

## Charles Dickens and the Politics of Fiction

Between 1841 and 1851, Charles Dickens was invited to stand for parliament on three different occasions. Each time, he declined. For Dickens, the influence he could exercise in the House of Commons was far inferior to the power of the pen – his fiction, he felt, could do far more good than politics ever could. But as his biographer John Forster rather astutely observed, there were question marks over the nature of Dickens's own political affiliations – his aversion to parliament, in other words, was not so simple and straightforward. If Dickens were to stand for parliament, what allegiances would he profess, whose side would he be on – whose interests would he seek to advance? Forster correctly identified some core ideological ambiguities at the centre of Dickens's fiction and indeed his personality – he spoke in many voices, impersonated and inhabited so many characters: where did the sympathies of his art really lie?

Had he not become an author, Dickens would probably have pursued a career on the stage or in the law courts – he was a dramatist, as his continuing involvement in private theatricals and his later flair for public readings were to show. And for Dickens, imaginative literature was not something to be consumed in private, but something to be celebrated as a powerful intervention in public life: as a type of discourse that could shape public opinion, or underwrite changes in government policy, or developments in jurisprudence and theology. To sustain that claim, I'm going to concentrate on a single case-study, that of the impoverished child Jo in *Bleak House*, Dickens's masterpiece published in twenty instalments in 1852-3 – a novel that I'm sure is well-known and hopefully loved by many of you. One of the things that I learnt in writing my most recent book on Dickens was to pay particular attention to which characters he was prepared to ritually sacrifice at the point of

narrative closure. In his plan for *Bleak House*, Dickens famously scribbles down – ‘ch. 46 – Jo? Yes. Kill him!’ – and so I want to ask now what that memorandum to self might mean. Dickens here seems to take some pleasure in thinking of Jo’s death almost as an offering to Moloch, the pagan divinity who demanded innocent children as a sacrifice. In pondering this terrible, foundational injustice – this offering up of the future to the past – we also register that there are many such innocent sacrifices in Dickens’s fiction – Little Nell, Paul Dombey, Johnny Higden, perhaps most memorably amongst the major characters – but there are also nameless little ones who suffer London’s poverty in silence and die quietly in the margins of his prose. Dickens held strong Unitarian sympathies and he did not believe in original sin, so in consigning the deaths of these innocents to the margins he was most emphatically not consigning them to hell – but what meaning then, do these deaths of the innocents hold?

Many of you will know that Dickens’s childhood was marred by financial disaster: his father’s impoverishment when he was only 12 meant that the ambitious boy was denied any hope of a formal education; instead, he was packed off to Warren’s Blacking Factory on the Strand to engage in demeaning employment for pitiful pay. Of course, he emerged to teach himself stenography and became firstly a lawyer’s clerk and then a parliamentary reporter, but buried deep in his heart and never forgotten was a sense that his future had been sacrificed to his family’s economic survival. Reflecting on the experience in an autobiographical fragment later in life he lamented his parents’ apparent lack of concern for his plight: ‘My father and mother were quite satisfied ... They could hardly have been more so, if I had been twenty years of age, distinguished at a grammar-school, and going to Cambridge’. But for Dickens himself, the experience was crucial, formative, a fulcrum on which different visions of his future were to turn – he was the little ‘ragged wayworn boy’ toiling on the long road in *David Copperfield*, a human sacrifice whose career from this point

on might in fact have been a criminal one: he sighs, 'I might easily have been, for any care that was taken of me, a little robber or a little vagabond.' In his later writing, he was to return time and time again to the Old Testament story of Abraham and Isaac, and in this version of the tale, he positions himself as the Isaac of his family, saved at the last moment by both the mercy of God and his own efforts of will. He refused to consent to a sacrifice that would have effected not his salvation but his condemnation to a life of crime, but in choosing to become most fully himself, he refused to obey Christ's command to self-abnegation and the way of the Cross that went on to become the template of his own art.

Driven by his ambition and the sheer energy of his genius, Dickens did of course escape the fate of the artful Dodgers and petty crooks of London, and his early successes in journalism coincided with the passage of the Great Reform Bill in 1832, which helped the young man to feel that he was the prophet of democracy, the voice of the people. So unsurprisingly, in the early days, his political instincts were radical, he spoke for those on the margins, infusing his novels with the eccentricity and vigour of working-class voice. His early novels, *Oliver Twist*, and *Nicholas Nickleby*, championed the progress of parish boys and orphans as they claimed their place in the wider world and critiqued the Poor Laws for their inability to support the ill, the illegitimate, the elderly: Matthew Bevis tells us, quite rightly, I think, that *Oliver Twist* can best be understood as a form of heckling the politicians from the public gallery – Dickens never wanted to forfeit his independence, so he could heckle those in power who needed correction the most. He loathed rotten boroughs and the unreformed House of Commons, and early in his career he speaks in favour of more representative forms of government. But somewhere along the line, that changes – perhaps influenced by the rise of Chartism from 1839 onwards, when many working-class men realised that they were not going to benefit greatly from this expansion of the franchise and they took to the streets to

protest accordingly. In the 1830s and 40s, public moralists such as Thomas Carlyle and J. S. Mill were afraid that England was sliding towards class war: even as agendas of reform were implemented, Benjamin Disraeli for example called England the land of the ‘two nations’ of the rich and the poor. Both *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge* contain terrible scenes of riot and destruction which critics feel respond in some ways to Chartist activity, with scenes of pike-men and torchbearers meeting at night to destroy property as part of a campaign for adult male suffrage. In this context of class struggle, who were the people – were they eternally divided amongst themselves, and if so, how might reconciliation be effected when the spectre of violence stalked the streets?

Dickens’s journalistic commentary on the Chartist trials of 1848 was, as you might expect from that quick summary, very conservative indeed – he showed himself willing to sacrifice innocent men if civil order was thereby more effectively preserved. Dickens in the late 1840s has no interest in socialism, in the provision of a welfare network, or for the formulation of legitimate grounds for civil protest. Yet he was aware that the achievements of the Great Reform Bill were proving to be more symbolic than real. What should a united and reformed Constitution look like? Several years after the Chartist riots, *Bleak House* begins to appear – a novel with arguably the highest body count of anything Dickens ever wrote. To diagnose the pathology of the nation, Dickens was compelled to experiment with an extraordinary dual narrative structure – he uses alternately a first-person narrator’s voice – that of the young woman, Esther Summerson, who offers us her retrospective memoirs – and the present tense account of a probably male, probably professional third-person narrator, perhaps a lawyer or a politician. The formal innovations of this ambitious project probe the ways in which a problem can only be understood when we look at it from both the outside and the inside – poverty, for example, isn’t just about statistics, it is also about how it feels to be

disenfranchised and misrepresented. Dickens was keen to insist on the value of the individual witness's testimony and in *Bleak House* he allows that witness to be a rather radical figure – an illegitimate young girl whom many would discard as incapable of moral insight. It is easy for us now to lose touch with what an extraordinary choice that was – as vice swirls around her, it a poor orphan girl who serves as our exemplar of goodness. *Bleak House* is the only novel where Dickens attempts this marriage of the first and third person accounts, and what he is seeking perhaps is a certain comprehensiveness – you need to take account of both these sets of values and virtues to understand contemporary life. But even as Dickens seeks inclusivity, there are still those, like Jo, whom Dickens will sacrifice, who cannot represent their own interests and speak for themselves in this imperfect world.

For Dickens, the Court of Chancery that he parodied and critiqued in *Bleak House* was as an offence to the ethics of neighbourliness which he so desperately wanted to promote in his own fiction. In response to the laissez-faire system of economics in which each man asserts his own self-interest, many Victorian realist novels promoted an ethics of interdependence – each man should ideally act as the Good Samaritan to his neighbour. Dickens's preference for a philosophy of personal responsibility goes hand in hand with an attack on the institutional care, and Esther's concern for her neighbours becomes his charitable manifesto: 'I thought it best to be as useful as I could, and to render what kind services I could, to those immediately about me; and to try to let that circle of duty gradually and naturally expand itself' (*BH*, p. 154). But so great was the literary suspicion of self-interest – so great the preference for a culture of altruism in an age of economic competitiveness – that authors from Dickens to Eliot felt compelled to advocate not just an ethics of neighbourly care but an ethics of extreme self-sacrifice: 'better to be Abel than Cain' Dickens tells us in *Our Mutual Friend*, 'more comfortable to be the calf than the butcher', Eliot tells us in *Daniel Deronda*.



And this illustration by Frederick Barnard shows precisely the dynamic I mean – this is Sydney Carton dying on the scaffold for his friend Charles Darnay in a late Victorian illustration of *A Tale of Two Cities*: ‘greater love hath no man than he lay down his life for his friends’ – an image that becomes an icon or a portable aide-de-memoire of how we should all behave when the going gets tough.

Or to return to the scene I invoked earlier, better to be Isaac surrendering gracefully to the will of God than to be Abraham wielding the knife. Much of the Victorian fascination with martyrdom is about disciplining characters to consent to their own sacrifice in the interests of the greater good. This returns us to Dickens’s own experience as the Isaac of his family – except of course you’ll recall that when the chips were down, Dickens found himself unable to practise what he preached. His fiction repeatedly returns to these questions – whether submission is always the right response to a call to martyrdom, and whose salvation might be

brought about by the transaction. Self-sacrifice – whether repudiated or willingly embraced – was never neutral in Dickens's fiction.

Now let us return to poor old Jo in *Bleak House* and the relish Dickens seem to feel when compelled his own commitment to his plot to have to kill him off. Jo is a crossing sweeper, dirt poor and lacking an education – the very ingredients which Dickens linked to criminal aetiology. His primary significance in the novel is to serve as witness to the goodness of Esther's unknown and at this point anonymous father, but his evidence cannot be received at the subsequent inquest because he cannot validate his testimony with an oath. Critics have identified a number of cases reported (perhaps by Dickens himself) in *The Examiner* and *Household Words* in 1848-50 in which the evidence of child witnesses was excluded because of their inability to answer questions from the Catechism and thus formally demonstrate their testimonial competence. One case was that of 14-year old George Ruby who was excluded from the witness-box because he didn't know anything of God or the devil – all he knew, he said, was how to sweep the crossing. The presiding magistrate said he couldn't take the evidence of a creature who knew nothing whatever of the obligation to tell the truth, but the editorial commentary pointed out that in confessing his ignorance, the boy in fact displayed a strict fidelity to truth: 'He was a truthful witness against himself, as society had to its shame suffered him to be; and for the very evidence of his adherence to truth most faithfully, the magistrate puts him aside as not to be trusted as a witness'.

Now let us look at Dickens's representation of Jo's death. After being endlessly moved on as a vagrant throughout the novel, Jo has finally collapsed. He is comforted by Allan, a doctor, who attempts to teach him the Lord's Prayer as his eyes close – an act of charity that Dickens

wants to affirm, I think, even as it is potentially undermined by the parodic laughter Dickens directs at other legal and liturgical forms in the novel: and let me put the text up on the screen for you –

‘Jo, my poor fellow!’

‘I hear you, sir, in the dark, but I’m a-gropin – a-gropin – let me catch hold of your hand’.

‘Jo, can you hear what I say?’

‘I’ll say anythink as you say, sir, for I knows it’s good’.

‘OUR FATHER’.

‘Our Father! – yes, that’s wery good, sir’.

‘WHICH ART IN HEAVEN’.

‘Art in heaven – is the light a-comin, sir?’

‘It is close at hand. HALLOWED BE THY NAME!’

Hallowed be – thy – ’

The light is come upon the dark benighted way. Dead!

Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day. (*BH*, p. 705)

As Dickens acknowledges here, Jo stands in a representative relationship to a much larger body of similar children, who suffer still and are ‘dying thus around us every day!’ This superbly crafted address to the parliament of the nation – a House of Commons as extensive and representative as the reading audience itself – makes claims on behalf of a wide body of constituents of which Jo is only the tip of the iceberg: George Ruby and the other unnamed children of the law reports stand incorporated into the group he represents. It is too late to help Jo, but many remain in need, and we are called to help them for his sake.

If I had more time, I would tell you more about the ways in which Dickens is drawing here upon his own profound understanding of the language of ‘interest’ and the theory of



‘representation’ that he extracts from Chancery jurisprudence in the period. Dickens’s knowledge of Chancery practice is immense (based on painful personal experience of litigation to protect his copyright in *A Christmas Carol* in 1844) and he eviscerates it from the inside, appropriating its forms – written evidence, presented in the third person – and yet demolishing its contents in the service of literary rather than legal truths. Ironically, Chancery – the court of the monarch’s conscience, the home of Equity, of flexible, personal justice – is completely ineffective and in showing that richer, fuller meanings of terms such as ‘trust’ can be found outside legal practice, Dickens is trying to divorce Equity from its institutional carapace and to reclaim it as a property of the ethical individual and of the literature which showcases charitable neighbours in action.

In revealing some of the ways in which Chancery was not able to arrive at a just division of property on behalf of a large cast of characters, Dickens was making the case for the novel being its successor. Historically, Chancery had been the home of class actions, where a single representative could bring a claim on behalf of a wider group of sufferers, but in the nineteenth century it proves itself completely unable to cope with the new groupings generated by an industrial landscape, such as friendly societies and joint stock companies. So Dickens very cannily positions *Bleak House* as an effective form of class action for better political recognition on the part of all the poor crossing sweepers of London, for example, or for fairer treatment of all ruined Chancery suitors whose pamphlets of paralegal complaint turned into the story of the desperate Gridley and the mad Miss Flite. What Dickens is seeking to promote in *Bleak House* is not self-interest, nor is it the pecuniary interests of Chancery, but it is the national interest – how and why we might all possess an interest in the governance of the nation. Hence it is of crucial significance that Dickens’s characters are themselves representative of the sufferings of a wider class – typical specimens of the poor suitor and the

neglected child. *Bleak House* thus arguably presents itself as what lawyers (and in particular the legal historian Stephen Yeazell) call a ‘litigative aggregation device’, fulfilling the social function of group litigation on behalf of those who could not afford to protect their interests in the cumbersome Chancery courts. Who can speak for those claimants failed by Equity? Not the courts, but the novelist, who claims justice for Jo and for all the others whom he stands for, whom he symbolises, in the whole great city of Victorian London.

This idea of the novel as a class action takes us to the heart of what Dickens is trying to do in *Bleak House*: he contends that it’s not owning property but rather being human that is enough of a *locus standi* for an individual to have an ‘interest’ in the constitution of society. And yet, even as I want to acclaim *Bleak House* as Dickens’s best attempt at perfecting the art-form of democracy, there are those whom Dickens chooses not to fully humanise. Esther might be given her own first-person narrative, but Jo is spoken of as little better than an animal – he can’t read, and even the sign of the cross on the dome of St Paul’s does not speak to Jo of any order, or any divine companionship with his suffering. It is as if Dickens is drawing a line between those marginal figures who can be demarginalized by the cultural work of the novel, and those who remain disenfranchised both politically and artistically. For however much Dickens seeks to critique the brutality of sacrifice, he practises it regularly – he can’t do without it – and the Jos and the Lady Dedlocks of the world suffer for the preservation of an order that has no place in it for them. Some victims of society are expendable even to the self-styled prophet of democracy. This returns us to the question with which I opened – if Dickens were to have entered the House of Commons, who would he have spoken for? Ultimately I think that such is the chameleon-like nature of his genius that the only answer is his art, his compulsion to craft a compelling tale, one which moves his readers to wonder at the dazzling extent of his own genius and perhaps also to moments of transformation, of

sacred cleansing tears. For regardless of his politics, Dickens at his best can move us profoundly, calling us to action even as he stands over the corpse of a body he has murdered himself – we are all complicit in this ecology of sacrifice and exploitation unless we do what we can, ladies and gentlemen, to stop the suffering, the stop the little ones dying thus around us every day.

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