

The Difficult "Change of Heart": A Study of Dickens's *Dombey and Son*

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I

Dombey and Son, written in the middle years of Dickens's career, is the novel in which the optimism of the early novels and the pessimism of the later novels seem blended together. In spite of the happy ending of the story, "a pervasive uneasiness,"¹ which foreshadows the "dark novels"² of post-*Dombey*, is undeniable.

The pessimism of the "dark novels" emerges from Dickens's deeper insight both into society and into human nature. Barbara Hardy says that

his optimism slowly vanished as his special cases [of social criticism] accumulated in number and then created a new kind of social vision and a less answerable problem.³

As a solution for complicated social evils Dickens stresses the necessity to regain a humane heart, which is beginning to be lost in the age of industrialism. George Orwell's famous comment aptly represents the essential characteristics of Dickens's novels:

It seems that in every attack Dickens makes upon society he is

always pointing to a change of spirit rather than a change of structure. . . . Useless to change institution without a "change of heart"—that, essentially, is what he is always saying.⁴

Dickens never loses his belief that man can be changed; nevertheless, he gradually recognizes the difficulty of a "change of heart" as well as of a "change of structure." The more insight he gains into human nature, the more he realizes the difficulty of changing the heart of a human being.

As Kathleen Tillotson and Ian Milner have shown, in *Dombey and Son* Dickens is successful in drawing "a character undergoing inner conflict."⁵ "Mr. Dombey," Dickens himself wrote in the preface of 1867, "undergoes no violent change, either in this book, or in real life":

A sense of his injustice is within him all along. The more he represses it, the more unjust he necessarily is. Internal shame and external circumstances may bring the contest to a close in a week, or a day; but it has been a contest for years, and is only fought out after a long balance of victory.⁶

Dickens's insight into human nature has become profound enough to know that a "change of heart" requires "a contest for years."

Dickens has at the same time created such characters as Edith Granger, who cannot change her heart. By describing two sorts of characters, he seems to emphasize his recognition of the difficulty of a "change of heart." The purpose of this paper is to show Dickens's deepening insight into human nature by examining the characterization of Mr. Dombey and of Edith, and to consider the meaning of a change of heart in the novel.

II

The process of Mr. Dombey's conversion is the main subject of the novel. How to make this mercenary gentleman learn the value of reciprocal human love is the problem which the author has to solve. By the death of Paul and the betrayal of Edith and James Carker, Mr. Dombey's dream of prosperity for his firm is shattered and broken, but submitting himself to Florence as his guiding angel, he finally joins the community of love. The wish to live as a changed man—as "another man," if we borrow Scrooge's words—is realized at the end of the story. "In Mr. Dombey," Tillotson has written, "Dickens achieves the remarkable feat of making us aware of the hidden depth of a character."⁷ To make Mr. Dombey's change of heart convincing, Dickens carefully describes the workings of his mind under the persona of a stiffnecked counting house businessman. The hidden yearning for the world of love is always with him, which foreshadows his final salvation.

In the process of Mr. Dombey's conversion, Florence acts as the guiding angel that leads him to a community of love. From the beginning of the story Mr. Dombey starts his spiritual pilgrimage for conversion in the depth of his mind.

In the first chapter Mr. Dombey is introduced as a man whose humane feelings are frozen and almost dead. He cannot sincerely lament the coming death of his wife because of his "callous inhumanity":⁸

... he certainly had a sense within him, that if his wife should sicken and decay, he would be very sorry, and that he would find a something gone from among his plate and furniture, and other household possessions, which was well worth the having, and

could not be lost without sincere regret. Though it would be a cool, business-like, gentlemanly, self-possessed regret, no doubt. (p. 5)

He has loved his wife not as a human being but as one of his "household possessions." The subjunctive mood of this passage, however, sounds a little tricky. It seems as if the narrator wants to imply a one-percent possibility of Mr. Dombey's humane feelings surviving.

In his subconsciousness Mr. Dombey feels vague attraction for his daughter, which turns his indifference towards her into uneasiness. Retrospecting on his wife's deathbed, he sees Florence timidly standing before his eyes:

The last time he had seen his slighted child, there had been that in the sad embrace between her and her dying mother, which was at once a revelation and reproach to him. . . . He could not forget that he had had no part in it. That, at the bottom of its clear depths of tenderness and truth, lay those two figures clasped in each other's arms, while he stood on the bank above them, looking down a mere spectator—not a sharer with them—quite shut out. (p. 31)

The stability of his mind is broken, and "an uneasiness of an extraordinary kind" (p. 31), which comes from the conflict between the cold inhumanity of his persona and awakened yearning for warm humanity in his depths, dominates his mind.

After the death of Little Paul, his uneasiness towards his daughter turns into positive hatred, since he sees in her "his own successful rival in that son's affection" (p. 252). In the train for Leamington, he asks himself with increasing bitterness of mind why the object of his hope was removed

instead of her (p. 277). However, at the same time

he knew full well, in his own breast, as he stood there, tinging the scene of transition before him with the morbid colours of his own mind, and making it a ruin and a picture of decay, instead of hopeful change, and promise of better things, that life had quite as much to do with his complainings as death. (p. 277)

"He rejected the angel, and took up with the tormenting spirit crouching in his bosom" (p. 278), but the image of the angel cannot be extinguished from his mind.

Mr. Dombey's depth of the mind is revealed both to readers and to himself on the night of his coming home from the honeymoon. Sitting in an easy chair and covering his head with a handkerchief, he observes Florence, who, without his knowledge, almost changed into a woman. His hidden yearning for the world of love emerges from his subconsciousness for a moment. "There are yielding moments in the lives of the sternest and harshest men," the narrator says, "though such men often keep their secret well" (p. 483). In such a moment, Mr. Dombey has some passing thoughts

that he had had a happy home within his reach—had had a household spirit bending at his feet—had overlooked it in his stiff-necked sullen arrogance, and wandered away and lost himself
(p. 483)

For the first time he sees Florence not as the rival for his lost boy's affection but "as the spirit of his home" (p. 484).

These occasional revelations of Mr. Dombey's secret depths make his change of heart persuasive. Edgar Johnson says:

. . . there are readers who have not been convinced of his later

change of heart. Their skepticism, however, ignores both the repeated psychological preparations Dickens makes for it in the book and the complex involutions of emotion in human beings.⁹

After the elopement of his second wife and bankruptcy of his firm he recognizes that, of all around him, Florence alone has never changed (p. 796), and after passing through the chaotic world of hallucinations and illness he is regenerated as a changed man. This is not a "violent change" but a natural conversion as a conclusion of his consistent longing for the better world.

III

The scene of the joyous toast in the parlour of the Wooden Midshipman, which celebrates Mr. Dombey's conversion, forms a contrast to that of the last meeting of Florence and Edith in the preceding chapter. After the elopement with Mr. Carker to Dijon, Edith alone returns to London and lives in "the close dull house" in Brook Street, where she had spent her days before marriage. "More sombre and brown than ever, it [the house] seemed to have been shut up from the wedding day, and to have hoarded darkness and sadness ever since" (p. 823).

Meeting Edith again, Florence entreats her to be reconciled with her father, but Edith refuses it. Florence says to Edith, "Walter . . . is at the door, and has brought me here. I will tell him that you are repentant; that you are changed . . . and he will speak to Papa with me, I know" (p. 824). But after some conversation Edith answers, "I do not repent of what I have done—not yet—for if it were to do again to-morrow, I should do it" (p. 826).

Why can Edith not repent and change herself? It is not simply her pride

and haughtiness that prevent her from conversion, because they are also Mr. Dombey's characteristics.¹⁰ More important are the sense of despair and rejection of salvation.

The author introduces Edith to readers in a dramatic way. It is in the street of Leamington, where Mr. Dombey first meets her walking beside her mother's wheelchair.

Walking by the side of the chair, and carrying her gossamer parasol with a proud and weary air, as if so great an effort must be soon abandoned and the parasol dropped, sauntered a much younger lady, very handsome, very haughty, very wilful, who tossed her head and drooped her eyelids, as though, if there were anything in all the world worth looking into, save a mirror, it certainly was not the earth or sky. (p. 280)

Her weariness as well as her haughtiness are her remarkable characteristics. Readers may feel even a "want of vital power," which proved fatal to Fanny and Little Paul; however, it is not her constitution but her spirit that is undermined.

From her childhood Edith has been taught by her mother to "scheme and plot," namely, to use her own beauty as a means of getting money. She marries Mr. Dombey, not for love for him but for his wealth. As Barbara Hardy says, "the self-contemptuous heroines have plenty of contempt for the unequivocally defective characters around them."¹¹ Although she herself is infected and corrupted by Mammonism, she opposes monetary power by despising money-conscious people such as Mrs. Skewton, Mr. Dombey, and Major Bagstock. Her haughtiness is her mask for resistance, by which she isolates herself from the people she despises.

In spite of her mind corrupted and degenerated by her mother's educa-

tion, Edith recognizes the value of the "warm humanity"¹² in Florence from the first. Though she has never known "what it is to have an honest heart, and love" (p. 381), she is aware of their value. Her impenetrable haughtiness is disarmed only in the presence of Florence, because there is no need of resistance in the world not infected by Mammonism. While Mr. Dombey's yearning for the world of love is hidden in his subconsciousness, Edith's is always in her consciousness. At the last meeting, reflecting of her past, Edith says that Florence might have been her guiding angel:

"Florence! . . . purest and best of natures,—whom I love—who might have changed me long ago, and did for a time work some change even in the woman that I am . . ." (p. 824)

Nevertheless, she could not and cannot be changed.

The sense of despair is deeply rooted in Edith's mind and overwhelms her wish to be converted. Edith analyzes her own pride as follows:

"I have dreamed . . . of a pride that is all powerless for good, all powerful for evil; of a pride that has been galled and goaded, through many shameful years, and has never recoiled except upon itself; a pride that has debased its owner with the consciousness of deep humiliation, and never helped its owner boldly to resent it or avoid it, or to say 'This shall not be!' a pride that, rightly guided, might have led perhaps to better things, but which, misdirected and perverted, like all else belonging to the same possessor, has been self-contempt, mere hardihood and ruin," (pp. 585–86)

The destructive power of her pride has been undermining her heart little by little and makes her feel that it is vain to try to resist it and to hope to

be happy. When Florence, who feels the estrangement between her father and mother more and more, asks Edith whether there is anything she can do to make them happier, Edith replies, "Nothing," and says, "I have bad dreams. Nothing can change them, or prevent their coming back" (p. 585). All of her reckless immoral actions—the marriage without love, the revengeful elopement, the betrayal to Mr. Carker—come from this desperation. She rejects even the last chance of conversion by refusing Florence's entreaty.

At the back of Edith's despair there lies an immense world of Dombeyism, in which "competitive greed and indifference to the welfare of others create a cynical economic system that spawns all the vices and cruelties of society."¹³ As Raymond Williams points out, in *Dombey and Son* society is presented not only as "a background against which the drama of personal virtues and vices is enacted" but also as "the creator of virtues and vices."¹⁴ When Edith says to Florence, "when I thought of all the causes that had made me what I was, I needed to have allowed more for the causes that had made him [Mr. Dombey] what he was" (p. 827), she is vaguely aware of the influence of society upon people. Just as cholera spreads over the city and infects innumerable people, so "the moral pestilence" prevails in society and drives people into corruption:

... where we generate disease to strike our children down and entail itself on unborn generations, there also we breed, by the same certain process, infancy that knows no innocence, youth without modesty or shame, maturity that is mature in nothing but in suffering and guilt, blasted old age that is a scandal on the form we bear. (p. 620)

Mr. Dombey's "master vice," his self-centered pride, is bred in such society,

and so is Mrs. Skewton's eccentric avarice. Edith's character is also formed partly by the power of society which one can hardly resist.

The narrator calls Edith "a woman with a noble quality yet dwelling in her nature, who was too false to her better self, and too debased and lost, to save herself" (p. 409). Though she has "a noble quality" and "better self," she has no desire to save herself from corruption. She says to her mother on the night before her engagement:

"... my education was completed long ago. I am too old now, and have fallen too low, by degrees, to take a new course, and to stop yours, and to help myself. The germ of all that purifies a woman's breast, and makes it true and good, has never stirred in mine, and I have nothing else to sustain me when I despise myself." (p. 382)

Her weariness, *ennui*, originates from the despair and the recognition of her powerlessness, which prevent her from changing herself. As the physical "want of vital power" is fatal to the flesh, the spiritual "want" is fatal to the soul.

VI

Hardy says that "characters like Edith are important because they make goodness seem very hard."¹⁵ The world of *Dombeyism* has the power which distorts and undermines even the good qualities of people, and in such a world a change of heart is certainly a very hard thing. In his original plan Dickens contemplated creating another character who was to show corruption and degeneration. In his letter to Forster he wrote that he intended to show Walter

gradually and naturally trailing away, from that love of adventure

and boyish light-heartedness, into negligence, idleness, dissipation, dishonesty, and ruin. To show, in short, that common, everyday, miserable declension of which we know so much in our ordinary life.¹⁶

In this passage we see Dickens's sad recognition of the harsh reality that in everyday life people easily fall into corruption and ruin. Dickens ultimately decided to reserve Walter for a happier future, his original idea took modified shapes in characters in the "dark novels," such as Richard Carstone in *Bleak House* and William Dorrit in *Little Dorrit*.

In Mr. Dombey's change of heart, however, Dickens articulates his refusal to settle for a pessimistic vision. In the last chapter of *Dombey and Son* a "change of heart" means a "change of structure." The story ends with the victory of the community of the Wooden Midshipman, which Mr. Dombey finally joins. By his marriage with Florence, Walter realizes the legend of Richard Wittington and re-establishes the firm of Dombey and Son, which is said to be ready to excel the old one. The old-fashioned shop of the Wooden Midshipman gradually prospers and proves to be a little before its time instead of being behind it (p. 830). The characteristics of the people of the Wooden Midshipman are originally presented as somewhat incompatible with the world of Dombeyism. They are threatened by the new age because of their goodness, generosity, and indifference to money. After Mr. Dombey's conversion, however, the value system of the world is reversed. By changing Mr. Dombey's heart, the author changes the structure of the whole society.

Some readers may feel that the last chapter is an over optimistic and improper ending to the story. Lyn Pykett says that *Dombey and Son* "embodies the idealized and idealistic longing for an apparently 'lost' and 'un-

attained' world."¹⁷ For Dickens, nevertheless, the world realized in the last chapter is not an unattainable ideal world.

In chapter 47, after showing readers appalling scenes of the world of reality in which the "moral pestilence" is prevalent, he invokes "a good spirit" as follows:

Oh for a good spirit who would take the house-tops off, with a more potent and benignant hand than the lame demon in the tale, and show a Christian people what dark shapes issue from amidst their homes, to swell the retinue of the Destroying Angel as he moves forth among them! For only one night's view of the pale phantoms rising from the scenes of our too-long neglect; and, from the thick and sullen air where Vice and Fever propagate together, raining the tremendous social retributions which are ever pouring down, and ever coming thicker! Bright and blest the morning that should rise on such a night: for men, delayed no more by stumbling-blocks of their own making, which are but specks of dust upon the path between them and eternity, would then apply themselves, like creatures of one common origin, owning one duty to the Father of one family, and tending to one common end, to make the world a better place! (p. 620)

As Williams points out, in this invocation Dickens proclaims the role of a novelist and his novel. It is to make plain the unseen reality which others cannot see, and then to make people aware of their common duty and common end "to make the world a better place."¹⁸

Not to be desperate, and to believe in the better world—this is what the author essentially wants to say in this novel. Society can be changed only by a "change of heart" of individuals. That "it's never too late for a individual to mend" (p. 803) is his message to readers as it is delivered to us

by Mr. Dombey.

NOTES

1. Kathleen Tillotson says that *Dombey and Son* is "the first in which a pervasive uneasiness about contemporary society takes the place of an intermittent concern with specific social wrongs." (Kathleen Tillotson, *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965], p. 157.)
2. "The term 'dark novels' originates in the title of an essay by Lionel Stevenson ('Dickens's Dark Novels, 1851-7'), published in the *Sewanee Review* of Summer 1942 . . ." (Alan Shelston ed., *Dickens: Dombey and Son and Little Dorrit* ["Casebook Series; London: Macmillan Publishers, 1985], p. 10.)
3. Barbara Hardy, *The Moral Art of Dickens* (London: The Athlone Press, 1985), p. 9.
4. George Orwell, *Dickens, Dali & Others* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1946), p. 22. Here Orwell uses "a change of spirit" and "a 'change of heart'" as synonyms. These two terms, however, seem to imply somewhat different nuances, and a "change of heart" may be a more proper term to express the conversion of characters in Dickens's novels.
5. Tillotson, p. 165.
6. Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 834. Hereafter cited in the text by page numbers only.
7. Tillotson, p. 167.
8. Edgar Johnson says that the principal theme of the novel is "the callous inhumanity of an economic doctrine that strips Mr. Dombey's relation with everyone to an assertion of monetary power." (Edgar Johnson, *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952], II, 630.)
9. Johnson, II, 638.
10. Before their marriage Mr. Dombey feels sympathy and fellow feeling towards Edith's haughtiness, which he thinks will lighten the dignity of Dombey and Son (p. 414).
11. Hardy, p. 63. Here Hardy discusses four women characters, Edith Dombey, Louisa Bounderby, Estella, and Bella Wilfer, who she says show us "a more acute insight into the division between vision and action" than the converted heroes (p. 57).

12. As an antithesis of "the callous inhumanity," Johnson uses this term. See Johnson, II, 631.
13. Johnson, II, 635.
14. Raymond Williams, "Introduction" to *Dombey and Son* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1983), p. 16.
15. Hardy, p. 67.
16. John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1980), II, 21.
17. Lyn Pykett, "Dombey and Son: A Sentimental Family Romance," *Studies in the Novel*, XIX (1987), 17.
18. Williams, p. 20.