

Edgeways Miscellany no. 10
16 May 2008

The Unique Genius of Dickens

This is a call for help and comment. For nearly forty years I have been intermittently at work on a book called *The Possibility of the Tragic English Novel*. Since about 1980, every time I go back to this project it gets shorter. At present I think there is only one tragic English novel, one true-bred but monstrous unlicked whelp, and one amazing work which incorporates a tragic novel in a larger whole. My question is about the last.

It must be ten years or so since I read *Bleak House*, and it breaks on me afresh much as *King Lear* does. Dickens, and Dickens alone in the English nineteenth century, is the real heir of Shakespeare. If Shakespeare had lived in the nineteenth century he would have written a *Bleak House*, though a very different one. He would not have invented the boring Boythorn or the incoherent Esther and her being loved by the barely conceivable John Jarndyce: Shakespeare's boringness is different. And he would not have mishandled the Richard Carstone story like Dickens, doggedly carrying out a determination to portray the blighting effects of Chancery. But Lady Dedlock and Mr Tulkinghorn are pure spirit-of-Shakespeare—consistently, for it is noticeable that the different parts of the novel go on being either superb or embarrassing, as they begin. Which is not to say that they go on being the same. Both Sir Leicester and Lady Dedlock are seen in dramatically new ways as the fable unfolds.

In chapter 41 of *Bleak House*, "In Mr Tulkinghorn's Room", and some later chapters, Dickens achieves in prose fiction (without blank verse to help him, for when he resorts to blank verse it is usually a sign of defeat) a tragic intensity which at that date could be found elsewhere in English only in Shakespeare.

Dickens has no stage, but the chapter has a beautifully imagined setting for the theatre of the mind in which the tragic action occurs. Mr Tulkinghorn is the extreme opposite of Hamlet in that nobody knows quite what is going on in his heart, if he has one: but he observes as acutely as Hamlet, and the scene between him and Lady Dedlock in his room at Chesney Wold is more than a little like *Hamlet* III.iv, where after killing Polonius, Hamlet brings his mother to see the error of her ways. Lady Dedlock, unlike Gertrude, does not need to be shown her fault.

Hamlet is quite possibly the funniest play in the world; it is true also of Dickens that creation one has to call comic is necessary to the tragic success, and that both are possible to Dickens because he has a prose capable of a Shakespearean range of creativity without ceasing to be prose. In the previous chapter, Mr Tulkinghorn has told Lady Dedlock's story, without naming her, to the whole tribe of Dedlocks gathered during a protracted general election campaign when they are trying to save the country from the Wat Tylerism of the manufacturing interest, and make it again safe for the proper distribution of pensions to poor relations. Sir Leicester "moves among the company, a magnificent refrigerator" (*refrigerator* was a very uncommon word in 1853). The election is brought about when "Doodle has found that he must throw himself upon the country—chiefly in the form of sovereigns and beer. In this metamorphosed state he is available in a good many places simultaneously . . ." That metaphor, however comic, is creative in the Shakespearean way. The chapter goes on to a wonderful evocation of the unoccupied Chesney Wold, poetic in a more obvious sense, and in the mode Dickens launches straight off in the first chapter, where not till the fourth paragraph is there a sentence governed by a finite verb! Of the first three sentences the first of all consists of one word, a proper noun, the second has a present participle and the third consists of a noun qualified by two adjectives. Though written in well-formed sentences, the evocation of Chesney Wold in chapter 40 is in the manner of the fog of chapter 1. As atmospheric as the heath in *Lear*!

When T. S. Eliot made his once-famous pronouncement, which I quote from memory, "Sensibility alters in us all from age to age whether we will or no, but expression is only altered by a man of genius," he was not thinking of prose; but Dickens's prose seems to me as genuine a change of expression as is ever to be found, and one he needed for his tragic story.

This is so, isn't it? Only Dickens did it.

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