

Mrs. General as Victorian England: Dickens's Image of His Times

VEREEN M. BELL

INTRODUCED AS SHE IS at mid-novel and almost casually attended to for the rest of the way, *Little Dorrit's* Mrs. General is apparently not one of those characters that Dickensians like to admire. Chesterton does not mention her, nor does Gissing, nor does Shaw who would have had better reason. Yet in her way she embodies one of Dickens's most mature and enlightened moral observations. She has of course one blessedly practical function: for those of us who, by the time she appears, are weary of Amy Dorrit's kissing her father and of Blandois' mustache going up under his nose and his nose going down over his mustache, she provides some comic relief. But she has something of a thematic function as well in that she tells us a great deal about what Dickens had on his mind during this period of his later novels.

During the fifteen-odd years before *Little Dorrit*, Dickens had expended most of his creative energy in dramatizing the obvious and yet carefully obscured iniquities of England's social system. In Edmund Wilson's words, it had been his purpose to demonstrate "that to the English governing classes the people they govern are not real," to personalize the "human actualities who figure for Parliament as strategical counters and for Political Economy as statistics. . . ." ¹ In Dickens's letters of the mid-fifties, political despair is a recurrent theme. He had all but ceased to hope for the conscience of the governing class, and his faith in what he called the public was fast waning. In the midst of the Crimean War scandal, he wrote to Austen Henry Layard that the people of

Vereen M. Bell is an assistant professor of English, Vanderbilt University.

¹ *The Wound and the Bow* (Cambridge, Mass., 1941), p. 26.

England, he feared, had become alienated from their own public affairs and had given up trying to make themselves heard. “Meanwhile, all our English tuft-hunting, toad eating, and other manifestations of accursed gentility . . . ARE expressing themselves everyday.” And “Finally, round all this is an atmosphere of poverty, hunger, and ignorant desperation, of the mere existence of which, perhaps not one man in a thousand of those not actually enveloped in it, through the whole extent of this country, has the least idea.”² About a year later in a conversation with a Mrs. Brown, a friend of Miss Coutts, he asserted bluntly “that in England people dismiss the mention of social evils and vices which do nevertheless exist among them; and that in France people do not dismiss the mention of the same things but habitually recognize their existence” (*Letters*, II, 770).

The reformist character of Dickens’s earlier novels—aside from their generally lighter tone—implies a kind of political optimism. Dickens seems to have assumed then that if government in a democratic state is made aware of evil conditions it will take measures to correct them. As his cynical remark to Mrs. Brown indicates, however, he had now sensed that the Englishman—in spite of evidence, in spite of publicity—was inclined to ignore any condition or situation that promised to seem unpleasant. It was apparently in this mood that he began to revise his professional strategy. And since *Household Words* had pre-empted the more explicitly polemical function of his novels, his artistic vision was now freed to consider more complex issues.

With *Hard Times* in 1854, Dickens waged, in his fiction, his last direct and major offensive against his principal foe—Gradgrind and Bounderby, the theoretical and practical executors of *laissez faire*. In the novels after *Hard Times*, his portraits of the poor’s misery grow less and less insistent, and his analysis of the governing class—especially the ascendant middle class—becomes more systematic. Instead of dragging images of slums and disease into England’s drawing rooms, he begins to hold up a mirror to those whom he considered responsible—apparently with the hope that if they could see nothing else they could at least see themselves. From a dramatization of effects, in other words, he turned to an analysis of causes. Hence, with *Little Dorrit*, he came upon Mrs. General.

² The Nonesuch *Letters*, ed. Walter Dexter (Bloomsbury, 1938), II, 651–652.

As the double implication of her name suggests, Mrs. General seems to have two identities, the one individual, the other representative or allegorical. As the first she is the rigorously military, autocratic governess of the Dorrit girls, a director of young lives, and the object of Mr. Dorrit's esteem; as the second she embodies what Dickens evidently considered the mid-century, middle-class ethos, a kind of female Everyman. Her attitudes are hers, and at the same time, Dickens implies, they are England's—vague, unoriginal, evasive.

Mrs. General had no opinions. Her way of forming a mind was to prevent it from forming opinions. She had a little circular set of mental grooves or rails on which she started little trains of other people's opinions, which never overtook one another, and never got anywhere. Even her propriety could not dispute that there was impropriety in the world; but Mrs. General's way of getting rid of it was to put it out of sight, and make believe that there was no such thing. This was another of her ways of forming a mind—to cram all articles of difficulty into cupboards, lock them up, and say they had no existence. It was the easiest way, and, beyond all comparison, the properest.

She was not to be told of anything shocking. "Accidents, miseries, and offenses, were never to be mentioned before her. Passion was to go to sleep in the presence of Mrs. General, and blood was to change to milk and water."³ Perhaps it would have been less obvious to Dickens's contemporaries, but from our perspective it seems clear that this description was meant to have a comprehensive as well as a particular application.

The Dedlocks, of course, are her antecedents, lifeless aristocrats who are so "wrapped up in . . . jeweller's cotton and fine wool" that they "cannot hear the rushing of the larger worlds." But their case is somewhat different; they have their wealth to protect and to isolate them. Mrs. General has only her propriety, the aspiring middle class's substitute for riches; if it cannot have the aristocracy's wealth, it may at least ape its attitudes. Podsnap, on the other hand, is one of her descendants: "I don't want to know about it; I don't choose to discuss it: I don't admit it!" Poverty he considers a very disagreeable subject. "I will go so far as to say it is an odious one. It is not one to be introduced among our wives and young persons." Yet Podsnap is a businessman, and it is in his

³ *Little Dorrit*, Oxford edition (New York, 1953), p. 450.

interest to resist Centralization. Mrs. General stands to gain nothing of substance; she can only preserve her dignity and her self-esteem.

Mrs. General is in fact in the business of cultivating surfaces—at the expense of the inner life. “The little that was left in the world, when all these deductions were made, it was Mrs. General’s province to varnish. In that formation process of hers, she dipped the smallest of brushes into the largest of pots, and varnished the surface of every object that came under consideration. The more cracked it was, the more Mrs. General varnished it” (pp. 450–451). From her instructions the Dorrit girls learn that one becomes socially refined by becoming morally and emotionally empty:

If Miss Amy Dorrit will direct her own attention to, and will accept of my poor assistance in, the formation of a surface, Mr. Dorrit will have no further cause of anxiety. May I take this opportunity of remarking, as an instance in point that it is scarcely delicate to look at vagrants with the attention which I have seen bestowed upon them, by a very dear young friend of mine? They should not be looked at. Nothing disagreeable should ever be looked at. Apart from such a habit standing in the way of that graceful equanimity of surface which is so expressive of good breeding, it hardly seems compatible with refinement of mind. A truly refined mind will seem to be ignorant of the existence of anything that is not perfectly proper, placid, and pleasant (p. 477).

One is not to have feelings; one is not to hold opinions (“Perfect breeding forms none, and is never demonstrative”).

Her absurdly alliterative formula for pretty lip formation has more significance than the usual Dickens leitmotif. The word “Father,” Amy is told, is vulgar; “Papa” is preferable—because it is more cosmetic. “The word Papa . . . gives a very pretty form to the lips. Papa, potatoes, poultry, prunes, and prism, are all very good words for the lips: especially prunes and prism. You will find it serviceable, in the formation of a demeanour, if you will sometimes say to yourself in company—on entering a room for instance—Papa, potatoes, poultry, prunes and prism, prunes and prism” (p. 476). Words are made to form lips, not to express thoughts. Even language and sense are sacrificed to appearance. Later on in Rome, among the fashionable visitors of ruins, there is a good deal of Prunes and Prism about, and Mrs. General is in her purest element. “Nobody said what anything was, but everybody said what

the Mrs. Generals, Mr. Eustace, or somebody else said it was. . . . Nobody had an opinion. There was a formation of surface going on around her on an amazing scale, and it had not a flaw of courage or honest free speech in it" (p. 512). Mrs. General, in other words, merely epitomizes a class of people.

That class of people might be described as the idle middle class. In a letter to Macready, Dickens labeled England's middle class as "nothing but a poor fringe on the mantle of the upper"; and *Little Dorrit*—in process at the time of his remark—gives us a fair notion of what he meant. More and more Dickens's later novels are concerned with those people in society who are well off, who live off their investments or legacies, and who believe that they have achieved rank because they do not work. (Perhaps significantly they are also among those who profit most from the Utilitarian concept of the general good.) Pretentiously they aspire to replace the moribund aristocracy, whose manners and values they imitate; and their snobbery is merely a symptom of their reluctance to see anything real about the rest of the world, anything in other words that is disquieting or unsettling to their sense of station.

Dickens likes to use children to overdraw the effects of evil; he employs women—mainly wives and mothers—to dramatize the emptiness of the idle rich. According to *Little Dorrit*, women who achieve wealth or—as in Mrs. General's case—the position of wealth without actually having it, are the perfect prototypes of those members of society who, in Shaw's phrase, merely consume without producing. They are given over wholly to voluptuous posturing and excessive ornamentation, a cultivation of surfaces—perhaps partly because they have nothing else to do. At the top of this scale in *Little Dorrit* stands Mrs. Merdle, whose husband is of course industrious, in his way. "She had large unfeeling handsome eyes, and dark unfeeling handsome hair, and a broad unfeeling handsome bosom, and was made the most of in every particular" (p. 238). In her elegant gestures she employs only her left hand, because of her two, which are not a pair, the left is the whiter and plumper. She is effectively dehumanized in a pointed synecdoche: Mr. Merdle

had provided that extensive bosom, which required so much room to be unfeeling enough in, with a nest of crimson and gold some fifteen years before. It was not a bosom to repose upon, but it was a capital bosom to hang jewels upon. Mr. Merdle wanted something to hang

jewels upon, and he bought it for the purpose. . . . Like all his other speculations, it was sound and successful. The jewels showed to the richest advantage. The bosom moving in Society with the jewels displayed upon it, attracted general admiration. Society approving, Mr. Merdle was satisfied (p. 247).

Marriage, says Mrs. General, should be “free from the trammels of passion.”

Economically lower down, and a little more surly because of it, is Mrs. Gowan, one of the genteel gypsies of Hampton Court. It is one of her opinions (one of those that it is safe to hold) that “if John Barnacle had but abandoned his most unfortunate idea of conciliating the mob, all would have been well.” And there is Fanny, who is mortified to find her sister herding with paupers. Her caste consciousness is so acute that she marries poor Sparkler simply to spite Mrs. Merdle, who had impugned her gentility. It is no accident that the young men of these families—Henry Gowan, Sparkler, Tip—are idlers all, selfish and without purpose. In fact, they might just as well be the same character except for their special structural function: in the redundancy of idle young men, as in that of the idly genteel ladies, Dickens manages to identify a moral affliction and at the same time to suggest something of its epidemic proportions.

Unfortunately for Dickens’s objectives, Amy Dorrit is the principal anti-type, friend of the friendless, open-hearted servant of the down-trodden. She alone in that world of surfaces has (or is supposed to have) spiritual dimension, and she finds herself first uneasy, then forlorn, under the prevailing discipline of Prunes and Prism. Until her father is freed, when she is a mature woman, she has known scarcely any life outside the Marshalsea—home of the indigent—and her mentality has been shaped by that environment. Ironically it has acted as a kind of cloister. She has learned there, as Mr. Meagles is made to say later on, that Duty has no antecedent, “in any origin or station, that will tell against us with the Almighty, or with ourselves.” Like most of Dickens’s heroines, however, Amy is more an image than an agent of good.

Amy serves mainly to represent one impulse of her father’s inner tension, just as Fanny represents the other. It is important to have these forces clearly dramatized, for Mr. Dorrit’s conflict is in a sense symbolic as well as psychological: his failure to acknowledge his own poverty, either during his imprisonment or afterward,

represents a failure to recognize Poverty as an abstraction and to perceive its implications for human existence. Only by confronting his own disgrace can he come to identify himself with humanity. In his circle, however, there are few individuals who are qualified to activate his conscience. Young John Chivery manages to shame him, but he is not much concerned with Mr. Dorrit's soul; Amy is concerned, of course, but because of her meekness she is ineffectual, and her good intentions are often frustrated by her lack of insight. On the one hand, she finds, Mr. Dorrit reigns paternally as Father of the Marshalsea; and on the other, once he is free, he turns his back upon those subjects from whom he commanded so much respect. What Amy fails to understand is that his ruling impulse in both circumstances is the same—a kind of neurotic pride, generated by his sense of failure as an individual. Mr. Dorrit in fact has a good deal in common with Pip in that neither can look down, or back, without seeing there the image of his own past. Both are revealing—and perhaps slightly self-conscious—insights into the mentality of the middle class.

Mr. Dorrit continues to feed his own illusions up to the end. Even his pursuit of Mrs. General has a sort of abstract, Gatsbyean rightness about it, for in wedding her he would be uniting himself with the epitome of all that is correct and admirable in Society; it would be a symbolic union. And in what turns out to be a pathetic, imitative gesture, he buys jewels, against the day when he will have acquired a bosom to display them upon. The burden of pretense, however, is too great for “the broken wings” of his “maimed spirit”; and in his first and only moment of self-understanding—on the verge of wedding Mrs. General, and fittingly in the company of the Bosom and her fashionable friends—he seems to see dimly that he has merely exchanged one kind of prison for another. Ironically, his dream was already doomed to failure with the collapse of Merdle and Co., in which its capital was invested.

The Circumlocution Office is simply England's complex and strained complacency institutionalized. Its rationale, in fact, as explained by the agreeable Barnacle, sounds very much like Mrs. General's:

Our place is . . . the most inoffensive place possible. . . . It is there with the express intention that everything shall be left alone. . . . Look at it from the right point of view, and there you have us—official and ef-

fectual. It's like a limited game of cricket. A field of outsiders are always going in to bowl at the Public Service, and we block the balls (pp. 736–737).

In discouraging creative activity (“Everybody is ready to dislike and ridicule any invention”), it frustrates the industrious, like Daniel Doyce, in order to comfort the delicate sensibilities of the idle. Its main function is to stand, with arms outspread, between England and the truth.⁴

Shaw called *Little Dorrit* seditious because it seemed to him an attack upon the very foundations of the capitalist system. Yet it is not concerned primarily with the suffering of the poor—in spite of Bleeding Heart yard. And it is not an indictment of those who inflict misery. It is mainly about a vacuum of sympathy that allows misery to exist; and the Mrs. Generals, like the Jellybys and the Dedlocks before her and the Podsnaps afterwards, seem to be products of Dickens's frustration over being unable to impose the reality of England's poor upon the conscience of England's rich. It is significant too in this sense that the original *Little Dorrit* was called *Nobody's Fault*.

⁴A good deal of the bitterness that went into *Little Dorrit* had been generated in Dickens by the cholera outbreak in 1854. That event had led him to feel that England would use any pretext for ignoring its own unhealthy social climate, even a war. “When I consider the Patriotic Fund on the one hand, and on the other the poverty and wretchedness engendered by cholera, of which in London alone, an infinitely larger number of English people than are likely to be slain in the whole Russian war have miserably and needlessly died—I feel as if the world had just been pushed back five hundred years” (*Letters*, II, 603). Dickens's speculative statistics turned out to be extravagant, of course, but he might have been right—if it had not been, ironically, for the mismanagement of the war itself. For the summer quarter of 1854 the *Annual Register* reports 26,722 deaths in England and Wales from cholera and diarrhea alone.