

A Triumph of Comparative Method:

A. J. Guerard on Fiction

Comparisons of Dickens's writings with those of one or more writers offer a generous sampling of the range and forms of that comparative study of prose fiction of which Albert Guerard's *The Triumph of the Novel* is a recent and notable example. A brief autobiographical digression: As a student, stirred by previous interest in Hardy and otherwise uninformed curiosity, I enrolled in a course on what seemed the unlikely combination of Hardy, Conrad, and Gide, offered by A. J. Guerard. Today as a teacher of British and American literature to Canadian students I am even more sympathetic now, if possible, than I became then to the educative and critical possibilities of even the most unexpected literary comparisons. Guerard has published separate books on Hardy, on Gide, and on Conrad, and now a book whose full title is *The Triumph of the Novel: Dickens, Dostoevsky, Faulkner*.¹ Obviously, then, *The Triumph of the Novel* has its place not only in the contexts of criticism on Dickens, on Dostoevsky, and on Faulkner, but in the context of Guerard's total activity as a critic of prose fiction, as a triumphant practitioner of the methods, the "poetics," of literary comparison. I shall look at *The Triumph of the Novel* in only two of many possible contexts: the comparison of Dickens with other writers of prose fiction and the "poetics" of literary comparison. The first of these contexts will provide examples to illustrate some tentative suggestions as to the general shape and forms of the second. The following eight works provide a context of the comparison of Dickens with other writers: Stefan Zweig, *Three Masters: Balzac, Dickens, Dostoevsky* (1920); Frank D. Wiestra, *Smollett and Dickens* (1928); Kathleen Tillotson, *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* (1954); Mark Spilka, *Dickens and Kafka: A Mutual Interpretation* (1963); Donald Fanger, *Dostoevsky and Romantic Realism: A Study of Dostoevsky in Relation to Balzac, Dickens, and Gogol* (1965); Pearl Chesler Solomon, *Dickens and Melville in Their Time* (1975); Alfred B. Harbage, *A Kind of Power: The Shakespeare-Dickens Analogy* (1975); and Guerard's own book.² I shall compare Guerard's with these other books mainly as to method rather than specific interpretation of Dickens.

The structure of any comparative study of Dickens with one or more other authors both informs and is informed by its author's other choices of comparative method. The conventional handbook distinction between "opposing" and "alternating" comparison, along with more subtle combinations thereof, still holds for such presumably more sophisticated critical discourses. The more absolutely such comparisons are opposed, up to the point where separate books or essays are simply bound as one, what may be gained in fullness of treatment of each author may be lost in vagueness and impressionism of comparison. Apart from a common critical vocabulary, if even this still be present, we may have no sense of any "poetics" of comparison to govern and inform the occasion or the process. Thus, for example, although Zweig's title and subject may seem roughly parallel to Guerard's or to Fanger's, his book has three totally separate essays, so separate that the respective essays have more citation of several other writers than of the other two of the "three masters" with whom they are supposedly concerned. Only the broadest typological category, of "world-

¹New York: Oxford University Press, 1976. Pp. viii, 365.

²In *Master Builders* (New York: Viking, 1939 [1930]; Amsterdam: C. de Boer, 1928; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956 (1954); London: Dennis Dobson, 1963; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967 (1965); New York: Columbia University Press, 1975; Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1975; and above.

portraying" epic, equally loosely applied to each author, associates the three. Guerard, on the other hand, as even a glance at his table of contents will suggest, achieves an artful and logical alternating structure—as do in their own ways Spilka, Harbage, and Solomon—intricate enough to embody the full shape of his critical procedures but not so elaborate as to destroy our sense of the three authors, and their works, as independent, unique wholes.

In his "Introduction" Guerard articulates easily but systematically his own poetics of literary comparison and, in a special "Note on Method," of the criticism of fiction generally. The four main points of the latter provide the premises of this book and of Guerard's earlier ones:

- 1) A concern with the creative process and with rhetorical effect. . . .
 - 2) A non-psychoanalytic but psychological approach to the interpretation of enigmatic scenes or events. . . .
 - 3) A high value placed on energy (of invention, narrative, language); and on fiction and play; and on tension, especially a tension between sympathy and judgment. . . .
 - 4) A distinction between first and later readings of a novel. . . .
- (pp. 17-20)

Each of these premises is, of course, developed during the "Introduction" and illustrated fully in the analyses in the body of the book. These four emphases are "the specific concerns or heresies" (p. 17) of a desired "flexibility of method that makes adjustments according to a novel's *area of discourse*" (p. 16). In the same "Introduction" Guerard rejects as inappropriate or undesirable certain "kinships and affinities" among his three subjects and proposes and welcomes certain others. Those "kinships" he specifically rejects are: culture, moment, or influence; those he proposes to test by the methods outlined above are: anti-realism, fictional world, innovation, and temperament.

Guerard unequivocally casts out the kinship of influence: "Kinship not influence—though Dostoevsky was conscious of his debt to Dickens and Faulkner of his major debt to both. American scholarship has not so long since freed itself from a good part of a century's obsession with influence, and I have no desire to revive the academic dead" (p. 3). Yet even Guerard, we notice, sketches in the lines of influence in the very act of erasing them and alludes to them later if only in passing (pp. 41, 95, 105, 125, etc.). We might ask why the ghost of influence-study, the "academic dead," should continue to haunt even those literary comparisons from which it has supposedly been exorcized. If, as Guerard also remarks, "the fact of influence teaches us almost nothing," why has this ghost been so difficult to lay? Because, I would argue, it does still speak to certain of our needs as readers and students of literature, needs both rational and emotional, scientific and mythic. Wierstra's *Smollett and Dickens*, to take an extreme, admittedly outdated example, opens with the premise that an author's sources somehow "form the foundation of his art," for "his greatness depends on the way in which he handles his material." What follow, however, are over a hundred innocently unflinching pages of unanalyzed, unevaluated, uninterpreted resemblances/indebtednesses between Dickens and Smollett, pages that read for the most part like some hitherto undiscovered parody by Mark Twain of a turn-of-the-century doctoral dissertation. Yet even this study, in addition to its unconscious parodic charm, speaks to the needs cited above. For in its uncritical fashion it does imply a larger if unarticulated pattern of organic, evolutionary, even progressive literary interrelatedness analogous to the great historical and scientific syntheses that answered the great questions of nineteenth and early twentieth-century

thought. It appeals as well, if equally unselfconsciously and unawaredly, to our genuine pleasure in any bond, even that of influence, that can connect the writers we study and care for. Such more recent and more sophisticated comparative studies of Dickens as those by Spilka and Fanger still feel these needs and try to satisfy them, if only as prelude and background to other critical ends. Solomon, on the other hand, scrupulously avoids discussing the possible influence of Dickens on Melville, her main purpose being the differences between them. Harbage, as a compromise, assumes Shakespeare's influence on Dickens but treats it elsewhere.³

Guerard rejects kinships of culture and moment for any lengthy consideration, but as inappropriate rather than useless: "The new light should come from discerning kinships and affinities among writers from radically different cultures (but cultures in uneasy moments of transition) and even more radically different moments in the history of the novel" (p. 3). Tillotson, by contrast, compares Dickens with three other British novelists of the eighteen-forties according to close kinships of moment and culture, within which, however, other differences still matter. Such kinships obviously need not be as exact as those Tillotson considers. Implicit throughout Fanger's discussion of the romantic realism that Dickens, Gogol, Balzac, and Dostoevsky shared are kinships of early to mid-nineteenth-century moment and urban culture that also linked them. Solomon, in turn, uses kinships of moment and of certain broad similarities of culture as a frame within which "to see some of the ways in which 'culture' determines the themes and forms of fiction; to see to what extent history and 'culture' form the writer"; for "not only are Dickens's and Melville's heroes different from each other; they stand—as did their authors—in entirely different relationships to their cultures" (p. 1). Because of the stability of English middle-class culture over two-and-a-half centuries Harbage can argue that even Dickens and Shakespeare "almost . . . come into the world as contemporaries" (p. 4). And there are many other possible kinships of moment and culture, any of which, like these, both determine and are determined, of course, by the critic's initial choice of authors for comparison.

Of the three kinships Guerard does single out, triumphs of antirealism brought into being by Dickens's, Dostoevsky's, and Faulkner's "unconscious creation and highly liberated fantasy" (p. 4), one is hardly news: "A first kinship, related to this saving lack of resistance, is that all three were exceptionally fecund creators of varied and quantitatively rich worlds" (p. 5). But Guerard, to this extent like Zweig, brings this truism to life by combining a sympathetic reader's enthusiastic relish and savor of such achievements with a fellow-novelist's informed admiration of them and by conveying both these responses eloquently. Moreover, Guerard, this time unlike Zweig, also energizes with this enthusiasm intellectual tasks of critical analysis and interpretation in a way more self-consciously "academic" critics seem unable or unwilling to adopt. Harbage, speaking out of earned Olympian retirement after long years of scholarly service, sustains a similarly uninhibited enthusiasm for his two subjects.

"A second kinship (sometimes forgotten of the first two) is that all three novelists were innovators, as most great writers are" (p. 5). Such innovation Guerard finds largely in the "illuminating distortion" (p. 13) practiced by all three. This distortion is further exemplified in the "paradoxical sympathies"

³ "Author's Preface," *A Kind of Power*, pp. xii-xiii; "Shakespeare and the Early Dickens," *Shakespeare: Aspects of Influence*, ed. G. B. Evans, Harvard English Studies, 7 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 109-34.

all three showed (Chapter ii of *The Triumph of the Novel*), in the "forbidden games" all played (Chapters ii-v), and in three different issues: Dickensian voices (Chapter vi), conscious and unconscious psychological understanding in Dostoevsky (Chapter vii), and various problems of Faulknerian technique (Chapter viii). The book is completed by chapters on three novels: *Martin Chuzzlewit* as comic entertainment, *The Possessed* as tragedy, and *Absalom, Absalom!* as impressionist art. These last chapters are the fullest form taken by Guerard's continuous method of discussing representative novels in some detail to illustrate each topic; but I do regret his reluctant choice of *Martin Chuzzlewit* over *Our Mutual Friend* (p. 15). These same topics also call forth Guerard's third kinship, that of temperament.

Guerard's second chapter and his first, on "anti-mimesis," cover with characteristic economy, ease, and thoroughness ground already trod by, among others, Spilka and Fanger—Guerard praises the latter in his first footnote and quotes the former in his discussion of Dickens's "forbidden games." Guerard's post-Freudian disentanglement of the "forbidden games" of Dickens, Dostoevsky, and Faulkner, "tabooed acts and relationships, strong 'antisocial' attractions or repugnances, threatening obsessions" (p. 70), is more radical, more original, more controversial, even today. It proves kinships of fantasy, world, and temperament, and to some degree of innovation; it employs fully all four of Guerard's "heresies" of method, above all the second. The presence of these "games" in the fictional worlds of Dickens, Dostoevsky, and Faulkner seems inescapable; what may be more controversial is the detail and special emphasis with which Guerard presents them, as well as his tactful but unapologetic mixing of fiction and biography, or at least personality, to make his points.

Comparative studies of prose fiction can be primarily thematic or technical, although each emphasis implicates the other and although any thorough comparison must contain both. Guerard always makes us fully aware of both, but his explicit emphasis does, I feel, adjust strategically from topic to topic: the first two chapters being evenly balanced, the next three more thematic, the next three more technical, and the concluding analyses of individual novels again balanced between theme and technique. Guerard's discussion of various Dickensian "voices" is exemplary of this shifting emphasis and of his organizing interests in fantasy, world, innovation, and temperament. The result—the best discussion of Dickens's prose I know of.

Comparative studies between more than two authors, especially if enriched by allusion to further comparative possibilities, fast grow into contextual studies. Hardy, Conrad, Gide, the three subjects of *The Triumph of the Novel*, and the many other novelists also associated, however briefly, with these six figures form, for Guerard, an important and demonstrable tradition or, more exactly, counter-tradition: "I had long pondered the polemical title *The Other Great Tradition*. For I was irritated by F. R. Leavis's priggish and essentially artless view of fiction, and by the stubbornness with which many reviewers and editors (but also eminent academic critics, some of them my colleagues and friends) clung decade after decade to nineteenth-century and 1930ish assumptions concerning 'the novel' and its mimetic obligation" (pp. 11-12). Guerard's antagonists may already be overtaken by critical history. For Leavis, or the Leavises, have in recent years modified their moral realism in the directions of Blake and Shakespeare. Moreover, the newest champions of realism, priggish or otherwise, are more likely to enter the lists under the devices of Lukacs and dialectical materialism. Yet Guerard's main argument stands, and *The Triumph of the Novel* does reassure us, finally, that comparative/contextual studies of prose

fiction can be both descriptive and evaluative, that the context they build up may be not only an historical and formal actuality, but an occasion for celebration and praise.

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The City as Metaphor: The Short Stories of Cyprian Ekwensi

Cyprian Ekwensi (born 26 September, 1921) has been described as "the Nigerian Defoe." He is "a key figure in the historical development of modern West-African writing in English."¹ He has written five full-length novels. The latest, *Survive the Peace*, is about the recent Civil War in Nigeria.² Ekwensi is also the author of seven short novels and the editor of *New Nigerian Writing* (1977), an anthology which commemorates the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture held in Lagos, Nigeria in January 1977. In 1968 he was awarded the Dag Hammarskjold Prize in Literature. He has two books of short stories; his last collection, *Restless City and Christmas Gold*,³ is reviewed here.

Ekwensi is popularly known as an urban novelist; and not surprisingly, the fifteen short stories in *Restless City*, except "One Night Every Year," are set in the city of Lagos. A keen social commentator, Ekwensi declared in a recent recorded interview by Voice of America that he likes to look at life "in the raw," to write about "the values or non-values in our society." He is committed to truth in life and transposes it in fiction. He believes that the recognition of a writer in his own home should be his greatest achievement, and he has been so recognized not only in Nigeria but in English-speaking Africa.

One of the title stories, "Restless City" is about the dilemma of young ambitious Nigerians who come home (after many years in the U.K.) to face the harsh realities of their country. They are disillusioned by the rat race for material wealth in the city of Lagos. Their youthful high ideals for their fatherland evaporate with the first shock from the craze for money. "Come back Elena" is about the wreck of the happy married lives of Elena and Vincent Chuma. It is also a look at the working of the deep recesses of a proud and jealous mind. The murder of Elena by Denis Okefa is the tragic lesson of wrong assumptions, suspicions, accusations, and anger in marriage. It is also a result not only of hurt pride, but more importantly, of a misplaced confidence in the power of wealth.

Ekwensi's favorite subject is the daily occurrences in society especially romantic love.⁴ It seems evident, from "The Great Beyond" and "One Night Every Year," that he is weak in handling supernatural and mysterious tales.

¹Ernest Emenyonu, *Cyprian Ekwensi* (London: Evans Brothers, 1974), back cover.

²See *International Fiction Review*, Vol. 5 No. 2 (July 1978), pp. 164-5.

³Cyprian Ekwensi, *Restless City and Christmas Gold* (London: Heinemann, 1975).

⁴See, for instance, *Jagua Nana* (London: Hutchison, 1961).