April 2017

The Final Farewell (Frederick Busch's The Mutual Friend)

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Recommended Citation

Deitz, Paula (2017) "The Final Farewell (Frederick Busch's The Mutual Friend)," Ontario Review: Vol. 9 , Article 22. Available at: http://repository.usfca.edu/ontarioreview/vol9/iss1/22

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The Final Farewell


On a bookshelf in the dining room of Longfellow's Cambridge house, there is a complete set of Dickens; and the story goes that Dickens, upon spotting this row of books when he dined there on Thanksgiving Day 1867, commented to Longfellow: "Ah-h-h! I see you read the best authors." Hearing this anecdote told by a guide in the Longfellow house, one has the sense of an immediate presence. This is the same effect worked by Frederick Busch in The Mutual Friend, his scrupulous recreation in novel form of Charles Dickens and those who attended him in his last years.

The novel begins in this 1867 period with Dickens's public readings in America, and the dinner with Longfellow figures in the early pages. "Begins" is a misleading word here, for Busch's admirable technique is anything but linear. With a firm control over his material—he is faithful to the recorded facts and intuitive with his inventions—he presents this account of the years leading up to Dickens's death, and its aftermath, from different points of view. He divides up the task among several narrators: Dickens's estranged wife, Catherine; his mistress, the actress Ellen Ternan; Barbara (a character invented by Busch), a whore turned maid in the Dickens's household; Dickens himself, of course, directly at the crucial moment of death and in the voice of his many quoted letters which form episodes within episodes throughout; and finally, George Dolby, always the master tour manager and manservant par excellence, who is the introducer and central narrator, until his own death in 1900 in a London charity ward, when his hospital attendant, Moon, "one-eyed nigger baby from Her Majesty's bleeding last Empire," takes over. And, in addition, the pages are peopled with Dickens's many acquaintances and business associates.

Each narrator unfolds a separate episode, as well as a separate relationship to the Chief, as he was called, and in so doing reveals facts and circumstances which foretell events leading up to the time of his death. This intent is clarified with the frequent repetition of the question: "Is it not curious how what is written may later come to pass?" This manner of relating the story is both a strength and a weakness. The obvious strength is in the cumulative effect: each time one learns more of what lies ahead. For example, when earlier in the book Ellen
Ternan describes the dead Dickens “lying in his dining-room, surrounded by blue lobelias, and musk and red geraniums, his favorite of all flowers,” the reader is better able to imagine the scene at Gad’s Hill when finally Nellie arrives. Or, as Dolby understands the separate voices: “... two people in the same place can witness the same act and see it as two wholly separate events ... and yet were we not indivisible?”

The weakness, if it is one, of this method, where all the pieces only tally up at the end, as in a dramatic work, is that it does not allow for a deep involvement on the part of the reader — who is occupied in simply keeping track of the pieces. But neither was this Frederick Busch’s intention. It was more important to him for the reader to be informed of facts at the right time, facts calculated to make the greatest impact and to give the fullest meaning even at the cost of violating the time-sequence of the story. At one point, just before their return to England in 1868, Dickens says to Dolby: “Home is where you go to die.” This banal statement becomes potent when in ever-declining health he finally summons a carriage on a London street with “Oh, get me home!” And then only after his death at home on Gad’s Hill Place in Higham near Rochester, the reader learns that this is the very house his father once pointed out to him with these words: “If you work like a man, and live like a good man, and come out as the best man, you may one day own a house just like that, lad.”

Busch’s prose is capable of conjuring up in only a few lines specific scenes which put our imaginations to work. His descriptions convey all we need to know — as in the details of Dickens’s study, or a Turner-esque sunset on the Thames, or the London settings of Dickens’s novels, particularly as he visits them in the company of his American friends, the Fieldses of Boston. (A curious aspect of this novel is the way it forces the reader to reconcile nineteenth-century life on both sides of the Atlantic.)

What Busch’s Dickens craves throughout these last years is affection, some permanent and meaningful tie; what he achieves is control — control over the lives and feelings of real people, as well as the fictional ones. He orchestrates whatever and whoever revolves around him, always changing and reshaping, even to the constant redecoration of his house. He was friend to many and a full occupation for those near to him. Of the Hogarth sisters, only Georgina remained as his friend and housekeeper to the end — Kate, the wife, was gradually left behind in the heat of the pace; and Mary, the youngest and the one whose complete devotion had touched Dickens so deeply, had died young. Dickens thrived on his control and felt it nowhere more than
on those occasions when he read the episode of Nancy’s murder by Bill Sikes (from *Oliver Twist*) to his adoring and transfixed audiences — even though the energy expended in putting on this act was what finally exhausted his physical strength. When in March 1870, at the end of his final Farewell Readings and after his last goodbye speech, Dolby compliments the “great man” when they are alone: “As to your f-farewell speech, there aren’t w-words, at least for me — ,” Dickens responds: “Got them, Dolby. Didn’t I?”

Upon completing this intelligent novel, the reader who wants more will naturally turn to Edgar Johnson’s excellent biography, one of Busch’s acknowledged sources, as well as to the novels themselves — from which only snippets are heard at the readings — to reexperience his own reasons for being drawn to these works. It is clear at every point then how well Busch has succeeded in making this a fresh encounter. Compare, for instance, the Johnson and Busch accounts of Dickens’s last meeting with Katey, “the best of daughters,” or of his final conscious moments — here first in Johnson’s accurate and worthy language:

Looking at him across the table, Georgina was alarmed by the expression of pain on his face. . . . Nevertheless he desired dinner to go on. . . . Suddenly, he said he had to go to London at once. . . . he rose, but would have fallen where he stood if Georgina had not hurried . . . to support him. . . . she was obliged to lower him to the floor. . . . “On the ground,” he murmured faintly.

And now from Busch, whose sharp and colorful phrasing strikes close to the very sensation of losing one’s grip as we have it in Dickens’s own voice:

It will come, say, at dinner. . . . We shall be dining, Georgie and I, and she will watch me. . . . She stares, now, and her mouth drops open wider, she makes no pretense to eat. My face has changed, I can feel it, and I push the chair back . . . at a distance from the table, seeing everything in wavering shapes. . . .

I hiss at her “Continue the meal!”

. . . I have stumbled to my feet, although I can stand on only one, and I tell her “I must go to London at once.”

Georgie holds me now, but cannot bear the weight. She cries “Oh, do lie down!”

I snicker . . . and relish my words as I reply “Yes, I will. On the ground.”
Just before the advent of this moment at age fifty-eight and at the end of a life of immense activity and intense personal relationships, Busch's failing Dickens faces his truth: "...success withal, a sense has come crushing upon me... of one happiness I have missed in life, and one friend and companion I never made. And it may be that the man whose blood pours upon the sheets of the charity ward... still does not complain as I do." In the end, Busch has written a book about that larger theme of loneliness in high places. For his Dickens felt more alone than did his man Dolby who does die of T.B. in a charity ward thirty years later secure in his devotion to the Chief — "I started out in sullen servitude and learned I loved him as well." He in turn thinks of how alone must be Ellen Ternan, now a parish wife, and this carries the reader back to the earlier picture of loneliness when Nellie is closeted away behind closed doors from the other guests to be Dickens's secret audience as he reads *A Christmas Carol*. Although it successfully elaborates on these points and gives the author the occasion for some fine Dickensian scenes, Busch's ending is needlessly melodramatic by contrast to his description of Dickens's real and tragic end.

His famous friends grieved for him — Longfellow wrote to Dickens's friend John Forster, "I never knew an author's death to cause such general mourning." But for a true barometer of how the public felt at that period — the public who read his novels as fast as they were published — it is best to go directly to the great New York diarist, George Templeton Strong. Strong had read and commented on all of Dickens in his diary, though he did not attend the December 1867 reading at Steinway Hall in protest of Dickens's lack of sympathy for the recent national cause. His entry of June 10, 1870:

My usual omnibus companion, the *Evening Post*, announced the news by telegram that Charles Dickens died yesterday at Gadshill soon after a shock of paralysis — an event in literary history... I feel Charles Dickens's death as that of a personal friend, though I never even saw him.

Frederick Busch's novel also expresses this keen sense of personal loss and makes that loss so immediate that in the end the reader himself will forever be more intimately connected with the inimitable Dickens.

*Paula Deitz*