



A Tale of Two Cities

CHARLES DICKENS'S first intimations of *A Tale of Two Cities* came in the summer of 1857, as he lay on the floor of the stage during one of his amateur theatricals – the play was *The Frozen Deep* in which he had taken the role of a desperate and thwarted lover whose eventual act of self-sacrifice redeems him. In fact Dickens played the part with such direct feeling that the audiences were cowed into a form of emotional submission, and even the workmen behind the scenes were reduced to tears by his performance. His desperate intensity was heightened by the fact that playing alongside him was a young actress, Ellen Ternan, for he was to say later that '... never was a man so seized and rended by one spirit'. It was now, in these special circumstances, as he lay dying on the stage towards the end of the play, obsessed, haunted, that '... new ideas for a story have come into my head ...' And no doubt it was the particular story of Sydney Carton, who sacrifices himself for love, which invaded him.

But a year of great turmoil and misery was to pass over his head before he actually began work on the novel itself, since it was in 1858 that he separated from his wife. They had been married for more than twenty years, and yet he turned away from her as harshly and abruptly as if she had been some importunate stranger. There had for a long time been a certain incompatibility of temperament between them, although the fault for that must lie as much in Dickens's own peculiar and mercurial character as in any presumed defects of his wife, but it is likely that his extraordinary passion for Ellen Ternan led to this final act of his domestic tragedy. First he sealed himself

away from his wife physically, by having his own bedroom partitioned off from hers, and then a few months later he asked her for a separation. It was a messy and protracted business, the difficulties of which were compounded by the rumours about Dickens's private life (at one stage he was even accused of committing incest with his sister-in-law, Georgina) and then further aggravated by the novelist's own bizarre behaviour. He turned irrevocably against anyone whom he considered to be taking his wife's part, rejecting some of his closest friends as a result, and then he decided to publish his own account of the separation in which he accused his wife of 'mental disorder' and outlined her incapacity as a mother. The latter charge was quite untrue but, at moments of crisis in his life, Dickens invariably turned to the themes and patterns of his own fiction as a way of describing or controlling reality: neglectful mothers play so large a part in his novels that it seems to have been for him the simplest act of transference to accuse his own wife of a similar fault. It will be seen how, in *A Tale of Two Cities*, the passions of his life are readily transformed into fiction; but the process could also work in reverse, with the images of Dickens's novels being literally imposed by him upon a bewildering world. He seems truly to have felt that he was the innocent party, despite the fact that he had pushed his wife away from his affections and from their shared home; he considered himself to be the target of malicious abuse, even though it was he who had published Catherine's supposed faults to the world. It is hard not to believe that he suppressed some elements of guilt and self-accusation in the process but, as *A Tale of Two Cities* often intimates, buried things may come to light; was this novel's concern with imprisonment, and with sacrificial death, an aspect of that guilt? 'My father was like a madman,' his daughter, Kate, was later to say of this period. 'This affair brought out all that was worst – all that was weakest in him . . . Nothing could surpass the misery and unhappiness of our home . . .' So these were the conditions of Dickens's life in

the year before the composition of *A Tale of Two Cities*. Struggle. Fear. Renunciation. Secrecy. The troubled belief in his own innocence. Suppressed violence. And can we not see these themes at work beneath the surface of the novel itself?

He actually began *A Tale of Two Cities* in order to launch his new periodical – he had severed all relations with his trusted and familiar publishers, Bradbury and Evans, on the dubious grounds that they did not fully support him in his actions against his wife. He had in the past used *Oliver Twist* and *The Old Curiosity Shop* as convenient ways of beginning new journals and now, with *All The Year Round*, he needed a similarly successful story to boost sales. In the spring of 1859 he hit upon the famous title for the new novel, and then eight days later began work upon the narrative itself; it was a task which would occupy him from May until October, as he struggled to maintain the rhythm of each weekly episode while trying to attend to the fact that it would also be published in monthly parts. The effort sometimes drove him 'frantic', he said, but it was worth all of his expended energy: the circulation of *All The Year Round* soon reached something like one hundred thousand copies, and never significantly dropped from that level.

Dickens was working quickly upon the novel, as was necessary for its weekly format, but at the same time he was taking great pains over the narrative. It is of course set at the time of the French Revolution, but he did not attempt a simple fictional reconstruction of the period: he had always admired Carlyle's *History of the French Revolution* and, quite apart from making use of that wonderful history, he asked Carlyle's advice on the books he should read for the purposes of research. In return he received something like a 'cart-load' of volumes from the London Library and, as a result, employed true incidents and places in the unfolding of his story.

But the sources of *A Tale of Two Cities* lie much deeper than the pages of even the most recondite volumes. Much of the imaginative energy of the narrative lies in Dr Manette's

troubled relationship with the Bastille, for example; he is released from his captivity but, at moments of crisis, he reverts to the psychic condition of imprisonment as if in a certain sense he has come to need the chains that once kept him down. Twelve years before Dickens had outlined in a letter '... the idea of a man imprisoned for ten or fifteen years ...' and in 1853 he had written an essay of an old man set free from the Bastille but who '... prayed to be shut up in his old dungeon till he died'. And of course the same theme emerges in *Little Dorrit*, where neither the eponymous heroine nor her father can ever really escape the shadow of the prison-house; it even emerges in Dickens's earliest sketches, concerning Newgate, and in the pages of *The Pickwick Papers*. It was a subject which always remained close to him.

There is another theme, also, which runs through the narrative and which touches upon the need for self-sacrifice and even renunciation in the pursuit of love. It has sometimes been suggested that Lucie Manette is a partial portrait of Ellen Ternan, and that in the story of Sydney Carton's final self-sacrifice for her sake there is some re-enactment of Dickens's own helpless and hopeless passion for the young actress; but we need not go so far as this in order to realise that he has taken as his theme the bewildering mysteries of love at precisely the time in his own life when he was being invaded by a passion over which he seems to have had very little control. As Dr Manette suggests '... mysteries arise out of close love, as well as out of wide division; in the former case, they are subtle and delicate, and difficult to penetrate. My daughter Lucie is, in this one respect, such a mystery to me; I can make no guess at the state of her heart.' There is another curious aspect to this: Manette had been 'buried alive' in prison for almost the same length of time as Dickens had been married. Now both were free, but is there in Manette's own wavering allegiance to his helpless past some hint of Dickens's own distrust of himself in his new situation? Certainly in the novel itself the theme of imprisonment is intimately associated with

the idea of renunciation – as if love itself, like a free life, were not easily to be endured. 'I have so far verified what is done and suffered in these pages,' Dickens wrote eventually in the preface to this novel, 'as that I have certainly done and suffered it all myself.' That is why *A Tale of Two Cities* is a novel more concerned with the narration of story than with the elaboration of character, more preoccupied with action than with dialogue, as if Dickens himself were literally acting out the drama – as if he were still upon the stage where the idea for *A Tale of Two Cities* first occurred to him.

That is one of the reasons why it is written in a more spare and direct manner than such immediate predecessors as *Bleak House* or *Little Dorrit* – Dickens could literally see the story and its development as he composed it – but that clarity of presentation is also related to the fact that Dickens himself had only recently established for himself a second career as a public reader. He had read *The Chimes* and *A Christmas Carol* before, in the appropriate season, to public audiences; but, the year before *A Tale of Two Cities*, he had for the first time embarked upon a national reading tour – taking himself and his novels across the country, reciting them to packed assemblies, basking in the applause, baking in the gas-light and the heat. He had fully discovered the power of a direct contact with his audience, in other words, and that in itself helps to explain the directness of *A Tale of Two Cities*; he was once more addressing his audience, trying to heighten the moments of violence or terror, and thus to elicit the appropriate effects.

As soon as the reading tour was over, in fact, he had felt jaded and worn, and somehow strangely depressed. It was as if he needed all the applause and affection which public audiences lavished upon him – especially now, after the separation from his wife and the resulting obloquy in the press and elsewhere. It was a way of reaffirming his own identity and his own popularity, just as it was a method of confirming the power of his fictions to move people. And, when the reading

tour was over, when the applause had died down and the lights had faded, he found himself thrust back into the real world where all the old miseries of life threatened to overtake him. On the platform, and on the stage, he could forget himself: he could perhaps even forget his obsession with Ellen Ternan. But not otherwise.

That is why he threw himself into his next novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, with so much fervour; he was acting out his part again, just as he was directly addressing a large audience, and in that dual capacity he could reclaim himself. Yet the tale itself sometimes tells a different story; certainly it can take off in quite a different direction from that suggested by the mood or intention of its creator. That is why, for all its energy and colour (particularly marked in the scenes concerning the Revolution itself), there are times when a solemn low note enters this narrative. The themes of escape and of violent struggle are wonderfully relayed here but, beneath them, there is a sense of wretchedness and weariness which emerges both in the rancid humour of the grave-robber, Jerry Cruncher, and in the mournful contemplations of Jarvis Lorry – ‘. . . as I draw closer and closer to the end, I travel in the circle, nearer and nearer to the beginning’. And was this Dickens’s sense, too, now that he seemed to be re-enacting all the conditions of his own childhood? A public reader now just as he had been an entertainer when he was a young boy, standing on a table in order to sing to his father’s friends. A man writing about the ambiguities of imprisonment, just as the child had once haunted the streets beneath the Marshalsea Prison. A man apparently obsessed by hopeless love for Ellen Ternan, just as the child believed he had somehow been betrayed by his older sister and mother. Were these the childhood conditions returning to haunt him, and was it his own awareness of that fact which lends this novel its gloomier shades? For *A Tale of Two Cities* is filled with horror and with darkness, just as it is marked with images of dirt and disease – and death. In fact death was very much on Dickens’s mind during this period

and, in a letter to a friend, he wrote that ‘. . . all ways have the same finger-post at the head of them, and at every turning in them’.

A Tale of Two Cities has suffered from some loss in critical esteem in recent years, but this is primarily because it is an ‘historical novel’ and historical novels are generally presumed not to be serious fiction at all. Yet there are times when the most significant preoccupations can only be couched in that literary form, and when apparently ‘historical’ fiction is the best medium for understanding the conditions of the present. Certainly this is one of Dickens’s most powerful and interesting novels, not at all inferior in theme or execution to the larger and apparently more imposing works which surround it. It is written with a discipline and a dramatic potency that in certain respects render it superior to some of the lengthier expositions in the longer novels. Dickens is no worse a writer for being forced into brevity, in this case because of the pressures of each weekly instalment in *All The Year Round*, and indeed this particular medium helps to emphasise his extraordinary gifts simply as a story-teller. His skills as a fabulist have never been shown to better effect than here but, additionally, in the very act and art of telling a story he discloses more of his own self than in some of his more deliberately composed fictions. For those who wish to understand something of the true nature of Charles Dickens, as well as one important aspect of his genius, *A Tale of Two Cities* is a necessary book.