Of Chekhov, Dickens, Henley and Pascal

by Theodore Dalrymple (April 2015)

Chekhov says somewhere that a writer should be able to write a story about an ashtray. Although I have not tried the experiment, I think he is right and in fact it would not be all that difficult to do so. If ashtrays could speak, what tales they could tell! Many have been flung in anger in the course of an argument, but even without such violent drama they would practically all have witnessed (if they had been capable of witnessing) untold emotional crises. Cigarettes are, after all, for many the emotional prop of first and last resort, the heart of a heartless world, to adapt slightly Marx's dictum about religion. They are not the opium, but the nicotine of the people.

Inspiration, then, should be everywhere, if only we exercised our curiosity and imagination sufficiently. For example, the other day I had occasion to visit the elegant house of an old literary couple. They were obliged by circumstances to leave me alone for a time in their drawing room-cum-library, and I amused myself (at their suggestion, but I would have done it anyway) with their books. I took down the eighth volume of the magnificent Pilgrim edition of Dickens' letters, Dickens being a man of such prodigious genius that his every sentence even on the most banal of subjects sparkles. He called himself the *Inimitable*, and that is what he was.

The volume fell open between pages 290 and 291, and my eye alighted on a short letter to Miss Burdett-Coutts, Dickens' philanthropic friend, a member of an immensely rich banking family. Dated 1 March, 1857, it went:

> My dear Miss Coutts,
>
> I do not see anything to object to in the accompanying report. You have done great good; an obviously bad thing is set right; although it would have been much better ingenuously done in the beginning than disingenuously, done it is, and many poor people will be the happier for it.
>
> I will not fail to return the pamphlet on Common Things, and the corrections, in the course of the week.

Ever faithfully & aff. [affectionately] yours,

Charles Dickens

The scholarly footnote tells us (and the notes to this edition are models of their kind) that the report referred to in the letter is probably about a dead woman in St George's Hospital. No doubt the hospital, in the immemorial (and continuing) tradition of all institutions, had tried to cover up its failures and failings; Dickens and Miss Burdett-Coutts had succeeded in forcing a confession and a promise of reform.

A discovery just over a year ago by the great scholar of nineteenth century dissection, Ruth Richardson (her subject being a great deal more revealing of social history than might at first appear), has added greatly to the information contained in the shot footnote to this letter – a proof, if one was needed, that no edition of anything as extensive as Dickens' correspondence is ever definitive.

Dr Richardson found that the case was that of Margaret Purvis, a poor widow who died of cancer in St George's Hospital (now a luxury hotel) aged 46. Her friend, Harriet Bragg, went to the hospital to collect the body, but was not allowed to enter what was called the *dead-house*, entry being reserved to the stronger sex. When the undertakers collected the body, however, they found it in a neglected state. It had never been properly laid out, and was stark naked on a slab with two naked men. Harriet Bragg, informed of this, enlisted Miss Burdett-Coutts who in turn enlisted Charles Dickens, who wrote to the governors of the hospital, eventually extracting from them the promise of reform.

Rationalists might say, I suppose, that what happens to a body after death little matters, and that therefore Miss Burdett-Coutts and Dickens were wasting their time. After all, it is what happens during life and before death that counts. There were surely worse abuses perpetrated against the living upon which these two philanthropists might have expended their time, albeit that Dickens was a man of volcanic energy: for even volcanoes are limited in their power of eruption.

But of course Dickens would have understood that the disrespect shown the body of Margaret Purvis was symbolic of and probably the continuation of the disrespect shown her before she died. To demand that respect be shown the bodies of the poor was to demand that respect was shown the poor while they lived: it was a kind of reverse engineering of general attitudes.

To demonstrate how far things had changed, the present deputy manager of the hospital's mortuary (which has moved to a less fashionable area of London) said in an interview that the

dead are now treated as if they were still patients, not altogether as reassuring as intended in view of the presumed failure of the treatment they received in the hospital. He went on to say that the dead patients ('deceased' in his slightly euphemistic term, presumed to be gentler and more sensitive towards the mourning) were 'handled' with dignity and respect, the term 'handled' undoing all the attempted sensitivity of the word 'deceased.' And he continued 'It's a lot more clinical and everything's clean and tidy and all the bodies are refrigerated…' I am sure this was meant to be consolatory to all those whose relatives or loved ones had died in St George's Hospital, but somehow it rather misses the mark. The unfortunate deputy manager of the mortuary evidently has no way with words, which might suggest to the uncharitable that he has no way with feelings either: though this would perhaps be unfair. One probably ought not to expect eloquence from deputy managers of hospital mortuaries, though come to think of it why should it have been the deputy manager rather than the manager himself who was interviewed? Did he have something more pressing to do, or did he consider himself too grand a figure to sully himself by answering press enquiries? It is strange what disrespect one can read into little things.

Nearly a century and a half later there was a scandal in England over the body parts of babies who died in hospital and that were extracted for research and other purposes without the parents' permission. This had been the practice for decades. In English law, at least, a body is not anyone's property. But the possibility, virtually unknown in Dickens' and Miss Burdett-Coutts' day, of monetary compensation for distress suffered heightened the distress of those whose babies had been dissected in this way – for the law creates a vested interest in distress, the rule being the more distress, the more compensation.

Quite apart from the strange recurrence a hundred and fifty years later of a scandal over the disposal of the human body or its parts, Dickens' short letter illustrates how certain human propensities persist in very different circumstances and social conditions. He and Miss Burdett-Coutts evidently vanquished the resistance of the governors of St George's Hospital, whose first instinct was to defend the indefensible, which is and always will be the first instinct of practically all organisation men. This is not wholly unreasonable on their part because many critics are actuated only by temporary and evanescent moral enthusiasm and give up when their enthusiasm wanes. Defenders of the indefensible often have more at stake than attackers of the indefensible, and it is only when the attackers are as redoubtable as Dickens and Miss Burdett-Coutts that ground should be given.

Thus in history there is both change and constancy. No one would claim that nothing important had changed since Dickens' time, and changed in small part because of Dickens' own efforts. The treatment of the bodies of the poor, for example, *did* change after he and Miss Burdett-

Coutts made their *démarche*. How far social change occurs because of deliberate political action and how far as the natural but unintended consequence of scientific and technological discovery, I am not sure: I suspect that the latter is much underestimated, especially by people of little scientific education or culture. But there is a level also at which nothing changes, or changes much, which is why we recognise the meaning of Dickens' letter when he says that it would have been better if the change had occurred ingenuously, that is to say without rear-guard action and from the simple recognition that it was necessary and right. Mankind is not so constituted, however; organisations no more than individuals change on the first conclusive intellectual proof or demonstration that they are mistaken, no more now than in Dickens' day. And this should help us be slightly less frustrated at or irritated with the intractable foolishness of our compeers, whom we no doubt frustrate or irritate in our turn.

While my hosts were out of the room I looked at the shelves of their library, extraordinarily rich in literary biography. I picked out a memoir of W E Henley, an all-but forgotten – but unjustly forgotten – poet about whom I wrote recently in an essay on poets with wooden legs. (Henley had one.) This was in part a satire on the tendency of modern literary scholars to classify and select authors by some politico-demographic criterion or other: sexual orientation, skin colour, etc.

Opening the book at page 4, the first words I read were as follows:

> Moreover Gloucester is so old a city and is so little changed that one can look to-day upon most of the very buildings that, for young Henley, gave life its setting.

This was written in 1930, but it couldn't possibly be written now. I almost cried as I read it. Gloucester has since been comprehensively destroyed, so that Henley would not have the faintest idea where he was, and is now only a glorious cathedral surrounded by a modernist slum. (Let no pedant point out that one or two mediaeval buildings remain: they serve only to emphasise the dispiriting slumminess of all that was built in the second half of the twentieth century, and in a way the survivals make everything worse by the starkness of the contrast.)

The destruction of old Gloucester was not the consequence of German bombing during the Second World War: Gloucester was little bombed. Indeed, the German bombing of Britain was much used by modernist architects and town planners as an excuse for doing what they wanted to do in any case: spit upon their ancestors for being so much better and more talented than they. It was the revenge of mediocrity upon talent and taste, and it continues to this day. After the war, much could have been rebuilt: but neither the people nor their governors cared enough for their aesthetic heritage to do so.

It is true that Gloucester had some appallingly crowded slums and some physically very squalid areas worthy of demolition: but the architects and planners made no distinction between a squalid slum tenement (which in the event they replaced by something just as bad, if bad in a different way) and a mediaeval priory or Georgian pump room. It was the latter, not the former, that they aimed at. It wasn't that they wanted to raise people up: they wanted to level them down. They wanted to create the New Man, that is to say the type who could not judge aesthetically of his own surroundings and therefore could aspire aesthetically to nothing. In large part they succeeded: I doubt that one person in a hundred in Gloucester notices just how terrible his city is. At best he will notice that the shops are not as good as in Cheltenham a few miles away.

The source of the modern hatred not of the injustice but of the achievements of the past is to me a subject of the greatest importance. It is a window on our souls.

I had only a few minutes in my hosts' library, itself but an infinitesimal part of any decent municipal library, let alone of that of Congress or the British Museum. In those few minutes I read only three or four sentences. There was obviously enough in that one room to stimulate a person for a lifetime, especially with the help of the internet. Now more than ever is what Pascal said true, that all of Mankind's problems derive from our inability to remain alone quietly in a room.

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is