Bleak House

As Charles Dickens reached the period of middle age, his life had never been more filled with duties and responsibilities. Of all novelists he was perhaps the one most committed to the doctrines of social progress and the principles of social welfare, but his always heavy burden of philanthropic activities and public speeches was now compounded by work of a more sustained kind. By 1851 he had become the editor and guiding force of a periodical, *Household Words*, on which he laboured week by week; in addition he had established a group of Amateur Players, and toured the country with them in order to raise money on behalf of his scheme for a Guild of Literature and Art. Public burdens were, however, of less significance than the private miseries which now began to pile up around him. His father died in a room which his son described as 'a slaughter house of blood' and in his grief he told his wife that 'I have sometimes felt, myself, as if I could have given up, and let the whole battle ride on over me'. But his wife, too, was even then a source of severe anxiety; she was suffering from extreme nervous depression and was forced to leave London for Malvern in order to take the waters there. And then, if all this familial distress were not enough to weigh him down, his infant daughter, Dora, died quite suddenly.

These biographical facts might not be of any consequence in themselves, were it not the case that they preceded the period in which his vision of *Bleak House* began to be distilled: and in the bleakness of all the world around him, can we not see something of that spirit of rage and that awareness of fatality which animate the novel? He travelled down to

Broadstairs in the summer of 1851, just a few weeks after the deaths of his father and his daughter, but even in the peace of the resort he became invaded by that 'violent restlessness' which generally preceded the birth of a new novel. But he could not begin it, not yet, for his generally unsettled condition was further aggravated by the need for him to move to a new house. The lease upon his previous residence was about to expire, and so he had all the trials of house-hunting, and house-cleaning, before he felt able to begin on the sustained and continuous activity which a new book would involve. Houses were very much on his mind, therefore, as the shape of *Bleak House* itself began to rise up in front of him.

He had in a sense already been preparing for it. In his new periodical, for example, he had written two essays on the parlous state of the country – in particular he had attacked the horrors of urban sanitation which condemned the poor to a 'poisoned life' and he had excoriated a system of justice which most plainly exhibited neglect and procrastination. Both of these subjects were to enter *Bleak House* itself, and it would not be going too far to say that Dickens, who was always a journalist as well as a novelist, used his periodical as a well from which he could draw up certain of his most significant images and themes. It was in *Household Words*, for example, that there appeared a description of a City churchyard which was no more than a '*Cholera Nursery*' as well as a report on the 'mental ignorance and neglect' which afflicted the labouring classes. Indeed the novel can itself be read almost like a symbolic report on the period within which it was written, a newspaper of the imagination where the most startling public issues were given the wraith-like resonance of that 'Shadow World' from which Dickens's fictions emerged. In the spring and summer months of 1851, for example, *The Times* had carried several articles on the absurd delays in Chancery proceedings, and in the same period Dickens himself had delivered a speech to the Metropolitan Sanitary Association in which he specifically refers to material which he would later redeploy in an-

other context: he talks of the fetid wind which carries disease from the poorer to the richer quarters of the city, and condemns those urban missionaries who attempt to save the souls of the poor without concerning themselves with the more visible ills of the body. One has only to read the accounts of Henry Mayhew, also, to realise that the horrors which Dickens invokes in *Bleak House* were the plainest truth. It has often been claimed that the poor crossing-sweeper, Jo, was no more than a figment of Dickens's more than usually sentimental imagination but in fact the very words which Jo utters at the famous inquest into the death of Krook are an almost exact reproduction of the cross-examination of George Ruby, a boy who worked as a crossing sweeper: 'that he did not know what prayers were; that he did not know what God was; that, though he had heard of the devil, he did not know him; that, in fact, all he knew was how to sweep the crossing . . .'

Dickens had begun writing *Bleak House* towards the end of 1851, and it soon became clear that this was the first novel in which he would intervene directly with social comments upon the conditions of the age. It does not have the nostalgic sentiment or plangent lyricism of its predecessor, *David Copperfield*, and indeed it is conceived in quite a different spirit. It has bite, fire, anger, intensity and drama. And yet at the same time it cannot be called a polemic in any conventional sense, for the literal recording of sickness and malnutrition is placed alongside such an extraordinarily non-naturalistic passage as the death of Krook by spontaneous combustion. Dickens always liked to pretend that he had relied upon the best scientific authorities in order to justify the use of such a flagrantly melodramatic device, but the truth was that, for him, the unnatural process of internal fire was a wonderful symbol for all the forces at work within the narrative itself: it became a metaphor for the threat of explosion which lurks beneath a decaying social fabric, as well as for all the powerful and indeed ferocious energy of the period. Thus melodrama and realism, symbol and topography, overlap each other to

create a most complex and mysterious reality: in *Bleak House* London is transformed, and becomes a theatre and a prison, a fair and a madhouse, a labyrinth and a grave.

By January 1852 he had completed the first two numbers, and cut down on all social and public engagements (he reduced himself to two public dinners a month) so that he could work undisturbed on the continuing narrative. In fact he seems to have been fully in command of his material from the beginning; certainly throughout the period of composition there are none of those anguished asides in his correspondence on the difficulties of writing or of 'keeping up to time' (it should never be forgotten that Dickens was always working against printers' deadlines for each month's material, and it says something about his steadiness of purpose and his firmness of resolve that he never failed to meet them). Even so, certain aspects of his narrative had to be amended or excised: in particular he felt obliged to alter some aspects of the character of Harold Skimpole so that the identification with Leigh Hunt could not be so easily made. The ruse was not successful, however, primarily because the portrait of Skimpole remained, in Dickens's own words '. . . an absolute reproduction of a real man'. There were other likenesses throughout the narrative, perhaps the most famous being that of Walter Savage Landor as Lawrence Boythorn. Dickens has often been criticised for thus transforming his friends into characters in his novels, but he could never stop himself doing so: the imperatives of his fiction, and of his fictional vision, were such that nothing in the world could impede the promptings of his imagination.

Nothing in the world, that is, except the world itself. He had begun the book steadily and continuously enough but, after a while, he could not ignore the fact that he had readily committed himself to a hundred different activities in almost as many places. In particular he had arranged to take his Amateur Players on a tour of Manchester and Liverpool in order to raise money for his most recent favourite cause, the Guild

of Literature and Art. So he felt it necessary to go down to Folkestone, and then on to Dover, in order to work undisturbed. Then he travelled to Boulogne, the French resort which over the next few years became his summer 'retreat'. He came back to London eventually, even as he continued his daily methodical work upon his narrative, and by the end of the year he had reached what he called the 'great turning idea' – the revelation of Esther Summerson's parentage. This period was a turning point, too, in another sense, for it was now that he agreed to give his first public reading of *A Christmas Carol*, thus inaugurating a new career as a public performer and one which would have a measurable effect on his succeeding novels.

He was getting up at five o'clock in the morning to continue his work on *Bleak House*, for it should never be forgotten that even as he toiled daily on his novel he was also labouring for as many hours upon his editorship of the new periodical. But the strain of his work was proving too much for him and, as at the beginning of his career when he was energetically pushing forward in the world, he became sick. His kidney, the bane of his childhood, became once more inflamed. And, as always when the pressures of life grew too much for him, he wanted to get away – to escape. So he decided to spend the summer again in Boulogne and it was there, in the first weeks of August 1854, that he finally completed the novel. It was always his custom to write a preface at the completion of his formal labours, and in his introductory remarks to the publication of *Bleak House* in volume form, he declared that in the novel 'I have purposely dwelt upon the romantic side of familiar things. I believe I have never had so many readers as in this book. May we meet again!'

Certainly his readers remained with him, but the reviewers were less loyal: the *Spectator* found it 'dull and wearisome', and it was not alone in that opinion. Even Dickens's friend, John Forster, seemed in part to share it. It seems inconceivable now that so great a novel as *Bleak House* should be routinely damned by the newspaper reviewers, but critical abuse became a feature of Dickens's writing career (as it has been for many other great writers, before and since). He simply ignored it, and went on as if nothing in the world could affect him.

There were perhaps specific or topical reasons for the lack of critical sympathy: the vexed question of Dickens's use of spontaneous combustion had alienated some of the more intellectual reviewers, and there was the familiar protest that his characters were not credible, that he relied too much upon sentiment, that he was, in short, not a realistic writer. There is a truth in that, of course, and it has been said that in the portrait of poor and suffering children in *Bleak House* he was merely rehearsing what had become old sentiment. But in truth Dickens's account of neglected children here – ranging from Jo to the Jellybys – is part of a larger theme. His concern in this novel is with want of earnestness and the ills which spring from it, perhaps its most malevolent offspring lurking in the wilful hardness of heart which characterises someone like Skimpole. Some of his suffering victims have been cast out from all human affection, and haunt the brick kilns and ruined slums; others are the victims of themselves and have cut out true human affection from their own breasts. In a sense they become representatives of a social system which seems to nurture at its core the denial of human feeling and, as a result, irresponsible levity towards human need.

There were times in his own life, and especially in his own childhood, when Dickens believed himself also to have been utterly cast away: which is why he was able to enter the consciousness of a character like Jo with such touching simplicity and truth. 'It must be a strange state, not merely to be told that I am scarcely human . . . but to feel it of my own knowledge all my life!' In *Bleak House*, then, he looks more closely than ever at the deprived and desperate lives of the poor (as he was also doing in his articles for *Household Words*); they represent in fact the thematic centre of the book, just as its

imaginative centre lies in the threat of spontaneous combustion on all levels – in the threat of irrational violence, for example, represented by a crowd of Londoners who are 'like a concourse of imprisoned demons'. There is, in other words, a strange mixture of elements at work here – sentiment, domestic intrigue, political satire, social statement, fantasy, romantic comedy, symbolic imagery and a myth-making instinct so intense that at one stage '. . . every noise is merged, this moonlight night, into a distant ringing hum, as if the city were a vast glass, vibrating'. For this is a world, too, where humankind is seen in its bare and naked state: 'In such a light both aspire alike, both rise alike, both children of the dust shine equally.'

'It was all a troubled dream?' Richard Carstone asks at the end of his wretched life. No, it is not a dream. It is a great, troubled reality – and one that in *Bleak House* is transfigured both by Dickens's own brooding, mournful, imagination and by his wild laughter at the state of the world.