

## Some recent Dickens criticism and scholarship

GEORGE WING

IN A paper read at Winnipeg in November 1968, Lauriat Lane Jr. remarked: 'It is fifteen years since George H. Ford's *Dickens & His Readers*, almost ten since Professor Ford and I edited *The Dickens Critics*, and five years since Ada Nisbet's bibliographical essay in Lionel Stevenson's *Victorian Fiction*. These past ten years have been the most productive years of a whole generation of scholars and critics who returned to undergraduate or graduate study after the Second World War . . .'.<sup>1</sup> The books Lane refers to are of course indispensable guides to the history of Dickens criticism and scholarship and Lane's own essay provides us with a late modern perspective.<sup>2</sup> What follows, largely by way of a celebratory gesture, is a sampling of the celebratory harvest. The intention is to take up from Lane, to comment briefly on a selection of the books which have appeared since 1968 and so far in this year of the Inimitable<sup>3</sup> and to observe, with the untuneful angels, whether any planets have been split.

Dickensian criticism since World War II has been for the most part academically based and predominantly concerned with psychological interpretations of 'evil,' with such factors as Dickensian man's unmeasured capacity for partly accumulatory, partly unconscious involvement with wells of criminal horror. Edmund Wilson and Orwell initiated this critical trend of bleak exposure. Of the critical books before us we begin with Sylvère

<sup>1</sup> 'Dickens Studies 1958-1968: An Overview,' first read at the University of Manitoba, Nov. 1968, in *Studies in the Novel (Dickens Special Number)* vol. 1, no. 2, 1969; pp. 240-254.

<sup>2</sup> As others have done more or less extensively, I have also attempted to indicate certain outlines of Dickensian critical history up to 1968: Chap. VI., *Dickens*, Oliver and Boyd, 1969.

<sup>3</sup> The requirement of deadlines prevented me from including certain books published in 1970.

Monod's mainly because we cherish the difference — the nationality of its author lends it both objectivity and an approach literally foreign to first language English speakers — but also because it appeared in its original French some years ago. This substantial work, in which a sophisticated Gallic appreciation is subtly interwoven with biographical information, first appeared as *Dickens Romancier* in 1953 and in that form it is, of course, already well-known to Dickens scholars. The English version, *Dickens the Novelist*, prompted to some extent by Edward Wagenknecht, is the author's own translation and was published in 1968 by the University of Oklahoma. Monod, in both versions of his work, is mainly concerned with establishing Dickens's craftsmanship — he deplores the allegation that Dickens was 'a purely instinctive writer'. He is refreshingly honest about his changed opinions since his original *thèse de doctorat*:

In the course of these labours I have repeatedly contradicted statements and opinions contained in the French version of the present work. If I deplore the incomplete information that caused some of my later retractions, I see no reason to feel ashamed of having changed my mind at other points where opinions, not facts, were involved. For I should be sorry to think that anyone's reactions to Dickens should have become immutable in his early thirties.<sup>1</sup>

It is apparent that, with such independence, Monod does not belong to the Wilsonian dark tradition; he does not belong to any school at all; he is an original.

A. E. Dyson, one of our busiest Dickens industrialists, is not a Wilsonian either but in the manufacture of his books he is not averse to recruiting a number of critics, mainly American, who belong unrepentantly to the 'dark' stream. The three Dyson books, *Dickens (Modern Judgements Series)*, *Bleak House (Casebook Series)* and *The Inimitable Dickens* published by Macmillan in successive years, contain, perhaps inevitably in this sort of market, a remarkable amount of reprinting. One of Dyson's chapters, 'The Old Curiosity Shop: Innocence and the Grotesque' in *The Inimitable Dickens* (1970), is also to be found in his *Dickens* (1968), another, 'Bleak House: Esther better not born?' is to be found in his *Bleak House* (1969); and for good

<sup>1</sup> From the Preface, *Dickens the Novelist*.

measure he has previously published a third chapter 'Edwin Drood: a horrible wonder apart' in his journal *Critical Quarterly*<sup>1</sup> in 1969. Both *Dickens* and *Bleak House* are all reprinted material — as of course is the intention of the series, unashamedly modelled on the American *Twentieth Century Views* and *Twentieth Century Interpretations*. If we look down the contents of the articles by eminent authors in *Dickens* (it is invidious to isolate names but let us invidiously mention Marcus, Miller, Kathleen Tillotson, Gross, Harvey, House, Dorothy van Ghent, Johnson — and a novelist, Green, thrown in for his celebrated *Twist* commentary) we might guess that any serious Dickens student would have already read some or all of these chapters in their original full-length books; not John Gross's perhaps but then his contribution is culled from an earlier critical anthology which he himself edited.<sup>2</sup> The material is generally of the highest standard but so it was in its original context. The first two parts of *Bleak House* contain some not so readily accessible material ('Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population, 1842' and early reviews from the *Athenaeum*, *Spectator* and *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*) but when we come to Parts 3 and 4 we read the names Miller, Kathleen Tillotson, Harvey, House, Johnson — and Dyson — all extracts from comparatively new books and generally available in most university libraries. The unfortunate thing is that A. E. Dyson is a fundamentally refreshing Dickens critic, both highly intelligent and highly articulate, who does not need to put on this editorial display and advertisement. There may be in *The Inimitable Dickens* a suspicion of defiance as though he dares us to criticize him for being uncritically exuberant; as though, aggressively, he is wearing ash on his forehead as a mark of his postured 'umility before the Inimitable. This truculent enthusiasm, however, merely spices a perceptive survey although subjectively, we might wonder whether any of the first three novels should be omitted before, say, *Hard Times*; or, for that matter, why omit any?

E. W. F. Tomlin has produced a celebratory book with an eye to the 1970 coffee tables. *Charles Dickens 1812-1870: A Centenary*

<sup>1</sup> He is joint editor with C. B. Cox.

<sup>2</sup> He is joint editor with Gabriel Pearson: *Dickens and the Twentieth Century*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962.

*Volume* carries some respectable academic names but also a mass of decoration, artistically presented, modern and modish. In the Preface, Tomlin, anticipating perhaps a wider audience, introduces his team with a certain laborious explication and his own chapter 'Dickens's Reputation: A Reassessment' is tastefully pedestrian. J. B. Priestley starts us off and, in an honest John Browdiesque way, takes measurements of Dickens's grandeur; with his admirable biographical persistence Edgar Johnson works at the two secrets in Dickens' life — the blacking warehouse and Ellen Ternan — and their importance in his literary development (but have we not heard this one before?); Emlyn Williams, suitably, writes on the theatre and, equally suitably, Nicholas Bentley on the illustrators; Harry Stone describes learnedly and fascinatingly the genesis of *Great Expectations* and Ivor Brown and Christopher Hibbert expound, with celebratory adequacy, on social reform and London respectively. The illustrative material, in black and white, sepia and glorious colour and sometimes startlingly arranged is wedged between the articles under such headings as 'Dickens's London,' 'Social Conditions' and 'Dickens in America.' The book constitutes an ornamental, if slightly precious, keepsake.

We have noticed in passing one modern novelist's appreciation of *Oliver Twist*. Another modern novelist, Angus Wilson, already the author of some perceptive essays on Dickens and a writer who acknowledges Dickens's influence on his own fiction, now offers a more embracing study. *The World of Charles Dickens* is ornamental, too, with celebratory embellishments of colour plates ('Jig-saw puzzles', 'A late-Victorian Valentine card') and of black and white reproductions — a number of them, historio-dramatic arrangements of King Alfred and Oliver Cromwell or 'The American Civil War: Richmond burning', to mention but three, being some stages removed from scholarly relevance. Yet the vigour of the text and a sensitivity which perhaps reflects a mutual professionalism partly atone for the coffee table exhibitionism and we cannot help suspecting that the book would read more cogently — less confusedly even — with the trappings expurgated. Wilson constructs a biographical apparatus with the intention, to express it basically, of proving that Dickens's novels, perhaps more than

is the case with any other writer, were the direct fictional utterance (without disregarding the magic of imaginative creation) of Dickens's own experience and prejudices. 'It is as a guide', he explains in the Preface, 'to exploring this Dickens imaginative system — both the various novels which are its planets and the whole marvellous group as it revolves around him — that this account of his life has been written'. Not unexpectedly Wilson does not tell us anything new about the life. The value of the book lies in its functioning critically through the biographical bias. Yet in a work so spasmodic and so variegated, there is naturally no constant of biographical flow; nor is there a great deal of profundity; we encounter rather clusters of entertainingly posited data. The first hundred pages, organised under conservative sub-titles such as 'The Blacking Factory', 'The Law', 'Parliament', 'Maria Beadnell', 'The Hogarth Sisters', treat of Dickens's life up to 1840. Subsequently we find a repeated sandwich pattern. Segments of Dickens life are concisely, often discerningly, surveyed and instant interpretations are declared on the basis of a summary of evidence randomly gathered. We then move into a criticism of the writing of the period under scrutiny. The final critical result brings a feeling of articulate enthusiasm rather than providing profound or disturbing evaluation. Apart from an occasional switch into modish colloquialism the writing is persuasive and the book, always excepting its 1970 gimmickry, constitutes a centenary salute from one of our talented novelists.

Grahame Smith's *Dickens, Money and Society* is an honest, sensitive work which pursues a rewarding line of critical inquiry and is perhaps weightier and more extensive than the title seems to indicate. A fashionable dismissiveness of the earlier novels (although Smith readily concedes the success of their 'comedy') is sometimes ambiguously argued: '... the book's [*Nickleby*] formal chaos leaves one with no unified imaginative experience. It lives on in one's mind as an increasingly dim memory of bits and pieces; it cannot make itself a part of the texture of one's life in the way that *Middlemarch* or *Anna Karenina* is capable of doing.' There are a number of such subjective ordinances but mainly we are aware of a serious original approach presented in a persuasive style. When we move from this substantial work to Martin Fido's

*Charles Dickens* in the *Profiles in Literature* series we are puzzled by a special wizardry which glossily magnifies so little as so much. The general editor of the series, B. C. Southam, claims that after studying this book the modern reader 'can then proceed with a sense of his bearings and an informed eye for the writer's art.' In the 119 pages of text there are long extracts from the novels and about 20 pages of 'commentary and analysis' which with effortless brevity cover a host of themes including 'Exuberant domestic optimism,' 'Social satire; caricature and irony,' 'Structure: thematic unity,' 'Insularity' and so on. Perhaps we should obtain a better sense of our bearings if we read a novel or two. Elizabeth Kyle's *The Boy Who Asked for More*, is obviously written for children (we are not being patronising, Dickens wrote for them too) and yet it is so much more purposeful, so transparently more informative, even — yes — more adult in design. Imaginatively illustrated, this account of Dickens's early life is to a point romanticized: 'Mr Jones, the Headmaster, was a bully. He thrashed the boarders, but he did not thrash Charles or the other day-boys, because he feared they might carry complaints of him home,' but there is throughout a living sense of social history and place. If Fido's is a book for non-readers of Dickens and Elizabeth Kyle's one for children, it is difficult to gauge for whom H. M. Burton's *Dickens and His Works* is intended. It carries a certain amount of academic apparatus (a decorative index spattered with capitals and a brief 'select booklist' by Norman Stone) but it is presented shinily, reminding us of a social memento of a big business convention. Burton's style exhibits a certain archness: 'The newspapers seemed cheap and nasty, the heating of the trains and hotels was suffocating and made him ill, the rough welcome of the crowds was a little *too* rough and the eternal gum-chewing and spitting was disgusting . . .' This was Dickens in America whereas Dickens's London . . .

For the sake of preserving some rough categorization, we should mention at this point two recent additions to the British Council's admirable *Writers and Their Work* series. In the forty pages allowed them (conciseness is of course the hall mark of this series) Trevor Blount and Barbara Hardy competently present stimulating introductions to *The Early Novels* and to *The Later*

*Novels* respectively. And these complement rather than supersede K. J. Fielding's earlier *Dickens* in the same series.

Linguists are becoming increasingly aware of Dickens's language. In *The Language of Dickens* G. L. Brook indicates that some reconciliation between the studies of linguistics and literature is feasible. Despite his expertise, his linguistic catholicity and his familiarity with the jargon, Brook's is a witty and humane book which need not make apprehensive those for whom linguistics appears as a formidably new discipline rapidly proposing its own mysteries. The chapter 'Idiolects' for example, with a denseness of Dickensian illustration, is typically explanatory of what is, for many of us, a new academic vocabulary: Nicholas Nickleby, for instance, voicing his Victorian heroics in faceless syllables, displays no idiolect ('he usually talks like a bad book') whereas Squeers and Pecksniff employ, each with its own appropriateness, many different kinds of speech. Professor Brook claims that a literary sensitivity can aid a linguistic inquiry:

By noticing who uses particular features of substandard speech it is possible to throw light not only on the characters but also on the nature of the substandard speech . . . In *The Tuggses at Ramsgate* . . . there is a good deal of light-hearted mockery of the class dialect of a lower-middle class London family. A legacy of £20,000 has immediate linguistic consequences: Simon and Charlotte become Cymon and Charlotta, while Cymon's father lags behind him in the attempt to acquire new speech-habits:

'Capital shrimps!' said Mr. Joseph Tuggs.

Mr. Cymon eyed his father with a rebellious scowl, as he emphatically said '*Shrimps*'.

'Well then, shrimps,' said Mr. Joseph Tuggs, 'Shrimps or shrimps, don't much matter.'

According to the blurb this book is unique because it is the only one 'devoted exclusively to all aspects of Dickens's English — phonological, morphological, syntactic, stylistic and dialectical.' It is no doubt as scholarly embracing as this description indicates (the appendices on substandard grammar and vocabulary testify to the years spent in compilation) but the main text, besides being hugely informative, has also qualities of warmth and wit and we can readily see how this sort of inquiry and analysis constitutes relevant aspects of Dickensian criticism.

We conclude with three books variously concerned with Dickens scholarship. *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge* were published in weekly numbers in *Master Humphrey's Clock* from April 1840 to November 1841. The letters published in the second volume of *The Letters of Charles Dickens* (edited by Madeline House and Graham Storey) date from 2 January 1840 to 30 December 1841 so epistolarily, we are very much in the period of genesis of Little Nell, the Varden family, Sim Tappertit and company. The volume contains 706 letters of which 250 are published for the first time and the texts of 471 are from originals or photographs. Most of the letters are of course fascinating, throwing all sorts of lights on Dickens's social life, his business, his authorial attitudes and so on, yet perhaps one of the most important claims made by the editors concerns the 'national grief' at the death of little Nell and Dickens's mood during the writing. 'Certain legends have grown up around its [*The Old Curiosity Shop*] reception which the letters and the reading material do not bear out;' the whole story, in the view of the editors, has been exaggerated: 'O'Connell flung away the book after reading of Nell's death, but with indignation, not tears . . .' And as for Dickens himself: 'The letters show that Dickens's state of mind during his writing of the bulk of the book was itself bouyant and cheerful. Moreover, they provide no evidence that his thoughts, during the first 70 chapters, ever turned to his dead sister-in-law, Mary Hogarth.' Besides this sort of prefatorial illumination, the book is presented with exemplary scholarship with, so far as we can tell, a disciplined respect for accuracy.

We suppose that Dickens is inevitably associated with the graphic arts and that may be the reason why Harry Stone has chosen to add 132 illustrations to his two volumes of *The Uncollected Writings of Charles Dickens: Household Words 1850-59*. (This is the Allen Lane Press title; it is slightly different and very much more expensive in its earlier American edition published by the Indiana University Press) without their necessarily being essential to an appreciation of the reprinted pieces. The pieces are fascinating in themselves and the work of detection on them even more so. Of the 78 pieces only 16 are ascribed by Stone solely to Dickens — and this ascription is based on either Dickens's signature or the



evidence of the Contributors Book. Of those which he claims carry Dickensian interpolation or revision Stone relies a little on external evidence (letters, payments, corrected proofs) but largely on internal evidence, 'allusions, imagery, structure, division, ideas, diction, syntax . . .' He challenges the reader to test his detection and therefore let us look at 'Valentine Day at the Post Office.' It begins presumably by W. H. Wills, like this:

Late in the afternoon of the 14th of February last past, an individual who bore not the slightest resemblance to a despairing lover, or, indeed to a lover in any state of mind, was seen to drop into the box of a Fleet Street receiving-house two letters folded in flaming colours. He did not look round to see if he were observed, but walked boldly into the shop with a third epistle, and deposited thereon one penny . . .

[He then walks to St. Martin's-le-Grand.]

Most people are aware that the Great National Post Office in St. Martin's-le-Grand is divided into halves by a passage, whose sides are perforated by what is called the 'Window Department'.

[It is here that the first Dickens interpolation is claimed.]

Here huge slits gape for letters, whole sashes yawn for newspapers, or wooden panes open for clerks to frame their large faces, like giant visages in the slides of a Magic Lanthorn . . .

It all looks very simple when it has been pointed out but it requires the erudition and discrimination of a fine scholar to be certain of Dickens cadences and texture of the last few lines and yet to ascribe to Wills the clause 'an individual . . . state of mind.'

Sister Lucille Carr's compilation of *A Catalogue of the Vander-Poel Dickens Collection at the University of Texas* is a consequence of Mr Halstead VanderPoel's gift to the University of his own collection. A review of this catalogue in the *TLS* led to a flurry of correspondence in that journal, mainly lamenting the dearth of original Dickens material in England compared with the riches listed here. The first two sections, 'Autograph Manuscripts and other Original Work' and 'Books and Periodicals' list the central treasure of the collection, the other listings being more peripheral (how valuable is it to know that Dickens owned an 'elaborately tooled' Pope 'in full red morocco'?). The book is attractively produced and, for one uninitiated in bibliographical lore, it seems to be admirably organized. In conclusion there are two other, very

different, bibliographies which were intended for the centenary year but which now may not appear until 1971. Joseph Gold, at the University of Manitoba is just completing *The Stature of Dickens: A Centenary Bibliography* which will be concerned with listing critical works on Dickens. Gold anticipates more than three thousand entries. Ada Nisbet, author of 'Charles Dickens' in *Victorian Fiction* (ed. Lionel Stevenson), has also almost completed a bibliography, *Charles Dickens: International Guide to Study and Research*. The key word is indeed 'international' for apart from a chapter of her own on England and America she has enlisted Sylvère Monod to cover France, Heinz Reinhold Germany, Igor Katarsky Russia, Anna Katena Hungary and twenty other distinguished names to cover the Dickens material in twenty further countries.

The following books are noticed in the above article:

Blount, Trevor, *Dickens: The Early Novels*. London: Longmans, Green & Co. (for the British Council and the National Book League), 1968. pp. 52. 3/6. [In the *Writers and Their Work* series, general editor Geoffrey Bullough.]

Brook, G. L., *The Language of Dickens*. London: Andrew Deutsch, 1970. pp. 269. £2.10. [In *The Language Library*, eds Eric Partridge and Simeon Potter.]

Burton, H. M., *Dickens and his Works*. London: Methuen Educational Ltd., 1968. pp. 91. 15/-. [In the *Methuen's Outlines* series.]

Carr, Sister Lucille, *A Catalogue of the VanderPoel Dickens Collection at the University of Texas*. Austin: The Humanities Research Centre, The University of Texas, 1968. pp. 274. \$7.50.

Dyson, A. E., ed., *Dickens*. London: Macmillan, 1968. pp. 288. 18/-. [In the *Modern Judgements* series, general editor P. N. Furbank.]

Dyson, A. E., ed., *Bleak House*. London: Macmillan, 1969. pp. 284. 13/-. [In the *Casebook* series, general editor A. E. Dyson.]

Dyson, A. E., *The Inimitable Dickens: A Reading of the Novels*. London: Macmillan, St Martins, 1970. pp. 295. £3. 10.

Fido, Martin, *Charles Dickens*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968. pp. 119. 8/-. [In the *Profiles in Literature* series, general editor B. C. Southam.]

Hardy, Barbara, *Dickens: The Later Novels*. London: Longman's, Green & Co. (for the British Council and National Book League), 1968. pp. 52. 3/6. [In the *Writers and Their Work* series, general editor Geoffrey Bullough.]

House, Madeline and Storey, Graham, eds., *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, Vol. II, 1840-41. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969. pp. 547. £6.75. [*The Pilgrim Edition.*]

Kyle, Elizabeth, *The Boy Who Asked For More*. London: Evans Brothers, 1966. pp. 182. 18/-.

Monod, Sylvère, *Dickens the Novelist*. Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1968. pp. 511. \$7.95.

Smith, Grahame, *Dickens, Money and Society*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968. pp. 226. \$6.95.

Stone, Harry, ed., *The Uncollected Writings of Charles Dickens: Household Words 1850-59*, two vols London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1969. pp. 716. £6.30 the set.

Tomlin, E. F. W., ed., *Charles Dickens 1812-1870, A Centenary Volume*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969. pp. 288. £3.50.

Wilson, Angus, *The World of Charles Dickens*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1970. pp. 302. £4.

## *From Seven Poems on a Theme to Laura*

You whisper to water,  
thoroughly embraced.  
When you separate,  
it clutches at your shoulders,  
collapses at your feet, battered.  
Rivulets remind your flank and back.  
I watch them slipping off your skin's  
indifference to their drying.

HAROLD F. MOSHER, JR.