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II. 18 *A Tale of Two Cities*

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Abstract: *A Tale of Two Cities* is one of Dickens's shortest and possibly one of his most atypical and puzzling novels. For French readers in particular – whose history this novel purports to reinterpret – The novel proves especially challenging. This article provides new insights into the understanding of this perplexing work. It argues that the complexity of the novel stems from its interculturality – especially in relation to translation – as well as from the historical, political, philosophical and sociological perspectives it engages with, and the interdisciplinary connections it thus establishes. The novel's puzzling quality also derives from its intricate handling of the concept of identity and its multifarious ramifications, that involve gender but also revolutionary crowds. Moreover, the elaborate combination of strong visual elements, added to an as yet underexplored but just as intense and multifaceted kinaesthetic dimension, enhance our reading of *A Tale of Two Cities*, and open up new possibilities for performing and adapting the novel.

Keywords: interculturality; translation; history; politics; sociology; philosophy; visual studies; identity; crowds, kinaesthesia, performance; adaptation.

A Tale of Two Cities is by no means the most popular Dickens novel in France, possibly because it tackles, in what the French may deem a somewhat unsubtle way, a rather traumatic episode of French history, namely the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution. In this respect, French translators of *A Tale of Two Cities* are known to have toned down the

gruesome and terrifying revolutionary episodes depicted in Dickens's novel, to make them more palatable to a French readership, whose collective psyche is still haunted by the trauma that pervades evocations of Revolutionary Terror¹. What this transformation of the original text demonstrates, is that translations of *A Tale of Two Cities* not only raise questions regarding interculturality, but also imply memory, and sometimes trauma. In this respect, an extensive study of the novel in the light of French memory, with the help of memory studies and possibly of trauma studies, would certainly yield a deeper understanding of the effects upon the French psyche of the novel's representation of Revolutionary Terror². A revealing anecdote seems to corroborate the need for such a memorial and intercultural undertaking: on the occasion of the bicentenary of the Revolution in 1989, the English Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, did not just commit a diplomatic *faux-pas*, but revealed an interesting amnesia of sorts on the part of the English government: she offered the French President, François Mitterrand, a copy of *A Tale of Two Cities*!

Now the question of the translation of *A Tale of Two Cities* from English into French can also fruitfully and paradoxically be reversed. One may, indeed, consider the novel as a skilful translation of the French Revolution into English. How did Dickens manage to translate this event for British readers whose imagination was also haunted by the spectre of this disturbing historical episode? For one thing, his transcription of a very French historical event into the English language and culture implied, among other things, the use of a sophisticated Anglo-French parlance in the form of English sprinkled with gallicisms³. This idiom is not just gimmicky, it highlights some of the troubling metaphysical questions that the French Revolution raises. Let us take the following dialogue from the famous wine cask scene:

‘How goes it, Jacques?’ said one of these three to Monsieur Defarge. ‘Is all the spilt wine swallowed?’

‘Every drop, Jacques,’ answered Monsieur Defarge.

... ‘It is not often,’ said the second of the three, addressing Monsieur Defarge, ‘that many of these miserable beasts know the taste of wine, or of anything but black bread and death. Is it not so, Jacques?’

‘It is so, Jacques,’ Monsieur Defarge returned. (I. 5, 36)

‘*Comment ça va*’ has come to mean in French ‘how things stand in the present circumstances’, but in the English transposition of this set phrase, ‘How goes it’, the verb ‘to go’ makes the sentence sound stilted. This preserves and highlights the sense of motion contained in the verb ‘to go’. Defarge’s question somehow seems to already foreshadow the vast crowd movements that will typify the French Revolution as depicted later in the novel. In contrast to this potential movement, the French tag questions and answers ‘*n’est-ce pas*’ and ‘*c’est ainsi*’, which would normally be translated into English as ‘do they?’, and as ‘no they don’t’, are rendered literally in the novel by ‘It is not often’, ‘Is it not so’ and ‘It is so’, tags emphasising the verb ‘to be’. This unexpected translation emphasizes the duration of the people’s wretchedness, thereby foregrounding a state of stasis, which paves the way for discontent and resentment.

Reverse translation also includes the glossing in English of French revolutionary terms like ‘tricoter’ (knitting), ‘lanterne de potence’ (swinging lamps) or ‘Guillotine.’⁴ These words do not make sense without a background knowledge of their meaning in French culture or of the meaning of the French words they translate. Such is the case with Madame Defarge’s knitting. Madame Defarge’s needlework clashes with the social and literary model of the Angel in the House with which Victorian readers were familiar. Her knitting is not connected to the private sphere, but foreshadows her role as the leader of revolutionary women in the Storming of the Bastille (II. 21 and 22), and later as the head of the French ‘*tricoteuses*’ (II. 15) whom she epitomizes. However, Dickens chose not to use the French

word ‘*tricoteuse*’, which might have immediately brought to mind the image of French women counting heads at the foot of the Guillotine. Instead, Dickens gradually infuses the English verb with its French meaning that materialises in the final image of the Vengeance and her friends sitting with their knitting at the foot of the Guillotine and waiting in vain for Madame Defarge’s arrival (III. 15, 358). These examples clearly bring to light more of the complex intercultural considerations raised by the novel⁵.

In addition to intercultural interpretations, *A Tale of Two Cities* lends itself to interdisciplinary critical readings that engage with the historical, political, philosophical and sociological issues that it tackles. Let us leave aside the already well-known critical debates as to whether or not *A Tale of Two Cities* can be considered as a historical novel, with some critics claiming that the novel does not contain sufficient historical evidence, and others arguing that Dickens offers a more or less convincing private and personal resolution to the political turmoil of a historically troubled period⁶. Let us consider instead the very materiality of historical evidence and how the novel deals with this issue. For one thing, a close examination of Dickens’s manuscript of the novel by Joel Brattin has revealed interesting new interpretations based on textual revisions that bring to light the existence of other doubles for Sidney Carton⁷. But the materiality of paper and documents is tackled in the plot itself which voices anxiety about the disintegration and disappearance of such historical testimonies, as has been shown by Céline Prest⁸.

In keeping with the conventions of historical novels, the French Revolution in *A Tale of Two Cities* is not just a backdrop, it is part and parcel of a plot which weaves together national history and the individual and fictional destinies of the Manette family. Strikingly, for French readers like myself, Dickens’s novel exemplifies a definition of history in keeping with what the famous historian Jules Michelet was to call, in his *History of France* (1869), a ‘complete resurrection’. By this, Michelet meant a historical approach that was not just

analytical and interpretative, but aimed at re-enacting events in writing. Though theorized by Michelet, this form of Romantic history had already been put into practice earlier by Thomas Carlyle in England – particularly in his *History of the French Revolution* (1837), a book which inspired Dickens's novel.

Besides exemplifying a form of romantic history, *A Tale of Two Cities* also uses a triple temporality that foreshadows the three-tiered view of historical time delineated by Fernand Braudel, another prominent French historian¹⁰. Braudel highlighted the existence of a slow, geographical evolution of time, alongside the quicker pace of social history, and the even faster momentum of event-driven history. *A Tale of Two Cities* strikingly prefigures these three temporal levels, identifiable in the novel first, as the gradual changes in nature wrought by the growing forests of Norway and France alluded to at the beginning of the novel (I. 1, 8); then, as the social history of two nations, England and France, and finally, as the accelerations of event-driven history embodied by the revolutionaries – this revolutionary history also standing for what would later be called 'history from below'.

Another interesting interdisciplinary connexion established by *A Tale of Two Cities* is the translation or the transposition of time into place, in other words of history into geography. Indeed, the novel maps a historical event into the geography of two cities. Moreover, this geography – that associates different scales, such as the microcosm of the Faubourg Saint Antoine neighbourhood with the geography of France and its interactions with the universe – is far from static: it evolves as the Revolution spreads. Sara Thornton and Michael Hollington have looked into this connection of space and time. Thornton has considered space not just horizontally but also vertically by showing how *A Tale of Two Cities* superimposes Paris and London stereoscopically, thus delivering a new political message which runs counter to the popular understanding that the novel was primarily hostile to the French Revolution¹¹. Hollington associates time and space in *A Tale of Two Cities* via

the themes of travel, mobility, and restlessness¹². Further investigations could involve mobility studies, since the novel is filled with journeys and displacements well-worth looking into¹³.

A Tale of Two Cities offers a poetic transfiguration of the French Revolution that is symbolic, epic, fantastic, and at times quasi-hallucinatory¹⁴.

For sequel see “A Tale of Two Cities”, in John Jordan, Bob Patten et Cathy Waters (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Dickens*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 260-272.

Further reading

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¹ See Christine Raguét, 'Terror Foreign or Familiar – Pleasure on the Edge: Translating *A Tale of Two Cities* into French,' *Dickens Quarterly* 26.3 (September 2009): 175-186.

² In this respect, Laurent Bury has studied remembering and dismembering in the novel in *Liberty, Duality, Urbanity: Charles Dickens's A Tale of Two Cities* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2012), 133–141.

³ Sylvère Monod, *Dickens the Novelist*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968.

⁴ See Nathalie Vanfasse, ‘Translating the French Revolution into English in *A Tale of Two Cities*,’ *Cahiers Victoriens et Edouardiens* 78 (Autumn 2013): n. pag. Web. 3 June 2016. Doi: 10.4000/cve.776.

⁵ See Murray Baumgarten ‘Writing the Revolution,’ *Dickens Studies Annual* 12 (1983): 161–76.

⁶ See Irene Collins, ‘Charles Dickens and the French Revolution,’ *Literature and History* 1.1 (1990): 40–58; Barton R Friedman, ‘Antihistory : Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*,’ in *Fabricating History: English Writers on the French Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988); Ruth Glancy, ‘*A Tale of Two Cities*’: *Dickens’s Revolutionary Novel*.

⁷ Joel Brattin, ‘Sidney Carton’s Other Doubles,’ in *Dickens in the New Millennium*, edited by N. Vanfasse, M-A. Coste, C. Huguet and L. Bouvard, *Cahiers Victoriens et Edouardiens* (February 2012): 209–223.

⁸ Céline Prest, ‘Recalled to Life: Exhuming Documents in *A Tale of Two Cities*,’ in *Charles Dickens: A Tale of Two Cities*, edited by J-P. Naugrette et al., *Cercles* 31 (2013): 115–124.

¹⁰ See Fernand Braudel’s preface to *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (London: Collins, 1972).

¹¹ Sara Thornton, ‘Paris and London Superimposed: Urban Seeing and New Political Space in Dickens’s *Tale of Two Cities*,’ *Etudes Anglaises* 65 (2012–2013): 302-314.

¹² See Michael Hollington, *A Tale of Two Cities* (Paris, Atlande, 2012).

Hollington connects the historical notion of Revolution to sundry cyclical movements in space and he links spatially linear patterns to linearity in time.

¹³ On mobility studies see Jonathan Grossman, *Charles Dickens’s Networks : Public Transport and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Ruth Livesey, *Writing the Stage Coach Nation: Locality on the Move in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹⁴ For analyses of patterns of imagery in the novel see Ruth Glancy 'A Tale of Two Cities': *Dickens's Revolutionary Novel*; Tetzeli von Rosador, Kurt. 'Metaphorical Representations of the French Revolution in Victorian Fiction,' *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 43 (1988): 1–23.