

## Dickens and the Power of an Umbrella

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Thank you very much indeed. It's a great pleasure to be here and a particular pleasure both to celebrate both Graham Storey's work and the long association between Charles Dickens and this college. Graham of course with Kathleen Tillotson was one of the general editors of the great Pilgrim edition of Dickens letters, from its beginning in the early 1950s right to its completion half a century later. After Dickens's death, 1000 or so carefully censored letters had been published by his daughter Mamie and sister-in law Georgina Hogarth. By the 1930s, some 6000 or so were in print; thanks to Graham's and his collaborators' labours, today we have just short of 15,000 letters, all immaculately edited and footnoted so that each volume is an encyclopaedia not just of Dickens's life but of the whole literary, theatrical and artistic worlds in which he moved. The Pilgrim is one of the great scholarly achievements of the second half of the twentieth century: twelve fat volumes of for the most part new Dickens, a goldmine for biographers, and the home of some amazing writing. It's a fraction of what Dickens wrote – many have been lost, censored or destroyed – but still more than one letter for every day of his adult life.

No other publication comes near to its ability to show close up that extraordinary career as journalist, public reader, actor-manager, unpaid almoner to the richest heiress of the day, tireless speechmaker, magazine proprietor, parliamentary reporter, legal clerk, travel writer, autobiographer, editor, amateur conjuror – and writer of fourteen novels, two travel books, *Sketches by Boz*, *The Uncommercial Traveller*, six fat volumes of miscellaneous journalism, five Christmas books, a good number of short stories and Christmas stories, four plays, some poems and *A Life of our Lord*. But the sheer scale of Dickens's achievement and the power of his creative imagination shouldn't blind us to its subtlety and strangeness. Vladimir Nabokov counselled us 'fondle the details' when reading Dickens's work, and George Orwell saw 'The outstanding, unmistakable mark of Dickens's writing' – what makes it stylistic, as it were – as 'the unnecessary detail'. And so instead of trying to compass the grandeur of Dickens, I'd like today to fondle a few necessary, unnecessary details, and in particular from the great Pilgrim edition of Dickens's letters.

After Dickens's death Mark Twain wrote a very funny essay called 'The Approaching Epidemic' about all the people whom he foresaw lecturing about Dickens. 'The rostrums', he writes:

will fairly swarm with these unfortunates. "Remembrances of Charles Dickens." A lecture. By John Jones, who saw him once in a street car and twice in a barber shop ... a lecture. By Miss Serena Amelia Tryphenia McSpadden, who still wears, and will always wear, a glove upon the hand made sacred by the clasp of Dickens. Only Death shall remove it.

Twain's list culminates in a man who lectures on a toothpick once used by Charles Dickens, a lady to whom Charles Dickens 'granted the hospitalities of his umbrella during a storm', and a person who 'possesses a hole which once belonged in a handkerchief owned by Charles Dickens.' I don't have Dickens's toothpick or handkerchief hole but I am going to talk about an umbrella, or several umbrellas, in his work. I take my cue from G. K. Chesterton who wrote in his introduction to Dickens's *Hard Times*, 'If we take a thing frivolously we can take it separately, but the moment we take a thing seriously, if it were only an old umbrella, it is obvious that that umbrella opens above us into the immensity of the whole universe.'

I should now announce the thesis of my talk. It is this: there is a surprising number of umbrellas in Dickens's work. Of course, Dickens is not alone in this: the work of his illustrators George Cruikshank and Phiz are full of umbrella-wielders. But Dickens's attachment to the umbrella – and as frequent detachment from it – seems even stronger. His very first published piece of fiction, for example, concerns Augustus Minns who we are told in the very first sentence 'always carried a brown silk umbrella with an ivory handle' which is then lost. At the very opening of Dickens's career, lies an umbrella which defines the story by disappearing within it. Many of Dickens's most powerful disturbing characters, including Quilp the villain of *Old Curiosity Shop*, Wackford Squeers in *Nicholas Nickleby*, Mrs Gamp in *Martin Chuzzlewit* and Mrs Joe Gargery in *Great Expectations* are holders and wielders of umbrellas. Miss Henrietta Petowker in *Nicholas Nickleby* knows she is admired at the theatre by the appearance of 'a most persevering umbrella in the upper boxes'; in the same novel, Wackford Squeers 'takes his umbrella to bed with him'; Miss Mowcher in *David Copperfield* carries an umbrella so large it 'would have been an inconvenient one for the Irish Giant' and Mrs F's aunt in *Little Dorrit*, rubs 'her esteemed insteps with her umbrella' while vindictively glaring at poor Arthur Clennam. The 'affectionate lunacy' of Mrs Bagnet in *Bleak House* is shown by her repeatedly giving Trooper George 'a great poke between the shoulders with her umbrella'.

The self-pleasure, affection and aggression of these sexually knowing women – actress, wife, widow, beautician – are all signified by the style of their umbrella-work.

Umbrellas are funny things for all sorts of reasons and in all sorts of ways: they usually belong to a particular person but are perpetually in danger of being mislaid or lost or turning up in the wrong place or doing something inappropriate or surprising. They can easily be lost and found, or turned inside out and righted again. They're often most noticeable when they're not there. Dickens's characters use umbrellas in many ways, as containers, weapons, disguises, shields, and pens. They often act like theatrical props that support characterisation, or all on their own stage little dramas of absence and presence. They appear in all sorts of places, from Parliament to palaces to prisons, in bedrooms and in omnibuses. Sometimes they're like detachable, mobile prostheses: Silas Wegg in *Our Mutual Friend* has both a wooden leg and an umbrella. Like Wegg's leg, they're often strangely invested with erotic desire in a distinctly bisexual or hermaphroditic way.

One of Dickens's most powerful, knowing women and his best-known wielder of the umbrella is Mrs Gamp in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Her umbrella became so famous that it entered the language: a 'gamp' is both a kind of nurse and a kind of umbrella, two things admitted to the bourgeois home that are meant to protect you from harm but which may in fact have the opposite effect. Mrs Gamp's umbrella, appropriately for a leaved object, is the colour of 'a faded leaf, except where a circular patch of lively blue had been dexterously let into the top'. It is like a miniature portable landscape, with a patch of blue sky over a plantation. That leafiness is picked up in *Our Mutual Friend* in the form of Silas Wegg's umbrella that resembles 'an unwholesomely forced lettuce'. Betsey Prig, appropriately, Mrs Gamp's friend, reverses the trope, possessing as she does a lettuce (or possibly a cabbage) 'of such magnificent proportions that she was obliged to shut it up like an umbrella.' Lettuces, letters, and umbrellas: as many-leaved as a literary style, and Mrs Gamp's umbrella is a particularly self-multiplying one, for she 'so often moved it, in the course of five minutes, that it seemed not one umbrella but fifty'. It too is linked to a specifically feminine knowledge of the two ends of human life, for without its presence, 'neither a lying-in nor a laying-out could by any possibility be attempted'. The philosopher Jacques Derrida once described umbrella as like 'hermaphroditic spurs encased in veils'. It's an acute remark but Mrs Gamp's umbrella is even more erotically ambivalent even than that, for at any moment in one of her many journeys, it is liable to 'thrust out its battered brass nozzle from improper

crevices and chinks, to the great terror of the other passengers'. 'Nozzle' is particularly felicitous because it implies that this is an umbrella that squirts liquid out rather than protects one from it, just as the later description of her 'dropsical umbrella' suggests that it had produced or absorbed the fluid that it was designed precisely to repel.

But if they inspire and accompany some of Dickens's most remarkable acts of fictional creation, umbrellas also seem strangely linked to the simultaneous acting out and warding off of certain kinds of deeply buried, potentially traumatic memory, for Dickens. Let's turn to this letter from the Pilgrim about an umbrella, which he wrote in June 1843, aged 31, as he was in the middle of writing *Martin Chuzzlewit*, just before Mrs Gamp made her first appearance in that book. It's written to a man called Augustus Tracey, who was the governor of Tothill Fields prison in London and a good friend of Dickens. It's about an umbrella that seems to have been lost.

Governor.

Now, we don't want none of your sarse—and if you bung any of them tokes of yours in this direction, you'll find your shuttlecock sent back as heavy as it came. Who wants your Bridewell umberellers? Do you suppose people can't perwidge theirselves with crooked handles, without axing you? Who ever see your umbereller? *I* didn't. Go and look for it in the Gruel; and if it an't there, search the Soup. It an't so thick, but wot you'll find three and sixpence worth of gingham among the ox heads as you pave your garden with. Ah. Oh. Yes. No. Yor'ne too cheekish by half Governor. That's where it is. You'd better take it out of yourself by a month and labour, on the Mill. If that don't answer, let off one of them blunderbusses in the office agin your weskut. That's what your complaint wants.

Villium Gibbuns his Mark.

*Memorandum added by the Chaplain*

P.S. The unfortunate man forgot to state that the umbrella was Found in his possession while he penned the above—that his wretched wife was as well as could be expected; also her sister—that he had determined not to ask the Governor in Dr Howe's behalf, for a ticket to the St. Giles's Lions (thinking the said Doctor troublesome in that respect) but had conferred with Mr. Crea according to the Governor's kind suggestion; and would write the Governor when the Night was fixed.

In response to a seemingly routine request, we see an astonishing fictional and parodic energy being swept into the response. The letter is marked by a good deal of comic aggression as Dickens or Gibbuns sends back what he calls this 'shuttlecock' (a shuttlecock like a miniature pointless umbrella) which is then batted back by Dickens himself in the shape of the chaplain. He writes to Tracey in the two very different styles of two different characters, neither of whom is himself: against and in defiance of the law on the one hand; and for it in the shape of the chaplain on the other. That's a characteristically ambivalent relationship to the law, that runs throughout his work. The two parts or two letters radically contradict or delete each other. It's rather like that wonderful Mr Micawber letter in *David Copperfield* where, having threatened suicide in the body of the letter 'for mental torture is not supportable beyond a certain point', he then adds in a postscript that his debts are settled and that 'I and family are at the height of earthly bliss.' That's a self-contradicting, self-cancelling performance and this is another one as we see in that wonderful Frankie Howard-like moment: 'Oh. Ah. Yes. No', successively and simultaneously exhalation, exclamation, affirmation and denial.

The letter is chockfull of what Dickens's contemporaries took as most characteristic of his style. It's full of linguistic innovation and hyperbole, highly informal in its diction and stuffed with jargon and street language, like 'bung', 'gingham' (meaning umbrella), 'tokens', and the exquisite 'too cheekish by half', as if cheek or cheeky had simultaneously diminished and extended itself by a half. 'Cheekish', like other words here, is newish, as Dickens's usage either precedes or coincides with the earliest listed in the *OED*. These 'oral' and performative qualities of Dickens's writing are a commonplace of how we think of his work, but the letter's relationship to the oral is more complex and conflicted than that. And the strangeness of the letter seems to me to have quite a lot to do with the strangeness of Dickens's childhood. I'm sure you know the story. One day John Forster, Dickens's closest friend and effectively his literary agent, said that Charles Dilke (earlier a friend of John Keats the poet) had mentioned to him that he had seen Dickens as a small boy working in Warren's blacking warehouse near Covent Garden. When Forster asked Dickens about this and if it could possibly be true, Dickens went silent but later gave him either all or part - we don't know exactly what - of his autobiographical account of those years, which included the heartbreaking story of his father's imprisonment for debt in the Marshalsea and his own time as a child labourer - a 'poor labouring hind' as he calls himself - at Warren's Blacking Warehouse. At 12 he's spending 12 hours a day sticking labels on pots of shoe blacking in a rat infested warehouse on the banks of the Thames and then later in a shop window being

looked at by passers-by. Dickens says he doesn't know – and we still don't know - whether it was six months or a year. It is in some sense for him immeasurable, deranges time through its later haunting presence, and was inassimilable to the usual procession of days and months. And it remained a secret. After John Dickens was released from prison and Charles went briefly back to school, the family never spoke of it again. Dickens at some point destroyed the manuscript of what's called the 'autobiographical fragment', having given at least part of it to Forster, with apparently 'no view' as to whether it should be published or not. Dickens's own children did not know what had happened - Forster and probably Catherine Dickens his wife were perhaps the only two who did until Forster published parts of it after his death.

Let's go back to the letter. There is, of course, a great deal of debate about prison and punishment in the nineteenth century and a good deal of innovation. One of the best known of these innovations was the 'silent system', where prisoners were isolated and forbidden to speak at all, in order – in theory – to foster a sense of guilt and responsibility for the crime and a moral reformation. Tracey's prison was run on the silent system and prisoners were punished (most commonly by deprivation of food) for speaking. His regime was one of the most punitive: over one third of all punishments in the whole prison system at this time were inflicted at Tothill Fields or at Coldbath Fields prison, which was also run by a friend of Dickens, who approved and supported his work. Punishments were most usually for infringing the silence rule, as an oral transgression, speech, was punished by an oral deprivation, hunger. Dickens here is writing to a friend, the governor of a prison whose punitive regime he approves of, by voicing, and speaking for, someone who is not allowed to speak, and certainly not like this to the Governor of the prison.

Dickens as Gibbuns does two things with the umbrella: he hides it, and he thrusts it down the governor's throat in the soup or gruel. It is hard not to think of *Oliver Twist* at this point: the governor politely asks for something and gets something very different from what he expected back. Like Oliver's asking for more, Tracy's polite request is answered with a beating or its equivalent: hard labour on the treadmill, followed by an encouragement to shoot himself with his own blunderbuss. The second half of the letter is stranger still, for it ends with an arrangement or failure to make an arrangement to see 'the St. Giles's Lions'. St Giles was a notorious criminal slum in London and its inhabitants are like the inhabitant of a Zoo. But also like a group of literary 'lions', the phrase of the time for celebrity. Literary celebrity and criminal life thus seem strangely linked together. It is hard at such a moment not to think of the passage in Dickens's

‘Autobiographical Fragment’ where he writes ‘but for the mercy of God, I might easily have been, for any care that was taken of me, a little robber or a little vagabond’, a passage which raises the fear and possibility that he might have been famous not as a literary celebrity but as a St Giles criminal. The umbrella of the prison governor, like this remarkable and self-divided feat of literary style, simultaneously links, attacks and wards off the memory of self, of prison and of hunger. Criminality and literary celebrity are radically divided and yet linked by letter, signature, parody, and umbrella in the writing of someone who cannot write and who signs with what looks like a mesh of crossed umbrellas. Dickens himself has, as a literary celebrity, gone lion hunting at Tracey’s prison and found a style to be carried and lost between prison and home and the two or three identities (chaplain, author, criminal) here at work.