

The Topography of Genius

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The World of Charles Dickens, by Angus Wilson, A Studio Book, *New York: The Viking Press, 1970. 302 pp. \$12.95.*

I

THIS BOOK, prepared and produced last year in England for the centenary of Charles Dickens' death, is richly illustrated in both color and chiaroscuro. The pictures have been admirably chosen to convey the aspects and atmospheres, the splendors and squalors of the Victorian world, which, as Humphry House put it, Dickens contrived to make "quite unlike any other world there has ever been." To accompany the pictures there is an elaborate bio-critical commentary by Professor Angus Wilson. He seems concerned with the outer and visible world represented in the pictures mainly as it affected or was affected by the private and subjective world of the greatest

English novelist. Although Mr. Wilson is a Vice-President of the Dickens' Fellowship his estimate of the hero stands well to this side idolatry; among the various defects of personality ascribed to Dickens are an emotional immaturity, snobbery and self-pity. Mr. Wilson's is not exactly a psychoanalytic exploration, but he brings to his task many of the doxies and much of the jargon of twentieth century psychology.

Some others have decided that Dickens, because of his passion for neatness and order in his household arrangements and his working habits, and his fastidious, even dandified manner of dress, must have been one of Dr. Freud's "anal types." Mr. Wilson is satisfied with the diagnosis of "a compulsive storyteller," making it seem a kind of vice—or, as we now prefer to think, disease—like alcoholism or gluttony. The label, however, is certainly accurate. The wonderful thing about Dickens, apart from his genius, was his prodigious energy in both work and play; one recalls the observation of Katherine Mansfield in one of her

letters that Dickens made the novelists of her own generation seem like so many "pencil-sharpeners." The energy, in the professor's view, derived not so much from physical vigor as from neurosis; he sees Dickens, for all his industry and achievement, as a man of unstable temperament, given to alternating moods of gaiety and gloom, of affectionate geniality and irascibility. He also discerns, or thinks he does, a latent and unconscious sadism, which betrays itself in Dickens' preoccupation with murder and murderers in so many of his journalistic sketches and in some of his imaginative creations, such as Sikes, Jonas Chuzzlewit, Bradley Headstone, John Jasper and so on. What, demands Mr. Wilson, is

the meaning of this life-long obsession with the working of the criminal mind, especially its workings on the threshold of death? There is sadism here clearly; and not far from the surface there is self-punishment in every terror, physical and mental, of those violent and lustful elements of his strong will so deeply suppressed in himself. But these are the usual hidden reverse sides of an implacable pursuit of justice. . . .

This seems to suggest that Dickens put something of himself even into his blackest, most unregenerate villains and atoned unconsciously for his guilt by making sure that retribution caught up with them before the final chapter. But then the passage quoted occurs near the end of Mr. Wilson's book, where the professor evidently had forgotten that on a much earlier page he had ascribed it all to Dickens' infantile love of blood-and-thunder melodrama and the delight he shared with Wardle's Fat Boy in making the flesh creep.

Mr. Wilson attributes much of the scope and all of the limitation of Dickens' power to the psychic scars left by three "traumatic experiences." The first of these was the disgrace of his father's imprisonment for debt and his boyhood bitterness against the parents who abandoned him at so ten-

der an age to ignominious servitude in the blacking factory and the miserable lodging in Camden Town. Of those woeful days he wrote many years later that, "Even now, famous and caressed and happy, I often forget in my dreams that I have a dear wife and children; even that I am a man; and wander desolately back to that time of my life." He sometimes wondered how he could have escaped the abyss of delinquency and crime into which so many neglected children like himself were lured in that corrupt and heartless London of those days after Waterloo. Doubtless he was inclined to give the credit to Providence, for he was in his own way a Christian; but Mr. Wilson thinks rather that he was saved by a combination of "willpower, an awakened imagination, and a snobbish sense of superiority." From this episode, the professor tells us, may be traced the moral tension that was to remain with Dickens all his life: on the one side his strong sense of evil and consequent abhorrence of crime and criminals; on the other his hatred of a society that could look with such callous indifference on the miseries of the poor. How, the professor thinks Dickens must have asked himself,

could he find a way to condemn the cold and dead society in which a small boy could so easily be sucked under and yet not seem to condone the callous brutality of criminals—men who were often once exactly such small lost boys? . . . It was an insoluble dilemma, but dwelling on it brought his thought and imagination very close to our own dilemmas about state power that has lost all feeling and answering violence that has lost all reason.

While the young Charles Dickens was drudging in the blacking factory or roaming lonely, disconsolate and often hungry through the streets, the rest of the family—except the talented sister Fanny, who had won a scholarship to the Academy of Music—were finding life in the Marshalsea more comfortable and less anxious than they had

lately known it on the outside. Charles no doubt would have been happier had he been allowed to join them in prison, though the loss to literature would have been grievous. For as Chesterton said, it was in those days of his misery that he acquired that "almost uncanny alertness and vigilance of attention," that became one of the signal qualities of his genius. Mr. Wilson, though, is sure that the sacrificial devotion of Little Dorrit to her father represents the role that the young Dickens would like to have played to his own father—"the small brave boy standing by his father in the warm, dramatizing [family] circle behind bars, rather than the lonely, unnoticed boy living out his bravery in the cold world outside bars." Yet the professor agrees that the memory of those heartbroken months "provided nearly a lifetime's impetus towards artistic creation. Without them we should not have a principal part of Dickens' novels, but with them . . . we have the final limitations of his work."

II

THE MAIN limitation, it seems, is the absence of "any real sympathy with or understanding for women" in Dickens' life or in his work. Though he supported his mother until her death—as well as many other relatives and relatives-in-law—he never forgave her for wanting him to go back to the blacking factory, even after a legacy had enabled Father Dickens to satisfy his creditors and leave the prison. This, the professor believes, warped his attitude toward the whole sex and made him "demanding and dissatisfied" in his relations with it. The second scarifying experience served to confirm him in this attitude. This was rejection of his ardent adolescent courtship by the frivolous and flighty Maria Beadnell, though it had amused her for a time to lead him on. She lives for us as Dora, the child-bride of *David Copperfield*, and later, grown fat, garrulous, widowed and middle aged, as Flora Finching of *Little Dorrit*. If

these portraits were reasonably close to life, one can only consider Dickens to have been lucky, but he took it very hard, as adolescents do. Many years afterward he wrote to her of "the wasted tenderness of those hard years which I have half loved, half dreaded to recall." The hurt he had then received, he said, had made him diffident about showing his affection to anyone, "even to my children, except when they are very young." The end of his romantic dream of love for Maria, Mr. Wilson tells us, turned him into

a man who divided women all his life into diminished categories, while preserving a self-indulgent ideal of what he wished from them. . . . From this categorizing we have some of the finest humors of women's various vanities and sillinesses to be found in any novels; but in all the rest, whether woman scorned and dangerous, woman the wise counselor and thrifty housekeeper, or—most extraordinary and yet most distorting—half girl, half angel, who by her purity keeps clean Man's Path to Heaven, we have nothing that gives woman the true dignity of a whole body and a whole mind. It seems extravagant . . . to attribute to a commonplace little middle-class teenage love episode the gulf that divides a writer of Shakespearean potentialities (indeed in his comic language and portraiture, Shakespearean in fulfillment) from Dickens' great but unequal achievements. Yet given the degree to which Charles Dickens, as evidenced in his letters and his talk, hugged his past self to him, I do not think it more than a meaningful simplification.

The third great trauma it appears, further strengthened Dickens in his character of what our lady liberationists call a "male chauvinist," and had the effect of making even more peculiar and inhuman Dickens' concept of womanhood in both life and fiction. This time it was the death of his pretty seventeen-year-old sister-in-law, Mary

Hogarth. It occurred very suddenly just after her return with Dickens and his wife from an especially merry theater party. He had loved her dearly, and so intense was his grief that he was unable that month to deliver his installments of *Pickwick* and *Oliver Twist*. Presently his grief found an outlet in his narration of the death of Little Nell and later of Paul Dombey, whereby thousands of Victorian readers came to share his sorrow; even the cynical Thackeray and the grim Carlyle could not refuse their tears. More recent, emotionally enervated generations have found the narratives unbearably maudlin and bathetic; even Santayana, the most perceptive and appreciative of all of Dickens' critics, found himself unable to take them; but then, he added in gentle apology, "I am a coward in so many ways." Mr. Wilson detects in Little Nell still another evidence of masculine egoism and self-pity. Hers, he tells us, a bit sanctimoniously, is no exemplary and edifying death like that of Clarissa Harlowe in Richardson's novel,

where the accent is upon her victory over this world, as she goes with careful preparation of shroud and coffin selected by herself to meet her true bridegroom in Heaven. . . . To this great organ music of the preceding century Dickens was deaf. . . . The emphasis in Dickens' novel is on those who are left behind: "If there be any who have never known the blank that follows death—the weary void, the sense of desolation that will come upon the strongest minds when something familiar and beloved is missed at every turn—the connection between inanimate and senseless things and the object of recollection, when every household object becomes a monument and every room a grave . . . they can never faintly guess." . . . [But] those who knew this suffering were offered the consolation: "When death strikes down the innocent and young, for every fragile form from which he lets the spirit flee, a hundred virtues

rise, in shapes of mercy, charity and love, to walk the world and bless it."
. . .

"May not an energetic, productive, materialistic society," demands the professor, "have wanted some assurance that the death of the young 'paid off,' here and now, in an uplifting sense that comes upon the mourners?"

Only toward the end of his life, it seems, did Dickens reach some understanding of what it is like and how it feels to be a woman, and this new knowledge, Mr. Wilson believes, can be discerned in some of the later heroines like Estella of *Great Expectations* and Bella Wilfer of *Our Mutual Friend*. The professor is inclined to give most of the credit to Ellen Ternan, the young actress with whom the aging Dickens is thought to have had an adulterous intrigue. The evidence for this, however, is scanty and obscure, consisting mainly of statements made in extreme old age by Dickens' daughter, Mrs. Perugini, to Miss Gladys Storey. Thackeray's correspondence shows that at the time of Dickens' separation from his wife—after more than twenty years of marriage and eleven children—Miss Ternan's name was mentioned in the ensuing gossip. Enough of it reached Dickens' ears to provoke him to furious denials. Thackeray himself, after a visit to Mrs. Dickens, wrote to his mother that the domestic row had not been over "the actress but [about] the sister-in-law" [Georgiana Hogarth]. He added that there is "nothing against Miss H., except that she is the cleverer and better woman of the two [and] has got the affections of the children and the father." But the professor with his special logic argues that the story of the liaison must be true since Dickens took so much pains to conceal it!

III

DICKENS WAS certainly no intellectual; he had little knowledge of philosophy or science, and history to him was little more

than a long record of superstition, bigotry and cruelty. This perhaps explains why those intellectuals who have yielded to his magic have been rather sheepish about confessing it. "I am ashamed," Lord Acton wrote to Mary Gladstone, "to think how much more often I return to Dickens than to George Eliot." Considering Acton's estimate of George Eliot, expressed elsewhere in the correspondence, this is an impressive testimony, for it seems that she was one of a small handful of writers who had helped to form his own mind, and he had found her infallible in dealing with those "problems of life and thought which baffled Shakespeare disgracefully. No writer who ever lived had anything like her manifold but impartially observed sympathy." Nevertheless it was Dickens with his "hearty fun" and direct and simple appeal to the emotions, rather than the moralizing lady positivist who exerted the stronger seduction for this bookish and busy man.

Professor Wilson, like Humphry House before him, has been at some pains to show us the naïveté and ambivalence of Dickens' notions about how the great social evils on which he expended so much indignation could be corrected or removed. He saw no help in legislation and dreaded government intervention. His experience in the reporter's gallery of the House of Commons had given him an abiding contempt for parliamentary processes and for politicians, and what he had seen of elections had disgusted him; the Eatanswill episode in *Pickwick* is a burlesque, but it is also a savage satire. In Mr. Bumble he has given us the archetype of all petty bureaucrats. He detested the prevailing Benthamite doctrines which looked on the poor not as human individuals but as statistical aggregates; and what he knew of the teachings of economists like Malthus and Ricardo filled him with horror. He was on the side of the factory workers against the Gadgrinds and Bounderbys but he distrusted the ambitious labor agitators who exploited the workers' miseries as a means to power. For a long time his hope rested in the education of the poorer classes

—though he was never quite sure what sort of education it should be—and in the growth of benevolence—a kind of all-year Christmas spirit—among the prosperous. But those well-to-do philanthropists who people his earlier novels—*Pickwick*, the *Cherrybles*, Mr. Brownlow, the regenerated Scrooge, and so on—were all part of a society which owed its prosperity to the exploitation of the poor and ignorant, or so Mr. Wilson assures us.

It might be interesting, even instructive, to see how many of the social disorders of Victorian England have recurred in our own time and country. Unless our newspapers, politicians, clergymen and sociologists have been deceiving us, there is plenty of poverty and destitution, which despite the enormous expenditures for relief, appear to be increasing. We have also our festering urban slums, though few of them are as yet quite as bad as Saffron Hill or Tom All-Along's. We have nothing quite as cruel and desolate as those Victorian workhouses, unless it is some of the nursing homes to which the aged and helpless are sent to die. Even the descriptions of the money-hungry, middle class Victorian society as "ill, neurotic" "corrupt from top to bottom" have a familiar sound. But the social contrasts are even greater than the similarities. The pruderies that prevented Dickens from explaining the precise relationship of Sikes and Nancy, or describing in detail the seduction of Little Emily by Steerforth, and the squeamish respect for sensibilities that forbade him to mention that a good part of the Harmon-Boffin "dust-pile" consisted of night soil from the privies and streets and alleys of London, have been thoroughly swept away. The distress of the modest Miss Ternan at having been cast for a male part in Sir Thomas Tilfourd's *Atalanta*, which required her to "show a bit of leg" should be compared with the recent revolt of our own women against a decree of fashion that did not allow them to show enough.

But to think of Dickens exclusively in relation to Victorian manners and problems is to do injustice to the universality of his

genius. Like Shakespeare to whom he is so often compared in imagination, humor and creative energy, even, as we have seen, by Mr. Wilson, Dickens is "not of an age, but for all time." One thinks, for example, of the illiterate half-caste in Evelyn Waugh's novel, *A Handful of Dust*, who had spent all his days in a jungle clearing in some Amazonian backwater where he kept captive the young English explorer solely to have him read aloud, over and over, the works of Charles Dickens. The fact that the captor knew nothing about coaching inns, railways, debtors' prisons, workhouses, chancery courts, curiosity shops, cathedral towns and what not, did not prevent him from laughing or weeping at the appropriate passages, just as the Victorian families had done when papa read aloud to them the successive installments from *Bentley's Miscellany* or *Household Words* or *All the Year Round*. Santayana considered the Dickens' galaxy one of the least destructible treasures of Western civilization, almost certain to survive even the most catastrophic of revolutions. "Indeed," he continued with prescient irony,

there is much in Dickens which communism, if it comes, would only emphasize and render universal. Those schools, those poorhouses, those prisons, with those surviving shreds of family life in them, show us what in the coming age (with some sanitary improvements) would be the nursery and home of everybody. Everybody would be a waif like Oliver Twist, like Smike, like Pip, like David Copperfield; and among the agents and underlings of social government to whom all these waifs would be entrusted, there would be a goodly sprinkling of Pecksniffs, Squeerses and Fangs; whilst Fagins would be everywhere the commissioners of the people . . .

All that will be missing will be the gaiety and the laughter.