

NOTES AND REVIEWS

The Imagination in Fiction: Two Versions of Dickens

For the hundred years covered by George Ford's *Dickens and His Readers*¹ critics of Dickens's fiction have constantly called on the term "imagination" and the different, at times contradictory, literary techniques and powers associated with it. This continuing commentary on Dickens's use of imagination in his fiction has had no necessary relation to the critic's own evaluation of the writings. Dickens has been damned by Bagehot and Lewes, and praised by such unlikely allies as Chesterton, Santayana, and Orwell, for his employment of the imagination: always the same term and often with the same broad significance intended. This ambivalence, even confusion, in the critical direction and force of the term "imagination" was in part caused by the great changes in poetic and critical theory around the end of the eighteenth century, changes convincingly charted by M. H. Abrams² and completed—if they ever were—about the time Dickens, and his critics, began to write. But it was also caused by the complexity of the very psychological and aesthetic energies we include within the term, as well as by the equally great fullness, complexity, and gusto of Dickens's own imagination.

Two recent studies of the powers and significance of Dickens's imagination make it clear that this concept, even with its ambivalences, is just as necessary today for the criticism of Dickens's art as it has ever been. These two studies are John Carey, *The Violent Effigy: A Study of Dickens' Imagination*,³ and Garrett Stewart, *Dickens and the Trials of Imagination*.⁴ For Carey, "what makes [Dickens] unique is the power of his imagination" (p. 7), and Stewart says, of "the miracle worked by all imagination, both in art and in daydream, on the stuff of reality" (p. xiii), "that this 'pleasure' in Dickens is among the largest and most continuous in our literature" (p. xxiii). But beyond this opening commitment, Carey and Stewart have little in common as critics of Dickens and illustrate just how widely discussions of the power of Dickens's imagination may differ.

First, and fundamentally, Carey and Stewart differ in the respect, implied or direct, they hold toward Dickens's imagination. This difference is evident, among other ways, in the very tone of their attitude toward Dickens, as in the following, on Dickens's humor. For Carey, "the double effect of smirking at the viewer and despising the viewed is highly characteristic of Dickens' humour" (p. 54), whereas for Stewart, speaking on behalf of Dickens, "my subject here, and Dickens's in novel after novel, has been the fictive capacity of ordinary men and women to rescue themselves from society's toxic indifference, from the corrosive, denaturing routines of getting from day to day. No such fictions can be ignoble. They mobilize the mind against deadness, and they may become saving privacies" (p. 225). The statements may not be exactly parallel, but the comparison is clear. Carey frequently writes of Dickens in this hostile mode; as if, rather like Waugh's hero, he had been forced against his will to spend ten years studying Dickens's writings at hard labor and has chosen this unlikely way of taking his revenge. Of one description of Dolly Varden we are told by Carey that Dickens "is evidently salivating freely. It is by far his sexiest scene" (p. 23). Such ill breeziness blows no one good.

Carey and Stewart also differ in the importance and centrality they allow to the imagination. For Carey, the imagination is curiously separable from certain other qualities or effects of literature. This becomes especially clear when he reaffirms, at the end of the Introduction, his approach as against the false concerns of earlier critics: "The main subject of the following chapters, then, will not be Dickens' morals, social criticism or alleged inferiority to George Eliot, but the workings of his imagination" (p. 10). As if any of these, or virtually any other issue involving Dickens's fiction, could be so neatly, so un-Coleridgeanly, dissociated from the workings of Dickens's imagination. The "imagination" that could survive this kind of surgery will strike some as more like Coleridge's "fancy" than true creative imagination, seen either philosophically or formally. This "imagination" also seems, for Carey, to be displayed in Dickens's minor writings as well as in his major ones, in his non-fiction as well as his fiction, in his personal voice as well as his artistic one. At times, in fact, this "imagination" seems to become an extra-literary phenomenon, more the verbal manifestations of Dickens's personal psyche, and psychoses, than of any genuine creative impulse—"Dickens' imaginative habits," as Carey calls them (p. 96), almost suggesting a theory of artistic automatism. (In his final chapter, on "Dickens and Sex," paradoxically, Carey does concern himself very much with "Dickens' morals, social criticism or alleged inferiority to George Eliot," or something that looks very much like them.)

Stewart seeks and finds the outward signs of Dickens's imagination less in certain characteristics and recurrences of imagery and detail and more in language, character, plot, and what F. R. Leavis calls "dramatic enactment,"⁵ always in the full context of the specific, special work of fiction within which they jostle, interact, or unite toward some less or more successful artistic whole. This difference makes the organization of the two studies, and the approach it reflects, radically different in another way. Carey chops up Dickens's separate novels and other writings into small bits he then reassembles under seven topics: Violence, Order, Humor, Corpses and Effigies, Symbols, Children, and Sex; retaining no real sense of the individual work of fiction and little indication of the development of Dickens's technical skills and maturity of vision. Stewart, however, gives detailed analytic consideration to three novels central to his special subject: *Pickwick Papers*, in his first three chapters; *The Old Curiosity Shop*, in his fourth chapter; and *Our Mutual Friend*, in his seventh and last chapter. And even when he divides his topic, by way of certain individual characters, into more and less dangerous recourses to the "refuge of imagination" earlier achieved by both Wellers and, more problematically, Dick Swiveller, Stewart places such "naughty company" as Pecksniff, Chadband, and Micawber (chapter five), on the one hand, and the "escape artists": "pastoralists," "fire-gazers," "personalities," and certain "heroes" of imagination" (chapter six), on the other hand, all firmly within the full context of their "dramatic enactment" in each separate novel.

Not only the writer's imagination but also that of the reader must take part in that final creation of the work of fiction—the reading experience itself and the fond recollection of it. And the critic of the imagination must be ready to mediate between the two imaginations, artist's and reader's. In this mediation not only the tone mentioned above, but also the generosity, thoroughness, and excitement of the critic's approach, will stir the reader's sympathetic imagination toward the heightened awareness called for by the products of the writer's creative one. Take the example of an intensely imagined, critically controversial character such as Jenny Wren in *Our Mutual Friend*. Carey dismisses this character in one short, name-calling paragraph, that includes a pair of three-line, unanalyzed quotations, as having "some wistful religious experience

foisted onto her by Dickens," a "maudlin vision" coated by "the wash of Dickensian religious sentiment" (p. 109). Stewart makes the same character the subject of a whole chapter, over twenty pages of close, sympathetic verbal, psychological, thematic, symbolic analysis of a character whose appearance at the bedside of Eugene Wrayburn Stewart sees as "one of the most wonderful moments in fiction, the climax of perhaps Dickens's greatest novel and of his career-long interest in the mending power of imagination" (p. 198). For "the artistic marvel of Jenny's conception is itself a large part of the significance toward which her whole being tends. She is not only created by, she comes in fact to symbolize, the Dickensian fancy at its most spacious and versatile" (p. 199). Stewart goes on to show, in great and eloquent detail, how.

With any writer as strongly committed to the powers of the imagination as Dickens, in theory and in practice, obviously was, it is not surprising that these powers of imagination should become not only a major aesthetic force toward the creation of the work of fiction but also a major ethical force within the created work. For Carey the powers of imagination within the novel are still limited to the author's own perspective: a "power of observation . . . capable of creating a fresh imaginative vision" (p. 96), and these powers are apparently successful for Carey only when allied with "a humour so interfused with his creative processes that when it fails his imagination seldom survives it for more than a few sentences" (p. 175). As Carey goes on to sum up the whole matter, in the final sentences of *The Violent Effigy*: "This toughness helped to ensure his commercial success, but it can be traced, too, in the way he manipulates his imagination. Behind his defenceless children—David or Pip—there stands, smiling, the secure adult writer; it is the same figure who authoritatively converts his insidious scissored women into frumps and termagants. Dickens' imagination transforms the world; his laughter controls it." But for Stewart, as must be already clear, the powers of imagination are exercised not only by Dickens in every aspect of his creative art but also ethically by many of Dickens's most important characters, through language, thought, and action, in ways that affect not only the careers of these characters but also the fates of many others surrounding them and that determine to a large extent, finally, the meaningful shape of the total work of fiction, a novel by Dickens.

His demonstration of the powers of imagination working within the novel is Stewart's final, and most original, contribution to our understanding and appreciation of Dickens, and such a contribution is the mark of a major critic of Dickens. Granted that our appreciation of a writer can always be enriched by a generous, thoughtful challenge to that idealized artist-hero of the literary imagination we create as the objective embodiment of our own subjective delights, a challenge such as Carey does occasionally offer, as in his vigorous attack on various symbolic readings of Dickens. But Carey, who clearly and genuinely feels that the criticism of Dickens's fiction has gone much too far in recent years, is content—unlike Stewart—to restore, i.e., reduce, restrict, the working of Dickens's imagination in his greatest works of fiction to a level of achieved form, apprehended complexity, and felt power it has not been restricted to for the last thirty years.

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NOTES

¹Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1955.

²*The Mirror and the Lamp* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953).

³London: Faber and Faber, 1973, pp. 183. Subsequent page references will be indicated in the text.

⁴Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974, pp. xxiv, 260. Subsequent references will be indicated in the text.

⁵*Dickens the Novelist* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970), p. 27.