

Charles Dickens in the Light of 21st Century Biographies

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Abstract: Dickens once said to Dostoyevsky that there “were two people in him...one who feels as he ought to feel and one who feels the opposite”. Biographers put all their efforts to grasp the two contradictory personalities in Dickens. Earlier biographers—John Forster, Edgar Johnson, Fred Kaplan, Peter Ackroyd—they all contributed to shape the complex and elusive figure through their biographies. In the twenty-first century, before twenty years passes, a good number of writers have attempted Dickens’ biographies from different perspectives and angles. The biographers of the present century who gained critical acclaims are Michael Slater, Robert Douglas-Fairhurst and Claire Tomalin. These three new biographers also stood unique in their own ways as they each explore something fresh that has not been discovered before. The present paper aims at to paint a Dickens of twenty-first century through the three versions of Dickens architected by these three new biographers.

Keyword: Dickens, biographies, Dickensian world, dark phase of Dickens’ writing, Michael Slater, Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, Claire Tomalin

“Everyone finds their own version of Charles Dickens”— Claire Tomalin

In 1862, Dickens had a remarkable meeting with Dostoyevsky in which Dickens told him that “All the good simple people in his novels, Little Nell, even the holy simpletons like Barnaby Rudge, are what he wanted to have been, and his villains were what he was (or rather, what he found in himself), his cruelty, his attacks of causeless enmity toward those who were helpless and looked to him for comfort, his shrinking from those whom he ought to love, being used up in what he wrote. There were two people in him, he told me: one who feels as he ought to feel and one who feels the opposite. From the one who feels the opposite I make my evil characters, from the one who feels as a man ought to feel I try to live my life. ‘Only two people?’ I asked” (qtd in Gates 1-2). This quality of Dickens to inculcate aspects of himself into his vividly rendered characters enabled him to produce some of best-loved novels the world sees ever. It also made him an elusive and indefinable figure for biographers and scholars. And this makes the

biographer Claire Tomalin comment: “Everyone finds their own version of Charles Dickens. The child-victim, the irrepressibly ambitious young man, the reporter, the demonic worker, the tireless walker. The radical, the protector of orphans, helper of the needy, man of good works, the republican. The hater and the lover of America. The giver of parties, the magician, the traveler. The satirist, the surrealist, the mesmerist. The angry son, the good friend, the bad husband, the quarreler, the sentimentalist, the secret lover, the despairing father” (Tomalin 41). Dickens once said to his friend and biographer that he was destined to lead “that so happy yet so unhappy existence which seeks its realities in unrealities, and finds its dangerous comfort in a perpetual escape from the disappointment of heart around it” (qtd. In Lankford 465). He typifies the life of any artist and at the same time, continues to struggle in a world of himself. This essay examines these ‘two people’ in Dickens’ personality and attempts to shape a concrete figure of Dickens through the three new biographies.

Michael Slater can be considered the first biographer who puts on a light to every corner of Dickens’ large Oeuvre in his biography *Charles Dickens: A Life Defined by Writing* (2009) . This has been possible for him for his lifelong study of the novelist, his sincere editions of Dickens’s journalism and his long engagement in the editorship of *The Dickensian*; and this gives him an unrivalled authority on the large body of works of the imaginative writer. Dickens produced 15 major novels, numerous stories, sketches and essays. He edited a number of periodicals such as *Household Words*, *Master Humphrey’s Clock*, *the Daily News* and *All The Year Round*. He was associated with a huge correspondence, and founded a house for abandoned and fallen women. He built a Guild of Literature and Art. He made himself engaged in pro-Reform and anti-Corn Law politics and served as a performer of his own literary works.

Slater is one of the few biographers who leave no stone unturned as far as his literary study of Dickens’ writing is concerned. He introduces and gives fresh outlook to many unfamiliar or less-known pieces of Dickens’ writing. For example, Slater brings our attention to Dickens’ heart-touching account of testimony in the trial of a helpless farmer and his starved child where a big piece of bread was available but he was not able to eat it. Slater’s biography highlights how alert and conscious Dickens was to the touches of the pathetic episodes and how lively he immortalised them in his writing. In a book review of *The Telegraph*, Claire Hartman writes:

Slater's deliberate focus on his subject's writings necessarily leaves everything that Dickens was trying to evade or displace by his frenetic work-life – all that 'disappointment of heart' – somewhat in the background. Unlike his subject, Slater doesn't attempt to do any scene-setting about blacking factories or the Marshalsea. He plays down the sensational material and, remarkably, for a man whose other books include one on Dickens and women, spends as little time as possible on the great novelist's agitated emotional life. When he does have to tackle the personal crises (or even the physical crises, such as the Staplehurst rail accident), he avoids gossip or speculation. At these points the safe pair of hands seems to don rubber gloves. Dickens's embarrassing campaign of public self-justification at the time of his separation from his wife, for instance, is documented here, but I don't think Slater adequately registers the turmoil it caused, the painful challenge it posed to the loyalties of his many friends and dependants, or the perplexity of his audience having their demigod address them like a deranged man. (02)

The biography is an incomparable portrait of literary life of the novelist. It is deeply touching as it is chronicling a flawless interaction between the life of the novelist and his work. Slater recaptures very effectively the account which Forster, Dickens' friend and first biographer provided him as a material needed for writing *Great Expectations*: "he seemed to have no care, all of that summer day, except to enjoy (his friends' and family's) enjoyment and entertain them with his own in the shape of a thousand whims and fancies; but his sleepless observation was at work all the time, and nothing had escaped his keen vision on either side of the river" (qtd. Callow 03).

Slater's biography concludes with the accounts of Dickens' final years. It describes the third phase of his writing career and the years of his writing the last novel *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Slater's *Charles Dickens: A Life Defined by Writing* can be a great source for the scholars and readers of the contemporary century and will open a new path to the dark world of Dickens' writing.

Mr. Douglas-Fairhurst is another new biographer of Dickens who has produced a Dickens compatible with the taste of the twenty-first century. While writing the biography, he argued that

trying to produce a fresh Dickens “is like putting your thumb on a blob of mercury” (Douglas-Fairhurst 46). His biography *Becoming Dickens: The Invention of a Novelist* (2011) published by Harvard University Press proves to be a considerably more revealing and groundbreaking study that gives a unique focus and insight on the early years in Dickens’ life and career. *Becoming Dickens* is, thus a study of Dickens’ career as a writer in the 1830s when he was seeking “to come to terms with the events that had made him into the person he was, and to work out what kind of writer he might yet become” (Douglas-Fairhurst 104). Douglas’s work can be considered, in other words, as some kind of musing on Dickens’ early career as he freshly reminded us of Dickens’ early hazard professions in law, theatre, journalist and of Dickens’ becoming a novelist at a time when it was far more likely that he would have made his living as a journalist, or even as a professional actor, than as the most celebrated living author of his day. In his prologue, Douglas articulates that the course or path from birth to death is neither clear/simple nor direct, that our final destination is reached by such a uniquely thickened path that it cannot be virtually measured or précised. This is true, yet we forget while reading biographies and expect every phenomenon to be narrated and explained with proofs.

Douglas’ *Becoming Dickens* takes us through Dickens early years of 1839 up to the completion of *Oliver Twist*, giving a double perspective; as it is capturing a young Dickens and simultaneously, is always looking forward to the mature Dickens. In the following example, we see how Douglas-Fairhurst’s narration operates. Dickens worked as a Lawyer’s clerk in his early phase of his career. This time, he used to pass away his leisure time at the theatre. One of his favourite performers was Charles Mathews at Drury Lane. Mathews performed one-man show which he called a ‘Monopolylogue’. Douglas cunningly explains that the whole arrangement of the stage for the performance inspired the manner in which Dickens presented his great public readings in later life. He also articulates that some of the characters in Mathew’s show must have constructed figures in Dickens’ novels.

Like Dickens’ earlier biographers, Mr. Douglas-Fairhurst underlines the great influences of the period where Dickens the boy “was obliged to work in a blacking warehouse while his father was imprisoned for debt” (51) and underscores how this phenomenon formed a Dickens with endless sympathy for abandoned children. Douglas-Fairhurst succeeds to explore Dickens’s “fear that although he had successfully come out of the shadows, they were always ready to welcome

him back,” and finds that his novels are peopled with children like Oliver Twist, David, Smike, Little Nell, “who wander away from their old lives and need to be rescued from danger, usually much later than Dickens was, and sometimes too late altogether” (229). As Dickens once acknowledged, “I might easily have been, for any care that was taken of me, a little robber or a little vagabond” (Forster 1-2). And thus, Douglas-Fairhurst finds that Dickens’ novels show doubles and alternate outcomes: *Great Expectations* ends with double/alternate outcomes, one happy, and the other sad. In novel like *Bleak House*, Mr. Douglas-Fairhurst dissects a connection “between people and places that at first appear wholly distinct” and the ways in which “those at the top of the social world are as unavoidably connected to those at the bottom as a body and its shadow” (242). In a book review of *The New York Times*, Michiko Kakutani comments:

No doubt Dickens’s sense of the randomness of fate and his own uncertain childhood combined to heighten his rage for order and control. While traveling, Mr. Douglas-Fairhurst reports, Dickens would frequently rearrange the furniture in hotel rooms to create ‘a reassuringly familiar environment before he could go to sleep’ and would similarly arrange his inkstand and pens and desk ornaments ‘in the usual form’ before he could start writing. He also warned Catherine to ‘keep things in their places’ at home while he was on the road. (04)

Dickens obviously could not recreate his childhood as it should been in real life. His relation with Catherine proved to be mismatched. He grew convinced that his sons are “a long line of versions of himself that had come out badly” (98). Yet, in his novels, he creates a world of idealized family and family relationships.

In Mr Douglas-Fairhurst’s *Becoming Dickens: The Invention of a Novelist*, Dickens could find a vocation “that was capacious enough to accommodate all the other possible identities, all the abandoned stories and apocryphal selves, that would be squeezed out of his own future” (98). Mr Douglas goes on to say, “And he is still changing. Not even death has stopped him, as generations of later readers have gone on enjoying his work, revising what it means, repeatedly returning to a writer who seems as reluctant as ever to say goodbye. He is still becoming Dickens” (102)

Claire Tomalin's biography *Charles Dickens: a Life* (2011) succeeds to produce another version of Dickens that creates new inquisitiveness among the twenty-first century Dickens' scholars. *Charles Dickens: a Life* proactively catches readers' attention for Tomalin's vivid sense of historical time and place and her empathetic elaboration of Dickens's complex personality. The unique power of this biography is Tomalin's strong intellect of capturing Dickens' life that we the readers see Dickens first and always "as a man," as an extraordinarily complex human being (xliii). Readers find Dickens a man both sympathetic and cruel, a brave activist for the unfortunate people, yet also an adamant hater of his rejected wife and a disappointed father of his children, As Tomalin comments in his *Charles Dickens* that "Everyone finds their own version of Charles Dickens. The child-victim, the irrepressibly ambitious young man, the reporter, the demonic worker, the tireless walker. The radical, the protector of orphans, helper of the needy, man of good works, the republican. The hater and the lover of America. The giver of parties, the magician, the traveler. The satirist, the surrealist, the mesmerist. The angry son, the good friend, the bad husband, the quarreler, the sentimentalist, the secret lover, the despairing father" (311). In a book review of *The Guardian*, William Boyd writes that Tomalin's *Charles Dickens* is much exciting and fresh as it has "flawless in its historical detail, and acute on the novels" and "is most valuable in the sense it gives us of the man himself" (Boyd 01). Boyd comments further:

Tomalin's biography – always scrupulous about what we can know, what we can deduce and what is mere speculation – paints a portrait of a complex and exacting man. He was at once vivacious and charming, charismatic and altruistic and possessed of superabundant energies – "Dickens kept going," Tomalin notes, "by taking on too much" ...But he was also, equally – to an almost schizoid degree – tormented, imperious, vindictive and implacable, once wronged. (Boyd 03)

Tomalin admits that "Dickens's most profound statement about his inner life" is that there "were two people in him, . . . one who feels as he ought to feel and one who feels the opposite" (qtd in Gates 1-2). Tomalin quotes this statement in his biography and regards this confession very 'amazing'. This confession is amazing only because through this confession Dickens, for the first time, comes out from the image-conscious to which anybody familiar with his work and his life has always intuited. "It is as though with Dostoyevsky he could drop the appearance of perfect virtue he felt he had to keep up before the English public" (Tomalin 201). Tomalin picks up

small incidents in Dickens' life and analyses them to grasp the personalities of those 'two people' in Dickens. Dickens had an intense concern for the poor and abandoned. Tomalin also reminds of little incidents like Dickens' effort to save Eliza Burgess in 1840, a servant girl accused of killing her newborn baby. Simultaneously, she uncovers the other side of Dickens' personality—the ruthless Dickens, the man with the 'military' glint, so evident in his dealings with his publishers, who so often started as angels and ended as villains. Tomalin's such interesting analysis of these 'two people' in Dickens, of the 'good' and the 'evil' makes her biography distinguished from others. As Boyd writes:

The work remains and endures – and Tomalin analyses the novels with great acuity – but what is so valuable about this biography is the palpable sense of the man himself that emerges. Tomalin doesn't hesitate to condemn Dickens when his behaviour demands it, yet she writes throughout with great sympathy and unrivalled knowledge in the most limpid and stylish prose. She has the gift of being able to set a scene and a time with compelling vividness. This is a superb biography of a great writer – and is a beautifully produced book, it should be said, with copious illustrations. It is worthy to stand beside Richard Ellmann on Joyce, Donald Rayfield on Chekhov and Jean-Yves Tadie on Proust – all three writers who deserve that rarest of accolades, genius. Like Dickens, they were complicated and often extremely difficult and demanding individuals. The more we learn about them as people – paradoxically – the greater their art resonates with us. (Boyd 03)

Recent biographies are mostly mixtures of familiar incidents, anecdotes and episodes. Their primary focuses remain on what is included, what is left out and how the biographer is engaged on the works and life of Dickens different from earlier ones. Though Tomalin has a vivid sense in capturing many small episodes in Dickens' life and its re-appearance in his novels, her work lacks the rich texture and empathetic intimacy that we see in Ackroyd' Longer work. Further, Tomalin, as David Gates comments, "would never indulge in zaniness like Ackroyd's interpolated self-interview or his scene in which Dickens meets his own characters or the imagined encounter between Dickens and a biographer, presumably Ackroyd himself" (Gates 02). On the other hand, while Tomalin engages her study to the personal world of Dickens, she

avoids some aspects of Dickens family life like his role as editor of *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* and his relationships with other acquaintances. In the Sunday book review of *The New York Times*, David Gates writes that although the three new biographers could not surpass the earlier ones like Peter Ackroyd or Forster, they are unique in some way or the other that makes them relevant to the atmosphere of the twenty-first century. As Gates comments:

Neither Tomalin nor Douglas-Fairhurst, in “Becoming Dickens: The Invention of a Novelist,” sees fit to show us Dickens dancing the hornpipe in his sailor suit, though Ackroyd and Slater apparently found it a charming, perhaps significant, glimpse of the young man at play. And how could Tomalin have resisted the story of Dickens’s first love, Maria Beadnell (affectionately evoked as Dora in “David Copperfield,” then cruelly caricatured as Flora Finching in “Little Dorrit”), near the end of her life, drunkenly kissing the place on her couch where he’d once sat? Maria’s former nursemaid published the account in 1912; Douglas-Fairhurst retells it, and while Slater didn’t include it in his biography, he’d already used it in an earlier book, “Dickens and Women.” Yet only an obsessive would worry too much about which anecdote didn’t make whose cut: an ideal life of Dickens would just stick in everything, and probably no publisher would touch it. (2-3)

In fact, the life and career of Charles Dickens is full of complexities and mysteries and in terms of the literary vastness, he comes next to Shakespeare. And so, no distinct line can be drawn between the two greatest men of letters. “Of Shakespeare, we know next to nothing; of Dickens we know next to everything” (Callow 01).

Therefore, all-inclusive and definite biography of such a mysterious figure is an impossibility. And each biographer’s labour was an attempt to comprehend some aspects of the figure. Like John Forster, Edgar Johnson, Fred Kaplan and Peter Ackroyd, these three new biographers come to the same line of literary journey in which each leaves some contribution to the discovery of their subject.

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