

GKC on CD: a bibliography

(I) Primary

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(II) Secondary

R. C. Churchill, “Chesterton on Dickens: The Legend and the Reality” *Dickens Studies Newsletter* 5:2 (June 1974), 34-38.

David L. Derus, “Gissing and Chesterton as Critics of Dickens” *The Chesterton Review* 12 (February 1986), 71-81.

Peter Hunt, (guest editor), *The Chesterton Review* (“The Charles Dickens Special Issue”) 11:4, November 1985.

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GKC / Gissing

(1) [G] is the soundest of the Dickens critics / G’s error about the early Dickens period we may put thus: in calling it hard and cruel he omits the wind of hope and humanity that was blowing through it. (CD 4, 5)

(2) Dickens . . . seldom develops character through circumstance. / It is an obvious fault of his work, when he exhibits victims of social wrong, that it takes no due account of the effect of conditions upon character. Think of little Oliver Twist, who has been brought up under Bumble and Company, amid the outcasts of the world, yet is as remarkable for purity of mind as for accuracy of grammar. (Gissing, CD 95, 206)

(3) Dickens was a mythologist rather than a novelist; he was the last of the mythologists, and perhaps the greatest. He did not always manage to make his characters men, but he always managed, at the least, to make them gods. They are creatures like Punch or

Father Christmas. They live statically, in a perpetual summer of being themselves. It was not the aim of Dickens to show the effect of time and circumstance upon a character; it was not even his aim to show the effect of a character on time and circumstance. It is worth remark, in passing, that whenever he tried to describe change in a character, he made a mess of it, as in the repentance of Dombey or the apparent deterioration of Boffin. It was his aim to show character hung in a kind of happy void, in a world apart from time --yes, and essentially apart from circumstance, though the phrase may seem odd in connection with the godlike horse-play of "Pickwick". (GKC, CD 62-63)

(4) *LD* is at once in some ways so much more subtle and in every way so much more sad than the rest of his work that it bores Dickensians and especially pleases George Gissing. (CD 165)

(5) Mr. George Gissing, from the point of view of the passing intellectualism of our day, has made (among his many wise tributes to Dickens) a characteristic complaint about him. He has said that Dickens, with all his undoubted sympathy for the lower classes, never made a working man, a poor man, specifically and highly intellectual. An exception does exist, which he must at least have realised -- a wit, a diplomatist, a great philosopher. I mean, of course, Mr. Weller. Broadly, however, the accusation has a truth, though it is a truth that Mr. Gissing did not grasp in its entirety. It is not only true that Dickens seldom made a poor character what we call intellectual; it is also true that he seldom made any character what we call intellectual. Intellectualism was not at all present to his imagination. What was present to his imagination was character -- a thing which is not only more important than intellect, but is also much more entertaining. (. . .) The whole superiority of the democracy of Dickens over the democracy of such a man as Gissing lies exactly in the fact that Gissing would have liked to prove that poor men could instruct themselves and could instruct others. It was of final importance to Dickens that poor men could amuse themselves and could amuse him. He troubled little about the mere education of that life; he declared two essential things about it -- that it was laughable, and that it was livable. The humble characters of Dickens do not amuse each other with epigrams; they amuse each other with themselves. (CD 181-82)

(6) In the time of the decline and death of Dickens, and even more strongly after it, there arose a school of criticism which substantially maintained that a man wrote better when he was ill. It was some such sentiment as this that made Mr. George Gissing, that able writer, come near to contending that *Little Dorrit* is Dickens's best book. It was the principle of his philosophy to maintain (I know not why) that a man was more likely to perceive the truth when in low spirits than when in high spirits.

(A & C, Introduction, p. xix)

(7) Perhaps it was a reminiscence of that metaphorical proverb which tells us that "truth lies at the bottom of a well." Perhaps these people thought that the only way to find truth in the well was to drown oneself. But on whatever thin theoretic basis, the type and period of George Gissing did certainly consider that Dickens, so far as he went, was all the worse for the optimism of the story of Micawber; hence it is not unnatural that they should think him all the better for the comparative pessimism of the story of *Little Dorrit*.

The very things in the tale that would naturally displease the ordinary admirers of Dickens, are the things which would naturally please a man like George Gissing. There are many of these things, but one of them emerges preeminent and unmistakable. This is the fact that when all is said and done the main business of the story of *Little Dorrit* is to describe the victory of circumstances over a soul. The circumstances are the financial ruin and long imprisonment of Edward Dorrit; the soul is Edward Dorrit himself. Let it be granted that the circumstances are exceptional and oppressive, are denounced as exceptional and oppressive, are finally exploded and overthrown; still, they are circumstances. Let it be granted that the soul is that of a man perhaps weak in any case and retaining many merits to the last, still it is a soul. (. . .) Let us concede then all this, and the fact remains that the study of the slow demoralisation of a man through mere misfortune was not a study congenial to Dickens, not in accordance with his original inspiration, not connected in any manner with the special thing that he had to say. In a word, the thing is not quite a part of himself; and he was not quite himself when he did it. (A & C 182-3)

GKC / Wilson

(8) [Wilson quotes Kate's remark "my father was a wicked man" and Mamie's adoration of D's exhilarating vitality at Christmas parties.] It is Scrooge bursting in on the Cratchits. Shall we ask what Scrooge would actually be like if we were to follow him beyond the frame of the story? Unquestionably he would relapse when the merriment was over--if not while it was still going on--into moroseness, vindictiveness, suspicion. He would, that is to say, reveal himself as the victim of a manic-depressive cycle, and a very uncomfortable person.

This dualism runs all through Dickens. There has always to be a good and a bad of everything: each of the books has its counterbalancing values, and pairs of characters sometimes counterbalance each other from the cats of different books. There has to be a good manufacturer, Mr Rouncewell, and a bad manufacturer, Mr Boundaby; a bad old Jew, Fagin, and a good old Jew, Riah. . . . (*The Wound and Bow*, 1941; Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux paperback, 1978: 53)

(9) "Of all the great Victorian writers," wrote Wilson, "he was probably the most antagonistic to the Victorian Age itself." Dickens, heaven knows, is a remarkable writer, however one understands and judges him; but surely it should have been more than remarkable--it would have been incredible--that an author so antagonistic to his age should have been the age's darling for a third of a century, and then posthumously thereafter? However would he have got away with it? (. . .) There remains more truth (if it's a less exhilarating truth) in one of House's asides, than in Wilson's pronouncement. "The voice of the Ten-Pound Householders could hardly speak more plainly," House remarks of one of Dickens's little things. (Philip Collins, "1940-1960 Enter the Professionals", *The Dickensian* Centenary Number on Dickens and Fame, May 1970, 155).

(10) The whole secret of his after-writings is sealed up in those silent years of which no written word remains. . . . Those years may have given him many moral and mental wounds, from which he never recovered. But they gave him the key of the street. (CD 35)

(11) This practical intensity of Dickens is worth our dwelling on, because it illustrates an elementary antithesis in his character, or what appears as an antithesis in our modern

popular psychology. We are always talking about strong men against weak men; but Dickens was not only both a weak man and a strong man, he was a very weak man and also a very strong man. (CD 42)

(12) Dickens stands first as a defiant monument of what happens when a great literary genius has a literary taste akin to that of the community. For this kinship was deep and spiritual. (. . .) Dickens did not write what the people wanted. Dickens wanted what the people wanted. (CD 77)

Dickens, I repeat, had common sense and uncommon sensibility. That is to say, the proportion of interests in him was about the same as that of an ordinary man, but he felt all of them more excitedly. (. . .) He wanted what a healthy man wants, only he was ill with wanting it. (CD 92)

(13) I have mentioned this matter for a special reason. It brings us back to that apparent contradiction or dualism in Dickens to which, in one connection or another, I have often adverted, and which, in one shape or another, constitutes the whole crux of his character. I mean the union of a general wildness approaching lunacy, with a sort of secret moderation almost amounting to mediocrity. Dickens was, more or less, the man I have described -- sensitive, theatrical, amazing, a bit of a dandy, a bit of a buffoon. Nor are such characteristics, whether weak or wild, entirely accidents or externals. He had some false theatrical tendencies integral in his nature. (. . .) Dickens always would explain. It was a part of that instinctive publicity of his which made him at once a splendid democrat and a little too much of an actor. He carried it to the craziest lengths. He actually printed, in *Household Words*, an apology for his own action in the matter of his marriage. That incident alone is enough to suggest that his external offers and proposals were sometimes like screams heard from Bedlam. Yet it remains true that he had in him a central part that was pleased only by the most decent and the most reposeful rites, by things of which the Anglican Prayer-book is very typical. It is certainly true that he was often extravagant. It is most certainly equally true that he detested and despised extravagance. (. . .) His literary genius consisted in a contradictory capacity at once to entertain and to deride--very ridiculous ideas. If he is a buffoon, he is laughing at buffoonery. His books were in some ways the wildest on the face of the world. (. . .) But for all that, you come, in the core of him, on a sudden quietude and good sense. Such, I think, was the core of Rabelais, such were all the far-stretching and violent satirists. This is a point essential to Dickens, though very little comprehended in our current tone of thought. Dickens was an immoderate jester, but a moderate thinker. He was an immoderate jester because he was a moderate thinker. What we moderns call the wildness of his imagination was actually created by what we moderns call the tameness of his thought. (CD 157-59)