

Born in 1812: Edward Lear, Robert Browning and Charles Dickens. A Reader's Story

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The year 2012 saw a series of anniversaries in English Literature that uncannily coincide with the diamond jubilee of the Queen of England, Elizabeth II: 2012 is the bicentenary of the birth of Charles Dickens (1812-1870) and of his contemporaries Robert Browning (1812-1889) and Edward Lear (1812-1888). At the same time, two modernist works in the English language have become so important that it is not inappropriate to include in the celebrations of 2012 the ninetieth year of the date of their publication: "The Waste Land" by T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) first published in *The Criterion* in 1922 and *Ulysses* (1922) by James Joyce (1882-1941). What follows is not so much an attempt to indicate points of connection between the authors just mentioned, but rather an account of how my readings and re-readings of Charles Dickens made me aware of those connections. Therefore, my essay is not meant as a theoretical account of influences, inspired, say, by Harold Bloom but rather a revisiting of authors whose books have nourished my life as a woman, a reader and a researcher.

My narrative starts with the Poetry of Romanticism, and with William Wordsworth as a case in point. "In the beginning" one wants to say, there was a poetry that grew out of the premise that words and things are connected in a "natural" way. According to this view, explained by Wordsworth in "Preface to Lyrical Ballads" (1800, 1802), language is not a representation of reality sanctioned by convention but an expression of a godlike Nature and thus analogous to it. As such, poetry is the universal language of humankind: "Poetry is the most philosophic of all writing (...) its object is truth, not individual and local, but general, and operative; not standing upon external testimony, but carried alive into the heart by passion; (...) Poetry is the image of man and nature" (Wordsworth 603).

As high priest of the universal language of the heart, Wordsworth's poet has only one restriction "to pay homage (...) to the native and naked dignity of man, to the grand elementary principle of pleasure, by which he knows, and feels, and lives, and moves" (605). "Pleasure" (the word occurs about forty times in only twenty-four pages) is poetry's powerful energy capable of healing inner divisions and of restoring the person back to himself as a sensuous, knowing, feeling and spiritual being.

1. Edward Lear (1812-1888)

The first to experience the more than human requirements made of poetry were the Romantics themselves, especially Wordsworth (1770-1850) whose eloquent poem "Ode. Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" (1802) conceives of poetry as the difficult work of memory in search for a lost unity. The text shows man as united to an original plenitude before he "falls" into incarnation and gradually forgets the fullness of being from whence he came. Poetry or the language of memory—"emotion *recollected* in tranquillity" (Wordsworth, "Preface" 611)¹—remains the royal way to recapture glimpses of the fullness experienced in childhood which is—the poem says—almost eagerly abandoned when lured by the pleasures of the immanent world.

Under the influence of the Romantics, the subsequent era of Victorianism becomes obsessed with an idea of happiness linked to a regressive movement that turns back, nostalgically, to a supposed purity connected with childhood. Thus, while the nineteenth century moves forward to the rhythm and reality of the Industrial Revolution, the rift between an early dream of innocence and the needs of material progress widens. The growing impossibility of integrating opposite demands becomes the great challenge of the Victorian poets who are asked to reconcile the inherited ideal of language as a means of unification with the awareness of language as "a difference" that reveals the strangeness of self and the disenchantment of the world. The idea of absence increasingly haunts the nineteenth century poet and one of the ways to look at the

¹ Emphasis mine.

literature of the time is to follow the traces of language that try to say what is “not” there. It is precisely here, in the celebration of what “is not” that the literature of “nonsense” is born with Edward Lear as “the Poet Laureate of Nonsense.”

Edward Lear (1812-1888) was a landscape painter who spent his life travelling in the south of Europe and the Middle East, writing and illustrating travel books. Almost by accident, he started to amuse the children of an aristocratic household where he was employed with sketches and short poems. First published in 1846 under the title *A Book of Nonsense*, these drawings and poems were received with enthusiasm, especially after the second edition of 1861.² Other “Books of Nonsense” followed which made humorous play with language fashionable and created a fad of “nonsense” literature, also for adults. By the end of the nineteenth century, and due to the success of Edward Lear’s poetry, the word “nonsense” meaning absurd and humorous poetry became an accepted general category for literature for children and humorous verse in general. This is the reason, accidentally, why Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), intended as a fairy-tale, was later re-appropriated as a work of “nonsense.”

In the twentieth century, in part because of the acceptance of Lewis Carroll by French Surrealism, the critical term “nonsense” spread geographically and historically and became a universal category for denoting a kind of absurdity that keeps pointing towards an ideal of innocence. In retrospect, a great many authors and entertainers belonging to the history of literature and the visual arts received the label of “authors of nonsense”: François Villon, Shakespeare, Rabelais, Kafka, Woody Allen, Monty Python, among others (Benayoun).³ Furthermore, the paradoxical nature of “nonsense” also became useful when talking of philosophy, mathematics and psychoanalysis as “*a certain register of expression and thought*” (*Dictionnaire des Anglicisme* 622; my translation). Thus, a word that, historically, had had the function to distinguish unimportant and frivolous

² For a study of the evolution of the meaning of “nonsense” from its common use towards “humorous verse” and critical term, see Petzold.

³ See Tarantino (ed.) and www.nonsenselit.org.

word play from “serious’ literature” expanded in the second half of the nineteenth century towards a critical term denoting a universal category with a positive meaning. However vague the use of “nonsense” may be when used as a critical term, it points to a negation as positive category.⁴ Playfully conveying a kind of absurdity, “nonsense” exists as a dissolving agent between a negative and a positive pole, a humorous play with absence, and paves the way to the literature of the absurd and other modernist expressions.⁵

Whereas the mainstream Victorian poet is increasingly confronted by the resistance that language exercises against the appropriation of meaning (the tortured rhythms and syntax of Hopkins come to mind here), Lear turns his back to the tension between words and meanings and jumps with hilarity into mere rhythm and sound. The contextual frame of the books promoting “childhood innocence” (= “nonsense”) provides Lear with the protection that exempts him of taking the responsibility towards meaning so that his poetry becomes a kind of *écriture automatique avant la lettre* that allows for private obsessions to surface. It is therefore no surprise that the literary critic and psychoanalyst Adam Phillips views the literature of “nonsense” as the English equivalent of surrealism.⁶ And indeed, the strength of Lear’s line-drawings clearly pre-figure twentieth-century expressionist art and—when considered outside the frame of playful intent—the limericks enact scenes of violence, mutilation and death.⁷ In more than one sense, the limericks and drawings of Edward Lear are

⁴ That is the reason, accidentally, why G. K. Chesterton equated the poetry of “Nonsense” with religious belief. Interestingly, negation and negativity as being an intrinsic part of the (religious) experience of living is defended by the contemporary theologian Lytta Bassett.

⁵ For the evolution from nineteenth-century literature towards the modernisms of the twentieth century as a movement from negation towards deletion, see Kurrik.

⁶ “There has never been a strong surrealist tradition in England but there has been, of course, a unique tradition of nonsense. And though Winnicott sounds like no one else in the psychoanalytical tradition, he can often sound curiously like Lewis Carroll” (Phillips 14).

⁷ Cf. my close analysis of all limericks of Edward Lear’s first *Book of Nonsense* in Mendes.

reminiscent of Goya's *Caprichos* and *Disparates*, those "code-books of hell" as the twentieth-century English poet Stevie Smith calls them.⁸ In both cases, the message of the title creates a positive space for the representation of what is negated in the realms of a world governed by reason (Goya) and by good common sense (Lear).

Edward Lear's personal life forced him to voluntary exile. He was compelled to speak the language of nonsense because there were, as yet, no words available in which to express the isolation forced on him by epilepsy (at the time related to sexual perversion) and the torment of rage. Unlike mainstream poets of the time whose work tries to engage with the contradictions of the time, the high Laureate of "Nonsense" makes a bonfire with all that must be expelled from accepted discourses in order to prevail and preserves the Romantic premise of unity and analogy by reducing them to absurdities. Maurice Bowra synthesizes the relationship between Edward Lear and Romanticism when he writes:

Lear's nonsense poetry is literally a *reductio ad absurdum* of Romantic methods, and especially the belief in vagueness. He differs from his grave models not in his means but in his end. (...) With him the Romantic indefiniteness passes beautifully into absurdity, and his own inchoate sorrows vanish in the divine light of nonsense. (...) Lear showed how close Romantic vagueness was to nonsense, and exploited it for his own purposes. The result is outside all literary canons, but none the less miraculous and magical. (279-80)

2. Robert Browning (1812-1889)

In the contemporary novel, *The Whirlpool* (1986) of the Canadian author Jane Urquhart, the setting is the nineteenth-century village of Niagara Falls where a group of characters tries to find ways to connect with the experience of a new country. The main narrative of the novel is framed by

⁸ "Some Impediments to Christian Commitment," *Me Again* 153-170. "I looked at Goya's pictures. I saw the terrible pictures Goya made in the prisons of the Inquisition that have such strange elliptical titles, like a code-book in hell" (158).

an introduction and an epilogue set in 1889 Venice telling of the last days of the life of the English poet Robert Browning. In the novel, Browning is haunted by Shelley, the poet he worships and would like to emulate. Feeling incapable of thrusting the spirit towards the absolute like his Romantic forebear, Urquhart's Browning finds no peace in the acknowledgement of his own fame as a Victorian poet.

The main character of the novel proper is a woman living in the village of Niagara Falls, Canada, obsessed with Browning who, in turn, is spied upon by an Englishman in love with Wordsworth. At the end, the protagonist mysteriously disappears from the story and the reader is induced to believe that she went away in search of a language (room?) of her own, capable of holding her new identity as a young Canadian woman. Browning, Urquhart's novel suggests, is the link between the ideals of Romanticism and a new world, where nature is not idyllic but hostile, threatening the human being with an otherness for which, as yet, there is no language.

Inside the canon of Victorian poetry, Robert Browning is the poet who explored the relation between world and word through a departure from the confessional stance of the Romantics. Exploring the dramatic positioning of the speaker in order to probe the many faces of identity, Browning prepares the modernist aesthetic of the impersonal.

The dramatic monologue developed by Browning "establishes itself as discourse-in-situation, as speech of an individual placed in circumstances of time and space that determine the relationships he establishes with others and with himself. The final result obtained translates itself in the discovery of one's own identity, or, at least, in an oblique and even undesired self-revelation" ("Prefácio" 14-15; my translation from the Portuguese). Instead of an "I" that is present to itself in total transparency, Browning's poetry explores what escapes self-appropriation and becomes the poetry of what is "outside," "different" and "unknown." As the poetry of "otherness," Browning's verse will influence the modernists Pound (who is known to have confessed "Ich stamm aus Browning") and T. S. Eliot who, in turn, dedicated "The Waste Land" to Pound (61).⁹ The aesthetic of Eliot's poem

⁹ "For Ezra Pound, *Il Miglior Fabbro* "The Waste Land" in *Collected Poems 1909-1962*.

of 1922 and his assertion about poetry as “the escape from emotion” (15-16) as opposed to Wordsworth’s “emotion recollected in tranquillity”¹⁰ must take into account “the poetry of experience” of Robert Browning and the latter’s exploration of the dramatic subject in situation.¹¹

In retrospect, one sees Tennyson and Browning standing side by side as the giant Victorian inheritors of both the language of transcendent loss of the Romantics (Tennyson) and of the exploration of identity as the workings of desire immanently realized in time and space (Browning). Browning seems to look more to the future, a direction taken up by the modernists that succeed him. But both work through the challenges of the Romantic poets concerning the possibilities of the poetic subject. Has the poet a unifying capacity to gather in a net of words the myriad dimensions of experience or does the poet fall through the mazes of the net when confronted with the necessary estrangement that language form imposes upon inner experience? Can the poet still nurture the illusion to be a “man speaking to men” or is he forced to recognize the hidden dimensions of both himself and others, so that—in Freudian (and Learian?) premonition—language grows out of the control of the speaker and is capable of revealing what was not intended or understood by the speaker himself.¹² Taking up Humpty Dumpty’s question about who is to be the master, whether the poet or the language, Browning points to a poetry that grows in awareness of how form determines meaning and he thus foreshadows the interminable “wrestle with words and meanings” (23) that T. S. Eliot will invoke in the twentieth century.¹³

¹⁰ Cf. note 7.

¹¹ “Tradition and the Individual Talent” in *The Sacred Wood* (1921): “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality,” <http://www.bartleby.com/200/sw4.html/> (accessed 17 July 2012). The expression “poetry of experience” refers to Langbaum.

¹² Cf. Edward Lear: “Why did I take the lodgings I have got/ Where all I don’t want is—all I want not?” “Growling Eclogue,” Noakes, ed. 234.

¹³ T. S. Eliot, “East Coker Burnt Norton” in *Four Quartets: Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle/ With words and meanings*.

3. T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1922)

Impersonal, then, poetry has to be, a juxtaposition ("montage") of voices, speech rhythms and allusions in order to build a support for "a heap of broken images" (63) in the fissures of which the voice of the poet murmurs, sings, stammers and conveys haunting visions of ruin and decay.¹⁴ In "The Waste Land" (1922) T. S. Eliot creates a new and powerful form that wards off interior appropriation and requires a new audience, capable of reading in a spatial rather than in a temporal way. One could argue that the form imposes itself on the reader who must become simultaneously a listener, a viewer and an erudite capable of recognizing the echoes of the cultural and literary tradition which are the building blocks of the text. And if the reader is not able to do so, the poet will teach him by including footnotes with references to the allusions woven into the tapestry of the poem. The poem creates the reader that it requires, imposing its vision, leaving no space for interpellation or dialogue. It is an elitist art, not so much because of the erudition, the fragmentation, the mixture of echoes and allusions, but because the poem is formally "what it is," the meaning godlike coinciding with its verbal tissue, as if Romantic vagueness had been transfigured into the solidity of word matter. The form is the master, as it is with Joyce in *Ulysses* (1922) a book that greatly influenced T. S. Eliot who read the original drafts of Joyce's novel when he was assistant editor of the *Little Review*.

Is it a mere coincidence that T. S. Eliot was born in 1888, the year that Edward Lear died? The modernist poet recognized his debt to Lear, both in his critical writing¹⁵ and his poetry. "Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats" (1939) is a direct inheritor of Lear as is, of course the poem, "*Lines for Cuscuscaraway and Mirza Murad Ali Beg*":

¹⁴ T. S. Eliot, "The Waste Land," verse 22 in *Collected Poems 1909-1962*.

¹⁵ T. S. Eliot, "Edward Lear's non-sense is not vacuity of sense: it is the parody of sense and that is the sense of it. *The Jumblies* (...) *The Youngby-Bongy Bo* and *The Dong with a Luminous Nose* are poems of unrequited passion—"blues" in fact," "The Music of Poetry" in *On Poetry and Poets* 29.

How unpleasant to meet Mr. Eliot!
 With his features of clerical cut,
 And his brow so grim
 And his mouth so prim
 And his conversation, so nicely
 Restricted to What Precisely
 And If and Perhaps and But.... (151)¹⁶

Which is a parody of Edward Lear's "How Pleasant to know Mr Lear":

How pleasant to know Mr Lear
 Who has written such volumes of stuff!
 Some think him ill-tempered and queer,
 But a few think him pleasant enough.....
(428-29)¹⁷

Just as for Lear, the ebullience of light verse was a way of covering up what he could not bring himself to say openly, for T. S. Eliot, "to play the possum" (to pretend, to feign) by hiding behind "a persona" were lessons learned from both Browning and Edward Lear.

It is a documented fact that originally Eliot had intended as title for "The Waste Land" a line borrowed from Dickens's novel *Our Mutual Friend*: "He do the Police in different voices." In Dickens's novel, the line belongs to a secondary character called Betty who cannot read herself but has a friend called Sloppy who reads the newspaper to her: "You mightn't think it" [Betty says], "but Sloppy is a good reader of a newspaper. He can do the police in many voices" (198).

As is clear from the context, Betty refers to Sloppy's dramatic gifts as a reader, capable as he is to impersonate the police in various forms, situations and contexts. Thus, the intended title, "he does the police in many voices," not only points towards the aesthetic of impersonality of

¹⁶ T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* For the relationship between Eliot and Lear see Boucherie 281-288.

¹⁷ Edward Lear, *The Complete Nonsense*.

“The Waste Land” but also to the composition of the poem where separate pieces of texts stand side by side in a display analogous to juxtaposed news items on the page of a daily paper. It highlights the fragmentary nature of experience and the absence of a narrative flow that connects the separate pieces into a timeline that gives them direction/sense. The Dickensian resonance also emphasizes the different kinds of discourse that make up Eliot’s poem: echoes from venerated poets of World Literature, but also from limericks, jazz music and everyday speech. Like in a Dickens’s novel, there is room for everything, albeit in a different way. Moreover, and reading the last great novels by Dickens, *Bleak House* (1853), *Little Dorrit* (1855) and *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), there are passages and images that *verbatim* anticipate the future modernists. This assertion needs detailed demonstration but not proof because the proof is everywhere scattered on the pages of Dickens and open for any reader to see. Suffice it here to quote Michael Cotsell who, in the “Introduction” to the Oxford edition of *Our Mutual Friend*, writes: “T. S. Eliot’s *Waste Land* (...) drew its first title and perhaps aspects of its symbolic organization from Dickens’s novel. [... *Our Mutual Friend* is] closer to the creativity of Joyce’s *Ulysses* than to the cold eye of Gissing’s fiction. In it, Dickens anticipates the rich linguistic textuality of modernist writing” (xxi).

4. James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Paris, 1922)

“Rich textuality” (as opposed to Romantic indefiniteness) is the expression with which Cotsell defines modernist art. Joyce makes this true in the creation of a word-world—an ocean of allusion, parody, neologisms, word-play, melody, rhythm—where the totality of world literature reverberates. A first reading experience of *Ulysses* is like plunging into language itself, a sensual and sensuous voyage that reveals the world as an infinite space of ever receding horizons, a tossing on verbal waves that opens up mind and body (mindbody or bodymind) towards a feel of life as infinite joy.

In a recent article of *The New York Review of Books*, the writer Michael Chabon speaks of Joyce’s “The Dead” and *Ulysses* as works that “(b)etween them (...) managed to say everything a pitying heart and a pitiless intellect could say about death and sex and love and literature, loss and desire, friendship and animosity, talk and silence, mourning and

dread” (45).¹⁸ And Philippe Sollers, an ardent lover of Joyce, sees Joyce’s art as «une remise en forme,” «a formal reset» in an absolute positive mode: «Ulysse et *Finnigans Wake*, qu’est-ce que c’est, sinon la traversée du temps, des apparences, du langage, pour une remise en forme qui soit absolument positive et avec un tremblement de joie dans toute l’épaisseur du langage? Oui ou non? Oui! (...) Aucune trace de nihilisme dans toutes ces œuvres!» (224).

Speaking of *Ulysses*, Sollers writes: “il est de plus en plus difficile de rencontrer quelqu’un qui a lu le livre” (“it is becoming increasingly difficult to find someone who has read the book” (529). I did, though, and I do, because reading Joyce means to be eager to touch words, to smell and savour them, to see and hear them turned upside down, crushed, taken apart and put back together in flowing cadences that allow the reader to soar and be free, surfing through all the works of Western Literary Traditions, embracing the span of life itself.¹⁹ Chabon speaks of

Joyce’s helplessness in the face of language, his glossolalia, the untrammelled riverine flow of words and wordplay in which Joyce plunged, and swam, and drowned; the compulsive neologism that echoes, typifies, and indeed in a clinical sense accounts, genetically, for the schizophrenia (...) that afflicted his daughter, Lucia. (47)

Chabon relates Joyce’s glossolalia to the English tradition of “nonsense,” speaking of passages of “the Spike-Milligan-meets-Edward Lear-prose” (48) in *Finnegans Wake* that can become cumbersome (25). The reference to Lear clearly opposes Lear—like nonsense formations with the lifesaving neologisms of Joyce. Yet, what has changed between Lear and Joyce is not

¹⁸ Michael Chabon’s article arrived in the post at the moment I was writing the passage about Joyce and I feel compelled to acknowledge the coincidence.

¹⁹ I read *Ulysses* twice and intend to read it again. And I read one (ONE) page of *Finnegans Wake*, as a challenge to myself many years ago. Before the internet and having at hand only the reference books of my personal library, it took me about 6 hours to “read” one page. The effort was rewarding, but I do not feel inclined to repeat it unless I catch the F. W. fever like Michael Chabon (cited above) whose report of a year reading *Finnegans Wake* is a wonderful love story between a reader and a text.

so much the technical pirouettes with words, but the context. Whatever his secret reasons, Lear unhinges words in order to better enhance the rules of common language/sense. The Joycean new language does not depend on a negative term, but “is” in its absoluteness—“*une remise en forme qui soit absolument positive*,” “another” and “new” language that makes no concession to the reader who must grow to the heights of the text, while the artist, godlike, has disappeared behind his new creation: “the artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails” (Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist*).

The encounter between Dickens and Joyce happens naturally: one is reading Dickens, unencumbered by Literary Criticism or Literary tradition, in turns astounded and ravished with what the popular Victorian novelist does with language, and suddenly up springs Molly Bloom, in the full blossom of one of Flora Finching’s long diatribes in *Little Dorrit*:

“And now pray tell me something all you know,” said Flora, drawing her chair near to his, “about the good dear quiet little thing and all the changes of her fortunes carriages people now no doubt and horses without number most romantic, a coat of arms of course and wild beasts on their hind legs showing it as if it was a copy they had done with mouths from ear to ear good gracious, and has she her health which is the first consideration after all for what is wealth without it as Mr F himself so often saying when his twinges came that sixpence a-day and find yourself and no gout so much preferable, not that he could have lived on anything like it being the last man or that precious little thing though far too familiar an expression now had any tendency of that sort much too slight and small but looked so fragile bless her!” (*Our Mutual Friend* 513)²⁰

²⁰ For another echo of Joyce in Dickens: *Our Mutual Friend*, I read on page 14: “Reflects Veneering; forty, *wavy-haired*, dark, tending to corpulence, sly, mysterious, (...). Reflects Mrs Veneering; fair, *acquilline-nosed* and *fingered* (..).” and I hear Joyce in *Finnegans Wake*: “a squad of urchins, *snifflynosed*, *goslingnecked*, *cloththeaded*, tangled in your lacings, tingled in your pants, etsiteraw etcicero” (*The Restored Finnegans Wake* 121).

The unexpected meeting of a twenty-century author (Joyce) in a “popular” Victorian novelist (Dickens) disparaged as “sensationalist” by an eminent fellow writer of the time (George Eliot), and not deemed a serious artist by the critic who promoted the novel to an art form (Cotsell ix and James) works like an epiphany. For the academic that I also am, the guilty pleasure of reading Dickens becomes respectable: after all, I am in good company, among the right sort of people. The first consequence of the discovery is of meeting fellow critics who have seen the presence of modernist writers in Dickens like Matthew J. Bolton or who have read “Joycean stream-of-consciousness” in other Dickens characters, like Simon Callow.²¹ Then and inevitably, Charles Dickens “suddenly” (a moment of revelation made possible by years of reading and rereading the author) reveals himself as “another” writer” and to the background recedes Dickens the entertainer, Dickens the social commentator, Dickens the humorist, Dickens the caricaturist, Dickens the (melo)dramatist, Dickens the reformer, Dickens the script writer of future films, and centre stage stands the wordsmith, Charles Dickens the poet.

5. Charles Dickens (1812-1870)

The facts about Charles Dickens are what they are: Charles Dickens is born in a middle-class family in 1812. His scholarly education is average and short. At the age of twelve, the boy Dickens is forced to fend for himself as a labourer in London while his father and the rest of the family spend some time in the Marshalsea, a debtor’s prison. He is lively, sensitive and determined never to be humiliated again. He is ambitious and works ferociously in order to make it in the world, first as a clerk, then as a stenographer and a journalist and then, almost by accident, as a writer of short sketches, and a novelist. *The Sketches of Boz* (1836), *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-7), *Oliver Twist* (1838) and *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-9) follow each other at an impossible speed in two years’ time. Their success is so enormous, that, at the age of twenty-four, Dickens has become an inimitable phenomenon. To read about Charles Dickens’s prodigious

²¹ “Mrs Nickleby’s chatter has become a Joycean stream-of-consciousness (...)” (296).

activity as novelist, editor, journalist, dramatist, actor, theatre director, friend, husband, father (he has nine children) and lover makes for almost unbelievable reading: some of the biographies of Dickens are (almost) as impressive as the novels he wrote.²²

Dickens contains all worlds (like Whitman who wrote of Dickens's "democratic" writing²³). His novels preserve life itself, creating a verbal energy that connects all beings, be they human, animal, vegetal, mineral or inanimate. They are parallel universes with intimations of infinite space where "everything" can exist and where everything is related to everything. Dickens himself speaks of his prodigious imagination which makes him see things in terms of something else as an "infirmity": "I think it is my infirmity to fancy and perceive relations in things which are not apparent generally. Also, I have such an inexpressible enjoyment of what I see in a droll light, that I dare say I pet it as if I were a spoilt child" (Letter to Bulwer Lytton, 28 November 1865, in *The Selected Letters of Charles Dickens* 397). In other words, and thinking of Wordsworth's pleasure principle and poetry as the universal language of the heart-mind-body, Dickens's writing irradiates a receptive energy where the reader feels accepted, welcomed, acknowledged and understood. As G. K. Chesterton writes: "Charles Dickens did not write what people wanted, he wanted what people wanted" (Chesterton, *Charles Dickens* 46).

The universal appeal of Charles Dickens has first of all to do with the kind of relationship he establishes with his reading public. Charles Dickens wrote to make a living and he wrote to be loved, acceptance and economic success being equivalent. His art is informed by Dickens's extraordinary imagination and dramatic gifts, but the tradition that feeds

²² Cf. Ackroyd, *Dickens* (1990) and Slater, *Charles Dickens* (2009). In 2011, three new biographies appeared: Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, *Becoming Dickens. The Invention of a Novelist*; Claire Tomalin, *Charles Dickens. A Life*; Simon Callow, *Charles Dickens and the Great Theatre of the World*. The most impressive is Ackroyd's; the one that best contextualises Dickens's art is Douglas-Fairhurst's and the one that best reveals Dickens is Simon Callow's.

²³ See also, Douglas-Fairhurst 307 for the analogy between Dickens, Whitman, Rimbaud and the split of the poetic "I."

Dickens are the “novels” of the eighteenth century that arose with the growth of the middle class before the Romantics come along with “intimations of immortality”: they are stories of men and women speaking to men and women, stories about common wishes and aspirations, adventures and anxieties, dreams and wonders. From *The Arabian Nights* to *Robinson Crusoe*²⁴ Dickens has learned the power of stories, their spell binding energy and mesmerizing power. He becomes the most un-platonic of writers, shamelessly seducing his audience and doing it marvellously, putting the reader straight into the urban landscape of the time. Stylistic devices abound that bind narrator to reader (and at the end of Dickens’s life, the public reader to his audience), devices that grow out of the author’s “joy” and genius in weaving his tales.²⁵ The seemingly spontaneous nature of the storytelling is one of Dickens’s triumphs, the reader nestling, as it were in the comfort of the narrator’s voice ready to meet the most extraordinary characters: young, innocent, sweet, violent, evil, grotesque, mad and frightening. As Robert Douglas-Fairhurst writes: “One way of summarizing his fiction would be to say that he attempted to show how many private worlds are contained in the public world we share—his writing is an unflinching celebration of the unique, the freakish, the stubbornly eccentric—while also reminding us of what we have in common” (182).

The multitude of characters that swarm Dickens’s novels, the verbal exuberance that brings them to life on the page and the patterns and plots through which they collide make for a spatial as well as for a linear reading

²⁴ These are the novels quoted in *David Copperfield* (which is Dickens’s version of *A Portrait of the Artist as Young Man*): “From that blessed little room, Roderick Random, Peregrine Pickle, Humphrey Clinker, Tom Jones, The Vicar of Wakefield, Dom Quixote, Gil Blas, and Robinson Crusoe, came out, a glorious host, to keep me company. They kept alive my fancy, and hope of something beyond that place of time, — they and *The Arabian Nights*, and the *Tales of the Genii*,” in *David Copperfield* 59-60.

²⁵ “The erotic triangle here, the peculiarly intense and intensely peculiar triangle of characters/readers/author, is one of the things which make Charles Dickens World Literature while some more responsible and intelligent novelists (George Eliot, for instance) remain English literature” (Lambert 117).

and thus announce the future art of modernism.²⁶ As spaces to live in and to love, the novels of Charles Dickens seem to possess a transcendence that does not come from above or beyond, but that resides in the concreteness of the characters and the places they inhabit. In Dickens, all that is ordinary becomes extra-ordinary because minutely observed, so that dull, monotonous, everyday life is transformed in a glorious, wild, grotesque and emphatic manner and each separate character becomes a universal “everyman.” A non-mimetic quality pervades Dickens, not only because of the melodramatic and the fairy-tale elements of his work, but because of the spaciousness of the novels, the great variety of characters and tones, and, especially in the last great novels, an increasingly symbolic structuring: the fog and suffocating atmosphere of the Chancery in *Bleak House*, the confinement of the prison in *Little Dorrit* and the emotional waste land of a society governed by money in *Our Mutual Friend*. The expansiveness of the novels allows for the myriad elements of the composition to float in space and to collide at random, as it were, conveying a feel of “a world in which the soul can live” (Chesteron, *Charles Dickens* 43). Dickens “transfigures the commonplace” and, like all true poets, creates a new universe. To quote Servotte on Dickens:

paradoxically, the detailed description of the visible world does not lead to an increasing realism, but to the transformation of the visible world (...). In the same manner the reader of Dickens meets Dickensian characters, not because they are there but because Dickens makes him look in a special way to people. It is as if not Dickens imitates reality, but as if reality imitates Dickens. Better said, between ourselves and the world of our experience moves the imaginary world of Dickens. He makes us see” (42).²⁷

²⁶ “‘Dickens was a pure modernist’, John Ruskin wrote in 1870,—and he had no understanding of antiquity except a sort of jackdaw sentiment for cathedral towers” (Douglas-Fairhurst 169).

²⁷ My translation of “Paradoxaal genoeg leidt de gedetailleerde beschrijving niet to meer realisme, maar tot een transformatie van de zichtbare wereld;” and p. 44: “Op dezelfde manier ontmoet de lezer van Dickens Dickensiaanse karakters, niet omdat die er zijn, maar omdat Dickens hem op een bijzondere manier naar de mensen leert kijken. Het

*

Dickens's work is **not** *une remise en forme qui soit absolument positive*—not a Joycean transubstantiation of life into art (Kearny 103)²⁸—but a bulk of magnificent words that creates a living world full of dark places and sombre spots, a parallel universe that fills one with wonder and nourishment. In Dickens, the sense of insubstantiality that lurks behind the scenes of human experience is not transfigured but seeps through the pages and enhances the bright colours of his art. Instead of overpowering the reader with language made object, Dickens leaves him breathing space and a never-ending sense of wonder. Applying Dr Johnson's words about literature in general to Charles Dickens, one can say that Dickens "enables readers better to enjoy life, or better to endure it."²⁹

6. Postscript

The saying of Dr Johnson just mentioned is quoted by Christopher Ricks in a review that also begins with a recall of literary anniversaries, in this case anniversaries related to the year 1922: "The year 1922 famously saw the birth of High Modernism, mewling and puking as well as shining and sighing in *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*. 1922 also saw the birth, in Coventry on August 9, of Phillip Arthur Larkin. For a poet of his lineage (...), most High Modernism would in due course expose itself as mystification and outrage." (*ibidem*) As Christopher Ricks's words make clear, to observe how new writers react to their literary forebears is a never-ending story that can go on indefinitely, as do the re-readings of the tradition in

is alsof niet Dickens de werkelijkheid maar de werkelijkheid Dickens imiteert. Beter gezegd, tussen ons en de wereld van onze ervaring schuift zich de verbeeldingswereld van Dickens. Hij doet zien."

²⁸ For a conversation between Joyce and his brother where Joyce compares his art to the transubstantiation of the Mass: "Don't you think (...) there is a certain resemblance between the mastery of the Mass and what I am trying to do?"

²⁹ "The only end of writing is to enable readers better to enjoy life, or better to endure it," Dr Johnson quoted in Ricks 42.

the light of authors that are still to come. Charles Dickens is the richer for standing in the company of his contemporaries Lear and Browning. Read in the light of modernism, the three Victorian authors acquire a different resonance and tell us how avant-garde they are.³⁰

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³⁰ I want to thank Manuel Vieira da Cruz who suggested the outline of this essay to me.

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ABSTRACT

Struck by the coincidence of the bicentenaries in 2012 of Edward Lear, Robert Browning and Charles Dickens, all born in 1812, I accepted the challenge, presented to me by a friend, to relate the three authors in a single text that would also include the ninetieth birthday of the publication of respectively *Ulysses* by James Joyce and “The Waste Land” by T. S. Eliot. My article uses the random element of a calendar year as a structuring element in a story of reading which shows the relationships between the five authors to be simultaneously prospective and retrospective. My conclusion is that the five authors, be they canonical poets and novelists, or “nonsense” poets and popular authors ultimately are all wordsmiths whose art is simultaneously time-bound and universal.

KEYWORDS

Edward Lear; Robert Browning; Charles Dickens; T. S. Eliot; James Joyce

RESUMO

No ano de 2012, um amigo lançou-me o desafio de escrever uma pequena nota sobre os bicentenários dos autores vitorianos Edward Lear, Robert Browning e Charles Dickens todos nascidos em 1812; convidou-me ainda a incluir uma referência ao nonagésimo aniversário dos grandes textos modernistas *Ulysses* de James Joyce e “The Waste Land” de T. S. Eliot. O que era para ser um apontamento bio-bibliográfico acabou por constituir uma longa reflexão sobre as complexas relações entre os autores que se revelaram igualmente prospectivas e retrospectivas. No fundo, o meu texto dá conta daquilo que ficou de muitos anos de leitura em que os autores ecoam entre si numa polifonia de vozes acabando por constituir um canto universal: o da arte da palavra.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Edward Lear; Robert Browning; Charles Dickens; T. S. Eliot; James Joyce
