

## The Martyr in Dickens

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Would Dickens have made a good judge? He was certainly not afraid to pass damning judgments on the men who administered justice in a court of law, like the Court of Chancery in *Bleak House*. And when he looked at the past he did not shrink from passing judgment on the great figures of English History. King Henry the Eighth for example: ‘The plain truth is, that he was a most intolerable ruffian, a disgrace to human nature, and a blot of blood and grease upon the History of England.’ (vol. III, p. 59) This is from *A Child’s History of England*.<sup>1</sup> I should mention that the Fellows and students of my College in Cambridge have to eat and drink under the beady gaze of this intolerable ruffian, whose portrait by Holbein hangs at the head of Trinity’s Great Hall.

Dickens was no less forthright about Henry’s daughter, ‘Bloody Queen Mary’ (whose portrait also hangs in our Hall). “‘By their fruits ye shall know them,” said OUR SAVIOUR,’ Dickens wrote. ‘The stake and the fire were the fruits of this reign, and you will judge this Queen by nothing else.’ Queen Mary is supposed to have said that when she was dead and her body opened they would find the name of the French port ‘Calais’ written on her heart. But, said Dickens, if anything *were* written on her heart, it should have been the names of the Protestant martyrs she had put to death: ‘JANE GREY, HOOPER, ROGERS, RIDLEY, LATIMER, CRANMER, AND THREE HUNDRED PEOPLE BURNT ALIVE, . . . INCLUDING SIXTY WOMEN AND FORTY LITTLE CHILDREN. But it is enough that their deaths were written in Heaven.’ (vol. III, p. 96)

We may not share Dickens’s religious convictions, but when we read him it is hard to resist the confidence with which he passes such judgments on the saved and the damned, the sheep and the goats. It is exhilarating to condemn the goats, the monsters like Henry the VIII and Queen Mary — or the ‘drunken ruffian’ Judge Jeffries, favourite of Charles II. Dickens described Jeffries as the ‘great crimson toad, sweltering and swelling with rage’ who

presided over the trial of Algernon Sidney in 1683 (vol. III, p. 290). Sidney was another martyr. His surname provides the first name of Dickens's own great fictional martyr, Sydney Carton in *A Tale of Two Cities*, but Carton's drinking also provokes an explicit association with Judge Jeffries. Henry VIII, Queen Mary, Judge Jeffries. When we read Dickens we share with him a joyous violence in cursing the great crimson toads of history, in damning the monsters and exalting the martyrs. This answers to a vision of justice with which we can all identify. This vision derives from a passionate identification with the victim of injustice, especially when the victim is a child. I have been quoting from *A Child's History of England*. But what if the victim is not a child, or no longer a child — as Sydney Carton is not?

My subject is 'the martyr in Dickens', and the questions about judgment, justice, conviction and compassion raised by the figure of the martyr. All martyrs are victims, but not all victims are martyrs. Dickens was passionately concerned with the victims of the modern world whose sufferings he saw around him in the streets of London by day, and even more by night. He was moved to identify with these victims, especially with the figures of children and women, but also with the outcasts driven to violent crime. He tried to bear witness to these sufferings, to expose them to view, to make his readers realize their hidden, secret existence. He also wanted to accuse, to prosecute and to pass judgment on the oppressors, the tyrants, villains and torturers who caused this suffering. Who are they? Where are they? For such suffering someone must be responsible. Someone must be named and blamed and shamed — preferably, if one can still find them in the modern world, a monster or a great crimson toad.

When David Copperfield's beloved old nurse Peggotty marries Mr Barkis the carrier, young David goes to visit her in her beautiful little new home. As he writes the personal history of life now, looking back across the years, David remembers best of all a certain old desk and inside it a large edition of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*. This was the popular title for the influential commemoration of the Protestants martyred under Queen Mary, first published in England in 1563.

This precious volume, of which I do not recollect one word, I immediately discovered and immediately applied myself to; and I never visited the house afterwards, but I kneeled on a chair, opened the casket where this gem was enshrined, spread my arms over the desk, and fell to devouring the book afresh. I was chiefly edified, I am afraid, by the pictures, which were numerous, and represented all kinds of direst horrors, but the Martyrs and Peggotty's house have been inseparable in my mind ever since, and are now. (ch.10)

Why?

As we shall see, when Dickens explicitly refers to ‘martyrs’ in the world of his fiction, it is usually in a comical vein. But he looked back without irony to the real victims of religious persecution in the sixteenth century. They were types of true martyrdom, men and women who died bravely for what they believed in, including the Latimer who famously said to his fellow Bishop as the bonfire that would consume them was being lit: ‘Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day light such a candle, by God’s grace in England, as (I trust) shall never be put out.’<sup>22</sup> Unlike many of his contemporaries, Dickens did not idealize England’s historical past. On the contrary, think of Mrs Skewton in *Dombey and Son* with her vacuous gushing sentiment.

‘Those darling bygone times . . . with their delicious fortresses, and their dear old dungeons, and their delightful places of torture, and their romantic vengeances, and their picturesque assaults and sieges, and everything that makes life truly charming! How dreadfully we have degenerated!’  
(ch. 27)

This is not quite how Dickens saw it. But if there was one thing he admired in the past it was heroism, especially when it took the form of religious conviction. Dickens shared with Carlyle and Ruskin a conviction that the modern world needed heroes, more badly than ever. But did it need martyrs? Do *we* need martyrs?

Let me turn back to David Copperfield and the book he devoured at Peggotty’s. Why does he devour it? David is happy with Peggotty. He feels secure and this allows him to contemplate the ‘direst horrors’ in the Book of Martyrs from a safe distance. Similarly with the other book he associates with Peggotty’s, the ‘Crocodile Book’ that he keeps on a shelf by the bed’s head. This experience stands in contrast to the one he is about to describe when he leaves the security of the happy adopted family at Lowestoft, Mr Peggotty and Ham and Mrs Gummidge and Little Em’ly. He returns from them to his ‘real’ unhappy family, the miserable home where ‘there was no face to look on mine with love or liking any more’. Only the Murdstones.

And now I fell into a state of neglect, which I cannot look back upon without compassion. I fell at once into a solitary condition, — apart from all friendly notice, apart from the society of all other boys of my own age, apart from all companionship but my own spiritless thoughts, — . . . I was not actively ill-used. I was not beaten, or starved; but the wrong that was done to me had no intervals of relenting, and was done in a systematic,

passionless manner. Day after day, week after week, month after month, I was coldly neglected. (ch. 10)

This is not martyrdom: indeed in a sense it is exactly the opposite of it. Martyrdom takes place in public, in front of witnesses. The word ‘martyr’ may derive from the ancient Greek for ‘witness’, and in its root meaning, martyrs do ‘bear witness’ or ‘testify’ to the religious faith for which they sacrifice their lives. But — bear witness to whom? To God, no doubt, so the martyr must believe, but also to his or her fellow beings, to an audience of human witnesses. Suppose that the martyr’s agony went unwitnessed, unnoticed, condemned simply to cold neglect? Here we touch on one of Dickens’s great motives: to expose to view the suffering that lacks all the glory of martyrdom, the spectacle, the public acclaim, the fame, the noise — the suffering that is by total contrast silent, unnoticed, neglected. It is a kind of anti-martyrdom. So in an important sense, the Book of Martyrs over which David pores at Peggotty’s represents a desirable ideal. He looks enviously at images of suffering that have been noticed, that have gone down into history, that have lodged in everyone’s memory.

However the Murdstones’ cold neglect is not the only form that the young David’s suffering takes. When he is sent away to Mr Creakle’s, he does suffer public humiliation. He is made to wear the placard that says ‘*Take care of him. He bites*’ (ch. 5). He is exposed to the eyes of others, as the young Dickens had himself been at Warren’s blacking warehouse, when he was set to work in the window with his mate Bob Fagin. Dickens recalled that the people used to stop and look, and sometimes quite a crowd would gather. This *is* spectacular, a burning shame that is the opposite of cold neglect; but it is still some way from martyrdom. Cruel and excessive as this punishment may be, David does not feel innocent because he has indeed bitten Mr Murdstone. For the best of reasons to be sure: he is desperately trying to defend himself. But this does not prevent, indeed it only aggravates the terrible beating he suffers. When it is over David crawls off the floor and looks at his face in the glass ‘so swollen, red, and ugly, that it almost frightened me. My stripes were sore and stiff, and made me cry afresh, when I moved; but they were nothing to the guilt I felt. It lay heavier on my breast than if I had been a most atrocious criminal, I dare say’ (ch. 4). So it is not just the crimson toad Judge Jeffries who can be swollen, red and ugly. This is what a victim can look like too.

We are touching here on some of the deepest and most powerful feelings in Dickens, feelings that are certainly connected to his own experience of humiliation at the blacking factory, famously recorded in the autobiographi-

cal fragment preserved by his friend John Forster.

It is wonderful to me how I could have been so easily cast away at such an age. . . . The deep remembrance of the sense I had of being utterly neglected and hopeless; of the shame I felt in my position; of the misery it was to my young heart to believe that, day by day, what I had learned, and thought, and delighted in, and raised my fancy and my emulation up by, was passing away from me, never to be brought back any more; cannot be written. My whole nature was so penetrated with the grief and humiliation of such considerations, that even now, famous and caressed and happy, I often forget in my dreams that I have a dear wife and children; even that I am a man; and wander desolately back to that time of my life.<sup>3</sup>

‘Famous and caressed and happy’ with a dear wife and children. Dickens wrote this in the spring of 1847 when he was in his mid 30s, just prior to the germination of his first great first-person novel, *David Copperfield*. Ten years later he was in his mid 40s: he was even more famous and no less caressed, but he was not happy, not happy at all. In 1857 his long marriage to Catherine Hogarth was about to explode. These were the years of crisis that led up to the creation of his fictional martyr Sydney Carton, and to the second of the two great novels written entirely in the first person, *Great Expectations*. (I say ‘entirely’ because it is important that half of *Bleak House* is also written in the first person.) Into both these novels, *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Great Expectations*, Dickens pours a great deal of his own guilt and shame, his self-pity and self-dislike — and his longing for vindication and reparation.

So what do I mean by ‘the martyr in Dickens’? I want to suggest that the martyr represents for Dickens an ideal of ‘good suffering’ that stands in contrast to both the kinds of suffering associated with the young David Copperfield (and with the young Dickens himself). The martyr dies bravely, heroically and even joyously in a good cause recognized and acknowledged by a world of witnesses. This is neither the suffering of cold neglect nor the suffering of shame, guilt and exposure to the derision of others. The martyr redeems both these ‘bad’ kinds of suffering. However — and this is the twist — because the martyr represents such a desirable ideal, it is particularly vulnerable to abuse. The role of the martyr provides all sorts of opportunity for self-aggrandisement, for spiritual pride and vanity, and for self-pity. So much depends on those witnesses. They can confirm but they can also reject the claims that the martyr makes for himself or herself. There is a particular temptation for martyrs to become their own audience in the interest of self-justification. This is a motive to which Dickens gives extraordinary creative

expression in the conception of Sydney Carton.

I want now briefly to sketch the range of Dickens uses of the word 'martyr', often in passing, for comical and satirical purposes. Here are Mr Toots and Mr Feeder at Dr Blimber's in *Dombey and Son*. Toots has got hold of a large green jar supposed to have been the property of the Prince Regent, and he and his friend are cramming snuff up their noses: 'In the course of which . . . they endured surprising torments with the constancy of martyrs: and, drinking table-beer at intervals, felt all the glories of dissipation' (ch. 14). Then there are the many women who pride themselves on their physical infirmities, like Mrs Crupp, David Copperfield's landlady when he is an article clerk and in love with Dora Spenlow. Mrs Crupp is 'a martyr to a curious disorder called "the spazzums," which was generally accompanied with inflammations of the nose, and required to be constantly treated with peppermint'. (ch. 26) Or Mrs Jarley in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, proprietress of the travelling waxworks, who remarks on the blessings of sleep. Little Nell asks her if she's had a bad night: 'I seldom have anything else, child', replied Mrs Jarley, with the air of a martyr: 'I sometimes wonder how I bear it' (ch. 28). Or again there is the absurd Mrs Witterley in *Nicholas Nickleby*, employer of Kate Nickleby and favourite patient of Sir Tumley Snuffim. Mrs Witterley prides herself on her nervous sensitivity but she is surpassed by her husband. He boasts to their aristocratic guests that the honour of their visit will be such a shock to his wife's system that she's sure to collapse tomorrow. 'Mrs Witterley is quite a martyr', one of them murmurs (ch.28).

Such women as this brandish their self-pity as an aggressive weapon. Like Mrs Skewton in *Dombey and Son*, who sees her daughter Edith flinch nervously from the window at the sight of Mr Carker outside: 'Don't tell me, my dear Edith, that you, so enviably self-possessed, are beginning to be a martyr too, like your unfortunately constituted mother!' (ch. 37) This kind of self-pity takes a particularly oppressive form when it is directed by a wife against a husband. These self-appointed martyrs include Gabriel Varden's wife in *Barnaby Rudge*, Joe Gargery's wife (Pip's sister) in *Great Expectations*, and Mrs Wilfer in *Our Mutual Friend*. Mrs Varden is described as 'A lady of what is commonly called an uncertain temper — a phrase which being interpreted signifies a temper tolerably certain to make everybody more or less uncomfortable . . .' (ch. 7). Especially her amiable husband Gabriel. She concludes a typical little skirmish with him about nothing, like this: "I know my duty. I need know it, I am sure. I am often obliged to bear it in mind, when my inclination perhaps would be for the moment to forget it. Thank you, Varden." And so, with a mighty show of humility and forgiveness, she folded her hands, and looked round again,

with a smile which plainly said “If you desire to see the first and foremost among female martyrs, here she is, on view!” (ch. 19) Or there is Mrs Wilfer, one of Dickens’s supremely self-appointed martyrs. Here she is on the melancholy celebration of their wedding anniversary.

The noble lady’s condition on these delightful occasions was one compounded of heroic endurance and heroic forgiveness. Lurid indications of the better marriages she might have made, shone athwart the awful gloom of her composure, and fitfully revealed the cherub [her husband] as a little monster unaccountable favoured by Heaven, who had possessed himself of a blessing for which many of his superiors had sued and contended in vain.

Her husband keeps on saying that he is afraid she is not enjoying herself. She responds:

‘My face might be a martyrdom, but what would that import, or who should know it, if I smiled?’ And she did smile; manifestly freezing the blood of Mr George Sampson [one of the guests] by so doing . . .’  
(Book III, ch. 4)

The real martyrs here, the reader infers, are the husbands.

But this is not always the case. In *The Old Curiosity Shop* Mrs Quilp’s female neighbours (and mother) condole with her in her husband’s absence. How terrible to be married to Mr. Quilp! ‘All the ladies then sighed in concert, shook their heads gravely, and looked at Mrs Quilp as at a martyr.’ But she is: ‘A pretty little, mild-spoken, blue-eyed woman, who having allied herself in wedlock to the dwarf in one of those strange infatuations of which examples are by no means scarce, performed a sound practical penance for her folly, every day of her life’. When Quilp arrives in person the neighbours’ courage instantly evaporates and they flee. Quilp tells his wife: ‘If ever you listen to these beldames again, I’ll bite you’ (ch.4). Or consider the scene at Warwick Castle as the doomed marriage looms between Edith and Mr Dombey. Watching the cold couple at a distance, the narrator imagines the pictures on the walls being ‘startled by the unnatural conjunction’ and protesting against it: ‘Loves and Cupids took to flight afraid, and Martyrdom had no such torment in its painted history of suffering’ (ch. 27). This is what lies ahead for the loveless couple. There are happy marriages in Dickens but they are matched by his sense of the torment in marital misery, a martyrdom that is most real when it is most silent.

When it is loudly voiced it is a different matter. In Dickens’s fiction people who proclaim themselves to be ‘martyrs’ are always demanding an

attention they don't deserve or a virtue they don't possess. In *Pickwick Papers* Sam Weller is invited to a footmen's soiree in Bath. An individual named Mr Whiffers announces that he has had to resign from job as a footman. Why? Because his employers made him eat cold meat. 'It is impossible to conceive the disgust which this avowal awakened in the bosoms of the hearers. Loud cries of "Shame!" mingled with groans and hisses, prevailed for a quarter of an hour.' Then 'the health of the interesting martyr was drunk in a most enthusiastic manner' (ch. 36). Some of Dickens's most shameless villains take the high moral ground in this way — Pecksniff for example. 'Perhaps there never was a more moral man than Pecksniff.' He refuses to shake John Westlock's hand but insists that he has forgiven John for the wrong he has done him. Westlock explodes with savage irony: "Here's a martyr!" (ch.2) Or Montague Tigg in the same novel, *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Tigg tries to get money out of Martin and Tom Pinch to pay his friend Chevy Slyme's bill at the Blue Dragon: "we have heard of Fox's Book of Martyrs, I believe, and we have heard of the Court of Requests, and the Star Chamber . . ." (108).

But even good characters can think better of themselves than they deserve. When Nicholas Nickleby is persuaded by the Cheeryble brothers to take part in a benevolent stratagem to help the penurious Madeline Bray, he is faced with a small ethical dilemma. Nicholas really ought to confess that he's in love with Madeline, but he persuades himself that by keeping it secret he will be acting selflessly, in the Cheerybles' interests. This is thoroughly disingenuous:

persuading himself that he was a most conscientious and glorious martyr, [he] nobly resolved to do what, if he had examined his own heart a little more carefully, he would have found, he could not resist. (ch. 46)

The very idea of conscious martyrdom seems to be tainted by deception or self-deception. Perhaps there is something to be said for his uncle Ralph Nickleby's hard-heartedness, his refusal to be taken in by shows of suffering. When his sister-in-law says that her husband died of 'a broken heart', Ralph comments sardonically that "it's the cant of the day. If a man can't pay his debts, he dies of a broken heart, and his widow's a martyr." (ch. 3)

Let me close this swift display of examples with two more auspicious references. The first involves one of Dickens's most admirable figures, Susan Nipper in *Dombey and Son*. As with David Copperfield at Peggotty's, it is interesting here to find Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* being associated with the idea of an abandoned child. Like Peggotty, Susan Nipper wants to protect her young charge, Florence Dombey, but unlike Peggotty, Susan challenges



the tyrannical father-figure, Mr Dombey. Indeed in boldly bearing witness to the truth, she stands as the equivalent of Shakespeare's Kent in *King Lear* or Paulina in *The Winter's Tale*:

'for I have seen her in her grief and I have seen her in her joy (there's not been much of it) and I have seen her with her brother and I have seen her in her loneliness and some have never seen her, and I say to some and all — I do!' and here the black-eyed shook her head, and slightly stamped her foot; 'that she's the blessedest and dearest angel is Miss Floy that ever drew the breath of life, the more that I was torn to pieces Sir the more I'd say it though I may not be a Fox's Martyr.' (ch. 44)

Of course she is not burned at the stake; she is only dismissed by Mrs Pipchin. But in her brave comical mode Susan Nipper is the novelist's ally. She is on his side, within the fictional text, giving a voice to the silent suffering child, the victim of cold neglect.

My second example is the selfless Daniel Doyce in *Little Dorrit*. His friend and business partner Arthur Clennam sympathizes with Doyce for the terrible disappointment he has suffered in the hopes he has had for his invention. But Doyce tells Clennam: 'I must not make a martyr of myself, when I am one of so large a company.' (Book II, ch. 8) So many characters in Dickens feel sorry for themselves, a few of them with good reason. Daniel Doyce does have good reason but he does not indulge in self-pity. This makes him good — but rather dull.

I want now to consider — and to contrast — two more weighty examples, figures who stand at the centre of their respective novels, Jo the crossing-sweeper in *Bleak House* and Sydney Carton in *A Tale of Two Cities*. Jo is certainly a victim. But is he a martyr? A martyr must surely die for something, in some good cause in which he believes. Poor Jo knows nothing of causes, but he is grateful to the nameless man who took pity on him, the self-named 'Nemo' 'who wos wery good to me'. Jo's gratitude represents for Dickens a primary ethical instinct. This is the good cause in which the narrator must speak for Jo, more fully than Jo can speak for himself. What is more, the narrator speaks not only *for* Jo. He speaks also *against* the forces of indifference that have left Jo to rot in cold neglect. The famous passage describing Jo's death closes with a great paragraph in which Dickens bears witness to the reader on behalf of the victim who cannot speak for himself. Let me lead up to it with some of the dialogue between Jo and the compassionate doctor, Allan Woodcourt.

‘Jo, my poor fellow!’  
 ‘I hear you, sir, in the dark, but I’m a gropin—a gropin—let me catch hold of your hand.’  
 ‘Jo, can you say what I say?’  
 ‘I’ll say anythink as you say, sir, for I knows it’s good.’  
 ‘OUR FATHER.’  
 ‘Our Father! — yes, that’s verry good, sir.’  
 ‘WHICH ART IN HEAVEN.’  
 ‘Art in Heaven — is the light a comin, sir?’  
 ‘Hallowed be — thy —’  
 The light is come upon the dark benighted way. Dead!  
 Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day. (ch. 47)

This is effective precisely because of the distance between the victim who suffers and the witness who speaks on his (or her) behalf. So much in *Bleak House* depends on a true acknowledgment of the distances between those suffering and those witnessing it. Think of Esther and Ada visiting the brick-maker’s family where they will see a child die before their eyes: ‘We both felt painfully sensible that between us and these people there was an iron barrier . . .’ (ch. 8).

However it can be a different matter when Dickens tries too closely to identify with the victim himself. I am thinking here of the fictional figure in which Dickens most directly, even flagrantly, embodied his idea of the martyr. I say ‘flagrantly’ because Sydney Carton so obviously fulfils a personal fantasy for Dickens himself. I do not believe that this represents the deepest or most successful aspect of Dickens’s creative imagination. The comparison and contrast with the great first-person novel that he went on to write immediately afterwards tells very distinctly in favour of the latter (*Great Expectations*). Nevertheless Sydney Carton is an unforgettable creation and the novel that is built around him, though it has never been a favourite with critics, has been ‘hugely popular with the general reader’ — and with audiences for the plays and films that have been made out of it (the latter starring Ronald Colman in 1935 and Dirk Bogarde in 1958).<sup>4</sup>

I say a ‘personal fantasy’. In his Preface to the novel Dickens tells us that he got the idea for Sydney Carton from the role he played in Wilkie Collins’s melodrama *The Frozen Deep* (1857). Dickens’s performance as Richard Wardour electrified audiences and fellow-actors. It also had a profound effect on Dickens himself. In Wardour he played the part of a man rejected in love who swears vengeance on the rival who has supplanted him.

The play is set in the Arctic and draws on the expeditions led by Sir John Franklin, the last of which came to a calamitous end. In the 1850s there were rumours that the starving crew had degenerated into cannibalism. Dickens refused to believe it and spoke up in defence of Franklin and his officers. Franklin was a Hero, even perhaps a martyr of sorts. And the role played by Dickens in Collins's play was certainly that of a martyr. Even more to the point, it was that of a martyr who redeems himself from the temptation to murder. Collins's title *The Frozen Deep* refers not only to its Arctic setting but also to the secret depths within Wardour himself. At the climax of the play Wardour has his rival at his mercy but instead of murdering him Wardour saves his life and returns him to the woman the two men have both loved. Wardour himself dies in her arms, as her grateful tears pour down on him.

Dickens had always enjoyed performing on stage, but Richard Wardour was something different. He wrote that he had been 'very much excited by the crying of two thousand people over the grave of Richard Wardour' and that this had put new ideas for a story into his head.<sup>5</sup> He had also been excited by first meeting the young actress Ellen Ternan, who took a small role in *The Frozen Deep* along with other members of her family, in Manchester. He started mulling over what would turn into *A Tale of Two Cities* in January 1858 but he did not truly begin writing until a year later. Meanwhile the experience of *The Frozen Deep* ignited or reinforced the idea of giving public readings from his own fiction. He had done this before for charity, but he decided now do it for profit. Despite the doubts of some of his friends, including Forster, the following April, 1858, he gave the first professional public reading of *A Christmas Carol*. A few weeks later his long marriage to Catherine Hogarth effectively came to an end when they separated.

I am not the first person to see a connexion between the distress of his private life and the impulse towards performance in public, as if he were seeking from the multitude of witnesses in public some affirmation or vindication. Not of course that the public readings entailed a lot of explicit agony on Dickens's part. He had too fine a sense of his audience's appetite for that: he made them cry, of course, but he also made them laugh. My point is that when Dickens sat down to write *A Tale of Two Cities* in early 1859 he was ready to try and reproduce in writing two things: both the excitement he had discovered from playing to full houses in public and the misery he had endured in his personal life, the fear of being unloved, the guilt at being unlovable, the yearning for intimate sympathy, forgiveness, pity. To put it simply, Dickens was ready to dramatize his own self-pity on the grandest of scales, against the most massive of backdrops, the French Revolution. The

novel contains some leading characters, along with innumerable minor ones, who could be thought of as victims and even martyrs to History. Charles Darnay *could* have been just such a figure, the Martyr to History. But instead Sydney Carton substitutes himself, the Martyr to — what — Love?

Sydney Carton believes himself to be unloved and perhaps unlovable. When we first meet him he is consumed by self-pity and self-contempt, a gloomy version of the jolly miller of Dee who sings 'I care for nobody, no! not I, / If nobody cares for me.' But Sydney does learn to care for Lucie Manette and he is partly redeemed by her pity. This means he is no longer alone in feeling sorry for himself; now he has found someone else who can share the task or even do it for him. Sydney concludes his redemption by sacrificing his life for the man Lucie does truly love, his double Charles Darnay. Sydney's martyrdom ensures that the happy surviving couple and their children will never be able to forget him. What a great gift and what a great burden he leaves them, dying like Christ on the Cross. Or like King Charles the Martyr, whose last word was 'Remember'. Or like the ghost of Hamlet's father, who tells his son to 'Remember me'. Early in the novel we are told 'that every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other' (ch. 3). Sydney Carton has been the epitome of this unreachable inner mystery. Yet in the extraordinary final paragraphs, the frozen deep melts. The writer enters Carton's innermost mind and gives voice to his vision of the future. Carton sees the namesake who will grow up to become 'foremost of just judges and honoured men' and will pass his story on to his own son, yet another Sydney Carton. The martyr's famous final words are not heard by anyone within the fictional world of the novel. They are directly addressed to us the readers: 'It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known.' Curtain. Applause.

Let me return in conclusion to *A Child's History of England*. You will remember the trouble that King Charles's Head causes Mr Dick in *David Copperfield*. Dickens was troubled and excited by the idea of people 'losing their heads'. We use the phrase as a figure of speech, but in Dickens's imagination the figurative passes easily into the literal and vice-versa. In the course of his own turbulent life there must have been occasions when Dickens felt he was losing his head, especially during the years in the late 1850s, around the break-up of his marriage. But unlike Mr Dick, Mr Dickens does not seem to have been particularly troubled by the fate of King Charles the Martyr. He describes without sentiment the emotional scene in which the King says farewell to his darling children and tells them that he is dying 'for the laws and liberties of the land'. Dickens comments: 'I am

bound to say that I don't think he did, but I dare say he believed so.' (vol. III, p. 220) The last moments of the execution scene itself are similarly vivid and matter-of-fact, with the King's memorable final injunction to Bishop Juxon: 'Remember!' But the writer's judgment is firm:

With all my sorrow for him, I cannot agree with him that he died 'the martyr of the people;' for the people had been martyrs to him, and to his ideas of a King's rights, long before. Indeed, I am afraid that he was but a bad judge of martyrs; for he had called that infamous Duke of Buckingham 'the Martyr of his Sovereign.' (vol. III, pp. 223-4)

In other words, King Charles stands as the supreme model for all those characters in Dickens who see themselves as martyrs. Anyone can claim to be a martyr. Anyone can call themselves anything, as Captain Hawdon calls himself 'Nemo'. Names and titles are conferred on us by others, as David Copperfield is called Trotwood, Brooks of Sheffield, Doady and Daisy. 'Martyr' is like 'Saint', a name that makes a very special claim. King Charles may have been 'a bad judge of martyrs' but who would claim to be a good judge of martyrs? Shouldn't we leave that to God?

This is why, for all Dickens's passionate desire to reward the just and to punish the unjust, his best position is not in the seat of judgment. He is a wonderful advocate, both for the defence and for the prosecution. But he is at his best — as perhaps all great artists are or should be — as a witness.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> References to *A Child's History of England* are to the first edition in three vols (1852-4). As for the novels referred to, given the variety of easily available good modern editions in which they can be read, I have supplied references to chapters only (or where relevant, to Book and chapter). The texts are taken from the Oxford World's Classics editions.
- <sup>2</sup> John Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, popularly known as the *Book of Martyrs* (1570 edn), p. 1937, and quoted by Dickens in *A Child's History*.
- <sup>3</sup> John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, 2 vols, (Everyman, 1966), pp. 21-3.
- <sup>4</sup> According to George Ford in 1968 *A Tale of Two Cities* had sold more copies than any other Dickens novel — some 300,000. This was 50,000 more than the next best-seller, *Great Expectations* (*Oxford Reader's Companion to Dickens*, ed. Paul Schlicke [Oxford: Oxford

University Press, 1999], p. 554).

- <sup>5</sup> Letter to Miss Burdett Coutts, 5 September 1857 (*The Letters of Charles Dickens*, Pilgrim Edition, vol. 8, 1856-1858, eds Graham Storey and Kathleen Tillotson [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995], p. 432).