

The Uncommercial Traveller

AT THE beginning of 1860 Charles Dickens began to write a series of essays for his weekly periodical, *All The Year Round*, in the guise of the 'Uncommercial Traveller'. The name had not occurred to him by chance; three weeks before he began the first of these essays, he had given an address to the Commercial Travellers Association, at which event a group of orphan children were paraded singing around the dining hall. Dickens was always highly susceptible to atmosphere and, for him, something of the melancholy or poignancy of that occasion may have attached itself to the name: the reflections of the 'Uncommercial Traveller' are not generally cheerful ones.

It was in any case a most difficult period within his own life; he was often ill and dissatisfied, unable to take much comfort in his fame or find much relief from his sorrows in his own work. He had recently finished *A Tale of Two Cities*, which in certain respects must be considered the darkest of his novels. He had come to the end of a series of provincial public readings, when he managed to exhaust himself nightly by reading out episodes from his fiction, and had just completed a series of Christmas Readings in London. His relationship with Ellen Ternan was obsessive and distraught, and his own mood was tinged with a weariness which on occasions came close to fatalism: 'I am a wretched sort of creature in my way,' he wrote to a friend, 'but it is a way that gets on somehow. And all ways have the same finger-post at the head of them, and at every turning in them.' Yet, despite that bleak prospect of death, he still went down his own 'ways' - he was

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still journeying forward in what he called, in one of these essays, 'that delicious traveller's trance'.

Certainly this was the mood with which he began writing in the guise of the 'Uncommercial Traveller'; he wrote sixteen essays between January and October of 1860, and his material ranged from the churches of the City of London to the work-houses of Wapping, from childhood memories of terror to descriptions of the Paris Morgue, from invocations of his lonely night walks through London to reports of his wandering through the dockside areas of Liverpool, from tramps to Mormons. He began a second series of essays under the same pen-name three years later, at another time in his life when the very name of 'traveller' suited him well. For he was constantly going between France and England (it is assumed that Ellen Ternan and her mother were living in a hamlet outside Boulogne), and it was a period when he confessed to being a prey to anxieties and miseries of every sort. This second group of essays also has its darker aspect, therefore.

But both series are extraordinarily interesting for the light they throw both upon Dickens himself and upon a now almost forgotten time. He was an alert and punctilious observer, after all, and there are passages in certain of these writings ('Night Walks' is a memorable example) where the whole weight of the 1860s seems to bear down upon the reader. But there is also another and more distant past enshrouded within these essays: it is Dickens's own past, and the dominant note here is often one of weary or nostalgic memory. It is not coincidental, in fact, that his novel of reverie, *Great Expectations*, actually was conceived as an essay in the 'Uncommercial Traveller' series before Dickens saw larger possibilities within it.

Of course these essays are on a smaller scale than anything he was attempting to do within his fiction, and in that respect at least they are not so significant an achievement; but they are wonderful pieces in their own right, and comparable to the work of any other essayist of the nineteenth century. It was

Dickens's belief that any work should be performed as if it were the one thing in the world worth doing, and there is nothing hasty or occasional about any of the writing he produced in this period; there are aspects of the 'Uncommercial Traveller' which are not to be found in any of his novels, and there are reflections or observations here which are invaluable for any proper understanding of Dickens.

It is within these essays, for example, that he provides the clearest and most detailed study of his own childhood – he himself is the 'very queer small boy' whom the 'Traveller' meets near Rochester; and it was to the young Charles Dickens that these words about Gad's Hill Place were actually directed: 'And ever since I can recollect my father, seeing me so fond of it, has often said to me, "If you were to be very persevering and were to work hard, you might some day come to live in it . . ."' Dickens was indeed persevering – and did one day come to live (and die) in it. There are accounts here of childhood birthdays and of childhood reading; the 'Uncommercial Traveller' recalls one occasion when he was dragged reluctantly into a chapel service and another when he attended a funeral 'wake'. He even describes the kind of nightmares he suffered as a child. Perhaps the most remarkable of these evocations, however, comes in the essay entitled 'Nurse's Stories' in which the 'Traveller' recalls the sensations of terror and anxiety which were instilled in him by a nurse who insisted on reading to him the most gruesome stories. ' . . . I suspect we should find our nurses responsible for most of the dark corners we are forced to go back to against our wills.' It cannot be assumed that every detail or every portrait is an exact representation of Dickens's own past – he was, after all, given a certain imaginative licence by writing under an assumed name; but it can fairly be said that in these reminiscences of childhood he is recreating the atmosphere and general circumstances of his infancy with some fidelity. There is a wonderful evocation of his childhood haunts in 'Dullborough Town', for example, when the 'Traveller' returns to the

scenes of his early days although he is now 'so worn and torn, so much the wiser and so much the worse!'

That particular tone of infinite weariness is one that emerges in many of these short pieces – most notably in accounts of his adolescence. He recalls an occasion when he visited a church with a young lady whom he admired, and then asks ' . . . what has become of Me as I was when I sat by your side!' These might be the conventional ruminations of a middle-aged man, were it not for the fact that Dickens's genius irradiates everything which it touches and, in an essay such as 'Chambers', his account of his early manhood is transformed by his extraordinary attention to detail and to mood. Incidents of the more recent past are also redeployed by Dickens within the framework of these essays; he describes the occasion he attended an inquest, and elaborates in a vivid or even theatrical manner on such subjects as a visit to an emigrants' ship and a Channel crossing.

One of the most extraordinary of these contemporary pieces is to be found in 'Night Walks', an essay in which Dickens reviews his own nocturnal wanderings through London. He makes strange journeys, this novelist who has imagined himself into a state of 'houselessness'; he passes Waterloo Bridge from where the suicides drop, and Newgate Prison, and Bethlehem Hospital for the insane. In these walks he is attracted to the dark river, upon which lies 'the very shadow of the immensity of London . . .' and to the prisons, as if they were the lodestone which he carried with him everywhere; and, as he wanders through 'the interminable tangle of streets', he invokes the presence of the dead and the mad. As he passes the asylum, for example, he is visited by the thought that 'Are not all of us outside this hospital, who dream, more or less in the condition of those inside it, every night of our lives?' It is a strange essay, in some ways the strangest Dickens ever wrote, which finds its proper climax in the novelist's encounter with a wretched, ragged creature who chattered and whined before it 'twisted out of its garment . . . and left me standing alone

with its rags in my hand'. It is possible to see something of the curve and direction of Dickens's imagination in episodes such as this – to locate the darker sources of his fiction as well as the springs of his self-absorbed melancholy.

For there is much here which helps to explain Dickens – some of his characteristics, for example, such as his indomitable sense of his own rightness are vividly displayed; 'I have created a legend in my mind,' he writes at one point, 'and consequently I believe it with the utmost pertinacity.' A small remark, one might think, and yet within it there is contained much of his true nature (and genius). The reader may here begin also to glimpse something of Dickens's obsessiveness – not the fact that he could quite easily walk twenty miles during the course of one night and feel no strain, or the fact that he is always fascinated by police officers and gaolers, but rather the more lugubrious evidence of two essays, 'Travelling Abroad' and 'The Morgue', in which he revels in his fascination for the bodies of the dead. They seem literally to haunt him and one drowned corpse put on display in the Paris Morgue, that of 'a large dark man whose disfigurement by water was in a frightful manner, comic, and whose expression was that of a prize-fighter who had closed his eyelids under a heavy blow . . .' followed him everywhere in his imagination. For some reason he relates this image of a drowned man to the fears of childhood, a subject to which he often returns, and explains that 'It would be difficult to over-state the intensity and accuracy of an intelligent child's observation . . . If the fixed impression be of an object terrible to the child it will be . . . inseparable from great fear.' It is an odd connection to make – a drowned man and childhood – but it is suggestive. And then Dickens returns to the Paris Morgue to see the clothes and the boots of the sodden corpse.

It was a 'picture' that he could not shake off and may indeed be related to a young man, living, who Dickens saw by Wapping Stairs and which he described in 'Wapping Workhouse'. He was 'a figure all dirty and shining and slimy, who may have

been the youngest son of his filthy old father, Thames, or the drowned man about whom there was a placard on the granite post . . .' This was written before Dickens embarked upon *Our Mutual Friend*, which itself begins by the river and with the prospect of drowned men, and not the least pleasure of the 'Uncommercial' essays is to see the lineaments of Dickens's perception and imagination before they have been transposed into the larger context of his novels. Those novels are with him everywhere, in fact, and it is typical of his delight in his own creations (and his propensity for seeing them in the streets when he walked around) that he should refer in one of these essays to a nurse ' . . . in whom I regretted to identify a reduced member of my honourable friend Mrs Gamp's family . . .'

In fact there seem to be two levels to these essays. When he is wandering and solitary, he customarily adopts a contemplative and even melancholy tone; but when he is acting as a reporter, describing and observing everything he sees, he becomes much more sprightly and animated. This change of perspective exists within his later novels, also, where wild humour surrounds the progress of a melancholy or anxious hero. In fact one of the most significant aspects even of these essays is the extent to which Dickens reverts to fiction or to semi-fictional situations; just as we cannot always assume that the 'Uncommercial Traveller' is the very image of Dickens himself (certainly not when he talks about his past), so we cannot assume that all the incidents and events recounted here are drawn directly from life or even from Dickens's experience. He saw and understood the world in terms of stories, and it is in the form of a story that he most freely explains himself.

Of course he had been writing essays of this kind in *Sketches By Boz*, some of which anticipate the themes and characters of this 'Uncommercial Traveller' series written some twenty-five years later. Dickens was always a wonderful journalist, in other words, and it can fairly be said that the articles by the 'Uncommercial Traveller' represent the very height of his

achievement as an essayist. There are passages and episodes here which can stand unashamedly beside the best of his fiction; as a collection it is unequalled for its presentation of mid-nineteenth-century life, and its insight into the consciousness of Charles Dickens himself.