

Popular Sentiments and Public Executions

Gail Marshall

In *The Warden* (1855), Anthony Trollope famously satirizes Thomas Carlyle as ‘Dr Pessimist Anticant’ and Charles Dickens as ‘Mr Popular Sentiment’. The latter is a powerful character who, by harnessing the feelings of his audience through his writing, is able to achieve the ‘great objects’ which were formerly the preserve of heavily burdened ‘reformers’:

In former times great objects were attained by great work. When evils were to be reformed, reformers set about their heavy task with grave decorum and laborious argument. An age was occupied in proving a grievance, and philosophical researches were printed in folio pages, which it took a life to write, and an eternity to read. We get on now with a lighter step, and quicker: ridicule is found to be more convincing than argument, imaginary agonies touch more than true sorrows, and monthly novels convince, when learned quartos fail to do so. If the world is to be set right, the work will be done by shilling numbers.¹

Of all such literary reformers, Trollope goes on, ‘Mr Sentiment is the most powerful’ (*The Warden*, p. 147). Trollope’s apprehension of such persuasive potency is demonstrated when he shows how Dickensian attention to a matter of popular outrage can prove both highly effective and appealing to the popular taste, and in the specific case of the almshouses in his novel, deeply misleading:

The artist who paints for the million must use glaring colours, as no one knew better than Mr Sentiment when he described the inhabitants of his almshouse; and the radical reform which has now swept over such establishments has owed more to the twenty numbers of Mr Sentiment’s novel, than to all the true complaints which have escaped from the public for the last half century. (*The Warden*, p. 149)

Trollope’s fears are both aesthetic and political, and to an extent are mediated through the language of decorum. He takes Dickens to task for a form of genre-bending which blurs the distinction between the two spheres of fiction and politics, realms that Trollope had also to traverse in his daily life as he moved between government work and the practice of his art. Trollope’s words reflect a view of Dickens that is still prevalent, namely that he works through the excitement of an emotional response, which he can then harness to his pedagogic ends, be they the reform of Yorkshire schools (in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–39)) or of the New Poor Law and its workings (in *Oliver Twist* (1837–38)). Trollope may doubt Dickens’s art, but he cannot fail, frustratedly, to perceive its affect and its effect:

There is no real life in Smike. His misery, his idiotcy, his devotion for Nicholas, his love for Kate, are all overdone and are incompatible with each other. But still the reader sheds a tear. Every reader can find a tear for Smike. Dickens's novels are like Boucicault's plays. He has known how to draw his lines broadly, so that all should see the colour.²

For Trollope, Dickens's popularity and the sentiment of his writings are almost synonymous.

This essay is concerned primarily with another scene that scarcely fails to provoke a tear: the execution at the hands of French revolutionaries of Sydney Carton in *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859). Trollope's aesthetic objections to Smike do not apply to Carton, an altogether more complex and self-knowing figure, operating within a novel that is itself also more sophisticated than *Nicholas Nickleby*. *A Tale of Two Cities* is not, of course, a campaigning novel, in the sense that *Nickleby* and Trollope's fictional *The Almshouse* were, but it does touch upon an issue of public concern with which Dickens had engaged over a number of years: public executions. This was a matter of topical debate throughout much of the nineteenth century, but the relationship between this aspect of the text and its political context defies Trollope's caricature of Dickens's campaigning persona and his indictment of a form of manipulative sentimentalizing. Dickens transmutes the scene of execution, on which he campaigns in his letters and early journalism, into a site which can articulate instead some of the most fundamental of human fears. Yet, while the depiction of Carton's death is replete with an emotion that is fundamentally irresistible, it is surely not a moment of instinctive, unreflective sentiment, and certainly not of the mawkishness that John Rignall finds in it.³ Rignall's analysis of the moment as part of a 'catastrophic continuum' of history is an otherwise sensitive account of a writer held captive by what Rignall himself describes as 'a rigorously linear, end-determined narrative and the grimly determinist vision of history which it articulates'.⁴ However, within the broad historical framework that Rignall discusses obtrudes an alternative narrative determined by the scaffold, or the gallows, scene of life-defining final moments, of moving speeches, and apparently of the most visceral possible reminder of the inexorability of narrative. This might be described as a sentimental narrative, but it is a form of narration that is far removed from Trollope's 'Mr Popular Sentiment'.

However we describe it, the impulse to respond fully and emotionally to this scene — whether in Dickens's text or on screen — is overwhelming and undeniable. But to see this in Trollopian terms as an unreflecting response to sentimental writing does little to

recognize the scene's multiple demands on the reader. It is a complex scene — narratologically, ideologically, and emotionally conflicted — and one which has attracted much critical attention over the years, as well as having become part of a common cultural heritage. It has its roots in the French Revolution, and in the public executions which Dickens witnessed in the 1840s, and by which he was disturbed and distressed. This essay will examine how Dickens comes to use a scene of public execution to such moving effect, and how he translates his own repulsion for public capital punishment into one of his fiction's most iconic moments. He seems to be recycling his repulsion here through a different medium than was evident in *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Oliver Twist*, and the outrage that those novels express at public mismanagement and cruelty. His ability to invoke an indignantly sympathetic mirroring experience in his audiences may be qualified by what Rignall, drawing on Walter Benjamin, calls an inability to '[blast] open the continuum of history by social and political action', but it might rather be the case that, in *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens looks instead to the articulation of undeniably perpetual concerns.⁵

I

'The horrors of the gibbet'

Dickens's views on capital punishment were expressed first through 'A Visit to Newgate' in *Sketches by Boz* (1836), in a series of letters to the *Daily News* in 1846, and in two letters to the *Times* in 1849. His position on capital punishment shifted across the years from one of arguing for the complete abolition of this form of punishment to the desire that any executions deemed necessary be carried out privately in front of only a few legally appointed witnesses. Dickens's initial grounds for unease with capital punishment are very various. He argues, ironically given the later experiences of Sydney Carton, that 'in the flush and fever of that flying interval between the Warrant and the Noose', he saw little chance for that 'living, lasting, growing' reformation which should be the object of punishment. Dickens contrasts this situation with the image of the prisoner who might instead '[work] on, in degradation and humility, from day to day; and striving, in its chains, and labour, and long-distant Hope, to make some atonement always'.⁶ He argues too, that the threat of capital punishment brings the law itself into disrepute by glamorizing the criminal, and invoking sympathy for him or her, rather than the victim. '[A]dventure and mystery' attended the burglar or highwayman 'when their offences were

visited with death', but with the rescinding of that punishment for all crimes but murder, they are 'mean, degraded, miserable criminals; and nothing more'.⁷ *A Tale of Two Cities* begins of course with Mr Lorry's flight to Dover through roads oozing mud and with the fear of the highwayman speeding the coach on its way. The shadow of the English gibbet thus precipitates a journey that ends with the French guillotine.

Dickens also suggests more controversially that putative murderers' recognition of the death penalty as a foregone conclusion for murder might actually provoke crime, writing:

A murder is committed in deliberate revenge. The murderer is at no trouble to prepare his train of circumstances, takes little or no pains to escape, is quite cool and collected, perfectly content to deliver himself up to the Police, makes no secret of his guilt, but boldly says, 'I killed him. I'm glad of it. I meant to do it. I am ready to die.' There was such a case the other day. There was such another case not long ago. There are such cases frequently. It is the commonest first exclamation on being seized.⁸

Dickens believes that the death penalty may pervert justice through juries' reluctance to condemn a prisoner who would inevitably die as a result of their action, and through their awareness that wrong verdicts offer no means of reparation. They have also, in Dickens's view, to balance the commission of relative wrongs: 'which is the greater wrong to society? To give this man the benefit of the possibility of his being mad [and therefore to evade capital punishment], or to have another public execution, with all its depraving and hardening influences?'.⁹

This ties in with Dickens's greatest anxiety, which concerns the effect of witnessing executions on the crowds that gathered around the scaffold as they would for any form of popular entertainment. Dickens's distress at the appetite of his fellow men for this spectacle is expressed several times, most vividly in his account of the crowd's behaviour at the execution of the Mannings, a married couple notorious for the murder of their lodger:

I believe that a sight so inconceivably awful as the wickedness and levity of the immense crowd collected at that execution this morning could be imagined by no man, and could be presented in no heathen land under the sun. The horrors of the gibbet and of the crime that brought the wretched murderers to it, faded in my mind before the atrocious bearing, looks and language, of the assembled spectators. When I came upon the scene at midnight, the *shrillness* of the cries and howls that were raised from time to time, denoting that they came from a concourse of boys and girls already assembled in the best places, made my blood run cold. [...] When the sun rose brightly — as it did — it

gilded thousands upon thousands of upturned faces, so inexpressibly odious in their brutal mirth or callousness, that a man had cause to feel ashamed of the shape he wore, and to shrink from himself, as fashioned in the image of the Devil.¹⁰

The range of animalistic imagery, the language of atrocity, the feeling of awful excess, in terms of the sheer numbers of people involved, as well as their moral depravity, become part of Dickens's register of responses to the revolutionary mob throughout *A Tale of Two Cities*.

That extract from Dickens's letter to the *Times* of 13 November 1849 distils his abhorrence of execution as a form of public spectacle that fundamentally degrades its spectators. It is part of an evolution of his responses to the figure of the mob and its relationship to capital punishment which begins with *Oliver Twist*. The crowds pursuing Bill Sikes to his death on Jacob's Island share some of the qualities of the French mob of *A Tale of Two Cities* and the mob witnessed in 1849, each putatively seeking justice for wrongs done, and inflamed by the moment. In *Oliver Twist*, the sounds of the crowd are particularly vividly evoked as 'impotent curses and execrations', 'one loud furious roar', 'a loud shout', 'cries and shrieks [... which] were dreadful'.¹¹ The crowd loses its human identity, being likened instead to a 'field of corn moved by an angry wind' or an 'unbroken stream' (*OT*, p. 410). The crowd here is an active part of the justice being meted out, forcing Sikes's hand, and thus being in some measure responsible for his end. This end is, of course, a form of capital punishment, engineered though it is by Sikes's own hand. Making a loop in a rope to lower himself to the ground and to escape, he is suddenly terrified by a haunting vision of the murdered Nancy's eyes, which causes him to stagger:

as if struck by lightning, he lost his balance and tumbled over the parapet. The noose was on his neck. It ran up with his weight, tight as a bow-string, and swift as the arrow it speeds. He fell for five-and-thirty feet. There was a sudden jerk, a terrific convulsion of the limbs; and there he hung, with the open knife clenched in his stiffening hand. (*OT*, p. 412)

This vivid description of Sikes's execution, however, achieves nothing of the horror of the public scenes of capital punishment later witnessed by Dickens, in part because the crowds, terrible though they are, are described through natural, organic metaphors that underpin the sense of natural justice invoked by the scene and this is augmented by Sikes's bringing his death on himself, by providing both its means and its impulse, in his guilty vision of Nancy's eyes. Sikes is self-condemned and punished, and has acted out, in

his circulating journeying since Nancy's death, a process of the recognition of his guilt, if not of the atonement that Dickens ideally sought. He has also fulfilled the path mapped out for him in the novel's 1841 Preface, where Dickens explains that he sought to show his criminals as they 'really do exist', 'to shew them as they really are, for ever skulking uneasily through the dirtiest paths of life, with the great, black, ghastly gallows closing up their prospect' (*OT*, p. liv).

One crucial difference, though, in Dickens's fictional and epistolary accounts of public hangings is that in *Oliver Twist* the body falls to the crowd's silence as Dickens adroitly and immediately shifts the reader's attention following Sikes's fall to the old chimney that 'bravely' took his weight, to Oliver's cries for release, and to Sikes's dog Bullseye, who jumps to his death. The spectacle of the hanging body is brief and shocking, but immediately overlaid by the forward thrust of the narrative and the death of a dog whose loyalty juxtaposes mutely and pathetically with Sikes's own lack of it. This is a highly theatrical episode in the novel, but at the end of it, spectators become actors and are reinstated in their proper relation to the novel's narrative. They are removed from the static moment of spectacle. In Dickens's letters, however, both spectator and 'actor' get caught up in the drama of the spectacle, and seem unable to reflect, as he would have them do, on the religious and other more sombre implications of the scene. The lure of notoriety, of the miserable impulse to 'die game [as they do] at the Minor Theatres and the Saloons', as he writes in the *Daily News* of 9 March 1846, is irresistible to the criminal. Of one of them Dickens writes that 'If he ever have another thought, it is for his genteel appearance on the scaffold; as when he begs the barber "not to cut his hair too short, or they won't know him when he comes out"'. On another occasion, Dickens is briefly hopeful that

there was some sense of Death and Eternity in the cry of "Hats off!" when the miserable wretch appeared; but I found, next moment, that they only raised it as they would at a Play — to see the Stage the better, in the final scene.¹²

The judges in Dickens's account are similarly unable to resist the drama:

[The] criminal judge is [...] a chief actor in the terrible drama of a trial, where the life or death of a fellow creature is at issue. No one who has seen such a trial can fail to know, or can ever forget, its intense interest. I care not how painful this interest is to the good, wise judge upon the bench. I admit its painful nature, and the judge's goodness and wisdom to the fullest extent — but I submit that his prominent share in the excitement of such a trial, and the

dread mystery involved, has a tendency to bewilder and confuse the judge upon the general subject of that penalty.¹³

Even they are seduced by their part in the spectacle, in ‘the attraction of repulsion’, as Dickens puts it. A potential solution to the distorting effect of the spectacle would be achieved if executions were held in private, a position Dickens would later go on to advocate, citing Henry Fielding’s views on this in his letter of 17 November 1849 to the *Times*. He quotes Fielding on the importance of managing effect to achieve the desired end: King Duncan’s murder offstage ‘will affect the audience with greater terror than if it was acted before their eyes’, just as an execution carried out in solemn secrecy might.

These closely argued letters are not those of Trollope’s ‘Mr Popular Sentiment’. Indeed, in his first letter on this subject to the *Daily News*, Dickens writes that ‘one of the evil concomitants of the Punishment of Death’ is ‘the morbid and odious sentimentality which has been exhibited of late years, in favour of ruffians utterly unworthy of it’.¹⁴ Rather, as Philip Collins argues in *Dickens and Crime*, the *Daily News* letters present the case against capital punishment very lucidly, with reference to various forms of objection, and types of evidence. Collins writes, ‘I cannot [...] recall [Dickens’s] *arguing* at such length about any other social question’.¹⁵ There is no recourse to sentiment in the letters, and scarcely any appeal to the feelings, except in Dickens’s registering his visceral abhorrence at the mob’s uncontrolled relish for the spectacle. At the end of *A Tale of Two Cities*, however, the reader can do little but make a heartfelt emotional response to Sydney Carton’s situation. This leaves the reader with the task of understanding how Dickens makes the transition from this reasoned mode of argument in his letters about a matter on which he feels strongly to the profoundly emotional response that is called into play by the fictional execution at the end of *A Tale of Two Cities*.

We can achieve some purchase on this question if we compare Carton’s execution to Carlyle’s narrative depictions of executions in *The French Revolution: A History* (1837), on which Dickens drew heavily whilst writing his novel. As he acknowledges in his Preface: ‘It has been one of my hopes to add something to the popular and picturesque means of understanding that terrible time, though no one can hope to add anything to the philosophy of Mr CARLYLE’S wonderful book.’¹⁶ He seems to create a distinction between his own additions to the ‘popular and picturesque’ understanding of the time, and the philosophy of Carlyle’s writings, but in this work Carlyle is nothing if not ‘picturesque’, albeit in a rather violent mode. His writing is dramatic and charged with the frantic

energies of the moment, much of which Dickens drew on for some of his own most disturbing scenes, such as the sharpening of the Revolutionaries' weapons in Book Three, Chapter Two, 'The Grindstone'.

Carlyle's treatment of French Revolution executions is disturbing in its prolonged immersion in hideous detail and particularly in the visceral immediacy of its present tense narration, which seems to have been chosen by Carlyle for its ability to articulate more effectively 'the haggard element of Fear!'.¹⁷ Furthermore, the present tense, unnervingly, does not date, and leaves its victims perpetually acting and re-enacting their struggle. The execution of Louis XVI, unlike Sydney Carton's, is not a dignified business:

The drums are beating: 'Taisez-vous, Silence!' he cries 'in a terrible voice, d'une voix terrible.' He mounts the scaffold, not without delay; he is in puce coat, breeches of grey, white stockings. He strips off the coat; stands disclosed in a sleeve-waistcoat of white flannel. The Executioners approach to bind him: he spurns, resists; Abbe Edgeworth has to remind him how the Saviour, in whom men trust, submitted to be bound. His hands are tied, his head bare; the fatal moment is come. He advances to the edge of the Scaffold, 'his face very red,' and says: 'Frenchmen, I die innocent: it is from the Scaffold and near appearing before God that I tell you so. I pardon my enemies; I desire that France — 'A General on horseback, Santerre or another, prances out with uplifted hand: 'Tambours!' The drums drown the voice. 'Executioners do your duty!' The Executioners, desperate lest themselves be murdered (*for Santerre and his Armed Ranks will strike, if they do not*), seize the hapless Louis: six of them desperate, him singly desperate, struggling there; and bind him to their plank. Abbe Edgeworth, stooping, bespeaks him: 'Son of Saint Louis, ascend to Heaven.' The Axe clanks down; a King's Life is shorn away. It is Monday the 21st of January 1793. He was aged Thirty-eight years four months and twenty-eight days.¹⁸

Carlyle's meticulous references sit bathetically alongside the drama of his narrative. Unlike Carton, the King struggles against his fate and the hands that bind him, and his last words are drowned out by drums. Later, his effects, even his blood, become ghastly souvenirs of the occasion:

There is dipping of handkerchiefs, of pike-points in the blood. Headsman Samson, though he afterwards denied it, (*His Letter in the Newspapers, Hist. Parl. ubi supra.*) sells locks of the hair: fractions of the puce coat are long after worn in rings. (*The French Revolution*, II, 69)

When the execution is over, Carlyle juxtaposes the epic and the everyday, chaos and custom, to disorientating effect: 'And so, in some half-hour it is done; and the multitude has all departed. Pastrycooks, coffee-sellers, milkmen sing out their trivial quotidian cries: the world wags on, as if this were a common day' (*The French*

Revolution, II, 70). This is an account of bewilderingly juxtaposed oppositions, which echo those we hear in the opening paragraph of *A Tale of Two Cities*. Carlyle registers the jarring of inappropriate responses to events that for him stand apart from the working-day world of commerce and the ‘trivial’ business of working and feeding, and a similar sense of outrage sounds through Dickens’s accounts of the executions that he witnessed, where, not the spectacle itself, but the crowds’ behaviour is most distressing to him. Both writers recognize, albeit in varying ways, the inappropriateness of responses that import the levity of the spectacle, the theatre, or the demands of everyday custom, into a scenario where a life is being violently ended, but both accounts more quietly also register the sheer difficulty of representing the ending of a life, the challenge of conveying intelligibly — and responsibly — the import of what has happened. Where Carlyle relies on the shock of the present tense, the jarring effort to realize the present event in all its brutality, Dickens resorts instead to sentiment, and a narrative mode that connects the moment of Carton’s death both with fears familiar to his readers, and with other expressions of sentiment in the novel.

II

Sentiment and Sydney Carton

For the narration of sentiment and the invoking of a primarily sentimental response are not of course confined to the end of *A Tale of Two Cities*. Interestingly, the three most obviously sentimental moments in the novel are all scenes of heightened emotion which cannot be fully realized dramatically before the viewer’s gaze. The first occurs at the end of Chapter 13, when Sydney Carton prophecies Lucie’s future life:

The time will come, the time will not be long in coming, when new ties will be formed about you — ties that will bind you yet more tenderly and strongly to the home you so adorn — the dearest ties that will ever grace and gladden you [...] when you see your own bright beauty springing up anew at your feet, think now and then that there is a man who would give his life, to keep a life you love beside you! (*ATTC*, p. 146)

Confident prophecy mingles with a present injunction and an unconditional promise of future devotion. In telling his devotion so movingly, Carton nonetheless struggles to place his love in a time and within a form of articulation where — and when — it can be fully realized, and the awkwardness of his narration speaks to his dilemma. His is a sentiment

that risks lapsing into sentimentality because it cannot find a present in which to locate itself, or a future to which it can confidently look. At this moment, the reader's emotional intelligence is called on to imagine hypothetical situations, rather than simply to watch the story unfold.

A similar technique surrounds Dickens's account of the death of Lucie and Charles Darnay's young son in Chapter 21, and indeed infiltrates the first pages of that chapter, when 'the echoing footsteps of years' blend actual events and fleeting fears for the future. Wrapped within the muffling metaphor and confusing temporality of the echoes of this chapter, the cruellest events are made less searing than they might be, and sentiment finds its voice:

Even when there were sounds of sorrow among the rest, they were neither harsh nor cruel. Even when golden hair, like [Lucie's] own, lay in a halo on a pillow round the worn face of a little boy, and he said, with a radiant smile, 'Dear papa and mamma, I am very sorry to leave you both, and to leave my pretty sister; but I am called, and I must go!' those were not tears all of agony that wetted his young mother's cheek [...] Thus, the rustling of an Angels' wings got blended with the other echoes, and they were not wholly of earth, but had in them that breath of Heaven. (*ATTC*, pp. 200–01)

Grief is mediated by the angels' wings of a religious belief that demands a conditionality of expression in this text. And this indeed seems to be the key to Dickens's invoking of sentiment in *A Tale of Two Cities*: it provides a register through which religious and emotional aspirations may be expressed, in contrast to the achieved suffering of the historical world. Its conditionality is further reinforced by the fact that both of the episodes to which I have referred are also embedded within a virtual temporal space, a conditional temporality that subverts the imperative of the historical narrative itself. The text cannot progress through, but only up to, moments of sentiment in which a compensatory future, existing beyond the material realm of pain and suffering, is envisaged.

These passages achieve their effectiveness most poignantly through the links made between the figure of a child and a future that is missing. Helen Small has similarly noted the 'inordinate burden of sentiment Nell has to bear' in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840–41), and that novel's 'determined sentimentalization of the spirituality of children'.¹⁹ In *A Tale of Two Cities*, the same equivalence between children, sentiment, and the spiritual is made, but rather than being primarily self-referential and child-centred, as it arguably is in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, here that confluence of powerful symbols is employed primarily

in giving form and voice to Sydney Carton's emotions. Carton's linking himself with the image of Lucie's child in Chapter 13 carries thoughts of him imperceptibly forward to the deathbed scene of Chapter 23, and the tears and angels of that moment in turn are recalled to our memories by the last and most famous example of sentiment in the novel in Carton's last words to the reader.

Those words are introduced thus by the narrator: 'If [Carton] had given an utterance to his [thoughts], and they were prophetic, they would have been these' (*ATTC*, p. 357). That is, these most moving words never took place, never had historical expression, were never heard, and operate alongside those episodes already mentioned in binding sentiment into a space beyond the historical at the end of this most historical of novels. Inspired perhaps by Carlyle, the words shift into the present tense:

I see Barsad, and Cly, Defarge, The Vengeance, the Juryman, the Judge, long ranks of the new oppressors who have risen on the destruction of the old, perishing by this retributive instrument, before it shall cease out of its present use. I see a beautiful city and a brilliant people rising from this abyss, and, in their struggles to be truly free, in their triumphs and defeats, through long years to come, I see the evil of this time and of the previous time of which this is the natural birth, gradually making expiation for itself and wearing out.

I see the lives for which I lay down my life, peaceful, useful, prosperous and happy, in that England which I shall see no more. I see Her with a child upon her bosom, who bears my name. I see her father, aged and bent, but otherwise restored, and faithful to all men in his healing office, and at peace. I see the good old man, so long their friend, in ten years' time enriching them with all he has, and passing tranquilly to his reward.

I see that I hold a sanctuary in their hearts, and in the hearts of their descendants, generations hence. I see her, an old woman, weeping for me on the anniversary of this day. I see her and her husband, their course done, lying side by side in their last earthly bed, and I know that each was not more honoured and held sacred in the other's soul, than I was in the souls of both.

I see that child who lay upon her bosom and who bore my name, a man winning his way up in that path of life which once was mine. I see him winning it so well, that my name is made illustrious there by the light of his. I see the blots I threw upon it, faded away. I see him, fore-most of just judges and honoured men, bringing a boy of my name, with a forehead that I know and golden hair, to this place — then fair to look upon, with not a trace of this day's disfigurement — and I hear him tell the child my story, with a tender and a faltering voice.

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. (*ATTC*, pp. 357–58)

As well as echoing Carlyle, these words, punctuated so effectively and movingly by 'I see', an action Carton will never fulfil, also recall Dickens's earliest letter on the subject

of public hangings in their rhetoric. Pondering the ‘flush and fever’ between the ‘Warrant and the Noose’ mentioned above, Dickens goes on, in horrified prophecy of that period:

I see the dreadful hurry of the time, expressed in every word and action that comes leaking through the prison walls, to be caught up by the thirsty crowd outside. I see Hope living on, and know it must live on, in some faint shape, until the Bell begins to toll. I see the restless mind wandering away, miserably, from the main theme of the repentant letter, written in the cell; and while it tells of trust and steadfastness, having power to settle nowhere. I see the abject clinging on to life, which clutches at the hangman’s hand, and blesses him beneath the beam. I see, in everything, the same wild, rapid, incoherent dream: of which I believe the penitence and preparation to be, at least, as unsettled and unsubstantial as any other part. And I believe this, because of the natural constitution of the human mind, and its ordinary workings at such a frightful pass.²⁰

The horror of this prophecy of course is that it is entirely lacking in sentiment and recognizes the condemned man’s failure even to see the future that he will not have. Children, as poignant signs of that future, have no place in this narrative, which is trapped in the inevitably passing present. The impending execution removes the prisoner from a realm of shared emotions.

At the end of *A Tale of Two Cities*, we do not see the politicized use of sentiment parodied by Trollope, nor a calculated invoking of ready emotions, nor even what Miriam Bailin has described somewhat cynically perhaps as an act whereby Carton rivalrously ‘cancels Darnay from his own hereditary line’.²¹ Rather, here, as elsewhere in the novel, sentiment registers some very profound human fears of a wasted life, of a forgotten life that themselves produce the final page’s plangent effect. It is that, rather than simply the spectacle of Carton’s own nobility and self-sacrifice, that generates the emotional and not simply sentimental effect of the novel’s conclusion. Carton dies in the antagonistic setting of a public execution, in front of a crowd, which, like those other crowds in London whom Dickens had found so abhorrent, refuses to recognize the enormity of what it has come to see. This French audience, like that which witnessed Louis XVI’s death, also acts as a synecdoche of the world beyond the individual, a world that can forget. Dickens has Carton seek to cheat death, time and forgetting, to effect a guarantee of being remembered, and it is that desperate act to forestall insignificance that is so poignant, moving, and universally recognizable.

A Tale of Two Cities ends in prolepsis and the novel is all the more poignant for it. The scene of execution distils a site of anxiety, Sydney Carton’s anxiety to be understood,

recognized and remembered in all the complexity of his humanity. This is born out of Dickens's witnessing the crowds' responses to public executions, responses that fail entirely to recognize the humanity of the prisoner, and have the effect also of denying the crowds' own humanity, thus enabling the barbarous practice of execution to continue. In narrating a scene that calls humanity into being through its invoking of shared sentiments, Dickens makes a potent case against capital punishment. He also recognizes, as Trollope could not, the active, legitimately affective power of sentiment.

¹ Anthony Trollope, *The Warden* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), p. 147. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

² Trollope, *An Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 249.

³ Rignall writes: 'Even in [Carton's] famous mawkish last words it is not the heroic deed but the long-sought repose, the "far, far better rest" that receives the final emphasis' (John Rignall, 'Dickens and the Catastrophic Continuum of History in *A Tale of Two Cities*', *English Literary History*, 51.3 (1984), 575–87 (p. 586)).

⁴ Rignall, 'Dickens and the Catastrophic Continuum of History', p. 586.

⁵ Rignall, 'Dickens and the Catastrophic Continuum of History', p. 586.

⁶ Charles Dickens, *Daily News*, 24 February 1846.

⁷ Dickens, *Daily News*, 28 February 1846.

⁸ Dickens, *Daily News*, 9 March 1846.

⁹ Dickens, *Daily News*, 28 February 1846.

¹⁰ *The Times*, 14 November 1849, p. 4; also reprinted in *The Pilgrim Edition of the Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Graham Storey and K. J. Fielding, 12 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), V (1847–49), 644–45 (emphasis in original).

¹¹ Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 410–11. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

¹² Dickens, *Daily News*, 28 February 1846.

¹³ Dickens, *Daily News*, 16 March 1846.

¹⁴ Dickens, *Daily News*, 23 February 1846.

¹⁵ Philip Collins, *Dickens and Crime* (London: Macmillan, 1965), p. 227 (emphasis in original).

¹⁶ Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), p. xiii. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

¹⁷ Carlyle writes in fuller explanation of his choice: 'For indeed it is a most lying thing that same Past Tense always: so beautiful, sad, almost Elysian-sacred, "in the moonlight of Memory", it seems; and seems only. For observe: always, one most important element is surreptitiously (*we not noticing it*) withdrawn from the Past Time: the haggard element of Fear! Not there does Fear dwell, nor Uncertainty, nor Anxiety; but it dwells here; haunting us, tracking us; running like an accursed ground-discord through all the music-tones of

our Existence; — making the Tense a mere Present one!’ (Carlyle, *The French Revolution*, 2 vols (London: Chapman and Hall, 1885), II, 44 (emphasis in original). Further references are given after quotations in the text.)

¹⁸ [*Newspapers, Municipal Records, &c. &c. in Hist. Parl.* xxiii. 298–349] Deux Amis [ix. 369–373], Mercier [*Nouveau Paris*, iii. 3g8.] (Carlyle, *The French Revolution*, II, 69).

¹⁹ Helen Small, ‘The Bounded Life: Adorno, Dickens and Metaphysics’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 32 (2004), 547–63 (p. 554).

²⁰ Dickens, *Daily News*, 24 February 1846.

²¹ Miriam Bailin, “‘Dismal Pleasure’: Victorian Sentimentality and the Pathos of the Parvenu’, *English Literary History*, 66 (1999), 1015–32 (p. 1030). Jeremy Tambling similarly argues that ‘[t]here is to be no heir for Charles Darnay: he is excluded from the prophetic future’, and quotes approvingly John Kucich’s argument that Carton’s triumphing over Darnay redeems his death from suggestions of waste (Jeremy Tambling, *Dickens, Violence and the Modern State: Dreams of the Scaffold* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), pp. 153–54).