DICKENS IN RELATION TO CRITICISM.

The old feud between authors and critics, a feud old as literature, has not arisen on the ground of chariness in praise, but rather on the ground of deficient sympathy, and the tendency to interpret an author's work according to some standard which is not his. Instead of placing themselves at his point of view, and seeing what he has attempted, how far he has achieved the aim, and whether the aim itself were worthy of achievement, critics have thrust between his work and the public some vague conception of what they required, and measured it by an academic or conventional standard derived from other works. Fond as an author necessarily is of praise, and pained as he must always be by blame, he is far more touched by a sympathetic recognition of his efforts, and far more hurt by a misrepresentation of them. No hyperbole of laudation gives a tithe of the delight which is given by sympathetic insight. Unhappily for the author, this can but sparingly be given by critics, who trust less to their emotions than to their standards of judgment; for the greater the originality of the writer, and the less inclination he has for familiar processes and already-trodden tracks, the greater must be the resistance he will meet with from minds accustomed to move in those tracks, and to consider excellence confined within them. It is in the nature of the critical mind to judge according to precedent; and few minds have flexibility enough to adopt at once a novelty which is destined in its turn to become a precedent.

There is another source of pain. Besides the very great difficulties of independent judgment, of adjusting the mental focus to new objects under new perspectives, and the various personal considerations which trammel even open minds—considerations of friendship, station, renown, rivalry, &c.—there is the immense difficulty which all men find in giving anything like an adequate expression to their judgments. It is easy for us to say that a book has stirred, or instructed us; but it is by no means easy to specify the grounds of our pleasure, or profit, except in a very general way; and when we attempt to do so we are apt to make ludicrous mistakes. Thus it is that the criticism which begins with a general expression of gratitude to the author, will often deeply pain him by misplaced praise, or blame misdirected.

Longinus declares that criticism is the last result of abundant experience; he might have added that even the ampest experience is no safeguard against utter failure. For it is true in Art as in the
commonest details of life, that our perceptions are mainly determined by our pre-perceptions, our conceptions by our preconceptions. Hence I have long maintained the desirability of preserving as far as possible the individual character of criticism. The artist in his work gives expression to his individual feelings and conceptions, telling us how Life and Nature are mirrored in his mind; we may fairly state how this affects us, whether it accords with our experience, whether it moves or instructs us; but we should be very chary of absolute judgments, and be quite sure of our ground before venturing to assume that the public will feel, or ought to feel, as we feel. Now it is the tendency of criticism to pronounce absolute verdicts, to speak for all; and the exasperation of the artist at finding individual impressions given forth as final judgments is the main cause of the outcry against criticism. The writer who would feel little irritation on hearing that A. and B. were unmoved by his pathos, dead to his humour, unenlightened by his philosophy, may be excused if he write under the authoritative announcement that his pathos is maudlin, his humour flat, his philosophy shallow. He may be convicted of bad grammar, bad drawing, bad logic; and if the critic advances reasons for particular objections, these reasons may be weighed, and perhaps accepted with resignation if not without pain; but no verdict which does not distinctly carry its evidence can be accepted as more than an individual judgment; and in matters of Art there is always a great difficulty, sometimes a sheer impossibility, in passing from the individual to the universal. It is impossible to resist feeling. If an author makes me laugh, he is humorous; if he makes me cry, he is pathetic. In vain will any one tell me that such a picture is not laughable, not pathetic; or that I am wrong in being moved.

While from these and other causes, especially from the tendency to exaggerate what is painful, authors have deeply resented "the malevolence" of critics—a malevolence which has been mostly incompetence, or inconsiderateness—it is not less true that there has been much heartfelt gratitude given by authors to critics who have sympathised with and encouraged them; and many lasting friendships have been thus cemented. It was thus that the lifelong friendship of Dickens and his biographer began, and was sustained. Nor is it just to object to Mr. Forster's enthusiasm on the ground of his friendship, since he may fairly answer, "Dickens was my friend because I so greatly admired him." One thing is certain: his admiration was expressed long before all the world had acknowledged Dickens's genius, and was continued through the long years when the majority of writers had ceased to express much fervour of admiration, preferring rather to dwell on his shortcomings and exaggerations.
And this brings me to the noticeable fact that there probably never was a writer of so vast a popularity whose genius was so little appreciated by the critics. The very splendour of his successes so deepened the shadow of his failures that to many eyes the shadows supplanted the splendour. Fastidious readers were loath to admit that a writer could be justly called great whose defects were so glaring. They admitted, because it was indisputable, that Dickens delighted thousands, that his admirers were found in all classes, and in all countries; that he stirred the sympathy of masses not easily reached through Literature, and always stirred healthy, generous emotions; that he impressed a new direction on popular writing, and modified the Literature of his age, in its spirit no less than in its form; but they nevertheless insisted on his defects as if they outweighed all positive qualities; and spoke of him either with condescending patronage, or with sneering irritation. Surely this is a fact worthy of investigation? Were the critics wrong, and if so, in what consisted their error? How are we to reconcile this immense popularity with this critical contempt? The private readers and the public critics who were eager to take up each successive number of his works as it appeared, whose very talk was seasoned with quotations from and allusions to these works, who, to my knowledge, were wont to lay aside books of which they could only speak in terms of eulogy, in order to bury themselves in the “new number” when the well-known green cover made its appearance—were nevertheless at this very time niggard in their praise, and lavish in their scorn of the popular humorist. It is not long since I heard a very distinguished man express measureless contempt for Dickens, and a few minutes afterwards, in reply to some representations on the other side, admit that Dickens had “entered into his life.”

Dickens has proved his power by a popularity almost unexampled, embracing all classes. Surely it is a task for criticism to exhibit the sources of that power? If everything that has ever been alleged against the works be admitted, there still remains an immense success to be accounted for. It was not by their defects that these works were carried over Europe and America. It was not their defects which made them the delight of grey heads on the bench, and the study of youngsters in the counting-house and school-room. Other writers have been exaggerated, untrue, fantastic, and melodramatic; but they have gained so little notice that no one thinks of pointing out their defects. It is clear, therefore, that Dickens had powers which enabled him to triumph in spite of the weaknesses which clogged them; and it is worth inquiring what those powers were, and their relation to his undeniable defects.

I am not about to attempt such an inquiry, but simply to indicate
two or three general points of view. It will be enough merely to mention in passing the primary cause of his success, his overflowing fun, because even uncompromising opponents admit it. They may be ashamed of their laughter, but they laugh. A revulsion of feeling at the preposterousness or extravagance of the image may follow the burst of laughter, but the laughter is irresistible, whether rational or not, and there is no arguing away such a fact.

Great as Dickens is in fun, so great that Fielding and Smollett are small in comparison, he would have been only a passing amusement for the world had he not been gifted with an imagination of marvellous vividness, and an emotional, sympathetic nature capable of furnishing that imagination with elements of universal power. Of him it may be said with less exaggeration than of most poets, that he was of "imagination all compact;" if the other higher faculties were singularly deficient in him, this faculty was imperial. He was a seer of visions; and his visions were of objects at once familiar and potent. Psychologists will understand both the extent and the limitation of the remark, when I say that in no other perfectly sane mind (Blake, I believe, was not perfectly sane) have I observed vividness of imagination approaching so closely to hallucination. Many who are not psychologists may have had some experience in themselves, or in others, of that abnormal condition in which a man hears voices, and sees objects, with the distinctness of direct perception, although silence and darkness are without him; these revised impressions, revived by an internal cause, have precisely the same force and clearness which the impressions originally had when produced by an external cause. In the same degree of vividness are the images constructed by his mind in explanation of the voices heard or objects seen: when he imagines that the voice proceeds from a personal friend, or from Satan tempting him, the friend or Satan stands before him with the distinctness of objective reality; when he imagines that he himself has been transformed into a bear, his hands are seen by him as paws. In vain you represent to him that the voices he hears have no external existence; he will answer, as a patient pertinently answered Lélut: "You believe that I am speaking to you because you hear me, is it not so? Very well, I believe that voices are speaking to me because I hear them." There is no power of effacing such conviction by argument. You may get the patient to assent to any premises you please, he will not swerve from his conclusions. I once argued with a patient who believed he had been transformed into a bear; he was quite willing to admit that the idea of such a transformation was utterly at variance with all experience; but he always returned to his position that God being omnipotent there was no reason to doubt his power of transforming men into bears: what remained fixed in his mind was the image of himself under a bear's form.
The characteristic point in the hallucinations of the insane, that which distinguishes them from hallucinations equally vivid in the sane, is the coercion of the image in suppressing comparison and all control of experience. Belief always accompanies a vivid image, for a time; but in the sane this belief will not persist against rational control. If I see a stick partly under water, it is impossible for me not to have the same feeling which would be produced by a bent stick out of the water—if I see two plane images in the stereoscope, it is impossible not to have the feeling of seeing one solid object. But these beliefs are rapidly displaced by reference to experience. I know the stick is not bent, and that it will not appear bent when removed from the water. I know the seeming solid is not an object in relief, but two plane pictures. It is by similar focal adjustment of the mind that sane people know that their hallucinations are unreal. The images may have the vividness of real objects, but they have not the properties of real objects, they do not preserve consistent relations with other facts, they appear in contradiction to other beliefs. Thus if I see a black cat on the chair opposite, yet on my approaching the chair feel no soft object, and if my terrier on the hearthrug looking in the direction of the chair shows none of the well-known agitation which the sight of a cat produces, I conclude, in spite of its distinctness, that the image is an hallucination.

Returning from this digression, let me say that I am very far indeed from wishing to imply any agreement in the common notion that “great wits to madness nearly are allied;” on the contrary, my studies have led to the conviction that nothing is less like genius than insanity, although some men of genius have had occasional attacks; and further, that I have never observed any trace of the insane temperament in Dickens’s works, or life, they being indeed singularly free even from the eccentricities which often accompany exceptional powers; nevertheless, with all due limitations, it is true that there is considerable light shed upon his works by the action of the imagination in hallucination. To him also revised images have the vividness of sensations; to him also created images have the coercive force of realities, excluding all control, all contradiction. What seems preposterous, impossible to us, seemed to him simple fact of observation. When he imagined a street, a house, a room, a figure, he saw it not in the vague schematical way of ordinary imagination, but in the sharp definition of actual perception, all the salient details obtruding themselves on his attention. He, seeing it thus vividly, made us also see it; and believing in its reality however fantastic, he communicated something of his belief to us. He presented it in such relief that we ceased to think of it as a picture. So definite and insistent was the image, that even while knowing it was false we could not help, for a moment, being affected, as it were, by his hallucination.
This glorious energy of imagination is that which Dickens had in common with all great writers. It was this which made him a creator, and made his creations universally intelligible, no matter how fantastic and unreal. His types established themselves in the public mind like personal experiences. Their falsity was unnoticed in the blaze of their illumination. Every humbug seemed a Pecksniff, every nurse a Gamp, every jovial improvident a Micawber, every stinted serving-wench a Marchioness. Universal experiences became individualised in these types; an image and a name were given, and the image was so suggestive that it seemed to express all that it was found to recall, and Dickens was held to have depicted what his readers supplied. Against such power criticism was almost idle. In vain critical reflection showed these figures to be merely masks,—not characters, but personified characteristics, caricatures and distortions of human nature,—the vividness of their presentation triumphed over reflection: their creator managed to communicate to the public his own unhesitating belief. Unreal and impossible as these types were, speaking a language never heard in life, moving like pieces of simple mechanism always in one way (instead of moving with the infinite fluctuations of organisms, incaulecable yet intelligible, surprising yet familiar), these unreal figures affected the uncritical reader with the force of reality; and they did so in virtue of their embodiment of some real characteristic vividly presented. The imagination of the author laid hold of some well-marked physical trait, some peculiarity of aspect, speech, or manner which every one recognised at once; and the force with which this was presented made it occupy the mind to the exclusion of all critical doubts: only reflection could detect the incongruity. Think of what this implies! Think how little the mass of men are given to reflect on their impressions, and how their minds are for the most part occupied with sensations rather than ideas, and you will see why Dickens held an undisputed sway. Give a child a wooden horse, with hair for mane and tail, and wafer-spots for colouring, he will never be disturbed by the fact that this horse does not move its legs, but runs on wheels—the general suggestion suffices for his belief; and this wooden horse, which he can handle and draw, is believed in more than a pictured horse by a Wouwermans or an Ansdell. It may be said of Dickens's human figures that they too are wooden, and run on wheels; but these are details which scarcely disturb the belief of admirers. Just as the wooden horse is brought within the range of the child's emotions, and dramatizing tendencies, when he can handle and draw it, so Dickens's figures are brought within the range of the reader's interests, and receive from these interests a sudden illumination, when they are the puppets of a drama every incident of which appeals to the sympathies. With a fine felicity of
instinct he seized upon situations having an irresistible hold over the domestic affections and ordinary sympathies. He spoke in the mother-
tongue of the heart, and was always sure of ready listeners. He
painted the life he knew, the life every one knew; for if the scenes
and manners were unlike those we were familiar with, the feelings
and motives, the joys and griefs, the mistakes and efforts of the
actors were universal, and therefore universally intelligible; so that
even critical spectators who complained that these broadly painted
pictures were artistic daubs, could not wholly resist their effective
suggestiveness. He set in motion the secret springs of sympathy by
touching the domestic affections. He painted nothing ideal, heroic;
but all the resources of the bourgeois epic were in his grasp. The
world of thought and passion lay beyond his horizon. But the
joys and pains of childhood, the petty tyrannies of ignoble natures,
the genial pleasantries of happy natures, the life of the poor, the
struggles of the street and back parlour, the insolence of office, the
sharp social contrasts, east-wind and Christmas jollity, hunger,
misery, and hot punch—these he could deal with, so that we laughed
and cried, were startled at the revelation of familiar facts hitherto
unnoted, and felt our pulses quicken as we were hurried along with
him in his fanciful flight.

Such were the sources of his power. To understand how it is that
critics quite competent to recognise such power, and even so far
amenable to it as to be moved and interested by the works in spite
of all their drawbacks, should have forgotten this undeniable power, and
written or spoken of Dickens with mingled irritation and contempt,
we must take into account two natural tendencies—the bias of
opposition, and the bias of technical estimate.

The bias of opposition may be illustrated in a parallel case. Let
us suppose a scientific book to be attracting the attention of Europe
by the boldness, suggestiveness, and theoretic plausibility of its hypo-
theses; this work falls into the hands of a critic sufficiently grounded
in the science treated to be aware that its writer, although gifted
with great theoretic power and occasional insight into unexplored
relations, is nevertheless pitiably ignorant of the elementary facts
and principles of the science; the critic noticing the power, and
the talent of lucid exposition, is yet perplexed and irritated at
ignorance which is inexcusable, and a reckless twisting of known
facts into impossible relations, which seems wilful; will he not pass
from marvelling at this inextricable web of sense and nonsense,
suggestive insight and mischievous error, so jumbled together that
the combination of this sagacity with this glaring inefficiency is a
paradox, and be driven by the anger of opposition into an emphatic
assertion that the belauded philosopher is a charlatan and an igno-
ramus? A chorus of admirers proclaims the author to be a great
teacher, before whom all contemporaries must bow; and the critic observes this teacher on one page throwing out a striking hypothesis of some geometric relations in the planetary movements, and on another assuming that the hypothenuse is equal to its perpendicular and base, because the square of the hypothenuse is equal to the squares of its sides—in one chapter ridiculing the atomic theory, and in another arguing that carbonic acid is obtained from carbon and nitrogen—can this critic be expected to join in the chorus of admirers? and will he not rather be exasperated into an opposition which will lead him to undervalue the undeniable qualities in his insistence on the undeniable defects?

Something like this is the feeling produced by Dickens's works in many cultivated and critical readers. They see there human character and ordinary events portrayed with a mingled verisimilitude and falsity altogether unexampled. The drawing is so vivid yet so incorrect, or else is so blurred and formless, with such excess of effort (as of a showman beating on the drum) that the doubt arises how an observer so remarkably keen could make observations so remarkably false, and miss such very obvious facts; how the rapid glance which could swoop down on a peculiarity with hawklke precision, could overlook all that accompanied and was organically related to that peculiarity; how the eye for characteristics could be so blind to character, and the ear for dramatic idiom be so deaf to dramatic language; finally, how the writer's exquisite susceptibility to the grotesque could be insensible to the occasional grotesqueness of his own attitude. Michael Angelo is intelligible, and Giotto is intelligible; but a critic is nonplussed at finding the invention of Angelo with the drawing of Giotto. It is indeed surprising that Dickens should have observed man, and not been impressed with the fact that man is, in the words of Montaigne, un être ondoyant et diverse. And the critic is distressed to observe the substitution of mechanisms for minds, puppets for characters. It is needless to dwell on such monstrous failures as Mantalini, Rosa Dartle, Lady Dedlock, Esther Summerson, Mr. Dick, Arthur Gride, Edith Dombey, Mr. Carker—needless, because if one studies the successful figures one finds even in them only touches of verisimilitude. When one thinks of Micawber always presenting himself in the same situation, moved with the same springs, and uttering the same sounds, always confident on something turning up, always crushed and rebounding, always making punch—and his wife always declaring she will never part from him, always referring to his talents and her family—when one thinks of the "catchwords" personified as characters, one is reminded of the frogs whose brains have been taken out for physiological purposes, and whose actions henceforth want the distinctive peculiarity of organic action, that of
fluctuating spontaneity. Place one of these brainless frogs on his back and he will at once recover the sitting posture; draw a leg from under him, and he will draw it back again; tickle or prick him and he will push away the object, or take one hop out of the way; stroke his back, and he will utter one croak. All these things resemble the actions of the unmutilated frog, but they differ in being isolated actions, and always the same: they are as uniform and calculable as the movements of a machine. The uninjured frog may or may not croak, may or may not hop away; the result is never calculable, and is rarely a single croak or a single hop. It is this complexity of the organism which Dickens wholly fails to conceive; his characters have nothing fluctuating and incommensurable in them, even when they embody true observations; and very often they are creations so fantastic that one is at a loss to understand how he could, without hallucination, believe them to be like reality. There are dialogues bearing the traces of straining effort at effect, which in their incongruity painfully resemble the absurd and eager expositions which insane patients pour into the listener's ear when detailing their wrongs, or their schemes. Dickens once declared to me that every word said by his characters was distinctly heard by him; I was at first not a little puzzled to account for the fact that he could hear language so utterly unlike the language of real feeling, and not be aware of its preposterousness; but the surprise vanished when I thought of the phenomena of hallucination. And here it may be needful to remark in passing that it is not because the characters are badly drawn and their language unreal, that they are to be classed among the excesses of imagination; otherwise all the bad novelists and dramatists would be credited with that which they especially want—powerful imagination. His peculiarity is not the incorrectness of the drawing, but the vividness of the imagination which while rendering that incorrectness insensible to him, also renders it potent with multitudes of his fellowmen. For although his weakness comes from excess in one direction, the force which is in excess must not be overlooked; and it is overlooked or undervalued by critics who, with what I have called the bias of opposition, insist only on the weakness.

This leads me to the second point, the bias of technical estimate. The main purpose of Art is delight. Whatever influences may radiate from that centre,—and however it may elevate or modify,—the one primary condition of influence is stirred emotion. No Art can teach which does not move; no Art can move without teaching. Criticism has to consider Art under two aspects, that of emotional pleasure, and that of technical pleasure. We all—public and critics—are susceptible of the former, are capable of being moved, and are delighted with what stirs the emotions, filling the mind with images having emotional influence; but only the critics are much affected
by technical skill, and the pleasure it creates. *What* is done, what
is suggested, constitutes the first aspect; *how* it is done the second.
We all delight in imitation, and in the skill which represents one
object in another medium; but the refinements of skill can only be
appreciated by study. To a savage there is so little suggestion of a
human face and form in a painted portrait that it is not even
recognised as the representation of a man; whereas the same savage
would delight in a waxwork figure, or a wooden Scotchman at the
door of a tobacconist. The educated eye sees exquisite skill in the
portrait, a skill which gives exquisite delight; but this eye which
traces and estimates the subtle effects of colour and distribution of
light and shade in the portrait, turns with disgust from the wax
figure, or the wooden Highlander. In the course of time the pleasure
derived from the perception of difficulty overcome, leads to such a
preponderance of the technical estimate, that the sweep of the brush,
or the composition of lines, becomes of supreme importance, and the
connoisseur no longer asks, *What* is painted? but *How* is it painted?
The *what* may be a patch of meadow, the bend of a river, or a street
boy munching bread and cheese, and yet give greater delight by its
*how*, than another picture which represented the Andes, Niagara, or
a Madonna and Child. When the critic observes technical skill in a
picture, he pronounces the painter to be admirable, and is quite
unmoved by any great subject badly painted. In like manner a
great poet is estimated by the greatness of his execution of great
conceptions, not by the greatness of his intention.

How easily the critic falls into the mistake of overvaluing technical
skill, and not allowing for the primary condition, how easily he
misjudges works by applying to them technical rules derived from
the works of others, need not here be dwelt on. What I wish to
indicate is the bias of technical estimate which, acting with that
bias of opposition just noted, has caused the critics to overlook in
Dickens the great artistic powers which are proved by his immense
success; and to dwell only on those great artistic deficiencies which
exclude him from the class of exquisite writers. He worked in delf,
not in porcelain. But his prodigal imagination created in delf
forms which delighted thousands. He only touched common life, but
he touched it to "fine issues;" and since we are all susceptible of
being moved by pictures of children in droll and pathetic situations,
and by pictures of common suffering and common joy, any writer
who can paint such pictures with sufficient skill to awaken these
emotions is powerful in proportion to the emotion stirred. That
Dickens had this skill is undisputed; and if critical reflection
shows that the means he employs are not such as will satisfy
the technical estimate, and consequently that the pictures will not
move the cultivated mind, nor give it the deep content which
perfect Art continues to create, making the work a "joy for ever,"
we must still remember that in the present state of Literature, with hundreds daily exerting their utmost efforts to paint such pictures, it requires prodigious force and rare skill to impress images that will stir the universal heart. Murders are perpetrated without stint, but the murder of Nancy is unforgettable. Children figure in numberless plays and novels, but the deaths of little Nell and little Paul were national griefs. Seduction is one of the commonest of tragedies, but the scene in Peggotty’s boat-house burns itself into the memory. Captain Cuttle and Richard Swiveller, the Marchioness and Tilly Slowboy, Pecksniff and Micawber, Tiny Tim and Mrs. Gamp, may be imperfect presentations of human character, but they are types which no one can forget. Dr. Johnson explained the popularity of some writer by saying, “Sir, his nonsense suited their nonsense;” let us add, “and his sense suited their sense,” and it will explain the popularity of Dickens. Readers to whom all the refinements of Art and Literature are as meaningless hieroglyphs, were at once laid hold of by the reproduction of their own feelings, their own experiences, their own prejudices, in the irradiating splendour of his imagination; while readers whose cultivated sensibilities were alive to the most delicate and evanescent touches were, by virtue of their common nature, ready to be moved and delighted at his pictures and suggestions. The cultivated and uncultivated were affected by his admirable mise en scène, his fertile invention, his striking selection of incident, his intense vision of physical details. Only the cultivated who are made fastidious by cultivation paused to consider the pervading commonness of the works, and remarked that they are wholly without glimpses of a nobler life; and that the writer presents an almost unique example of a mind of singular force in which, so to speak, sensations never passed into ideas. Dickens sees and feels, but the logic of feeling seems the only logic he can manage. Thought is strangely absent from his works. I do not suppose a single thoughtful remark on life or character could be found throughout the twenty volumes. Not only is there a marked absence of the reflective tendency, but one sees no indication of the past life of humanity having ever occupied him; keenly as he observes the objects before him, he never connects his observations into a general expression, never seems interested in general relations of things. Compared with that of Fielding or Thackeray, his was merely an animal intelligence, i.e., restricted to perceptions. On this ground his early education was more fruitful and less injurious than it would have been to a nature constructed on a more reflective and intellectual type. It furnished him with rare and valuable experience, early developed his sympathies with the lowly and struggling, and did not starve any intellectual ambition. He never was and never would have been a student.

My acquaintance with him began soon after the completion of
“Pickwick.” Something I had written on that book pleased him, and caused him to ask me to call on him. (It is pleasant for me to remember that I made Thackeray’s acquaintance in a similar way.) He was then living in Doughty Street; and those who remember him at that period will understand the somewhat disturbing effect produced on my enthusiasm for the new author by the sight of his bookshelves, on which were ranged nothing but three-volume novels and books of travel, all obviously the presentation copies from authors and publishers, with none of the treasures of the bookstall, each of which has its history, and all giving the collection its individual physiognomy. A man’s library expresses much of his hidden life. I did not expect to find a bookworm, nor even a student, in the marvellous “Boz;” but nevertheless this collection of books was a shock. He shortly came in, and his sunny presence quickly dispelled all misgivings. He was then, as to the last, a delightful companion, full of sagacity as well as animal spirits; but I came away more impressed with the fulness of life and energy than with any sense of distinction. I believe I only saw him once more before I went to Germany, and two years had elapsed when next we met. While waiting in his library (in Devonshire Terrace) I of course glanced at the books. The well-known paper boards of the three-volume novel no longer vulgarised the place; a goodly array of standard works, well-bound, showed a more respectable and conventional ambition; but there was no physiognomy in the collection. A greater change was visible in Dickens himself. In these two years he had remarkably developed. His conversation turned on graver subjects than theatres and actors, periodicals and London life. His interest in public affairs, especially in social questions, was keener. He still remained completely outside philosophy, science, and the higher literature, and was too unaffected a man to pretend to feel any interest in them. But the vivacity and sagacity which gave a charm to intercourse with him had become weighted with a seriousness which from that time forward became more and more prominent in his conversation and his writings. He had already learned to look upon the world as a scene where it was the duty of each man in his own way to make the lot of the miserable many a little less miserable; and, having learned that his genius gave him great power, he was bent on using that power effectively. He was sometimes laughed at for the importance he seemed to attach to everything relating to himself, and the solemnity with which he spoke of his aims and affairs; but this belonged to his quality. Il se prenait au sérieux, and was admirable because he did so. Whatever faults he may have committed there were none attributable to carelessness. He gave us his best. If the effort were sometimes too strained, and the desire for effect too obtrusive, there was no lazy indulgence, no trading on a great renown, no “scumbling” in his work. “What-
ever I have tried to do in life,” he said, speaking through Copperfield, “I have tried with all my heart to do well. Never to put one hand to anything on which I could throw my whole self, and never to affect depreciation of my work, whatever it was, I now find to have been my golden rules.”

Since I have been led in the course of argument to touch upon my personal acquaintance with Dickens, I may take advantage of the opening to introduce a point not mentioned in Mr. Forster’s memoir, though he most probably is familiar with it. Mr. Forster has narrated Dickens’s intense grief at the death of his sister-in-law, Mary—a grief which for two months interrupted the writing of “Pickwick,” and which five years afterwards thus moves him in a letter to Mr. Forster on the death of her grandmother. The passage itself is in every way interesting, displaying a depth and delicacy of feeling, combined with a tenderness towards the sacredness due to the wishes of the dead, which is very noticeable:—

“It is a great trial to me to give up Mary’s grave; greater than I can possibly express. I thought of moving her to the catacomb, and saying nothing about it; but then I remembered that the poor old lady is buried next her at her own desire, and could not find it in my heart directly she is laid in the earth to take her grandchild away. The desire to be buried next her is as strong upon me now as it was five years ago; and I know (for I don’t think there ever was love like that I bear her) that it will never diminish. I cannot bear the thought of being excluded from her dust; and yet I feel that her brothers and sisters and her mother have a better right than I to be placed beside her. It is but an idea. I neither hope nor think (God forbid) that our spirits would ever mingle there. I ought to get the better of it, but it is very hard. I never contemplated this; and coming so suddenly, and after being ill, it disturbs me more than it ought. It seems like losing her a second time.”

Again, when writing from America and describing his delight at the Niagara Falls, he says:—

“What would I give if you and Mac were here to share the sensations of this time! I was going to add, what would I give if the dear girl whose ashes lie in Kensal Green had lived to come so far along with us; but she has been here many times, I doubt not, since her sweet face faded from my earthly sight.”

Several years afterwards, in the course of a quiet chat over a cigar, we got on a subject which always interested him, and on which he had stored many striking anecdotes—dreams. He then narrated, in his quietest and most impressive manner, that after Mary’s death her image not only haunted him by day, but for twelve months visited his dreams every night. At first he had refrained from mentioning it to his wife; and after deferring this some time, felt unable to mention it to her. He had occasion to go to Liverpool, and as he went to bed that night, there was a strong hope that the change of bed might break the spell of his dreams. It was not so however. That night as usual the old dream was dreamt. He resolved to unburthen his mind to his wife, and wrote that very
morning a full account of his strange experience. From that time he ceased to dream of her. I forget whether he said he had never dreamt of her since; but I am certain of the fact that the spell had been broken then and there.

Here is another contribution to the subject of dreams, which I had from him shortly before his death. One night after one of his public readings, he dreamt that he was in a room where every one was dressed in scarlet. (The probable origin of this was the mass of scarlet opera-cloaks worn by the ladies among the audience, having left a sort of afterglow on his retina.) He stumbled against a lady standing with her back towards him. As he apologised she turned her head and said, quite unprovoked, “My name is Napier.” The face was one perfectly unknown to him, nor did he know any one named Napier. Two days after he had another reading in the same town, and before it began, a lady friend came into the waiting-room accompanied by an unknown lady in a scarlet opera cloak; “who,” said his friend, “is very desirous of being introduced.” “Not Miss Napier?” he jokingly inquired. “Yes; Miss Napier.” Although the face of his dream-lady was not the face of this Miss Napier, the coincidence of the scarlet cloak and the name was striking.

In bringing these detached observations to a close, let me resume their drift by saying that while on the one hand the critics seem to me to have been fully justified in denying him the possession of many technical excellencies, they have been thrown into unwise antagonism which has made them overlook or undervalue the great qualities which distinguished him; and that even on technical grounds their criticism has been so far defective that it failed to recognise the supreme powers which ensured his triumph in spite of all defects. For the reader of cultivated taste there is little in his works beyond the stirring of their emotions—but what a large exception! We do not turn over the pages in search of thought, delicate psychological observation, grace of style, charm of composition; but we enjoy them like children at a play, laughing and crying at the images which pass before us. And this illustration suggests the explanation of how learned and thoughtful men can have been almost as much delighted with the works as ignorant and juvenile readers; how Lord Jeffrey could have been so affected by the presentation of Little Nell, which most critical readers pronounce mauldin and unreal. Persons unfamiliar with theatrical representations, consequently unable to criticise the acting, are stirred by the suggestions of the scenes presented; and hence a great philosopher, poet, or man of science, may be found applauding an actor whom every play-going apprentice despises as stagey and inartistic.

George Henry Lewes.