Two Modes of Reviving the Past

A novel based on historical events must needs go far in inciting the imagination of the author, who in setting his mind on an earlier period will evoke a colourful world that differs essentially from his own surroundings. Conversely, the creative flow will have to be somewhat more restrained than it might be in an ordinary tale, as the overall action is predetermined and can only permit a narrow range of actualisations. A highly imaginative writer like Charles Dickens will evade this predicament by concentrating on an individual plot engaging entirely fictitious characters, leaving the historic figures on the margin. Within a narrative model of this type the author may follow his bent for variety without overriding historical accuracy. In this respect Dickens's two historical novels differ considerably. Whereas *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) is closely structured and proceeds in close accordance with the historical events on which it is based, *Barnaby Rudge* (1841) is less strictly organised, tends to lose sight of the period it purports to represent, and abounds in various inconsistencies, sure proof of the author's imaginative indulgence.

Charles Dickens had wavered for a long time over the form of publication and to which publishing agency his new novel ought to be entrusted. This might have given him a rare chance to lend more thought and care to his composition than he could usually muster. Having initially been conceived as the story of a valiant London locksmith who, as the annals record, distinguished himself through his great fortitude during the Gordon Riots of 1780, the book is first mentioned under its present title three years before its eventual serialisation. In the final work, the story of the hearty Gabriel Varden, who does indeed conduct himself admirably in this crisis, forms only one of several plot-lines focussing on different sets of characters who are all involved with one another in various ways, whereas the historical figure of the instigator of the riots, the eccentric Lord George Gordon, remains largely apart from these

entanglements. In fact he only makes his appearance in the second half of the novel, when what has begun as a domestic tale enhanced with Gothic elements, having been halted for a period of five years, expands somewhat abruptly into a historical narrative. Despite this diversity, recent criticism has assessed the structure of *Barnaby Rudge* more favourably, thus overruling John Forster's contemporary verdict that the novel lacked a "singleness of purpose, unity of idea, or harmony of treatment" (Forster, p. 170). Nevertheless, a close analysis of the text will reveal a considerable number of incoherences and indeterminacies that might well derive from a discontinuity of attention on the part of the author during the long gestation period. There is equally good reason to assume that the frequent interruptions must have given rise to a high incidence of fanciful intrusions.

A striking instance of Dickens's inconclusive narrative organisation is found in the ending of *Barnaby Rudge*, which allows the eponymous figure, a weak-minded young man who has been actively involved in the excesses, to escape the gallows at the very last moment. In fact, Barnaby is unconditionally returned to his grieving mother, together with his cunning pet raven Grip, who has quite unaccountably been allowed to keep him company through two imprisonments. The author must have foreseen that such a surprise turn of events would be well received by many of his readers, who, like the audience in *The Beggar's Opera*, did not want their hero to die. And the somewhat romantically conceived Barnaby Rudge is after all cast as the title figure and central character of the novel. Yet this move is introduced so abruptly and treated so incongruously that we may assume a belated change of mind on the part of Dickens, who shortly before (BR, ch. 77) had let his narrator dwell on the extreme severity of the law towards the apprehended rioters. To be sure, the possibility of gaining a remission of punishment for two other offenders through the intercession of a high-ranking person is emphatically requested in an earlier number (BR, ch. 75) but fails to carry conviction and is coldly dismissed as a mere fancy. Since chapter 77 ends with a valedictory apostrophe to "poor lost Barnaby" as the convict is carted away to the gallows, whereas the following unit turns to an entirely different line of action, the law might be assumed to have taken its course in the meantime. Contrary to such forebodings on part of the contemporary reader, who had to wait for a whole week for the next number to appear, chapter 79 turns the events upside down. A pardon has after all been obtained for the idiot

boy from the highest quarters, and he is triumphantly returned among a large crowd of well-wishers, who "stretched their throats, and cheered with all their might".

How accurately Dickens had judged his audience is proved by the several dramatic adaptations of the novel wherein Barnaby usually takes a main part. As one might expect, the riots have receded into a marginal event in these melodramatic entertainments, whereas the murders committed by Barnaby's father and the eventual scenic punishment of the evil-doer are foregrounded. And one can easily understand that Dickens's study of a mentally deficient person, on whose deranged mind the misdeeds of the father have left indelible traces, must have impressed the theatrical impresarios of the time. The dark, uncanny atmosphere of these plays, which yet permits of the hope that virtue will prevail in the end, finds its embodiment in the stagey figure of Barnaby, who continually holds the scene. The part was always assigned to a prominent actress, who added a further lyrical element to the spectacle. It is worth consideration that Dickens, who usually distanced himself from these trivialisations of his art, took a very favourable view of the presentation of a Miss Fortescue (Lady Gardner), who performed the role in one of the first productions, *Barnaby Rudge* of 1841 (Forster, p. 321).

A further noticeable piece of evidence of Dickens's liberal mode of writing can be found in another strand of action where the aristocratic Edward Chester and Joe Willet, the son of an innkeeper, cooperate in rescuing several victims of the rioters. Here too the author seems to have reconsidered the course of action, in which the two young men not only function as saviour figures, but even seem to operate as secret agents of some unidentifiable higher authority. Nevertheless, various inconsistencies have remained unsolved. We are meant to believe that Joe Willet, who, having fallen out with his obtuse father and despairing of his fortune, signed up as a soldier years ago, should quite unexpectedly return home at the height of the Gordon Riots. And further, that the same Joe Willet, invalided out, should have met Edward Chester on his way back to England after a long stay in the West Indies purely by chance, and immediately have set about to accomplish a dangerous mission, whose import he hardly could have comprehended at the time. And yet the two men, who must have lost touch with developments in their native country over a period of five years, act resolutely and with considerable acumen in these chaotic upheavels. How all these propitious happenings came about

is never satisfactorily explained, as not even the narrator declares them as the working of Providence.

In fact, Joe Willet is reintroduced as an unknown figure when the feeble-minded Barnaby Rudge, who has in all his innocence sided with the worst of the rioters and offered violence on his arrest, is put into a prison cell in some military barracks (BR, ch. 58). Through an opening in the door of the cell he observes two men engaged in talk. One is a recruiting sergeant, who in his bluff and rough manner might be identical with the officer that had cunningly enlisted Joe a long time ago, the other (who is addressed by the name of "Tom Green", which is not mentioned in the earlier recruiting scene in ch. 31) has lost his left arm; despite his soldierly bearing and the military ambience he is, however, dressed as a plain civilian. He seems to recognise Barnaby's voice when the latter entreats the sergeant to save his pet raven Grip, but makes no ostensible effort to help him. As a matter of fact, "Tom Green" entirely disappears from the narrative at this point while Barnaby is taken to Newgate prison under heavy guard (BR, ch. 58). Yet this is by no means the end of the mystery: in chapter 60 a one-armed man, whose head is so heavily bandaged that his face remains almost hidden, plays a critical part by informing the savage Hugh, a leader of the rioters, that Barnaby has been arrested and taken to Newgate, upon which Hugh and his accomplices set out for the prison to set their friend free. Could this unidentified man, whom nobody seems to know, be identical with Joe Willet, alias Tom Green, and for what conceivable reason should he of all people incite the angry mob to storm the prison and thus add dramatically to the disorder?

Joe's next and equally mysterious appearance occurs in chapter 64 where Dickens returns to the original idea of the novel. The stalwart locksmith Gabriel Varden has been marched to Newgate by the rioters, who want him to unlock the fortified prison door. In refusing to assist them, he runs the danger of being killed by a brutal ruffian wielding a poleaxe, upon which an unnamed one-armed man and another unidentified person knock down the attacker and lead Varden safely away.

Joe Willet is only identified at a later stage when he, together with Edward Chester, saves the Roman Catholic landowner Geoffrey Haredale and a brave vintner whose house is besieged by the mob (BR, ch. 68). At this point Joe's insight into the chaotic situation over which the authorities have long ceased to exercise control passes belief. Leading his little party to safety, he resorts to a secret pass word whenever the men

are stopped by soldiers, obviously a sign of some authority. He certainly seems to know that Dolly Varden, whose coquettish refusal made him leave England, and Chester's bride Emma Haredale have been captured by Hugh and the other ringleaders. Almost miraculously, it does not take the two men very long to find out the remote hiding place of the abductors and save their captives just in time (BR, ch. 71). Once the girls have been reunited with their families however – Varden having been rescued in chapter 64 already – Joe loses his newly gained stature once more, and is reduced to the station of an invalid soldier seemingly without any prospects for the future. It is only much later that his outstanding services are acknowledged by the King, through a silver snuff box sent in his majesty's name. Would this imply that he has been employed on a high, arcane mission after all?

Having been returned to the ordinary, to real life as it were, Joe certainly seems to have lost all his former courage when Dolly, who has long since regretted her erstwhile refusal, appeals for his courtship. In the end it is Dolly, whose sensual attractiveness has been dwelled upon ever so often, and who has more than once been in danger of being ravished by Hugh (BR, chs. 21 and 59), who makes the first move towards a final union. No further impediments interfering, the lovers are married without delay and can face much happiness together. As for their compatibility, no problem seems to arise in their marriage – after all, Joe may be maimed, but has not lost his manhood – for we are told that the two produce more children "than could easily be counted" (BR, Chapter the Last). Probably without ever having consciously implied such a reading of his narrative, Charles Dickens has provided modern critics with a very telling example of a negative metonymy.

Although Dolly Varden must take second place in the hierarchy of female characters in *Barnaby Rudge*, the higher-ranking Emma Haredale pales in comparison with her. While the aristocratic heroine never wavers in her attachment to Edward Chester, notwithstanding the strong opposition of her guardian and of her lover's father, Dolly's vanity, flirtatiousness and playfulness frequently come to the fore. At the same time, the characterisation admits of no doubt about her good nature, kindness and emotional depth. And yet it is Dolly's outward appearance that seems to absorb the narrator's interest rather more than her inward qualities. It would seem as if Dickens had meant to contrast the two young women more sharply than the traditional opposition between heroine and sou-

brette might warrant. Whenever the opportunity arises, their difference in looks and spirit is emphasised. "Emma was so fair," the narrator will observe, "and Dolly so rosy, and Emma so delicately shaped, and Dolly so plump" (BR, ch. 20). Though no reference is ever made to the polarity of spiritual and earthly love, one can hardly doubt that the juxtaposition of these two icons of Western thought weighed on the author's mind at the time. On the other hand, we would look in vain for any attempt to balance the appeal of the two beauties. Far more is in fact made of this "very impersonation of good-humour and blooming beauty" (BR, ch. 4) that Dolly represents. As if it was not enough that the reader was constantly reminded of her love of dress, a catalogue of her apparel must accompany her entries, which the illustrator took pains to do justice to in his own medium (BR, ch. 19). A portrait of the girl which Dickens ordered from the artist W. S. Frith would confirm his delight in his own creation. We may take it for granted that Dolly's costumes were treated with similar emphasis in the theatrical adaptations of *Barnaby Rudge*, where her part gained more importance even than it originally held, and may fairly assume that the contemporary fashion for straw hats trimmed with cherry colored ribbons and matching dress derived from these sources.[1]

Rather more is also made of the sexual appeal of this "very pink and pattern of good looks" (BR, ch. 19) than is usually the case with young girls in Charles Dickens's narratives. Without doubt, Dolly is fully aware that her physical attractions rouse the passions of men, but is horrified when faced with violence. Walking away from the Warren with a love letter she has been entrusted with by Emma Haredale, she is assailed by Hugh, the brutal hostler of the Maypole Inn, who only lets go of her when help arrives just in time in the person of Joe Willet. Far more is made of this little incident than its importance for the plot would warrant. It would seem as if the frame of the encounter – a beautiful woman waylaid by a savage man in the wilderness – had suggested a far-reaching exploration of the sexual theme which Dickens hardly ever otherwise allows himself. Hugh's bold advances admit of no doubt that he will not be satisfied with the kiss that he forcefully gains from Dolly. Especially so as he is obviously not restrained by any fear of punishment, but openly indulges in his lawlessness. Another aspect of this vividly-rendered scene deserves particular attention. Although the narration focusses on the fearful reactions of the deeply shocked girl, the assailant is certainly not decried as a base brute. Hugh, it will be remembered, is first introduced

as an impressive, even picturesque figure in a cameo passage that dwells on the "muscular and handsome proportions" (BR, ch. 11) of the sleeping giant. Paradoxically, it would seem, the narrator still takes delight in Hugh's appearance even now that his fierce nature has come to the fore. His coarseness notwithstanding, he is yet seen as a "handsome satyr" (BR, ch. 21); which may cause the reader to wonder how a goatlike creature could be aesthetically perceived unless its traditional association with the sexual instinct was taken into account. Dolly, who cannot rid herself of the unsettling incident for quite a while, has doubtless gained more than a glimpse of the fear and beauty of sexuality.

Contrary to what the scene in the woods might have suggested, the encounter is not followed up by any further experiences of this kind. As Dolly's cool behaviour to Joe, who so desperately longs for an encouragement from her, shows, she has still not overcome her girlish coquettishness. It will take a more unsettling event to develop her personality fully. Once again it is a confrontation with naked sexuality that is resorted to in this connection. And it is again Hugh who represents the instinct in its most aggressive shape. When Dolly and Emma Haredale are abducted by him and the other rioters, no pains are taken to conceal, or at least euphemistically mitigate, their intentions. Less reserve is in fact observed in these scenes than anywhere else in Dickens's novels. Several times the narrator recounts at some length Dolly's angry endeavours to fend off the embraces of Hugh; which are bound to fail, as no rescue can be hoped for this time. And we are more than once reminded how her present state – with "her hair dishevelled, her dress torn, her dark eyelashes wet with tears, her bosom heaving" (BR, ch. 59) – must excite the drunken men even more. However, Dolly must necessarily escape a fate worse than death, and so a rivalry among the captors offers a temporary relief, a narrative strategy that also serves to keep the reader's suspense heightened.

Charles Dickens is less consistent, or in fact uncertain, in the following parts in which the narration, after an interval, returns to the two young women. As one might have expected, the locksmith's daughter proves initially more practically minded than her genteel friend, assuring her that their situation is by no means desperate (BR, ch. 59), whereas the other declines into a stupor. Subsequently, however, the relationship is completely reversed, with Emma, firm and composed, doing her utmost to console Dolly, who is now shown to cling to her in a pitiable condition. And yet their conduct changes once again, when Gashford, a

villainous henchman of Lord Gordon, pretending to be a Catholic, seeks to persuade Emma to flee with him. At this critical moment it is the latter who would abandon herself to any means of escape, whereas Dolly shows more fortitude and common sense (BR, ch. 71). It is in fact due to her firm resistance that Gashford's intrigue is delayed, and ultimately thwarted by the arrival of Joe Willet and Edward Haredale. As her happy and indeed extremely satisfactory marriage to Joe demonstrates, Dolly's disturbing experiences seem to have heightened rather than inhibited her sexual instincts.

However the links and ramifications of the "Machinery of the Tale" as Charles Dickens called it (CDL, II, p. 417) may be assessed, the historic figure of Lord George Gordon is only indirectly related to the various plot lines that contribute to it. Although his ultimate responsibility for the riots is never left in doubt, he makes no appearance in the horrifying scenes of mob violence, which so engrossed the author. If we accept, and there seems to be no reason to question the agreed opinion, that the descriptions of the disorders belong to the finest work that the genius of Dickens achieved, we must also allow a high ranking for the character study of the political demagogue whose personality had equally, if less intently, absorbed his interest. It has been suggested that the mentally unstable Lord Gordon and the feeble-minded Barnaby may be regarded as parallel figures. After all, the highminded instigator of the excesses and the active perpetrator, who equally fails to comprehend the outrages committed by the rabble, are both motivated by idealistic notions. In fact, their inward similarity, borne out by their grotesque outward appearance, is even demonstrated through two brief encounters between them during which Gordon comes close to grasp that his own warped notions are not so different from the poor youngster's mental derangement (BR, chs. 48, 57). It is noticeable how the author in these, as in other scenes where Lord Gordon makes an appearance, seems intent on working out the pathological symptoms of the charismatic politician (cf. BR, chs. 35–37, 43). His deep-seated uncertainty, which makes him an easy tool for his intriguing counsellors, and the messianic megalomania that lends authority to his activities are especially emphasised. The awkward bearing of the leader, another characteristic he shares with the childish Barnaby, which is never deplored or even noticed by his followers, is even construed as a sign of his sincerity and genuine humanity. In summing up Gordon's wasted life, which ended ignominiously in prison, Dickens rises to the striking

observation that "many men with fewer sympathies for the distressed and needy, with less abilities and harder hearts, have made a shining figure and left a brilliant fame" (BR, Chapter the Last).

Contemporary critics, as John Forster, who expressly protested against the favourable depiction (Forster, p. 168), and many later readers of the novel have wondered about the sympathy that Dickens seems to have felt for this "poor crazy lord". As so often, the author's initial interest in a character may in this case also have developed into compassion. After all, even a thoroughly evil figure like the brutal murderer Bill Sikes is not unfeelingly dismissed by his creator once he himself has turned into a victim. What should not be overlooked is the excellence of the psychogram of the demagogue who, quite paradoxically, gains his strength from his own weakness. In achieving this compelling portraiture, Charles Dickens may have anticipated a phenomenon which we associate with the political climate of the twentieth century rather than with the period in which *Barnaby Rudge* was conceived. At the same time, the literary antecedents of the deluded Gordon, who makes such a poor figure on horseback, must also be considered. The sympathetic figure of the honest, simple John Grueby, who is so devoted to his master that he will cling to him despite his own feelings about Gordon's vagaries, closely resembles the literary model from which so many of Dickens's servant figures take their origin. Although the narrator is eager to point out the very Englishness of the "square-built, strong-made, bull-necked" (BR, ch. 35) attendant, his resemblance to the immortal Sancho Pansa remains obvious. Like him, this faithful servant will stick to that "knight of the woeful countenance" up to the very end when the pitiable nobleman, unlike his great forebear who gained insight into his erratic notions, takes his bizarre delusions with him to his grave.

It is worth noting that Lord Gordon remains the only figure of any political significance in the narrative. Keeping close to his historical sources, Dickens did not choose to oppose the Protestant leader by a personage of similar authority who might represent the cause of the Catholic minority. Apart from the encounter at Westminster Hall, where the aristocrat Geoffrey Haredale rebukes the lord for his instigations before an angry rabble (BR, ch. 43), the demagogue is never directly faced with an opponent. And though the severe Haredale exhibits considerable courage in this confrontation, he is too much involved with his personal affairs ever to take up a leading position among his fellow believers. In fact his conduct

during the riots proves so imprudent that he, rather than lend assistance to the victims of the attacks, has to be rescued by Joe Willet and Edward Chester. Quite characteristically, the other Catholic to be led away by the two young men is a purple-faced vintner of generous proportions. Dickens may have felt that his austere picture of the gloomy and ascetic Haredale had to be completed by another traditional stereotype to answer to the popular image of Catholicism. Nevertheless, the representation of the persecuted minority remains incomplete. We are told of the vast damage done to Catholic householders and shopkeepers, whose property is looted or wilfully destroyed by the mob, but the people themselves never enter the description.

Even more noticeable is the absence of the Roman Catholic clergy. While the narrator specifically refers to the destruction of several places of worship and the theft of church implements and ornaments, the priests, who must have suffered most in the fury directed at their belief, never ever enter the picture. It would seem as if Catholicism was hardly more than an entirely wordly attachment to some common interest. The same holds good for the Protestant faith. Mrs Varden's professed adherence to Christian regulations is continually satirised as a strategy of henpecking rather than genuine bigotry. The only noticeable Protestant minister in the narrative, an Anglican clergyman attending to the prisoners awaiting execution, is shown up as a feeble, canting figure (BR, ch. 77). A festive mood prevails among the main characters after the happy outcome of the tribulations, but this evidently does not call for a devouter celebration at which a priest might be officiating. Nothing further is said about the weddings of the two young couples, thus evading the delicate issue of whether Edward and Emma were united in the Catholic or the Protestant faith. Excluding a few instances where Providence is indeed appealed to, *Barnaby Rudge* is notably free from religious sentiments. One wonders whether Dickens deliberately underplayed the religious aspect of the domestic conflict of 1780 to lend greater relief to the political and social side of the upheaval. More relevant to the present study though, would be the structural aspect of *Barnaby Rudge*. Charles Dickens's first attempt at historical writing can be reduced to a tenuous combination of several more traditional narrative genres. While the general reader will be much affected by its exciting scenes, and whereas the historian may seek to unravel the political strain embedded in the narrative, the literary critic would do best to approach it as a domestic novel that has absorbed the

modes of the novel of adventure and of the Gothic tale. The structural variety of *Barnaby Rudge* must be borne in mind when the inconsistencies and aporias of the narrative are considered.

With its wide range of individualised figures, some of which belong to the more memorable of Charles Dickens's creations, *Barnaby Rudge* must also count as a novel of character, or rather of characters. In this respect, and in several other ways, Dickens's second historical novel, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), differs widely from its precursor. While some of its specific features obviously derive from its brevity, the overall effect of the novel points back to a firm determination on part of the author to keep his writing under closer control (Forster, pp. 729–732). Compared to the highly imaginative, in some instances nearly extravagant earlier work, that includes so much that would be entirely expendable for the progress of the main lines of action, of which there are quite a few, a *Tale of Two Cities* appears as a closely-structured composition. Its clear-cut, straightforward plot does not require a large number of agents, and does in fact engage a handful of characters only. John Forster expressed his highest admiration for the way "in which the domestic life of a few simple private people is in such a manner knitted and interwoven with the outbreak of a terrible public event, that the one seems but part of the other". Yet despite its concentrated organisation, even this narrative work contains elements that may be traced to what we have defined as Charles Dickens's second mode of composition. Its relatively compact texture notwithstanding, *A Tale of Two Cities* will allow the critic to ascertain variations and divagations, meanderings of the narration which once again offer striking proof of the author's abundant imagination.

In his critical study on *Charles Dickens* (1906) G. K. Chesterton, differing widely from modern assessments of the novels, maintained the opinion that the later titles were inferior to the early narratives since the author had manifestly yielded to a contemporary trend towards realism in this phase of his career. The imaginative energy, which Chesterton regarded as the essence of Dickens's genius, was no longer allowed free play but was restrained by a contrary force. This controlling component is from now on noticeable everywhere. Chesterton does indeed conceive its restrictions as a concession to the prevailing realistic mode, which he associates with the idea of verisimilitude rather than with an amassing of factual details in this context. In its very essence, realism must hence involve artistic construction and will run counter to Dickens's mythmaking.

In following his true nature, as Chesterton puts it in a different context, Charles Dickens "writes realism in order to make the incredible credible"[2], but does not aim at a depiction of reality. In his view, Dickens had come to perceive that he ought to introduce a higher amount of probability and, by implication, of artistic construction into his tales; quite unware of the constraining, even stifling effect this reorientation might exert on his creativity.

This idiosyncratic view may seem more in line with Chesterton's own literary perspective than with the novelist's artistic development. There is perhaps no other point in Dickens studies on which present-day critical opinion is so widely agreed as on its high assessment of the later novels. Nevertheless, even a reading as subjective as Chesterton's preference for a purely imaginary mode of storytelling and consequent dismissal of realistic and by implication artistically shaped presentation deserves attention. As will appear presently, such an impassioned response may even prove suggestive in many ways. We will go further and apply it to *A Tale of Two Cities*, a book of which Chesterton thought highly, although he might deplore its close artistic structuring. Here after all was a narrative with a pronounced ideological theme that brought Charles Dickens's ingrained radicalism to the fore.

A Tale of Two Cities has never roused much critical interest since its publication in 1859, when it appeared simultaneously in weekly and monthly portions. Compared to the novels of the early period, which Chesterton so emphatically preferred, it might seem forbidding and lacking in variety. However its plot and the agents participating in its progress may be assessed, the main line of action advances on a higher level. Admittedly, much of the ethos of a *Tale of Two Cities* derives from the dramatic involvement of a small group of personages who maintain their moral integrity against the overpowering pressure of a political and social upheaval. Conversely, the French Revolution does not merely function as a mere backdrop or pervasive discourse; it presupposes every link in the action and continually intrudes into the scenes and descriptions in which the configurations of the characters appear foregrounded. Although only a fraction of the historical events enter the narrative, the spectacle of a the radical transformation of a whole nationhood remains forcefully present thoughout.

Unlike other historical novelists and his own writing of *Barnaby Rudge*, Charles Dickens did not choose to introduce historical figures into his

later work. The state of the country leading up to the outbreak of the revolution, its brief triumph and rapid decline into a reign of terror are not seen as determined by individual leadership. The people of France seem engaged *en masse* in a violent change that runs its own course once it has gained momentum. Even the contrary figures of the despotic Marquis St Evrémonde and the implacable Madame Defarge are representative only of forces which lie far beyond their control or understanding. In his attempt to paint the revolution as a process carried by the masses, Dickens even accommodated his narrative style to achieve a truly panoramic form. His *Tale of Two Cities* is the only novel in which the author, apparently quite deliberately, cut down on his character portrayal, hardly unaware that many contemporaries considered it the most outstanding feature of his writing.[3] The historical, as it were public, parts of the novel, are mainly peopled by figures distinguished by their social and professional position. In line with his intertextual model, Thomas Carlyle's *History of the French Revolution* (1837), Dickens will even introduce personifications that feature as mere referents. This becomes strikingly apparent by the mode through which the dissatisfied poor and the would-be conspirators are introduced. When the wine-seller Ernest Defarge, "a dark man altogether, with good eyes and a good bold breadth between them" (TTC, I, ch. 5), one of the few genuinely personalised figures among the inhabitants of Paris, summons his helpers to a secret meeting, the attendants are not individualised but appear as so many Jacques, ostensibly a ploy to escape identification. It can hardly be overlooked though that the author is deliberately avoiding character description in this case. The Jacques, whose number increases with the progress of time, are mere cyphers carried along by the events like leaves in the rising storm.

There is, however, one particular Jacques upon whom the narrator chooses to bestow at least a few attributes. While the true name of Jacques V, a simple countryman, is never disclosed, he is singularised through his profession as a "mender of roads" and further reified by a blue cap that he invariably employs in his gesturing when words fail him, and a piece of brown bread that he munches greedily in the absence of other sustenance. The rural labourer is first introduced as an observer who descried the man clinging to the lower part of the chariot in which the Marquis St Evrémonde travelled to his country-seat. That man is yet another Jacques, avid to revenge the death of his child whom the vehicle of the nobleman recklessly ran over in a busy thoroughfare of Paris. He gains his

retribution, but is eventually caught and publicly executed. Once again the labourer with the blue cap acts as a witness, and it is for this reason that Defarge takes him to Paris, where his inarticulate account of the cruel treatment of a fellow human being before a gathering of Jacques will serve as another incitement against the ruling classes. Previous to his return to the country, the mender of roads, who has gained in distinction as the narration progresses, is even taken to Versailles to observe the luxuriousness of the royal court that so strikingly contrasts with the indigence of the people. To Defarge and his resentful wife Thérèse, the roadmender represents only one moment in their subversive activities; from a narrative and thematic point of view the inarticulate workman aptly serves to represent the as yet inert, and only gradually roused, people of France.

There is every reason then why the man with the blue cap might have been withdrawn from the narrative at this point, when the uprising lies still far in the future. Nevertheless Dickens introduces him again at a later stage as if he had taken an additional interest in this so far barely individualised figure. In the following incident Jacques V represents the villagers who watch the destruction of the castle of the late Marquis by the personified agents of the insurrection with considerable approval. By this time the roadmender has exchanged his attributive blue cap for the red headgear of the Sansculottes (TTC, II, ch. 23). The revolution is now under way. When the little man appears next he has given up his former occupation and settled somewhat unaccountably in Paris as an apparently self-employed woodcutter. The location of his workshop outside the La Force prison might perhaps suggest that he had been placed there by the Defarges as yet another spy in an atmosphere charged with distrust, which in this respect does not differ all that much from the air of that other city, London, where agents are employed by the administration to offer false evidence.

It so happens that this vantage point enables the wood-sawyer (who has even advanced to the title figure of chapter 5 of the third Book of the novel) to observe the regular attendance of Lucie Darnay, who will place herself in front of the prison to assure her detained husband of her constant devotion. Naturally such unusual activities must arouse interest, and eventually suspicion, under a regime of terror. Enquiries by the agitated populace would be expected in such a situation, and once again Jacques V has a role to fulfil; this time as that of a speech partner for the faithfully attending woman, who cannot afford to ignore his clumsy ad-

dresses while keeping the reason for her coming secret. Anxious to prove his adherence to the Sansculottes cause, which he secretly dreads, the wood-sawyer incorporates the conduct of the man in the street under an arbitrary rule; one more instance of Charles Dickens's imaginative grasp of a phenomenon that only a later age was to reveal fully. A further development has however become noticeable: the formerly cowed, completely self-effacing nonentity now gives free vent to a sadistic trend. In chopping the wood he empathises with the executioner, whose work at the guillotine he has observed with considerable gusto. Altogether, the erstwhile colourless figure is set to gain the contours of a rounded character. An individuation has been brought about which carries more realistic conviction than the grotesqueries of the English servant figures in *A Tale of Two Cities*, who never merge into the social panorama. Could this have been the reason why the author chose to remove the character from the narrative at this point? Would he have felt that he was getting too much absorbed by a component that had originally not been intended for more than as a supernumerary?

The wood-sawyer is indeed not present in the following three chapters. After this interval, however, the character makes a brief return. On his long walk through Paris, Sydney Carton stops on purpose before the La Force prison to engage the still watchful observer in a little talk. As would be expected, the little man expresses his extreme callousness towards the fate of the prisoners of the republic. In a later and now final appearance in the text, he is shown attending a meeting held by Madame Defarge, who now after all requires his testimony of having seen Lucie Darnay making signals to her imprisoned husband. Eager to satisfy, fearful of raising suspicion against himself, the little man confirms the accusation wholeheartedly. And this is after all the last time that he is heard of. Somewhat unexpectedly, he is not included in the scene at the guillotine, which he was supposed to attend (TTC, III, ch. 15); nor is he proleptically dwelled upon in the finale, as befits a character who seems so much wedded to the reality of things.

There is no way of knowing how Chesterton, whose high esteem of the *Tale* runs counter to his censure against the artistry of the later novels, would have judged the entries of the roadmender turned wood-sawyer, who bears so little similarity to the larger-than-life characters he cherished so much; whereas the gradually accruing realistic features of that minor figure must have pointed to a mode of writing he could not come

to terms with. Paradoxically, Chesterton might have found it easier to accommodate the melodramatic Thérèse Defarge, who serves a multiple function in the plot structure. Together with her husband, over whom she exerts complete control, the formidable woman runs a conspiratorial club, which tries to incite the people against the feudal regime and will eventually lead them into rebellion when the change sets in.

Never in doubt that the *ancien régime* will eventually be overthrown, Thérèse Defarge makes it her business to keep a record of whatever case of inhumanity comes to her knowledge. Like the weird sisters who weave the shroud of fate in Norse mythology or one of the Parcae from another tradition, the ever-watchful woman is forever knitting away at a texture in which all offences are entered for future evidence; a piece of fantasising on Dickens' part which may remind the modern reader of the employment of a laptop. Though the commanding middle-aged woman is largely individualised, her metonymic or indeed emblematic significance as the spirit of an oppressed people thirsting for revenge does not admit of an entirely realistic construction. The ever-busy needles are briefly laid aside, exchanged for deadlier arms in the storm at the Bastille in which she will gain prominence through her leadership and unrestrained ferocity. Yet when the trials begin Thérèse Defarge will take her seat among the tricoteuses beneath the guillotine, still knitting as the terror claims its victims.

In the private plot centring on Charles Darnay and the Manettes, the Defarges act as the contrary force that seeks to punish the young family for the misdeeds of Darnay's aristocratic forbears. It is they who accomplish the second arrest and subsequent trial of the reneged aristocrat that leads to his conviction. While Doctor Manette, a former prisoner of the Bastille, strains to exculpate his son-in-law, his own testimonial, a letter hidden in the wall of his cell in which he inveighed against the Evrémonde family, weighs heavier with the judges, and Darnay is sentenced to death. Yet Thérèse Defarge's lust for revenge is still not saturated. Having secured evidence like the woodcutter's affirmation she herself sets out to incriminate Darnay's wife Lucie, hoping for a heedlessly spoken complaint on her part that might incur the death sentence. In the last phase of action in which the Darnay family seek to escape from the terror, Thérèse Defarge gains demonic properties. She intervenes as an evil power that would still prevent the flight. Significantly, it is not a figure of some substance, but Lucie's devoted maid, the frumpish "wild-looking" Miss Pross, that stub-

bornly places herself in her way. In the ensuing struggle the leading spirit of the revolution is ignominiously killed by a stray bullet from her own revolver (TTC, III, ch. 14).

In the absence of working notes or number plans, a reference in a letter of Charles Dickens may shed some light on his artistic intentions. When Edward Bulwer-Lytton, a very attentive reader of the novels, expressed disagreement with what he regarded as a somewhat contrived closure of the *Tale of Two Cities*, the author firmly rejected the objection (CDL, IX, pp. 259f.). Letting a character perish through an accident seemed to him perfectly admissible when it conformed to the narrative design from which it arose. In this particular case, the concurrence had been strictly consistent with the "passion and emotion" of the character in question. He may also have thought of the metonymic quality of the scene though. Thérèse Defarge wipes herself out just as the revolution itself turns on those who have raised the terror in their thirst for destruction. Besides her primary role as a counter agent in the private plot, she would also fulfil a figurative function in the encompassing, historical narrative.

To read her character from this perspective should not, however, induce us to disregard some further details that might after all support a realistic construction. It has been pointed out, though not quite convincingly, that Madame Defarge's superiority to her husband, whom she often treats as an underling rather than as her partner, would imply a reversal of the Biblical order and hence prove the godlessness of the new regime.[4] There is more than a mere suggestion that Charles Dickens thought further than that. Initially conceived as a matronly though resolute figure (TTC, I, ch. 5) the wineshop-keeper's wife turns into a charismatic warrior at the attack on the Bastille, in the aftermath of which she distinguishes herself through her cruelty. In the final characterisation when she is shown on her way to wreak vengeance on Lucie Darnay, the narrator has found words of acknowledgement for this "tigress", whom the ruthlessness of the oppression has deprived of any feelings of pity. She has now become a fierce beauty possessed "of a strong and fearless character, of shrewd sense and readiness, of great determination, of that kind of beauty which not only seems to impart to its possessor firmness and animosity, but to strike into others an instinctive recognition of those qualities." Fully aware of her superiority the narrator feels certain to assert that "the troubled time would have heaved her up, under any circumstances" (TTC, III, ch. 14).

Thérèse Defarge undoubtedly stands for many, the women of a highly gifted nation whom abuse and coercion have prevented from attaining the selfhood they now claim; albeit at a price. However, an analysis of her personality should reach further than that. Deprecating the loss of womanly virtues the desire for retaliation has wrought upon her, the narrator must still admit her pride and integrity. At this point an entirely individual trait is introduced after all. The proud self-assurance of the woman, it is here suggested, may be traced to her adolescence, which was spent on the seashore. Hers, we read, is the "supple freedom of a woman who had habitually walked in her girlhood, bare-foot and bare-legged, on the brown seasand" (TTC, III, ch. 14). Exempt from the power of the landowning class, growing up among fishermen who had no superior landlord to attend to, an ordinary woman in eighteenth-century France might have gained a self-confidence commonly denied to the lower orders. Dickens may here have recalled the proud recklessness of another fisherman's daughter, of Little Em'ly, whose fervent ambitiousness so impresses itself on the young David Copperfield's mind.

While the woman from the sea may not have suffered the tyranny of the aristocracy on herself, her hatred against the ruling classes is deeply founded. Thérèse, it is disclosed, was the sister of the unfortunate farmer's wife, a beauty whom the younger brother of the Marquis St Evrémonde forced to become his mistress, thereby driving her to her death. The sister likewise of a young man whom the nobleman killed when he stood up to him. As the last remnant of a family ruined by aristocratic licentiousness, Thérèse Defarge has indeed every reason to hate the Evrémondes and see even their descendants destroyed. It is worth pointing out in this connection that the record of their wrongdoings as it appears in the final text is not entirely consistent. As a substantial change in the extant manuscript shows,[5] Dickens had originally intended Thérèse's sister to have willingly agreed to become the Marquis' mistress, who would soon have abandoned her. Her mental breakdown at her brother's death would, under these circumstances, derive from an even deeper reason. The child she bore under her heart when she herself died was surely that of a faithless lover who carelessly killed her next of kin.

Thérèse Defarge's resentment of the Evrémondes gains a different dimension when seen from this perspective. The grief she must have felt over the loss of her family would have been coupled with a sense of shame at her sister's failings. That this thought lay still on Dickens's mind, in

spite of the alteration in the manuscript, can be deduced from the significant circumstance that she reveals her history to her husband only after he has discovered Doctor Manette's letter in the prison cell when the Bastille opens its doors to the revolutionaries (TTC, III, ch. 12). The author undoubtedly wanted to cast his Madame Defarge as a deeply wronged woman who could never forget that her sister had lovingly conceived a child by the man who subsequently destroyed her entire family. A woman also who may never have been able to reconcile herself to her own childlessness, and who must have been deeply hurt to learn of the existence of another child whose aristocratic father, a son of the seducer, had married the mother despite her common station. It is more than mere malignity that Thérèse Defarge should seek the extermination of Lucie Manette and of her "blue-eyed" daughter (cf. TTC, III, ch. 3; ch. 14).

The final confrontation between the two women, in which Thérèse meets her doom, has sometimes been construed as a facile resort to xenophobia, an encounter in which British virtue must needs win over foreign villainy. Such a reading would fail to respond to a less obvious, yet more significant theme, that of feminity and its relation to motherhood. Two middle-aged women to whom fate has denied maternity are fighting over a young mother, one risking her own life to protect, the other likewise resolved to destroy her. For Miss Pross – who stigmatically loses her hearing in the struggle, though she be the innocent party – Lucie fills the role of the child she never bore; for Thérèse Defarge she embodies all the infamy her own family had to suffer, and what she must regard as a triumph of the Evrémondes: to escape the deserved punishment and prolong their existence. While many contemporary readers would have regarded her as a monstrous distortion of the role of woman, a closer reading will confirm that her animosity has manifold causes which go far beyond the instinctual behaviour of a Miss Pross.

The dramatic encounter between the two opponents would certainly suggest a polarity between them, each functioning as the other's opposite. Yet such a configuration would not do justice to the character of Thérèse Defarge as it unfolds in the course of the narrative. Whereas the brief introduction of the wine-keeper's wife might seem to indicate that Charles Dickens had originally cast her as a stereotyped supernumerary, the gradual development of the figure points into another direction. We have no reason to doubt that the author's main interest, which he obviously tried to convey to the reader, lay with Lucie Darnay, the angelic

heroine of the *Tale of Two Cities*. It has been pointed out that the narrator's comment on a twitch in her facial features might even be construed as a hidden reference to Ellen Ternan. It certainly reflects an attempt at individualisation. Conversely, we may permit ourselves to question Dickens's sincere commitment to the "goldenhaired doll", as she is cynically called by one of her friends. Despite the narrator's emphatic account of her motherhood, Lucie never gains womanly qualities. Doctor Manette's daughter may not be as insipid, as critics of Dickens's female characters have judged her, but she is as lacking in sexual appeal as Emma Haredale, the pale heroine of *Barnaby Rudge*. In that novel, as we have observed, there is every compensation for this failing through the figure of Dolly Varden, whose attractions so engross the ruffians who keep her captive, and quite manifestly also engage the narrator's interest somewhat unduly. Without doubt a figure on the lines of the charming, coquettish locksmith's daughter would not have fitted into the dark and ominous panorama that a *Tale of Two Cities* evokes. Conversely, the author may have felt that his narrative, in its attempt to take in a wide range of human needs and desires, required more depth from its female representatives than the pale figures of Lucie and of the poor little seamstress, whom the gallant Sydney Carton comforts on her last journey, could provide. This is not to say that he deliberately added some womanly attributes to the figure of Thérèse Defarge which would render the relentless revolutionary a more sensual and altogether more complex personality. Charles Dickens may not even have been entirely conscious of the changes that the character underwent while the narration was in progress. But there is every indication that the image of the emancipated, passionate, proud Frenchwoman striding through the streets of Paris without fear or concern touched him deeply. Is it only an act of poetic justice, a verdict on the ruthlessness of a revolutionary movement that had run out of control, that Thérèse has to die and by her own hand, as it were? Or had Dickens sensed that he was becoming more absorbed by this greatly suggestive character than its function in the plot would warrant ? Did he feel that he had to destroy his own creation lest it upset a narrative scheme just as it was beginning to jell into a conclusive shape? There is no reason to doubt that his creative energy could have made more of this remarkable figure than a cursory reading of the text may convey.

Some evidence for this may be found in *A Tale of Two Cities*, a dramatic adaptation of 1860 by Tom Taylor, in which Dickens collaborated.

In this version Thérèse Defarge, acted by the prominent, French-born actress Mme Celeste, appears as a commanding figure whose forcefulness is matched by her beauty. It is she who testifies to the Tribunal, rising to the role of the accuser in a spectacular scene. While her husband relents towards Charles Darnay and his family, her desire to eradicate them remains unchanged. Her accidental death is brought about in a struggle with her own husband, demonstrating the self-destructive element of the revolution.

At this point, we might once more return to G. K. Chesterton's so very singular concept of realism, which in his view adulterated the later novels of Dickens. Taking his unqualified admiration for *A Tale of Two Cities* into account, it might seem as if he had intermittently abandoned his preference for the imaginative side of the author's narrative talent with regard to this title. Dickens's second historical novel is doubtless determined by clarity and restraint rather than by the highly imaginative, mythmaking quality that Chesterton thought so essential to the early works of the master. As for the fanciful, larger-than-life characters so dear to the critic, as to the contemporary reading public, not even the wild-looking Miss Pross, obviously intended to provide a morsel of comic relief, will stand comparison with the many highly inspiring and memorable figures that distinguish the other novels. It is certainly on account of its story rather than for its personae that the *Tale of Two Cities* has retained some favour with Charles Dickens's perennial reading public.

It would be wrong though to dismiss this ideologically conceived work as a closely-structured composition in which Dickens's inventive power is entirely restrained by his constructive craftsmanship. As we have seen, the imaginative urge will after all disrupt the straight narrative in many ways. Almost against the author's intention, it would seem, a mere cypher will turn into a credible human figure, whereas another character ostensibly intended to portray the evils arising from disorder will grow beyond this narrow demarcation. As the narrative progresses, the erstwhile typecast wine-shop keeper develops into a complex personality, whose striving for retribution derives from a variety of causes. And yet the final text does not do full justice to the potential of this so very absorbing character.

In other instances the interference of the controlling faculty of the writer may result in a gap in the narrative. When the Marquis St Evrémonde is found stabbed in his bed with a note claiming another "Jacques" to have been the perpetrator, no suspicion settles on his heir Charles Darnay,

who had a heated altercation with his uncle the night before (TTC, II, ch. 9). As a matter of fact, the reader is not told under what circumstances Darnay would have left the chateau or how he was informed of the event. Much later, a presumably illiterate pauper from Paris is arrested and executed for the crime. But even at this point the narrator will not disclose how the deed was accomplished against all odds (TTC, II, ch. 15).

Charles Dickens's historical novels differ essentially from each other. And yet even the later and strictly organised work contains inconsistencies which we are inclined to derive from his inventive power and from an uncertainty as regards certain delicate issues that is so characteristic of the author. The doppelgänger motif that pervades the *Tale of Two Cities* is almost from the very inception of the novel resolved in favour of Charles Darnay, although Sydney Carton, sacrificing himself for his double, will turn out to be the moral victor in the end. Carton is deeply in love with Lucie Manette, but has known from the beginning of their acquaintance that he has no chance of ever winning her heart; that she will be drawn to the gallant young Frenchman Charles Darnay, whose idealism must weigh more with a young person than Carton's world-weary cynicism. There is so little faith left in the debauched lawyer that he has no qualms about admitting to a wasted life. In the highly emotional talk between him and Lucie (TTC, II, ch. 13) he meets her attempts at encouragement with the contention that he "will sink lower, and be worse". The traditional paradigm of sinful man appealing to female innocence to reform him is here inverted. So abominable is his state that he could not even dream of gaining her love for fear of ruining her – "bring you to misery, bring you to sorrow and repentance, blight you, disgrace you". While a confession on these lines might have sufficed for the Victorian audience, a contemporary reader may well ask himself what Carton's so highly contagious degradation amounts to. While his alcoholism is indeed continually dwelled upon, an addiction to heavy drinking could hardly count as irreparable; unless it was the consequence rather than the root of his desperate condition. In fact his so active engagement on behalf of the condemned Darnay proves that he is still in control of his mental faculties. There must be another defect in him that would "blight" a woman who had attached herself to him, as he himself has been "blighted" (TTC, II, ch. 5).

We are told in passing that Sydney Carton and his former schoolmate and present employer Mr Stryver spent some time in Paris, studying French law, where the keen jurist applied himself avidly to his studies.

Not so the other, who admits to have done little work in what was then still a city of many attractions. The narrator is so explicit about Carton's background, it would seem, to explain his fluency in French, which stands him in good stead in his later intrigue. But is this the only reason why the reader is enlightened about his earlier days? Would the Victorian reader not have been alerted by this particular reference, associating a notion of idle days spent in that city of delight with reckless dissipation, and ultimately with disease? Carton's admittance to being beyond help might point to an incurable and shameful illness, that would indeed blight a woman were she to join him. The fact that he should die deliberately at the guillotine rather than rot away slowly towards a gruesome end does not diminish the significance of his self-sacrifice – a "far, far better thing" than anything he has ever done.

For all its briskness and the directness of its presentation, *A Tale of Two Cities* is not lacking in suggestiveness. It may seem paradoxical to juxtapose the latent or in any case unpronounced references to sexuality with the varied religious echoes that are contained in the novel. Conversely, there is ample justification for this procedure. In each case the references are oblique and frequently quite indistinct. To be sure, religious issues are not exactly evaded in the narration. The closure of churches and persecution of priests in revolutionary France are briefly noted, though not commented on. The Gordon Riots of 1780 when so many Roman Catholics suffered at the hands of a London mob are not referred to, though Charles Darnay and Lucie Manette, both presumably Catholics, are married at a small Anglican church a short time afterwards. While the reader is left in no doubt that all the main characters are good Christians, though seemingly not attached to any particular belief, the only figure in the novel who regularly says her prayers is the wife of Jerry Cruncher, a messenger at Tellson's bank, but also engaged in abhorrent nightly activities. Cruncher, who suspects his wife of knowing about his practice of exhuming corpses for medical purposes, keeps blaming her for her piety. Rather incongruously, his dark crime is that of a resurrection-man, as body snatchers were also called at the time. Yet the irony extends even further: Doctor Manette, the prisoner of the Bastille, is "Recalled to Life" (TTC, I), and the words of the gospel "I am the Resurrection and the Life" are quoted when Sydney Carton and his little protégée, "children of the Universal Mother" (TTC, III, ch. 15), ascend the scaffold. This is not the final message, however, for Carton's vision of what is to come that

winds up the narrative is of an entirely worldly kind. The beautiful city that he sees arising from the present inferno is the Paris as Charles Dickens knew it, and loved so well.

One more incidence of the resurrection motif deserves further notice. When the Bastille is stormed by the people of Paris, Defarge enters a cell in the North Tower where Doctor Manette was incarcerated to appropriate a secret account that the prisoner is supposed to have written. Yet the search proves in vain. Or so we are told (TTC, II, ch. 21). It is only much later, at the second trial of Charles Darnay, that Defarge concedes to having found the incriminating writing on that occasion. Manette's indictment of the Evrémonde family has been resurrected after all, and will prove an instrument of destruction. The omission may be explained as a narrative strategy, to leave the reader in doubt about the entanglement pending. Conversely, Dickens may not have decided at this point how the document was going to enter the narrative, and hence left the option open. It might also be regarded as yet another case where Charles Dickens, trying to keep his imaginative urge under control, failed to come clean on an important issue. In this, as in so many other passages in the two novels under discussion, a critical reader may detect an underlying conflict between his creative imagination and his constructive craftsmanship.