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**DR. MANETTE AND OTHER PRISONERS:
HISTORY AND IMAGINATION IN *A TALE OF TWO CITIES***

*A speech delivered to the Dickens Fellowship of Cleveland
at the Mayfield Library on November 9, 1994.*

To borrow the frequently quoted words of Charles Dickens, the twentieth century which recently staggered to its close has been "the best of times and the worst of times." It has been an age of liberation but, on a scale unimaginable by our ancestors, it has been the epoch of imprisonment. We have shared the painful memories of survivors of the Holocaust, former inmates of the Gulag Archipelago and hostages of terrorism who have fortunately been rescued or released. With these testimonials of contemporary suffering and endurance engraved in our minds, what value can we find in portrayals of prisoners in nineteenth-century fiction?

Let me remind you quickly of the destinies of three such prisoners whom we all know well.

Prisoner No. 1, the twin brother of a king, is a security risk because of his fatal resemblance to the ruling monarch and is therefore imprisoned. A former royal guardsman conspires to free the captive and set him on the throne in his brother's place, but the plot is foiled and the unforgiving king consigns the pretender to an island prison where his face is to be covered from view for the rest of his life.

Prisoner No. 2 is also incarcerated on an island, having been sent there on the strength of a charge of treason fabricated by a jealous rival and a band of confederates. During his fourteen years of captivity, the prisoner acquires encyclopedic knowledge through the tutelage of a fellow inmate, who also reveals the location of a great treasure. The prisoner escapes, discovers the treasure and under a variety of disguises wreaks vengeance on his enemies one by one.

The third prisoner, a physician, is called to the bedside of a pregnant woman who is dying. He is unable to save her life but learns that she has been raped by a nobleman who has also killed her brother. This inconvenient knowledge brings the doctor eighteen years of imprisonment without trial.

Of course, all of you have recognized, in mercilessly compressed form, the life stories of two of the most famous characters of Alexandre Dumas, the Man in the Iron Mask and the Count of Monte Cristo, and finally of Dickens's immortal Dr. Alexandre Manette. If I return now to the question I posed at the outset, I am confident that you will agree with me that Dr. Manette's experience remains more pertinent to the

twentieth-century reader than the strange destinies of the other two prisoners with whom I have bracketed him. If we ask ourselves why, however, our first explanation is likely to be in error. We may be tempted to judge that the life stories of the Man in the Iron Mask and the Count of Monte Cristo are extravagantly unbelievable, that they are exotic fictions characteristic of the Romantic period of literature that produced these two heroes. By contrast, it may seem to us that Dr. Manette, despite the strange circumstances that cost him his freedom, suffered a fate more realistically placed by the novelist in the context of historical events.

The surprising fact, though, is that all three stories have their roots in history as it was lived or remembered.

Although it is not universally recognized by American readers, the Man in the Iron Mask lived and suffered in flesh and blood. My wife Helen and I have visited his cell on the Ile Ste. Marguerite, and have stood where he must have looked out yearningly at the shoreline of the French Riviera where the city of Cannes rises; as a souvenir, we have even stolen a tile fragment from the prison corridor. Voltaire was one of the first to assert (in his *Questions on the Encyclopedie*) that the Man in the Iron Mask was a brother of Louis XIV and Dumas follows his lead. This theory is now generally discredited, but the unraveling of the identity of the Iron Mask remains one of the favorite historical puzzles in France to this day.

It is only rather recently that I have discovered that the Count of Monte Cristo, whom I had always regarded as wildly imagined by Dumas, was based on the principal figure in what the French like to call a *fait divers*, a human interest story often featuring crime or violence. Dumas found the roots of his novel in an 1838 work by a lawyer Jacques Peuchet, entitled *Historical Memoirs Drawn from the Archives of the Police of Paris*. Peuchet tells of a young shoemaker, François Picaud, who was falsely denounced as a traitor in 1807 and imprisoned, not in the Chateau d'If, the fortress that held Edmond Dantès, the future Count of Monte Cristo, but in the Chateau de Fénestrelle; from this prison Picaud emerged in 1814 to avenge himself serially on his enemies. Even the Abbé de Faria, who taught Edmond Dantès and led him to the treasure of Monte Cristo, has been identified as a historical personage; the real Faria, an adept in the doctrines of Swedenborg and Mesmer, became a pioneer of the techniques of psychological suggestion.

The origins of Dickens's Dr. Manette are to be found in documents of the French Revolution and in Thomas Carlyle's history, which Dickens proudly claimed, I hope with some exaggeration, to have read nine times before embarking on the writing of *A Tale of Two Cities*. In addition to his exercise of direct influence on Dickens through the pages

of his history, Carlyle, according to Dickens, sent him “two cartloads” of books on the French Revolution and its prelude, which apparently included Louis Sébastien Mercier’s valuable work, *Le Tableau de Paris*, published in Amsterdam in 1782. The Mercier volume describes movingly a prisoner released from the Bastille on the accession of Louis XVI:

[He is] an old man, who has for forty-seven years groaned under detention within four thick, cold walls. The low door of his tomb turns on terrible hinges, opens not halfway as ordinarily, and an unknown voice tells him that he can leave. He believes that it is a dream. He hesitates, gets up and walks with trembling steps, astonished by the space that he is traversing. He stops as if bewildered and lost; his eyes can hardly bear the light of day; he looks at the sky like a newfound object; his eyes stare; and he cannot cry. He is stupefied by his freedom of movement, and his legs, in spite of himself, remain as immobile as his tongue.

When he is brought back to the street where he had lived, his house is gone, the whole neighborhood is changed and nobody knows him. An old family servant is found and tells him that his children are scattered abroad and that all his friends are gone. Overwhelmed with grief, he calls on the minister who released him from prison and begs to be returned to his cell.

The original version of a significant passage in Dickens’s portrayal of Dr. Manette is easily identified in the pages of Carlyle’s *French Revolution*. Carlyle writes that, when the Bastille was stormed, a letter was found that had been written years before by a prisoner begging for news of his wife. In the lines quoted by Carlyle from this letter, you will recognize without difficulty the source of the conclusion of Dr. Manette’s narrative that was read into evidence at Charles Darnay’s second trial in Paris:

If for my consolation Monseigneur would grant me, for the sake of God and the Most Blessed Trinity, that I could have news of my dear wife; were it only her name on a card, to show that she is alive! It were the greatest consolation I could receive; and I should forever bless the greatness of Monseigneur.

The scene in which Dr. Manette attends a dying woman in the Evremondes’ chateau may well be based on a local tradition of Wiltshire. A ballad in Sir Walter Scott’s *Rokeby*, which describes a similar occurrence, was founded on a story in John Aubrey’s correspondence. In the Aubrey anecdote, Dr. Manette’s role in the drama was played by a midwife:

Sir ____ Dayrell of Littlecote in Corn. Wilts., having got his lady's waiting woman with child, when her travail came, sent a servant with a horse for a midwife, whom he was to bring hoodwinked. She was brought, and layd the woman, but as soon as the child was born, she sawe the knight take the child and murder it, and burn it in the fire in the chamber. She having done her business was extraordinarily rewarded for her paines, and sent blindfolded away.

As we know, Dr. Manette was less lucky, being compensated for his professional attentions by eighteen years of unlawful detention in the Bastille.

It is not, however, in these fragmentary historical sources that we can find the principal reasons for the credibility of Dickens's portrait of Dr. Manette or for our perception that his experience is more meaningful to us than the sorrows of the Man in the Iron Mask or of the Count of Monte Cristo. To my mind, the greatest accomplishment of Dickens in *A Tale of Two Cities* is his imaginative grasp and compelling portrayal of the psychology of the unjustly imprisoned. In the early pages of the novel, we are led to expect that, unlike the Count of Monte Cristo, Dr. Manette has abandoned thoughts of vengeance and plumbed more profoundly the depths of the human condition. On the Dover Road, the self-styled "man of business" Jarvis Lorry intuitively prefigures Dr. Manette's experience:

Now, which of the multitude of faces that showed themselves before him was the true face of the buried person, the shadows of the night did not indicate; but they were all the faces of a man of five-and-forty by years, and they differed principally in the passions they expressed, and in the ghastliness of their worn and wasted state. Pride, contempt, defiance, stubbornness, submission, lamentation, succeeded one another; so did varieties of sunken cheek, cadaverous colour, emaciated hands and figures. But the face was in the main one face, and every head was prematurely white. A hundred times the dozing passenger inquired of this spectre:

'Buried how long?'

The answer was always the same:

'Almost eighteen years.'

'You had abandoned all hope of being dug out?'

'Long ago.'

'You know that you are recalled to life?'

'They tell me so.'

'I hope you care to live?'

'I can't say.'

One feature of Dr. Manette's prison experience is perhaps the most celebrated and at the same time the most miraculously predictive of

what we have come to learn from the experiences of prison camp survivors—that recourse to some creative activity, however humble, can serve as a defense against the loss of humanity. Dr. Manette is able to persuade his captors to permit him to use a shoemaker's bench and tools so that he can make ladies' shoes. Later, as the Ancien Régime collapses in economic ruin, all France becomes a prison house of famine and want, and Frenchwomen bend their heads over their knitting to find some mechanical distraction from their hunger.

In the evening, at which season of all others St. Antoine turned himself inside out, and sat on doorsteps and window-ledges, and came to the corners of vile streets and courts, for a breath of air, Madame Defarge with her work in her hand was accustomed to pass from place to place and from group to group: a Missionary—there were many like her—such as the world will do well never to breed again. All the women knitted. They knitted worthless things; but, the mechanical work was a mechanical substitute for eating and drinking; the hands moved for the jaws and the digestive apparatus: if the bony fingers had been still, the stomachs would have been more famine-pinched.

I believe that Dickens, who had a keen eye to pattern, intended an analogy between Dr. Manette's hammering at his bench and the knitting of the Parisian women, which is given horrific focus in the vengeful register of enemies of the people that unrolls from the needles of Madame Defarge.

A strong element of Dickens's plot concerns Dr. Manette's struggle to readjust to life outside the prison walls that held him. In following Dr. Manette's experiences over a period of two decades after his liberation, Dickens displays a remarkable insight into prison trauma and its consequences: the survival of protective mechanisms, repression of memory, instability, relapse and ambiguity of prognosis.

At times of severe stress Dr. Manette returns to his shoemaker's bench or to memories of the shoemaking that served him well in the Bastille. The doctor's two major breakdowns were induced by his daughter Lucie's marriage to Charles Darnay, whom Manette has learned to be the scion of the family responsible for his long imprisonment, and later by his inability to secure Darnay's release from a prison of the Terror.

When Lucie and Charles have left on their honeymoon, Jarvis Lorry finds Manette at work over his bench, which his friends had the forethought to preserve for him when they brought him over from Paris.

The Doctor looked at him for a moment—half inquiringly, half as if he were angry at being spoken to—and bent over his work again.

He had laid aside his coat and waistcoat; his shirt was open at the

throat, as it used to be when he did that work; and even the old haggard, faded surface of face had come back to him. He worked hard—impatiently—as if in some sense of having been interrupted.

Mr. Lorry glanced at the work in his hand, and observed that it was a shoe of the old size and shape. He took up another that was lying by him, and asked what it was?

‘A young lady’s walking shoe,’ he muttered looking up. ‘It ought to have been finished long ago. Let it be.’

The final breakdown occurs in Paris during the height of the Terror. Dr. Manette returns empty-handed from his mission to save his son-in-law Darnay; Sydney Carton and Jarvis Lorry have no idea whether the doctor had been able to face the revolutionary leaders one last time:

Whether he had really been to any one, or whether he had been all that time traversing the streets, was never known. As he stood staring at them, they asked him no questions, for his face told them everything.

‘I cannot find it,’ said he, ‘and I must have it. Where is it?’

His head and throat were bare, and, as he spoke with a helpless look straying all around, he took his coat off, and let it drop on the floor.

‘Where is my bench? I’ve been looking everywhere for my bench, and I can’t find it. What have they done with my work? Time presses: I must finish those shoes.’

They looked at one another, and their hearts died within them . . .
‘Lost, utterly lost!’

At the end of the novel Dr. Manette’s future remains at best uncertain. Sydney Carton, in the prophesy that Dickens attributes to him as he stands at the foot of the scaffold, sees the doctor “aged and bent, but otherwise restored, and faithful to all men in his healing office, and at peace.” Philip Hobsbaum, author of *A Reader’s Guide to Charles Dickens*, regards this vision as “on the face of it, unlikely.” Whatever the ultimate clinical fate of the doctor, Dickens brilliantly distinguished between Dr. Manette’s reactive symptoms and their underlying cause. After Manette’s first serious breakdown at the time of Lucie’s wedding, Mr. Lorry, obtaining the doctor’s thinly veiled consent, destroys the shoemaker’s bench with the assistance of Miss Pross, but when Manette’s mind fails again after Darnay’s second imprisonment in Paris, he does not need the bench to spur his relapse into his prison cell activity: he sinks into a shoemaking of the mind. When he had earlier authorized Lorry to dispose of the bench, Manette gave his friend a lucid explanation of his dependency on shoemaking. Playing by the rules diplomatically established by the banker, he expressed his medical judgment indirectly, as if he were commenting dispassionately on the interesting mental condition of a third person:

'You see,' said Dr. Manette, turning to [Mr. Lorry] after an uneasy pause, 'it is very hard to explain, consistently, the innermost workings of this poor man's mind. He once yearned so frightfully for that occupation, and it was so welcome when it came; no doubt it relieved his pain so much, by substituting the perplexity of the fingers for the perplexity of the brain, and by substituting, as he became more practised, the ingenuity of the hands, for the ingenuity of the mental torture; that he has never been able to bear the thought of putting it quite out of his reach. Even now, when I believe he is more hopeful of himself than he has ever been, and even speaks of himself with a kind of confidence, the idea that he might need that old employment, and not find it, gives him a sudden sense of terror, like that which one may fancy strikes to the heart of a lost child.'

In my view, Dickens's empathetic recreation of the personality of the unjustly imprisoned is of permanent value despite all the terrible documents of persecution that date from our own time. Moreover, the same may be said for *A Tale of Two Cities* as a whole, despite the romantic and picturesque elements that Dickens added to suit the palates of his readership. Like his mentor Carlyle, Dickens saw the violence perpetrated during the period of the French Terror as the fruit of social disorder and injustice; he compared the workings of the guillotine to the English capital punishment system, which he detested. We do not seem far removed from the Paris of 1793 when, in the opening pages of the novel, we read Dickens's description of London in the same era:

[P]risoners in London gaols fought battles with their turnkeys, and the majesty of the law fired blunder-busses in among them, loaded with rounds of shot and ball; thieves snipped off diamond crosses from the necks of noble lords at Court drawing-rooms; musketeers went into St. Giles's, to search for contraband goods, and the mob fired on the musketeers, and the musketeers fired on the mob, and nobody thought any of these occurrences much out of the common way. In the midst of them, the hangman, ever busy and ever worse than useless, was in constant requisition; now, stringing up long rows of miscellaneous criminals; now, hanging a housebreaker on Saturday who had been taken on Tuesday; now, burning people in the hand at Newgate by the dozens, and now burning pamphlets at the door of Westminster Hall; to-day, taking the life of an atrocious murderer, and to-morrow of a wretched pilferer who had robbed a farmer's boy of sixpence.

Although often dismissed as a blood-and-thunder romance devoid of Dickens's usual concerns for human suffering, *A Tale of Two Cities* sounded the alarm that what had happened in France was possible in England if long overdue reforms were not made in the nation's social policy and justice system. It is therefore quite accurate to say that *A*

Tale of Two Cities is also to be read as a cautionary tale *for* two cities, whose lessons applied equally to the English and the French.