

Green, Ethical, and Queer: The Way We Read Dickens Now

Contemporary Dickens. Edited by Eileen Gillooly and Deirdre David. Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press. 2008. 315 pp.

Queer Dickens: Erotics, Families, Masculinities. Holly Furneaux. New York: Oxford University Press. 2010. 282 pp.

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<1> In one of the canniest essays in the always-engrossing volume *Contemporary Dickens*, Deborah Epstein Nord points to the shifting nature of the critical reputation accorded to the novelist in the 1950s and 1960s. In Nord's account, after decades of critical rough treatment at the hands of early-twentieth-century British critics, a trio of non-academic and academic critics-- Edmund Wilson, Lionel Trilling, and Steven Marcus-- found that their new fascination with psychoanalysis, then enjoying a deferential reception in the United States, allowed them to discover in Dickens new terms for critical appreciation. Their emphases were quite distinct from earlier rehabilitations by George Orwell and Humphrey House, who in the 1930s and 1940s had emphasized a socially alert Dickens, unencumbered by the until-then-*de rigueur* biographical referentiality. As Nord demonstrates, these American critics focused on precisely that aspect of Dickens's writing--its absorption in childhood as a discrete, never-to-be-fully-transcended state of being (that is, a Freudian conception of childhood)--that had once rendered Dickens anathema to late Victorians such as Oscar Wilde, modernist innovators such as Virginia Woolf, and ambivalent traditionalists such as F.R. Leavis, all of whom had disparaged Dickens for excessive materiality, a haphazard prose style, inordinate sentimentalism, and an absence of "maturity." In Nord's account, psychoanalysis rescues Dickens's critical reputation (ironically, given that he is arguably the least psychological of major nineteenth-century British novelists). As Wilson saw it, Dickens grandly sublimates his childhood traumata into a career that (as Nord explains) proceeded with "neurotic single-mindedness" to produce novels whose obsession with murderous rage and hallucinatory states suggest that they fit more comfortably into the tormented ranks of Dostoevsky than any writer in Leavis' Great Tradition (274).

<2> What animates present-day critics of Dickens? With *Contemporary Dickens* and *Queer Dickens*, it is tempting to draw on the example of Nord's brilliant meta-critical discussion in order to render some conclusions about the state of Dickens criticism today. On the (admittedly

limited) evidence of these two works, there exists a lively, productive, and by no means altogether oppositional tension in Dickens Studies—namely, between those critics interested in the writer as a worldly novelist of largely liberal inclinations, acutely aware of his era’s debates about such topics as ethics and psychology, and those critics who are turning to the novelist as new critical ground for advanced theorizing about sexuality, gender, and (a new critical turn) definitions of the family. The editors of *Contemporary Dickens* graciously acknowledge this friction even as they drop something of a critical gauntlet, noting in their introduction that they seek to stress such topics as “moral philosophy, the psychology of the emotions, liberal theory, life writing, nationalism, and national character,” subjects that, they maintain, “are being rediscovered as compelling objects of study, competing successfully for attention with race, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and” other modes of analysis that “have dominated professional inquiry in recent years” (3). Furneaux’s study, meanwhile, insists that queer theory, gender studies, and feminist criticism can contribute powerfully to our understanding of Dickens’s fictional corpus and its afterlife in current debates about dissident sexuality’s relation to the Victorian family and the assimilability of a dissident erotics to make-shift, unorthodox, and non-biological familial arrangements. Like *Contemporary Dickens*, *Queer Dickens* posits a novelist of expansive and advanced political and ethical sympathies, yet, quite startlingly given the usual terms in which queer theory sets its various agendas, Furneaux’s study often presents Dickens as a radically skeptical outsider—indeed, as a bold social and sexual visionary.

<3> Yet there is more uniting these two volumes than the above tensions might suggest, a unity of perspective that tellingly reveals the conception of Dickens literary scholars prefer at present. Clearly, the aesthetic and formal assumptions of modernist and Leavisite adjudicators no longer have much critical purchase today. Not a single scholar in either of these two books could be said to fret over Dickens’s literary technique, his penchant for caricature, or his intellectual “maturity.” Formalist criticism, supposedly in ascendance in Victorian Studies nowadays, makes no appearance here, and so we get little in the way of a discussion of the particularities of the novelist’s aesthetic effects. In a kind of post-deconstructionist consensus, Dickens represents, for all the critics in these volumes, not so much a novelist of ideological positions as a writer of ideas. In fact, what is striking about the diverse group of contributors to David and Gillooly’s volume is the degree to which most of them directly or indirectly insist on Dickens’s seriousness as a novelist meditatively and strenuously responsive to philosophical, scientific, and social trends, issues, and systems. We are far more likely to learn in these pages about Dickens’s debt to Benthamite political theory or prevailing Victorian scientific models of double consciousness, say, than his involvement with Victorian theatricals or his messy entanglement with rival novelists. Although the editors claim that the volume’s absorption in cultural studies is a rationale for dedicating the collection to Steven Marcus (for his scholarship on Dickens but also for his *The Other Victorians* [1967], which, with its attention to nineteenth-century pornography, anticipated cultural studies), the absence of an “ideological Dickens” troubles that assertion. With the exception of Joseph Childers’s illuminating demonstration of the “Englishness” of Christmas in Dickens’s fiction and Tatiana M. Holway’s witty essay on the novelist’s afterlife on British currency and in England’s symbolic economy, there is not much interest here in what is usually defined as cultural studies. Essay by essay, *Contemporary Dickens* recalls the thrust of Michael Slater’s 2009 biographical assessment of the novelist, which presented Dickens as sensible businessman, thoughtful man of the world, and kindly philanthropist rather than as neurotically obsessive writer that was so evident in Peter Ackroyd’s 1990 biography, in which

the novelist emerged (aptly for a 1,195-page tome) as a writer of lurid sensational effects and as a flamboyant, outsized self-promoter. The three sections structuring *Contemporary Dickens* —“Ethics and Narrative,” “Material Culture,” and “Contextual Reading”—underline this more sober image of the novelist, as do most of the essays, which present Dickens as brooding with stringent attention on topics ranging from the nature of moral reasoning and material culture to child-rearing and English commons preservation.

<4> In addition to Nord’s account, there are winning essays throughout this volume. George Levine’s incisive assessment of the ways in which sacred and secular tensions animate *Little Dorrit* persuasively reminds us that the Victorian novel never thoroughly jettisons its engagement with religious preoccupations. In a fresh reading of *Hard Times*, Richard H. Moyer construes the novel as “wrapped up in the idea that, inevitably, we live by our fictions, and the struggle is between competing versions of reality” (103). Nancy Youssef brilliantly explores the ways in which Dickens relied on eighteenth-century philosophers, namely Shaftesbury, in forging an understanding of sympathy. Far from suggesting that sympathy holds unambiguous benefits to those who are its recipients, Youssef explains that Dickens was aware of the limitations of sympathetic feeling. In a reading of *Bleak House*, she argues that sympathy often can leave the objects of its attention feeling less understood, in scenarios that offer a rebuke of one strand of Victorian sentimentalism. In an exploration of Victorian moral philosophy, Robert Newsom discusses Dickens’s relation to the debate between Empiricists and Intuitionists, as he notes that Dickens believed deeply in innate ethical intuitions and sympathies (hence the numerous children in the novels—*Oliver Twist*, *Florence Dombey*, and *Esther Summerson*—whose “upbringings are so harsh that the only explanation for their moral sweetness is inborn goodness” [48]). John Bowen cogently tackles the novelist’s neglected *The Haunted Man*, viewing it as conversant with nineteenth-century psychology’s theorizing about how the mind retains memory and relates experiences to one another. “Dickens,” Bowen shrewdly observes, “is one of the great poets of memory; more strangely and disturbingly, he is, with Proust, the great poet of not forgetting,” a welcome, uncommon acknowledgement of Dickens’s cultural coordinates outside of Britain (78).

<5> In a forceful essay that engages recent scholars of commodity culture, Elaine Freedgood argues that materialist critics are far too apt to perceive Victorian culture as mired in a dehumanizing materiality. Dickens’s novels, so saturated in objects, only superficially lend assent to object-fetishization; in fact they depict a range of “thing love.” Along the way, Freedgood makes a case for considering Dickens, even at his most scorching, as a novelist whose critique of industrialization is palpably different from that offered by Marx (a point made less systematically by Orwell in his celebrated essay). Karen Chase and Michael Levenson thoughtfully consider a “Green Dickens,” who participated in the period’s environmental debates about urban decay versus an undestroyed countryside. They note that while Dickens began his career convinced of the “Wordsworthian aura” bestowed by a pastoral counter-world, he came to spoof such figures as Mrs. Skewton, Harold Simpole, and Mrs. Merdle as hypocrites who “veil self-interest within the language of pastoral” (137). In an essay on child-rearing in Dickens’s fiction, Eileen Gillooly accentuates the ways in which his novels repeatedly depict the raising of children as arduous and challenging. In one of the few essays in the collection to integrate biographical detail by taking measure of the resistance of Dickens’s children to the roles their father envisioned for them, Gillooly subtly attends to the place of nurturance in several novels.

James Eli Adams offers a probing investigation into the private versus public nature of sexuality in Dickens's fiction as Adams critiques the value of Althusserian modes of "interrogation" in estimations of Dickens's writing.

<6> Only James Buzard's contribution could have used some more attentive editing; its interesting argument about inventories in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, or the ways in which the characters in Dickens's novel defer to the narrator's cataloguing impulses, remains undeveloped. Deirdre David's essay, "*Little Dorrit's* Theater of Rage," is alone in evoking a Dickens of over-the-top sensational effects, as David concentrates on the novelist's penchant for scenarios in which assumptively male readers of Dickens's fiction are primed to observe disturbingly primal scenes of female anger. That *Contemporary Dickens* offers no essays related to the abundance of recent movies or theatrical productions inspired by the novelist's work lends an occasional bloodless austerity to the Dickens presented in these pages (although Childers offers some shrewd insights into Frank Capra's "It's a Wonderful Life" as an all-American distillation of the archetypally Dickensian Christmas, with its sense of the yuletide holiday as a momentary respite from and critique of capitalist progress.) We are richly instructed in the writer as Great Thinker, ever in control of his materials, but rather far from the garish entertainer who may have hastened his own death with his endless re-enactments of Nancy's murder, the novelist criticized by Ruskin for having chosen to "speak in a circle of stage fire"(1) or the psychically divided man portrayed by Edmund Wilson.

<7> Those versions of Dickens aren't on display in *Queer Dickens* either. Holly Furneaux is interested in the novelist as profoundly committed to the depiction of sexual outsiders and countercultural families. Dickens, so familiar as the patriarchal sage of the Victorian domestic sphere and sentimental adorer of chaste and noble femininity, emerges here as a proponent of heterodox figures, pairings, and families. Offering not only an original contribution to Dickens Studies, this volume suggests nothing less than a overhaul in queer theory's often-reflexive disparagement of the family and its tendency to see all familial structures as norm-reproducing, punitive, and inhospitable to alternative desires. Perhaps because of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's much-cited essay on *Our Mutual Friend* and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* in *Between Men* (1985), one of the foundational works of queer theory, most literary critics of Dickens have tended to follow Sedgwick's lead of seeing Dickensian homoeroticism as most, or only, legible in acts of violence. In explicit dissent, Furneaux traces "an abundance of gentler, but no less eroticized, same sex encounters" in the writer's work (16). She perceives through Dickens's bachelor fathers, maritally resistant men, and male nurses, novels that reserve a privileged status for varieties of nurturance, rather than a longing for heterosexual reproduction.

<8> *Queer Dickens* begins with an astonishing account of Dickens the maverick journalist visiting Newgate Prison in 1835 where he met James Pratt and John Smith, the last two men in Britain who would be executed for the "detestable and abominable" crime of "buggery" (2). To these doomed men and other prisoners, Dickens dedicated "A Visit to Newgate" (1836), a stirring record of the costs of capital punishment, in which he offered his commiseration "for them there was no hope in this world," a comment that, as Furneaux notes, hints at a salvation for "sodomites" most of his contemporaries denied such men (2). Turning to the novels, Furneaux locates patterns of serial bachelorhood, "female and male marital resistance" (18),

reparative masculinities, and a preponderance of alternative family structures. For Furneaux, everywhere in Dickens's writing there is an emphasis on the constructed nature of family as the novelist highlights nurturance over genealogy. At the same time that it accentuates the positive alternate-family scenarios in Dickens's major fiction, *Queer Dickens* is careful not to over-idealize all non-traditional scenarios, pointing out, for example, the unsavory symmetry between the criminal Fagin's craven attachment to Oliver and the well-off Brownlow's possessiveness towards the boy in *Oliver Twist* (1837-39). The volume concludes with a trenchant chapter on Dickens' fate in recent film, particularly Douglas McGrath's astonishing 2002 adaptation of *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-39). This heightened focus on Nicholas and Smike's homoerotic camaraderie relates the story's male duo to other Hollywood films (*Midnight Cowboy* and *Brokeback Mountain* primarily), in which male-male desire inevitably ends in death, as same-sex narratives assume an elegiac force that renders standard heterosexual resolutions in marriage strangely thin in comparison.

<9> What is especially exciting about Furneaux's account is that it not only at long last brings the body of Dickens's writing within the compass of queer theory, but it suggests a new turn in queer theory itself. Furneaux wants to move beyond overly-rehearsed Althusserian interrogations to recapture Dickens's fictional endorsement of a range of sexualities, socially anomalous figures, and "queer families." I suspect her readings of the fiction will prove less controversial than her polemical provocations within the field of queer theory. Yet to the extent that these two fine volumes evoke the state of advanced Dickens Studies today, criticism of the novelist is determined to construe the writer as almost preternaturally anticipating our ideological preoccupations, less a flamboyantly gifted genius-cipher or a comic showman than the most cerebrally prescient, socially advanced thinker produced by a tumultuously conflicted Victorian culture.

Endnotes

(1) John Ruskin, "The Roots of Honour," in *Unto This Last* (Kent: George Allen, 1877), 14(^)