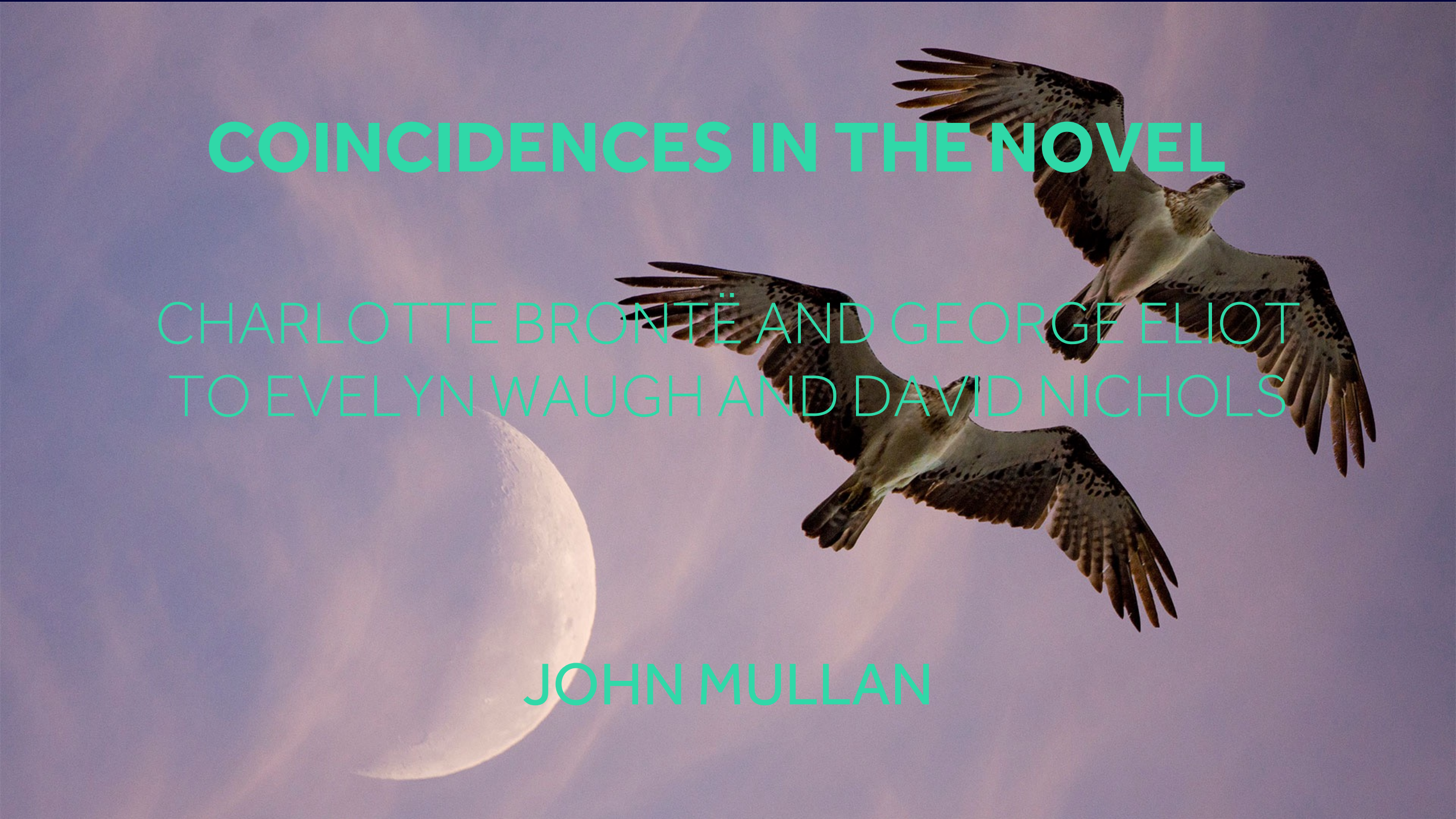
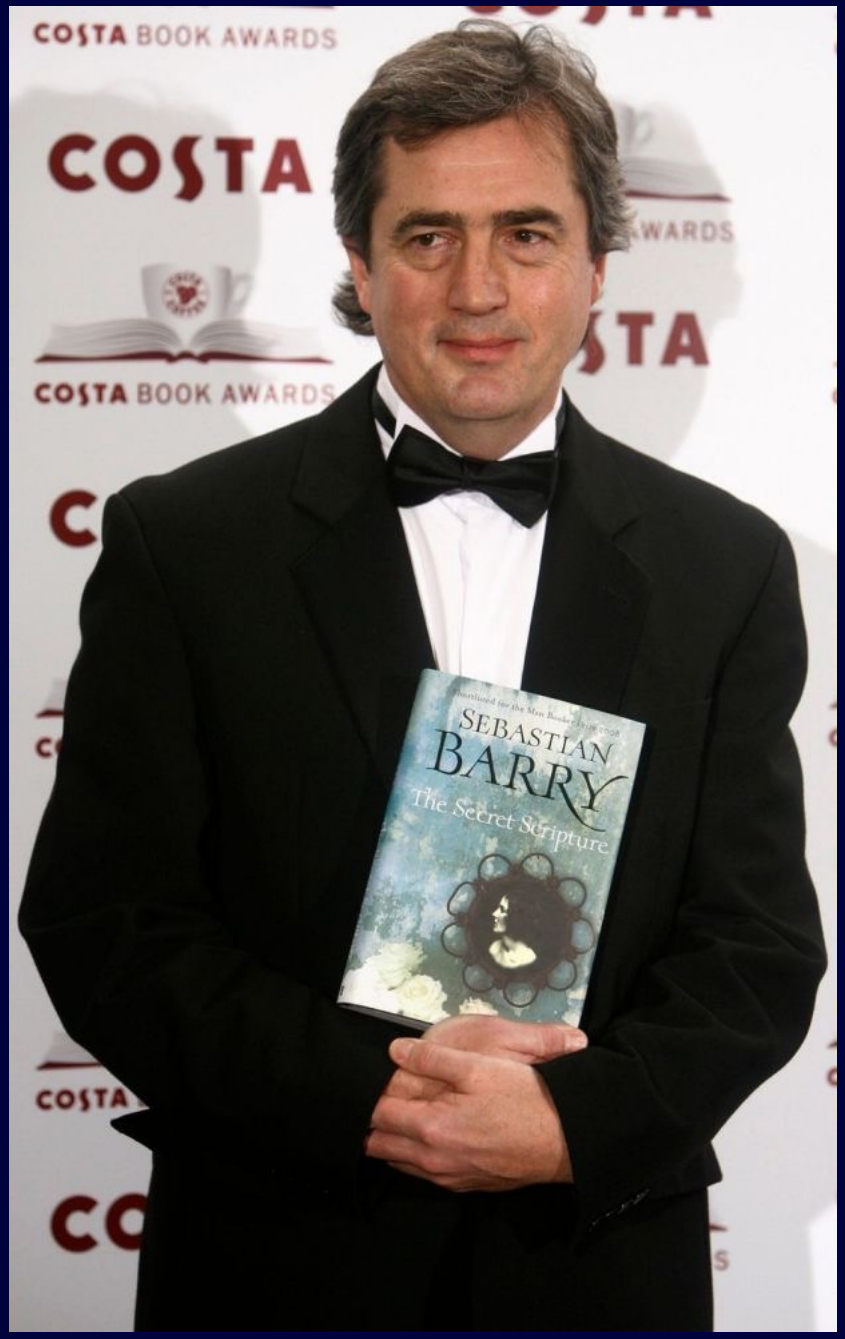
COINCIDENCES IN THE NOVEL

CHARLOTTE BRONTË AND GEORGE ELIOT TO EVELYN WAUGH AND DAVID NICHOLS



JOHN MULLAN


COSTA BOOK AWARDS
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SEBASTIAN
BARRY
The Secret Scripture

The novelist Sebastian Barry was named the winner of the Costa Book of the Year award last night in spite of writing a novel that was, according to the judges "flawed in many ways". …

Matthew Parris, the columnist and chair of the judges, said the competition between Barry and Adam Foulds, who nearly claimed the prize for his poetic works, *The Broken Word*, was "extraordinarily close". Parris said the judges agreed to give the prize to Barry's book despite its less than perfect ending.

"It was an extraordinarily close finish among the judges," said Parris. "There was huge support for both. The feeling among judges was that there was a lot wrong with it [*The Secret Scripture*]. It was flawed in many ways, almost no one liked its ending. For some, this was fatal. I don't think the ending works, no-body thought the ending worked. But there was a feeling among the judges that many great works of literature are also flawed."

The Independent, January 28, 2009

A cold silvery mist had veiled the afternoon, and the moon was not yet up to scatter it. But, the stars were shining beyond the mist, and the moon was coming, and the evening was not dark. I could trace out where every part of the old house had been, and where the brewery had been, and where the gates, and where the casks. I had done so, and was looking along the desolate garden walk, when I beheld a solitary figure in it.

The figure showed itself aware of me, as I advanced. It had been moving towards me, but it stood still. As I drew nearer, I saw it to be the figure of a woman. As I drew nearer yet, it was about to turn away, when it stopped, and let me come up with it. Then, it faltered, as if much surprised, and uttered my name, and I cried out,—

"Estella!"

Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (1860-1), Ch. LIX

We sat down on a bench that was near, and I said, “After so many years, it is strange that we should thus meet again, Estella, here where our first meeting was! Do you often come back?”

“I have never been here since.”

“Nor I.”

Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, Ch. LIX

"I agree with you that the coincidence is extraordinary—the sort of thing that happens mainly in novels and plays. But I don't see, you must let me say, the importance or the connexion—"

"Of my having made the purchase where you failed of it?" She had quickly taken him up; but she had, with her eyes on him once more, another drop into the order of her thoughts, to which, through whatever he might say, she was still adhering. "It's not my having gone into the place, at the end of four years, that makes the strangeness of the coincidence; for don't such chances as that, in London, easily occur? "

Henry James, *The Golden Bowl* (1904), XXXIV

"You are not, perhaps, aware that I am your namesake?—that I was christened St. John Eyre Rivers?"

"No, indeed! I remember now seeing the letter E. comprised in your initials written in books you have at different times lent me; but I never asked for what name it stood. But what then? Surely—"

I stopped: I could not trust myself to entertain, much less to express, the thought that rushed upon me—that embodied itself,—that, in a second, stood out a strong, solid probability. Circumstances knit themselves, fitted themselves, shot into order: the chain that had been lying hitherto a formless lump of links was drawn out straight,—every ring was perfect, the connection complete. I knew, by instinct, how the matter stood, before St. John had said another word; but I cannot expect the reader to have the same intuitive perception, so I must repeat his explanation.

Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1847), Vol. III, Ch. VII

Reader, it was on Monday night—near midnight—that I too had received the mysterious summons: those were the very words by which I replied to it. I listened to Mr. Rochester's narrative, but made no disclosure in return. The coincidence struck me as too awful and inexplicable to be communicated or discussed. If I told anything, my tale would be such as must necessarily make a profound impression on the mind of my hearer: and that mind, yet from its sufferings too prone to gloom, needed not the deeper shade of the supernatural. I kept these things then, and pondered them in my heart.

Jane Eyre, Vol. III, Ch. XI

Presentiments are strange things! and so are sympathies; and so are signs; and the three combined make one mystery to which humanity has not yet found the key. I never laughed at presentiments in my life, because I have had strange ones of my own. Sympathies, I believe, exist (for instance, between far-distant, long-absent, wholly estranged relatives asserting, notwithstanding their alienation, the unity of the source to which each traces his origin) whose workings baffle mortal comprehension. And signs, for aught we know, may be but the sympathies of Nature with man.

Jane Eyre Vol. II, Ch. VI

He jerked forward the flask and Rigg went to a fine old oaken bureau with his keys. But Raffles had reminded himself by his movement with the flask that it had become dangerously loose from its leather covering, and catching sight of a folded paper which had fallen within the fender, he took it up and shoved it under the leather so as to make the glass firm. ….

He played this part now with as much spirit as if his journey had been entirely successful, resorting at frequent intervals to his flask. The paper with which he had wedged it was a letter signed *Nicholas Bulstrode*, but Raffles was not likely to disturb it from its present useful position.

George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (1871-2), Ch. XLI

"I did not indeed expect to see you in this remote country place."

"Well, it belongs to a stepson of mine," said Raffles, adjusting himself in a swaggering attitude. "I came to see him here before. I'm not so surprised at seeing you, old fellow, because I picked up a letter—what you may call a providential thing. It's uncommonly fortunate I met you, though; for I don't care about seeing my stepson: he's not affectionate, and his poor mother's gone now. To tell the truth, I came out of love to you, Nick: I came to get your address, for—look here!" Raffles drew a crumpled paper from his pocket.

Middlemarch, Ch. LIII

"She's overtired," Margaret whispered.

"She's something else," said Henry. "This won't do. I can't have her in my garden in this state."

"Is she—" Margaret hesitated to add "drunk." Now that she was going to marry him, he had grown particular. He discountenanced risque conversations now.

Henry went up to the woman. She raised her face, which gleamed in the twilight like a puff-ball.

"Madam, you will be more comfortable at the hotel," he said sharply.

Jacky replied: "If it isn't Hen!"

"Ne crois pas que le mari lui ressemble," apologised Margaret. "Il est tout à fait différent."

"Henry!" she repeated, quite distinctly.

Mr. Wilcox was much annoyed. "I congratulate you on your proteges," he remarked.

"Hen, don't go. You do love me, dear, don't you?"

E.M. Forster, *Howards End* (1910), Ch. XXVI

Margaret began to grow frightened. “I don’t know what it is all about,” she said. “Let’s come in.”

But he thought she was acting. He thought he was trapped. He saw his whole life crumbling. “Don’t you indeed?” he said bitingly. “I do. Allow me to congratulate you on the success of your plan.”

“This is Helen’s plan, not mine.”

“I now understand your interest in the Basts. Very well thought out. I am amused at your caution, Margaret. You are quite right—it was necessary. I am a man, and have lived a man’s past. I have the honour to release you from your engagement.”

Still she could not understand. She knew of life’s seamy side as a theory; she could not grasp it as a fact. More words from Jacky were necessary—words unequivocal, undenied.

E.M. Forster, *Howards End* Ch. XXVI

‘And a very well-spoken, genteel, shrewd lady, she seemed to be,’ continued he; ‘asked more questions about the house, and terms, and taxes, than the Admiral himself, and seemed more conversant with business; and moreover, Sir Walter, I found she was not quite unconnected in this country, any more than her husband; that is to say, she is sister to a gentleman who did live amongst us once; she told me so herself: sister to the gentleman who lived a few years back at Monkford. Bless me! what was his name? At this moment I cannot recollect his name, though I have heard it so lately. Penelope, my dear, can you help me to the name of the gentleman who lived at Monkford: Mrs Croft’s brother?’

But Mrs Clay was talking so eagerly with Miss Elliot, that she did not hear the appeal.

Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (1818), I Ch. III

The reader may please to recollect that Mr Wilson had intended a journey to the west, in which he was to pass through Mr Adams's parish, and had promised to call on him. … Mr Adams had no sooner mentioned the discovery of a stolen child, and had uttered the word strawberry, than Mr Wilson, with wildness in his looks, and the utmost eagerness in his words, begged to be shewed into the room, … Joseph complied with the request of Mr Wilson, who no sooner saw the mark than, abandoning himself to the most extravagant rapture of passion, he embraced Joseph with inexpressible ecstasy, and cried out in tears of joy, "I have discovered my son, I have him again in my arms!"

Henry Fielding, *Joseph Andrews* (1742), Bk. IV Ch. XV

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Monday Morning

MONDAY 15 JULY 2002

Belsize Park

The radio alarm sounds as usual at 07.05. It is already bright and clear outside, but neither of them move just yet

David Nicholls, *One Day* (2009)

She philosophically noted dates as they came past in the revolution of the year; the disastrous night of her undoing at Trantridge with its dark background of The Chase; also the dates of the baby's birth and death; also her own birthday; and every other day individualized by incidents in which she had taken some share. She suddenly thought one afternoon, when looking in the glass at her fairness, that there was yet another date, of greater importance to her than those; that of her own death, when all these charms would have disappeared; a day which lay sly and unseen among all the other days of the year, giving no sign or sound when she annually passed over it; but not the less surely there.

Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), Ch. XV

“ … For your own sake I rejoice in your descent. Society is hopelessly snobbish, and this fact of your extraction may make an appreciable difference to its acceptance of you as my wife, after I have made you the well-read woman that I mean to make you. My mother too, poor soul, will think so much better of you on account of it. Tess, you must spell your name correctly—d’Urberville—from this very day.”

“I like the other way rather best.”

“But you *must*, dearest! Good heavens, why dozens of mushroom millionaires would jump at such a possession! By the bye, there’s one of that kidney who has taken the name—where have I heard of him?—Up in the neighbourhood of The Chase, I think. Why, he is the very man who had that rumpus with my father I told you of. What an odd coincidence!”

“Angel, I think I would rather not take the name! It is unlucky, perhaps!”

She was agitated.

Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, Ch. XXX

On the coincidences, resemblances and surprises of life Dickens liked especially to dwell, and few things moved his fancy so pleasantly. The world, he would say, was so much smaller than we thought it; we were all so connected by fate without knowing it; people supposed to be far apart were so constantly elbowing each other; and tomorrow bore so close a resemblance to nothing half so much as to yesterday.

John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens* (1872-4)

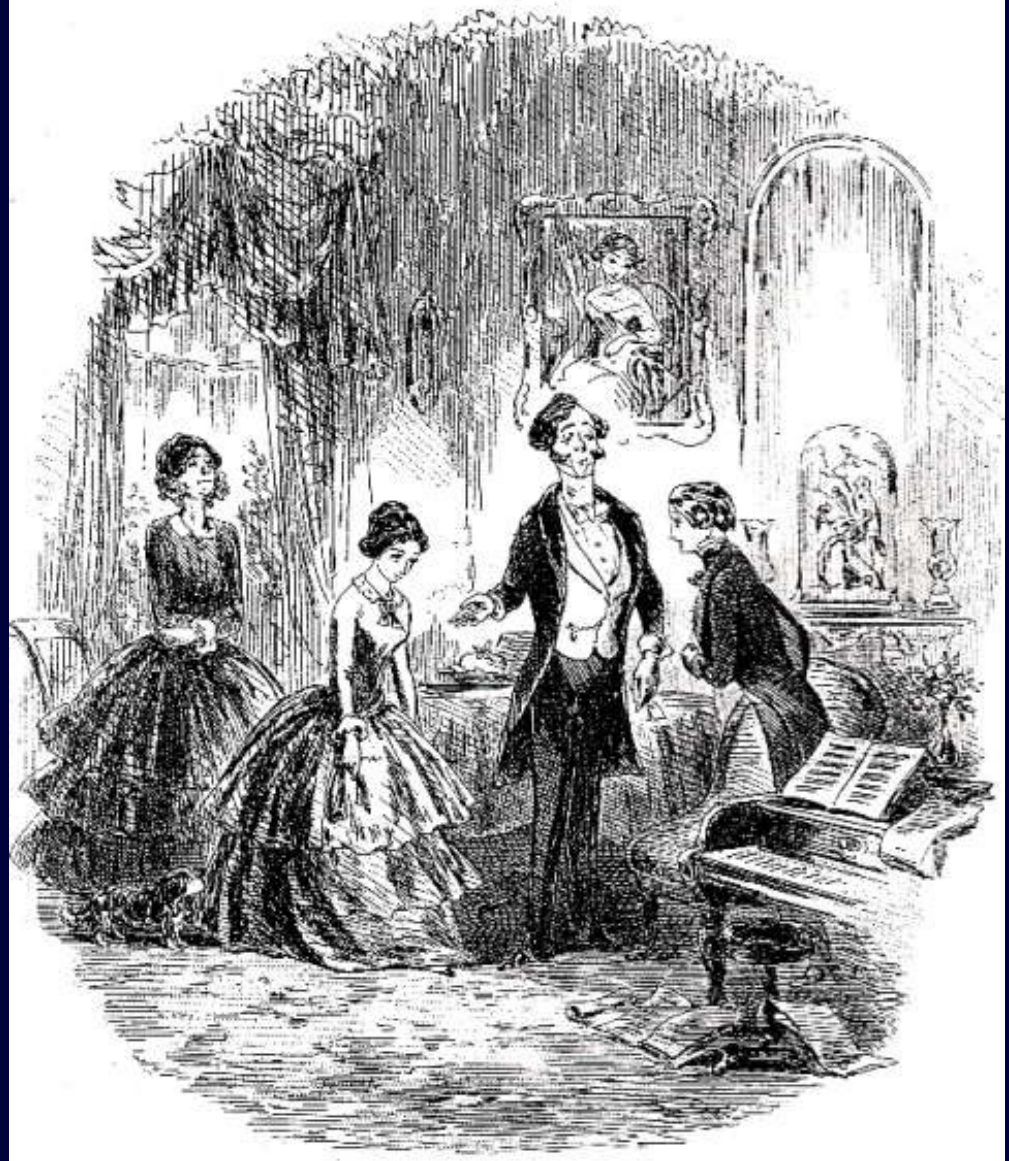
There was no pausing on the brink; no looking down, or looking back; I was gone, headlong, before I had sense to say a word to her.

'I,' observed a well-remembered voice, when I had bowed and murmured something, 'have seen Mr. Copperfield before.'

The speaker was not Dora. No; the confidential friend, Miss Murdstone!

I don't think I was much astonished. To the best of my judgement, no capacity of astonishment was left in me. There was nothing worth mentioning in the material world, but Dora Spenlow, to be astonished about. I said, 'How do you do, Miss Murdstone? I hope you are well.' She answered, 'Very well.' I said, 'How is Mr. Murdstone?' She replied, 'My brother is robust, I am obliged to you.'

Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (1849-50), Ch. XXVI



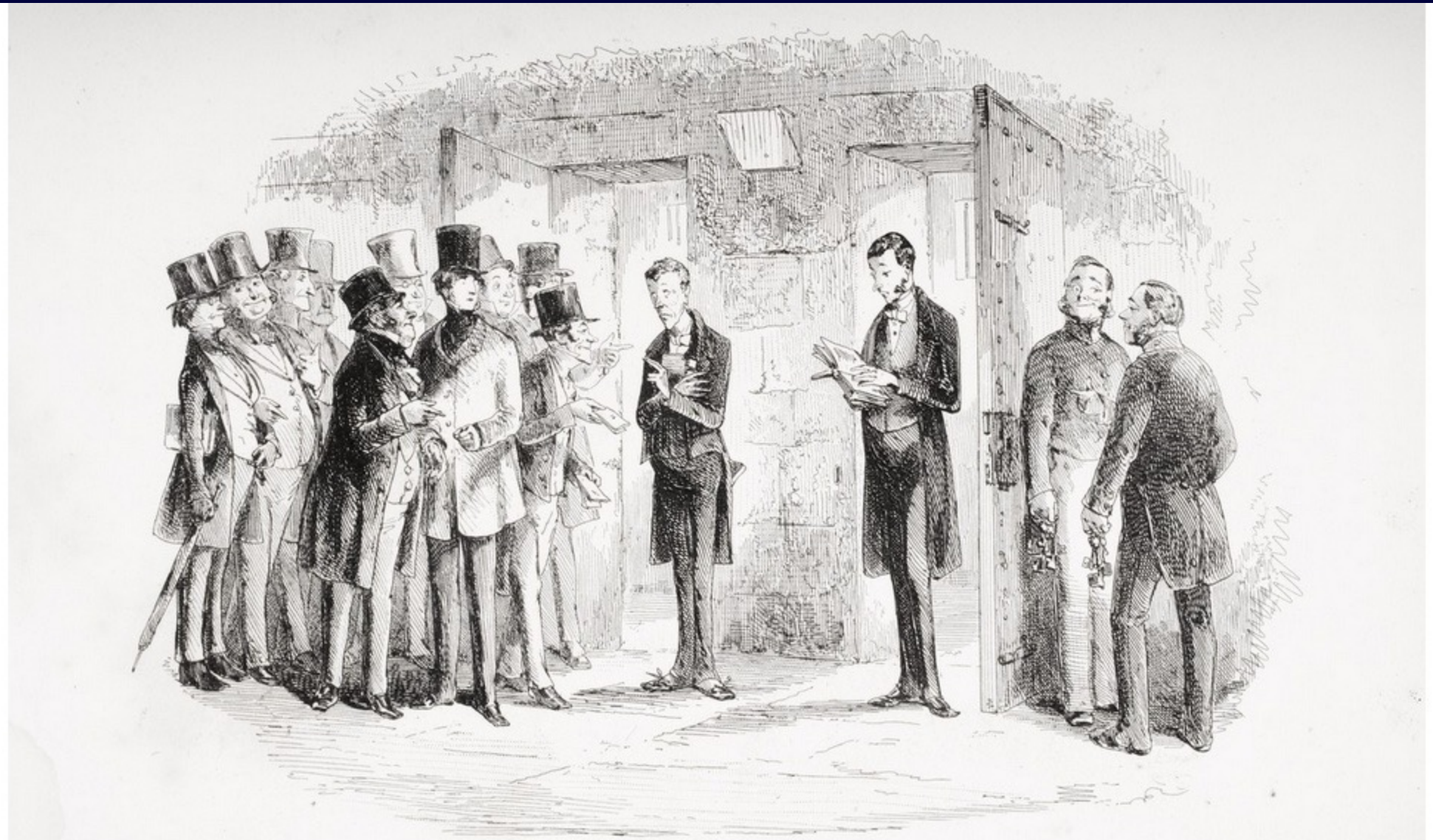
I fall into captivity.

Mr. Creakle directed the door of the cell to be unlocked, and Twenty Seven to be invited out into the passage. This was done; and whom should Traddles and I then behold, to our amazement, in this converted Number Twenty Seven, but Uriah Heep! …

Twenty Seven stood in the midst of us, as if he felt himself the principal object of merit in a highly meritorious museum. That we, the neophytes, might have an excess of light shining upon us all at once, orders were given to let out Twenty Eight.

I had been so much astonished already, that I only felt a kind of resigned wonder when Mr. Littimer walked forth, reading a good book!

David Copperfield, Ch. LXI



I am shewn two interesting penitents.

Paul found another old friend at Egdon Heath Prison: a short, thick-set, cheerful figure who stumped along in front of him on the way to chapel, making a good deal of noise with an artificial leg. ‘Here we are again, old boy!’ he remarked during one of the responses. ‘I’m in the soup as per usual.’

‘Didn’t you like the job?’ Paul asked.

‘Top hole,’ said Grimes, ‘but the hell of a thing happened. Tell you later.’

That morning, complete with pickaxes, field-telephone and two armed and mounted warders, Paul and a little squad of fellow-criminals were led to the quarries. Grimes was in the party.

‘I've been here a fortnight,’ said Grimes as soon as they got an opportunity of talking, ‘and it seems too long already. I've always been a sociable chap, and I don't like it. Three years is too long, old boy. Still, we'll have God's own beano when I get out. I've been thinking about that day and night.’

‘I suppose it was bigamy?’ said Paul.

‘The same. I ought to have stayed abroad. I was arrested as soon as I landed.’

Evelyn Waugh, *Decline and* Fall (1928), Part Three, Ch. IV

MS: Well, I was always very interested in the Brontës. I think they were a remarkable set of people and very non-Victorian. They came straight out of the eighteenth century and into the twentieth century, or almost. They were extremely advanced. A little group of people in Haworth in the North, with only the old father to bring them up. Really they brought themselves up. He was a very interesting man, the father, the minister of the Parish. He let them have a lot of leeway and he had an Irish turn of thought. He was very much a radical, and they were radical. They were free-spoken for young women of the time, very advanced and the books are charming. Jane Eyre is an absolutely lovely book, full of improbabilities and 'dragged-in' coincidences. I thought that Emily Brontë's book was marvellous too.

Muriel Spark, interview with Martin McQuillan, November 1998

I enjoyed it thoroughly, beginning it suitably in a restaurant crowded with old American couples on a cruise except for one solitary middle-aged woman who waited for me beside the lift & pounced — but I was warned by your book & saw the headlines, American Hostess Found Strangled in Author's Bed & left her coldly at the door — on the same floor as mine, a sinister Sparkian coincidence, & I finished your novel in my bed—safe

Graham Greene, letter to Muriel Spark, 1970

Meanwhile the new arrival, having been jostled by Lise, turns to look at her. He starts, and bends to pick up his bags.

Lise touches him on the arm. ‘You’re coming with me,’ she says.

‘No,’ he says, trembling. His round face is pink and white, his eyes are wide open with fear. He looks neat in his business suit and white shirt, as he did this morning when Lise first followed and then sat next to him on the plane.

‘Leave everything,’ says Lise. ‘Come on, it’s getting late’. She starts propelling him to the door.

Muriel Spark, *The Driver’s Seat* (1970), 7

Suddenly her other neighbour looks at Lise in alarm. He stares, as if recognizing her, with his brief-case on his lap, and his hand in the position of pulling out a batch of papers. Something about Lise, about her exchange with the man on her left, has caused a kind of paralysis in his act of fetching out some papers from his brief-case. He opens his mouth, gasping and startled, staring at her as if she is someone he has known and forgotten and now sees again. She smiles at him; it is a smile of relief and delight. His hand moves again, hurriedly putting back the papers that he had half drawn out of his brief-case. He trembles as he unfastens his seat-belt and makes as if to leave his seat, grabbing his brief-case.

On the evening of the following day he will tell the police, quite truthfully, 'The first time I saw her was at the airport. Then on the plane. She sat beside me.'

Muriel Spark, *The Driver's Seat*, 3