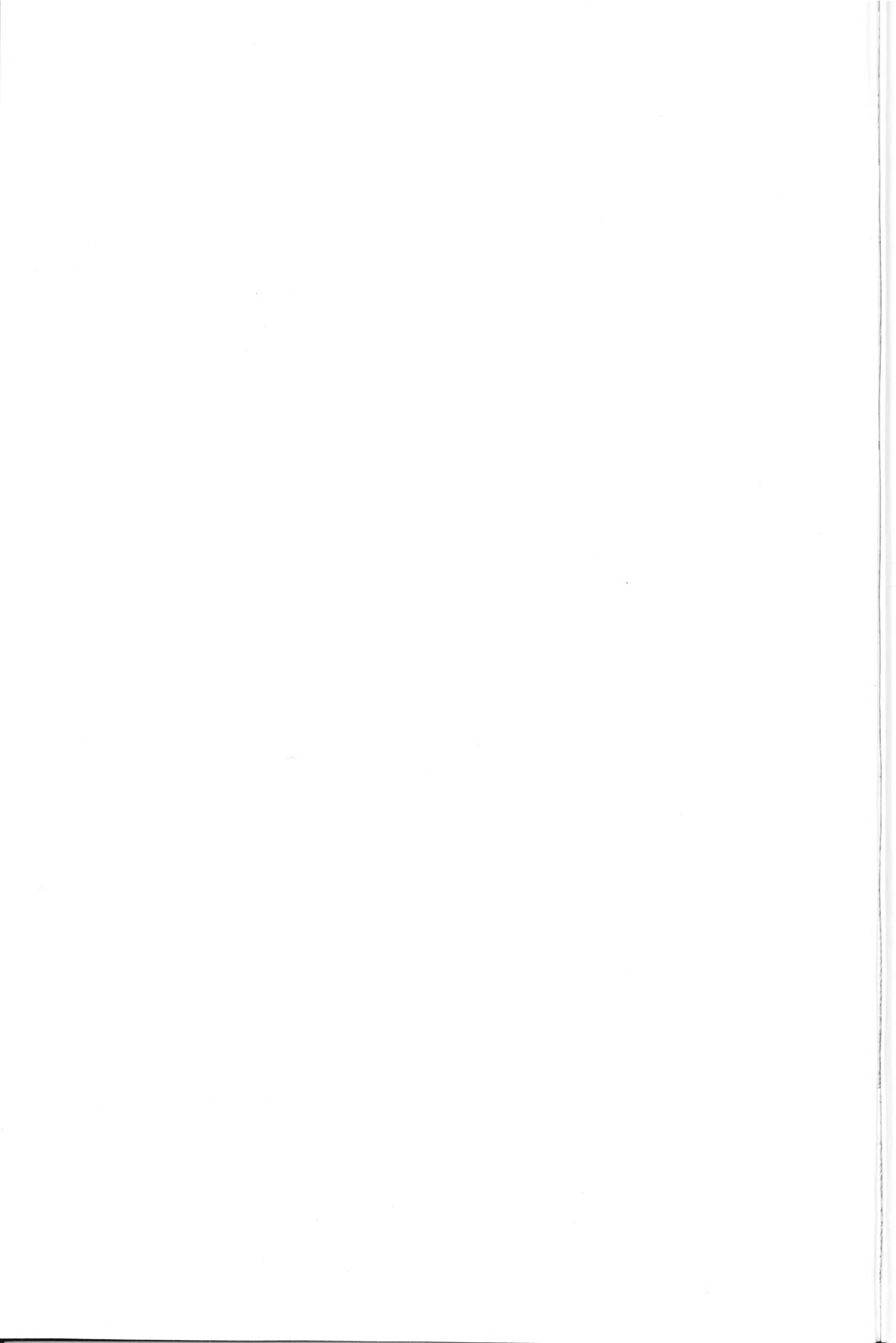
Review Essays



REVIEW ESSAY

David Dobler

The Mutual Friend, by Frederick Busch. 222 pp. Harper & Row; 1978.

POOR WRITERS—they set a few words down on paper and then people (nasty reviewers like me, for instance) come along and use them for their own purposes. What a dangerous, belly-exposing thing writing is! I could, and will, for instance, take a few of Mr. Busch's words and turn them back on him to give you this capsule impression of his book as a whole:

> "It was awful, sir," Dolby said.
> "It was," replied Dickens. "And wonderful, in a way. In a *way*, mind you."

Charles Dickens and George Dolby (who was during the last four years of Dickens's life his road manager on the reading tours of America and Britain, and who is the chief narrator of this novel) say these words after observing the police fish yet another corpse out of the river, the corpse of a young woman under thirty, apparently. Yet another suicide, apparently. Yet another victim for Dickens to see, ponder upon, and then stick into a book. For Dolby to do likewise with. For Busch too. And for me also to make use of in this review.

Cannibals, aren't we? Consumers of human carrion. But in this world, and in this novel especially, there is so much dead flesh around that one simply cannot resist. The River of Life in *The Mutual Friend* is log-jammed with bodies that pop to the surface with bursts of putrid gas and just beg to be used, to be written about.

It is a bloody book, a painful book; its inhabitants suffer and/or die from an almost infinite variety of causes. Here is a partial listing:

consumption (with much bright blood)
"True American Catarrh"
paralysis
gout
toes swollen from exposure (trench foot)
food poisoning (from partridges)
falling hair
burning in buildings and furnaces (many, many examples of this, including babies—this is a motif)
strangulation
crushing beneath carriage wheels
starvation (many examples)

King Cholera
throat and face slashed with broken bottle
dashing brains out
buggering with lit candle
raping/drugging/lashing
railway accidents with unspeakable carnage
"the most terrible operation known in surgery" (without chloroform)
convulsions
influenza
various "bronchial afflictions"
hanging
sundry fevers
shooting
exhaustion
drowning
human bulldog baiting
post-mortem on a baby (in its hovel with parents and siblings looking on)
syphilis
carbuncles
alcoholism.

And all this in a relatively short book. Most war novels have far less death per page. Of course, some of these manglings and maladies are mentioned only briefly, but many, many of them are presented in vivid and ghastly detail. I am hard put to select a passage as an example for you from the seventeen I have marked but I will do so. A random choice will suffice, I suppose; they are all pretty much the same—in their effect, at any rate. Here is Dolby contemplating the death and burial of Dickens (and of himself, of Busch, of you and me):

> Am I finally not the only man, of every man, who can speak so of his dying and interment in the fields which one day must grow crowded with the dead? Cannot I, of all, tell how the dead will mount up as the brutal age progresses? How his coffin will vie for space in the shifting snake-swarmed ground with other boxes until, like little ships in a slimy sea, they coast and bump and crowd one another, thrust one another up, and away, until the prow of one breaks the graveyard's crust and the gases of corruption within force the lid up, squeeze out rotted green and purple portions of a nostril or toe, a finger perhaps, and a terrier at play seize upon it, scrap of maggoty meat, to drop at his master's feet, and wag in pride above the redolent toy?

Powerful, virtuosic writing, isn't it? Was Poe ever so exquisite?

The superficial explanation for all this painfully beautiful harping on

death and corruption is that George Dolby is, ostensibly, writing this story from a nest of blood-crimsoned sheets in a consumptives' ward. Just as his disease, ironically, consumes him, so does he consume the past: in his helplessness he alters the past in a pathetic and neurotic effort to control it.

Dickens died in 1870; it is now 1900 and the intervening years have not been kind to Dolby. His one achievement in that time was to write *Charles Dickens As I Knew Him*, an account of the reading tours, but this book made little money for him and eventually he sank down deep into poverty and alcohol. (Dolby's book, by the way, is clearly Busch's primary source, though he does not acknowledge this in his Note and only one brief mention of the book is made in the text.) Thus, Dolby, who had hobnobbed with Dickens and his circle, who had handled with efficiency the thousands upon thousands of pounds earned by the most financially successful writer of his era, found himself in the end without a farthing, sprawled among the lowest of the low in the filth of the floor of a workhouse more wretched than any Dickens ever described, eventually to be taken to a bloody gaspers' ward where he would write and die, die and write.

Friend is divided into six sections, each introduced by two or three pages of bold-faced type wherein Dolby tells of his weakening condition, his bloody surroundings, the process of his nightly writing, and his motivations ("I've a purpose, and it isn't merely recollection, or the comfort of my flesh and blood"). He is a bit like Scheherazade staving off death with her stories. His audience is Moon, a mysterious Asian orderly who brings Dolby gin and rum and in exchange listens to his stories in order to improve his English. Moon learns his lessons very well, we see eventually.

Each of the sections has a different narrator. Dolby takes the first himself, describing the final reading tour of America. Large parts of this section consist of quotations taken from Dolby's book, Dickens's letters and other sources. The quotations are modified to fit Dolby's sickbed memories and imaginings. Dickens's own sicknesses—partial paralysis and gout (or trench foot)—are emphasized. Dolby characterizes Dickens as a man driven by a monomania: his dramatizations—especially that of Bill Sikes's brutal murder of Nancy in *Oliver Twist*—are exhausting, debilitating, almost suicidal. Dickens requires the adulation of his audience; he must have it even if it kills him. He enjoys the financial rewards very much, too.

Dolby characterizes himself, cynically, as Dickens's faithful, boot-lick dog. He is, however, a dog who can see through his master. Dickens's massive ego, his greed, his lechery—all these Dolby sees with crystal clarity, albeit through dun-colored glasses.

In this first section is introduced the burning body motif: we learn that Dickens and Dolby learned that Longfellow's beautiful wife burned to

death in a house fire. Burning bodies and thoughts of them keep turning up throughout the rest of the novel.

Novel—it is very important to keep in mind that what we are reading is a novel, that quotations are taken out of context and modified, that history is being distorted, for a purpose, an artistic one. Imagine a full-length bronze statue of Dickens; imagine a sick old man banging away at it for some hours with a ball peen hammer, leaving intact little more than a small plaque at its base that says: Charles Dickens. This is the image of Dickens that Dolby gives us. Dolby is like the slasher of a Rembrandt, the defacer of Michelangelo's *Pietà*.

If the first section is (perhaps gruesomely) fascinating, the second is even more so. It is narrated by one Barbara, a supposedly reformed prostitute who claims to be a Jew in order to procure a job in Dickens's household (Dickens was, it seems, feeling guilty and feeling pressure because of Fagin's Jewishness). The sadomasochistic Barbara (the lit candle) steps directly out of *My Secret Life* to join the happy family at Gad's Hill. She promptly finds Dickens's son, Plorn, masturbating in bed; she gives him some help with that, seduces him (while he talks smuttily), and eventually becomes pregnant by him, before he goes off to Australia. Her intercourse (verbal) with Dickens is even more interesting. He finds her surprisingly well skilled at repartee (as does the reader). In their conversations she bests Dickens, adroitly using quotations from his own works to do so. Like Dolby (and she really is like Dolby, for she is a figment of his fevered brain) she sees through Dickens with ease. (Everybody sees through Dickens with ease in this novel.) Barbara senses that he performs his suicidal readings simply for the immense pleasure they afford him; after all, she herself has often sacrificed a very great deal merely "for the sake of a caress." She and Dickens are cut from the same cloth; it would seem that Dolby would have us believe that they are both whores. Like sisters in sin, they understand each other very well. In the end Dickens pensions Barbara off: she and her bastard will be well taken care of. She knows and he knows and Dolby knows that Dickens could never permit a part of his own flesh and blood to go unprovided for. Barbara planned well.

The third section, "An English Mother," is narrated by Dickens's long-suffering wife, Kate, who is speaking, it seems, to her late infant child, Dora Annie. She emphasizes, as one might expect, Dickens's mistreatment of her, his extraordinary passion for her long-dead sister Mary—for whom he still cries out at night—his illicit affair with Ellen Ternan, and so on. Her tone is sharply sarcastic. This section is in a sense the least distorted of them all, for Dickens deserves each dart she throws at him: in the later years of their marriage he was notoriously cruel to his wife, even by Victorian standards.

Dolby returns as narrator of the next section, but it is not the same

Dolby: this man is sicker, his dog's tail thumps louder and more often, and the Dickens he shows us is even more melodramatic and monomaniacal than before. Here Dickens begins writing his last novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, which plunges him into "the profoundest explorations of despair," but which is also immensely profitable financially. His final public reading, his final Murder of Nancy, is well orchestrated, wonderfully dramatic, and ends tearfully for Dickens, Dolby, and audience alike. Afterwards, Dolby congratulates him:

> "You are a g-great man, sir, and if I dare say it at such a time, a greatly admired friend. As to your f-farewell speech, there aren't words, at least for me—"
>
> As if from the mirror, as if from my face, the ragged and whispering voice of the man in his final fatigues returned, crooning, "Got them, Dolby. Didn't I?"

"Sin Overrated and Abandoned," the penultimate section, is narrated by Ellen Lawless Ternan Robinson, Dickens's erstwhile mistress, now married to a clergyman. In detail she describes her defloration at the hands of Dickens. As they drive off into the country to accomplish this end, Dickens is, ludicrously, disguised as a clergyman. He pictures himself, however, as a knight-errant (or-rampant, perhaps) who would face any danger, be it "a dragon of inestimable proportions all covered in slime and breathing more than flame," in order to rescue (or rape) his fair maid. She finds him, though, merely a "gouty old man in his wintery years," a crude, revolting, insensitive lover, with a "great red sausage" of an organ which he will not let her fondle. He is all take and no give; it is all pain and no pleasure for her. And later he transforms her, Ellen, into the Estella of *Great Expectations*; Ellen sees that she is but another "effigy he might shape." Ultimately, Dickens turns to language to control her, as he turns to language in order to control all the world.

The final section, "Who, of All, May Speak," is a genuine tour de force. Dickens is writing his will here. His old diseased body has degenerated into a mere sac with a heart knocking about inside, but his will is intact and he will assert it, he will use his mind and his money and his words to control, even after he is dead, his heirs and his friends and the world. And yet he, who has seen so much death, who has murdered Nancy and others so often, who knows or imagines he knows what death is, now fears the fires that await him:

> Perhaps in the spontaneous burning, beneath the ground, of my own corrupted coffin. A blue lambency of death-fire surrounded by worms which writhe as they cook, and cannnot escape. Or a death by accidental flames, say in a carriage at Pall Mall, bursting alight inexplicably, then drawn all afire by fear-maddened horses through the

black night, the driver on fire and screaming, the tack and harness on fire and the horses bellowing and rolling their eyes and biting at nothing, running on and striking sparks with their hooves, the whole a behemoth of burning motion which vanishes into darkness and is recovered miles away, days later, by a rotting pier beneath which the stinking water laps—my body within the charred wooden frame, a shrunken ashy doll forever sculptured black, forever arrested in his open-mouthed shriek, which is forever unheard.

Dickens goes on with his will, on with the writing of *Drood*, on with his morbid thoughts. He is alone, alone, dying and alone, as all men are ultimately alone, and then he is buried "in fields that one day must grow crowded with the dead;" and it is 1900 now, and Dickens's lips and pen are silent now but Dolby's are not; Dickens is Dolby; and Dolby, Dickens; and Dolby is everyone, every voice, it is clear.

Dolby is in the consumptives' ward, lusting after good things to drink, thinking morbid thoughts of his horrible past and his coming death. And he, too, is alone. Barbara is gone (it *seems* that she was his daughter); and his son George, too, is gone, to Paris (it seems he wants to become a writer, an artist). Dolby has only Moon, the faithful Moon, to tell his story to.

And his story is long and painful: factories and corpses, workhouses and pollution, disease and corruption, babies burned in ovens. More and more and more of it.

And Dolby's voice fades too in the end, as it must, and now we hear Moon's voice speaking (he has learned his language lessons well). Dolby's manuscript is in his hands now, and he, "heir to Dolby's words," pledges to alter it as he sees fit: "I will one day start at the bloody beginning. I will bloody well change it all. Rewrite the lives old Dolby set down, his and his Chief's and my own. Why not? It is wrong that a man be imprisoned by language." Poor Dolby—Moon is taking his words from him and using them for his own purposes.

The Mutual Friend is, clearly, a novel about language. As W. H. Auden says in "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," "The words of a dead man/Are modified in the guts of the living." This is precisely what happens again and again in this novel; its characters seek to control in a chaotic and malignant world the use of language, but in the end their words are taken from them, all control is lost, and death comes by water and by fire. Just as "Memory" is not so much about Yeats as it is about Auden and what he thinks poetry is or should be, so is *Friend* not so much about Dickens, who is really only a source of material, as about Busch and his conceptions of what the novel and novelist are or should be. And, judging from this one dark book, it would seem that Mr. Busch looks upon his profession as, ultimately, rather futile.

Yet, obviously, he takes great (and justifiable) pride in his own skill as a craftsman: this book is highly wrought; it is stitched together with admi-

rable precision. But in his use of language, Mr. Busch suffers at times from self-indulgence. He is not alone in this; Bellow and others are similarly self-indulgent at times. It is a common enough malady today. I believe the passages I have quoted prove this point well enough. As John Gardner points out in *On Moral Fiction*, virtuosity for virtuosity's sake, which we see too much of in this novel, distracts the reader and calls attention to the writer instead of focusing that attention where it should be—on the story. At the end of his career, Yeats realized that throughout much of his life he had been guilty of the same mistake:

> It was the dream itself enchanted me:
> Character isolated by a deed
> To engross the present and dominate memory.
> Players and painted stage took all my love,
> And not those things that they were emblems of.
>
> —"The Circus Animals' Desertion"

The Mutual Friend is indeed an "awful" book in some ways—it is certainly not for everyone, especially not for the squeamish. But it is, too, a wonderful book in a way, in many ways.