

## REPRINTED PIECES

Those abuses which are supposed to belong specially to religion belong to all human institutions. They are not the sins of supernaturalism, but the sins of nature. In this respect it is interesting to observe that all the evils which our Rationalist or Protestant tradition associates with the idolatrous veneration of sacred figures arises in the merely human atmosphere of literature and history. Every extravagance of hagiology can be found in hero-worship. Every folly alleged in the worship of saints can be found in the worship of poets. There are those who are honourably and intensely opposed to the atmosphere of religious symbolism or religious archæology. There are people who have a vague idea that the worship of saints is worse than the imitation of sinners. There are some, like a lady I once knew, who think that hagiology is the scientific study of hags. But these slightly prejudiced persons generally have idolatries and superstitions of their own, particularly idolatries and superstitions in connection with celebrated people. Mr. Stead preserves a pistol belonging to Oliver Cromwell in the office of the Review of Reviews; and I am sure he worships it in his rare moments of solitude and leisure. A man, who could not be induced to believe in God by all the arguments of all the philosophers, professed himself ready to believe if he could see it stated on a postcard in the handwriting of Mr. Gladstone. Persons not otherwise noted for their religious exercise have been known to procure and preserve portions of the hair of Paderewski. Nay, by this time blasphemy itself is a sacred

tradition, and almost as much respect would be paid to the alleged relics of an atheist as to the alleged relics of a god. If any one has a fork that belonged to Voltaire, he could probably exchange it in the open market for a knife that belonged to St. Theresa.

Of all the instances of this there is none stranger than the case of Dickens. It should be pondered very carefully by those who reproach Christianity with having been easily corrupted into a system of superstitions. If ever there was a message full of what modern people call true Christianity, the direct appeal to the common heart, a faith that was simple, a hope that was infinite, and a charity that was omnivorous, if ever there came among men what they call the Christianity of Christ, it was in the message of Dickens. Christianity has been in the world nearly two thousand years, and it has not yet quite lost, its enemies being judges, its first fire and charity; but friends and enemies would agree that it was from the very first more detailed and doctrinal than the spirit of Dickens. The spirit of Dickens has been in the world about sixty years; and already it is a superstition. Already it is loaded with relics. Already it is stiff with antiquity.

Everything that can be said about the perversion of Christianity can be said about the perversion of Dickens. It is said that Christ's words are repeated by the very High Priests and Scribes whom He meant to denounce. It is just as true that the jokes in Pickwick are quoted with delight by the very bigwigs of bench and bar whom Dickens wished to make absurd and impossible. It is said that texts from Scripture are

constantly taken in vain by Judas and Herod, by Caiaphas and Annas. It is just as true that texts from Dickens are rapturously quoted on all our platforms by Podsnap and Honeythunder, by Pardiggle and Veneering, by Tigg when he is forming a company, or Pott when he is founding a newspaper. People joke about Bumble in defence of Bumbledom; people allude playfully to Mrs. Jellyby while agitating for Borrioboola Gha. The very things which Dickens tried to destroy are preserved as relics of him. The very houses he wished to pull down are propped up as monuments of Dickens. We wish to preserve everything of him, except his perilous public spirit.

This antiquarian attitude towards Dickens has many manifestations, some of them somewhat ridiculous. I give one startling instance out of a hundred of the irony remarked upon above. In his first important book, Dickens lashed the loathsome corruption of our oligarchical politics, their blaring servility and dirty diplomacy of bribes, under the name of an imaginary town called Eatanswill. If Eatanswill, wherever it was, had been burned to the ground by its indignant neighbours the day after the exposure, it would have been not inappropriate. If it had been entirely deserted by its inhabitants, if they had fled to hide themselves in holes and caverns, one could have understood it. If it had been struck by a thunderbolt out of heaven or outlawed by the whole human race, all that would seem quite natural. What has really happened is this: that two respectable towns in Suffolk are still disputing for the honour of having been the original Eatanswill; as if two innocent hamlets each claimed to be Gomorrah. I make no comment; the thing is beyond speech.

But this strange sentimental and relic-hunting worship of Dickens has many more innocent manifestations. One of them is that which takes advantage of the fact that Dickens happened to be a journalist by trade. It occupies itself therefore with hunting through papers and magazines for unsigned articles which may possibly be proved to be his. Only a little time ago one of these enthusiasts ran up to me, rubbing his hands, and told me that he was sure he had found two and a half short paragraphs in *All the Year Round* which were certainly written by Dickens, whom he called (I regret to say) the Master. Something of this archæological weakness must cling to all mere reprints of his minor work. He was a great novelist; but he was also, among other things, a good journalist and a good man. It is often necessary for a good journalist to write bad literature. It is sometimes the first duty of a good man to write it. Pot-boilers to my feeling are sacred things; but they may well be secret as well as sacred, like the holy pot which it is their purpose to boil. In the collection called *Reprinted Pieces* there are some, I think, which demand or deserve this apology. There are many which fall below the level of his recognised books of fragments, such as *The Sketches by Boz*, and *The Uncommercial Traveller*. Two or three elements in the compilation, however, make it quite essential to any solid appreciation of the author.

Of these the first in importance is that which comes last in order. I mean the three remarkable pamphlets upon the English Sunday, called *Sunday under Three Heads*. Here, at least, we find the eternal Dickens,

though not the eternal Dickens of fiction. His other political and sociological suggestions in this volume are so far unimportant that they are incidental, and even personal. Any man might have formed Dickens's opinion about flogging for garrotters, and altered it afterwards. Any one might have come to Dickens's conclusion about model prisons, or to any other conclusion equally reasonable and unimportant. These things have no colour of the great man's character. But on the subject of the English Sunday he does stand for his own philosophy. He stands for a particular view, remote at present both from Liberals and Conservatives. He was, in a conscious sense, the first of its spokesmen. He was in every sense the last.

In his appeal for the pleasures of the people, Dickens has remained alone. The pleasures of the people have now no defender, Radical or Tory. The Tories despise the people. The Radicals despise the pleasures.

THE END