

DICKENS AND TWO ARGENTINE WRITERS OF HIS TIME

The connection between Dickens (1812-1870) and the Argentine writers of the 19th Century may be found particularly in two personalities of our literature, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento and Eduardo Wilde. The former transcends the limits of Americanism to take his place in the realm of world literature; the latter finds himself unjustly relegated to the position of writers who today are little read despite the fact that his work, deep and intimate, marks the culture and feeling of his time.

Dickens and Sarmiento

In January 1842 Dickens left England for the U.S.A. He was only thirty years of age but already famous. He started off his London and regional sketches (*Sketches*, 1834), the monthly numbers of *Mr. Pickwick* (*The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*) which made him a national figure, his triumph being crowned by the novels *Oliver Twist* (1838), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839), *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840) and *Barnaby Rudge* (1841). Invited by his American admirers to visit the young republic, the novelist was received there with enthusiasm and was highly acclaimed.

Nevertheless, in the midst of the noisy festivities, Charles Dickens lifted up his voice, spoke out to demand in his own name and that of his English colleagues – Rafael Arrieta tells us – the “author’s rights that Yankee publishers seem to overlook”. Washington Irving, Hofman, Bryant, and others spoke up too passionately in favour of the cause but none dared admit publicly with Dickens “the abominable state of the legislation” in this matter.

Baffled, thwarted by the failure of his protests and efforts, Dickens felt his illusions with respect to the crumbling of the great republic and returned more English than ever to his island home. Before 1842 ended, he published *American Notes* where he had nothing marvellous or flattering to say and the Yankees tore the book up or threw it away indignantly. The following year *Martin Chuzzlewit* was published. The writer was not consumed by rancour but, as they read, the Americans realised that they were looking into a mirror reflecting a picture that was a definite caricature.

Five years later, in 1874, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, a year older than Dickens and by then the author of *Facundo*, after touring Europe with a commission from the Chilian Government – a tour he was to describe in *Viajes* –, visited U.S.A. to pick up and set down with his tireless, ever active pen, all the details of the epic creation in North America. His notes reflect the amazement, meditation and concern of the statesman and educator that he really was, and his American fervour and increasing admiration for the great nation of the North. In London, before leaving for the U.S.A, Sarmiento had occasion to read a book by Horace Mann whose pedagogical theories made a profound impression on him.

Once installed in his new destination, the author of *Facundo* decided to interview Mann in Boston. Mr. and Mrs. Mann received him kindly and Mary Mann, who spoke Spanish, acted as interpreter in the conversation between the two educationalists and Mann furnished Sarmiento with letters of introduction to several personalities in political, cultural and educational life.

Conflictos y armonías de las razas de América was to carry, in its second part, the statement: “The U.S.A. was almost unknown in this part of America and in Europe it was barely considered a nation... This at least was the tone of the European press which tended to ridicule it because of the picture Dickens, the famous English novelist, drew on his return from the U.S.A...”. The disparity of opinion about the same country between the English novelist and the Argentine writer and politician – to quote Arrieta once more – , was due to their origins, that is where they came from. Dickens saw everywhere an excessive caricature of old English life, old England, and Sarmiento, on the other hand, was imbued with the ideal of the America of the

future and, therefore, saw in the greatness he beheld a surprising and authentic realisation of his own ideal. They didn't agree at all, in fact, but the Englishman visited the U.S.A. for the first time five years before the Argentine did.

Destiny or chance, however, was to bring them together twenty years later, in 1865, in a New York hall. But we are running on too fast! Let us go slower and explain.

On reaching maturity, Charles Dickens, at the height of his power and literary career, was invited to read in public a chapter from one of his books. He chose one from *Pickwick* and the reading was an enormous success. Ever since he was a child, he had shown he had something, nay indeed quite a lot, of the actor about him, and he would often entertain his own children at home by performing for their amusement. Carried away by the success of the first public reading and tempting offers from managers and agents, Dickens set out on his reading tours personifying, before an evergrowing audience that knew all his books by heart, the characters he had created with his pen. Men and women, old and young, rich and poor, filled the halls where Dickens read in all over Great Britain. Nobody expected anything new; everybody was agog to see and hear their wellknown characters come alive and speak in the voice and gesticulation of their creator.

The echo of these triumphal reading tours reached the States and Dickens's admirers there wanted to share the magic of his performances. The invitation was accompanied by the assurance of tempting fees. The old resentment had died down. Charles Dickens hesitated, overcame his scruples, accepted, and crossed the Atlantic for the second time in 1865. For the second time too, that same year 1865, now as the diplomatic representative of his country that was then free from the tyranny, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento returned to the country he so much admired.

Mrs. Mann, who was by then widow of the pedagogue Sarmiento had met on his previous visit, became his "old angel", admired his *Viajes and Recuerdos de provincia*, praised his friends and introduced him to important American citizens. Furthermore, so that Sarmiento could learn English, Mary recommended as a teacher Ida, the young wife of the distinguished local doctor, Dr. James Wickersham. And, evoking Alighieri in *La Commedia*, for the Argentine diplomat, before going to a New York hall to hear a dramatic reading of the English writer's works, Charles Dickens had become his Galeotto:

"Galeotto fu il libro e qui lo scrisse;
quel giorno più non vi leggemmo avante".
Inf. V, 137/138

In fact, José Ignacio García Hamilton tells us in *Cuyano alborotador*: "There came a succession of rainy days so they (Ida and Sarmiento, teacher and pupil) gathered in the livingroom to read *The Pickwick Papers* and one afternoon, in the middle of a lesson... .. young Ida, Mrs. Wickersham, scolded Sarmiento for a mispronunciation and Domingo plucked up courage, came forward and kissed her on the mouth". Stenway Hall, one of the largest in the city, was packed. A bald gentleman with a white moustache and goatee, smartly dressed, mounted the dais. Silence fell. He had a book in his hand but recited by heart what everybody had read a hundred times. It is a living book, that's all, Sarmiento added later summing up the event. On that occasion the English novelist relived cheerful and plaintive scenes from *Pickwick* and the Argentine educator recalled that he had twice been declared a member of the Pickwick Club and had pleasant memories of it. Our Pickwickian representative who prided himself on being an excellent reader and who wrote so much about reading, its method, art and efficacy – Arrieta tells us – admired unreservedly the diction, respect for the pauses, the mimicry and the skill in conveying the varying states of mind of the different characters shown by Dickens in his reading. And when Dickens read a passage from *David Copperfield* about the old tar Peggotty, Sarmiento remarked that the deep voice of the reader "made you

feel in the hall the roar of the surging sea and almost see the bows of the ship running upon the rocks”.

Dickens went back to London and didn't repeat his *American Notes*. Sarmiento returned home to be sworn in as President of the Argentine Republic; and nevertheless, the memory of Dickens inspired his ever fertile pen on more than one occasion.

Dickens and Wilde

Eduardo Wilde, born during his parents's exile due to Rosas tyranny, was for Ricardo Rojas a fragmentary writer. His works indeed did not attain worldwide fame because the exigencies of life and his profession prevented him from achieving a continuous and coherent literary output.

Wilde did a lot with great effort. He graduated as a doctor in 1870, adding to his passion for politics the fight against disease. A curious detail: writing his thesis on hiccough which gained him his doctorate, he discovered his literary talent. Endowed with a very fine sensitiveness always on edge and alert, "being a writer and a doctor meant that humor was the only possibility", Florencio Escardó observes in his biography of Wilde adding this reflection: "Medicine and humor are only two militant sorts of sorrow, mournfulness, disconsolation". This, in Escardó's opinion, manifests itself in "a tenderness carried to the verge of poetical compassion". In general, the scholars which study and comment the works of Wilde, connect his works with those of Charles Dickens on account of his saxon origin and think that this is the only clue of his sense of humor. Ricardo Rojas, for example, in reference to *Tiempo perdido* – short stories full of realism – picks up "Tini", through which, in his opinion, flows Wilde's deep love for children: this story, says Rojas, "could have been written by Dickens" because "to make fun of pain is a way to scape it". Escardó goes further in his own analysis: Wilde, like Dickens, is a man who lives, the humorist who attempts to reform the world "because that is his moral duty". Devoid of any false sensibility, of any sort of cheap sentimentality, the tenderness of the writer is identified with that of the doctor in tears at the sight of a child seriously ill or a hopeless case described in the most authentic anecdotes. With Eduardo Wilde, Escardó sums up, the child comes into the world of Argentine literature.

In one of his letters from Brussels to his friend Angel Estrada, Wilde evoked episodes of his own childhood. It is illustrative. For Wilde, as for many other inhabitants of Buenos Aires, 1871 was a terrible year, though Wilde was luckier than others. The future doctor and writer was recovering in the Estradas' country estate from the yellow fever raging in Buenos Aires. To entertain the convalescent, Estrada, the father, would read to him from *The Pickwick Papers*, *David Copperfield* and *Nicholas Nickleby*, books which, Wilde himself tells in his letter, were a revelation to him.

Notwithstanding the undoubted legitimacy of relating Wilde and Dickens from the literary point of view – by virtue of the ingredients common to the work of both: humor, social sensibility, love of childhood, desire for reform, its Buenos Aires character gives a particular tint to the works and the whole life of Wilde, though only a part of it has permanent literary value, Escardó concludes.

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To sum up, we have followed an unusual track within the creation of two Argentine writers contemporary with Dickens, our purpose being to recover and revitalise the links uniting them, observed by different writers from our own national viewpoint. Let such links serve to reinforce a deep, universalist regard, only recognising as frontiers, apart from geography, fashions or veiled interests, the immutable prestige

of what is transcendental, the value of the written word in the ambit of true literature.

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(translated by Patrick O. Dudgeon)