

COLIN JONES, JOSEPHINE MCDONAGH, AND JON MEE, Eds.

CHARLES DICKENS, A TALE OF TWO CITIES AND THE FRENCH

REVOLUTION (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). xi + 212 pp.

Reviewed by Laurence Davies

Almost every page of this collection offers a fresh idea or a piquant reading. Fruits of a conference on Dickens and the French Revolution held in 2006, the contributions are ripe but pleasingly distinct in flavour. The editors rightly observe that the “iconic status” of *A Tale of Two Cities* “has allowed it to accommodate a great variety of often wildly divergent readings,” for example as “a reference point for Franco-British relations, a representation of mob violence, a fable about Christian sacrifice or a psychological emanation of the author’s troubled sexuality” (5). The present volume aims “to bring together the novel’s diverse contexts and spheres of influence” (5). *A Tale of Two Cities*, that is to say, has significant antecedents and equally significant progeny, yet this is no routine survey of sources or influences, nor do its contributors see the past as altogether a different country. Modern readers, and modern adaptors (for cinema or television, for instance) face the same questions that Dickens faced about the causes, the efficacy, and the morality of political violence. The novel itself draws its energy from the incessant flux of history. Discussing the chapter in Part III called “The Substance of the Shadow,” which reveals the master secrets of the Manette, Defarge, and St-Evrémonde families, Mark Philp writes: “In this way, history plays out: substance generating shadow, shadow made substance, and the substance of the old order cast into the shadows.” (37) As Michael Wood puts it in his

succinct Afterword, discussing the narrative shifts in time and place, “Dickens wanted his readers to be rattled and puzzled as well as entertained” (193).

However strong the determination of editors and organisers, volumes of conference proceedings often feature at least a handful of dutiful papers included not so much for their quality as for their attention to topics that cannot supposedly be ignored. Colin Jones, Josephine McDonagh, and John Mee take a different editorial line, not fussing overmuch about the spread of topics. Thus we find two chapters on film adaptations, but only passing references to relevant works from Dickens’s oeuvre such as *A Child’s History of England* or his other historical novel, the less familiar but remarkable *Barnaby Rudge*, whose dramatization of demagoguery and religious bigotry speaks to our present with particular urgency. (Although brief, the references to the latter work are suggestive, especially the connection Mark Philp makes between the reverberating footsteps in II.vi and the Gordon rioters [28].) This imbalance is a virtue rather than a failing. A volume exploring all the relevant background to the portrayal of crowds and insurrection might, if only to establish what Dickens wasn’t doing, look at *Coriolanus* and *Julius Caesar*, or Gilray’s brutal caricatures of the sans-culottes as cannibals, as far from Dickens’s enraged but not utterly unrighteous revolutionaries as the marquis de St-Evrémonde is from Burke’s “nation of men of honor and of cavaliers” (*Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 1790). An alternative placing of the novel might be in the literature of migration. A broader discussion of its cultural aftermath might treat at length radio adaptations such as the one by Orson Welles for the Mercury Theatre of the Air, or its role as an educational text, not least in the United States, where generations of high school graduates could quote the opening paragraph from memory; this is among the most aural of all novels. Fascinating though these possibilities are, the volume under review preserves an

intellectual intimacy that would be lost on any larger scale. Evidently these scholars have been listening to each other, even when we come to such disparate (yet both compelling) passages as the accounts of Sidney Carton's death by Kamilla Elliott (100-02) and John Bowen (120-23).

The editors start the volume with a deft Introduction touching on the main points to come and offering their own ideas about the novel's contexts, historical, political and geographical. They note the blazing success in Britain of this "national icon" and its chilly reception in France, where readers "tended to like their Dickens full of character, individualism and 'English' eccentricity" and have continued to take exception to what they see as a smug, even jingoistic contrast between French hotheadedness and English prudence (6-7). Perhaps the editors overstate the continuing prevalence of this view in France; during the last thirty or so years, scholars such as François Furet in history and Sylvère Monod in literature have advocated a less drastic understanding of this national contrast as have many of their English-speaking counterparts. In any case, along with several of their authors, the editors argue that the novel's presentation of French and English ways is closer to admonition than self-congratulation. In his final minutes Sydney Carton imagines a future Paris transformed into the clean, bright city that was quite literally being opened up in the 1850s; meanwhile, in Dickens's present, the spiked heads on Temple Bar had disappeared, but large areas of London were still dark, fetid, and desperately poor (14-15). Elsewhere in Britain, Manchester and Salford were even worse, and only 20 years previously, though eventually reprieved, three physical-force Chartists in Wales had been sentenced to the gruesome public ritual of a traitor's death – the fate that Charles Darnay only just escapes. To borrow a paradox from Michael Wood,

“What is inevitable will happen—unless we prevent it. 1859 in England is just like 1789 in France, except for the difference in time and place.” (193)

1. The first two essays take up the theme of violence and qualify the widely-held idea that when Dickens acknowledges Carlyle’s *The French Revolution* in the Preface to *A Tale of Two Cities*, he tells us all we need to know about its intellectual roots. Mark Philp, who works on political history and philosophy, detects the influence of Arthur Young’s *Travels in France* (1792) and Louis-Adolphe Thiers’ *Histoire de la révolution française* (1823-27, translated 1838) and, more generally and forcefully, that of the “new philosophy” as it emerged in France, the United States, and Britain (and, I would add, Ireland) in the late eighteenth century. “That philosophy”, Philp writes, “involves an essential egalitarianism and humanitarianism and an understanding that there are certain fundamental features of human beings that demand respect, since without it they can be ruled only by force and fraud.” (29) Gareth Stedman Jones, who has a distinguished record as a student of poverty and class in Victorian Britain, makes a similar point: “Dickens’s language for the description of the crowds and the violence of the French Revolution was not that of Burke and Carlyle, or later of Hippolyte Taine, but of the radicals of the 1790s, Paine and Wollstonecraft, or advanced Whigs like Charles James Fox and James MacKintosh; or indeed Arthur Young” (56). Dickens certainly admired Carlyle’s furious energy and eye for a vivid character, and shared his contempt for the “pig philosophy” of Utilitarianism (*Latter-Day Pamphlets*, 1850). Yet to see a little

distance open up between them is liberating. This less than total separation enables a rounder view of the novel itself, hints at some intriguing connections with London radicalism, and shows us a better informed and more thoughtful Dickens than some lines of criticism will allow. (For a summary of the contrary argument that Carlyle is the one influence that matters, see [Alev Baysal's essay on *A Tale of Two Cities*](#); Baysal cites some striking examples of early critical condescension.) This is not to say that Dickens revealed his intellectual powers by preferring Wollstonecraft, Paine, or Young over Carlyle; it is rather to say that he had the critical intelligence to engage them all rather than simply echo the intoxicating Scotsman. Jones does not slight the importance of Carlyle as a thinker. He has many valuable things to say about the originality of Carlyle's treatment of crowds, his sense of their inability to "speak their meaning" (50), and his "preoccupation [...] with spiritual crisis, with the terrors of the loss of faith and with the urgency of its recovery" (44). In a particularly notable passage, Jones ranks Dickens with Carlyle and Marx as "three of the most powerful writers and observers of the nineteenth century" (58). Yet Carlyle's ambitions were always epic, and he believed that "the historian's task" was that of "diviner and seer" (44). By way of contrast, this bountiful essay ends with the words of the Seamstress on the day of her execution: "I am not unwilling to die, if the Republic which is to do so much good to us poor, will profit by my death; but I do not know how that can be, Citizen Evrémonde." Dickens's power

was that of the novelist, who asks rather than answers questions and sees the small along with the large.

A second round of essays deals with shows, appearances, identities. Keith Michael Baker's brief and elegant contribution attends to a fictional victim of the old regime, Dr. Manette, and the strong possibility that his genealogy included a waxwork model of another long-bearded victim, the comte de Lorges. Dickens saw him at Madame Tussaud's, his beard, like Dr. Manette's reaching down to his waist, accompanied by waxen rats and a waxen loaf of prison bread. Baker remarks that as a major attraction the unfortunate comte spent more time in the Chamber of Horrors than he ever did in the Bastille. Indeed, he too was a fictional character, inspired by the many pamphlets from 1789 and even earlier about the infamous prison and its inmates, and made for exhibition by Anna Maria Tussaud's mentor, Philippe Curtius, who really had been present at the storming of the Bastille.

To read Sally Ledger on the trials of Charles Darnay is to feel both delight and sadness. This scholar who did so much to advance and enliven the cause of Victorian and feminist studies, not least by presiding over several excellent collections of essays, died abruptly while this collection was in press. The volume is dedicated to her memory, and her contribution brings together several of its dominant themes. The courtroom scenes, she points out, are imagined in the spirit of broadsides and popular drama, a potent influence on this most theatrical of Dickens's novels (76), as well as preparing the way for other contributors who consider performances of the story on stage and screen. By juxtaposing the French and English trial scenes, she also throws light on the contentious issue of national comparisons. Shrewdly she observes that Dickens gives the London trial a satiric as well as a melodramatic aspect while the two Parisian trials are purely melodramatic, arguing that "whereas satire,

with its desire to correct wrongs through ridicule, can be effective in a context of the rule of law, in the unstable, shifting and seemingly arbitrary law of the Terror it is ineffective as a political aesthetic” (82). Nevertheless, she acknowledges that “the bloodthirsty English mob disappointed by Darnay’s reprieve is every bit as savage as its French counterpart later in the novel” (79). Like Philp and Jones, Ledger understands *A Tale of Two Cities* as a radical novel for an age of simmering radicalism. Thus, a combination of satirical mockery, street culture, and melodrama creates “a truly democratic as well as a politically alert literary text” (84).

Kamilla Elliott writes on “Face Value” and John Bowen on “Counting On”.. Both chapters consider the implications of likeness and unlikeness, the identities of people as individuals and as groups or categories. Elliott makes her case in three stages, each buzzing with ideas. First she develops a taxonomy of taxonomies, investigating the ways in which identity and category are marked in the novel and more generally in the period of the revolution, when “hierarchical patriarchy is being levelled by horizontal fraternity” (93), considering visual and ekphrastic descriptions of faces, the implications of given and family names, and the ways that a single name may stand for a class and its behavior, as with *Jacques*, *Jacquerie*, and *Monseigneur*. Next, in a fine theoretical move, she rehabilitates the simile as a way of expressing both connectedness and difference worthy to stand with the familiar pairing of metaphor and metonymy. In the third stage, she applies these concepts of face and simile to the rendering of particular characters, notably Lucie, Madame Defarge, Darnay, and Carton, rounding off with a provocative reading of the exchange of identity in the final scenes considered as a “similaic identity theft [that] changes personal vice into public virtue and public vice into personal virtue” (100-01). Thanks to its richness, the argument is hard to summarize, but even at full length, it suffers

from compression in a few places. For example, Elliott asserts that Darnay is guilty of “class crimes” (101), guilty “of the nominal and affiliative charges of [being an] *émigré*, aristocrat and Evrémonde” (100). Is this a way of thinking one’s way into the period by adopting Madame Defarge’s practice of “metonymic identification” (98) or an ascription of guilt that outlasts the urgency of revolutionary justice? Whether for his class origins or for the crimes of his uncle, did Darnay (who, not so incidentally, has chosen to bear his mother’s name) really deserve his sentence? A *Yes* would bring us alarmingly close to the world according to Saint-Just and Robespierre.

John Bowen confesses to being “caught” by a “contagion of enumeration” (111), by the “tensions and contradictions” of “the many, the single, the few” (109). Like Elliott, he moves easily but thoughtfully back and forth between theory and the unexpected literary detail. Enumeration in *A Tale of Two Cities* is indeed everywhere, beginning with its title, then on to the satirical evocation of loaves and fishes in the second paragraph, all the way to the decapitation of Twenty-Three. Bowen’s enumerations enable him to write not only about doubling, the one form of counting that has already received plenty of critical commentary, but about triangles of desire, and about the sufferings of millions, families, groups of friends, and individuals, and about the moral, political, and artistic problems of paying heed to and of representing that whole range. He places these ways of counting in the contexts of Utilitarian education (as inflicted on poor Sissy Jupe), Mill’s writings on democracy and political representation, and Dickens’s discontent with the discontented condition of England. Moving to the twentieth century, Bowen thinks through the problem of the many and the few (and challenges Lukács’s judgment that Dickens retreats from history into privateness) with the help of Derrida’s *The Politics of Friendship* and *The Gift of Death*. But there is more to come, and it is powerful indeed. The final pages of this

chapter confront us with another kind of enumeration: “the sign of, and counterforce to unbearable or traumatic affect” (121). Such is the meticulous measurement of space and time by the prisoner Darnay and the former prisoner Doctor Manette. Such, too, are the compulsive iterations of Manette’s patient, the dreadfully abused woman--the words “My husband, my father, and my brother!” and the counting up to twelve. She is Madame Defarge’s sister, and her experience of abduction and rape is “the founding trauma of the book” (122).

The last three chapters before the Afterword cover adaptations. Joss Marsh’s witty account of stage plays lingers over the most beloved of them all, John and ‘Nina’ Martin-Harvey’s *The Only Way*, which between 1899 and 1939 averaged 100 performances a year. Marsh has much of interest to say about the shaping of this play, its association with sacrifice and British virtue in the years before and during the First World War, and the latent homoeroticism in the doubling of Carton and Darnay. She also has some delightful finds to display, such as the story of Robert Baden-Powell reconstructing the play from memory and performing it for the besieged troops at Mafeking, or the comments on the back of photos of Martin-Harvey mailed to each other by four keen young women, or the inundation of gifts and souvenirs sent to the tireless couple by their fans.

The two chapters on films are also excellent. Judith Buchanan (assisted by Alex Newhouse) writes on the 1917 Fox production with William Farnum doubling Carton and Darnay; Charles Barr, on the 1935 MGM produced by David O. Selznick with Ronald Colman as Carton, and the 1958 from the Rank Organisation in the UK, produced by Betty Box with Dirk Bogarde as Carton. Highlights of the commentary include Buchanan and Newhouse on the staging of the crowd scenes, the rendering of inner experience, and the ending, which shows the Darnay family living in the

perpetual shadow of Carton's sacrifice; Barr is very good indeed on the political constraints facing the makers of the 1935 version, which could not seem too "Russian", on the handling of doubling in both movies, and the sexual charge of the British film, with Christopher Lee (immediately before his famous performance in *Dracula*) as the marquis and the gay icon Dirk Bogarde. All three of these essays on adaptation share the great merit of being at home with the medium in question while being intensely engaged with the original *A Tale of Two Cities*. In fact, every piece in this admirably thought-out collection illuminates the novel itself as well as deepening our knowledge of its influence and contexts.

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