Celebrations in Victorian Literature

According to the *Collins Cobuild Dictionary*, a celebration is "a special enjoyable event that people organise because something pleasant has happened, or because it is someone's birthday, or it is an anniversary." The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* focuses on slightly different aspects when the entry "to celebrate" reads "to do something *to show* that a day or an event is important, or an occasion for rejoicing" (emphasis added). The common denominator of both definitions is that of "rejoicing," "pleasant" moments, and enjoyment. Therefore, some types of celebrations — namely weddings or wedding anniversaries, birthdays, Christmas, etc. — are an occasion for merrymaking, gatherings, socialising, and communal "rejoicing." Moreover, celebrations are very often commemorations, as in the case of anniversaries, or mass for instance. Celebrations are part of every day life, but have a symbolic role, as the *Oxford Dictionary* stresses. It is a question of "showing," hence the highly representational status of celebrations which can be also regarded as a set of forms used in a social, communal context. Celebrations and ceremonies are supposed to proclaim the existence of order, or to re-establish it, and to symbolise stability by their periodical recurrence. They are also meant to absorb, integrate, channel and/or eradicate disorder and chaos, as in the case of carnivals. Even commemorative celebrations for the dead suggest the victory of meaning over nothingness and emptiness, and belong to the field of the sacred.

There are close links between the terms "festival," "celebration," and "party," all three possible translations for the French "fête," so that the word "celebration" will be taken in its wider sense. Moreover music and disguise, or at least specific clothes, are common enough ingredients, usually invested with rich meaning in literature.

But whereas, more often than not, celebrations are synonymous with gaiety in real life, they have more paradoxical or ambiguous qualities in novels. Nowhere as strongly as in literature is the sense of precarious equilibrium so acutely felt, and the intimation of impending disaster so ubiquitous. Actually, celebrations sometimes give us the feeling of a momentary lull before the storm. Cheerfulness, and a sense of fraternity and communal rejoicing are not necessarily absent but fictional celebrations are borderline moments when the balance between order and disorder is bound to be shortly tipped, and when happiness is at its height and cannot but decrease, or come to an end. Resting my analysis on W. D. Howells's *Indian Summer*, Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*, George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, I would like to show that literary celebrations present only short-lived and apparent harmony; at bottom, more or less explicitly, they are moments of disruption and breaking points.

Many literary scenes staging celebrations are both highly symbolic and proleptic. They constitute deeply meaningful nuclei epitomising the major future developments of the novel, as in the case of *Indian Summer*, published in the United States in 1885, whose action, located in Italy, is characterised by the very festive atmosphere of the Carnival celebrations. In fact, dancing, public merry-making, balls and parties form the dramatic and psychological base of the book, from Chapter eight onwards, but although there seems to prevail a very cheerful Carnival mood, the characters actually go through a bitter-sweet experience, that could be called a comedy of errors — a rather dark one at times:

> The first of the Carnival sights, that marked the lapse of a month since his arrival, took Colville by surprise . . . [This] stirred [his] blood a little, as any sort of holiday preparation was apt to do (Howells VIII, 669).

> In the *Por San Maria*, Colville found masks and dominoes filling the shop windows and dangling from the doors. A devil in red and a clown in white crossed the way in front of him from an intersecting street; several children in pretty masquerading dresses flashed in and out among the crowd. He hurried to the Lung' Arno, and reached the pal-

> ace where Mrs Bowen lived with these holiday sights fresh in his mind. Imogene turned to meet him at the door of the apartment (VIII, 677).

All the necessary elements required for the plot to build up are concentrated in these few lines: the presence of disguise and appearances connoting illusions (masks and dominoes), the theme of lost/recaptured youth (children), the presence of two women (Mrs Bowen/Imogene), and the symbolic contrast of red and white (evil, passion/good, purity), associated with the words "devil," and "clown." Indeed, because of his sentimental shilly-shallying about the two women, Colville, going through a mid-life crisis, intoxicated by the Carnival festivities, and vainly trying to make up for his lost youth by courting Imogene, twenty years his junior, loses his way and makes a fool of himself. This is what the devil and the clown seem to suggest. Chapter IX represents a symbolic and dramatic climax in the novel: it stages the "Veglione" (a fancy-dress masked ball) when Colville misguidedly and half-heartedly declares his love to Imogene. Failure seems inevitable — as it also was seventeen years ago — in such a context, as the Veglione is synonymous with appearances, disguise, hence probably illusions, and possibly insincerity:

> he remembered the Veglione of seventeen years before, when he had dreamed through the waltz with the girl who jilted him . . . he believed afterwards that if he had spoken frankly then, she would not have refused him. But he had veiled his passion in words and phrases that, taken in themselves, had no meaning (IX, 692-93).

Moreover, the preparations for the Carnival ball are a turning-point. Colville's inability to tell Mrs Bowen from Imogene, plausible though it is literally, must inevitably be read as emblematic of his hesitation between them throughout the rest of the novel:

> "Which is which?" the ladies both challenged him, in the mask's conventional falsetto, when they came out.
> With a man's severe logic he distinguished them according to their silks; but there had been time for them to think of changing, and they took off their masks to laugh in his face.
> .....

> "Ah, you'll never be so fascinating again!" he cried. He wanted to take them in his arms, they were both so delicious (IX, 686).

Indian Summer gives us one of the "softest" versions of celebrations and their fictional functions. Chapter 10 stages Rachel's birthday dinner-party in *The Moonstone* and includes all the key elements and themes of the whole novel. As in the case of Chapters VIII and IX in *Indian Summer*, it epitomises many of the events to come, and it has both a symbolic and a proleptic role. Furthermore, it is one of the rare instances of celebrations during which everything not only goes quite wrong, but is *explicitly* shown as going wrong:

> Looking back at the birthday now, by the light of what happened afterwards, I am half inclined to think that the cursed diamond must have cast a blight on the whole company. I plied them well with wine . . . but all to no purpose. There were gaps of silence in the talk, as the dinner got on, that made me feel personally uncomfortable. When they did use their tongues again, they used them innocently, in the most unfortunate manner and to the worst possible purpose. Mr Candy, the doctor, for instance, said more unlucky things than I ever knew him to say before (Collins X, 101-02).

> But talk as [Franklin] might, nine times out of ten he pitched on the wrong subject, or he addressed himself to the wrong person; the end of it being that he offended some, and puzzled all of them . . . He not only terrified the company . . . but . . . getting on the subject of the medical profession, said such downright things in ridicule of doctors, that he actually put good-humoured little Mr Candy in a rage (104).

> . . . my lady was obliged to interfere, and forbid the dispute to go on. This necessary act of authority put the last extinguisher on the spirits of the company. The talk spurted up again, here and there, for a minute or two at a time; but there was a miserable lack of life and sparkle in it. The Devil (or the Diamond) possessed that dinner-party (105).

The prevailing mood of that evening is one of discord and of constraint, which prefigures the split within the Verinders' household after the theft of the Moonstone, lamented by Franklin himself: "'When I came here from London with that horrible Diamond,' he said, 'I don't believe there was a happier household in England than this. Look at the household now! Scattered, disunited — the very air of the place

poisoned with mystery and suspicion!'" (I, 23, 223). The character of Dr Candy himself can be regarded as a cluster of themes and meaning. He utters his first "unfortunate," yet highly divinatory remark, when he asks Rachel to let him take her diamond to his house and burn it "in the interests of science:" "we evaporate the diamond, and spare you a world of anxiety about the safe keeping of a valuable stone!" (100). This very obviously (provided we are not reading the book for the first time!) foreshadows the theft of the gem, thereby preparing us for the criminal motif. Moreover, the fact this "pleasant, companionable little man" appears to be "too fond, in season and out of season, of his joke" (100) is particularly relevant to the following chapters, as his practical joke on Franklin triggers off the catastrophe, and the investigation. His tendency to blunder is also evidenced in the bitterly funny misunderstanding between him and the widowed Mrs Threadgall, one of the guests, when the incongruous topic of anatomy and skeletons is broached during the dinner, and Doctor Candy tells her Professor Threadgall should "pay a visit" to the "remarkably fine skeletons" of the College of Surgeons! This remark indirectly introduces the medical theme of the book, also heralding Dr Jennings's research, role, and his "hideous" surgery with a skull at the top of the bookcase "in place of the customary bust" (II, Third Narrative, 10, 432). It also ominously announces the presence of disease and death in the novel, with the disappearances of Rosanna Spearman, Lady Verinder, Ezra Jennings, and Godfrey Ablewhite, not to mention Dr Candy's long and mysterious fever. More generally, the light and darkness motive — used in the novel both metaphorically and symbolically, at plot and at character levels — is also distinctly present in the chapter. Indeed, when Franklin irritatingly accuses doctors of having patients "grope in the dark," using the image of "the blind leading the blind" (105), the reader retrospectively comes to realise how apt a representation of his own future predicament Franklin is unconsciously and ironically giving. Chapter 10, and the beginning of Chapter 11 hold the keys to the whole mystery. But the prevailing comic and humorous tone and mood act as red herrings, diverting our attention from key elements and significant facts.

Chapter 6 in *Daniel Deronda* is also a proleptic and symbolic cluster in which all the key elements and themes of the novel are

concentrated. The party at Offendene during the merry Christmas period stages a very uncanny occurrence, when people from the neighbourhood are invited to watch some charades and *tableaux vivants* performed by Gwendolen Harleth, her cousins Anna and Rex, and a few others:

> Everything indeed went off smoothly and according to expectation . . . until the incident occurred which showed Gwendolen in an unforeseen phase of emotion . . . the movable panel, which was on a line with the piano, flew open . . . and disclosed the picture of the dead face and the fleeing figure, brought out in pale definiteness by the position of the wax lights. Everyone was startled, but all eyes . . . were recalled by a piercing cry from Gwendolen . . . She looked like a statue into which a soul of Fear had entered (6, 91).

This scene is doubly interesting, as a miniature image of the novel, in that it rests on drama (Gwendolen's concern until Chapter 31 is to become as talented an actress as Rachel, the great French tragedienne), and on the clash between the glamour and excitement of life seen as a game and a stage, and its grim actualities. Besides, here, the heroine is ironically more convincing when she is not acting, just as she will become pitiable and human once she has experienced suffering and sorrow. Drama is therefore also used metaphorically as "the narrow theatre which life offers to a girl of twenty" (6, 94). Moreover, the dead face that terrifies her so much, is initially an existing painting first discovered by Gwendolen when the family have just moved into Offendene in Chapter 3: "The opened panel had disclosed the picture of an upturned dead face, from which an obscure figure seemed to be fleeing with outstretched arms . . . Gwendolen shuddered silently" (56). Then the painting and the face gradually go through a surprising metamorphosis. Their frightening and seemingly incongruous reappearance during the party in Chapter 6 is meant to symbolise first Gwendolen's strange foreboding and irrational fears — as if she could sense dark things to come — then to prefigure her wrongdoing and her punishment. The fleeing figure is disturbingly evocative of someone trying to escape his/her fate, so that the "celebration" of Chapter 6 is a proleptic picture of the tragedy to come. In Chapter 54, the dead face clearly represents Gwendolen's hate and repressed murderous impulses towards Grandcourt; then, after his getting drowned, the face can no

longer be distinguished from the dead man's. Its haunting presence becomes a symbol of Gwendolen's tormenting feeling of guilt:

> . . . her vision of what she had to dread took more decidedly than ever the form of some fiercely impulsive deed, committed as in a dream . . . to find death under her hands, but instead of darkness, daylight; instead of satisfied hatred, the dismay of guilt . . . a white dead face from which she was for ever trying to flee and for ever held back (54, 737-38).

> Sometimes I thought that he would kill me if I resisted his will. But now — his dead face is there, and I cannot bear it (56, 758).

The wedding celebration in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* also deserves to be mentioned because it is not only proleptic but, as in Eliot's novel, it features a sinister, obsessive element, namely the coach (Hardy). Both the description of the vehicle (oddly reminiscent of a trap or a prison, and an instrument of torture), and Tess's strange oppression on her wedding day strike the reader as ominous. The postilion's wound provides an oblique parallel with Tess's past misfortune — as the victim of Alec, a sham aristocrat — and her future ordeal and death — as a prisoner of the inescapable atavistic d'Urberville heritage:

> The church was a long way off . . . A close carriage was ordered from a roadside inn, a vehicle which had been kept there ever since the old days of post-chaise travelling. It had . . . immense straps and springs, and a pole like a battering-ram. The postilion was a venerable "boy" of sixty . . . He had a permanent running wound on the outside of his right leg, originated by the constant bruisings of aristocratic carriage-poles during the many years that he had been in regular employ at the King's Arms, Casterbridge. . . . Inside this cumbrous and creaking structure, and behind this decayed conductor, the *partie carrée* took their seats (Phase the Fourth, 33, 205).

> A certain d'Urberville of the sixteenth or seventeenth century committed a dreadful crime in his family coach; and since that time members of the family see or hear the old coach whenever — But I'll tell you another day — it is rather gloomy (207).

The carriage, the curse and the legend, are ironically evoked for the first time by Angel Clare in Chapter 26 (160), then by Alec

d'Urberville himself in Chapter 51 when *he* of all men reveals the real meaning of the legend to Tess: "'One of the family is said to have abducted some beautiful woman, who tried to escape from the coach in which he was carrying her off, and in the struggle he killed her — or she killed him — I forget which'" (Phase the Sixth, 344).

But the representations of disturbances during celebrations, emblematic though they are in *The Moonstone*, *Daniel Deronda*, or *Tess*, are not always so unmediated. They sometimes consist in a series of "filigree" allusions, of undertones, veiled proleptic elements, seemingly insignificant clues, implicit warnings, oblique intimations. What is foreshadowed is not necessarily death, though it is frequently the case. The point can be borne out by Chapter 31 in *Daniel Deronda* where the bride's and bridegroom's extreme pallor are both in keeping with their personalities and usual appearances, but can also be perceived as symbols of emotional frigidity, and foreshadowings of death: ". . . it might be thought that a title required something more rosy; but the bridegroom himself not being fresh-coloured . . . the match was the more complete" (400).

The May-Day dance in *Tess* offers particularly rich visual and colour symbolism:

> Its singularity lay less in the retention of a custom of walking in procession and dancing on each anniversary than in the members being solely women.
>
> .....
>
> The banded ones were all dressed in white gowns — a gay survival from Old Style days, when cheerfulness and May-time were synonyms . . . though the whole troop wore white garments, no two whites were alike among them. Some approached pure blanching; some had a bluish pallor; some . . . inclined to a cadaverous tint, and to a Georgian style (2, 7).

The emphasis on the past, and the unexpected death imagery (that almost passes unnoticed on a first reading), show that the end is already inscribed in the beginning, and Tess's destiny and life are already mapped out. It is no coincidence that these elements should be

present within the virginal spring celebration. The fact Tess is the only one among the group wearing "a red ribbon in her hair," and has a "peony mouth" (8), also described as a "deep red mouth" (9) singles her out as a "scarlet woman." The colour red also being that of blood and prefiguring both her seduction by Alec and the murder in Chapter 56 in which the same juxtaposition of red and white can be observed:

> [Mrs Brook's] eyes glanced casually over the ceiling till they were arrested by a spot in the middle of its white surface . . . it speedily grew as large as the palm of her hand, and then she could perceive that it was red. The oblong white ceiling, with this scarlet blot in the midst, had the appearance of a gigantic ace of hearts (372).

Indeed, Angel Clare's regrets, when from a distance he watches Tess whose "white shape stood apart by the hedge alone" (12) — probably a symbol of her different personality and destiny — and wishes he had chosen her instead of dancing with another girl, are so insistent and are given so much prominence that they seem to represent a warning that everything is already too late, and the tragic chain of events has already started :"She was so modest, so expressive, she had looked so soft in her thin white gown that he felt he had acted stupidly" (12). Angel's regrets are echoed by Tess's, reminding us of the May Day dance episode twenty-eight chapters and many months later, and by her foreboding, too, as she is about to marry him: "'you would not dance with me. O, I hope that is of no ill-omen for us now!'" (Phase the Fourth, 30, 184) "'Why didn't you stay and love me when I — was sixteen; living with my little sisters and brothers, and you danced on the green?'" (31, 189).

Tess's fears work forward and backward, concerning both the past and the future. After the May dance (the first stage in her tragedy), the novel presents another type of celebration in Chapter 10 that appears as directly responsible for Tess becoming more inextricably entangled in the tragic meshes of life: "there came a Saturday in September, on which a fair and a market coincided; and the pilgrims from Trantridge sought double delights at the inns on that account" (57). As the result of too much "celebrating" and drinking, a violent argument breaks out between Tess — the only sober person in the group — and the "Queen

of Spades," supported by the "Queen of Diamonds," leading to the heroine literally falling into Alec d'Urberville's arms in Chapter 11, at the end of Phase the First, entitled "The Maiden."

From all points of view, above all emotionally, dramatically, and symbolically or imagistically, celebrations are moments of high and/or painful tension, whose ambiguous status is illustrated, at its extreme, by Edgar Allan Poe's "Thou Art the Man," which is a good example to show that disturbances during celebrations are sometimes represented in a directly intelligible way, in the shape of unexpectedly violent and frightening events. Poe's short story also illustrates what could be called the "sudden looming up of the skeleton in the middle of the banquet." The ironically named Mr Goodfellow, although he had "given over all expectation of ever receiving the promised Château-Margaux" as his friend Mr Shuttleworthy died before being able to keep this promise, receives a letter from the wine merchants telling him about the oncoming arrival of the claret:

> . . . and he, therefore looked upon it *now* as a sort of especial dispensation of Providence in his behalf. He was highly delighted, of course, and in the exuberance of his joy invited a large party of friends to a *petit souper* on the morrow, for the purpose of broaching the good old Mr Shuttleworthy's present. . . . The morrow at length arrived, and with it a very large and highly respectable company . . . but, much to the vexation of the host, the Château-Margaux did not arrive until a late hour, and when the sumptuous supper supplied by "Old Charley" had been done very ample justice by the guests (Poe 481).

The "monstrously big" box is lifted onto the table to be "disembowelled." The ironically macabre imagery is used unwittingly by the murderer himself who calls the process of opening the box "disinterring the treasure;" all this sounds rather incongruous in a festive context, but actually paves the way for the horrible *coup de théâtre*:

> . . . the top of the box flew suddenly off, and, at the same instant, there sprang up into a sitting position, directly facing the host, the bruised, bloody, and nearly putrid corpse of the murdered Mr Shuttleworthy himself. It gazed for a few moments, fixedly and sorrowfully, with its

> decaying and lack-lustre eyes, full into the countenance of Mr Good-fellow; uttered slowly, but clearly and impressively, the words — "Thou art the man!" 482).

The public disclosure of his sinful act directly leads to the shame, confession, and death of the murderer. Of course, the ambiguous status of celebrations pre-existed to the Victorian period, and is one of the distinctive features of the banquets in *Hamlet*, or in Tirso de Molina's or Molière's *Don Juan*; the presence of the avenging stone guest shows the haunting persistence of death within life, or the interpenetration between Eros and Thanatos. Drinking wine from a skull could also aptly represent the essence of celebrations. Their paradoxical quality outlived the end of the Victorian period. The gaunt, sniggering entertainer-cum-musician performing to the greatest enjoyment of the Hôtel des Bains guests, in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912) turns out to be a disturbingly grotesque embodiment of death. Could we not read or interpret all this as evidence that post mediaeval and Victorian literature transformed the traditionally religious notion of the vanity of human existence, and transferred it to the field of celebrations, thereby giving them a dark, gloomy side, and changing them into secularised, latter-day versions of the "*memento mori*?"

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