A Tale of Two Cities

by

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In comparing *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens's second historical novel, with *Barnaby Rudge* written some eighteen years before, Michael Slater has suggested that one of the major differences lies in the second work not being composed beneath the shadow of Sir Walter Scott's achievements and in its being concerned with plot rather than with character. In a letter written to John Forster from Gad's Hill on August 25th 1859 Dickens explained his intentions concerning this new novel which was appearing in weekly instalments in *All The Year Round*. In sending his friend four weeks' proofs he added

I hope you will like them. Nothing but the interest of the subject, and the pleasure of striving with the difficulty of the forms of treatment, nothing in the mere way of money, I mean, could also repay the time and trouble of the incessant condensation. But I set myself the little task of making a *picturesque* story, rising in every chapter with characters true to nature, but whom the story itself should express, more than they should express themselves, by dialogue. I mean, in other words, that I fancied a story of incident might be written...

The 'picturesque' story has remained one of the most popular of Dickens's works and Martin-Harvey's dramatization, *The Only Way*, was prominent in the repertoire of London theatres throughout the first thirty years of the twentieth century before being made into a 1925 silent film and a later BBC television production. The novel also was popular for being based in the times of the French Revolution, the most dominant historical influence on the nineteenth century, one that was kept in the public eye by Thomas Carlyle’s enormously influential history which Dickens pointed to in the Preface he wrote for the bound edition of the novel:

It has been one of my hopes to add something to the popular and picturesque means of understanding that terrible time, though no one can hope to add anything to the philosophy of Mr. Carlyle’s wonderful book.

*A Tale of Two Cities* has been republished more than any other novel by Dickens and this Bookmark will focus on some of the aspects of the novel which may have accounted for this.

**Resurrection**

There is an eerie and dramatically powerful moment when Jarvis Lorry opens the message brought to him by Jerry Cruncher on the Dover Road near the top of Shooter’s Hill in South London. The scene had already been set by Dickens to suggest a world of suspicion haunting the Dover mail where 'the guard suspected the passengers, the passengers suspected one another and the guard; they all suspected everybody else, and the coachman was sure of nothing but the horses'. Into this scene of darkness where 'There was a steaming mist in all the hollows' which 'had roamed in its forlornness up the hill, like an evil spirit, seeking rest and finding none', comes the message from London 'Wait at Dover for Mam’selle' to which the confidential clerk at Tellson's Bank replies 'Jerry, say that my answer was, RECALLED TO LIFE.'

At this early point in the novel the reader does not yet know that Jerry Cruncher is a Resurrection-Man who supplements his living of errand-running (anticipating Mr Boffin of *Our
by robbing the graves of the freshly buried. These ‘fishing’ expeditions are not explained until chapter XIV of the second part of the novel and at that point they appear with a particular sense of horror by being witnessed through the eyes of Jerry Cruncher’s son. This young witness to his father’s professional endeavours (which, incidentally, also anticipate the more literal ‘fishing’ in the Thames undertaken by Gaffer Hexham in the first chapter of Our Mutual Friend) is unnerved as his ‘long-cherished desire to know more about these matters’ is finally satisfied. Peeping in at the gate of the graveyard in St Pancras fields he sees that his father and his accomplices have ‘got a bite’:

There was a screwing and complaining sound down below, and their bent figures were strained, as if by a weight. By slow degrees the weight broke away the earth upon it, and came to the surface. Young Jerry very well knew what it would be; but, when he saw it, and saw his honoured parent about to wrench it open, he was so frightened, being new to the sight, that he made off again, and never stopped until he had run a mile or more.

As the eye of childhood fears a painted devil so young Jerry’s fear is metamorphosed into a surreal cartoon in which ‘the coffin he had seen was running after him’ as he pictures it ‘hopping on behind him, bolt upright, upon its narrow end, always on the point of overtaking him and hopping on at his side.’

However, there is a more psychologically serious aspect to the idea of being ‘recalled to life’ and it is one that had occupied Dickens’s mind throughout the writing of Little Dorrit: the impossibilities of a man being incarcerated for many years and then being returned to social integration. In 1842 Dickens had visited the Eastern Penitentiary in Philadelphia as part of his American tour that would become written up as American Notes published in the same year. In chapter VII, under a heading ‘Buried Alive’ he gives a clear account of the prisoners who were condemned to solitary confinement and concludes

My firm conviction is that, independent of the mental anguish it occasions—an anguish so acute and so tremendous, that all imagination of it must fall short of the reality—it wears the mind into a morbid state, which renders it unfit for the rough contact and busy action of the world. It is my fixed opinion that those who have undergone this punishment, MUST pass into society again morally unhealthy and diseased.

Dickens remained under no illusion about the devastating effects of long-term confinement and in the novel which preceded A Tale of Two Cities he focussed on William Dorrit ‘with the jail-rot upon him, and the impurity of his prison worn into the grain of his soul.’ There was no escape for Dorrit after his confinement for twenty years in the Marshalsea and when he finally was released into a world of wealth and foreign travel he carried the sordid walls with him collapsing as the ‘broad stairs of his Roman palace were contracted in his failing sight to the narrow stairs of his London prison.’ As his younger daughter, Amy, had already recognised even if her father could be released ‘where could father live, or how could he live?’ As Jarvis Lorry moves between sleep and waking during the rattled journey from Shooter’s Hill to Dover he feels that ‘He was on his way to dig some one out of a grave’ and he imagines a fellow passenger in the mail coach actively involved in the physical resurrection of a body:

…the passenger in his fancy would dig, and dig, dig—now, with a spade, now with a great key, now with his hands—to dig this wretched creature out. Got out at last, with earth hanging about his face and hair, he would suddenly fall away to dust.

The Doctor of Beauvais who became the shoemaker in cell number One Hundred and Five, North Tower of the Bastille can also never pull the walls down and will remain forever haunted by the experience of the deprivation of liberty. When we first see Manette
The faintness of the voice was pitiable and dreadful. It was not the faintness of physical weakness, though confinement and hard fare no doubt had their part in it. Its deplorable peculiarity was, that it was the faintness of solitude and disuse. It was like the last feeble echo of a sound made long and long ago. So entirely had it lost the life and resonance of the human voice, that it affected the senses like a once beautiful colour faded away into a poor weak stain. So sunken and suppressed it was, that it was like a voice underground.

However, within the psychological realism of the effects of imprisonment which Dickens had been made aware of from his own family history in the 1820s things which are buried do not always stay underground. References to both *Macbeth* and *King Lear* thread their way through both this novel and its successor, *Great Expectations* and perhaps most important here are the words with which Macbeth confronts the ghost of Banquo:

The time has been
That, when the brains were out, the man would die,
And there an end. But now they rise again
With twenty mortal murders on their crowns,
And push us from our stools.

In chapter XIX of the second part of *A Tale of Two Cities* Jarvis Lorry and Miss Pross destroy the shoemaker's work bench in an act which is similar to murder and they bury the remains on the mistaken supposition that the dead will lie down:

On the night of the day on which he [Manette] left the house, Mr. Lorry went into his room with a chopper, saw, chisel, and hammer, attended by Miss Pross carrying a light. There, with closed doors, and in a mysterious and guilty manner, Mr. Lorry hacked the shoemaker's bench to pieces, while Miss Pross held the candle as if she were assisting at a murder—for which, indeed, in her grimness, she was no unsuitable figure. The burning of the body (previously reduced to pieces convenient for the purpose) was commenced without delay in the kitchen fire; and the tools, shoes, and leather, were buried in the garden. So wicked do destruction and secrecy appear to honest minds, that Mr. Lorry and Miss Pross, while engaged in the commission of their deed and in the removal of its traces, almost felt, and almost looked, like accomplices in a horrible crime.

With a sense of inevitability these symbolic objects of prison life will rise up again at the end of the novel as Dr. Manette relapses into the Bastille prisoner when he is confronted again with the loss of his family security. His sanity is 'Lost, utterly lost!' and it is as if 'all that had happened since the garret time were a momentary fancy, or a dream' and we see the Doctor of Beauvais 'shrink into the exact figure that Defarge had had in keeping.'

**Doubles**

Michael Slater points to the theme of doubles and double lives in this novel and associates the focus with 'the different lives that Dickens himself was simultaneously living by this time' dominated by both his separation from his wife and his increasingly close relations with Ellen Ternan (Nelly):

The upright hero of *A Tale* Charles Darnay, the significance of whose first name and initials has not escaped commentators (though none, I believe, has remarked on the fact that he is a much younger man than his creator whereas Lucie is Nelly's age) has his double and dark shadow in the dissipated Sydney Carton.
The figure of the dissipated but ultimately heroic Carton possesses qualities and defects that have appeared elsewhere. There is a languor and diffidence that makes us recall James Harthouse from *Hard Times* and Henry Gowan from *Little Dorrit*. Equally there is a sharpness of tongue and mind which anticipates Eugene Wrayburn in *Our Mutual Friend*. When Carton tells the professional banker from Tellson’s that he has no commitment to business we might almost be listening to Gowan telling Mr. Meagles that he cannot be bothered with the professional life:

‘Business! Bless you, I have no business,’ said Mr. Carton.
‘It is a pity you have not, sir.’
‘I think so, too.’
‘If you had,’ pursued Mr. Lorry, ‘perhaps you would attend to it.’
‘Lord love you, no!—I shouldn’t,’ said Mr. Carton.
‘Well, sir!’ cried Mr. Lorry, thoroughly heated by his indifference, ‘business is a very good thing, and a very respectable thing.’

There is also an echo here of Arthur Clennam’s broken mid-life in which he can see no prospects and as the relationship between that man and little Amy Dorrit provides an ending to the earlier novel here we see Carton offering assistance to ‘a poor little thing’ who is accompanying him to the guillotine. As Clennam and Amy Dorrit ‘went quietly down into the roaring streets, inseparable and blessed…they passed along in sunshine and shade, the noisy and the eager, and the arrogant and the forward and the vain’ so Carton and the young girl he has befriended ‘stand in the fast-thinning throng of victims…Eye to eye, voice to voice, hand to hand, heart to heart…two children of the Universal Mother, else so wide apart and differing’ who ‘have come together on the dark highway, to repair home together, and to rest in her bosom.’

The merging of qualities within these double characters enables Dickens to echo aspects of Arthur Clennam’s nature with that of Carton’s alter ego, Charles Darnay. Like Clennam Darnay fears that his family has some hidden responsibility for the incarceration of a long-term prisoner and like Clennam he falls in love with the prisoner’s daughter. Perhaps most telling of all there is the awareness Darnay has of the importance of Lucie Manette to her father which echoes Clennam’s understanding of Amy Dorrit’s central position in the life of her imprisoned father:

‘I know,’ said Darnay, respectfully, ‘how can I fail to know, Doctor Manette, I who have seen you together from day to day, that between you and Miss Manette there is an affection so unusual, so touching, so belonging to the circumstances in which it has been nurtured, that it can have few parallels, even in the tenderness between a father and a child.’

**Hunger**

In *A Christmas Carol* the Ghost of Christmas Present reveals to Scrooge the two figures he has concealed in the folds of his robe, Ignorance and Want, and readers can find more written about these two disturbing spectres in the first of the Dickens Bookmarks which is devoted to just that Christmas story. In *A Tale* a similar personification of abstract misery and deprivation is presented to the reader in the figure of Hunger:

The mill which had worked them down, was the mill that grinds young people old; the children had ancient faces and grave voices; and upon them, and upon the grown faces, and ploughed into every furrow of age and coming up afresh, was the sign, Hunger.
The noun is repeated eight times within the same paragraph and it precedes a description of Paris streets which could as easily be those of London:

A narrow winding street, full of offence and stench, with other narrow winding streets diverging, all peopled by rags and nightcaps, and all smelling of rags and nightcaps, and all visible things with a brooding look upon them that looked ill.

The term ‘brooding’ is powerfully evident throughout the dramatic build-up to the Revolution and immediately after the Marquis has run-over and killed the child with his carriage Dickens suggests that the normality of a poverty-stricken life returns only to bide its time:

The water of the fountain ran, the swift river ran, the day ran into evening, so much life in the city ran into death according to rule, time and tide waited for no man, the rats were sleeping close together in their dark holes again, the Fancy Ball was lighted up at supper, all things ran their course.

The sense of inevitability in these lines, of an inescapable Fate, brings to mind the poem written by Matthew Arnold some eight years before as he stood by a window overlooking the straits of sea between Dover and Calais. As Dickens's mail coach moves through the 'clammy and intensely cold mist', through a world which merges land and sea 'in ripples that visibly followed and overspread one another', it contains those mutually distrusting passengers referred to at the opening of this Bookmark. The coach 'lumbered on again, with heavier wreaths of mist closing round it as it began the descent' and Jerry Cruncher is left 'alone in the mist and darkness'. As a setting for the novel Dickens presents the reader with a world that Arnold saw in the last stanza of ‘Dover Beach’ as he turned to his newly-wed wife to implore her loyalty:

Ah, love, let us be true  
To one another! for the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,  
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;  
And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

If Dickens's growing affections for Nelly Ternan and his increasing hostility towards his wife may have had any effect on the composition of A Tale it is perhaps to be located in the yearning for a happy ending bought at a great price. The figure of the two people named Charles, Darnay and Dickens, seems to point to a world of light with the rejected but redeemed figure of SydneyCarton thinking, as he mounts the scaffold, of the former as ‘a man winning his way up in that path of life’. Carton sees an idealised Lucie-Nelly with her husband 'lying side by side in their last earthly bed’ but this idealisation is confounded in Dickens's own history when he wrote to John Forster about his domestic affairs 'It is all despairingly over…A dismal failure has to be borne, and there an end.’ The revolutionary chaos and confusion which takes place in ignorance and darkness may well have a domestic shadow to it that makes this novel more than simply a ‘picturesque story’.

Further Reading:
Thomas Carlyle’s The French Revolution  
Michael Slater’s Biography of Charles Dickens