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Dickens part two (of three)

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 enhance 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 an 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 if 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 to 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 humourous 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.