



RECALLED TO LIFE EXHUMING DOCUMENTS IN *A TALE OF TWO CITIES*

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Although the words "recalled to life" [*A Tale of Two Cities* : 14]¹ are specifically applied to Doctor Manette's symbolical exhumation from the Bastille,² the idea of resurrection is crucial in the novel, which continuously brings up the past in the guise of characters, bodies, narratives, objects and trauma.

In *A Tale of Two Cities*, resurrection is coupled with the threat of dissolution: what was inhumed and subsequently disinterred might turn to dust. The dread of such a fate appears very early in the novel, in Jarvis Lorry's nightmarish anticipation of "dig[ging] someone out of a grave" [18]: "[Lorry] in his fancy would dig, and dig, dig—now with a spade, now with a great key, now with his hands—to dig this wretched creature out. Got out at last, with earth hanging about his face and hair, he would suddenly fan away to dust" [18-19].

This fantasy would have sounded familiar to a Victorian reader who would have made the connection with the tales of exploration of the Egyptian tombs. Indeed, thanks to the development of archaeology, the nineteenth century rediscovered ancient Egypt and developed an obsession for its tombs, mummies and papyri [DAY]. Narratives of exploration were extremely popular, for example those of Giovanni Battista Belzoni, whose tales of tomb excavations tell the reader that the exhumed body — of flesh or paper — is likely to dissolve in the act of exposure. This is expected of something that has been buried for a long time; what, on the contrary, arouses our suspicion and wonder is precisely that which remains intact.

A Tale of Two Documents

In *A Tale of Two Cities*, if men are buried alive in cells, they strive to regain

¹ All references to *A Tale of Two Cities* are taken from the Oxford World's Classics edition, 2008.

² The Bastille is repeatedly compared to a tomb in the novel. In his narrative, Alexandre Manette insists on it being his "living grave" [318].

control over their destinies by inhuming their own words transcribed on paper, thus attempting to preserve their own speech, if not their own body, through time. These manuscripts become guardians of memory, records meant to carry a particular voice through the years and shield it from annihilation and alteration: "Some pitying hand may find it there, when I and my sorrows are dust" [306]. However, as the novel shows, the act of inhumation has a dual nature: it can obliterate as well as preserve.

The first manuscript is mentioned in the chapter "Hundreds of people" in which Darnay tells the story of a document which was discovered in one of the cells of the Tower of London. The other document is the narrative of Doctor Manette, recording the circumstances of his imprisonment in the North Tower, and denouncing the Evremonde family for the crime of having him falsely arrested and buried alive, as a witness of their mistreatment of a peasant family. The two manuscripts are bound to be compared: written by two prisoners from two Towers — the Tower of London and the North Tower — and meant to bear and protect a secret, they were both concealed and buried, lying in wait and awaiting discovery. However, the Tower of London manuscript cannot be read, for it is reduced to ashes as soon as it is disinterred: the record has dissolved and so has the past. Manette's manuscript, on the other hand, emerges perfectly intact after twenty-seven years of concealment.³ This article will discuss the implications of the preservation of Manette's document, and explore what circumstances or tricks of composition allowed it to survive all those years.

Profaning necropolises

The tales of exploration of Ancient Egypt might give a hint how to interpret the fates of these two documents. A first analogy can be established between the exploration of the two Towers in *A Tale of Two Cities*, and the exploration of Egyptian tombs by Belzoni; indeed, these necropolises are described in quite a similar fashion:

I perceived immediately (...) by the hieroglyphics in basso-relievo, that I had at length reached the entrance of a large and magnificent tomb. I hastily passed along this corridor and came to a staircase twenty-three feet long, at the foot of which, I entered another gallery thirty-seven feet three inches long, where my progress was suddenly arrested by a large pit thirty feet deep and fourteen by twelve feet three inches wide.

³ Manette starts writing his manuscript in December 1767 and buries it in the chimney of his cell, hoping that it will be found eventually. Indeed, the document is discovered during the storming of the Bastille in 1789, that is to say twenty-two years after it was written.

[BELZONI : 9]

Through gloomy vaults where the light of day had never shone, past hideous doors of dark dens and cages, down cavernous flights of steps, and again up steep rugged ascents of stone and brick, more like dry waterfalls than staircases, Defarge, the turnkey, and Jacques Three, linked hand and arm, went with all the speed they could make. (...)

The turnkey stopped at a low door, put a key in a clashing lock, swung the door slowly open, and said, as they all bent their heads and passed in:

"One hundred and five, North Tower!"

(...)

"Pass that torch slowly along these walls, that I may see them," said Defarge to the turnkey.

The man obeyed, and Defarge followed the light closely with his eyes.

"Stop!—Look here, Jacques!"

"A. M.!" croaked Jacques Three, as he read greedily.

"Alexandre Manette," said Defarge in his ear, following the letters with his swart forefinger, deeply engrained with gunpowder. "And here he wrote 'a poor physician.' And it was he, without doubt, who scratched a calendar on this stone." [*A Tale of Two Cities* : 209-210]

Even though Belzoni's text is much more scientific, giving the exact measurements of the corridors and galleries, the two texts echo each other, describing hasty progress through stairs, halls and (literal and metaphorical) burial chambers.

Moreover, the walls of both Towers and the Egyptian tomb described by Belzoni are covered in mysterious carved inscriptions and hieroglyphics that cannot be easily deciphered (see quoted passages above). The messages in the Tower of London prove particularly difficult to read.

Every stone of its inner wall was covered by inscriptions which had been carved by prisoners—dates, names, complaints, and prayers. Upon a corner stone in an angle of the wall, one prisoner, who seemed to have gone to execution, had cut as his last work, three letters. They were done with some very poor instrument, and hurriedly, with an unsteady hand. At first, they were read as D. I. C.; but, on being more carefully examined, the last letter was found to be G. There was no record or legend of any prisoner with those initials, and many fruitless guesses were made what the name could have been. At length, it was suggested that the letters were not initials, but the complete word, DIG. [96]

This passage may reflect the difficulties faced by tomb raiders, explorers and Egyptologists, despite their familiarity with the environment: indeed,

several attempts are necessary to decipher the inscriptions on the wall, since interpretative difficulties are superimposed — identifying the letters, and understanding their semantic meaning — thus giving the symbols a hieroglyphic quality. In the three cases, however mysterious it is, the writing on the wall is eventually deciphered and points the way to a tomb containing a body, be it of flesh or paper.

In *A Tale of Two Cities*, the two documents are found under a stone that needs to be removed, very reminiscent of the cover of a sarcophagus in that respect.

The floor was examined very carefully under the inscription, and, in the earth beneath a stone, or tile, or some fragment of paving, were found the ashes of a paper, mingled with the ashes of a small leathern case or bag. [96-97]

In a hole in the chimney, where a stone has been worked out and replaced, I find a written paper. This is that written paper. I have made it my business to examine some specimens of the writing of Doctor Manette. This is the writing of Doctor Manette. [305]

In undergoing exhumation, both documents will have to follow a vertical itinerary to emerge to the surface of the present. In this respect, Defarge is closely related to Jerry Cruncher: both are resurrectionists, digging up bodies of flesh or paper to exploit their value. The same process applies in archaeology, which consists in returning to previous traces by digging down through the strata. However, the emergence of an underground world is unnatural and threatening: the expected trajectory is supposed to be that of descent, not of ascent. The dangers of such verticality [GUILLAUD] provide the basis for numerous nineteenth-century novels: the progress of science with archaeology and paleontology verticalised the imagination and recalled from death underworld creatures such as vampires, mummies, spectres, living-deaths and other undead revenants, even dinosaurs (as seen in the novels of Bram Stoker, Sheridan Le Fanu, Theophile Gautier, M.R. James, and Conan Doyle) which always represent a threat to living human beings. More specifically, the excavation of Egyptian tombs engendered quite a number of "mummy curse" tales⁴ in Europe and the United States, which shows how these explorations appealed to the Western imagination. In these novels, exhumations are akin to a profanation, and are inevitably followed

⁴ To name just a few: "Lost in a Pyramid; or the Mummy's Curse" by Louisa May Alcott (1869); *The Mummy! A Tale of the Twenty-Second Century* by Jane Loudon (1828); "After Three Thousand Years" by Jane G. Austin (1868); "The Mummy's Soul" (anonymous novel written in 1862).

by dire consequences.

The Revenge of the manuscript

A Tale of Two Cities opposes the fates of two documents. One of them disintegrates into dust, as it should, and has no actual influence on the diegesis. Only this disintegrating manuscript does have a purpose: highlighting and serving as a counterpart to the other document – Manette’s manuscript. In this respect, it belongs to the realm of the Uncanny. Indeed, the document seems perfectly preserved: it is fully transcribed in the novel, no element of the story seems to be missing and everything seems very legible. With this in mind, let us recall that the manuscript is a very long document taking up a whole chapter of the novel, entirely made of scraps. A first question arises: where did Manette find these scraps? Unlike the Marquis de Sade, Manette had no visitors who could slip him pieces of paper. Another troubling element about this manuscript is its lifespan of twenty-seven years,⁵ which is extremely long by eighteenth-century standards, and even by Dickens’s standards. In his novels, paper usually disintegrates, being an organic matter bound to fall apart, as the fate of the Tower of London manuscript shows, annihilated like the prisoner who wrote it. However, just as Manette does not disintegrate into dust as in Lorry’s fancy, his own manuscript uncannily resists the weight of the years as well as the excavation: both Manette and the manuscript are not only dug up but recalled to life.⁶ Many questions arise: why has Manette’s manuscript

⁵ The document is discovered twenty-two years after it was written, and it is read during Darnay’s trial five years after its discovery, which means that it has survived for twenty-seven years.

⁶ In *A Tale of Two Cities*, the fates of documents and their writers seem more than linked: the novel seems to suggest an identity between (wo)man and manuscript. For instance, with Madame Defarge’s death, the coded signs of her knitted registers cannot be deciphered anymore, for she was the only one to master their meaning as this exchange suggests:

"Are you sure," asked Jacques Two, of Defarge, "that no embarrassment can arise from our manner of keeping the register? Without doubt it is safe, for no one beyond ourselves can decipher it; but shall we always be able to decipher it—or, I ought to say, will she?"

"Jacques," returned Defarge, drawing himself up, "if madame my wife undertook to keep the register in her memory alone, she would not lose a word of it—not a syllable of it. Knitted, in her own stitches and her own symbols, it will always be as plain to her as the sun. Confide in Madame Defarge. It would be easier for the weakest poltroon that lives, to erase himself from existence, than to erase one letter of his name or crimes from the knitted register of Madame Defarge" [165].

With the death of Madame Defarge, the symbols turn into hieroglyphics, undergoing

survived all these years? Why is it intact? A supernatural reading would state that it is the curse of the buried man that holds the scraps together. Indeed, it ends with a prophecy announcing the fall of the house of Evremonde, moulding the future with a performative power:

(...) now I believe that the mark of the red cross is fatal to them, and that they have no part in His mercies. And them and their descendants, to the last of their race, I, Alexandre Manette, unhappy prisoner, do this last night of the year 1767, in my unbearable agony, denounce to the times when all these things shall be answered for. I denounce them to Heaven and to earth. [318]

Manette is presented to us here as a master of time, summoning the past, determining the future through the spell he has cast on his manuscript. Indeed, the document has an evil, mysterious, magical quality about it, coming back and condemning Darnay, accomplishing the curse that it has carried through the years. The very components of the ink — blood, soot and coal — seem like the magical ingredients in an occult ritual designed to resurrect the document: indeed, the blood seems to be the living principle that animates the soot and charcoal — precisely the remnants of organic matter — and gives the document a new life. This paper-revenant was therefore always destined to return, exhume the past and drag Darnay to his death;⁷ the record has become a *lettre de cachet*.⁸

The strange case of Doctor Manette

However, with the use of his own blood in place of ink, Manette not only preserves the secrets of the past but also seems to have trusted a part of his

the same act of silencing as their originator.

⁷ Another document has the same consequence, if not the same purpose: Gabelle's letter written from prison and sent to England to recall the Marquis de St-Evremonde to France, and therefore to death. It is a very strange document, reaching its destination against all odds, as if guided by a mysterious force. Indeed, in England, nobody knows Darnay by his real name so it was quite unlikely that he should receive it. However, by a series of coincidences, Darnay reads the letter and is dragged to his fate.

⁸ The victims of the *Ancien Régime* created their own version of the *lettre de cachet*, with Madame Defarge's knitted document recording the crimes of the past and those who must be punished for it. Like Manette's manuscript, and like the *lettres de cachet*, it has a performative power which arbitrarily condemns to death anybody who is inscribed upon it. Both Manette and Madame Defarge are vengeful recorders, contrary to Miss Pross, whose task at the end of the novel is to register the crimes of Jerry Cruncher, but who is merciful: "I am quite sure, Mr. Cruncher," returned Miss Pross, "that you never will do it again" [349].

own self to the manuscript, ironically the very self he would seek to repress during his London life. Similarly, he also asserts his urge to live by carving his initials on the wall of his cell: A.M, "Alexandre Manette" [210]. In this respect, he takes over the Egyptian tradition of inscribing names in burial chambers: "The protection of the name of the deceased was vital. The tomb, the mummy, the equipment, the paintings and the reliefs were all designed to help preserve the name of the individual" [EL-MAHDY : 13]. However, "A.M" can also be read as "AM", so that through this inscription, Alexandre Manette becomes also a verb, an impulse to live. As a physician, Manette has an in-depth knowledge about life, death and the passing of time, and both inscription and document appear as his own attempt to protect himself as he is being buried in the Bastille. Eventually, the inscription points the way to the document which recalls the Bastille prisoner to life, enabling him to appear in court to denounce Darnay in person. The manuscript thus reveals itself a double of Manette, his Bastille persona faithfully denouncing the crime in his own words, with his full conscience: "I solemnly declare that I am at this time in the possession of my right mind—that my memory is exact and circumstantial—and that I write the truth as I shall answer for these my last recorded words, whether they be ever read by men or not, at the Eternal Judgment-seat" [*A Tale of Two Cities* : 306]. The content of the manuscript seems specifically designed to function as testimony in a trial, first telling its version of the crime, and then identifying and charging the accused.

And so the past emerges in the present, perfectly intact, uninfluenced by the twenty-seven years that have passed. The mechanisms that have been set up almost three decades earlier, patiently biding their time, are now put in motion and will not be stopped, liberating all the fatal potential of the repressed story. By denying change and obeying Manette the prisoner, the manuscript provokes a tragic conflict and betrays Manette the father. For the first time in the novel, the two selves of Manette – the prisoner and the father – are forced into confrontation. With the revelation of the document, what was intended – and striving – to remain separate actually collides, as foreshadowed by the carved initials ("A.M") which seem divided but are nevertheless united by the full stop, simultaneously the tiniest and the most fundamental of all punctuation marks. The tragedy of *A Tale of Two Cities* precisely resides in this full stop, uniting what should have remained separated: two selves, two stories that were never supposed to come together, and which fatally meet.

Although the revelation of the document's existence is very sudden to the reader and the characters, the text has, to some extent, prepared the ground

for this disinterment. Indeed, the manuscript announces its return in at least two distinct moments in the novel: the first clue can be found in the chapter "Hundreds of People", when Manette is taken ill precisely when told the story of the Tower of London document. This event, which is not immediately accounted for, points towards the existence of Manette's own manuscript for one who is able to decipher the signs. Another passage in the novel puts the document right under the very eyes of the reader without him being aware of it: during Defarge's search of Manette's cell, as the Bastille is being stormed, in the chapter "Echoing Footsteps". This passage is quite mysterious at first, since the reader is not provided with any explanation for Defarge's actions; only much later do we understand what he was looking for. The buried manuscript crosses the novel through underground passages, unseen, detectable solely by the shadows it casts and gaining substance only at the end of the novel.

Charles Dickens, resurrectionist

The resurrection of Manette's manuscript reflects the narrative technique of the author, who digs up stories from the past to reinsert them into his present of the nineteenth century. If revolutionary Paris belongs firmly to the eighteenth century, London is very close to the city Dickens describes in his non-historical novels. Indeed, the London of the novel shares its bureaucratic organisation and obsession, its overabundance of documents and paper with the London of *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*: in this respect Tellson's Bank is quite similar to Chancery or the Circumlocution Office, and it is worth mentioning that the Old Bailey of the novel was still a tribunal in Dickens's time. Moreover, some slight anachronisms creep in from the England of Dickens's nineteenth century: the episode of the Dover mail coach is typical of nineteenth-century novels (including Dickens' own works like *The Pickwick Papers*, *Bleak House* or *David Copperfield*), all the more since the Dover mail coach could not have existed in 1775.⁹

Other examples of temporal disjunction in the novel are the scenes of body-snatching: indeed, it became a contemporary preoccupation only in the nineteenth century, when the number of criminals condemned to death

⁹ In England, mail coaches appeared in 1784: "Here it is proposed merely to recall some of the incidents of the coaching days (...) between the time when Palmer's mail-coaches were put on the road in 1784, down to the time when they were shouldered off the road by the more powerful iron horse." [HYDE : 27]

could no longer meet the demand for medical specimens.¹⁰ This accounts for the sudden surge in the activity of body-snatching at the beginning of the nineteenth century in England, to which Jerry Cruncher belongs, all the more since he speaks nineteenth-century slang.¹¹

Therefore, if this novel is the tale of two cities indeed, it is most of all the tale of two eras, of the nineteenth century revolving back towards a threatening past which might be recalled to life. Dickens exhumes the French Revolution and inserts it in his own time, using it as a warning to announce what might result from social oppression, such as that which prevailed during the Industrial Revolution. Like anything exhumed, the tale retains a magical and mysterious quality; however, it should also be read as cautionary.

A Tale of Two Cities thus reveals Dickens as a resurrectionist, summoning the stories of the past; this is how he viewed himself according to an anecdote: one day at the beginning of his career, Dickens mischievously left a calling-card announcing himself as:

Charles Dickens
Resurrectionist
In search of a subject
[SANDERS : ix]

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¹⁰ "Medical schools officially used only the corpses of executed criminals for dissection, but by the late 1820s demand far outstripped the number of criminals executed (...). Thus, most medical schools quietly dealt with resurrection men, men who stole recently buried corpses from cemeteries." [FLANDERS : 62]

¹¹ See note 4, page 465 of the Penguin Classics edition: "*blow her boy out*: That is, fatten him up. This seems to be Regency or Victorian rather than eighteenth-century slang".

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