

Dickens and the Date

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Where can we live, Philip Larkin wonders, but days? (Larkin 1968, 67). Days are the way in which the force and necessity of number seem to intersect with what we call 'lived time'. We have clocks to mark the passing of the hours, but days seem to keep the beat on their own account. It is easy to appreciate the arbitrariness of divisions like hours and minutes and seconds, since we could get along perfectly well with hours and minutes and seconds of different durations; but days seem like a spontaneous self-numbering of nature. 'They come, they wake us', writes Larkin (Larkin 1968, 67). Days are like numbers in that they seem to be naturally given to us as exactly equivalent units. We need a clock or some other system of measurement to tell us when an hour has passed, but days themselves tell us of their coming and going. If there is variation in the length of days over the course of the year, there is no variation in that pattern of variation, and no let-up in the endless succession of days that, like numbers, are each one the same, and yet each one different, but only in the fact of simply being the next in sequence. The givenness of days as units is indicated by the fact that they provide the principal reference point or gearing for all human reckonings of historical time, a week, month or year being reckoned as a certain number of days, not a certain number of hours or minutes.

And yet, number-like as they are, days are not of course self-numbering. They have the cardinal dimension of number, but not the ordinal. The word 'date' is from 'datum', that which has been given, but really dates are no such thing, since dating is precisely how we subject the empty, open, isotonic succession of days to numbering, allowing both for the rhythm and scansion of individual lives and, most importantly, for the coordination of time lived and experienced in common. Dates are both arbitrary and empty and yet also charged with significance. We give a kind of magical power to recurrences that have reference only to our dating systems – principally in birthdays and anniversaries.

Benedict Anderson famously compares the workings of a novel to that of a newspaper, in its function of forming an imagined community. Both the novel and the newspaper, he suggests, depend upon the 'meanwhile', upon the idea of lives convened and made comparable by the arbitrary fact of taking place simultaneously, synchronised by the date (Anderson 2006, 24-5). Indeed, a newspaper is sometimes used as a kind of timepiece, as when hostages are photographed holding a newspaper as proof that they were still alive on a particular day.

For the most part, our calendrical systems serve as a way of giving ourselves to the givenness of time: as Woolf's Mrs Dalloway thinks to herself, 'that one day should follow another; Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday; that one should wake up in the morning; see the sky; walk in the park; meet Hugh Whitbread; then suddenly in came Peter; then these roses; it was enough' (Woolf 2000, 104). And yet that steady succession is mined with menace. 'After that', Clarissa immediately thinks, 'how unbelievable death was! – that it must end' (Woolf 2000, 104). I may experience, as

folklore suggests, a sudden shiver when somebody ‘walks over my grave’. But, especially for those of us without access to family vaults, we need not necessarily know or have traversed where on the earth on which we have had our fitful residence our long home will turn out to be. But, even though, as Samuel Beckett puts it ‘Death has not required us to keep a day free’ (Beckett 1965, 17), the existence of dates and dating means that I will in fact have met my deathday and lived it through as many times through as my birthday (plus or minus one). Days are where we live, but one day in particular will be, and will always have been, the day I was to die. There is indeed, a kind of fatality in dates, a kind of enunciative force, fatality being from the past participle of Latin *fari*, to speak or utter.

The relations between time and timing became newly demanding in the nineteenth century, as the increasing speed of travel and communications meant that the world needed to be ever more synchronised. This produced greater consistency and commensurability in temporal experience – no longer was there Reading time and Cheltenham time – but also produced paradox, especially when it came to taking the measure of global time. Lewis Carroll was much taken up with the problem of the date-line, and included it in a series of mathematical puzzles that he set for a monthly magazine during the 1880s, and published as *A Tangled Tale* in 1885. One of the problems in this book concerns the question of when, or, what puzzlingly comes to the same thing, where precisely the date changes. If it is midnight in London, then it must be Wednesday to the west of London and Thursday east of London. But if you could travel faster than the sun and set out from London travelling east through Thursday, there would have to come a point at which you would find yourself back in Wednesday. But where, or when? That question was answered by *fiat* with the establishment of the international date line. Carroll himself could offer no solution to the problem, writing to his subscribers ‘I must postpone, *sine die*, the geographical problem [...] because I am myself so entirely puzzled by it; and when an examiner is himself dimly hovering between a second class and a third how is he to decide the position of others?’ (Carroll 1998, 401). The sly little joke of the Latin tag *sine die*, which, when applied to a postponement, simply means ‘indefinitely’, but literally means ‘without a day’, points to the very condition of temporal deterritorialisation that puzzles Carroll.

During the nineteenth century, novels came closer to the condition of newspapers than ever before because they were more often themselves produced periodically. Dickens lived his writing life subject to the relentless tick of the hours and the days, keyed in as they were with columns of type and printed pages. His novels were not only written by numbers, but the monthly parts were themselves known as ‘numbers’, just as turns in the music hall would later be. We know that Dickens began to develop a kind of internal time-sense in his writing, so that his sentences and chapters were not so much subject to the clock and the calendar as themselves meting them out. But his internal word-clock could sometimes go a little haywire (a word that entered English in the sense of tangled or confused only as late as 1929), overproducing or, even more alarmingly, undershooting, so that he needed on occasion to make up the missing material for the 32 printed pages required for each monthly instalment. The reading of novels was also subject to this rhythm of publication and distribution, in a kind of prosody of the commodity.

And yet, if novels are in this sense held in lockstep with collective and commercial time, they are also hostile or allergic to it. The fact that there are so many Sundays and Thursdays, Mays, Novembers and Januarys in Dickens’s writing is a proof of the novels’ worldly secularity, but fiction tends to recoil from actual, historical dates,

because they seem to belong too much to the deathly, entropic one-thing-after-another order of *chronos* rather than the order of *chairos*, sacred or significant time. Just as there are two kinds of figurings of time, the singular and the figurative (things that would happen and things that would often happen) there are two kinds of date, which we may call the calendrical and the categorical. A calendrical day is singular and unrepeatable. An actual, that is to say, unique date, is the equivalent of a proper name. Dates confront literary texts with the order of the irreversible. The point about the ‘implacable November weather’ of the beginning of *Bleak House* is that it is not any particular November that is being specified, it is November as a quality rather than a place in a sequence. November is in fact the month that is mentioned most commonly in Dickens’s novels, because of being the richest in associations of bleak and dreariness: in *American Notes* we meet ‘four morsels of girls (of whom one was blind) [who] sang a little song, about the merry month of May, which I thought (being extremely dismal) would have suited an English November better’ (Dickens 2000, 58). In *Bleak House*, much of the action of which seems to occur in an arrested November, the smoky and explosive associations of the month for English readers are also drawn on, for example in narrating the arrival of the guy-like figure of Grandfather Smallweed in ‘a group at first sight scarcely reconcilable with any day in the year but the fifth of November’ (Dickens 1971, 425). Of course, the Fifth of November is, like the Fourth of July, not a calendrical value but a topos, and a poetic one at that, which helps to smooth its passage from the alien order of number into the order of language, as in David Copperfield’s efforts to compose a note to Agnes: ‘I even tried poetry. I began one note, in a six-syllable line, ‘Oh, do not remember’ – but that associated itself with the fifth of November, and became an absurdity’ (Dickens 1999, 411).

When a fiction incorporates an actual date, it acts both as a kind of authentication, suggesting the historicity of the events in question and as a kind of foreign body, which must somehow be digested to the parallel order of symbolic or represented time that novels always substitute for calendrical time, even, and perhaps especially, if they are representing what purport to be historical events. There are quite a few particular dates in *American Notes*, and *Pictures from Italy*, but these are the mark of a kind of writing that advertises itself as chronicle rather than fiction. Even here, Dickens can take a sort of comic revenge on the order of number through a kind of quantitative hyperbole, in the opening words of *American Notes*:

I shall never forget the one-fourth serious and three-fourths comical astonishment, with which, on the morning of the third of January eighteen-hundred-and-forty-two, I opened the door of, and put my head into, a ‘state-room’ on board the Britannia steam-packet, twelve hundred tons burden per register, bound for Halifax and Boston, and carrying Her Majesty’s mails. (Dickens 2000, 9)

When actual historical dates make their appearance in Dickens’s fiction, they are often subject to this kind of assimilation to the symbolic order of the novel, as public time gives way to private fantasy. This friction tends to be a feature of novels dealing with historically dateable events, like *A Tale of Two Cities*:

The scene was Mr. Cruncher's private lodging in Hanging-sword-alley, Whitefriars: the time, half-past seven of the clock on a windy March morning, Anno Domini seventeen hundred and eighty. (Mr. Cruncher himself always spoke of the year of our Lord as Anna Dominoes: apparently under the

impression that the Christian era dated from the invention of a popular game, by a lady who had bestowed her name upon it.) (Dickens 1994b, 55)

Much more typical is the recoil from particular dates we find at the beginning of *Oliver Twist*, in the interest of creating a kind of mythic or chairotic time:

Among other public buildings in a certain town, which for many reasons it will be prudent to refrain from mentioning, and to which I will assign no fictitious name, there is one anciently common to most towns, great or small: to wit, a workhouse; and in this workhouse was born; on a day and date which I need not trouble myself to repeat, inasmuch as it can be of no possible consequence to the reader, in this stage of the business at all events; the item of mortality whose name is prefixed to the head of this chapter. (Dickens 1994a, 3)

There are quite a few moments of coyness about dates in Dickens. '[O]ne November morning', writes Esther Summerson, 'I received this letter. I omit the date' (Dickens 1971, 74). Why does Dickens not simply omit to tell us of the date, rather than telling us of the omission? The tell-tale locket in *Oliver Twist* is described by the workhouse matron: ' "It has the word 'Agnes' engraved on the inside," said the woman. "There is a blank left for the surname; and then follows the date; which is within a year before the child was born." ' (Dickens 1994a, 274). There are two kinds of blankness here, the blank left for the surname and the date which is present but blanked out by the narrative. Though Pip can remember the 'character and turn' (Dickens 2003, 3) of the inscriptions on his parents' tombstones, no mention is made of the dates of their decease. It is almost as though fiction maintains a deliberate blindness with respect to dates, equivalent to the principle that most people are unable to read writing that may present itself in dreams or, even more intriguingly, that light switches never work in dreams (Hearne 1981, 98). Just as switching on the light is a kind of *felo-de-se* for the dreamwork, so the letting in to fiction of the toxic force of purely serial succession would signify a kind of dissolution of its power to give shape to time.

Dates are, for the most part, external to literary works, precisely because dates belong to the order of death. This is highlighted when dates are promoted into titles, when there is a certain tendency to spell the dates out as words rather than numerals, as in Victor Hugo's *Quatrevingt-treize* (1874), Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) or Adam Thorpe's *Nineteen Twenty-One* (2001), as though to neutralise the alienness of number by digesting it into the order of words. Philip Larkin's poem 'MCMXIV' goes even further by spelling the date out in Roman numerals, which mimic those on memorials. Dickens does something similar at the beginning of *Pickwick Papers*, where we read:

That punctual servant of all work, the sun, had just risen, and begun to strike a light on the morning of the thirteenth of May, one thousand eight hundred and twenty-seven, when Mr Samuel Pickwick burst like another sun from his slumbers, threw open his chamber window, and looked out upon the world beneath. (Dickens 1972, 72-3)

The trial of Pickwick makes much play with the specificity of dates, which stands as one of the characteristics of legal discourse, coming into comic collision with fictional discourse:

‘Let me read the first: – “Garraway’s, twelve o’clock. Dear Mrs. B. – Chops and Tomata sauce. Yours, PICKWICK.” Gentlemen, what does this mean? Chops and Tomata sauce! Yours, Pickwick! Chops! Gracious heavens! and Tomata sauce! Gentlemen, is the happiness of a sensitive and confiding female to be trifled away, by such shallow artifices as these? The next has no date whatever, which in itself is suspicious. “Dear Mrs. B., I shall not be at home till to-morrow. Slow coach.” And then follows this very remarkable expression. “Don’t trouble yourself about the warming-pan.” The warming-pan! Why, gentlemen, who *does* trouble himself about a warming-pan?’ (Dickens 1972, 563)

The most significant date in the trial is the unspecified but ‘particular morning in July last’ on which Pickwick is held to have proposed to Mrs Bardell. Naming the day is put into play in different ways in the testimony of Susannah Sanders:

Susannah Sanders was then called, and examined by Serjeant Buzfuz, and cross-examined by Serjeant Snubbin. Had always said and believed that Pickwick would marry Mrs. Bardell; knew that Mrs. Bardell’s being engaged to Pickwick was the current topic of conversation in the neighbourhood, after the fainting in July [...] Thought Mrs. Bardell fainted away on the morning in July, because Pickwick asked her to name the day; knew that she (witness) fainted away stone dead when Mr. Sanders asked *her* to name the day, and believed that everybody as called herself a lady would do the same, under similar circumstances. (Dickens 1972, 571)

The point here once again seems to be to mobilise in order to neutralise the friction between number and word. Dates belong to the order of the law rather than of fiction and, especially in the matter of wills, dates are caught up in calculation, contracting and transaction; but the play with the date here is what makes it clear that this kind of legal discourse is in fact itself extravagantly fictional in method and intent.

If dates offer a way of keeping track of one’s life, they can often dizzy and disorientate too. Phil’s method of calculating his own age in *Bleak House* involves a labour that is at once numerical and autistic with regard to number:

‘I was just eight,’ says Phil, ‘agreeable to the parish calculation, when I went with the tinker [...] That was April Fool Day. I was able to count up to ten; and when April Fool Day come round again, I says to myself, “Now, old chap, you’re one and a eight in it.” April Fool Day after that, I says, “Now, old chap, you’re two and a eight in it.” In course of time, I come to ten and a eight in it; two tens and a eight in it. When it got so high, it got the upper hand of me; but this is how I always know there’s a eight in it.’ (Dickens 1971, 421)

Mr Dick’s uncertain grasp on time and memory in *David Copperfield* is expressed through his simultaneous fixation upon and distraction by one special date, that of King Charles’s execution:

The first time he came,’ said Mr. Dick, ‘was – let me see – sixteen hundred and forty-nine was the date of King Charles’s execution. I think you said sixteen hundred and forty-nine?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘I don’t know how it can be,’ said Mr. Dick, sorely puzzled and shaking his head. ‘I don’t think I am as old as that.’

‘Was it in that year that the man appeared, sir?’ I asked.

‘Why, really’ said Mr. Dick, ‘I don’t see how it can have been in that year, Trotwood. Did you get that date out of history?’ (Dickens 1999, 282)

But, precisely because of the deathly nature of their stubbornly neutral seriality, dates can actually be taken up into projective fantasies of time, as in John Chivery’s funereal reverie in *Little Dorrit* about his happy-ever-after afterlife with Amy Dorrit:

they would glide down the stream of time, in pastoral domestic happiness. Young John drew tears from his eyes by finishing the picture with a tombstone in the adjoining churchyard, close against the prison wall, bearing the following touching inscription: ‘Sacred to the Memory Of JOHN CHIVERY, Sixty years Turnkey, and fifty years Head Turnkey, Of the neighbouring Marshalsea, Who departed this life, universally respected, on the thirty-first of December, One thousand eight hundred and eighty-six, Aged eighty-three years. Also of his truly beloved and truly loving wife, AMY, whose maiden name was DORRIT, Who survived his loss not quite forty-eight hours, And who breathed her last in the Marshalsea aforesaid. There she was born, There she lived, There she died.’ (Dickens 1967, 256)

Another way of turning the fatality of dates to account is to give them the force of a kind of necessity, as we commonly do in celebrating anniversaries. Sometimes this tallies, or at least dallies, deliciously with the deathliness of date-recurrence, turning blank arbitrariness into poetic potency, as in the murder story told by Solomon Daisy in *Barnaby Rudge*:

‘The crime was committed this day two-and-twenty years – on the nineteenth of March, one thousand seven hundred and fifty-three. On the nineteenth of March in some year – no matter when – I know it, I am sure of it, for we have always, in some strange way or other, been brought back to the subject on that day ever since – on the nineteenth of March in some year, sooner or later, that man will be discovered.’ (Dickens 1973, 58)

If there is a fondness in Dickens for things that are ‘out of date and out of purpose’, like the Clennams’ house in *Little Dorrit* (Dickens 1967, 85), characters can also find a kind of stability and purpose through the periodicity of dates, which, far from exposing them to time, can seem to immunise them from it, as in the careful accountancy of Tim Linkinwater in *Nicholas Nickleby*:

It was a sight to behold Tim Linkinwater slowly bring out a massive ledger and day book, and, after turning them over and over, and affectionately dusting their backs and sides, open the leaves here and there, and cast his eyes, half mournfully, half proudly, upon the fair and unblotted entries.

‘Four-and-forty year, next May!’ said Tim. ‘Many new ledgers since then. Four-and-forty year!’ (Dickens 2008, 471)

In fact, a certain kind of date-fetishism can become a way of resisting the erosive arbitrariness of seriality, nowhere more so than in the superstitious determination of Mrs Badger in *Bleak House* never to allow variation in her personal calendar of attachments:

‘I was barely twenty,’ said Mrs Badger, ‘when I married Captain Swosser of the Royal Navy. I was in the Mediterranean with him; I am quite a Sailor. On the twelfth anniversary of my wedding-day, I became the wife of Professor Dingo.’

(‘Of European reputation,’ added Mr Badger in an undertone.)

‘And when Mr. Badger and myself were married,’ pursued Mrs Badger, ‘we were married on the same day of the year. I had become attached to the day.’

‘So that Mrs. Badger has been married to three husbands – two of them highly distinguished men,’ said Mr. Badger, summing up the facts; ‘and each time upon the twenty-first of March at Eleven in the forenoon!’

We all expressed our admiration. (Dickens 1971, 225)

The skirmishing which takes place in Dickens’s writing with regard to the question of dates is part of a much larger and tenser story, of the tense interpenetration of language and number that became ever more a feature both of writing and of social-symbolic life during the nineteenth century. The novel both accommodates us to living in and by numbers and also offers the fantasy that there might be some other mode of living in time, as hinted at with sad ridiculousness by Mr Dick: ‘“I suppose history never lies, does it?”’ said Mr. Dick, with a gleam of hope.’ Keeping track of the date is a task that is always divided between Mr Dick and Mr Dickens.

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