

**REPRINTED FROM DICKENS: THE CRAFT OF FICTION AND THE
CHALLENGES OF READING BY "CARLO DICKENS: A SITE DEVOTED TO
DICKENS STUDIES IN ITALY".**

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THE COMEDY OF SADNESS IN *DOMBEY AND SON*

The aim of this essay is to consider a disconcerting aspect of the experience of reading Dickens – an aspect which I have noticed recently while teaching *Dombey and Son*, but which applies to some extent to all of the novels – namely, the fact that comedy is very frequently associated in Dickens's work with the mental anguish of obviously unhappy characters. Somewhat earlier in the history of the novel, in Fielding and Smollett for example, we often find comic moments which involve *wretched* characters – characters who are wretched both in the sense of being unhappy and in the sense of being morally irredeemable, selfish and corrupt. The unhappiness here is arguably a just punishment for wickedness, and, in laughing at the unhappiness, the narrator and the readers or narratees, the implicit, invisible gang clustered around the vanquished Blifil or whoever it may be, are confirming a relatively complacent moral status quo. But in the Dickensian instances that I have in mind the situation is very different, for here we seem to be invited to laugh at a character's pain, but also, at the same time, to feel affectionately towards them.

To start with a rather light example, here is Mr Toots at the end-of-term party at Blimber's Academy:

[...] Mr. Toots appeared to be involved in a good deal of uncertainty whether, on the whole, it was judicious to button the bottom button of his waistcoat, and whether, on a calm revision of all the circumstances, it was best to wear his wristbands turned up or turned down. Observing that Mr. Feeder's were turned up, Mr. Toots turned his up; but the wristbands of the next arrival being turned down, Mr. Toots turned his down. The differences in point of waistcoat-buttoning, not only at the bottom, but at the top too, became so numerous and complicated as the arrivals thickened, that Mr. Toots was continually fingering that article of dress, as if he were performing on some instrument; and appeared to find the incessant execution it demanded, quite bewildering (*Dombey and Son*, Chapter XIV, p. 195).

A number of elements conspire in this passage both to stimulate affection for Mr Toots and to make him seem ridiculous: his innocent impressionability, the way he makes manipulating buttons seem as arduous as playing the clarinet, the way in doing so he unconsciously gives meaning to his own euphonious surname. But at the same time he is clearly not enjoying himself. The phrase “on a calm revision of all the circumstances” ironically reminds us that Toots is not calm by any means. He is caught within this ludicrous predicament, not able to stand back and see the fun of it like Dickens, you and me. In turning Toots’s body into a musical instrument, Dickens in a sense removes its nerves, making it an unfeeling body – but an emotional, anxious Toots is still there as well, leaning over this mechanical person, desperately trying to make it work.

Of course, if this were the worst that Toots had to endure for our entertainment, then to feel that it raised any serious ethical problems would be ridiculously over-sensitive. But Toots has just as much trouble, just as amusingly, with the things that mean most to him in life. Here he is, not for the first time in the last ten seconds, trying to begin a conversation with Florence Dombey:

“How d’ye do, Miss Dombey?” said Mr. Toots. “I’m very well, I thank you; how are you?”

Florence gave him her hand, and said she was very well.

“I’m very well indeed,” said Mr. Toots, taking a chair. “Very well indeed, I am. I don’t remember,” said Mr. Toots, after reflecting a little, “that I was ever better, thank you.”

“It’s very kind of you to come,” said Florence, taking up her work. “I am very glad to see you.”

Mr. Toots responded with a chuckle. Thinking that might be too lively, he corrected it with a sigh. Thinking that might be too melancholy, he corrected it with a chuckle. Not thoroughly pleasing himself with either mode of reply, he breathed hard (Ch. XVIII, p. 245).

Here, with the sigh, the chuckle, the breathing, we have Toots the musical instrument again, fastened to a performer who just cannot get himself to generate a satisfactory pattern of sounds. Toots’s own chuckle has been placed by Dickens as a kind of seed, to precipitate laughter in the sympathetic reader, who is likely to be dazzled and enchanted by Toots’s clumsiness. But Toots himself is tottering hopelessly between contradictory feelings, love for Florence and delight at being in her presence, a sense of his own incapacity to make an attractive enough impression to win more than pitying affection, and grief for his friend, Florence’s dead brother, about whom he is talking, moments later, tearfully, and “with sympathy in every fibre of his otherwise expressionless face.” What a strange description that is! How could his face

have any other expression, if every fibre of it is filled with sympathy? Is he supposed to look heroic, or droll, or portentous at the same time?

"It's of no consequence," Toots is always saying, whenever he is feeling most upset. But everything emotional is of consequence to him. His mind has been emptied of facts and worldly wisdom, allegedly, by Blimber's pedagogic cramming, and this is reflected by his empty face. But just as the empty face is actually full of sympathy, so the empty mind is awash with sympathetic joy and sadness, and it is this turbulent spectacle, including the sadness just as much as the joy, that essentially constitutes the comedy of Mr Toots.

Of course, it has become familiar to associate Dickens with a certain kind of gloom or darkness of vision. He is, in John Lucas's application of Immanuel Kant's phrase, "the melancholy man." (Lucas 1980). But to a certain extent this is part of an old-fashioned and dispensable view of Dickens as a writer who did not really know what he was doing: a tremendous, blundering bag of emotions who cannot help creating scenes of psychological insight and intensity which he would have been unable to analyse coherently. And the term "melancholy," in particular, associates Dickens with a tradition of dark thoughts, of which Kierkegaard is perhaps the leading mid-nineteenth-century exponent, which are essentially irreducible to specific causes and experiences, but rather part of the general experience of modern life (Ferguson 1995). In fact, the unhappiness represented within Dickens's texts is almost always much more precise and tangible than this: it has good reasons. Toots, for example, is a person who has suffered actual mental damage, through a mixture of congenital weakness and misguided education, who senses his own mental feebleness and difference from others, which are real and insuperable disabilities, and who consequently lives in a state of perfectly reasonable anxiety.

In due course, Dickens arranges a happy ending for Toots, who has the good fortune to marry Susan Nipper, a woman who has exactly the mental resources that he lacks. So we might feel that any laughter at Toots's expense is exonerated retrospectively. He is a happy man, ultimately, and we are laughing at transient difficulties, which perhaps needed to be laughed at, therapeutically. But the case is different in respect of several lesser characters: Master Bitherstone, for example, and Miss Panky – Paul's abused fellow captives at Mrs Pipchin's. The sorrows of these two are highly comical, but, as far as we know, they have very little to hope for, as far as happiness in this world is concerned. And this is a novel which is distinctly ambivalent about happiness in the next world, too. There may be reasons to think, for example, that the dying Paul floats out into a comforting sea of faith, but it may also be a sea of interstellar vacancy like that which the terrified Mrs Skewton seems to contemplate in her last moments. Both views of death and what follows it are richly envisioned in the novel, and it is up to us to decide which is most

convincing. So, in other words, the sadness in *Dombey and Son* seems to find an antidote, sometimes, either in personal, earthly good fortune or in the comforts of spirituality, but at other times, for other characters, it simply does not.

It is not *always* particularly funny, in *Dombey and Son*, when a character is sad and fails to be comforted. For instance, when Florence grieves for her brother, and nature appears to respond and echo her grief, and in doing so only exacerbates it:

It was a wet night; and the melancholy rain fell pattering and dropping with a weary sound. A sluggish wind was blowing, and went moaning round the house, as if it were in pain or grief. A shrill noise quivered through the trees. While she sat weeping, it grew late, and dreary midnight tolled out from the steeples (Ch. XVIII: 251).

In a sense, there is no good reason why Dickens should not have made this scene funny. If the person involved had been Toots perhaps he would have mistaken a moaning tree for a ghost, and tried to talk to it. We might have had a little spoof of *Hamlet*. But no, this is Florence, and for better or worse Dickens has excluded her from the fullest existence as a character – the existence that includes the capacity to be ridiculous. It might be argued that Florence's situation is just too awful for it to be funny, just as real people, after a phase of wryness, tend to lose their sense of humour when they are really sad. This argument would be supported, in an inverted way, by Dickens's exuberant handling of the specific absence of mental suffering, as in the case of the child, Alexander Mac Stinger, who occasions humour through exhibiting symptoms of sadness, but without the fact of it:

On Florence making bold to enter, without any more parley, and on Susan following, Mrs Mac Stinger recommenced her pedestrian exercise in pattens, and Alexander Mac Stinger (still on the paving-stone), who had stopped in his crying to attend to the conversation, began to wail again, entertaining himself during that dismal performance, which was quite mechanical, with a general survey of the prospect, terminating in the hackney coach (Ch. XXIII, p. 321).

Much of the humour here is perhaps attributable to a kind of relief and satisfaction that all that weep are not necessarily miserable, that there may not be quite as much gloom in the world as it seems, that human beings may be tougher and more elastic than a sentimentalist or melancholic would tend to assume.

It is possible to develop a similarly optimistic reading of the comedy involved even in the sufferings of Miss Panky. She is sacrificed, but, as a result, Mrs Pipchin's inhumanity is exposed, and, if we recognise this, then perhaps we are on the road to a better world, and should be happy.

In fact, there are all sorts of ways of finding a particular literary moment funny. Some readers might laugh at Miss Panky through a sense of relief, feeling that her predicament is too preposterous to be true, being reassured, therefore, that real life is not too bad. Or one might laugh at her if one felt that she was a badly drawn character, so that one would be laughing at Dickens's incompetence, as a way of announcing one's good taste and sense of artistic standards. On the other hand, a certain kind of reader might (and probably does) laugh at Miss Panky, without doubting that she is a realistic representative of mistreated nineteenth-century youth, through sadism, through taking real pleasure, for whatever odd psychological reason, in the spectacle of someone else's suffering, with ethics put very much aside. And no doubt Dickens's pleasure in his own humour and all his feelings for the good- and ill-fortune of all his characters was a complex phenomenon, with dark and irrational aspects. But, nevertheless, within all these undecidable complexities, there remain certain strategies, including certain habitual associations of suffering and humour, which suggest that Dickens does, in part, as much as any of us, know what he is doing.

Which brings me to what is probably the most intense and challenging conflation of comedy and sadness in *Dombey and Son*, Chapter XXIX, where Lucretia Tox learns of the engagement of Mr Dombey, whom she had fancifully hoped to marry herself, to Edith. The pain of this revelation is exacerbated by the behaviour of Miss Tox's friend, Dombey's sister, Louisa Chick, who is hyperbolically outraged by what she sees as the impudence of Tox's feelings. But even before Mrs Chick arrives with the devastating news of the engagement, Dickens has prepared his readers to feel sorry for Miss Tox, and, more specifically, to see her as a person who will always be imperfectly fulfilled, and who will always bestow more affection than she receives. Thus Dickens has her sit in the window-seat of her neat but pathetic apartment, with its "high-shouldered canary, stricken in years," and has her smell a faint breeze from the country and, metaphorically, from the past, and so she thinks of "her good Papa deceased," and then of "how she had made chains of dandelion-stalks for youthful vowers of eternal constancy, dressed chiefly in nankeen," "fetters" which had soon "withered and broken," and then of "her good Mama deceased," so that finally these "recollections were so strong upon Miss Tox, that she shook her head, and murmured she would be comparatively old before she knew it." "[W]hich seemed likely," adds Dickens's laconic narrator, striking a note which hovers indefinitely between sympathy and satire.

The moment at which Tox actually registers the disappointment which her wistful meditations prefigure is again both sympathetic and satirical, both tragic and farcical:

Miss Tox made no verbal answer, but took up the little watering-pot with a trembling hand, and looked vacantly round as if considering what article of furniture would be improved by the contents. The room door opening at this crisis of Miss Tox's feelings, she started, laughed aloud, and fell into the arms of the person entering; happily insensible alike of Mrs. Chick's indignant countenance, and of the Major at his window over the way, who had his double-barrelled eye-glass in full action, and whose face and figure were dilated with Mephistophelean joy (Ch. XXIX, p. 400).

Tox laughs, just as Toots chuckles, and each is involved in a joke, but that doesn't mean that either is happy. Major Bagstock is happy, after a fashion, but here he stands for one sort of reader whom Dickens's narrator implicitly does not favour, a witness who revels in the discomfiture of others in a completely selfish, amoral way. The narrator perceives every bit of the folly in Miss Tox that Bagstock ridicules, and is not going to understate her weaknesses, but the chapter closes with the image of a woman whose absurdity is pitiful, and whose life is much less fun than it is funny:

Poor excommunicated Miss Tox, who, if she were a fawner and toad-eater, was at least an honest and a constant one, and had ever borne a faithful friendship towards her impeacher [Mrs Chick], and had been truly absorbed and swallowed up in devotion to the magnificence of Mr. Dombey – [...] poor excommunicated Miss Tox watered her plants with her tears, and felt that it was winter in Princess's Place (Ch. XXIX, p. 406).

And "winter" here is to be contrasted with the "summer recollections" of childhood in which Tox had been indulging shortly before. Youth is put in its place here – the distant past – and Tox faces the final, absolute destruction of a whole class of hopes.

Miss Tox's situation at the end of the novel is not too bad – she has gained a sort of substitute family in the Toodles – but it is not the happiness that she had wanted, and of which she seems worthy and capable. In the course of the novel she has developed far beyond the fairy-tale ugly sister role which she seems initially to occupy. And her promotion is above all to do with her capacity to feel, even if she sometimes, like Toots, exhibits it clumsily – as when, in the immediate wake of Paul's death, she makes her comic, grotesque, insightful but ill-considered point about "Dombey and Son" being "a Daughter after all!" (Ch. XVI, p. 225). This observation was denounced in *The Examiner* in 1848, as "too light an intrusion," and was omitted in subsequent

printings, but the sad and comic point that this critic missed is that “lightness” really can disfigure solemnity in real life, and no amount of good-heartedness can save one from sometimes putting one’s foot in it. It is impossible to do the right thing always. And in recognising this, well, you have to laugh.

The greater impossibility for Miss Tox, the fact that her sadness can never wholly be alleviated, is also part of her comedy. It leaves us with the spectacle of struggle. Dickens, of course, is concerned with improvement and reform on many levels, and prosecutes these interests with some success, but he apparently perceives that some things cannot be improved – and finds a virtue in evoking that state. I would suggest a comparison, here, with the opposition of Utilitarianism and Intuitionism in Victorian moral philosophy. The Utilitarians tried to establish a formalised, objectified, commensurable ethics, based on rational calculation. Intuitionists, on the other hand, like the theologian Frederick Dennison Maurice, developed an ethics based on individual sympathies. It is your *feeling* for a sufferer that makes you do them good. Dickens is in tune with the Intuitionists in associating the recognition of a character’s pain with a developing warmth towards that character, signalled by comedy. But the comedy is partly to do with the hopelessness of this sympathy – the recognition, perhaps, that if one followed the likes of Maurice with proper commitment, and took account of even a tiny fraction of the suffering in the world, life would be impossible. For our peace of mind, of course, depends on an encyclopaedic indifference to the specific difficulties of millions around us. So I think that one part of Dickens, at least, wants to present the comedy of a floundering ethics in *Dombey*, of an inability in the author or the reader, or anybody, to do all the good that is needed.¹

Wondering “Why does tragedy give pleasure?” in his recent book of that title, A. D. Nuttall asks the poet Craig Raine, who answers, “All emotion is pleasurable.”² Impressive for a few seconds, this soon comes to seem an odd and slightly glib remark. It depends what you mean by emotion and what you mean by pleasure. People can be so afraid that they throw up or pass out, so sad that they are unable to eat, so angry that they beat their fists against hard metal objects. The pleasure in this is often obscure. But once the sufferer is able to step back a little, the emotion subsiding just so much that the mind can

¹ The most useful general study of Victorian ethical thought remains J.B. Schneewind, *Sidgwick’s Ethics and Victorian Moral Philosophy* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1977). More recently, Jane Nardin has made a very strong case for saying that the fiction of Anthony Trollope responds to some of the main debates between the Utilitarians, Intuitionists and Idealists, and for claiming that his books were designed to appeal to an educated philosophical awareness in their readers (*Trollope and Victorian Moral Philosophy* [Athens, OH, Ohio University Press, 1996]). It seems very likely that a similar case could be made for Dickens.

² A.D. Nuttall, *Why Does Tragedy Give Pleasure?* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1996) p. 104.

form an image of itself as containing that emotion, then a different range of experiences – something like those to which Raine seems to be alluding – comes into play, and the visceral is supplemented, if not, at least for a moment, obscured, by the ethical, the aesthetic, and even the comic. In Dickens, it seems that the comedy often involves a related stepping back, not so much from his personal sufferings (affairs like the blacking factory) but from the general widespread wretchedness – the failure, the loneliness, the unfulfilment – of innumerable less successful lives, and this stepping back is not at all heartless or irresponsible, but in fact – through emphasising the bewildering, laughable scale of such problems – rational, responsible, and, while full of feeling, deeply unsentimental.

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