Where George Stopped Growing: Dickens's George Silverman's Explanation

MICHAEL A. ULLMAN

"GEORGE Silverman's Explanation" is one of the least read of Dickens's works.[1] A short story written in 1868 to fulfill an order from an American magazine, it is remembered by John Forster only as having been "paid for at a rate unexampled in literature."[2] The story has received little critical attention, with the recent exception of Q.D. Leavis's essay in which she calls it "one of his best written and most accomplished" works[3] and a worthy successor to *Great Expectations*. Dickens himself remarked in a letter to his sub-editor, W.H. Wills: "I feel as if I had read something (by somebody else) which I should never get out of my head!"[4]

Like many of the short stories of Dickens, the "Explanation" is told in the first person. It deals with the difficulties men encounter in Dickens's society in establishing positive relationships. The story appears simple, yet it revolves about the conflicting theories the narrator has about himself, and the complex impressions he makes on the reader. While perfectly frank, George Silverman reveals things about himself and about life that he does not himself know.

The tale derives its power from a clear depiction of social oppression and its effect on the psyche of a man who accepts his society's professed moral values literally. George Silverman is controlled and exploited because he acts out the ethic of humility, self-effacement and Christian charity as a strategy to gain favor — ironically, from those least likely to appreciate his actions. George's strategy is not born out of a religious awareness or a view of justice, but rather as a reaction to his early deprivation and the blatantly unjust

accusations leveled against him. His attitude, linked with the forces of oppression, prevents his development into an active and moral human being. This development is shown to be possible by the larger context to which George appeals and from which we actually see him receive his sustenance: the natural world in which even George is shown to have a place. Ultimately, the story suggests that a healthy morality depends on men who know and respect their own place in the universe, who can live in the natural world, loving and being loved, acting justly and resisting injustice where it occurs. Yet paradoxically the very sensitivity that allows George to see and feel the impact of this mysterious natural world makes him an unequal combatant against the aggressors in the story. At the end, George remains a crippled man: unlike Esther Summerson, Oliver Twist, or Arthur Clennam, he has lost his capacity for love.[5] An adequate description of this tale must deal with the struggle between nature and an evil society for George's soul, and with his own complicated capitulation.

Many of Dickens's characters are notable for their early sufferings: Paul Dombey, David Copperfield, Esther Summerson, and Pip follow little Oliver in having been treated unkindly or unfairly as children. Every character whom we follow to maturity bears the marks of this treatment in his soul. Copperfield attributes his romantic temperament not only to heredity, but to the times when his imagination seized in desperation on romantic fiction as a substitute for love. Later he is unable to recognize true, mature love. Esther Summerson, told as a child that she had better not have been born, devotes considerable time in her narrative to showing how much affection she is able to win through her goodness. Pip, like Copperfield, cannot see the love at his doorstep, and rejects the ties he has to seek the hand of Estella and the calling of a gentleman. Yet none of these familiar figures had as horrific a beginning or as bleak a continuation of childhood as does George Silverman. Pip's fancies may have been perverted by the darkness and stagnation of Satis House, but George was born in the depths,

without the benefit of a Joe Gargery or Biddy to mitigate his situation. Indeed, the distinctive factor in his early life is that he is close to no one. One has to go to Jo the sweeper in *Bleak House* or to the "monster child" in "The Haunted Man" to find an equally deprived child, and yet both of these function more as symbolic threats to "civilized" London than as characters interesting in themselves. The difficult task Dickens has undertaken in "George Silverman" is to take such a child and allow him to grow up in decent surroundings, revealing his incapabilities in a self-serving narrative.

The outline of the story is clear: it progresses by movements, each of which terminates in a climactic charge of "worldliness" against the hero. The child lives in a poor and pestiferous cellar in Preston, dodging his parents' blows and crying for food. His parents see him as a competitor for bread, and his mother is the first to call him "worldly". Locked up alone, George can think only of his body. When his parents take the fever, he tends them as they sicken and die. Rescued, he cries for food and is accused of being worldly again. At this point, the child seizes for the first time on this charge as the explanation for his extraordinary experiences. He is taken advantage of by a Dissenter, Brother Hawkyard, who seizes the child's inheritance and brings him up on a pittance. Sent to the country in an undeclared quarantine, George decides to prove his unworldliness by avoiding the farm folk, and especially a young girl. This is the first act prompted by the child's conscience. George is educated, refuses to join Hawkyard's congregation (worldly again), and leaves the town for college. There he works hard and becomes a good tutor, finally accepting a small living offered by the rapacious Lady Fareway, who exacts demeaning labors from him in return. He loses the living when he aids the girl he loves, Lady Fareway's daughter, in marrying an eligible but poor young gentleman. Lady Fareway accuses him of accepting a bribe in the affair and he is dismissed. He lives out the rest of his life, slowly regaining the trust of his peers, and decides to pen his explanation at age sixty, when he feels that life has passed him by.

The "Explanation" has a surface simplicity that goes beyond the necessities of form.The characters other than George are merely emblematic, and in crucial scenes the narrator allows the barest sketch to convey his meaning. The names of the characters are indicative of their roles: Lady Fareway, the aristocrat with business acumen, a smart but exploitative dealer who believes in the greed of others; Sylvia (sylvan) the farm girl, who acts with nature to awaken the suffocated spirit of the orphan child; Brother Verity Hawkyard, the unchristian Puritan, secure in the belief that God's interests are his own, a bird of prey who seizes on an orphan's possessions.

The story reveals George's one true passion in life: his drive to be understood. George himself is not entirely aware of the struggle for his soul between the "natural and healing" influences he encounters and the several vanities and hungers that isolate him. On one side are the sun and the fields, the healthy companions at college, all the possibilities in life he passes by, and most important, the two girls he rejects mistakenly. On the other are Hawkyard's greed which replaces love, and his vicious egotistical religion which replaces Christianity; Lady Fareway's genteel manners masking her ruthlessness; and perhaps even the obtuseness of the farmer who cannot understand the moroseness of a child who has lost his parents. Most crucial is George's own crippled nature, egotistical in its concentration, which separates him from the natural impulses which should enable him to form lasting ties.

At the end of the story it is clear that "nature" has lost, and that George himself feels responsible. The "Explanation" is an attempt to justify his actions against accusations the reader never believes in, to expound upon his sacrifices, and to hide the equivocal satisfaction he derives from having lived up to his moral code. He has co-operated with society in its program of oppression. A sensitive and self-sacrificing man reduced to impotence, George at sixty looks towards death: "I pen [the explanation] at my open window in the summer-time, before me lying, in the churchyard, equal resting-place for sound

hearts, wounded hearts, and broken hearts. I pen it for the relief of my own mind, not foreseeing whether or no it will ever have a reader" (p. 756). He is alone because no one ever taught him to be *with* someone. he anticipates death as an experience he can share with others.

From the beginning, George is ambiguous about his relationship to the reader. He starts his explanation three times, stopping and puzzling over the first two tries after the initial, unequivocal statement, "It happened in this wise —" (p. 729), has been registered. He decides to continue, erasing nothing, in the "natural manner". Yet his hesitancy and difficulty in beginning to "explain my explanation" indicate an important aspect of his character: a crippling self-consciousness, his incessant timid worry as to how he appears. The fact that he needs an "explanation" at all is suggestive: how many men, looking towards death, would feel such a need? George Silverman declares that he does not even know if he will have a reader, and thus the problem becomes, potentially, how can George Silverman explain himself to himself?

He has no problem explaining others. He describes his parents in unemotional yet bleakly unattractive terms, in which there is no hint of regret despite the subsequent awakening of his sensibility. "Mother had the gripe and clutch of poverty upon her face, upon her figure, and not least of all upon her voice" (p. 730). The only detail identifying his father is his rounded shoulders. His mother beats him and his father despairs. They live like rats in a cellar, clutching after one another in the darkness and struggling for food.

George's introduction to society brings him into the hands of Brother Hawkyard. Asked how he feels, the child answers in the only terms he knows: "I told him that I didn't feel cold, and didn't feel hungry, and didn't feel thirsty. That was the whole round of human feelings, as far as I knew, except the pain of being beaten" (p. 733). He is brought into the light in physical terms only and he gets no sympathy from the society he enters. As a worldly devil, he offers only the possibility of infection and competition for bread. If society has denied its

community with the poor, thrusting them into fever-ridden cellars, nature undercuts the "quarantine" by asserting that there is a common susceptibility to disease and hunger, if nothing else.

Brother Hawkyard breaks into the ring isolating the child and makes the quarantine real by sending George to the country. Hawkyard is a "prominent member of some obscure denomination or congregation, every member of which held forth to the rest when so inclined" (pp. 733-34). The purpose of such a sect is to avoid raising certain members above the rest of the Christians because of the danger of pride. Instead of the pomp of churches and priests, they have chapels and "brothers". The result in this case is an unparalleled field for the development of the vulgar egotist. The services are dominated by Brother Hawkyard and Brother Gimblet, the latter a "bellower" whose main prayer is a thinly veiled threat to reveal Hawkyard's exploitation of George unless Gimblet receives a share of the goods. When the speaker claims God put the words into his mouth, George decries this "familiar knowledge of the ways of the sublime, inscrutable Almighty" (p. 738). These men are the formal representatives of Christianity in the story.

Their primary sin is not greed and rapaciousness, or even hypocrisy, as much as the attempt to whittle God and His mysteries down to their own size. They use a force founded on real brotherhood and pervert it. Hawkyard lectures the congregation on the subject of George's refusal to join them despite the youth's education. As usual, Hawkyard allows the Lord to speak through himself. Revealingly, he expresses this fact as a commercial transaction:

> "I got those words that I wanted on account of my wages. I got 'em from the Lord, my fellow-sinners. Down! I said, 'Here's a heap of wages due; let us have something down, on account.' And I got it down, and I paid it over to you; and you won't wrap it up in a napkin, nor yet in a towel, nor yet a pocketankercher, but you'll put it out at good interest." (p. 740)

This unmistakable insistence on the commercial is truly demonic. Hawkyard is proud to have driven a hard bargain with the Lord, and he is identified comically with

contemporary business habits as he adjures the congregation to avoid the old-fashioned methods of saving.

Hawkyard continues, demonstrating with ironic clarity his tendency to make God in his own image. In a parody of argument, he proves that the angels are ignorant because many ignorant people have joined the congregation, whereas George is an unbeliever despite "all the learning that could be crammed into him" (p. 740). The crudity of the verb suggests Hawkyard's view of the mind as a sort of warehouse, an attitude contradicted by George's vision of the mysteries underlying the natural world.

George cites two aspects of the brotherhood in explaining his rejection of them: their inferior morality outside the chapel and their egotism within it:

> Before the knowledge became forced upon me that outside their place of meeting these brothers and sisters were no better than the rest of the human family, but on the whole were, to put the case mildly, as bad as most, in respect of giving short weight in their shops, and not speaking the truth, — I say, before this knowledge became forced upon me, their prolix addresses, their inordinate conceit, their daring ignorance, their investment of the Supreme Ruler of heaven and earth with their own miserable meannesses and littlenesses, greatly shocked me. (p. 739)

Unfortunately for George, his judgment is clouded by the brothers' habit of calling sin "worldliness", thus touching him on his wound and obsession.

The fact of this wound loses its importance as the source of his sensitivity. In order to make his judgment of the brothers, George must be initiated into the mysteries they blaspheme. His initiation starts in the country where he is quarantined. He describes himself sleeping there for the first time, "stretched out . . . in the cold light of the moon, like a young vampire" (p. 735). The hatred of his former self is obvious. He implies that he is a worldly parasite, a bloodsucker, yet cold, colorless and unemotional as the moon. He must be affected by warmth, light and the sun.

He describes his unawakened self with clarity. More difficult is any statement relating to his later self: "It is equally the fact that I had never been alone, in the sense of

holding unselfish converse with myself. I had been solitary often enough, but nothing better" (pp. 734-35). Solitude is always his problem. Here he means that in his animal-like childhood he had no sense of the outside world, no standard by which to judge himself. He knew nothing of the "mysteries of God and nature".His higher faculties were frozen within him, and he never gained the perspective necessary to moral action. Yet his manner of stating this fact implies a closed circle, a paralyzing self-concern. "I had never been alone, in the sense of holding unselfish converse with myself" recalls the difficulties he had in trying to "begin to explain my explanation" in its suggestions of a suffocating self-consciousness. The taint of worldliness can be detected in those words.

George's spirit awakens at Hoghton Towers under the influence of a natural world unavailable to the poor city dweller. He experiences "sweet scents, and sights of fresh green growth, and ever-renewing life, that I had never dreamed of" (p. 736). These natural influences suggest a sympathy between the world and himself: "I knew that all these things looked sorrowfully at me; that they seemed to sigh or whisper, not without pity for me, 'Alas! poor worldly little devil!' " (p. 736). George values his experiences, which signal the birth of his imagination and a new perception of the world. Yet these disturbing and somehow comforting feelings are structured by him in terms of his emerging obsession. He is open to nature to a certain extent; he feels softened emotions that are not purely selfish. He could not make Hawkyard's mistake and ignore the existence of anything beyond the self. But his previous experience curtails crucially the effects these influences are able to work in him, and he will meet nothing in his society to encourage this developing vision.

Under these influences, the child begins to care for the little farm girl and decides to protect her by isolating himself from her. With this idea comes a melting comparable to that of Mr. Dombey, Dickens's original man of ice: "As my heart swelled with that new feeling, it insensibly softened about mother and

father. It seemed to have been frozen before, and now to be thawed" (p. 737). The pattern of the child's growth is clear: his mere exposure to beauty awakens a corresponding spirit in him, leading him to a general sympathetic understanding which may be called charity. Ironically, the only gesture the boy can make in response to this understanding is to isolate himself further. His actions are misunderstood, and he is considered sullen.

As it turns out, Hoghton Towers has a dual aspect. On the one hand are the leaves, the butterflies and bees; on the other are the ruins. If the place offers the little farm girl, there are also the dark cellars and decrepit staircases of the castle. It is in this latter environment that he has his idea: "There were two or three rats at the bottom of one of the smaller pits of broken staircase when I craned over and looked in. They were scuffling for some prey that was there; and, when they started and hid themselves close together in the dark, I thought of the old life (it had grown old already) in the cellar" (p. 736). Paradoxically, when he retreats into the ruin, George moves into the habitat of the rats and lives like them, avoiding the prescribed influence of the sun. Like the vermin, he has but "scrambling board". He also takes up for the first time the position he ends with: he looks through a window at the life without. "I often watched for her at the dim windows; and, when I saw that she was fresh and rosy, felt much happier" (pp. 736-37). He remains a sort of vampire, feeding on the lives of others.

The reader is left with the belief that George has begun to view the realities underlying the world and that this sense of sympathy with living creatures is a crucial lesson. And yet it is clear that the individual's consciousness of this reality is not enough. To be effective, the sympathy must exist in a supportive community. The lesson nature teaches is community, which can be negated.

Later, Silverman describes himself at college:

> It may be in a certain degree owing to the situation of my college-rooms (in a corner where the daylight was sobered), but it is in a much larger degree referable to the state of my own mind, that I seem to myself, on looking back to this time of my life, to have been

> always in the peaceful shade. I can see others in the sunlight; I can see our boats' crews and our athletic young men on the glistening water, or speckled with the moving lights of sunlit leaves; but I myself am always in the shadow looking on. (p. 746)

George maintains the same attitude towards life. He might uneasily be aware of the circumstance (note the irrelevant suggestion that the problem might be the position of his rooms). But the result is that he remains an isolated creature living vicariously through the energies of others. He is sympathetic, but unassertive. If the repetition of the charge of worldliness is the most significant feature of the story to George himself, the repetition of this attitude seems crucial to the reader.

Despite George's reticence, he is able to develop into an excellent teacher. He is one who prepares others to go out into life (or in this case, to exams). A don says that " 'his gift of quiet explanation, his patience, his amiable temper, and his conscientiousness made him the best of coaches' " (p. 746). As with Pip and to some extent David Copperfield, the source of Silverman's weakness is closely related to the source of his attractive qualities: the sensitivity which allows him to do this particular work effectively is born in the same conditions as the peculiar insecure egotism which incapacitates him for other social relations.

The climactic action of George's life begins when he is offered a living by Lady Fareway as a result of some unremunerative tutoring of her son. The son warns George about her unscrupulous greed, but the Lady implies that George would be mercenary to object to any of her unreasonable demands. While he sees that she speaks "coldly" and while he also is embarrassed by the "steady glare" of her eyes, he is unable to resist coming under her influence once those words are spoken.

George falls in love with Lady Fareway's daughter Adelina. More surprisingly, she falls in love with him. George speculates on how this love grew: "she may have refined upon a playful compassion which she would sometimes show for what she called my want of wisdom, according to the light of

the world's dark lanterns, and loved me for that; she may — she must — have confused the borrowed light of what I had only learned, with its brightness in its pure, original rays; but she loved me . . ." (p. 750). For the first time in his life, the possibility develops of an organic relationship, founded on mutual sympathies and interests.

But George decides to reject Adelina: he is not good enough for her; he does not want to take advantage of his position; and he does not want to look as though he wanted her fortune. "Worldliness should not enter here at any cost" (p. 751). So he introduces her to a young gentleman; they fall in love, and George marries them secretly. On the day of the ceremony, he gets the courage he needs by submitting himself to the influences of a beautiful dawn: "Methought that all I looked on said to me, and that all I heard in the sea and in the air said to me, 'Be comforted, mortal, that thy life is so short. Our preparation for what is to follow has endured, and shall endure, for unimaginable ages' " (p. 753). Presumably George *should* be comforted. The tranquility is real, even if it says to man that life is short, even if George bends the meaning of the natural world to fit his situation (note the pompous, ecclesiastical style of nature's speech to him).

Ironically, George never does participate in this tranquility, for Lady Fareway accuses him of having a financial interest in the marriage. George knows the type of woman she is, knows the injustice of her accusation, but nevertheless quails under the charge and becomes a "rat" again. He leaves her "almost suspecting that my voice had a repulsive sound, and that I was a repulsive object" (p. 756). And the reader is left with the uneasy feeling that George needed the anticipated approval of his self-sacrifice more than he needed the love of a woman.

And this is the reason for the "Explanation". George cannot rest in meditations about eternity because he is obsessed with the way he appears now, both to himself and to the public, the reader he may or may not have. He lives with the child's stunted emotional nature, asking only one thing: that the world have compassion for him, and assure him he is not a

repulsive object. He is locked into the contradiction of his life; he demands that men accept a certain version of himself, yet this demand is based on the fact that he has withdrawn from them. Ultimately, he suffers because he lacks the courage or the confidence that would allow him to love and accept love from others.

The incident with Lady Fareway has occurred thirty years before the writing of the "Explanation". The narrative justifies him against the charge of worldliness, yet it fails to justify his self-imposed isolation even while explaining how it came about. For George is a crippled creature, who has been led to reject the very influences he reveals to us as humanizing. We can see now why the other people in the story are hardly described: they have identities only in relation to his problem. George has become the very thing he wants to avoid: an egotist. But his egotism is based on his wound. Fatally unsure of himself, Silverman is doomed to be making explanations, unclear whether to himself or to others.

"George Silverman's Explanation" is important to the Dickens canon, and not only because it is Dickens's last completed work. Though Dickens himself said that it read like something "by somebody else," nevertheless it is a logical development from his earlier works. This story deals with social oppression, yet clearly the emphasis is on the psychology of the oppressed; indeed, the oppressors in the story are not very formidable. Unlike the late novels, this tale does not give the impression of a monolithic society from which there is no escape. But once George has suffered his childhood experiences, he simply cannot summon the will to change. The frightened child lives, gnome-like, under the surface of the sixty-year-old man, mediating between him and the world. Horribly, George "stops growing" when he is a mere baby. Dickens could never get his own childhood out of his head: could it be that here he acknowledges that his experiences have damaged his relationships with his world, his companions and his lovers? This may be no more than an intriguing speculation; but it is clear that in "George Silverman's Explanation" Dickens has left one of his most

profound descriptions of the wounded man and his problems in an unresponsive society.

NOTES

[1]The major articles on the story are the following: Harry Stone, "Dickens' Tragic Universe: 'George Silverman's Explanation'," *Studies in Philology* 55 (January 1958): 86-97; Barry D. Bart, "George Silverman's Explanation," *Dickensian* 60 (January 1964): 48-51; and Deborah Allen Thomas, "The Equivocal Explanation of Dickens's George Silverman," *Dickens Studies Annual* 3 (1974): 134-43. All references to "George Silverman's Explanation" are to *The Uncommercial Traveller and Reprinted Pieces*, New Oxford Illustrated Edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 729-56.

[2]John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, 2 volumes (London: Everyman, 1969), II, 297.

[3]Q.D. Leavis, "How We Must Read *Great Expectations*" in F.R. Leavis and Q.D. Leavis, *Dickens the Novelist* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970), p. 282.

[4]Charles Dickens, *Letters*, ed. by Waugh, Walpole, Dexter, and Hattan in 3 volumes (Bloomsbury: Nonesuch Press, 1938), III, 533.

[5]Ross Dabney comments that despite their harsh childhoods, Arthur Clennam and Oliver Twist maintain their capacity for love (Ross Dabney, *Love and Property in the Novels of Dickens*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969, p. 98). Florence Dombey and Esther Summerson revel an unremitting need for love; it is an indication of the hopelessness of George's case that he rejects love when it is offered.