

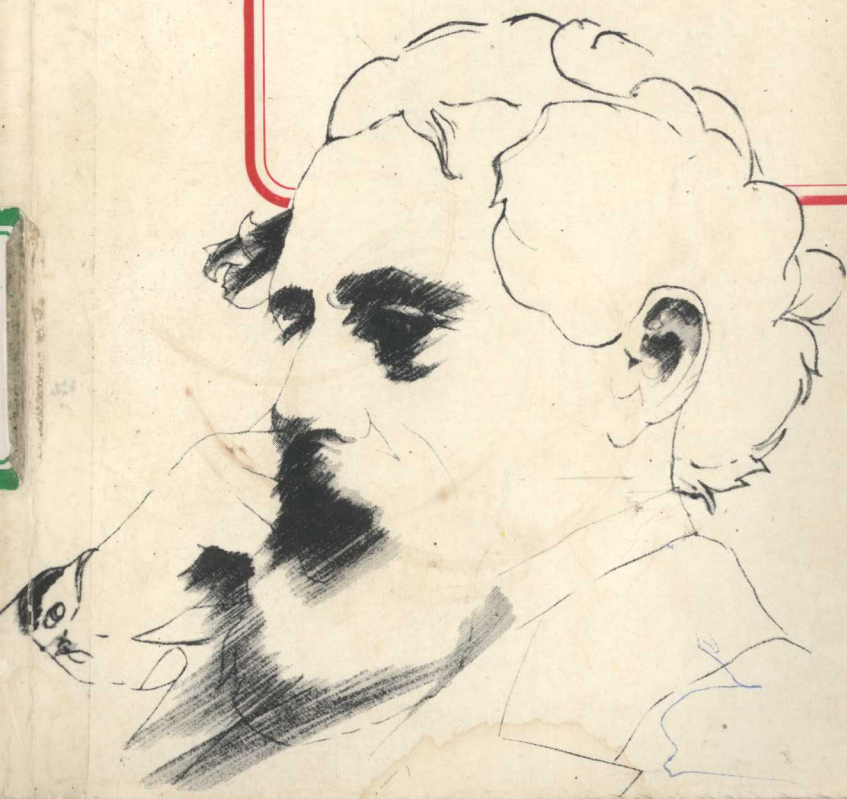


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The Imagination of Charles Dickens

A.O.J. Cockshut



THE IMAGINATION OF CHARLES DICKENS

Mr Cockshut describes Charles Dickens as a man with a commonplace mind, who by being perfectly tuned to the public taste developed into a master of his art. The clue to this paradox lies, he believes, in Dickens' obsession with such topics as money, crowds and prisons which touch the life of everyone. From the deep fears of his childhood they became the main food for his imagination. As his creative mind worried them, so his art developed. This process provided the driving force behind his work, and is at the root of his greatness as an artist.

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A. O. J. COCKSHUT

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Charles Dickens*

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Preface

No book on Dickens can reasonably aim at completeness. The subject is too vast, and in any case some excellent work has already been done. On the whole the most distinguished critics of Dickens have made a sharp distinction between the popular idol and the artist. Thus Mr. Ford in *Dickens and his Readers* writes of what he meant to a vast international audience; the late Humphry House placed him brilliantly in his setting of legislation and social change; and Mr. Hillis Miller, Professor Trilling and other American critics have written of him mainly as a subtle and complicated classic.

I have learnt from all these, but unlike them, my aim has been to show that the popular idol and the great artist are not only the same person, but completely inseparable for criticism. His melodramatic bias, his sympathy with popular taste, were the indispensable means by which his more profound gifts became productive.

I have also tried to show a continuous development and enrichment of his mind and art from *Pickwick* to *Our Mutual Friend*. I am conscious of an important omission in *Edwin Drood*, his last, unfinished book. But fascinating as it is, it seems too enigmatic to occupy a clearly-defined position in

the line of development traced here. I hope to write on *Edwin Drood* elsewhere.

Dickens's development was very complex, of course. But I have stressed in particular the development of certain simple ideas, prisons, crowds, justice, money and dirt, which seem to have been fundamental for him. It was not primarily a progress of ideas or opinions, but an ever deeper penetration into the majestic range of possible meaning contained in the simple ideas and images of his youth. For an understanding of this development, dates are important, and instead of a full bibliography which might be confusing, a simple list of the dates of works discussed at any length in the text is placed at the end.

I wish to acknowledge my debt to Edgar Johnson's excellent biography of Dickens. Like him, I have felt it necessary to say some hard things about the man and the writer. But right at the start, I put on record my conviction that Dickens was one of the few who are truly great.

A.O.J.C.

I

Introductory

In the last twenty-five years, Dickens has advanced from the "classics" shelf in the preparatory school library to the position of a real and acknowledged classic. The process by which the best-seller whom many clever people despise achieves classic status would repay attention from sociologists. But for my purpose, two questions are raised: How did a man with such a coarse mind become a master of his art? and, How was it possible, in the nineteenth century, to be a best-seller and a true classic at the same time?

The artistic handicaps inherent in his mind certainly seem at first sight formidable enough. He was not a man who could be deeply influenced by literature. It seems likely that, to the end of his days, he never came to understand himself or his own motives very well. He lacked the disinterested curiosity, and the detachment which are indispensable for profound spiritual or intellectual development. He never attained any deep understanding of history, art or politics. His general critical comments are, without exception, jejune and superficial, and show that he never progressed very far beyond his simple boyish enthusiasm for Fielding and Smollett. His prefaces reveal a literal mind, and a determination to prove that his strangest imaginative flights are only sober reporting.

An examination of the text of his works shows that some of the qualities in which he is reputed to be strong are largely fortuitous or even non-existent. Thus, Dickens, more perhaps than anyone else, is regarded as the founder of our modern version of Rousseauist innocence. When people talk about the fundamental decency of the working class, they are often influenced by Dickens. This is odd, for two reasons. First, owing to the uncomfortable pseudo-gentility of his family, and his early bitter experience of being treated in the blacking factory as a member of the working class, Dickens was very class-conscious. It is significant that all his heroes (except in *Hard Times*, which provides exceptions to several fair generalisations) speak the King's English, even when it is impossible to understand how they can have learnt it. But such is his melodramatic power, and the sympathy he excites for outcasts like Smike, who are helped and patronised by his gentlemanly heroes, that many people actually think that he wrote mainly about the working class.

But there is another and more fundamental reason for surprise that this myth of proletarian innocence finds an important source in Dickens. It is really the darkness of their surroundings, and the hypnotic power of their enemies that make his threatened innocents so influential. If you stop a man in the street and ask him to name a Dickens character, he may mention a purely comic figure, but it is just as likely that he will name a threatened innocent like Oliver Twist. But no one would have remembered Smike if it had not been for Squeers, and no one would have remembered Oliver if it had not been for Fagin. Moral goodness in Dickens exists largely by contrast. The goodness of those who are not isolated or threatened, like the Cheeryble brothers, is frequently absurd, or at the least, even in his mature vein, pale and faintly embarrassing like that of John Jarndyce and Esther.

Dickens failed here because he had absolutely no conception of sanctity. A writer has spoken recently of the "religious inanity of our greatest novelist." If the compliment is scarcely too high, the blame, too, is scarcely too severe. Dickens's religion, a kind of loose, moralistic Anglicanism-cum-unitarianism, was perfectly sincere. But as the above confused definition will indicate, it lacked consistency. Worse still, it was cut off from the spiritual and intellectual treasures of the Christian tradition. When he was really thinking, he unconsciously assumed that religion was irrelevant; and it seems likely, too, that emotional and indeed sentimental though its expression often was, it did not operate at a level where it could mingle with his deepest and most persistent feelings.

His innate melodramatic tendency, though, as I shall try to show, an advantage to him in many ways, was no help here. It left him very imperfectly aware that good and evil exist together in the same person, and therefore unaware also of the difficulty of living up to one's own standards. The Cheeryble brothers are unconvincing largely because they never seem to have known an impulse to be ungenerous. In reading Dickens, it is apt to seem rather easy to be good, or as good as Dickens expects you to be. Hence, at his worst, he tends to encourage pharasaism. He was, on the technical side, profoundly conservative; and melodramatic conventions appealed to him for their solid, traditional strength. They appealed also to his engrained love of violence. He was able to become a great artist without ever ceasing to be crudely melodramatic. (Think, for instance, in two of his best books, of the Dedlock mystery, and Boffin's salvation from the clutches of miserdorm.) In this, and especially in the way he was fascinated all his life by the subject of murder, he can fairly be compared with a master who no doubt surpassed him, but who nevertheless learnt

much from him—Dostoevsky. In the conservative nature of his technical originality, he can be called Shakespearian. At all times it was both his strength and weakness that he immersed himself completely in his work. A letter of 7th January 1841 to Forster about Little Nell was typical of his lifelong attitude to his creations. "It casts the most horrible shadow upon me, and it is as much as I can do to keep moving at all. I tremble to approach the place a great deal more than Kit. . . . I have refused several invitations for this week and next, determining to go nowhere till I had done." Even at his worst, Dickens cannot be dull. He hypnotised the reader because he hypnotised himself.

II

It does not seem useful to inquire here into possible biographical sources of his favourite images. It would be easy, though perhaps mistaken, to link some of them to experiences of his early years. Thus both the prison and the money obsession could be explained by the fact that his father was imprisoned for debt. But what matters for the evaluation of his novels is that he already had an obsession with these things at the start of his career in *Pickwick Papers*, and that he had it still in *Our Mutual Friend*. So it is that his work, as much as anyone's should be seen as a continuous whole. There are some irregularities in the pattern, naturally, to remind us that we are dealing with an unpredictable human being. There are moments in *David Copperfield*, for instance, when he seems to revert to an earlier style. But taken as a whole, the development is extraordinarily continuous. The stock of ideas and images hardly varies; the profundity of their meaning and the skill of their arrangement develop prodigiously. The lack of spiritual and intellectual develop-

ment is excused by the wonderful development in imagination and technique.

His intense awareness of physical objects was necessary to him as a symbolist; and it was necessary in other ways too. For in constant tension with his sense of facts and objects was his bias towards fantasy. Sometimes fantasy was too strong. I give in the chapter on prisons my reasons for thinking that this is so in the case of *Pickwick Papers*. But even in this book fantasy was not completely out of control. The fantasies of Dickens, like those of Mrs. Gamp, were very earthy—and, despite some failures, the tension between fantasy and obsessive sensibility to detail was very fruitful.

One might say that his abiding and ever-increasing sense of the pressure of life, and his advancing technical skill gradually compressed and solidified the volatile essences of his early fantasy. The light and airy *Pickwick Papers* was transformed into the weighty bulk of *Our Mutual Friend* or *Great Expectations*. So his later books give the impression of having been formed under pressure like geological strata. This disciplining, and partial elimination of his sparkling fantasy was necessary for achievement of his best works; but it was not all gain. The greatest casualty in the process was his humour.

Humour,

Positive and Negative

The humour of Dickens is his best-loved contribution to our life; and perhaps his most influential, for most English humorous writing since his time unconsciously imitates him. So it is hard to realise how far he lies outside the various humorous traditions of earlier times. His best humorous writing is only very mildly satirical. When he became deeply satirical, his humour declined, as we shall see. Chaucer, Ben Jonson, the Augustan satirists and the eighteenth-century novelists, all required for their humorous effects an accepted moral system and the idea of a society as an organic body in which functions varied. Now Dickens ultimately showed that he, too, could work from this basis; but in his most characteristic early comic writings, his moral sense and his vision of corporate society were in abeyance.

He is faintly linked with Augustan satire by his use of mock-heroics. But very faintly, because he uses it so crudely as to make any detailed comparison with Pope absurd, and even Fielding easily surpasses him. A comparison with Shakespeare is slightly more rewarding, but even in the passages where Shakespeare's humour comes nearest to Dickensian extravagance, in the mechanicals of *A Mid-*