A woman with dark, curly hair is seated, wearing a dark, high-collared dress with large, puffed sleeves and a light-colored sash. She holds a long, thin sword horizontally across her lap. The background is a textured, light-colored wall. The overall mood is dramatic and historical.

"Lucid, accessible,  
sharp, entertaining  
and witty."

—Merle Rubin, *Los Angeles Times*

# SAVAGE REPRISALS

BLEAK HOUSE, MADAME BOVARY, BUDDENBROOKS

PETER GAY



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# SAVAGE REPRISALS



*Bleak House*  
*Madame Bovary*  
*Budden brooks*

PETER GAY



W. W. NORTON & COMPANY · NEW YORK · LONDON

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## Dedication

*To Dorothy and Lewis Cullman,  
who changed my life,  
and to  
Doron and Jo Ben-Atar  
Jerry and Bella Berson  
Henry and Jane Turner,  
my New Haven crew*

---

## Epigraph

The face of Dickens . . . is the face of a man who is always fighting against something, but who fights in the open and is not frightened, the face of a man who is *generously angry*, in other words, of a nineteenth-century liberal, a free intelligence, a type hated with equal hatred by all the smelly little orthodoxies which are now contending for our souls.

—*George Orwell on Charles Dickens (1939)*

For Flaubert, who all his life repeatedly declared that he wrote to *take his vengeance* on reality, it was above all negative experiences that inspired literary creation.

—*Mario Vargas Llosa on Gustave Flaubert (1975)*

But the only weapon available to the artist's sensitivity, to let him react with it to phenomena and experiences, to defend himself against them handsomely, is expression, is description. And the reaction by expression which (to speak with a certain psychological radicalism) is the artist's sublime *revenge* on his experience, will be all the more vehement the more refined his sensitivity.

—*Thomas Mann on Thomas Mann (1906)*

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frontispiece: *The Sword*, by Alfred Pierre Agache (1843–1915). Oil on canvas, Art Gallery of Toronto, Canada, 1896.

“Charles Dickens at Desk with Characters.” Original caption: “Author Charles Dickens surrounded by his characters.” From a drawing by J.R. Brown. Undated illustration. Corbis.

*Death Room of Madame Bovary*, by Albert August Fourie. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen. Photo credit: Giraudon/ Art Resource NY.

First edition of *Buddenbrooks* by Thomas Mann, 1901. Courtesy of S. Fischer Verlag.

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## PROLOGUE

### *Beyond the Reality Principle*



DURING THE SPECTACULAR CAREER OF LITERARY Realism in the nineteenth century, the style was covered with accolades, none more heartfelt than Walt Whitman's: "For facts properly told, how mean appear all romances." Honoré de Balzac famously saw himself as "the amanuensis of history," vaulting claim that the following pages will serve to examine and complicate, but which on their own convey a novelist's powerful sense of reality. And in February 1863, Ivan Turgenev brought word to his fellow diners in Paris, all of them prominent literary figures—Flaubert was there, as were France's leading critic, Sainte-Beuve, and the Goncourt brothers, diarists and novelists—that Russian writer, too, a little belatedly, had joined the Realist party.

In fact, it is fair to say that well into the twentieth century, novelists across Europe and the United States were firmly committed to the Reality Principle. They made, as it were, a tacit compact with their reading public that obligated them to remain close to truths about individuals and their societies—to invent only "real" people and situations, in short to be trustworthy in their fictions about ordinary life. Romantic sagas about gallant knights and improbable adventures, seductive ladies and doomed lovers, all bathed in extravagant luxury, were not for them. Rather, the Realists found their material in circumstances essentially like their bourgeois readers' own styles of speech and ways of life. Even classic modernists like Marcel Proust or James Joyce created characters that, they insisted, obeyed the laws of human nature; in fact, *A la recherche du temps perdu* and *Ulysses* aimed at penetrating to the heart of internal life, the one with meticulous analyses and the other with linguistic experiments, more effectively than their more predictable fellow novelists could manage. Avant-garde or conventional Realists made exceptional efforts to paint credible backgrounds and credible personages.

The three writers I am exploring in this book were all Realists, each in his own way. Their writings consistently paid homage to their commitment to the mundane. For all the eccentrics that populated Charles Dickens's novels, all his unsubtle division of characters into heroes and villains, he insisted on the strongest terms—in *Bleak House* perhaps most urgently—that he was in league with nature and science in imagining the scenes he spread out before his readers. Thomas Mann rifled his memories of Lübeck and canvassed his older brother Heinrich, other family members, and older acquaintances to provide his *Buddenbrooks* with the authority of living verisimilitude. Even Gustave Flaubert, who despised the newly fashionable genre called "Realism" for what he derided as its alleged vagueness and vulgarity, developed his own brand of Realism with fussy, downright obsessive care, making the characters in *Madame Bovary* as lifelike as possible. Whatever precise meaning authors, critics, and readers might assign to "Realism," they could agree that the serious novelist must strictly confine himself—and herself—to plausible characters living in plausible surroundings and participating in plausible (and one hoped, interesting) events.

But their increasingly prestigious vocation as novelists pushed leading Realists beyond the Reality Principle. They were makers of literature, not mere photographers or stenographers of commonplac

life. Their prized imaginative powers liberated them in ways barred to scientists of society—sociologists, political scientists, anthropologists, historians—for whom facts and their rational interpretation remained paramount.\* That is why nineteenth-century writers basked in the right to cherish their freedom from pedestrian constraints—of course always within reason. In the extraordinary letters that Flaubert wrote to his mistress Louise Colet at midcentury while he was at work on *Madame Bovary*, long bulletins from the front that amount to a treatise in aesthetics, he exclaimed over and over: “That is everything: the love of Art.”

For his part Thomas Mann, astonished that *Buddenbrooks* should have caused “a sensation in Lübeck and bad blood,” protested against this literal-minded reception of his first novel at home. “The reality that a writer subjects to his intentions,” he wrote with some indignation of his own, “may be his darling world, may as a character be his closest and most beloved; he may show himself as subordinate to the possible to details provided by reality, may use its deepest trait greedily and obediently for his text, and yet there will remain for him—and should for all the world!—an immeasurable difference between the reality and his handiwork: that is to say, the essential difference which forever separates the world of reality from that of art.”

This Realist manifesto is too eloquent to require much comment. There is no point in making excessive demands on the realism of Realism. Certainly, as Realist novelists and their readers knew perfectly well, Realism is not reality. At one point in *Buddenbrooks*, Mann propels the tale forward with the bridge passage, “Two and a half years later,” a reminder that in fiction time makes acrobatic leaps. Again, late in *Education sentimentale*, Flaubert breaks into the continuity of his hero’s life with a famous two-word paragraph, “He traveled,” and then in a few terse words reports what happened to Frédéric Moreau between 1848 and 1867. The Realist novel cuts the world apart and puts it together again in distinctive ways. Its reality is stylized—pushed and twisted—to serve the requirements of an author’s plots and character developments. Even when novelists deliberately resort to such easy, lazy tricks as the long arm of coincidence and the all-solving deus ex machina, they profess that the world they are constructing is authentic.

Realist fiction, then, to underscore the almost self-evident, is literature, not sociology or history. It permits, in fact invites, the pleasures of encountering Dickens’s delightful or frightening misfits in *Bleak House*; observing Flaubert’s dissection of a sadly overmatched provincial beauty in *Madame Bovary*; appreciating Mann’s irony at play in *Buddenbrooks*, that most subversive of family chronicles. I have no quarrel with the literary critic who visualizes novelists, including those of the Realist persuasion, as alchemists who transmute the dross of the quotidian into the gold of art. Nothing I shall be saying in these pages should dissuade readers from taking novels as aesthetic productions with their own standards, their own gratifications, their own triumphs. After all, the novel is one of the signal achievements of modern civilization.

To be sure, there is more than one way of reading a novel: as a source of civilized pleasures, as a didactic instrument serving self-improvement, as a document opening doors to its culture. I have already singled out the first of these for praise; I leave the second, with its good intentions and its earnestness, to pedagogues and the salesmen of spirituality. In what follows, I shall investigate the third of these alternatives: this book is a study of novels as a possible (and possibly treacherous) treasure house of knowledge. That seems to me a necessary exercise, for it is by no means self-evident just how to extract truths from fictions.

❏ LIKE OTHER READERS, MOST HISTORIANS HAVE IGNORED these difficulties, uncritically

assigning or recommending novels as so many works of reference that supply dependable social and cultural information. True, no sensible scholar would turn to Franz Kafka's *Trial* for straightforward reporting on the Austro-Hungarian judicial system, or to his *Castle* for the duties of a land surveyor. But nineteenth-century novelists, particularly the Realist majority—like the Portuguese Eça de Queiroz, the French Goncourt brothers, or the American William Dean Howells—have seemed more promising as providers of serviceable particulars. Whether enshrined in laws or perpetuated by social habits like the authority of the father or the status of women in the family, the financial side of marriage arrangements, the average salary of a clerk, the correct mode of addressing a bishop, have been turned into bits of evidence that scholars have found attractive, almost irresistible.

Prospecting, say, for hard facts in Pérez Galdós's unforgettable novel, *Fortunata and Jacinta* (1880-87), which is set around 1870, a historian could come away with a mass of reliable information about bourgeois marriage in Madrid, intellectual fashions in university circles, prevalent business practices, and endemic political tensions. Again, the scholar interested in the history of the department store may do well to begin with Zola's *Au bonheur des dames* of 1883, after making allowances for some melodramatic overstatements and oversimplifications. Such examples illustrate why the novel seems such an unsurpassable guide. It stands at the strategic intersection between culture and the individual, the large and the small, rehearsing political, social, religious ideas and practices, portentous developments and epochal conflicts, in an intimate setting. Read aright, it promises to become a superbly instructive document.

The Realist novel is so rich in comprehensive implications precisely because it puts its characters through their paces across time and space as though they are real persons growing into a microcosm of their culture and its history. It treats them as individuals solidly anchored in their world, in *this* world. Justly so: by the age of five or six, a child is a miniature anthology of the ways of the society that envelops it. It has imbibed rules of conduct, canons of taste, religious beliefs from its educators, formal and informal—parents, siblings, nannies and servants, teachers, priests, school friends. The result is, after all, nothing astonishing about the fact that the child of Italians speaks Italian or the child of Episcopalians grows up to be an Episcopalian. By the time the youngster goes to school, then, after the first years of its domestic apprenticeship for life, it has learned, more or less effectively, how to deal with siblings, playmates, and authority figures, with competence and frustration, rewards and punishments, and the little hypocrisies necessary for survival. Realist novelists were bound to make their characters conform to such basic facts of life.

And early lessons persist, whether easily absorbed or obstinately resisted. This was no news to the Victorians; it had been no news to the ancient Greeks and to educators in the centuries from Plato to Pestalozzi. A hundred years before Freud made a theory of it, Wordsworth had famously proclaimed that the Child is father of the Man, and, in 1850, on his tour through the Near East, Flaubert mused in a letter to his mother: "First impressions are not effaced, you know that. We carry our past with ourselves; through our entire life, our wet nurse makes herself felt." A character first grown in the familial cocoon is unlikely to deviate from the course imposed on it in its earliest days.

Marxist literary critics have often complained that the "bourgeois" Realist novel fails to take a sufficient account of the social location in which its personages must subsist and act. One of the leading theorists, G. V. Plekhanov, proposed that the critical reader of the bourgeois novel must translate the language of art into the language of sociology. But one need not be a disciple of dialectical materialism to recognize the incessant and intimate interaction of what I am calling the large and the small. Hawthorne wrote *The Scarlet Letter*, with its evocation of the unforgiving rigor of American Puritanism, without any ballast of literary theory. Dostoyevsky wrote *The Brothe*

*Karamazov* without the benefit of Freud's account of the family triangle, the Oedipus complex.

As my exhibits will show, imagined characters pass (or fail) the tests the world imposes on them in their most private sphere, within the mind—responses to early mistreatment in *Bleak House*, marital disillusionment in *Madame Bovary*, fading fortunes in *Buddenbrooks*. All these personal reactions have their cultural dimensions. But the sole center of perceptions is always the individual, who tries to unriddle their meanings and to calculate their consequences. That is why it is possible, and can be highly productive, for students of society reading novels to oscillate between the large and the small, exploring each in the light of the other. The novel, in a word, is a mirror held up to its world.



BUT IT PROVIDES VERY IMPERFECT REFLECTIONS. Stendhal's famous definition of the novel as a mirror moving along a highway is arresting but incomplete: it is a distorting mirror. One of Dickens's mature works, *Hard Times*, published in 1854 right after *Bleak House*, may make this point for me. In the opening scene, he has a teacher, Thomas Gradgrind, address his pupils: "Now, what I want is Facts. Teach those boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else." With a sneer, Dickens calls Mr. Gradgrind, who injects his charges with this repellent doctrine, "A man of realities." As he pursues his argument, Dickens directs his most censorious and most bitter witticisms against what he considers the foundations of Gradgrind's pedagogy: the uncharitable, bloodless, almost literally inhuman philosophy of Jeremy Bentham and his followers, the Utilitarians; he apparently believed that this doctrine dominated and was ruining his England. "Coketown," Dickens's replica of an industrial city, is to his mind the perfect spawning ground for Utilitarians.

Acting as a prosecuting attorney, Dickens calls his witnesses to the stand, making them testify how horribly they have been disfigured by an education that trains the intellect and forgets the heart. Gradgrind's son, spoiled and irresponsible, takes his father's educational dogma far enough to end up as a bank robber; Gradgrind's daughter, whose soul has never been permitted to blossom in her childhood and youth, defenseless and friendless, allows herself to be married to the well-named banker Mr. Bounderby, the richest man in Coketown, whom she does not love and cannot love.

This assault is not a serious critique of a philosophical school but a sheer lampoon. Whoever takes it to be a factual account would be misled almost as badly as are Mr. Gradgrind's charges by his Utilitarianism. Bentham's influence on English life in the decades of the 1830s and after was a complicated affair. An unsparing critic of the English law and encrusted English traditions, a radical committed to a psychology that put the calculus of pleasure and pain at its center, he had prominent disciples in Parliament and out who worked, at times successfully, to translate his ideas into legislation and administrative edicts. But Dickens was too emotional and too ignorant to appreciate the significance of Bentham's thought.\*

For all these cautions, novels have much to say to historians. Even when they get things wrong, they may do so in instructive ways, throwing light on typical class attitudes or religious prejudices. Dickens, achieving unrivaled popularity with his often demagogic methods for attracting readers, seemed to speak to the longings for kindness and justice among many of his contemporaries. Flaubert, maliciously misinterpreting the French bourgeoisie, gave voice to the anxieties of a literary and artistic avant-garde appalled by middle-class tastes; Mann, half lamenting and half caressing the decay of the German patriciate, offered perceptive insights into the ravages of drastic social

upheavals. Yet whoever enlists fiction to assist in the hunt for knowledge must always be alert to authorial partisanship, limiting cultural perspectives, fragmentary details offered as authoritative, say nothing of neurotic obsessions. That is why the reader who treats a novel as rich in clues to social, political, and psychological insights must always consult second opinions.



THERE IS ONE TYPE OF REALIST FICTION THAT MAKES particularly stringent demands on its author and its readers alike: the historical novel, notably the kind that includes historic players in its cast of characters. Hadrian, Robespierre, Napoleon, van Gogh, Bismarck, both Roosevelts, Stalin, even Elvis Presley—the list is endless—have found their way into novels, often as protagonists. When writers enlist these outsized personalities as instruments of their political enthusiasms or aversions, they have often done, their novels yield little if any new historical wisdom. They only dramatize what readers have already learned elsewhere or lay bare their inventor's take on politics.\* The authors of historical novels must struggle between fidelity to undisputed biographical facts and the flights of their literary imagination. Certainly readers must grant novelists some leeway as they make up the protagonist's conversations and thoughts, but the boundaries that hem them in as they imagine words and ideas for which they have at best limited warrant must remain narrow. If they violate them, they make a Bismarck or a van Gogh into a tool of ideology or of fancy, into a largely fictional figure that happens to bear the name of, and somewhat looks like, a real person.

Inventing reality is a demanding business. It is like filling in a mosaic from which some of the pieces are missing and others are illegible. There can be no general rule just how much fictional passages are legitimate reconstructions, and how much sheer fancy. Certainly the leeway for imagining the conduct of real persons inhabiting a novel must vary with the writer's skill and information. To the gifted and well informed, much is permitted. In an author's note to her massive and persuasive novel on the French Revolution, *A Place of Greater Safety* (1992), Hilary Mantel candidly points out: "The events of the book are complicated, so the need to dramatize and to explain must be set against each other." This is the conflict the historical novelist must resolve. Mantel does her best—which is very good—stay close to the dates, places, and import of historic events and to derive her principal portraits—Robespierre, Danton, Desmoulins, Marat—from what she could discover about them. But, following her major characters into their youth and their intimate relationships, she had to go beyond what she could actually verify. And it is in these imaginary intervals (which she took care not to make too imaginative) that she had to take her audience with her. The test that *A Place of Greater Safety* passed not as a novel but as a piece of imagined history, is that a historian specializing in the French Revolution can read it without cringing.

Readers want to trust writers of fiction quite as much as they think they want to trust historians. At a price higher than usually imagined: the infamous hunchback of Richard III, which everyone takes to have been the ultimate cause of his viciousness, should stand as a warning against credulity. It was fabricated by a talented Tudor propagandist named William Shakespeare, quite incidentally showing how clever concoctions have a way of smuggling themselves into our sense of the past, how fiction becomes "fact." But, just as readers like to trust writers, for their part too makers of fiction want to be or at least seem to be, worth trusting. The burden on the Realist historical novelist to earn that trust is particularly onerous.

❖ A LOOK AT *WAR AND PEACE* MAY SERVE TO ILLUSTRATE the genre and its problems. Even as a young rake, Tolstoy was an avid and largely self-started reader, and when in 1865 he launched *War and Peace*, which was to grow into *War and Peace*, he prepared himself diligently. He studied memoirs, letters, autobiographies, and histories, and consulted knowledgeable archivists. His principal sources were bulky histories then fashionable, like Adolphe Thiers's vastly detailed, and vastly popular *Histoire du consulat et de l'empire* (1845–62), a liberal interpretation of the recent French past that supported the French Revolution until its time of Terror, and Napoleon before he became a bloated world conqueror. Its twenty volumes were a treasure trove for Tolstoy, and he pillaged them freely.

In short, he had an enormous amount of historical material at his disposal, much of it quite authoritative; in consequence, many of his crowded pages withstand skeptical scrutiny. Tolstoy actually insisted that he could document each of the events he chronicled down to the slightest detail, a dubious claim at best. More, he was obsessed by a radical theory of history: Great men are playthings of forces they do not recognize and could not overcome if they did. Truth lies not in the pompous pronouncements of celebrities but in the sayings of humble peasants or the sage conduct of blunt, honest soldiers who let the spirit of their country speak through them. Hence, to Tolstoy, Napoleon, the very embodiment of vanity who believed that his actions changed things, was a pathetic puppet in the hands of history. Hence, too, Tolstoy remodeled Prince Kutuzov, the Russian commander in chief during the French invasion of Russia in 1812, from a courtier into a wholehearted and admirable spokesman for Russia's soul.\* Tolstoy's philosophy of history, as he called it, is an interesting perspective, but what matters here is that Tolstoy allowed it to override some of the information at his command. If facts contradicted his thesis, Tolstoy would sacrifice the facts. Acceptable as much of the novel is as dramatized history, it is just as well that people read *War and Peace* as literature.



IT FOLLOWS FROM ALL THIS THAT ANYONE EVALUATING the evidence a novel might provide must get to know intimately not just the fiction in question, but its maker and his society. To borrow from Kipling: What do they know of novels who only novels know? To understand what fiction has to offer the researcher, he must learn what made it happen. That is why the essays that follow will embed fictions in the literature and politics of their time, and in the author who gave them their being.

There are (to put it schematically) three principal sources of motivation—society, craft, and individual psychology. These are not watertight compartments but flow into one another, making the act of literary creation an intricate process. It is only together, in unique, not wholly predictable proportions, that they produce a portrait, a statue, a tragedy—a novel. Only a third- or fourth-rank work can be largely explained by a single cause: a hack writer spurred on by the profitable demand for his stories; a lifeless epic by the superior models its author has shamelessly appropriated; an amateurish first novel by its author's compulsion to regurgitate early memories. To make literature of any distinction, the sublimation of intimate motives calls for more mental exercise than this. It must command the often conflict-ridden cooperation of the causes I have listed: the novelist's society, the novelist's craft, the novelist's mind.

In this trio, the last, the psychological springs of action that include unconscious wishes and anxieties, do double duty. For what must ultimately have the greatest impact on the novelist is not

simply what really happens in his (or her) culture but what he makes of it, not simply what his profession really demands of him but how he receives or reshapes its canonical procedures. This may sound like an attempt on my part to impose a psychoanalytic reading on a writer's work. But while I am sympathetic to, indeed engaged in, this line of interpretation, I fully recognize that it is not without its hazards. Whether it fosters or obstructs literary understanding depends on the claims made for it. It is one thing to characterize George Eliot's *Silas Marner* as a wishful attempt to master the traumas of her life—which, in part, it seems to have been—quite another to parade this partial analysis of the novel as a sufficient interpretation, precluding the need for more investigation. All simple, one-dimensional readings, the Freudian among them, are susceptible to the crippling and uninteresting formulations we disdainfully call “reductionism.”

## 5

IT WAS PRECISELY THE CHARGE OF REDUCTIONISM THAT modernist writers began to level against the Realist novel after the end of the nineteenth century. Searching for techniques that would capture the complexities of human nature at work more satisfactorily than Emile Zola or Theodor Fontane to their mind ever had, masters like James Joyce in *Ulysses*, Marcel Proust in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Virginia Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway*, and lesser authors in their camp experimented with syntax, points of view, internal monologues, and bold offenses against the King's English and other didactic norms.

These innovators, of course, were also Realists in their own way; the Realist novel has never disappeared. But they expanded the range of what they thought belonged to the realities open to the makers of fiction. The Old Realists, too, had claimed to understand the motives of their protagonists, but their exposition was largely indirect, allowing readers to deduce minds through actions. In contrast, the New Realists dug beneath the surfaces of behavior. Just as the novelist's mind is an indispensable element in any exploration of his work, so the minds of imagined characters require careful scrutiny. Hence the second opinions to which their audience could appeal were far less from history than from psychology. The Old and the New Realists belong to the same literary universe, but what divides them is equally important.

No novelist has confronted this gulf more lucidly than did Virginia Woolf. In a famous paper, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” that she delivered before friends in 1924, she pleads for the kind of Realism that does not remain content with the social surfaces of fictional characters. Everyone knows the essay, or at least quotes her observation that “on or about December 1910, human character changed.” She mentions changes in “religion, conduct, politics, and literature,” but it is the last of these, literature, that really concerns her. The leading Realists of her day gave her no satisfaction. She quotes Arnold Bennett, her principal target: “‘The foundation of good fiction is character-creating and nothing else,’” and wholly agrees with him. “I believe that all novels . . . deal with character, and that it is to express character—not to preach doctrines, sing songs, or celebrate the glories of the British Empire, that the form of the novel, so clumsy, verbose, and undramatic, so rich, plastic, and alive has been evolved.”

But Bennett's way of creating character, she objects, fails to carry out the contract he has, as it were, made with his readers. She chooses at random one of his novels, *Hilda Lessways*, and documents her contention: the eponymous heroine's creator speaks extensively about the town she sees from her window, goes into detail about the house in which she lives and the rent her mother pays. That, she

insists, is the wrong way, an impoverished, stunted Realism. This is not to say that she views nineteenth-century novels as invariable failures. There have been great writers like Tolstoy from whose *War and Peace*, it seemed to her, “there is hardly any subject of human experience that is left out.” She is not arguing that a novelist must be a modernist to meet her stringent demands for Realism that is as deep as it is wide.

For the student of Realism in Dickens, Flaubert, and Thomas Mann, this reasonable agenda comes as a relief: we may wonder if Dickens, one of the greatest of caricaturists in any literature, is penetrating with human reality as he believed himself to be. As we shall see, this is a difficult issue for there are ways to truth through exaggeration. But, as the pages that follow will demonstrate, with the authors of *Madame Bovary* (which Virginia Woolf includes in a short list of great novels) and *Buddenbrooks*, there can be no doubt. They, and Dickens, give the historian much work to do, especially the historian not afraid of Freud.

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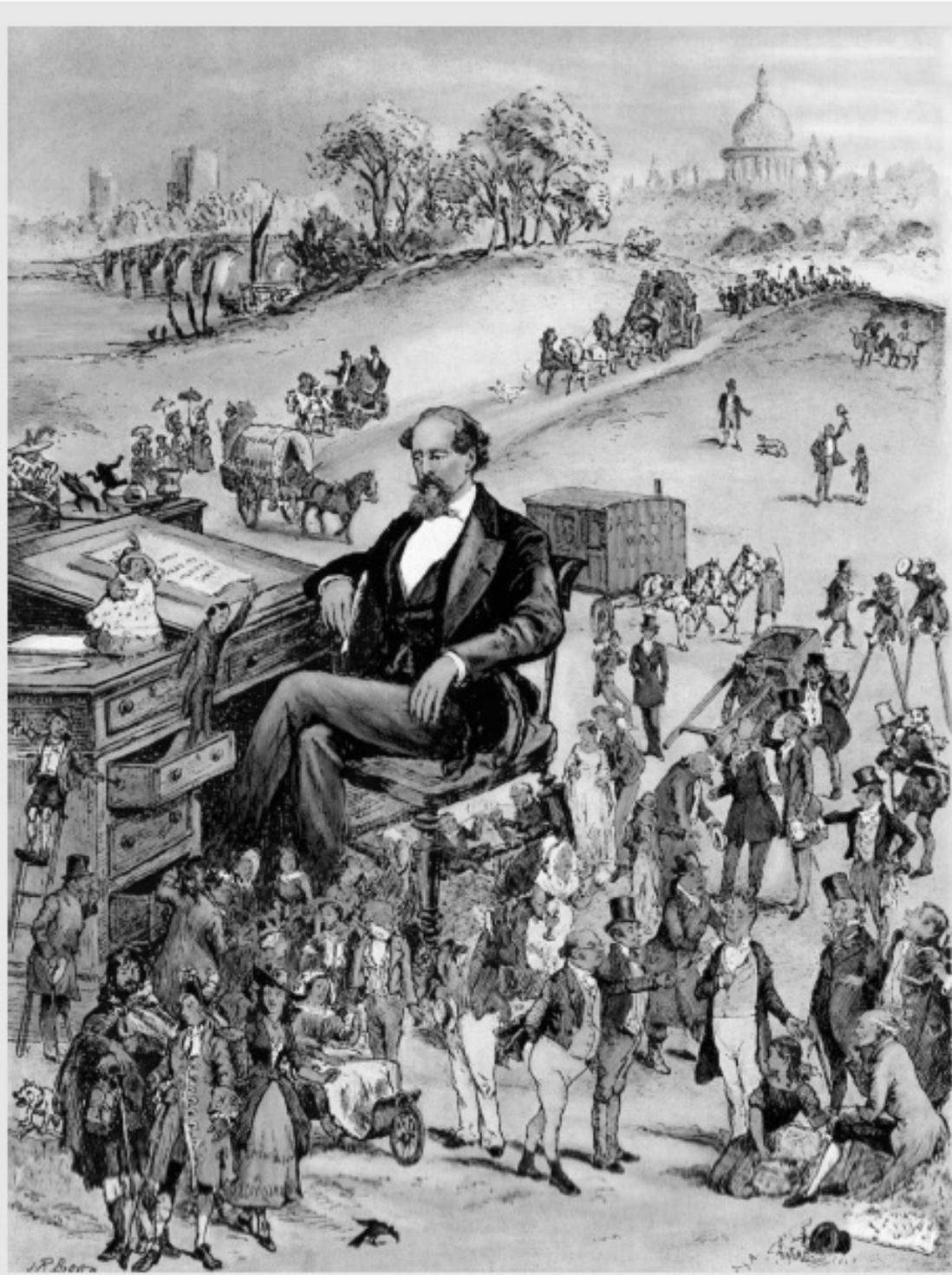
\* In the pages that follow, I shall, for the sake of simplicity, use “historian” to stand for all these scientists of society.

\* In his fine study, *The Dickens World* (1941; 2nd ed.1942), Humphry House writes: “Many people still read Dickens for his records and criticism of social abuses, as if he were a great historian or a great reformer” (p. 9). Of course, he was neither. As for his criticism of Utilitarianism: “It is impossible to say that he disliked Bentham’s theories, because there is no evidence that he knew what they were” (p. 38).

\* See Gore Vidal’s *The Golden Age* (2000), which makes the long discredited view that President Roosevelt provoked the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor a centerpiece. In this instance, the novel becomes a political diatribe rather than “reliable” historical fiction.

\* “The reader may ask how to tell fact from fiction,” she adds. “A rough guide: anything that seems particularly unlikely is probably true.” This is amusing and, considering the excited times her novel deals with, not wholly implausible. But it cannot be taken as a general rule (p. x).

\* Tolstoy had “an undisputed right,” writes Isaiah Berlin, in *The Hedgehog and the Fox* (1933), “to endow [his heroes], Pierre Bezukhov or Karataev [the wise peasant] with all the attributes he admired—humility, freedom from bureaucratic or scientific or other rationalistic kinds of blindness. But Kutuzov was a real person, and it is all the more instructive to observe the steps by which he transforms him from the sly, elderly, feeble voluptuary, the corrupt and somewhat sycophantic courtier of the early drafts of *War and Peace* which were based on authentic sources, into the unforgettable symbol of the Russian people in all its simplicity and intuitive wisdom.” Once this transformation is complete, “we have left the facts behind us, and are in an imaginary realm, a historical and emotional atmosphere for which the evidence is flimsy, but which is artistically indispensable to Tolstoy’s design. The final apotheosis of Kutuzov is totally unhistorical for all Tolstoy’s repeated professions of his undeviating devotion to the sacred cause of the truth” (p. 28).



---

ONE



THE ANGRY ANARCHIST

CHARLES DICKENS IN

*Bleak House*

IF THERE WAS ONE CRITICAL MOMENT IN HIS NOVELS that was Charles Dickens's specialty and that unfailingly appealed to the Victorians' ready tear ducts, it was the emotional death scene. And in *Bleak House*, he disposed of several characters in particularly satisfying ways. There is likable and obstinate young Richard Carstairs, who dies of a broken heart as his fantasies of quick riches evaporate. There is Lady Dedlock, the heroine's mother, who is found dead near her lover's grave. There is Jo, the ragged, illiterate crossing sweep, whose demise gives Dickens a golden opportunity to denounce his heartless fellow citizens. But none of these can rival the sudden exit of Krook, the coarse, mean-spirited owner of a wretched junkshop, who shuffles off his mortal coil by collapsing into dust. This particular death did not play on the reading public's love of a good cry but on its credulousness. Krook's end, Dickens expected his vast readership to believe, was a case of spontaneous combustion.

He did not take all his public with him, and some skeptics among them went into print with their objections. G. H. Lewes, a prominent editor and literary critic, and, as the companion of George Eliot, an intimate of genius, declared that "spontaneous Combustion is an impossibility." Instead of letting the matter drop, or conceding that disposing of a fictional character in this fanciful fashion was just an amusing literary conceit, Dickens energetically defended himself. In his preface to *Bleak House*, he marshaled eighteenth-century experts to show that about thirty cases of authenticated spontaneous combustion were on record. "I have no need to observe," he assured his admiring audience, "that I do not willfully or negligently mislead my readers, and that before I wrote that description I took pains to investigate the subject." That his authorities were anything but authoritative seems not to have occurred to him. When one thinks of Realists in nineteenth-century fiction, one does not think of Dickens first, but he wanted it known that he had reality firmly in his grasp.

He took the same strong line justifying his portrayal of Nancy, the prostitute, in *Oliver Twist*. When Thackeray accused Dickens of knowing full well that "his Miss Nancy is the most unreal fantastic personage possible," and that he "dare not tell the truth concerning such young ladies," Dickens countered testily in a preface to the novel, "It is useless to discuss whether the conduct and character of the girl seem natural or unnatural, probable or improbable, right or wrong. IT IS TRUE." He apparently assumed that writing in capitals, as it were shouting in print, could substitute for reasoned debate. There was something at stake in this squabble: in depicting a whore with a heart of gold, Dickens's fiction was in danger of being lumped with the popular lowbrow English genre called the Newgate novel, which idealized criminals and turned them into heroic outlaws. But even if that contempt by association had not hung over Dickens, he would have sturdily stood for the verisimilitude of his characters and their fates. THEY ARE TRUE.

In a curious way, one personage in *Bleak House*, Harold Skimpole, supports Dickens's assertion that his fictions were drawn from facts. Though not a central character—a few reviewers thought him gratuitously dragged in—Skimpole, like everyone in the novel, is a pawn necessary to the plot. He is a master sponger forever pronouncing himself to be a child who lives for poetry and music alone and for whom money means nothing. He lives off other people who are so charmed by his sprightly conversation that they are willing to overlook his unscrupulous exploitation of his friends and his family.

Some readers singled out Skimpole as one of Dickens's most "delicious" characters, but those in his circle readily recognized the portrait as a brutal caricature of Leigh Hunt. An agreeable poet, liberal essayist, and prolific playwright, Hunt's main contribution to nineteenth-century English letters was his work as an editor. He knew everybody in the literary world and launched many a reputation in his periodicals, including that of Keats. He was perpetually short of money, what with a large family, an alcoholic wife, and the meager income his magazines provided. The vicious narcissist Dickens invented for *Bleak House*, though, was the very opposite of Hunt in almost every respect except his impecuniousness. As a minor concession, he instructed the illustrator of *Bleak House*, Hablot K. Browne ("Phiz"), to draw Skimpole as short and stout: "singularly unlike the great original," since Hunt was tall and slender. But this disguise was too perfunctory to hoodwink anyone in Dickens and Hunt's crowd.

Certainly, Dickens was sure that he had got Hunt absolutely right. In a confidential letter of September 1853 to a friend, Mrs. Richard Watson, he boasted about his portrayal of Skimpole: "I suppose he is the most exact portrait that ever was painted in words! I have very seldom, if ever, done such a thing. But the likeness is astonishing. I don't think he could possibly be more like himself." He announced that he would not do such portraits again, but in Skimpole "there is not an atom of exaggeration or suppression. It is an absolute reproduction of a real man. Of course I have been careful to keep the outward figure away from the fact; but in all else it is the Life itself." About six weeks later, he reaffirmed his borrowing from life in a letter to an aggrieved Hunt: "everyone's writing must speak from points of his experience, and so I of mine with you."

Whatever the cause of Dickens's resentment may have been, his conscience smote him. Writing to Hunt in early November 1854, he explicitly denied what he had explicitly affirmed before. "The character is not you, for there are traits in it common to fifty thousand people besides, and I did not fancy you would ever recognize it." In a word, feeling guilty about his savage treatment of his old friend, he could think of nothing better than to lie to him. On this occasion at least, his claim to be a truthful Realist had even more substance than he was willing to admit.



BUT FOR DICKENS, REALISM WAS NOT SYNONYMOUS WITH literalism. Starting with the opening scene of *Bleak House*, with its famous evocation of the London fog, he enlisted a notorious fact of metropolitan life as a metaphor to make a political point. "London. Michaelmas Term late over,"—this is the first sentence of the novel—"and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall . . ." Then, in an apparent leap: "Fog everywhere. Fog up the river . . . fog down the river, where the masts and funnels and smoking chimneys of the ships roll defiled among the tiers of shipping, and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city." These two realities are not distinct: they describe a single phenomenon. If any doubt should remain, Dickens resolves it promptly: "at the very heart of the fog, sits the Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery."

Serious readers of *Bleak House* have long recognized that Dickens gave the fog connotations far wider than its usual meaning. It was a savage comment on the irrational rigidity, the willful obscurantism, that the Court of Chancery embodied for him and that he saw spreading across London like a blight. And, though this is less evident than will appear in the course of the novel, the Court itself is a stand-in for one of Dickens's favorite villains, the Law. "The law," says Mr. Bumble in *Oliver Twist*, "is a ass—a idiot." The Dickens of *Bleak House* intensified this negative appraisal: the

law was worse than stupid; it was vicious.

Dickens was never subtle about his symbolism. What with London's chimneys belching out dead particles from coal-burning stoves and fireplaces, the fog was real enough. But its impenetrable gloom, its lethal emanations, its intermittent omnipresence ideally served a writer intent on pointing the finger at larger evils—evils that Dickens, the intuitive and impetuous reformer, was determined to expose, even, in his most ambitious moments, to eradicate. The fog, in fact, had served him before. In November 1850, he had written an article in *Household Words*, the periodical he had launched earlier that year, in which he openly employed it as a commanding metaphor. "Mrs. Bull and her rising family were seated round the fire, one November evening at dusk, when all was mud, mist, and darkness, out of doors, and a good deal of fog had even got into the family parlour." Unfortunately that parlor was not fog-proof, though the Bulls did have an excellent ventilator over the fireplace. Its name: "Common Sense." Nothing could be more obvious.

❏ THERE IS MORE THAN ONE WAY TO START A NOVEL. Its author may plunge into the action by introducing the protagonist. "Call me Ishmael," we recall from *Moby-Dick*. "For a long time I used to go to bed early," is Proust's way of launching his serpentine river of a novel. Dickens, too, at times adopted this technique. "Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show," is how he introduces *David Copperfield* and David Copperfield, both the novel and its protagonist. But not in *Bleak House*. He begins not with individuals—we cannot count the Lord Chancellor as a person; he is a figurehead draped in the habiliments of authority—but with the public stages on which Dickens will unfold his drama: the Court of Chancery and its own larger backdrop, the city it disgraces. He pushes without delay into the heart of the matter for his characters, which he sees also as a great matter for his country: the abuse of authority, the law's delay. Hanging over all the personages in the novel is an appalling, seemingly immortal legal tangle, "Jarndyce and Jarndyce."

In short, the reader is made to feel in painful detail the pressure that social forces exert on individuals. Dickens deploys the small and the large, the interplay of personal destinies and social issues, with impatient rapidity. The novel, as crowded as a nineteenth-century grand opera with its stars and teeming with spear carriers, is (whatever its detractors have said) beautifully controlled. Each character, major and minor—even, as I have said, Mr. Skimpole—contributes to the tale. And Dickens's fog dramatizes the pervasive presence of society, which profoundly affects, often permanently enslaves, its victims.

Mr. Jarndyce, of the unfortunate family enmeshed in the suit that bears its name, can partially rise above the case. As a philanthropic gentleman who spends his days assisting those less fortunate, he has been made to suffer less than the impecunious casualties of the interminable affair. The young wards in Chancery, the beautiful Ada and her beloved Richard, both of whom Jarndyce virtually adopts, do not fare so well. The two fall in love and secretly marry, but Richard, in company with so many others in the Court's grip, grows addicted to his suit. Defying all evidence, he refuses to see it as a beckoning, mendacious mirage, and constructs a fantasy kingdom in which his case will be settled promptly, greatly to his financial advantage. Ada's affectionate and increasingly desperate entreaties fail to shake him loose from his delusion, and he dies almost literally of *Jarndyce and Jarndyce*.

Others ensnared in the Court's web also suffer recurrent bouts of irrational buoyancy. Krook, he of the spontaneous combustion, seems remote from the Jarndyce imbroglio, but has papers that he thinks might be profitable to him in the case. Among the more marginal characters, perhaps the saddest is

genteel and pathetic elderly madwoman, Miss Flite, who faithfully attends every session of the Court predicting to all who will listen a favorable outcome of her suit any day now. There are others broken by the Law, destroyed by hopes they would have had—under normal circumstances—every right to cherish. But, Dickens insists, the Court of Chancery is wholly incompatible with normal circumstances.

To be sure, like all of these cases, *Jarndyce and Jarndyce* does benefit some participants in this cruel play: the lawyers. They batten on their hapless clients by arousing expectations they know full well the Court will never gratify—the attorneys and barristers are among the most chilling presences in *Bleak House*. At long last, after years and even decades, once a case is finally settled, it often happens that there is nothing left for the heirs; the whole estate will have been absorbed by costs—that is, absorbed by the lawyers' fees. Others in the novel, like Mr. Snagsby, the nervous, timid, softhearted stationer who supplies all the paraphernalia necessary to a lawyer's practice, profit in a far more modest way. Yet Snagsby, too, will be drawn into the crowded panorama that dazzled Dickens' readers in 1852 and 1853, installment after monthly installment. Snagsby employs men with a legible hand to do copying for his clients, and one of these is a destitute, silent, enigmatic law writer who soon dies and seems to disappear from the narrative. Yet it will emerge that he had the closest connection to another domain of English society so distant from Mr. Jarndyce's circle as to seem beyond reach, let alone intimacy.

For *Bleak House* moves in two worlds, and Dickens does not linger in introducing his readers to the second of them. The chapter "In Fashion" follows directly upon the first, "In Chancery." It features Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, in his late sixties, very class-conscious, intellectually limited, rather pompous, anxious to see the Old England he loves being subverted by so-called reformers. He is, though, sincerely attached to his wife, Lady Dedlock, at least twenty years younger than her husband, still beautiful, unfailingly elegant, remote, self-contained, and ostentatiously bored. The couple moves restlessly from their country estate to their town house and back, or flee to Paris in search of entertainment, accompanied by relatives and hangers-on, all of them, whether rich or much reduced in income, fearfully fashionable.

It is self-evident that Dickens would not have placed his novel in two widely separated social spheres if he had not planned to join them somehow. And, far more than the obscure law writer of whom readers get just a glimpse, it is the protagonist, Esther Summerson, who unites the two worlds. Significantly, Dickens introduces her as the narrator of the novel's third chapter, closing the circle. She too, like Ada and Richard, is an orphan whom the munificent Mr. Jarndyce invites to make her home with him. Eventually, she will be revealed to be Lady Dedlock's illegitimate daughter, and the law writer her father. As the narrator of thirty-three of the novel's sixty-seven chapters, she is privileged to meet, and closely observe, almost everyone in *Bleak House*, and participates in the progress of its convoluted narrative. Unlike heroines in several other Dickens novels, she is active even, with all due modesty, opinionated. She survives maltreatments, disappointments, and disease and will end up marrying Allan Woodcourt, an idealistic young doctor who worries more about his patients than he does about himself. It is the interaction of the two spheres, and Esther Summerson's growth into deserved marital felicity, with *Jarndyce and Jarndyce* long a looming presence, that are the core of *Bleak House*.

❖ MANY READERS HAVE FOUND ESTHER SUMMERSON a stumbling block to a full enjoyment of the novel. She is simply inhumanly perfect. She is devout, discreet, modest, loving, hardworking

pretty, preternaturally perceptive. “I had always rather a noticing way,” she confesses as she introduces herself. She harbors no wicked thoughts even for those who have mistreated her. She quickly charms everyone she meets: rough working-class men, their oppressed wives, gentryfolk, the sick, the eccentric, the mad, and, of course, children. She is, though inexperienced and untrained, an imaginative, reliable housekeeper for Mr. Jarndyce, importantly clanking her bunch of keys, superintending supplies, regulating expenditures. Perhaps not surprisingly, her elderly guardian falls in love with her and proposes marriage, an invitation to a dull domestic quietness untroubled by sexual excitement that she gratefully accepts even though she loves someone else. Unable to appreciate her many virtues to their full extent, she has to be pushed to claim her true preference after Mr. Jarndyce comes to his senses and hands her over to Woodcourt. “ ‘Allan,’ said my guardian, ‘take her from me, a willing gift, the best wife that ever a man had.’ ” All he wants from the couple-to-be is an occasional invitation to the house he also bestows on them. “Let me share its felicity sometimes, and what do I sacrifice? Nothing, nothing.” This is the sort of passage that makes even a loyal Dickensian cringe.

That is simply too much virtue to pile on a single mortal; such pure creatures exist only in the fantasies of men who have never got over their boyish vision of their mother as a Madonna, and who have carried this idealization into adult life. To be sure, some contemporary reviewers delighted in Esther’s sweetness. John Forster, as Dickens’s closest friend scarcely an unbiased witness, particularly admired the early portions of her narrative, “as charming as anything Mr. Dickens has ever written—indeed some of the best things in the book.” Other Victorians, more tough-minded, did not care for her—there *were* far more tough-minded men and women among the Victorians than they have been credited with. G. H. Lewes listed Esther Summerson among Dickens’s “monstrous failures.” An anonymous reviewer in the *Spectator*, out of patience with the parade of her admirable qualities, also demurred: “Such a girl would not write her own memoirs, and certainly would not bore one with her goodness till a wicked wish arises that she would either do something very ‘spicy’; or confine herself to superintending the jam pots at Bleak House.” Another, in *Bentley’s Miscellany*, found her, like Mr. Jarndyce, quite unreal, and objected sensibly enough to the way that her guardian surrenders her to Woodcourt: “We do not know whether most to marvel at him who transfers or her who is transferred from one to another like a bale of goods.”

Recent critics, too, have declared her “mock modesty” to be quite “tiresome.” And it is true that Dickens’s most impassioned admirers have felt compelled to acknowledge that his pathos—implausible unselfish actions, prolonged and heart-rending death scenes, the cozy munificence of philanthropists—too often lapsed into bathos. Yet, even though some mid-Victorians anticipated a twentieth-century reserve toward Esther Summerson, there was a shift of emotional responses from their day to ours. What has struck recent readers as involuntarily funny in Dickens, many among his contemporaries thought immensely moving. Reading about Jo’s last minutes on earth, they, like Oliver Twist, asked for more. Oscar Wilde’s famous quip that one must have a heart of stone to read about the death of Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop* without laughing was more than a typical perverse witticism: it signaled the emergence of a new, a more cynical post-Victorian sensibility. Characters in *Buddenbrooks* are strangers to such sentimentality, and the one character in *Madame Bovary* who exhibits all its symptoms pays for it.

READING ABOUT ESTHER SUMMERSON, THAT MODEL OF flawlessness, one must remember that she was not an isolated or uncharacteristic leading character in Dickens's oeuvre. She had a sister in Agnes Wickfield, the heroine of *David Copperfield*, the novel that directly preceded *Bleak House*. The character of Agnes says much about Esther Summerson, especially since many of Dickens's readers—certainly this reader—regard *Copperfield* as his finest novel, a judgment that Dickens shared: he called it his “favourite child.” It is an English *Bildungsroman* which, particularly in its first half, strikingly resembles the author's own youth. It chronicles a thriving writer's life from his birth to his thirties, happily married and a happy father—a denouement Dickens liked to provide for his heroes and heroines even though (or, rather, because) his own marriage was quite unhappy. Agnes is Copperfield's second wife, after a brief marriage to Dora, an appealing, girlish young woman who providentially dies to give way to her successor, who has been his affectionate “sister” since childhood and who is his destined mate. David Copperfield needs to mature, to educate his heart, before he can truly value the treasure he has in Agnes.

From the first, Agnes's angelic traits irritated some of Dickens's vast audience. Reviewers accused him of producing a mere cipher, a Victorian doll lacking all individuality. Some called Agnes “detestable.” Even the almost invariably supportive John Forster admitted in his biography of Dickens that he preferred Dora, Copperfield's “loving, little child wife,” to Agnes, with her “too unflinching wisdom and self-sacrificing good.” And in the twentieth century, George Orwell, in an appreciative essay on Dickens, said almost the last word on that model of womanhood. Agnes, he wrote, was “the most disagreeable of his heroines, the real legless angel of Victorian romance.” After so devastating a verdict, what hope for an appeal?

Part of this indictment has merit. It is true that the personage who persists in calling Agnes an angel is David Copperfield, a fictional character. But there is every sign that Dickens subscribed to the adoring words he invented for his protagonist. We have seen it over and over: the subtly nuanced character was not his strong suit; he discovered the urge to oversimplify, to exaggerate, to caricature, too enticing. His villains are so very villainous, not just in their actions but in their appearance, that the reader almost expects to find drops of blood on the page. When he came to human types he detested—sectarian preachers, orotund hypocrites, sadistic authority figures—he could satirize them so broadly as to descend to sheer lampoons. No wonder that Henry James, that subtlest of writers, had strong reservations about Dickens, to his mind “the greatest of superficial novelists.” Sir Leicester Dedlock, in *Bleak House*, is a rare and gratifying exception: after his wife flees as her murky past about to be exposed, this stuffy, reactionary, empty-headed aristocrat shows himself to be a man of authentic decency. He refuses to think ill of the woman who has left him, and keeps hoping—we know that it is in vain—that she will return to him. But for the most part, there are angels in Dickens's novels and devils, or, to put it less dramatically, wholly benevolent and wholly malevolent characters.

Yet for all of Dickens's melodramatic streak, I want to offer two pleas on Agnes Wickfield's behalf: the one psychological, the other cultural. Agnes's mother had died in giving birth to her, and her father, a charming, weak-willed lawyer given to drowning his sorrows in drink, perpetually revisited this calamity, this fatal fact of his, and his daughter's, life. One can safely predict the effects of such tactless reminders. Agnes lives with her father's accusation every day, even if it does not sound reproachful, only mournful. And children are bound to take any family discord upon themselves. They will feel responsible, even guilty, when parents quarrel and, worse, when a mother dies in childbirth, especially when one has been the agent of her demise. To put it bluntly: Agnes Wickfield stands convicted of murdering her mother.

Hence, when her father proposes to take his clerk, the power-hungry, fawning, and repulsive Uriah



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