

RECENSIONES

IVANKA KOVAČEVIĆ, *Fact into Fiction 1750—1850*, Leicester University Press / University of Belgrade, Beograd, 1975, pp. 424.

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 or is experiencing 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 sifting 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 existing class structure could no longer be regarded as sacrosanct. Since change was the outstanding feature of the nation's economic life, changes for the better could be envisaged in other areas, such as the legal system, and public institutions, so as to protect the interests of all classes. Thus the acceptance of social injustice as a necessary evil was replaced by an increasing effort to secure some degree of equality with respect to the basic necessities of life."

The above quotation shows the extent to which Professor Kovačević'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 valuable and different from most others.

The six passages in the anthology 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 whose 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 between propaganda-through-tracts and propaganda-through-fiction; William Godwin, a major figure in the history of ideas in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, an anarchist and rationalist; Hannah More who initiated the use of fiction for propaganda purposes and whose clear message was for the new prole-

teriat to fear God and the king, to be submissive and work hard; Harriet Martineau, a political propagandist of formidable proportions, almost as influential as Dickens himself in her impact on public opinion; Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna whose *Helen Fleetwood* (1839-40) was the first English novel to be entirely concerned with the lives of industrial workers and whose feelings for Christian brotherhood impelled her to expose the human suffering caused by industrialization; and Richard Henry Horne, an associate of Dickens, and for many years actively engaged in examining 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 number of other ways are of interest to students of literature. For example a fascinating aspect of the psychology of literary creation is brought out by a comparison of Harriet Martineau's "A Manchester Strike" with a parallel episode in Dickens's *Hard Times*. Harriet Martineau was certainly no champion of workers' solidarity and the effective moulding force of industrial action, but her restrained portrait of Allen, the half-reluctant and ultimately 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 relevance for stylistic studies in a comparison between some extracts within the anthology itself if we consider the devices by which the writers make their point. A comparison between 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 outside 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 childlike, and that the helpless state of the little pin-headers 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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