



J. Hillis Miller, c. 1970

Chapter X CONCLUSION

THIS study has attempted to trace the development of **Dickens' imagination**. Each novel has been viewed as the transformation of the real world of Dickens' experience into an imaginary world with certain special qualities of its own, qualities which reveal in their own irreplaceable way Dickens' vision of things. But certain elements persist through his work. **Among the most important of these are the general situation of the protagonist at the beginning of the story and the general nature of the world he lives in.** Each

protagonist confronts, from moment to moment, a certain kind of world, a world in which inanimate objects, space and time, other people, and his own inner life have certain given modes of existence. These entities are initially, in most cases, **distant from the protagonist, inimical, without comprehensible relation to him.** The non-human world seems **menacing** and apparently has a secret life of its own, **unfriendly** to man, while the social world is an **inexplicable** game or ritual, in which people solemnly enact their parts in an absurd drama governed by **mysterious** conventions. Each Dickensian hero, then, lives like Paul Dombey, "with an aching void in his young heart, and all outside so cold, and bare, and strange" (*DS*, 11). **He is even alienated from himself, and views his own consciousness as something mysterious and separated from himself.** Beginning in isolation, each protagonist moves through successive adventures, adventures which I have tried to describe and define. These adventures are essentially **attempts to understand the world, to integrate himself in it, and by that integration to find a real self.** In this interchange between mind and world there is in Dickens' characters and in the novels themselves as wholes a constant attempt **to reach something transcendent**, something more real than one's own consciousness or than the too solid everyday material world. This supra-reality is perhaps caught in fleeting glimpses at the horizon of the material world, or in the depths beneath the upper layers of consciousness. In those depths are the regions of dreams, or of that hallucinated vision of things and people which is so characteristic of Dickens. The realm of images, where self is given a material form, and where things are transmuted into emblems of the self, is the very domain where the reality beyond or within reality may be momentarily apprehended. To put self and the sensible world it possesses as image in touch with these depths would be **to transfigure the self, thus to validate it.** Dickens' protagonists, initially creatures of poverty and indigence, are constantly in search of something outside the self, something other than the self, and even something other than human, something which will support and maintain the self without vaporizing and engulfing it. **Dickens' novels, then, as I have tried to**

show, form a whole, a unified totality. Within this whole a single problem, **the search for viable identity**, is stated and restated with increasing approximation to the hidden center, Dickens' deepest apprehension of the nature of the world and of the human condition within it.

Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels. 328–9. (My emphases.)

Victorian fiction raises for the twentieth-century reader **the dark question** of whether the assimilation of the protagonists into the community by way of a happy relation to another person is a valid resolution, or whether, to our deeper insight, it should appear as a covering over and forgetting of the fundamental fact of human existence so persuasively dramatized in the body of the novel . . .

The Form of Victorian Fiction. 136-7. (My emphasis.)

Selected Books by J. Hillis Miller

- Charles Dickens : the world of his novels.* Indiana University Press. 1959.
The Disappearance of God: Five 19th Century Writers. Harvard Univ. Press. 1963.
Form of Victorian Fiction. Univ. of Notre Dame Press. 1968.
Thomas Hardy, Distance and Desire. Harvard Univ Pr. 1970.
Fiction and Repetition : Seven English Novels. Harvard Univ Pr. 1985.
The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin. Columbia University Press. 1986.
The Linguistic Moment: From Wordsworth to Stevens. Princeton Univ Pr. 1987.
Versions of Pygmalion. Harvard Univ Pr. 1990.
Victorian Subjects. Duke Univ Pr. 1991
Tropes, Parables, Performatives : Essays on Twentieth-Century Literature. Duke Univ Pr. 1991.
Theory Now and Then. Duke Univ Pr. 1991.
Hawthorne & History : Defacing It (Bucknell Lectures in Literary Theory. Blackwell Publishers. 1991.
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Ariadne's Thread: Story Lines. Yale Univ Pr. 1992.
Topographies (Meridian Crossing Aesthetics). Stanford Univ Pr. 1995.
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Black Holes (Cultural Memory in the Present. Stanford University Pr. 1999.
Speech Acts in Literature. Stanford Univ Pr. 2001.
Others. Princeton Univ Pr. 2001
On Literature (Thinking in Action). Routledge. 2002 (To be published).