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The Dual Purpose of the Dickens Novels

By James Leatham

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PART ONE (OF THREE)

**Was Dickens what is called a Gentleman?**

*By Way of Preface*

The question with which this page is headed is more or less answered, incidentally, in the body of the essay. Accepting the etymology of the word 'Gentleman,' there can be no safer definition of it than that which is usually given last, though that, as we shall see, is not adequate. The first dictionary I open gives: 'A man that is well born; one that is of good family; one that bears arms, but has no title'; and last and best of all, 'One of gentle or refined manners.' None of these definitions covers the ground. Men who have been cretins physically and blackguards morally have been both 'well born' and 'of good family.' There were Richard Crookback, the Dauphin who gave up Joan of Arc, and John Churchill, first Duke of Marlborough.

The only safe ground is stated by Shakespeare when he says of Brutus, 'His *life* was gentle.' He was a giver, not a taker. He worked for his livelihood, and did not take money from the poor by force of arm, either legal or lethal. John Milton's idea of a gentleman was to

*Defend the poor and desolate,  
And rescue from the hands  
Of wicked men the low estate  
Of him that help demands.*

And Dickens said: 'I have *systematically* tried to turn fiction to the good account of showing the *preventable* wretchedness and misery in which the masses of the people dwell.'

That is a better title to gentleness than 'gentle and refined manners,' which may be, and often are, quite compatible with the robbery of the poor and the intensification of their misery. One of the gentlest men I have known was an owner of rack-rented slum property. Dickens's championship of the poor did not help him. It was not a stunt. And although Queen Victoria sent him her book as from 'The Least to the Greatest of Authors,' there were others besides Macaulay who thought they decried Dickens's Humanity when they called it Socialism.

## The Dual Purpose of the Dickens Novels

### I

I have just been asked if I proposed to attend a lecture by a professor of *belles lettres* on 'The Art of Charles Dickens.' Those in the confidence of the lecturer explained to me that it was 'the art of Dickens, not his teaching,' with which the lecturer proposed to deal.

Now, I am very far from being uninterested in the art of Dickens, even as so delimited and narrowed. I should, indeed, say that I was interested in the craft of literary composition in all its minutiae beyond even most authors. I have been writing myself, and considering the writing of others, too long and too practically to be indifferent to 'the form of sound words.' As regards Dickens, I have had for many years a facsimile copy of the manuscript of his 'Christmas Carol,' which I sometimes show to young people as an example of *how* Dickens actually wrote English with his very hand. He was a very deliberate artist with as little as possible of the hasty improviser about his methods. His printed works shows that. His manuscript shows it. We know it from his correspondence. As a reporter he could and did write descriptive journalese very rapidly, and transcribed many columns of short-hand notes in coach journeys, in spite of the bad light, the jolting, and the distractions caused by his fellow passengers. But his early career as a reporter is not reflected in the mechanism of his style. There is no easy journalistic writing in his novels. In its animation and concentration, his style is, after that of Thomas Carlyle, the most individual and instantly recognisable of any prose in the language. He got the last scintilla of imaginative suggestion out of all situations, characters, appearances, and incidents.

### *A Matter that Matters*

With these features I shall deal in detail later on. But before proceeding further I wish to say that to divorce Dickens's style from the varying message by which it was always inspired and informed, to confine one's attention to his manner and discount

his matter, is as if we admired a carpenter's dexterity in throwing off shavings or driving nails, with no thought of what he was actually engaged in making.

There is a dull colourlessness of character which chooses neither good nor evil, neither truth nor error, but does not choose at all. It drifts, and is swept up by one current of movement after another, no matter how mutually exclusive and contradictory these tendencies may be, voting Tory at one election and Liberal or Labour at the next, according to what may appear to be the prevailing opinion in the constituency at the moment. There is a gaping gawkiness, by no means confined to yokels, which sits astonished at all manifestation of ability, while paying no noticeable heed to its value, if any – positive, comparative, or superlative. This cataleptic passivity has no standards of judgment, because it is without sincerity. On all settled questions there was a right and a wrong even before they were settled. But they never would have been settled if the men who settled them, instead of being men of strong and declared convictions, had been careless Gallios who could not make up their minds one way or the other on the moral merits. The ability to define, distinguish, and decide is the basis of all capacity whatever. The absence of it is a defect. In my hotly propagandist days, working from Manchester as a centre, I used to have the curiosity to ask what sort of speaker so-and-so was – meaning someone whom I frequently preceded or followed, but whom I had never heard. 'A champion speaker!' was, in the nineties, the most customary formula, with such indeterminate variants as 'fine,' 'At,' or 'grand.' Once in a while you met a person who had the moral sincerity to be dissatisfied with the descriptive adjectives that did not describe. Such an one would tell you that the object of your inquiry was 'an analytical speaker,' or 'witty,' or 'emotional and powerful,' or 'homely and picturesque,' or 'very fond of statistics,' or – best of all – he would give specific points or lines of argument or illustration used by the speaker. This was the descriptive method of persons interested in both the matter and the manner, and all the more interested in the one because interested in the other.

'What are you reading my lord?' asks Ophelia. 'Words,' answers Hamlet. That is intended for sarcasm: but to those for whom style is the great, almost the only, thing the sarcasm in its full impact must be lots. Ophelia naturally adds: 'But I mean the matter?' To Ophelia the matter seemed to be a matter that supremely mattered. And there we shall leave the matter for the present.

### *Dictation.*

We read of successful novelists who dictate to a stenographer, the lady (it is usually a lady) taking down off the hand words in shorthand and then transcribing the notes into typescript. Making all due allowance for the superior readiness of the modern mind, as also for the extent to which practice in dictation perhaps makes for tense accuracy, it is difficult to believe that anything like the best results can be achieved by dictation.

This facsimile of the MS of the 'Christmas Carole' shows that Dickens made many changes in his phrasing. The interlineations, substitutions, and erasures are carefully and thoroughly made, and all the alterations are improvements. Thus the first chapter had been headed 'Old Marley's Ghost'; but the 'Old' is struck out. The small improvement is undoubted. Marley's partner is describes as 'old Scrooge.' They had both been old men; but apart from the fact that too much use of the word 'old' was to be deprecated, the ghost was *not* old. Marley had just died, so that his ghost would really be a new ghost. Then brevity is good in itself – 'the soul of wit,' said Pope; while Byron said, 'brevity is good, whether you are or are not understood.'

Now, all these erasures and interlineations and substitutions represent not only second, but third or fourth thoughts. On the evidence of his highly-wrought manuscript, Dickens was the last man who could or would have cared to dictate to an amanuensis. Dictation may be good enough for the easy requirements or mere formulas of commercial correspondence; but literature is made of distilled words, and dictation and distillation are not very near relations. It was a defect of the old-fashioned typewriter that the writing was not visible to the typist at work; and the desirability of *seeing* one's words while composing is so evident that inability to see them is one of the great drawbacks of dictating. The presence of a second party, too, prevents one from feeling alone with the idea and turning it over in one's mind at leisure, and without the awkwardness involved in keeping the stenographer waiting. H.G.Wells tells of a novelist whose typist used to show by a scarce perceptible shrug and hesitation when she disapproved of what was dictated to her. Wells much have realised this from his own experience. Even the signs of approval from an amanuensis would be detraction from the intense, the more than intimate privacy and brooding, the hatching slowness, the tentative, tortuous, oft-abandoned attempts, with recastings of phrase, sentence and paragraph, that go to the best writing.

We could not conceive of Shakespeare dictating. Stevenson and Gibbon wrote passages and chapters over and over again, and improved them, we may be sure, at each re-writing.

### *The Hasty Improver.*

Scott and Dumas would probably represent the opposite method of composition – the method of hasty improvisation. Scott's facility was so great that, at a time when he was suffering from prolonged and acute neuralgia, he was nevertheless able to dictate to his secretary, Willie Laidlaw, the whole of the powerful tale 'The Bride of Lammermuir,' with its fine and laughable portrayal of the shifts of Caleb Balderstone to cover the nakedness of the land at Ravenswood. Often Scott's enunciation would be broken by an irrepressible groan; the devoted Laidlaw shed tears of sympathy while he wrote or waited; and when the finished story was put into its author's hands it was almost as a new book to him.

Dumas, again, was always writing against time, the printer's messenger coming and taking away instalments of 'copy,' for which he sometimes had to wait. These instalments, moreover, would often be comparatively small; just enough to keep the compositors going and complete the sheet of 'eights' or 'sixteens' immediately in hand.

Dumas, indeed, was so much the improver, bent on filling the sheets, that he is said to have been the first to adopt the practice of making every sentence a paragraph – a device which fills a sheet with many blanks, but certainly gets you down the page.

Scott also, like Arnold Bennett today, had to do his daily stent. But even at his worst, Scott wrote from a mind so full as well as so fine and big that there is an appearance of inevitableness about his language and the development of his story such as do not belong to Dumas. The Frenchman's heroes come out for adventures, and they have them in endless chain; but often one has the feeling that the story might take any one of a hundred courses; that Dumas does not in the least know what is to come next; that anything might have happened as readily as the thing that does happen.

In Arnold Bennett, it must be confessed, in spite of his oft-quoted habit of matter-of-fact word-stringing, it is difficult to see that waiting for inspiration, or taking longer time over his work, would have made much difference. In his newspaper articles he is careless as to whether he finds a synonym or not, and works the same noun or adjective as hard as he would in ordinary slack conversation. Even this is better than stilted writing; but good writing has the charm of variety in the choice of synonyms, in addition to all its other charms.

*The Purpose, always the Purpose.*

But while Dickens was all the time an artist, his artistry is only an incidental in the value of his work. The merely literary critic, the *belles lettristic* commentator, professional or other, is almost from the nature of the case, not concerned about the essentials of Dickens's art *as a whole*. Surely to discern the purpose as well to enjoy the art; to accept the teaching with what modifications may be necessary to our own standpoint, is to get vastly more out of these creations than is possible to the non-sociological reader. To read for the art's sake, to regard the man of fiction as a complete identity – what Whitman calls 'a simple, separate person' without regard to the potent social circumstances which shape him, and which he ought to help to shape in turn, is to ignore the better part of even the 'art' that has created him. There are no simple, separate persons: we are all members of one another.

There are millions of readers, however, who are so little impressed with an author's purpose that they are not conscious of it. One has met Conservatives who were very much surprised to learn that Dickens was hotly Radical, and as such the first editor of the *Daily News*, which began as a Radical newspaper and has continued to be so during the whole course of its fourscore years' existence.

Not to recognise that Dickens was, in all he wrote, distinctly and strongly Socialistic in tendency is sheer mental blindness. It is quite true that charity, benevolence, and the Christmassy feeling are not politics – are not anything like so good as old age pensions, the ‘dole’ or even a humane Poor Law; but the humanity Dickens loved to propound had to come as preparation of the individual for these legislative changes. With most people the enlightened humanity has still to come.

*In Detail.*

Let us see, without too much of pedestrian summarising, something of what Charles Dickens did accomplish with those dual purposes always before him of writing a great story and at the same time aiming at the redress of social scandals.

Even in his early ‘Sketches by Boz,’ Dickens showed himself as the High Priest of Humanism in Fiction. These sketches were actual pictures of London life, in which the seamstress and the poor street-singer arouse the pity of the young journalist, while the gas-bag of the public-house parlour – that enemy of real reform – equally comes in for realistic treatment. The very name of Boz suggests the source of Dickens’s inspiration. He admired so much the writings of Oliver Goldsmith – a social reformer in all he wrote – and the name of Moses, the son of the good Vicar of Wakefield, was so often on his lips, that his younger brother called him Boz as a child’s attempt at the name. And just as the ‘Vicar of Wakefield’ was the first novel – indeed the first book of any kind – that advocated prison reform and a lightening of the penal code, so in the ‘Pickwick Papers’ the demoralising life of the debtor’s prison was depicted in striking colours derived from the novelist’s own experience while his father was an inmate of the Marshalsea prison.

His own experience, gained in the blacking factory where he spent a miserable time with several London guttersnipes, is not less vividly reflected in ‘Oliver Twist,’ with its sketches of the young criminals Charley Bates and the Artful Dodger as trained by old Fagin the Jew. In the brutality and unhappiness of Bill Sikes and Nancy he shows the real misery of the crook’s life and its inevitable tragic end. Bumbledom, also, is so presented here that, on the whole, it can scarcely be said to have survived it, and the inmates of workhouses are now comparatively pampered. Similarly, the cruel magistrates of Dickens’s day, of whom he had not only the special knowledge derived from his experience as a reporter in the courts, but had studied afterwards in the true portrait of Justice Fang and in that alone; for the city stipendiary of today is wonderfully understanding and clement, and regularly acts as a buffer between the public and an officious police force, in which the promotion of individuals has a tendency to depend upon the number of convictions secured.

The shabby genteel people of ‘Nicholas Nickleby,’ the warm-heartedness and open-handedness of ‘show folk,’ the mockery of education as carried on in places of the Dotheboys Hall type, the brainlessness of the aristocracy as exemplified in Lord Verisopht, and its occasional turpitude as in Sir Mulberry Hawk, are further

indications of Dickens's strong class feeling and the steadiness of his humanistic purpose.

'Martin Chuzzlewit,' hits off Yankee vulgarity and embalms to immortality Mrs Gamp, the private-enterprise nurse, with her snuff-taking and tipping irresponsibility, and Pecksniff the pharisaical fraud.

'Domby and Son' reproves the pride of wealth with unforgettable and pathetic realism. That it contains such characters as Mrs Pipchin and poor little Paul gilds the philosophic pill; but it seems necessary to point out that the pill is there, since its presence is not always observed apparently. I have known people who were ardent admirers of Dickens, yet continued to believe in the institutions and failings he satirised.

'Bleak House' illustrates the folly of those who busy themselves with foreign missions while neglecting domestic concerns. Among much else, it shows how wealth may be punished by the consequences of the poverty itself has made, epidemic disease from the hovel of Tom-All-Along invading the homes of the wealthy. It reveals the mischief done by the law's delay in the case of Arthur Jarndyce and poor Miss Flite; and it fastens the responsibility for the miserable life and premature death of Poor Jo upon society as a whole.

*Not Unerring.*

While Dickens's social instinct was sound, his specific approach to a given problem was not always unerring. 'Hard Times,' based upon his experience of a strike in Preston, is wrong as to the place and value it accords to trade unionism, and unjust to trade union leaders as personified in Slackbridge the agitator. Stephen Blackpool is, say what Dickens will, an abetter of blacklegging. No workman can afford rightly to stand off from the union of his calling on the plea that he does not approve of its every act. Broadly, trades unionism has improved the status of all workers, and the benefits it has won cannot rightly be enjoyed while the agency itself is belittled and denied. But the characters of Gradgrind the man of facts, and Bounderby the bully of humility, with his boasting of how 'I was brought up in the gutter, sir,' are immortal; their names have become epithet; and the influence of the satire is a long way from being spent because unnecessary. There are still public men who are not ashamed to tell that their parents sent them to work at ten and twelve years of age.

'Little Dorrit' exposes the methods of the Barnacles and the Circumlocution Office, evidently not in vain; for the Civil Service is now prompt and efficient, and is open to entrants by examination. The character of the financier Merdle, who makes such wholesale shipwreck of other people's fortunes and his own, shows that Dickens realised a very long time ago the true inwardness of the methods of the class of Hooleys, Jabez Balrours, and Whittaker Wrights, who now more than ever prey upon the cupidity of the large class that seeks to secure something for nothing.

*Was Dickens a 'Gentleman?'*

But it matters not to which of the tales we turn. The social purpose is so obvious that critics who resent Dickens's Humanist tendency long since discovered, first, that he had never portrayed a gentleman, and then that he was not a gentleman himself.

It depends upon the definition. Etymologically the word means a man who is gentle, in speech, manner and action. 'His life was gentle,' says Mark Anthony of Brutus, in Shakespeare's panegyric.

If to be a gentleman means to be a useless person, one who has 'never soiled his hand with trade,' then Dickens had very obviously nothing but contempt for that character. This he shows again and again. It is the whole *motif* of the powerful tale 'Great Expectations,' in which the nominal hero, Pip, is corrupted from the very first hint of his great expectations, and passes from one failure to another till his expectations come to an end and he enters upon a career of self-supporting effort. The most loveable figure of the book is the honest blacksmith Joe Gargery, whose forbearance and kindness are inexhaustible, and whose good nature is not mere lumpish inertia, but has its basis of reason as stated by him when he points out that his own mother had suffered so much at the hands of a brutal husband that he is, as he says, 'dead afeerd of going wrong in the way of not doing what's right by a woman. I'd fur rather of the two go wrong the tother way and be a little ill-conwenienced myself.' His wife is one of the great shrews of imaginative literature; but he, the powerful smith, has reasoned out his philosophy of forbearance as being the line of wisdom, even when Mrs Joe takes a handful of whiskers in one of her rampages.

The Sir Leicester Deadlock of 'Bleak House' is the essence of pompous futility, and the character of the conventional 'gentleman,' lightly but significantly touched in Sir Leicester, has all the t's crossed and all the I's dotted in the full-length figure of Podsnap in 'Our Mutual Friend.'

It is the manifest intention of this great creator of character in fiction that we should admire most the minor useful and kind people in his stories – Mark Tapley the optimist servant rather than Martin Chuzzlewit the selfish young master; Sam Weller, with his sense and fun, rather than the conventional and somewhat footling Pickwick.

There is no more moving or graphic view of the causes that led to the French Revolution than the series of vignettes in 'A Tale of Two Cities.' When the cinema producer wishes to show what the Bastille did to its prisoners, how the marquis's coach ran down the poor in the streets, and how, at the breaking of a wine-cask, the starving poor chewed the very staves, after they had lapped up all they could of the escaping liquor, the cinema producer turns, not to Mignet, or Michelet, or even to Carlyle, but to Dickens.

*A Crusade within a Crusade.*

Each novel is a crusade, but there are even crusades within the crusades, as where in 'Great Expectations' Dickens pours scorn upon the severity of a penal code which



would hang a man who has lived down his past because he dared to come back, a man of property, from the penal settlement to which he has been exiled. Dickens was immensely concerned about the housing of the people, about sanitation, education, the reform of the judicial procedure, the abolition of executions in public, the lightening of the penal code, the improvement of the conditions of servile labour, the improvement of prisons, the adjustment of copyright, and the abolition of American slavery, the blighting influence of which in the Southern States he powerfully described both in his private correspondence and his published writings.

To emphasise the social and political aims of Dickens is the less superfluous because a race of novelists has arisen which discounts 'missions' and 'messages' and regards the novelist simply as the purveyor of entertaining pot-boilers. This is a departure from the whole motive of the novel as originally conceived and as carried out in practice by the masters of the art. From Cervantes down by way of Fielding, Smollett, Swift and Goldsmith, to Dickens, the Brontes, Mrs Beecher Stowe, Charles Reade, Mrs Gaskell, Victor Hugo, Emile Zola, George Eliot, Bulwer Lytton, George MacDonald, Sir Walter Besant, H.G.Wells, and Biasco Ibanez, the outstanding writers of prose fiction have all been crusaders, more or less pronounced and declared.

#### *The Entertainers.*

One has nothing to say against the mere entertainers. That they are content to forego one-half of the *raison d'être* of their art, to fight with a single broadside, is their affair and the affair of their readers. Even Shakespeare and Scott are supreme historical expositors, of whom many a student can say, as the Duke of Marlborough did, that they owe more of their knowledge of, and interest in, history to the reading of Shakespeare's plays and Scott's novels than to direct study of the professed historians.

#### *Types that are Real Characters.*

Nobody can say that Squire Western is a less lifelike character because historians appropriately choose him as the type (as he was intended to be) of the rough, ignorant, fox-hunting squire of two centuries. The art of Tobias Smollett is not lessened by its true portraiture of the doddering Duke of Newcastle, long Prime Minister of Britain, or the figures of Commodore Trunnion and Bo'sun Pipes as drawn by the same satirical ex-navy surgeon. Bulwer Lytton's admittedly best fiction, 'My Novel,' gains its merits from its didactic purpose as a view of the 'Varieties of English Life,' as its subtitle declares it to be. The varieties are types, not merely people to whom things happen – not merely 'the sweepings of a Pentonville omnibus,' as Ruskin unflatteringly declared casual collections of ordinary people to be. All this is no mere gratuitous arrogance. In the increasing complexity and difficulty of life, there is so much necessary informative and educative reading to be done that one grudges the time wasted on books that are merely entertaining, since it is possible to have better entertainment along with the serious teaching, as the

writings of Charles Dickens abundantly show. An ignorant and frivolous democracy is at its worst when international danger on an unprecedented scale, and at its best a sad drag upon sound social progress. It is possible to go to the public and circulating libraries for 'best sellers' during a whole lifetime, and yet be as ignorant as dirt on most of the things that really matter.

*The Dickens Spirit Not Out of Date.*

If Dickens can draw types that afford us unique enjoyment, it is a pure extra to the crusading. The crusading itself is not at all out of date – very far from that. There are still people who live idly upon great expectations and unearned incomes. The law still has its delays. Financiers still swindle the public. Honest industry is still despised. The law still musters the corporate force of society to break butterflies on the wheel, and to make the lives of those already miserable more miserable still. People still worship pedigrees and swell with family pride, the pride being always in inverse ratio to the achievements of the ancestry. Dickens was up against the established order at every turn; and it is a tribute to the efficacy of his assault that mere ornamental persons, and not much of that, should find that they cannot read him and that he was not a gentleman.

II.

What makes the style of Charles Dickens so individual and recognisable? Shortly stated, it is surely its academic yet whimsical intensity, is it not? Absurdity set forth in graceful language is irresistible. Even his little boys are under all circumstances polite. David Copperfield taken in by the greedy waiter, and little Pip tilted upside down upon a table tombstone till he sees the church steeple under his feet, never forgot their company manners. Pip addresses as 'Sir,' the terrible convict who threatens him so fiercely and handles him so unceremoniously, and David is abashed in the presence of the cormorant waiter, and answers him with propitiatory courtesy. The contrast of their innocent helplessness, put upon as it is, with the unscrupulousness which abuses it, is enhanced in its pathos by the gentle politeness of the little men. This urbanity is a distinguishing note of Dickens's style.

*Attention.*

Dickens himself attributed the basis of his powers to Attention. He had, much in the manner of his own little Paul Dombey, observed closely and thought long analytical thoughts about everything that interested him. It is claimed for him, on the strength of a statement of his own, that his memory went back to things he had noticed in his cradle. One has heard this statement called in question: but to doubt it seems gratuitous scepticism. It would be interesting to compare notes with individuals as to when their conscious observation or observant consciousness began. Such an inquiry would be quite in keeping with the celebrated investigations into human faculty conducted by Francis Galton.

It would be a pity to spoil such an inquiry by self-complacent exaggeration and there would be a tendency to do that; but, speaking for myself, I have a great many definite recollections of infantile activities, adventures, and speculations that must have begun not later than the age of three. My people removed from the house in which I was born when I was at the age of 4 ½; and I went to school very tearfully and rebelliously just after the removal; but vivid memories of summers, winters, exploits, and day-dreaming ante-date this period by what seem so long a stretch that it does not appear at all to be difficult to believe that so exceptional an observer as Dickens might begin his critical, speculative, analytical stocktaking even in his cradle.

Baldly stated, attention as a recipe for mental achievement may not seem to take us far; but let us not rest satisfied with the bald statement of it; let us see in some detail what it means. The admonition of the French preceptor, *Attendez vous* – pay attention – is the most fruitful good advice that an instructor can give. One of the best technical pupils I have had was the daughter of a poor labourer who sometimes said, ‘Will you do that again, please?’ when she had not quite followed the manual trick of an operation. She seldom needed a third repetition, and the very look of her quiet grey eyes bespoke special attentiveness.

#### *A Hopeful Theory.*

That we may do more or less what we wish to do if we are only sufficiently in earnest to attend to the means of success is obviously a hopeful theory; and the more it is examined the more feasible it does seem. It appears to place achievement within the compass of all who can attain to the moral quality of sincerity, in art as in any other branch of human service. When we use the word ‘genius’ in *ad captandum* fashion as covering something not to be accounted for, something to be set apart as beyond explanation, we may be ignoring or ruling out a whole process of preparation in the mind, studies, and pursuits of a person whom we suppose to have achieved a certain result by some inexplicable *tour de force*, without preparation, and without the concentration which is itself a preparation. It is common to find men who excel in music, poetry, eloquence, painting, or sculpture defective to the extent of disorderliness on the side of business, figures, and general attention to the requisites of personal material prosperity. What does this mean except that the genius is so pre-occupied with his art that he has no thought for the small change of general social commerce?

The artist can reproduce scenes or figures by the closeness with which he observes them. Attempts at drawing reveal in line and perspective the degree of notice which the draughtsman has taken of appearances. As the artist has an attentive eye for appearances, for form and colour, so has the actor for the sound of spoken words, the tone, gesture, and facial expression of the speaker. The musician has a closely-related attention for tune, time, and musical enunciation. But to reproduce form and colour by line and pain, to imitate sounds by other sounds, whether spoken words or notes of music – these are comparatively simple processes as contrasted with the

reproduction of sounds, scenery, speeches, atmosphere by means of the totally different medium of words. Yet this last is what the author does. And as such art at its best is the most difficult of all, a corresponding degree of attentiveness is required for mastery in it.

To say that musical, scenic or verbal artists produce their effects by having given specially close attention to the thing to be produced may not seem much of an explanation. The artist must, of course, feel that the thing to which he gives attention is supremely worthy of his attention, or he may just have a turn that way without having consciously theorised in justification of his state.

### *Genius.*

Genius is the capacity and the will to give attention to trifles, an infinite patience for taking pains, and the more or less conscious belief that the trifles are worth taking pains with. This it is which marks him off from the average man, who is apt to let a job go with 'It will do well enough.' Simple people, savages, and children take the most marvellous work of the human hand and brain as a matter of course. They have little curiosity. Perhaps they despair of being able to understand. Those who know nothing of machinery give it up: in the case of women they have little attention for it. But a boy, and still more a man who already knows something of mechanics, is interested at once, and will try to master the principle of a machine. The man who reads is more or less interested in all books, and will glance over the titles of a row of volumes even if he has no time to look inside them. But the illiterate give books no thought. they are as incapable of giving them attention as the woman is with the machinery for which she has no use. I was surprised to find that a clever teacher, herself something of a draughtswoman, had never noticed that the stones or bricks out of which a wall was composed were not laid exactly on top of one another, but were set so that the middle of one stone fell on top of the joining of the two stones below it, one course thus locking another.

People who tell a joke, but leave out the point of it, simply have not attended to the story properly. People who cannot tell one tune from another, have not listened properly, are perhaps *incapable* of listening properly, to musical sounds. That such people can nevertheless reproduce subtle shades of pronunciation would seem to show that they are not so much destitute of 'ear' as that they do not consider music *worth* listening to. We can note that in which we are interested. Dull men who forget important facts the moment after they have heard or read them can nevertheless remember small sums that are due to them, and men can often give a prolix account of all the minor circumstances in connection with a matter while forgetting the essential features of what happened.

There is ordinary photographic perception, and there is the selective, didactic perception which we call art. Zola takes down everything. Dickens, or any other true artist, selects, transposes, shortens, heightens, and rejects. Zola was a literary photographer; Dickens a literary artist.

### *Laughter-Makers.*

But farcical humour is a thing by itself – one of the rarest human gifts. The comedian is always popular, irrespective of the precise value of his talent, because his talent has what economists call a ‘scarcity value.’ That we take the humourist to our hearts, is because, for every thousand writers who can make us shudder, weep, or just follow a plain tale with mild interest, there is but one who can make us laugh. Mark Twain in America, Dickens and Shaw in England are not merely writers among thousands: there is no arithmetic to express uniqueness.

In many readers and hearers the faculty of laughter is so much a minus quality that unless they are warned beforehand that they are expected to laugh, they fail to do so, in this reminding us of deaf people who laugh too soon or in the wrong place, because they have been told that So-and-so is ‘a funny man.’ The white face and red nose of the clown are part of the warning, a sign that jokes may be expected. A perception of the grotesque is so little to be counted upon with all individuals that if one wishes a jest to be taken it is safest to put the saying in the mouth of a some character, real or invented, with a change of voice to indicate that the remark is intended to amuse. Many worthy people need to know a joker for years ere they realise that his every remark is not to be taken seriously, and one has heard the drollest sayings accepted by those to whom they were addressed as if they were ordinary matters of fact.

Attention to trifles makes the genius: but must one be a genius in order to consider the trifles worth attending to and working out? Often one has heard a laugh raised by the saying of something that had occurred to oneself and probably to others present, but that the joker alone had thought worth giving expression to. Even then, there are trifles that are essential and trifles that are not, and genius is required to distinguish the one from the other. Much of the success of Dickens as a humourist lies in the patience, born of keen personal enjoyment, with which he elaborates an absurdity some features of which had occurred to ourselves, though we had not dwelt on it long enough to get the full flavour of its farcical suggestion. This is not to say that Dickens’s humour has not mostly the charm of the perfectly unexpected.

### *The Charm of the Unexpected.*

The following passage from ‘Great Expectations’ (which happens to be the latest of these novels I have re-read) takes one quite suddenly. It is not introduced by Dickens merely for the sake of fun, but is a necessary part of the narrative. Pip has to hide a portion of his bread for the benefit of the escaped convict, and this is how the humourist turn the necessity to account: -

The effort of resolution necessary to the achievement of this purpose, I found to be quite awful. It was as if I had to make up my mind to leap from the top of a high house, or plunge into a great depth of water. And it was made the more difficult by the unconscious Joe. In our already-mentioned freemasonry as fellow-sufferers, and

in his good-natured companionship with me, it was our evening habit to compare the way we bit through our slices, by silently holding them up to each other's admiration now and then – which stimulated us to new exertions. Tonight Joe several times invited me by the display of his fast-diminishing slice, to enter upon our usual friendly competition; but he found me, each time, with my yellow mug of tea on one knee, and my untouched bread-and-butter on the other. At last I desperately considered that the thing I contemplated must be done, and that it had best be done in the least improbable manner consistent with the circumstances. I took advantage of a moment when Joe had just looked at me, and got my bread-and-butter down my leg.

Joe was evidently made uncomfortable by what he supposed to be my loss of appetite, and took a thoughtful bite out of his slice, which he didn't seem to enjoy. He turned it about in his mouth much longer than usual, pondering over it a good deal, and after all gulped it down like a pill. He was about to take another bite, and had just got his head on one side for a good purchase on it, when his eye fell on me, and he saw that my bread-and-butter was gone.

The wonder and consternation with which Joe stopped on the threshold of his bite and stared at me, were too evident to escape my sister's observation.

'What's the matter now?' said she, smartly, as she put down her cup.

'I say, you know!' muttered Joe, shaking his head at me in a very serious remonstrance. 'Pip, old chap! You'll do yourself a mischief. It'll stick somewhere. You can't have chewed it, Pip.'

'What's the matter now?' repeated my sister, more sharply than before.

'If you can cough any trifle on it up, Pip, I'd recommend you to do it,' said Joe, all aghast. 'Manners is manners, but still your 'elth's your 'elth.'

By this time my sister was quite desperate so she pounced on Joe, and, taking him by the two whiskers, knocked his head for a little while against the wall behind him; while I sat in the corner, looking guiltily on.

'Now perhaps you'll mention what's the matter,' said my sister, out of breath, 'you staring great stuck pig.'

Joe looked at her in a helpless way; then took a helpless bite, and looked at me again. 'You know Pip,' said Joe, solemnly, with his last bite in his cheek, and speaking in a confidential voice, as if we two were quite alone, 'you and me is always friends, and I'd be the last one to tell upon you, any time. But such a' – he moved his chair, and looked about the floor between us and then again at me – 'such an uncommon bolt as that!'

'Been bolting his food, has he?' cried my sister.

‘You know old chap,’ said Joe, looking at me, and not at Mrs Joe, with his bite still in his cheek, ‘I Bolted, myself, when I was your age – frequent – and as a boy I’ve been among many a Bolter; but I never see your bolting equal yet, Pip, and it’s a mercy you ain’t Bolted dead.’

My sister made a dive at me, and fished me up by the hair; saying nothing more than the awful words, ‘You come along and be dosed.’

Some medical beast has revived Tar-water in those days as a fine medicine, and Mrs Joe always kept a supply of it in the cupboard; having a belief in its virtues correspondent to its nastiness. At the best of times, so much of this elixir was administered to me as a choice restorative, that I was conscious of going about, smelling like a new fence. On this particular evening, the urgency of my case demanded a pint of this mixture, which was poured down my throat, for my greater comfort, while Mrs Joe held my head under her arm, as a boot would be held in a boot-jack. Joe got off with half-a-pint; but was made to swallow that (much to his disturbance, as he sat slowly munching and meditating before the fire), ‘because he had had a turn.’ Judging from myself, I should say he certainly had a turn afterwards, if he had none before.

It was no wonder if Mrs Gargery was exasperated at her husband; and Pip had a grievance against him too.

If we speak of the charm of the unexpected, what could be less expected than the suggestion in the conclusion of this passage?

‘You look very well, Mr Barkiss,’ I said, thinking he would like to know it. Mr Barkiss rubbed his cheek with his cuff, and then looked at his cuff as if he expected to find some of the bloom upon it.

There is a remark that lingers in my mind from the first boyish reading of ‘Nicholas Nickelby’: these things will never hit us again with the original laughter-raising impact. Round the area door of Arthur Gride, notorious miser, there gathers the human flotsam of a city street, attracted by loud knocking to which there is no response. Some held that old Gride’s housekeeper had fallen asleep, some that she had burnt herself to death, some that she had got drunk. The atmosphere would be ominous of tragedy except that the life of the street relieves the gloom. At any rate, tragedy is effectually turned to comedy when a very fat man in the little crowd suggests that Peg Sliderskew, the miser’s old housekeeper, has seen something to eat, which has frightened here so much (not being used to it) that she has fallen into a fit!

#### *A General Characteristic.*

Dickens’s style is not simple. It is, for one thing, a Latinised style. We could not fancy him writing ‘cheap’ – he writes ‘inexpensive.’ When the ironmaster is announced to Sir Leicester Deadlock he asks that ‘the ferruginous gentleman’ be shown in. Mr Pumblechook’s shop is described as ‘peppercorny and farinaceous.’ The humorous

effect is heightened by some of these rather stately locutions. Thus Joe Gargery's reference to a certain sum as 'a cool four thousand,' gives rise to the comment : - 'I never discovered from whom Joe derived the conventional temperature of the four thousand pounds, but it appeared to make the sum of money more to him, and he had a manifest relish in insisting on its being cool.'

The slight stateliness there – and it is but slight - was inseparable from the thought, and these reflective interludes, which are frequent in Dickens's books, are the more effective when they follow the broad illiterate speech of humble characters out of whom the novelist secures his best comic effects.

In this banter about the transferred epithet 'cool' as applied to money he reminds us of how he makes Mr Dick puncture a similar expression about there being no room to swing a cat in his apartment. 'But I don't want to swing a cat,' says Mr Dick, with the wisdom of folly, which refuses to accept more or less inappropriate tags which pass current with the more sophisticated. 'How old would you be?' asked the lady. And the half-wit answered: 'It's not how old I would be, but how old am I?' Perhaps someone will yet give a really effective flick to such overworked *clichés* as 'exploring every avenue' and 'leaving no stone unturned.'

These whimsical analyses belong to a leisurely style which has gone out. The old-fashioned novel was much longer than the stories of today. There was more writing up, and less concern for getting ahead with the story. The fairly long-drawn preliminaries of 'David Copperfield,' in which the caul with which he was born, and the views of the old lady who bought it for five shillings, of which she was twopence-halfpenny short, are given at length, probably represented rhetorical sparring for an opening; though there, as always with Dickens, the rhetoric is not wasted, but sparkles and coruscates and gets charmingly and definitely somewhere. William de Morgan is the only latter-day writer of fiction who gambles with his pen in the same leisurely and sportive way.

Even in the relatively short 'Christmas Carol' Dickens opens with a characteristic whimsical aside:

Old Marley was dead as a door-nail. Mind! I don't mean to say that I know of my own knowledge what there is particularly dead about a door-nail. I might have been inclined, myself, to regard a coffin-nail as the deadest piece of ironmongery in the trade. But the wisdom of our ancestors is in the simile, and my unhallowed hands shall not disturb it... You will therefore permit me to repeat emphatically that Marley was as dead as a door-nail.

### *The Rhetoric of High Spirits.*

Besides illustrating his turn for whimsical reflective asides, the passage is also an example of that quickness of observation which lets nothing be taken for granted or held as read. In its continuation it also reflects that rhetoric of high spirits which is one of the chief marks of Dickens's style.



Scrooge knew he was dead. Of course he did. How could it be otherwise? Scrooge and he were partners for I don't know how many years. Scrooge was his sole executor, his sole administrator, his sole residuary legatee, his sole friend and mourner.

This is the garrulous circumstantiality of one who is happy at his desk, who thoroughly enjoyed playing verbally with his theme. He is in no hurry to get on with the story. The preparation, the creation of the atmosphere, had to be complete.

The mention of Marley's funeral brings me back to the point I started from. There is no doubt that Marley was dead. This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come from the story I am going to relate. If we were not perfectly convinced that Hamlet's father died before the play began, there would be nothing more remarkable in his taking a stroll at night, in an easterly wind, upon his own ramparts, than there would be in any other middle-aged gentleman rashly turning out after dark in a breezy spot – say Saint Paul's Churchyard for instance – literally to astonish his son's weak mind.

The best styles are always Latinised, if regard be had, not merely to the music of language, but still more to its content. The English Bible is not at all Latin in style, and it is very beautiful, but not at all subtle. The Biblical writers did not argue, did not discuss. They announced. Shakespeare as a stylist is beautifully balanced and copious, and still, after fourscore years, the most delightfully humorous writer in English, both in sudden suggestion and sustained comic analysis. This would hardly seem worth mentioning if so many people did not find that they 'can't read him.'

### *Personifying the Impersonal.*

He has this in common with Shakespeare, that he is much given to personifying the impersonal. Indeed, he carries this further than the dramatist did. When Shakespeare makes the reeds 'lackey the dull stream' he is giving a human attribute to the mere rushes. But he does it in one word. Whereas Dickens resorts to personification of things more freely than Shakespeare does, and he stretches the personification to greater lengths. Thus of a dirty newspaper he says 'It had taken the measles in a highly irregular form.' And he says: 'Occasionally the smoke came rolling down the chimney as though it could not bear to go out on such a cold night.' And again; 'The day came creeping on, halting and whimpering and shivering, and wrapped in patches of cloud and rags of mist like a beggar.'

These examples are taken more or less at random from the nearest novel to hand. They will at once be recognised as examples of Dickens's habitual trick, sometimes pursued at great length and with powerful imaginative ingenuity, of giving human attributes to insensate things. It is this breaking into sudden passionate soliloquy that caused Dickens to be classed as of the 'spasmodic' school. It is quite likely that matter-of-fact, donnish people will not follow him in fanciful speculations say over a dull and gusty morning. But such fancies are in the true line of imaginative writing if

we are to accept as exemplars the Psalmist who makes the mountains dance, and the Dramatist who causes the sun to 'flatter the mountain-tops with sovereign eye,' and that later poet who figured the torrents of Mont Blanc as 'fiercely glad.' These devices of personification are with Dickens dramatic pauses which immensely enhance the effectiveness of the situation that follows.

### *The Names in the Novels*

One great open secret of the classic stamp which is upon these fictions lies in the author's happy choice of unforgettable names, both for places and for characters. We learn from Forster's 'Life' – what we might have divined from experience of the range and peculiarity of actual English names – that the nomenclature in Dickens, when it was not obviously coined, as in Do-the-boys Hall, was taken down from signboards, nameplates, newspaper reports, and the everyday hearing of the ear.

To Scotsmen, Welshmen, or Irishmen who have never lived away from their own country, the Dickens names often appear incredibly absurd. There are ugly names in the Celtic lands – McCulloch, MacFadyen, MacGurk, Auchinachie are not exactly verbal poems – but at least the Celtic names have a meaning: *Mac* is 'the son of,' and *auch* is 'a field.' But some English names would appear to have been affixed for their absurdity. No name is too grotesque, too jeering, to gross, or too ugly to be an actual name carried through life by some unfortunate English man or woman who must repeat it to strangers, be addressed by it in speech or writing, or hear it announced at a great public assembly. What are we to think of Hogben, Quirk, Titterington, Coffin, Bugg, Ragg, and Juggins? Passing along Chester Road, Manchester, one day with Robert Blatchford and William Palmer the artist, we sighted a brass plate bearing the legend: 'Tipper, Contractor.' My companions smiled when I called attention to its appropriateness; but they had evidently seen without thinking of it before. A little later, in Stretford Road, we came upon the name 'Godbehere' over a Bible shop, and again it was the northern newcomer who was struck with the oddity rather than the English journalist and the English artist who passed the shop regularly.

When in Dickens's page we light upon place names like Chinks's Basin, Millpond Bank, and the Old Green Copper Ropewalk we may be sure that the great writer has seen these names and joyfully jotted them down for use. They were almost certainly real names. In Hull to this day there is a Bowlalley Lane and a Land of Green Ginger.

The surnames in these novels are forever identified with typical human characteristics as adjectives and substantives. Coined names like Gradgrind and Bounderby carry their meaning in their face; but names less indicative of personal characteristics have nevertheless become generically descriptive. The groveller is Uriah Heep; the whole tribe of cracksmen are Bill Sikes; Sarah Gamp's surname has provided a short synonym for umbrellas that have now little in common with the plethoric *paraplui* she carried; Chadband and Stiggins stand for the class of

theologians - now mostly extinct, one would say - whose unction was in inverse ratio to their sincerity.

### *Pairs*

The names seem to go in pairs, because they are chosen upon a principle, and we link them so much with pleasure in the mere enumeration. There is Jarley and Marley, and Lillyvick and Linkinwater. There are Podsnap and Snodgrass, Peg Sliderskew and Poll Sweedlepipe. We bracket Joe Gargery who had 'sich larks' with Barkiss who 'was willin.' When we think of two hard, hermit-like old hunks we couple Scrooge who was hard bitten by habit rather than nature with the diabolical Quilp who rioted in badness. If we think of lawyers it is impossible to remember Spenlow & Jorkins without recalling Dodson & Fogg. There are names that suggest the qualities of the characters who bear them, as they were, of course, intended to do – the Brothers Cheeryble as optimists, Murdstone, the hard man whose name is suggested by grindstone; Miss Flyte, whose estate took flight in litigation; Serjeant Buzfuz who was indeed all fuss and buzz; Trotty Veck, Silas Wegg, Newman Noggs, Mark Tapley (the very name for a man from a public house) ; Mrs Pipchin (what a name!) and Mrs Gummidge , who grumbled so long and then turned out a trump. What a galaxy of memories they call up, and how they have served the world with catchwords and similes, from Wilkins Micawber's 'Waiting for something to turn up,' and Captain Cuttle's 'When found make a note of,' to the proverbs and metaphors of the Wellers, father and son.

To many a million the England of Charles Dickens and his people is the only England there is; and when we read that Germans in the trenches read the novels of Dickens in greater numbers than did our own Tommies, it seemed no wonder that they should have been so ready to fraternise with us at the first Christmas of the Great War, or that afterwards they should have mutinied against fighting the compatriots of an author in whose hands English humanity appears, on the whole, in such a delightful guise.

Well, we may say that the foundation of Dickens's style was the close attention with which he observed, the intense feeling with which he wrote, and the happy patience with which he unfolded the humours of character in humble individuals with whom both the queerest freakishnesses and the greatest tenderness are oftenest to be found. One thinks of all the art expended on the Aged Parent, deaf and past work, yet affectionately cherished and humoured by his son, who in the city was the hardest of legal nuts. But the secret of Dickens's humour and wit and kindness is beyond us. The combination has a *moral* as well as an intellectual basis. Like Shakespeare, Dickens must have been a great lover of his fellow men.

### *Exaggeration.*

It is often argued that Dickens was greatly given to exaggeration. For anyone who read the daily marvels of the press and keeps an open eye for the marvels of ordinary

life it would be hard to say that the greatest wonders of the mere novelist *can* be exaggerated. One has met queerer people in life than any novelist dared to put in his books. There are many things that are impossible, but hardly any that are improbable.

All fictitious presentation of character has by its concentration necessarily the effect of exaggeration. To set down actual occurrences and speeches in the order of their occurrence, with all the inconsequent, insignificant things said and done in between the events and conversations that are of moment, would not be worth while. The artist must exclude the unessential in word and act. We all have friends and acquaintances who do and say, at intervals, things which we call characteristic. But during most of the time their words and acts are quite ordinary, and of no literary significance. In plays or novels, however, characters must always speak in character, and acts must have dramatic significance. This means that the ordinary must be excluded, and thus exaggeration becomes inevitable. A play or novel, thus, cannot be natural. They can only approximate to nature. It is enough that Dickens in his exaggeration can always carry us along with him. The story marches as a story, and the oddity of the characters, their odd names, their odd surroundings, their unusual experiences, and the didactic (teaching) significance of the whole tale, give it its value, in Dickens's case a supreme value.

### *The Open-Eyed Sociologist.*

The sociologist in Dickens never sleeps. He cannot take Pip to Mr Pumblechook's shop without giving a picture of the whole High Street which is of vast economic significance:

Mr Pumblechook appeared to conduct his business by looking across the street at the saddler, who appeared to transact *his* business by keeping his eye on the coachmaker, who appeared to get on in life by putting his hands in his pockets and contemplating the baker, who in his turn folded his arms and stared at the grocer, who stood at his door and yawned at the chemist. The watchmaker, always peering over a little desk with a magnifying glass at his eye, and always inspected by a group in smock-frocks poring over him through the glass of his shop-window, seemed to be about the only person in the High Street whose trade engaged his attention.

That is competitive commerce – the small market town of wasteful hops and idle shopmen, with only one busy craftsman in the street.

As to sentiment, Dickens was one of the earliest of early Victorians; and while his fund is as fresh as ever, the pathos, say, of Little Nell and the old man is tiring. But with all his sentiment, he was ahead of his age, even ahead of the present age, in his socioeconomic shrewdness. It is still the fashion to sympathise with the money-lender's victims, and judges gain cheap popularity by denouncing the money-lender. The dishonesty of borrowers who do not mean to pay, and of idle extravagant people who live well upon credit, taking goods they have no intention of paying – of this we

hear only as a joke, though it is no joke to billed tradesmen and to the honest folk who are charged to make good the losses incurred with the bilkers. On this Dickens eighty years ago was more sound than all the judges who give all their sympathy to the plunging borrower and their scorn to the men who risk their money in the most desperate of all ventures, spending their lives in coping with conscienceless impecuniosity. He makes Arthur Gride in 'Nicholas Nickleby') soliloquise:

Ten thousand pounds! How many proud printed dames would have fawned and smiled, and how many spendthrift blockheads done me lip-service to my face and cursed me in their hearts, while I turned that ten thousand pounds into twenty! While I ground and pinched and used these needy borrowers for my pleasure and profit, what smooth-tongued speeches and courteous looks and civil letters would have given me! The cant of the lying world is, that men like me compass our riches by dissimulation and treachery; by fawning, cringing and stooping. Why, how many lies, what mean evasions, what humbled behaviour from upstarts who, but for my money, would spurn me aside as they do their betters every day, would that ten thousand pounds have brought me in! Grant that I had doubled it – made cent. per cent. – for every sovereign told another – there would not be one piece in all the heap which wouldn't represent ten thousand man and paltry lies, told, not by the money-lender, oh, no, but by the money- borrowers, your liberal, thoughtless, generous, dashing folks, who wouldn't be so mean as to save a sixpence for the world.

That is not only good sense, but good drama. The money-lender is made to speak just as a money-lender would speak. It is the essence of drama to be able to put yourself in the place even of characters with whose sorry trade (as in this case) you have no sympathy.

#### *A Parable.*

I have quoted extensively from 'Great Expectations,' not only because of its 'artistic' merits as a tale, but because it seems to embody its author's latest, wisest attitude to life. In its conclusion, Pip, who has lived upon the ex-convict's bounty without knowing the source of his unearned income, from the moment the coarse but affectionate man turns up, revolts against accepting another penny of his money.

The money has been lawfully earned abroad: it is the human channel through which it comes that Pip cannot abide.

How many men and women of today would jib at the fortune that came through such hands? It is such men as Magwitch, coarse in speech, in feature, hands, and habit, who make most of the world's wealth. Are we to believe that because the rents and dividends of the idle well-to-do come through the hands of lawyer or stockbroker the dependence of the well-groomed, well-schooled, travelled, expensively-turned-out people is any less dishonourable?

If the upshot of Dickens's tale counts for anything it is that every man and woman who does not work for a living is in precisely the same degrading position which Pip

found so dishonourable when his patron turned up in person. Pip would not have the course Colonial's money. He and his friend Herbert Pocket alike declared the idea intolerable. Is it tolerable for the well-to-do generally to live upon the labour and earnings of just such men, multiplied manifold, but keeping themselves mostly out of sight?

The miner, the navvy, the slaves of the stokehold, the bloated men of the brewery, the anaemic factory hands, the wretched beings from soapworks and chemical works, one of whom declared to an R.A.M.C friend that the life in the trenches was a holiday by comparison with his ordinary occupation in civil life – these are, *mutatis mutandis*, men very like Abel Magwitch, gnarled hands, bristling hair, sidelong doglike chewing, rude speech and all. But it is from these conscripts of toil that the idle shareholder draws his (or her) dividends. The shareholder cannot help it, it may be said. But he could help to change entirely the system of production and of life. As it is he votes and subscribes to prevent the system being altered.

Dickens does not thus drive home the general social significance of his story; but he must not only have known that it had no other significance, but intended it to carry that significance. Morally the whole story points to that.

Nay, it must be because his well-to-do readers have seen such teaching running through a great part of his work that they discover he was 'not a gentleman.'

If to be a 'nice' man, falling in with the tastes and outlook of the masters rather than the serfs, be the test, then Dickens certainly was not a gentleman. The point need not be laboured. To many of us it will be in such ways, for such teaching, that the real *noblesse oblige* of Charles Dickens – himself a hard worker all his life – most truly emerges.

### *Conclusion.*

Thus we come back to the point from which we set out – the social purpose of these tales.

The large industrious class of pointless writers of fiction are annoyed that we should look for any such. 'The business of the novelist' says one of them, is to tell a plain tale in which his characters should be left to express themselves in action.' So that the tale is to be plain as well as meaningless.

Why a plain tale? We used to say 'a penny plain, tuppence coloured,' the colours evidently doubling the value. We can get plain tales from the newspapers; but the significance of them is not shown, and the simple reader often finds them meaningless on the 'plain' presented elements. The Singh-Robinson case, or any *cause célèbre* of the hour, is much more novel than any novel; but who shall say that the full significance of these plain tales is realised? For the rest, it is desirable that the characters who 'express themselves in [recorded] action' should be worth expressing. So many characters are not.

Yet another best-seller says: 'The novelist should before everything else be an entertainer, a teller of tales.' The implication of this is that worth-while characters, great events, and spirited narrative are not entertaining. This is not only hard on the historian and the biographer, but it is hard on the novelists who have had a purpose to serve as well as an entertaining story to tell – Dickens, for one, among many.

The author of a particularly sordid story of the East End of London says: 'All this high falutin' chatter about ideals! A playwright's and a missionary's calling appear to me to be two distinct and separate callings which should not be permitted to overlap. The one aim of a novelist or dramatist is to amuse.' Poor Shakespeare, the moralist and poet! Poor Shaw, the missionary! Poor Dickens, poor George Eliot, poor Charles Reade, poor Victor Hugo, poor Bellamy, poor Wells, hopeless high falutin' chattering idealists all, but also, somehow, great entertainers. Why did you not confine your attention to ladies of the type of 'Liza of Lambeth,' instead of introducing us to Desdemona, Lady Macbeth, Imogen, Constance, Catherine Eliassoen and Joan of Arc?

A lady novelist, whose interest lies in making out that Shakespeare and Dickens are back numbers, in reviewing the book of a brother-in-trade, says;

The philosophy of any novel is negligible; what matters in it is style, atmosphere, imagination, the drama of events or of emotion, and character presentment. 'These Barren Leaves' is restful, refreshing, and entertaining. You feel at the end of it that you have been paying a leisurely visit to a gossiping and amusing house party, no more unintelligent or tiresome, though a good deal more affectionate, than the average set of people in real life.

Do you want to read about 'an average set of people in real life?' Why should you? Is it not better to keep the very best company that you can? Average talk is neither wise nor interesting. Average people are very much opposed to learning anything, and mostly they are appallingly ignorant, even of the business out of which they make a living. This 'average set of people,' are the company at a country house. One has sat hour after hour in the smokeroom of a country house in the company of politicians, proconsuls, physicians, authors and divines, and their conversation ranged over topics the bare mention of which would raise a smile from 'an average set of people.' But their conversation was intensely absorbing, informative, and so stimulating that it impressed one afresh with a sense of one's own limitations, and raised still higher the studious ambition. In addition to that, it was witty and entertaining as the talk of average people never is. Greville of the 'Memoirs' was a horsey man, keeping the company, often, of jockeys and stableboys. But he was, by virtue of his birth and family influence, Clerk to the Privy Council. He often met in company Macaulay, Sydney Smith, Lord Holland, Lord Melbourne, and the Duke of Wellington. After such a meeting he would enter in his journal remorseful lamentations over time mis-spent with average people, and make good resolutions for the future; and he was on the less wise because these resolutions were not kept.

The best company should be good enough for anyone. If we cannot keep it in person we can do so in literature – the best man in a thousand years are better in their books than ever they were in personal contact. It is not arrogance or superior personism to want to associate with grown-up people. The average person has not quite grown up. The C3 people wallowing in gossip about the football or the billiards which they do play, and the sporting chances of politicians in whose politics they take no interest, are spectators at a show of whose antecedents, meaning, and possible course they have no idea. Why make books about the Grey Mass when there are outstanding people, events and things to write up?

If we wish occasionally to read novels as a dissipated alternative and alternative to books about real people who matter, important events that did happen or are happening now, or the science and the story of the world and the universe in which we live, the masters of fiction are good enough; and the test of their quality is the extent to which they have used their tales, not merely for amusement, but in order to shed real light on the life of man the struggler, still so imperfectly known to us. Regarded as entertainers, it is not to the journeymen of the craft that these masters of craft will take a back seat.

*Addendum to the Second Edition.*

As criticism of the foregoing, it is said that the crusades of the didactic writers will destroy the value of their fictions when the propaganda has done its turn and the evils are exposed no more. But ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin,’ is still a great seller *because* it is the most graphic exposure of the many evils of chattel slavery. ‘Don Quixote’ is not out of date because it satirises the absurdities of medieval chivalry. The grosser evils of the factory system have been removed, but ‘Mary Barton’ is still a classic because it illustrates them in detail; it has had a lease of life not extended to Mrs Gaskell’s less didactic novels, beating even the exquisite semi-autobiographical ‘Cranford’ which is the Cheshire home of her youth, Knutsford. The Bronte stories have always a serious background, probably all unnoted by the careless reader – the Napoleonic wars, high prices, and the Luddite firing of factories and smashing of machinery. Sir Walter Scott is not a back number because his tales have usually a purposeful historic setting: it is the non-historic ones such as ‘St Ronan’s Well,’ that are less successful. Thackeray’s ‘Esmond,’ and ‘The Virginians’ are among his more enduring writings because they revive the atmosphere of an age that is ‘dead’ only to those whose lack of imagination leaves them uninterested in history, which with Mr Henry Ford, they probably find to be ‘all bunk.’

To the thoughtless, ‘didactic’ means ‘of the nature of copybook maxims.’ Be it said in passing, the crystallised wisdom of the copybook maxim is better gear than ‘the clink of teaspoons and the accents of the curate,’ and much better than the full, true, and particular account of the dawn of Lady Ermytrude’s passion for the chauffeur. Didactic means teaching, and now that fiction has become the only reading of the largest class of those who look at a book at all, it is more than ever necessary that it should be informed with purposes. ‘The Jungle,’ ‘King Coal,’ ‘The Brass Cheek,’



‘Looking Backwards,’ ‘Elmer Gantry,’ among the more modern American novels with a purpose –aren’t they all good enough tales as such? Of didactic the greatest entertainer of the time has written in the preface to ‘Man and Superman’: ‘When he declares that art should not be didactic, all the people who have nothing to teach and all the people who do not want to learn agree with him emphatically.’

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