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The Dual Purpose of the Dickens Novels

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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 gentlehood 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 Chuzzlewhit,' hits off Yankee vulgarity and embalms to immortality Mrs Gamp, the private-enterprise nurse, with her snuff-taking and tippling irresponsibility, and Pecksniff the pharisaicial 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-Alone 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 Cirumlocution 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.

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