By the same Author

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CULTURE AND SOCIETY
THE LONG REVOLUTION
MODERN TRAGEDY
COMMUNICATIONS
DRAMA FROM IBSEN TO BRECHT
being a revised edition
of
DRAMA FROM IBSEN TO ELIOT
THE COUNTRY AND THE CITY

Novels

BORDER COUNTRY
SECOND GENERATION

THE ENGLISH NOVEL

From Dickens to Lawrence

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1973
CHATTO & WINDUS
LONDON

INTRODUCTION

I KEEP thinking about those twenty months, in 1847 and 1848, in which these novels were published: *Dombey and Son*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Vanity Fair*, *Jane Eyre*, *Mary Barton*, *Tancred*, *Town and Country*, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

What was it just then that emerged in England? It was of course no sudden process of just a few months. But we can see, looking back, those months as decisive. The English novel before then had its major achievements; it had Defoe and Fielding, Richardson and Jane Austen and Walter Scott. But now in the 1840s it had a new and major *generation*. For the next eighty years the novel was to be the major form in English literature. And this was unprecedented. What these months seem to mark above all is a new kind of consciousness, and we have to learn to see what this is, and some ways of relating it to the new and unprecedented civilisation in which it took shape.

The changes in society had been long in the making: the Industrial Revolution, the struggle for democracy, the growth of cities and towns. But these also, in the 1840s, reached a point of consciousness which was in its turn decisive. The twelve years from Dickens's first novel to his radically innovating *Dombey and Son* were also the years of the crisis of Chartism. The first industrial civilisation in the history of the world had come to a critical and defining stage. By the end of the 1840s the English were the first predominantly urban people in the long history of human societies. The institutions of an urban culture, from music-halls and popular Sunday newspapers to

public parks museums and libraries, were all decisively established in these years. There was critical legislation on public health and on working-hours in factories. A major economic decision, on free trade and the repeal of the corn laws, had begun a long realignment of politics. In the struggle and disturbance of those years the future, of course, was not known. But the sense of crisis, of major and radical issues and decisions, was both acute and general. It is then not surprising that in just this decade a particular kind of literature—already known and widely read, but still not very highly regarded—should come to take on new life, a newly significant and relevant life. Here, in these hands, a generation of writers, in very different ways, found the common forms that mattered, in response to a new and varied but still common experience.

There were of course immediate and related reasons for the new importance of the novel. Reading of all kinds was increasing. Between the 1820s and 1860 the annual number of new books rose from 580 to over 2,600, and much of the increase was in novels. New methods of binding and printing had brought book-prices down. In the period in which these novels were published there were new cheap libraries: the Parlour and the Railway: not led, of course, by the new generation, but by others: Lytton, Marryat, G. P. R. James. The reading of newspapers and magazines was increasing rapidly, though the major period of expansion was still twenty years ahead. In every way the reading-public was still a minority, and the book-reading public especially so. But serial publication of fiction, in the new family magazines, was significantly expanding the number of readers of novels. Direct market factors were important to writers in more pressing and evident ways.

But this is no simple case, in the end, of demand and supply. Several of the best new writers were involved in the market, and with their eyes wide open to it: Dickens above all. But

what was written and what had to be written had many other sources. The crisis of the society and the expansion of reading were themselves related. More and more people felt the need for this kind of knowledge and experience, as customary ways broke down or receded. But beyond even this, as we can see most clearly from the novels themselves, the new pressures and disturbances were not simple moulds out of which new forms came. The men and women who were writing—some at the centre of opinion-forming and the market, some distant and isolated—took from the disturbance of these years another impetus: a crisis of experience, often quite personally felt and endured, which when it emerged in novels was much more than a reaction to existing and acknowledged public features. It was a creative working, a discovery, often alone at the table; a transformation and innovation which composed a generation out of what seemed separate work and experience. It brought in new feelings, people, relationships; rhythms newly known, discovered, articulated; defining the society, rather than merely reflecting it; defining it in novels, which had each its own significant and particular life. It was not the society or its crisis which produced the novels. The society and the novels—our general names for those myriad and related primary activities—came from a pressing and varied experience which was not yet history; which had no new forms, no significant moments, until these were made and given by direct human actions.

What then can we define that emerged from those months: those twenty months in which, looking back, we can see so clearly a particular achievement: a confirmation of a generation; confirmation of a new importance, a new relevance and new forms? From the many possibilities in those varied reading experiences I would choose one bearing as central: the exploration of community: the substance and meaning of community.

From Dickens to Lawrence, over nearly a hundred years, this

bearing seems to me decisive. What community is, what it has been, what it might be; how community relates to individuals and relationships; how men and women, directly engaged, see within them or beyond them, for but more often against them, the shape of a society: these related themes are the dominant bearings. For this is a period in which what it means to live in a community is more uncertain, more critical, more disturbing as a question put both to societies and to persons than ever before in history. The underlying experiences of this powerful and transforming urban and industrial civilisation are of rapid and inescapable social change; of a newly visible and conscious history but at the same time, in most actual communities and in most actual lives, of a newly complicated and often newly obscure immediate process. These are not opposite poles: they are the defining characteristics of the change itself. People became more aware of great social and historical changes which altered not only outward forms—institutions and landscapes—but also inward feelings, experiences, self-definitions. These facts of change can be seen lying deep in almost every imagination.

And then of course it was right that the novel should be used to explore and to realise this process, in unprecedented ways. In the great eighteenth-century realists, in the precise social world of Jane Austen and in the historically conscious imagination of Scott, its powers and its possibilities were already evident. But though they drew some of their strength, their starting strength, from their great individual predecessors, these new novelists of a rapidly changing England had to create, from their own resources, forms adequate to the experience at the new and critical stage it had reached.

Two features of this development stand out. The historical novel, as Scott had developed it, has almost run its course—its fashionable course—before this generation began. Dickens used

it occasionally; George Eliot went back to it once. But in the main line it had become a separate form: from history as change, eating into human consciousness, to history as spectacle, the spectacular past, as most clearly in Lytton. Each of these possibilities can be seen in Scott: the romantic use of the past to transcend the present had many colourful opportunities in fiction. But the permanent achievement of the romantic imagination, at the point of its deepest engagement with its own time, was not this kind of transcendence. It was the establishment of a position in human experience which was capable of judging—not incidentally but totally—the very society that was forming and changing it. Society from being a framework could be seen now as an agency, even an actor, a character. It could be seen and valued in and through persons: not as a framework in which they were defined; not as an aggregate of known relationships; but as an apparently independent organism, a character and an action like others. Society, now, was not just a code to measure, an institution to control, a standard to define or to change. It was a process that entered lives, to shape or to deform; a process personally known but then again suddenly distant, complex, incomprehensible, overwhelming.

In what had been learned of process in the historical novel, the new novel of social change—of the valuation of change—found its impetus, its initiative, its decisive and eagerly taken opportunity. Thomas Carlyle, who did more than anyone else in his generation to communicate this sense of history—of historical process as moral substance and challenge—came to think that the novel was outdated, that it could be replaced by history. He was of course to be proved wrong, but only by the transformation of the novel in very much the direction of his central argument. It was by becoming history, contemporary history—but a history of substance, of process, of the interaction

of public and private life—that one important kind of novel went to the heart of its time. When Balzac, in France, learned from Scott, he went back not to the Middle Ages, at a distance which was bound to be spectacle, but as Scott had done in his best work to the recent and connecting history of Scotland; to the decisive origin of his own epoch: to the years of the French Revolution. He learned in this way, in the search for origins, how to go on to write the continuing history of his time. The new English novelists learned in comparable ways: going back to the decisive origins of their own epoch, in the crises of the Industrial Revolution, of democratic reform and of the movement from country to town: from Charlotte Brontë on the Luddites in *Shirley* to George Eliot on the years before 1832 and on town and country in *Middlemarch* and in *Felix Holt*. It was in this kind of use of the historical imagination, rather than in the fanciful exercises of a *Romola* or a *Tale of Two Cities*, that the real growth took place. And it was in these ways that novelists learned to look, historically, at the crises of their own immediate time: at Chartism, at the industrial struggle, at debt and speculation, at the complicated inheritance of values and of property.

That was one very important line of development, but there is another, even more important, which enters even more deeply into the substance and form of the novel. Most novels are in some sense knowable communities. It is part of a traditional method—an underlying stance and approach—that the novelist offers to show people and their relationships in essentially knowable and communicable ways. Much of the confidence of this method depends on a particular kind of social confidence and experience. In its simplest form this amounts to saying—though at its most confident it did not have to be said—that the knowable and therefore known relationships compose and are part of a wholly known social structure, and that in and

through the relationships the persons themselves can be wholly known. Thus from the middle term, of visible and comprehensible relationship, both societies and persons are knowable; indeed certain fundamental propositions about them can even be taken for granted, in terms of a received and mutually applicable social and moral code.

Many factors combined to destroy this confidence, in the process of extraordinary change through which the new novelists were living. One effect of this change has been widely recognised. It has indeed become a dogma—more properly, a half-truth—that persons are only partially knowable in and through relationships; that some part of the personality precedes and survives—is in a way unaffected by—relationships; that in this special sense persons are not knowable, are indeed fundamentally and crucially unknowable. And this is a belief which in itself forces new and very radical experiments in the novel; experiments which have been more active and more exclusive in every subsequent generation.

What is not so often recognised in this well-known effect is that at the other end of the scale a similar process has been evident: an increasing scepticism, disbelief, in the possibility of understanding society; a structurally similar certainty that relationships, knowable relationships, so far from composing a community or a society, are the positive experience that has to be *contrasted* with the ordinarily negative experience of the society as a whole (or of the society as opposed to the local and immediate community). An important split takes place between knowable relationships and an unknown, unknowable, overwhelming society. The full seriousness of this split and of its eventual consequences for the novel can be traced only towards the end of the century. But its pressure is evident from this first period of crisis: Dickens's response to it—a very early and major response—is perhaps the key to understanding him, and

especially to understanding his very original and creative use of the novel as a form.

Now we have only to name this particular crisis—the crisis of the knowable community—to see how deeply it is related to the changes through which these novelists were living. We can see its obvious relation to the very rapidly increasing size and scale and complexity of communities: in the growth of towns and especially of cities and of a metropolis; in the increasing division and complexity of labour; in the altered and critical relations between and within social classes. In these simple and general senses, any assumption of a knowable community—a whole community, wholly knowable—becomes harder and harder to sustain. And we have to remember, with this, that there is a direct though very difficult relationship between the knowable community and the knowable person. Wordsworth, in *The Prelude*, had got through to this relationship very early. In the great seventh book—*Residence in London*—he directly related the new phenomenon of the urban crowd—not the occasional but the regular crowd, the new crowd of the metropolitan streets—to problems of self-identity, self-knowledge, self-possession:

> *How often in the overflowing Streets,*
> *Have I gone forward with the Crowd, and said*
> *Unto myself, the face of every one*
> *That passes by me is a mystery . . .*
> *. . . And all the ballast of familiar life,*
> *The present, and the past; hope, fear; all stays,*
> *All laws of acting, thinking, speaking man*
> *Went from me, neither knowing me, nor known.*

It is from this critical conjunction—the unknowable crowd and the unknowing and unknown individual—that he created the image of the blind beggar with the label telling his history and his identity:

> *It seemed*
> *To me that in this Label was a type,*
> *Or emblem, of the utmost that we know*
> *Both of ourselves and of the universe.*

It is a familiar romantic conclusion; but it is important that the insight occurred where it did: in the crowded street of a city. It is a related alienation, of a community and of persons, of the kind which Blake also had seen, with a sharper emphasis on power, in his poem *London*.

The problem of the knowable community, with its deep implications for the novelist, is then clearly a part of the social history of early nineteenth-century England and of the imaginative penetration and recoil which was the creative response. But what is knowable is not only a function of objects—of what is there to be known. It is also a function of subjects, of observers—of what is desired and what needs to be known. A knowable community, that is to say, is a matter of consciousness as well as of evident fact. Indeed it is to just this problem of knowing a community—of finding a position, a position convincingly experienced, from which community can begin to be known—that one of the major phases in the development of the novel must be related.

It is so often taken for granted that a country community, most typically a village, is an epitome of direct relationships: of face-to-face contacts, within which the novelist can find the substance of a fiction of personal relationships. Certainly this aspect of its difference from the city and the suburb is important. Most English novels before Dickens are centred in rural communities, and it is because he is centred in the city—and not only a city but a metropolis—that he has to find strength and basis in an alternative tradition: in the popular culture of urban industrial society. We shall see the measure of that change and

his extraordinary creative use of it when we come to look at the substance of his fiction.

But even within rural communities the problem of what is known—what is desired and needs to be known—is very active and critical. This is the real key to a very important development of the country novel from Jane Austen to George Eliot and then again from George Eliot to Hardy. We shall trace this in detail, but it is worth now briefly looking back at the community of Jane Austen.

It is a truth universally acknowledged that Jane Austen chose to ignore the decisive historical events of her time. Where, it is still asked, are the Napoleonic wars: the real current of history? But history has many currents, and the social history of the landed families at that time in England was among the most important. As we sense its real processes we find that they are quite central and structural in Jane Austen's novels. All that prevents us from realising this is that familiar kind of retrospect, taking in Penshurst and Saxham and Buck's Head and Mansfield Park and Norland and even Poynton, in which all country houses and their families are seen as belonging effectively to a single tradition: that of the cultivated rural gentry. The continual making and remaking of these houses and their families is suppressed, in this view, by an idealising abstraction, and Jane Austen's world can then be taken for granted, even sometimes patronised as a rural backwater, as if it were a simple 'traditional' setting. And then if the social 'background' is in this sense settled, we can move to an emphasis on a fiction of purely personal relationships.

But such an emphasis is false, for it is not personal relationships, in the abstracted sense of an observed psychological process, that preoccupy Jane Austen. It is, rather, personal *conduct*: a testing and discovery of the standards which govern human behaviour in certain real situations. To the social

considerations already implicit in the examination of conduct, with its strong sense and exploration of the adequacy of social norms, we must add from the evidence of the novels a direct preoccupation with estates incomes and social position, which are seen as indispensable elements of all the relationships that are projected and formed. Nor is this a preoccupation within a settled 'traditional' world; indeed much of the interest and many of the sources of the action in Jane Austen's novels lie in the changes of fortune—the facts of general change and of a certain mobility—which were affecting the landed families at this time.

Thus it would be easy to take Sir Thomas Bertram, in *Mansfield Park*, as an example of the old settled landed gentry to be contrasted with the new 'London' ways of the Crawfords (this is a common reading), were it not for the fact that Bertram is explicitly presented as what Goldsmith would have called 'a great West Indian': a colonial proprietor in the sugar island of Antigua. The Crawfords may have London ways, but the income to support them is landed property in Norfolk, and they have been brought up by an uncle who is an admiral. Sir Walter Elliot, in *Persuasion*, belongs to a landed family which had moved from Cheshire to Somerset and which had been raised to a baronetcy in the Restoration, but his income now will not support his position. His heir-presumptive has 'purchased independence by uniting himself to a rich woman of inferior birth', and the baronet is forced to let Kellynch Hall to an admiral since as his lawyer observes:

> this peace will be turning all our rich naval officers ashore. They will be all wanting a home. . . . Many a noble fortune has been made during the war.

The neighbouring Musgroves, the second landowning family, are by contrast

> in a state of alteration, perhaps of improvement. The father and mother were in the old English style, and the young people in the new.

Darcy, in *Pride and Prejudice*, is a landowner established for 'many generations' but his friend Bingley has inherited £100,000 and is looking for an estate to purchase. Sir William Lucas has risen from trade to a knighthood. Mr Bennett has £2,000 a year but an entailed estate, and has married the daughter of an attorney whose brother is in trade. Knightley, in *Emma*, owns Donwell Abbey, and Martin one of the new gentlemen farmers is his tenant. The Woodhouses have little land but Emma will inherit £30,000 'from other sources'. Elton the vicar has some independent property, but must 'make his way as he could, without any alliances but in trade'. Mr Weston belongs to a 'respectable family which for the last two or three generations has been rising into gentility and property'. He marries, through the militia, the daughter of 'a great Yorkshire family' and when she dies enters trade and purchases 'a little estate'. Harriet, finally revealed as the daughter of 'a tradesman, rich enough' marries her gentleman farmer with the reasonable 'hope of more, of security, stability, and improvement'. The Coles live quietly, on an income from trade, but when this improves 'in fortune and style of living, second only to the Woodhouses, in the immediate neighbourhood'. In *Sense and Sensibility* the Dashwoods are a settled landowning family, increasing their income by marriages, and enlarging the settlements of their daughters. They are also enclosing Norland Common, and buying up neighbouring farms; the necessary cashing of stocks for enclosure and engrossing affect the rate of the family's immediate improvement. In *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine Morland, the daughter of a clergyman with two good livings and a considerable independence, goes with a local landowning family, the Allens, to Bath, and in that sharply

observed social exchange meets the son of the family which has owned the Abbey estates since the dissolution of the monasteries; his sister marries on the 'unexpected accession' of her lover 'to title and fortune'.

To abstract this social history is of course to describe only the world of the novels within which the more particular actions begin and end. Yet it must be clear that it is no single settled society. It is an active complicated sharply speculative process: of inherited and newly enclosing and engrossing estates; of fortunes from trade and colonial and military profit being converted into houses and property and social position; of settled and speculative marriages into estates and incomes. It is indeed that most difficult world to describe, in English social history: an acquisitive high bourgeois society at the point of its most evident interlocking with an agrarian capitalism that is itself mediated by inherited titles and by the making of family names. Into the long and complicated interaction of landed and trading capital, the process that Cobbett observed—the arrival of 'the nabobs, negro-drivers, admirals, generals' and so on—is directly inserted and is even taken for granted. The social confusions and contradictions of this complicated process are the true source of many of the problems of human conduct and valuation which the personal actions dramatise. An openly acquisitive society, which is concerned also with the *transmission* of wealth, is trying to judge itself at once by an inherited code and by the morality of improvement.

The paradox of Jane Austen is then the achievement of a unity of tone, of a settled and remarkably confident way of seeing and judging, in this chronicle of confusion and change. She is precise and candid, but in very particular ways. She is for example more exact about income, which is disposable, than about acres, which have to be worked. Yet at the same time she sees land in a way that she does not see 'other sources' of income.

Her eye for a house, for timber, for the details of improvement, is quick, accurate, monetary. Yet money of other kinds, from the trading houses, from the colonial plantations, has no visual equivalent; it has to be converted to these signs of order to be recognised at all. This way of seeing is especially representative. The land is seen primarily as an index of revenue and position; its visible order and control are a valued product but the process of working it is hardly seen at all. Jane Austen then reminds us, involuntarily, of the two meanings of improvement which were historically linked but in practice so often contradictory. There is the improvement of soil, stock, yields, in a working agriculture. And there is the improvement of houses, parks, artificial landscapes, which absorbed so much of the actually increasing wealth. It is the essential commentary on what can be abstracted technically as the agricultural revolution; that it was no revolution, but the consolidation the improvement and the expansion of an existing social class.

Cultivation has the same ambiguity as improvement. There is increasing growth and this is converted into rents, and then the rents are converted into what is seen as a cultivated society. What the 'revolution' is for, then, is this: this quality of life. Jane Austen could achieve her remarkable unity of tone—that cool and controlled observation which is the basis of her narrative method; that highly distanced management of event and description and character which need not become either open manipulation or participation and personal involvement—because of an effective formula: improvement is improvement. The working improvement, which is not seen at all, is the means of social improvement, which is then so isolated that it is seen very clearly indeed.

It is not seen flatteringly. The conversion of good income into good conduct was no automatic process. But what is crucial is that the moral pretension is taken so seriously that it

becomes a critique: never of the basis of the formula, but coolly and determinedly of its results in character and action. She guides her heroines steadily to the right marriages. She makes settlements, alone, against all the odds, like some supernatural lawyer, in terms of that exact proportion to moral worth which could assure the continuity of the general formula. But within this conventional bearing, which is the source of her confidence, the moral discrimination is so insistent that it can be taken in effect as an independent value. It is said by literary historians that she derives from Fielding and from Richardson; but Fielding's genial manipulative bluff and Richardson's isolating fanaticism are in fact far back, in another world. What happens in *Emma*, in *Persuasion*, in *Mansfield Park*, is the development of an everyday uncompromising morality which is in effect separable from its social basis and which, in other hands, can be turned against it. It is in this sense that Jane Austen relates to those later writers who had to learn to assume, with increasing unease from Coleridge to George Eliot and Matthew Arnold, that there was no necessary correspondence between class and morality; that the survival of discrimination depended on another kind of independence; that the two meanings of improvement had to be not merely distinguished but contrasted; or, as first in Coleridge, that cultivation in its human sense had to be brought to bear as a standard *against* the social process of civilisation. In these hands, decisively, the formula broke down: improvement was not improvement; not only not necessarily but at times in definite contradiction. Jane Austen, it is clear, never went so far. Her novels would have been very different, involving new problems of structure and language, if she had. But she provided the emphasis which had only to be taken outside the park walls into a different social experience to become not a moral but a social criticism. It is this transformation and its difficulties that we shall meet in George Eliot.

But now consider again Jane Austen's 'knowable community'. It is outstandingly face-to-face; its crises, physically and spiritually, are in just these terms: a look, a gesture, a stare, a confrontation; and behind these, all the time, the novelist is watching, observing, physically recording and reflecting. That is the whole stance; the grammar of her morality. Yet while it is a community wholly known, within the essential terms of the novel, it is as an actual community very precisely selective. Neighbours in her novels are not the people actually living near by. They are the people living a little less near by who in social *recognition* can be visited. What she sees across the land is a network of propertied houses and families, and through this tightly drawn mesh most actual people are simply not seen. To be face-to-face in this world is already to belong to a class. No other community, in physical presence or in social reality, is by any means knowable. And it is not only most of the people who have disappeared. It is also most of the country, which becomes real only as it relates to the houses which are the real nodes. For the rest the country is weather or a place for a walk.

It is proper to trace the continuity of the novel—a very important tradition of moral analysis—from Jane Austen to George Eliot. But we can only do this intelligently if we recognise what else is happening in this literary development: a recognition of other kinds of people; other kinds of country; other kinds of action on which a moral emphasis must be brought to bear.

Thus *Adam Bede* is set by George Eliot in Jane Austen's period: at the turn of the eighteenth into the nineteenth century. What she sees is of course very different: not primarily because the *country* has changed, but because she is drawing on a different social tradition.

> The germ of *Adam Bede* was an anecdote told me by my Methodist Aunt Samuel . . . an anecdote from her own experience. . . . I

> afterwards began to think of blending this and some other recollections of my aunt in one story, with some points in my father's early life and character.

Thus the propertied house is still there, in the possession of the Donnithornes. But they are now seen at work on their income, dealing with their tenants:

> 'What a fine old kitchen this is!' said Mr Donnithorne, looking round admiringly. He always spoke in the same deliberate, well-chiselled, polite way, whether his words were sugary or venomous. 'And you keep it so exquisitely clean, Mrs Poyser. I like these premises, do you know, beyond any on the estate.'

We have encountered this 'deliberate, well-chiselled, polite' way of speaking before. But it is not now among relative equals, just as the old Squire's way of looking is not now simply an aspect of character but of character in a precise and dominating social relationship. As Mrs Poyser reacts to it:

> 'as if you was an insect, and he was going to dab his finger-nail on you'.

The proposition that is put through the politeness is in fact a reorganisation of the tenancy, for the estate's convenience, which will take away the Poysers' corn land. It is accompanied by a threat that the proposed new neighbour

> 'who is a man of some capital, would be glad to take both the farms, as they could be worked so well together. But I don't want to part with an old tenant like you'.

It is not a particularly dramatic event, but it is a crucial admission of everyday experience which had been there all the time, and which is now seen from an altered point of view. The politeness of improvement is necessarily counterpointed by the crude facts of economic power, and a different moral emphasis has become inevitable. This is then extended. The young squire is anxious to improve the estate; as the tenants saw it

> there was to be a millennial abundance of new gates, allowances of lime, and returns of ten per cent.

And he takes up Adam Bede as the manager of his woods. But in what is essentially the same spirit he takes up Hetty Sorrel as his girl and succeeds in ruining her. A way of using people for convenience is an aspect of personal character—this emphasis is not relaxed—but it is now also an aspect of particular social and economic relationships. And then as George Eliot observes ironically:

> it would be ridiculous to be prying and analytic in such cases, as if one was inquiring into the character of a confidential clerk. We use round, general, gentlemanly epithets about a young man of birth and fortune.

Jane Austen, precisely, had been prying and analytic, but into a limited group of people in their relations with each other. The analysis is now brought to bear without the class limitation. The social and economic relationships are seen necessarily as elements, often determining elements, of conduct.

The problem of the knowable community, that is to say, is not only a matter of physical expansion and complication. It is also and primarily a problem of viewpoint and of consciousness. And it is at this point, precisely, that it interlocks with the methods derived from the new historical consciousness; the new sense of society as not only the bearer but the active creator, the active destroyer, of the values of persons and relationships.

It is a complicated interaction. In the late 1830s and especially in the 1840s everything seems to start at once, in a quite newly experienced world. Between Jane Austen and Scott and the beginning of Dickens there is a pause, an interregnum: not in actual production, for the making of novels continued, and there are interesting isolated exercises, such as those of Peacock; but in vital contribution, in the making and remaking of a

form and a generation. As we move to the 1840s we have to shift our attention this way and that, in so many new directions that no single account is possible. But before that decade there was this one decisive moment: the first appearance of Dickens. It took him many years, in and through his great success, to arrive at the works which now define his achievement. Yet it is not only the accident of time but this emphatic arrival of genius that directs our attention, from the beginnings in the 1830s, to Dickens: and above all to the Dickens who reached his full power and full difficulty as a novelist in those months of 1847 and 1848.

I

Charles Dickens

IT is still widely believed that the traditional culture of the English people was broken and disintegrated by the Industrial Revolution. What then emerged, it is said, was on the one hand a debased synthetic commercial culture—the world of the newspapers and popular entertainment; on the other hand an increasingly threatened minority culture—an educated tradition within which the finest literature and thought of the time sought to maintain and extend itself and to keep its connections, its continuities, with the best work of the past. Each of these descriptions seems to me partially true but when we have given them all the weight we can they still do not, taken together, describe the whole situation in urban and industrial England, and above all in its culture; in the novel especially. What is missing is that element of authentic popular response to the new conditions of life, through which in many ways—in new radical institutions and beliefs, but also in the crowded many-voiced anonymous world of idioms, stories, songs, jokes, parodies, sentiments, caricatures—people described and responded to their unprecedented experiences.

We do not yet know nearly enough about either of these kinds. The educated world has of course neglected them. In the last few years we have been getting some preliminary accounts: both of the radical culture which is so central an achievement, and in more fragmentary ways of the anonymous culture, which has a continuing, often oral, traditional strength. And as we begin to see these more clearly we can see the condition of literature in this rapidly changing society, and especially the con-

dition of the novel, in some very new ways. We can especially realise our good fortune that at the most critical point in this history—at the time of the critical remaking of the novel and of the critical emergence of a new urban popular culture—we have a novelist of genius who is involved in both; we have Dickens.

The shift of emphasis involved here is of course very difficult. It extends its changes of viewpoint—some of them very radical—into a whole structure of critical and social beliefs. Dickens certainly is now more admired, more respected, more carefully studied than he has ever been, and especially within a minority critical public; the majority of readers he has of course always kept. But I do not think this would be happening in the way it now is if the other revaluation were not also going on, in what amounts to a recovery of some of the central history and culture of our own people: a history and a culture that had been excluded, set aside, by the rigidities of an old educated world. We are beginning to know now, with increasing substance and precision, our inherited popular culture; and to know its difference from a folk culture, which is perhaps the hardest point to grasp.

There are always eventual interactions, of a limited kind, between folk and polite culture. But characteristically each occurs in a relatively rigid and immobile society: in peasant communities and in courts; or in the country and in the city when these are relatively distinct. When the society becomes mobile, both internally and as a whole, these simpler kinds disappear in their old forms. Through many transitional stages we come to different cultures, where the terms that matter are not 'folk' and 'polite' (or 'aristocratic'); but significantly, 'popular' and 'educated'. In a class society of a modern kind these characteristically express a *relationship* rather than a distinction or separation. Thus when an 'educated' culture is called, as so often, a 'minority' culture, we have to see this as an indication of a social fact and relationship: the class limitation

of education. 'Popular culture' is similarly a fact of the whole society, not of a distinct and separate area as in 'folk'.

Each kind of culture, in a class society, is aware of the other: involved, critical, responsive, hostile. And 'popular culture' is especially complicated, because it includes both what is provided *for* the majority and what is made *by* them. It would be simpler if these were wholly separable areas but as the whole history of fiction (among many other cases) indicates they are not and cannot be. When we say of Dickens that he draws on a popular culture, we do not mean that this is unaffected or that he is unaffected by the educated culture. Many serious ideas had been popularised, and there were earlier recognised artists who had expressed this popular life. No more can we say of George Eliot, who is the crucial contrasting case, that she draws on an educated culture (which is obviously true) but not on a popular culture (which especially in popular religion and rural life is as obviously part of her world). It is really the interaction, indeed the disturbance induced in her work by the changing relations between the 'educated' and 'popular' life and thought, that is decisive.

Similarly in popular culture, even before we get to Dickens's creative uses of it, we have to notice a range and a contradiction. It goes all the way from authentic popular response in idioms and values, through authentic popular demand for certain kinds of issue and story, through important earlier art and thought which had been based on or accepted into its sensibility, to exploitation and manipulation of popular response and demand (as in so much tendentious magazine fiction written to direct or deflect the interests of the majority) and finally to that most difficult area of all, in which certain adjustments, resignations, illusions, fantasies—born of the whole experience of the society—became popular and even self-generating. These are authentic enough in that they are widely represented, but

they are also inauthentic in the sense that they are incapable of revealing, that they prevent others revealing, certain actual interests and truths. What is composed in particular (and this is very relevant to Dickens) is a self-defensive, alternately jolly or cynical tone and mood, which can take over and become very difficult to distinguish from the humorous or ironic popular observation of reality.

That is our central critical problem in Dickens. But it is masked by another which we had better deal with directly. By the standards of one kind of novel, which in England has been emphasised as the great tradition, Dickens's faults—what are seen as his faults—are so many and so central as to produce embarrassment. Almost every criterion of that other kind of novel—characteristically, the fiction of an educated minority—works against him. His characters are not 'rounded' and developing but 'flat' and emphatic. They are not slowly revealed but directly presented. Significance is not enacted in mainly tacit and intricate ways but is often directly presented in moral address and indeed exhortation. Instead of the controlled language of analysis and comprehension he uses, directly, the language of persuasion and display. His plots depend often on arbitrary coincidences, on sudden revelations and changes of heart. He offers not the details of psychological process but the finished articles: the social and psychological products.

Yet we get nowhere—critically nowhere—if we apply the standards of this kind of fiction to another and very different kind. We get nowhere if we try to salvage from Dickens what is compatible with that essentially alternative world, and then for the rest refer mildly and kindly to the great entertainer and to the popular tradition: not explaining but explaining away. The central case we have to make is that Dickens could write a new kind of novel—fiction uniquely capable of realising a new kind of reality—just because he shared with the new urban

popular culture certain decisive experiences and responses. That he shared with it, also, certain adjustments and illusions is a significant but minor part of this case. Unless we acknowledge this new reality—essentially it is the reality of the new kind of city—we shall go on discussing his methods in abstract and marginal ways. Yet if we can grasp this new experience, we shall see how much of his method—his creative method—necessarily follows from it; that it is the only or at least the major way in which that unprecedented experience could be seen and valued; that it is a breakthrough in the novel from which those other novelists of cities—Dostoievsky and Kafka are the most immediate names—in their own ways learned. Not apology then. Not a slow resigned acceptance that he is not after all George Eliot. But emphasis—critical emphasis—that he is a new kind of novelist and that his method *is* his experience.

Of course we can acknowledge as a fact in itself his marvellous energy. But then the energy and the methods are in fact inseparable. It is through his very specific plots and characters and not in spite of them that he makes his intense and involving world. He takes and transforms certain traditional methods: not like George Eliot into more locally observed actions or more particularly known individuals or more carefully charted stages of growth of a relationship; but, in his own way, into a dramatic method which is uniquely capable of expressing the experience of living in cities.

As we stand and look back at a Dickens novel the general movement we remember—the decisive movement—is a hurrying seemingly random passing of men and women, each heard in some fixed phrase, seen in some fixed expression: a way of seeing men and women that belongs to the street. There is at first an absence of ordinary connection and development. These men and women do not so much relate as pass each other and then sometimes collide. Nor often in the ordinary

way do they speak to each other. They speak at or past each other, each intent above all on defining through his words his own identity and reality; in fixed self-descriptions, in voices raised emphatically to be heard through and past other similar voices. But then as the action develops, unknown and unacknowledged relationships, profound and decisive connections, definite and committing recognitions and avowals are as it were forced into consciousness. These are the real and inevitable relationships and connections, the necessary recognitions and avowals of any human society. But they are of a kind that are obscured, complicated, mystified, by the sheer rush and noise and miscellaneity of this new and complex social order.

This creation of consciousness—of recognitions and relationships—seems to me indeed to be the purpose of Dickens's developed fiction. The need for it is at the centre of his social and personal vision:

> Oh for a good spirit who would take the housetops off, with a more potent and benignant hand than the lame demon in the tale, and show a Christian people what dark shapes issue from amidst their homes, to swell the retinue of the Destroying Angel as he moves forth among them. For only one night's view of the pale phantoms rising from the scenes of our too long neglect; and from the thick and sullen air where Vice and Fever propagate together, raining the tremendous social retributions which are ever pouring down, and ever coming thicker. Bright and blest the morning that should rise on such a night; for men, delayed no more by stumbling-blocks of their own making, which are but specks of dust on the path between them and eternity, would then apply themselves, like creatures of one common origin, owning one duty to the Father of one family, and tending to one common end, to make the world a better place. Not the less bright and blest would that day be for rousing some who have never looked out upon the world of human life around them, to a knowledge of their own relation to it, and for making them acquainted with a perversion of nature in their own contracted sympathies and

estimates; as great, and yet as natural in its development, when once begun, as the lowest degradation known. But no such day had ever dawned for Mr Dombey, or his wife; and the course of each was taken.

That potent and benignant hand, which takes off the housetops and shows the shapes and phantoms which arise from neglect and indifference; which clears the air so that people can see and acknowledge each other, overcoming that contraction of sympathy which is against nature: that hand is the hand of the novelist; it is Dickens seeing himself. And it's significant that this comes in a description of the city, in that same forty-seventh chapter of *Dombey and Son*. He is describing, in the image of a dense black cloud hanging over the city, the human and moral consequences of an indifferent and 'unnatural' society. It is an image to which he often returns: the obscurity, the darkness, the fog that keeps us from seeing each other clearly and from seeing the relation between ourselves and our actions, ourselves and others.

And this is another aspect of Dickens's originality. He is able to dramatise those social institutions and consequences which are not accessible to ordinary physical observation. He takes them and presents them as if they were persons or natural phenomena. Sometimes as the black cloud or as the fog through which people are groping and looking for each other. Sometimes as the Circumlocution Office, or Bleeding Heart Yard, where a way of life takes on physical shape. Sometimes as if they were human characters, like Shares in *Our Mutual Friend*, and of course the Great Expectations. This connects with his moral naming of characters: Gradgrind, McChoakumchild, Merdle. It connects also but in a less obvious way with a kind of observation which again belongs to the city: a perception, one might say, that the most evident inhabitants of cities are buildings, and that there is at once a connection and a confusion

between the shapes and appearance of buildings and the real shapes and appearances of the people who live in them.

As in this passage from *Little Dorrit*:

Upon that establishment of state, the Merdle establishment in Harley Street, Cavendish Square, there was the shadow of no more common wall than the fronts of other establishments of state on the opposite side of the street. Like unexceptionable society, the opposing rows of houses in Harley Street were very grim with one another. Indeed, the mansions and their inhabitants were so much alike in that respect, that the people were often to be found drawn up on opposite sides of dinner-tables, in the shade of their own loftiness, staring at the other side of the way with the dullness of the houses.

Everybody knows how like the street, the two dinner-rows of people who take their stand by the street will be. The expressionless uniform twenty houses, all to be knocked at and rung at in the same form, all approachable by the same dull steps, all fended off by the same pattern of railing, all with the same impracticable fire-escapes, the same inconvenient fixtures in their heads, and everything without exception to be taken at a high valuation—who has not dined with these? The house so drearily out of repair, the occasional bow-window, the stuccoed house, the newly-fronted house, the corner house with nothing but angular rooms, the house with the blinds always down, the house with the hatchment always up, the house where the collector has called for one quarter of an idea, and found nobody at home—who has not dined with these?

The house that nobody will take, and is to be had a bargain—who does not know her? The showy house that was taken for life by the disappointed gentleman, and which does not suit him at all—who is unacquainted with that haunted habitation?

This is a formal description which takes the analogy of houses and people right through, and in the end playfully. But it recurs in more local insights, where the house and the life being lived in it are indistinguishable (this is again from *Little Dorrit*):

> The debilitated old house in the city, wrapped in its mantle of soot, and leaning heavily on the crutches that had partaken of its decay and worn out with it, never knew a healthy or a cheerful interval, let what would betide. You should alike find rain, hail, frost and thaw lingering in that dismal enclosure, when they had vanished from other places; and as to snow, you should see it there for weeks, long after it had changed from yellow to black, slowly weeping away its grimy life. The place had no other adherents. As to street noises, the rumbling of wheels in the lane merely rushed in at the gateway in going past, and rushed out again: making the listening mistress Affery feel as if she were deaf, and recovered the sense of hearing by instantaneous flashes. So with whistling, singing, talking, laughing and all pleasant human sounds, they leaped the gap in a moment, and went upon their way.

Or again:

> It was now summertime; a grey, hot, dusty evening. They rode to the top of Oxford Street, and there alighting, dived in among the great streets of melancholy stateliness, and the little streets that try to be as stately and succeed in being more melancholy, of which there is a labyrinth near Park Lane. Wildernesses of corner houses, with barbarous old porticoes and appurtenances, horrors that came into existence under some wrong-headed person in some wrong-headed time, still demanding the blind admiration of all ensuing generations and determined to do so until they tumbled down; frowned upon the twilight. Parasite little tenements, with the cramp in their whole frame, from the dwarf-hills in the mews, made the evening doleful. Rickety dwellings of undoubted fashion, but of a capacity to hold nothing comfortably except a dismal smell, looked like the last result of the great mansions breeding in-and-in; and, where their little supplementary bows and balconies were supported on thin iron columns, seemed to be scrofulously resting upon crutches. Here and there a Hatchment, with the whole science of Heraldry in it, loomed down upon the street, like an Archbishop discoursing on Vanity. The shops, few in number, made no show, for popular opinion was as nothing to them.

This method is very remarkable. It has its basis, of course, in certain properties of the language: perceptions of relations between persons and things. But in Dickens it is critical. It is a conscious way of seeing and showing. The city is shown as at once a social fact and a human landscape. What is dramatised in it is a very complex structure of feeling. Thus he can respond warmly to the miscellaneous bustle and colour of a mobile commercial life:

> Mr. Dombey's offices were in a court where there was an old-established stall of choice fruit at the corner: where perambulating merchants, of both sexes, offered for sale at any time between the hours of ten and five, slippers, pocket-books, sponges, dogs' collars, Windsor soap, and sometimes a pointer or an oil-painting.
>
> The pointer always came that way, with a view to the Stock Exchange, where a sporting taste (originating generally in bets of new hats) is much in vogue.

And it is characteristic that when Mr Dombey arrives none of these passing commodities is offered to him. His kind of trade, reflected in his house—his 'Home-Department'—has established itself in colder, more settled, more remote ways; and then another aspect of the city is evident:

> Mr. Dombey's house was a large one, on the shady side of a tall, dark, dreadfully genteel street in the region between Portland Place and Bryanstone Square. It was a corner house, with great wide areas containing cellars frowned upon by barred windows, and leered at by crooked-eyed doors leading to dust-bins. It was a house of dismal state, with a circular back to it, containing a whole suite of drawing-rooms looking up a gravelled yard, where two gaunt trees, with blackened trunks and branches, rattled rather than rustled, their leaves were so smoke-dried. The summer sun was never on the street, but in the morning about breakfast time, when it came with the water-carts and the old-clothes men, and the people with geraniums, and the umbrella-mender, and the man who trilled the little bell of the Dutch clock as he went along. It was soon gone again to return no more that day; and the bands of

> music and the straggling Punch's shows going after it, left it a prey to the most dismal of organs, and white mice; with now and then a porcupine, to vary the entertainments; until the butlers whose families were dining out, began to stand at the house-doors in the twilight, and the lamp-lighter made his nightly failure in attempting to brighten up the street with gas. It was as blank a house inside as outside.

The contrast between the dismal establishment and the strolling variety of the streets is very clearly made. Again, the characteristics of houses and of people are consciously exchanged:

> cellars frowned upon by barred windows, and leered at by crooked-eyed doors.

This transposition of detail can then be extended, again with some traditional support, to a way of seeing the city as a destructive animal, a monster, utterly beyond the individual human scale:

> She often looked with compassion, at such a time, upon the stragglers who came wandering into London, by the great highway hard by, and who, footsore and weary, and gazing fearfully at the huge town before them, as if foreboding that their misery there would be but as a drop of water in the sea, or as a grain of sea-sand on the shore, went shrinking on, cowering before the angry weather, and looking as if the very elements rejected them. Day after day, such travellers crept past, but always, as she thought in one direction—always towards the town. Swallowed up in one phase or other of its immensity, towards which they seemed impelled by a desperate fascination, they never returned. Food for the hospitals, the churchyards, the prisons, the rivers, fever, madness, vice, and death—they passed on to the monster, roaring in the distance, and were lost.

That is one way of seeing it: the rhetorical totalising view from outside. But Dickens moves with still greater certainty into the streets themselves: into that experience of the streets—the crowd of strangers—which many of us now have got used to

but which in Blake and Wordsworth was seen as strange and threatening. Dickens recreates and extends this experience, in a new range of feeling, when Florence Dombey runs away from her father's dark house:

> The cheerful vista of the long street, burnished by the morning light, the sight of the blue sky and airy clouds, the vigorous freshness of the day, so flushed and rosy in its conquest of the night, awakened no responsive feelings in her so hurt bosom. Somewhere, anywhere, to hide her head! somewhere, anywhere, for refuge, never more to look upon the place from which she fled!
>
> But there were people going to and fro; there were opening shops, and servants at the doors of houses; there was the rising clash and roar of the day's struggle. Florence saw surprise and curiosity in the faces flitting past her; saw long shadows coming back upon the pavement; and heard voices that were strange to her asking her where she went, and what the matter was; and though these frightened her the more at first, and made her hurry on the faster, they did her the good service of recalling her in some degree to herself, and reminding her of the necessity of greater composure.
>
> Where to go? Still somewhere, anywhere! still going on; but where! She thought of the only other time she had been lost in the wide wilderness of London—though not lost as now—and went that way.

This street of the city is seen in very particular ways. It is a place of everyday business, not frightening in itself but amounting in its combined effect to a 'wide wilderness'. It is a place as difficult to relate to as her 'shut-up house'. But another note is struck: a physical effect which is also a social fact, sharply seen: the same social fact against which Dickens's effort at recognition and kindness is consistently made:

> the rising clash and roar of the day's struggle.

The only companion she finds is her dog, and she goes on with him:

> With this last adherent, Florence hurried away in the advancing morning, and the strengthening sunshine, to the City. The roar soon grew more loud, the passengers more numerous, the shops more busy, until she was carried onward in a stream of life setting that way, and flowing, indifferently, past marts and mansions, prisons, churches, market-places, wealth, poverty, good, and evil, like the broad river side by side with it, awakened from its dreams of rushes, willows, and green moss, and rolling on, turbid and troubled, among the works and cares of men, to the deep sea.

What is emphatic here is not only the noise and the everyday business; not only the miscellaneity—'prisons, churches'; but through all this the indifference, in an unwilled general sense:

> a stream of life setting that way, and flowing, indifferently.

It is again not a matter of particular acts or characters. It is a general phenomenon—a stream, a way of life. It is what Arthur Clennam and his wife go down into, in *Little Dorrit*, having learned, painfully, a precarious but still inviolable human connection:

> They went quietly down into the roaring streets, inseparable and blessed; and as they passed along in sunshine and in shade, the noisy and the eager and the arrogant and the froward and the vain, fretted, and chafed, and made their usual uproar.

The individual moral qualities, still sharply seen, are heard as it were collectively, in the 'roaring streets'. This is again an advance in consciousness as it is very clearly a gain—now absorbed—in fictional method.

For we have to relate this view not simply to description—animated description—but to the power of dramatising a moral world in physical terms. The physical world is never in Dickens unconnected with man. It is of his making, his manufacture, his interpretation. That is why it matters so much what shape he has given it.

Dickens's method, in this, relates very precisely to his historical period. It was in just this capacity to remake the world,

in the process we summarise as the Industrial Revolution, that men reached this crisis of choice; of the human shape that should underlie the physical creation. At one extreme Dickens can see this as comic:

> The earth was made for Dombey and Son to trade in, and the sun and moon were made to give them light. Rivers and seas were formed to float their ships; rainbows gave them promise of fair weather; winds blew for or against their enterprises; stars and planets circled in their orbits, to preserve inviolate a system of which they were the centre.

This is a mocking of a familiar commercial confidence but not at all in the name of an undisturbed nature. Rather it is a way of seeing the kind of system that is *imposed*, that is *made* central. It is qualified, precisely, by the other kinds of physical life and confidence in which men are making their own worlds, carrying them about with them through the noise and the crowding. It is not only that power is ambiguous—the power to create new worlds. There is also a choice: a choice of the human shape of the new physical environment. Or there *can* be a choice—we *can* be in a position to choose—if we see, physically and morally, what is happening to people in this time of unprecedented change:

> The first shock of a great earthquake had, just at that period, rent the whole neighbourhood to its centre. Traces of its course were visible on every side. Houses were knocked down; streets broken through and stopped; deep pits and trenches dug in the ground; enormous heaps of earth and clay thrown up; buildings that were undermined and shaking, propped by great beams of wood. Here, a chaos of carts, overthrown and jumbled together, lay topsy-turvy at the bottom of a steep unnatural hill; there, confused treasures of iron soaked and rusted in something that had accidentally become a pond. Everywhere were bridges that led nowhere; thoroughfares that were wholly impassable; Babel towers of chimneys, wanting half their height; temporary wooden

> houses and enclosures, in the most unlikely situations; carcasses of ragged tenements, and fragments of unfinished walls and arches, and piles of scaffolding, and wildernesses of bricks, and giant forms of cranes, and tripods straddling above nothing. There were a hundred thousand shapes and substances of incompleteness, wildly mingled out of their places, upside down, burrowing in the earth, aspiring in the air, mouldering in the water and unintelligible as any dream. Hot springs and fiery eruptions, the usual attendants upon earthquakes, lent their contributions of confusion to the scene. Boiling water hissed and heaved within dilapidated walls; whence also, the glare and roar of flames came issuing forth; and mounds of ashes blocked up rights of way, and wholly changed the law and custom of the neighbourhood.
>
> In short, the yet unfinished and unopened railroad was in progress; and from the very core of all this dire disorder, trailed smoothly away, upon its mighty course of civilisation and improvement.

This is the apprehension of direct disturbance, but Dickens goes on to see what in the end matters more: not the disorder of change, but the kind of new order that is made to emerge from it:

> The miserable waste ground, where the refuse-matter had been heaped of yore, was swallowed up and gone; and in its frowsy stead were tiers of warehouses, crammed with rich goods and costly merchandise. The old by-streets now swarmed with passengers and vehicles of every kind; the new streets that had stopped disheartened in the mud and waggon-ruts, formed towns within themselves, originating wholesome comforts and conveniences belonging to themselves, and never tried nor thought of until they sprung into existence. Bridges that had led to nothing, led to villas, gardens, churches, healthy public walks. The carcasses of houses, and beginnings of new thoroughfares, had started off upon the line at steam's own speed, and shot away into the country in a monster train.
>
> As to the neighbourhood which had hesitated to acknowledge the railroad in its struggling days, that had grown wise and

> penitent, as any Christian might in such a case, and now boasted of its powerful and prosperous relation. There were railway patterns in its drapers' shops, and railway journals in the windows of its newsmen. There were railway hotels, coffee-houses, lodging-houses, boarding-houses, railway plans, maps, views, wrappers, bottles, sandwich-boxes, and time-tables; railway hackney-coach and cabstands; railway omnibuses, railway streets and buildings, railway hangers-on and parasites, and flatterers out of all calculation. There was even railway time observed in clocks, as if the sun itself had given in. Among the vanquished was the master chimney-sweeper, whilom incredulous at Staggs's Gardens, who now lived in a stuccoed house three stories high, and gave himself out, with flourishes upon a varnished board, as contractor for the cleansing of railway chimneys by machinery.
>
> To and from the heart of this great change, all day and night, throbbing currents rushed and returned, incessantly like its life's blood. Crowds of people and mountains of goods, departing and arriving scores upon scores of times in every four-and-twenty hours, produced a fermentation in the place that was always in action. The very houses seemed disposed to pack up and take trips. Wonderful Members of Parliament, who, little more than twenty years before, had made themselves merry with the wild railroad theories of engineers, and given them the liveliest rubs in cross-examination, went down into the north with their watches in their hands, and sent on messages before by the electric telegraph, to say that they were coming. Night and day the conquering engines rumbled at their distant work, or, advancing smoothly to their journey's end, and gliding like tame dragons into the allotted corners grooved out to the inch for their reception, stood bubbling and trembling there, making the walls quake, as if they were dilating with the secret knowledge of great powers yet unsuspected in them, and strong purposes not yet achieved.

The complexity of this feeling is a true complexity of insight. All the pride of power—the new power of the Industrial Revolution—is felt in the language: the circulation by railway is the 'life's blood'. But there is also the recognition of this

power overriding all other human habits and purposes. It is the recognition confirmed, later, in

> the power that forced itself upon its iron way—its own—defiant of all paths and roads, piercing through the heart of every obstacle, and dragging living creatures of all classes, ages and degrees behind it.

The railway is at once the 'life's blood' and 'the triumphant monster, Death'. And in this dramatic enactment Dickens is responding to the real contradictions—the power for life or death; for disintegration, order and false order—of the new social and economic forces of his time. His concern always was to keep human recognition and human kindness alive, through these unprecedented changes and within this unrecognisably altered landscape.

> The very houses seemed disposed to pack up and take trips.

That is the mobility, the critical mobility, which was altering the novel. It is also the altered, the critically altered relationship between men and things.

In this altered relationship the character of moral analysis is inevitably changed. Thus it is easy to see that *Dombey and Son* is a novel about pride. But we have to go on and make a more difficult distinction. I suggested earlier that there is a kind of moral analysis in which society is a background against which the drama of personal virtues and vices is enacted, and that there is another kind—increasingly important in the development of nineteenth-century literature—in which society is the creator of virtues and vices; its active relationships and institutions at once generating and controlling, or failing to control, what in the earlier mode of analysis could be seen as faults of the soul.

And then the important thing to realise about a novel like *Dombey and Son* is that Dickens uses and relies on both these kinds. Indeed *Dombey and Son* is the novel in which he makes a

decisive transition from the first to the second, in his essential organisation.

> 'I have dreamed,' said Edith in a low voice, 'of a pride that is all powerless for good, all powerful for evil; of a pride that has been galled and goaded, through many shameful years, and has never recoiled except upon itself; a pride that has debased its owner with the consciousness of deep humiliation, and never helped its owner boldly to resent it or avoid it, or to say, "This shall not be!" a pride that, rightly guided, might have led perhaps to better things, but which, misdirected and perverted, like all else belonging to the same possessor, has been self-contempt, mere hardihood, and ruin.'
>
> She neither looked nor spoke to Florence now, but went on as if she were alone.
>
> 'I have dreamed,' she said, 'of such indifference and callousness, arising from this self-contempt; this wretched, inefficient, miserable pride; that it has gone on with listless steps even to the altar, yielding to the old, familiar, beckoning finger,—oh mother, oh mother!—while it spurned it; and willing to be hateful to itself for once and for all, rather than to be stung daily in some new form. Mean poor thing!
>
> And now with gathering and darkening emotion, she looked as she had looked when Florence entered.
>
> 'And I have dreamed,' she said, 'that in a first late effort to achieve a purpose, it has been trodden on, and trodden down by a base foot, but turns and looks upon him. I have dreamed that it is wounded, hunted, set upon by dogs, but that it stands at bay, and will not yield; no, that it cannot, if it would; but that it is urged on to hate him, rise against him, and defy him!'
>
> Her clenched hand tightened on the trembling arm she had in hers; and as she looked down on the alarmed and wondering face, her own subsided. 'Oh Florence!' she said, 'I think I have been nearly mad to-night!' and humbled her proud head upon her neck, and wept again.

That is a traditional kind of individualised moral description. In the same spirit there is a traditional invocation to wake from

error, in the description of Florence going in to her father's room:

> Awake, unkind father! Awake now, sullen man! The time is flitting by; the hour is coming with an angry tread. Awake! Awake, doomed man, while she is near! The time is flitting by; the hour is coming with an angry tread; its foot is in the house, Awake!

But this is not the only way in which this destructive pride is seen. 'House' in this civilisation has two meanings: the family home and the firm. In bringing their values into contradiction, in the single word, Dickens sets going his characteristic conflict of primary and secondary feelings. For the outlook of the firm—a social institution, trading in the confident spirit of its time—is seen from the beginning as the creator of a destructively indifferent pride. Here, characteristically, Dickens does not plead emotionally, but sets down ironically:

> Common abbreviations took new meanings in his eyes, and had sole reference to them. A. D. had no concern with anno Domini, but stood for anno Dombei—and Son.

That is part of the observation—the satirical observation—that 'the earth was made for Dombey and Son to trade in'. It is the way in which social institutions, particular social purposes, reshape not only the physical but the moral world. And the question then arises: what is the nature, the human nature, by which this can be judged?

> Was Mr. Dombey's master-vice, that ruled him so inexorably, an unnatural characteristic? It might be worth while sometimes, to inquire what Nature is, and how men work to change her, and whether, in the enforced distortions so produced, it is not natural to be unnatural. Coop any son or daughter to one idea, and foster it by servile worship of it on the part of the few timid or designing people standing round, and what is Nature to the willing captive who has never risen up upon the wings of a free mind—drooping and useless soon—to see her in her comprehensive truth!
>
> Alas! are there so few things in the world, about us, most unnatural, and yet most natural in being so! Hear the magistrate

> or judge admonish the unnatural outcasts of society; unnatural in brutal habits, unnatural in want of decency, unnatural in losing and confounding all distinctions between good and evil; unnatural in ignorance, in vice, in recklessness, in contumacy, in mind, in looks, in everything. But follow the good clergyman, or doctor, who, with his life imperilled at every breath he draws, goes down into their dens, lying within the echoes of our carriage-wheels and daily tread upon the pavement stones. Look round upon the world of odious sights—millions of immortal creatures have no other world on earth—at the lightest mention of which humanity revolts, and dainty delicacy living in the next street, stops her ears, and lisps 'I don't believe it!' Breathe the polluted air, foul with every impurity that is poisonous to health and life; and have every sense, conferred upon our race for its delight and happiness, offended, sickened and disgusted, and made a channel by which misery and death alone can enter. Vainly attempt to think of any simple plant, or flower, or wholesome weed, that, set in this foetid bed, could have its natural growth, or put its little leaves forth to the sun as God designed it. And then, calling up some ghastly child, with stunted form and wicked face, hold forth on its unnatural sinfulness, and lament its being, so early, far away from Heaven—but think a little of its having been conceived, and born and bred, in Hell!

It is interesting to see where this question has led Dickens. Beginning with Dombey's 'master-vice', and its traditional reference to 'Nature', he has gone on to describe a process in which men work to change nature and to produce 'enforced distortions'. The argument then slips imperceptibly to the strongest social feeling he then had: his horror in seeing the diseased slums of the city, produced by indifference and neglect: a Hell produced and maintained by men.

It is at this point, significantly in the course of trying to answer a traditional moral question, that Dickens reaches not only an indignant social description but the definition of purpose that I have already quoted:

> Oh for a good spirit who would take the house tops off

—a way of seeing through the 'dense black cloud'. An individual moral question has become a social question and then, decisively, a creative intervention. This seems to me the essential pattern of all Dickens's work.

What do we mean, precisely, by 'creative intervention'? What I mean, though it is hard to say, is that Dickens's morality, his social criticism, is in the form of his novels: a form based on ways of seeing people in their world and their society. Certainly these complicated ways of seeing are more important to his achievement than his separable attitudes to money, to poverty, to the family and to other known social questions. Nothing is clearer, when the treatment of any of these is examined by a method predicated by the assumption of 'treatment', than that Dickens is often contradictory, often confused, and indeed often, to use fashionable terms, unenlightened and unintelligent. And I do not mean that any of these observations is negligible, but they are only critical responses when they are parts of a whole response.

Thus it has been argued (and I among others have felt the force of this) that he is curiously blind to the real forces in nineteenth-century society which were even then beginning to 'reform the abuses against which he protested'. This is where an initial wrong assumption returns to confuse us. Certainly Dickens saw abuses and wanted them reformed. But it is not only that he increasingly saw them as related to a general condition: a fact reflected in the more concentrated organisation of the novels from *Dombey and Son* onwards. This was in the best sense an intellectual perception, and Shaw was right when he described it as 'declaring that it is not our disorder but our order that is horrible'.

More deeply, however, from his whole experience, and underlying the intellectual formulations which—like popular radical culture itself—he picked up from so many and so different and such contradictory sources, the total vision, not so much drawn from his material as imposed on it, came through and was decisive. This human drama, rooted and acted through, is inescapably general, and its generality, its totality, is its strength rather than its weakness. If the general condition and the forces operating on it were as he felt them to be, then what others may see as the 'real forces' can indeed seem incidental. Parliament, the trade unions, educational reform, public protective legislation of many kinds: outside the fiction Dickens can often see these as others saw them: now this opinion, now that. But the kinds of thing they were could not operate, at that level, in the fiction itself. We can say if we wish that this is blindness: an emotional overpowering of the ways in which the world has to be seen and changed. But it may be some check to our confidence, even now, to ask if the human and social condition as Dickens saw it has been much changed by the kind of work we call enlightened. The haunting isolation; the self-conscious neglect of the damned of the earth; the energy and despair of fixed public appearances, endlessly talking: these too are social facts and more resistible to reform than the institutions which they intersect.

To suppose that man as created by an immensely powerful society can be primarily affected by institutional amendments may not after all be very enlightened. This is why it is stupid of Orwell to dismiss Dickens as a 'change-of-heart' man (though it is characteristic of his own persistently external vision). Reference to a 'change of heart' is indeed now mainly known as a rationalisation of resistance to change, but this is clearly not Dickens. To see a change of heart and a change of institutions as alternatives is already to ratify an alienated society, for neither can be separated, or ever is, from the other; simply one or other can be *ignored*. The relevant question is still that of Marx: who educates the educators? Or, more

generally, who legislates the legislators? Who mans the institutions?

In most important ways, Dickens has little in common with Marx. But they shared the sense of a general human condition:

> Human life is the true social life of man. As the irremediable exclusion from this life is much more complete, more unbearable, dreadful and contradictory, than the exclusion from political life, so is the ending of this exclusion, and even a limited reaction, a revolt against it, more fundamental, as man is more fundamental than the citizen, human life more than political life.

Marx is talking here of alienated labour but the vision is structurally similar to that of Dickens. Absolute human exclusion is more important than the relative kinds of exclusion which can be remedied by partial and piecemeal change. What Dickens saw as a redemption through love and innocence Marx saw as revolution, and that difference is crucial. But still, if this kind of total change is seen as the necessary response to a total condition, the consequent attitude to limited changes is governed by principle rather than by a kind of overlooking.

This is the key, surely, to Dickens's contradictions in the matter of character and environment. Consider this from *Nicholas Nickleby*:

> Now, when he thought how regularly things went on from day to day in the same unvarying round—how youth and beauty died, and ugly griping age lived tottering on—how crafty avarice grew rich, and manly honest hearts were poor and sad—how few they were who tenanted the stately houses, and how many those who lay in noisome pens, or rose each day and laid them down at night, and lived and died, father and son, mother and child, race upon race, and generation upon generation, without a home to shelter them or the energies of one single man directed to their aid—how in seeking, not a luxurious and splendid life, but the bare means of a most wretched and inadequate subsistence, there were women and children in that one town, divided into classes,

> numbered and estimated as regularly as the noble families and folks of great degree, and reared from infancy to drive most criminal and dreadful trades—how ignorance was punished and never taught—how jail-door gaped and gallows loomed for thousands urged towards them by circumstances darkly curtaining their very cradles' heads, and but for which they might have earned their honest bread and lived in peace—how many died in soul, and had no chance of life—how many who could scarcely go astray, be they vicious as they would, turned haughtily from the crushed and stricken wretch who could scarce do otherwise, and who would have been a greater wonder had he or she done well, than even they, had they done ill—how much injustice, and misery and wrong, there was—and yet how the world rolled on from year to year, alike careless and indifferent, and no man seeking to remedy or redress it:—when he thought of all this, and selected from the mass the one slight case on which his thoughts were bent, he felt indeed that there was little ground for hope, and little cause or reason why it should not form an atom in the huge aggregate of distress and sorrow, and add one small and unimportant unit to swell the great amount.

This deliberately generalising description, which it pleases some people to call rant, is the general condition as Dickens quite consistently saw it. Within it, certainly, there is determinism: circumstances create evil. To that, inevitably, there is the humane response: help, where now no man seeks to 'remedy or redress'; teach, rather than punish, ignorance. But the whole description is of a *system*: the numbering into classes; the carelessness and indifference; the aggregate of distress and sorrow.

It is then a social condition but seen at a level where it is also a human condition. The complaint of beauty dying and ugliness surviving is what is so often now seen, by men who think they have outgrown social criticism, as 'criticising life'. But social criticism when it is most successful is always and inescapably a criticism of life. If Dickens believed that not only 'noisome pens' and 'stately houses' but the death of beauty and

the 'griping' survival of ugliness were the products of the system, can we be quite sure that he was wrong? It would be easy to show him falling into confusion of unlike facts, in some 'general mood' of indignation. But death and survival, though they can be seen as absolutes, are almost always related to a general condition of living. And to push social criticism that far is to pass beyond what is ordinarily seen as social criticism but not to pass beyond social experience. Moreover, if the 'huge aggregate of distress and sorrow' is seen as a human condition, in this way of living, it is seen as a matter for response rather than for mere recognition. Nicholas, after this vision, 'gradually summoned up his utmost energy'. It is what Dickens manages to do, almost always, by way of intervening. He often believed because he must try to believe that good circumstances would produce good characters, and so help for the unfortunate. But already, in this early novel, he cannot see it as a *general* fact. The comfortable turn haughtily away, and from *Dombey and Son* onwards we see a social system in which the turning away is as much a product of circumstances as the distress. Indifference indeed, in the later novels, is a thing that the system and its expectations actively teach.

Yet under the weight of this system, and from no demonstrable cause, a turning towards also occurs. It is easy to show that having defined a social condition as the cause of virtue and vice, Dickens then produces virtue, almost magically as in *Little Dorrit*, from the same conditions which in others bred vice; or produces charity by making an exceptional and surprising benevolence flourish, overriding the determinism of the system, or often by an arranged and unexplained withdrawal from the system, where charity can suddenly be afforded.

We may or may not believe in it, as social observation, but though it has the character of miracle it is the kind of miracle that happens: the flowering of love or energy which is inexpli-

cable by the ways of describing people to which (usually under the influence of the same system) we have got used. There is no reason, that is to say, for love or innocence, except that almost obliterated by this general condition there is humanity. The exclusion of the human, which we can see operating in a describable system, is not after all absolute, or it would make no sense to call what is alienated human; there would otherwise be nothing to alienate. The inexplicable quality of the indestructible innocence, of the miraculously intervening goodness, on which Dickens so much depends and which has been casually written off as sentimentality is genuine *because* it is inexplicable. What is explicable, after all, is the system, which consciously or unconsciously has been made. To believe that a human spirit exists, ultimately more powerful than even this system, is an act of faith but an act of faith in ourselves. That this became more and more difficult for Dickens is not surprising, but to the end, under increasing pressure, it is what he is not only saying but making happen.

It is in this dimension that we must judge his creation of characters. There has been an important critical difficulty about what is called his reduction of people to caricatures and about what is called the 'sentimentality' of his 'impossibly pure' heroines. But Dickens was creating, openly and deliberately, a world in which people had been deprived of any customary identity and yet in which, paradoxically, the deprivation was a kind of liberation, in which the most fantastic and idiosyncratic kinds of growth could come about. People had to define themselves and their position in the world—it is his characteristic mode:

> 'My present salary, Miss Summerson, at Kenge and Carboy's, is two pound a week. When I first had the happiness of looking upon you, it was one-fifteen, and had stood at that figure for a lengthened period. A rise of five has since taken place, and a further rise

> of five is guaranteed at the expiration of a term not exceeding twelve months from the present date.'

> 'When I offered to your sister to keep company, and to be asked in church, at such times as she was willing and ready to come to the forge, I said to her, "And bring the poor little child. God bless the poor little child".'

> 'But that's like me I run away with an idea and having none to spare I keep it, alas there was a time dear Arthur that is to say decidedly not dear nor Arthur neither but you understand me when one bright idea gilded the what's-his name horizon of et cetera but it is darkly clouded now and all is over.'

> 'My friends, what is this which we now behold as being spread before us? Refreshment. Do we need refreshment then, my friends? We do. And why do we need refreshment, my friends? Because we are but mortal, because we are but sinful, because we are but of the earth, because we are not of the air. Can we fly, my friends? We cannot. Why can we not fly, my friends?'

The emphasis is often isolated, often absurd, but what runs through it is a paradoxical energy. It is a loss of customary settlement, though not of customary phrases, which in their abstract repetition can become ludicrous because misplaced. But at the same time it is a kind of release, which even at its most grotesque is irrepressible and above all various. It is in this paradoxical dimension that Dickens creates the ordinary human condition, in ways that are clearer and sharper, given his general vision, than any more normative characterisation could be. Many of the techniques for this kind of description came from popular journalism, including 'police characters', from popular illustrations and cartoons, and from the theatre. It is from the theatre also and especially from melodrama that the counterweight is taken: the stabilising simple figures of innocence and purity. These are not the morality figures of an age of common belief, but the dramatic figures of an age in which individuality and growth are paradoxical and in which,

as an emphasis and an intervention, the simplest human qualities of love and kindness must be deliberately sustained. It is a structure of feeling, in its strengths and weaknesses, which he shares with the popular culture of his time.

At the same time, by moving this structure into an extended action, Dickens ran into problems which are quite specific to his own art. There are times when the emotions can seem too large for the objects and situations through which they are released, and the line between intensity and absurdity is then often crossed, quite apart from those occasions when the dramatic structure fails, temporarily, to hold and is merely remembered and imitated. Where the failure is in the writing we can only note and consider it. But when there is overlapping of meaning it may be possible to avoid some of our own failures by analysis. Here is a mixed case:

> The mature young gentleman is a gentleman of property. He invests his property. He goes in a condescending amateurish way, into the City, attends meetings of directors, and has to do with traffic in Shares. As is well known to the wise in their generation, traffic in Shares is the one thing to have to do with in this world. Have no antecedents, no established character, no cultivation, no ideas, no manners; have Shares. Have Shares enough to be on Boards of Direction in capital letters, oscillate on mysterious business between London and Paris, and be great. Where does he come from? Shares. Has he any principles? Shares. What squeezes him into Parliament? Shares. Perhaps he never of himself achieved success in anything, never originated anything, never produced anything. Sufficient answer to all: Shares. O mighty Shares!

It is true that this passage would have 'special force in the years just before the crisis of 1866, which saw the failure of Overend and Gurney', and that it is integrated into the novel by its reference to the careers of several of the characters. But we do not need to deny these points to remind ourselves that this power of making an abstraction into a dramatic force is, as we

have seen, a major element in all Dickens's social vision. And it is just here that the problem of 'exaggeration' is hardest. Traffic in shares is the *one* thing to have to do with the world? Do even the wise in their generation believe that? It is like 'no man seeking to remedy or redress it', in the *Nickleby* passage, when the most casual observation would have turned up a thousand. Is Dickens then being unfair? Is such a character credible?

But the character here is Shares. And the question is not really whether share capital, as a technique, leads to economic prosperity or to the crash of Overend and Gurney. It is what quality of living, what kinds of relationships, Shares embody (the repeated capital letter is important, as is stressed again in 'Boards of Direction'). It is not so much an isolated economic technique or an isolated aspect of character. It is more a free-acting force, separated from man though of course created by him. That it then in turns creates behaviour, principles, power: this is the whole point and the social observation is indeed fundamental—this is a *general* condition. The dramatic element, which Shares becomes, is like the dust-heaps and the river and the isolated colliding characters who live through and on them and who are brought to a willed and valued resolution. If you ask in detail how shares operate, this share and that, or how and why businesses flourish and fall, you are outside the drama, but what you have gained in one kind of contact with reality you have lost in another: learning the detailed workings but missing Dickens's dramatisation of what he saw as the total experience.

And this is of course very easy to do, quite apart from Overend and Gurney. For once he has got his dramatic figure, Dickens literally throws the book at it. The received phrases of aristocratic values—'antecedents, established character, cultivation, ideas, manners'—are hurled with the bourgeois values—

'achieved success, originated, produced'. Are these then to be set against Shares? Is that Dickens's meaning? But then which set of values, or both? From the primary feeling—that shares are replacing men as the active creators of the world—there is a rapid process of translation and overlapping, through the ordinarily available meanings. It is like the spectre attendant on Merdle addressing the high priests of the Circumlocution Office—'Are such the signs you trust and love to honour; this head, these eyes, this mode of speech, the tone and manner of this man?', for all the world as if it were Matthew Arnold. The spectre is the general vision; the words are from the book. And in a sense, any book will do, once the action is joined. Mainly Carlyle, of course, and the angry, sarcastic radicalism of Cobbett. But also, when it can help, a proposition about utility (as House has shown); a constructive suggestion from Robert Owen (character immediately alterable by change of circumstances); an appeal for organised charity and a tirade against it; a reminiscence of Scripture; a detail from a contemporary report; a statistic and a tirade against statistics. It wouldn't be difficult, picking up all these bits and pieces and seeing how often they are contradictory, to call Dickens merely irresponsible; indeed it has been done. But the responsibility, finally, is to the general vision, and in the end this is deep and remarkable. At the surface, there is the confusion of theory and the debris of phrases so characteristic of this period of English popular radicalism; and that the confusion persisted, that Dickens even propagated it, is historically very important. But still, the whole drama of values, the powerful way of seeing the world so that it cannot but be criticised and responded to: these, as substance, are more penetrating into the reality of nineteenth-century England than any of the systems which were in fact made clear and consistent.

Even the deepest contradictions are within this power. The

vision of alienation has its own alienated elements: a child is destroyed, as in *Dombey and Son*, by the subjection of a human being to a social role, but then Toodles or Cuttle are similarly subjected, by their author, who defines their whole reality in the jargon of their job, not only to show but in fact to minimise the pressures on them. The appeasing ventriloquism of the whining poor is only a step from the desperate inarticulacy of men subject to arbitrary economic power, but the step is taken. The aggregate of distress and sorrow has only to move, collectively, to be converted into its opposite and be seen as a howling mob. The trick played by Dombey on Polly, making her Richards for his convenience, is played by Meagles on Tattycoram, but the flow of feeling is now different. The good are *our* people, even when other people are different only because they are minor characters. Money corrupts, but it does not corrupt Sol Gills. The house of Dombey deserves to fall, but Walter can re-establish it. There are very many examples of this kind. The hurling of random ideas and the profoundly selective character of the moral action have certainly to be recognised. They are the problems of translation, but also the probable accompaniments of so single, intense, compulsive and self-involving a vision: the characteristic weaknesses where we have already recognised the strengths.

But the social criticism, giving that phrase its full value—not a set of opinions only, nor a series of reforms only, nor even habitual attitudes only, but a vision of the nature of man and the means of his liberation in a close and particular place and time—this social criticism is in the end marvellously achieved and still profoundly active. For indeed it is the kind of social criticism which belongs to literature and especially, in our own civilisation, to the novel. Sociology can describe social conditions more accurately, at the level of ordinary measurement. A political programme can offer more precise remedies, at the

level of ordinary action. Literature can attempt to follow these modes, but at its most important its process is different and yet still inescapably social: a whole way of seeing that is communicable to others, and a dramatisation of values that becomes an action.