BOOKS

Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph.

Johnson, Edward. *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph.* Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1979. Rev. ed. 601 pp.

One of Charles Dickens' triumphs was a long and apparently successful campaign for popular education in England. At Dickens' death in 1870, the *Times* obituary remarked on the coincidence of that event with the passage of the Forster Education Act. Under the provisions of the Act, many of the educational practices—and lacunae—that Dickens found most inhumane, were finally remedied. But was Dickens a prime mover in educational reform? Readers of Edward Johnson's book will be frustrated if they hope to find a clear and explanatory answer to this, and to many other central problems in the life of Charles Dickens.

A good example of Johnson's frustrating methods is provided in his treatment of "political economy," a concept already in popular use among Dickens' friends and in political circles of the mid-nineteenth century. Johnson flits over the broad contours of Dickens' notion of political economy, often speaking of Dickens' education work in the same breath. Never, however does the biographer find any possible connection between the two; nor does he analyze the content and logical force of Dickens' concepts of "education" and "political economy." This is all the more frustrating considering how much is now known about the evolution and circumstances in which these conceptions grew. The new edition of Johnson's work includes no bibliography at all; in fact, there are no less than two thousand articles and books for the period since 1945 dealing with Dickens' paternal family and his own children, Dickens' various attempts at "social" work, not to mention the evolution of his educational theory. Thus, despite the claims of the book jacket, this is hardly a definitive biography.

Johnson provides just enough facts, it must be said, for the *reader* to make connections between education and political economy in Dickens' work. But Johnson presumes his reader both capable and desirous of making them, and of asking the necessary explanation-demanding questions in the first place.

The remainder of this essay considers Dickens' political economy, its origins and its educational implications. My aim is to use Johnson's own book to draw some possible conclusions about these matters; in so doing, I have put aside other equally interesting themes and questions: if education is concerned with character formation above all, were Dickens' activities *prima facie* evidence that he thought schooling the single most powerful agent of education? Was he as successful politically speaking as the 1870 "coincidence" suggests? Did Dickens distinguish between the relatively disinterested philanthropy of the gentry, and that of the bourgeois and middle classes?

Dickens' view of politics, economics and the State owed much to the circumstances of his birth and first professions.

His father was a propertyless civil servant inclined to live just a little beyond his means. In early nineteenth-century England, that was a catastrophic weakness. John Dickens, in spite of financial difficulty, sent young Charles to the neighborhood "dame" school in Portsea. In this tiny, private setting, Dickens acquired literacy and numeracy. In 1821, when Charles was nine, he attended an ordinary day school—again, private and local. By the time Charles left school, forced to work as a boot-black (1824) to help his father out of Marshalsea Debtors' Prison—he had also learned an indeterminate amount from his loquacious father, and from a small wall-library of adventure and travel books. Without saying why, Johnson hints throughout his work that the wall library counted for more than anything else in Dickens' education.

Indeed, Johnson makes only literary or psychological connections between events in Dickens' life, if he makes them at all. The grasping Mr. Gradgrind is and must be both capitalist and schoolmaster, Johnson darkly hints, for those were the psychologically dominant facts of Dickens' life. Dickens was forever marked by boot-black poverty—but was his whole outlook on education and the State actually moulded by it?

At least in part, it was. There is evidence of a more-than-literary link between the misery Dickens knew, and his notion of schooling. A host of critical studies exist to show the way. F. S. Schwarzenbach's recent study *Dickens and the City* (London: Athlone, 1979)—to choose just one—points in the

right direction, reminding us of Dickens' rural childhood, the shock of his encounter with urban criminality, urban police and urban "thought control." Dickens' happier second career, as parliamentary stenographic reporter, introduced him to the mechanisms by which propertied interests controlled the press, and limited the language of political discourse. Dickens was in Parliament from 1832-1836, always despairing at the slowness and the limits of parliamentary reform. Johnson's book is always at hand to remind us that the younger Dickens' memory of John Dickens' stay in Marshalsea (1824) continually fed Charles' despair and reformatory zeal. This is clearly not enough, as we now see: it was Charles Dickens' realistic assessment of crime and its roots, of policing and judicial favoritism, of politics and "thought control" that led to his reform activity.

Dickens was both successful businessman and practical philanthropist. The objects of his charity were usually artists and writers fallen on hard times; his wealthy friend, Miss Coutts, responded to his suggestions for aid to Ragged Schools. But Dickens rarely became personally involved in education work. His highly publicized talks and readings were sometimes given before Mechanics' Institutions, or other voluntary associations of working people. Dickens did not come closer than this to active education work. One wonders why.

Johnson is little help on this question, except as a provisioner of facts. Those facts, however, do suggest an answer to this point, as they did to the other points raised earlier.

Any reader of Dickens' pamphlets and correspondence as well as his novels, knows Dickens was a pessimist in politics, and no socialist. In *Dombey and Son* (written 1846-1848) and *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838), Dickens made bad schools seem products of their proprietors' greed. That same greed, in other contexts, led to horrific living conditions for the industrial poor everywhere. Dickens visited mines and factories; he knew the evil, even when it was dressed in the garb of the Charity Commission or the Established Church.

The cure could not lie altogether in political action and change, for the condition of Parliament seemed unlikely to change.

Instead, Dickens saw the cure in a host of peripheral changes unlikely to uproot property-holders. Limits on profiteering in the market-place, more homes for the sick and aged, humane and less rigid legislation concerning a wide range of small crimes, less punitive justice more equally applied—these measures might now be thought "social democratic." And of course Dickens hoped for more schools, not because he saw in them the engine of all other social reforms, but because children would otherwise be vagrant or at work, and because gentleness and learning might otherwise be wholly absent from children's lives. In the end, Dickens hoped, these changes would bring a new measure of happiness and security to family life. That was Dickens' supreme goal.

Dickens' political economy was, then, static and to some extent dismal. Schooling, like other social reforms, could mitigate the worst consequences of industrial capitalism but could not hope to change its mechanisms. The best the school could do was extend a familial happiness to all children, and thereby permanently change their "moral outlook."

Why has Johnson failed to push on past his recitation of events? Johnson might himself argue that his book was intended as literary biography, and therefore need not offer explanations. But surely the story of books and ideas can never be disentangled from their author's circumstances of life. And in turn, surely it is impossible to account for the twists and turns of an author's life without knowing something of the outside world in which he worked. This notion of a book/author/world relationship is itself an explanatory vehicle, and pushes past chronology and event-recitation.

To conclude, Dickens' life might best be characterized under four headings:

(1) acquisition of wealth and material security;

(2) learning to write, and intoxication with the means of mass communication;

(3) development of a driving literary imagination;

(4) growth of a strong but pragmatic devotion to social change.

Education, political activity and certain charitable work were Dickens' ways of carrying out (4). If only Johnson had concluded his work with anything like a list of this kind, his readers might have been able to judge for themselves whether this was explanatory biography or just a well told bed-time story.

Perhaps this is the book's real achievement: it is a reminder of the crucial respect in which biography must always be history, and subject therefore to historical canons of evidence, inference and explanation.

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