A Tale of Two (Gotham) Cities: Nolanizing Dickens

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Is a text set in a specific historical register only circumscribed within its historical timeframe or does it offer possibilities to move beyond the temporal zone of the past to intrude into the present and anticipate the future? While surveying the relevance of a historical novel in present times, the question may invariably crop up in our mind. In fact, I strongly believe that a historical novel can pass the test of time only if history is relived in contemporary events. Things become more interesting when a historical novel is cinematized; the change of medium invariably complicates the process. It is, however, also guided by a similar concern for finding contemporary resonance in a historical text. As Pierre Sorlin observes ? "historical films are concerned with the problems of the present even if that concern is expressed only indirectly" (71). The director guided by the disjuncture of temporality and medium of representation, tends to reinterpret the text offering newer readings. It is the challenge of the director to keep the historical relevance intact while opening newer interpretations of the text.

All these observations and deliberations would be addressed in this paper in which I try to find a newer reading of a canonical Dickensian historical novel A Tale of Two Cities. This remapping of a Dickensian text is conducted through one of its unlikeliest cinematic representations. Charles Dickens, as we know, has written two historical novels; if the first one Barnaby Rudge (1841) is relatively less studied, the

second A Tale of Two Cities (1859) is one of his more popular creations. Set in the backdrop of the French Revolution and the consequent Reign of Terror, it is Dickens's response to a cataclysmic event in world history and his critique of the anarchic way in which history unfolds itself. Dickens's vision of the Revolution is mired by certain ambivalence. If on the one hand, he validates the reasons of outbreak of public anger against the oppression of the ancien régime; his sympathy for the revolutionaries stops short of supporting the fanatic and irrational revenge that culminates into the Terror. The novel which started as a justification of the Revolution soon transformed into a harsh critique of the excesses that followed it.

The title of the novel holds the key to understand this essential Dickensian ambivalence. It is not only a tale of two cities but a tale of two countries characterized by contrary identities. The novel's famous opening line, balanced by contraries, obviously sets the tone:

> It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair . . . . (5)

France and England share some obvious parallelisms, certainly more than having large jaw kings and plain/fair faced queens. The lawlessness of France is anticipated in an early English scene where Charles Darnay is tried as a spy and traitor. The frenzied and sadistic Englishmen assembled at Old Bailey to see Darnay sentenced to death certainly anticipate the cheering mobs during the public execution in revolutionary France. There is also an implicit warning for Britain which could replicate the fate of France because of a laissez-faire complacency and public inertia. In one of his letters, Dickens voices his concern in no uncertain terms:

> I believe the discontent to be so much the worse for smouldering instead of blazing openly, that it is extremely like the general mind of France before the breaking out of the first Revolution, and is in danger of being turned by any one of a thousand accidents - a bad harvest - the last straw too much of aristocratic insolence or incapacity - a defeat abroad - a mere chance at home - into such a Devil of a conflagration as has never been beheld since. (qtd. in Jones 58)

However, the parallelism is continued only to a certain degree. Dickens instead consummately offsets France with England, Paris with London, Saint-Antoine with

Soho. If France during Terror makes a travesty of justice; England essentially upholds the spirit of justice. Darnay, in spite of the public demand, is set free at Old Bailey but is sentenced to execution in France. The public grievance in France takes resort to blood-dimmed anarchy but England, in spite of the potentialities rarely witnesses the mass outbreak of public outrage.1 Even the characters are carefully placed in two sides of the moral scale ? the English nationals like Jarvis Lorry, Miss Pross and Sydney Carton as well as the Anglicized French characters like Dr. Manette, Lucy and Darnay are the good ones; the French characters, be it the aristocrats like Monseigneur and Monsieur or the radical working class like the Defarges and the Jaqueses, are placed on the other.

Dickens has always been a great favourite for cinematic adaptations; the directors across the world have used his novels both for celluloid and television. A Tale of Two Cities has also been cinematized numerous times. But among all the cinematic adaptations of this historical novel, I must single out the two most popular adaptations in this place. The first was directed by Jack Conway and produced by David O. Selznick for MGM in 1935; the second was directed by Ralph Thomas and produced by Betty Box for the Rank Organization in 1958. Both are ambitious projects with high production values and a top romantic star in the role of Sydney Carton ? Ronald Colman in the 1935 version and Dirk Bogarde in the 1958 version. Both offer an intriguing blend of respect for the novel with interesting changes ? changes motivated by the perceived requirements of the film medium and the film audience as well as by the historical contexts in which they were made. Selznick was quick to realize that A Tale of Two Cities offers a more formidable challenge to the script writer than any of the other Dickensian novels for reasons of both form and subject-matter. He considered the novel to be "sheer melodrama and when the scenes are put on the screen, minus Dickens' brilliant narrative passages, the mechanics of melodramatic construction are inclined to be more than apparent, and in fact, to creak" (qtd. in Glancy 104). The adapter has to then work hard to extract a cohesive narrative line; and the subject matter is the potentially incendiary one of popular revolution. In a world fraught with terrorist violence and intermittent riots and uprisings, A Tale of Two Cities can become an immensely appropriate text for cinematic representations.[2]

Though no major cinematic adaptation of the novel has been attempted in recent years, a different sort of representation occurs as a popular comic book franchise reactivates the Dickensian text without changing the basic spirit of the novel. Christopher

Nolan's Batman series, especially the last one The Dark Knight Rises, makes deliberate references to the Victorian text. The references are not at all co-incidental as the screenplay writer brothers, Jonathan and Christopher Nolan, consciously used the Dickensian references. It was Jonathan who was first to draw the parallel. As Christopher Nolan said in an interview to Comingsoon.net:

> When Jonah showed me his first draft of his screenplay, it was 400 pages long or something. It had all this crazy stuff in it. As part of a primer when he handed it to me, he said, 'You've got to think of A Tale of Two Cities . . . When I did my draft on the script, it was all about A Tale of Two Cities. (n.p)

Christopher further comments on the significance of the novel which to him was "one of the most harrowing portraits of a relatable, recognizable civilization that completely folded to pieces with the terrors in Paris in France in that period. It's hard to imagine that things can go that badly wrong." (n.p)

The exploits of Batman have been cinematized earlier with varying degrees of success. Tim Burton's version (Batman and Batman Returns) where Michael Keaton reprises the role of Bruce Wayne/Batman earned considerable popular success. Joel Schumacher's version in which Val Kilmer and George Clooney become Batman in two successive films (Batman Forever and Batman and Robin) was a disaster, to put it mildly. In Nolan's directorial gaze, the franchise takes a more complicated but engaging turn. Filmed in a post-9/11 world held hostage by the memory of 9/11 and paranoia for further terror strikes, both from within and without, the franchise deliberately revives the memory of the Terror in France. Gotham is apparently a fallen city controlled by the thugs, smugglers and murderers. It is a city waiting to be purged of its sins through the excision of blood. The idealist terrorist Ra's-al-Ghul wants to destroy Gotham in Batman Begins because he can find no redeeming feature in the sinful city:

> Gotham's time has come. Like Constantinople or Rome before it the city has become a breeding ground for suffering and injustice. It is beyond saving and must be allowed to die . . . . Gotham . . . must be destroyed. (Batman Begins)

Idealistically, Ra's-al-Ghul is no different from a Robespierre, Marat or Danton. The Joker in The Dark Knight recalls the mindless anarchy of the Terror and Harvey Dent's fall reminds how even the honest minds fail to retain their probity and are vulnerable to the seduction of the evil. In The Dark Knight Rises, Miranda Tate aka

Talia-al-Ghul in her relentless search for revenge recalls Madame Defarge. Both of them want to avenge their personal losses, the loss of a sister, raped and murdered by the Evremondes and the death of a father in the hands of Batman. The terrorist Bane is a machinery of destruction, a Guillotine controlled by Miranda. A masked man like Batman, he engenders the opposite feeling among the citizen of Gotham. In Nolan's cinematic gaze, the September Massacre of 1792, the terrorist attack on America and the massive scale destruction of Gotham City are all telescoped together. The destruction of the Blackgate3 obviously refers to the fall of Bastille, where as the mock-trial that follows in Gotham is similar to the travesty of justice that took place during the Terror. Bane's speech inciting the prisoners to break the jail seems to be an echo from the past:

> We take Gotham from the corrupt! The rich! The oppressors of generations who have kept you down with myths of opportunity. And we give it to you, the people. Gotham is yours! None shall interfere, do as you please. Start by storming Blackgate and free the oppressed. Step forward, those who would serve, for an army will be raised. The powerful will be ripped from their decadent nests and cast out into the cold world that we know and endure. Courts will be convened, spoils will be enjoyed. Blood will be shed. (The Dark Knight Rises)

Like Dickens who offsets the blood-dimmed tide of fanatic revolution with the calm sacrifice of Sydney Carton; Nolan, too, imagines his Dark Knight in terms of Christian sacrifice. In A Tale of Two Cities, Carton emerges as an unlikely hero. A man of deep secret and reticence, Carton overcomes personal failures to transform into the most memorable character of the novel. Nolan's Bruce Wayne is a similar character despite coming from an affluent background. He has to wrestle his inner demons and personal losses to emerge as the saviour of the city. In spite of all the wrongs suffered by him, he has not lost faith in humanity. It is he who comes forward to save the city which has betrayed him and declared him as an outlaw. Bruce along with Commissioner Gordon, Lucius Fox, Alfred Pennyworth and Inspector Blake represent the undefiled Gotham city; a London within Paris.

Bruce is also the Manette figure, who overcomes his personal desire for revenge against the Evremondes and learns to accept Darnay as his son-in-law. Bruce has lost his family and beloved to the corrupt Gotham. Yet, whenever any threat comes to Gotham in the shape of Falcone, Scarecrow, Ra's-al-Ghul, the Joker or the Bane, he

takes on his alternate identity to protect the city. Bruce also recalls Dr. Manette in their commonality of being "buried alive" in prison. Both in Batman Begins and The Dark Knight Rises, he is consigned to prison. In Batman Begins, his accidental fall in a dark pit makes him a victim of life-long claustrophobia. He is also incarcerated for his dallying in drug smuggling. The Dark Knight Rises uses the motif of prison with more earnestness. Bane consigns Bruce into a deep pit to let him lie helpless when he would go on destroying Gotham. Unlike Manette's incarceration, where there was no hope release, this prison sports with the hope of getting escaped from this prison. Bane, himself a prisoner once in this depth, knows it quite well:

> There's a reason why this prison is the worst hell on earth . . . Hope. Every man who has ventured here over the centuries has looked up to the light and imagined climbing to freedom . . . I learned here that there can be no true despair without hope. So, as I terrorize Gotham, I will feed its people hope to poison their souls. I will let them believe they can survive so that you can watch them clamoring over each other to "stay in the sun." You can watch me torture an entire city and when you have truly understood the depth of your failure, we will fulfill Ra's- al -Ghul's destiny . . . . We will destroy Gotham and then, when it is done and Gotham is in ashes, then you have my permission to die. (The Dark Knight Rises)

Prison, as we know is a favourite motif in Dickens. Critics like Lionel Trilling, Jeremy Tambling and Alfred Hutter have emphasized on the ubiquity of prison in Dickens's novels. The imprisonment of his father in the Marshalsea Prison for bankruptcy created a lasting impression on the novelist. Prison thus, in its different forms, occur in novels like Little Dorrit, Great Expectations and obviously A Tale of Two Cities. In a letter to his friend John Forster, Dickens writes ? "good Christian characters might be grown out of the idea of a man imprisoned for ten or fifteen years: his imprisonment being the gap between the people and the circumstances of the first part and the altered people and circumstances of the second, and his own changed mind" (qtd. in Glancy 18). Dr. Manette is "buried alive" in the Bastille for eighteen long years; he is "recalled to life" only reluctantly. His change involves a schizophrenic disorder that frequently leads him to a relapse in the past. Bruce Wayne, on the other hand, rises from the pit through his own action. The freedom is more than a physical emancipation for the "rise" is also spiritual in nature. After escaping the prison, he shifts his role to emerge as the sacrificial hero, a Christ figure who rises only to save humanity. Nolan, thus,

follows Dickens in the popular but sentimental ending; if Dickens, lets win the values of London triumphant over the values of Paris; Nolan, makes the good Gotham wins over the sinful Gotham city.

The physical death of Carton is certainly not the end. Carton's last words imagined by the novelist offers the vision of a resurrected city:

> 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 thus is the natural birth, gradually making expiation for itself and wearing out . . . . 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. (389)

Nolan makes Commissioner Gordon read these lines at the end of the film reifying the parallel between Carton and Bruce's sacrifice. Carton's name would continue to live, as has been hinted, among the sons and grandsons of Lucy and Darnay. The death of Bruce is similarly not the end of Batman. Nolan ends his film with Inspector Blake deciding to leave the job of a policeman and entering the Batcave with the aid of the GPS left for him by Bruce. We are informed that Blake's original name is Robin, and surrounded by the bats, he is seen rising in an iron platform. Batman is dead, long live the Batman.

NOTES

1. Dickens never mentions the Gordon Riot of 1780 which he had earlier used as the backdrop in Barnaby Rudge.

2. I am indebted to Barr for this part of my article.

3. The name certainly alludes to the infamous Newgate Prison in London to which Dickens refers in Great Expectations.

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