

## CHAPTER 6

# ‘The Thing and Not the Thing’: The Contemporary Dickensian Novel and Donna Tartt’s *The Goldfinch* (2013)

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The reviews were in, and they were unanimous. Donna Tartt’s *The Goldfinch* (2013) was Dickensian. Michiko Kakutani of *The New York Times* wrote, ‘In this astonishing Dickensian novel, Mrs Tartt uses her myriad talents—her tactile prose, her knowledge of her characters’ inner lives, her instinct for suspense—to immerse us in a fully imagined world’ (Kakutani C1). *The New York Times Book Review*’s 10 Best Books of 2013 called the book ‘Intoxicating ... like the best of Dickens, the novel is packed with incident and populated with vivid characters’ (‘10 Best’ 12). In *USA Today*, Kevin Nance wrote, ‘A massively entertaining, darkly funny new book that goes a long way toward explaining why its author is finally securing her place alongside the greatest American Novelists of the past half century, including ... Philip Roth, Toni Morrison and that other latter-day Dickensian, John Irving’ (Nance). And finally, providing a kind of keynote for this chapter, Jessica Duffin Wolfe wrote,

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Some have suggested *Bleak House* as a corollary, but to me, the Dickens novel that *The Goldfinch* most resembles is *Great Expectations*. Pip's struggles reappear in Tartt's portrayal of a child caught up in adult trouble, in the guilt—good grief, the guilt—and nostalgia of Theo's first-person narration. Indeed, Tartt's utterly antiquarian book is driven by a madness for the past and its relics that is as much Walter Scott as Dickens. (Wolfe)

In *The Goldfinch*, an adolescent protagonist, Theo, is orphaned when a terrorist bomb blast at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art kills his beloved mother. In the ensuing confusion, he ends up taking a priceless 1654 painting, *The Goldfinch* by Carel Fabritius, that becomes his dark secret and that thrums under the plot. An orphan and a mystery is a promising Dickensian beginning. As we'll see, Tartt rummages through all of Dickens with direct and indirect corollaries, relics, touchstones, and narrative strategies with an 'antiquarian's' devotion to transport us back into the past.

First, and most obviously, Tartt uses structural and thematic features clearly borrowed from Dickens. Structural elements include the early glimpse of a colourful minor character who will serve as a link to a major plot later in the novel (à la Herbert Pocket in *Great Expectations*). We get a glimpse of a young red-haired girl, Pippa, who, like Estella, will become Theo's pole star and eventual love interest. Old-fashioned Dickensian foreshadowing is also a favourite tactic of Tartt. There might be the portentous mention of sailing and a central character's fear of open water, and that guarantees a shipwreck and a drowning later (echoes of Steerforth). Structurally, it is a classic *Bildungsroman* in the spirit of *Great Expectations* and *David Copperfield*: as in Dickens, there is an emphasis on wealth and class disparities. In *The Goldfinch* much is made of the gap between Theo's marginal social standing and his well-heeled friend (and almost in-law) Andy Barbour's Upper East Side privilege. And, like Pip, Twist, or Nicholas Nickleby, we see how a promising, though impoverished, youth might be of interested to wealthy benefactors.

I say Pip or Twist, because Tartt is gifted at the character 'off rhyme' – where a blend of attributes makes us think of other like characters without a single, direct correlation. For instance, Theo is committed to the memory of his mother's boho youth. She was a former model, a would-be actress, a muse to artists and actors, and a PhD candidate at NYU in art history. This puts one in the mind of loveable bohemians like the Micawbers or Crummleses. In fact, Theo's fairy godfather, the benevolent antique dealer Hobie, is not so much a Cheeryble brother as a Mr Brownlow, Mr Micawber, or perhaps even Nell's grandfather in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. He is all of these in one way or another, a Dickensian composite.<sup>1</sup> When Theo is informed by Hobie that his story has appeared in the papers, he describes it as 'an orphan's plight ... a charity-minded socialite steps in' story. In other words, even inside the world of the novel, Theo's plight has almost immediately been fictionalised into something resembling Oliver

Twist and Brownlow. What's more, the red-haired Pippa whom Theo sees just prior to the explosion that changes his life also resembles other orphan wards: Pip, of course, but also Little Nell and to a lesser extent Esther in *Bleak House*. She shares a resemblance to Estella with another character. The socialite who steps in will come to resemble Miss Havisham, and Theo's friend Boris will be explicitly compared to the Artful Dodger.<sup>2</sup> The meaning of these corollaries, composites, or cobbled-together assemblages grow later as it becomes clear the novel is interested in cobbled-together copies.

It is less an adaptation in the traditional sense than the neo-Victorian rewritings discussed in Chapter 4 of this volume. It also employs thematic and character borrowings as traced in Kathy Rees's discussion of Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson in Chapter 2 and Francesca Arnanvas's treatment of *The Diamond Age* in Chapter 7. These inheritors' books make it seem as if there is an agreed-upon set of characteristics to copy (the imperilled runaway, the magical benefactor, the band of larcenous orphans), but that the copies must be indirect: a barely traceable fingerprint rather than a facsimile.

One of Tartt's most potent Dickensian tools is her style of initial character description. Mr Barbour (one of Theo's early benefactors and a Dickensian 'absent father'), initially a genial presence but ultimately becoming a broken, troubled figure, is given a theatrical Dickensian description on his first appearance, Tartt's single most Dickensian habit:

Mr. Barbour was a tiny bit strange-looking with something pale and silvery about him as if his treatments in the Connecticut 'ding farm' (as he called it) had rendered him incandescent; his eyes were a queer gray and his hair was pure white, which made him seem older than he was until you noticed that his face was young and pink—boyish even. His ruddy cheeks with his long, old-fashioned nose, in combination with the prematurely white hair gave him the amiable look of a lesser founding father, some minor member of the Continental Congress teleported to the twenty-first century. (96)

This is in an old-fashioned character description – a big block of text on the character's first appearance, with a list, giving bright outsized detail and repetition (white hair twice), explicit judgement ('strange-looking') and a link to an external referent (founding father). It certainly resembles the Dickens method: 'Uncle Pumblechook: a large hard-breathing middle-aged slow man, with a mouth like a fish, dull staring eyes and sandy hair standing upright on his head, so that it looked as if had just been all but choked' (*GE* 42). Like Pumblechook's fish mouth and 'standing upright' hair, or Wemmick's square 'wooden face' and 'post-office box mouth', Mr Barbour's almost cartoonish 'incandescent' appearance is meant to summon an external image, in this case, the image on a 20-dollar bill—and readers are to remember that bold, broad stroke image and that hair. In contrast, much of modern fiction salts in description or leaves it out altogether. External markers like extravagant hair as an indication of character





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are frowned upon. Tarrt leans pretty heavily on laid-on externals, what we'll see later Hobie will call (in reference to antiques) 'patina': easily applied referents and brand names to conjure instant images and provide unearned associations. Old movies, *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, *A Christmas Carol* and *Great Expectations*, are all deployed for quick descriptions and shorthands.

So, as the reviewers point out, there are many Dickensian correspondences. But what is the meaning of these correspondences and how do they function? First, Donna Tarrt uses description, lists, and catalogues to propel us back in time, and she seems to self-consciously use what Tracy C. Davis calls 'recombinative' techniques to build her novel, and then mirrors that in the work done in the book's antique shop (the reconstruction and reclamation of antique furniture), and the painting that are both at the centre of the novel. But, finally, what is most compelling is where Tarrt diverges from Dickens, most notably in the absence of comedy.

The Dickensian heart of the novel is the basement workshop of that antique shop 'Hobart and Blackwell' and its shaggy owner, Hobart (Hobie). The artifacts produce their own 'atmosphere' that ushers the young protagonist Theo backward:

Hobie lived and wafted ... in his own mild atmosphere, the dark brown of tea stains and tobacco, where every clock in the house said something different and time didn't actually correspond to the standard measure but instead meandered along at its own sedate tick-tock, obeying the pace of his antique-crowded backwater, far from the factory-built, epoxy-glued version of the world. (489)

When Theo looks through the dusty window, he sees:

Staffordshire dogs and majolica cats, dusty crystal, tarnished silver, antique chairs and settees upholstered in sallow old brocade, an elaborate faience birdcage, miniature marble obelisks atop a marble-topped pedestal table and a pair of alabaster cockatoos. It was the kind of shop my mother would have liked—packed tightly, a bit dilapidated, with stacks of old books on the floor. (145)

The shop is a time-travelling portal, what Theo's mum calls a 'Time Tunnel' (20), and, once inside, we get more epic catalogues that put reader in a Dickensian mood: 'In the shop behind-the-shop, the tall-case clocks ticked, the mahogany glowed, the light filtered in a golden pool on the dining room tables, the life of the downstairs menagerie went on' (206).

**Figure 6.1:** *The Goldfinch*, Carel Fabritius, 1654. Copyright: Mauritshuis, The Hague (2018), reproduced with permission. The painting at the heart of the novel.

The lists are serving a purpose beyond description.<sup>3</sup> They are meant to waft us into the past. The lists are too long and drowsy-making to be scene-setting. They are literally intoxicating, and, as the repeated mention of the 'tick' 'of the tall-case clock' suggests, pleasantly drowsy-making. It is a place, he says, where:

without even realising it you slipped away sometimes into 1850, a world of ticking clocks and creaking floorboards, copper pots and baskets of turnips and onions in the kitchen, candle flames leaning all to the left in the draft of an opened door and tall parlor windows billowing and wagged like ball gowns, cool quiet rooms where old things slept. (210)

The mention of how his long-dead mother would have liked the shop hints at its purpose as a means of time travel. The shop immediately connects him with his mother. Tarrt gives us these lists throughout, making it a signature move of the book: the hypnotic, lulling quality of the lists can even 'lull [Theo] to sleep' and back into the shop-behind-the-shop when he is away from it. It is both the antique items and the hypnotic contemplation of them that transports, as if in a trance. Its method of time travel is part of the project seemingly borrowed from another well-known contemporary novel interested in time travel, Jack Finney's *Time and Again*.

In *Time and Again*, time travel is achieved by putting the protagonist (Simon Morley) in a room in the Dakota Apartment building – looking out on Central Park – and surrounded by period furnishings from 1882. Both novels are concerned with how seemingly inconsequential actions in the past can affect the future.<sup>4</sup> Both novels argue that once placed in the appropriate atmosphere, the past comes rushing back. In both novels, Central Park, Gramercy Park, W. 57th Street, Greenwich Village, and antique shops are touchstones and portals to the past. At a key early moment of *The Goldfinch*, moments before her death, Theo and his mother are walking up Fifth Avenue along Central Park, and she stops and says, 'Time warp.' Theo asks her what she means, and she tells him that the location, so unchanged, is like a 'time tunnel' that propels her into the past:

'Up here ... Upper Park is one of the few places where you can still see what the city looked like in the 1890s. Gramercy Park too, and the Village, some of it. When I first came to New York I thought this neighborhood was Edith Wharton and *Franny and Zooey* and *Breakfast at Tiffany's* all rolled into one.' (20)

Central Park serves the same purpose in this novel as it does in *Time and Again*: transit to the past. And Tarrt seems to be gesturing toward *Time and Again* without (for once) explicitly naming it, by saying this Central Park view is 'what the city looked like in the 1890s.' With the compulsive cultural referentiality of the novel (and the characters) it would not be surprising that Theo's mother is thinking of this much re-produced 1894 photo from *Time and Again*, which serves as proof of that protagonist's journey into the past. Tarrt almost certainly is. Simon Morley snaps the picture during one of his time travels:





**Figure 6.2:** *Skating in Central Park in front of the Dakota, c.1890.* Photograph by J.S. Johnston. Copyright: The New York Historical Society (2018), reproduced with permission.

Halfway across the park ... I took the photo on the opposite page. I like it; it shows how alone the Dakota was. But I didn't allow too well for the reflected light from the ice, and embarrassingly, it's overexposed. There was a man in the middle foreground, for example, wearing a silk topper, and I don't know if you can see him... (242)

The protagonist steps into that past – propelled by the assemblage of objects and locations, like the unchanged Central Park. He then captures it (apologising for the poor quality) but also validating that this picture is his by pointing to that man in the 'silk topper' in the foreground. That seems to be the method of *The Goldfinch* for both the character and the reader. With this use of Central Park, Tartt is slyly making that point. 'Here,' she seems to be saying, 'is a novel that is the means of your transportation into the past, and proof of my ability to transport you.'

The way the book worms deep into the basement workshop seems an effort to will the modern world away – or to locate a 19th-century hideaway in a 21st-century novel. As in Stephenson's *The Diamond Age* (discussed in Chapter 7), the Dickensian past is used as a springboard to the future. Hypnosis produced by the contemplation of antiques (and some literal hypnosis in *Time and Again*)

is the means in both books of getting to the past you wish to live in. As constructed by Tartt, Hobie's shop is a warm, inviting place that you might see in Dickens novels (operating as a similarly inviting sanctuaries, like the Old Curiosity Shop, do there), and it is the way that Theo also uses it in this novel. Like Mr Venus, Hobie lives among 'the lovely trophies of [his] art'. And, just as in Dickens, the reclamation of furniture that occurs in this shop is akin to the novel's theme of time travel and reclamation: of the Fabritius painting, of the love of the lost mother and the time before her violent death, and even of the Victorian novel itself.

But the description of *The Goldfinch* as 'Dickensian' is in the end, however, not quite true. A 'Dickensian' text should go beyond these plot points and markers, these external correspondences. It is in the intangibles. Linda Hutcheon, speaking of textual influence and citing Dickens as an example, writes:

Many professional reviewers and audience members alike resort to the elusive notion of the 'spirit' of a work or an artist that has to be conveyed in an adaptation for it to be a success. The 'spirit' of Dickens or [Richard] Wagner is invoked, often to justify the radical changes in the 'letter' or the form. Sometimes it's the 'tone' that is deemed central, though rarely defined. But all three are arguably subjective and it would appear difficult to discuss, much less theorize. (10)

*The Goldfinch* is, of course, not an adaptation. But the way adaptation theory talks about film adaptations, sequels, and prequels as not being 'faithful' copies but containing the DNA of the original is helpful here. *The Goldfinch* employs the 'recombinative' strategies of adaptations: using elements and strands of previous works to create new ones (Davis 13).<sup>5</sup> Gary R. Bortolotti and Linda Hutcheon argue that the 'homology' or 'similarity in structure that is indicative of a common origin' is key to understanding the story's 'replication' in a new form (Bortolotti and Hutcheon 444). Bortolotti and Hutcheon are most concerned with the various 'vehicles'—memes, genes, or elements—that allow for this replication. As we have seen, *The Goldfinch* contains many genetic markers of the Dickensian, but some essential strand or binding material (nucleotide) is missing.<sup>6</sup> *The Goldfinch* seems to be an example of what Linda Hutcheson describes as 'a creative and interpretive act of appropriation' fitting 'along a continuum of fluid relationships between prior works and later—and lateral—revisitations of them' (Hutcheon 8, 171). John Bryant talks about how one text can capture elements of and then perhaps 'part of the energy' of the initial text but how, as is the case here, it might conversely have all the markers but somehow lose that energy (62).<sup>7</sup> In the same way, Laurena Tsudama's treatment of *The Wire* in Chapter 8 demonstrates that a Dickensian influence can be cited explicitly by characters and creators but be most present in 'how reality is represented' and betraying the DNA of 'Dickens's representational strategies.'



### Tone/voice and what the voice knows

When talking about the replication of a 'spirit', Hutcheon points to 'tone' and 'style'. The tone of the first-person voice used in *The Goldfinch* is transparent, conversational, and knowing. It is a style that readers of Tartt's *The Secret History* will recognise: the narrator who knows and yet does not know. The narrator tells us that he is 'blind' to his future and does not see the 'shadow' of a parting overhead but, in telling us this on page 15, he is signalling that a big change is about to come. Indeed, since the novel begins with the adult character hiding out in a hotel room in Amsterdam – this first-person voice knows almost everything at the outset (how he got to that hotel room, how it connects with the disaster that is the novel's inciting incident, how the painting that he more or less unwittingly takes from the Met after the terrorist attack leads inexorably to that hotel room). We know almost nothing. It is a very modern scrambled chronology: begin at the end and rewind. Tartt's narrator is careful to guide us from outside the narrative. 'It strikes me now, though it didn't then' is a frequent phrase that reminds you the narrative is happening from a point in the far future, but, even without these signposts, the narrative would have a 'from the future quality' to it. The narrator has perspective on the childhood events that, in Dickens, often disappears as soon as we enter the child's view of his world. That move, from distant past to immediate present, is the crucial thing *The Goldfinch* loses.

Still, like much of Dickens's *oeuvre*, the novel is a page turner. It is impossible to put down, and slightly melodramatic in its mechanics. As the novel plunges forward from explosive inciting incident to disastrous effects and from event to event, you see dominoes toppling and can barely catch your breath between the short chapters. Pressing it all forward is the 'how did he get here?' question of the frame narrative. A disaster kicked off the novel and, because of the narrator's predicament, you know a disaster awaits him. But, when you think of Dickens novels told from the point of view of an adult narrator recounting childhood adventures, you think of those that begin with a child who behaves in a way that does not indicate that he knows what will happen next, e.g. *David Copperfield*. Even when the whole narrative is in the past, those narrators might state, 'Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own tale, or that station will be held by someone else, these pages must show...' and then plunge into the child's present.

Likewise, in *Great Expectations*, when Pip encounters Magwitch, he knows the history that will unfold. When he meets Estella, or Herbert for that matter, there is some foreshadowing, but we never feel as if that moment in the story is not being lived. When he suffers under the tyranny of Mrs Joe, or comforted by Joe Gargery, we do not have the immediacy drained by a 'little did I know...'. We see the pangs of guilt (where he says, 'but I was capable of any meanness towards Joe or his name') and pointers forward like this one:

There have been occasions in my later life (I suppose as in most lives) when I have felt for a time as if a thick curtain had fallen on all its interest and romance, to shut me out from anything save dull endurance any more. Never has that curtain dropped so heavy and blank, as when my way in life lay stretched out straight before me through the newly entered road of apprenticeship to Joe. (*Great Expectations* 114)

Tartt seems to self-consciously echo the parenthetical, the curtain, and the fore-shadowing look backwards and forwards: 'I like to think of myself as a perceptive person (as I suppose we all do) and in setting all this down, it's tempting to pencil a shadow in overhead. But I was blind and deaf to the future, my single crushing worry was the meeting at school' (15). Later in the book, Theo again walks 'the familiar streets' but thinks of his 'old, lost life with his mother'. Tartt even uses the image of the curtain as dividing line between 'before' and 'after': 'it was as if a black curtain had come down on my life in Vegas' (513). But, in Pip's earlier scenes with Joe, there is warmth and detail of character that places us at the table with Pip's badly spelled epistle, or secreting bread from Mrs Joe. We will not be getting a portentous 'shadow overhead' or 'I was blind and deaf to my future' from a place somewhere above the action.

Pip will come to mourn his bad behaviour and his treatment of Joe, but will not be so clear-sightedly nostalgic for Joe and the old hearth before the fact. Similarly, David Copperfield does not experience the foreboding of his mother's death. To do this would rob early scenes of their bright, lived immediacy. Tartt, who is a smart and skilled novelist, seems to make the trade-off of nostalgia for lived, real-time 'in-scene' experience. Theo, in those opening chapters, continually contemplates the 'last times' he has with his mother before the disaster, and then returns to those 'last times' (last words, last Saturdays at the movies, even a last supper at an otherwise forgettable Italian restaurant) after her death. This has a powerful impact and thematic importance in the 'You neither know the day nor the hour' sense. But in Tartt we are not securely in these moments as the heavily advertised disaster looms. As Rees points out in Chapter 2, it is the same move made by Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson of conjuring the past, present, and future simultaneously. In contrast, David Copperfield says,

Looking back ... into the blank of my infancy ... the first objects I can remember as standing out by themselves from a confusion of things, are my mother and Peggotty. What else do I remember? Let me see. There comes out of the cloud our house—not new to me, but quite familiar, in its earliest remembrance. On that ground floor is Peggotty's kitchen, opening into a back yard... (25)

But David (and Dickens) then apologises for the long stretch of scenic overview: 'Here is a long passage—what an enormous perspective I make of it!' (25),

and then slides into the first dialogue with Peggotty, and from that moment we are in vivid lived reality.

The opening chapters of *The Goldfinch*, on the other hand, are suffused with nostalgia before the fact. In any event, on his return to New York, 20 years later, Theo feels the pull of nostalgia for the lost places and he feels that 'black curtain' come down on his intervening 'life in Vegas'.<sup>8</sup> Most of the New York sections exist in this hazy 'cloud' of remembrance – a mostly satisfying atmosphere of past mingled with present. We can see that it closely tracks Dickens's language. But what is missing?

## Humour

Tartt has many gifts: she is an extraordinary storyteller—she is, like Dickens, unafraid of taking big risks – making large leaps in place and time, embracing coincidence that approaches 'magic', and she has an exquisite eye for telling description. She has a gift for images that are familiar and new and filled with energy that might make you think of Dickens's fresh way of seeing the world: 'Light from the street flew in black bands across the floor' (107). She has a sense of the interior, often irrational, ways a person might deal with the death of a parent and the difficulty of the world not caring: 'the thought of returning to any kind of normal routine seemed disloyal, wrong ... it's hard to believe the world had ended and yet somehow these ridiculous activities kept grinding on' (110). That is cleared-eyed, sharp, and true. Tartt does deadened endurance well. But throughout the novel, as Theo is hiding a priceless masterpiece and even as he comes close to exposure, the crackle of guilt and fear that comedy would allow is absent. Theo simply reports: 'For some reason, during this strained interlude ... it occurred to me that maybe I ought to tell Hobie about the painting, or ... broach the subject in some oblique manner, to see what his reaction would be. The difficulty was how to bring it up' (214).

Tartt's childhood scenes lack something in texture and wonder and, yes, even pathos for the protagonist's suffering.<sup>9</sup> Dickens's charming, theatrical presentation of childhood memory brings it to life.<sup>10</sup> Pip's misery at the hands of Mr Wopsle and Pumblechook is occasion for laughter as well. In that famous scene from *Great Expectations*, Pip, having stolen food for Magwitch, sits with a 'guilty mind', expecting 'to find a Constable in the kitchen' as Pumblechook sermonises on the similarity between 'swine' and boys like Pip.

'True, Sir. Many a moral for the young,' returned Mr. Wopsle, and I knew he was going to lug me in, before he said it; 'might be deduced from that text.'

('You listen to this,' said my sister to me, in a severe parenthesis. Joe gave me more gravy.)

‘Swine,’ pursued Mr. Wopsle in his deepest voice, and pointing his fork at my blushes, as he were mentioning my Christian name; ‘Swine were the companions of the prodigal. ‘The gluttony of Swine is put before us as an example for the young.’ (I thought this pretty well in him who had been praising up the pork for being so plump and juicy.) ‘What is detestable in a pig is more detestable in a boy.’ ...

‘Besides,’ said Mr. Pumblechook, turning sharp on me, ‘think what you’ve got to be grateful for. If you’d been born a Squeaker—’

‘He *was*, if ever a child was,’ said my sister, most emphatically.

Joe gave me some more gravy.

‘Well, but I mean a four-footed Squeaker,’ said Mr. Pumblechook... .

(44–5)

Dickens enters the guilt and shame directly in scene and in dialogue, providing an avenue for the reader to experience Pip’s humiliation and enjoy the comedy. He puts us in the scene, so we see the pointed jabs at Pip, and Joe’s efforts at consolation, and even Wopsle’s and Mr Hubble’s crosstalk in real time. With Tartt, you never have this feeling of Theo’s vulnerability because Tartt is reporting from a once-removed distance. In Dickens through the means of comedy, there is the frisson and electricity of guilt and fear and exposure.

But, despite *The New York Times* and *USA Today*’s claims to the contrary, Tartt is not funny in *The Goldfinch*. Nor, in her defence, as far as I can tell, does she try to be. Of course, comedy and the comic have a mixed reputation, but books on comedy and essays like Steve Almond’s ‘Funny is the New Deep’ are multiplying, and comedy studies seems to be entering into a refreshing period of respectability.<sup>11</sup> But, usually, critics do not feel the loss of the comic when a book is determined to be dark. Often enough, even with books that are decidedly dark *and* comic (*Catch-22*), claims for its respectability seem to insist that it is important despite being comic.<sup>12</sup>

When the comic enters the universe of *The Goldfinch*, it is reported, not enacted: told not shown. Take this example. Theo is wearing the duffel coat of Platt Barbour, the oldest Barbour son, a bully in the Bentley Drummle mould. His ‘best friend’, Tom Cable, makes a crack about his ‘costume’ and Theo, we are informed, replies in kind. We are not given the reply but are told ‘it was part of our ongoing dark-comedy act, amusing only to us, to abuse and insult each other’ (111). ‘Amusing only to us’ is right. We have no means of judging ‘the dark-comedy act’. And note that Tartt, even here, in the reporting of comic hijinks, has to dignify the comic with ‘dark’ – their ‘dark-comedy act’. Then we are told, ‘My friendship with Tom had always had a wild, manic quality, something unhinged and hectic and a little perilous about it and though all the same old high energy was still there but the current had been reversed, voltage humming in the opposite direction’ (112). Errr... if you say so. It is all past tense for us.



By the time we meet Theo and Tom there is no voltage. We'll get some sense of this later when a little electricity is introduced with his Russian friend Boris. There, you get some of the Artful Dodger's dangerous attraction for Oliver, or Steerforth's magnetic appeal for David. But, even here, rather than hilarity on the page you get this summary report of hilarity: 'everything was funny; everything made us laugh' and 'We knew how to tip each other into hysterics with an arch of an eyebrow or quirk of the mouth' (359). Each other, but not us.

Again and again, Tartt chooses to tell, not show, the hilarity. It is a 'safe' choice if you are uncertain of your comic chops. But it comes at a high cost. When the underpinning of the two boys' relationship cannot be shown – the hilarity, the hysterics – there is something lost in the emotional register. Steve Almond writes:

Comedy is powered by a determined confrontation with a set of feeling states that are essentially tragic in nature: grief, shame, disappointment, physical discomfort, anxiety. ... The best comedy is rooted in the capacity to face unbearable emotions and to offer by means of laughter a dividend of forgiveness. Sometimes these unbearable truths have to do with the world around us, but for the most part they have to do with the world inside us. ... The comic impulse consists in being willing the 'dwell' in the awkward shameful places we'd prefer not to dwell. (92)

If you do not show us the intensity in real time, when it ceases we do not feel the loss. Think of the dinner the Finches of the Grove have in *Great Expectations*, or Herbert and Pip's reckoning of accounts, or Herbert's instruction on table manners. Seeing the two friends confronting difficulty and sharing them in the warmth and light of those comic moments (most of which are based on fear and shame) deepens the relationship and heightens the stakes when the dark times come.

Of course, comedy and laughs are only missed if a work declares itself as comic. Usually even doing so is a strategic mistake, because 'this is not funny' or 'I do not find this funny' is pretty certain to come. So avoidance may be good practical policy. But the cost alluded to above is that comedy heightens tragedy and the intermingling of dark and light reflects life.<sup>13</sup> Dickens, of course, said it first in *Oliver Twist* in his famous 'streaky bacon' observation on placing dark and light side by side: 'It is the custom on the stage, in all good murderous melodramas, to present the tragic and the comic scenes, in as regular alternation, as the layers of red and white in a side of streaky bacon' (168).

In *Great Expectations*, you will have the comic marriage of Wemmick in Chapter 55, followed by Magwitch's imprisonment and trial in Chapter 56, and Pip's sickness and convalescence under Joe's care in Chapter 57. Even as Pip emerges from his fever, racked with guilt at the way he has treated Joe and

gratitude at how Joe has cared for him, Dickens gives us this exchange on Miss Havisham's death:

'Is she dead, Joe?'

'Why you see, old chap,' said Joe, in a tone of remonstrance, and by way of getting at it by degrees, 'I wouldn't go so far as to say that, for that's a deal to say; but she ain't—'

'Living, Joe?'

'That's nigher where it is,' said Joe; 'she ain't living.' (423)

In the report of the death of a character who has meant a lot to Pip (admittedly, not all of it good) and whom he risked his life to save, Dickens layers in the tragedy with the comedy, heightening the moment with a classic joke structure.

*The Goldfinch* does layer the sunny Las Vegas sections in between the mellow 'Shop behind the Shop' sections. The bright emptiness of Las Vegas is the backdrop for Theo and Boris's drug-fuelled hijinks. But this is the least Dickensian section of the book. Theo and Boris drift around without knowing what to do with themselves. Theo's alcoholic gambler of a father careers out of control in the background, and Theo and Boris might be said to have a moment or two of Steerforth–David intimacy. There is much hilarity and out-of-control laughter *reported*, but we never experience or 'dwell' in any of it. So, when Theo reluctantly leaves Las Vegas, he is unhappy, but I cannot say I was. Back in New York, we are told 'There had been nights in the desert where I was so sick with laughter, convulsed and doubled over with aching stomach for hours on end, I would happily have thrown myself in front of a car to make it stop' (475). It is the hysterical laughter of a disaster survivor, but there is not much joy in it for him or us.

Once back in New York, trying to piece together the life he once led, Theo experiences the 'crossfade' between his memory of the place and the remnants of it that are conjuring it for him. His experience is at least as old as William Wordsworth's notion of how 'collateral objects' become 'habitually dear' and 'all their forms and changeful colors by invisible links were fastened to the affections' (1:597–603).

It was the first time I'd been anywhere near Sutton Place since returning to New York and it was like falling back into a friendly old dream, crossfade between past and present, pocked texture of the sidewalks and even the same old cracks ... lots of the same old places still in business, the deli, the Greek diner, the wine shop, all the forgotten neighborhood faces muddling through my mind. ... I was only a few blocks from our old building; and looking down towards Fifty-Seventh Street, that bright familiar alley with sun striking it just right and bouncing gold off the windows I thought Goldie! Jose! (529)

Just as Wordsworth predicts, the place summons the associations 'doomed to sleep.' Theo imagines a reconciliation scene between himself and the building's doormen, and being filled in on all the building's gossip. But, when he turns the corner, he sees a gutted building, now an empty shell. 'It had all seemed so solid, so immutable,' he says, 'the whole system of the building, a nexus where I could always stop in and see people, say hello, and find out what was going on. People who had known my mother. People who had known my father' (531). Time, as in Rees's discussion of Bjørnson, seems to promise connection to the past, but then is a reminder of the 'mutability of life' and the 'relentlessness of time passing'.

Collateral objects and associations and 'invisible links' are sundered. Not for the first time, Theo pities himself. And the 'scenes which were a witness of ... joy,' 'of obscure feelings representative of things forgotten,' are destroyed. Measure this return against Pip's ignominious return to his hometown. Pip's plan when he sees his boyhood nemesis Trabb's boy approaching him on the street is to take the high road befitting his new expectations and gentleman's status. His assumption is that Trabb's boy will be forced to acknowledge his superiority and silently accept his aloof treatment. The problem is that Trabb's boy will not cooperate.

Casting my eyes along the street at a certain point of my progress, I beheld Trabb's boy approaching, lashing himself with an empty blue bag. Deeming that a serene and unconscious contemplation of him would best beseem me, and would be most likely to quell his evil mind, I advanced with that expression of countenance, and was rather congratulating myself on my success, when suddenly the knees of Trabb's boy smote together, his hair uprose, his cap fell off, he trembled violently in every limb, staggered out into the road, and crying to the populace, 'Hold me! I'm so frightened!' feigned to be in a paroxysm of terror and contrition, occasioned by the dignity of my appearance. As I passed him, his teeth loudly chattered in his head, and with every mark of extreme humiliation, he prostrated himself in the dust. (233)

Where Tartt might elevate to a retrospective height, Dickens stays on the ground. Pip tries to ignore Trabb's boy's paroxysms, which only provokes more ingenuity in the harassment, and ends in Trabb's boy's famous mockery of Pip's attempt to cut him ('Don't know yah!') and Pip's disgraceful 'ejection' 'into the open country' (234).

Two returns to hometowns where the protagonist finds that they have become strangers. In Tartt, we have a global and serious sense of melancholy and distant, almost generic, loss. A philosophical construction worker even shrugs and comments, 'That's the city for you' to displace the personal to the gentrifying general (530). In Dickens, we get a close-up on intense, protracted comic humiliation. We get the hero congratulating himself for the way he's handled



**Figure 6.3:** *Chest-on-Chest, Philadelphia, 1750–60.* Daderot CC0/Public domain. Carving attributed to Nicholas Bernard: the kind of furniture which Hobie mimics and ‘makes’ into what he calls his ‘changelings.’

the encounter with his ‘subordinate,’ and then the teeth-chattering, knee-smotting, staggering, ‘hold me, I’m so frightened!’ enactment of Pip’s worst fears. The intimacy of the second seems to impart emotional intensity to the comic encounter – and display Dickens commitment to sticking with the humiliation and the physical discomfort.

The Dickensian allusions and references and all those lists ease you across the threshold into the past, but they are finally like the patina and ‘wear’ that Hobie and then Theo applies to the restored furniture. Hobie says, ‘Patination is always one of the biggest problems in a piece. With new wood, if you’re going for an effect of age, a gilded patina is always easiest to fudge. ... Heavily restored pieces—where there are no worn bits or honorable scars, you have to hand out a few ancients and honorables yourself. The trick of it is never to be too nice



about it' (516). Hobie applies it honestly and fits new pieces with old pieces – for reclamation with maybe 'recombinative' intentions.<sup>14</sup> The restored cabinet is not absolutely the thing itself but can pass for it and retains the spirit of the thing. It is a new thing and an old thing at once – something sitting in the modern age but that has sleight of hand and clever cheats.

The changeling furniture also resembles the Fabritius painting of *The Goldfinch* in these sleights of hand. In the following passage, a mysterious stolen-art dealer and criminal fence named Horst says calls the painting 'the thing and not the thing' because it seems to be a simple example of *trompe l'oeil* – that artist's effort to 'deceive the eye'. But, on closer inspection, he seems to be making a joking commentary on this effort to deceive. Horst<sup>15</sup> calls *The Goldfinch* (the painting) 'a masterly riposte to the whole idea of *trompe l'oeil*'.

Fabritius ... he's making a pun on the genre. ... Because in other passages of the work—the head? The Wing?—not creaturely or literal in the slightest, he takes the image apart very deliberately to show us how he painted it. ... It's a joke, the Fabritius. It has a joke at its heart. ... And that's what all the great masters do ... Rembrandt, Velazquez. ... They make jokes. They amuse themselves. They build up the illusion, the trick ... but, step closer? It falls apart into brushstrokes. Abstract, unearthly. A different and ... deeper sort of beauty altogether. ... The Thing and not the thing. (721)

And, like the novel *The Goldfinch*, the painting itself is making a kind of 'joke' about its hybrid nature, and amusing itself while not being especially interested in being funny. It takes itself apart as we are putting it together. Hobie calls these hybrids pieces of old and new 'Changelings'.<sup>16</sup> Late in the book Theo applies the patina and recombinative techniques less honestly, with the intention of fooling customers. Tartt is more Hobie than Theo. She is fitting narrative pieces together (plot, description, narration) with near-Dickens (orphans, curiosity shops, characters named Pippa) and produces a beautiful object. It is just that the warmth and texture and 'spirit' of the Dickens novel is hard to reproduce. As Hobie puts it, 'the genuine pieces' are marked by how they are 'variable, crooked capricious, singing here and sullen there', marked by 'warm asymmetrical streaks on a rosewood cabinet from where a slant of sun had struck it while the other side was as dark as the day it was cut' (516). This novel, enjoyable as it is, is passably Dickensian in the dark shop, but in the bright light of the Las Vegas sun, where the sun hits it, it is a little less so. And this is perhaps what Tartt intends. It is a lovely changeling, but, as Hobie would say, it is 'epoxy-glued' in places. Still, the novel does become a means of time travel. What is lacking – the mixture of pathos and humour, the insistent charming narrator, the warmth, the texture, the 'crooked, capricious' lived moments – is, perhaps after all, inimitable. It is the thing and not the thing.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Hobie, who is from upstate New York, is also inexplicably British- or perhaps Irish-sounding. He says 'strand' for beach, 'the local' for a favourite local restaurant, and the hard-to-pin-down 'in a bit of tip' for in a spot of trouble.
- <sup>2</sup> If one does not pursue the 'off-rhyme' tangents, one-to-one character corollaries to *Great Expectations* might indicate that the heartless Kitsey is a stand-in for Estella; Platt Barbour is Bentley Drummle. Perhaps Lucius Reeves, who seeks to expose Theo's fakes and Theo as a fake, is some fully embodied form of Orlick or the Avenger – that character who seeks to unmask the protagonist's pretensions.
- <sup>3</sup> The novel drops into these lists repeatedly. Here is a list of lists. We are told that the boy returns to the shop for: 'Three oddly absorbing afternoons a week, after school: labeling jars, mixing rabbit-skin glue, sorting through boxes of drawer fittings. ... Amidst the drowsy tick of the tall-case clocks, [Hobie] taught me the pore and luster of different woods, their colors, the ripple and gloss of tiger maple and the frothed grain of burled walnut, their weights in my hand even their different scents ... spicy mahogany, dusty-smelling oak, black cherry with its characteristic tag and the flowery, amber-resin smell of rosewood. Saws and counter-sinks, rasps and rifflers, bent blades and spoon blades, braces and mitre-blocks' (207). 'He side-stepped a book face down on the carpet and a tea-cup ringed with brown on the inside, and ushered me to an ornate chair, tucked and shirred, with fringe and a complicated button-studded seat—a Turkish chair. ... Winged bronzes, silver trinkets, Dusty gray ostrich plumes in a silver case' (153); 'There are 'Murky portraits, china spaniels on the mantelpiece, golden pendulum swinging, tockety-tock, tockety-tock' (156); 'He pushed open a door into a crowded kitchen with a ceiling skylight and a curvaceous old stove: tomato red, with svelte lines like a 1950s spaceship. Books stacked on the floor—cookbooks, dictionaries, old novels, encyclopedias; shelves closely packed with antique china in a half dozen patterns. Near the window, by the fire escape, a faded wooden saint held up a palm in benediction; on the sideboard alongside a silver tea set, painted animals straggled two by two into a Noah's Ark. But the sink was piled with dishes, and on the countertops and windowsills stood medicine bottles, dirty cups, alarming drifts of unopened mail, and plants from a florist's dry and brown in their pots' (161); 'Her fairytale books, her perfume bottles, her sparkly tray of barrettes and her valentine collection paper lace, cupids, and columbines, Edwardian suitors with rose bouquets pressed to their hearts' (482).
- <sup>4</sup> For instance, 13-year-old Theo's suspension for bad behaviour at school is what puts Theo and his mum outside the Metropolitan Museum on a school day. His mum's momentary car sickness prompts them to exit a taxi on West 86th Street and Fifth Avenue, instead of nearer the school. Theo first

presses for breakfast at a Madison Avenue diner, but relents, and they wander towards the park down Fifth Avenue. Caught in a downpour with just a flimsy umbrella (just as the mother is thinking about 'time warps'), they just miss snagging another cab and are driven into the nearby museum. In the museum, Theo sees and follows Pippa, and is momentarily separated from his mother. A terrorist bomb kills her, spares him, and in the confused aftermath he takes the painting. Any one of these trivial events, if changed, would have changed the future. In *Time and Again*, Simon is told by one his handlers to disregard one scientist's worry about changing the future while visiting the past: 'Listen to him long enough and you'll think that if you sneezed too loud back in January 1882, you might somehow set off a chain of events that could blow up the world. But it wouldn't. ... People don't ... do anything else of any importance because of the routine trivial action of some stranger' (230). But *The Goldfinch* argues any small action might 'blow up the world'.

- <sup>5</sup> In describing how the 'recombinative' process works, Davis writes, 'New media are forged from older media. For example, the visual tricks of magic lantern slides and the plots of melodramas were among the earliest influences in cinema. Likewise, modernist innovations in staging and playwriting are comprehensible in relation to older practices, traces in the recombinative use of staging techniques and narrative motifs for performance. Performance never breaks wholly from tradition but exists in reference and reconstitution of it' (13).
- <sup>6</sup> See Gary Bortolotti and Linda Hutcheon's 'On the Origin of Adaptations: Rethinking Fidelity Discourse and "Success"—Biologically,' *New Literary History: A Journal of Theory & Interpretation*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2007. Bortolotti and Hutcheon discuss first the second-class status of adaptations, and then propose a 'homology between biological and cultural adaptation. By homology we mean a similarity in structure that is indicative of a common origin: that is, both kinds of adaptation are understandable as processes of replication. Stories, in a manner parallel to genes, replicate; the adaptations of both evolve with changing environments. Our hope is that biological thinking may help move us beyond the theoretical impasses in narrative adaptation studies represented by the continuing dominance of what is usually referred to as "fidelity discourse"' (444). Fidelity discourse tends to 'judge an adaptation's "success" only in relation to its faithfulness or closeness to the "original" or "source" text threatens to reinforce the current low estimation of cultural capital) of what is, in fact, a common and persistent way humans have always told and retold stories'. Biology, on the other hand 'does not judge adaptations in terms of fidelity to the "original"; indeed, that is not the point at all. Biology can celebrate the diversity of life forms, yet at the same time recognise that they come from a common origin' (445). In this way, the Dickens novels Tarrt borrows pieces from are 'ancestors' of the a wholly original novel called *The Goldfinch* rather than a source. Also, in

the novel, the antique furniture created by Hobie are not 'copies' of 'originals' so much as new forms with a variety of ancestors.

<sup>7</sup> *The Fluid Text: A Theory of Revision and Editing for Book and Screen*. Michigan UP, 2002, p. 62.

<sup>8</sup> As an example of how the book uses nostalgia before the fact, consider this. Just before the explosion that kills his mother, when Theo sees red-haired Pippa; she is the proximate reason for his not following his mother (to her death). She also is an occasion to contemplate a shared movie-watching memory with his mother and an excuse to think about a famous passage on future regret from *Citizen Kane*. The famous 'red-haired girl' anecdote: 'Someday too I might be like the old man in the movie, leaning back in my chair with a far-off look in my eyes, and saying: "You know, that was sixty years ago, and I never saw that girl with the red hair again, but you know what? Not a month has gone by in all that time when I haven't thought of her,"' Theo remembers the elderly character Mr Bernstein in *Citizen Kane* saying (37). Then, boom. The explosion distracts the reader from how it odd it is for a little boy to be casting himself forward 60 years the way an old man casts himself 60 years back in a 60-year-old movie.

<sup>9</sup> Like melodrama, Dickens's use of pathos has famously gotten a bad name. But reclamation of both have been underway for a while, since melodrama often produces pathos. See the following for the work done on reclaiming 'Melodrama': Carolyn Williams' 'Melodrama.' *The Cambridge History of Victorian Literature*, edited by Kate Flint. Cambridge UP, 2012, pp. 193–219. *The New Cambridge History of English Literature*; Peter Brooks's *The Melodramatic Imagination*. Yale UP, 1996; Tracy C. Davis's *Theatricality*. Cambridge UP, 2003, pp. 1–39.

<sup>10</sup> Famously, Robert Garis, who writes of the 'Dickens Theater', sees theatricality as a sign of the failure of genuine emotion, respect for the 'inner life' of his characters, or genuine connection between text and reader. The connection, he says, is frustrated by the interposition of the narrator or 'artificer'. Garis cites the opening of *Little Dorrit* and concludes 'The prose is thick with artifice, which actually forces itself into our consciousness. Nor is there the slightest suggestion of an attempt to hide the presence of the artificer' (8). But John Glavin draws the opposite conclusion about theatricality, seeing it as a conduit of emotion (24, 31), and I am following Glavin here, where comedy and even the Garis 'artificer' is a means of connection with the audience.

<sup>11</sup> See for example *Humor: A Reader for Writers*, by Kathleen Volk-Miller and Marion Wrenn (Oxford UP, 2014); *The Cambridge Introduction to Comedy* by Eric Weitz (Cambridge UP, 2009); *Comedy in the New Critical Idiom Series*, by Andrew Stott (Routledge, 2015); *Comedy: A Very Short Introduction* by Matthew Bevis (Oxford UP, 2013) and from Bloomsbury an ongoing project: a six-volume *Cultural History of Comedy*, edited by Andrew Stott. Still, serious novelists like Jonathan Franzen might say that he 'thinks of himself as a comic novelist' and tries to be funny on every page, but he is not reviewed that way, as if critics need serious novelists to be serious. 'Fresh



Air with Terry Gross.' Interview. 'Jonathan Franzen, on Writing: It's an Escape from Everything' NPR. 1 Sep. 2015. <https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=436442184>. Accessed 20 Nov. 2019.

- <sup>12</sup> Edwin Eigner makes a parallel point about how sentimentality, like melodrama, pathos, and – I would add – comedy, has come to be viewed suspiciously – all seeming to be the enemy of sincerity. He begins by quoting Fred Kaplan, who writes, “the notion of sentimentality as insincerity, as false feeling, even as hypocrisy,” is a modern prejudice ... and that “throughout the eighteenth-century and through much of the nineteenth, neither word [sentimental or sentimentality] had pejorative implication, except in special cases.” Sentimentality, [Kaplan] explains was a thoroughly respectable emotion, sanctified by such important eighteenth-century moral philosophers as Adam Smith and David Hume, both of whom “believed that an access of feeling cannot be an excess of feeling...” Dickens, who inherited this belief from Goldsmith and others, never doubted the sincerity of sentimentalism.’ (Eigner 38; Kaplan 17, 19–20).
- <sup>13</sup> Playwright and filmmaker Kenneth Lonergan talks about how the comedy in his plays and films heightens the tragedy – and the intermingling reflects life. ‘I’ve never seen there being a tremendous dividing line between comedy and tragedy,’ Lonergan said at a question-and-answer session after *Manchester by the Sea* at the New York Film Festival, in October 2016. ‘Even if it’s the worst of the worst, it’s not happening to everyone. It might just be happening to you, or to someone you know, while the rest of the world is going on doing things that are beautiful, or funny, or material, or practical’ (Mead, Rebecca. *New Yorker*, 7 Nov. 2016).
- <sup>14</sup> Thomas Leitch might call these recombinative ‘changelings’ ‘homages’ to the originals rather than copies or, borrowing from Kamilla Elliott, ‘de(re) compositions’ – where the new adaptations are ‘composites’ based on the ‘de(re)composing concept’ in which ‘film and novel decompose, merge, and form a new composition’ of the material and new added elements’ (103).
- <sup>15</sup> Horst himself is something of a ‘changeling’: an assemblage of various 1940s Hollywood *mitteleuropean* heavies (maybe Peter Lorrie, or nearly the entire supporting cast of *The Third Man*). Tartt uses the old-fashioned descriptive shorthand mentioned earlier: ‘With his ripped jeans and combat boots, he was like a scuffed up version of some below-the-title Hollywood character actor from the 1940s, some minor *mittel-europäischer* known for playing tragic violinists and weary cultivated refugees’ (716).
- <sup>16</sup> The notion of ‘changeling’ is explained here: ‘Hobie had been making these cannibalized and heavily altered pieces (“changelings” as he called them) for virtually his whole working life... I had admired Hobie’s changelings for years and had even helped work on some of them, but it was the shock of being fooled by these previously unseen pieces that (to employ a favored phrase of Hobie’s) filled me with a wild surmise. Every so often there passed through the shop a piece of museum quality too damaged or broken to save; for Hobie, who sorrowed over these elegant old remnants as if they were

unfed children or mistreated cats, it was a point of duty to rescue what he could (a pair of finials here, a set of finely turned legs there) and then with his gifts as carpenter and joiner to recombine them into beautiful young Frankensteins that were in some cases plainly fanciful but in others such faithful models of the period that they were all but indistinguishable from the real thing.' (561)

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