

## CHAPTER XI

### COMPARISONS

TWENTY years ago a familiar topic for debating societies was a comparison of the literary characteristics of Dickens and Thackeray — (or of Thackeray and Dickens, I forget which). Not impossibly, the theme is still being discussed in country towns or London suburbs. Of course, it was always an absurdity, the points of difference between these authors being so manifest, and their mutual relations in literature so easy of dismissal, that debate in the proper sense there could be none. As to which of the two was the "greater novelist," the question may be left for answer to those who are capable of seriously propounding it. He will be most positive in judgment whose acquaintance with the novelists' writings is least profound.

It seems to me, however, that we may, without waste of time, suggest comparison in certain points between Dickens and one or two of his foreign contemporaries, writers of fiction who, like the English master, were pre-occupied with social questions, and evinced special

knowledge in dealing with the life of the poor. Balzac, Victor Hugo, Dostoieffsky, Daudet — these names readily occur to one, and I shall not err in assuming familiarity with their principal works in those who have cared to read so far in this little book. Of course I have no intention of saying all that might easily be said as to points of contrast: so thorough an Englishman as Dickens must needs differ in particulars innumerable from authors marked on their side by such strong national characteristics. Enough to indicate certain lines of similarity, or divergence, which, pursued in thought, may help to a complete understanding of our special subject.

Evidently there is a difference on the threshold between Dickens and three of the foreign authors named — a difference which seems to involve the use of that very idle word “realism.” Novels such as those of Balzac are said to be remorseless studies of actual life; whereas Dickens, it is plain, never pretends to give us life itself, but a selection, an adaptation. Balzac, calling his work the “human comedy,” is supposed to have smiled over this revelation of the littleness of man, his frequent sordidness, his not uncommon bestiality. Dostoieffsky, absorbed in compassionate study of the wretched, the desolate, the oppressed,

by no means goes out of his way to spare our delicacy or our feelings ; and Daudet, so like to Dickens in one or two aspects, matures into a conception of the novel which would have been intolerable to the author of *David Copperfield* — cultivates a frankness regarding the physical side of life which in England would probably have to be defended before legal authorities with an insular conception of art. Realists, we say ; men with an uncompromising method, and utterly heedless as to whether they give pleasure or pain.

The distinction is in no way a censure upon Dickens. As soon as a writer sits down to construct a narrative, to imagine human beings, or adapt those he knows to changed circumstances, he enters a world distinct from the actual, and, call himself what he may, he obeys certain laws, certain conventions, without which the art of fiction could not exist. Be he a true artist, he gives us pictures which represent his own favourite way of looking at life ; each is the world in little, and the world as *he* prefers it. So that, whereas execution may be rightly criticized from the common point of view, a master's general conception of the human tragedy or comedy must be accepted as that without which his work could not take form. Dickens has just as much

right to his optimism in the world of art, as Balzac to his bitter smile. Moreover, if it comes to invidious comparisons, one may safely take it for granted that "realism" in its aggressive shapes is very far from being purely a matter of art. The writer who shows to us all the sores of humanity, and does so with a certain fury of determination, may think that he is doing it for art's sake; but in very truth he is enjoying an attack upon the order of the universe—always such a tempting form of sport. Well, Dickens was also combative, and enjoyed his palpable hits; only, his quarrel was with certain people, and certain ways of thought, never with human nature or the world at large.

There are orders of imaginative work. A romance is distinct from a novel; so is a fairy tale. But there can be drawn only a misleading, futile distinction between novels realistic and idealistic. It is merely a question of degree and of the author's temperament.

In Balzac's *Le Cousin Pons* are two figures amiable, eccentric, such as Dickens might have conceived in other surroundings. Pons, the collector of bric-a-brac, and his friend Schmucke, are good, simple creatures, and Balzac loves them; but so bent is he on showing that life, or at all events Paris, is a

vast machine for torturing and crushing the good (and therefore the weak), that these two old men end in the most miserable way, amid baseness and cruelty which triumphs over them. We know how Dickens would have shaped the story. In art he was incapable of such sternness; and he utterly refused to believe that fate was an irresponsible monster. Compare the Maison Vauquer, in *Le Père Goriot*, with "Todgers's" in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. No one will for a moment believe that Dickens's picture differs from that of Balzac because the one is a bit of London, the other of Paris. Nor is it a question of defect of humour; Mme. Vauquer (née de Conflans) and her group of boarders in the Rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève, are presented with sufficient suggestion of humorous power. But Balzac delights in showing us how contemptible and hateful such persons can be; whereas Dickens throws all his heart on to the side of the amusing and the good. When sheets are wanted to shroud the dead body of poor old Goriot (a victim of atrocious greed), Mme. Vauquer exclaims: "*Prends les draps retournés; par Dieu! c'est toujours assez bon pour un mort.*" It is a fierce touch, and Dickens could no more have achieved it in a novel than have uttered the words in his

own person. There is a difference of artistic method. We are free to express a preference for this or for that way of presenting life; but such preference involves no judgment. On either side, a host of facts can be brought forward to justify the artist's view; the critic's part is merely to inquire how the work has been executed.

One finds in Balzac a stronger intellect, but by no means a greater genius. Very much wider is his scope in character and circumstance; he sees as clearly and as minutely as Dickens; but I doubt whether he ever imparts his vision with the vividness of Dickens at his best; and assuredly his leagues of description fail in art when compared with the English author's mode of showing us what he wishes. In construction they are both flagrantly defective, though erring in different ways.

Let the critic who dismisses Dickens's figures as types, turn for a moment to Victor Hugo's masterpiece, *Les Misérables*. What are we to call the personages in this story? Put side by side the detective Javert and Inspector Bucket. It is plain at once that in the latter we have an individual, a living man full of peculiarities, some professional, others native to himself; he represents, no doubt, the London police force of his day, but only as any

very shrewd, brisk, and conscientious inspector would have done so. Javert, on the other hand, is an incarnation of the penal code; neither more nor less. Never for one instant do we mistake him for a being such as walks the earth. He is altogether superhuman; he talks the language of an embodied Idea; it cannot surprise us however ubiquitous he seems or however marvellous his scent for a criminal. Go through the book and it is always the same thing. Jean Valjean might be likened to Prometheus; he is a type of suffering humanity, he represents all the victims of social wrong. Let his adventures go to any length of the heroic, the surprising, we do not protest; he is not one man but many. Fantine, too; what is she but the spirit of outraged womanhood? Even as Cosette stands for childhood robbed of its natural inheritance, trodden under foot by a greedy and ferocious civilization. *Les Misérables* is one of the world's great books. That cannot be said of any one of Dickens's; but the reason is certainly not because he failed in characterization. *Les Misérables* is not rightly to be called a novel; it belongs to the region of symbolic art. And my only reason for putting it beside Dickens's work is to make manifest at a glance his superior quality as a writer of fiction.

Hugo is concerned with wide historical questions, with great forces in the life of the world; he probes the theory of society, searches into the rights of the individual; he judges man; he seeks to justify the ways of God. He is international; and his vast drama belongs to all modern time. He is in the faithfulest sense of the word a democrat; for him there can be, in the very nature of things, no ruling voice save that of the people; all other potentates and lawgivers are mere usurpers, to be suffered for a time. Dickens, though engaged heart and soul in the cause of the oppressed, fights their battle on a much narrower ground. The laws he combats are local, belonging, for the most part, to certain years of grace. His philosophy is the simplest possible, and all his wisdom is to be read in the Sermon on the Mount. Democrat he is none, but a hearty English Radical. His force is in his intense nationality, enabling him to utter the thoughts of voiceless England. Yet of necessity there are many points at which his work and Hugo's touch together, inviting comparison. Child-life is one of them. I have spoken of Dickens's true pathos; but is there anything in all his stories that springs from so deep a fount of tender pity as that vision of Cosette putting out her wooden shoe

at Christmas? For the rest, Dickens's children are generally creatures of flesh and blood; Cosette, save at moments, belongs to the spirit world. An inferiority in the Englishman — if we care to glance at it — becomes plain by a contrast of his wronged women with Fantine. Abstractions these, as we have already noted, and therefore an illustration of what his people for the most part are *not*; as abstractions, how thin and futile and untrue when brought into the light of a noble creation, such as the mother of Cosette. At root, both writers have the same faith in man; they glorify the same virtues. But for Dickens life is so much simpler — and so greatly more amusing. From his point of view, how easily all could be set right, if the wealthy and the powerful were but reasonably good-natured — with an adequate sense of humour!

He is wroth with institutions; never bitter against fate, as is so often the case in "realistic" novels of our time. Something of this, though for the most part unconsciously, appears in the great Russian novelist Dostoeffsky, whose work, in which Dickens would have found much to like and admire, shows so sombre a colouring beside the English novels. It is gloomy, for one reason, because it treats of the empire of the Tzar; for another, because Dos-

toieffsky, a poor and suffering man, gives us with immense power his own view of penury and wretchedness. Not seldom, in reading him, one is reminded of Dickens, even of Dickens's peculiarities in humour. The note of his books is sympathy; a compassion so intense as often to seem morbid — which indeed it may have been, as a matter of fact. One novel is called *The Idiot*, a study of mental weakness induced by epilepsy. Mark the distance between this and *Barnaby Rudge*; here we have the pathos of saddest truth, and no dallying with half-pleasant fancies. But read the opening of the story called in its French translation *Humiliés et Offensés*; it is not impossible that Dickens's direct influence worked with the writer in those pages describing the hero's kindness to the poor little waif who comes under his care; in any case, spiritual kindred is manifest. And in how alien a world, regarding all things outward!

Dostoeffsky's masterpiece, *Crime and Punishment*, abounds in Dickens-like touches in its lighter passages. Extravagances of character delighted him, and he depicted them with a freer hand than Dickens was permitted or would have cared to use. Suppose the English novelist born in Russia, he might well have been the author of the long scene at the begin-

ning of the book, where Sonia's father, the eccentric drunkard, makes himself known to us in his extraordinary monologue. For that matter, with such change of birth and breeding, Dickens might well have written the whole book, which is a story of a strange murder, of detective ingenuity, of a ruined girl who keeps her soul clean, and of a criminal redeemed by love and faith in Christ; the scene throughout being amid the darkness, squalor, and grotesque ugliness of Russia's capital. Dostoieffsky is invariably pure of tone and even decorous from our own peculiar point of view; his superiority as a "realist" to the author of *David Copperfield* consists merely in his frank recognition of facts which Dickens is obliged to ignore or to hint with sighing timidity. Sonia could not have been used by the Englishman as a heroine at all; as a subordinate figure he would have turned her to his most stagey purposes, though meaning all the time an infinitude of gentleness and sympathy; instead of a most exceptional girl (by no means, I think, impossible), she would have become a glaring unreality, giving neither pleasure nor solace to any rational reader. The crucial chapter of the story, the magnificent scene in which Raskolnikoff makes confession to Sonia, is beyond Dickens, as we know him; it would not have been so but for

the defects of education and the social prejudices which forbade his tragic gift to develop. Ras-kolnikoff himself, a typical Russian, a man of brains maddened by hunger and by the sight of others hungry, is the kind of character Dickens never attempted to portray; his motives, his reasonings could not be comprehended by an Englishman of the lower-middle class. And the murder itself—Bill Sikes, Jonas Chuzzlewit, show but feebly after we have watched that lank student, with the hatchet under his coat, stealing up the stairs; when we have seen him do his deed of blood, and heard the sound of that awful bell tinkling in the still chamber. Dostoieffsky's work is indescribably powerful and finely tragic; the murders in Dickens are too vulgar of motive greatly to impress us, and lack the touch of high imaginativeness.

Little as he cared for foreign writers, we learn that Dickens found pleasure in a book called *Le Petit Chose*, the first novel of a very young author named Alphonse Daudet. It would have been strange indeed had he not done so; for Daudet at that time as closely resembled Dickens himself as a Frenchman possibly could. To repeated suggestions that he modelled his early work on that of his great contemporary, M. Daudet has replied with a good-humoured shake of the head; and

as an illustration of how one can seem to plagiarize without doing anything of the kind, he mentions that he was about to give to the little lame girl, Désirée Delobelle, the occupation of doll's dressmaker, when a friend made known to him the existence of just such a figure in *Our Mutual Friend*. This being the case, we can only wonder at the striking resemblance between his mind and that of Dickens. Not only is it a question of literary manner, and of the humour which is a leading characteristic in both; the Frenchman is penetrated with a delicate sense, a fine enjoyment of the virtues and happiness of simple domestic life, and in a measure has done for France what Dickens in his larger way did for England, shaping examples of sweetness and goodness among humble folk, which have been taken to their hearts by his readers. Bélisaire, in *Fromont Jeune*, is a typical instance; and the like may be found even in his later novels, where, as some think, he has been unhappily led after false gods by the literary fashion of his time. Real life has frequently supplied him with an artistic motive precisely such as Dickens rejoiced in finding; for example, "père Joyeuse" in *Le Nabab*, the clerk who, having lost his employment, shrinks from letting his family know, and leaves home each morning as if

going to the office as usual — a delightful sketch, done with perfection of kindness and humour. Then, there is Daudet's fine compassion. He says in his autobiographic sketches: "*Je me sens en cœur l'amour de Dickens pour les disgraciés et les pauvres, les enfances mêlées aux misères des grandes villes;*" and this is abundantly proved throughout his writings.

Daudet has a great advantage in his mastery of construction. Where, as in *Fromont Jeune*, he constructs too well, that is to say, on the stage model, we see what a gain it was to him to have before his eyes the Paris stage of the Second Empire instead of that of London in the early Victorian time. Moreover, he is free from English fetters; he can give us such a portrait as Sidonie, done with wonderful truth yet with a delicacy, even a tenderness, which keeps it thoroughly in tone with his pure ideals. I do not speak of the later novels, much as I see to admire and like in them; only of the time when his resemblance to Dickens was most pronounced. Jack's mother, the feather-brained Ida de Barancy, belongs to a very different order of art from anything attained in female portraiture by the English novelist. In his men, too, this advantage is often very noticeable. Delobelle the illus-

trious, and the mouthing D'Argenton, have points of character which easily suggest persons in Dickens ; but they belong to a world which has more colour, more variety, and the writer does not fear to present them completely. These things notwithstanding, Dickens's work is of course beyond comparison wider in scope and richer in significance. We may concede to Daudet all his superiority as a finished artist, and only become the more conscious of Dickens's unapproachable genius.

Telling us of the hapless lad from whom he modelled his Jack, M. Daudet touches on points of difference between the characters in life and in fiction ; the real Jack had not altogether that refinement which heightens our interest in the hero of the novel. "*Il faut dire,*" adds the writer, "*que le peuple ignore bien des délicatesses, des susceptibilités morales.*" Could such a remark possibly have fallen from the pen of Dickens, even when not employed upon fiction? Of "the people" he could neither have said nor thought it ; was it not to "the people" that he turned when he wanted an example of the finest delicacy of heart, the most sensitive moral susceptibility? Perhaps it was just this lack of faith that held Daudet from fulfilling what seemed the promise of his early time. Such lack of faith in the

multitude is not difficult to account for in a very acute observer. It was especially hard to maintain in face of a literary movement which devoted itself to laying bare the worst of popular life. The brothers Goncourt, Flaubert, and M. Zola were not companions likely to fortify a naïve ideal. It is just possible that they inflicted serious injury upon Daudet's work, and robbed France of a precious gift—the books he might have written but for the triumph of “realism.” Dickens, who died before the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war, can barely have suspected the lines that literature was to follow in the next decade; to the end he represented in himself a literary force which had burst upon the world with irresistible charm, had held its way victoriously for five-and-thirty years, and seemed as far as ever from losing its dominion over English readers. The likelihood is that his unwavering consistency will stand him in better stead through the century to come than any amount of that artistic perfection which only a small class can appreciate and enjoy.