

AUTHORSHIP, ETHICS
AND THE READER
Blake, Dickens, Joyce

DOMINIC RAINSFORD



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Dominic Rainsford
October 1996

Texts and Abbreviations

WILLIAM BLAKE

Quotations, unless stated otherwise, are taken from E: *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, newly revised edn (New York, 1988). Blake's plate or manuscript page numbers, followed by line numbers, are given for all works except short poems. For Blake's illustrations to his engraved texts I give page references to the reproductions in IB: *The Illuminated Blake*, annotated by David V. Erdman (London, 1975).

A	<i>America</i>
Ah	<i>The Book of Ahania</i>
ARO	<i>All Religions are One</i>
CGW	<i>The Complete Graphic Works of William Blake</i> , ed. David Bindman, assisted by Deirdre Toomey (London, 1978).
DC	<i>A Descriptive Catalogue</i>
Eu	<i>Europe</i>
FC	<i>For Children: The Gates of Paradise</i>
FR	<i>The French Revolution</i>
FS	<i>For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise</i>
FZ	<i>The Four Zoas</i>
J	<i>Jerusalem</i>
L	<i>The Letters of William Blake, with Related Documents</i> , ed. Geoffrey Keynes, 3rd edn (Oxford, 1980).
M	<i>Milton</i>
MHH	<i>The Marriage of Heaven and Hell</i>
N	<i>The Notebook of William Blake: A Photographic and Typographic Facsimile</i> , ed. David V. Erdman with the assistance of Donald K. Moore (Oxford, 1973).
NNR	<i>There is No Natural Religion</i>
PS	<i>Poetical Sketches</i>
SE	<i>Songs of Experience</i>
SI	<i>Songs of Innocence</i>
SIE	<i>Songs of Innocence and of Experience</i>
SL	<i>The Song of Los</i>
Th	<i>The Book of Thel</i>

- Ti *Tiriel*
 U *The [First] Book of Urizen*
 VDA *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*
 WBW *William Blake's Writings*, ed. G. E. Bentley, Jr, 2 vols (Oxford, 1978).

CHARLES DICKENS

- AN *American Notes for General Circulation*, ed. John S. Whitley and Arnold Goldman (Harmondsworth, 1972).
 BH *Bleak House*, ed. George Ford and Sylvère Monod, Norton Critical Edition (New York, 1977).
 BR *Barnaby Rudge*, ed. Gordon Spence (Harmondsworth, 1973).
 CS *Christmas Stories*, intro. Margaret Lane, The Oxford Illustrated Dickens (Oxford, 1956).
 DC *David Copperfield*, ed. Nina Burgis, The Clarendon Dickens (Oxford, 1981).
 DS *Dombey and Son*, ed. Alan Horsman, The Clarendon Dickens (Oxford, 1974).
 ED *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, ed. Margaret Cardwell, The Clarendon Dickens (Oxford, 1972).
 GE *Great Expectations*, ed. Margaret Cardwell, The Clarendon Dickens (Oxford, 1993).
 HT *Hard Times*, ed. George Ford and Sylvère Monod, Norton Critical Edition, 2nd edn (New York, 1990).
 LD *Little Dorrit*, ed. Harvey Peter Sucksmith, The Clarendon Dickens (Oxford, 1979).
 MC *Martin Chuzzlewit*, ed. Margaret Cardwell, The Clarendon Dickens (Oxford, 1982).
 MP *Miscellaneous Papers*, ed. B. W. Matz, 2 vols, Gadshill Edition, additional vols 35 and 36 (London, 1908).
 NL *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Walter Dexter, The Nonesuch Dickens, 3 vols (London, 1938).
 NN *Nicholas Nickleby*, ed. Michael Slater (Harmondsworth, 1978).
 OCS *The Old Curiosity Shop*, ed. Angus Easson, intro. Malcolm Andrews (Harmondsworth, 1972).
 OMF *Our Mutual Friend*, ed. Stephen Gill (Harmondsworth, 1971).
 OT *Oliver Twist*, ed. Kathleen Tillotson, The Clarendon Dickens (Oxford, 1966).

- PL *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Madeline House and others, The Pilgrim Edition (Oxford, 1965–).
- PP *Pickwick Papers*, ed. James Kinsley, The Clarendon Dickens (Oxford, 1986).
- SB *Sketches by Boz*, intro. Thea Holme, The New Oxford Illustrated Dickens (London, 1957).
- TTC *A Tale of Two Cities*, ed. George Woodcock (Harmondsworth, 1970).

JAMES JOYCE

References to *Ulysses* use the episode and line numbers first employed in Hans Walter Gabler's critical edition (New York, 1984). These numbers also appear in the Penguin Student's Edition and the Bodley Head edition of 'the Corrected Text' with a preface by Richard Ellmann (London, 1986). This last, which is a corrected printing of Gabler's reading text, is the source for all my quotations.

- CW *The Critical Writings of James Joyce*, ed. Ellsworth Mason and Richard Ellmann (Ithaca, NY, 1959).
- D *'Dubliners': Text, Criticism and Notes*, ed. Robert Scholes and A. Walton Litz, The Viking Critical Library (New York, 1969).
- FW *Finnegans Wake*, 3rd edn (London, 1964).
- JJA *The James Joyce Archive*, ed. Michael Groden, Hans Walter Gabler, David Hayman, A. Walton Litz and Danis Rose, with John O'Hanlon, 63 vols (New York, 1977–80).
- L1 *Letters of James Joyce*, ed. Stuart Gilbert (London, 1957).
- L2, L3 *Letters of James Joyce*, vols 2 and 3, ed. Richard Ellmann (London, 1966).
- P *'A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man': Text, Criticism and Notes*, ed. Chester G. Anderson, The Viking Critical Library (New York, 1968).
- PE *Poems and 'Exiles'*, ed. J. C. C. Mays (Harmondsworth, 1992).
- PSW *Poems and Shorter Writings*, ed. Richard Ellmann, A. Walton Litz and John Whittier-Ferguson (London, 1991).
- SH *Stephen Hero*, ed. Theodore Spencer, revised by John J. Slocum and Herbert Cahoon (London, 1956).
- SL *Selected Letters of James Joyce*, ed. Richard Ellmann (London, 1975).

- U *Ulysses*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler with Wolfhard Steppe and Claus Melchior, corrected edn (London, 1986; repr. 1989).

PERIODICALS

- BIQ *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly*
DQ *Dickens Quarterly*
DSA *Dickens Studies Annual*
JJQ *James Joyce Quarterly*
NLH *New Literary History*
SEL *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900*
SiR *Studies in Romanticism*
TLS *Times Literary Supplement*

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Introduction

This book concerns the ethical status of the idea of the author. More particularly, it concerns ways in which literary texts may pointedly seem to disclose their authors' sense of their own ethical status, and the significance that these disclosures may have for a reader who is interested in relating literature to ethical questions in extra-literary life. The book pursues these matters through close readings of William Blake, Charles Dickens and James Joyce, but its central argument is designed for wider application: to other authors and even to other, non-literary forms of discourse.

The connections between literature and ethics have recently been the object of increased attention in influential quarters. In fact, according to Steven Connor, 'the word "ethics" seems to have replaced "textuality" as the most charged term in the vocabulary of contemporary literary and cultural theory'.¹ I shall attempt, in this Introduction, to give some indication of the way in which my particular interests relate to this current trend. But first, I should say what I mean by 'ethics'.

The works of William Blake, Charles Dickens and James Joyce, like those of most literary authors, contain much imaginative recreation both of the benevolent behaviour of human beings and of their oppressive or cruel interactions, whether in a domestic context or in such fields as politics, commerce, the law, education, industry or warfare. Such forms of behaviour are of constant concern in real life: people do things to one another all the time that we feel inclined to approve, and other things that we deplore (however much we may disagree about what things, exactly, fall into these categories). And we have to select our own actions, too, according to our sense of what is desirable or undesirable, or, as we are likely to think and say, 'right' or 'wrong'. Our decisions in these matters, even if we do not believe in a morality grounded on anything more than contingency, expediency or self-interest, can be said to be governed by moral concepts: ideas of how to behave when we find ourselves in certain relations to other individuals, relations which affect their happiness or well-being. In so far as we reflect upon, question and theorize these moral concepts we may be said to be engaging in moral philosophy or ethics.²

The study of literature, with its representation of actions which, in life, we would treat as good or bad, can be seen as involving itself with ethics in many ways. At one extreme, perhaps, we have F. R. Leavis – now so frequently maligned – who looked to literature, both as an art and as an academic discipline, to leave its readers better and richer people, through an unmistakably serious engagement with morals, and who was correspondingly unrestrained in his own essentially ethical judgements as to which texts were worth a reader's time and which were not.³ At the other extreme, perhaps, we have a poststructuralist such as J. Hillis Miller, who has a rather Leavisian taste in novelists, but for whom the 'ethics of reading' consists of an attention to language that is so scrupulous, so reluctant to foreclose on any possibility of meaning, that the application of literature to a real-life moral dilemma, requiring a firm decision, seems likely to be indefinitely deferred.⁴ My own approach lies between these extremes, but takes inspiration from the obvious sense of an importance in literature, and of a duty in criticism, that underlies both of them.

Geoffrey Galt Harpham, another leading figure in this debate, has recently argued that a humanistic desire to make literature serve life, and the highest level of theoretical rigour, far from being incompatible, positively entail one another, and do so through ethics: '[e]thics is . . . the point at which literature intersects with theory, the point at which literature becomes conceptually interesting and theory becomes humanized'.⁵ I view the ethical problems associated with the idea of the author in a similar way: as a set of points at which the reader is encouraged to make creative, useful connections between, on the one hand, the necessary process of describing the world to ourselves, and ourselves to the world, that is exemplified by literary narrative, and, on the other, the responsibility that any human being is likely to feel to think his or her way towards a point of view on the practical moral questions that punctuate daily life.

So why Blake, Dickens and Joyce? It is hard to see how any piece of writing that shows human beings interacting in any but the most superficial ways could avoid lending itself to the ethics-oriented approach which I have just described. And, to a certain extent, my choice of authors could be said to be arbitrary. Many specific parallels are drawn in the ensuing chapters between the respective *œuvres* of these authors, but this is not meant to be taken as an influence study: I am interested in describing causal links between

Blake, Dickens and Joyce only in so far as this helps me to pursue a particular set of attitudes to authorship for which Blake, Dickens and Joyce provide outstandingly strong examples. Each of these authors, I shall argue, appears to have become more and more embroiled, as his career progressed, in ethical questions raised by the act of describing, through literature, social and individual ills which paralleled the experience of real people: a development which reveals itself through increasingly troubled versions of implied authorial presence. The texts of each of these authors came, more and more, to display a sense of crisis in moral authority. In each case, the idea of the author that the reader is encouraged to hold becomes a microcosm or synecdoche of the more general, social problems which seem to exercise that author – the things that appear to be most seriously wrong, ill or evil in the world conjured up by his work.

The fact that Blake, Dickens and Joyce encourage the reader to question their benignity by no means disqualifies their work from engaging in the examination of moral concepts which constitutes ethics. Rather, I would suggest that this implied doubt is a necessary symptom of rigorous ethical thought, and that it offers the reader an encouragement to bring moral problems which might seem abstract, or cocooned in literary art, thoroughly to life. Wayne C. Booth, in *The Company We Keep*, one of the finest contributions to the resurgence of ethics in literary criticism, presents literary texts and their implied authors as 'friends'. 'Even satiric fictions', he claims, 'that present a snarling surface address us with what amounts to a friendly offer: "I would like to give you something for your own good – a nasty medicine that may cure you."' ⁶ Blake, Dickens and Joyce, as I read them, offer an even more paradoxical kind of friendship: they present themselves, at times, as enemies, and thus they encourage the reader to be wary, in a world of fragmentary self-knowledge, of any author's, or even any reader's, assumption that he or she is on the right side, doing the right thing. My central argument, in summary, is that Blake, Dickens and Joyce earn a special credibility for the role of the literary text as a vehicle for productive ethical debate through linking an implicit scrutiny of themselves, as authors and as human agents, to their analyses of the world around them.

This way of approaching literature has potential relevance to the criticism of any author who in one way or another invites the reader to form a sense of that author as a person, and who associates this

process with scenes which carry an ethical charge – which show human beings acting in ways that affect others for good or ill. Thus, there is no reason to confine this debate to the novel (which has been very much the privileged genre in recent work on literature and ethics). And, indeed, much of what I have to say has implications beyond literature. Any situation in which a writer or speaker addresses an issue in ethical language – a politician, for example, talking about ‘values’ – and, in doing so, projects a version of themselves that is anything more than blandly factual, which the reader/listener might or might not be encouraged to compare, as a quasi-fiction, with whatever the writer/speaker has to say about the outside world, could usefully be measured against the moral equilibria of author and reader, which I trace in Blake, Dickens and Joyce. But this should make itself apparent in due course. What is important, now, is to be clear about what these concepts, ‘author’ and ‘reader’, entail, and how they relate to the separate artifacts, ‘texts’, with which the ensuing pages are chiefly concerned.

Much of my understanding of textual mechanics and the function of the author accords (to the best of my comprehension) with Philip J. M. Sturges’s *Narrativity: Theory and Practice*. My readings may often be described as attending to the ‘narrativity’ which, according to Sturges, ‘determines not only the chronology of a novel’s story, but equally every interruption of that story, and every variation in the mode of representation of that story’.⁷ This concept, in assimilating many of the apparent self-contradictions of a text into a higher logic of uncompromised meaning gives ‘the writing author’ credit for many of the ‘flaws’ which poststructuralist theory has tended to present as the critic’s own discovery,⁸ but should not be taken as positing some metaphysical notion of the absolute truth of a text. On the contrary, ‘the role of the reader in detecting a narrative’s logic of narrativity is crucial and this, when the reader is both pluralized and contextualized by his historical moment of reading, at once qualifies any idea of a “pure and essential meaning” intrinsic to the work’.⁹ This concept lends itself to my purposes since, while my argument depends on the exploitation of apparent contradictions and crises in the ethical life of texts and their implied authors, I mean this to be an indication of the value and importance of these texts: these same contradictions provide privileged moments in which the past efforts of the author and the present efforts of the reader combine in productive ethical thought – where there is more going on, in fact, than can be allowed for by a concept of

the text as striving for a point of view that is an isolable sub-section of itself, or indeed anything less than the warts-and-all of narrativity.

The 'implied author' to whom frequently I explicitly or implicitly allude is derived mainly from Booth, but is also well described by Sturges.¹⁰ My book discusses aspects of the ethical significance of texts by three actual authors – Blake, Dickens and Joyce – chiefly through an examination of the narrativity of those texts, a narrativity which in each case includes the writing author's manipulation of implied versions of himself – sometimes through characters within the text who seem, to some degree, to have been designed to function as portraits of the author, but, more generally, through writing that seems to imply that it originates, beyond and above the realm of the fictional narrator, from a certain cast of mind. Thus, the actual behaviour of the original living author, outside his texts, is not the main focus here.

As it happens, I believe that we should give Blake, Dickens and Joyce a great deal of credit for having written texts which are wonderfully suggestive for ethical debate, and I believe that much of this suggestiveness accrues from the impressions of contact with the author which such texts provide, but this is not the same as regarding a work of literature as revealing, in any straightforward sense, its author's potential for good or bad behaviour in private life. We may make informed guesses, based on *Songs of Experience*, or *Bleak House*, or *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (or based, with roughly equal security, on Gilchrist's or Forster's or Ellmann's biographies) to the effect that Blake was compassionate but prone to rage, or that Dickens was affectionate but also sadistic, or that Joyce was self-reliant but had a weakness for self-pity, but these individuals, for all that we may admire and thank them, are dead and gone.¹¹ The argument of this book depends on keeping the historical author in mind – as someone who did once exist – but its focus is on the versions of Blake, Dickens and Joyce which emerge from the interaction of paper, ink and a living reader – a specific reader, I might add, although I hope and believe that my readings are not so conditioned by individual circumstances as to preclude a fair amount of critical consensus. Indeed, it will be apparent throughout that my ideas about Blake, Dickens and Joyce connect with the work of many other scholars.

The structure of this book is slightly unusual, and it may be helpful if I summarize its progress in advance. The first chapter consists of a discussion of Blake's work from his first publication,

Poetical Sketches, to *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. In my reading, Blake's earliest writings are more sombre and challenging than is often supposed. Through a simultaneous examination of lyrics, fictional narratives and theoretical writings such as *There is No Natural Religion* and Blake's annotations to Lavater's *Aphorisms on Man*, I draw attention to a range of epistemological and ethical cruxes and ambiguities, which in turn are related to Blake's explicit efforts, during this period, to depict or define the author, whether in the disintegrated self-portraiture of *An Island in the Moon* or in enthusiastic concepts of the 'Poetic Genius'. The chapter concludes with an examination of Blake's *Songs*, in which I draw attention to sinister elements in Blake's depiction of 'Innocence', and to ways in which both the narrator and a version of the poet himself can be seen as knowingly implicated in the evils of 'Experience'. I argue that these works show signs of an energetic didacticism which makes them comparable to the moralistic tracts of authors such as Anna Laetitia Barbauld and Mary Wollstonecraft, but that they also contain elements of negativity and violence which seem radically to conflict with a conventional didactic purpose.

Chapter 2 attends to several of the shorter Prophetic Books, together with some of Blake's Notebook lyrics. Here, I draw special attention to what I take to be the presentation, sometimes obvious and sometimes covert, within these works, of parodic images of the author. At the same time I discuss Blake's half-sympathetic depiction of mythic and historical villains, thus developing further my conception of Blake as an author who tends, implicitly, to disclaim moral superiority to the evils which he describes.

The last Blake chapter attends to *The Four Zoas*, *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, paying particular attention to Blake's literary treatment of events from his own life. The humanitarian, redemptive message which these epic works project is contrasted with Blake's handling of personal resentments, and I demonstrate that Blake, in his texts, did not always transcend the violence and oppression that he execrates in society at large. I conclude my survey of Blake by claiming that the reader's awareness of apparent lapses from ethical responsibility, on Blake's part, which Blake makes no effort to conceal, positively strengthens his work as a vehicle for productive ethical debate.

I begin my survey of Dickens, in Chapter 4, by looking at his earliest published works, paying particular attention to the unpredictable mixture of light entertainment and moral portentousness which they contain, and to the way in which Dickens's attitude

towards his first fictional heroes, especially *Oliver Twist*, seems to waver. I argue that while Dickens's handling of plot seems usually to have these characters' interests at heart, there are other elements in the surrounding texts which criticize and mock them. Like the implied Blake of *Songs of Experience*, the narrators in these early works sometimes seem uncomfortably close to the points of view which Dickens nominally attributes to his fictional villains. The chapter concludes with readings of *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge*, concentrating on Dickens's experimentation, in these novels, with pastoral, with moralistic allegory and with psychotic modes of perception. Dickens's deviations from the language and imagery of everyday life for the purposes, first, of quasi-Christian pastoral didacticism and, secondly, of a recreation of mad or criminal states of mind, is here contrasted. I argue that it is the second, morally suspect purpose, analogous to the Orcian violence of the *Prophetic Books*, in which Dickens is most successful.

Chapter 5 consists of readings of *Dombey and Son*, *David Copperfield* and *Little Dorrit*. Here, I seek to trace a progressive shift, through the middle of Dickens's career, away from a sense of the author as a warm entertainer, quick to reward his characters, towards a much cooler authorial presence and a much less optimistic sense of the world. I pay particular attention to Dickens's stern handling of *David Copperfield*, a character who has long been read, to some degree, as a version of Dickens himself, and to the growing eccentricity of Dickens's narrators in general. Perverse and iconoclastic elements in Dickens's depiction of character and society in *Dombey*, for example, complicate what might otherwise be a disturbingly simplistic moral standpoint, and, in *Little Dorrit*, Dickens seems to make a point of blurring the distinction between the views of the implied author, the narrator and the leading male character, uniting all of these in a shared sense of limitation and marginality.

The last Dickens chapter begins with a reading of *Great Expectations*, in which I stress the complexity of the relationship of hero to author in this novel, and the ways in which it seems simultaneously to espouse and debunk an ideal of self-development and moral progress. Here and in the readings of *Our Mutual Friend* and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, which conclude the chapter, I attempt to demonstrate that Dickens continued to the last to find new ways to make his narrators and his implied authorial presence ethically suspect, and that this sense of corruption in the author reinforces Dickens's depictions of evil in the world outside.

Chapter 7 begins with a discussion of Joyce's work prior to *Ulysses*. As might be expected from my treatment of David Copperfield and Pip, I am especially interested in Joyce's quasi-autobiographical depiction of Stephen Dedalus, a character who undergoes important changes in the move from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* to *Ulysses*, and who is anticipated, to a certain extent, even in *Dubliners*. It is convenient for this stage of my argument that I am able to draw attention to parallels and divergences between Joyce's early formulations of his own artistic role, particularly through Stephen Dedalus, and the critical essays on Blake and Dickens which, in a casual manner and for odd reasons, he wrote in Italy in 1912. The influence of Blake and Dickens upon Joyce is not my main concern, as already explained, but these essays are helpful in my attempt, in this penultimate chapter, to demonstrate an essential sympathy of interests and approach between the three authors. Paradoxically, this demonstration involves the argument that Joyce subjected Blake and Dickens to aggressive misreading and unreasonable disparagement.¹² Joyce's treatment of the earlier writers, that is, participates in the wider ethical problematic, involving the relationship between authorship and moral categories such as goodness and fairness, which it is the main purpose of this book to explore.

Finally, I apply Blakean and Dickensian perspectives to *Ulysses*, considering it as a novel which alludes movingly and engrossingly to many forms of human suffering, which raises many important moral and ethical dilemmas, but which at times seems pointedly casual and heartless in its tone, construction and narrative point of view, and in which images of the author are promoted which impel the reader to think about Joyce's own relation to the warmth or coolness, kindness or cruelty of his text, and hence to respond to that text as a live and pressing repository of ethical doubts and challenges. In this way, *Ulysses* is seen as a brilliant and frighteningly uncompromised expression of what is essentially the same fruitful mixture of self-doubt and moral earnestness as that which animates the work of Blake and Dickens.

I take issue, at various points of the book, with critical approaches, often poststructuralist ones, which seem to me to neglect or suppress the ethical force of literature. However, I hope that, instead of offering in place of these approaches an inadequately theorized and arguably discredited liberal humanism, I shall be seen to have acknowledged some of the strongest insights of poststructuralist theory (which, after all, has a lot to do with my sense of the fragmented,