

Dickens and Collins:
The Rape of the Sentimental Heroine

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Yes, his daughter! Look at her! Look here! down upon the ground, clinging to him, calling to him, folding her hands, praying to him.

‘Papa! dearest Papa! pardon me, forgive me! I have come back to ask forgiveness on my knees. I never can be happy more without it!’

Unchanged still. Of all the world unchanged. Raising the same face to his, as on that miserable night. Asking *his* forgiveness.¹

He stooped and lifted Magdalen in his arms. Her head rested gently on the sailor’s breast; her eyes looked up wonderingly into the sailor’s face. She smiled and whispered to him vacantly. Her mind had wandered back to the old days at home; and her few broken words showed that she fancied herself a child again in her father’s arms. ‘Poor papa!’ she cried softly. ‘Why do you look so sorry? Poor papa!’²

AT THESE TWO HIGHLY-CHARGED MOMENTS, the differences between the prose style of Dickens and Collins emerge sharply. The sentimental register is common to both: the simplified, highly-potent vocabulary of feeling: daughter, Papa, child, on my knees, breast (used to evoke “delicious” sensations of male tenderness — the female equivalent is almost always “bosom”), old days at home, in her father’s arms. Emotions are evoked by this naming of key words, which brings with them trains of accepted connotations. But beyond a shared register, the Dickensian rhetoric of intensification has little in common with Collins’s characteristic rhetoric of exposition. Dickens’s tableau *demand*s a response — Mr. Dombey himself appeals to a third

party — “Look at her! Look here!” (recalling Lear at the death of Cordelia). The intense anaphora accretes layers of simple feeling onto the complex emotional situation. The repetition of present participles — “clinging . . . calling . . . folding . . . praying” — paradoxically make of Florence a static *object* to be explored — like Bernini’s Saint Theresa. “Papa . . . papa . . . forgive . . . forgive . . . Unchanged . . . unchanged.” The emotional possibilities are exploited and enjoyed to the full. Sentences are monolithic; there is no need for subjects or verbs, for what is being represented is an object not an action.

Dickens organizes words as the Baroque sculptor “organizes” stone: to produce an emotional response. What he elicits is “pure” emotion — “pure” in the sense that it has been deliberately separated from mental processes. This seems to be a prerequisite of all sentimental writing of the nineteenth century — a feature which makes it significantly analagous to sexual activity. Ratiocination destroys the “here and now” of both. Casting one’s mind into past and future hinders the spontaneous movement of emotion (“moving out”) and of physical desire. Collins’s effects are not, on this analysis, sentimental. The reader is required to join the narrator in a strenuous exploration of contingent circumstances. One recalls the difference between the two men over the staging of *The Frozen Deep*. Collins distributed the interest of the play widely, including speeches about the heroine’s past and speeches by an old nurse with second sight about the future; Dickens pared these down and threw all the interest onto the figure of Wardour, to achieve one final powerful moment of release for the audience — and for himself, in the role of Wardour.³

In the declaration of love between Florence and Walter, Dickens draws again on the accumulated expectation of his readers to achieve the emotional climax. The scene must be quoted at length for its careful organization to emerge:

She raised her head, and spoke to him with such a solemn sweetness in her eyes; with such a calm, bright, placid smile shining on him through her tears; with such a low, soft tremble in her frame and voice; that the innermost chords of his heart were touched, and his sight was dim as he listened.

'No, Walter, I cannot forget it. I would not forget it, for the world. Are you — are you very poor?'

'I am but a wanderer,' said Walter, 'making voyages to live across the sea. That is my calling now.'

'Are you soon going away again, Walter?'

'Very soon.'

She sat looking at him for a moment; then timidly put her trembling hand in his.

"If you will take me for your wife, Walter, I will love you dearly. If you will let me go with you, Walter, I will go to the world's end without fear. I can give up nothing for you — I have nothing to resign, and no one to forsake; but all my love and life shall be devoted to you, and with my last breath I will breathe your name to God if I have sense and memory left.'

He caught her to his heart, and laid her cheek against his own, and now, no more repulsed, no more forlorn, she wept indeed, upon the breast of her dear lover.

Blessed Sunday Bells, ringing so tranquilly in their entranced and happy ears! Blessed Sunday peace and quiet, harmonising with the calmness in their souls, and making holy air around them! Blessed twilight stealing on, and shading her so soothingly and gravely, as she falls asleep, like a hushed child, upon the bosom she has clung to!

Oh load of love and trustfulness that lies so lightly there! Aye, look down on the closed eyes, Walter, with a proudly tender gaze; for in all the wide wide world they seek but thee now — only thee! (p. 679)

The content of the passage — the ideas and information conveyed — can be easily summarized:

Walter: Florence, please forget what I have said.

Florence: I don't want to forget it. Are you very poor?

Walter: I am a poor sailor.

Florence: Are you soon going away again?

Walter: Very soon.

Florence: Will you take me with you as your wife?

Walter: (implied) Yes.

The extract is preceded by the ending of a misunderstanding between Florence and Walter which clears the way for the declaration. The misunderstanding involves the removal of the terms "brother" and "sister" which have previously confined the relationship. The whole passage in fact is a statement and restatement of the new relationship. Florence's questions reveal the logic

of emotion: Are you very poor? Are you soon going away again? Will you take me with you? Dickens's narrator's interventions into the dialogue are all in the interests of intensification, so that the moment becomes charged with almost religious significance. The figure of Florence is suffused with light so that Walter as worshipper cannot see clearly:

She raised her head, and spoke to him with such a solemn sweetness in her eyes, with such a calm, bright, placid smile shining on him through her tears, with such a low, soft tremble in her frame and voice; that the innermost chords of his heart were touched, and his sight was dim as he listened.

Florence remains still throughout the dialogue, exuding the tears which (again suggesting displaced sexuality) prepare Walter's entry into the inner sanctum: "He caught her to his heart, and laid her cheek against his own, and now . . . she wept indeed upon the breast of her dear lover." The climactic "emotional coition" is achieved, continuing the tradition of displacement, via the "heart" and "breast" of the male — hence the power of these words in the sentimental register. The whole process is then transfigured (again the ecstasy of Saint Theresa seems appropriate) into religious terms — the soul raped by divine Love — with the movement to the "Blessed Sunday bells" in the incantatory coda.

The blurring of religious and "romantic" feeling is characteristic of the sentimental mode. The effort involved though in the reader's *repressing* the sexual connotations releases its own energy into the passage. Paradoxically the adjective trains ("calm, bright, placid") blur meaning, disarm analysis and, though the feelings are overnamed, the final result is an emotion which is all the more powerful for being nameless.

The lyrical quality of this prose provides an emotional shape allowing for the rise and fall of the reader's emotion and a final pause for the cleansing tears. Each lengthy period (for long and convoluted sentences are crucial in the "pacing out" of emotional arousal and release) consists of rising action, climax, and falling action:

ine. Collins, however, neatly exposes the complex of assumptions in his readers by reversing expectations and showing that Norah's gravity hides a conventional yielding female while it is the open Magdalen who is in fact the possessor of the dangerous "hidden depths."

The narrative style sets the tone of the irony. It is from the beginning self-contained and controlled, despite the overt extolling of contrary qualities. Paragraphs describing feelings tend to begin with a dramatic reaction, then to return to explanatory ratiocination. Collins's ability to describe the *activity of the conscious mind* — as opposed to stream of consciousness, Jamesian moral depths or Dickensian feelings — is supreme: this prose (as the extract in epigraph shows) generates endless new beginnings, sentences link logically together, there is an expansiveness analogous to that of the exploring mind. Perhaps as a consequence, the habitual technique is to move at once away from emotional heights, to dissipate emotion. Even in the melodrama of Magdalen's near-suicide, there is an undertow of restraint. Magdalen is described in all her bodily awkwardness, and given no dying speech, only a sentence ending on a dying fall: "She dragged herself to the bedside, and rested her hand upon it, sitting on the floor. 'Oh my life, my life!' she thought, 'What is my life worth, that I cling to it like this?'" (p. 389). It is a very logical proposition for such a situation and I suggest that it can only be read on a descending scale. Chapter endings are almost all "dying falls," heavy with implication, but descending: "Before the first hour of the new day was at an end, Mrs. Lecount was on her way back to England" (p. 402). "Before noon the next day, Mr. George Bertram had left the house, and the last chance in Magdalen's favour had left with him" (p. 522).

Collins makes use of the sentimental register throughout the novel — "the last refuge of her poverty and despair, in the hour of her sorest need," etc. — but an examination of his style reveals that the characteristic action of his prose is not, as in Dickens, intensification, but logical progression. The effect is not the purging of emotion but its dissipation, and enjoyment of the exercise of the questioning mind.

In enacting his concern for the logical connections and contingencies that build up the society he distrusts, Collins sends Magdalen wandering through the world like Bunyan's pilgrim. The exploration of Saint Crux on the Marsh becomes a paradigm for the action of the restless mind seeking satisfactory answers in an unhealthy society:

Haunted night and day by the one dormant idea that now possessed her, she leapt all logical difficulties at a bound. . . . Up to this time, it had been her settled belief that he kept all his important documents in one or other of the suite of rooms. . . . Why — she now asked herself, with a sudden distrust of the conclusion which had hitherto satisfied her mind — why might he not lock some of them up in the other rooms as well? (p. 529)

As an emblem for the action of Collins's creative mind one might cite also the trains of thought of most of the characters. Miss Garth is a good example:

Searching, as a glass darkly, into the two natures [of Norah and Magdalen] she felt her way, doubt by doubt, from one possible truth to another. . . . *It might be*, that the upper surface of their characters was all that she had thus far plainly seen in Norah and Magdalen. *It might be*, that the unalluring secrecy and reserve of one sister, the all-attractive openness and high spirits of the other, were more or less referable, in each case, to those physical causes which work towards the production of moral results. *It might be . . . was this so? Was the promise of the future . . . ? If the life of the elder sister . . . was the life of the younger . . .* she recoiled with angry suddenness from the whole *train of thought* in which her mind had been engaged but the moment before. [Emphasis added.] (p. 107)

The struggle here, dramatized in the rhetorical questions, the propositions, the general logical structure of the prose, is between the active moment of the mind and the, as Collins sees it, passive reliance in the inevitable triumph of Good. Collins has presented Miss Garth as a reliable viewpoint, but with her "recoil" he distances himself, observing that "[h]er heart was the heart of a true woman. It accepted the conviction which raised Norah higher in her love: it rejected the doubt which threatened to place Magdalen lower" (p. 107) and thus throws into the ring a major issue in the novel. The (falsified?) view of life as a tableau

in which Good *stands* triumphant over Evil is identified with what is feminine. The model of life as Manichean struggle, involving action rather than passivity, is identified with the threatening masculinity of Magdalen.

The habitual action of prose is, by this account, "masculine": it involves itself by its very articulation of ideas, in the manufacture of chains of logic. Mrs. Lecount shows the metaphor in action:

She was positively determined to think and think again . . . (she) set herself to review the conclusions which she had gathered from the events of the day. . . .

She had got no further than this during the day; she could get no further now: the chain of thought broke. Her mind took up the fragments, and formed another chain which attached itself to the lady who was kept in seclusion. . . . [H]er thoughts . . . wandered back from present things to past . . . they entered the bare, comfortless room at Vauxhall Walk. . . . With electric suddenness, her mind pierced together its scattered multitudes of thoughts, and put them before her plainly under one intelligible form. (pp. 295-96)

The enactment of the movement of a train of thought, its directions and indirections, the importance of the mosaic model, the restless exploratory thrust of the series of clauses — leads us inevitably to Collins's basic premise, that Truth lies fragmented around us and can be discovered only through strenuous use of the mind. The static and passive "feeling heart," in this view, is not only incompetent, but positively inimical to the triumph of truth and justice. The reaction of the two sisters to their disinheritance highlights this passive/active, feminine/masculine tension which gives the novel its dynamic:

'I speak for my sister as well as for myself', [Norah] said, with her colour a little heightened, with her natural gentleness of manner just touched by a quiet, uncomplaining sadness. 'You have done all that could be done, Mr. Pendril. We have tried to restrain ourselves from hoping too confidently; and we are deeply grateful for your kindness, at a time when kindness is sorely needed by both of us.'

Magdalen's hand returned the pressure of her sister's — withdrew itself — trifled for a moment impatiently with the arrangement of her dress — then suddenly moved the chair closer to the

table. Leaning one arm on it (with the fist clenched) she looked across at Mr. Pendril. (p. 111)

Magdalen's withdrawal from the female (sentimental) role is brilliantly dramatized in the impatient movement against the confinement of her clothing, and in the clenched fist — as powerful a gesture against feminine traditions as a Black Power Salute against racist society. The terror she inspires in the "Society" of the novel seems immensely inappropriate unless one sees her as the active principle who can, by her mere presence, destroy the whole emotional structure on which the novel — and the society it belonged to — was built.

Collins brilliantly dramatizes the threat in terms of Richardsonian "sexual fainting." The first victim is Miss Garth:

So, without a tear on her cheeks, without a faltering tone in her voice, she repeated the lawyer's own words, exactly as he had spoken them. Miss Garth staggered back a step, and caught at the bench to support herself. Her head swam; she closed her eyes in a momentary faintness. When they opened again, Magdalen's cold lips kissed her. She drew back from the kiss; the touch of the girl's lips thrilled her with terror. (p. 105)

Miss Garth herself has "a masculine readiness and decision of movement; (an) obstinate honesty of look and manner" — but she has built her own construct of the world in terms of society's version of the fitness of things. Magdalen's assertion of masculine will is, by this account, diabolical, and Miss Garth experiences here a diabolical version of the spiritual rape of St. Theresa. Collins could hardly have presented the central issue more tellingly than by exposing what he sees as the corruption of the sentimental vision *in its own terms*. He practises a similar "inversion" in the final reunion of Kirke and Magdalen. Again it is the overtly "masculine" character who faints:

The shock of the double recognition — the recognition, at the same moment of the face and of the dreadful change in it — struck him speechless and helpless. The steady presence of mind in all emergencies which had become a habit of his life, failed him for the first time. The poverty-stricken street, the squalid mob round the door, swam before his eyes. He staggered back, and caught the iron-railings of the house beside him. (p. 560)

At various points in the story Magdalen reveals that, underneath her emotional transvestitism, she *is* still female: she cries. Tears occur rarely in Collins but they are decisive as a touchstone of the sisters' reactions to bereavement and disinheritance. Norah responds appropriately; Magdalen does not:

The agony of Norah's grief had forced its way outward to the natural relief of tears. It was not so with Magdalen. . . . Nothing roused, nothing melted her. (p. 77)

...

'Oh my love', [Miss Garth] said, 'no tears yet! Oh if I could see you as I have seen Norah!' (p. 80)

Norah desperately tries to prove that her sister is not 'unnatural':

'Don't think ill of Magdalen,' she said. 'Magdalen suffers in secret more than I do.' (p. 106)

...

She pointed to the letter. The traces of heavy teardrops lay thick over the last lines of the dead man's writing.

'*Her* tears,' said Norah softly.

Miss Garth's head drooped low, over the mute revelation of Magdalen's return to her better self.

'Oh, never doubt her again!', pleaded Norah. (p. 108)

Tears are evidence of femininity — in the broad symbolic sense involving complicity in social values: they act here as a sort of emotional menstruation. Collins sneers at them in the effeminate males he creates, who are Magdalen's complements and are also threateningly "unnatural," such as Frank, who "[i]n his own effeminate way . . . looked like a convalescent Apollo" (p. 57). "The ready tears rose in Frank's eyes" (p. 85).

There is for me something weary and becalmed in the final chapters. Restraint and chastening of passion have brought hero and heroine into an autumnal calm — "The autumn sunshine was bright even in the murky streets . . ." (p. 590). Kirke represents a return to the fold of society, to "Church and State" if you like. Magdalen's conscious use of feminine wiles ("little by little she presumed on all her privileges, and wound her way unsuspected into the most intimate knowledge of his nature" [p. 576]) recalls Margaret's autumnal marriage to Mr. Wilcox in *Howards*

End and her equally conscious acceptance of the conventional feminine role. Magdalen is given what appears to be a triumphant revelation of emotion in her declaration of love for Kirke, but Collins as always demands that we *think* our way through to the response appropriate to the occasion. Magdalen crams a whole sentenceful of ideas, summing up many of the book's themes, into the traditional heroine's declaration, thus destroying any movement of emotional arousal and release:

'Do I deserve my happiness?' she murmured. . . . 'Oh I know how the poor narrow people who have never felt and never suffered, would answer me, if I asked them what I ask you. If *they* knew my story, they would forget all the provocation, and only remember the offence — they would fasten on my sin, and pass all my suffering by. But you are not one of them? Tell me if you have any shadow of a misgiving! Tell me if you doubt that the one dear object of all my life to come, is to live worthy of you! I asked you to wait and see me: I asked you if there was any hard truth to be told, to tell it me here, with your own lips. Tell it, my love, my husband! — tell it me now! . . .

He stooped, and kissed her. (pp. 592-93)

It seems to me that Collins's aims were never those of the sentimental novelist. Even Magdalen's ultimate lyrical outburst to Kirke "Tell me . . . tell me . . . I asked . . . I asked . . . tell it . . . tell it" is a fine compromise: emotional outburst *in character* and therefore designed primarily for narrative rather than for emotional ends. Magdalen's active, aggressive, demanding use of language has been sustained from her opening, beautifully ironic words in the first chapter: "Suffering! . . . I don't know the meaning of the word: if there's anything the matter with me, I'm too well" (p. 9). Collins places an active, initiating female figure into the structure of a society he sees as emotionally corrupt and, with supreme restraint, explores the circumstances of her inevitable immolation. He enacts a theme, realizing it through structure and style, rather than presenting a thesis. At the same time, by a final irony in a novel built on irony, he seems to yield, as Magdalen wearily does, to the weight of the traditional structure at last, and to give his heroine up to "clinging" and to belying Miss Garth's accurate original assessment: "She is resolute and impetuous, clever and domineering; she is not one

of those model women who want a man to look up to, and to protect them . . ." (p. 56). Whatever the precise nature of the irony, whether the final collapse into Kirke's arms is victory or defeat for Collins's ideals, the reader's satisfaction is complex, involving not simply a sense of emotional "rightness" but among many other elements the intellectual pleasure of appreciating the long-anticipated pun on "with your own lips."

Collins depicts a society in which emotion is encouraged as part of the necessary bonding which holds up the social structure. Society is, as it were, dedicated to the feminine principle. Dangerous passions are displaced into tears and fainting. Magdalen's masculinity, identified with thinking rather than feeling, endangers the complicity of the social relationship. It cannot be tolerated: "They had summoned their courage to meet the shock of her passionate grief, or to face the harder trial of witnessing her speechless despair. But they were not prepared for her invincible resolution to read the Instructions; for the terrible questions which she had put to the lawyer; for her immovable determination to *fix* all the *circumstances* in her *mind*." [Emphasis added] (p. 116).

Collins's rhetoric operates subtly at many levels: the questioning expository prose exemplifies the struggle against the static moral/emotional tableaux; the repression involved in the dying falls, the diffusion of emotion away from climaxes again represent a rejection of the sentimental mode. The action of the novel is indeed a triumph for society, for sentimental values, but within it one recalls Mr. Clare's words:

Over our whole social system, complacent imbecility rules supreme — snuffs out the searching light of Intelligence with total impunity — and hoots, owl-like, in answer to every form of protest. See how well we all do in the dark! One of these days that audacious assertion will be practically contradicted; and the whole rotten system of modern society will come down with a crash. (p. 52)

In the end there is no place in such a society for Magdalen — she is "too healthy" — Collins tells us explicitly — for an implicitly unhealthy society. The inevitable reduction of Magdalen from health to frailty which allows her to resume her place in

society is brilliantly accomplished in the central image of health versus sickness.

'You know how strong I am? You remember how I used to fight against all my illnesses, when I was a child? Now I am a woman, I fight against my miseries in the same way. Don't pity me, Miss Garth! Don't pity me!' (p. 465)

...

Her energy was gone; her powers of resistance were crushed. . . . She yielded as submissively, she trembled as helplessly, as the weakest woman living. (p. 536)

Miss Garth's "Voice of Sanity" in fact triumphs explicitly: "I have no patience with the pride and perversity of the young women of the present day" (p. 546). It is in these terms that Magdalen's fall is seen: "So, she made the last sacrifice of the old perversity and the old pride. So, she entered on the new and nobler life" (p. 590).

The immolation of Magdalen is complete and she is reduced to having Kirke "stoop" to protect her, and to thinking "if I could be a man, how I should like to be such a man as this!" (p. 577). There is no model for the *adult* female except that of failed male. Explicitly, Collins seems to back away from the implications of his creation and to return to sentimental certainties (as Thackeray was to back away from the implications of *Vanity Fair* in *Pendennis*). But implicitly, in the nature of the prose itself, he leaves the reader amid labyrinthine ironies, still questioning.

NOTES

- ¹ *Dombey & Son*, ed. Alan Horsman (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 801. All subsequent page references in the text are to this edition.
- ² *No Name* (1862; rpt. London: Antony Blond, 1966), p. 561. All subsequent page references in the text are to this edition.
- ³ See the excellent account in R. L. Brannan's *Under the Management of Mr. Charles Dickens: His Production of 'The Frozen Deep'* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell U.P., 1966), p. 151ff.