

The Reception of Dickens: From his First English Readers to his Present-Day Arab Readers⁽¹⁾

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to trace reader responses to Dickens's fiction at the time of original publication to the present day. It will first show how the reception of Dickens's novels has to some extent been conditioned not only by the social mores of a particular society in a particular period, but by the circumstances of the production, distribution, and consumption of fiction. To this extent, the paper will be situated in the disciplinary area of cultural studies.

The focus of the paper is then narrowed to specifically literary concerns and considers the responses to Dickens's fiction of two nineteenth-century Russian novelists---Tolstoy and Dostoevsky- who undoubtedly read his work and whose own writings in various respects show marked signs of influence by the English novelist.

Two twentieth-century European writers-Proust and Kafka-are referred to with a view to understanding how their reading of the English author had an effect on the production of their own fiction. The reception of Dickens by two twentieth-century Arab novelists-Naguib Mahfouz and Hanna Minnah- is then considered with the conclusion that it is the socio-political dimensions of Dickens's novels which mainly attracted them, although in the latter case, sentiment also plays an important role.

The paper ends with a brief look at Dickens's reputation in the Arab world today, with particular reference to his frequent representation on courses in Arab universities.

If Charles Dickens were alive today he would be very surprised to find his novels the focus of study at a university, and particularly a foreign university such as the University of Kuwait, where English is not used as the first language. He would even be surprised to see his novels taught at a British university. If English literature had been on the university curriculum during Dickens's lifetime (which it was not), he could hardly have imagined that his works would have been included on a course of lectures. He might more easily have expected a series of readings from his novels, since he himself gave readings, although in a spirit of entertainment rather than with an educative purpose in mind. This is because Dickens, and the majority of his first readers, regarded fiction as a popular form of entertainment with an appeal to a mass readership rather than merely to a small intelligentsia, as later, in the twentieth century, was to become partly the case with the publication of the esoteric works of such writers as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann and Franz Kafka. (The consumption of pulp fiction, of course, continues apace).

In fact, Dickens's novels were regarded by most of his first readers rather as a television audience today views a soap opera, such as *Dynasty* or *Dallas*. This in no way devalues Dickens's art, but rather explains the conditions of its production and consumption. Indeed, the Colombian novelist, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, in an interview, has gone so far as to assert that "Soap opera is a very high art form; it is the same genre as Dostoevsky and Dickens, only visualized."⁽²⁾ Of course, Marquez is not claiming here that all soap opera will survive as classics of late-twentieth-century television, as not all novels published in the nineteenth century were destined for canonization.

If "the Novel" as a literary genre is more highly regarded now as an art form than it was in the nineteenth century, this can partly be explained by advances in technology and the advent of modern entertainment media such as film and television, with the consequent displacement of the popular novel as a mainstream entertainment. Conversely, it was technology, making possible a burgeoning book industry, which allowed Dickens to reach out to a wide readership. If, as Edmund Wilson, has said: "Of all the great Victorian writers, [Dickens] is probably the most antagonistic to the Victorian age itself",⁽³⁾ it is also a fact that in spite of his criticism of commercial and industrial England, Dickens was one of the great beneficiaries of the process. Improved methods of paper production, steam-driven printing presses designed to handle mass production, and a distribution system made possible by the building and opening of the railways, all of which made reading matter cheaper to produce and thus to sell, gave access of readership to a far greater extent than had

been known prior to the industrial revolution.⁽⁴⁾ Again, in spite of Dickens's antagonism towards industrialism and the Utilitarian ethic which underlay it, the large quantity of Dickens's writings and his vast and varied readership ranging from factory hands to Queen Victoria (a great admirer of Dickens's work) testify to the spirit of mass production and the commercial ethos of the period.

It will perhaps be easier to accommodate the comparison between the original reception of Dickens's fiction and that of modern soap opera if it is remembered that for affordability the majority of Dickens's novels were originally published in serial form in magazines containing other literature (usually in monthly episodes). His writing strategy, therefore, had to meet with the expectations of a following readership. Nor should it be forgotten that Dickens had often not completed writing a novel before beginning its publication and sometimes did not even know what the outcome was to be. Indeed, the very structure of a Dickens novel usually had to take into account the breaking off point of each serial, so that either the reader was held in suspense in anticipation of the next episode (there was a sound commercial reason for this of course), or an episode was brought to a decisive conclusion in order to clear the way for the introduction of fresh material or a new plot even or, as is often the case in Dickens, a sub-plot.⁽⁵⁾

A significant example of an episode which is brought to a decisive conclusion can be found in *Dombey and Son* (1847-48). At the end of the fourth issue (only a third of the way through the novel) little Paul Dombey dies, leaving the reader to ask how the story is to continue with the demise of the character who was thought to have been the true hero. After all, the title of the novel is *Dombey and Son*. It was certainly the case that Dickens's first readers were as much shocked and perplexed by Paul Dombey's death as modern television viewers have been by the killing off of J.R. or Bobby Ewing, with the difference of course that for Dickens there could be no trick of bringing them back to life. We know from Dickens's first biographer, his friend John Forster in *The Life of Charles Dickens* (1872),⁽⁶⁾ that the author wrestled with himself over the development and fate of his characters, and that this had much to do with the consensual relationship he wanted to build with his readership. To a large extent Dickens shared the values of his readers, and for this reason wanted at all costs to avoid displeasing them.⁽⁷⁾ To rephrase in terms of late-twentieth-century market economics, Dickens was intent on satisfying his consumers.⁽⁸⁾ Furthermore, the reception of Dickens's fiction is likely to have been affected by the conditions under which it was read: A serial purchased fairly cheaply at a W.H. Smith bookstall on a railway station and read en route is psychologically quite different from borrowing a bound three decker of the complete novel from a Midway Circulating Library and reading it in the comfort of a middle-class home.

Why did the fiction appeal so much to Dickens's first readers? One obvious reason was that it was topical and immediate: the London the author depicted in *Dombey and Son* was recognizably the simultaneously affluent and poverty-stricken metropolis where inner suburbs such as Camden Town had been gouged out to make way for railway track and terminus, and where the new outer suburbs were springing up, sprawling over, and consuming the country-side. The Coketown of *Hard Times* (1854), personally researched by the author at the time of the general strike in Preston, clearly represented the smoke-begrimed industrial cities of the north, with their factory chimney stacks belching smoke, canals and rivers polluted, and row upon row of monotonous red-brick back-to-back terrace houses.⁽⁹⁾ An essential part of this topicality, of course, lay in the social distortions which had risen out of a rapidly changed and still changing society and a greatly accelerated mode of life, distortions which Dickens was intent on bringing to the attention of his readers and which in the fiction are thrown into sharp relief.⁽¹⁰⁾

But Dickens was not merely content to *show* his readers by way of *description* what he considered to be wrong with entrepreneurial and industrial England; he also *told* them through his *expressive* narrative voice what he felt about the condition of his country and his countrymen and women. However, what was once considered to be a great virtue of the novel—the writer's unerring moral tone—has for many modern readers become a drawback. Certainly, those who live in, or who have been conditioned by, pluralistic Western societies where values have come to be regarded relativistically, do not expect to have their minds made up for them by an insistent narrator who in any case could be fallible. Such readers would rather expect the action to reveal itself, and to come to their own moral conclusions according to the cultural, religious and intellectual codes to which they have been exposed, and which serve as referents for evaluation. However, in spite of this post-Jamesian disinclination on the part of modern Western readers to trust a writer's intrusive and judgemental narrative voice, it does not alter the fact that there is more critical attention being given to Dickens today than ever before.⁽¹¹⁾ On the other hand, what may have come to seem a drawback to today's Western readers has for many of Dickens's modern Arab readers been seen as a strength. The uncompromising voice of the narrator has provided a firm moral centre in a world which, as it is depicted by the author, seems sometimes to be on the verge of anarchy. The clearly enunciated criticism, the voicing of moral precepts, and the advocacy of solutions for social amelioration, have the effect of endowing Dickens's novels with an exemplary integrity which they might have lacked had the narrator not been allowed to speak up in such an uncompromising manner. At the level of satire, this explicit narrative voice has been particularly important as far as Arab readers are concerned because the prioritised social trajectory of Dickens's criticism has proved to be meaningful in the reformation of post-colonial societies in the Arab world.

Dickens's satirization of the English legal system (notably in *Bleak House*), educational institutions (as in *Nicholas Nickleby*), and so-called charitable institutions (as the workhouse in *Oliver Twist*) certainly appealed to Dickens's original readers because they emphasized the problems and shortcomings of a society of which his readers were already a part. For modern readers, on the other hand, the satire needs to be interpreted in terms of its historical context and, therefore, it cannot be appreciated as a contemporary participator but rather as a historically distant spectator. This is not to say that for the modern reader the past bears no relationship to the present, but rather to recognise that history viewed with hindsight often elicits from the reader judgements which may not necessarily square with those of Dickens's narrators. Perhaps this may also account for the modern Western reader's preference for seeing what is going on in the fiction, rather than being told what ought to be thought about it.

Although the author may, in effect, have constructed a number of intersecting histories of industrialised English society, this does not (with the exception of *A Tale of Two Cities*) make his texts historical novels. They are, rather, satires with the essential function of criticising contemporary social conditions in England. The texts, then, take as their context a lived-in cultural system and, as far as their first readers were concerned, were read synchronically in terms of a temporal "now". The opposite may be the case with the modern reader who will inevitably tend to read (interpret) diachronically—i.e. through time from the period in which the action of the novel takes place to his/her present-day social reality. This may not necessarily be a drawback provided such a critique does not presume that literary texts constitute an objective autonomous history, but one of numerous constructed (thus, subjective) histories.⁽¹²⁾

Another characteristic of Dickens's work which drew great approval from his original readers was his appeal to sentiment. Again, most of his readers shared, or were sympathetic to, the author's fundamentally romantic sensibility and to episodes in which emotions were brought to such a pitch that tears were shed by all—both the characters in the novel and the readers of the novel—and it is noticeable in Dickens that characters who cannot feel deeply, or who cannot give expression to their emotions, often serve as the butt of his satire.

This poses another problem for today's Western reader, for our post-modern age is anything but romantic and, for this reason, some find it hard to accept Dickens's propensity for sentimentality as the great part of his art. In other words, our modern sensibilities sometimes coerce us into evaluating Dickens's sentiment anachronistically according to our own emotional

programming. This is not to say, of course, that those familiar with Dickens have not come to appreciate the values his sentiment express.

If, as George H. Ford maintains, "[The] principal Victorian asset [sentiment] becomes [the] principal twentieth-century liability",⁽¹³⁾ this is certainly not so for Arab readers for whom the prominence of sentiment in Dickens has always been regarded as a great strength of his fiction, no doubt because it is thoroughly in tune with Arab sensibilities. The expressiveness not only of Dickens's narrators, but also his fictional characters, has had, for the Arab reader, the effect of reinforcing the sincerity with which the author projects his ideas, rather than as with many modern Western readers, creating an impression of an over-emphasised rhetorical strategy.

Perhaps the most enduring attribute of Dickens's fiction which had such an appeal for his early readers, and which still does for those of us who read Dickens today, is the author's creation of character. One of the reasons for Dickens's large readership (apart from the economic ones outlined) no doubt had something to do with the wide social range of fictional characters created by the author with whom readers from all social classes could identify. Such characters might be regarded by Dickens's readers as though they were living persons who might be met with on the street or in the newspapers, much as television characters today become a term of reference in our daily conversation as the episodes continue inevitably over the years.⁽¹⁴⁾

The Russian novelist, Leo Tolstoy, made a perceptive remark when he wrote of Dickens: "The first condition of an author's popularity, the prime means to make people like him, is the love with which he treats his characters. That is why Dickens's characters are a bond of union between man in America and man in Petersburg."⁽¹⁵⁾ Tolstoy who, incidentally, had read Dickens in French translation (Dickens was enormously popular in Russia) owes a considerable debt to the English novelist. One can see how, through his reading of Dickens, Tolstoy was to use and develop some of the basic methods of the English author. A case in point is Dickens's use of leitmotif as exemplified in the recurring image of the railway in *Dombey and Son* which is carried over to Tolstoy's novel, *Anna Karenina*. Such use of imagery is charged with political meaning and conveys similar authorial attitudes to a particular historical development. Another similarity is the frequent use of caricature and irony as a means of satirizing the institutions of society. This is more often than not achieved through targeting the personnel of bureaucracies and professional bodies who come to represent the bad faith and dysfunctionality of the organizations themselves. But it is not merely a transference of image, tone and

caricatural method, but also of ideology, for the butts of Tolstoy's criticism were similar to those at which Dickens aimed, such as the law courts and the medical profession, and one can see, therefore, a similarity of political sensibility: a latent anarchism in Dickens which is fully realized in Tolstoy.

In *Oliver Twist*, to take an example from an early Dickens novel, the strong ironical tone has a moral/critical purpose (generically satire), irony functioning in such a way that the faults of the institution are ridiculed through the grotesque appearance and behaviour of its personnel. The point of exaggeration is to diminish both the institution and its administrators. The satire is here aimed at both the pomposity and hypocrisy of men put into positions of power and the vices of the institution itself—in this case the workhouse.

At the beginning of the novel, Oliver has been orphaned at birth and has been farmed out to a Mrs Mann; but he is now old enough to join the other children in the workhouse and is brought before the governing board:

Oliver was frightened at the sight of so many gentlemen, which made him tremble; and the beadle gave him another tap behind, which made him cry; and these two causes made him answer in a very low and hesitating voice; whereupon a gentleman in a white waistcoat said he was a fool. Which was a capital way of raising his spirits and putting him quite at his ease.

'Boy', said the gentleman in the high chair, 'listen to me. You know you're an orphan, I suppose?'

'What's that, sir?' inquired poor Oliver.

'The boy is a fool - I thought he was,' said the gentleman in the white waistcoat, in a very decided tone. If one member of a class be blessed with an intuitive perception of others of the same race, the gentleman in the white waistcoat was unquestionably well qualified to pronounce an opinion on the matter.

'Hush!' said the gentleman who had spoken first. 'You know you've got no father or mother, and that you were brought up by the parish, don't you?'

'Yes sir', replied Oliver, weeping bitterly.

'What are you crying for?' inquired the gentleman in the white waistcoat. And to be sure it was very extraordinary. What *could* the boy be crying for?

'I hope you say your prayers every night,' said another gentleman in a gruff voice, 'and pray for the people who feed you, and take care of you, like a Christian.'

'Yes, sir', stammered the boy. The gentleman who spoke last was unconsciously right. It would have been very like a Christian, and a marvellously good Christian, too, if Oliver had prayed for the people who fed and took care of *him*. But he hadn't, because nobody had taught him.⁽¹⁶⁾

The narrator's irony is thoroughly intrusive and is sustained intermittently throughout the scene. This is reinforced by the depiction of "the gentleman in the white waistcoat" who is repeatedly referred to in this way and in no other way; no mention is made of either his physical features or, indeed, any other of the clothes he might have been wearing, so that the man is effectively transformed into a white waistcoat; in other words, a thing—precisely the way he has treated Oliver: as an object without feelings. This reification of "the gentleman in the white waistcoat" obviously has its corrosive effect in that it deprives the fictional character of the little humanity he might have had, and certainly divests him of his gentlemanly character in any genuine sense: his behaviour is neither gentle nor manly. Furthermore, the appellation, "gentleman", through constant reiteration, not only by way of reference to "the gentleman in the white waistcoat", but also to the other members of the board, becomes so thoroughly ironised as to make clear their unworthiness to determine the lives of the inmates of the workhouse and, too, their share in the responsibility for the travesty of what is euphemistically called a charitable institution.

Implicit in the narrator's comments is something of Dickens's own Christian values—not theology, but kindness and compassion for the downtrodden and meek—a quality which led another nineteenth-century Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky, to call Dickens "the great Christian"⁽¹⁷⁾—that is, not Dickens's belief, but his practice. The characters of Dostoevsky's novels are often the downtrodden and meek, such as Sonia Marmeladov in *Crime and Punishment* and stinking Lizaveta in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Indeed, Dostoevsky did write a novel called *Unizhennyye i oskorblennyye* (*The Insulted and the Injured*) which might well have been translated into English as *The Downtrodden and the Meek*.

But the method of criticism illustrated above is not one which Dostoevsky would have so readily employed. It is rather that of Tolstoy, though Tolstoy's voice would not have been so strident as is Dickens's (toned down perhaps, in response to a more controlled realism); that is, the voice is more restrained, but the ironic tone is still apparent. Here, for example, is Tolstoy in Chapter Two of his short story, "The Death of Ivan Ilyich" (1886):

Ivan Ilyich's life had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible. He had been a member of the Court of Justice, and died at the age of forty-five. His father had been an official who after serving in various ministries and departments in Petersburg had much the sort of career which brings men to positions from which by reason of their long service they cannot be dismissed, though they are obviously unfit to hold any responsible position, and for whom therefore posts are specially created, which though fictitious carry salaries of from six to ten thousand rubles that are not fictitious, and in receipt of which they live on to a great age.

Such was the Privy Councilor and superfluous member of various superfluous institutions, Ilya Epimovich Golovin.⁽¹⁸⁾

The satirical thrust at a government institution is overt here as it is in the extract from *Oliver Twist*, though in the short story it is much more economical in its presentation. And like Dickens, Tolstoy's demolition of an institution is effected both through the ironic voice of the narrator and, later in the narrative, through the characterization of its officials.

As noted earlier, for Tolstoy, Dickens's greatness lies in his creation of characters which inspire love in his readers. Similarly for Dostoevsky the creation of ideal and beautiful characters is Dickens's great achievement. He is particularly drawn to the character of Mr. Pickwick, whom he regards as great, though not as great as Cervantes's fictional creation of Don Quixote.⁽¹⁹⁾ And yet there were those who regarded Dickens's characterization as a fundamental weakness of his fiction. Listen to another English novelist of the period, George Eliot, drawing attention to what she regarded as a shortcoming in his work:

"We have one great novelist [Dickens] who is gifted with the utmost power of rendering the external traits of our town population, and if he could give us their psychological character, their conceptions of life, and their emotions with the same truth as their dress and manners, his books would be the greatest contribution Art has ever made to social sympathies."⁽²⁰⁾

The accusation here seems to be that Dickens is only able to depict the exterior person and that there is no psychological penetration of his characters. Perhaps this has something to do with the fact that George Eliot was judging Dickens by her own literary standard of a refined literary realism where the balanced psychology of a character is developed rather than the disturbed abnormal states with which Dickens's work is undeniably permeated. One could say that while George Eliot was generally concerned with depicting the light

side of her characters, Dickens was drawn to the dark side of the human psyche.

The psychological features of Dickens's fiction are not always fully recognized, unlike the social and moral dimensions; but they attracted Dostoevsky: dream, hallucination, the uncanny, phobias, neuroses, manias and perversions. These were the psychological traumas induced by living on the threshold of debt, disease, despair and death—this apart from the ideal and beautiful characters already referred to.

Another episode from *Oliver Twist* illustrates what would have attracted Dostoevsky to the work of the English novelist; this time from Chapter 5: young Oliver, old enough to leave the workhouse, has been apprenticed to Mr. Sowerberry, the local undertaker, and has gone with him to a poor part of the town to measure up for a coffin. The description of the street prefigures what Oliver is to find when he runs away to London: "The Kennel [gutter] was stagnant and filthy. The very rats, which here and there lay putrefying in its rottenness, were hideous with famine." The undertaker knocks at the door and the narrative continues.

It was opened by a young girl of thirteen or fourteen. [...The undertaker] stepped in; Oliver followed him.

There was no fire in the room; but a man was crouching mechanically over the empty stove. An old woman, too, had drawn a low stool to the cold hearth; and was sitting beside him. There were some ragged children in another corner; [...].

The man's face was thin and very pale; his hair and beard were grizzly; his eyes were bloodshot. The old woman's face was wrinkled; her two remaining teeth protruded over her underlip; and her eyes were bright and piercing. Oliver was afraid to look at either her or the man. They seemed so like the rats he had seen outside.

'Nobody shall go near her,' said the man, starting fiercely up, as the undertaker approached the recess, 'Keep back! Damn you, keep back, if you've a life to lose!'

'Nonsense, my good man,' said the undertaker, who was pretty well used to misery in all its shapes, 'Nonsense.'

'I tell you,' said the man: clenching his hands, and stamping furiously on the floor, - 'I tell you I won't have her put into the ground. She couldn't rest there. The worms would worry her - not eat her - she is so worn away.'

[...] He twined his hands in his hair; and, with a loud scream, rolled grovelling upon the floor, his eyes fixed, and the foam covering his lips.

The terrified children cried bitterly; but the old woman, who had hitherto remained as quiet as if she had been wholly deaf to all that passed, menaced them into silence.[...].

'She was my daughter,' said the old woman, nodding her head in the direction of the corpse; and speaking with an idiotic leer, more ghastly than even the presence of death in such a place. 'Lord, Lord! Well it is strange that I who gave birth to her, and was a woman then, should be alive and merry now, and she lying there so cold and stiff! Lord, Lord! - to think of it; it's as good as a play - as good as a play!'

As the wretched creature mumbled and chuckled in her hideous merriment, the undertaker turned to go away.⁽²¹⁾

There is, of course, social content here of a very stark kind, but what Dostoevsky would have particularly noticed would have been the uncanny atmosphere—nightmarish in quality—which Dickens has created. He also would have observed the author's likening of the inmates of the poverty-stricken room to vermin, the image of the rat here functioning like a downward metaphor signalling a metaphysical comment about the human condition and the impossibility of immortality.⁽²²⁾ The Russian author would have seen the man's dreadful expression of anger mingled with anguish as evoking more than a social state of destitution, but an existential cry of despair. His demented behaviour, culminating in what seems like an epileptic fit, would have been particularly striking to Dostoevsky since he was himself an epileptic (the figure of Monks, the man who turns out to be Oliver's half brother, is of course another such epileptic, though the malady is never mentioned by name). The grotesque features of the old woman's face suggesting something both frightening and pathetic, and her uncanny behaviour, are again what one expects from Dostoevsky, as is the pathetic state of the children which speaks for itself and does not require a critical narrative voice, nor even amplified description, to sustain it, so dramatically powerful is the situation.

All this brings to mind scenes in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866) taken up with the death of Mr. Marmeladov, a drunkard ex-civil servant, and the frenzied despair of his poverty-stricken wife who is herself dying of consumption, and who has two children that have to be cared for (Part 2, Chapter 7). This episode in *Crime and Punishment* is very similar to the passage quoted from *Oliver Twist*: it has the same intensity of expression, and

the same demented behaviour of the person soon to be bereaved (Mrs Marmeladov), whose despair has been caused by an unrelenting state of destitution. Both scenes are morbidly concentrated on the process of death and give the impression of approaching a point of no return both psychologically and physically: a living on the threshold—between sanity and insanity, perhaps, and between life and death.

Mikhail Bakhtin in his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* has pointed out that many of the episodes in Dostoevsky's fiction take place on the threshold: on landings, on stairways and at doors, and that this has a psychic correspondence in the minds of the characters.⁽²³⁾ There are numerous instances where this can also be observed in Dickens, and which might lead one to conclude that the Russian author's frequent evocation of threshold experience stemmed from his reading of Dickens. One might take examples, once more from *Oliver Twist*, in order to illustrate how pervasive the phenomenon is. The classic instance is, of course, Oliver in the workhouse asking for more to eat (on the threshold of corporal punishment). Or again, Fagin in the condemned cell, filled with dread before the hour of public execution (capital punishment), and contemplating the moment when he will step over the threshold of his cell into the daylight. Another example is when Oliver climbs through the window of the Maylies's house (on the threshold of committing a crime or *transgression*); and having been shot, finds himself on the threshold of death as he kneels before the literal threshold of the Maylies's door. One can see in this and the previous example a close correlation between the physical threshold—the place and point of entering—and the psychical threshold—the limit of consciousness and the point of passing to unconsciousness. Thus, in both Dickens and Dostoevsky, the act of passing from one place to another can often be correlated with the process of passing from one state of mind to another.⁽²⁴⁾

It may have been observed that in the last-quoted passage from *Oliver Twist* there is an uncharacteristic absence of an intrusive narrative voice. This is much more typical of Dostoevsky where, according to Bakhtin, the homophonic (omniscient single voice) status of the narrator is submerged by the polyphony (many voices) of the characters.⁽²⁵⁾ Although Dickens's narratives are predominantly uni-accentual, there are instances where polyphony temporarily takes over, the last-quoted passage being one of them. Conversely, multi-accentuality in Dostoevsky is not absolute, and there are instances where the voice of the narrator overrides polyphony, though this is rarely sustained for long. In any case, where the English author does allow his narrator to relinquish his hegemonic voice, a consequent relativization of focus tends to put the plot on a much less stable basis than it would be in a homophonic narrative, giving it more the appearance of a fragmented modernistic structure than it does an integrated plot of the conventional kind.

We have clearly arrived here, through Dostoevsky (and Bakhtin), at a more modern(ist) reading of Dickens, and we should not, therefore, be surprised to find twentieth-century writers of fiction responding in a similar way, nor to find novelists such as Arnold Bennett and John Galsworthy recognizing Marcel Proust as the "lineal descendent of Dickens and George Eliot."⁽²⁶⁾

In order to illustrate the apparent modernity of Dickens, Elizabeth Czoniczer, in her study of Proust's literary antecedents, quotes two passages, which might either be from Dickens or from Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913-1927), and asks her readers to identify the author:

"We have all some experience of a feeling, that comes over us occasionally, of what we are saying and doing having been said and done before, in a remote time - of our having been surrounded, dim ages ago, by the same faces, objects, and circumstances—of our knowing perfectly what will happen next, as if we suddenly remembered it.

"He seemed to swell and grow before my eyes; the room seemed full of echoes and voices; and the strange feeling (to which, perhaps, no one is quite a stranger) that all this had occurred before, at some indefinite time, and that I knew what he was going to say next, took possession of me."⁽²⁷⁾

Those of my readers familiar with Proust will perhaps be surprised to learn that these passages are not translations from *Remembrance of Things Past*, but are taken from Dickens's novel, written in the first person autobiographical mode, *David Copperfield*. But they strike us as Proustian because they hint at the complex origin of involuntary recollection in the memory, draw attention to the subjectivity and heterogeneity of the perception of the real, make it hard to distinguish between the generality of phenomena and their essence, and remind us of the occurrence of universal repetition and the immensity of the mental sphere.⁽²⁸⁾ All this brings to mind in the modern reader the uncertainties of a modern existentialist philosophy rather than the innate optimism of nineteenth-century idealism with which one would traditionally associate Dickens.

Another twentieth-century novelist, who has undoubtedly come under the influence of Dickens, is Franz Kafka. In his diary Kafka wrote of his first novel, *America* (1927, written 1911-14), that it was his intention "to write a Dickens novel". The first chapter of the novel, moreover, he admits to being "a sheer imitation of Dickens".⁽²⁹⁾ Mark Spilka has delineated this more specifically by drawing attention to a major influence in *America* coming from Kafka's reading

of *David Copperfield*, not only in the thematic correspondences of "childhood isolation, country courtship and urban squalor", but also in method.⁽³⁰⁾ This at first seems an unlikely proposition until it is realized that Dickens's evocation of what Spilka calls "infantile perspective"⁽³¹⁾ bears a resemblance to the naive mode of Kafka's discourse.

But Kafka himself admitted that because he lacked Dickens's vitality, he was also able to avoid the faults of his writing. In his diary, Kafka wrote of "Dickens's opulence and great, careless prodigality, but in consequence passages of awful insipidity in which he wearily works over effects he has already achieved." Kafka continues: "[it] gives one a barbaric impression [...] that I [...] thanks to my weakness and wiser for my epigoism have been able to avoid"⁽³²⁾. Put simply, Kafka was playing introvert to Dickens's extrovert.

Dickens's *Bleak House*, a proto-absurdist novel if ever there was one, was instrumental in the formation of Kafka's second novel, *The Trial* (1925, written 1914-15).⁽³³⁾ The comparison is obvious if it is recalled that both novels are concerned with a long and protracted legal case which ultimately does not lead to justice. Most readers, however, would locate Dickens's fiction on a secular plane whilst Kafka, at least in the West, has often been thought to be allegorizing a religious or metaphysical dilemma. How the reader interprets, of course, depends on the extent to which the language of the text is perceived as functioning symbolically on an extra-literal plane. One would agree with Edmund Wilson when he says of Dickens in relation to the moderns:

"The people who talk about the symbols of Kafka and Mann and Joyce have been discouraged from looking for anything of the kind in Dickens [...]. We may be surprised to return to him and find in him a symbolism of a more complicated reference and deeper implication than the metaphors that hang as emblems over the door."⁽³⁴⁾

To return to the comparison of Dickens and Kafka, further echoes of Dickens's late novel, *Great Expectations*, occur in Kafka's *The Trial*, particularly in the episodes where Josef K. visits the old judge Huld and is teased and provoked by Leni the girl who looks after him. This may recall Pip's visit to old Miss Havisham and his being vexed by the beautiful Estella. It is not only the situation which is similar, but the peculiar atmosphere which both writers are able to conjure up, so that an episode that seems at first light-hearted is gradually permeated with the most awful and threatening dread. Perhaps one does not normally think of Dickens's novels as the harbinger of a modern existential anxiety, but the modernists have certainly been touched by it.

The influence of Dickens has not, of course, been restricted to twentieth-century European writers. A case in point is the Egyptian novelist, Naguib

Mahfouz, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988. His famous trilogy of novels, written in the 1940s at a time when Dickens was being widely and enthusiastically read in recent Arabic translation by the Lebanese, Mounir Baalbaki, undoubtedly bears marked Dickensian features. Indeed, the scale of Mahfouz's fiction has led one commentator to remark that in his novels "Naguib Mahfouz has painted as vivid and courageous a picture of twentieth-century life in Egypt as Balzac did of life in France and Dickens did of life in England in the nineteenth century."⁽³⁵⁾ In the trilogy (1956, 1957, 1957), one could narrow the location specifically to the old Jamialiyah quarter of Cairo, each of the titles of the novels taking the names of a street or district in the area.

Although Dickens did not name his novels after places, place, as has often been noted, does play an important role in his novels because it is foregrounded in such a way as to seem frequently to be forming character or, conversely, the characters may be made responsible for giving the city its ambience, its moods, and its colour. This ambiguous interaction between fictional people and actual places in Dickens is also characteristic of Mahfouz whose settings clearly are an integral part of the development of character, whether it is a matter of the characters learning to adapt to a city environment, or the city is perceived as a phenomenon of their own making.

Again, Mahfouz's wide range of social classes, and his concern for the socially underprivileged and exploited, is similar to Dickens's, but with the major difference that the Egyptian writer generally refrains from direct narratorial criticism or judgement. His humour, furthermore, derives not from an ironic narratorial voice, as is often the case in Dickens, but is achieved through the verbal exchanges made between the fictional characters.

The butts of Mahfouz's criticism are also similar to those of the English writer; for example, the hypocrisy of the authoritarian husband/father in the first book of the trilogy, *Baina Al-Quasrain (Between the Two Palaces)*, and the waning of his familial authority, is reminiscent of Dombey's unyielding attitude towards his son and daughter, and the loss of control over them caused by the premature death of Paul and the temporary disappearance of Florence. Concomitant to this, the role of submissive Victorian wife in *Dombey and Son* is similarly treated by Mahfouz in *Baina Al-Quasrain*, although here there is a more evident concern for the reform of men's attitudes towards women and for the assertion by women of their social rights.

As is well known, the repression and exploitation of women is a recurring theme in Dickens which has certainly led some scholars to note the feminist implications of the author's concern.⁽³⁶⁾ In Mahfouz, however, the theme is treated much more radically, and it is very evident that the Egyptian writer is

advocating social reform, in contrast to Dickens's appeal to individual moral sensibilities.

In *Al-Sukkariyyah*, the third novel in the trilogy, Mahfouz interrogates the problem of homosexuality as he had done in his earlier novel, *Zuqaq Al-Mudaq* (1947) (*Midaq Alley*). This was a subject which Dickens for reasons of Victorian propriety felt unable to make explicit in his novels, even though the theme of paederasty is sometimes not far from the surface, particularly in the frequent physical and psychological abuses meted out to children. Mahfouz, too, features the exploitation of children in his trilogy, one of a range of social abuses the rendering of which appears to owe something to Dickens, both in their social dimension as a critique of the condition of modern Egypt, and at a psychological level as individual manifestations of mental disturbance and abnormality.

One further characteristic of Dickens's novels which probably appealed to Naguib Mahfouz, and which certainly did to Dickens's Arab readers in the 1940s and 1950s, was the translatability of the English author's prose into a language close to the kind of classical Arabic which Mahfouz himself employed.⁽³⁷⁾ As Trevor Le Gassick has remarked, Mahfouz's style "is clear and unaffected and his characters speak their dialogue in an extraordinarily natural 'classical' language, at times full of proverbs so typical of Arab conversation, but devoid of the deliberate colloquial words and phrases favoured by some Arab writers today."⁽³⁸⁾

Although in subsequent novels Mahfouz has maintained his particular style, in *Awlad Haritna* (1959) (*Children of Our Alley*) the social and psychological realism characteristic of the trilogy is here governed by an overriding allegorical meaning quite unlike anything attempted by Dickens.⁽³⁹⁾ And after this novel there is an evident movement away from nineteenth-century realism towards a modern impressionism⁽⁴⁰⁾ which marks a further distancing from Dickens's literary influence.⁽⁴¹⁾

Another Arab writer to come under Dickens's influence, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, is the Syrian novelist, Hanna Minnah. Like Mahfouz, it is Dickens's social critique which is at first so pertinent to the Syrian writer who though an avowed Communist (which Dickens was not), was unconsciously a devout Christian (which Dickens certainly was). In his socio-political novels, however, Minnah does not allow his personal feelings voiced by the narrator to override commitment at a communal level. This is particularly the case in his first novel, *Al-Massabeeh Al-Zurq* (1954) (*Blue Lamps*) and novels of the 1960s such as *Al-Thulj Ya'ati min Al-Nafithah* (*Snow Comes Through the Window*), set in Beirut, and *Al-Shumss fi Yom Gha'im* (*Sunshine on a Cloudy Day*), set in Damascus. As in Dickens, the social classes are often represented in terms of

those who exploit and those who are exploited, with the major difference that whereas the Syrian novelist exposes the economic base which gives rise to social misery, Dickens rather focuses on the symptoms of an English social malaise without positing a political agenda which might overcome it. Dickens, in idealist vein, rests his faith in the human condition and the forces of life and love, while Minnah, by tracing the social and economic patterning of society is able to envisage a structural solution to social inequalities and injustices.

On the other hand, in those novels of the Syrian writer which are partially autobiographical, such as *Al-Moustanqua'a (The Swamp)*, there is a marked effusion of feeling quite unlike the objective style of the socio-political novels; and although the autobiographical novels are not usually regarded as Minnah's best, the influence of Dickens is apparent in the sentimental strain running through them.

But the present generation of modern writers in Syria and Egypt have not taken Dickens as their foreign mentor as was the case during the immediately pre- and post-independence periods in the Middle East, when not only were his novels translated into Arabic, but were also adapted by David Lean in his 1940s film productions of *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations* which had wide distribution in many Arab countries.⁽⁴²⁾

The waning of Dickens's influence upon writers of the contemporary Arab world does not mean to say that his works have lost their currency among the intellectual elites of the area. Dickens continues to be well represented on the syllabi of Arab university courses devoted to English fiction, and it is rarely the case that a Dickens novel is not one of the set books for courses on the nineteenth-century novel. During my tenure at the University of Tunis from 1985 to 1989, for example, *Great Expectations*, *Oliver Twist*, and *Dombey and Son* were taught consecutively, and *Hard Times* has been on the syllabus of the Nineteenth-Century Novel course in the English Department at Kuwait University for some years now. In fact, there must be very few students who have passed through an English Department in the Arab world who have not had exposure to at least one of Dickens's novels. His place on university syllabi is guaranteed not simply because his works belong to the canon of English literature. If this were the only reason, one might ask why novels by Sir Walter Scott or Anthony Trollope are so rarely chosen as set books on the syllabi of nineteenth-century novel courses in the Arab world. Dickens's frequent inclusion may also be because Arab undergraduates readily agree with the

English author's clearly enunciated ethical position: his championing of the family as the essential unit of society is but one instance where Dickens's values coincide with those of his Arab readers; whereas in modern Western societies the ideal of a family seated cozily around the fireside has diminished in value with the coming of central heating and the welfare state.

Ultimately, though, it is the enjoyment offered by Dickens—his satirical humour, memorable character portrayals, and engrossing plots—which present-day Arab students find so congenial. If this is indeed the case, Dickens would not, after all, be so surprised to find his novels studied at universities in the modern Arab world. On the contrary, so long as his student readers were entertained and the teachers (Lecturers/Readers) entertaining one feels that the association of his novels with Academia would meet with Dickens's enthusiastic approval.

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