, too, a fire-box of mysterious and unknown construction.' It may be imagined that the matches were formerly ignited by drawing them on a piece of sandpaper fixed on the bottom of a fire-box. 'Turn him heels up'ards for the light' in the above quotation seems to refer to this mode of ignition. Is this supposition to be admitted?

Why all this trouble about such apparent trivialities? We are not interested in the articles themselves in question, but want to know their constructions simply because they are here exploited with gusto to give a vividly peculiar image of the old gentleman by way of characterization which is of vital significance in this descriptive context. The typically English authors are as often as not inclined to think in images, and that in images of tangible facts and phenomena at hand, among which names of concrete objects such as illustrated above will not profitably be overlooked. This applies particularly to names and words of personal reminiscence or association which, though at present almost buried in oblivion, serve to give a lively colourful touch to picturesque (sometimes almost poetical) expressions. We shall suffer a heavy loss in understanding Dickens, for instance, if we forget all about debtors' prisons, workhouses, stage-coaches, Doctors' Commons, &c. which form the realistic and often dramatic scenes in his novels. Dickens's language, except for slang and dialect, is certainly easier to apprehend than Shakespeare's, but there are a host of quaint allusions to familiar songs and tales, tags echoed from contemporary melodramas, and trivial quotations from popular literature and journalism that are now a stumbling-block to us because they originate frequently from sources at present almost forgotten. The late T. W. Hill's notes on Dickens's works in *The Dickensian* are neither comprehensive nor correct in every detail. If not

explored and preserved in their proper origin and use, these odds and ends of entertaining expression will for ever elude us, causing a serious difficulty in interpretation and historical explanation. To what extent, then, are we allowed to ignore with impunity this English sense of fact and observation so as to brand, with K. J. Fielding ("Dickens Criticism: a Symposium," *The Dickensian*, No. 340, p. 75),[1] such pieces of curious inquiry as "the trivialities of scholarship"? For sheer criticism it may be trifling and vain enough, but historical studies cannot but start with such minutiae of practical information. We are often reminded how important these small bits of historical knowledge are in apprehending English creations and institutions, of which the language and literature are our immediate concern.

The bulk of Dickensiana is multiplying from day to day, and we have, in addition to "The England of Dickens", "The Dickens Country", "In Dickens's London" and other kinds of topography, an ever-increasing amount of personal information, often fragmentary, offered by eager Dickensians, scholarly or otherwise. Such waifs and strays may be, as they certainly have been, pieced together in a continuous series of episodes that make up the author's biographical story, of which we have such masterworks as John Forster's classical "Life" and Edgar Johnson's recent voluminous work. Such informative studies of the man, his life and work, giving as far as possible the temporal as well as local habitations and names to the airy visions of creative imagination, cannot fail to inspire us with the sense of English reality in the historical perspective which is the traditional view of man and the world in England. On the other hand, we should not forget that "Dickens Land" is not to be identified in every detail with the author's native land itself out of which it has been created. However noted for his love of exact documentation, Dickens is an author of marked individuality with intense imagination and

[1] Fielding is referring to Sam Weller's 'red-faced Nixon' (*Pickwick*, xliii) which George Ford chooses as an example of a detail that might well be annotated.

sensibility who does not always present a slavishly photographic picture of his land and age.

To biographical studies in English poetry serious objections have recently been raised by some "new critics", of whom Cleanth Brooks may properly be considered as a distinguished champion. Brooks desires to deal with the poet's attitudes "in terms of the organization of the given poem itself", because he is "primarily interested in the specific view taken in the particular poem, and interested in how the attitude of the poem was made to inform the poem—and not primarily interested in historical or psychological generalizations about the poet's mind."[1] This is a radical reaction against the recent tendency of inquiry in which biographical evidence is so exclusively valued to the neglect of the literary productions themselves. But it should not be forgotten, on the other hand, that analysis is of any literary significance only where we have not a fixed texture as in Brooks's studies of English poems, but a dynamic process and a historical development. Brooks's analytical questions, pursued also by some other critics, of formal structure and patterns of imagery, symbolizatios, paradoxes, ironies, & c. are not limited to the criticism of poetry, but they have come to be applied to prose literature as well.

We may choose as a penetrating example A.O.J. Cockshut's *The Imagination of Charles Dickens*, in which the author concentrates on Dickens's melodramatic bias and his sympathy with popular taste which were the indispensable means of making his more profound gifts productive. According to Cockshut's analysis, "*David Copperfield* continually evades the consequences of its own assumptions; it lacks the inner logic of Dickens's most distinguished works" (p. 115). "Throughout the book," this critic goes on to say, "there is no real pressure of reality, no logic of cause and effect" (p. 122). It is true that this "personal history" lacks the inner logic of the later works (which begins in point of fact with *Dombey and Son* immediately preceding *David Copperfield*), but in

[1] *The Well Wrought Urn*, p. 225.

spite of, or rather because of, its scanty logical sequence and consistency, it abounds with vitality, solidity, and vivacity that combine to make fictional scenes and episodes so many realistic facts. Though not really coherent, it gives the supreme sense of the living reality. Dickens's principles in this work are not the principles of reason pure and simple but of human nature liable to be swayed by sentiment and emotion which are inextricably fused in the historical or (auto)biographical contexts.

Dickens had a superb imagination of the real which comes literally from the acute English awareness of time and actuality, and created a realistic, not real, world of humanity. Take, for example, Mr. Micawber. His original is said to be John Dickens, the author's father, with whom this character has a number of eccentric qualities in common. But, paradoxically enough, how interestingly real this person looks in comparison with the original who sombrely appears in the author's biography! Cockshut candidly admits, as Chesterton once did, that to read of Mr. Micawber is like receiving a blow in the face, and remarks that it is a deeply-felt experience, but it is not susceptible of analytic description (*op. cit.*, p. 114). Mr. Micawber in the melodramatic scene in which he heroically defeats Uriah Heep looks indeed another person than Mr. Micawber who hopes 'something will turn up' in the helpless depths of poverty. This surprising reversal of character may admit of no logical link of cause and effect, but it does not necessarily mean that we cannot thereby acknolwedge the existence of the two personalities originating in the author himself. Edmund Wilson aptly notices the co-existence of 'the two Scrooges' or Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in the person of this novelist (*The Wound and the Bow*), and such seeming irrelevance can be more naturally accounted for in the process of human life than in the psychological structure, not to speak of logical consistency, of the literary work. Wilson's biographical approach renders many an apparent irrelevance or contradiction real and convincing in the narrative of Dickens's progress as a novelist.

Wilson, however, seems to go too far in retracing the biographi-

cal facts in Dickens's works when he seeks to identify Estella in *Great Expectations* and Bella Wilfer in *Our Mutual Friend* with the supposed original (Ellen Ternan) who has loomed large in the recent lives and criticisms of Dickens. His touching privacy with this female which had been systematically kept secret for a long time may be partly responsible for the gloomy despondency predominant in the later works, but we tread on delicate ground here, and far-fetched conjectures and relentless identifications and disclosures should not unduly delight persistent source-hunters, of whom we have (alas!) too many in this workaday world. We should remember, as Humphry House (*The Dickens World*, p. 11) observes, that "the proper interest of such discoveries is only in their relevance either to Dickens's own biography or to the social history behind his novels." Gissing once indicated as a timely warning that it was only in his later years that Dickens visited Yarmouth where the young David is so charmingly described to spend a few romantic days with Emily that one may naturally imagine that this scene is a faithful rendering of the author's childish experience at the seaside town. As it is, fact and fiction are unified so organically in the world of Dickens's imagination that there is almost no exact identification to be made both in time and place. For all that, it is the very existence of some kind of reality behind that makes his work so lifelike and impressive.

As an artistic achievement *Great Expectations* enjoys higher estimation than its autobiographical counterpart *David Copperifield.* In this later novel Dickens was more deliberate and wished to create a coherent unity sadly missed in its predecessor. He was determined, says Cockshut (*op. cit.*, p. 159), "to conceive unity partly in terms of harmonising images, and partly in terms of a neat plot." Though the plot is never quite exempt from melodrama peculiar to the author, he succeeded here in producing the unity of imagery which impresses us with the helpless sense of uncertainty and despair, as poetical and symbolical as anything in the English novel (one may be reminded in some way of the Yorkshire moors in

Wuthering Heights or Hardy's Egdon Heath). Cockshut notices decay which is at the centre of this symbolic structure, corresponding to the parasitic moral situation (p. 163). The poetic scenes are by no means rare even in the early novels, but it was not until *Dombey and Son* appeared that the symbolic structure and the unity of poetical images came to perform a vital function in the novel. So it is proper for recent critics to be shrewdly aware of this poetical structure and subtle design in the later novels, but we can notice, apart from the penetrating interpretation of plot and construction, the abstract, intellectual, analytical method of their criticism which tends to reduce artificially and sophistically all life and character to the aesthetic pattern or the technical mechanism, one of the virtues and vices of the "new criticism". This kind of mechanical analysis presupposes the autonomy of the novel as an achieved work separating itself from the author and his life. All is a matter of skill and elaboration. Moreover, recent criticism has occasionally a way of isolating each work from the great sequence of Dickens's novels, thus emphasizing the peculiarity of *Great Expectations* as distinguished from *David Copperfield*. In this connection Monroe Engel (*The Maturity of Dickens*, pp. 147f.) seems right when he, while pointing to specific and detailed evidence of the change in Dickens's view in the two novels, observes that "the continuity of his imagination is more profound than the change in his view or construction of those facts and configurations of experience in which his imagination is founded." It is this same continuity that makes each novel real and characteristic in the author's range of literary creation.

It is matter rather than form, reality rather than construction, that may be considered as traditionally constituting the English novel, in which story, character, and incident are faithfully told in the narrative. Fact and history or the "objective correlative" is the vital concern in preference to aesthetic images and symbolic structure. This may be a truism but needs now to be re-asserted in consideration of the fact that recent criticism is prone to overemphasize symbolism and structure at the expense of character and

story. As a result of critical analysis, the literality or ' matter-of-factness ' of the English novel is in danger of being slighted or ignored in favour of structural abstractions. To counterbalance this analytical proclivity we should pay due regard to the legitimate significance of histories and historical studies.

From this point of view it is illuminating to notice what Cockshut calls the solitary exception that counts (i.e. Joe Gargery) in working productively in *Great Expectations* (*op. cit.*, p. 166). " His forge is the only reminder of the necessity of work, of the connection between skill and wealth. In a book full of soft, hazy images, of mists and marshes, and full also of hazy mental processes, Joe's forge is a hard fact, represented by iron and fire." This is a hard fact indeed and a human enough reality. Productive or not, Joe Gargery and his workshop are without doubt the living realities against the vague misty background. David in the latter half of *David Cooperfield* is nothing but a shadowy spectator, but Pip as a sentient being of flesh and blood is more than a second image of the author, being full of solid reality through his uncertain course of aspiration and disappointment. How pathetically real he is, for example, when, at the very beginning, he timidly fetches a file at the request of an escaped convict! The construction of *Great Expectations* is perfectly designed, but so much the more Magwitch at its centre impresses us throughout the book as an unconvincing mystery as in a detective story. There remain a few " Dickens characters " dear to the readers of the early novels and the author's characteristic creations of fantasy and romanticism such as Estella and Miss Havisham in her ominous room. They are, to use Chesterton's paradox, romantically realistic and not always in keeping with the realistically romantic plot and construction of this novel.

David Copperfield and *Great Expectations* are variations on the same autobiographical theme. They prove most autobiographical, the plot and construction apart, when they recount or reflect the dark, melancholy period of the author's internal as well as external life. They are not only surrounded by the dark and heavy

atmosphere but throughout obsessed by a certain inferiority complex which is not visionary but horribly real. What is actually this complex and how it has been occasioned should be explained by an early sorrowful incident in the author's own life. The bitter consciousness of social hierarchy in respectable Victorian England becomes here a psychological matter of individual agony and humiliation. Persons and facts as we see them in these novels are perceived and described so vividly and vigorously that they remain as the intensified visions of the actuality. This perceptive and imaginative intensity may justly be judged as most typical of the English genius.

English reason and imagination work mainly by the principles of humanity which concern themselves with human interest and historical preoccupation. Dickens started his literary career as an ardent observer and recorder of the life and manners of Londoners, of which *Sketches by Boz* is an amusing collection of accounts. The *Sketches* consist of a wealth of raw materials of the young author's real experience to be sifted, refined, and re-created as the realistic sources of the scenes and characters in the later works. The world of the *Sketches* is never the dead world of things, but the brisk and noisy scenes alive with everyday people in everyday life. Our geographical and historical curiosity is excited by such a rich storehouse of interesting and edifying information. However full of raw stuff, it is not a dreary region of material mechanism only but a lively stage on which the human comedy is seen to be presented. It is mentioned by House (*op. cit.*, p. 21) that Dickens had no exact historic sense but he had a very acute sense of time and liked to give his books a surface of tidiness and punctuality. It is frequently so extensive and so precise that we are too much entangled in the piled mass of information and complicated description not to lose the thread of the narrative. Such minute presentation originates in the author's inspired observation and realization of actual facts and phenomena as in the *Sketches* (later reappearing with greater maturity in the *Uncommercial Traveller*), in which the reader is sure to join imaginatively with keen enjoyment.

This enthusiastic interest in human facts and realities has produced a host of great histories and biographies in English literature. Doctor Johnson called biography a piece of history. To say nothing of the ancient *Lives of the Saints*, his own *Lives of the English Poets* provides us with the personal documents of the chosen poets which are, though sometimes petulant and prejudiced, are for the most part attractive and enlightening reading. The proper history of English literature is best founded in this kind of personal information. John Forster narrated the story of his friend in *The Life of Charles Dickens*, followed by a considerable number of readable biographies. In them we can observe that not merely Dickens's peculiar personality is most clearly (almost dramatically) described against the industrial background and the political atmosphere of his time, but, though he had no exact or systematic knowledge of the social and economic issues, their environment is most brilliantly reflected in his moral and psychological concerns. Such biographical inquiry is not accidental, but is deep-rooted in the English love of humanity and reality which calls for our historical treatment more properly than philosophical or scientific analysis.

David Hume dealt philosophically with human nature but it was Fielding who illustrated human nature in the English way in his *History of Tom Jones*. Burke considered politics to be adjusted to human nature (not exclusively reason) which is in his English thought the historical actuality. Humanity in the abstract does not interest the English so much as individual humours and characters (often eccentrics), who people the stage and histories and novels. Historians, dramatists and novelists, therefore, may be regarded as the best English moralists as opposed to the French *moralistes* who are said to be perfectly philosophical. Moreover, man is likely to be viewed in English literature, not in his ideal Platonic existence or hopeless brutality (Swift is an exceptional genius and Iago a monstrous creation), but in constant growth and progress. This organic view of man is not peculiar to Shakespeare who liked to 'perceive that men as plants increase' (*Sonnet* XV), but shared

by all who boast the English quest for humanity. From this evolutionary insight evolves that social outlook in which men as political animals are considered to live and grow together in a certain moral as well as physical climate within a definite public system or institution. The order of society is viewed, as by Burke, to grow as the result of natural adaptation to environment with the background of ages of proved wisdom and action. This view, however, is not essentially so much naturalistic as historical. It is, most of all, historical methods in English literature that do justice to this individual perception and imagination of the English mind.

An extensive, though less comprehensive and least of all systematic, collection of observed facts, upon which a number of monumental English works, Darwin's *Origin of Species* and the *Oxford English Dictionary* among them, have been solidly based, is the outcome of the energetic activity of Englishmen gifted with enormous vitality, given to little meditation but caring, like Robinson Crusoe, a great deal for the steadfast, methodical plans to work out their practical ideas. This positive, business-like, manly character to be best observed in eighteenth-century prose should not once for all be disposed of in psychological or ethnological terms but is a matter to be historically accounted for. It is intimately connected with a long history of English prose which is not exclusively a production of purely intellectual, far less aesthetic, inspiration but is the fruit of a long series of bourgeois life and thought and activity in the modern world. In English prose the massive body of information and experience is told in the order or plot of a story or in the historical contexts that help to explain how persons and things came into being and progressed. The efficient reason of 'becoming' tends to attract the English people more strongly than the final cause of 'being'. To tell a story, as Richard the Second likes to do, seems more congenial to their sense and sensibility than to speculate or theorize.

Nowadays it is prevalent to assess Dickens's later works from a structural point of view, bringing critical analysis chiefly to bear upon the author's deliberate design and symbolism. In this analyt-

ical light *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend*, though admired respectively as works of artistic perfection, reveal both of them some weakness in construction. Suffice it here to glance at the lack of coherence or consistency in the mode of narration or description. The complicated method of telling a story within a story, which irritatingly impedes the action or progress of the main narrative (later fairly brought to perfection) in the *Pickwick Papers*, reappears still in these later novels in such a way that Esther Summerson narrates the charming human side of *Bleak House* in her delicately innocent style and Rokesmith thinks out in a lengthy passage his mysterious past in the latter part of *Our Mutual Friend*. The novels suffer in construction owing to these inserted narratives which are, in themselves, probably unsurpassed in their respective ways, particularly in the traditional English way in which they are told. Rokesmith ' thinks it out ' but does not ' think aloud ' as in the interior monologue of recent novels. The foggy scene in the court in *Bleak House* is not merely a pre-eminent symbolism but a most realistic description produced by the author's own intimate knowledge. The same is true of the vivid description of the Thames in *Our Mutual Friend*, in which the author seems, as it were, to be ath ome as in his native element. It is not so with the description of ' the Mounds ' (dust heap), whose symbolical design is lauded to the skies by some recent critics. This mythical image may rather be considered an allegorical device, while the pictures of misty London and the river are, no matter how symbolical, supremely characteristic of the English realistic expression.

Such matter-of-fact English prose seems to repel some recent novelists of distinction. A daring spokeswoman of the twentieth-century revolt against conventional prose is Virginia Woolf, who labels Wells, Bennet, and Galsworthy as materialists who " have disappointed us, because they are concerned not with the spirit but with the body " (*Modern Fiction*). If what she calls life or spirit, truth or reality, seems to be lacking when she turns to these Edwardians, she will be more helplessly disappointed in this respect by Victorian novelists. But Dickens, to mention a single eminent

name, has plenty of life or spirit, truth or reality, of his own, which will fail her in her peculiar psychological scrutiny. Exquisitely subtle and even poetical, her 'stream-of-consciousness' style in her own novels is too fluid and tenuous to survive continuously in English prose. It is indeed vital and spiritual, but lacks the body and materialistic conditions that are indispensable to make English truth or reality what it is. A work of psychological fiction, remarks Herbert Read (*Reason and Romanticism*, p. 222), "must pass from one generation to another with the least possible obstruction of material factors; it must be above the accidents of time." It is to be doubted how far this is possible in English fiction. Virginia Woolf's represents a shrewd attempt, mainly experimental, but never is a historical creation that justifies or admits of historical explanation. Our historical studies are defied if ever by such a literary phenomenon.