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Dombey and Son

CHARLES DICKENS

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

DOMBEY AND SON

Charles Dickens

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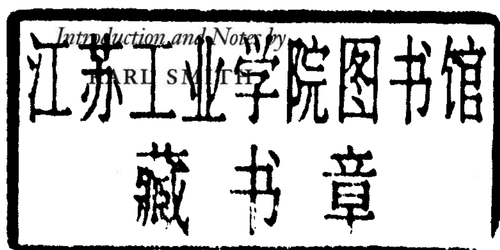

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

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INTRODUCTION

Of all Dickens's novels, *Dombey and Son* has been the least adapted for film and television. This is surprising, given the contemporary relevance of the subject matter – the need to balance business life with family, and self-image with human interaction. It is even more surprising, since it is not only moving, but entertaining in nearly every chapter. The novel's most minor characters, such as Mr Chick, Jack Bunsby and The Game Chicken, provide rich potential for show-stealing cameo appearances and the comic ones have unforgettable catchphrases, recurring in unlikely places, that the creators of *The Fast Show* would be proud of. Perhaps one reason why 'Dombey the Movie' has never been made, however, is that although events happen in the novel, the significant action takes place internally as the characters re-evaluate their dreams and their sense of how they relate to one another. Furthermore, the Dombeys invest things like the seafront at Brighton and the trains

emerging from Euston with powerful, irrational and often contradictory meanings. Although the narrative technique allows Dickens to carry this off vividly, it would be hard work for a director to do the same. These, however, are not problems for the reader, but they are a reminder of the unique intensity of the experience of reading Dickens's words.

Some of the intensity of this particular book must surely come from the circumstances in which it was written. *Dombey and Son* was begun two years after the completion of *Martin Chuzzlewit* in 1844. Although he had been satisfied with that novel, it had not sold in the same quantities as his previous fiction. In the intervening period, he had not been idle. Two Christmas books, *The Chimes* and *The Cricket on the Hearth*, and a series of reflections on his continental travels had appeared, but these were no substitutes for a new novel. And this came at a time when Dickens was extremely anxious about money. *A Christmas Carol* had been written partly in the hope of paying his debts to the publishers, Chapman and Hall, but its highly decorated appearance had been expensive to produce and the profits were so disappointing that he told his friend, John Forster, 'I shall be ruined past all hope of mortal redemption.'[1] Furthermore, his editorship of the *Daily News* ended after only eighteen acrimonious days. The same anxiety can be seen in his application to become a magistrate because he wanted 'some permanent dependence besides literature'.[2] It is not surprising, then, that Paul's question, ' "Papa! what's money?" ' (p. 90) and his father's obsessive reverence for it should play such a major part in *Dombey and Son*.

Dombey's power to disturb comes from his belief that human relationships can be controlled by money. He tries to prevent his son's nurse from developing an attachment to the boy by emphasising the wages he pays her. Mrs Pipchin's small talk satisfies him as 'the sort of thing for which he paid so much a quarter' (p. 132). Worst of all, he effectively buys his second wife and expects that his wealth and position in society will be enough to keep her in awed obedience to him. Paul's questions about money are only the first indication of the naïvety of this outlook.

Only one thing means more to Dombey than money and that is his vision of the firm. It is fitting that such an all-consuming idea should provide the title of the novel. But the words Dombey and Son describe a personal relationship, which, for the father, has no existence apart from the business. And they exclude another relationship, as the last words of

1 11 February 1844, in House and Storey (eds.), *The Letters of Charles Dickens*. For full details of this and other references, turn to the Bibliography at the end of this Introduction.

2 to Lord Morpeth, 20 June 1846

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the first serialised number pointedly underline: ' "So here's to Dombey – and Son – and Daughter!" ' (p. 45) Dombey's neglect of and emotional cruelty toward Florence are strictly a private matter, but they bring out the horror of contemporary values as Dickens saw them.

We are encouraged to regard Dombey as monstrous by the chilling appearance of everything about him and his house. When Florence lives alone there, it is explicitly connected to the 'enchanted houses', complete with 'dragon sentries' and 'Gorgon-like' walls, of romance, where heroines are imprisoned by gothic villains (pp. 295–6). Yet, despite the oppressive atmosphere he creates, Dombey is not the villain of the piece. That, after all, is Carker's role. Contemporary reviewers admired Dombey's propriety and independence, and Morfin in the novel says, ' "He is a gentleman of high honour and integrity . . . it would do us no harm to remember oftener than we do that vices are sometimes only virtues carried to excess!" ' (p. 753). Whenever he fears the reader may be too critical, Dickens is careful to emphasise these good qualities and the factors that have led to his megalomania. Unstinting criticism of Dombey's philosophy is mitigated by a sense of his vulnerability. His dream is precarious from the beginning and his grief is genuine, if selfishly motivated. Richards sees him as 'a lone prisoner in a cell' (p. 25). He is so confined that any who attempt to show him love are repulsed on an emotional reflex, yet he is keenly aware of his loneliness. He simply cannot let anyone else into the public persona he has built for himself. The satire against this man is tempered with compassion.

One reason for this may be that Dickens himself was an intensely private man. Dombey's horror at his breach with Edith appearing in the newspapers curiously prefigures Dickens's own anger at the press when he separated from his own wife ten years later. It is easy to explain the novelist's sympathy with Florence the neglected child, since Dickens always resented having been deprived of education and put out to work as a small boy. Yet Dombey too may have his sources in the biography of a man fixed in a public role, who often misunderstood his family and of whom Peter Ackroyd says, 'There is never any indication . . . that he ever confessed to being wrong about anything' (Ackroyd, p. 875).

The charge, then, that Dombey's conversion is unconvincing, that 'he becomes the best of fathers and spoils a fine novel' (Taine, pp. 362–3), is repudiated with some justification in the novel's preface. The 'perpetual struggle' described there is indeed 'within him all along' and sometimes, as in Chapter xxxv, there is a real possibility that he will be moved by Florence – a hope cruelly shattered when Edith returns and aggravates his pride once more. The change of heart Dombey undergoes is as much prepared for as that of his predecessor Scrooge, with whom he has much

in common, for all his difference in temperament. Even after his repentance, the 'certain secrecy' with which he displays his love for his grandchildren is consistent with his earlier character. As Kathleen Tillotson puts it, 'In Mr Dombey, Dickens achieves the remarkable feat of making us aware of the hidden depths of a character, while keeping them largely hidden; his method respects Mr Dombey's own proud reserve' (Tillotson, p. 167). His genius lies in creating a man that can be pitied and laughed at without detracting from the awe his stifling greatness inspires in all around him.

Edith's pride and greatness are of a different order altogether and clash violently with those of her husband. Her weary refusal to participate in the absurd artificial conventions of Mrs Skewton's world – and then of Dombey's – is as honest as it is chilling. Some of the ground is laid here for the more successful figure of the mature Estella in *Great Expectations*. Nevertheless, Edith's is not a pride that can be softened to repentance, not even by Florence, and this adds pathos to the relationship between girl and woman.

Dickens seems originally to have intended to humiliate Dombey by cuckolding him. Lord Jeffrey's horror that the novel might end in such a way was noted by Dickens – not without some satisfaction – as representative of his general readership and he resolved ultimately to subvert these expectations. On 21 December 1847, he wrote to John Forster that Jeffrey,

> won't believe (positively refuses) that Edith is Carker's mistress. What do you think of a kind of inverted Maid's Tragedy, and a tremendous scene of her undeceiving Carker, and giving him to know that she never meant that?[3]

If Edith's elopement and refusal to participate in Carker's sexual appetites seem melodramatic, this exchange suggests what Dickens's motivation was. The reference to Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy*, moreover, is a reminder that these scenes descend directly from the conventions of English theatre, extending back to 1611 and beyond. In that play, it is the married man, Amintor, who finds his sexual plans thwarted because his proud wife, Evadne, has wed him with an agenda of her own. The angry scene that ensues (II, i) is of the same genre as Dickens's chapters. ' "Ile not go to bed," ' Evadne cries (l. 150), and Amintor's nervous, ' "How pretilie / That frown becomes thee" ' (ll. 159–60), is reprised in Carker's, ' " . . . you handsome shrew? Handsomer so

3 See *Letters*, op cit.

than any other woman in her best humour?" ' (p. 700). Nevertheless, much of the preceding dialogue between Dombey, Edith and Carker is undeniably wordy and wearying. That this sold woman should turn out to be related to Alice Marwood the prostitute also seems too heavy-handed a pointing of the moral. At the time, Dickens was setting up a home for the reform of women fallen into crime with the Evangelical philanthropist, Angela Burdett-Couts and he attempts to explore such figures again in his next novel, *David Copperfield*.

In actual fact, there are many shared features between these two novels. Murdstone is another unstable father figure with an *idée fixe*; David is another neglected child. Furthermore, the books attack two very different styles of education. The faults of Doctor Blimber's academy, which stultifies its pupils with indiscriminate study of the classics, are more subtle then the sheer brutality of Mr Creakle's establishment – and indeed of Dotheboys Hall – but neither environment is easily forgotten. The products of Blimber's system, whose brains have been rotted through miseducation, are joyful comic creations yet they have all the poignancy of wasted potential. Mr Toots in particular is a kind of Romantic holy idiot. His pride in his tailor and admiration for the unlikely figure of the Game Chicken are depicted hilariously. Nevertheless, the humour of catchphrases like, ' "It's of no consequence . . . " ' makes his hopeless love for Florence and desire to be of service to her infinitely more touching than the plight of the comparable (but deadly serious) Smike in *Nicholas Nickleby*. Could there be any declaration of love more sincerely offered and yet more wonderfully absurd than, ' "If you could see my legs when I take my boots off, you'd form some idea of what unrequited affection is" ' (p. 626)? Again, *David Copperfield* presents a similar capacity in Mr Dick, who excels Toots in the glorious liberty of the lunatic, but not in his blend of pathos and comedy.

In these two atmospheres, Dombey's house and Blimber's school, Dickens displays the remarkable character of Little Paul. He is, of course, a direct descendant of Little Nell, who also dies before reaching adulthood. In an age where infant death was a much more common part of life for all classes, such stories were not morbidly sentimental. Lord Jeffrey was not alone in weeping as he read that episode and Dickens's main rival, William Thackeray, told his editor, 'There's no writing against such power as this – one has no chance!'[4] Even ten years later, it moved grown men to tears at the public readings. Nevertheless, Paul represents an advance on Nell. He is far more individual and eccentric

4 quoted in Collins (ed.), p. 219

than the original heroine is allowed to be and whereas she is merely observed in her death, Paul's is consistently presented from the child's own point of view. This approach paves the way for the extraordinary insights into the alien world of the child offered in the first chapters of *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*. In actual fact, most of the Little Nell-ishness is displaced on to Florence, whose untiring devotion to an under-appreciative parent recurs throughout Dickens. There is some fairness in Julian Moynihan's criticism of Florence, which he takes to the extent of accusing her of an intention to subject her father to 'a death by drowning' in the sheer volume of her tears![5] However beautiful her constant loyalty and consideration for her father may be, they seem too good to be credible in an age like ours, which has largely embraced the values of Dombey. As the focus shifts from Paul to Florence, her outbursts of emotion gradually come to seem repetitive and even, to the harsher critics, somewhat self-inflicted. At her best, however, she is a fine portrait of an unsatisfied longing to love and be loved. Her care that no one should think badly of her father, whatever pain he causes her, is genuinely moving.

> If a book were read aloud, and there were anything in the story that pointed at an unkind father, she was in pain for their application of it to him; not for herself. [p. 322]

With extraordinary sensitivity, Dickens delineates the terrible conflict Florence undergoes between accepting the loving compassion of others and feeling disloyal to her unloving father.

When she might otherwise be flagging, he keeps her alive by showing her half-smiling, half-tearful interaction with the comic characters, who are, of course, devoted to her.

Another character who develops a pattern from Dickens's earlier novels, whilst pointing the way to future works, is Carker. From Fagin onwards, the terrifying figure exerting power over others by an infallible knowledge of their secrets becomes one of the author's trademarks. Like Nadgett, the professional stalker in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Carker seems to be in league with the structure of the city in his effortless ability to acquire information. His victim, Rob, glances 'cautiously up at the packer's and at the bottle-maker's, as if, from any one of the tiers of warehouses, Mr Carker might be looking down' (p. 590). His gentlemanly businesslike respectability marks him out as the ancestor of Tulkinghorn in *Bleak House* and even of Jaggers in *Great Expectations*.

5 'Dealings with the Firm of Dombey and Son: Firmness versus Wetness', in Gross and Pearson (eds), pp. 121–32

And his involvement in the secrets of others leads him to as sticky an end as Tulkinghorn's. The fifty-fifth chapter, where he is forced to flee his outraged employer, magnificently continues the theme of the guilt-haunted man from Bill Sikes in *Oliver Twist* and Jonas's restless sense of pursuit in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. There is always a strong sense in Dickens of the narrative drive of discovery catching up with those who deal in darkness, but in this novel that force is embodied in the dynamic symbol of the railway train.

In the early Victorian world, the trains were the bringers of a new civilisation, but they were also a dangerous unknown quantity. The opening of the first passenger line, the Liverpool and Manchester, in 1830 provided an ill omen for this mode of travel when William Huskisson, former President of the Board of Trade and early champion of the railways, was killed by the Rocket. In 1865, Dickens himself was involved in the Staplehurst accident in which ten people lost their lives. Carker's mangling on the tracks works on an understandable popular fear of the steam engine and turns it into a motif that gives direction to this story.

Whether or not it is in the foreground, the railway dominates the novel. It points the connection between Carker the running man and Dombey on the run from the truth about himself and his world. In a previous chapter, he too is seen riding on a train and is as quick as Carker to fear it as a semi-supernatural agent of inevitable fate:

> The power that forced itself upon its iron way – its own . . . piercing through the heart of every obstacle, and dragging living creatures of all classes, ages, and degrees behind it, was a type of the triumphant monster, Death! [p. 261]

One reason why he hates this machine so much is that it also threatens to admit the public into 'a proud gentleman's secret heart' (p. 261). As a former journalist and editor, Dickens knew the importance of the railways in accelerating the process of gathering and distributing news quickly. Now, at last, national newspapers were viable as news reported in London could still be current when it reached Glasgow. When Dombey, then, speaks of 'the world' knowing of his downfall because of the printed matter 'steaming to and fro on railroads' (p. 660), he refers to no small number of people. This is why he associates his journey not only with death, but also with 'this face of Florence' (p. 263), who constantly makes his spiritual emptiness known to him, 'As if she held the clue to something secret in his breast . . . and her very breath could sound it' (p. 31). Because he ignores the love she offers as an alternative to his worldview for so long, he ends up as much a broken man as Carker. The resultant calamity is described in comparable terms to the rail accident:

> . . . she could have brought a dawning knowledge home to Mr Dombey at that early day, which would not then have struck him in the end like lightning. [p. 30]

The railway is also shown as having a deadly effect upon the London of the novel. Chapter VI shows Camden Town reduced to 'carcases of ragged tenements' and becoming a hopelessly fragmented landscape during the construction of the London–Birmingham line (p. 63). Although this was completed in 1838, London was still in major upheaval at the time of writing, and this continued throughout the century. In 1866 alone, the Midland Railway Company demolished four thousand houses in the capital, displacing thirty-two thousand inhabitants and flattening a cemetery so that St Pancras could be reached. Many critics have taken this novel as 'a horrified picture of the impact of the railways'.[6] Yet, when the same area is revisited in Chapter XV, the development turns out to have amazingly improved the whole city:

> new streets, that had stopped disheartened in the mud and waggon-ruts, formed towns within themselves . . . Bridges that had led to nothing, led to villas, gardens, churches . . .

The 'rotten' has been replaced by the wholesome and 'the miserable waste ground' and 'refuse-matter' with energetic, living 'palaces' complete with 'comforts and conveniences' that have 'sprang into existence' (pp. 204–5). Transformation of the cityscape into such a vision of the Heavenly Jerusalem is a recurrent feature of Dickens's later fiction. Such scenes accompany moments of revelation about altruistic love in *Little Dorrit* and *Great Expectations*. In the former, for example, Mrs Clennam's house functions as microcosm of a London dominated by a distorted Puritanism and a hollow business ethic. When Little Dorrit explains to her that the real meaning of the Bible she has hypocritically used to pronounce judgement on others is to be embodied in a charitable action, the house and all it represents crumbles. At this point, they gain a renewed perspective of London as a whole (Bk II, Ch. 31, p. 771). There is a real sense that the churches have resumed their true relevance within the context of the city and that the numinous has, albeit briefly, genuinely transfigured the capital. *Dombey and Son* also concerns the collapse of a house (Chapters LX ff.) and the replacement of the austere money-dominated worldview it enshrines with Florence's transcendant love. The later novels, however, present altered cityscapes merely from the subjective viewpoint of certain characters privileged by the author.

6 Jeffrey Richards, 'The Role of the Railway', in Wheeler (ed.), p. 124

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In this book, London, as it is affected by the railways, provides a more tangible expression of the possibility that regeneration can follow the death brought about by revelation. It is to this symbolic meaning that Chapter xv owes its sense of miraculous wonder.

The other major theme of the novel brought out by the railways is that reforming, revitalising revelation is governed by a carefully planned scheme. Whereas Ned Cuttle's watch is fundamentally inaccurate and must be ' "Put . . . back half an hour every morning, and about another quarter towards the arternoon" ' (p. 252), Solomon Gills's 'unimpeachable chronometer' (p. 37) remains absolutely correct. Although he appears to be a man at odds with the passage of time, his investments turn out to be 'a little before' rather than behind it (p. 804). The 'conspiracy . . . on the part of all the clocks and watches in the City' which he fears (p. 37) comes to pass as Dickens comments on the 'railway time' which standardises time throughout London (p. 205). Because of the need to observe a national timetable, the rail network did indeed eradicate local times by the 1880s. The chronometer, however, is eventually shown to tally with the new system as both function symbolically as guarantors of Providence.

Dombey is more like Cuttle in trying to manipulate time for his own purposes. His watch is 'running a race' (p. 13) with the doctor's and he wills Paul to grow up too quickly in his impatience to fulfil his plans. In this most fatalistic of Dickens's novels, however, it cannot be done. More than anything else, it is the trains that suggest this to the reader. The most chilling suggestion that every death and resurrection happens to a rigid schedule larger than the scope of the individual is the station porter's statement to Carker about the vehicle that kills him: ' "Express comes through at four, sir. It don't stop" ' (p. 717).

In the reformed London, Dickens is keen to plant the suggestion that these agents of change will bring about the catastrophe as supernatural machinery would have done in previous fiction, and that they will do so at an exactly defined point:

> Night and day the conquering engines rumbled at their distant work, or, advancing smoothly to their journey's end, and gliding like tame dragons into the allotted corners grooved out to the inch for their reception, stood bubbling and trembling there, making the walls quake, as if they were dilating with the secret knowledge of great powers yet unsuspected in them, and strong purposes not yet achieved. [p. 205]

In one magnificent sentence, Dickens has captured the blend of supreme orderly regularity and terrifying unknowness which the railway trains

evoked for the early Victorians. His measured but sonorous prose conveys the stately power of the engines. Although it is long and complicated, the sentence is 'gliding' into 'allotted corners' just as carefully prepared as the terminations of the rail journeys. Yet the words can sometimes rumble and dilate like their subject matter, reminding the reader that the precisely calculated movements of the trains require an enormous superhuman energy which may be very dangerous to men and women.

On the most prosaic level, it is Bradshaw's rail timetable that determines when these 'strong purposes' will be 'achieved'. Nevertheless, the guiding force that plots the movements of the engines is not merely human. After all, the schedule planners did not set out to destroy Carker at four a.m. precisely. Rather it is Dickens himself who, as the author, holds the trains back, champing at the bit, until the correct moment for their mission. Yet the novelist had a profound conviction that the writer's judgement of the timing of fictional revelations and consummations only reflected the actual Providential scheme. He solemnly wrote to Wilkie Collins on 6 October 1859,

> I think the business of art is to . . . shew . . . what everything has been working to – but only to SUGGEST until the fulfilment comes. These are the ways of Providence – of which ways, all art is but a little imitation.

The overwhelming impression with which this novel leaves the reader is of a bewildering world governed by an unseen divine force of inexorable order.

In seeking answers to the physical and ontological confusion of the modern city and, by implication, modern society, in this way, *Dombey and Son* may helpfully be read as a more optimistic precursor to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). It may even have paved the way for the approach of that remarkable poem. It makes of London a disorienting environment. Florence is lost there on two occasions. Furthermore, it is a place reluctant to embrace regeneration because it is just too painful. Dombey's attitude is magnified in the scepticism of the Staggs's Gardeners to the force that will revitalise them. 'April is the cruellest month' to the inhabitants of the metropolis both writers present because they consistently refuse to embrace a necessary death so that new life may result. Both the Thames and the crowd impel the quester toward this death and the revelation it so achingly promises in *The Waste Land*, and the same is true in this novel. And an important theme of both works is that such aspects of London can be interpreted differently by different individuals. While Dombey believes that 'Rivers . . . were formed to float

their ships' (p. 6), Paul sees the Thames as the force that carries him to transcendence. Nevertheless, this understanding does not come overnight. The boy initially feels, like everyone else in this London, that death by water is something to be resisted.

> His only trouble was, the swift and rapid river. He felt forced, sometimes, to try to stop it – to stem it with his childish hands . . . and when he saw it coming on, resistless, he cried out! [p. 208]

At the level of the plot, however, the water symbol is most significant in relation to Walter's shipwreck. Whilst this occurs off-stage, as it were, it is vividly prefigured in the stories of death on the high seas he so enthusiastically tells with his uncle (pp. 41–3). Captain Cuttle's plans for him are as devastated as those of Dombey when the boy seems to have gone under the waters for good and these two unlikely figures are united in the name of the doomed vessel, *The Son and Heir*. The image of this event permeates the entire book. Captain Cuttle, speculating on Walter's fate, is stranded by his landlady's fierce washing of the floor and is seen sitting like a castaway, with 'his legs drawn up under his chair, on a very small, desolate island, lying about midway in an ocean of soap and water' (p. 306). Upon finally realising that her expectations of a loving father must be surrendered, Florence feels 'like the sole survivor on a lonely shore from the wreck of a great vessel' (p. 616). And ultimately Dombey's house collapses and is compared to a ship that 'strained so hard against the storm . . . and could not bear it' (p. 748). Once these dreams have been yielded to death, however, they are miraculously given back. Walter turns out to have been alive after all and Dombey finds in him the son he has lost in Paul. Captain Cuttle's morbid repetition of the question, ' "Drownded. An't he?" ' in Chapter XLIX shows him ensuring that Florence has accepted the lesson he has learned: that, in the fatalistic world of this novel at least, surrendered visions are restored in a transformed shape upon their renunciation. The fusion of the symbols of shipwreck and the crumbling and renascent metropolis must have helped to prepare for Mr Eliot's 'Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead' and 'Falling towers'. Ultimately, however, whereas the London of *The Waste Land* may only yearn for a transformation through the surrender of cherished dreams and ask expectantly, 'What is the city over the mountains . . . ', *Dombey and Son* is clear that renewed metropolises and renewed civilisation will come about with renewed hearts.

All of this may suggest that I agree with G.K. Chesterton's remark in his excellent book *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens* that *Dombey and Son* 'shows an advance in art and unity; it does

not show an advance in genius and creation' (p. 122). Certainly *Dombey and Son* is much less episodic in character than its predecessors. The enormously successful serialised format adopted by Dickens had had an effect on the style of fiction he produced. Each monthly part had to be inclusive enough for any who had not read previous instalments, but also required a good cliffhanger to keep the public buying. *Dombey and Son*, however, was conceived first and foremost as a continuous novel. A letter to Forster on 26 July 1846 shows the major details of plot and theme already substantially worked out. We have seen moreover that the diverse experiences of the large numbers of characters all illuminate the experiences of the others. Toots's descent into the 'silent tomb' (p. 653 and elsewhere) as his hopes of marrying Florence die and his statement that his heart ' "is a desert island" ' (p. 626) alone demonstrate just how deeply the numerous leitmotifs are relevant to the structure of the whole. The art and unity are evident immediately.

As for the genius and creation, Chesterton himself goes on to enthuse about the vibrancy and insight that gave birth to Major Bagstock, Cousin Feenix and Mr Toots. To these I would add Mr Chick, Susan Nipper, Captain Cuttle and Jack Bunsby – and even Walter Gay and Solomon Gills. If thematic unity and a more tightly organised plot cause Dickens to restrain his accustomed comedy and vividness, it only gains force from that restraint and bursts out in unexpected places. One has only to think of Mr Chick, who, even at a time of mourning, cannot repress a chorus of ' "rump-te-iddity, bow-wow-wow" ' and must follow this with a hasty, ' "We're here one day and gone the next" ' (pp. 14–15). Hot on the heels of this inappropriateness comes his immortal line on breast-feeding, ' "Couldn't something temporary be done with a tea-pot?" ' The pathos of Dickens's stories is so robust that it is heightened rather than debased by their almost inevitable accompaniment by characters who ridiculously fail to understand its significance. He is not even afraid to interrupt Paul's musings on the boat flowing out to sea that give the book its solemn symbolic structure with irreverent irrelevance:

> The child looked at him so steadfastly, and spoke so earnestly, that Mr Toots, feeling himself called upon to say something about this boat, said, 'Smugglers.' But, with an impartial remembrance of there being two sides to every question, he added, 'or Preventive.'
>
> [pp. 159–60]

Poignancy is added by the failure to communicate significant emotions like these, and as the reader enjoys the comedy, he also feels how important it is that he correctly apprehends them. In a comparable

manner, Bunsby follows Captain Cuttle's sorrowful meditation, ' "There he lays, all his days – " ' by bellowing, ' "In the Bays of Biscay, O!" ' which the Captain feels to be an entirely 'appropriate tribute to departed worth' (p. 512). This recently made me laugh out loud in a crowded and very silent library. It is as if the good spirits of Dickens himself can create such a dark and orderly novel only by allowing his native verbal energy to erupt all over it in characters such as these.

Solomon Gills and Walter are also to be included as characters of this type, although they are much quieter. For all their determination to be 'men of business', Gills still discusses the sea 'with an air of stealthy enjoyment' and both work their way to a crescendo of pleasure as between them they build up a tale of ocean adventure (Chapter IV). The intense joy of the storyteller and of the novelist in creating extraordinary verbal effects breaks out all over this novel. Nipper's expressive figures of speech continually take the reader by surprise:

> '. . . though I can bear a great deal, I am not a camel, neither am I,' added Susan, after a moment's consideration, 'if I know myself, a dromedary neither.' [p. 301]

Bunsby's seagoing remarks are so unfathomable and yet contain such a suggestion of meaning to his audience that he can only conclude, ' "The bearings of this observation lays in the application on it" ' (p. 313). Cuttle too delights in the resonance of words, whether they be nautical terms or quotations from 'literature', the Bible and church tradition. His garbling of these makes for some extraordinary and unforgettable utterances:

> 'Cap'en Cuttle is my name, and England is my nation, this here is my dwelling-place, and blessed be creation – Job,' said the captain, as an index to his authority. [p. 425]

What makes *Dombey and Son* – and indeed the work of Dickens as a whole – worth reading again and again is his recognition that solemn themes require humour and verbal vigour to accompany and complement them. Characters who can only be themselves and insist upon being so in defiance of the conventions of the surrounding world are part of the same energy that drives the railway engine along and propels the narrative to its conclusion. Grim psychological realism, social commentary, comic absurdity and symbolic transcendence are here brought together more than in any previous novel with the possible exception of *Oliver Twist*. *Dombey and Son* not only prepares the ground for Dickens's later masterpieces, but demands to be enjoyed for its own energy and richness.

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