

"THE ART OF VISIBLE SPEECH": INFERNAL AND PURGATORIAL FIGURATIONS IN *GREAT EXPECTATIONS* AND *A TALE OF TWO CITIES*.

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Declaration

I declare this dissertation my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

Sonia Fanucchi

30th day of November 2009

TO MY MOTHER

FOR FIRST NURTURING IN ME MY LOVE OF THE FANTASTICAL

Preface

The title of this dissertation is taken from the tenth Canto of Dante's *Purgatorio*. Here Dante encounters a cliff which is adorned with marble carvings that depict the virtue of humility. The figures in these carvings have the power to enact the scenes in which they are represented, coming alive before Dante's eyes. Thus the pictures do not merely reflect the virtues that they depict but they dynamically embody them so that they seem to communicate with the pilgrim through a kind of "visible speech". When reading *Our Mutual Friend* I first noticed this quality in Dickens's imagination where figures spring into a dramatic life by enacting more than themselves. I became aware that this allegorical dimension of Dickens's narrative was tinged with a particularly Dantesque colouring evident in its palpable infernal energy and obsession with death and judgement. This was the initial spur for my thesis.

This fascination with the grotesque and the fantastical suggests a connection with romance. Dickens himself acknowledges this fairy-tale quality of his fiction in his preface to the first edition of *Bleak House* where he states that his intention in this novel was to dwell "upon the romantic side of familiar things". I am aware that this fantasy quality of Dickens's fiction which takes one into a symbolic realm is germane to my topic. But my interest in this dissertation is specifically in the way in which Dickens appropriates dramatic techniques or features and how this generates allegory.

In the first chapter I survey the most important criticism on Dickens's imagination and suggest why judging his work by the standards of literary realism does not adequately account for its power or depth. The second chapter is biographical in character and examines Dickens's fascination with the city, the theatre and the nature of dreams. From this chapter it becomes evident that Dickens was inclined to look beyond the material world towards the supernatural. In chapter three I examine the nature of allegory, noting that it is defined by a continual correspondence between two levels of signification – the literal and the figurative. I further explore the different types of allegory that are manifested in Dickens's fiction: the allegory of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the *Commedia* and the Medieval Morality play. The last three chapters of this dissertation discuss the nature of Dickens's allegorical tendency in *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Great*

Expectations. In chapter four I argue that religious language and allusion in *A Tale of Two Cities* deepens Dickens's sense of the interaction between the material and the transcendent. The last two chapters focus on *Great Expectations* and emphasise the balance between continuing realist concerns and the emergence of a symbolic subtext.

I would like to thank Father Peter Lestrangle and the Jesuits of Campion Hall for allowing me to stay there and conduct research at the outset of this study. A very special thank you is due to my supervisor, Professor Victor Houliston, for his patience, generosity and wise advice. Above all I would like to thank my family – my nonni, my parents, Sylvia, Dario and Leonard – for standing beside me on this long journey. Without their constant love and support I would not have had the strength or the confidence to reach the finishing line.

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All quotations from *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) are taken from the penguin edition edited by George Woodcock (1970; rpt. London: Penguin Books, 1988). Quotations from *Great Expectations* (1860–61) are taken from the penguin edition edited by Angus Calder. (1965; rpt. London: Penguin Books, 1985).

Quotations from *Hamlet* are from the Arden Shakespeare edition edited by Harold Jenkins (1982; rpt. London: Methuen, 2000).

All quotations from and references to Dante's *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* are from the editions edited by F. Mariani and F. Gnere (Torino: Loescher Editore, 1996). English translations from the *Inferno* are by Anthony Esolen (New York, NY: The Modern Library, 2003).

Quotations from *The Pilgrim's Progress* are from the penguin edition edited by Roger Sharrock (London: Penguin Books, 1987).

The 1611 Authorized King James Version (AV) is used for all biblical quotations and references. References to the Bible use the standard abbreviation as found in the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary.

CHAPTER ONE

DICKENS'S TURN FROM REALISM

Literary realism and the formulation of nineteenth century realist dogma

Realism in literature is a notoriously slippery concept and has changed drastically in significance over the last few centuries: Damian Grant notes that in the eighteenth century a correspondence theory of realism was popular, according to which language is “merely an image of reality” and fiction must be utterly accountable to the material world, seeking to represent it rather than to transform it.¹ This definition did not allow for much imaginative innovation and was soon superseded by the ‘coherence theory’, a more sophisticated theory for which there are still apologists: this posits the notion that the writer’s imagination draws on the facts of the real world in a way that suggests a greater power and significance (p. 15). Both of these theories assume that reality is fixed and objective. Further, they assume that art functions as a kind of mirror reflecting life and that it is through the representation of reality that the author can access a greater, unchangeable truth underlying day to day experience.

But such definitions can by no means account for the variety and complexity of author responses to the concept of ‘reality’ and the role of the realist: Wayne C. Booth attempts to make sense of the “mass of conflicting claims . . . clustering about the term ‘reality’”, by outlining four programmes of realism: the first, he suggests, is a group of writers for whom the subject matter of the text rather than its form is the most significant way of representing reality. Thus the plot should present a convincing picture of life, which, many feel, ought to emphasise life’s darker aspects.² These writers depict reality as a broad concept rather than focussing on its specific details (p. 56). The second group that Booth identifies is more meticulous: they attempt to capture the structure or shape of ‘real-life’ events: this raises questions about whether a chain of causality and

¹ Damian Grant, *Realism* (London: Methuen, 1974), p. 11.

² Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 55.

conclusive endings are really plausible devices or whether one ought to capture life's open-endedness (pp. 56–7). The third group of writers is concerned with the plausibility of narrative technique: some believe that the tale should create the sense that it is being related as it would be in real-life while others believe that the author should disguise his presence, creating the impression that the events are occurring spontaneously. Finally Booth suggests that there are those writers for whom realism becomes an “end in itself”, more important even than the truth about reality or the aspect of reality that the author wishes to emphasise; but there are also writers for whom realism is subordinated to other purposes – these include didactic writers like Bunyan or writers like Dickens who considered themselves more objective but who were always ready to sacrifice ‘truth to life’ for ‘truth about life’ (p. 57).

Lately the conventions of realism as they were defined in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, have been consciously challenged and undermined by postmodern fiction: Alison Lee argues that postmodern novels set themselves in opposition to realism by affirming the multiplicity and ambiguity of meaning. For the postmodernists ‘reality’ is no longer a stable point of reference but “purely a linguistic construct”. In this way they seek to destabilise the notion that a novel reflects life.³ The move away from realism can further be seen in changing attitudes towards the role of the author: a new group of ‘reader-response’ critics emerged during the 1960s. These critics argue that meaning is created not by the author alone but by the interaction between the text and the reader: each reader interprets the text in a different way according to his own social and cultural background. (pp. 23–4). Thus realism’s assumption of the author’s authoritative knowledge has been compromised.

Realism enjoyed its heyday in the mid-nineteenth century during the time when Dickens was writing: the works and critical formulations of George Eliot in England and Gustave Flaubert in France were seminal contributions to the movement: according to W.J. Harvey, the achievement of George Eliot’s fiction can best be understood when applying the literal description of “Lydgate’s researches into the fundamental structure of

³ Alison Lee, *Realism and Power: Postmodern British Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 25

organic matter . . . metaphorically . . . to her”.⁴ It is her aim to “pierce the obscurity of those minute processes which prepare human misery and joy”.⁵ For Eliot the writer of realism is herself a kind of scientist whose job it is to discover the ‘truth’, a task that can only be achieved by art’s ability to “denote, describe and represent things and events in [the] world”.⁶ William J. Hyde observes that Eliot’s principal concern is with character rather than events,⁷ and her insight into character is achieved by a similar process of observation and deduction: W. Robertson Nicoll praises her perceptive handling of children’s consciousness in *The Mill on the Floss*: “George Eliot . . . could enter into the thoughts of children, could follow out their little trains of half reasonings, could penetrate the child-soul in the essential things, common to all children”.⁸

Eliot’s theory of realism stresses the importance of keeping one’s “eyes on the real world” and the danger, which she elaborates in *Adam Bede* when discussing the necessity of depicting the commonplace in Art, of framing “lofty theories which only fit a world of extremes”.⁹ Thus she believes that the novel should not idealise or romanticise experience but should attempt to present the ordeals of ordinary un-heroic people, without smoothing over their imperfections. She cautions that the writer’s imagination must not be given free reign, as it is easy to create falsehoods, but must remain subject to the ‘truth’ – it is only through careful thought and analysis, rather than wild flights of fancy, that the writer can present the authentic life of her characters.¹⁰ Such a view is opposed to Dickens’s indulgence in melodrama and it is thus unsurprising that Eliot was critical of his work: although it cannot be proved, it is a critical commonplace that she attempted to rewrite *Bleak House* in *Middlemarch* exposing what she saw as the sentimental “wretchedness” of Dickens’s treatment of the ‘common’ people such as the

⁴ W.J Harvey (introd.), *Middlemarch*, by George Eliot (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965), p. 22.

⁵ George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (1871–2), ed. W.J. Harvey (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965), p. 194.

⁶ John P. McGowan, “The Turn of George Eliot’s Realism”, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 35.2 (September 1980): 171–192 (p. 174).

⁷ William J. Hyde “George Eliot and the Climate of Realism”, *PMLA* 72.1 (March 1957): 147–164 (p. 164).

⁸ Robertson Nicoll (introd.), *The Mill on the Floss*, by George Eliot (London: Everyman’s Library, 1908), p. viii.

⁹ George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (1859), ed. Steven Gill (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980), p. 224.

¹⁰ Barbara Smalley, *George Eliot and Flaubert: Pioneers of the Modern Novel* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1974), p. 31.

sweeper, Jo.¹¹ Thus, according to Eliot, art must attempt to depict scenes from quotidian life as faithfully as possible without resorting to fantastic exaggeration. This implies scepticism towards the extraordinary or sensational, key components of much of Dickens's work.

Gustave Flaubert is in some ways Eliot's opposite: Barbara Smalley observes that unlike the "rational discursive" prose of George Eliot, Flaubert's writing has a fantastical, dream-like quality which pre-empts the Symbolists. The sensuous nature of his imagination, as well as his sensitivity to mood, recalls the Romantics. But, like Eliot, Flaubert attempts to discipline his Romantic temperament to the demands of his realist philosophy: in *Madame Bovary* he consciously sets himself the task of controlling his tendency to revel in Romantic lyricism although, Smalley suggests, this still forms an essential part of the novel's greatness.¹² Further, Flaubert resembles Eliot in his attempt to create the illusion of reality through the meticulous structuring of his work, which involves the careful choice of details to achieve specific effects.¹³ For Flaubert, as for Eliot, commonplace characters are essential to a plausible picture of life and in *Madame Bovary* his figures are mainly mediocrities caught up in the mundane concerns of bourgeoisie life.¹⁴

But Flaubert's realism differs from Eliot's in that he attempts to erase himself entirely from his texts, adhering to the philosophy that the deeper significance of events and characters is more fully apprehensible without the aid of authorial commentary; Eliot, by contrast, renders her characters' inner life intelligible through the sympathetic remarks of the author.¹⁵ Nevertheless, through these different techniques, they achieve remarkably similar results: they both measure the characters' inner drama against an objective reality which emphasises the limitations and delusions of the characters' "romantic egoism". For both writers the "inner vision" takes precedence over a "shared

¹¹ Jerome Meckier, *Hidden Rivalries in Victorian Fiction: Dickens, Realism, and Revaluation* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1987), p. 264.

¹² Smalley, *George Eliot and Flaubert*, pp. 7, 6.

¹³ Alan Russel (introd.), *Madame Bovary: A Story of Provincial Life* (1856), by Gustave Flaubert (1950; rpt. London: Penguin Books, 1980), p. 8.

¹⁴ Smalley, *George Eliot and Flaubert*, p. 31.

¹⁵ Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, p. 96.

social vision” so that they represent the outside world as “seen through the delusions of a vividly particularised ego”.¹⁶

Dickens’s awkward relation to realism

If one takes Eliot and Flaubert’s realistic and introspective analysis of character and event as a standard for all fiction then the works of Charles Dickens seem to pale by comparison. Modern critics have not failed to notice the apparent limitations of Dickens’s psychological and philosophical vision when compared with Eliot’s: Robertson Nicoll rather patronizingly asserts that “Dickens [can] give pictures of odd children, true and touching in their way” but, in essence, too fantastic to be probable whereas Eliot’s are “real children”;¹⁷ this notion that Dickens’s characters are inescapably caricatures, incapable of the psychological depth of Eliot’s, is a critical commonplace: when discussing Eliot’s Nicholas Bulstrode, Barbara Smalley argues that Dickens would have presented such a character as farcical and exaggerated, without much “notion of his carrying on a complex drama inside him”.¹⁸ Dickens’s plots further appear to lack the careful control and planning of Eliot’s: W.J. Harvey complains that the vitality of Dickens’s characters sometimes threatens to “overwhelm and destroy the novel’s central themes” whereas Eliot’s “philosophic power” ensures that in her novels “all is disciplined to the demands of the whole”.¹⁹

While it is clear that analysing Dickens’s work in terms of literary realism does not account for its imaginative power, he himself would have argued that his work was a true and plausible picture of life as most people experience it. When anyone suggested that what Dickens wrote was fantasy, he was highly offended. This, according to Peter Ackroyd was partly due to his belief, inspired by his age, that the writer was a kind of teacher with a serious obligation to reveal the ‘truth’, which was taken in a limited and literal sense.²⁰ Further, like many of his contemporaries, Dickens saw himself as a ‘reforming novelist’

¹⁶ Smalley, *George Eliot and Flaubert*, p. 44.

¹⁷ Robertson Nicoll (introd.), *The Mill on the Floss*, p. viii.

¹⁸ Smalley, *George Eliot and Flaubert*, p. 40.

¹⁹ Harvey (introd.), *Middlemarch*, p. 9.

²⁰ Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens’s London: An imaginative vision* (London: Headline, 1987), p. 693.

who intended to make readers aware of social inequalities in order to inspire them to take appropriate action.²¹ In order for his social agenda to be taken seriously, Dickens had to market himself as a realist and in his preface to *Pickwick Papers*, he does just that: he argues that the change in Pickwick's character "as these pages proceed . . . will not appear forced or unnatural, if . . . [readers] . . . reflect that in real life the peculiarities and oddities of a man who has anything whimsical about him, generally impress us first, and that it is not until we are better acquainted with him that we usually begin to look below these superficial traits, and to know the better part of him".²² Thus Dickens protects himself from charges of implausibility by arguing for his particular mode of depicting characters – by their 'outer oddities' – and suggesting that it is from their mannerisms that we can reach their 'inner life'. Significantly, when he argues for the psychological credibility of his characters, it is clearly their outward expressiveness which fascinates him.

A closer look at his works reveals that while he believed himself to be a realist writer, his particular understanding of what constituted 'truth' was not necessarily that of the nineteenth century realist. This is the description of Thomas Gradgrind in *Hard Times*:

Thomas Gradgrind, sir. A man of realities. A man of fact and calculations. A man who proceeds upon the principle that two and two are four, and nothing over, and who is not to be talked into for allowing anything over. Thomas Gradgrind sir – peremptorily Thomas – Thomas Gradgrind. With a rule and a pair of scales, and the multiplication table always in his pocket, sir, ready to weigh and measure any parcel of human nature, and tell you exactly what it comes to. It is a question of figures, a case of simple arithmetic.²³

The figure of Thomas Gradgrind seems to offer an indirect satire on 'realism'. For Gradgrind, human nature is dissectible and reducible to facts – he himself is a kind of machine made up of the parts of the various implements for measuring figures. In fact *Hard Times* can be read as a kind of apologia for Dickens's theatrical style: Mr Sleary of the circus folk says of his trade that "people must be amuthed, Thquire, thomehow" (p. 82). Indeed, the theatrics of the circus folk prove the value of entertainment. The

²¹ Andrew Sanders, *The Short Oxford History of English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 405.

²² Charles Dickens, *Pickwick Papers* (London: Oxford University Press 1967), p. xii (preface).

²³ Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (1854), ed. David Craig (London: Penguin Books, 1974), p. 48.

circus is indicative of an entire philosophy of life, an emotional engagement with the world that is intimately connected with the discovery of self: Louisa, brought up in the destructive Gradgrind system, suppresses her emotional and imaginative side to the point that she chooses the wrong husband and almost degrades herself further by having an affair with Harthouse. Ultimately Gradgrind, faced with the wrecks of his daughter and son, is forced to acknowledge the falseness of his own outlook on life and to accept that the imaginative thinking encouraged by the theatrics of the circus entertainers provides insight into a greater 'truth' than 'facts' ever can.

It is when he describes scenes within the circus environment that Dickens's style becomes more fantastic: the circus attire which Tom, in hiding, is forced to wear becomes emblematic of his spiritual inadequacy: he is dressed in "an immense waistcoat, knee-breeches, buckled shoes, and a mad cocked hat; with nothing fitting him, and everything of a coarse material, moth-eaten, and full of holes; with seams in his black face, where fear and heat had started through the greasy composition daubed all over it" (p. 300). Further, Mr Gradgrind's confrontation with Tom suggests an encounter with his own moral failure: this is dramatically embodied in the moment when he sits on "the clown's performing chair in the middle of the ring" (p. 299), face-to-face with his son. The world of the circus has become more than just a place of entertainment. It has been transformed into a space in which the characters' moral colouring is allegorically revealed and interrogated. Thus veiled in Dickens's social agenda, there seems to be an artistic one, a theory of the imagination which appears to privilege the symbolic or allegorical mode over a constricting realist style.

Dickens's sense of what constitutes the 'real' is closer to that of the Renaissance where to write realistically meant to follow Neoplatonic theory which suggests that both nature and art "imitate the same prior principles".²⁴ As A.D. Nuttall notes, the Elizabethan imagination evokes the interrelationship of sensory reality and a heightened, transcendent realm: this can be seen in the art of memory where an individual memorises certain abstract topics by attaching them to vivid, material places and figures (p. 90). It is also central to Shakespeare's vision in *The Tempest* where, unlike the Victorian realists, he

²⁴ A.D. Nuttall, *Two Concepts of Allegory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967), p. 103.

does not attempt to efface artifice but rather draws our attention to the 'unreal' as a means of intensifying material experience: Nuttall suggests that Prospero whose "discontents and ambitions are extremely worldly" can appear in his speech and bearing as one who inhabits a different "order . . . of being" (p. 142).

The similarity between Dickens's modulation of realism and Shakespeare's double vision in *The Tempest* is evident in the following extract from *Little Dorrit*:

They all gave place when the signing was done, and Little Dorrit and her husband walked out of the church alone. They paused for a moment on the steps of the portico, looking at the fresh perspective of the street in the autumn morning sun's bright rays, and then went down.

Went down into a modest life of usefulness and happiness. Went down to give a mother's care, in the fullness of time, to Fanny's neglected children no less than to their own, and to leave that lady going into Society for ever and a day. Went down to give a tender nurse and friend to Tip for some years, who was never vexed by the great exactions he made of her, in return for the riches he might have given her if he had ever had them, and who lovingly closed his eyes on the Marshalsea and all its blighted fruits. They went quietly down into the roaring streets, inseparable and blessed; and as they passed along in sunshine and in shade, the noisy and the eager, and the arrogant and the froward and vain, fretted and chafed, and made their usual uproar.²⁵

Here Little Dorrit and Arthur Clenham's marriage has the effect of elevating them onto a higher plane of existence so that one has the sense that they are returning down to the cares of everyday life from the perfection of heaven. They both participate in day-to-day living in the way in which they help to raise Fanny's children and to care for Tip but they remain at one remove from it – insulated against the "uproar" of the unenlightened world around them by the blessedness of their love. Thus, through the two lovers, the perfection of paradise makes its way into ordinary reality and is able to rectify it without becoming tainted itself. In this way Dickens makes us aware of transcendent reality existing closely with temporal experience.

²⁵ Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit* (1857), eds. Stephen Wall and Helen Small, rev. edn (London: Penguin Books, 2003), pp. 859-860.

The critical response to Dickens

During his own career and for much of the last century, critics have found Dickens's art somewhat of an anomaly. After reading the first few instalments of *Little Dorrit*, Edward Bruce Hamley voiced what was becoming a growing concern with Dickens's 'unrealistic' style: in a review written in *Blackwood's Magazine* in April 1857, he laments that *Little Dorrit* is "not a novel of incident or character" and that it can thus "scarcely be a great picture of life".²⁶ Some of Dickens's contemporaries were unconvinced about the plausibility of his dialogue and after Dickens's death D.H. Lewes caustically undermined the author's claim that his characters were real people.²⁷ Thus, although Dickens's success was virtually unrivalled in the first half of his career, the increasing tendency to compare him with realist writers such as Thackeray and George Eliot (who began writing novels in the 1850s) led to unfavourable perceptions of his work that left his portrayal of character and event looking superficial and implausible.

The problem of reconciling Dickens's apparent failings as an artist of realism with what was felt to be his almost hypnotic power over his readership persisted well into the Twentieth Century: E.M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel and related writings*, while acknowledging the power of Dickens and Wells to "trick the reader into a sense of depth" when describing 'flat' characters, goes on to argue that "flat people are not in themselves as big achievements as round ones" and that they are "at their best when they are comic".²⁸ This gives the impression that Dickens, the master of the 'flat' character, is somehow inferior to authors whose concern it is to represent psychologically plausible characters and that for this reason his prose is ultimately superficial and incapable of the power or depth of tragedy. F.R. Leavis and Q.D. Leavis, writing in 1970, attempt to grapple with the problem of Dickens's 'art of the surface' by denying that this is a facet of his work at all. They set themselves in opposition to critics such as Robert Garis who, they suggest, deny Dickens's "marked intellectual powers" by emphasising that his "line was

²⁶ David Skilton, *The Early and Mid-Victorian Novel* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 122–3.

²⁷ Raymond Chapman, *Forms of Speech in Victorian Fiction* (London and New York: Longman, 1994), p. 231.

²⁸ E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel and related writings* (London: Edward Arnold, 1974), p. 50.

entertainment".²⁹ Stressing the 'realistic' nature of Dickens's art sometimes leads the authors to untenable conclusions such as their assertion that in *Great Expectations* Dickens "shows in flashes" that Estella had been "improving in self-knowledge as she grew up" (p. 330n.). Since Estella only really shows a greater self-awareness at the very end of the novel, I think it is far more convincing to argue that Dickens is not concerned with a realistic exploration of her psychology but rather with presenting the dramatic contrast between her coldness and Pip's passionate love for her. In attempting to reconcile the novel with a realist model, the Leavises further repudiate its grotesque or fantastical dimensions: this is evident in their dismissal of its fairy-tale like elements as well as in their insistence that Orlick should be read realistically rather than as an allegorical embodiment of Pip's suppressed desires (pp. 278, 315n.). This approach further leads to the occasional passing of questionable value judgements such as their conclusion that Dickens ultimately means the society of Miss Havisham and Estella to be preferable to that of Joe and Biddy (pp. 328–9). At times the authors do seem to glimpse a more symbolic mode of writing in Dickens's prose: they describe Pip's journey to meet Orlick as a "journey that takes place in his 'inner self'", a journey which they see as invoking Christian's spiritual pilgrimage in *A Pilgrim's Progress* (p. 320). But their insistence that Dickens is engaged in a 'serious' purpose of depicting experience as 'true to life' and their denial of the highly dramatic and theatrical flavour of his art, prevents them from developing such hypotheses beyond the discussion of a few scenes.

The fantastical side of Dickens's imagination, the side that resists definition by the critics armed with their realist theories, has, however, been recognised in the last sixty or so years by a new group of critics. These critics have claimed that Dickens's real strength lies not so much in his astuteness as a social writer as in the versatility of his imagination and, in so doing, have traced out a new path for Dickens criticism. John Carey exuberantly seizes on the idea of Dickens's imaginative power in his influential book *The Violent Effigy* where he argues that Dickens is an "imaginative writer" who has the power to recast the reader's circumscribed notions about what constitutes the 'real'.³⁰ Carey's thesis suggests

²⁹ F.R. Leavis and Q. D. Leavis, *Dickens, the novelist*, 2nd rev. edn (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970), p. ix

³⁰ John Carey, *The Violent Effigy: A Study of Dickens's Imagination* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), p. 10.

that Dickens's work is an explosion of the imagination, generating thousands of often irrelevant details. He therefore rejects those critics who "labour to unearth [its] 'meanings' as if great works of art are to be cherished, in the last resort, for whatever moral droppings can be coaxed from them" (p. 10). Not only does he resist the notion that Dickens's work is more of a moral treatise than an exercise in the imagination but he also suggests that emphasising thematic unity and consistency in Dickens's oeuvre, as J. Hillis Miller and others do, is ultimately a fallacious argument: he notes the "inconsistencies" in Dickens's novels – his ability to "espouse diametrically opposed opinions with almost equal vehemence" (p. 8). Certainly it cannot be denied that the rambling nature of many of his novels resists a consistent thematic structure. According to Carey, Dickens's is an anarchic imagination that resists and overturns conventional literary approaches and morality: Dickens's presentation of "Pecksniff, Mrs Gamp, Squeers, Bounderby and other great hypocrites" results in the "pattern of crime and retribution that Dickens seeks to impose upon his fiction . . . [being] . . . blown aside by the comic vitality of the figures we are supposed to deplore" (p. 67). Thus Dickens's imagination often favours the perverse or the immoral – evident in the fascination Steerforth, Eugene Wrayburn or Monsieur the Marquis exert on him, so that his overt teaching is frequently undermined.

Carey suggests that this amoral and chaotic imaginative energy is often directed at blurring the boundaries between the animate and inanimate worlds: he notes that many of Dickens's characters, such as Mrs Tippins, are so artificial that they have become lifeless monstrosities, "effigies which intriguingly populate the shadow-land that lies between objects and people" (p. 91). But inanimate objects such as pictures or clothing are, themselves, often strangely animated; and there are yet other creatures that straddle the divide between the living and the non-living: people that are made up out of inanimate objects like wigs and wooden legs (pp. 90–1).

Carey's thesis is testimony to the rich variety of Dickens's imagination which has the ability to revive "and release . . . into endless variety, experiences which language has petrified into a figure of speech like 'shaking hands'" (p. 98). Dickens's imaginative vision is, he asserts, in and of itself far more valuable than his symbolism which is muddled and often involves "vague, religious" connotations (p. 109).

Like Carey, A.O.J. Cockshut emphasises Dickens's imaginative power but he locates this principally in the melodramatic nature of the author's work: he suggests that melodrama is largely a source of strength in Dickens:³¹ this, he argues, can be seen in the influence which extreme melodramatic types had on Dickens's creation of larger-than-life figures. He notes that Dickens's early comic figures are elevated to mythic status by the fantastical energy that infuses them, energy that makes them appear superhuman: in these characters Dickens uses "idiosyncrasies of language, [which show] forth impossible eccentricity" (p. 18). These creations reveal "new abysses of absurdity, fantastic and yet hypnotically real to the reader" (p. 18). Thus Cockshut emphasises that it is not the realistic plausibility of these characters but the very opposite – the very fact that they represent extremes not ordinarily found in human nature, which makes them hauntingly alive. Like Carey, Cockshut argues that Dickens's melodramatic sense of the fantastic is so intense that at times it threatens to overwhelm his narrative. Thus his awareness of "facts and objects" is necessary to keep his imagination in check (p. 15).

A shortcoming of both Cockshut's and Carey's theses is that they uphold the myth of Dickens as an undisciplined and largely unconscious genius: Cockshut asserts that Dickens was "not a man who could be deeply influenced by literature" and that he "never came to understand himself or his own motives very well";³² and Carey separates Dickens's overt, symbolic purpose from his imaginative flair, suggesting that the universe of Dickens's fiction is fragmented rather than whole and does not allow for the "sort of symbolism that issues in protracted allegories".³³ He further emphasises Dickens's populist leaning, arguing that his attempts at an intellectual critique of society reveal him to be as fickle as the public for which he was writing (p. 8). Such assertions overlook the possibility that Dickens drew upon literary and theatrical traditions to enrich his narratives or that his artistic energy was anything but wild and random.

Garis's book *The Dickens Theatre* develops Cockshut's emphasis on the melodramatic quality of Dickens's imagination: he claims that Dickens's art is not what we normally understand as "high art", that which is practised by the 'serious' novelists. This is

³¹ A.O.J. Cockshut, *The Imagination of Charles Dickens* (London: Collins, 1961), pp. 15, 185.

³² Cockshut, *The Imagination of Charles Dickens*, p. 11.

³³ Carey, *The Violent Effigy*, p. 129.

because the contrived nature of his prose prevents one from judging it by realist standards; it is a prose “thick with artifice, which actually forces itself into our consciousness” and without the “slightest suggestion of an attempt to hide the presence of the artificer”.³⁴ What Garis is arguing, therefore, is that Dickens’s style is theatrical – that is to say that he is concerned with the explicit, presented in “showy” ways. He suggests that, in drawing attention to its artificiality, Dickens’s narrative achieves a kind of escapism from ‘real’ experience: his characters, rather than psychologically complex individuals, are actors, behind whom one can always glimpse Dickens himself. Thus Garis stresses Dickens’s ultimate unreality and further claims that it is his very artificiality which is his artistic strength. This argument marks a radical departure from the kind of criticism that emphasises Dickens’s realistic, social agenda. However, Garis’s insight into Dickens is ultimately obscured by his adherence to a definition of high art which suggests that a work is incapable of depth if it does not provide psychological commentary on the “inner life” of the characters. This leads him to suggest that Dickens, being unable to probe the depths of his characters, is unable to present an individual’s “spiritual progress” and that when he does attempt to present the “drama of human choice and change”, in *Little Dorrit* and *Bleak House*, the results are inferior (p. 99). In keeping with this notion of Dickens’s ultimate superficiality, Garis repudiates the quite plausible suggestion that Orlick in *Great Expectations* is enacting Pip’s “rage against his sister” in a kind of “allegorical psychomachia”, arguing that it is the “theatricality of the whole passage which . . . forbids us to attempt any irrelevant deep analysis” (p. 216). Thus, while he notices the expressive, histrionic nature of Dickens’s art, his tendency to look for a particular type of artistic complexity leads him to argue that Dickens’s work is simple and that this simplicity is a weakness when Dickens attempts to explore the concerns of ‘serious’ writers.

Like Garis and Cockshut, Earle Davis in *The Flint and the Flame* emphasises the theatricality of the Dickens oeuvre. He notes that Dickens, whose main priority was entertainment, drew on the melodramas and tragedies that were being performed in

³⁴ Robert Garis, *The Dickens Theatre: A Reassessment Of The Novels* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp.7–8.

Victorian theatres and was particularly influenced by the comedy and mimicry of the actor, Charles Mathews.³⁵ Yet, while for Garis and Cockshut Dickens's theatrical method was in the main antithetical to complex symbolic meaning, Davis's argument goes some way towards seeing Dickens's theatrical style as conducive to a symbolic or allegorical method: he notes the way in which Dickens's characters are "partially displayed" in that their "essential traits" are "exaggerated" and become "representative" of themselves (p. 52): this element of caricature in which a figure expresses or enacts itself is also an element of allegory. Later, Davis notes that *Oliver Twist* is an "allegorical or symbolical character rather than a real person" because of the way in which he represents that "innocence which is ours at birth and ought not to be spoiled" (p. 97). Ultimately, for Davis, Dickens is a man who uses the methods of the entertainer to reveal a deeper truth. Although he does not use the term allegory, what Davis is describing is in many respects the style of an allegorist: he notes how Dickens "came to reveal inner realities by outer oddities . . . the eternal by the ephemeral" (p. 309). He sees in Dickens's narratives a tendency to depict the eternal or the supernatural within the palpable world, to depict his world as an "inferno of intolerance" but a world in which "Paradise [is always] within reach" (p. 310). Ultimately Dickens's theatricality is the source of a symbolic style that seeks, through the combination of the characters' "actions and their surroundings to imply a total comment upon the meaning of human existence" (p. 309).

While Davis acknowledges that the theatre was the basis for Dickens's art, he is, nevertheless, to some degree ambiguous about its effect on his fiction. Although he notices the efficacy of this method especially of the "farce-caricature technique" in Dickens's comic scenes (p. 52), he is also reluctant to credit a technique that exposes Dickens to the charge of producing "only eccentrics and stage figures, not real people" (p. 52). Davis's anxiety about the implausibility of a lot of Dickens's prose is an important factor in informing his response to the writer. His awareness of Dickens's theatrical and expressionistic style is always tempered by his belief in a 'truth' which Dickens's method sometimes "distorts" (p. 52). It is this desire to deny the stylised nature of Dickens's art which causes him to attempt to validate Dickens by arguing that his earlier novels were

³⁵ Earle Davis, *The Flint and the Flame* (Columbia: Missouri University Press, 1963), p. 54.

often falsely melodramatic and therefore less plausible than his later novels in which he had “fought his way through the mists of melodrama and sentiment to authentic tragedy and sincere emotion” (p. 308).

But in *Dickens's Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture*, Juliet John challenges this notion that Dickens's melodramatic mode is a liability, arguing that it is central to his development of a symbolic style. Like the other critics who emphasise the theatrical nature of Dickens's imagination, she suggests that the histrionic side of Dickens's art sets it in opposition to the realist novel.³⁶ But she takes Davis's argument that Dickens uses outer characteristics to suggest an inner profundity, a little further to argue that this tendency is central to his melodramatic approach: unlike the internalised intellectualised psyche upheld by the Victorian realists, she suggests that Dickens's melodramatic mode of art allows him to engage with a character's inner life through the external manifestation of the emotions, which are presented as palpable indices of a character's psychological state. This, she argues can be seen in the figure of Sydney Carton, whose “self-abuse manifests itself physically . . . in . . . alcoholism” and whose “potential as well as . . . demise is passionately and melodramatically rendered” (p. 189). Thus, by ascribing emotions to surfaces, Dickens suggests depths.

Further, John argues that the blurring of the animate and inanimate worlds which Carey emphasises, is also a result of Dickens's inclination to give surfaces the impression of depths (p. 105): this can be seen in the way in which the emotions expressed in the non-human world resemble and magnify those of a particular individual so that the character and his world meld together into a kind of “melodramatic organism” (pp. 106–7). Thus John's thesis expands on the arguments of Carey, Cockshut, Garis and Davis: she describes Dickens's imagination as haunted by the exaggerations and distortions of human nature, but goes beyond this to suggest that his mind penetrates to the heart of human experience through the melodramatic presentation of superficialities.

I intend to argue that Dickens's investment of intensity or passion in the outward, the named figure, which advertises exactly what it represents, can be called allegorical.

³⁶ Juliet John, *Dickens's Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 8.

Gay Clifford notes that allegorical narratives rely on “the visual and concrete to convey abstract and moral meaning”: thus the emblems of allegory are drawn from palpable reality and made to suggest a transcendent world. Such emblems generally involve a complex blending of “intellectual and emotive significance”. In discussing Dickens’s allegorical tendency, I will concern myself with this aspect of allegory as well as with its use of “repetition and generalisation” to express “larger kinds of truth” that are assumed to be universal.³⁷

Conclusion

John’s point that Dickens’s imaginative strength is in his melodramatic style can be taken one step further to suggest that the way in which he employs melodrama in his novels resonates with older allegorical traditions, traditions which he appropriates and transforms through the medium of melodrama. Melodramas have been criticised because of their implausibility: their contrived plots, sensational episodes, oversimplified characters who indulge in an excess of emotion, and their evocation of exaggerated categories of good and evil.³⁸ However, critics have often failed to observe that melodrama is also a conscious, deliberate and far-reaching tradition which draws on the powerful symbolism of allegorical drama: the allegorical battle of moral absolutes central to melodrama, and the inevitable triumph of good over evil, recalls the Christian pattern of the Morality play where the triumph of the Mankind figure and the Christian message of redemption depends on the defeat of the Vice figure. Thus melodrama retains the ‘happy’ resolution of the Morality play but transposes it into an entirely secular context. Further, like the allegorical figures of the Morality drama, melodramatic types evoke a more universal paradigm of good and evil and so have significance beyond themselves.³⁹

I will argue that Dickens’s allegorical method was not only shaped by Victorian popular culture but also by a more ‘high-brow’ literary and theatrical tradition to which

³⁷ Gay Clifford, *The Transformations of Allegory* (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), pp. 10, 14.

³⁸ Martha Vicinus, “‘Helpless and Unfriended’: Nineteenth-Century Domestic Melodrama”, *New Literary History*, 13.1 (Autumn, 1981): 127–143 (p. 127).

³⁹ John, *Dickens’s Villains*, pp. 26, 33–34.

he was exposed in Medieval and Renaissance allegory as well as in Renaissance plays, particularly those of Shakespeare: Dickens was well read in the works of Shakespeare and had seen many of his plays performed: thus the structures of Medieval Morality drama were not only mediated to him through popular melodrama but also through Shakespeare's works in which they were still strongly resonant. He had read Bunyan's *A Pilgrim's Progress*, the influence of which can be seen in the quasi-allegorical quest of Nel and her grandfather in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. There is also strong evidence to suggest that he had read at least parts of Dante's *Divine Comedy*: the Victorian period was distinctive for its interest in the great Italian poet and Stephen Bertman has shown that Dickens himself possessed a copy of Flaxman's illustrations of the poem which were accompanied by selections from the scenes that they illustrated; Dickens further possessed a volume of Italian poetry that contains the complete works of Dante.⁴⁰ The influence of these writers and traditions on Dickens's style will be the subject of a detailed survey in a later chapter.

⁴⁰ Stephen Bertman, "Dante's Role in the Genesis of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*", *Dickens Quarterly* 24.3 (September 2007): 167 – 175 (pp. 171–172).

CHAPTER TWO
THE FORMATIVE ELEMENTS OF DICKENS'S ALLEGORICAL IMAGINATION: THE
BIOGRAPHICAL EVIDENCE

The city: the “birthplace of his imagination”

In *The Old Curiosity Shop* Dickens describes the Labyrinthine city through which Nell and her grandfather travel:

Damp rotten houses, many to let, many yet building, many half-built and mouldering away – lodgings, where it would be hard to tell which needed pity most, those who let or those who came to take – children, scantily fed and clothed, spread over every street and sprawling in the dust – scolding mothers, stamping their slipshod feet with noisy threats upon the pavement – shabby fathers, hurrying with dispirited looks to the occupation which brought them ‘daily bread’ and little more – mangling-women, washer-women, cobblers, tailors, chandlers, driving their trades in parlours and kitchens and back rooms and garrets, and sometimes all of them under the same roof – brick-fields, skirting gardens pale with staves of old casks, or timber pillaged from houses burnt down and blackened and blistered by the flames – mounds of dock-weed, nettles, coarse grass and oyster shells, heaped in rank confusion – small dissenting chapels to teach, with no lack of illustration, the miseries of Earth, and plenty of new churches, erected with a little superfluous wealth, to show the way to Heaven.⁴¹

This description presents the city as a kind of empty chaos, comprising of an overwhelming clutter of diverse objects and people: the “coarse grass and oyster shells” are lumped indiscriminately together with the “scantily fed and clothed” children, the “shabby fathers” and the “scolding mothers”. This has the effect of dehumanising the city-dwellers: not only is it impossible to distinguish them from one another (their various trades seem interchangeable) but it is also no longer possible to differentiate them from the decaying objects around them. Thus Dickens creates a monstrous sense of inhumanity, where everything “sprawl[s] . . . in the dust”. The way in which the narrative

⁴¹ Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), ed. Angus Easson (London: Penguin Books, 1972; rpt. London: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 172–3.

frenetically shifts the reader's attention from things to people gives the impression that the indiscriminate mass of humans and objects is frighteningly animated by a life of its own, dramatically suggesting the power that poverty commands over the individual. In such a world the divine dimension is disempowered: this can be seen in the fact that the chapels are small and can only reveal the "miseries of this world". This implies that the churches are utterly swamped by the misery around them so that they have become ironically bereft of their power of salvation. In this passage Dickens's critique of religion is primarily social: the many new churches which are erected to "show the way to Heaven" are made to suggest the cold indifference of the wealthy who wish to save the poor's souls without alleviating their suffering in the here and now. But although Dickens's only explicit reference to religion in this passage is focussed on secular matters, the intense narrative energy extends beyond this to suggest a grotesque hell-like realm which utterly consumes the people, denying them any spiritual life.

This city of death – both spiritual and physical – occurs and reoccurs in Dickens's fiction: in *Oliver Twist* the Artful Dodger guides young Oliver into the very heart of criminal London. Here Oliver encounters "heaps of children" who are "crawling in and out of doors" and one of whom is "screaming".⁴² He and the Dodger take ways which "diverge . . . from the main street" where they come across "drunken men and women . . . positively wallowing in filth" and "ill-looking fellows" carrying out illicit crimes (p. 103). F.S. Schwarzbach notes the "evocation of horror" at the "core of this scene" – that the "people who inhabit this place, whose salient characteristics are filth, stench, darkness and a terrifying closeness, are animals". He suggests that Dickens is here describing a nightmarish "city of death" at the centre of which Fagin presides as "the Devil himself, an incarnation of the pure evil of the world he inhabits".⁴³ From Schwarzbach's analysis, one gets the impression that the death-like nature of the city gives rise to a demonic terrain which is dramatically embodied by the figure of Fagin. In *Oliver Twist*, the hell-like nature of the city is even more strikingly portrayed than it is in

⁴² Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (1838), ed. Peter Fairclough (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966; rpt; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 103.

⁴³ F.S. Schwarzbach, *Dickens and the City* (London: University of London, The Athlone Press, 1978), pp. 47–8.

The Old Curiosity Shop: here the dark criminal underworld of Fagin and Sykes is described as a labyrinthine hell which traps and corrupts innocents.

Dickens was clearly a man of the city – the city generates the symbolic force which powers the bizarre and monstrous world of his novels. It reverberates with significance, both personal and universal. Dickens's memories of his experiences in London were of a kind of degenerate hell – a place of poverty and wickedness which exerted a strong "attraction of repulsion" over him.⁴⁴ The poverty and neglect that he suffered in London intensified into a nightmare in the blacking warehouse: in the fragment of an autobiography that he wrote many years later, he describes the warehouse as a "crazy, tumble-down old house, abutting of course on the river, and literally overrun with rats. Its wainscoted rooms, and its rotten floors and staircase, and the old grey rats swarming down in the cellars, rise up visibly before me".⁴⁵ Thus, in his mind's eye the warehouse becomes a hauntingly gothic image of crime and degeneration. Chatham, the place where Dickens spent his early childhood, represented for him the very antithesis of his London experiences: where London was a place of decay and corruption, Chatham was a paradise of innocence, an idyllic world characterised by its colour and vitality: Forster describes it as the "birthplace of his fancy", with its "busy varieties of change and scene" and its "gay, bright regiments always going and coming, the continual parading and firings, the successions of sham-sieges and sham-defences, the plays got up with his cousin in the hospital, the navy pay-yacht in which he had sailed to Sheerness with his father, and the ships floating out in the Medway, with their far visions of sea" (1: 13–14). F.S. Schwarzbach argues that Dickens's association of Chatham with the ideal of childhood and of London with filth and corruption suggests that he saw his own move from country to city as a "secular equivalent of the Fall" (p. 16). In Dickens's mind, then, his own personal experiences ritually affirmed the universal pattern of man's fall into sinfulness, making his own experiences in the city resonate Everyman-like with an all-encompassing moral and spiritual paradigm.

⁴⁴ John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, 2 vols (London: Chapman and Hall, 1876), 1: 17, 25.

⁴⁵ Forster's *Life*, 1: 17.

The notion of the city as a fallen, hell-like world as opposed to the Eden-like countryside was not merely a Dickensian motif – the city haunted the Victorian imagination: the rapid growth of urban industrialisation meant that more and more people were migrating to urban areas: living conditions in the city rapidly deteriorated because of the growing urban population, and those living there experienced feelings of isolation – a sense of being alienated from the social and moral codes of their rural communities. In contrast people’s lives in the countryside were governed by clearer values and mores.⁴⁶ The horrors of town life led people to idealise their rural beginnings, infusing them with associations of a “pastoral dream, the myth of a lost rural Eden”.⁴⁷

The city of the Victorian imagination had a particularly religious colouring: Alexander Welsh notes that although the nineteenth century was an age where religion was invoked in a vain struggle to obscure the growing tendency towards secularism, it was also to a large extent an age still “steeped in the tradition – Pauline, Augustinian, and Puritan – of two cities: the earthly city of men and the city of God”.⁴⁸ Tellingly, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, which dramatically portrays the binary between the earthly and the heavenly city, enjoyed immense popularity in the nineteenth century. In *The Old Curiosity Shop* Dickens draws on Bunyan’s description of Christian’s journey away from the City of Destruction and towards the Celestial City: as Welsh points out, in this novel Dickens evokes the common associations of the earthly city with death: the death-like corruption of city life is portrayed as far more damaging than Nel’s literal death at the end of her journey (p. 59). Thus Dickens’s imaginative response to the city is shaped by notions of the transcendent which have their source in a far-reaching Christian tradition.

Both despite its dark and ominous nature and because of it, the city continued to attract Dickens throughout his life. It was a mark of his restless imagination that he was unable to sleep at night and, often, this would drive him into the streets where he would wander through the city until daybreak. The city at night captured his imagination in the way that it seemed to mirror his own troubled mood: his sketches reveal the “restlessness of a great city, and the way in which *it* also tumbles and tosses before it can

⁴⁶ Alexander Welsh, *The City of Dickens* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971) pp. 9–10.

⁴⁷ Schwarzbach, *Dickens and the City*, p.21.

⁴⁸ Welsh, *The City of Dickens*, p. 141.

get any sleep”.⁴⁹ He was drawn by the city’s beauty such as the vitality and variety of Covent Garden,⁵⁰ but he was just as attracted to its squalor and misery: Forster remembers his friend’s passion for St Giles’s and the way in which his experience of it caused “wild visions of prodigies of wickedness, want and beggary” to “[arise] in [his] mind”.⁵¹ His love of fantasy and the grotesque further led him to nurture a passion for the places of death in the city, its graveyards and its morgues.⁵² From this one can deduce that the city’s vices and virtues came alive in Dickens’s fantasy, becoming possessed of a surreal and haunting quality.

But the city was also to him an allegorical tableau which concealed within it truths of a more universal nature. In the 1850s Dickens decided to help Miss Coutts remove a London slum in order to build housing for the working class.⁵³ He describes one of the scenes he observed thus: “there was a wan child looking over at a starved white horse that was making a meal of oyster shells. The sun was going down and flaring out like an angry fire at the child – and the child, and I, and the pale horse, stared at one another in silence for some five minutes as if we were so many figures in a dismal allegory”.⁵⁴ This is an almost apocalyptic vision: the dying sun flaring at the child suggests the threat of death or even of damnation. This notion of frailty is crystallised in the image of the author staring at the pale horse and wan child: in the author’s musing notion that they were like “so many figures in a dismal allegory” the physical infirmity of the figures is given overtones of spiritual frailty, in which Dickens, who stands silently looking at them, becomes implicated himself. In an article on London for the *All Year Round* entitled “A Small Star in the East” (1868), Dickens describes the city in terms of the Medieval allegorical satire – *The Dance of Death*. The original satire was a Medieval allegorical concept that was usually expressed in a literary or visual form: it portrayed death as a universal fate to which people from all walks of life – the young, the old, the rich and the poor – are brought. Its intention was to warn people of the ultimate frailty of humankind

⁴⁹ Forster’s *Life*, 2: 289.

⁵⁰ Schwarzbach, *Dickens and the City*, p. 25.

⁵¹ Forster’s *Life*, 1: 14.

⁵² Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1990), p. 519.

⁵³ Fred Kaplan, *Dickens: a Biography* (New York: William Morow, 1988) p. 262.

⁵⁴ Madeline House and Graham Storey, *et al*, eds, *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, 12 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965–2002) 7: 2.

and the insubstantiality of a life dedicated to the pursuit of material wealth. Dickens's article changes the emphasis of the original irony: rather than seeing death as the leveller of all men, he describes it as the starvation that cruelly overcomes the poorer classes in particular, a death that is far more brutal than that depicted in the original satire. The "squalid maze of streets, courts, and alleys or miserable houses" that Dickens finds on the "borders of Ratcliff and Stepney" are personified in his imagination as a "bare, gaunt, famished skeleton, slaying his way along".⁵⁵ This figure becomes the allegorical embodiment of the scenes of suffering and desperation which Dickens encounters in the different working-class houses that he enters.

Various bizarre sights that Dickens encountered in the city – such as a woman dressed in black who had been driven insane by the death of her brother, or a tapeworm that had been removed from somebody's stomach – became a source of more profound meaning for the author: he saw the city as the imaginative hub of his novels and many of their most evocative scenes were inspired by his countless city ramblings, which were often deliberately undertaken with a novel in mind: in preparation for *Hard Times* he passed through the "blast furnaces and belching chimneys" of Wolverhampton. He looked down "from the high railway arches upon the pit mouths and the flaming kilns in the blackened landscape",⁵⁶ and it was here that he conceived of the dark working world of Coketown in which the people, like H.G. Wells's Morlocks, inhabited a shadowy and threatening underworld. During the time when he was writing *Edwin Drood* Dickens stayed in Piccadilly with his two daughters where he made many night-time excursions to slums and police stations. With Fields he visited a "dockside opium den, where curls of hallucinatory smoke rose from long-stemmed pipes into his imagination for later use".⁵⁷ F.S. Schwarzbach argues that the city in *Edwin Drood* becomes indexical of "the interior space of a single soul".⁵⁸ This is an interesting suggestion and is worth pursuing: the scene when Jasper and Durdles descend into the crypt is particularly revealing:

⁵⁵ Charles Dickens, "A Small Star in The East", in *The Uncommercial Traveller*. London: Chapman & Hall, 1901, p. 258.

⁵⁶ Edgar Johnson, *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph*, rev. and abridged edn (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 406.

⁵⁷ Kaplan, *Dickens: A Biography*, p. 542–3.

⁵⁸ Schwarzbach, *Dickens and the City*, p. 219.

Among those secluded nooks there is very little stir or movement after dark. There is little enough in the high tide of day, but there is next to none at night. Besides that the cheerfully frequented High Street lies nearly parallel to the spot (the old cathedral rising between the two), and is the natural channel in which the Cloisterham traffic flows, a certain awful hush pervades the ancient pile, the cloisters and the churchyard after dark which not many people care to encounter.⁵⁹

Here the city around them seems to reflect the spiritual death within Jasper himself: notably Dickens does not focus on the main road of the city but instead his focus is on the unfrequented byways, the hidden nooks which are pervaded by a ghostly hush. These secret nooks seem to suggest the hidden nature of Jasper himself. This death-like atmosphere becomes more hellish as the two ‘pilgrims’ emerge from the crypt and are assaulted by Deputy, the demonic street urchin. Deputy announces his presence by dancing in the moonlight in a hideous fashion whilst showering the two men with stones. Ultimately Jasper, roused to a fury, “so violent, that he seems an older devil himself”, turns on him “[r]egardless of the fire, though it hits him more than once” (p. 120). This figure, in the way in which it incites Jasper to a brutal rage, seems to be an allegorical embodiment of the former’s demonic passions, a culminating image of the death-like infernal atmosphere evoked by the hidden city streets. So for Dickens the city is ultimately both indicative of a universal hell and also symbolically bound up with the psychology of each individual.

Yet, while his cities are in the main fallen – an underworld populated by demonic beings – Dickens, like his contemporaries, is reluctant to discard St Augustine’s Heavenly City altogether. Alexander Welsh notes that the “distant promise” of Heaven can be felt in his novels just as it was still present, though faded, within the Victorian consciousness.⁶⁰ He argues that the good characters in Dickens’s novels are “sojourners . . . in the literal sense of St Augustine or St Paul. They are travelling beyond the earthly city, beyond death”; even though they “are within the city” they are “not of it” (p. 118). These heavenly figures are mainly women who are capable of redeeming their men and

⁵⁹ Charles Dickens, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood & Other Stories*, introd. Peter Preston (London: Wordsworth Classics, 1998; rpt. London: Wordsworth Classics, 2005) p.115.

⁶⁰ Welsh, *The City of Dickens*, p. 57.

elevating them above the moral depravity of earthly existence: little Dorrit, Agnes Wickfield and Lizzie Hexam are only a few examples. Welsh observes that the sanctification of women was central to the Victorian belief in the holy nature of the home which became a kind of replacement for heaven in an age when religious fervour was on the wane (p. 143). The home and the virtuous woman represented the triumph of life over death: this can be seen in the way in which the angelic woman achieved a kind of immortality (Nell resembled her mother and her mother before that), becoming a stable presence that authenticated the hero's identity (p. 156). Many of these women, Welsh suggests, are allegorical figures, the courtship of whom seems to invite a distinction "between the courtship of desire and of faith" (p. 176). Interestingly, the function of these women as Welsh describes it, is strikingly similar to the role of Dante's Beatrice: like Beatrice, they embody redemptive, spiritual love so that to love them does not mean to desire them sexually but to elevate oneself above worldly concerns.

Alexander Welsh suggests that ultimately the "rare glimpses of [a heavenly] city" in Dickens are "glimpses only", as proved by Sydney Carton who achieves immortality in the memories of the Darnays (p. 136), or by *A Christmas Carol*, which, for all its ghosts and suggestions of an afterlife, reduces the world beyond to a function of memory (p. 199). Thus according to Welsh, Dickens is more concerned with material reality than with transcendent truth, for in the Victorian age "it was easier to accept the reality of an earthly city than believe in the promise of a heavenly one" (p. 136). Although it is certainly true that Dickens's invocations of divinity are, at best, pale and sentimental, it seems to be taking things a little too far to suggest that Dickens's consciousness was irretrievably secular. If his experience of divinity strikes us as strained and implausible, it did not strike him as such. He entertained a very strong, almost childlike belief in the heavenly nature of his dead sister-in-law and not only he but most of his contemporaries were moved to tears by the pure and good Little Nell. Neither was Dickens's constitution anything like an atheist's. In fact he was so superstitious that Forster, in his embarrassment, omitted references of that nature from the *Life*. Dickens's attitude to the occult was ambiguous: at times he dismissed the notion of ghosts coming back from the dead as ridiculous but there are times when he sincerely seems to believe it such as when he writes in horror to Forster about his fear that ghosts may be haunting the prisoners in

the jails at night. Friday was his 'lucky' day and he believed that certain objects needed to be touched three times to avoid bad luck.⁶¹ According to Forster, Dickens was a capable conjurer. But in Bologna in 1854 Dickens went to see a conjurer who performed tricks that really impressed him and he declared himself as "having not the slightest idea of the secret".⁶² Thus he showed himself to be enchanted by the notion of magic, expressing a desire to believe in it even if he knew he was being fooled. He also had a life-long obsession with mesmerism – a healing technique according to which "the powers of the human body could be conducted and controlled by an invisible fluid". Dickens practised mesmerism frequently and became quite skilled at it so that he often sent Catherine into a trance without even meaning to. He also managed to relieve the symptoms of illness in his friends such as Augusta de la rue.⁶³ Thus for Dickens the paranormal was palpably present in quotidian life.

Rather than functioning merely in a decorative capacity to dramatise the real, horrific conditions of the city or to express a purely secular desire to be remembered for one's good deeds, the language of heaven and hell employed by Dickens belongs to an entire paradigm of thought. Dickens's city is not just *like* a possible hell: the imagery which he uses to describe the bizarre streets of London conveys the sense that hell is a very real place, a vital realm which exists just beyond the city or even at its very heart. Although the images of Heaven are sparser and more colourless, they still suggest a divine realm which very occasionally reveals itself on earth.

Dickens's sense of our world as reflecting greater, universal forces of good and evil extends beyond the metaphor of the city: on his numerous holidays, he continually reads visions of the divine and the hellish into every place he encounters – whether it is a city, a village, an isolated building, or a vast natural panorama. In 1846, up in the mountains in Lucerne, Switzerland, he came across a little outhouse which was populated by the bodies of people who had died up in the mountains and never been claimed. He describes them as all "standing up, in corners and against walls; some erect and horribly human, with distinct expressions on their faces; some sunk down on their

⁶¹ Ackroyd, *Dickens*, p. 358.

⁶² Forster's *Life*, 2: 187, 189.

⁶³ Ackroyd, *Dickens*, p. 244.

knees; some drooping over on one side; some tumbling down altogether, and presenting a heap of skulls and fibrous dust".⁶⁴ There is something piteous about these bodies, trapped forever in the snow and ice, but there is also something monstrous about their decay which brings to mind Dante's sinners trapped in the ice in the lowest circles of hell.

When Dickens went to Venice in 1844 he became utterly enamoured of it. He was deeply affected by the extreme contrasts of the Venetian cityscape – the "glory" of the piazza which was "insupportable" and which emitted a "radiant, unsubstantial Magic"; and the "awful prisons, deep below the water; its judgement chambers, secret doors, deadly nooks, where the torches you carry with you blink as if they couldn't bear the air in which the frightful scenes were enacted".⁶⁵ The Venetian landscape appeals to Dickens's sense of a universe of brilliant contrasts: here the realm of heaven, which is vital, beautiful and resplendent with light, is juxtaposed against the realm of hell, which is cloistered, dark and suffocating.

In 1841 he went to Scotland: he was impressed with what he, in a letter to Forster, referred to as the Highland's "tremendous wilds" that were "really fearful in their grandeur and amazing solitude". At the entrance to Glencoe he describes the "huge masses of rock" on the road, which sprinkle "the ground in every direction and give it the aspect of the burial place of giants". He was particularly affected by a rainstorm when returning through the Glencoe pass which he describes as covered in torrents of rain that were "rushing down every hill and mountainside, and tearing like devils across the path and down into the depths of the rocks". When describing the extreme, savage terrain of nature, Dickens turns instinctively to the language of fantasy and the supernatural. But not only does he transform such panoramas into the battlefields of epic vices, he also finds them expressive of intense personal emotional and physical states: he comments to Forster that the Glencoe pass is full of terrible haunts that "you might find yourself wandering in, in the very height and madness of a fever".⁶⁶

Where the storm of Glencoe invoked for Dickens a demonic underworld, the basin of the Niagara Falls had a very different effect on him: standing in the basin marvelling at

⁶⁴ Forster's *Life*, 1: 480.

⁶⁵ Forster's *Life*, 1: 400.

⁶⁶ Forster's *Life*, 1: 179, 181.

the cascades in 1842, he imagined himself as standing the nearest to God as one could on this earth. He “looked up” to “a fall of bright green water” which “seems to die in the act of falling” and a “tremendous ghost of spray”, which arises from its “unfathomable grave” that feels as if it has “been haunting this place” from the creation of the world. Something of the universal Christian message of death and resurrection seems to express itself in Dickens’s depiction of this scene. And certainly it did lead him to contemplate divine truths for his next thought is of his dead sister-in-law who, in his mind, was associated with divine perfection and who he imagined must walk amidst the falls often.⁶⁷

“Speaking in a circle of stage fire”

Dickens’s was a theatrical imagination and when he considered the presence of the holy and the hellish in the city or in the countryside he always conceived of them in dramatic terms. His article in the *Bentley’s Miscellany* in March 1837 fuses his love of the city with his love of theatre. Here Dickens asserts that a “Pantomime is . . . a mirror of life” and in a delightfully light and humorous manner he goes on to pick out the Pantomime prototypes that one is likely to come across in day-to-day experience: one such figure is the “elderly gentleman” who is “richly, not to say gaudily dressed” and whose comfortable position in life is signified by the “oily manner in which he rubs his stomach”.⁶⁸ Just when such gentlemen are nearest “the zenith of [their] pride and riches”, they have a laughable tendency to stumble and fall, following which they are usually set upon by a “shouting mob”, which knocks them over, destroys their neatly arranged clothing and wigs and makes off with their money and watches (p. 501). Thus, in such incidents, Dickens sees an almost ritualistic enactment of the humbling of the proud, made an attractive spectacle by its pantomimic exaggeration and buffoonery.

Yet such incidents are not isolated pockets of Pantomime amidst an otherwise ‘ordinary’ society. Rather Dickens sees the world as teeming with even more familiar

⁶⁷ Forster’s *Life*, 1: 287.

⁶⁸ Charles Dickens, *Dickens’s Journalism: Sketches by Boz and other early papers 1833–39*. ed. Michael Slater (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1994), p. 501.

dramatis personae of Pantomime: the pantaloons who are “the most debauched” of all the Pantomime figures and who spend their time “swarming at the west end of town” whilst engaged in “ineffectual attempts to be young and dissolute” (p. 502); the clowns, who take “lodgings which [they have] not the slightest intention of paying for” and who obtain “goods under false pretences” and swindle “everybody they possibly can” (p. 503); and the harlequins who “are just ordinary men, to be found in no particular walk or degree, on whom a certain station, or particular junction of circumstances, confers the magic wand” (p. 505). Such observations, argues Dickens, suggest that Shakespeare’s words ring true – “all the world is a stage”, although he emphasises that for him the play is a Pantomime (p. 507).

This article was written in defence of the Pantomime which, people were beginning to feel, was losing its magic. Yet it can be taken as a defence of Dickens’s particular artistic vision: rather than providing a realistic picture of life, Dickens’s imaginative world is peopled with figures that seem to have stepped right off the Victorian stage – grotesque Vice figures such as Quilp or comic exaggerations such as Mr Micawber – figures which are steeped in the hyperbolic rhetoric of Melodrama and whose theatrical actions recall Pantomime and Farce.

From when he was a small child and his nurse Mary Weller used to tell him horror stories, Dickens began to develop a taste for the melodramatic. He recalls one year when he received a mask for Christmas, a mask which terrified him so much that he would awaken during the night crying out, “O! I know it’s coming! O! the Mask!”⁶⁹ The stylised nature of his terrified cry is reminiscent of the gothic horror stories on which Dickens was raised but it also expresses a very particular quality of his imagination – his ability to infuse inanimate objects with a surreal life. The very lifelessness of the mask – its unchanging expression – becomes a source of terrible life so that it transforms into a kind of demonic presence which haunts the child’s imagination.

His early intensely melodramatic response to the mask could be the response of an actor in a melodrama to a dramatic figure of vice. As I have already mentioned in

⁶⁹ Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Tree* (1850), in ed. Ernest Rhys, *Christmas Stories From “Household Words” and “All The Year Round” By Charles Dickens* (1910; rpt. London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1917), p. 5.

chapter one, Dickens's earliest imaginative responses were shaped by melodrama which flourished in England throughout the nineteenth century: at the Haymarket and the Adelphi theatres one could see operas, burlettas, extravaganzas, and shows,⁷⁰ whose artistic merit was dubious but which nevertheless drew on far reaching dramatic traditions.

When he was seven, Dickens was taken to London to watch the Christmas pantomimes where he was particularly taken with the striking features of the clowns.⁷¹ The pantomime was thus one of his first theatrical experiences. Coral Lansbury suggests that pantomime offers a "secular and consoling rendition of that final day of judgement when all will be changed as the gates of heaven open for the saved and hell gapes for the damned".⁷² The transformation scene in particular is a "joyful prefiguration of that moment of terrible and divine mystery foretold in *Revelation* when the last trump will sound and 'we shall all be changed'". But the potentially unsettling nature of this transformation of the stage and characters is averted by the "knockabout harlequinade" which follows (p. 46). Thus in the world of the pantomime the young Dickens encountered a dramatic blending of the secular and transcendent realities, of the solemn contemplation of the mysteries of divinity and damnation with a more worldly comic irony. Here too he encountered depictions of the Medieval Vice figure, the "monstrous villain", who, in the world of pantomime was "changed into the Clown" and had to possess the "ability to tumble" (p. 47). Every Clown embodied selfishness and Grimaldi's clown was a more sinister figure (p. 48). This is perhaps where the first seeds were sown in Dickens's imagination for the figure of Quilp who seamlessly combines immense comic vitality with the "motiveless malignity" of the Vice.

His child-like imagination, fascinated with the quasi-magical world of the pantomime was matched by his sharp, worldly wit – his desire to 'see through' the world of the play and to show it up as a sham: when he was a child, Lamert, a friend of the family, used to take him to the Theatre Royal in Rochester where he saw productions

⁷⁰ Davis, *The Flint and the Flame*, p. 58.

⁷¹ Johnson, *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph*, p. 25.

⁷² Coral Lansbury, "Pecksniff and Pratfalls", in *Dramatic Dickens*, ed. Carol Hanbery MacKay (London: Macmillan Press, 1989), p. 46.

such as *Richard III*, *Macbeth*, *The London Merchant* or *The History of George Barnwell*.⁷³ Later he recalled laughingly how his “young heart leapt with terror as the wicked king Richard, struggling for his life against the virtuous Richmond, backed up and bumped against the box in which he was” or his horror at king Duncan who kept rising from the grave in the guise of somebody else.⁷⁴ Thus the theatre appealed both to Dickens’s sense of the transcendent as well as to his sense of the ludicrous. When Dickens was a young teenager at Wellington House Academy in the period of 1824–6, he was becoming conscious of his theatrical power – his ability to manipulate people and situations: it was at this time that he distinguished himself amongst his companions for his sense of fun and frequent engagement in daring pranks: one companion recalls how the young Dickens convinced his class-mates to join him in Drummond Street where they all pretended to be beggars and asked old ladies for money. When the old ladies were shocked by their audacity, Dickens, unable to contain his laughter, would run away as fast as he could.⁷⁵

To Dickens, then, the theatre was play – it involved the knowing creation of fictions, a kind of light-hearted deception. But it also was a space where he could make sense of the chaos of life, where he could manipulate the raw material of his experiences into dramatic and allegorical patterns. In his mind’s eye he would preside god-like over the theatrical space as he did over his toy theatre when he was a child: on the tiny stage, he first made the cardboard characters perform plays such as *The Miller and His Men* and *Elizabeth* or *The Exile of Siberia*. So immersed did he become in the drama of these plays that he would “read and act . . . out the scenes” while his brothers merely moved the players.⁷⁶ His exuberance for the world of drama extended also to his circle of friends – a certain Mr Walsh, a childhood friend of Dickens, recalls enacting a play with the young Dickens in the back kitchen of Dan Tobin’s house. They made the “Tragedy” so deep that they were sure that if there had been an audience “they would have cried”.⁷⁷

⁷³ Ackroyd, *Dickens*, p. 35.

⁷⁴ Forster’s *Life*, 1: 12.

⁷⁵ Forster’s *Life*, 1: 49.

⁷⁶ Ackroyd, *Dickens*, p. 38.

⁷⁷ Forster’s *Life*, 2: 488.

But his appreciation of theatre was not confined to passive attendance at the melodramas or to private games. His was the consciousness of a performer and from a young age he developed his dramatic skills: Dickens's family was musical and inclined towards the performing arts – his mother loved to dance and his sister excelled at the piano. The young Charles used to perform popular tunes and lyrics as well as vocal comedy for his family who delighted in his talents. Thus from an early age he developed a performer's personality.⁷⁸ His nurse Mary Weller remembered him reciting his favourite passages such as *The Voice of the Sluggard* by Dr Watts and singing little ditties, especially sea-songs.⁷⁹ He sang at parties and even composed his own songs such as the comic *Sweet Betsy Ogle*. He was also very skilled in the performance of the "monopolyogue" which involved one person impersonating all the characters in a short play, expressing each of their idiosyncrasies "by means of stock phrases, comic mannerisms and the mimicry of dialect".⁸⁰ In acts such as this one, Dickens developed his sense of character as taking shape from the interplay of spoken language and dramatic gesture.

In Dickens's mind, the theatre always interacted closely with literature: he recalled his passion for reading when still in Chatham between 1816–21: "When I think of it the picture arises in my mind, of a summer evening, the boys at play in the churchyard, and I sitting on my bed, reading as if for life". It was this passion that led him to write his own tragedy which was based on one of the *Tales of Genii* and which was called *Misnar, the Sultan of India*.⁸¹ This play, which is about a wise prince who was frequently attacked by demons and monsters,⁸² melds Dickens's love of theatre together with his love of the fantastical – a combination which would form the cornerstone of his imaginative vision in later years.

Novel-writing and the theatre continued to coexist as twin poles of his imaginative engagement with the world although he only made a serious living out of the former. In his youth, however, Dickens seriously considered becoming an actor and when he was 20 he decided to write to apply for an acting position to the stage manager at Covent

⁷⁸ Kaplan, *Dickens: a Biography*, pp. 26, 27.

⁷⁹ Ackroyd, *Dickens*, p. 39.

⁸⁰ Ackroyd, *Dickens*, p. 40.

⁸¹ Forster's *Life*, 1: 10–11.

⁸² Ackroyd, *Dickens*, p. 38.

Garden. He wanted deliberately to model his career upon that of Charles Mathews, the comic actor who was famous for his imitation of stock character types such as the gossip, the street urchin or the foreigner.⁸³ Eventually a date for an audition was made where Dickens would be allowed to play any one of Mathews's parts that he chose. However, this turned out to be an aborted dream, for on the day of the audition Dickens came down with a bad cold and never re-scheduled it.⁸⁴

Notwithstanding his early abandonment of the theatre as a serious profession, Dickens remained passionately engaged in it. He continued to see a variety of melodramas, farces, pantomimes and operas and he continued to act on the amateur stage. Dickens's admiration for the comedy of Charles Mathews profoundly influenced his own acting style: he drew on Mathews's acting technique in *Mr Nightingale's Diary* where his performance was distinguished by his versatility – his ability to enact a variety of characters in quick succession.⁸⁵ Over and above his admiration for the comedy of Charles Mathews, Dickens also entertained a profound respect for the work of the actor, William Macready. Macready played roles in many tragedies, particularly those of Shakespeare. Earle Davis notes that, apart from Shakespeare's plays, Macready also acted in poetic tragedies of the eighteenth century, romantic melodramas, as well as serious Victorian tragedies written by important dramatists such as Knowles, Talfourd, Byron, and Bulwer-Lytton.⁸⁶ Davis describes Macready as "an emotional actor, always overplaying a part", which meant that he "performed with vigour scenes calling for madness, extreme anger, violent feeling or oratorical displays of rhetoric" (p. 60). The repetitive motif of murder and violence that one finds in Dickens's plots may owe something to Macready's depiction of criminal passions. Davis notes that Macready was particularly good at portraying the extreme guilt experienced by a criminal after a crime (p. 60): here again his influence is discernable in Dickens's novels – in the piteous figure of Miss Havisham, wracked by her sense of her own irredeemable shame, or in the haunted consciousness of Sykes as he wanders through a demonic terrain, his pursuers

⁸³ Ackroyd, *Dickens*, p. 139.

⁸⁴ Forster's *Life*, 1: 49.

⁸⁵ Ackroyd, *Dickens*, p. 631.

⁸⁶ Davis, *The Flint and the Flame*, p. 60.

encroaching ever nearer. Throughout his work Dickens shows himself to be obsessed by questions of violence and guilt, the symbolic possibilities of which he continues to exploit.

The adult Dickens indulged in numerous expeditions to the theatre and some of his enthusiasm for it was captured in his novels – one only has to think of the magic of David's first experience at the theatre or of Pip's wry delight in Wopsle's poor rendition of Hamlet. When Dickens was a young man he immersed himself in the theatrical entertainment of Rochester and Chatham and often watched Edmund Kean and Charles Mathews perform at the Theatre Royal or attended the occasional Melodrama, farce or tragedy.⁸⁷ While in Albaro in 1844, he went to see two operas – *Sacramuccia* and *The Barber of Seville* as well as a Russian circus. In 1853, in Rome, he enjoyed a production of the opera *Moses In Egypt*. He also went to see the performance of the Marionetti whom he found in a "sort of stable attached to a decayed palace". This performance enchanted him because of its fairy-tale like magic but also, conversely, because he found it delicately handled, natural and life-like.⁸⁸

But his understanding of what constituted 'realism' in theatre was not straightforward: at the *Ambigu* in Paris in the 1850s he went with Collins to watch a production of *Paradise Lost*. He was thoroughly unimpressed with the naturalness of the supernatural personages and found the presentation of the conflict between the heavenly and infernal powers, which was in "conversational French", quite ridiculous, complaining that all the supernatural beings walked "about in the stupidest way".⁸⁹ Thus, in order for the transcendent world to be convincing to Dickens it has to be presented as a world infused with the magic of the paranormal, the sense of a reality which surpasses and intensifies ordinary experience – the French production failed him by being too 'real', too mundane.

Dickens had quite a reputation as an amateur actor and, while on holiday in America in 1842, he was invited to play in various theatricals such as *A Round For Oliver*; *Two o'clock in the Morning* and either *The Young Widow* or *Deaf as a Post*.⁹⁰ Every New

⁸⁷ Johnson, *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph*, p. 25.

⁸⁸ Forster's *Life*, 1: 373, 170.

⁸⁹ Forster's *Life*, 2: 200.

⁹⁰ Forster's *Life*, 1: 373.

Year's Eve he would hold Twelfth Night celebrations for his family at Travistock House, on the first floor of which he had built a stage in a back room. His son, Charley Dickens, remembered how his father used to control proceedings – inventing new songs for the children to sing, revising and adapting the plays and checking that each child knew his or her own part.⁹¹ In the performance of such theatricals, then, Dickens was able to manipulate the theatre as if it were a symbolic space at his disposal. But it was always a place of immense enjoyment – in 1844–5 Travistock House saw the production of children's theatricals such as *Tom Thumb* and *Fortunio* which involved a lot of fun and laughter on the part of the adults and Dickens played the part of Gaffer Thumb's ghost.⁹² Among the other amateur theatricals in which Dickens was involved were Collins's *The Lighthouse*, performed in Travistock House in 1855, Jonson's *Every Man in his Humour*, first performed in 1845, Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor* performed instead of *The Alchemist* in 1848, and *The Frozen Deep*, first performed on the 6 January 1857.

The role Dickens played in Jonson's *Every Man in his Humour* is particularly revealing about his acting style as well as his conception of character. Dickens not only played the character of Bobadil but he *became* him: Forster notes that long before he actually played him onstage he “[talked] and [wrote] Bobadil, till the dullest of our party were touched and stirred to something of his own heartiness of enjoyment”. Thus Dickens's strength as a performer lay in his ability to bring a variety of characters to vivid life by infusing them with his own vitality. Dramatis personae with vivid extremes of emotions were more appealing to him than subtler psychological studies: Forster observes that one of the reasons why Bobadil appealed to him was because of the extreme contrast between his initial “bombastic extravagance” and his later “tragical humility and abasement”.⁹³

Here as in other amateur theatricals Dickens was not only an actor but also acted as a prompter, director, stage-carpenter, band-master and property-man, jobs which he performed admirably, creating out of the chaos and confusion, a “cosmos . . . of

⁹¹ Ackroyd, *Dickens*, p. 648.

⁹² Forster's *Life*, 2: 158.

⁹³ Forster's *Life*, 1: 435, 436.

cleanliness, order and silence”.⁹⁴ In the combination of his acting skill and managerial abilities, one can see the two sides of Dickens’s personality: his vitality and love of extremes and his love of control, his need to order his theatrical universe meticulously, to structure the confusion into a cohesive whole.

Of all his roles, Dickens’s performance of Wardour in *The Frozen Deep* was perhaps the most intense: the role became an outlet for his own unhappiness as his marriage began to fall apart. Dickens channelled his feelings into his performance so that he brought Wardour’s anguish vividly to life: this was evident in the frenzied way in which he rushed from the stage in the last act. The emotional urgency with which he played the role captivated his audience and everyone including his fellow actors was moved by his “death scene”. Although Dickens was concerned with making the production as realistically convincing as possible – he “devised novel lighting effects, simulating the changing hours of the day, from bright sunshine through crimson sunset to the grey twilight and the misty blue of the night” – it was the passionate depiction of Wardour that moved people.⁹⁵ Thus Dickens’s power was a more abstract one which found its expression in the depiction of the extremes of guilt and selflessness which characterise Wardour. This is the zenith of his imaginative achievement – his ability to create out of ordinary, human characters figures that are almost superhuman in their intense emotions.

It has already been suggested that Dickens’s notion of what made theatre convincing was fairly complex. In fact he believed that it was more possible to find deep truths in the stylised world of theatre than in ordinary life: Jean Ferguson Carr notes how Dickens denounces the “falseness possible when a person acts in his world, and [promotes] the ‘reality’ evoked when a person acts on stage”.⁹⁶ This she suggests is because theatre draws attention to its artificiality, inviting audiences not to accept the world it presents as the ‘real’ world but to look beyond the surface of the action to the meaning concealed within it. This implies that Dickens sees the theatre as a deliberate

⁹⁴ Forster’s *Life*, 1: 436.

⁹⁵ Johnson, *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph*, p. 440.

⁹⁶ Jean Ferguson Carr, “Dickens’s Theatre of Self-Knowledge”, in *Dramatic Dickens*, ed. Carol Hanbery MacKay (London: Macmillan Press, 1989), p. 32.

metaphor, seeking to crystallise and organise the truths of life in a way that offers “focussed and preserved clarity” (p. 32). Arguably the figure of Wardour, steeped in the rhetoric of melodrama, revealed more of the ‘truth’ of Dickens’s emotional condition to his audiences than his public persona did. In the rehearsed and dramatised, Dickens found deeper meaning than in the natural: Carr notes that after Dickens had a dream about Mary Hogarth he felt the need to rehearse it a number of times before he could convey its original sense of reality (p. 33).

Not acting but reading

The widespread effect of the Victorian theatre on Dickens’s novels has been well-documented and has been shown to have had a profound effect on the development of his imaginative vision: Carolyn Buckley LaRocque suggests that Dickens draws on ritual patterns in *David Copperfield* and that by employing the techniques of the Victorian stage he finally “animates these patterns into rites”.⁹⁷ Mary Saunders discusses the ‘floor scenes’ of Dickens’s women characters, scenes that are often of a confessional nature and in which the characters usually collapse on the ground in melodramatic desperation. Saunders suggests that these scenes are something more than histrionics and that they allow for the sympathetic engagement with a character’s inner life through outward melodramatic expression.⁹⁸ Judith L. Fischer examines the various ways in which Dickens makes use of the ‘sensation scene’ – a scene which normally occurs at the climax of a novel or play and which is identifiable by heightened “rhetorical and dramatic rhythm”. Such scenes normally involve extravagant visual effects and extreme life-threatening situations.⁹⁹ She argues that in his later novels Dickens makes use of these scenes to embody the characters’ inner moral struggle which is intensified to the point that it is universalised, becoming “larger than life” (p. 153). The arguments of these critics suggest

⁹⁷ Carolyn Buckley LaRocque, “A Ritual Passage in Three Acts”, in *Dramatic Dickens*, ed. Carol Hanbery MacKay (London: Macmillan Press, 1989), p.53.

⁹⁸ Mary Saunders, “Lady Dedlock Prostrate: Drama, Melodrama, and Expressionism in Dickens’s Floor Scenes”, in *Dramatic Dickens*, ed. Carol Hanbery MacKay (London: Macmillan Press, 1989), p. 77.

⁹⁹ Judith L. Fisher, “The ‘Sensation Scene’ in Charles Dickens and Dion Boucicault”, in *Dramatic Dickens*, ed. Carol Hanbery MacKay (London: Macmillan Press, 1989), p. 153.

that Dickens uses the conventions of melodrama in order dramatically to convey a deeper symbolic meaning.

Given Dickens's love of Victorian theatricals and his use of the techniques of melodrama within his novels, it could be argued that melodrama formed the kernel of his imaginative vision. However, to say that Dickens's novels are merely melodramatic is to ignore what ultimately sets his writing apart from the histrionics of the Victorian stage and what made him a far better writer than he was a script-writer. When Dickens was still very young, whilst writing *Pickwick Papers*, he wrote a burletta which was entitled *The Village Coquettes* and which was adapted from one of his own stories. He also turned one of his stories, *The Great Winglebury Duel*, into a farce. These plays written in Dickens's youth involved conventional, melodramatic plots and were not particularly effective: years later Dickens suggested that he was not partial to writing farce because of his desire to weave symbolic meaning into his plots.¹⁰⁰ Although the dramatic nature of Dickens's early novels in particular made them appeal to theatrical adapters, they lost a lot in translation: Regina Barreca, writing about George Almar's melodramatic adaptation of *Oliver Twist* in 1838, argues for the literary sophistication of the novel. She notes that the play simplifies the complexity of Nancy as a moral agent by omitting any reference to "prayer, heaven or God" in her murder scene and thus denies her the redemptive qualities given to her by Dickens.¹⁰¹ Peter Ackroyd suggests that ultimately Dickens's "gift lay in symbolic narrative rather than in dialogue, in creating characters who dwell in language rather than ones who dwell upon the boards".¹⁰² This implies that the characters and plots of Dickens lose something when they are translated into pure melodrama for in essence the power of Dickens's work lies in his linguistic flair.

The novels, then, seem to occupy the hinterland between the kind of literature where the language takes on a dynamic life of its own and meaning is generated by the very form of the narrative, and the staginess of melodrama, where meaning is communicated through histrionic action. This blending of symbolic narrative with overt,

¹⁰⁰ Ackroyd, *Dickens*, p. 187.

¹⁰¹ Regina Barreca, "The Mimic Life of the Theatre': The 1838 Adaptation of *Oliver Twist*", in *Dramatic Dickens*, ed. Carol Hanbery MacKay (London: Macmillan Press, 1989), p. 91.

¹⁰² Ackroyd, *Dickens*, p. 188.

theatrical expression was nowhere better captured than in the public reading tours which Dickens undertook: the first time that he read in public was in December of 1853 in Birmingham when he read from *The Cricket on the Hearth* and twice from *A Christmas Carol*. It was here that he realised the enormous power which he wielded over his readers, the way in which he was able to instil within them his own intense emotions and beliefs: he was particularly impressed on his second reading of *A Christmas Carol* when he was loudly applauded by the working people of Birmingham.¹⁰³

Later he began the reading tours in earnest and continued to have a profound impact on his audiences: during his reading tours at Dover, his audience would not leave after the performance but sat there applauding heartily and they laughed at Squeers reading the boys' letters with such "cordial enjoyment" that Dickens himself began to laugh with them. At times his power over them was so great that he caused them to express the extreme emotions in which he indulged in his own novels: during his reading tour in America in 1868, a young girl was so moved by the death of Tiny Tim that she burst into uncontrollable grief.¹⁰⁴

Thus Dickens's readings were an "extraordinary exhibition of acting that seized upon its audience with a mesmeric possession": he could people "his stage with a throng of characters" merely "by a change of voice, by gesture, by facial expression".¹⁰⁵ The purpose of the whole setting was to focus the audience's attention on him and to raise their expectations by delaying his arrival onstage. When, finally, he arrived the stage was set so that his very presence generated power.¹⁰⁶

Peter Ackroyd suggests that the readings had a "mesmeric effect" – they were in fact more of a "spectacle" than a "performance", more of a "kind of haunting" (p. 983). Each action of the characters such as Bob Cratchit "sniff[ing] and smell[ing] the pudding in his house" would be enacted by Dickens and he would mimic in exaggerated tones the way in which each figure spoke, making use of his whole face to convey the characters' emotions. Rather than act out his characters he would *become* them, impersonating

¹⁰³ Ackroyd, *Dickens*, pp. 683, 684–5.

¹⁰⁴ Forster's *Life*, 2: 299, 426.

¹⁰⁵ Johnson, *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph*, pp. 472, 473.

¹⁰⁶ Ackroyd, *Dickens*, p. 980–1.

them so completely that he gave a child in the audience the impression that he was no longer Mr Dickens but Starleigh and then the young girl student who interrupted Bob Sawyer's party. Dickens's reading of Nancy's murder by Sykes, first performed in St James's Hall on the 5 January 1869 was a kind of "Theatre of Terror", playing on the Victorian audience's love of violence and horror.¹⁰⁷ So immersed did Dickens become in this scene that it took absolute possession of him: his son Charley recalled one day, when he was working in the study, hearing the sound of a violent quarrel outside which he at first dismissed as a domestic row between a tramp and his wife. However, when he heard blood-curdling yells and screams he rushed outside thinking that he would have to intervene. Instead he found his father savagely murdering an imaginary Nancy.¹⁰⁸ Yet the power of such scenes still rested principally in the novelistic language out of which they arose: despite the dramatic nature of the scenes which he read, he "remained a reader", never quite acting out the scenes but only suggesting them.¹⁰⁹ The readings reveal how his work is both on the brink of theatrical expression and immersed within the language of the novel.

'The common world of dreams'

There is, however, another language which shapes his vision – the language of dreams. Fred Kaplan emphasises the importance which Dickens ascribes to dreams, his conviction that the "primal force of life" was located in the unconscious.¹¹⁰ This, he suggests, can be seen in Dickens's belief that dreams have the power to reveal to us more about our "true selves" than everyday reality, in the way in which they can unearth the "demons of the mind" (p. 30).

On February 2, 1851, Dickens wrote a letter in response to an article entitled "Dreams" which was written by Dr Stone.¹¹¹ In the letter he emphasises three

¹⁰⁷ Ackroyd, *Dickens*, pp. 983–4, 10038–9.

¹⁰⁸ Johnson, *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph*, p. 552.

¹⁰⁹ Ackroyd, *Dickens*, p. 986.

¹¹⁰ Kaplan, *Dickens: a Biography*, p. 30.

¹¹¹ *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, 6: 276–279.

characteristics of dreams: firstly, he suggests that people dream of things with which they are consciously preoccupied, “in a sort of allegorical manner”. He describes the nature of these allegorical dreams in the following way: if some concern is occupying his conscious mind he observes that he won’t dream of it directly but he may dream of “trying to shut a door that *will* fly open, or to screw something tight that *will* be loose” (p. 276). Thus such dreams reveal one’s inner, emotional turmoil metaphorically through the presentation of seemingly unrelated occurrences.

Another aspect of dreams, Dickens suggests, is their universality. Just like the mythologies of Medieval allegories which evoked a shared, Christian truth, Dickens asserts that “taking into consideration our vast differences of mental and physical constitution” our dreams have a “remarkable sameness in them” (p. 278). Thus in the dream-world the social categories of upstanding citizen and social deviant fall away, leaving a more primal interplay of vicious and virtuous passions which are common to all of us.

Finally, Dickens suggests that as a person dreams, there is a “waking and reasoning faculty of the brain” which is aware that the person is dreaming. Often the fantastical events of the dream are tempered by a vague consciousness of the world without, which undermines the effect of the dream phantoms in an “occasional endeavour to correct our delusions” (p. 279). Another aspect of these part-dreams is the way in which events outside the dream affect the nature of the dream itself. An example of this is Dickens’s dream in Italy when the figure of Mary Hogarth was suggested to his unconscious self by the sound of ringing bells (p. 277). These part-dreams, Dickens suggests in *Oliver Twist*, make us conscious of the mind’s “mighty power, its bounding from earth and spurning time and space, when freed from the restraint of its corporeal associate”.¹¹² If at such times one becomes aware of the superiority of the dream-world, its ability to transcend ordinary reality in power and significance, at other times the real world appears as a more palpable and threatening version of what is only dimly perceived in dreams: this is what Warrington Winters suggests when discussing Jonas’s dream in *Martin Chuzzlewit* where Jonas’s sinister plan to kill Tigg with a club threatens to break

¹¹² Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, p. 106.

through the allegory of a “public festival in a strange city”.¹¹³ These fictional dream experiences involve a continual interplay between the tangible, real world and the intangible allegorical phantasmagoria of dreams. Significantly, Dickens, even when he is not writing a dream sequence, often achieves this effect where his narrative hovers uncertainly on the brink of the symbolic world of dreams but never strays entirely from a sense of the real, material world so that “reality and imagination become so strangely blended that it is afterwards almost a matter of impossibility to separate the two”.¹¹⁴

In the chapter on Venice in *Pictures From Italy* Dickens deliberately blurs the boundaries between dream and reality allowing the city of Venice to emerge in snatches from a stream of images. He describes a “crowd of objects” that “wandered in the greatest confusion through [his] mind” and from which the city of Venice begins to take shape.¹¹⁵ The effect of this dream-like narrative is to infuse the literal sights of Venice with a profound significance, transforming it into an allegorical terrain that seems to suggest a transcendent reality: the night-time tour through the city in the Gondola is transformed into an almost Stygian scene when Dickens describes himself floating “over the dark water” towards a “light upon the sea” which soon becomes “a cluster of tapers, twinkling and shining out of the water”. The Dantean overtones of a journey through a hell-like world of the dead are reinforced when Dickens describes them as passing by a “cemetery, lying out there, in the lonely sea” and which loomed out at them “through the gloom” (p. 383). Through his flitting and dream-like imagery, Dickens creates an image of hell accentuated by his descent from “the cheerful day into two ranges, one below another, of dismal, awful, horrible stone cells” (p. 387), where he encounters the monstrosity of death and judgement. Yet Dickens’s contemplation of the marvels of Venice also generates images of perfection and perhaps even of divinity – when he first sees it in the light of day he describes it thus: “The glory of the day that broke upon me in this Dream; its freshness, motion, buoyancy; its sparkles of the sun in water; its clear blue sky and rustling air; no waking words can tell. But, from my window, I looked down on

¹¹³ Winters, “Dickens and the Psychology of dreams”, p. 993.

¹¹⁴ Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, p. 309.

¹¹⁵ Charles Dickens, *American Notes and Pictures From Italy* (1846) (London: Chapman & Hall, 1901), p. 382.

boats and barks; on masts, sails, cordage, flags; on groups of busy sailors working at the cargoes of these vessels; on wide quays strewn with bales, casks, merchandise of many kinds; on great ships lying near at hand in stately indolence; on islands crowned with gorgeous domes and turrets; and where golden crosses glittered in the light, atop of wondrous churches springing from the sea!" (p. 385). This is hardly the heaven of Dante's *Paradiso* where the souls, transfigured into their perfect forms, revolve in their spheres in perfect harmony. But it is a kind of worldly paradise, a land of plenty which basks in its splendour and wealth: its glorious churches seem less heavenly than material, embodying the pinnacle of human achievement. Thus Venice comes to represent for Dickens something more than itself: it becomes an allegorical city, a universal terrain in which visions of paradise and inferno meld into one another.

In this chapter I have traced the shaping of Dickens's imaginative output by cityscapes, melodrama and his performance in amateur theatricals; all of which come together in his novels to create a dreamlike world which evokes a more universal mythology. My exploration of Dickens's imaginative experiences is not intended to conflate his biography with his fiction. The author's imagination is not a knowable entity in any straightforward way and I do not wish to make any claims about Dickens's psychology or his private mental world. Rather, the purpose of this chapter has been to bring to light aspects of Dickens's life that have a bearing on the relationship between realism and allegory and which may be seen working themselves out in his art.

The tendency of Dickens's writing to occupy a kind of hinterland, a world at one remove from daily reality, has affinities with the "liminal space" in romance. Although it is not my concern in this thesis to pursue the affinities of Dickens's work with romance or fantasy, a few words should be said about his evocation of the liminal condition as this is a significant aspect of his allegorical method. Sarah Gilead describes the liminal space as a dramatic rendering of a "transitional ordeal" in which the "liminal passenger" is "detached from a prior condition of social membership" and finds himself in a place which is "necessarily outside the ordinary classificatory systems". This space invokes a

transcendent and shared mythology which it ritually affirms.¹¹⁶ Gilead notes that the desire to “conflate disorienting changes in social structure with ritualist/mythic patterns of transformation” was in fact a feature of Victorian writing at large: theirs was an “age in transition” and many Victorian writers attempted to assuage their fear that their society might collapse into chaos by imaging “history as a purposive, logical, even providential narrative” (p. 186). In Dickens’s narratives this universal language is of a particularly Christian character and is dramatically charged with images of Christian damnation and redemption. In this it recalls the language of Medieval allegories which ritually affirm the Christian pattern of innocence-fall-redemption. The following chapter will be a formal examination of the various ways in which the transcendent realm is evoked in different types of allegories – *A Pilgrim’s Progress*, the Morality plays and *The Divine Comedy* – all of which, it will be shown, had an impact on Dickens’s imaginative development.

¹¹⁶ Sarah Gilead, “Liminality, Anti-Liminality and the Victorian Novel”, *ELH*, 53.1 (Spring, 1986): 183–197 (p. 183).

CHAPTER THREE

ALLEGORY IN DICKENS

Ever since the Romantics, allegory has suffered from criticism that depicts it as inferior. In the third of his 1818 lectures, when discussing Spenser, Coleridge noted that the “dullest and most defective parts of Spenser are those in which we are compelled to think of his agents as allegories” and that we appreciate Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* because his characters strike us as “real persons, who have been [allegorically] nicknamed by their neighbours”.¹¹⁷ Thus Coleridge largely dismisses allegory as an ineffectual and reductive mode of writing which simplifies character and event rather than providing a deep insight into experience. Coleridge’s analysis of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* suggests that the more transparent allegory is the less effective it becomes: his praise for the lifelikeness and vividness of Bunyan’s creations suggests that Bunyan’s allegory appeals to him because it is opaque rather than pure.

Coleridge’s Romantic predilection for the symbol over the allegorical emblem is emphatically present when he compares the two narrative modes: in the seventh of his 1819 lectures he argues that in allegory a distance is maintained between the idea being expressed and the fictional means by which the author expresses it. This means that, as with a parable, the reader must make an imaginative leap from the literal story to the figurative truth lying beyond it. In this, he argues, it differs from the symbolical which reveals the ‘truth’ in a more meaningful way because it is “itself a *part* of that whole of which it is representative”.¹¹⁸ In an article for the *Statesman’s Manual* written in 1816 his sense of symbolism’s superiority is even more marked: here he suggests that allegory “is but a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language” whereas symbolism is far

¹¹⁷ *The Philosophical Lectures Of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Hitherto Unpublished*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (London: Pilot Press, 1949), p. 108.

¹¹⁸ *The Philosophical Lectures of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, p. 418.

more versatile since the symbol “is characterised by a translucence of the special (i.e., of the species) in the individual, or of the general (i.e., of the genus) in the special, or of the universal in the general; above all by the translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal”.¹¹⁹

The distinction that Coleridge makes between allegory and symbolism is comparable to the distinction commonly made between metaphor and metonymy. Metonymy is a rhetorical device which functions in a similar way to Coleridge’s symbolism because it involves the “synecdochal substitution of part for whole”.¹²⁰ Thus a word or image is extended to suggest a greater context through the associations that it calls to mind: the image of the writer’s pen in the poem, *Digging*, for example, is closely associated with the farmer’s spade so that Seamus Heaney’s vocation as a writer evokes his father’s trade, suggesting that he is building on the family tradition rather than departing from it.¹²¹ Metaphor is closer to Coleridge’s definition of allegory: Charles Hartman suggests that the double significance of a metaphor is created by the structure of the metaphor rather than suggested by “linguistic evidence” in the poem or novel in which it is used: the ‘tenor’ or subject of the metaphor is often not explicitly stated but embodied in the ‘vehicle’ or signifier.¹²² This kind of language is used by Dickens in *A Tale of Two Cities* when he describes the revolutionaries as a “living sea” which rises “wave on wave, depth on depth” and overflows the city (c. xxi, p. 245). Here the image of the raging sea dramatically embodies the crowd’s abandonment of their humanity in their desire for vengeance. The way in which metaphorical language gives precedence to the signifier as a means of accessing the signified, calls to mind Coleridge’s definition of allegory as a fiction which obliquely suggests a transcendent significance. But, as has already been noted, Coleridge argues that this division between the signifier and signified is what makes allegory less accessible than symbolism, where the literal and symbolic

¹¹⁹ Samuel Talyor Coleridge, *The Statesman’s Manual*, in *Lay Sermons*, ed. R. J. White, vol. 6 of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, Bollingen Series LXXV (Princeton, 1972), p. 30.

¹²⁰ Geoffrey Hartman, “The Voice of the Shuttle: Language from the Point of View of Literature”, *The Review of Metaphysics* 23.2 (Dec., 1969): 240–258 (p. 241).

¹²¹ Seamus Heaney, *New Selected Poems 1966–1987* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 1.

¹²² Charles O. Hartman, “Cognitive Metaphor”, *New Literary History* 13.2 (Winter, 1982): 327–339 (p. 332).

levels are fused.¹²³ This, he asserts, is because allegory is the more conscious and formalised of the two approaches and so simplifies greater truths rather than spontaneously suggesting them as symbolism does.

Coleridge's depreciation of allegory was shared by many nineteenth century writers and critics: Thomas Carlyle in *On Heroes and Hero Worship* asserts that "Men do not believe in an Allegory" and that Dante's *Commedia* is so powerful because it is written with "entire truth of purpose" and if it makes use of emblems it is also "unconscious of any emblemizing" since to Dante Hell, Purgatory and Paradise were "indubitable awful facts".¹²⁴ Here again is the suggestion that allegory is stilted and that to write allegorically means to diminish the poetic force of one's argument. Thus in order to argue for Dante's poetic genius Carlyle attempts to undermine the importance of his use of allegory or even to suggest that it cannot really be read as allegory at all.

The notion of allegory's limitations remained a commonplace in critical thinking right up into the last century so that critics continued to provide insubstantial definitions for the term. In his influential book *The Allegory of Love*, C.S. Lewis attempts neatly to separate the definition of allegory from that which he terms "sacramentalism or symbolism".¹²⁵ His argument runs along these lines: both forms, he suggests, are concerned with the "fundamental equivalence between the immaterial and the material" (p. 44). However, they go about this in different ways: the allegorist restricts himself to depicting the 'inner life' of an individual by using personifications. Thus he begins with the immaterial – the feelings and thoughts of an individual – and creates fictions or abstractions to embody and depict these impressions. This definition of allegory recalls that of the Romantics who shifted allegory's focus away from the objective presence of universals in the cosmos to their "own reaching out (or reaching in) towards them".¹²⁶ Thus for Lewis, as for the Romantics, allegory is principally a means of representing one's inner consciousness. Symbolism, by contrast, seeks to depict an invisible world through

¹²³ *The Philosophical Lectures of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, p. 418.

¹²⁴ Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus and On Heroes and Hero Worship* (London: J.M Dent and sons, 1908; rpt. London: J.M Dent and sons, 1964), p. 330.

¹²⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 87.

¹²⁶ Carolyn Van Dyke, *The Fiction of Truth: Structures of Meaning in Narrative and Dramatic Allegory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 289.

concrete images taken from material reality: thus, according to Lewis, the symbolist sees our world as itself “the allegory” which reflects a transcendent world that is “more real” (p. 45).

The way in which Lewis defines these terms implies two basic assumptions about allegory: the first is that an allegorist always begins with a set of abstract ideas for which he attempts to find signifiers. Thus he works from the unknown to the known, while the symbolist works in the opposite direction, using the known world to suggest the world beyond. However, this distinction is problematic since it assumes that it is possible for a reader to tell whether the writer starts with a world of signified and then sets out to find signifiers, or whether he starts with a signifier and points it at possible mysterious signifieds.

The second assumption that Lewis makes about the nature of allegory is that it is a far more determinate system of signification than symbolism. According to Lewis, the connection between figure and figured is absolute in allegorical writing, whereas a symbol, which does not ascribe meaning so definitively, is far more open to interpretation. This leads him to conclude that allegory is a system of personification, the effects of which are fairly reductive. According to this definition, allegory is most effective when it describes psychological or emotional states, and is not as well-equipped as the more versatile symbolism to describe the ineffable world beyond. One can detect, in this argument, resonances of Coleridge. But the temptation to dismiss allegory as the ‘weaker twin’ of symbolism persists into modern times: William Kerrigan describes allegory as the “literary analogue” of philosophy’s dream to create a “clear and explicit language requiring no special act of interpretation because its interpretation is already conveyed in its sense, *is its sense*”.¹²⁷ Thus, like Lewis, Kerrigan argues that allegory is a far more transparent mode of expression than symbolism. He further suggests that allegory’s very transparency has a reductive effect on the language of poetry and literature because, like philosophy, allegory is “discourse with a limit” whereas “poetry is chaos” (p. 273).

¹²⁷ William Kerrigan, “Milton’s place in intellectual History”, in Dennis Danielson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Milton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 271.

This belief that allegory forcibly harnesses the language of poetry and literature to a limited meaning is in fact untenable. A.D. Nuttall in *Two Concepts of Allegory* shows that the distinction between allegory and symbolism as Lewis and Kerrigan define it, is difficult to uphold: he contests Lewis's assumption that symbolism is a far more effective mode to describe the metaphysical, by suggesting that we necessarily use the figurative language of allegory to describe both the human mind and transcendent concepts such as God, Heaven and Hell.¹²⁸ Because of this, he argues, one cannot reduce allegory's scope solely to personification for its language is "infected with metaphysics" and indeed many seminal allegories such as Dante's *Commedia* are principally concerned with investigating the nature of the transcendent realm (p. 46).

Having muddled the waters of Lewis's simple separation of allegory from sacramentalism, one is still left with the baffling question of what precisely allegory is. The question is not an easy one to answer without going into a lengthy discussion; but since this is not possible here, I will attempt to trace out the main points of the debate: John Whitman suggests that up until recently, most students of Medieval allegory have agreed that it is, at its most basic, an "oblique way of writing",¹²⁹ which "says one thing, and means another". This definition acknowledges that there are two levels of signification in allegory –one literal and one metaphorical. It further stipulates that the literal meaning diverges from the symbolic (p. 2). There must, of course, be some correspondence between the literal and figurative levels as well as a divergence. Thus the literal level must always "point to a goal that lies beyond it" (p. 13).

John Whitman and Phillip Rollinson both note that allegory is made up of the convergence of two traditions. The first tradition is called "interpretive allegory" and involves a philosophic and metaphorical reading of classical texts. The second tradition is known as compositional or creative allegory: this refers to the creation of a narrative in which personified concepts interact.¹³⁰ Whitman further asserts that compositional allegory is not solely a mode based on the use of personifications – even if it is at its most

¹²⁸ A.D. Nuttall, *Two Concepts of Allegory*, p. 20.

¹²⁹ John Whitman, *Allegory: The Dynamics of an Ancient and Medieval technique* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 1.

¹³⁰ Whitman, *Allegory: The Dynamics of an Ancient and Medieval technique*, p. 4.

effective when it is. Instead it can involve a kind of extended metaphorical narrative where the literal level corresponds more generally to the symbolic: thus, for example, instead of using a personified figure to represent wise actions, one could describe the careful steering of a ship (p. 7). However, according to Whitman, allegory always threatens to undo itself because there is a “literal element . . . [to it] which cannot be allegorized” (p. 4). Thus some of the characters’ actions, conversations or even some of the imagery used to describe a certain scene lend authenticity to the literal setting of the narrative and because they are not immediately ‘translatable’ into an abstract significance, the whole allegory is in danger of falling apart.

This view of allegory suggests that it is a narrative precariously suspended between the literal and the figurative modes of signification, where the former always threatens to overwhelm the latter. This implies that the literal level of allegory is incapable of conveying meaning in and of itself and that it primarily exists as an oblique way of indicating the symbolic level. But in later years this undermining of the literal level as merely an aid to the symbolic has been contested. Carolyn Van Dyke in *The Truth of Fiction* questions the meaning of “saying one thing and meaning another” often ascribed to allegory. She argues that it is not possible to separate the two levels of meaning – the fiction of the text and the supposed truth to which it points – so precisely, and emphasises the importance of the literal level of a text: in the *Psychomachia* she notes how all the details describing Luxuria do not individually embody the abstract concept of Luxury but are attractive in themselves. But rather than distracting us from the true significance of the figure of Luxuria, the fascinating materiality of these details in itself suggests the significance of Luxuria as an unrestrained indulgence in sensual pleasures.¹³¹ Thus, for Van Dyke, while allegory shows “the conviction that the intelligible is more authentic than the sensible . . . [it also shows] the equally important belief that the sensible nonetheless participates in intelligible reality” (p. 65). This definition of allegory which emphasises the continuity between the literal and the figurative levels of meaning, brings it closer to Lewis’s symbolism. Thus although allegory implies a wide gap between signifier and signified, it is not possible to differentiate it from ‘sacramentalism’ where

¹³¹ Van Dyke, *The Fiction of Truth*, p. 53.

the signifier in some way participates in the signified. Van Dyke's definition of allegory suggests that it is a dynamic process which involves the recurrent shifting of perspective between the concrete and the universal, so that one may "apprehend intelligible truth as materially real, or . . . recognize material reality's participation in universal truth" (p. 111).

Maureen Quilligan notes that allegory concerns itself "self-reflexively with language" in a way that is more particular than other literature (p. 282). But this alone would not distinguish it from other literary tropes such as irony or the pun – all of which involve a certain play with words, a "mode of expression" as C.S. Lewis might say. The point of this survey has been to show that allegory cannot be simplified. It is not merely a "mode of expression", a flourish of style. It is this; but it is also more: it is also a "mode of thought", a way of harmonising the particular with the universal. Fundamentally all theories agree that allegory makes "coherent sense" on two levels of signification: the literal or explicit level as well as an implicit, related level of meaning.¹³² However, Van Dyke's suggestion that allegorical narrative is a vision of human life "as a continual interchange between temporal event and eternal pattern" seems more tenable than Whitman and Rollinson's emphasis on allegory's obliquity.¹³³ Rather than petrifying the language of poetry and literature into a philosophical formula, allegory traces the continual modulation between the material, literal level of experience and the numinous.

At this point it is important to stipulate that my intention is not to suggest that Dickens shifted entirely towards allegory in his later novels. Although I have been discussing allegory as a genre, I do not mean to suggest that Dickens's fiction can be classed with works which are generally termed allegories. In detecting an allegorical quality in Dickens's fiction one must be careful not to fall into the critical error of Jane Vogel who believes Dickens to be a Christian allegorist and that David of *Copperfield* is "a spiritual kinsman of the Old Testament David".¹³⁴ Such a claim is a reductive interpretation of the complexity of Dickens's creative genius and imposes the critic's own allegorical reading on the text. Rather, I wish to note that among the many voices of

¹³² M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (London: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005), p. 5.

¹³³ Van Dyke, *The Fiction of Truth*, p. 63.

¹³⁴ Jane Vogel, *Allegory in Dickens* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1977), p. 1.

Dickens's fiction – the journalistic, the realistic and the prophetic – one can also discern at times a new voice which entails an allegorical mode.

As has already been suggested in the previous chapter, one's understanding of the dramatic, the extreme and the fantastical in Dickens's fiction can be deepened by an awareness of his immersion in various allegorical traditions. I will now turn to a discussion of the ways in which Dickens was influenced both directly and indirectly by *The Divine Comedy* and *A Pilgrim's Progress* – seminal allegories – as well as the theatrical tradition of the Medieval Morality play, which was mediated to him through his contact with Victorian melodrama and the Renaissance plays of Shakespeare and Jonson. This will also involve a close analysis of the particular type of allegory employed in each work or tradition discussed.

The Divina Commedia

During the nineteenth century Dante and his *Commedia* enjoyed widespread popularity in England. In *Gladstone and Dante*, Anne Isba suggests a number of reasons for why Victorians were so drawn to the Italian poet: firstly, the Victorian era was characterised by a “nostalgia for the Middle-Ages” which was seen as “a simpler, more Christian time with clearer values”.¹³⁵ Thus Dante was appreciated for his pious Medieval Christianity, the loss of which Victorians lamented. He was also admired for his humanism, his ability to probe the depths of human psychology by exploring “sin as its own hell – and virtue as its own reward” (p. 28). Alison Milbank suggests that of Dante's *Commedia*, the *Inferno* in particular appealed to Victorians because of the fascination of “sub-Miltonic epics” and the perception of hell as a gothic realm where sinners underwent torturous sufferings.¹³⁶ The *Commedia* was also attractive to Victorians because it defines our reality in terms of

¹³⁵ Anne Isba, *Gladstone and Dante: Victorian Statesman, Medieval Poet* (Woodbridge: Royal Historical Society Boydell Press, 2006), pp. 26, 28.

¹³⁶ Alison Milbank, *Dante and the Victorians* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 170.

an absolute value system, which served as a stable moral touchstone at a time when Matthew Arnold lamented the sea of faith's "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar".¹³⁷

Victorian writers, poets and painters all responded enthusiastically to Dante's works but their love-affair with Dante was not as straightforward as it seemed: Alison Milbank has noted that Dante was not easily assimilated into Victorian consciousness and that artists were thus engaged in a continual dialogue with him, reinterpreting and refashioning his vision in the context of their own vastly different paradigm of thought.¹³⁸ Some of the varied responses to Dante's texts will be discussed briefly below.

Alison Milbank observes that both Coleridge and Macaulay, who wrote at the beginning of the nineteenth century, were drawn to the realism of Dante's *Inferno*, the palpable, authentic quality of his spiritual realm; but they were also attracted by the allure of the supernatural as well as the extreme violence and gothic horror of Dante's vision (pp. 21–26). Thus they saw Dante as both a discerning realist and a Romantic capable of accessing a symbolic world charged with an intensity of feeling. Both of these responses emphasise the darkness and fallenness of Dante's conception of the world beyond, concentrating on the *Inferno* and largely ignoring the motif of redemption explored in the *Paradiso* and *Purgatorio*. In *Sartor Resartus* (1833–4), Thomas Carlyle echoed the Romantic perception of Dante's *Commedia* in his belief that Dante was "intense in all things".¹³⁹ He further indulged in the Romantic view of Dante as a melancholy man whose imagination harped on the satanic aspects of experience: in *On Heroes and Hero Worship* (1841) he depicts Dante as a brooding, Byronic figure who suffered an unhappy marriage and came to a miserable end, exiled from the city that he loved (pp. 311–333). Milbank's discussion of John Ruskin's perception of Dante is worth summarising here: like Carlyle, Ruskin was fascinated by the grotesque and fallen nature of Dante's hell.¹⁴⁰ However, unlike Carlyle, he emphasised the motif of salvation and the fact that Dante ultimately overcomes the depths of sin (p. 38). Further, he suggested that

¹³⁷ Matthew Arnold, *Dover Beach*, iv, 25, in Lionell Trilling and Harold Bloom (eds.), *Victorian Prose and Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 594.

¹³⁸ Milbank, *Dante and the Victorians*, p. 4.

¹³⁹ Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus and On Heroes and Hero Worship*, p. 327

¹⁴⁰ Milbank, *Dante and the Victorians*, p. 37.

the strength of the *Commedia* lay in its use of allegory – its ability to place the events it depicts within a universal framework from which they can be interpreted (p. 33).

Unlike Ruskin and Carlyle, Robert Browning did not emphasise the grotesque or mysterious nature of Dante's imagination, nor did he take an interest in its allegorical quality. Rather his interest was in the possibilities that the first-person narratives of Dante's figures offer, for a more thorough analysis of human nature: Steve Ellis notes this tendency in the poem *Sordello* (1840) where Browning presents the individual as a complex psychological whole.¹⁴¹ Tennyson also reinvented Dante, recreating his allegorical figures as more realistic: *Ulysses* (1842), which is consciously modelled on Canto 26 of Dante's *Inferno*, shifts the focus away from a transcendent world of death and judgement towards a realist understanding of the individual as self-aware and possessed of an inner psychological life. While the journey that Dante's figure undertakes is ultimately emblematic of his damning pride, Tennyson encourages us to admire his Ulysses for his adventurous spirit, his desire "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield".¹⁴²

Responses to Dante's *Commedia* were not confined to literature or poetry: Dante's afterlife was also a common theme of artworks of the time. Alison Milbank suggests that Dorè's popular illustrations of *Inferno* reveal through art the Victorian emphasis on the individual consciousness: she argues that hell in these images often appears more as an inner, psychological experience than as part of a theological conception of the afterlife. This can be seen in the way in which the poets appear dwarfed by the infernal landscapes so that the power is vested in the latter: thus they do not provide an objective perspective from which the horrors of hell can be interpreted, but rather the focus is on their personal quest to "endure and then escape" hell.¹⁴³

Thus perceptions of Dante were far from uniform: he was both an important popular icon and an integral part of the Victorian intellectual community. His vision in the *Commedia* was admired for its gothic vividness, for its depiction of a world fallen into sin,

¹⁴¹ Steve Ellis, *Dante and English poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 83.

¹⁴² Lord Alfred Tennyson, *Ulysses*, 70, in *Tennyson's Poetry*, ed. Robert W. Hill Jr. (1979; rpt. New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), p.84.

¹⁴³ Milbank, *Dante and the Victorians*, p. 198.

but also for its emphasis on the possibility of redemption. To the Victorians Dante was the brooding Romantic whose imagination harped on the violent or grotesque nature of sin, but he was also seen as a realist, able to capture the world in all its infinite variety and detail. Perhaps what all these perceptions of Dante have in common is that they all find in him a way to relate present, earthly reality to an all-embracing, spiritual domain. As the search for universal significance became more and more desperate, Dante's neat Medieval theology seemed to provide an attractive but sometimes disturbing solution.

As a man who was immersed in both the popular and intellectual life of his day, Charles Dickens could not fail to be influenced by the varied responses to Dante and his works. He was in touch with commonplace assumptions about the poet, his masterpiece, the *Divina Commedia*, and his love affair with Beatrice; but his association with literary men and women, especially his extensive knowledge of Carlyle's works, meant that he was also aware of a more scholarly approach to Dante. Dickens met Carlyle in March 1840 and soon became acquainted with the social and political theories of his most important works.¹⁴⁴ It is well known that Carlyle's *The French Revolution* was the inspiration for *A Tale of Two Cities* but other of Dickens's novels such as *Hard Times* and *Little Dorrit*, owe much to Carlyle's influence. Carlyle was well read in Dante's works as can be seen in *On Heroes and Hero Worship* where he places the Italian poet alongside Shakespeare as a seminal literary figure. Thus something of Dante's sense of the Stygian would have been mediated to Dickens through him. But Dickens was probably influenced by the works of other contemporary writers and poets who were well-studied in Dante such as George Eliot and Robert Browning. Browning's works approach Dante's concerns – the role of the individual and the relationship between good and evil, from a realist perspective and with less of Dante's Medieval certainty about their place in the cosmic vision. Eliot's works are riddled with allusions to Dante that help to elucidate her social and psychological vision: in *Romola* (1862–3), for example, she alludes to important figures from Dante's *Inferno* such as Farinata to illuminate her concern with the political instabilities and rivalries of fifteenth century Italy. Both of these interpretations of Dante helped to shape Dickens's own notion of the Dantesque.

¹⁴⁴ Michael Goldberg, *Carlyle and Dickens* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1972), p. 20.

In his own writings, Dickens mentions Dante three times: the first is in *Pictures From Italy* (1846) where he describes “The Stone of Dante, where (so runs the story) he was used to bring his stool, and sit in contemplation. I wonder was he ever, in his bitter exile, withheld from cursing the very stones in the streets of Florence the ungrateful, by any kind remembrance of this old musing place, and its association with gentle thoughts of little Beatrice!”.¹⁴⁵ Here he shows at least a cursory understanding of the pains of Dante’s exile as well as the redemptive qualities associated with Beatrice, although in this allusion she appears more as a worldly love and comfort than as an uplifting, spiritual one. There is also a passing reference to Dante in *Little Dorrit* when Dickens notes rather deprecatingly of Mr Sparkler that that gentleman knew of the poet as “an eccentric gentleman in the nature of an Old File who used to put leaves round his head, and sit upon a stool for some unaccountable purpose, outside the cathedral of Florence”.¹⁴⁶ This satirical allusion to Mr Sparkler’s lack of real appreciation for or understanding of Dante implies at least that Dickens regarded himself as better acquainted with the poet. Finally Dickens alludes to the Italian poet in a letter to Forster written in Lausanne in 1846: it was here where he met a number of English travellers, upon whose idiosyncrasies he delighted in expounding. One of these individuals was a Lord Vernon whose “singular delusion” with rifle-shooting was such that he won all sorts of prizes that he carried “from place to place, in an extraordinary carriage” and only saw his wife once every six months.¹⁴⁷ Dickens found it quite melancholy to contemplate such a life and thought that it was all the more of a pity since the Lord was “well-informed” and “a great Italian scholar deep in Dante” (p. 476). This little anecdote reveals the two sides of Dickens’s imaginative vision: his delight in the absurdities of human nature coupled with his respect for the profound and poetic. The way in which Dickens uses Dante’s name in this instance suggests that he felt the name to be synonymous with a sophisticated literary intellect.

How well Dickens knew Dante cannot be easily determined. However, it is very likely that he read the *Vita Nuova* and at least parts of the *Commedia*. Stephen Bertman shows that his household inventory of 1870 includes a copy of Flaxman’s illustrations of

¹⁴⁵ *American Notes and Pictures From Italy*, p. 504.

¹⁴⁶ *Little Dorrit* (1857), p. 524.

¹⁴⁷ Forster’s *Life* 1.: 477.

Dante's *Hell*, *Purgatory* and *Paradise* which were accompanied by selections from the scenes that they illustrated. In the same inventory is a "56-volume illustrated anthology of Italian poetry" that once belonged to Leigh Hunt. Significantly this anthology contains the complete works of Dante written in the original Italian.¹⁴⁸ Dickens's Gadshill Library catalogue shows that he was also in possession of an 1867 translation of Dante's *Vita Nuova*, entitled *Dante's New Life* and translated by Charles Eliot Norton.¹⁴⁹ This illustrates that even towards the end of his life, Dickens continued to show an interest in Dante's works.

The extent of the influence of Dante on Dickens's imaginative development cannot be established but in a lot of his work one can find what appear to be Dantesque echoes. For example Dickens's records of his experiences in Italy, down to the most casual observances, seem to take on a Dantesque flavour: when in Albaro in 1844, he was completely taken with the "impenetrable blue" of the sea which had such an "absorbing, silent, deep, profound effect" that he began to think that it "suggested the idea of Styx".¹⁵⁰ Strangely, and even jarringly in this context, Dickens's dwelling on the classical marsh of hell summons up the terrain of Dante's *Inferno*. Perhaps the most Dantesque of Dickens's Italian experiences was the visionary dream of his sister-in-law, Mary Hogarth, which he had on the 30th September 1844 when in Genoa. The way in which this dream is described seems to recall Dante's spiritual love for Beatrice: Dickens dreams that Mary appears to him dressed like the Madonna in blue. She recoils from his affectionate address to her as 'dear' and he feels as if he shouldn't have "addressed [her] so familiarly" since she is not of his "gross nature".¹⁵¹ He immediately apologises. Although this is but momentary in Dickens's dream, it seems to evoke Beatrice's anger and belittlement of Dante when she appears to him in the Earthly Paradise. Soon afterwards, however, Mary is moved by "heavenly compassion" for Dickens and when he asks her

¹⁴⁸ Stephen Bertman, "Dante's Role in the Genesis of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*", pp. 171, 172.

¹⁴⁹ John Harrison Stonehouse, *Catalogue of the Library of Charles Dickens From Gadshill. Catalogue of His Pictures and Objects of Art. Catalogue of The Library of W.M Thackeray And Relics From His Library* (London: Piccadilly Fountain, 1935), p. 26.

¹⁵⁰ *American Notes: And Pictures From Italy*, p. 365.

¹⁵¹ *Forster's Life*, p. 388.

which faith is the best she says the Catholic is the best for him. Here a divine woman attempts to redeem Dickens's spiritual life in a manner that recalls Dante's divine Beatrice. Of course Dickens was in Italy and thoughts of Catholicism and the Madonna could not have been far from his mind in a country where that faith was so prevalent. Yet the Dantesque overtones of the dream – the indeterminate heavenly realm in which Dickens finds himself; the pure, spiritual nature of the woman whose spirit comes to save him after she was taken from him by death when she was very young and the strong emphasis on religion – are too tantalizing to ignore entirely.

Stephen Bertman provides a strong argument suggesting that Dickens modelled *A Christmas Carol* on Dante's *Divina Commedia*. He notes that both stories focus on the overcoming of pride and trace the path of a sinful individual towards salvation – Dante himself in the *Commedia* and the miser Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*.¹⁵² Further, he observes, each figure's spiritual crisis is imaged as a "waking dream" which begins in gloom and obscurity and develops into a journey through various instances of sin and punishment (p. 167). The two are different in that the focus in *A Christmas Carol* is primarily on temporal reality – Scrooge's past, present and future – rather than on the afterlife. Nevertheless, both works are concerned with the interaction between the temporal and the universal and both can be read as an allegorical confrontation with the nature of sin and salvation. It is tempting to argue that here Dickens, in the manner of many of his contemporaries, was both drawing on Dante's vision and reshaping it.

Allegory in the *Commedia*

In order to establish the possible influence of the *Commedia* on the allegorical quality of Dickens's imagination, it will be necessary to turn to a brief examination of the type of allegory used in Dante's magnum opus. In the *Convivio* Dante distinguishes between two types of allegory – the "allegory of poets" and the "allegory of theologians".¹⁵³ The distinction, as Dante defines it, is similar to that made earlier between metaphor and

¹⁵² Bertman, "Dante's Role in the Genesis of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*", p. 167.

¹⁵³ Van Dyke, *The Fiction of Truth*, p. 211.

metonymy: like metaphorical writing, the “allegory of poets” involves the substitution of image for concept; the “allegory of theologians”, by contrast, creates a greater continuity between image and concept in the manner of metonymy: it is, in the words of Charles Singleton, an allegory of “this and that”.¹⁵⁴ If Dante follows his own distinction as outlined in the *Convivio*, then the kind of allegory which he writes in the *Commedia* must be the “allegory of poets”. However, if one attempts to read the *Commedia* in this way, in which the literal meaning of the text is seen merely as a veil behind which the more significant figurative meaning is concealed, one will be disappointed. Read as the “allegory of poets”, there are many details in the *Commedia* that would seem puzzlingly irrelevant. One has only to consider the figure of Farinata rising up out of the tomb of heretics in order to discuss his fixation with Florentine politics or the admired Brunetto Latini suffering the punishment of the sodomites whilst giving intellectual advice to Dante about his future and the future of Florence. Certainly the figures and events encountered in these circles of hell do not seem immediately to correlate with the particular type of sin being explored. In fact Dante’s literal experience in the hereafter is so realistic and terrifying in itself that it is not easily translatable into allegorical terms.

This has given rise to quite a bit of confusion amongst critics: Carolyn Van Dyke notes that the allegory of the *Commedia* is a “vexed question”¹⁵⁵ among Dante scholars and that many of them, notably Coleridge, have denied that it is an allegory at all (p. 205). Moreover the desire to read the *Commedia* as standing somehow apart from traditional allegory, has led to some important contributions to Dante studies, those of Eric Auerbach and Charles Singleton being foremost among them.

Both Auerbach and Singleton argue for the primacy of the literal text of the *Commedia*. According to Singleton Dante is not writing the “allegory of poets” but “allegory as Holy Scripture”.¹⁵⁶ Like the events described in the Bible, Dante insists that his journey to the realm beyond is immutable, historical fact. But, just as the history in the Bible reflects another meaning “concerning our journey, our way of salvation, here in this life” (p. 16), so too does Dante’s “irreducible journey . . . time and again recall that

¹⁵⁴ Charles Singleton, *Commedia: Elements of Structure* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), p. 89.

¹⁵⁵ Van Dyke, *The Fiction of Truth*, p. 206.

¹⁵⁶ Singleton, *Commedia: Elements of Structure*, p. 14.

other journey where the prologue scene placed us, our journey here". Thus the allegorical meaning of the *Commedia* is not conveyed by inviting us to "see through the event there as if it were not there, not by washing out the literal" (p. 13). Rather the literal journey continually recalls and refines the theme of the path of the soul towards salvation.

In *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, Auerbach argues that the *Divina Commedia* is a significant example of the shift that occurred in literature after the rise of Christianity – a shift towards realism. Because of the Christian insistence that man must not try to avoid his fate in the manner of the stoics but must suffer the conflict and turmoil of earthly experience as Christ did, Christian writings were more "worldly and concrete" than earlier works (p. 14). The Christian belief in the diversity of created things which together reflect God's grandeur shifted the emphasis towards the individual (p. 84). Thus Dante, growing up in a Christian paradigm, gave meaning to universal experience by weaving "the most personal aspects of his life into a universal context" (p. 63).

According to Auerbach the world of the *Commedia* is a kind of heightened reality: he argues that it is different from all "visions of the other world" in that in it "man's earthly personality is preserved and fixed".¹⁵⁷ Thus, rather than presenting an entirely new and abstract order of experience, Dante's vision of the afterlife incorporates and intensifies the earthly world: the sufferings of the sinners in hell do not submerge the character of the individual by making him merely an embodiment of his sins; rather the punishments illuminate and enhance the particular personalities of the sinners by representing an amplification of their characters in life (p. 114). This even applies to paradise where the souls have been transfigured into universal essences that are closer to God. Here the words of the souls connect their "heavenly rank" with their "past existence on earth" thereby "portraying the whole man, transfigured but intact" (p. 121). Thus although the "historical order and form" of the souls' earthly life have been destroyed, their memory allows them to select the crucial elements of their earthly lives

¹⁵⁷ Eric Auerbach, *Dante Poet of the Secular World*, introd. Michael Dirda, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York, NY: New York Review of Books, 2001. First publ. as *Dante als Dichter der irdischen Welt*: Walter de Gruyter, 1929), p. 114.

and so they are able to reinterpret their lives in terms of their final forms in the hereafter (p. 144).

Not only are the figures themselves intensified by their states in the afterlife but Dante also draws on concrete images from his everyday life in his metaphors. Rather than attempting to mystify meaning his metaphors strive for clarity. Thus he refers to aspects of life with which everyone at his time would have been familiar, in order to describe a world that is strange and remote (p. 154). Ultimately, Auerbach argues, because of its focus on Dante the pilgrim who is himself still alive, the *Commedia* is not so much a poem which attempts to deal with remote, philosophical concepts that have very little bearing on real life, as it is a “human drama” which traces “the danger confronting all who live” (p. 171). The fact that the dreamlike reality of the afterlife is “permeated by the memory of [our] reality,” means that “it seems real while life itself becomes a fragmentary dream” (p. 173). Finally the *Commedia* draws everything – the material and the spiritual – into an historical framework. This emphasis on the importance of history and the unfolding of an individual fate within an historical framework, leads to the “lyrical self-portraiture” initiated by Petrarch and from there to the realist novel (p. 179).

Both Auerbach and Singleton, then, emphasise the realism of Dante’s literal narrative – its palpable, authentic quality and its seeming preoccupation with the inner psyche of each individual. Carolyn Van Dyke develops this argument for the realistic quality of the *Commedia*’s literal narrative, arguing that it is an indication that he is writing an allegory of a very particular type. According to Van Dyke the allegory of the *Commedia* is “integumental allegory – narrative whose syncretic agents are not immediately apprehensible”.¹⁵⁸ What she means by this is that the universal meaning is not concealed within the literal narrative but that there is a delay in the revelation of meaning; the abstractions are thus not obviously indicated, giving the sense that they are shaping the narrative from without (p. 214). Thus the action of the poem constantly generates a universal interpretation, something which is reinforced by the fact that it is set in a supernatural realm governed by divine principles (p. 215).

¹⁵⁸ Van Dyke, *The Fiction of Truth*, p. 214.

From Carolyn Van Dyke's analysis of Dante's allegory in the *Commedia* it is clear that one cannot attempt to read the universal into the particular by "affix[ing] abstract labels" so precisely to "as many events and characters as possible" (p. 215), something which would be more acceptable with personification allegory. Rather, Dante avoids making the connection between image and idea absolute (p. 217) so that the reader is continually required to search for the correlation between them: for example Dante's conversations with Farinata and Cavalcante in the circle of the heretics do not immediately correspond with the sin of heresy, necessitating a closer examination of the relationship between the two sinners and the sin which they represent (p. 216).

From the above discussion, one can conclude with Van Dyke that the *Divina Commedia* traces the "never-completed movement towards understanding" (p. 246). It acknowledges the limitations of our language and attempts to discover the pattern of God's creation which is "never fully discernable through any human medium" (p. 246). Thus Dante's allegory creates the sense of a transcendent truth which encompasses our imperfect reality and towards which our reality can only gesture.

Dickens's indebtedness to Dante's allegorical method is evident in the way in which he invests certain figures and places with a dramatic intensity that gestures towards a transcendent realm. Like Dante, he conceives of punishment as an allegorical externalisation and crystallisation of a figure's inner passions which are damnably entrapping: this can be seen in figures such as Mrs Clenham whose funereal appearance dramatises her imprisonment within her pride, or Magwitch, whose obsessive filing at his leg comes to embody his self-destructive vengeance. This allegorical depiction of the inner moral states of his characters evokes a wider paradigm of sin and judgement so that the moral state transcends the individual and is universalised. Thus Dickens's allegorical method evokes Dante's in that he creates a strong link between allegorical markers and an intensification of moral significance, in a way that demands a simultaneous awareness of both levels of signification.

The Pilgrim's Progress

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries *The Pilgrim's Progress* enjoyed immense popularity: it was the most widely distributed of all English novels and it was seen as essential in the literary education of both adults and children. A. Richard Dutton argues that it had a particular appeal for the Victorians and formed the central motif of *Vanity Fair* (1847–8) and the ideological cornerstone of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868–9).¹⁵⁹ As Dayton Haskin observes, Bunyan's book was evidently not meant to appeal to the general populace: most of its characters are ultimately damned rather than saved and it sustains "the doctrine of double predestination, whereby God, with his inscrutable will, singles out only a few to be his elect".¹⁶⁰ But this moral gravity appealed to the Victorians and *The Pilgrim's Progress* became indispensable to the literary diet of learned and unlearned Victorians alike.

Most Victorians first encountered the novel in childhood, since it was perceived as a children's classic, an educational tool that would provide children with a sound set of values and grounding in religious principles: this must have been the thinking behind Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868–9) when Mrs Marsh tells her children to bear in mind Bunyan's novel which traces, as she defines it, "the longing for goodness and happiness". This, she continues, is "the guide that leads us through many troubles and mistakes to the peace which is a true Celestial City".¹⁶¹ Meg echoes this notion when she says that *The Pilgrim's Progress* is about "trying to be good" which is not always an easy thing to accomplish (p. 11). And yet this advice, although it stresses the need to live life in a decent, ethical way, is essentially far too secular to be Bunyan's. Dayton Haskin argues that Alcott has emptied Christian's experience of its biblical connotations and made him into a secular Everyman whose journey is an instructive example of how to overcome the dilemmas of middle-class life.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ A. Richard Dutton, "'Interesting but Tough': Reading *The Pilgrim's Progress*", *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 18. 3 (Summer 1978): 439–456 (p. 439).

¹⁶⁰ Dayton Haskin, "The Burden of Interpretation in *The Pilgrim's Progress*", *Studies in Philology*, 79.3 (Summer 1982): 256–278 (p. 256).

¹⁶¹ Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (1868–9) (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1963), p. 11.

¹⁶² Haskin, "The Burden of Interpretation in *The Pilgrim's Progress*", p. 276.

In fact, the religious instruction of *The Pilgrim's Progress* seems to have appealed least to its Victorian readers: John Ruskin lamented that his mother exposed him to *The Pilgrim's Progress* in the hope of making "an evangelical clergyman out of [him]"; but she never succeeded in this aim so that all he "got was the noble and imaginative teaching of . . . Bunyan".¹⁶³ This implies that Ruskin almost entirely rejects the religious dimension of *The Pilgrim's Progress* in favour of a purely imaginative enjoyment. Thomas Arnold shows more appreciation for the dogmatic aspect of *The Pilgrim's Progress* but he is very concerned to argue that while the novel "seems to be a complete reflection of Scripture", it has "none of the rubbish of the theologians mixed up with it".¹⁶⁴ The Victorian dislike of doctrine informs most responses of the time to Bunyan's book. While there are those, like Ruskin, who wholly reject that aspect of Bunyan's work, there are others who attempt to downplay and excuse it: Macaulay is quick to dismiss any "zealous persons" who are "dissatisfied with the mild theology of *The Pilgrim's Progress*", and is particularly disgusted with an "absurd allegory" written by a "raving supralapsarian preacher" to express his disapproval of Bunyan's religious doctrine.¹⁶⁵

Macaulay's protestations against those who see religious concerns as the overriding motif of *The Pilgrim's Progress* suggest that for most Victorians *The Pilgrim's Progress* seems to be first and foremost an escapist adventure story. Such perceptions have the effect of oversimplifying and undermining the searching, theological quality of the book. However, it would be untrue to say that the Victorians were completely unaware of this aspect and that their imaginations were not awakened by the striking images of salvation and damnation that Christian encounters on his journey. Macaulay describes the world of *The Pilgrim's Progress* in a way that recalls the fallen world of the Romantics:

¹⁶³ *Praeterea: Outlines of Scenes and Thoughts Perhaps worthy of Memory in my Past Life* (1886) in *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E.T.Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, vol xxxv (1908) p. 13, cit. in John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress: A Casebook*, ed. Roger Sharrock (London: Macmillan, 1976), p. 55.

¹⁶⁴ Thomas Arnold, "Letter to Mr Justice Coleridge, 30 November 1836, and passages from conversation", in *The Life and Correspondence of Thomas Arnold, D. D.*, ed. Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, D. D. (1877), vol II, p. 57, cit. in, *The Pilgrim's Progress: A Casebook*, p. 54.

¹⁶⁵ Thomas Babington Macaulay "Review of Southy's edition of *Pilgrim's Progress*", in *Edinburgh Review* (1830); reprinted in *Critical and Historical Essays of Lord Macaulay*, ed. F. C. Montague, vol. 1 (1903) pp. 335–49, cit. in Sharrock, *The Pilgrim's Progress: A Casebook*, p. 74.

... as we advance, the valley [of Humiliation] becomes deeper and deeper. The shade of the precipices on both sides falls blacker and blacker. The clouds gather overhead. Doleful voices, the clanking of chains, and the rushing of many feet to and fro, are heard through the darkness. The way, hardly discernable in gloom, runs close by the mouth of the burning pit, which sends forth its flames, its noisome smoke, and its hideous shapes, to terrify the adventurer. Thence he goes on amidst the snares and pitfalls, and the mangled bodies of those who have perished, lying in the ditch by his side.¹⁶⁶

This description evokes a kind of Odyssey through an infernal landscape: the potency of the images of sin and suffering call to mind Dante's *Inferno*. In fact, a lot of Victorians were inclined to make parallels between Christian's pilgrimage and Dante's journey through the afterlife: Gladstone, who first read *The Pilgrim's Progress* when he was ten, wrote in his diary in 1890 that Bunyan's objective style and strong personal voice reminded him of Dante.¹⁶⁷ Some writers took the analogy further: Anne Isba observes that Emilia Russell Gurney in her book entitled *Dante's Pilgrim's Progress* (1893) achieves a "remarkable Bunyanesque effect" by "objectivising Dante's first person narrative" and making the poet's journey towards redemption the exclusive focus of her tale (p. 101). Thus, the Victorians found in Bunyan, as they did in Dante, an answer to their own feeling of metaphysical exile, a text which gave a sense of universal meaning and purpose to the life of the individual.

Richard Dutton suggests that Victorians were uninterested in the spiritual quality of *The Pilgrim's Progress* and that they primarily responded to the secular consolation implicit in its affirmation of the value of human experience.¹⁶⁸ However, in light of the above discussion, this argument seems untenable. Dayton Haskin suggests that *The Pilgrim's Progress* helped Victorians to see that the Bible can be "reread –even rewritten – with considerable freedom and pleasure".¹⁶⁹ Thus the comfort which it offered its readers most definitely had a spiritual dimension: old, tired ideas about the individual's responsibility to overcome sin in order to be redeemed and to avoid damnation were imaginatively revitalised by Bunyan's allegory and given an attractive sense of immediacy and reality.

¹⁶⁶ Macaulay, "Review of Southy's edition of *Pilgrim's Progress*", p. 67.

¹⁶⁷ Isba, *Gladstone and Dante*, p. 91.

¹⁶⁸ Dutton, "'Interesting but Tough': Reading *The Pilgrim's Progress*", p. 455.

¹⁶⁹ Haskin, "The Burden of Interpretation in *The Pilgrim's Progress*", p. 278.

Dickens had read *The Pilgrim's Progress* and it clearly suggested to him the pilgrimage motif which occurs and reoccurs in his fiction. Of all Dickens's novels *The Old Curiosity Shop* was perhaps the most consciously based on Bunyan's book. In Chapter Fifteen of the novel, Nell alludes to *The Pilgrim's Progress* when she remembers reading it and wondering "whether it was true in every word, and where those distant countries with the curious names might be".¹⁷⁰ She then goes on to comment to her grandfather that she feels "as if we were both like Christian, and laid down on the grass all the cares and troubles we brought with us; never to take them up again" (p. 175). Like Christian, Nell and her grandfather are escaping from a kind of City of Destruction, although unlike Christian, whose burden represented his own ignorance of his blessed state, the burdens of Nell and her grandfather were not of their own making but were forced upon them by an evil, corrupt society.

Malcom Andrews argues that the affinities between *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *The Old Curiosity Shop* are in fact rather superficial since for Dickens, who saw the city as a breeding ground of vice, a journey towards a Celestial City would be a "contradiction in terms" (p. 17). But Andrews here seems to me to be rather too quick to dismiss the influence *The Pilgrim's Progress* evidently had on Dickens's imaginative conception of this novel. John W. Noffsinger has noted that the extent to which *The Pilgrim's Progress* influenced Dickens's thinking in *The Old Curiosity Shop* goes beyond the simple binary between earthly and heavenly city: like *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Dickens's novel concerns itself primarily with the metaphysical aspects of experience: its symbolic exploration of the conflict of good and evil through emblematic figures as well as its preoccupation with death and the meaning of life give the novel a remarkably Bunyanesque flavour.¹⁷¹

Rachel Bennet suggests that the flight of Nell and her grandfather bears a close resemblance both stylistically and thematically to various scenes from *The Pilgrim's Progress*:¹⁷² one of the most Bunyanesque of the scenes that she observes is Nell's flight to the Black Country which evokes Christian's experience in the Valley of the Shadow of

¹⁷⁰ *The Old Curiosity Shop*, p. 175.

¹⁷¹ John W. Noffsinger, "Dream in *The Old Curiosity Shop*", *South Atlantic Bulletin*, 42.2 (May 1977): 23–34 (p. 23).

¹⁷² Rachel Bennet, "Punch versus Christian in *The Old Curiosity Shop*", *The Review of English Studies*, 22. 88 (Nov. 1971): 423–434, (p. 424).

Death. It is worth pursuing a comparison between these two episodes: Dickens describes the workers in the Black Country toiling amidst “the beating of hammers and roar of furnaces, mingled with the hissing of red-hot metal plunged in water, and a hundred strange unearthly noises never heard elsewhere”. They move “like demons among the flame and smoke, dimly and fitfully seen, flushed, flushed and tormented by the burning fires, and wielding great weapons” as they “labour . . . like giants”.¹⁷³ Here the workers inhabit a hell-like realm where their frenetic energy is demonic and destructive in character. This recalls the moment when Christian, standing in the midst of the Valley of the Shadow of Death, sees the “mouth of Hell”: Christian notices the “flame and smoke” come out in “abundance” and there are “sparks and hideous noises”. He hears “doleful voices” and “rushings to and fro, so that sometimes he thought he should be torn to pieces” (*The Pilgrim’s Progress*, p. 109). Strikingly, Bunyan’s hell, like the factory of workers, is a place of wild and threatening energy.

Bennet argues that the echoes of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* become stronger in Dickens’s novel as Nell journeys closer to death but that this overreliance on Bunyan’s Christian theme imposes a rigid and restricting model on the shape of the little Nell chapters. This, she suggests, has the effect of alienating Dickens from his natural comic creativity (p. 434). However, whether one finds the actual scene of Nell’s death plausible or not, it seems a little extreme to argue that the scenes of her pilgrimage are rendered in a stilted fashion because of Dickens’s desire to ape Bunyan’s style. If Nell herself is dull, the strange and dreamlike scenes and people she encounters along the way such as Mrs Jarley and her waxworks or the gamblers who tempt her grandfather, have a certain vitality to them. Furthermore, the motif of death and pilgrimage also runs through the comic plot: Phillip Rogers notes that during his illness, Dick Swiveller is “obliged to repeat Nell’s weary pilgrimage”.¹⁷⁴ This is how Dickens describes the scene of Dick’s illness:

Tossing to and fro upon his hot uneasy bed; tormented by a fierce thirst which nothing could appease; unable to find, in any change of posture, a moment’s peace or ease; and rambling for ever through deserts of thoughts where there was no resting-place, no sight

¹⁷³ *The Old Curiosity Shop*, p. 417.

¹⁷⁴ Philip Rogers, “The Dynamics of Time in *The Old Curiosity Shop*”, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 28.2 (Sep. 1973): 127–144, (p. 141).

or sound suggestive of refreshment or repose, nothing but a dull eternal weariness, with no change but the restless shiftings of his miserable body, and the weary wanderings of his mind, constant still to one ever-present anxiety – to a sense of something left undone, of some fearful obstacle to be surmounted, of some carking care that would not be driven away and haunted the distempered brain, now in this form, now in that – always shadowy and dim, but recognisable for the same phantom in every shape it took, darkening every vision like an evil conscience, and making slumber horrible; in these slow tortures of his dread disease, the unfortunate Richard lay wasting and consuming inch by inch, until at last, when he seemed to fight and struggle to rise up, and to be held down by devils, he sunk into a deep sleep, and dreamed no more.¹⁷⁵

Dick's near-death experience is very like Christian's passing over the river into the Celestial city: his confrontation with death is described as a desperate and fearful struggle accompanied by a strong feeling of guilt. Finally, when he awakes from his delirium, he is overcome by a "sense of blissful rest" (p. 579). Unlike Christian, Dick's reward for his struggle with death is that he is allowed to live; but his experience nevertheless evokes a kind of spiritual quest through sin and towards redemption. Thus in *The Old Curiosity Shop* Dickens draws on images and motifs from *The Pilgrim's Progress* and blends them into a secular context. For Dickens, then, *The Pilgrim's Progress* provides a deeper insight into material reality by suggesting always a wider spiritual framework of which that reality forms a part. Thus in *The Old Curiosity Shop* the familiar and commonplace is transformed into something strange and quasi-allegorical which seems to occupy a place in a wider universal vision of good and evil.

Allegory in *The Pilgrim's Progress*

In his Apology for *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Bunyan defends his use of metaphorical language thus:

But must I needs want solidness, because
By metaphors I speak? Were not God's laws,
His gospel laws, in olden times held forth
By types, shadows, and metaphors? Yet loath
Will any sober man be to find fault
With them, lest he be found for to assault
The highest wisdom. No, he rather stoops,
And seeks to find out what by pins and loops,

¹⁷⁵ *The Old Curiosity Shop*, p. 579.

By calves and sheep, by heifers and by rams,
 By birds and herbs, and by the blood of lambs,
 God speaketh to him; and happy is he
 That finds the light and grace that in them be.
 Be not too forward, therefore, to conclude
 That I want solidness – that I am rude;
 All things solid in show not solid be;
 All things in parables despise not we;
 Lest things most hurtful lightly we receive,
 And things that good are, of our souls bereave.
 My dark and cloudy words, they do but hold
 The truth, as cabinets enclose gold (p. 46).

Bunyan's argument is twofold: firstly his use of allegory to communicate his spiritual message is justified by the Bible's use of parables to convey its truth. Like the Bible's truth, Bunyan suggests that the truth contained in the pages of his book should be taken seriously if we do not wish to "bereave" our souls by dismissing it. It is therefore clear that he intends his metaphors to convey truths that are spiritually enriching and not mere flights of the imagination. But a second and covert point is also implied: in his reference to the reader's need to stoop to discover the truth hidden within the simple biblical stories about "calves and sheep" and "birds and herbs", Bunyan implies that the spiritual and transcendent realm should be accessible through descriptions of concrete, ordinary experience.

Strangely, although Bunyan's argument is intended to bolster and vindicate the metaphysical gravitas of his narrative, critics throughout the ages have been impressed by the realism of *The Pilgrim's Progress*: Coleridge argued in 1830 that "in spite of all the writer's attempts to force the allegoric purposes on the Reader's mind by his strange names", we experience the characters as "real persons, who have been nicknamed by their neighbours".¹⁷⁶ Coleridge's observation about Bunyan's use of nicknaming is an interesting insight into the way in which Bunyan departs from traditional allegory: since a nickname is not a true name, a character with an abstract nickname is not a true personification; in this way the 'naming' quality of allegory has been in some way diminished.

¹⁷⁶ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Coleridge on the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Roberta Florence Brinkley (Duke University Press, 1955): 475–6, cit. in John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress: A Casebook*, ed. Roger Sharrock, 52–53.

Coleridge's position was taken up by many critics in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: J.W. Hales, writing in 1893 asserted that Bunyan "deals with realities" and "could paint straight from nature".¹⁷⁷ Macaulay further commends Bunyan's power to give "to the abstract the interest of the concrete"¹⁷⁸ noting that the figures and places that Christian encounters on his journey are all "existing beings to us" (p. 68). His praise for the palpable nature of Bunyan's imagination is echoed by Sir Charles Firth: Firth sees Bunyan as turning away from allegory towards realism, especially in the second part of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, where he seems to abandon his allegorical mission and become immersed in the drama or comedy of the literal story.¹⁷⁹ Much later, in 1951, Arnold Kettle reiterates these arguments in his suggestion that Bunyan's simple, colloquial language lends authenticity to his narrative as well as to the speech of his characters.¹⁸⁰ Both R.M. Frye and Roger Sharrock follow Coleridge in emphasising the sharply defined psychology of the figures that Christian encounters as well as the individuality of Christian himself.¹⁸¹

It is important to recognise that these critics were all writing at a time when realism was the dominant literary mode and allegory was neglected and largely misunderstood. Yet the overwhelming support for the authenticity of Bunyan's imagination – his eye for the ordinary and his understanding of human psychology – is hard to ignore. The fact that Bunyan himself suggested that spiritual truths can be found in the simplicity of one's ordinary, natural surroundings, makes it possible to propose that the realistic nature of his imagination was an important aspect of his allegory.

For C.S. Lewis the realism of Bunyan's imaginative vision in *The Pilgrim's Progress* does not obscure the abstract dimension of his work but rather interacts with it in a very

¹⁷⁷ J.W. Hales, "Folia Litteraria" (1893), cit. in Roger Sharrock, *The Pilgrim's Progress: A Casebook*, pp. 252–5.

¹⁷⁸ Macaulay, "Review of Southy's edition of *Pilgrim's Progress*", p. 68.

¹⁷⁹ Sir Charles Firth, The essay originally formed part of the Introduction to the Methuen edition of *Pilgrim's Progress* (London 1898); published separately as "*John Bunyan*, English Association Pamphlet", no. 19 (London 1911); reprinted in *Authors and Poets: Bibliographies, Criticism and Comment. The English Association Pamphlets and a Presidential Address* (London, 1968), pp. 39–64, cit. in *The Pilgrim's Progress: A Casebook*, p. 85–6.

¹⁸⁰ Arnold Kettle, "The Moral Fable", in *An Introduction to the English Novel*, vol I (1951), pp. 43–8, cit. in *The Pilgrim's Progress: A Casebook*, p. 140–1.

¹⁸¹ Roger Sharrock (Introd.), *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1966), pp. 54–61, cit. in *The Pilgrim's Progress: A Casebook*, pp. 187, 191.

particular way: Bunyan's "high theme" – his investigation of the spiritual life – is "brought down and incarnated on the level of an adventure story of the most unsophisticated type – a quest story, with lions, goblins, giants, dungeons and enchantments";¹⁸² and even this story is translated from the world of "high romance" into the terms of "the contemporary life that Bunyan knew" (p. 197). The implications of the term 'incarnated' which Lewis uses to describe Bunyan's vision, are worth teasing out: Bunyan's allegory is evident in the way in which he creates a double vision, making one simultaneously aware of the material and transcendent realities. But the incarnation or material embodiment of his abstract ideas retains our attention so that our vision is drawn towards the immanent. In Dante, by contrast, our gaze is drawn to the transcendent, as a sacrament might draw one to see God in all things. Thus Dante's method in the *Commedia* can be described by the word "sacramental" which Lewis uses in relation to symbolism. This difference in approach of the two allegorists can be seen when one compares their depiction of Heaven: Carolyn Van Dyke notes that while Dante's *Paradiso* transcends literal description, Bunyan's "redeeming vision" is ultimately "concrete and particular":¹⁸³ his heaven is "so familiar as to seem childish" and God seems to be "bound by physical laws like those of the human world" when he has to ask his messengers to tell him about his new guests (p. 185). Thus the literal realism of Dante's text always gestures upwards towards a spiritual dimension which it attempts progressively to define; but for Bunyan the numinous blends into material reality, creating a place which is "both ideal and concrete at once".¹⁸⁴ It is important to stipulate the difference between these two types of allegory since we shall see both types manifested in Dickens's fiction.

As is evident from the example of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Dickens drew the motif of a spiritual journey from *The Pilgrim's Progress*. His fiction abounds with figures whose literal travelling evokes their spiritual progress towards salvation. While some, such as Arthur Clenham, reach the secular equivalent of heavenly peace, there are others, like Mr Dorrit or Lady Dedlock, whose restless roving produces no effect on their spiritual

¹⁸² C. S. Lewis, "The Vision of John Bunyan" in *Selected Literary Essays* (1969), pp. 145–53, cit. in *The Pilgrim's Progress: A Casebook*, p. 196.

¹⁸³ Van Dyke, *The Fiction of Truth*, p. 185.

¹⁸⁴ Henry. A. Talon, "Space and The Hero in *The Pilgrim's Progress*: A Study of the Meaning of the Allegorical Universe", *Etudes anglaises*, xiv (1961), pp. 124–30, cit. in *The Pilgrim's Progress: A Casebook*, p. 162.

condition, leaving them forever trapped in their own inadequacy. All of these figures seem to inhabit two worlds: a palpably present reality defined by social and political forces and a shadowy realm of moral landscapes that magnify the characters' inner spiritual lives: the marshes in *Great Expectations* is one such landscape in the way in which it is both a real place where Pip passes his childhood years and a sinister embodiment of Magwitch's criminal passions. Thus the journeys made by Dickens's characters are 'real' journeys which evoke a figurative dimension just as Christian's world is both materially present and spiritually suggestive.

Victorian Melodrama, Shakespeare and the Medieval Morality Play

As has already been suggested, Dickens was exposed to the structures of Medieval Morality drama through his immersion in melodrama and in the works of Shakespeare: melodrama first emerged as a distinctive theatrical genre at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Its emphasis was on a greater realism, evident in its plot-based storylines and recognisable characters with whom the audience could identify.¹⁸⁵ However, notwithstanding its tendency towards naturalism, echoes of the allegorical Morality drama from which it derived, are still discernable within it.¹⁸⁶ The characteristics that melodrama shares with Morality drama will be listed briefly below:

Firstly, its basic structure is reminiscent of the earlier drama: beneath its primarily secular concerns, is an emphasis on the conflict between good and evil forces, a cosmic battle of moral principles. This conflict is presented as a protracted persecution of the good characters by the villain until he is invariably overthrown at the last minute and the play ends with the apotheosis of virtue (p. 35).¹⁸⁷ This recalls the structure of the Morality play where Mankind is corrupted by the Vice figure but ultimately triumphs over sin and is redeemed.¹⁸⁸ Mankind's movement towards salvation follows a pattern of

¹⁸⁵ Michael Kilgariff, *The Golden Age of Melodrama* (London: Wolfe Publishing, 1974), p. 16.

¹⁸⁶ Michael. R. Booth, "Melodrama and the Working Class" in *Dramatic Dickens*, ed. Carol Hanbery MacKay (London: Macmillan Press, 1989), p. 40.

¹⁸⁷ Peter Brookes, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), pp. 35–36.

¹⁸⁸ Robert Potter, *The English Morality Play*, (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 57.

innocence/fall/redemption, which is still apparent in many melodramas: Michael Booth observes that domestic melodramas trace the movement of an individual from an innocent life in the countryside towards corruption in the city. In most cases he does not succumb entirely to these forces of evil and is ultimately delivered from their destructive influence.¹⁸⁹

Melodramatic characters frequently state their moral outlook on the world.¹⁹⁰ This general tendency towards the transparent expression of the characters' moral stance recalls Morality drama where the moral principles that the characters represent become the kernel of their dramatic interaction: the "tempters must single-mindedly tempt [and] the preachers must lead men to repentance".¹⁹¹ Michael Kilgariff notes the allegorical Morality play quality of melodramatic characters when he suggests that the hero can be seen as an emblem for Christ and that the villain can be identified with Satan.¹⁹² Of all the figures of melodrama the figure of the villain bears the most striking resemblance to his Morality play predecessor: like the Vice figure of the Moralities, who attempts to "seduce, hector and mock [the Virtues]",¹⁹³ the villain of melodrama curses and mocks the hero and heroine, making them the victims of his elaborate schemes. Meg Twycross notes that the undermining of the Virtues in the Morality play is always achieved in an enjoyable and "supremely theatrical" manner: in *Mankind* Mercy is subverted by Mischief who undermines his authority by parodying his language and righteous behaviour.¹⁹⁴ The melodramatic villain is also a kind of performer whose theatrical violence against the good characters is considered by many critics to be the most appealing aspect of melodrama.¹⁹⁵ Thus the theatrical deceptions of both the villain and the Morality play Vice figures emphasise the spurious attractiveness of vice.

Finally, melodrama shares the ritualistic quality of Medieval Morality drama. Robert Potter notes that to rehearse a ritual is to accept a concept communally and this

¹⁸⁹ Booth, "Melodrama and the Working Class", p. 106.

¹⁹⁰ Booth, "Melodrama and the Working Class", p. 37.

¹⁹¹ Potter, *The English Morality Play*, p. 39.

¹⁹² Kilgariff, *The Golden Age of Melodrama*, p. 26.

¹⁹³ Meg Twycross, "The theatricality of medieval plays", in *The Cambridge Companion to the Medieval English Theatre*, p. 74.

¹⁹⁴ Twycross, "The theatricality of medieval plays", p. 73.

¹⁹⁵ John, *Dickens's Villains*, p. 48.

gives universal significance to the life of each individual.¹⁹⁶ He notes that Morality plays perform this function by presenting a “series of significant collective *actions*” with the intention of celebrating a “collective articulation” (p. 10): thus the Morality play does not merely provide entertainment for its audience; rather it affirms their participation in a universal moral order. It is a “validating performance, a tangible substantiation of higher principles” (p. 16). Michael Kilgariff notes that, like Morality drama, melodrama ritualistically affirms the existence of a universal moral realm which gives value to the lives of each individual. He observes that the “stiffly rhetorical and archaic” language of melodrama is reminiscent of the language of ritual. He further sees this ritualistic element in melodrama’s triumphant affirmation of the validity of Christian beliefs.¹⁹⁷ One might contend that melodrama’s focus is on more secular concerns and that its invocation of divine and transcendent principles is so contrived that it is no longer plausible. Nevertheless, its constant reaching towards the transcendent cannot be ignored and is a significant feature of its language: Peter Brookes notes that melodramatic rhetoric maintains a “state of exaltation” in order to suggest that the universe is “inhabited by cosmic ethical forces ready to say their name and reveal their operation at the correct gesture or word”.¹⁹⁸

During the nineteenth century melodrama was the most prominent theatrical genre and was performed in highbrow and lowbrow theatres alike.¹⁹⁹ There are a number of reasons for this widespread appeal: firstly the repressive nature of the age led Victorians to seek some degree of release which they found in the “satisfying inevitability of the melodramatic last scene climax”.²⁰⁰ Even more significantly, at a time when the evils of city life seemed overwhelming, melodrama offered people the solace of unambiguous moral categories and the certain triumph of virtue over vice.²⁰¹

Despite its predictability, prudish morality and tendency to uphold racial and gender stereotypes, melodrama had a significant (and not unfortunate) influence on the

¹⁹⁶ Potter, *The English Morality Play*, p. 11.

¹⁹⁷ Kilgariff, *The Golden Age of Melodrama*, p. 26.

¹⁹⁸ Brookes, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p. 40.

¹⁹⁹ Booth, *English Melodrama*, p. 96–7.

²⁰⁰ Kilgariff, *The Golden Age of Melodrama*, p. 11.

²⁰¹ James. L. Smith (introd.), *Victorian Melodrama* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1976), , p. viii

fiction of the time: Michael Booth observes that one can find in nineteenth century fiction the “extremes of vice, virtue, sensationalism, and pathos that one finds in melodrama” and many writers such as George Bernard Shaw acknowledged that they consciously borrowed from the genre.²⁰² Because of the qualities that they shared with melodrama, a lot of Victorian novels were easily adaptable to the stage: the novels of Walter Scott inspired Gothic melodrama and the works of Dickens, particularly *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Oliver Twist*, were often made into domestic melodramas (p. 51). As I have noted in a previous chapter, melodrama had a significant impact on Dickens’s imaginative development and he drew on aspects of the genre to form a more allegorical art.

At the beginning of this section I mentioned that Dickens was also exposed to the Medieval Morality tradition through the works of Shakespeare and the works of the Renaissance. Renaissance playwrights were still familiar with the basic pattern of the Morality play and plays of the calibre of *Dr Faustus*, *Henry IV Part One*, *Measure for Measure*, *Othello*, *Volpone* and *King Lear* took shape around the principles of Morality drama.²⁰³ Robert Potter notices “basic and sometimes mocking similarities” between *Everyman* and Jonson’s *Volpone*. Both plays use art to explore humanity’s response to certain death, contrasting the principal figure’s materialism with his mortality.²⁰⁴ Shakespeare’s plays also evoke and transform the old Morality pattern: *King Lear*, it has been widely agreed since the time of Bradley, contains conventions that strongly recall the Morality play: a “patterned cast of characters – a generalised central figure, set about with ‘virtuous’ and ‘vicious’ subordinate figures” (p. 152). Further, Potter observes the conventions of the Morality play in many of the “highly stylised and emblematic scenes of *King Lear*” such as Kent’s disgrace and Lear’s reunion with Cordelia (p. 152). In *Hamlet* Shakespeare evokes the Morality conventions in the play-within-the play. Potter argues that by juxtaposing the Morality tradition of sin and repentance against Hamlet’s ‘real-life’ dilemma, Shakespeare exposes the artificiality of the earlier tradition, suggesting that it is ultimately incapable of solving Hamlet’s troubles (p. 138).

²⁰² Booth, “Melodrama and the Working Class”, pp. 50, 176.

²⁰³ Potter, *The English Morality Play*, p. 105.

²⁰⁴ Potter, *The English Morality Play*, p. 144.

Shakespeare's plays were very popular in Victorian theatres – not only were they “the sacred province of the patent theatres” but they were also “melodramatised for the minors”,²⁰⁵ and Dickens himself was well-acquainted with them. In *Great Expectations* we see exactly this kind of melodramatising of Shakespeare: the way in which Dickens exploits this and works it into the moral and imaginative scheme of the novel, will be discussed in a later chapter.

Allegory in the Medieval Morality Play

For centuries Morality drama was universally disparaged by critics and labelled as “allegorical potpourris of personifications” which were at best “vaguely uplifting in sentiment” and which paled by comparison with the more complex and realistically convincing works of the Renaissance.²⁰⁶ Further, since they were designed to appeal to a popular audience, critics immediately considered them an inferior drama which did not make any significant contribution to the dramatic form.²⁰⁷

Criticism of the Moralities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was particularly unflattering: the Romantics who patronized allegory as picturesque and archaic were even less disposed to find artistic merit in the allegory of the Morality tradition: they found it dull, didactic and ultimately incapable of expressing the depth of the individual psyche.²⁰⁸ According to Robert Potter, nineteenth century critics, for whom a playwright's adherence to the doctrine of realism was indicative of his artistic skill, believed that the Morality plays originated in a more primitive form of allegory than the realistic cycle plays.²⁰⁹ Thus the twentieth century inherited assumptions that the Morality play tradition was characterised by wooden, uninteresting personifications engaged in the most simple and transparent of allegorical interaction. The moralistic

²⁰⁵ Booth, *English Melodrama*, p. 53.

²⁰⁶ Potter, *The English Morality Play*, p. 208.

²⁰⁷ David M. Bevington, *From Mankind to Marlowe: Growth of Structure in the Popular Drama of Tudor England* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 2.

²⁰⁸ Bevington, *From Mankind to Marlowe*, p. 208.

²⁰⁹ Potter, *The English Morality Play*, p. 37.

purpose of such plays was seen to be paramount and to override any meagre artistic merit that they might possess.

However, when *Everyman* was performed on the 13 July 1901, many of these prejudices were shown to be false: as Potter observes, the performance revealed that the “lifeless abstractions” of the Moralities were not “walking categories” but “realized figures, parts in a play” and the reviews that the play received were all enthusiastic (p. 2). Since then critics have attempted to repair the damage done to the reputation of the Moralities by endeavouring to account for their dramatic power: David Bevington observes that as early as 1910, E.N.S. Thompson took the Morality tradition more seriously, arguing that Morality plays recall the sermon tradition in the way in which they allegorically embody and define the pattern of human life in relation to a universal dimension of abstract Christian truth.²¹⁰

In the last forty or so years the work of critics such as Robert Potter and David Bevington has provided insights into the nature of the tradition and its particular use of allegory. Bevington in his important study, *From Mankind to Marlow*, argues that the Moralities present a symmetrical depiction of the opposing forces of good and evil, which battle for the possession of man’s soul (p. 119). He suggests that this pattern of personified spiritual conflict recalls the *Psychomachia* of Prudentius, an early work which took its allegorical form from the conflict of contrasting Virtues and Vices (p. 10).

This very schematic definition of the Morality plays as *Psychomachia*-like battles of virtue and vice provides some insight into the nature of a play like *The Castle of Perseverance* where the Virtues and Vices engage in armed conflict over the soul of Mankind. However, this definition does not account for a play like *Everyman* where the protagonist’s progression towards spiritual awareness is dramatised in his interaction with the allegorical embodiments of his earthly desires and attachments. Robert Potter provides an alternative definition for Morality drama which seems more tenable. He argues that the plays present the universal progression from sin towards redemption, which is explored through a central Mankind figure.²¹¹ The concepts of repentance and

²¹⁰ Bevington, *From Mankind to Marlowe*, p. 221.

²¹¹ Potter, *The English Morality Play*, p. 7.

mercy are essential to the philosophy of the Morality play which is why the *Psychomachia*, whose figures are heroic rather than human, cannot be seen as an adequate analogue for the Morality tradition (p. 37).

The crucial factor in distinguishing the allegory of the Moralities from other allegories is that it is *theatrical*: this means that it is dependent on the visual symbolism of the stage to convey a transcendent significance. Morality plays draw on the Medieval traditions of mime and pageantry (p. 34), which can be seen in the way in which a change of clothing often indicates a “change in personality”.²¹² In this way meaning is conveyed allegorically through visual icons. Both Robert Potter and Carolyn Van Dyke note that in Morality drama the world of the stage represents our world so that what happens in the play is a picture of what happens in life: this lends a universal authenticity to the message of the Morality play.²¹³ The close resemblance of the play-world to our conception of the moral world that we inhabit, also has the effect of personalising the abstract drama to the degree that we are able to identify with the transcendent truths it attempts to convey.

The way in which the plays are performed also contributes significantly to the nature of the allegory: Carolyn Van Dyke argues that the fact that the abstract characters are represented by human actors gives a human dimension to the play which coexists with its symbolic dimension (p. 4): the palpable nature of the performance, “the actor’s idiosyncrasies, the weather, diversions in the audience”, counterbalances our sense of the play as an “interaction of ideas” (p. 109). In this way we are made aware of two simultaneous perspectives – the universal and intangible, and the particular and concrete. Van Dyke traces in detail the way in which the dramatic tension between these perspectives is exploited in different plays of the Morality tradition: in *The Castle of Perseverance* and *Mankind* the universalised Mankind figure experiences a fall into particularity. We are forced to identify with the pull that the real material world and its concerns exerts on these figures – in *Mankind* this is achieved by using humour to draw us into the world of Mischief and the three N’s – but we remain aware of the universal,

²¹² Van Dyke, *The Fiction of Truth*, p. 94.

²¹³ Van Dyke, *The Fiction of Truth*, p. 111.

allegorical frame of reference from which they stray. In *Everyman* the protagonist progressively overcomes his attachment to earthly life until he is able to recognise divine truth and achieves immortality (pp. 128–138).

Another aspect of the allegory of the Medieval Morality play, which has already been touched upon, is its ritualistic quality. Robert Potter notes that like “enacted ritual” the purpose of the Morality play is communally to affirm the permanence of certain principles.²¹⁴ It is therefore a “theatre of demonstration” in that it attempts to “embody, to verify, to create, the acknowledged Truth” (p. 16). Thus it attempts to provide “a tangible substantiation” of elevated concepts (p. 16). In order for its truths to have an impact, the Morality play must cause each individual to identify the pattern of his life with that represented by the *Mankind* figure on the stage. In this way the Morality play harmonises the various facets of human experience into an all-encompassing vision of human existence. It ritualistically blends the individual with the universal, the corporeal with the numinous.

At certain points in his narratives, Dickens’s passionate appeal to the reader goes further than melodrama. He makes use of melodramatic techniques in the scenes depicting the desperate repentance of Miss Havisham and Lady Dedlock or in the desperate escape of Sykes. However, these moments of dramatic intensity become more than a mere indulgence in histrionics: they theatrically embody the moral conflict within the characters, and ritualistically evoke a universal pattern of sin and repentance. Thus Dickens’s engagement of the reader at a deep personal and religious level, recalls Morality drama. The Morality play elements in his fiction are evident in the way in which the moral state of certain figures is symbolically suggested by their external appearance and, further, in the patterned movement of figures from sin towards redemption.

In this chapter I have attempted to discern the elements that Dickens draws from these allegorical sources. The allegorical dimension of his fiction is more complex than it at first appears: at times he evokes a ritualistic pattern which draws its symbolic force from visual emblems and enacted conflict. At other times his depiction of the material world becomes charged with an intense moral colouring that propels it towards the

²¹⁴ Potter, *The English Morality Play*, p. 11.

transcendent. This is not to suggest that Dickens's allegory breaks free from the material world: rather the real remains significant in its own right but also coexists with a transcendent significance. I will now turn to an examination of Dickens's symbolic style in *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Great Expectations*.

CHAPTER FOUR

“MAN’S SOARING BEYOND MAN”: ALLEGORY AND THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION OF A *TALE OF TWO CITIES*.

A Tale of Two Cities has been called one of Dickens’s most religious novels because of the spiritual nature of Carton’s conversion. Dennis Walder suggests that in this novel, as in all Dickens’s later works, the “religious dimension is more deliberately evoked than before” through a wealth of biblical quotations and allusions.²¹⁵ In this chapter I will explore the effect of Dickens’s deepening spiritual awareness in the *Tale* and the implications for his narrative method of this reaching towards the transcendent. I will begin with a general discussion of Dickens’s religion which he drew from broad evangelical ideas as well as from the Romantic outlook of men such as Thomas Carlyle. I will digress briefly in order to discuss Carlyle’s religious outlook, as Carlyle’s vision in *The French Revolution* was central to Dickens’s own conception of revolutionary France. Finally I will examine the *Tale*’s exploration of the possibility of resurrection and rebirth for the individual in an atmosphere of self-destructive vengeance.

Dickens’s religion

In a well-known letter to J.M. Makeham about his use of Biblical references in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Dickens describes his religious agenda in his fiction:

I have always striven in my writings to express veneration for the life and lessons of our Saviour; because I feel it . . . But I have never made proclamation of this from the housetops.²¹⁶

This refusal to proclaim his religion from the housetops has made it very difficult for critics to ascertain the precise nature of his Christianity: G. K. Chesterton laments that Dickens’s attitude towards religion was shaped by “all the prejudices of his time. He had,

²¹⁵ Dennis Walder, *Dickens and Religion* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), pp. 197–98.

²¹⁶ Forster’s *Life*, 2: 469.

for instance, that dislike of defined dogmas, which really means a preference for unexamined dogmas".²¹⁷ As Chesterton suggests, the only clearly formed opinion that Dickens seemed to have about religion was his hatred of dogma. This can be seen in his rejection of Catholicism and Evangelical Dissent, both of which emphasise the importance of doctrine and modes of worship: Dickens made no secret of his dislike of Roman Catholicism, taking offence to what he perceived as its hypocritical and manipulative clerics and dismissing its rituals and veneration of statues as superstitious and degrading to the faithful.²¹⁸ His hatred for Dissent was just as marked: David A. Ward suggests that Dickens created a stereotype of Dissent in his fiction: his novels associate Dissent with a pedantic observance of Scripture and an austere emphasis on the doctrines of original sin and eternal punishment that suffocates the imagination.²¹⁹ But apart from his outrage at what he saw as perversions of the true faith, Dickens remained so tentative about expressing his beliefs that it is difficult to determine the depth of his religious feeling.²²⁰ This fundamental vagueness of Dickens's religious outlook has led critics to downplay the religious dimension of his fiction and to assume, as A.O.J. Cockshut does, that Dickens's invocation of religion is at best sentimental and does "not operate on a level where it [can] mingle with his deepest and most persistent feelings."²²¹

In the last thirty or so years critics have made a more sustained effort to explore the way in which Dickens's religious position shapes his fiction: a still notable contribution to this tradition is Dennis Walder's *Dickens and Religion*. Walder argues that Dickens was aware of and involved in the religious debates of his day, suggesting that he was perhaps not quite as naive about religious matters as is generally supposed.²²² Walder emphasises the fact that Dickens was not concerned with matters of theology but that his was a popular religion, a kind of "social gospel", that aimed to touch "the religious consciousness of a vast reading public" (p. 175). He cites *The Life of Our Lord* where

²¹⁷ G. K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens* (London: Wordsworth Editions, 2007), p. 110.

²¹⁸ Michael Schiefelbein, "Little Nel, Catholicism, and Dickens's investigation of death", *Dickens Quarterly* IX.1 (1992): 115–125 (p. 116).

²¹⁹ David A. Ward, "Distorted Religion: Dickens, Dissent, and Bleak House", *Dickens Studies Annual* 29 (2000): 195–232 (p. 203).

²²⁰ V. H. Houlston, *That Most Excellent Gift: Dickens's use of Religious Material in the Treatment of the Theme of Charity* (Cape Town: The University of Cape Town, 1982), p. 1.

²²¹ A.O.J. Cockshut, *The Imagination of Charles Dickens* (London: Collins, 1961), p. 13.

²²² Walder, *Dickens and Religion*, p. 175.

Dickens adjures his children to follow the basic teaching of the New Testament, as an example of his preference for the “essential moral aspects” of Christianity over its supernatural elements (p. 13). Ironically, despite the vigour with which Dickens satirises the Evangelical movement within the Anglican Church, Walder suggests that the novelist’s own beliefs were influenced by evangelical doctrine: like the Evangelicals, Dickens stressed the importance of “earnestness, duty and bourgeois family values” although he rejected the notion that man was born in a fallen state. He was perhaps most influenced by the doctrine of conversion which stood at the “heart of ‘Evangelical’ theology” and which expressed a belief in the dramatic spiritual conversion that an individual underwent when he realised his sinfulness, begged God’s mercy and was reborn anew (p. 18). In his novels he often provides a secular equivalent of this doctrine, imbued with religious feeling.

Walder stresses the fact that Dickens’s religion had a significant social dimension to it – he believed in actively improving the social and moral life of the community. This connected him with the Unitarian movement in which he became interested after his tour to America in the 1840s (p. 12). At this time Unitarianism had a Romantic leaning which emphasised the power of nature and the emotions as avenues to the divine (p. 115). In fact Dickens was particularly drawn to the Romantic understanding of religion and in the 1820s and 30s he joined a group of writers for radical journals such as the *True Sun*, the *Morning Chronicle*, *The Examiner*, and the *Monthly Repository*. These men shared a Romantic religion of “tolerance, charity and transcendental intuitions” that had a profound impact on Dickens’s thinking (p. 14). Walder emphasises the presence in Dickens’s fiction of the Romantic vision that reaches “towards a more subjective faith of inner apprehensions, of a sense of the numinous” (p. 64): in *Oliver Twist* he notes that good and evil appear as transcendent forces as well as significant aspects of the individual’s subjective inner life – this is evident in Oliver’s unyielding goodness and in the self-destructiveness of Fagin’s evil (p. 55). From the above survey it is evident that Walder sees Dickens as following a popular, generalised form of Christianity which had a strong Romantic leaning.

Carlyle, Dickens and the motif of conversion

In order to understand the Romantic dimension of Dickens's religion it may be helpful to discuss briefly the religious outlook of Thomas Carlyle. Andrew Sanders argues that amongst his contemporaries Dickens was the most "well-versed" in the writings of Carlyle.²²³ Many critics have noted the influence of Carlyle's writings on Dickens's fiction: Dennis Walder suggests that Dickens's cry to Dombey to "Awake!" echoes Carlyle's appeal to the Captains of industry in *Past and Present*.²²⁴ Janet L. Larsen also notes that Dickens draws on Carlyle's motifs and biblical rhetoric in *Dombey and Son* as well as in many of his later novels.²²⁵ In *Little Dorrit*, for example, she observes that Dickens emphasises the importance of work, a central motif of Carlyle's writings (p. 213). The extent of Dickens's debt to Carlyle is acknowledged by Dickens himself in the preface to *A Tale of Two Cities* when he shows his admiration for Carlyle's *The French Revolution*, suggesting that his attempt at writing a history of "that terrible time" cannot hope "to add anything to the philosophy of Mr Carlyle's wonderful book" (*preface*, p. 29). Dickens's respect for Carlyle can further be seen in the dedication of *Hard Times*.

But what was Carlyle's religious outlook? In his own time Carlyle was seen as a kind of prophet and grew in importance as a religious figure throughout the world.²²⁶ He himself saw his social views as well as his belief that an earthly golden age was imminent for human kind, as essentially a religious vision.²²⁷ According to Andrew Sanders this sense of himself as a "latter-day Jeremiah" can be seen in the rhythms of his writings which owe their "confident, prophetic utterance" to the Bible.²²⁸ Yet despite the prevalent belief amongst Carlyle's contemporaries that his vision was profoundly religious, it is difficult to understand the nature of his religion which, most critics concur,

²²³ Andrew Sanders, *The Short Oxford History of English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 405.

²²⁴ Walder, *Dickens and Religion*, p. 138.

²²⁵ Janet L. Larson, *Dickens and the Broken Scripture* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1985), p. xii.

²²⁶ Ian Campbell, "Carlyle's Religion", in ed. John Clubbe, *Carlyle and His Contemporaries: Essays in honour of Charles Richard Sanders* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1978), p. 20.

²²⁷ Richard J. Bishirjian, "Carlyle's political religion", *The Journal of Politics* 38.1 (Feb 1976): 95–113 (p. 95).

²²⁸ Andrew Sanders, *The Short Oxford History of English Literature*, p. 403.

is probably not a Christian one.²²⁹ There is no doubt that Carlyle saw belief as an important source of hope in the faithless times in which he lived, as Ian Campbell suggests:²³⁰ Campbell argues that Carlyle continually emphasised the necessity of belief of the individual in a mechanical age (p. 7) – he admired his father for whom belief was an essential part of life and who retained his religious convictions alongside his “rational powers of enquiry” (p. 5). This emphasis on the individual, Campbell suggests, echoes Calvinist doctrine, according to which the individual is of central importance and answers directly to God (p. 15).

But what really gives Carlyle’s work its spiritual quality is its Romantic sense of the transcendent: in *Sartor Resartus* Carlyle speaks of the “wondrous agency of *Symbols*” through which the “commonest Truth stands-out to us, proclaimed with quite new emphasis”.²³¹ Janet Ray Edwards emphasises the significance of symbols in Carlyle’s vision as it was through them, rather than through plot, that he could engage the emotional and spiritual sensibilities of his audience.²³² Edwards further suggests that this symbolic mode of writing involves the association of the material environment with a spiritual realm,²³³ arguing that he creates this effect by first describing places as physical locations and then infusing them with “a transcendental light or transcendental darkness which carries them beyond the limits of the material”. Further she argues that Carlyle reveals something about a character’s inner life by dramatising his external appearance (p. 94). The sense in which material reality gestures towards the numinous and the use of outer oddities to suggest the unseen inner life are also common in Dickens: dramatic caricatures whose inner life is immediately discernable from their appearances, abound in his fiction: examples of such figures are Quilp, Fagin and Madame Defarge. The marshes in *Great Expectations* or the burning of the Marquis’ chateau in *A Tale of Two Cities* are good examples of how Dickens uses landscape and setting to evoke a transcendent hell-like realm.

²²⁹ Walder, *Dickens and Religion*, p. 95.

²³⁰ Ian Campbell, “Carlyle’s Religion”, in ed. John Clubbe, *Carlyle and His Contemporaries*, p. 3.

²³¹ Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus and On Heroes and Hero Worship*, p. 165.

²³² Janet Ray Edwards, “Carlyle and the Fictions of Belief: *Sartor Resartus* to *Past and Present*”, in ed. John Clubbe, *Carlyle and His Contemporaries*, p. 100.

²³³ Janet Ray Edwards, “Carlyle and the Fictions of Belief: *Sartor Resartus* to *Past and Present*”, in ed. John Clubbe, *Carlyle and His Contemporaries*, p. 94.

One final point about the nature of Carlyle's belief is worth mentioning – his emphasis on conversion. In *Sartor Resartus* Carlyle describes the nature of Teufelsdröckh's conversion as follows:

'Es leuchtet mir ein, I see a glimpse of it!' cries he elsewhere: 'there is in a man a HIGHER than Love of Happiness: he can do without Happiness, and instead thereof find Blessedness! Was it not to preach-forth this same HIGHER that sages and martyrs, the Poet and the Priest, in all times, have spoken and suffered; bearing testimony, through life and through death, of the Godlike that is in Man, and how in the Godlike only has he Strength and Freedom? Which God-inspired Doctrine art thou also honoured to be taught; O Heavens! And broken with manifold merciful Afflictions even till thou become contrite, and learn it! O, thank thy Destiny for these; thankfully bear what yet remain: thou hadst need of them; the Self in thee needed to be annihilated. By benignant fever-paroxysms is Life rooting out the deep-seated chronic Disease, and triumphs over Death. On the roaring billows of Time, thou art not engulfed, but borne aloft into the azure of Eternity. Love not Pleasure; Love God. This is the EVERLASTING YEA, wherein all contradiction is solved, wherein whoso walks and works, it is well with him.'²³⁴

At first glance the passage appears to be of a Christian character: apart from the religious language and Biblical rhythms, it also evokes the Christian message of salvation: this can be seen in the assertion that it is possible to conquer time and death through the humbling of the self ("the Self in thee needed to be annihilated") and the love of God. It is therefore not surprising that in the earlier part of the last century critics have seen this moment of conversion as comparable with the religious conversion of Saint Paul.²³⁵ But upon closer analysis the supposed Christian character of the experience is questionable: as Richard J. Bishirjian notes the moment of conversion involves a passionate self-assertion that is defiant rather than humble,²³⁶ emphasising the discovery of the god-like qualities in man. Thus it is man's own glory rather than God's that Teufelsdröckh is celebrating. Finally Carlyle redefines spiritual rebirth in humanist terms: life conquers death through hard work and perseverance. Thus central to Carlyle's concept of conversion is the discovery of individual worth in a secular society.

The concept of conversion is also central to Dickens's vision: Dennis Walder notes that the theme of a change of heart becomes increasingly significant in most of Dickens's

²³⁴ Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus and On Heroes and Hero Worship*, p. 145.

²³⁵ Carlisle Moore, "Sartor Resartus and the problem of Carlyle's "conversion"", *PMLA* 70.4 (Sep, 1955): 662–681 (p. 662).

²³⁶ Bishirjian, "Carlyle's political religion", p. 96.

works following *Barnaby Rudge*.²³⁷ According to Walder, many of Dickens's characters are converted from a materialistic attitude to a "new awareness of the spiritual ties which bind mankind together" (pp. 113–14). He argues that the main tenor of such conversions is secular although something of the biblical message to abandon the pursuit of wealth and follow Christ is implicit. Thus Walder suggests that Dickens's understanding of conversion is similar to Carlyle's as it does not "primarily involve an acceptance of Christ, or the innate sinfulness of man", but "[does] involve a spiritual transformation affirming a new consciousness of oneself and one's place in the universe" (p. 14). Walder is not alone in emphasising the essentially secular nature of Dickens's understanding of conversion: about ten years earlier Barbara Hardy suggested that the conversion scene in Dickens, as in the typical Victorian novel, "is not a religious conversion but a turning from self-regard to love and social responsibility".²³⁸ This suggests that the vision expressed in Dickens's novels is more generally religious (in the sense of compassionate fellowship) rather than specifically Christian.

The view that novelists of the nineteenth century were involved in what John Maynard refers to as the "secularisation of culture", is commonly held amongst critics: Maynard notes that Dickens is often grouped with writers such as George Eliot, Matthew Arnold and Trollope who reinscribe religion "within a more secular culture" – one that privileged inner experience over "institution, ritual and myth as the location of the sacred".²³⁹ Victor Houlston notes the stilted and unconvincing nature of many of Dickens's overtly religious passages, his tendency to lapse into "conventional sentiment and diction" when describing what to him is a profoundly religious experience such as his thoughts at the Niagara Falls.²⁴⁰ According to Houlston, Dickens's religious language does not give us much insight into Dickens's conception of God. Rather, it characterises "relationships with other people" (p. 10).

While I don't deny that Dickens's primary focus was a realist concern with human relationships in the here-and-now rather than the nature of the transcendent realm, my

²³⁷ Walder, *Dickens and Religion*, p. 113.

²³⁸ Barbara Hardy, *The Moral Art of Dickens* (London: The Athlone Press, 1970), p. 27.

²³⁹ John Maynard, "The Brontës and religion", in ed. Helen Glen, *The Cambridge Companion to The Brontës* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 193.

²⁴⁰ Victor Houlston, *That Most Excellent Gift*, p.10.

intention in this chapter will be to suggest that there is also an opposite tendency in his fiction – a reaching beyond material reality towards an all-encompassing spiritual realm. In a recent article on Dickens's religious outlook in *The Life of Our Lord*, Gary Colledge challenges the basic assumption that Dickens conceived of conversion in a primarily secular manner. He contends that Dickens believed penitence and forgiveness to be central in the process of conversion and thus his religious vision was more orthodox than is generally supposed.²⁴¹ He further notes that Dickens emphasises Jesus' role as the saviour – the "Redeemer and Mediator" (p. 140). This, coupled with the fact that Dickens refers explicitly to Jesus being worshipped suggests that Dickens's Jesus was more than "simply a good man, a good teacher, and a good example"; he was a deity (p. 138). I have summarised Colledge's argument here as it reveals another side to Dickens's vision: a sense of the divine as something that transcends the material world, and an understanding of the concept of salvation which follows a more clearly defined pattern, reaching back to Christian tradition. In the following analysis I will examine the way in which Dickens draws on Christian allusion in *A Tale of Two Cities*. I propose that his frequent use of religious language and symbols in this novel has the effect of suggesting a transcendent moral universe so that the historical action constantly evokes a wider spiritual paradigm.

***A Tale of Two Cities*: revolutionary France**

Dennis Walder argues that *A Tale of Two Cities* is a good example of Dickens's desire to harness the plots of his later novels forcibly to religious motifs, making them appear contrived: he suggests that, notwithstanding the intentional invocation of Christ's martyrdom, the significance of Carton's sacrifice remains vague and implausible.²⁴² This reading of *A Tale of Two Cities* fails to see how deeply ingrained Christian symbols and motifs are in the entire structure of the novel: not only Carton's death but the actions of the revolutionaries are all included within a wider Christian framework which, rather than

²⁴¹ Gary. L. Colledge, "The Life of Our Lord Revisited", *Dickens Studies Annual* 36 (2005): 125–151 (p. 140).

²⁴² Walder, *Dickens and Religion*, p. 197.

being meaninglessly tacked on to the narrative, is the source of its power and significance.

David Rosen argues that Dickens, like Carlyle in *The French Revolution*, describes the acts of the revolutionaries as a deliberate perversion of Christian ritual into pagan rite. Rosen points out that this is most vividly present in the description of the murder of Foulon.²⁴³ This scene is worth considering: here the crowd – so enthused by its sense of power over the lives of others – works itself up into a feverish madness which takes on a ritualistic quality: when Defarge tells the people that Foulon has been found, he incites them to immediate action and the “drum [starts] beating in the streets, as if it and the drummer had flown together by magic” (Bk ii, c. xxii, p. 252). The drum-beat invokes primitive ritual and so imbues the crowd’s murderous ventures with an almost superhuman power.

In their mad lust for violence, the crowd is transformed into mythological figures: the Vengeance is likened to the Furies of ancient mythology as she rushes about letting out “terrific shrieks” and “flinging her arms above her head” in a wild abandonment. As the lust for violence increases so the Vengeance, who resembled the “forty furies at once”, seems to multiply into hundreds of Furies: all the women reflect her in the way in which they “beat . . . their breasts, tear . . . their hair, and scream . . .”. The invocation of the Furies suggests the intensification of violence into madness. Further, by comparing the women to Furies, Dickens emphasises the dehumanisation of the women – their relinquishment of their humanity and femininity: their words intensify their wrath as exclamation flows into exclamation, culminating in a declaration of vengeance and a desire to be given the “blood of Foulon . . . the head of Foulon . . . the heart of Foulon . . . the body and soul of Foulon”. The horror in this scene is its emphatically anti-Christian nature: Foulon’s martyrdom at the crowd’s hands distorts the significance of Christ’s crucifixion and recalls the pagan fertility rites: in these rites, Rosen observes, the worshippers of Bacchus would devour their victim in order to celebrate Bacchus’ miraculous rebirth after being ripped apart his enemies.²⁴⁴ In this discussion I would like

²⁴³ David Rosen, “A Tale of Two Cities: Theology of Revolution”, *Dickens Studies Annual* 27 (1998): 171–185 (pp. 174, 176).

²⁴⁴ Rosen, “A Tale of Two Cities: Theology of Revolution”, p. 172.

to build on Rosen's argument, suggesting that the poor's perversion of Christian rituals involves a betrayal of their humanity. I will further consider the connections between Dickens's depiction of the revolutionaries and the method that Dante uses to present the nature of the sinners' transgressions in *Inferno*.

A good place to start this discussion is with the wine-drinking scene in Saint Antoine. The wine-cask that breaks on the street brings all the people together to drink: they all "suspend . . . their business, or their idleness, to run to the spot to drink the wine" (Bk i, c. v, p. 59). This recalls the sacrament of communion where the people gather together to partake of bread and wine which symbolise the body and blood of Christ and the promise of salvation. The way in which the people interact with one another in the street creates a sense of wholesome Christian fellowship: the men try to "help the women, who [bend] over their shoulders, to sip, before the wine [has] all run out between their fingers" (Bk i c. v, p. 59). Later the people laugh and play together, showing a "special companionship" which can be seen in the "inclination on the part of every one to join some other one, which [leads], especially among the luckier or lighter-hearted, to frolicsome embraces, drinking of healths, shaking of hands, and even joining of hands and dancing, a dozen together" (Bk i c. v, p. 60).

However, this harmonious Christian atmosphere is belied by an underlying physicality that is almost brutal: the stones in which the wine is caught are rough and "irregular" and seem to have been made "to lame all living creatures" (c. v, p. 59). In order to drink the wine, the people must first come over the stones which have the potential to harm them. Further, unlike the wine in Christian sacrament, the people do not see this wine as spiritual food. To them it is merely a means of assuaging their physical hunger: they "[lick], and even [champ] the moister wine-rotted fragments with eager relish" (Bk. i c. v, p. 60). Thus, the people have been reduced to an animal-like state in their starvation.

This emphasis on basic physiological needs is made to portend the spiritual perversion of the revolutionaries: the "places where [the wine] had been most abundant [are] raked into a gridiron-pattern by fingers" (Bk i, c. v, p. 60). The claw-like pattern that is left suggests an underlying bestiality and violence that will drive the French poor towards destructive revolution. The threatening undercurrent erupts to the surface of

the narrative undermining the complacency of the scene – the man returning to his work and the woman trying “to soften the pain of her fingers and toes, or those of her child” is immediately followed by the description of the “men with bare arms, matted locks and cadaverous faces” that “descend back into cellars” like ghoulish, demonic figures that have been summoned out of hell by the presence of the wine casket (Bk i, c. v, p. 60). These quasi-demonic figures suggest the dangerous and threatening consequences of the people’s hunger.

Thus, Dickens draws on the spiritual symbolism of the wine in Christian ritual in order to suggest the people’s physical needs as well as their ultimate spiritual perversion. The wine has “stained many hands, too, and many faces, and many naked feet, and many wooden shoes. The hands of the man who sawed the wood, left red marks on the billets; and the forehead of the woman who nursed her baby, was stained with the stain of the old rag she wound about her head again. Those who had been greedy with the staves of the cask, had acquired a tigerish smear about the mouth” (Bk i, c. v, pp. 60–1). Here the stain of the wine comes to suggest the taint of sin rather than the promise of salvation. Christ’s blood was spilled in order to deliver mankind from sin and the drinking of wine in the communion service recalls this fact. But here the wine symbolises the blood that the people will spill in their malicious desire for vengeance. The bestial lust for blood is embodied by the “tigerish smear” about their mouths: they will be the cause of the spilling of blood which they will relish.

At the Last Supper Christ broke bread and drank wine in order to prophesy his own rising from the dead, a miracle that would reverse the effects of his pain and suffering and offer hope for the life to come. The wine in this scene also has prophetic significance but here it is a sign of the pending bloodshed: a joker scrawls “upon a wall with his finger dipped in muddy wine-lees – BLOOD”. At this point the prophetic voice of the narrator intercedes, presaging the time when blood “would be spilled on the street stones, and the stain of it would be red upon many there” (Bk i, c. v, p. 61). Thus the drinking of wine, which, in the sacrament of communion brings people together in Christian humility and affection, is made to signify the loss of human fellowship and the spiritual values associated with it, through death and destruction.

The people's physical need to eat ultimately becomes paramount so that it replaces the need for spiritual fulfilment: Saint Antoine is described as a "saintly presence" waited upon by "the lords, cold, dirt, sickness, ignorance and want" (Bk i, c. 61). The spiritual values of Saint Antoine are replaced by the personified figures of Hunger and Want:

. . . the children had ancient faces and grave voices; and upon them, and upon the grown faces, and ploughed into every furrow of age and coming up afresh, was the sign, Hunger. It was prevalent everywhere. Hunger was pushed out of the tall houses; in the wretched clothes that hung upon poles and lines' Hunger was patched into them with straw and rag and wood and paper; Hunger was repeated in every fragment of the small modicum of firewood that the man sawed off; Hunger stared down from the smokeless chimneys, and started up from among the filthy street that had no offal, among its refuse, of anything to eat. Hunger was the inscription on the baker's shelves, written in every small loaf of his scanty stock of bad bread; at the sausage shop, in every dead-dog preparation that was offered for sale. Hunger rattled its dry bones among the roasting chestnuts in the turned cylinder; Hunger was shred into atomies in every farthing porringer of husky chips of potato, fired with some reluctant drops of oil (Bk i, c. 61).

The people and their world are transformed into figures of Hunger which is a presence of mythic scale in the way that "it push[es] out of the tall houses" and pervades all the meagre signs of their civilisation. Hunger becomes a watchful almost supernatural presence that is elevated above the world and "stare[s] down from the smokeless chimneys" (Bk i, c. v, p. 61). It seems to have replaced God in the people's lives in that it has absolute power over them: this power can be seen in its ability to transform them into signs of itself – they are not described as individuals or even as people at all. Rather they are merely "rags and nightcaps" which people the "narrow, winding streets". It is described as a figure of death – a skeleton that "rattles its dry bones among the roasting chestnuts in the turned cylinder" (Bk i, c. v, p. 61). This suggests that the death-like existence to which the people have been confined could potentially give rise to a life-like monster. This points towards another, more destructive energy that is born of grim Want: vengeance. Dickens anatomises the people into parts that express their repressed anger – "eyes of fire", "compressed lips", "foreheads knitted in the likeness of the gallows rope they mused about enduring, or inflicting" (Bk i, c. v, p. 62). Thus, paradoxically, Hunger prevails over the people, reducing them almost to nothing, and simultaneously breeds within them a terrible power that is yet to be unleashed. Here Dickens both dehumanises and vitalises his creations: allegory in this instance is used as a form of dehumanisation –

the people have been reduced to emblems figuring the social condition of the French Third Estate. But the allegorical figures of Hunger and Want also confer a kind of demonic life to the people by portending their moral perversion. Thus the realistic, historical vision becomes subsumed in a more universal depiction of the nature of vice.

It seems likely that Dickens had read Dante's *Commedia* by the time he wrote the *Tale*: certainly there are many similarities between his depiction of the violent revolutionaries and Dante's understanding of violence in Canto 12 of the *Inferno*. It may be helpful to draw a comparison between the two: in Canto 12 Dante descends into the seventh circle of Hell where the murderers and tyrants are immersed in Phlegethon – a river of boiling blood. Jeremy Tambling has suggested that the image of the sinners dipped in blood is a kind of parody of Baptism.²⁴⁵ Further, according to Tambling, the image of blood suggests that violent actions lead to one's ultimate loss of identity:²⁴⁶ Nessus only refers in passing to the other types of murderers and although he names the tyrants and gives some information about their sins, they, too, remain enigmatic, unable to speak for themselves and only identifiable by their foreheads (*Inferno* xii: 103–24). The sinners have become so steeped in blood that it has consumed their whole beings – their desire for bloodshed has become their only defining feature.

Like Dante, Dickens also associates the spilling of blood with a kind of parody of Baptism: after describing the atrocities committed by the revolutionaries in the storming of the Bastille, Dickens warns that “they are not easily purified when once stained red” (Bk ii, c. xxi, p. 250). This fulfils the prophecy of the earlier scene where the stain of the wine was made to presage the more morally perverse stain of blood: in the New Testament the fulfilment of Christ's prophecy of his death and resurrection brought the promise of forgiveness of sins to those who repent. But the fulfilment of this prophecy merely affirms the destructive cycle of violence which leaves no one free from its taint. Dickens's words here bring the ritual of Baptism where man is cleansed of the stain of original sin, powerfully to mind: in embracing brutal vengeance, the people are reversing the Christian promise of the forgiveness of sins and marking themselves as the damned.

²⁴⁵ Jeremy Tambling, “Monstrous Tyranny, Men of Blood: Dante and *Inferno* XII”, *The Modern Language Review*, 98.4 (October 2003): 881–897 (p. 889).

²⁴⁶ Tambling, “Monstrous Tyranny, Men of Blood: Dante and *Inferno* xii”, p. 882.

Dickens repeatedly refers to the stain of blood when describing the revolutionaries: when Mr Lorry and Doctor Manette look down on the people sharpening their weapons, they notice that not “one creature . . . [is] free from the smear of blood” (Bk iii, c. ii, p. 291). The stain is all over “their limbs and bodies” and they are dressed in “all sorts of rags” with the “stain upon” them (Bk iii, c. ii, p. 291). The prominence of the stain emphasises its emblematic function: like Dante’s river of blood it dramatises the horror of violence in which the people lose themselves.

Throughout Canto 12, Dante presents us with images of man’s degradation, the perversion of his humanity into beast-like forms: the first thing that Dante sees as he descends into the seventh circle of Hell is the Minotaur of Crete who is so enraged by Virgil’s words that he bucks violently this way and that, unable to control his fury (*Inferno* xii: 24). Here the Minotaur’s violent nature overrides his rational faculties and makes it impossible for him to think clearly or even to control his movements. This frightening image of man’s split nature – both human and animal – is repeated in a more attractive guise in the figures of the centaurs. All of the centaurs are figures of wrath and vengeance – Nessus, for example, poisoned his own blood in order to avenge himself on Hercules (*Inferno* xii: 69) – but they also possess a kind of mythic attraction: they are described as “quelle fiere isnelle”(quick and sleek-limbed beasts) (*Inferno* xii: 76) and Nessus takes over the role of Dante’s guide for the rest of the Canto. The horrifying reality of violence is therefore slightly downplayed in favour of a more mythic depiction. In this way Dante seems to be affirming the spurious attractiveness of vice.

Like Dante in Canto 12, Dickens stresses the dehumanising nature of violence in his description of revolutionary France: by giving in to their passion for vengeance the people of Saint Antoine have been transformed into a beast-like creature made up of many “naked arms” that are “convulsively clutching at every weapon or semblance of a weapon that was thrown up from the depths below” (Bk ii, c. xxi, p. 244). The dehumanising effect of the people’s revenge is evident in the way in which Dickens describes them not as individuals or even as an amorphous crowd, but as parts of people: the women’s fingers are “vicious, with the experience that they [can] tear” (Bk ii, c. xxii, p. 251) and the “raggedest nightcap” and the “wretchedest head” are animated by a cruel desire “to destroy life” in their enemies (Bk ii, c. xxii p. 250). Dickens

suggests that it is the crowd's lack of pity, which to him is a very important Christian virtue, that has made them demonic: they are described as a sea that is made up of "turbulently swaying shapes, voices of vengeance, and faces hardened in the furnaces of suffering until the touch of pity [can] make no mark on them" (Bk ii, c. xxi, p. 249). In their wild violence they no longer seem to belong to the world of the living but instead to a hell-like realm.

When describing the wrath of the centaurs or of the Minotaur, Dante emphasises its self-defeating nature: the self-destructive nature of Nessus' vengeance is emphasised in the words, "e fe di se la vendetta elli stesso" (made himself a vengeance for himself) (*Inferno* xii: 69) and the Minotaur is overpowered by his own rage. Dickens sees the vice of the revolutionaries in a similar light: the people's wild vengeance ultimately turns in on themselves: this can be seen during the beheading of Foulon when the women are "lashed into a blind frenzy" and "strike . . . and tear . . . at their own friends". The madness of the women results in their falling into a "passionate swoon" and ultimately needing to be saved from being "trampled underfoot" (Bk ii, c. xxii, p. 252).

In the figures of the centaurs Dante depicts the imbalance of the intellect and the more primitive drives: rather than allowing their higher faculties to dominate the lower, the centaurs use their intellect in service of a savage desire for violence: they use their bows and arrows to hunt the sinners and to satisfy their lust for blood. For Dickens the revolutionaries have abandoned their human, rational natures in favour of a more primitive drive to destruction: their actions are described as intense manual labour – they appear as "scarecrows [that have been] heaving to and fro" all morning with "gleams of light above [their] billowy heads where bayonets [shine] in the sun" (Bk ii, c. xxi, p. 244). This mindless, physical toil emphasises the people's animal nature, their lack of more refined spiritual sensibilities. Further by abandoning their human powers of reason, the people have made themselves the pawns of nature, an avenue through which the destructive forces in the universe can find expression: they are likened to a "living sea" that "[rises], wave on wave and overflow[s] . . . the city" (Bk ii, c. xxi, p. 245); and the way in which the weapons pass over the crowd's heads, "crookedly quiver[ing] and jerk[ing], scores at a time . . . like a kind of lightening" (Bk ii, c. xxi, p. 244), suggests that the multitude draws its power from the elements to strike down and destroy its foes.

They also grant themselves god-like powers over life so that each person is “demented with a wild readiness to sacrifice it” (Bk ii, c. xxi, p. 244). This disrespect for the sanctity of human life is suggested by the ferocious ease with which the people shed their own blood in order to be able to harm others: people who cannot “lay hold of” any weapons “set themselves with bleeding hands to force stones and bricks out of their places in the walls” (Bk ii, c. xxi, p. 244). In their indiscriminate violence the people have become incapable of the gentleness and compassion implied in the wine drinking scene: this cuts them off from the spiritual significance which Dickens associates with these qualities – life only has meaning for them in the sense that it can be so easily terminated.

The crowd blasphemously appropriates God’s power of judgement: they sacrifice seven people and save seven more. The freed prisoners wonder in a bemused way whether “the Last Day ha[s] come” and whether the people rejoicing around them are “lost spirits” (Bk ii, c. xxi, p. 249). Thus the freeing of the prisoners parodies Judgement Day when the Son of Man will come to free his chosen people, leaving one person behind for each person that he saves (Matt 24: 32–44). Even in the midst of the people’s infernal madness Dickens suggests the presence of a divine perspective from which the crowd’s actions will be judged and damned: the seven “dead faces” come to portend the true Judgement Day when the people will be made to answer for their actions: the expressions of these faces are suspended, as “having yet to raise the dropped lids of the eyes, and bear witness with the bloodless lips, ‘Thou didst It!’” (Bk ii, c. xxii, p. 250).

Later, when Dickens describes the crowd sharpening their weapons on the grindstone, he describes them from the perspective of the Doctor and Mr Lorry who look “out . . . into the courtyard” (Bk iii, c. ii, p. 291). This gives us the impression that we are looking down from an elevated moral standpoint into the bowels of Hell itself. The people’s ‘work’ at the grindstone has become a kind of torment: an infernal suffering is implicit in their “want of sleep” which makes them “stare . . . and glare . . .” and their wolfish excitement causes them to “turn . . . and turn . . . , their matted locks now flung forward over their eyes, now flung backward over their necks” in a convulsive and repetitive motion (Bk iii, c. ii, p. 291). Soon afterwards Mr Lorry and the doctor recoil “from the window” in horror. Thus a moral distance is implied between the “unbrutalised beholder”, with whom the reader would most probably identify, Mr Lorry and the doctor

– who all remain untainted by the spectacle that they behold – and the brutal mob, wallowing in excessive violence. In this scene Dickens allows the spiritual dimension to be apprehended through the intensification of meaning rather than a flight from earthly reality: the people's immersion in violence becomes so extreme that it is infused with a demonic energy, the perversity of which is made strikingly apparent when viewed from the moral perspective of the “decent” characters. Here virtue manifests itself in a perspective. Dante uses this device throughout the *Inferno* (although he refrains from doing so in the more mythic Canto 12): this is particularly evident in the tenth ditch of Malebolge when Virgil reprimands Dante and by implication the reader for becoming so taken with the fight between Master Adam and Sinon of Troy (*Inferno* xxx: 130–48). Thus Virgil's words recall Dante to his senses, allowing him to assess the fighting he has just observed as well as his own reaction to it from a superior moral standpoint. Carolyn Van Dyk suggests that this modulation from a more particular perspective focussed on material reality to a more universal, moral one, is an important feature of allegories.²⁴⁷ She notices this pattern in the Morality play, *Mankynde*, where the particularity of the three Ns who “recast the play in earthier mode” (p. 141), is finally proved inane and superseded when Mercy assimilates the “anomalous agents of particularity into a doctrinal pattern” by providing explicit allegorical meanings for them: Titivillus is “the devil” and “New-Guise, Nowadays, and Naught together constitute the world” (p. 141). A similar process is also evident in *A Pilgrim's Progress* where the interpreter provides Christian with “the training in metaphoric perspective” which allows him to understand his experiences in terms of a heightened, universal truth.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁷ Van Dyke, *The Fiction of Truth*, p. 141.

²⁴⁸ Van Dyke, *The Fiction of Truth*, p. 173.

The class of Monseigneur

Like that of the revolutionaries, the power of the French aristocracy is presented as a kind of blasphemy. Dickens first introduces us to the class of the nobles by presenting the chocolate-taking ceremony of Monseigneur the Marquis: the absurd ritual that Monseigneur undergoes in order to “take his chocolate” constitutes a parody of Christian ritual: Monseigneur believes that his custom of the chocolate-taking is indispensable in order for him to “hold his high place under the admiring Heavens” (Bk ii, c. vii, p. 134). But where each action in a Church ritual is charged with symbolic significance, the ritual of Monseigneur is made up of meaningless pomp: Monseigneur requires “four men, all . . . ablaze with gorgeous decoration” in order to “conduct the happy chocolate to [his] lips” and cannot conceive of having any fewer (Bk ii, c. vii, p. 134). The ceremony echoes the Christian communion in the way that the chocolate is poured out in the presence of Monseigneur, recalling the moment when the priest pours out the wine during the communion service. However, where the purpose of the wine-drinking in communion is to symbolise Christ’s sacrifice of himself for his people, the purpose of Monseigneur’s ceremony is merely to satisfy his own trivial desires because he refuses to make any effort of his own, even to fulfil his smallest whim. Thus the nobles are so focussed on sensual pleasures that they have drained their lives of significance and embraced a kind of half-life.

In this scene Dickens describes Monseigneur not as a real man but solely as an allegorical embodiment of the anti-Christian vices of his class: Dickens applies the forms of Christianity ironically to Monseigneur in order to suggest his sense of his own power and importance: his home is referred to as his “sanctuary of sanctuaries” and he as the “Holiest of Holiests” who is waited upon by a “crowd of worshippers” so that he can say of himself: “the earth and the fullness thereof are mine, saith Monseigneur” (Bk ii, c. vii, pp. 134–35). By applying God’s words to Monseigneur Dickens suggests the blasphemous arrogance of his class who wish to deny the existence of a deity greater than themselves. The fact that the nobles are always “perfectly dressed” becomes a substitute for their moral inadequacy: if the “Day of Judgement had been ascertained to be a dress day, everybody there would have been eternally correct” (Bk ii, c. vii, p. 137). This obsession

with outward appearances makes their world so superficial that it ultimately appears monstrously unreal – an empty, heartless existence: by holding art such as the “Comedy and the Grand Opera” in more esteem than he does the “needs of France” (Bk ii, c. vii, p. 135), Monseigneur turns himself and his world into a kind of art-form – a monstrous imitation of life that lacks any true substance. Thus the trappings of civilisation – epitomised by art and culture – are perverted by the society of Monseigneur, so that frivolous diversion and materialism replaces true human feeling and compassion. From the above discussion it is clear that the pride of the aristocrats dehumanises them in the same way that vengeance dehumanises the revolutionaries, making them blind to the true Christian message of forgiveness and redemption. In both cases Dickens employs allegorical narrative to convey a sense of demonic inhumanity. But I have shown that in the description of the revolutionaries the reality of poverty and violence becomes so intense that it invokes a symbolic hell-like realm which is made more palpable through allusion to Christian ritual. By contrast, in the description of Monseigneur, the realism of the scene is superseded by an allegorical interpretation which Dickens projects on to the nobles.

The Marquis Evremonde and Madame Defarge

J.M. Rignall accuses Dickens of beating the life out of his characters in this novel by “forcibly harness[ing] [them] to allegorical meanings”.²⁴⁹ Rignall’s comment implies that characters such as Madame Defarge and the Marquis St Evremonde, who are clearly emblematic of their social class, are “melodramatic simplifications”,²⁵⁰ merely mouthpieces for simplified concepts such as revenge or pride. There is some truth in this comment insofar as the allegory that Dickens employs is of a simple kind. But Rignall is too quick to dismiss the effectiveness of this method and does not take into account the impact of historical forces on the individual which is central to Dickens’s conception of these figures.

²⁴⁹ J.M. Rignall, “Dickens and the Catastrophic Continuum of History in *A Tale of Two Cities*”, *ELH* 51.3 (Autumn 1984): 575–587 (p. 582).

²⁵⁰ Rignall, “Dickens and the Catastrophic Continuum of History in *A Tale of Two Cities*”, p. 580.

It will be necessary to examine Madame Defarge and the Marquis in closer detail. The Marquis has come to epitomise the overtly pleasing yet profoundly cruel vice of his class. He embodies the tendency of the aristocrats to replace the inner moral life with an artistic exterior: his face is “like a fine mask” and is “handsome” and “remarkable”. But it is also an evil face – his nose which is “slightly pinched at the top of each nostril” gives a “look of treachery, and cruelty to the whole countenance” (Bk ii, c. vii, p. 140). Thus, in his desire to freeze all human emotions, the Marquis has been transformed into an inanimate artwork that is both aesthetically pleasing and frighteningly inhuman. His individual personality reflects his social position entirely so that he has become an historical allegory, embodying the perverse values of the aristocracy: the way in which his carriage rushes through the city with “a wild rattle and clatter, and an inhuman abandonment of consideration” is not an action peculiar to the Marquis himself but is indicative of the general attitude in that “deaf city and dumb age” towards the “mere vulgar” (Bk ii, c. vii, p. 140). The careless arrogance of the Marquis leads to the death of a peasant child and his attitude towards the people epitomises the cold superiority of his class: he reacts with an inhuman coldness to the “wild desperation” of the father and dismisses the man by throwing a coin at him with the “air of a gentleman who [has] broken some common thing, and [has] paid for it” (Bk ii, c. vii, p. 142). Like the other aristocrats, the Marquis blasphemously believes himself to be God – he has ultimate power over the people and is answerable to no one: the perversity of this belief is made clear in his actions, which distort Christian faith: rather than offering comfort and pity to the grieving father, he remains removed and indifferent. Further, he believes that money will atone for the death of the child and shows not a hint of repentance. Thus his attitude towards death and homicide is frighteningly materialistic and he remains unable to grasp the moral implications of what he has done.

Like the Marquis, Madame Defarge is subject to the forces of history which exert such a power over the individual that they reduce him or her to an historical allegory. This raises the question of whether an individual is shaped entirely by his history or whether it is possible for individual free-will to exist. Thus the description of Madame Defarge and the Marquis challenges the Christian vision which assumes that each person has the freedom to choose his path in life and is responsible for his actions: Dickens describes

Madame Defarge as a woman on whom the time has laid “a dreadfully disfiguring hand” (Bk iii, c. xiv, p. 390). In this way he attributes her moral perversion to the vices of her time which have destroyed her natural womanly virtues so that she has become a “ruthless woman” of a “fearless character”. Because she was brought up with a “brooding sense of wrong” and an “inveterate hatred of class”, she has been transformed into a “tigress”, a being “without pity” who cannot even pity herself (Bk iii, c. xiv, p. 391). Thus Dickens asks us to pity the kind of perversion of human or perhaps, more specifically, “womanly” goodness that social injustice is capable of creating.

During the storming of the Bastille Madame Defarge is so consumed by vengeance that she seems to become an allegorical figure of cruel retribution: she stands “immovable close to the grim old officer” and remains “immovable close to him through the streets” until he begins to be “struck at from behind” (Bk ii, c. xxi, p. 249). She is accorded almost supernatural powers in the way in which she floats along next to him until, “suddenly animated, she put[s] her foot upon his neck, and with her cruel knife – long ready – hew[s] off his head” (Bk ii, c. xxi p. 249). Madame Defarge is only “animated” by the act of executing vengeance. When she is not thus engaged she is entirely static – as if she were more of a figure in a fresco painting than a real-life woman. The terrible energy with which she suddenly comes to life when she executes the officer, emphasises the fact that she has made herself into a figure of vengeance – she has no other emotion apart from her all-consuming hatred and without this she does not seem to be alive at all.

Madame Defarge also becomes a symbol of Fate, epitomising the inevitable doom that threatens the nobility: after the Marquis has ridden over the child in the street, she seems to rise ominously out of the faceless crowd. Where “not a voice, or a hand, or even an eye [is] raised” amongst the cowed people, Madame Defarge stands knitting and steadily looking “the Marquis in the face” (Bk ii, c. vii, p. 143). Thus the submissiveness of the crowd is transformed through this figure into something much more overtly threatening: she has come to embody the damning justice to which the ruling class will be brought “with the steadfastness of Fate” (Bk ii, c. vii p. 143). In her transformation into a figure of vengeance, Madame Defarge sacrifices her humanity: the image of her heading towards Lucy’s home with a loaded pistol “hidden in her bosom” and a “sharpened dagger” that is “hidden in her waist” contrasts with the echo from her

girlhood when she used to walk “bare-foot and bare-legged, on the brown sea-sand” (Bk iii, c. xiv, p. 391). Thus, in her attempt to personify herself into an image of revenge, she has lost the freedom of her youth. Similarly, the Marquis embodies the vices of his class so absolutely that he no longer seems human.

From the above discussion one can deduce that as Madame Defarge and the Marquis become flattened into figures of impersonal processes, there is a draining away of moral character. Thus moral psychology has been displaced from the inner life (so beloved of a realist like George Eliot) onto the larger canvass of interacting moral energies. In light of the above discussion, J.M. Rignall’s accusation that these characters are oversimplified and uninteresting seems to be missing the point. The power of historical forces over individuals can be seen in Dickens’s use of allegory as a kind of force-field that draws everything and everyone into an intensity, simple and diamond clear. This vitalises Dickens’s historical vision and dramatises what I see as a central concern of the novel: the conflict between the individual’s desire to affirm his selfhood, and the tides of history that threaten to overwhelm and destroy him.

Death and resurrection: Doctor Manette and Charles Darnay

The virtuous characters of the novel dramatise this conflict: they struggle continually against the dehumanising forces of history and attempt to maintain their individuality in a world in which every person has become a reflection of his social and political environment. These characters are confined to a kind of death-in-life by a society that has no place for them and attempt to be reborn anew, to re-enter society without losing their individual identities.

But these attempts are ultimately weak and ineffectual: in the case of Darnay, for example, the revolutionaries insist on seeing him as “one of a family of tyrants” and refuse to acknowledge his attempts to help them and to view him as a separate person in his own right (Bk iii, c. ix, p. 345). When he enters the prison of La Force after a “long unreal ride”, Darnay is greeted by the prisoners who all rise “to receive him, with every refinement of manner known to his time, and with all the engaging courtesies of life”. But these “refinements” are “spectral . . . in the inappropriate squalor and misery through

which they [are] seen" (Bk iii, c. i, p. 285). Darnay is the perfect gentleman but like the people he now encounters, he is so vaporous that his virtuous acts lack force and conviction: his desire to go to Paris and help Gabelle for example seems to be motivated at least as much by his "latent uneasiness" (Bk ii, c. xxiv, p. 267) as it is by his desire to do good. Unable to escape his class, Darnay has become a ghostly figure just like his fellow aristocrats.

One of the most haunting moments in the novel is when Darnay is alone in his cell obsessed with death, walking "to and fro" while outside "the roar of the city [arises] like muffled drums with a wild swell of voices" (Bk iii, c. i, p. 286). The silent and self-enclosed cell is like a tomb outside of which the only sound of life is the war-like swell of the voices in the streets. As Darnay paces he loses all touch with reality: his thoughts become halting so that he is unable to recall who the woman "dressed in black" reminds him of and his only relief is the repeated refrain "he made shoes" (Bk iii, c. i, p. 286). This refrain in its monotonous and slightly hysterical repetition implies a complete mental breakdown. Here the ghostly quality to which Darnay and all that he stands for have been reduced is in fact a function of the domination of irrational monstrous forces embodied by the revolutionaries. His last struggle thus constitutes a desperate and flagging attempt to find some source of resistance to this effacement.

Dickens's anxiety about the impossibility of an individual retaining his identity in a world dominated by social strife is closely examined in the case of Dr Manette who is divided against himself: Marisa Sestito observes that during the reading of his memorial, Manette is transformed into the victim of his younger self who desired vengeance and death.²⁵¹ The young Manette's suffering drove him to a cry for vengeance so that he declared his belief that the Evremondes have "no part in [God's] mercies" and "denounce[d] them to Heaven and to earth" (Bk iii, c. x, p. 361). This contrasts strikingly with the older Manette who has been reborn through love and forgiveness, and who is reduced to a desperate state by the denouncement made by his younger self so that he wrings his hands "with a shriek of anguish" (Bk iii, c. x, p. 363). Manette's attempts to assert his will against the system fail abysmally twice and he himself is initially overcome

²⁵¹ Marisa Sestito, "Divided Dickens", *The Yearbook of English Studies* 26 (1996): 34–42 (p. 36).

with the vengeance and anger of which he will later become a victim. Thus Manette's own self seems to be swallowed up in the war between the oppressed and the oppressor.

Manette's 'rebirth', his re-emergence into society after eighteen years of being "buried alive" is described as a constant psychological battle rather than a spiritual reawakening: when Lorry and Lucy Manette first find him in a garret near Defarge's wine-shop he is reduced to a "white-haired man" who is "very busy, making shoes" (Bk i, c. v, p. 70). He has become trapped in the persona of the shoe-maker, a persona that he initially assumed in order to alleviate his pain but that has now become the tomb in which his former personality is trapped. The persona of the shoemaker consumes Manette so entirely that he cannot stop working on his shoes for a moment and when he is made to stop he lays "the knuckles of the right hand in the hollow of the left, and then the knuckles of the left hand in the hollow of the right, and then [passes] a hand across his bearded chin" (Bk i, c. v, p. 72) again and again in successive nervous motion. But he nevertheless battles to overcome it: when Lorry tries to speak to him his true self surfaces very briefly in "marks of an actively intent intelligence in the middle of the forehead" only to be quickly "over clouded again" (Bk i, c. v, p. 73). This struggle to assert his identity persists throughout the novel and he is constantly overpowered by the intrusion of the wider social conflict into his personal life – he reverts to the shoemaker persona briefly when he discovers that Darnay is an Evremonde and again later when he hears the words of his younger self denouncing Darnay.

Like Darnay, Manette is a phantom-like figure: his voice is so faint that it is like the "last feeble echo of a sound made long and long ago" (Bk i, c. v, p. 70). This description suggests that Manette's voice comes out of a distant and forgotten past, that he has become a ghost of his former self. The ghostly quality of the good characters has wrongly been seen as an (unconscious) failure on Dickens's part – a sign that they are stereotypes, lacking vitality. But Dickens makes a point of emphasising their vaporous nature (which in Manette's case dramatically communicates his suffering) because it suggests the precarious state of the good, moral individual in a world dominated by terrifying social and political forces. In order for the 'good' characters to overcome the reductive forces of history, something more than Manette's re-emergence into society is required.

Conclusion: the spiritual rebirth of Sydney Carton

Sydney Carton is most memorable for his sacrificial death which haunts the last pages of the novel. However, the effectiveness of Carton's last moments is in dispute amongst critics: Dennis Walder finds Carton's sacrifice implausible, suggesting that Dickens's evocation of the religious dimension adds very little to the significance of Carton's death and that we are more moved by the "sympathetic identification with fellow humanity" of the little seamstress who is guillotined with him.²⁵² He contends that Dickens's focus is ultimately on this world rather than on the next, suggesting that the kind of immortality that Carton achieves is purely secular – to live on in the memories of generations of Darnays (p. 199). J.M. Rignall remains unconvinced by Carton's story of regeneration, seeing the Christian rhetoric of redemption and salvation merely as a means of covering up what is essentially an act of ultimate resignation – the capitulation to the forces of history and society which have proved themselves stronger than the individual.²⁵³ Both of these critics sideline the Christian dimension of Carton's death, regarding it as superfluous window-dressing or even as a way of obscuring a very unchristian and pessimistic portrayal of despair.

It is true that one encounters difficulties when one attempts to understand Carton realistically as a figure who is reborn through his sentimental love for Lucy: Dickens asks us to believe that Carton's feelings for Lucy are what give him a sense of purpose in his otherwise meaningless life so that on the day when he confesses his love for her, his purposeless wanderings suddenly become "animated by an intention, and, in the working out of that intention, they [take] him to the Doctor's door" (Bk ii, c. xiii, p. 179). But the redemptive quality of his love for Lucy is open to question: Lucy herself is unconvincing because the portrayal of her goodness is so shadowy and sentimental – she is the heart of the home which she "so adorn[s]" and the happiness which she embodies and in which Carton has denied himself part involves "the little picture of a happy father's face look[ing] up into [hers]" and her "own bright beauty springing up anew at [her] feet"

²⁵² Walder, *Dickens and Religion*, p. 198.

²⁵³ Rignall, "Dickens and the Catastrophic Continuum of History in *A Tale of Two Cities*", p. 585.

(Bk ii, c. xiv, p. 183). There is something strained and even childish implied in the use of the diminutive “little picture” (Bk ii, c. xiv p. 183) – the idealised picture of domestic bliss is indeed ‘little’ in the face of the powerful forces of evil of the revolution and certainly pales before them. Lucy admits that she can have “no tenderness” for Carton and yet she asks him if “without it” she cannot “save [him]” (Bk ii, c. xiv p. 181). Her desire to “recall him . . . to a better course” (Bk ii, c. xiv p. 181) without giving him her full love makes it very difficult for us to believe in the strength of her emotions here. She seems merely to mouth what is expected of her as a virtuous young woman whose role it is to direct men onto a better course.

Further, Carton is so self-pitying – he says with tears in his eyes and voice that he will not improve in his ways but only “sink lower, and be worse” – that one feels as if he is more focussed on himself and his own pitiful state than he is on his feelings for Lucy. Beneath the surface of Carton’s declaration of selfless love, his motives seem to be more self-interested than he cares to admit: his declaration of love appears as a last-ditch effort by a suitor to gain some favour with his lady: he asks for her pity so that his “faults, and miseries, [can be] gently carried in [her] heart.” (Bk ii, c. xiv p. 182). In asking for her pity and for her to see him in this light and not to judge him by the way in which he presents himself in society, Carton reveals a certain mawkish self-preoccupation, a desire to give himself some importance despite all his protests to the contrary. Finally Carton’s declaration of love culminates in his expressing his desire to “give his life, to keep a life you love beside you” (Bk ii, c. xiv p. 183). True as this turns out to be, Carton’s sentimental harping on the notion of self-sacrifice seems a little too extreme and implausible for the situation. This confession most certainly does not move one to appreciate the altruistic quality of Carton’s love for Lucy and there is nothing in it at this point that would make us consider it divine. In Carton’s declaration of love for Lucy, Dickens attempts to sanctify the affairs of the heart – to suggest that it is through love and affection for another that one can overcome one’s moral inadequacy. But, as I have argued, this attempt falls flat so that it is easier to believe Rignall’s suggestion that Carton’s death is a kind of suicide than it is to accept that he was inspired to an act of altruism through his love for Lucy.

Read realistically as a personal act of love for a woman, Carton's sacrifice lacks plausibility. However, it is possible to read it more philosophically as a virtuous act, the desire to sacrifice oneself in order to save another, paradoxically affirming the value of the individual life against the backdrop of violence and bloodshed where life is expendable. When read in this way, Carton's sacrifice becomes a symbolic act – a spiritual rebirth reaffirming the significance of the individual life – and resonates with a wider Christian paradigm.

Kenneth M. Sroka has noted the wealth of religious allusion with which Carton's last moments are inscribed – he becomes the drink for the guillotine, recalling Christ's martyrdom on the cross; further his last meal is a kind of 'Last Supper' in which he eats bread, prefiguring the way in which he will become the bread of life for the Darnays.²⁵⁴ I would like to suggest that such allusions emphasise Carton's greater awareness of a divine realm. This progression towards spiritual rebirth is evident when one compares his earlier debauchery with his renewed respect for life before he is executed. This can be seen in his attitude towards eating and drinking: when he dines with Darnay after the court-case at the Old Bailey, Carton overindulges in wine, informing Darnay that this is a means of escaping the life that "has no good in it for [him]" (Bk ii, c. iv, p. 114). Here Carton attempts to fulfil his spiritual emptiness by over-indulging in sensual pleasures, the effects of which are physically and morally damaging. But in his last meal before he goes to court, Carton drinks "nothing but a little coffee", eats "some bread, and, having washed and changed himself, [goes] out to the place of trial" (Bk iii, c. ix, p. 344). The association, which Sroka has observed, between Carton's simple meal of bread and the life-giving bread of Christ, suggests his spiritual purification.

Carton's last moments echo the concerns of the earlier scene at the Old Bailey court in London, infusing them with a deeper spiritual significance. In the scene at the Old Bailey, Carton is described as a social misfit: he responds to Darnay's cordial thanks for going to apologise to Miss Manette for him in a manner that is "so careless as to be insolent" as he stands "half-turned from the prisoner, lounging with his elbow against the

²⁵⁴ Kenneth M. Sroka, "A tale of two Gospels: Dickens and John", *Dickens Studies Annual* 27 (1998): 145–169 (p. 165).

bar" (Bk ii, c. iii, p. 108). He remains aloof from the celebrations of Darnay's release and continues to show a lack of social graces so that Mr Lorry becomes "thoroughly heated by his indifference" (Bk ii, c. iv, p. 113) when he mocks him for hesitating to go and tell Darnay that Miss Manette was over her agitation. Here Carton's arrogant, careless manner is what alienates him from the society of the 'decent' characters.

On the night before his death Carton is described as somehow removed from the city around him, recalling his earlier isolation: he passes by the theatre as people "pour out cheerfully" and he watches with "solemn interest . . . the lighted windows where the people were going to rest" (Bk iii, c. ix, p. 343). Notably Carton's attitude is no longer cavalier. Rather he shows a profound respect for the simple pleasures of the people and the little peace still left in their lives. This compassion and reverence for life differs from his earlier attitude after saving Darnay for the first time: after the court-case at the Old Bailey Carton invites Darnay to dine with him and treats him quite callously, telling him that he has already dined "when those numbskulls were deliberating which world you would belong to – this, or some other" (Bk ii, c. iv p. 114). Carton's reference to the world after death is vague and dismissive and his attitude suggests that he trivialises matters of life and death. But on the night before his death Carton contemplates "the whole life and death of the city" from a moral perspective, noticing the spiritually depraved nature of France: he notes the "towers of the churches where no prayers were said" because of the "popular revulsion from years of priestly imposters" and the "abounding gaols" filled with innocent people who are soon to be meaninglessly executed (Bk iii, c. ix p. 343). These images of spiritual degradation and a disregard for the sanctity of life contrast markedly with Carton's decision to sacrifice his life in order to save Darnay: this sacrifice will give meaning and purpose to his own life and will confer a certain dignity to the deaths of those who have been meaninglessly slaughtered by the Guillotine.

Dennis Walder complains that the invocation of Jesus' words from the Gospel of Saint John reveals very little about the nature of Carton's sacrifice.²⁵⁵ But I disagree: Carton first recalls the words, "I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whoever liveth and believeth

²⁵⁵ Walder, *Dickens and Religion*, p. 198.

in me, shall never die", just before his night-time wanderings through the city (Bk iii, c. ix p. 342). These words contrast with the images of the city's moral depravity – the empty churches as well as the "abounding gaols" (Bk iii, c. ix p. 343). In this way, Carton's repeated refrain emphasises the fact that his sacrifice will recover a sense of the divine and the transcendent in a world where moral sensibility has been smothered and perverted. The fleeting nature of life in the city is made evident in the emphasis on death: this can be seen in the "distant burial-places", and the suggestion that death has lost its spiritual aspect and become a "common and material" affair (Bk iii, c. ix p. 343). This is juxtaposed against the promise of the sanctity and permanence of the spiritual life embodied by Carton's spiritual rebirth. This reawakening is expressed through Christ's words so that Carton's sacrifice is made to resonate with a universal Christian vision.

Carton stands out from the other 'good' characters of the novel because he is finally able to conquer the reductive forces of history and society by asserting, through his sacrifice, the significance of the individual life. At first Carton is a victim of society: he allows himself to be sidelined by a society that favours the arrogant and ambitious so that he uses his brilliant mind in service of the obviously inferior Stryver and he has "waste forces within him and a desert all around" (Bk ii, c. v, p. 121). Although he is a man "of good abilities and good emotions", he is "incapable of their directed exercise, incapable of his own help and his own happiness, sensible of the blight on him, and resigning himself to let it eat him away" (Bk ii, c. v, p. 122). Thus Carton allows his own sense of social inadequacy to stifle his potential for moral growth. Significantly the world has no place for Carton's spiritual qualities – it is entirely focussed on earthly success regardless of how it is achieved so that Stryver is able unscrupulously to use his friend in order to receive undeserved adulation.

Ultimately, Carton is reborn into an understanding of his life's true purpose, not through the strengthening of earthly ties, as is the case for Dr Manette, but through the renunciation of the ways of the world. Of course, Carton's main reason for his sacrifice is his earthly love for Lucy but the significance of his sacrifice soon surpasses this and comes to embody a transcendent Christian truth. His last moments on the scaffold evoke Christ's crucifixion more potently than before: the "sombre wheels" of the "six death carts" roll down the streets of Paris to "[r]idges of faces, thrown to this side and to that" (Bk iii, c. xv

p. 400). The many faces witnessing his death recall the large group of people who followed Christ on his walk up the hill and who gathered in front of his cross to witness his last moments (Luke 24: 48–49). Just as the crowd before whom Jesus was sentenced to death shouted to Pilate, “Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!” (John 19: 15) so the people raise “cries . . . against [Carton]” (Bk iii, c. xv, p. 400). The ignorance and cruelty of the people who sentenced Christ to death is recalled in the words of the man who cries “Down Evremonde! To the Guillotine all aristocrats! Down Evremonde!” (Bk iii, c. xv, p. 401): the man’s malicious desire to see ‘Evremonde’ guillotined contrasts with Carton’s selfless assumption of Darnay’s identity, emphasising the redemptive alternative that he offers to the crowd’s vengeance. No critics to my knowledge have yet commented on the implications of the name Evremonde (derived from the French for ‘Everyman’) in relation to Carton. When applied to Darnay the name seemed to have more secular connotations of the ordinary, good man who is always persecuted; but when applied to Carton, the name recalls the symbolic figure of Everyman in the Morality tradition who was redeemed and saved. Thus Carton’s death recalls the allegorical pattern of the Morality play where the Mankind figure gradually embraces a greater, spiritual reality. But Carton’s spirituality differs from that of the Mankind figure in that it is not ethereal: he achieves transcendence through the rebirth of human qualities – he repents of self-indulgence and becomes purposeful, loving and self-sacrificial.

Carton comes to embody the qualities of love and comfort which prove to be more enduring than the fatalistic ethic of the revolutionaries: the wrath of the people eventually turns inward on themselves so that Madame Defarge brings about her own downfall and Defarge, we are told, becomes himself a victim of the guillotine. Carton, however, becomes a figure of peace and reassurance for the little seamstress who tells him that she could not be “so composed without [him]” (Bk iii, c. xv, p. 402). Her trust in him is absolute and this emphasises the analogy between Carton and Christ who offers the comfort of eternal life to whoever believes in him. Whereas vice makes “expiation for itself and [wears] out” (Bk iii, c. xv, p. 404), Carton’s sacrifice will be remembered by generations of Darnays. In this way virtue is redefined as a perpetual affirmation that surpasses particular human beings and this accords it a power that vice cannot have. Thus death, which might be seen as annihilation, in this case allows for the transcendence

of self: the virtue that Carton affirms becomes most fully his in death, and therefore (paradoxically) most able to survive him and be bequeathed to others – in this sense virtue becomes greater than he is. Unlike the other allegorical depictions where people are reduced to figures and absorbed into an all-consuming vice, here Carton becomes both an embodiment of virtue and a transcendent self.

CHAPTER FIVE

REWRITING SHAKESPEARE: FROM BURLESQUE TO MELODRAMA TO MORALITY

Shakespeare, the Victorians and Dickens

In *Dickens, The Novelist*, F.R. Leavis and Q.D. Leavis argue that the imaginative intensity of Dickens's work owes much to the influence of Shakespeare.²⁵⁶ Since the Leavises wrote, Dickens's creative debt to Shakespeare has been universally acknowledged by critics. My interest in this long-standing critical tradition will be developed in the next two chapters, where I will focus on Dickens's response to *Hamlet* in *Great Expectations*. I intend to show that while in *Hamlet* Shakespeare sets Hamlet's individual anxiety against the formulaic world of the Morality drama and Revenge Tragedy, Dickens, however unwittingly, evokes both of these theatrical traditions and weaves them into a more allegorical mode of expression. In *Hamlet* the juxtaposition of the theatrical formulae of Morality drama and Revenge Tragedy with Hamlet's individual dilemma sharpens the distinction between the play-world and real-life. In *Great Expectations*, it will be argued, the distinctions between life and artifice are harder to define: Magwitch's sudden reappearance in Pip's life or Miss Havisham's histrionics in Satis House, seem, by drawing on melodramatic stage conventions, to create a dream-like world in which 'reality' is heightened and projected into a transcendent realm. This chapter will begin with a brief examination of Shakespeare's influence on the Victorian consciousness in general and on Dickens in particular. It will then move on to discuss the ways in which Shakespeare draws on the older theatrical tradition of the Morality play in *Hamlet*. Finally it will examine Dickens's approach to the theme of redemption in *Great Expectations*.

The nineteenth century saw a revival of interest in Shakespeare: not only were his plays performed in highbrow theatres but they were also performed as burlesques in popular theatres under pseudonyms like, *Methinks I see my father* (for *Hamlet*) and *How*

²⁵⁶ F.R. Leavis and Q. D. Leavis, *Dickens, The Novelist*, 2nd rev. edn (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970), p. 26.

to *Die for Love* (for *Romeo and Juliet*).²⁵⁷ The plays also had an influence on other creative disciplines such as literature, art, ballet and opera. Another strand in Shakespeare performance attempted to present the plays as historically authentic.²⁵⁸ Yet another approach to Shakespeare was to emphasise a greater realism in performance: although realism did not become a distinctive theatrical genre until the late nineteenth century, realistic elements were already present on the nineteenth century stage at the time when Dickens was writing.²⁵⁹ As James Woodfield notes, realism in Victorian theatre was influenced by the literary realist movement that was championed by George Eliot. Like the realist novelists, those who desired realism on the stage stressed the necessity of focussing on ordinary experience rather than the supernatural or the exaggerated. But it was on the stage where realism's limitations were most embarrassingly present. Woodfield captures succinctly the irreconcilability of the realist and dramatic modes: "lacking the expansive detail of the novel, how could drama compress and select the essentials of real life, and present them in an entertaining theatrical manner, without distortion?" (p. 24).

Nevertheless interest continued to grow in presenting plays that were authentic and true-to-life and this also influenced Shakespeare productions: the continued interest in the realistic qualities of Shakespeare's drama was accompanied by an interest in his presentation of the individual consciousness: J.B. Bullen argues that Victorians did not only see the Renaissance as a time of revival in religion and politics but that they also saw it as a time defined by a new focus on the individual.²⁶⁰ The association of Shakespeare with this cult of the individual is best illustrated by the Victorian predilection for the figure of Hamlet who was seen as a "symbol of 'modern' individualism".²⁶¹ *Hamlet* was the most well-known of Shakespeare's plays and directors saw in it opportunities to explore profound human emotions; but its sombre mood and focus on serious inner

²⁵⁷ Coral Lansbury, "Pecksniff and Pratfalls", in *Dramatic Dickens*, ed. Carol Hanbery MacKay (London: Macmillan Press, 1989), p. 45.

²⁵⁸ Stanley Wells (Introd.), *Nineteenth-Century Shakespeare Burlesques* (London: Diploma Press, 1977), pp. viii, ix, xiii.

²⁵⁹ James Woodfield, *English Theatre In Transition 1881–1914* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), p. 21.

²⁶⁰ J.B. Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance in Nineteenth-Century Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 2.

²⁶¹ John, *Dickens's Villains*, p. 13.

conflict also made it an irresistible object of satire: John Poole, who wrote *The Hamlet Travestie* very early in his career, found *Hamlet* one of the best of Shakespeare's plays to satirise because of its popularity and its preoccupation with introspective analysis.²⁶² Charles Dickens shared his contemporaries' interest in Shakespeare and particularly in *Hamlet* which, like Poole, he took a delight in mocking.

Dickens remained passionate about the theatre throughout his life and it is thus unsurprising that he was well acquainted with the works of Shakespeare who was a "constant presence" in the nineteenth century theatrical and literary consciousness: Valerie Gager suggests that Dickens's "involvement with the theatre as a spectator, participator, and reviewer" contributed a significant amount to his understanding of and appreciation for Shakespeare.²⁶³ Coral Lansbury further notes that Dickens particularly appreciated skits done on Shakespeare: when he was twenty-one he wrote his own "musical Shakespeare" based on Othello and entitled "The O'Thello".²⁶⁴

Valerie Gager's book *Shakespeare and Dickens: The Dynamics of Influence* (1996), details the immense debt that Dickens owed to Shakespeare. She observes that Dickens responded to Shakespeare's works in various ways, appreciating them for their popular and melodramatic appeal as well as for their engagement of more refined intellectual sentiments: this is evident from the fact that he watched both highbrow and lowbrow productions of Shakespeare and particularly took to Macready's histrionic acting style:²⁶⁵ the influence of Macready's interpretation of Shakespeare on Dickens can be seen in his modelling of Sykes's flight on Macready's *Macbeth* (p. 76). Further, Gager notes that Dickens did not only respond to Shakespeare as theatre: he was also influenced by painters' interpretations of Shakespeare's plays, especially those of Daniel Maclise (p. 33). He was drawn to Maclise's depiction of *Hamlet* where the artist uses "lighting to duplicate the re-enacted murder in shadow" (p. 87). This technique suggests a "preoccupation with the workings of the guilty mind and with the supernatural" (p. 88).

²⁶² Wells, *Nineteenth-Century Shakespeare Burlesques*, p. xvii.

²⁶³ Valerie Gager, *Shakespeare and Dickens: The Dynamics of Influence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 139.

²⁶⁴ Lansbury, "Pecksniff and Pratfalls", p. 45.

²⁶⁵ Gager, *Shakespeare and Dickens*, p. 68.

From these observations one can deduce that Dickens's imagination was excited by Shakespeare's evocation of a transcendent world of death and judgement.

Many critics have followed the Leavises' lead in discerning the Shakespearean quality of Dickens's narrative style as well as the thematic content of his novels: Harold Bloom suggests that Dickens's depiction of the revolution in *A Tale of Two Cities* masters Shakespeare's "art of counterpointing degrees of terror, of excess, so as to suggest a dread that otherwise would reside beyond representation".²⁶⁶ Nicola Bradbury argues that Shakespeare contributed "perhaps most importantly to [Dickens's] development of complex form" which involves "control, balance, and design, always tested by contrary effects of chaotic proliferation and disorder".²⁶⁷ Further, when discussing *Nicholas Nickleby*, Robert L. Patten observes that the relationship between Nicholas and Smike begins more and more to resemble the relationship between "Lear and his fool".²⁶⁸

Of all of Shakespeare's works, Dickens refers most often to *Hamlet*.²⁶⁹ Novels such as *David Copperfield* engage deeply with *Hamlet's* concerns, transforming them to suit Dickens's own vision: Valerie Gager argues that in *David Copperfield* Dickens tacitly transforms *Hamlet's* revenge theme into a story of individual triumph and rebirth: David avenges himself on those who treated him cruelly in his youth by becoming a successful writer and loving parent (p. 241). Gager further suggests that the novel draws on *Hamlet's* preoccupation with the relationship between the world of the theatre and the 'real' world: rather than separating the world of art from that of 'real' life as *Hamlet* does, Dickens heightens the significance of David's dream sequences and imaginative ruminations by giving them a theatrical quality (p. 237). Dickens also makes use of *Hamlet* satirically in his novels. In *Nicholas Nickleby* Mrs Curdle, a self-professed drama critic, complains that there is no actor "now living who can present before us those changing and prismatic colours with which the character of Hamlet is invested" and Mr

²⁶⁶ Harold Bloom (introd.), *Modern Critical Views: Charles Dickens* (New York, New Haven, Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), p. 24.

²⁶⁷ Nicola Bradbury, "Dickens and the form of the novel", in ed. Jordan, J.O., *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 156.

²⁶⁸ Robert L. Patten, "From *Sketches to Nickleby*", in *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, p.27.

²⁶⁹ Gager, *Shakespeare and Dickens*, p. 19.

Curdle agrees with her, lamenting that Hamlet is “gone, perfectly gone”.²⁷⁰ Already the exaggerated nature of this praise makes it appear false. But when this is coupled with the knowledge that Mr Curdle’s reputation rests on the pamphlet in which he wrote about “the Nurse’s deceased husband in *Romeo and Juliet* with an inquiry into whether he really had been a ‘merry man’ in his lifetime” and his proof that “by altering the received mode of punctuation, any one of Shakespeare’s plays could be made quite different and the sense completely changed” (p. 233), it becomes very difficult to endorse the Curdles’ acclamation of the figure of Hamlet. Here Dickens mocks academic preoccupation with minute and impertinent details and seems to be suggesting that the lavish praise heaped on *Hamlet* by academics of the time might be equally meaningless.

In *Great Expectations* Dickens uses Wopsle’s production of *Hamlet* satirically to debunk realist theatre’s concern with producing plays that attempted to imitate “real life” and presented characters as psychologically complex. As in *David Copperfield*, the play world is implicitly melded with Pip’s ‘reality’, throwing his experiences into relief. But this novel takes a bolder stance on the notions of revenge and forgiveness than the former, examining them against the backdrop of judgement and purgation. The following analysis will attempt to trace Dickens’s melodramatic reinterpretation of *Hamlet*’s tragic vision by suggesting that Dickens invokes the structure of the Morality play still resonant in *Hamlet*: thus the false social values of Pip’s world are put into a crucible of moral absolutes. This approach may seem over-schematic but it is convenient to reinforce the way in which Dickens is preparing the course of moral regeneration in a non-realist way.

Hamlet and the Morality Play

In his still authoritative book, *The English Morality Play*, Robert Potter makes an interesting argument for the influence of the Medieval Morality play on Renaissance drama. He notes that in *As You Like It*, Jacques’ description of the pattern of human life in his “all the world’s a stage” speech recalls the conventions of Medieval drama in the way in which it describes one man’s progression from infancy to old age as archetypal of that

²⁷⁰ Charles Dickens, *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1839), p. 233.

of humanity.²⁷¹ Further, he notes that Jacques's reference to the stage as an analogue for the world recalls the Medieval understanding of theatre according to which a play attempts to portray not "mimetic demonstrations of life" but "analogical demonstrations of what life is about".²⁷² Thus the theatre becomes itself an emblem in an attempt to depict the pattern of human life as universal – a ritualistic process in which the audiences knew themselves to be implicated. Yet, Potter is at pains to point out the differences between Jacques' speech and the Morality tradition, bringing to light the way in which the playwrights of the Renaissance both drew on and transformed the theatrical traditions that they inherited: whereas Jacques' vision is tragic, emphasising man's progression from humble beginnings towards a "plateau of illusory achievement", and his final "decay into senility . . . and non-existence" (p. 10), the figure of Everyman in the Moralities, although he falls from innocence into "a dilemma of his own making", is "inexorably delivered by divine grace to achieve salvation and eternal life" (p. 10). The Morality play follows the pattern of innocence-fall-redemption and in this way manages to create an effect that is optimistic and life-affirming, promising salvation to all who repent. But by the time Shakespeare was writing, as Potter's analysis demonstrates, one of the ways in which Renaissance drama had diverged from its Medieval predecessor, was in its emphasis on the "spiritual destruction" of Mankind (p. 197). Potter suggests that this transformation of the optimistic conclusion of the Morality tradition into a tragic one is also reflected in Shakespeare's works: the tragedy of *King Lear* for example draws on the "political Morality play tradition" where Lear is initially described as a kind of Mankind figure who is prompt to reject the Virtue figures (Cordelia and Kent) in favour of the Vices (Goneril and Regan) (pp. 153–4). However, the possibility of Morality play forgiveness and redemption suggested in the figure of Cordelia is proved illusory when she dies and is unable to perform the role of Mercy for Lear (p. 169). In this way, Shakespeare moves beyond the limitations of the theatrical style which he inherited.

²⁷¹ *As You Like It*, II, vii, 139–66, in *Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. G.B. Harrison (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1952), cit. in Robert Potter, *The English Morality Play: Origins, History and Influence of a Dramatic Tradition* (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 9.

²⁷² Potter, *The English Morality Play*, p. 33.

Potter's argument about Shakespeare's transfiguration of the Morality tradition is a compelling one. In order to throw light on Dickens's use of Wopsle's farcical production of *Hamlet* in *Great Expectations*, it might be helpful to summarise the way in which Potter develops his thesis in a discussion of *Hamlet*'s use of *The Murder of Gonzago*.²⁷³ Although *The Murder of Gonzago* is not in itself a Morality play, Potter argues that it is used by Shakespeare to suggest the illusory nature of repentance and redemption which is the only solution to the Mankynde figure's dilemma posited by the Moralities. In *Hamlet*, he notes, the play-within-the-play functions as "a call to repentance" for Claudius, who, confronted with the despicable reality of his sin, is overcome by fear. He is immediately driven to repent and, in soliloquy, appears as the Mankynde figure of the Morality play, "confronted inescapably with the dilemmas of sin and repentance" (p. 139). However, two things work against a successful Morality play conclusion: the first is that Claudius, although aware of his crime, cannot repent for it because he does not wish to give up the privileges that his new position has afforded him; and the second is that instead of Claudius being presented with Mercy, the agent of repentance, Hamlet appears on the scene as an agent of revenge. Hamlet only spares Claudius because of his fear that if he (Hamlet) were to play the role of "Death which the scene has contrived for him", Claudius' soul would be saved. But the "Closet scene" is perhaps the most ironic of the repercussions of *The Murder of Gonzago* in the way in which it undercuts the repentance scene that Hamlet attempts to put into effect: Hamlet, having succeeded as an agent of penitence in compelling Gertrude to realise her sin, undercuts the force of his own argument by murdering the innocent Polonius under the mistaken assumption that he is the unrepentant Claudius hiding in Gertrude's chambers. Thus Hamlet's hopeful urging of his mother to confess her sins, suggesting that a "resolution to all the misfortunate is possible", is ridiculed by the tragic reality of the dead body at his feet, pointing to his own corruption (p. 143). These scenes show Hamlet to be sandwiched between two traditions

²⁷³ Although it is possible that Shakespeare based *The Murder of Gonzago* on an actual play already in existence, this cannot be determined as there is no known printed source. The name *Gonzago* is derived from the name of Luigi Gonzaga who was a kinsman of the Duke of Urbino, Francesco Maria 1 della Rovere who was poisoned in October 1538. Gonzaga's name was linked with the Duke's poisoning, although this was never proven. The version of the story which Shakespeare drew on had switched the name of the murderer to his victim but it is unclear how he came across this confused version of the original story. See: Harold Jenkins (introd.), *Hamlet*, Arden Shakespeare (London and New York: Routledge, 1982), p. 102.

– the Morality tradition with its emphasis on the possibility of salvation for every sinner and the tradition of the Revenge Tragedy with its suggestion that “blood-revenge for murder” is justifiable and its concern with the “effects of violence on the moral stature of the characters involved”.²⁷⁴ Potter’s analysis suggests that by bringing these two traditions into contact with one another, Shakespeare offers a critique of both.

Great Expectations: the Return to Allegory

From the above discussion one can infer that Shakespeare uses *The Murder of Gonzago* to emphasise a shift in focus from allegorical pattern to individual experience. In *Great Expectations* Dickens is also concerned with exploring the boundaries between art and life, but in a different way. In this novel Dickens uses Wopsle’s production of *Hamlet* as a backdrop against which to cast the awakening of Pip’s moral consciousness. Dickens’s depiction of the play satirises the Victorian theatre which, as William. A. Wilson notes, had “degenerated into a form of mass entertainment . . . inimical to tragic concerns”.²⁷⁵ Dickens uses Wopsle’s production to mock the theatre-goers, showing them to be incapable of the refined tastes required to appreciate tragedy. However, the satire extends to the performance itself for the actors are the only ones who believe in the effectiveness and plausibility of their production. The failure of Wopsle’s *Hamlet* to convince its audience suggests a subtle critique of the realist tradition in which the text of *Hamlet* had become implicated. Citing Dickens’s preface to the Folio Society publication of *A Christmas Carol* in which he suggests that Hamlet was weak of intellect and a poser, Juliet John notes that Dickens rejected the notion, embodied in the figure of Hamlet, “that interiority constitutes authenticity”. Thus *Great Expectations* is an attempt to rewrite the life of the individual in an outward and allegorical way.²⁷⁶ Here Dickens seems to be shifting away from an approach to art that emphasises its mimetic function, towards a more stylised allegorical mode.

²⁷⁴ Gamini Salgado (introd.), *Three Revenge Tragedies* (London: Penguin Books, 1965), pp. 15, 14.

²⁷⁵ Wilson, “The Magic Circle of Genius”, p. 165.

²⁷⁶ John, *Dickens’s Villains*, p. 13–14.

The production of *Hamlet* is presented farcically and its introspective analysis of selfhood is undermined as the narrative exposes the artificiality of the play. Immediately upon his “arrival in Denmark”, Pip notices that the King and Queen are “elevated in two armchairs on a kitchen table” (*Great Expectations*, c. xxxi, p. 273). The banality of the props trivialises the opulence of the Denmark court. The representatives of the Danish nobility appear absurdly out of place: the “Peer” has a “dirty face” and looks as if he has “risen from the people late in life” and the cavalry has a distinctly “feminine appearance” (c. xxxi, p. 274). Thus the physical appearance of the actors jars with the impression of reality that they are intending to create, making the whole thing laughable. Wopsle, who plays Hamlet, stands “gloomily apart” and Pip is upset by the seemingly inconsequential fact that Wopsle’s “curls and forehead” do not seem “probable” (c. xxxi, p. 274). This insistence on the fact that the actor’s appearance does not match his part detracts from the play’s focus on deep philosophical introspection. It seems in fact that the actors’ attempts to portray the inner life of their characters are rendered impossible by the ludicrousness of their outward attire or their ‘improbable’ features. The stilted nature of the play is emphasised, too, by Mr Wopsle’s manner of speaking which is “very slow, very dreary, very up-hill and down-hill and very unlike any way in which any man in any natural circumstances of life or death ever expressed himself about anything” (c. xxxi, p. 276). Mr Wopsle’s rendition of Hamlet is thus entirely implausible and far from bringing his part to life, his way of speaking draws attention to the unnaturalness of his acting style and finally to the failure of the illusion that he is attempting to create. The artificiality of Ophelia’s elocution has a similar effect – her “slow musical madness” is such that the poignancy of her state of mind is consequently lost upon the audience and a “sulky man” in the gallery “growl[s] that it is time to “have supper” now that “the baby’s put to bed” (c. xxxi, p. 275). Further, the fact that the “late King” is “troubled with a cough” even once he has returned from the tomb as a ghost, demystifies him and undermines his claim on Hamlet’s sympathies. What, in the original play, was a spiritual affliction that the ghost was suffering because of his consignment to purgatory, has become, in Wopsle’s farce, a merely physical malaise. The force of the ghost’s words, so potent in the original play in inciting Hamlet to avenge its death, is completely lost: the ghost refers to a “ghostly manuscript round its truncheon” with “an air of anxiety and a

tendency to lose the place of reference" (c. xxxi, p. 274). This calls into question the very "ghostliness" of the spectre and emphasises instead the actor behind the role who needs to refer to his script in order to remember his words.

Significantly it is the audience that exposes this play for the farce that it is. Hamlet's probing questions of selfhood are undermined by the participation of the crowd who start a "debating society" about "whether 'twas nobler in the mind to suffer" (c. xxxi, p. 275). The scene in the churchyard, which, in the original play, involves a morbid confrontation with the crude nature of death, is dismissed by the crowd as trivial and entirely meaningless: the painful realisation of Ophelia's death in the form of the coffin incites the audience to "general joy" (c. xxxi, p. 275) rather than profound sadness and this reaction completely overshadows the sense of loss that was meant to overhang this scene. The inability of the crowd to respond to the philosophical subtlety of the scene may be interpreted as reflecting poorly on the capacity of Victorian audiences to comprehend weighty questions of selfhood and the nature of death. Yet, it seems more likely that it is not these subjects themselves to which the audience (and presumably Dickens too) objects but rather the way in which they are handled by the actors, whose attempts to make an obviously phony production appear true-to-life are revealed as ridiculous.

The actors ironically are the only ones who have been taken in by the illusion and Mr Wopsle remains convinced of his success and his satisfaction with the performance moves Pip to pity him. In the comical description of the *Hamlet* scene Dickens both implies a parallel between the play and the narrative of *Great Expectations* and ridicules its realist approach to Hamlet's dilemma. Pip is initially kept at a distance from the play by the narrative. He remains in the audience and while he "feel[s] keenly for [Wopsle]" he participates in their laughter and finds the whole thing "so droll" (c. xxxi, p. 276). However, Pip is unwittingly brought closer to the players: when he and Herbert attempt to leave the theatre without seeing Wopsle, he is apprehended by one of Wopsle's colleagues and is finally forced into polite conversation with Wopsle himself. Ultimately he dreams of himself as "playing Hamlet to Miss Havisham's ghost" (c. xxxi, p. 279). The fact that Pip identifies himself with the players in his "miserabl[e] dream[ing]" (c. xxxi, p. 279) is significant in the way that it reflects the reality of Pip's situation: he, like the actors

in Mr Wopsle's *Hamlet*, is caught up in a farcical illusion through which he cannot see, acting out the role of a gentleman that turns out to be a lie. Affinities are implied between Pip and Hamlet – both are trapped between the competing possibilities of revenge and forgiveness – but these serve to illuminate the different methods which Shakespeare and Dickens use to explore their dilemmas. For example, the melodramatic presentation of Magwitch's extreme passions in the graveyard scene, creates the sense that he has taken on a significance beyond himself as an emblem within Pip's moral universe. As I will demonstrate, Pip's inner turmoil is depicted outwardly and melodramatically in the figures and scenarios which he encounters, while Hamlet's is dealt with introspectively.

As has already been mentioned, the ghost in Wopsle's farce is exposed as a ridiculous imposter and this suggests a critique of *Hamlet's* revenge theme. Like the ghost in *Hamlet*, Magwitch attempts to make Pip carry out his revenge on the gentleman class. Yet, William A. Wilson has noted that the similarity between Magwitch and the ghost in *Hamlet* is in fact deceptive for while "the Ghost of Hamlet's father appears in Elsinore to begin a Revenge Tragedy . . . Magwitch's return to London effectively ends the one he himself authored".²⁷⁷ Magwitch's effect on Pip's moral development is ironically a positive one for his reappearance in Pip's life causes Pip to reassess not only the means of acquisition of his wealth but ultimately also his spiritual condition.

The meeting between Pip and Magwitch ultimately reflects ironically on the revenge motif of *Hamlet*: although Magwitch desires Pip to be his agent of revenge and to show the colonists and the judge "a better gentleman than the whole kit on you put together", Pip, unlike Hamlet, does not respond to the injustices done to Magwitch with righteous indignation but instead with "a frenzy of fear and dislike" (c. xl, p. 347). Not only does he feel under no obligation to help along Magwitch's plan but he also cannot respond to Magwitch with the love owed to a parent, even if Magwitch sees himself as Pip's "second father" (c. xxxix, p. 337). Instead of being spurred on towards revenge by his natural love for a father figure, Pip laments that "if [he] had loved [Magwitch] instead of abhorring him" the situation "would have been better" (c. xxxix, p. 340). Thus

²⁷⁷ Wilson, "The Magic Circle of Genius", p. 159.

Magwitch's return emphasises the fact that he has made Pip into the very class of gentleman upon which he desires to be avenged: "the colonist stirring up the dust" (c. xl, p. 347) does not seem to be that far from Pip who holds the convict in silent contempt. Not only is Magwitch's revenge self-defeating but in fact, rather than inciting Pip to revenge, Magwitch's reappearance gradually brings him to self-knowledge and repentance: on the night when Pip meets Magwitch the lamps have all been blown out on the staircase and the first thing that Pip hears of Magwitch is his voice emanating from the inscrutable darkness below. This creates the impression that Pip is looking into the obscure depths of his own self and is struggling to identify this image of himself that is emerging by degrees from his subconscious. Pip tries to illuminate Magwitch with his reading lamp, which has a "very contracted . . . circle of light" so that he is able to illuminate only for a moment the "face that [is] strange to [him]" and to make out that the figure is "incomprehensi[bly] touched and moved to see [him]" (c. xxxix, p. 332). The darkness and the limited range of Pip's lamp imply a blindness that is not only literal but also spiritual: Pip's inability to comprehend Magwitch's emotional reaction to him points to a greater moral blindness which causes him to be incapable of a sympathetic response to Magwitch.

Pip's hypersensitivity to detail as he watches Magwitch ascending the staircase implies a keen interest in the strange man and a closer connection between the two figures than Pip's confused response allows for. He notices that the man is "dressed roughly", that he has long "iron-grey hair" and that his legs are "browned and hardened" (c. xxxix, p. 332). This heightened sense of Magwitch's appearance seems to transcend realistic expression and makes Magwitch appear almost larger than life, as if he were a fantastical being emerging from the Underworld. Magwitch's associations with spiritual death and judgement have been suggested from the moment of his first appearance in Pip's life. But whereas Pip's childish inability to comprehend the significant role that Magwitch would come to play in his moral development was understandable given that he was as yet ignorant of the way in which things would unfold, Pip's present confusion as the figure of Magwitch is revealed to him from out of the darkness, seems to amount to a stubborn refusal to recognise the importance of the figure before him. The alienating effect of Magwitch's appearance is belied by the imagery, which involves him climbing up

the staircase closer and closer to Pip until both of them are “included” in the “light of Pip's lamp” (c. xxxix, p. 322), implying a close affinity between them.

Magwitch's affection for Pip is described in his dramatic gesture of “holding out both his hands to [him]”, an expression of “bright and gratified recognition” that invokes in Pip only “a stupid kind of amazement” and a general feeling of disgust and distaste (c. xxxix, p. 322). Magwitch's expression of warmth is striking in its theatricality and his dramatic reaching out to Pip seems to suggest a side of Pip's own nature that demands acknowledgement. This implied self-division is emphasised by the narrative's foregrounding of the question of knowing one another and, especially in light of ensuing events, knowing oneself: Pip obstinately refuses to recognise Magwitch, although he “look[s] at him attentively” (c. xxxix, p. 333). The fact that he “recoil[s] a little from him” (c. xxxix, p. 333) and is generally horrified by him, conveys, perhaps, his fear of confronting what Magwitch represents to him – not only his own coarse upbringing, but also his moral ineptitude.

The moment of Pip's recognition of Magwitch is described as a kind of epiphany. In a matter of seconds Pip goes from finding Magwitch's affection “unintelligible and most exasperating” (c. xxxix, p. 333) to “knowing my convict . . . distinctly” even though he cannot “recall a single feature” (c. xxxix, p. 333). The fact that Pip does not need to recognise Magwitch's facial features in order to know him, implies a more profound kind of knowledge, a kind of knowledge that is intimately connected with self-knowledge. This is strongly suggested in the way in which Pip uses the word ‘my’ very powerfully at the moment of recognition. Dickens evokes the image of the storm at this point and gives it a more precise psychological dimension, describing Pip's recognition of Magwitch as so powerful that it is as if “the wind and the rain had driven away the intervening years, had scattered all the intervening objects, had swept us to the churchyard where we first stood face to face on such different levels” (c. xxxix, p. 333). In this description we are invited to view the meeting as taking place within a preternatural space, where time and place have been dissolved and Pip is made to confront his own conscience.

Once he has understood Magwitch's role in his great expectations, Pip is beset by the “sharpest and deepest pain of all”, the knowledge that “it was for the convict . . . that [he has] deserted Joe” (c. xxxix, p. 341). For the first time his “sense of [his] own

worthless conduct towards [Joe and Biddy]” is so great that he is too ashamed to believe that he can ever “undo what [he has] done” (c. xxxix, p. 341). Thus, unwittingly, Magwitch has functioned as a Penitence figure from the old Morality play tradition. Like the Death figure of *Everyman*, he has made Pip aware of the ephemeral nature of his ‘achievements’ as well as his moral inadequacy. The *Murder of Gonzago* in *Hamlet* gave rise to a series of thwarted ‘Morality plays’, which, in their failure to be effective, revealed instead the inexorable pull towards tragedy. In *Great Expectations*, however, Magwitch’s thwarted revenge plot functions in such a way as to suggest the call to repentance of the Morality play. However, it must be noted that at this point Pip’s repentance is deeply compromised: he reproaches himself because he had deserted Joe for a convict but the implication is that he would have believed his actions to be excusable had he deserted his family for Estella.

The scene of Magwitch’s arrival has a number of elements that signify its departure from realism. These elements also recall the Medieval Morality tradition by suggesting the spiritual reassessment of the self in a context of death and judgement. I will list them briefly below: firstly the interchange of light and shadow is used to indicate the shift to a heightened plane of significance by conveying visually another more symbolic dimension to the narrative: as Magwitch emerges gradually out of the shadows one gets the sense that he is taking shape out of Pip’s subconscious. The interplay between light and shadow further gives the scene a murky quality suggestive of a dark and threatening underworld so that Magwitch’s arrival is not only significant in Pip’s life but evokes a wider universe of cosmic forces of good and evil. Finally, the scene unfolds in a manner that implies a close connection between Pip and the other man, anticipating a moral and religious examination of self-hood. This Morality-Play dimension to the narrative is again evoked in Pip’s final, climactic encounter with Orlick, which shares all the above elements in common with the moment of Magwitch’s arrival.

For some time it has been agreed amongst critics that Orlick can be read, in the words of K.P. Wentersdorf, as a “figure for the dark side of Pip’s character”—a demonic

being in which Pip's latent desires find expression.²⁷⁸ It is revenge in particular that Orlick seems to embody: when Orlick makes an attempt on the life of Pip's sister, he does so to avenge himself on her for favouring Pip over him. Significantly, Pip feels as if he "must have had some hand in the attack" (c. xvi, p. 147). When this fear is coupled with Pip's terrifying night-time encounter with Orlick in the sluice-house, the notion that Orlick takes on allegorical life as a demonic externalisation of Pip's 'darker side', that which is obscured by the comic-gentle nature of his narrative voice, is not implausible.

As Pip comes towards the old limekiln, his surroundings, which are, he tells us, so well known to him, seem, in their atmospheric intensity, to lose that familiarity, becoming almost surreal. The night is "dark" and Pip imagines the distance between the limekiln and the old Battery as signalled by a "light burning at each point" between which there would have been a "long strip of blank horizon" (c. Liii, p. 433). In these images there is something reminiscent of an archetypal underworld. There is an oppressive, foreboding atmosphere and a sense of absolute isolation. "After a while" Pip feels as if he has "the whole flats" to himself (c. Liii, p. 433). This image of Pip as a solitary figure in a bleak landscape pre-empted an introspective analysis of selfhood.

Pip's surroundings are abandoned and derelict. The sluice is "broken" and the house provides a flimsy defence against the weather (c. Liii, p. 433). When Orlick first appears his identity is not immediately apparent to Pip. Rather, he emerges from the darkness extinguishing Pip's light. In his violent struggle with him, Pip is only at first aware of parts of Orlick's body – "sometimes, a strong man's hand, sometimes a strong man's breast, were set against my mouth to deaden my cries" (c. Liii, p. 434). Later Pip sees Orlick's "lips and the blue point of the match" with which he is trying to strike a light. Even this image is "fitful": this gives the impression that Orlick is taking shape out of the dilapidated environment that surrounds him, suggesting that he is a figure materialising from Pip's own consciousness.

When the light flares up it reveals Orlick to Pip in a shocking revelation. The light that reveals him seems almost violent in the way that it leaps up and this is clearly

²⁷⁸ Karl. P. Wentersdorf, "Mirror-Images in *Great Expectations*", *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 21.3 (December 1966): 203–224 (p. 203).

associated with Orlick who appears as devilish and monstrous. Initially, in their exchange of words, Orlick clearly is the aggressor: he calls Pip an “enemy” and malignantly enjoys the “spectacle that [Pip] furnish[es]” (c. Liii, p. 435). Pip appears as the victim who is the terrified target of Orlick’s jealous rage: he asks him helplessly what he is going to do with him and Orlick replies savagely that he will burn him in the kiln. Orlick intends to murder Pip as an act of ultimate revenge because of his feeling that Pip was “always in [his] way” (c. Liii, p. 436).

At this point Pip does not seem at all prone to the merciless vengeance that characterises his attacker and the two figures appear poles apart. Yet, as the situation grows more intense, Pip is brought symbolically closer to Orlick until the two men begin to reflect one another. As Pip contemplates Orlick he is flooded by a “scornful detestation of him” and is further driven by a desire to “kill . . . him even in dying” (c. Liii, p. 437). Thus Pip is roused to a passionate hatred of Orlick that reflects Orlick’s violent rage against him. Interestingly Orlick calls Pip a “wolf” – a beast of prey (c. Liii, p. 436). In this insult it seems that he is accusing Pip of preying on him, whereas in this scene he is clearly preying on Pip. His words seem to imply that the two figures are interchangeable. Pip and Orlick also accuse each other of murdering Pip’s sister. Ironically Orlick’s reason for killing Mrs Joe is that he was “bullied and beat” while Pip was “favoured” (c. Liii, p. 437). Clearly this isn’t the case since Pip was bullied by his sister. Orlick’s motive for attacking Mrs Joe, then, is the very same reason that Pip has for resenting her. Thus both figures are drawn closer together, implicating them both in the vengeance that led to Mrs Joe’s demise. In this way we are given the impression that Orlick is a wild intensification or exaggeration of the malicious potential in Pip.

Pip is hyper-aware of Orlick’s actions almost as if they were his own. Here Orlick uses the candle to “throw . . . light on [Pip]” whereas previously the flame threw light on Orlick, revealing him to Pip in the beginning of the encounter. Thus, through these images of light and shadow, Pip is brought closer to Orlick. Also Pip describes Orlick as a tiger waiting to pounce. This image of a beast of prey has some affinity with a wolf, which Orlick has called Pip. Orlick reminds Pip of the night that Magwitch arrived and it is brought back to him in vivid detail. The emphasis on darkness and shadows in that scene seems to parallel it with this one and in so doing breaks down the boundaries of time and

implies a dark continuum within Pip – an inner landscape peopled with repressed, violent and destructive desires. This notion that Orlick is more of a demon of Pip’s consciousness than a real-life man is given greater weight when one considers that he evades capture by the “struggle of men” who attack him, slipping mercurially through their grasp. In his escape he is accorded almost supernatural qualities – he “clear[s] the table in a leap” and “fl[ies] out into the night” (c. Liii, p. 440).

One could read Pip’s encounter with Orlick as a kind of exorcism. Like Miss Havisham’s fire which burns Pip’s hands, the flame that Orlick flares at Pip is harmful in the way in which it singes his hair and almost blinds him (c. Liii, p. 439). But it also has the power to illuminate Orlick out of the shadows in a kind of revelation. The connotations of the flame are not purely destructive then. It seems rather to be associated with Pip’s awakening to a darker side of himself and with the painful purging of his repressed vengeful desires.

After Orlick escapes, Pip awakens to find himself lying on the floor and staring up into the faces of Herbert and Trabb’s boy. Pip’s moral transformation is emphasised by the fact that Trabb’s boy is included in the friendly and familiar community into which he re-emerges. At the outset of his expectations Pip felt that Trabb’s boy was the “most audacious boy in all that countryside” (c. xxix, p. 177) and later on he was most upset at being the object of the boy’s vivacious pranks (c. xxx, pp. 266–7). But Pip’s dislike of Trabb’s boy suggested his own limitations, as Chesterton notes in his memorable passage: “[the quality of Trabb’s boy] is the quality which has always given its continuous power and poetry to the common people everywhere. It is life; it is the joy of living of those who have nothing else but life. It is the thing that all aristocrats have always hated and dreaded in the people. And it is the thing that poor Pip really hates and dreads in Trabb’s boy”.²⁷⁹ Pip’s pretensions prevented him from engaging with the emotional life and vitality represented by Trabb’s Boy and which for Dickens is an essential aspect of one’s spiritual fulfilment. But, like the passage of the Mankynde figure through sin towards salvation, Pip’s ordeal with Orlick functions as a kind of ritualistic purgation after

²⁷⁹ G.K. Chesterton, *Appreciations and Criticisms of the works of Charles Dickens* (London: J.M Dent & Sons, 1911), p. 204.

which he can more fully understand and appreciate the valuable qualities of human nature. The quiet wisdom of Pip's narrative voice is perhaps a product of this scene which acts as a kind of catharsis in Pip's progress towards moral maturity.

Allegorising Pip's regeneration

Magwitch's failed escape dramatically figures Pip's movement towards spiritual enlightenment. The 'real' flight in the boat is described in such a way as to recall the search for the convicts on the marshlands in Pip's childhood. When Pip looks at the river banks, he thinks that they are "like [his] own marsh country, flat and monotonous, and with a dim horizon" (c. Liv, p. 449). The deliberate invoking of the marshlands at this moment points towards something more than merely a literal similarity between the river and the marsh country: it has the effect of recalling the world of Pip's childhood and, with it, the former associations of the marshlands with Pip's emotional condition. Pip sees reflected in his dull surroundings a kind of monotonous obsession: "the winding river [turns] and [turns], and the great floating buoys upon it [turn] and [turn], and everything else [seems] stranded and still" (c. Liv, p. 449). The lonely melancholy which overhangs the scene suggests the morbid state of Pip's mind – everything that he held dear in life has turned out to be a glittering sham, leaving him trapped in an empty, death-like condition. The process of Pip's spiritual degradation seems to be embodied by the images around him: the fact that the "ballast-lighters" are shaped like a "child's first rude interpretation of a boat" (c. Liv, p. 449) recalls the world of Pip's childhood. This building lies "low in the mud; and a little squat lighthouse on open piles, [stands] crippled in the mud on stilts and crutches; and slimy stakes [stick] out of the mud, and red landmarks and tidemarks [stick] out of the mud, and an old landing stage and an old roofless building [slip] out of the mud, and all about [them] is stagnation and mud" (c. Liv, p. 449). Thus, alongside the image of Pip's ruined childhood dreams, there are derelict and decaying buildings that seem to have been devoured by mud. The lighthouse which should give direction to boats has instead become "crippled" and all the other buildings seem literally to be sliding into the mud, giving the impression that Pip's mind has become a wreck of what it once was. It is only now, when Pip has realised his own

self-deception, that the formerly rather cryptic marsh country takes on a greater emblematic significance: what was once the threat of spiritual degeneration for Pip has become a reality. In his childhood Pip was in the search party chasing Magwitch but now he has fully identified with the world of the criminal fugitive.

The fact that Pip is powerless to stop the steamer from coming up against their boat or even to influence anything thereafter suggests a relentless movement towards a tragic conclusion. However, such a conclusion is averted when Pip is saved and in the process has changed his feelings about Magwitch to a humane and loving approach. When Compeyson is flung into the merciless river, Pip feels the “boat sink from under him” and finds himself struggling, “but for an instant” with “a thousand sand mill-weirs and a thousand flashes of light” (c. Liv, p. 455). This desperate struggle with the propellers of the boat is paralleled by the fight between Magwitch and Compeyson who go under the water locked in each other’s grip (although Pip is only informed of this later). If a similarity is suggested between the two ‘fights’, significant differences are emphasised as well: while Magwitch and Compeyson’s struggle results, ultimately, in both of their deaths, Pip’s own struggle helps him to be reborn into a new spiritual life.

In *The Mill on the Floss* George Eliot makes a less successful attempt to use the literal drowning of Maggie and Tom as a figure of transcendent love. In this instance Eliot attempts to use the language of realism to immortalise the innocent love of brother and sister – with dire results. Maggie’s pain and fear is muted as she is swept away by the flood. She feels as if she has “suddenly passed away from the life which she has been dreading” without the agony of death.²⁸⁰ From this moment of numb oblivion she becomes fixed on the idea of returning home to her brother and her mother. There are sentimental overtones suggesting a recovery of childhood innocence in the recovery of the relationship between brother and sister but the image of the flood does not deepen our sense of the experience. Rather, its principal function seems to be to provide a sufficiently desperate situation to facilitate a reunion between brother and sister: “what quarrel, what harshness, what unbelief in each other can subsist in the presence of a

²⁸⁰ George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), ed. A. S. Byatt (1979; rpt. London: Penguin Books, 1982), p. 650–651.

great calamity, when all the artificial venture of our life is gone, and we are all one with each other in primitive and mortal needs?" (p. 652). Finally, the capsizing of the boat results in the brother and sister going "down in an embrace never to be parted" (p. 655). The moment when the siblings drown in each other's embrace metonymically recalls their innocent childhood embraces. But the image of the flood seems disconnected from the significance which it is meant to convey: rather than heightening our sense of the renewal of Tom and Maggie's relationship, it provides an excuse for the mawkish soliloquising of the narrative voice which suggests that the moment of drowning marks a return to an idealised childhood when the siblings "clasped their little hands in love, and roamed the daisy fields together" (p. 655).

Dickens, however, has recourse to the metaphorical language that allows him to transform Pip's near-drowning experience into a potent symbol of spiritual redemption. By making Pip's surroundings a figure for his inner death, Dickens is able to make his spiritual condition more palpable. At the moment of crisis the very language has the rhythm of a psychological breakdown: "In the same moment, I saw the steersman of the galley lay his hand on his prisoner's shoulder, and saw that both boats were swinging round with the force of the tide, and saw that all hands on board the steamer were running forward quite frantically. Still in the same moment, I saw the prisoner start up, lean across his captor, and pull the cloak from the sitter in the galley" (c. Liv, p. 455). This creates the impression that time itself has fragmented and the stalling rhythm of the sentences gives the feeling that Pip's mind is stalling in its inability to grasp the catastrophe that has beset him. Further, the way in which many events seem to happen simultaneously while Pip stands by powerless to interfere, creates a strange sense of detachment between Pip and the scenes he observes – the kind of dream-like detachment one feels when caught up in a crisis except here the language intimates that the crisis is spiritual as well as physical.

The symbolic intensity of Pip's near-drowning experience is similar to Christian's experience in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Christian's sudden failing of faith as he enters the river causes a "great darkness and horror" to fall upon him and he becomes afraid that he will drown in the river: he literally goes under and rises "up again half dead" (*The Pilgrim's Progress*, pp. 210–11). This desperate battle with the depths of the river

dramatises Christian's physical death and spiritual struggle: the river is a literal location but Christian's spiritual crisis determines its effects on him: Hopeful, who does not give in to despair, does not find the water deep and can "feel the bottom" but Christian is completely overcome by it (p. 210). The river is Christian's last trial – with the encouragement of Hopeful he is finally able to understand its significance in his spiritual pilgrimage and reaches a kind of epiphany where he "see[s] [Jesus] again" (p. 211). After he has found his feet the river seems shallow. Thus the river functions allegorically to suggest Christian's progress towards spiritual transcendence.

Like Christian, Pip seems to be drowning and his experience is described as a kind of death. Even after he has been pulled back onto the boat by Herbert, he is still completely disoriented and, as they rush along, he finds himself unable to "distinguish sky from water or shore from shore" (c. Liv, p. 455). Pip's physical crisis, then, is a figure for a deeper spiritual and psychological crisis.

The first thing that begins to make sense out of the nightmare of oblivion is "a dark object" beneath the stern "bearing towards [them] on the tide", a figure that turns out to be Magwitch, "swimming, but not swimming freely" (c. Liv, p. 455). This image of Magwitch in captivity that should cause Pip to despair instead awakens within him a gentle humanity and humility. Now, for the first time, Pip sees in Magwitch, not a despicable criminal, but a man who "had felt affectionately, gratefully, and generously, towards [him] with great constancy through a series of years . . . a much better man than [he] had been to Joe" (c. Liv, p. 457). The literal regaining of consciousness thus symbolises a rebirth into a more profound spiritual life. Pip redeems Magwitch by recognising his virtues (and by noting, in comparison, his own vices) and in forgiving Magwitch he redeems himself. Ironically, although it seemed to be a sign of death, the river becomes a sign of rebirth. Just as it was for Christian and also for Eugene Wrayburn of *Our Mutual Friend*, Pip's near-drowning experience has become a baptism into grace. Thus, the image of the river illuminates a wider Christian significance of spiritual redemption.

Allegorising Forgiveness and Reconciliation in *Great Expectations*

In the Morality plays the Mankind figure is first humbled before he can be redeemed: the humbling of the principal figure usually involves a profound realisation of unworthiness accompanied by a sense of loss: in *Mankind*, the protagonist is so overcome with his guilt that he attempts to commit suicide, crying out despairingly, “A roppe a rope a rope I am not worthy”.²⁸¹ Humanum Genus in *The Castle of Perseverance* is shocked by the wound inflicted by Penetentia into a state of “sorwe” and a consciousness that “In dedly synne my lyfe is spent”.²⁸² *Everyman* involves perhaps the most intense exploration of loss in the way that it traces the protagonist’s progressive loss of his worldly friendships and possessions and even of his own qualities so that he cries out in desperation “O Jesu, help! All hath forsaken me”.²⁸³ Pip’s last few encounters with Miss Havisham recall the Medieval Morality play tradition in their dramatic foregrounding of the notions of loss and guilt. Further, the way in which Pip first causes Miss Havisham to repent and then later pardons her, creates a Morality-like pattern which frames the dramatic action.

Pip’s meeting with Miss Havisham and Estella after he has discovered the true source of his expectations, is described as a painful parting for him: after he has passionately confessed his love for Estella, he laments, “All done, all gone! So much was done, and gone, that when I went out at the gate, the light of day seemed of a darker colour than when I went in” (c. xlv, p. 378). This heartbreaking cry suggests the irretrievability of his early idealistic dream of love and the dark hopelessness into which he has now been plunged. But Pip’s moment of loss is also a moment of agonizing awareness for Miss Havisham: at first, her only reaction to Pip’s admonishment that she has led him on in his self-deception in a most unkind way is to “flash into wrath” suddenly and to demand, “Who am I, for God’s sake, that I should be kind?” (c. xlv p. 373). These words dramatically express Miss Havisham’s obstinate pride which cuts her off from

²⁸¹ *Mankind*, in ed. David Bevington, *The Macro Plays: The Castle of Perseverance; Wisdom; Mankind* (New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1972), l. 800.

²⁸² *The Castle of Perseverance*, in ed. David Bevington, *The Macro Plays: The Castle of Perseverance; Wisdom; Mankind*, ll. 1404, 1414.

²⁸³ *Everyman*, in ed. A.C. Cawley, *Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays* (1909; rpt. London: Everyman’s Library, 1970), l. 851.

compassion and repentance. Her reaction to Pip has a similar effect to the reaction of Humanum Genus in *The Castle of Perseverance* when he refuses Penetentia's aid: his contention that he is not afraid to suffer damnation since he will be in the company of many sinners,²⁸⁴ reveals the wilful ignorance and moral blindness of his sinful state. Similarly Miss Havisham's refusal to admit her maltreatment of Pip emphasises her spiritual blindness. During her interview with Pip Miss Havisham undergoes a change from blind arrogance to a guilty awareness. This resonates strongly with the progression of the Mankind figure towards a spiritual awakening in the Morality tradition: as she listens to Pip's "passionate . . . grief" after he has heard that Estella is going to be married to Drummle, Miss Havisham holds her hand over her heart as if she has been wounded there (c. xlv, p. 376). This action expresses in a strikingly allegorical image the pain of repentance which has been awakened within her by Pip's suffering. As has been noted already, the Morality tradition presents the moment of repentance of the Mankind figure as a significant step towards his redemption. This moment is expressed differently in the various Morality plays but the way in which it is presented in *The Castle of Perseverance* achieves a remarkably similar effect to Dickens's description of Miss Havisham in this scene: in *The Castle*, the repentance of Humanum Genus is conveyed iconically through the holy wound that Penetentia inflicts on him. Thus the state of his soul is allegorically embodied by the actions of the players.

When Pip meets Miss Havisham for the last time, the suggestion of guilt and penitence in the earlier scene is amplified so that her surroundings reflect her fallen state. The absence of Estella is palpable: even before he enters the house, Pip notices a new emptiness overhanging the area so that the "swell of the old organ" sounds like funeral music to him and the swinging of the rooks in the "bare high trees of the priory garden", suggest to him that the place is "changed, and that Estella ha[s] gone out of it for ever" (c. xlix, p. 407). The loss of Estella – the embodiment of both Pip and Miss Havisham's worldly ambitions – leaves both of them facing their own spiritual barrenness (suggested here in the funereal organ music and the death-like atmosphere of the priory gardens).

²⁸⁴ *The Castle of Perseverance*, ll. 1370–1375.

This sense of loss and emptiness is intensified in the dejected figure of Miss Havisham who has been deposed from her precedence over the house: she is not even in her own room but in a “larger room across the landing” (c. xlix, p. 407) and is “sitting in a ragged chair” (c. xlix, p.407) with “an air of utter loneliness upon [her]” (c. xlix, p. 408). The ruin of Miss Havisham’s house is no longer terrifying and foreboding. Rather it represents the pitifully tattered state of her soul. Her shattered pride and guilty awareness of her wrongs is conveyed in her utter absorption in the ashy fire. Miss Havisham’s desire to know whether Pip is ‘real’ or not suggests the extreme nature of her guilt: her conscience is haunted by the people that she has wronged to the degree that she is no longer able to discern between the real Pip and the figure in her mind. Pip is able to pity her despite the wrong she has done him because he sees himself reflected in her: he feels that in the “progress of time I too had come to be a part of the wrecked fortunes of the house” (c. xlix, p. 408). Thus Miss Havisham reflects back to him the ruin to which his own pride has brought him.

In the Morality tradition the despair of the central figure is followed by his redemption through mercy: in the play, *Mankind*, the figure of Mercy shows touching compassion for Mankind who has thrown himself on the ground in his misery, telling him to “A ryse my precyose redempt son ze be to me full dere”.²⁸⁵ So despairing is Mankind’s state that he at first cannot believe that mercy is possible and laments that “The egalle lustyse of god wyll not permytte sych a synfull wrech/To be rewyvyd & restoryd a geyn yt were Impossibyll” (ll. 831–2). However, Mercy does not allow him to give in to hopelessness, and persists, reassuring him that “God wyll not make zow preuy on to hys last judgement” (l. 839). In this way Mankind is redeemed and prays to God in his joyful relief to “send ws all plente of hys gret mercy” (l. 900). Miss Havisham’s interaction with Pip shares elements with this pattern of repentance and redemption:

‘My name is on the first leaf. If you can ever write under my name,
 “I forgive her,” though ever so long after my broken heart is dust – pray do it!’
 ‘O Miss Havisham,’ said I, ‘I can do it now. There have been sore mistakes; and my life has
 been a blind and thankless one; and I want forgiveness and direction far too much, to be
 bitter with you.’

²⁸⁵ *Mankind*, l. 811.

She turned her face to me for the first time since she had averted it, and, to my amazement, I may even add to my terror, dropped on her knees at my feet; with her folded hands raised to me in the manner in which, when her poor heart was young and fresh and whole, it must have been raised to heaven from her mother's side. To see her with her white hair and her worn face kneeling at my feet, gave me a shock through all my frame. I entreated her to rise, and got my arms about her to help her up; but she only pressed that hand of mine which was nearest to her grasp, and hung her head over it and wept. I had never seen her shed a tear before, and, in the hope that it might do her good, I bent over her without speaking. She was not kneeling now, but was down upon the ground.

'O!' she cried, despairingly. 'What have I done! What have I done!' (c. xlix, p. 410)

Like the Mankind figure who falls to the ground, overwhelmed by a consciousness of his own sinfulness, Miss Havisham abases herself in front of Pip. This dramatically embodies her repentance, her desire for Pip to forgive her even if he can only bring himself to do so after she has died. Her manner of kneeling before him is also reminiscent of the sacrament of Confession which is given dramatic life in the Morality play, *Everyman*: here Everyman is brought to Confession before whom he kneels, asking God to "Forgive my grievous offence".²⁸⁶ Miss Havisham's act of kneeling before Pip is emphatically associated with a plea for spiritual redemption in the way in which it recalls her innocent prayers from her mother's side. Further, her agonised lament "What have I done! What have I done", evokes the despair of the Mankind figure, his conviction that his sins are too grievous for him ever to be redeemed. The scene has ritualistic overtones that are powerfully conveyed in Pip's attempts to raise Miss Havisham to her feet, an action that recalls Mercy's lifting of the Mankind figure from the ground, symbolising the latter's spiritual rebirth.

But, although it evokes Morality-like structures, the scene also departs from the Morality tradition in significant ways: firstly, Miss Havisham is not asking mercy of a divine figure but of Pip – a fallen sinner like herself. Rather than being morally elevated above her, Pip reflects her in his sinfulness, seeing the state of his own soul in her ruined house and admitting that he cannot be angry with her because he is in need of forgiveness himself. This shifts the emphasis away from a vision of human life as a simple

²⁸⁶ *Everyman*, l. 587.

drama of moral absolutes, suggesting the complexity of 'real-life' experience where meaning is partial and fraught with moral ambiguities.

Secondly, while the despair of the Mankind figure is merely a precursor to his triumphant salvation, Miss Havisham is incapable of overcoming her shame. Although she kneels to Pip, ritualistically recalling the act of Confession, the emphasis is on her self-abasement rather than on her redemption: her "white hair and worn face" accentuate her pitiful degradation. Further, Pip is incapable of lifting her up and his attempts to do so only cause her grief to augment so that she begins to weep. She becomes deeper and deeper enmeshed in her misery, beginning by kneeling to Pip but ultimately abasing herself further, falling from a kneeling position "down upon the ground." (c. xlix, p. 410). She repeats the lament, "'What have I done! What have I done!' . . . over and over again" while she "[wrings] her hands, and crushe[s] her white hair" (c. xlix, p. 411). Thus, unlike Everyman's shame, Miss Havisham's guilt has no relief; it is merely a circular lament. Significantly Pip describes her as being trapped in the "vanity of sorrow which had become a master mania, like the vanity of penitence, the vanity of remorse, the vanity of unworthiness, and other monstrous vanities that have been curses in this world" (c. xlix, p. 411). The word "vanity" is worth dwelling on: in the Morality tradition this term is often used to suggest the futility of a life spent pursuing sensual pleasures: in *Mankind*, Mercy laments that the way of living into which Mankind has fallen is a "detestabull pleasure/vanitas vanitatum all ys but a vanyte".²⁸⁷ The term is drawn from Ecclesiastes where it is used powerfully to suggest the fleeting nature of worldly acquisitions and ambitions. But the Morality plays, following Christian tradition, suggest a way of overcoming this hopelessness: although material things are an empty pursuit that will lead to one's ultimate annihilation, it is possible to be reborn into eternal spiritual life by repenting for one's sins. But in the case of Miss Havisham the term applies to her sorrowful and remorseful condition. Thus guilt, which, in the Morality tradition, had the power to lead one away from the vanity of material pursuits, is ironically itself a futile and entrapping emotion. From the above discussion one can deduce that Dickens evokes Morality-like patterns alongside a more realist insistence on the imperfect nature of

²⁸⁷ *Mankind*, ll. 766–767.

experience, the impossibility of giving a final shape and meaning to Miss Havisham's life. Thus Miss Havisham remains an ambivalent figure poised between salvation and damnation, suggesting that divine mercy is not so simply effective or even so easily given.

Conclusion: realism and idealism in the two endings

The pattern of Pip's movement from repentance towards redemption echoes Miss Havisham's in its ultimate lack of closure. When Pip returns to the village of his childhood he feels as if he is "leaving arrogance and untruthfulness further and further behind" (c. Lviii, p. 486). The literal journey towards his old home thus evokes a spiritual journey towards greater peace and wisdom, which is embodied by the dream of his marriage to Biddy. Such a marriage would relieve Pip of his guilt and so symbolise his rebirth, giving final significance to the suffering and loss that he has undergone. However this "last baffled hope" (c. Lviii, p. 487) is soon thwarted by his discovery, upon arriving, that Biddy is married to Joe. Thus Pip's rapturous reunion with Joe and Biddy is accompanied by a muted sense of loss, the consciousness that the spiritual ideals embodied by their simple village life will forever elude him.

In the original ending this sense of the incompleteness of experience and the ultimate elusiveness of moral absolutes is emphasised:

It was two years more, before I saw herself. I had heard of her as leading a most unhappy life, and as being separated from her husband who had used her with great cruelty, and who had become quite renowned as a compound of pride, brutality, and meanness. I had heard of the death of her husband (from an accident consequent on ill-treating a horse), and of her being married again to a Shropshire doctor, who, against his interest, had once very manfully interposed, on an occasion when he was in professional attendance on Mr Drummle, and had witnessed some outrageous treatment of her. I had heard that the Shropshire doctor was not rich, and that they lived on her own personal fortune. I was in England again – in London, and walking along Piccadilly with little Pip – when a servant came running after me to ask would I step back to a lady who wished to speak to me. It was a little pony carriage, which the lady was driving; and the lady and I looked sadly enough on one another. 'I am greatly changed, I know; but I thought you would like to shake hands with Estella too, Pip. Lift up that pretty child and let me kiss it!' (She supposed the child, I think, to be my child.) I was very glad afterwards to have had the interview, for, in her face and in her voice, and in her touch, she gave me the assurance that suffering had been stronger than Miss Havisham's teaching, and had given her a heart to understand what my heart used to be (*Appendix A*, pp.495 – 496).

Terrence Wright argues that the apotheosis of realism's achievement is its ability to imitate the open-endedness of life, its "lack of significant shape, a beginning, middle and end", and to create out of seemingly trivial events a sense of art's "formal beauty" and profound significance.²⁸⁸ This, he suggests, is the effect that Dickens creates in the passage quoted above: he notes the "unideal" nature of the ending, the fact that Pip and Estella encounter one another by chance in the street in Piccadilly rather than in a place charged with emotive significance such as Satis House. He further observes that Pip and Estella's sorrowful realisation of their past blindness is conveyed in the muted sentence, "the lady and I looked sadly enough on one another", suggesting that "our greatest moments may be embodied in the most insignificant action" (p. 9). I agree with Wright that the realist mode is dominant in this ending so that Pip and Estella's growth towards moral maturity is subtly suggested in fleeting actions such as the look that they share, rather than dramatically and overtly expressed: Estella's humbled state, for example, is conveyed to us primarily through Pip's subjective impression of her softened touch and voice, rather than embodied in intense allegorical moments. Estella's remarriage to the Shropshire doctor precludes the possibility of her marriage to Pip: in this way Dickens avoids evoking the spiritual ideal of salvation which the Victorians often associated with marriage. This suggests that although Pip has grown towards a greater moral perception through his suffering, he cannot be entirely liberated from the shame of his past misdemeanours. Thus Dickens foregrounds the partiality of 'real-life' experience into which the Morality ritual of the purgation of sins and spiritual rebirth cannot be entirely incorporated.

But in the ending which was rewritten at the request of Edward Bulwer Lytton, Dickens suggests that the ideal of Pip's marriage to Estella is still possible. This has the effect of evoking the symbolic associations of marriage with spiritual redemption: Pip's profound sense of loss and spiritual barrenness is dramatically figured in the arid landscape where Satis House had once been – now there is no house, "no brewery, no building whatever left, but the wall of an old garden" (c. Lix, p. 491). His obsessive

²⁸⁸ Terrence Wright, "The Imperfect Ideal of the Novel", *The Modern Language Review* 73.1 (Jan 1978): 1–16 (p. 2).

harping on his deluded past is powerfully suggested in the way in which he traces in his mind's eye where "every part of the old house had been, and where the brewery had been, and where the gates, and where the casks". As he does so, he notices a "solitary figure" in the "desolate garden walk" (c. Lix, p. 491): in this image Estella seems to materialise out of the ruins of Satis House as a reflection of Pip's own dejected sense of loss. But the appearance of Estella in her gentler and humbled state also represents hope for a new beginning as is suggested by the image of the rising moon (c. Lix, p. 492). The novel closes in the following way:

'I little thought', said Estella, 'that I should take leave of you in taking leave of this spot. I am very glad to do so.'
 'Glad to part again, Estella? To me, parting is a painful thing. To me, the remembrance of our last parting has been ever mournful and painful.'
 'But you said to me,' returned Estella, very earnestly, 'God bless you, God forgive you!' and if you could say that to me then, you will not hesitate to say that to me now – now, when suffering has been stronger than all other teaching, and has taught me to understand what your heart used to be. I have been bent and broken, but – I hope – into a better shape. Be as considerate and good to me as you were, and tell me we are friends.'
 'We are friends,' said I, rising and bending over her, as she rose from the bench.
 'And will continue friends apart,' said Estella.
 I took her hand in mine, and we went out of the ruined place; and, as the morning mists had risen long ago when I first left the forge, so, the evening mists were rising now, and in the broad expanse of the tranquil light they showed to me, I saw no shadow of another parting from her (c. Lix, p. 493).

The image of Pip and Estella walking hand in hand out of the ruins suggests a spiritual journey away from despondency and towards salvation and thus emphasises the redemptive quality of their love. The rising evening mists recall the rising morning mists on the day Pip first left the forge to pursue his expectations. But whereas the dispersal of the morning mists suggested the birth of Pip's worldly ambitions, the dispersal of the evening mists emphasises Pip's clearer moral perception, his desire to achieve spiritual redemption through marriage. Here Estella, who throughout the novel represented Pip's worldly desires, has come to reflect his humbled condition and to represent the ritualistic possibilities for spiritual regeneration which, in the Morality tradition, follows the fall of the Mankind figure.

But, despite Pip's renewed optimism, Estella's words are still the words of parting: although she beseeches Pip's forgiveness, she still insists that they remain "friends apart". W.A. Wilson argues that this is a sign that Estella's progression towards

repentance is implausible and that she is still “heartless [and] self-estranged”.²⁸⁹ I tend to disagree: rather than a blind selfishness, Estella’s words reveal a profound consciousness of loss, a mature sense that one can never fully regain one’s innocence. By contrasting Estella’s words with Pip’s optimistic belief in reunion, Dickens counterpoises the ideal of spiritual rebirth against a more realistic understanding that human life cannot be embodied in moral absolutes. The uncertainty of Pip’s idealistic vision is captured in the notoriously ambiguous line, “I saw no shadow of another parting from her”: the line may mean that Pip’s dream has been realised and he and Estella will never part again or it could suggest that Pip, in his euphoria at having met Estella and witnessed her softened state, is unable to foresee their subsequent painful parting. Thus both endings to *Great Expectations* foreground the novel’s realist mode by suggesting the incompleteness of ‘real-life’ experiences. But, as has been observed, the revised ending evokes more strongly the ideals of rebirth and salvation, symbolically recalling the Morality ritual of innocence/fall/redemption. In this way it both directs our vision towards the transient nature of real, material existence and shifts our attention towards a transcendent realm of spiritual truths.

²⁸⁹ Wilson, “The Magic Circle of Genius”, p. 173.

CHAPTER SIX

VENGEFUL ALLEGORISING IN *GREAT EXPECTATIONS*

My focus in the previous chapter was on the Morality play dimension of *Great Expectations* which was evident in the treatment of Pip's moral choices and self-knowledge. My purpose in this chapter will be to examine Dickens's response to *Hamlet's* revenge theme: whereas Morality patterns frame universal moments of judgement and repentance in the novel, Dickens also draws on the conventions of Revenge Tragedy to illuminate the way in which Miss Havisham takes justice into her own hands. The manner in which this is achieved, it will be argued, involves a turn towards allegory, which is analogous to Dickens's recouping of the Morality tradition. This differs from Shakespeare's response to the revenge tradition in *Hamlet* which, as Millicent Bell, Alexander Welsh and Richard Brucher among others have noted, involves a turning inward to examine individual responsibility, emphasising the psychological ramifications of vengeance. In this chapter I intend to examine *Great Expectations's* melodramatic remodelling of *Hamlet's* revenge motif. I will begin this discussion with a brief overview of the nature of Revenge Tragedy and Shakespeare's response to the tradition in *Hamlet*. In Revenge Tragedy the avenger is also an artist, able to manipulate people and situations at will and it is the tension between this thespian's delight in role-playing and moral obligation that Shakespeare exploits and develops in *Hamlet*. The larger part of this discussion will involve an examination of Dickens's depiction of the artist-avenger in Miss Havisham.

***Hamlet* and Revenge Tragedy**

Revenge Tragedy normally follows the revenge mission of a principal protagonist who believes himself to have been maltreated and whose vengeance is therefore a kind of just

retribution, a setting right of wrongs.²⁹⁰ A principal feature of these plays is their melodramatic preoccupation with violence and corruption in which the avenger figure often becomes implicated himself.²⁹¹ But Gamini Salgado and Robert Ornstein argue that these plays are not merely sensational but that they still evoke the structures of Morality drama in their emphasis on a universal moral paradigm against which the actions of the main protagonists are judged.²⁹² Yet, while they still retain the ritualistic allegorical pattern of Morality drama, the focus of revenge plays has shifted away from the progress of Mankind's soul towards redemption and instead emphasises the conflict between the "the moral failure and aesthetic triumph of artful murder".²⁹³ The plays' exploration of the relationship between art and life has been explored by critics such as Gregory M. Semenza and Richard Brucher: Semenza stresses the plays' underlying moral structure, suggesting that the aesthetically attractive solution for corruption offered by revenge is ultimately exposed as dangerously misleading.²⁹⁴ But Brucher argues that one cannot make too much of Revenge Tragedy's invocation of a universal moral paradigm, since the forces of good and evil are not simply and clearly present in these plays as they are in Morality drama.²⁹⁵ Michael Neill takes this reading further to suggest the subversive nature of Revenge Tragedy: he argues that *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1607) is infused with a malicious playfulness which overrides its moral significance: this can be seen in Vindice's cruel enjoyment of his vengeful schemes which, disturbingly, even colours the play's depiction of divine forces.²⁹⁶ Thus, although one cannot ignore the moral imperatives underlying revenge drama, its overriding attraction is its escapist quality – its revelling in extreme violence without forcing audiences to consider the serious psychological and moral implications of these actions. In this it shares something in

²⁹⁰ Ronald Broude, "Revenge and Revenge Tragedy in Renaissance England", *Renaissance Quarterly* 28.1 (Spring 1975): 38–58 (p. 40).

²⁹¹ Broude, "Revenge and Revenge Tragedy in Renaissance England", pp. 38–9.

²⁹² Robert Ornstein, "The Ethical Design of the Revenger's Tragedy", *ELH* 21.2 (June 1954): 81–93 (p. 87).

²⁹³ Richard, T. Brucher, "Fantasies of Violence: *Hamlet* and *The Revenger's Tragedy*", *Studies in English Literature, 1500 – 1900* 21.2, Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama (Spring 1981): 257–70 (p. 259).

²⁹⁴ Gregory M. Semenza, "'The Spanish Tragedy and Revenge'", in eds Garret A. Sullivan, Jr Patrick Cheney, and Andrew Hadfield, *Early Modern English Drama: A Critical Companion* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 59.

²⁹⁵ Brucher, "Fantasies of Violence", p. 259.

²⁹⁶ Michael Neill, "Death and the Revenger's Tragedy", in eds Sullivan, Cheney and Hatfield, *Early Modern English Drama*, p. 174.

common with Victorian melodrama although melodrama suppresses or sensationalises the more subversive or amoral aspects that it inherited from Revenge Tragedy, emphasising instead the immutability of divine justice.

The self-conscious artistry in revenge plays is epitomized by the avenger figure: Brucher argues that the avenger figure uses art to gain control of his environment and even of death itself.²⁹⁷ Brucher suggests that this notion is reinforced throughout *The Revenger's Tragedy*: already in his opening speech one can see Vindice's tendency to transform the realities of death and corruption into art – in his mind's eye he brings the skull of his mistress to life by imagining her youth and sensuality before she was murdered.²⁹⁸ Salgado also emphasises Vindice's affinity with the artist figure. But whereas Brucher's focus is the avenger's ability to manipulate events, Salgado foregrounds the avenger as an actor, a role-player and deceiver who loses himself in his game of deception and in so doing implicates himself in the corruption which he seeks to purge from society.²⁹⁹

Revenge Tragedy was largely passé as a theatrical genre by the time that Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* although the success of Shakespeare's play helped bring the genre back into popularity. Shakespeare consciously modelled *Hamlet* on the revenge tradition, drawing on and transforming the conventions of early revenge plays such as Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (1587?) and the *ur-Hamlet*. Millicent Bell argues that *Hamlet* evokes Revenge Tragedy only to transform it: she notes that *Hamlet* shares many elements in common with Revenge Tragedy such as the ghost who incites the hero to revenge and even the play-within-the-play. But she emphasises that *Hamlet* shifts away from the sensationalism of the revenge plays towards a more profound philosophising and interrogation of inner conflict.³⁰⁰

This notion that *Hamlet* evokes the formulaic world of Revenge Tragedy, giving it a more complex, psychological dimension, is taken further by Richard Brucher. Brucher argues that *Hamlet* resembles Revenge Tragedy in its melodramatic indulgence in the

²⁹⁷ Brucher, "Fantasies of Violence", p. 259–60.

²⁹⁸ *The Revenger's Tragedy*, l.i.14–18, in *Three Revenge Tragedies*, ed and introd. Gamini Salgado (London: Penguin Books, 1965), p. 45.

²⁹⁹ Salgado, *Three Revenge Tragedies*, p. 27.

³⁰⁰ Millicent Bell, "Hamlet, Revenge!", *The Hudson Review* 51.2 (Summer 1998): 310–328 (p. 312).

violence of revenge but that it simultaneously keeps the emotionally disturbing nature of vengeance before the audience. According to Brucher, Shakespeare forces his audiences to contemplate the psychological ramifications of murder. He does so by suggesting that Hamlet himself is a figure constantly troubled by the conflict between the abstract notion of revenge as an art and the reality of his revenge on Claudius: like the avenger, Hamlet is witty, willing to kill and enjoys his own cleverness. But his murderous ventures are ultimately perverse as is emphasised in Horatio's muted response to Hamlet's scheme to kill Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In this way the figure of Hamlet offers a realist critique of the avenger.³⁰¹

Brucher observes a second way in which Shakespeare foregrounds the conflict between life and art in *Hamlet*: demonstrations of artifice – the-play-within-the-play and the player's speech on Priam's slaughter – are juxtaposed with Hamlet's 'real' predicament. While *The Murder of Gonzago* and Aeneas's speech to Dido parallel Hamlet's situation by emphasising the motif of murder and revenge, they are far more stylised and artificial than the "illusion of real violence" which Shakespeare creates. By creating a disparity between the "distinct artifice" of the theatre world and Hamlet's 'real-life' vendetta against Claudius, Shakespeare stresses the fundamental difference between enjoying "murder plays and tales of reckless heroism" and committing a vengeful murder in real-life.³⁰²

The way in which *Hamlet* deviates from Revenge Tragedy in its exploration of the motif of death can best be illustrated by a comparison between Vindice's attitude to the skull of his mistress in *The Revenger's Tragedy* and Hamlet's melancholy ruminations in the graveyard scene. In *The Revenger's Tragedy*, the skull carries with it the macabre connotations of death: death's horrifying grotesqueness when compared with the sensuous fullness of life, is emphasised in Vindice's memory of the once luscious lips of Gloriana. However, Vindice is able to transcend this unsettling significance with his art: Brucher notes how, when he dresses up Gloriana's skeleton to deceive the Duke, he celebrates the permanence that she has achieved – now she has a blush that never

³⁰¹ Brucher, "Fantasies of Violence: Hamlet and The Revenger's Tragedy", pp. 265, 263, citing *Hamlet* V.ii.55.

³⁰² Brucher, "Fantasies of Violence: Hamlet and The Revenger's Tragedy", p. 265.

fades.³⁰³ Thus through his art and skill, Vindice seems to have conquered death itself. This magnificent control over death can best be seen in the way in which he ingeniously transforms the skull into a weapon of his revenge.³⁰⁴

In the skull of Yorick, however, Hamlet is brought face-to-face with the futility of life, the fact that all of Yorick's "flashes of merriment" and "gibes" ultimately come to nothing (*Hamlet* V.i. 183–4). This points towards Hamlet's inability to achieve a god-like immortality in the carrying out of his revenge plot: death finally makes his plans to kill Claudius meaningless. Both Stephen Greenblatt and Alexander Welsh argue convincingly that it is Hamlet's powerlessness against death rather than his impetus towards revenge that is at the centre of the play: according to Welsh Hamlet's desire for revenge is ultimately an outlet for his grief for the loss of his father: "there is nothing one can do about the death of a loved person, after death, unless – unless the person was actually murdered, in which case there would be an opportunity of doing something, of killing someone in fact, which is exactly what one feels like doing".³⁰⁵ Greenblatt notes that the ghost in *Hamlet* differs from its predecessors in that it does not just adjure Hamlet to avenge it; rather, its parting wish is that he remember.³⁰⁶ But Hamlet's passionate commitment to the ghost's memory which he swears to prove through vengeance seems oddly to evaporate towards the end of the play. Greenblatt notes how in Hamlet's final speeches "there are no more melancholy broodings over his father's nobility or manly virtue, no more loving descriptions of his appearance, no more tortured recollections of the love he bore his mother".³⁰⁷ Thus at the centre of *Hamlet* is the tragic inability of the individual to achieve permanence: the living are annihilated by death and the dead by time.

³⁰³ Brucher, "Fantasies of Violence: *Hamlet* and The Revenger's Tragedy", p. 260.

³⁰⁴ Neill, "Death and the Revenger's Tragedy", in *Early Modern English Drama*, p. 170.

³⁰⁵ Alexander Welsh, *Hamlet in His Modern Guises* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 32.

³⁰⁶ Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 206.

³⁰⁷ Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, p.226.

The rhetoric of Miss Havisham's revenge scheme

In the figure of Miss Havisham Dickens goes beyond melodramatic presentation and revives *Hamlet* and Revenge Tragedy's preoccupation with the relationship between artful vengeance and moral responsibility. I will now turn to a closer analysis of Dickens's presentation of the revenge motif in the Miss Havisham chapters.

In the figure of Miss Havisham Dickens dramatises *Hamlet's* concern with the interrelationship of art and life in a different way from Shakespeare. Hamlet uses art – the play of *The Murder of Gonzago* – to influence 'real' events in the hope that it will give him the kind of objective evidence he needs to break free of his obsession and inner doubts: during the production he keeps up a charade of insanity subjecting Ophelia to all manner of indignities. Yet he remains intent on the audience's reaction to the play and when the player queen protests her love for the king, he pointedly asks his mother her opinion of the play so far (*Hamlet*, III.ii.224). Thus Hamlet uses *The Murder of Gonzago* not merely as entertainment but as a means of inspiring certain responses in his on-stage audience.

But for Miss Havisham the 'drama' becomes an end in itself: she, attempts to transform her subjective reality into art and to shape the minds of others by drawing them into her allegory of revenge: like Hamlet she is presented as a perverse kind of artist who directs proceedings in Satis House, continually ordering Pip to call Estella and often desiring to watch the two children play. She also sets up a kind of play – the card game between Pip and Estella – over which she presides, sitting "corpse-like" and encouraging the children to play out the scene of cruelty and heartbreak that she experienced at the hands of Compeyson: she hangs on Pip's every word as he describes how he thinks Estella is "very pretty" (c. viii, p. 90) and she encourages him to want to see Estella again even though he finds her "very insulting" (c. viii, p. 90). Further, she whispers to Estella that she can "break [Pip's] heart" (c. viii, p. 89). Estella herself she treats as a very valuable acquisition, trying "the effect" of a "jewel . . . upon her fair young bosom and hair" and telling her that she will "use it well" one day (c. viii, p. 89). Thus Miss Havisham attempts to transform Estella into an art-object, wishing her to

become the same as the glittering diamond that she holds against her – to attract men to her but to be as hard as a stone underneath her glittering exterior. In her self-obsessed desire for revenge, Miss Havisham is unable to engage with the emotional life of others. Her interaction with others is informed by an extreme and perverse materialism so that she manipulates people as if they were things and crushes the animate world into an inanimate form.

On her birthday, Miss Havisham presents a frightening spectacle as she conducts Pip with her “withered hand” (c. xi, p. 112) into the room in which the remnants of her bridal feast are decaying. She shows him the table where she will be laid when she dies and the great decaying cake that was her bridal cake, as if she were conducting a walking-tour through a museum. The cake which is “so overhung with cobwebs that its form [is] quite indistinguishable” has something morbidly corpse-like about its appearance, evoking the veiled, corpse-like figure of Miss Havisham. In fact a comparison between the two is intended by Miss Havisham herself: she makes an analogy between her inner pain and degeneration and the decaying cake by telling Pip that she and the “heap of decay” have “worn away together” and that the “mice have gnawed at it, and sharper teeth than the teeth of mice have gnawed at [her]” (c. xi, p. 117). In this way every object within her domain is made to emblematised her death – both spiritual and physical.

But she does not allow Pip to observe her suffering from a detached perspective. Rather she forces him to experience her inner turmoil by making him walk her “round and round the room” (c. xi, p. 113) in a repetitive and “fitful” (c. xi, p. 114) motion that re-enacts dramatically her obsessive and self-destructive harping on Compeyson’s betrayal. Pip feels as if they are “going fast because her thoughts [go] fast” and it is as if, through this physical motion in which Pip is obliged to partake, she causes him to experience her restless state of mind and the circular motion of her thoughts in which she has become damnably entrapped (c. xi, p. 114). Thus she seems to be guiding Pip deeper and deeper into the abyss of her own distorted psyche.

Dickens draws on elements of satire in his depiction of Miss Havisham and this reinforces the affinities that these scenes share with Revenge Tragedy for, as Gamini Salgado suggests, the revenge motif is very similar to satire’s exposure of the corruption

of society.³⁰⁸ Traditionally satire has been understood as a “kind of doctrinaire writing”, which differs from comedy in that its humour is directed at correcting the vices of society.³⁰⁹ This aim is achieved through the use of “grotesque caricatures” that embody and exaggerate society’s flaws. Like the avenger of Revenge Tragedy, the satirical hero is generally a “railer against society”:³¹⁰ although on the surface he is presented as honest and truthful compared with the society around him, his “urge to tell the whole truth conflicts with [his] need to paint the truth as black as possible”. Thus a “darker side” to his personality emerges, which, in its relishing of evil, shares much in common with the avenger figure (p. 21). But there are those critics for whom the moralising aspect of satire is less attractive than its playful aspect: Harriet and Irving Deer emphasise satire’s obsession with “man[as] a word-game player”, and its presentation of characters who take a conscious delight in role-playing.³¹¹

In the scene of Miss Havisham’s birthday Dickens’s approach to Miss Havisham’s conscious manipulation of other characters is distinctly satirical: Pip finds himself involved in a game where Miss Havisham’s relatives attempt to upstage one another for her affections. Where, formerly, the horror of Miss Havisham’s manipulations was stressed, there is a jaunty playfulness about this scene to which the reader cannot help responding. On this day Estella conducts Pip to a room filled with Miss Havisham’s relatives. Pip is instantly aware that they are “all toadies and humbugs, but that each of them pretend[s] not to know that the others [are] toadies and humbugs: because the admission that he or she did know it would have made him or her out to be a toady and humbug” (c. xi, p. 109). Thus Miss Havisham’s relatives are engaged in a rather transparent act to make themselves appear morally superior to one another in the eyes of their hosts in order that they may be more eligible for Miss Havisham’s wealth than the others. The whole thing is a game of deception but the toadies are blind-sighted by their hosts who are quick to capitalise on their follies: the fact that Estella brings Pip into the room for a while and allows him to remain there and listen to the conversations

³⁰⁸ Salgado (introd.), *Three Revenge Tragedies*, p. 19.

³⁰⁹ Harriet and Irving Deer, “Satire as Rhetorical Play”, *Boundary 2* 5.3 (Spring 1977): 711–722 (p. 712).

³¹⁰ Salgado (introd.), *Three Revenge Tragedies*, p. 19.

³¹¹ Harriet and Irving Deer, “Satire as Rhetorical Play”, pp. 715, 719.

seems a little too suspicious to be arbitrary. His presence certainly does not go unnoticed – when he enters the room the conversation dies down and Pip infers from this that its “occupants [are] looking at [him]” (c. xi, p. 109). Whether he is unwittingly part of some kind of plot between Estella and Miss Havisham to unsettle their relatives by implying that he will be given the lion’s share of their fortunes remains unexplained but certainly seems likely. This hypothesis is supported by what occurs later, when Pip comes into his fortune, and Miss Havisham delights in pretending (both to Pip and to Sarah Pocket) that she is his benefactor.

Aside from her intentional misleading of her relatives regarding Pip, it is interesting that Miss Havisham mainly undermines their pretensions by being brutally honest with them and exposing them for the imposters that they are: Miss Sarah Pocket’s feigned affection in the words, “how well you look”, is met with the rebuff, “I do not . . . I am yellow skin and bone”; and Camilla’s preposterous lament that she thinks of Miss Havisham “more in the night than [she is] quite equal to” is met with the curt reply, “Then don’t think of me” (c. xi, p. 114). Such bland logic makes Camilla’s histrionics – her overflowing tears and her claim to be sensitive to Miss Havisham’s condition – appear even more ludicrously exaggerated. Her power over her would-be vultures is direct and absolute so that her halting in the room can bring “a sudden end” to “Camilla’s chemistry” (c. xi, p. 116). Thus Miss Havisham is able to expose the falsity of her relatives’ discourse – the fact that they feign true emotions to disguise their perverse materialism. However, although she is so perceptive of the vices of those around her, Miss Havisham is unable to see the irony of her own situation: like the satirical hero and the avenger of Revenge Tragedy, she has become so obsessed with exposing the follies of others, that she has become lost in the game, unaware that she herself is tainted.

Miss Havisham does not only play the role of director of proceedings in Satis House, she is also an actress: in her brief conversation with Pip after she has just met him, she dramatises her own pain: she “lay[s] her hands, one upon the other, on her left side” and asks Pip if he knows what it is that she touches. When he tells her that it is her heart she utters the word “Broken!” emphatically and with an “eager look” and a “weird smile that [has] a kind of boast in it” (c. viii, p. 88). Thus she is not merely dramatising her pain but her histrionics have a very definite purpose of influencing Pip. Miss Havisham is

clearly playing the part for which the scene has been elaborately set. She is the self-martyring victim of man's cruelty but she has turned her very victimisation into a weapon that she can use to avenge herself on men.

In this scene she recalls the avenger who transforms his world into a play and himself into an actor: the way in which she takes a melodramatic delight in her own heartbreak, using it as a weapon of vengeance, is reminiscent of Vindice's opening soliloquy when his lament for the "sallow picture of my poisoned love" turns into a speech to revenge:³¹²

"Advance thee, O thou terror to fat folks,
To have their costly three-piled flesh worn off
As bare as this".³¹³

Dickens's presentation of Miss Havisham further recalls *Hamlet* and Revenge Tragedy in his use of the image of the skeleton to suggest death and corruption. However, he does so in a more strikingly allegorical manner: Miss Havisham transforms *herself* into a skeleton-like creature figuring her pain and suffering and vengeance. When Pip meets her for the first time she seems to belong more to the inanimate world than to the animate one: she appears as a "waxwork" or a skeleton which has been "dug out of a vault under the church pavement" (c. viii, p. 87), both of which are now frighteningly animated with "dark eyes" (c. viii, p. 87). In fact the only 'life', if it can be called that, apparent in the figure of Miss Havisham is in her eyes which seem in their sinister watching of Pip to be looking right out of a hell-like realm. Thus, unlike Hamlet, Miss Havisham is not overpowered by death and decay. Rather, by transforming her suffering into art, she achieves a weird kind of power: her ghoul-like presence exerts a gothic fascination over Pip's imagination as he attempts to play cards with Estella and it occurs to him that she looks as if the "admission of the natural light of day would have struck her to dust" (c. viii, p. 90).

In her macabre masochism Miss Havisham wreaks revenge for the pain she has suffered by desiring her own death, a death that would provide an aesthetic culmination of her twisted desire to dramatise and crystallise her inner suffering: in death she wishes

³¹² *The Revenger's Tragedy*, l.i.14

³¹³ *The Revenger's Tragedy*, l.i.45-7.

to be laid “in [her] bride’s dress on the bride’s table” (c. xi, p. 117) as a final, static symbol of the betrayal that she suffered. She sees herself as literally being torn to shreds and devoured, not only by the man she loved, but also by her relatives who owe her love: on her birthday she exposes their loveless desire for her possessions in a strikingly allegorical image in which they will all be allocated places around her dead body so they can “feast upon [her]” (c. xi, p. 116). Thus the banquet of her wedding has been transformed into the banquet of her funeral; but in a depraved, cannibalistic twist, Miss Havisham transforms herself into the meal to be consumed. In this way Miss Havisham makes herself the central symbol of the allegory that she has fashioned, so that all those who encounter her are immediately conscious of her victimisation and suffering, which ironically is itself a source of her power.

Allegorising revenge: the motif of art and life

Whereas the traditional avenger’s artistry is a kind of escapism, a way to free himself through revenge on his enemies, the main purpose of Miss Havisham’s artistry is to make her suffering meaningful: her intention is not merely to make men suffer for what Compeyson did to her, but it is also to make them see and understand the reason for her anguish. She ensures that the wrongs perpetuated against her are not forgotten by focussing obsessively on her past pain and allegorising it for the benefit of others: she remains in her wedding garments and has not “quite finished dressing” (c. viii, p. 87) just as she was when she discovered Compeyson’s betrayal. However, her desire to crystallise her initial suffering ironically makes it more open to the ravages of time and spiritual decay so that her initially pitiful state deteriorates into something more sinister and empty.

This is evident in the scene of her first appearance where Dickens juxtaposes a death-like state with the memory of a time of vitality and life: when Pip first enters Miss Havisham’s chambers he is overwhelmed by the objects cluttering the room – he notices a “draped table with a gilded looking glass” and he notices that there is a lady sitting there “dressed in rich materials” (c. viii, p. 87). He notices every detail of her dress: her white shoes, her white veil, the “bridal flowers in her hair”, some “bright jewels” which

sparkle on “her neck and her hands” and “other jewels” that lie “sparkling on the table” (c. viii, p. 87). The wealth of materials in which Miss Havisham is dressed and the variety of objects about the room – dresses “less splendid” than the one that she is wearing are “scattered about” , a watch chain, gloves, her handkerchief and a prayer book all lie on the table before her – give the impression of a lavish and exuberant existence. However, Pip soon realises that “everything within [his] view that ought to have been white, had been white long ago, and had lost its lustre, and was faded and yellow” (c. viii, p. 87) and that Miss Havisham herself has “withered like the dress” (c. viii, p. 87). The way in which Pip moves from admiring the splendour of his surroundings to noticing its decay, gives one the impression that it withers before his eyes, figuring Miss Havisham’s decay into spiritual depravity. As I have noted earlier, this obsession with death and decay, the degeneration of the vitality and fullness of life into an empty shell of what it once was, is also a feature of *Hamlet* and *The Revenger’s Tragedy*. But Hamlet’s memories of Yorick as a “fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy” who “hath bore me on his back a thousand times” (*Hamlet* V.i.163–4), is also a lament for the loss of innocence – the light-hearted exuberance of Yorick no longer has a place in Denmark. The scene of Miss Havisham’s first appearance has a similar effect: Miss Havisham’s passionate, youthful love has led to a disaster out of which a monstrous creature with a dead visage and bright “sunken eyes” (c. viii, p. 87) emerges, a parody of its former passionate self.

The self-destructive limitations of Miss Havisham’s artificial realm are made more palpable in her confrontation with Estella much later: initially the two women appear as polar opposites: Miss Havisham has “Estella’s arm drawn through her own” and “clutch[es] Estella’s hand in hers” (c. xxxviii, p. 322) in a gesture of obsessive and possessive affection, whilst Estella begins to “detach herself” gradually (c. xxxviii, p. 322), showing a cold aloofness in the face of Miss Havisham’s intense emotions. Miss Havisham grows more and more heated as the conversation progresses and Estella shows “only a self-possessed indifference . . . that [is] almost cruel” (c. xxxviii, p. 322). However, in her words, “do you reproach me for being cold? You?” Estella implies that Miss Havisham has no right to accuse her of aloofness because if anyone should understand her coldness it is Miss Havisham (c. xxxviii, p. 322). Estella’s words imply that she reflects back to Miss Havisham what she has shown her and that, in asking for her love, Miss Havisham is

asking her to “give [her] what [she] never gave to [Estella]” (c. xxxviii, p. 323). Miss Havisham’s fierce passion, then, is implicitly brought closer to Estella’s aloofness and both appear as reflections of one another.

Miss Havisham’s words pervert the meaning of love – she describes it as an obsessive and entrapping emotion, “inseparable from jealousy at all times” (c. xxxviii, p. 323). The perversity of Miss Havisham’s ‘love’ is mirrored back to her by the cold figure of Estella who is “what [Miss Havisham] ha[s] made [her]”. The very rhythm of Miss Havisham’s words is echoed by that of Estella’s: the repetitive laments of Miss Havisham, “so hard, so hard” and “so cold, so cold” are followed by Estella’s repeated retort, “who taught me to be hard?” and “who taught me to be cold?” (c. xxxviii, p. 323). Clearly Miss Havisham’s twisted love is closer to coldness in its cruelty and this aspect of her own self is dramatically and allegorically mirrored back to her by Estella. In the way that the appearance of Magwitch forced Pip into self-recognition, so the confrontation between Miss Havisham and Estella seems to suggest a similar potential for Miss Havisham: Estella, in her brutal honesty, never confuses her duty towards Miss Havisham with love. She refers to her quite coldly as “Mother by adoption” and tells her clearly that although “all [she] possess[es] is freely [Miss Havisham’s]” she cannot love her for her “gratitude and duty cannot do impossibilities” (c. xxxviii, p. 323). Yet the circular and repetitive nature of the discourse belies any possibility for Morality-play-like conversion. Rather Miss Havisham remains stubbornly blind to the truth of Estella’s retorts, unable to realise her own complicity in the malformation of Estella’s character. The emphasis on the psychological ramifications of Miss Havisham’s philosophy for Estella as well as for herself, suggests a more realist interest in moral formation. However, this is counterpoised against a symbolic exploration of the character of love and vengeance which is suggested by the way in which the rhythm of Estella’s cold words mirrors that of her mother’s passionate and jealous expression of love. The ironic failure of Miss Havisham’s artistry is thus expressed both realistically (in Estella’s inability to return Miss Havisham’s love) and symbolically in the way in which Estella becomes a dramatic reflection of Miss Havisham’s self-destructive pride rather than simply a weapon of vengeance.

Further, there is a creation of an allegorical tableau as Estella becomes the mirror-figure: when Pip finally decides to leave the two women, his last view of them seems to crystallise them in their emotional states, forming a striking picture: Miss Havisham is “settled down” amongst the “faded bridal relics” with her “grey hair all adrift upon the ground” while Estella is “yet standing by the chimney piece” (c. xxxviii, p. 324): Mary Saunders has called Dickens’s “floor scenes” a type of expressionism rather than simply histrionics because, she claims, it is in these scenes that words and gestures are able to embody intense emotional conditions that cannot be expressed by more banal encounters.³¹⁴ Expressionism was a German movement in literature and the visual arts between 1910 and 1945 and involved a departure from realism in that writers and artists communicated powerful inner feelings by exaggerating “representations of the outside world”.³¹⁵ In the scene that I have been discussing, Miss Havisham’s melodramatic collapse anticipates what the expressionists formulated in the way in which it functions as a powerful visual icon imaging her inner suffering and breakdown. The image of Estella standing coldly erect by the chimney piece forms a striking contrast with Miss Havisham wallowing in her despair and figures emblematically the prideful inability to engage with the emotional life of others which is a key aspect of Miss Havisham’s tragic failure.

Dickens’s presentation of Miss Havisham involves a turn towards signification in the sense that signs or symbols are used to denote meaning. In this it resembles Dante’s use of the *contrapasso* in his depiction of the sinners in *Inferno*: the *contrapasso* or retribution is used to describe the way in which the punishments of the sinners dramatically figure their sins, displaying “man’s just deserts and God’s justice”.³¹⁶ Like Dante’s sinners, Miss Havisham becomes representative of her moral state: she and her garments are withered and yellow, figuring the twisted decay of her love into vengeance. The way in which Miss Havisham is frozen in her vengeance recalls Dante’s method of depicting Ugolino’s hatred for his enemy Ruggieri in Canto Thirty Two of *Inferno*: Ugolino’s blind hatred for his enemy and his inability to see let alone understand the

³¹⁴ Mary Saunders, “Lady Dedlock Prostrate: Drama, Melodrama, and Expressionism in Dickens’s Floor Scenes”, in *Dramatic Dickens*, ed. Carol Hanbery MacKay (London: Macmillan Press, 1989), p. 77.

³¹⁵ Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, p. 90.

³¹⁶ Singleton, *Commedia: Elements of Structure*, p. 2.

spiritual significance of his actions, is conveyed emblematically through the savage image of him feeding on the head of his arch-nemesis. So trapped is he in his vengeful rage that he is only impelled to speak by the desire to “fruitti infamia al traditor ch’i’ rodo” (sprout/infamy for the traitor whom I gnaw) (*Inferno* xxx: 7). In a similar way the monstrous skeletal figure of Miss Havisham figures emblematically her unhealthy obsession with the moment of betrayal. Further, she is entirely consumed by her vengeance to the point that she takes a twisted delight in harping on it and dramatising her pain.

Ugolino’s entrapment within the ice of Cocytus suggests the spiritual death in which his vengeance has ensnared him. In a similar way Miss Havisham’s obsession with her past heartbreak has become a trap for her: on the day when he first meets her Pip notices that she has “the appearance of having dropped, body and soul, within and without, under the weight of a crushing blow” (c. viii, p. 91). Thus, in making herself a monument of suffering, Miss Havisham has also trapped herself forever, forced to suffer endlessly and hopelessly within the role of martyr that she has created for herself. By transforming herself into an artwork Miss Havisham personifies her suffering and forces everyone to acknowledge it. However, where life is dynamic and changing, the world of art is static and unchanging and in sacrificing her life to art, Miss Havisham is never able to overcome the suffering that has been inflicted on her. Thus she is ultimately not powerful or heroic as she believes herself to be, but fallen and pitiful.

Pip’s allegorical consciousness

After watching Wopsle’s *Hamlet* Pip dreams of himself as “playing Hamlet to Miss Havisham’s ghost” (c. xxxi, p. 279). Here Magwitch, who was described as a ghost-like figure in his initial encounter with Pip, has been replaced in Pip’s mind by Miss Havisham. The analogy made between Miss Havisham and the king’s ghost emphasises her function as a principal figure of revenge. In the scenes that follow, Dickens stresses Miss Havisham’s ghostly qualities to the point that she achieves a separate existence apart from her own self-dramatised action: on the night after he witnesses Miss Havisham’s argument with Estella, Pip is unable to sleep because he is troubled by visions of a

“thousand Miss Havishams” (c. xxxviii, p. 325) and when he finally gets up he sees her “going along [the passage] in a ghostly manner, making a low cry” (c. xxxviii, p. 325). The blurring of the boundaries between the figures of Pip’s imagination and the real Miss Havisham heightens her surreal quality and suggests that she emerges out of Pip’s own consciousness as a threatening figure representing his hopeless entrapment within his desires.

The appearance of Miss Havisham in this scene is given a stronger allegorical dimension if one recalls that not long before this Pip describes Miss Havisham’s house as if it were an emotional landscape for the inner workings of his mind: he sees in his environment the “construction that [his] mind ha[s] come to, repeated and thrown back to [him]” (c. xxxviii, p. 321). It is as if his derelict surroundings reflect his inner life and he sees his thoughts “written” in the “cobwebs from the centrepiece, in the crawlings of the spiders on the cloth . . . and in the gropings and pausings of the beetles on the floor” (c. xxxviii, p. 321). This desolate picture of Pip’s inner landscape is heightened by the unsettling presence of Miss Havisham, lost in her despair as she wanders ghost-like through Satis House at night.

Like the King’s ghost in *Hamlet* Miss Havisham can be read as an embodiment of revenge whose presence in Pip’s life constantly suggests to him the possibility of retribution. But unlike Hamlet who knowingly embraces (or attempts to embrace) the role of avenger, Pip is not overtly aware of this tendency within himself. Rather, it is in the subconscious world of his dreams and imagination that he seems to acknowledge his own desire for vengeance, a desire that is embodied in the figure of Miss Havisham: just after he has taken leave of her for what he thinks is the last time, he has a sudden “childish” and foreboding apprehension that she is “hanging to the beam” of the brewery (c. xlix, p. 413), a moment that melodramatically presages her demise. Because Pip makes clear that the image is created by “[his] fancy” (c. xlix, p. 413), it seems to figure more explicitly the state of his inner psyche. The fact that the imaginary Miss Havisham is hanging to the beam as if a macabre and primitive justice has been carried out on her suggests that Pip is subconsciously expressing his desire for vengeance.

In the scene of Miss Havisham’s demise, Dickens expands on her symbolic significance as a figure of revenge: instead of abandoning the image of Miss Havisham

hanging to the beam as merely a bizarre fantasy of Pip's, the narrative expands on it, exploding into a horrifying and dramatic description of the 'real' Miss Havisham's sudden catching alight. This blurring of the real world into Pip's imaginary landscape makes Miss Havisham appear as less of a real old woman who is being consumed by a flame, and more of a melodramatic figure dramatically embodying Pip's own deviant passions: in a frighteningly expressive gesture, Miss Havisham flies at Pip "shrieking, with a whirl of fire blazing all about her, and soaring at least as many feet above her as she [is] high" (c. xlix, p. 414). The subsequent struggle describes the actual events – Pip's delivering of Miss Havisham from the flames – in such a way as to suggest Pip's symbolic overcoming of his vengeful desires: when he sees her consumed by the flame his first action is to "close . . . with" her and "[throw] her down" (c. xlix, p. 414), pulling his coats over her and covering her closer, while all the time she shrieks "more wildly and trie[s] to free herself" (c. xlix, p. 414). What should be an encounter between Miss Havisham in her frantic agony and Pip, her saviour, resembles instead a struggle between "desperate enemies": Pip forcibly subjugates Miss Havisham, holding her down as if she were "a prisoner who might escape" (c. xlix, p. 414). Although Pip is in fact attempting to save Miss Havisham by preventing her from being consumed entirely by the flames, his actions here unwittingly resemble the actions of an aggressor: by forcing Miss Havisham down, he seems to be asserting his power over her. This illuminates his desire to vanquish the destructive vices that she represents for him.

The fact that this scene seems to grow from Pip's bizarre fantasy gives it a nightmarish, dream-like quality. But, as I have shown, it is through a melodramatic heightening of the situation that Dickens suggests a deeper spiritual meaning. This characteristic links this scene with dream-sequences in allegories: commonly, dreams are used in allegory to heighten one's awareness of a spiritual dimension. Dante uses dream sequences in his *Purgatorio* to suggest his growing perception of divine truths: when he is being carried to the gates of Purgatory by Saint Lucy, he dreams that he is being carried by an eagle into the circle of fire where the two of them burn together (*Purgatorio* ix: 19–33). Thus Saint Lucy's action of carrying Dante up towards Purgatory gives it a deeper spiritual significance of being liberated from the burden of one's past sins. The struggle of Pip and Miss Havisham in the flames has similar purgatorial overtones – it seems as if

Pip suffers the violent blaze in order to be cleansed of the destructive past in which he and Miss Havisham were entangled: this is evident when Pip drags the wedding feast, which has become a “heap of rottenness” into the fire and that Miss Havisham’s wedding dress is reduced by the flames into “patches of tinder yet alight . . . floating in the smoky air” (c. xlix, p. 414). Thus Miss Havisham is purged of every emblem that she used to figure her inner torment and corruption. Later Pip poignantly reverses the devastating effects of Miss Havisham’s vengeance and hatred with an act of love: on leaving her, he “lean[s] over her and touch[es] her lips with [his]” (c. xlix, p. 415), an action which suggests his spiritual growth towards forgiveness and redemption.

Conclusion

From the above discussion one can deduce a number of ways in which the figure of Miss Havisham draws on and transforms the significance of the king’s ghost in *Hamlet*. Some of these will be examined briefly below:

In *Hamlet*, it is unclear whether the king’s ghost is a figure of righteousness or whether Hamlet is right to suspect that it may be a demon attempting to deceive him. Critics have long been divided over how Shakespeare wishes us to see the ghost: Miriam Joseph, for example, has asserted that the ghost is unequivocally a purgatorial spirit whose message should be heeded as morally and legally acceptable. In support of her argument she suggests that “the abode of the ghost and his character fit descriptions of a purgatorial spirit in both doctrine and popular legend”.³¹⁷ But as Robert H. West points out in his article entitled “King Hamlet’s Ambiguous Ghost”, one can make an equally convincing case arguing that the ghost is “a devil in disguise manoeuvring to get Hamlet’s soul – and, while he was about it, promoting the false Romish doctrine of purgatory, a thing that Protestants supposed devils constantly to do”.³¹⁸ West’s argument that Shakespeare consciously intended to create more questions than answers around the

³¹⁷ Miriam Joseph, “Discerning the ghost in *Hamlet*”, PMLA 76.5 (December 1961): 493–502 (p. 502).

³¹⁸ Robert H. West, “King Hamlet’s Ambiguous Ghost”, PMLA 70.5 (December 1955): 1107–1117 (p.1110).

figure of the ghost in order to heighten its dramatic effectiveness,³¹⁹ provides a convincing alternative to the debate.

In *Great Expectations* Miss Havisham is also an ambiguous figure: initially her motives regarding Pip are unclear – she could be his fairy godmother or a wicked witch, bent on deceiving him. Even when Pip is convinced that he has Miss Havisham to thank for his expectations, Dickens never allows us to overlook her sinister connotations. But in her last moments her moral ambiguity becomes dramatically manifest: as I have noted, her desperate repentance coupled with her catching alight has purgatorial overtones. But there is also something implicitly menacing about her in the way in which she flies shrieking at Pip, suggesting that she is suffering the torment of hell's flames. This notion that she is a damned spirit is emphasised even after it is all over: after the blaze has been smothered, Miss Havisham remains unable to free herself from the vestiges of her past: she cannot quite shake off “her ghastly bridal appearance” (c. xlix, p. 415) as she lies, in a macabre twist of fate, on the very table on which she had predicted she would be laid, under cotton wool covered by a sheet. Her complete mental breakdown is conveyed by the three sentences, which relate to her sense of guilt that she continues to repeat, “never chan[ging] [their] order” . . . but “sometimes leav[ing] out a word . . . [just] leaving a blank and going on to the next word” (c. xlix, p. 415). Thus the uncertainty of Miss Havisham's redemption is emphasised through the evocation of a transcendent moral realm that seems suddenly to explode into ‘reality’, recreating it as a Dantesque scene of death and judgement.

Robert H. West notices that the spirits in Shakespeare often have distinctly human qualities: even *Macbeth's* three witches perform ceremonies, which does not correlate with beliefs about spirits at the time.³²⁰ The ghost of the King in *Hamlet* is also driven by a personal vindictiveness that compromises the claims of some critics that he is “a saved Christian soul acting as an instrument of God's wrath and justice”.³²¹ Stephen Greenblatt takes this a bit further to suggest that Hamlet's realisation of the ghost's demands is

³¹⁹ West, “King Hamlet's Ambiguous Ghost”, p. 1113.

³²⁰ West, “King Hamlet's Ambiguous Ghost”, p. 1112.

³²¹ West, “King Hamlet's Ambiguous Ghost”, p. 1113.

complicated by the ghost's oddly physical nature, its "strange quasi-carnality".³²²

Traditionally, in Shakespeare's time, a person who was about to die would fast in order to purify himself for heaven. However, the king's sudden death prevented him from carrying out this ritual and Hamlet is disgusted by the thought of his father dying with a full stomach.³²³ By emphasising the grossly physical nature of the ghost, Shakespeare humanises it and, in so doing, undermines its otherworldly power over Hamlet's consciousness.

But Dickens's depiction of Miss Havisham differs slightly from Shakespeare's presentation of the King's ghost: whereas the ghost is a supernatural being whose human qualities weaken its power over Hamlet, Miss Havisham is a living woman whose bizarre and ghostly qualities are emphasised to the point where she seems to transcend her mortality and wield a superhuman power over Pip. Thus she appears to inhabit two realms – the physical world of Satis House and an abstract world of Pip's consciousness where she achieves objective significance as a figure of revenge.

The above comparison illustrates the principal argument of this chapter: Dickens invokes *Hamlet* in the Miss Havisham scenes only to effect a turn towards allegory. It is necessary to reiterate at this point that the novel is characterised by a continuing realist concern with the personal formation and moral choices of the protagonists treated as real-life people: this is evident in Pip's growing awareness of the emptiness of his ambitions and in Estella's psychological malformation and consequent bad choice of husband. But, as I have shown, this is balanced by an emergence of a symbolic, even surrealist, subtext which can be seen first in the creation of a tableau of self-destruction and dehumanisation and second in the mediation of metaphysical dream-allegories through Pip's subconsciousness.

I have further demonstrated that an important concern of the Miss Havisham scenes is the relationship between art and life. Joshua Adler observes that a major preoccupation of Victorian fiction is the "superiority of the dynamic, spontaneous mode of life over the static and self-imprisoned": this idea, he suggests, is often conveyed

³²² Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, p. 243.

³²³ Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, p. 243.

through a comparison between the fluidity of life and the constricting nature of art.³²⁴ This can be seen in Browning's *My Last Duchess* (1842) where the Duke replaces the Duchess with her portrait, which he can use as a showpiece and which cannot capture the innocent vitality of the real woman. Here the Duke's appreciation for art implies his demonic inability to engage with the emotional life of others: he appreciates the portrait of his Duchess as an aesthetic achievement, referring to it as "a wonder",³²⁵ which has been carefully crafted by Fra Pandolf. But he could not tolerate the individual whims of his lady when she was still alive, the fact that she did not subject herself completely to his dominion. This obsessive selfishness, Adler notes, is made strikingly palpable when the Duke is contrasted with the Duchess, who "vibrat[ed] in sympathy with her fellow creatures, [and was] ever open to the beauty and goodness in the universe". But Adler suggests that what truly makes the Duke demonic is not his refined artistic taste, but the fact that his appreciation is for the artist's technique rather than his insight: he notes that the artist has captured the Duchess's dynamic response to life in the "spot of joy" on her cheek but that the Duke is unable to respond to this except as a sign of the Duchess' naive flirtatiousness.³²⁶ Thus, although art can never capture life's vitality, the poem suggests that when one takes time to consider it deeply enough, art is not wholly incapable of probing life's deeper significance.

At the end of the century Oscar Wilde again raises the concern of the relationship between art and Morality: in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), Dorian literally transforms into his portrait and, in crystallising his beauty, becomes detached from real-life experiences, losing all moral sensibility. Like the avenger figure of Revenge Tragedy, he transforms his life into art and, by aestheticising his experiences, frees himself of moral imperatives. But this involves an ultimate sacrifice of his humanity of which the horror of his melodramatic demise is a stark reminder.

Dickens's exploration of the motif of art and life shares something with the above examples: like Dorian in *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, whose attempts to transform life

³²⁴ Joshua Adler, "Structure and Meaning in Browning's *My Last Duchess*", *Victorian Poetry* 15.3 (Autumn 1977): 219–227 (p. 220).

³²⁵ Robert Browning, *The Poems of Browning*, 2 vols, eds John Woolford and Daniel Karlin (London and New York, NY: Longman, 1991), p. 158, l. 3.

³²⁶ Adler, "Structure and Meaning in Browning's *My Last Duchess*", pp. 225, 227.

into art drain it of its meaning, creating a superficiality that is monstrous, Miss Havisham's world is a world of surfaces where the heart's deepest most passions are put on display, making them less profound and convincing. But, as Joyce Carol Oates notes, in *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* "real life is eclipsed by art and by the emotional responses we commonly give to works of art, as we rejoice in their artificiality".³²⁷ This implies that art loses some of the depth and significance of real life through our consciousness of its unreality – we enjoy it as a spectacle from which we are at one remove and do not spontaneously experience it as we would life. Miss Havisham, by contrast, attempts to invest her life with meaning by imposing a static picture of suffering and bitterness upon herself. The constricting nature of her artificial realm is reminiscent of the way in which Robert Browning's Duke used art to impose a rigid control on his Last Duchess. But where the Duke attempts to trivialise the significance of the Duchess's life by concentrating on the aesthetic pleasure her portrait gives him, Miss Havisham makes an art out of the *meaning* of her heartbreak and this ironically traps her within her misery, denying her the possibility of change and redemption.

In both *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* and *My Last Duchess* the motif of art and life is explored through the juxtaposition of a portrait with the lives of the principal protagonists. In the Miss Havisham scenes, however, Dickens does not make use of an actual artwork to suggest Miss Havisham's attempt to crystallise her life into art. Rather in the figure of Miss Havisham the world of art is melded into that of 'real life' so that the 'real world' of the novel takes on a heightened allegorical significance. Juliet John observes that Dickens often presents his deviant women as artworks: she notes that figures such as Mrs Clenham, Lady Steerforth and Lady Dedlock are trapped within their roles so that they appear as emotionless statues incapable of expressing their passionate inner life.³²⁸ Miss Havisham differs from these figures in that she is both artwork and artist, creating allegories out of her life and transforming her world into an icon of her vengeance. Like the portrait of the Duchess, Miss Havisham's art is both constricting to her self-hood and illuminating about the state of her soul: in the figure of Miss Havisham

³²⁷ Joyce Carol Oates, "The Picture of Dorian Gray: The Parable of the Fall", *Critical Inquiry* 7.2 (Winter 1980): 419 – 428 (p. 426).

³²⁸ John, *Dickens's Villains*, pp. 224–5.

Dickens brings together the revenger figure and the notion of divine justice: whereas the avenger figure of Revenge Tragedy was able to achieve a certain freedom through the recreation of his vengeance as artifice, Miss Havisham's artful vengeance is as much a sign of her power as it is a sign of her sinfulness. The self-destructive nature of her vengeance suggests a transcendent moral perspective from which her actions are judged as sinful and damnable.

CONCLUSION: THE DANTE FACTOR

When discussing *Great Expectations* G.K. Chesterton asserts that “a great man of letters or any great artist is symbolical without knowing it”.³²⁹ This point raises two related questions that are central to my thinking in this dissertation: the first is how far one can call Dickens a realist – does his imaginative power reside in his depiction of the material world or in the evocation of a symbolic dimension of transcendent truths? The second question relates to the nature of Dickens’s symbolic method: is it the unwitting by-product of an intense imaginative energy as Chesterton suggests, or does it draw on and rework complex allegorical patterns? It cannot be doubted that Dickens attempts to evoke a symbolic dimension in his narratives and that this is often suggested through explicitly religious language. The purpose of this dissertation was to determine the nature and effectiveness of this approach.

This necessarily implies an interrogation of John Carey’s argument in *The Violent Effigy*. Carey’s thesis is that Dickens’s power lies in his relish for the chaotic, in the destruction of meaning, rather than in his attention to complex symbolic motifs and images. He argues that Dickens’s imagination draws its power from the material world, suggesting that the moment that Dickens attempts to embrace symbolic and particularly religious significance, the natural vividness of his narrative and imagery becomes diluted by sentimental and hackneyed rhetoric.³³⁰

This point is worth considering: there are many instances when Dickens’s deliberate attempt to invest his narrative with a sense of the divine leads him to create the shadowy and insubstantial imagery about which Carey complains. Perhaps the most notorious example of this mawkish, clichéd narrative is in Dickens’s description of the death of Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. As Malcom Andrews observes, Nell’s death is described in such a way as to suggest the Nativity: this, he observes can be seen in the way in which the “single solitary light” guides Kit, the single gentleman and Mr Garland to

³²⁹ Chesterton, *Appreciations and Criticisms of the works of Charles Dickens*, p. 204.

³³⁰ Carey, *The Violent Effigy*, pp. 13, 16.

their destination , strongly evoking the traditional image of the star overhanging the stable.³³¹ In the description of Nell herself Dickens attempts to suggest her ultimate transcendence of the mortal world:

She was dead. No sleep so beautiful and calm, so free from trace of pain, so fair to look upon. She seemed a creature fresh from the hand of God, and waiting for the breath of life; not one who had lived and suffered death.

Her couch was dressed with here and there some winter berries and green leaves, gathered in a spot she had been used to favour.

"When I die, put near me something that has loved the light, and had the sky above it always." Those were her words.

She was dead. Dear, gentle, patient, noble Nell, was dead. Her little bird – a poor slight thing the pressure of a finger would have crushed – was stirring nimbly in its cage; and the strong heart of its child-mistress was mute and motionless for ever.

Where were the traces of her early cares, sufferings and fatigues? All gone. Sorrow was dead indeed in her, but peace and perfect happiness were born; imaged in her tranquil beauty and profound repose.

And still her former self lay there, unaltered in this change. Yes. The old fireside had smiled upon that same sweet face; it had passed like a dream through haunts of misery and care; at the door of the poor schoolmaster on the summer evening, before the furnace fire upon the cold wet night, at the still bedside of the dying boy, there had been the same mild lovely look. So shall we know the angels in their majesty, after death.

. . . "It is not," said the schoolmaster, as he bent down to kiss her on the cheek and gave his tears free vent, "It is not on earth that Heaven's justice ends. Think what it is compared with the World to which her young spirit has winged its early flight, and say, if one deliberate wish expressed in solemn terms above this bed could call her back to life, which of us would utter it!" (pp. 655–654).

In death Nell is freed from the pain of life and does not bear the mark of her suffering so that it seems as if she has not yet lived at all: she appears as a perfect and untainted creature of God – an angel as we "shall know" them in their "majesty". In this way Dickens attempts to crystallise Nell's innocence and to divinise her, elevating her above life's cares. Rather than an end, he suggests that her death is a beginning: she is born into "peace and perfect happiness". But the narrative imposes on Nell an idealised picture of heavenly peace and perfection which utterly eclipses the physical reality of her death, preventing us from appreciating the poignancy of her demise. There is something disturbing about the description of Nell lying "unaltered" with the same sweet smile frozen on her face – in attempting to immortalize her, Dickens has denied her dramatic life, making her into a static symbol of sentimental bliss. The heavenly realm does not

³³¹ Malcom Andrews (introd.), *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), p. 29.

therefore appear as a vividly real presence but rather as a lifeless set of clichés that are invoked as a pale comfort for death: this is particularly evident in the schoolmaster's rapturous assertion that, given the choice, he would not recall Nell from that World to which her "young spirit has winged its early flight" for it is a far better place than this one. Thus in death Nell is as she was in life – a shadowy figure, burdened with vague spiritual associations which she cannot convincingly embody.

The same is true of *Oliver Twist* in his encounter with Fagin in his cell:

"Oliver," cried Fagin, beckoning to him. "Here! Here! Let me whisper to you."

"I'm not afraid," said Oliver in a low voice, as he relinquished Mr Brownlow's hand.

"The papers," said Fagin, drawing Oliver towards him, "are in a canvas bag, in a hole a little way up the chimney in the top-front room. I want to talk to you, my dear. I want to talk to you."

"Yes, yes," returned Oliver. "Let me say a prayer. Do! Let me say one prayer. Say only one, upon your knees, with me, and we will talk till morning."

"Outside, outside," replied Fagin, pushing the boy towards him and towards the door, and looking vaguely over his head.

"Say I've gone to sleep – they'll believe *you*. You can get me out, if you take me so. Now then! Now then!"

"Oh! God forgive this wretched man!" cried the boy with a burst of tears.³³²

In this encounter Oliver is sentimentalised to the point that his words have no power to move us. Fagin's desperate, half-mad attempt to manipulate Oliver to help him escape is far more interesting than Oliver's implausible plea to God to have mercy on his tormentor. Oliver's evocation of the divine seems like empty words put into his mouth by Dickens who is determined that we appreciate the child's heavenly goodness. However, rather than giving us a sense of divine Morality in contrast with Fagin's depravity, these words strike a false note.

Images drawn from popular forms of Victorian religiosity are rife in Dickens's fiction: one such example is the description of Foulon in *A Tale of Two Cities*: just before Saint Antoine rushes for him, the sun strikes "a kindly ray, as of hope or protection down upon the prisoner's head".³³³ This image of Christian mercy which creates a Christ-like halo over Foulon's head recalls the sentimental subject matter of sacred prints, which, Dennis Walder notes, were a common feature of Victorian homes.³³⁴ But this image of

³³² Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (1838) (1966; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), p.414.

³³³ *A Tale of Two Cities*, p. 249.

³³⁴ Walder, *Dickens and Religion*, p. 80.

divinity appears static and colourless when compared with the fervent hatred of the crowd that consumes Foulon like an infernal wind. Thus Dickens's evocation of the divine and the transcendent often appeals to a popular Victorian sentimentality which has long since ceased to affect a modern audience: Walder notes the modern inability to respond to Victorian sentimental conventions in his discussion of Little Nell's death scene. He argues that the way in which Dickens describes Nell here is influenced by the popular convention which stressed the "happiness of death, and where little saints, filled with the power of forgiveness, linger endlessly to provide touching farewells and moving reflections in the assembled mourners".³³⁵ This he suggests is very far from modern sentimentality which overemphasises the "disgust and ugliness" of death (p. 83).

But Carey's suggestion that Dickens's symbolism is all of this lifeless and colourless variety ignores a fundamental source of his imaginative power. The findings of this dissertation suggest that the study of Dickens's imagination can be enriched by acknowledging the allegorical tendency of his narrative, a viewpoint which shares something in common with that of a seminal critic of the Dickensian imagination, J. Hillis Miller: for Hillis Miller Dickens is principally concerned with the interaction between transcendent and ineffable forces and material reality. He suggests that this can be seen in the way in which Dickens seeks emblematically to interpret human experience by transposing reality from the commonplace into a symbolic terrain where figures and places are inscribed with universal significance.³³⁶ He argues that this interplay between the palpable world and intangible realities is further evident in Dickens's exploration of the self where images and actions in the outer world are made to suggest the depths within (p. 26).

My examination of Dickens's narrative method in *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Great Expectations* suggests that Dickens's exposure to the allegorical works of Dante and Bunyan quickened his interest in the world beyond: rather than the sentimental and satirical approaches which he often took to spiritual aspects of experience, I have noted that at certain points in these novels he creates a double vision so that characters and

³³⁵ Walder, *Dickens and Religion*, p. 84.

³³⁶ J. Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1958; rpt. London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 328.

scenarios not only represent themselves but interact with and even embody universals beyond them, which give them a dramatic life and intensity. From my discussion, it is evident that the way in which Dickens imports the religious dimension into material reality carries more weight and conviction because of its Dantesque quality. This dissertation has identified two aspects of Dickens's allegorical imagination that have affinities with Dante's method in the *Inferno*: the first is the motif of a perverse baptism which is conveyed through striking emblems like blood or water. Dickens employs these images in different ways throughout his fiction – a notable example is in *Our Mutual Friend* where the river, like Dante's Styx, is associated with physical death and decay as well as spiritual corruption. Secondly, the way in which Dickens describes his characters as entrapped within their pride and malice resembles Dante's use of the *contrapasso* or retribution according to which the punishments of the damned dramatically figure their sins: Dickens's use of this technique is evident in his description of Mrs Clenham in *Little Dorrit* whose tomb-like house conveys emblematically the petrified state of her soul.

My analysis of *Great Expectations* and *A Tale of Two Cities* suggests a trajectory in Dickens's treatment of allegory: in both novels Dickens attempts to integrate religious and transcendent ideas with material reality but in *A Tale of Two Cities* the real threatens to become superseded or forgotten in the allegorical. In chapter four I describe two ways in which this novel breaks away from realistic expression to embrace a more transcendent significance: the first is the way in which figures become flattened into emblems of historical processes. The allegory is quite simple – Madame Defarge becomes an emblem of the vengeance of the Third Estate and the Marquis becomes representative of the cruelty of his class. However, as I have shown, rather than emptying these figures of vitality, this technique gives them a terrible dramatic life by emphasising the dehumanising power that historical forces wield over the individual. Dickens's allegorical method is most convincing in the depiction of the revolutionaries, when it evokes Dante most strongly: the power of the wine-drinking scene is in the sense that a demonic realm is hovering on the fringes of society, threatening to overwhelm it. This is made more palpable in the allegorical emblems and personifications – such as Hunger and Want – that seem to enter into the scene, creating a foreboding sense of revolutionary vice. Here the narrative maintains a distance between the symbolic, hell-like realm and

the 'real' people drinking wine in the street of Saint Antoine. But later on, in his description of the revolution, Dickens evokes the demonic dimension through an intensification of the material: the people become so maddened by their lust for violence that they are transformed into demonic creatures of vengeance. This is where Dickens's method most resembles Dante's: Dante amplifies the deviant desires of his infernal figures so that they are both authentic figures and vivid embodiments of vice.

Significantly, these figures are given a dramatic life by their moral colouring – their sinful natures come to define them. Similarly, in his description of the revolutionaries, Dickens vitalises his creations by intensifying their moral character: the sharpening of weapons at the grindstone, for example, is made to signify the people's brutal lust for blood and it is this expression of their demonic character which gives them a terrible dramatic power.

Carton's sacrifice is more problematic: here the allegorical and realistic dimensions of Carton's last moments exist in an awkward relation to one another: Carton's implausible personal love story becomes almost entirely superseded by the symbolic and spiritual significance of his act. Dickens's attempt to leap beyond reality into a realm of universal truths is not entirely effective here because his conception of the spiritual realm is so vague: Carton's rebirth into a spiritual life is only hinted at in the description of the break of day when a "bridge of light" appears to "span the air between [Carton] and the sun" (p. 344); later, Carton comforts the little seamstress by telling her that in the realm beyond there is "no Time" and "no trouble" but these words have little more than emotional purchase. It is true, as I have shown, that the invocation of Christ's words ritualistically reinforces the transcendent dimension of Carton's last moments: this is evident in the rhythmic manner in which the words are repeated throughout Carton's wanderings in the city; further the words strengthen the analogy between Carton and Christ, infusing Carton's death with a universal, Christian significance. But despite the strong emotional pull towards the numinous, Dickens's spiritual world remains indistinct, lacking the palpable, visual quality and conviction of Dante's, which is carefully and painstakingly defined.

While the allegory in *A Tale of Two Cities* is crude and artificial, in *Great Expectations* the allegorical dimension is seamlessly fused with Dickens's realism: here I argue that the allegorical moments emerge naturally out of the narrator's consciousness

so that the universal pattern and figuration remains intimately connected with human weakness and particularity. In chapter five I examine the continued correspondence between the real and symbolic dimensions in Pip's encounters with Orlick, Magwitch and Miss Havisham: this involves the heightening of the realistic situation until it achieves a nightmarish intensity. But this does not suggest a break away from Pip's psychological drama: rather the surreal qualities of these scenes come to reflect and embody Pip's inner turmoil. Thus Magwitch's slow advance up the stairs on the night of his return both signifies his return into Pip's life and symbolically brings Pip into a confrontation with his past self: the figure of Magwitch brings Pip's childhood experiences on the marshes vividly and dramatically back to life so that Pip is stripped of his pretensions. Here the dark underworld, evocatively present in the contrast between light and shadow, has become part of Pip's inner world. Thus the two sides of Dickens's split vision – the continued realist interest in the psychological life of his characters and the charged symbolic dimension– reinforce each other. My argument here provides an extension of Carey's thesis: for Carey, the power of Dickens's narrative is in his demonization of the material world, his ability to infuse the most mundane actions with a hellish life. My analysis of these scenes in *Great Expectations* suggests that the demonization of the material world evokes a realm of symbolic significance which gives a greater vividness and intensity to Dickens's creations.

In chapter six I examine two other aspects of Dickens's allegorical method which are evident in his depiction of Miss Havisham: Dantesque features are apparent in the dreamlike, nightmarish quality of Miss Havisham's demise. Miss Havisham's self-imprisonment does lead to a kind of release, which is evident in the purgatorial quality of the narrative. In *Hamlet* Shakespeare initially dramatises Hamlet's powerlessness, his sense that he is imprisoned in a kind of purgatory (which is suggested in his encounter with the ghost). But the way in which Shakespeare portrays Hamlet grappling with his predicament, shifts attention from purgatory to Denmark. In *Great Expectations*, by contrast, Dickens's description of Miss Havisham's demise invites us to lift our eyes from Victorian England to the fires of purgatory. The importation of purgatory into present reality involves a resacralising of Dickens's narrative: in the same way as Dante uses dream allegories to suggest the transcendent reach of his vision, so the way in which Miss

Havisham is consumed by the flame invests her last moments with a transcendent, purgatorial significance.

Secondly, the way in which Miss Havisham allegorises herself and her world suggests a tendency to think discursively about allegory as an artistic technique. The power of the Miss Havisham scenes draws from Dante's conception of the damned as trapped within the sins which they have come to embody. But Dickens adds another dimension to this: like the sinners of *Inferno*, Miss Havisham dramatically figures her obsession with vengeance, which blinds and entraps her. But what damns her is not only her desire for vengeance, it is also the fact that she refuses to embrace the real world, creating for herself an artificial, hell-like realm. Because she deliberately divorces herself from the outside world, Miss Havisham becomes a parody of her former self. Here Dickens suggests the importance of keeping a sane, sound grasp of reality.

Thus, my argument has shown that Dickens is concerned, both self-reflexively and intuitively, with maintaining a balance between the symbolic and realistic dimensions of his fiction. From this one can deduce that the realistic element remains integral to his vision. But the nature of his realism is difficult to pinpoint. For nineteenth century realists such as George Eliot and Gustave Flaubert, the anarchic, romantic imagination seduced the writer into presenting exaggerations and unrealities. In order not to mislead their readers into mistaking such fantastic depictions for 'real' life, they were obliged to tame their imaginative energy to the demands of the verifiable or documentable. Thus they saw themselves as historians, sifting through the facts of experience and working them into an illuminating whole. In his preface to *Oliver Twist* Dickens expresses a remarkably realist disapproval for those who romanticise criminal society: he argues that he intends to depict his criminals as they "really are", in the "squalid misery of their lives" without the "allurements and fascinations" that are commonly "thrown around them".³³⁷ This emphasis on depicting an authentic picture of life that is not exaggerated or fantastical puts him in league with his realist contemporaries.

There are some aspects that Dickens shares with the realists: most of his fiction is motivated by a sincerely felt social agenda which realists such as George Eliot saw as an

³³⁷ *Oliver Twist*, p. 34.

important aspect of the author's didactic function. Further, particularly in *Great Expectations*, there is a strong drive towards investigating the individual psychology of the protagonists. But, as I have shown, Dickens also departs from realism in important ways: whereas the realists attempt to control and diminish the symbolic drive towards the numinous, Dickens's narrative powerfully evokes the transcendent realm, fusing it with his depiction of the material world. In this his allegorical imagination moves towards the vision of the Romantics: J. Robert Barth notes that the power of the Romantic symbol, as Coleridge conceived it, was in its sacramental nature, the fact that the "symbols of poetry and art and of the material world are never allowed to remain an end in themselves". Because of the "consubstantiality" of all things – and all things that stand as symbols of other things – [they all] say something of God, the I AM".³³⁸ In this way the symbol performed a religious function, bringing together the transcendent and the material worlds, "through and in the Temporal".³³⁹ In noting the tendency in Dickens's fiction to fuse the religious dimension with the 'real', this dissertation corroborates with the long line of Dickens criticism that sees him as a post-romantic writer.

Yet, as Juliet John notes, Dickens's imaginative vision differs from that of the Romantics in that he "dramatises rather than analyses the psyche".³⁴⁰ Thus the numinous is immediately accessible through dramatic embodiments in a manner that resonates strongly with Dante. G.K. Chesterton argues that it is the realist writers who will "suffer from time" for they "observed every fashion of this world which passeth away", but Dickens will remain eternal for "a fact flies away quicker than a fancy".³⁴¹ But I have argued that the fancy in Dickens is more than a fancy: it is in the meeting point between the material and the symbolic dimensions that Dickens creates figures which are so real, they cannot die.

³³⁸ J. Robert Barth, S.J., *The Symbolic Imagination: Coleridge and the Romantic Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 15.

³³⁹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Statesman's Manual*, p. 30.

³⁴⁰ John, *Dickens's Villains*, p.3.

³⁴¹ G.K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens*, p. 148.

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