
In the last decades of the eighteenth century and the first of the nineteenth Britain moved across the threshold of development and became an industrial country. Every nation has experienced this move according to its own cultural traditions and patterns. There is something to be gained from the intellectual currents and the creative life of every country in which it happens, and perhaps there is something particular to be gained from the experiences of the country in which it happened first. It is in this context that Ivanka Kovačević’s book is important. It has grown out of many years of sitting and assimilating the enormous amount of material available, material that is sometimes the despair of the student of the nineteenth century. In it she has explored some of the ways in which the industrial revolution affected the writing of fiction, especially the writing of didactic fiction, between 1750 and 1851.

The book has two parts. A long Introduction, making up one third of the whole, and an anthology of short works (all but one complete in themselves) by six writers of popular didactic fiction. In the first section of her introduction Professor Kovačević calls attention to an aspect of early industrialization and machine society which is constantly repeated as countries move from manual to machine power, but which has long been forgotten by the developed countries, namely the enormous pride in having achieved a machine civilization, at all, a pride in the machine itself, in what it can do. In Britain this coincided with a time when it seemed proper to express such sentiments in verse and in her “Genesis of a New Theme” she quotes from poets of varied attainment who were inspired not only by the power of the new machinery, but by the aesthetic impact of streams of liquid fire flowing across the floor by the spinning, whirling and changing patterns of threads and looms, the atmospheric effect of steam, sparks and diffused light. This pride in the machine soon gave place to less euphoristic considerations of what it all meant in terms of the physical social and moral life of the machine tenders, and in the further section of her introduction she examines the ambivalent and sometimes contradictory social philosophy of the early Victorians as seen in the doctrine of Self-Help and in the growth of a new sensibility towards social justice:

“In periods dominated by a static view of society one will usually find a placid or stolid acceptance of the fact of social injustice. When the structure of society is believed incapable of change, except for the worse, its continued existence must be ensured by all means. It required the tremendous pressure engendered by the process of industrial-
ization for the traditional static view to be replaced by a more
dynamic one based on the idea
of social equality. As increasing
numbers grew aware of the fact
that the very ground on which
the social structure rested was
shifting, the static view had to
be abandoned. And the moment
that all aspects of society were
examined and assessed, the exist-
ing class structure could no long-
er be regarded as sacrosanct.
Since change was the outstand-
ing feature of the nation's eco-
nomic life, changes for the better
could be envisaged in other areas,
such as the legal system, and
public institutions, so as to pro-
tect the interests of all classes.
Thus the acceptance of social in-
justice as a necessary evil was
replaced by an increasing effort
to secure some degree of equality
with respect to the basic neces-
sities of life."

The above quotation shows the
extent to which Professor Ko-
vačević's work is based on what
in the foreword is called Marxist
thinking. Indeed her sensitive and
undeviating Marxist approach is
one of the things that makes this
introduction particularly valu-
able and different from most
others.

The six passages in the antolo-
gy section that make up the book
are all by writers whose role in
any study of English literature
may be minor, but who were far
from being nonentities, and who-
se cultural role and influence on
opinion in their own day were
very considerable. These writers
are: William Paley, a minister of
the Church of England, whose
work hardly crossed the line be-
tween propaganda-tracts and
propaganda-fiction; William Godwin, a major figure
in the history of ideas in the late
eighteenth and early nineteenth
century, an anarchist and ratio-
nalist; Hannah More who initia-
ted the use of fiction for propa-
ganda purposes and whose clear
message was for the new prole-
tariat to fear God and the king,
to be submissive and work hard;
Harriet Martineau, a political
propagandist of formidable pro-
portions, almost as influential as
Dickens himself in her impact on
public opinion; Charlotte Eliza-
beth Tonna whose Helen Fleet-
wood (1839-40) was the first En-
gh novel to be entirely concern-
ved with the lives of industrial
workers and whose feelings for
Christian brotherhood impelled
her to expose the human suffer-
ing caused by industrialization;
and Richard Henry Horne, an as-
sociate of Dickens, and for many
years actively engaged in exami-
nating how to improve the lot of
factory children.

The anthology is interesting as
providing background documents
to the climate of opinion of the
time that are not easily available
to those who do not have ready
access to good libraries. But they
are more than that and in a num-er of other ways are of inter-
est to students of literature. For
example a fascinating aspect of
the psychology of literary cre-
ation is brought out by a com-
parison of Harriet Martineau's
"A Manchester Strike" with a
parallel episode in Dickens's Hard
Times. Harriet Martineau was
'certainly no champion of work-
ers' solidarity and the effective
moulding force of industrial ac-
tion, but her restrained portait of
Allen, the half-reluctant and ul-
imately victimized organizer of
the Manchester strike, is a much
more convincing portrait than
Dickens was able to give in
Stephen Blackpool and the Trade
Union organizer Slackbridge and
a less romanticized one even than
Mrs. Gaskell in Mary Barton.

There is relvance for stylistic
studies in a comparison between
some extracts within the antho-
logy itself if we consider the de-
vices by which the writers ma-
ke their point. A comparison be-
tween the Godwin extract from
Fleetwood and "The Little Pin-
Headers" by Charlotte Elizabeth
Tonna serves as illustration. Both
deal with the gross abuse of child labour and they illustrated the difference between those who would favour the static and those who would favour the dynamic view of society given above. Both writers are equally appalled by the stunting of young human life. But Tonna’s approach is one of sentimental appeal. The form in which her message is conveyed projects children as helpless and pitiable victims of ill use, seen through the eye of an outsider observer they are largely passive, psychologically unrealized, and wrapped in a thick cotton-wool of biblical imagery and language which says much about the public to whom the work was addressed. Godwin’s whole angle of approach is different. What we see we see through the intelligence of the child himself. He is both the rebellious and active element of change. Godwin’s child has a mind and a will and expresses himself through the language of understanding, apprehension and conviction. It may be argued that he is too little childish, and that the helpless state of the little pinheaders was nearer the true position of the majority of young children, but the real point is that we have here appeals of two different natures. It is to a belief in the potentialities of individual development that Godwin is directing our interest not simply to a piously provoked pity which may or may not stir outside action.

Finally when we read these extracts with a knowledge of work similar in basic inspiration by the great novelists we become newly aware of to how much greater an extent and with what subtler and surer control of language and greater powers of imagery a Mrs. Gaskell a Charles Dickens and even a Charles Reade penetrate our imagination and how much more complex is their apprehension of both social milieu and individual psychology.

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