
THE CRITICAL FORTUNES OF *GREAT EXPECTATIONS**

Richard Dutton

THE initial reception of *Great Expectations* has to be seen in the context of the trough into which Dickens's reputation had fallen in the late 1850s; this 'reputation', though ultimately based on the sales of Dickens's novels, was to a large extent shaped and moulded, troughs and all, by the literary reviewers of the time. After early triumphant success, in the period from *The Pickwick Papers* (1836–7) to *David Copperfield* (1849–50), Dickens steadily lost his popular appeal as his later novels such as *Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit* and *A Tale of Two Cities* reflected an increasingly sombre mood. A number of the early reviewers of *Great Expectations* hailed it as a return to the old Dickens. E. S. Dallas in *The Times*, 17 October 1861, for example, rejoiced that

Mr Dickens has good-naturedly granted to the hosts of his readers the desire of their hearts. . . . Without calling upon his readers for any alarming sacrifices, Mr. Dickens has in the present work given us more of his earlier fancies than we have had for years. *Great Expectations* is not, indeed, his best work, but it is to be ranked among his happiest. There is that flowing humour in it which disarms criticism, and which is all the more enjoyable because it defies criticism.

H. F. Chorley in *The Athenaeum*, 13 July 1861, hailed *Great Expectations* as 'the imaginative book of the year':

Trying Mr. Dickens by himself, we find in this his last tale as much force as in the most forcible portions of *Oliver Twist*, as much delicacy as in the most delicate passages of *David Copperfield*, as much quaint humour as in *Pickwick*. In short . . . this is the creation of a great artist in his prime.

He tried to forestall some possible objections – 'There are those who will say that Miss Havisham's strange mad life is overdrawn; but such have not been conversant with the freaks and eccentricities which a haughty spirit in

*The extract from the York Handbook *An Introduction to Literary Criticism* by Richard Dutton (Longman/York Press, Harlow and Beirut 1984) is reprinted by permission of the publishers. Copyright Librairie du Liban.

agony can assume' – but failed to convince a number of people, including the anonymous writer in the *Saturday Review*, 20 July 1861:

Mr. Dickens has always had one great fault . . . that of exaggerating one particular set of facts, a comic side in a character, or a comic turn of expression, until all reality fades away . . . Miss Havisham is one of Mr. Dickens's regular pieces of melodramatic exaggeration.

This writer does, however, concede that 'Mr. Dickens may be reasonably proud of these volumes. After the long series of his varied works – after passing under the cloud of *Little Dorrit* and *Bleak House* – he has written a story that is new, original, powerful and very entertaining'; he particularly approves of the fact that 'there are passages and conceptions in it which indicate a more profound study of the general nature of human character than Mr. Dickens usually betrays.' Only Mrs. Margaret Oliphant, writing later than most in *Blackwood's Magazine* (May, 1862), was really disappointed:

So far as *Great Expectations* is a sensation novel, it occupies itself with incidents all but impossible, and in themselves strange, dangerous, and exciting; but so far as it is one of the series of Mr. Dickens' work, it is feeble, fatigued, and colourless. One feels that he must have got tired of it as the work went on. . . .

One of the crosses that a modern writer such as Dickens (unlike Shakespeare and Donne) has to bear is the reception of his published works by reviewers like this – all honourable people, no doubt, but their prejudices and preconceptions invariably seem to figure more prominently than we would expect in more formal criticism. But one striking feature of the reception given to *Great Expectations* is the number of themes and issues it raised which have echoed down in the criticism of the novel to this day, however much opinions may have shifted on some of these matters. Firstly, there is the determination to see the novel as part of Dickens's unfolding career rather than as an individual work; this is coupled with a favourite vice of reviewers, and perhaps of readers more generally, which is a wish that, once an author has done something well, he will go on doing the same thing for the rest of his life – the tendency to castigate *Great Expectations* for not being *The Pickwick Papers* or *Oliver Twist* is quite evident. There is also the question of Dickens's 'melodramatic exaggeration' of characters; opinion on this seems to divide between those who do not see it as a problem as long as it contributes to the 'flowing humour' which they value so much in Dickens, and those who are exercised about how 'realistic' such an approach may be. On the one hand there are those who insist that Miss Havisham is a truthful depiction of a 'haughty spirit', and on the other those who insist

that she is merely an example of a character trait being exaggerated 'until all reality fades away'. The fundamental assumption is common to all, however, that *realism* is the name of the game – whatever differences there may be as to whether it is achieved or not, and whatever allowances are made for 'humour'. This was commonly the case of novel criticism at this time.

A number of the early reviewers also pointed to the obvious fact that *Great Expectations* follows the example of *David Copperfield* in being narrated as a first-person autobiography, with extensive childhood scenes. They seemed to find that the comic vitality of the earlier work pervaded the later one. They were followed in this by Dickens's friend and biographer, John Forster (1812–76):

It may be doubted if Dickens could better have established his right to the front rank among novelists claimed for him, than by the ease and mastery with which, in these two books of *Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*, he kept perfectly distinct the two stories of a boy's childhood, both told in the form of autobiography. . . . The characters generally afford the same evidence . . . that Dickens's humour, not less than his creative power, was at its best in [*Great Expectations*] (*The Life of Charles Dickens*, 1874).

This same book revealed for the first time that the ending of the novel as published, in which we are all but promised that Pip and Estella will marry, with reasonable happiness, was not the one Dickens originally conceived, which was altogether more disenchanting, and that the change was made at the instigation of his friend and fellow-novelist, Bulwer-Lytton (1803–73). Forster quotes a letter in which Dickens mentions (cynically? flippantly?) that 'I have put in as pretty a little piece of writing as I could, and I have no doubt the story will be more acceptable through the alteration', and then comments himself: 'This turned out to be the case; but the first ending nevertheless seems to be more consistent with the drift, as well as natural working out, of the tale.' This has remained a fruitful source of critical controversy ever since; it perfectly focuses such issues as artistic integrity, the special problems of writing for periodical publication and whether there really can be such a thing as the 'natural working out' of a piece of creative fiction. See, for example, Martin Meisel, 'The Ending of *Great Expectations*', *Essays in Criticism*, 15 July 1965.

On the whole, however, *Great Expectations* does not figure very prominently in the criticism that appeared in the years after Dickens's death. The biographer and critic G. H. Lewes (1817–78) does not mention it in his retrospective essay for the *Fortnightly Review*, 'Dickens in Relation to Criticism' (1872); the novelist George Gissing (1857–1903) calls it 'that rich little book' but has relatively little to say about it in his *Charles Dickens* (1898). Similarly, the essayist, novelist and poet G. K. Chesterton (1874–

1936) acknowledged that it was a 'fine story . . . told with a consistency and quietude of individuality which is rare in Dickens'. By this he seems to mean that the first-person narrative subdued what he saw as the excesses of Dickens's usual style, but he shared the taste of Dickens's contemporaries for the comedy of the earlier novels and regretted 'the road of a heavier reality' which Dickens had travelled in this and other late works. In acknowledging the novel's moral and psychological power, he concedes that 'all this is very strong and wholesome; but it is still a little stern' and makes it clear that he approves of 'the robust romanticism of Bulwer-Lytton' which brought about the lighter ending' (*Charles Dickens*, 1906). Chesterton is aware that 'realism', 'the road to a heavier reality', is now a loaded term – novels can no longer simply be judged on subjective impressions of their 'lifelikeness'. The novelist and essayist E. M. Forster (1879 – 1970) addresses this question generally in his characteristically understated *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) and draws on *Great Expectations* for a number of examples; he compares the passage describing Mrs. Gargery's funeral with a passage from the novelist H. G. Wells (1866 – 1946):

The novelists are, both humorists and visualizers who get over an effect by cataloguing details and whisking the page over irritably. They are generous-minded; they hate shams and enjoy being indignant about them; they are valuable social reformers; they have no notion of confining books to a library shelf. Sometimes the lively surface of their prose scratches like a cheap gramophone record, a certain poorness of quality appears, and the face of the author draws rather too near to that of the reader.

Dickens is implicitly being contrasted with more discreet and self-effacing authors such as Jane Austen and Henry James; the inference is that their novels are 'art' while those of Dickens, whatever other virtues they have, are scarcely that. Forster makes the same point again in a famous passage about characterization:

Dickens's people are nearly all flat (Pip and David Copperfield attempt roundness, but so diffidently that they seem more like bubbles than solids). Nearly every one can be summed up in a sentence, and yet there is this wonderful feeling of human depth . . . Those who dislike Dickens have an excellent case. He ought to be bad. He is actually one of our big writers, and his immense success with types suggests that there may be more in flatness than the severer critics admit.

Forster's distinction between 'flat' and 'rounded' characters is one that Dickens criticism has never really shaken off; it is nearly always advanced to his discredit, partly because – for all Forster's deference to Dickens as 'one of our big writers' – his terms of reference keep implying that the 'rounded' characters of such as Jane Austen and Henry James are the

product of a more sophisticated art.

It was symptomatic of a radical change of taste that, in the Preface to a 1937 edition of *Great Expectations*, George Bernard Shaw focused upon, and applauded, what he saw as the novel's essential seriousness: 'It is too serious a book to be a trivially happy one. Its beginning is unhappy; its middle is unhappy; and the conventional happy ending is an outrage on it.' Two long essays that appeared shortly thereafter mark a watershed in Dickens criticism as a whole, and incidentally set the tone for the criticism of *Great Expectations* that was to come. The first was George Orwell's 'Charles Dickens' (1939), which he described as an attempt to answer the questions 'Why does anyone care about Dickens? Why do *I* care about Dickens?' The answer he came up with was to some extent an answer for the times, just before the outbreak of the Second World War, and he summed it up in the idea of a 'face somewhere behind the page':

It 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.

This was an attempt to lay the ghost of Dickens as primarily the author of *Pickwick* and *A Christmas Carol*, to insist that, *despite his popularity*, he should still be taken seriously by intelligent people. One consequence of the insistence on the novel as an art form, largely instigated by Henry James and followed by critics like Forster, was that popularity became a suspect criterion: how could something be great art if it was also widely accessible? Orwell tries to counter this by insisting that the spirit and content of Dickens's novels matter more than their artistic 'form'. It was indicative of the climate of opinion that Orwell was protesting about, that there was no place for Dickens (except, rather oddly, for *Hard Times*) in F. R. Leavis's *The Great Tradition* (1948).

The second of the two long essays, and in many ways the more influential, was Edmund Wilson's 'Dickens: The Two Scrooges', published in *The Wound and The Bow* (1941). Wilson too starts from the assertion that Dickens 'has become for the English middle class so much one of the articles of their creed – a familiar joke, a favourite dish, a Christmas ritual – that it is difficult for British pundits to see in him the great artist and social critic that he was'. He sets out to counter this by stressing the element of social criticism in Dickens's novels and by emphasizing the psychological gloom they so often reflect; the latter point in particular causes him to accord unusual prominence to the later novels, from *Bleak House* (1852–3) onwards. These are, for Wilson, and for virtually all the critics who follow him, the

richest and most rewarding of Dickens's achievements; and *Great Expectations* emerges as a pivotal work:

In *Great Expectations* we see Pip pass through a whole psychological cycle. At first, he is sympathetic, then by a more or less natural process he turns into something unsympathetic, then he becomes sympathetic again. Here the effects of both poverty and riches are seen from the inside in one person. This is for Dickens a great advance. . . .

Among the criticism of *Great Expectations* which may be said to follow directly from Wilson's essay are Dorothy Van Ghent's 'On *Great Expectations*' in *The English Novel: Form and Function* (1953); G. R. Strange's 'Expectations Well Lost: Dickens' Fable for his Time' (*College English*, XVI, October 1954); and Julian Moynahan's 'The Hero's Guilt: the Case of *Great Expectations*' (*Essays in Criticism*, January 1960). All are connected in seeing the question of guilt as central to the novel's psychological, moral and artistic concerns. J. Hillis Miller (*Charles Dickens: the World of his Novels*, 1958) places Pip's guilt in a wider vision of the novel as a kind of reworking of *Paradise Lost*, while Barbara Hardy (*The Moral Art of Dickens*, 1970), focuses the whole question of moral accountability in the novel through its preoccupation with food: 'Food in *Great Expectations*, as in *Macbeth*, is part of the public order, and the meals testify to human need and dependence, and distinguish false ceremony from the ceremony of love.'

Recent criticism of *Great Expectations*, in short, is virtually unanimous in regarding it as a sombre and successful moral fable; there has been some occasional interest in the technical questions of the first-person narrative, periodical publication and the changed ending, but even these are generally measured in terms of their bearing on the overall moral tone/design of the novel. The revolution in taste that has taken place in the century or so since Dickens's death could hardly be more complete; it bears comparison with the shift in taste between Johnson — who looked to Shakespeare's comedies for the true artist — and Coleridge, who looked to the tragedies. Where Dickens's contemporaries looked for comedy, and apparently found it, we discover disturbing psychological concerns; where some of them — and later proponents of the 'art' of the novel — decried the caricature-style of the characterization or rather feebly tried to defend it as 'realistic', most of us now calmly accept it as part of his complex, symbolically pointed style; where they yearned for him to keep repeating his exuberant early triumphs, we seem to be rather pleased, in a way, that his later years were riddled with doubts and anxieties — as titles such as *The Melancholy Man: a Study of Dickens's Novels* (John Lucas, 1970, 1980) and *The Violent Effigy: a Study of Dickens's Imagination* (John Carey, 1973) testify.

Like Shakespeare, Dickens seems to be sufficiently multi-faceted to have

something significant to offer to each successive generation of critics. This may be one definition of greatness. It says something for Dickens's stature that so forceful a critic as F. R. Leavis, after all but dismissing him in *The Great Tradition*, felt obliged to recant and, with his wife, Q. D. Leavis, produced a full-scale study of the novels: *Dickens the Novelist* (1970). (The chapter on *Great Expectations* is in the characteristic imperative mode of his later years: 'How We Must Read *Great Expectations*'). The tradition of criticism of Dickens poses one question most acutely: how proper or useful is it to discuss individual texts in relation to a writer's other works or against the background of his supposed 'imaginative career'? Dickens seems especially to attract such criticism, with all the dangers it runs of prejudging or distorting a text in order to make it fit some preconceived pattern.

Once again, we should be aware that the popularity in the classroom of the text we have been considering is not entirely due to the qualities most frequently discussed in formal criticism. *Great Expectations* has the merit of being relatively short, unlike *Bleak House* (1852–3) or *Little Dorrit* (1855–7), the other masterpieces of Dickens's later career (which many critics would judge to be even finer works), and unlike Dickens's other fictional 'autobiography', *David Copperfield* (1849–50). It is also generally believed that young people find stories of growing up inherently interesting and 'relevant' to themselves: hence the frequent appearance of such texts as *Great Expectations*, James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914–15), D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913), J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and Laurie Lee's *Cider with Rosie* (1959) on school syllabuses.