DICKENS: AN ESSAY IN CHRISTIAN EVALUATION

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IT is just over half a century since G. K. Chesterton warned his readers not to insist too urgently on the splendours of Dickens's last works lest it should be discovered that they were not true admirers of the novelist. Chesterton celebrated the Dickens of the stage-coach and the spirit of Merry Christmas and charity: that aspect of the novelist which Mr Walter Allen has termed the jolly Dickens, Dickens in fairyland. It is not surprising that he had but faint praise for the later, darker novels. Most recent critics of the novelist, however, have tended to direct their attention chiefly to the later works and to occupy themselves with the task of elucidating and illuminating what is sometimes spoken of as his powerful and impressive rendering of evil and, by contrast, the weakness of his portrayal of goodness.

This contrast, and the problem it poses for the critical reader, is strikingly apparent at the very beginning of Dicken's career. In the early novel *Oliver Twist* it is the vision of the underworld, the world of the workhouse and Fagin's lair that most of us remember. The world of the Brownlows and the Maylies fails to grip the imagination. Probably the least thoughtful and least satisfactory way of elucidating this weakness is to suggest simply that what we are confronted with here are characters who fail to impress because they are too good to be true. This explanation appears to be irrepressible; it is capable of appearing, usually in the form of a brief aside, even in the work of critics who have in fact much more carefully considered explanations to offer. It is so obvious that Dickens does create characters who are, in one sense, too good to be true (too benevolent, for example, to be real people) that it is easy to overlook the fact that this is no explanation of their weakness unless one accepts naturalism as the criterion of good art. And this is something which students of Dickens will, on the whole, hardly wish to do. Critics from the first, with their talk of caricatures, 'humours' and exaggeration, have recognized in Dickens a creative artist who transforms and transfigures his materials, achieving his effects by methods which preclude the possibility of producing the illusion of what is loosely called reality. Indeed, it is interesting to note how many of the devices which Dickens employs to heighten and intensify his descriptions of what is intended to make us recoil in horror are relied on just as heavily in his portraits of what we are expected to admire. Wherever one looks in Dickens, and whether he is writing within or outside what is sometimes spoken of as his range, one finds the same verbal devices employed. In *Oliver Twist*, for example, one observes everywhere the dependence on metaphor and simile (Fagin is a devil, and on the whole, effectively loathsome, Rose Maylie is an angel and insipid); the use of repetition and superlatives (the approach to Jacob's island lies through the dirtiest, the blackest, the filthiest, the strangest of localities and is memorable, the Maylies' generosity is the purest and most amiable and Oliver's gratitude the truest and warmest, and these are uninspiring). This not only undermines the suggestion that Dickens's weakness can be accounted for in terms of a lack of 'realism', it also casts some doubt on two other attempts to elucidate his failings, each of which suggests that the weakness occurs when the author's imagination is not able to function.

Mr A. O. J. Cockshut has recently argued[1] that Dickens's painful description of deaths such as Little Nell's is the result of an evasion of a clash between desires and principles. Dickens, he says, having a naturally morbid nature, wished to enjoy the spectacle; desperately anxious, however, to be respectable, he evaded his own enjoyment, with the result that he avoided the physical detail which was the proper food of his imagination and was reduced to employing high-sounding, vague adjectives and phrases—gentle, noble, profound repose, perfect happiness. Now Dickens's love of physical detail is undeniable, but it is misleading I think to suggest that the presence or absence of such detail is the key to an understanding of Dickens's strength or weakness. On the contrary, I believe that the vivid and memorable description of which Dickens is capable is achieved, as I have suggested, to an appreciable extent by the use of exactly the same kind of verbal devices as appear in many of his least effective passages. If this is the case, Dickens's weakness must be explained in some other way than by saying that it occurs when the novelist, fettering his imagination, has abandoned the descriptive devices which allow it expression.

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[1] See 'Sentimentality in Fiction', an article by A. O. J. Cockshut in *The Twentieth Century*, April 1957.

A similar objection can be lodged against a more popular theory, one which seeks to illuminate the weakness by reference to the author's childhood. The effect which an unhappy childhood had on Dickens's work was not much disputed even before Mr Edmund Wilson's influential essay *The Two Scrooges*, which took Dickens's childhood experiences as its starting point. It is difficult to read much writing about Dickens without encountering the suggestion that the brief but humiliating months in the blacking factory were decisive for his art. In later life, it has been argued, his imagination was stimulated by what he had experienced at the age when he was, as Lord David Cecil has said, most susceptible to impression. Hence the nightmare intensity with which he described fear, insecurity, cruelty and persecution. This was his range; these were the aspects of experience which stimulated the exaggerated and heightened descriptions which are characteristic of his art and a sign that his imagination is at work. But as has been noticed, the devices designed to heighten and intensify his subject appear not only in Dickens's most effective passages but also in those places where he is feeble and uninspiring. This is not sufficient of course to dispose of the theory that Dickens's own imagination, because of experiences peculiar to the novelist, was not fired by certain subjects which he chose to deal with at some length. Merely to use a literary device is not necessarily to use it well, and no sign that the imagination has been stimulated. It would be possible to argue that in his attempts to render characters whose motives and behaviour he intended us to admire, Dickens was merely going through the motions of using devices which, when he portrayed what was intended to horrify us, he used imaginatively and effectively. Nevertheless, the mere presence of the same stylistic techniques wherever one looks in Dickens is sufficient reason to pause and consider whether the weakness in his work is not an abstractable 'aesthetic' weakness, a failure of the artist's imagination to function given certain subjects, but a weakness, a limitation in the man's vision of life. The weakness, that is to say, may be rooted not in the fact that certain aspects of experience did not stimulate him, but that there were important aspects of experience which were entirely beyond Dickens's ken.

It is to this conclusion that Mr Graham Greene's essay on *Oliver Twist*[2] leads us, before deflecting us from the truth about Dickens with its conclusion that he revealed, without realizing it, the taint of the Manichee; that he was unable to believe in his own good characters and possessed of the belief that the world was made by Satan and not God. Mr Greene cannot believe, any more than the adherents of the other theories mentioned, that Dickens's imagination was stimulated by what does not, in his work, stimulate ours. His conclusion is likely to reduce the essay for most people to an interesting but essentially bizarre contribution to the understanding of Dickens, but when Mr Greene speaks of the Dickens world as a world without God, of goodness wilting into philanthropy and of the substitution of a few sentimental references to heaven for the power and the glory of the omnipotent and omniscient, he exposes unerringly the true source of Dickens's weakness.

It is not that in reality no one was ever so benevolent as Dickens's 'good' characters are; it is not that disagreeable qualities always exist in real people together with the pleasant. True though this may be, it is not the source of Dickens's inadequacy. The inadequacy has its roots in the fact that characters of the Pickwick-Brownlow-Cheeryble type embody not goodness but benevolence or philanthropy and that Dickens has nothing more than this to offer us in the way of ultimate values. Goodness in Dickens has been reduced to the exclusion of the more obviously disagreeable human qualities and the intensification of the more obviously agreeable ones. And if we find the result feeble it is not because Mr Brownlow is too good to be a real person but because goodness cannot, for us, be reduced in this way. A scrutiny of the Dickensian Christmas reveals the same flaw. As Mr Humphrey House pointed out in *The Dickens World*,[3] the Christmas spirit which pervades so much of Dickens's work represents an attempt to hold up benevolence as an ideal. Mr House's comment on this was that it may well be possible to achieve the ideal during the two or three days at Christmas when the love and festivities last, but that this is an interlude and it is difficult to see how the spirit of generosity is to be prolonged throughout the year. Implicit here is the usual criticism—Dickens's ideal is 'too good to be true', impossible to attain. It would be more to the point to enquire whether, even if the ideal were achieved, it would be satisfying. Have we, in envisaging a life of never-dying generosity, exhausted our notion of the good life? When we turn to George Orwell's analysis of what Dickens considered to be the most desirable way of life[4] we discover again that if Dickens's ideal fails to seize our imaginations, it is not because it is too good to be true but because it is not exalted enough to be good. What, after their adventures and tribulations are over, do Dickens's heroes and heroines do? The answer, as Orwell pointed out, is that they do nothing and that most of the novels end in a sort of radiant idleness. Orwell called it an empty dream and suggested that we should expect nothing more from Dickens, living when he did. An empty dream—it is the adjective not the noun which is important here. What is wrong with the ideal of what was called 'genteel sufficiency' is not that it is a dream, impossible for all to attain, but that it is empty, devoid of meaning and purpose.

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[2] 'The Young Dickens', first printed by Messrs Hamish Hamilton as an introduction to *Oliver Twist* and reprinted in *The Lost Childhood and other essays*, by Graham Greene (London, 1951).

[3] *The Dickens World*, by Humphrey House (Oxford University Press, 2nd edition, 1942), pages 53-54.

It was a failure to recognize what Orwell so clearly saw—Dickens's affinities with his age—that led Mr Greene to his interpretation of the novelist. Mr Greene could not believe in the Dickensian version of goodness and of the good life and he paid Dickens the tribute of suggesting that the novelist couldn't either. Like many other critics, though in a more unusual way, he subscribes to the belief that those characters in whom goodness has in fact wilted into philanthropy did not engage Dickens's imagination any more than they do ours. I have suggested that there are reasons at the merely linguistic level for doubting this. However, even if this be considered erroneous, it seems difficult to escape the conclusion that Dickens belongs firmly to his age and that the limited vision which he shared with many in his day is the root of his weakness. The fact to which his experience never led him was that even if our hearts were enlarged sixfold, like Mr Brownlow's, and that even if the more obvious disagreeables were eliminated from human society, there would still be an *absolute* to which Man can never attain. This is something which it is easier perhaps to receive from religion than to discover for oneself, and Dickens lived at a time when it was easier to be deprived of than to receive the admonitions and consolations of religion. He belongs, as Mr House's invaluable chapter on religion[5] makes clear, to the age of Humanism and Humanitarianism. It is no coincidence that it was, too, the age of utopias. It is not widely enough recognized that the weakness of a utopia is not usually that it is 'too good to be true', *impossible to attain*, but—as in Dickens's case—that it is all too human to be good. Dickens belongs to the age of progress and optimism. A certain re-arrangement of the physical environment, a liberation of our deepest instincts and, so it was argued, the golden age would dawn. The rejection of the concept of fallen humanity is nowhere more obviously implicit than in the description of Nancy with which the fortieth chapter of *Oliver Twist* opens:

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[4] 'Charles Dickens', an essay in *Inside the Whale and Other Essays*, by George Orwell (London, 1940).

> 'The girl's life had been squandered in the streets, and among the most noisome of the stews and dens of London, but there was something of the woman's original nature left in her still. . . .'

This is the doctrine of original sweetness and light. Its adherents are frequently strong in their protests against inhumanity; they believe that Man, armed with a protest and a programme, can eliminate imperfection. Their weakness lies in the fact that their concept of the good is a merely human one. This is the key to an understanding of the strength and weakness of Dickens. The man who could express with passion and artistry the inhuman and sterile view of life of a Gradgrind was unable to recognize what it is that alone gives meaning and value to human life. Implicit in what is most memorable in *Oliver Twist*—the imaginative descriptions of the workhouse, the slums, Fagin's lair—is Dickens's human protest against the oppression and malignity at which we too rebel. But when the humanitarian in him turns from protest at the absence of human benevolence and kindliness and seeks to elevate these qualities into ultimate values, his work palls. When he portrays the good life, he can offer only the unsatisfying dream of which Orwell spoke; unsatisfying not because it left Dickens unsatisfied and prevented him from employing the techniques which elsewhere made his work vivid, but because no amount of artistry could conceal the fact that the dream is inherently empty.

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[5] *op. cit.*, Chapter V.

The author of *The Power and the Glory*, above all critics, might have been expected to have recognized that Dickens's weakness was rooted not where he located it but in nineteenth-century liberalism, to which modern totalitarianism is by no means unrelated. The question, in Mr Greene's novel, which the priest asks of the police lieutenant, who has been describing his version of the good life, might be put with equal pertinence to Oliver and Mr Brownlow, or any of Dickens's other 'good' characters, as they prepare to enter, at the end of the story, into their inheritance: 'And what happens afterwards?' Dickens's affinities with the lieutenant are not immediately apparent for several reasons. The lieutenant disavows a belief in God ('I don't fight against a fiction'), whereas Dickens does not explicitly exclude God from his paradise at the end of *Oliver Twist*. But Mr Brownlow's devotion is to 'that Being . . . whose great attribute is Benevolence'. Dickens, like almost all English nineteenth-century liberals, retained much of the vocabulary and formulae of religion, with a result which is sometimes unconsciously comical (his attempt, for example, to place on God—'a stronger hand than chance'—the responsibility for the complicated and improbable plot of *Oliver Twist*), but more often sentimental (the notorious references, for example, to angels, merely to elicit an emotional response). But Heaven, to use Oliver's own phrase, is 'a long way off' in the Dickens world! Another superficial difference between Dickens and Mr Greene's lieutenant is that the lieutenant seems 'tough' ('Death's a fact. We don't try to alter facts.') whereas Dickens, weeping for the death of Little Nell, Paul Dombey and Jo, seems 'soft'. But having nothing to say about death and responding to it with a self-indulgent wallowing in emotion are alike in that they both indicate an absence of any context for death.[6] Finally, the lieutenant has a militant programme of reform. Dickens had no more intention than Mr Brownlow of espousing any of the militant ideologies which were substituted for religion in the nineteenth century and which the modern world has inherited. What he did hold to was something too loosely formulated and easy-going to be called an ideology: a cheerful belief in the native goodness of man; in a scale of values which placed the natural affections in paramount place, and in an all-too-human conception of the good life. His view of life was one which seems especially attractive to the ordinary Englishman. It looks far less sinister than the Marxist or Fascist view of life, but equally with these it is one from which the power and the glory of the absolute has vanished, together with the goodness that belongs to the omnipotent and omniscient and is visible in the human, limited, finite world only when it is conferred from without, and only then in a fractured and chequered form.

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[6] This is something which Mrs Tillotson failed to appreciate when commenting on pathos in Victorian novels. See *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* by Kathleen Tillotson (Oxford, 1954), page 49.

IAGO AND ST THOMAS

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THE character of Iago in Shakespeare's play, *Othello*, has greatly puzzled critics over the past century, and much controversy has centred around the motivation behind his hatred of Cassio and Othello. The intensity of his emotion and the fiendishness of his actions seem to many critics completely disproportionate to the causes of resentment which Iago declares to be his motives. This puzzlement is, at least, partly caused by failure to recognize and appreciate the nature of sin in the Christian sense of the word. Critics would cease to wonder at the extent of Iago's moral depravity if they were willing to take seriously those Christian teachings on personal sin and its destructive effects on human nature which still formed a living part of western man's intellectual equipment in the fifteenth century. Shakespeare's dramatic analysis of the effects of sin on Macbeth afford one, though not the only, example of how well he understood them. His delineation of Iago is another. In many ways, indeed, Iago constitutes an excellent illustration in dramatic form of St Thomas' teachings on sin, as well as those on the special sins of pride and envy and on the Devil.

As so many critics have insisted, the specific instance of wounded pride which Iago alleges as the source of his bitterness certainly