

CHARLES DICKENS AND THE POPULAR RADICAL TRADITION

CHARLES DICKENS

E A TRADIÇÃO DO RADICALISMO POPULAR

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Was Charles Dickens a radical writer? This question has received a certain amount of critical attention. In her 2007 work *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination* Sally Ledger, for example, argues that Dickens draws on the traditions of popular radical satire and melodrama, and traces the influence of Regency radicals on his novels, from William Hone to William Cobbett. In this essay I contend, however, that Dickens's novels are far from being the descendents of a popular radical tradition, either satirical or melodramatic. No matter the powers of observation and imagination, present in the Dickensian fictional world, or his liberal views and reformist endeavours, there is not enough of the confrontational, counter cultural attitude and the delighted exploitation of ridicule towards authority which constitute the identity marks of the writings of Regency radicals such as William Hone and William Cobbett.

Key-words: radical, popular radicalism, confrontational, counter-cultural.

Poder-se-á dizer que Charles Dickens foi um escritor radical? Esta questão tem sido alvo de alguma reflexão crítica. Na sua obra de 2007 *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination* Sally Ledger, por exemplo, defende que Dickens se inspirou nas tradições da sátira radical e do melodrama popular, e traça a influência de radicais do período da Regência nos seus romances, de William Hone a William Cobbett. Porém, no presente texto defendo que os romances de Dickens estão longe de poderem ser considerados descendentes da tradição popular radical quer satírica, quer melodramática. Apesar da capacidade de observação e imaginação, bem como das suas opiniões liberais e preocupações reformistas, não existe na obra de Dickens a atitude confrontacional, mesmo contra cultural, e a exploração deleitada do ridículo para com os detentores do poder que caracterizam os textos de autores radicais do período da Regência, tais como William Hone e William Cobbett.

Palavras-chave: radical, radicalismo popular, confrontacional, contra cultural.

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The adoption by Dickens of a satiric/melodramatic style to articulate a critical stance towards the ills and vices of Victorian society makes it tempting to view his fictional production as strongly influenced by what Sally Ledger (2004; 2007) calls the “popular radical imagination”. Ledger argues that Dickens’s work draws on a popular radical tradition rather than a middle-class radical one – a debt that Joss Marsh (1998) had already pinpointed – and traces the influence of Regency radicals on his work, from William Hone to William Cobbett.

Ledger claims that Dickens’s novelistic production was influenced by the satirical and melodramatic radical traditions of the early nineteenth century, more specifically by the popular radical tradition that culminated in the satirical pamphlets produced and circulated by William Hone and George Cruikshank. However, to say that a direct lineage can be traced between Hone and Dickens’s satirical discourses bypasses their rationale. The object of this essay is precisely to highlight the different nature of both discourses, their intention and target audiences.

One of the elements of Ledger’s argument is the comparison between the trial parody *Non Mi Ricordo*, issued by Hone in 1820 at the height of the Queen Caroline affair (with a magisterial frontispiece illustration by George Cruikshank), and the trial scene Bardell *versus* Pickwick, in chapter xxxiv of the *Pickwick Papers*. Despite the essential difference between both texts – the public political character of the first in opposition to the private nature of the second – it may be right to argue that Dickens has “re-written the semantic obfuscations and the occlusion of truth in a court of law” (Ledger, 2004: 578) in the *Pickwick Papers*:

“Now, Mr. Winkle, I have only one more question to ask you, and I beg you to bear in mind his Lordship’s caution. Will you undertake to swear that Pickwick, the defendant, did not say on the occasion in question — “My dear Mrs. Bardell, you’re a good creature; compose yourself to this situation, for to this situation you must come,” or words to that effect?”

“I — I didn’t understand him so, certainly,” said Mr. Winkle, astounded on this ingenious dove-tailing of the few words he had heard. “I was on the staircase, and couldn’t hear distinctly; the impression on my mind is — ”

“The gentlemen of the jury want none of the impressions on your mind, Mr. Winkle, which I fear would be of little service to honest, straightforward men,” interposed Mr. Skimpin. “You were on the staircase, and didn’t distinctly hear; but you will not swear that Pickwick did not make use of the expressions I have quoted? Do I understand that?”

“No, I will not,” replied Mr. Winkle; and down sat Mr. Skimpin with a triumphant countenance (Dickens, 2008: 305-6).

Yet to make the same claim in relation to *Non Mi Ricordo* fails to capture its essence. Hone’s satire is certainly riddled with nicknames and double meanings to ridicule trial procedures and their role in occluding the truth, but that is not the main point. *Non Mi Ricordo* is about the representation of the gradual fusion of the Italian witness Theodore Majocchi (the most notorious witness against Queen Caroline) and the King, in order to target the latter as object of ridicule – a crucially different choice of satirical object, carrying different implications. Hone’s chief aim in *Non Mi Ricordo* is not to criticise the law and its officers in general, but to confront the political establishment directly in the person of the King through the hilarious exposure of his vices and character:

Are you a sober man?
 More no than yes.
 How many bottles a day do you drink?
 Non mi ricordo. (...)
 How many nights in the week do you go to bed sober?
 Non mi ricordo.

Are you sober now?
 More no than yes. (...)
 How do you live?
 I have a *doll*-shop, and a large stable in the country, and some *cow*-houses in different parts.
 Are not your favourite friends *horn*-boys and flashmen? – (*Order, order.*)

Can you produce a certificate of good character from those who *know* you?
 Yes, from the *minister*.
 Pho! Pho! Don’t trifle; can you from any *respectable* person?
 More no than yes. (...)

By what acts of your life do you expect you will be remembered hereafter?
 I shall not answer you any more questions; you put questions to me
 I never dreamt of (Hone, 1820: 203-4)

Hone’s characters may be fictionalized, but they are not virtual characters. That is the essence of popular radical culture in general and of the popular radical print culture in particular. It is therefore necessary to go beyond

the understanding of literature as virtual space and recognize that the radical print culture is essentially politico-cultural assertion through rhetorical confrontation. It is disruptive intervention in the public sphere.^[1]

Hone was a radical satirist because he openly challenged the established authority with his writings and risked paying the price for the challenge. The success of his parodies^[2] originated precisely in this attitude of defiance, from which he could not expect to reap any material profit. On the contrary; like other Regency radicals, he paid a high price for his editorial success. A small time bookseller, satirist, journalist, and antiquarian, Hone was tried for blasphemous libel during three consecutive days in 1817 for having published three parodies of the Catechism of the Church of England, and in spite of the powerful self-defence and final acquittal he never fully recovered from the strain, either physically or financially. The energy and essence of the popular radical tradition lies precisely in the combination of these two factors – imaginative ridicule of authority and personal courage to face the consequences.

George Cruikshank, the leading caricaturist of the Regency era and one of Dickens's early illustrators,^[3] is also a crucial element in building the argument of Dickens's affiliation in the popular radical tradition. This inheritance is made more plausible still by the fact that, unlike the other original illustrators, Cruikshank was already famous when he began working for Dickens. Yet Cruikshank's acknowledged volatile politics, amply discussed by his biographer Robert Patten (1992), makes any positive assertion as to his radicalism rather risky. Cruikshank has a remarkable record as a radical caricaturist, but his radical inclinations were temporary and much more the result of the intellectual and political influence exercised by William Hone than of his own political commitment. Thus, Dickens's association with George Cruikshank reflects the latter's evolution into the profitable business of book illustration – and the estrangement from former radical ventures, including his relationship with Hone –, rather than the acknowledgement of a popular radical genealogy for Dickens. In any case, the heavy

1 The expression "public sphere" is borrowed from Jürgen Habermas ("Öffentlichkeit" in the original) to refer to public political intervention. In a more abstract sense, Habermas uses it in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas, 1989) to designate the realm of private people who join together to form a "public."

2 *Non Mi Ricordo*, for example, published in September 1820, went through at least twenty-six editions in that year (Hone, 1820).

3 Jane Cohen (1980: xii) lists the main contributors to the analysis and appreciation of Cruikshank's work as Dickens's illustrator: Axton and Richard Vogler, Hillis Miller, Robert Patten, William Feaver, Hilary and Mary Evans, and John Wardroper.

irony and sarcasm against those in power, epitomized by the parodies produced by the Hone-Cruikshank partnership between 1819 and 1822 have no counterpart in Dickens's style.

There is certainly satire in Dickens's novels as there is sentimentalism, pathos and melodrama (which also exist in popular radical texts, even satirical). However, in the popular radical print culture these two satirical devices – irony and sarcasm – are the instruments of personalized political confrontation, whereas in the Dickensian fictional world they are first and foremost the tools of social criticism. The depiction of such characters in *Oliver Twist* as Mr Bumble, the venial and mean beadle who “labelled” the children (rather than named them) by following the alphabetical order, or Mrs Mann, the woman in the house who gave gin to them, and many other characters, may be the ingredients of an “aesthetic of protest” (Ledger, 2004: 590-1) but they were not politically rebellious. Dickens's characters are “exuberant types which do actually exist in the ruder classes of society”, as Gilbert Chesterton (1911: xvii) notes, not political caricatures. A propos Cohen (1980: 3) observes that Dickens is much more influenced in his satirical depictions by the realistic satires of William Hogarth – an influence acknowledged by Dickens himself – than by the grotesque caricatures by George Cruikshank. This preference is no surprise if one is reminded of Hogarth's disregard for caricature, considered a low art form. Like Hogarth, Dickens preferred characters to “caricaturas”.^[4]

Dickens is indisputably a master in the detailed delineation of character, put at the service of social criticism. However, the focus on individualism and empirical experience limits the reader's ability to reflect upon the mechanics of society. There is little grasp of the workings of history and of the tensions within society at large in Dickens's novels, or of the “historical panorama” in which the characters are inserted, as Timothy Johns (2009: 79) notes. The rules of the political and of the economic game are not discussed, much less challenged. Nicholas Dames (2011) sees in the abundant use of conditional similes, which characterizes Dickens's style, essentially the emancipation of the reader's fictional imagination from historical context. Regency radicals, on the contrary, defined their authorial work as political intervention in the public sphere in the sense of bringing to light the tensions at work in society and of finding their own place in it. For them, fiction was an encounter with history.

4 Hogarth's 1743 print *Characters and Caricaturas* (British Museum Collection Database Registration Number: 1868,0822.1557) is especially meaningful in this respect.

The thesis of Dickens drawing on a popular radical literary tradition also tends to pay little attention to the changes that occurred in print culture from the 1830s and 1840s onwards and, consequently, to the meaning of these changes. These consisted essentially of the introduction of new genres and new print media, as well as of the increased commercialization of literature and culture in general. The movement towards new genres and new print media mirrors the victory of the middle-class world vision, in detriment of the popular radical one, and, in a certain way, this movement can be understood as the reaction to the destabilizing outburst of popular radical satire and melodrama in the Regency period, especially during the so-called Queen Caroline affair of 1820-1.

Although the continuity of popular radical satire in the 1820s and 1830s is clearly documented, for example, in the graphic language of the caricatures by Charles Jameson Grant, as argued elsewhere (Abreu, 2011), the dedicated single-sheet caricature disappeared and gave way to other forms of graphic art directed at a new market, formed by the urban middle-classes. The 'scrap', as a new graphic form, illustrates and symbolises both the resistance to change and the adaptation to new conditions. Caricaturists used the "scrap" without losing the irreverence and comic intensity of the caricature mode, but the scrap was also used in albums as a pastime of Victorian ladies (Maidment, 2007: 4-15).

The flourishing of the novel as a literary genre in this period is part of this shift towards the needs and tastes of a new middle-class market, a shift to which Dickens, as the greatest novelist of the era, strongly contributed. Between 1837 and 1901 about 60,000 novels were published in Britain, roughly 20% of all book production, authored by approximately 7,000 novelists (Brantlinger & Thesing, 2006: 1-2). These figures show that despite the initial dismissal of novel-reading (and of fiction in general) as frivolous entertainment, from the end of the 1830s novels gradually acquired a status of respectability and success. Dickens's career as a novelist also began at the end of the 1830s with the first series of *Sketches by Boz*, published in 1836 with illustrations by George Cruikshank and *The Pickwick Papers*, the first two parts illustrated by Robert Seymour and published in 1837. This respectable status mirrors the origins and commitments of the novel, a genre that gives voice to the modes, action, and perceptions of the middle-classes, the most visible face of nascent and victorious industrial capitalism.

The fundamental relationship between middle-class ideology, capitalism and the novel is well established since the 1960s and 1970s in revisions

by Marxism and New Historicism of theories of this genre, centred on the writers' relations to the marketplace and the development of modern advertising.^[5] The focus is placed on the increased commercialization of literature and on the way writers became ever more involved in marketing their work. This new reality was accompanied by the appearance of new publishers in the 1830s and their partaking in the authors' literary process, not only in relation to format but also to themes and even the length of novels (Mays, 2006: 11-30). Serialization (in magazines), part publication, and illustration – means for boosting sales by attracting the widest possible audience – became common marketing strategies among the novelists of the time, including Dickens. Changes in the plot were also contemplated. As the early sales of *Martin Chuzzlewit* were disappointing, compared to previous serial publications, Dickens changed the plot and sent young Martin to America. This work, considered the last of his picaresque novels, was released to the public in monthly parts between January 1843 and July 1844.

Dickens fundamentally wrote for this new urban middle-class audience. He may have tested the limits of middle-class “respectability” (Vansasse, 2004: iii), but he did not transgress them. In the preface to the third edition of *Oliver Twist*, he is quite clear about complying with a number of rules of decency in order to be accepted by a middle-class readership: “no less consulting my own taste, than the manners of the age, I endeavoured (...) to banish from the lips of the lowest characters I introduced any expression that could by possibility offend” (Dickens, 1861: x).

This aspect is the key to understanding the distance between Dickens and popular radicalism. In effect, there is hardly anything more alien to the popular radical print culture than middle-class “respectability”. Theirs was a style that glorified and delighted in “unrespectability”, as Marcus Wood (1994), perhaps better than anyone else, showed. The association of the novel to the values of the capitalist middle-class, including that of “respectability”, is symbolized by the ideal of domesticity, with the implicit separation between the public and the private spheres (a separation in part contested by the popular radicals).^[6] Even two of his most directly political novels, *Bleak House* and *Oliver Twist* (the latter with its critique of the 1834

5 The post-doctoral work by Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, published in Germany in 1962 and belatedly translated into English in 1989, constitutes one of the most influential theories to explain these changes.

6 The claim that the personal could be political underlay the arguments upon which the radical critique of political corruption was grounded. Regency radicals established a pattern of political criticism – the correlation between character, private vice and corruption in high places. The radical representation of the Queen Caroline affair is one of the best proofs thereof.

New Poor Law), do not escape a conformist happy-ending, with the idyllic representation of home and the reassuring prevalence of right curing all the diseases of society.

It is often accepted that the unfavourable reception of *Bleak House* by critics evinces the discomfort produced in the establishment by Dickens's attack on institutions such as the law, stewarded by the middle and the upper classes. However, unlike popular radical satire, the critique of the whole edifice of government and its institutions in *Bleak House* has no real culpable individuals. The following excerpt is significant in that respect:

(...) Supposing the present Government to be overthrown, the limited choice of the Crown, in the formation of a new ministry, would lie between Lord Coodle and Sir Thomas Doodle – supposing it to be impossible for the Duke of Foodle to act with Goodle, which may be assumed to be the case in consequence of the breach arising out of that affair with Hoodle. Then, giving the Home Department and the Leadership of the House of Commons to Joodle, the Exchequer to Koodle, the Colonies to Loodle, and the Foreign Office to Moodle, what are you to do with Noodle? You can't offer him the Presidency of the Council; that is reserved for Poodle. You can't put him in the Woods and forests; that is hardly good enough for Quoodle. What follows? That the country is shipwrecked, lost, and gone to pieces (as is made manifest to the patriotism of Sir Leicester Dedlock), because you can't provide for Noodle! (Dickens, 2009: 106).

Dickens's naming and nicknaming in the above excerpt are entirely unreal. This virtual reality, or what Marjorie Stone (1985: 149) calls "a system of fictions", conceals "miserable or menacing realities" in Dickens's novels. It makes corruption a figure of speech. In popular radical satire, on the contrary, nicknames had concrete addressees: "the Doctor" with his clyster pipe was the Home Secretary, Lord Sidmouth; "Derry-Down triangle" was Lord Castlereagh, the Foreign Affairs minister; George IV had many nicknames – "Prinny", "the first gentleman of Europe", "the Prince of Pleasure", or "Hum IV".

Thus, for better or for worse, stopping at the threshold of political reality separates Dickens's work from the writings of Regency radicals. To complicate matters, some of his political views, namely the endorsement of the death penalty and the opposition to women's political rights, are, at the very least, surprising. Dickens's own claim to radicalism must be understood in an amused, playful sense: "By Jove how radical I am getting! I wax stronger and stronger in the true principles every day. I don't know whether it's the

sea, or no, but so it is", he exclaimed in a letter of 13 August 1841 to his friend, agent and first biographer John Forster. Dickens was referring to some rhymed squibs he had written (anonymously)^[7] against the return to office of the Tories. Justifying the full reproduction of one of these squibs, entitled "The Fine Old English Gentlemen, to be said or sung at all Conservative Dinners", Foster assured that "it had no touch of personal satire in it, and he [Dickens] would himself, for that reason, have least objected to its revival" (Foster, 1872-4: xii).

These words reveal both Dickens's liberal views and the distanced relationship he kept with actual politics. In the context of the discussion of *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *Dombey and Son*, as novels which portray a world in transition between aristocratic and middle-class rule, Fumie Tamai (2002: 278) argues that Dickens's liberal belief in progress, education, and liberty is countered "by an equally strong belief in the rightfulness of the existing social order". Nonetheless, the acknowledgement of the differences between Dickens and the popular radical tradition does not question his social consciousness, which some authors believe had more personal than political origins. In his review of Simon Callow's (2012) biography of Dickens's in the *Guardian* of 17 February 2012, David Edgar observes that it was the novelist's experience at the shoe-polish factory that gave him both his social anger and ebullient willpower,^[8] an aspect also underlined by Michael Slater (2009). In his biography of Dickens, he speaks of his ruthless ambition,^[9] explained as a combination of his unshakable self-confidence and the traumatic experience of his childhood poverty and family's financial disasters.

Dickens's campaigns in favour of the education of the people, the humane treatment of the sick and destitute, or the rehabilitation of women who had fallen into prostitution, are well known (Smith, 1974: 195-6). When he launched the ultraliberal newspaper *The Daily News* in 1846 in the context of the anti-Corn Law debate, he wrote in the editorial of the first issue: "The Principles advocated by the *Daily News* will be Principles of Progress

7 Popular radical satires were characteristically anonymous texts, and editorial responsibility fell on publishers and vendors. However, as radical publishers such as William Hone were also authors, there was no hiding place for them.

8 [Online] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/feb/17/charles-dickens-great-theatre-world-review> [accessed 28/05/2012]. David Edgar's adaption of *Nicholas Nickleby* to television was released on BFI on 25 February 2012.

9 Slater's work is reviewed by Dinah Birch in the *Independent* of 02/10/2009. Birch is professor of English at Liverpool University and has edited the *Oxford Companion to English Literature*. [Online] <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/charles-dickens-by-michael-slater-1796012.html?printService=print> [accessed 29/05/2012].

and Improvement; of Education, Civil and Religious Liberty, and Equal Legislation” (*apud* Grubb, 1952: 240). The same social awareness – not only commercial interest – led him to keep a continued relationship with his audience. He speaks of the “affection and confidence” between himself and his audience, and interprets this relationship as his moral responsibility: “A writer with a great audience (...) has his duty to do, and he must do it” (*apud* Birch, 2009). The large audience and the awareness of authorial responsibility are perhaps Dickens’s truest links to the popular radical tradition.

The print culture of Regency radicalism defined itself by a distinctive style of personal satirical depiction of the powerful, a style that is largely absent from Dickens’s novels. Here, the lampooning of state institutions is often directed at the middle and lower ranks of society, not at the powerful. It is true that Queen Victoria was not George IV and that Parliament had been reformed in 1832 – a major popular radical demand – but it is no less true that the First Reform Act had left out of the ballot all the working classes, both urban and rural. In addition, the structural changes brought about by the industrial revolution under way were “novelties” of dramatic human consequence, which Edward Thompson (1991: 207-32) qualified as catastrophic.

No matter the rich intertwining of observation and imagination^[10] in Dickens’s work, his writing was not made into “act” instead of simply “text” (Dyer, 1997: 9), or into a counter-cultural instrument with great popular appeal. This type of disruptive intervention was the achievement of a culture that reached its climax during the years of fire of Regency radicalism and whose claims for human dignity still make sense 142 years after Dickens’s death.

10 Farina (2011) highlights these powers by arguing that the reliance on the conditional simile, ‘as if’, is the fundamental syntax of Dickensian characterization and a means to articulate the moral and emotional complexity of his principal characters. In a somewhat complementary way, Nathalie Vanfasse (2004: vii) analyses the tensions resulting from the combination of “mid-Victorian realism” (as mirroring the point of view of the respectable middle-class) with idealisation and even sensationalism to conclude that these apparent paradoxes can be explained by Dickens’s heteroglossic definition of realism – the combination of realism and imagination.

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