

https://dspace.org/

Realism and ritual in the rhetoric of fiction: anti-theatricality and anti-catholicism in Brontë, Newman and Dickens

Fanucchi, Sonia

2016

http://hdl.handle.net/10539/20798

Fanucchi, Sonia (2016) Realism and ritual in the rhetoric of fiction: anti-theatricality and anti-catholicism in Brontë, Newman and Dickens, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, <http://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/handle/10539/20798>

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

REALISM AND RITUAL IN THE RHETORIC OF FICTION: ANTI-THEATRICALITY AND ANTI-CATHOLICISM IN BRONTË, NEWMAN AND DICKENS

Sonia Fanucchi

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in fulfilment of the requirements of Doctor of Philosophy.

Johannesburg, 2016.

ABSTRACT

This thesis is concerned with the meeting point between theatre and religion in the mid-Victorian consciousness, and the paradoxical responses that this engendered particularly in the novels and thought of Dickens, Newman and Charlotte Brontë. It contributes to the still growing body of critical literature that attempts to tease out the complex religious influences on Dickens and Brontë and how this manifests in their fiction. Newman is a religious writer whose fictional treatment of spiritual questions in *Callista* (1859) is used as a foil to the two novelists. There are two dimensions to this study: on the one hand it is concerned with the broader cultural anti-Catholic mood of the period under consideration and the various ways in which this connects with anti-theatricality. I argue that in the search for a legitimate means of expressing religious sentiments, writers react paradoxically to the latent possibilities of the conventions of religious ceremony, which is felt to be artificial, mystical, transcendent and threatening, inspiring the same contradictory responses as the theatre itself. The second dimension of this study is concerned with the way in which these sentiments manifest themselves stylistically in the novels under consideration: through a close reading of *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), *Pictures From Italy* (1846), and *Villette* (1852), I argue that in the interstices of a wariness of Catholicism and theatricality there is a heightening of language, which takes on a ritual dimension, evoking the paradoxical suggestions of transcendent meaning and artificiality associated with performance. Newman's *Callista* (1859) acts as a counterpoint to these novels, enacting a more direct and persuasive argument for the spiritual value of ritual. This throws some light on the realist impulse in the fiction of Brontë and Dickens, which can be thought of as a struggle between a language that seeks to distance and explain, and a language that seeks to perform, involve, and inspire.

In my discussion of *Barnaby Rudge* (1841) I argue that the ritual patterns in the narrative, still hauntingly reminiscent of a religious past, never become fully embodied. This is because the novel is written in a style that could be dubbed "melodramatic" because it both gestures towards transcendent presences and patterns and threatens to make nonsense of the spiritual echoes that it invokes. This sense of a gesture deferred is

also present in the travelogue, *Pictures from Italy* (1846). Here I argue that Dickens struggles to maintain an objective journalistic voice in relation to a sacramental culture that is defined by an intrusive theatricality: he experiences Catholic practices and symbolism as simultaneously vital, chaotic and elusive, impossible to define or to dismiss. In *Villette* (1852) I suggest that Charlotte Brontë presents a disjuncture between Lucy's ardour and the commonplace bourgeoisie world that she inhabits. This has the paradoxical effect of revitalising the images of the Catholic religion, which, despite Lucy's antipathy, achieves a ghostly presence in the novel. In *Callista* (1859), I suggest that Newman concerns himself with the ritual possibilities and limitations of fiction, poetry and theatre. These dramatic and literary categories invoke and are ultimately subsumed in Christian ritual, which Newman considers the most refined form of language – the point at which detached description gives way to communion and participation.

Keywords: Victorian literature, Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, John Henry Newman, ritual, religion, realism, theatricality, anti-Catholicism

DECLARATION

I declare this dissertation my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy 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
20th day of May 2016

To my husband: for helping me believe.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my warmest thanks to my supervisor, Prof. Victor Houliston, who first inspired me to pursue a degree in Literature and who opened my eyes to the wonders of the Victorian literary universe when I was still an undergraduate student. I have benefited immeasurably from his intellectual guidance, encouragement and patience during this process and will forever be indebted to him for his kindness and support as my supervisor and mentor.

I would also like to thank my colleagues in the Wits English Department for their patience and professional support and especially Prof. Libby Meintjes, in her role as Head of the School of Literature, Language and Media. I further greatly benefited from the writing retreats organised by the School and the Postgraduate Centre, which provided me with the space and time to pursue my research away from lecturing responsibilities.

Finally, I would like to thank my family: my father, Piero, sister, Sylvia, brother, Dario, Robbie, and my beloved nieces – thank you all for your love, support and good-humored encouragement these last few years. To my dear Mother, Patrizia: my gratitude for your unwavering encouragement and inspiration is inexpressible. My Nonni – though you are now beyond time's veil, I will always carry your wisdom with me and am proud to have been loved by you. My husband, Leonard: it is only because of your unfailing love that I have had the strength to persevere, "to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield".

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ii
DECLARATION iv
DEDICATION v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS vi
BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE ix
INTRODUCTION: The Myth of Secularity 1
Survey of Mid-Victorian attitudes to Religion, Catholicism and Drama 1
Some theoretical Perspectives 11
Brief introduction to the novels 17
Definition of terms 18
CHAPTER ONE: The Attraction/Repulsion of the "Visible Invisible": a Survey of Mid-Victorian Anti-Theatricality and Anti-Catholicism. 20
Theatre, Tractarianism and anti-Catholicism 42
Anti-Catholicism 53
Conclusion 67
CHAPTER TWO: Pantomimes, Games and "Amens in the right place": Dickens, Theatricality and Religion – the Biographical Evidence 69
Dickens and the theatre 69
Dickens, religion and ritual 79
Theatricality in the novels 91
CHAPTER THREE: "Ghosts of ghosts of ghosts": Melodrama in Barnaby *Rudge* (1841). 97
The Raven 99
Barnaby 106
The anti-Catholic riots 116
Conclusion 128
CHAPTER FOUR: Catholic Culture and Intrusive Theatricality in *Pictures From Italy* (1846) 132
CHAPTER FIVE: A "mighty revelation": Catholic Ghosts and the Ambivalent Attraction of Sham Theatre in *Villette* (1852) 165
"Our Plays": Charlotte Brontë's attitudes to the theatre 165
Villette: Vashti and M.Paul's Vaudeville 171
Charlotte Brontë and Catholicism 174
Anti-Catholicism in Villette 178

The Nun of Villette – the gothic, realism and theatricality 188
Conclusion 195
CHAPTER SIX: An Apologia for Ritual in Newman's *Callista* (1859) 200
Newman and the Imagination: the importance of poetry in the life of the soul 201
Poetry and Ritual 204
Callista 209
Pagan and Christian ritual 220
Conclusion 230
CONCLUSION 233
Instress and inscape in Hopkins's thought and poetry 233
Brontë 242
Dickens 249
Newman 253
Instress, ritual and realism 257
Concluding thoughts about theatricality, realism and ritual 259
BIBLIOGRAPHY 264

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Quotations from *Barnaby Rudge: A Tale of The Riots of Eighty* (1841) are taken from the Penguin edition edited by John Bowen (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

Quotations from *Pictures From Italy* (1846) are taken from the original edition of *American Notes and Pictures From Italy* that was published by Bradbury & Evans (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1846).

Quotations from *Villette* (1853) are taken from the Penguin edition edited by Helen M. Cooper (London: Penguin, 1994).

Quotations from *Callista: A Tale of the Third Century* (1859) are taken from the Longmans, Green edition (London, New York: Longmans, Green, & Co, 1891).

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.

INTRODUCTION: The Myth of Secularity

Survey of Mid-Victorian attitudes to Religion, Catholicism and Drama

In his essay collection entitled *Realism, Ethics and Secularism* George Levine suggests that the most important question facing the Victorians was an ethical one: "how might one lead a meaningful, good, and satisfying life in a world from which God has disappeared?"[1] He argues that the Victorians were attempting to make sense of a world from which the comforting sea of faith had withdrawn, that they were thrown into "moral anarchy and despair" by their increasing secularism, by the paradoxical sense that as they "tried to wrench themselves free from traditional religion", they were unable to escape the dualism between "knowledge and ethics, knowledge and value".[2] The driving force behind novels of the nineteenth century for Levine is therefore a search for "value", a "non-theistic enchantment" where religious order is imitated but "gods are not allowed". [3]

An overarching concern for Levine in his essays is to explore the complex and entangled relationship between science and literature and he therefore develops his argument from an impressive analysis of scientific naturalism at the time: among others, his focus is on the writings of the naturalists Thomas Henry Huxley, John Tyndall and W. K. Clifford and their connection with George Eliot and G. H. Lewes, in their passionate search for a non-transcendental truth. His discussion of scientific naturalism is ultimately consistent with his theory of the Victorian novel as "domesticating" and demystifying, a transferral of the "powers of Romantic poetry" into the domestic and social space where moral questions are revised and revisited from a secular perspective.[4]

Levine's emphasis on progressive secularisation in Victorian literature is not in itself a new idea and, until relatively recently, had become something of a critical commonplace among nineteenth century scholars. It was the subject of J. Hillis Miller's notable *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth Century Writers* which was written

---

[1] George Levine, *Realism, Ethics and Secularism: Essays on Victorian Literature and Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. vii.
[2] Ibid., p. 16.
[3] Ibid., p. 60.
[4] Ibid., p. 212.

in 1963. Here Hillis Miller speaks about Victorian novelists' disconcerting sense of the withdrawal of God from the narrative of human history. He describes this in terms of the "splitting apart" of poetic symbols from the divine reality of nature from which they arose and which they were meant to embody, a fragmentation that led to the creation of symbols that have no reach beyond the here and now.[5] For Hillis Miller, this crisis of the "*Deus absconditus*, hidden somewhere behind the silence of infinite spaces," is the defining feature of Victorian thought, the impact of which should not be underestimated.[6]

More recently John Kucich has also placed a strong emphasis on the duality between religion and science in the nineteenth century, suggesting that the relationship between the two was essentially a polemical one and that science was "quite clearly a central – perhaps the central – arena of intellectual life".[7] Kucich concurs with Levine in his assertion that, as an antidote to their own fragile faith, novelists of the early Victorian period attempted to "recreate a consoling sense of social wholeness through the secularization of traditional religious values", a process that is evident in the "providential love plots of Dickens, Thackeray and the early Trollope" as well as in the fact that the Victorian novel is a strongly moralistic genre.[8] Yet, Kucich suggests that even these attempts at translating religion into a domestic context were unsuccessful at creating a secure moral defence against the scientific challenge to orthodoxy: for Kucich the Victorian novel is most notable for its anarchic passions and "disorienting" landscapes rather than its spiritual sensibility. It is ultimately concerned with the "breakdown of social wholeness", a "loss of spiritual stability in a morally incoherent world".[9]

For Kucich, Levine and Hillis Miller, among others, Victorian novels become a "battleground" where science and religion are pitted against one another and where spiritual energies are ultimately diffused and overcome. According to this theory, the religious patterns and echoes in Victorian novels are at best secular imitations, devoid of

---

[5] J. Hillis Miller, *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth Century Novels* (1963; rpt Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 3.
[6] Ibid., p. 6.
[7] John Kucich, "Intellectual Debate in the Victorian novel: Religion, Science, and the Professional", in *The Cambridge Companion to The Victorian* Novel, ed. Deirdre David (2001; rpt Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 213.
[8] Ibid., p. 216
[9] Ibid., p. 214.

their transcendent significance. This position, which was dominant among twentieth-century critics, has recently been contested by scholars of Victorian religion. The emphasis on pervasive secularisation, particularly in the early Victorian period, is troubling for a number of reasons: first, critics tend to overstate the polarity between science and religion, relying too heavily on the opinions of an elite intellectual class and of scientists and materialists such as Huxley and Tyndall: these commentators tend to minimise religion's importance to the Victorians by opposing it to "progressive", scientific thinking and highlighting its limitations.

Privileging the opinions of these commentators leads to a reductive reading of religion which does not acknowledge the intense doctrinal debates of the period or the variety of ways in which spirituality manifested itself in Victorian thinking: both Levine and Kucich admit this in passing. Kucich acknowledges that despite religious doubt, Church attendance did not flag throughout the century and that there were a number of religious debates and reforms introduced into the Established Church.[10] In a footnote to his essay collection, Levine affirms Kucich's point and suggests that regardless of a burgeoning scientific interest, the majority of Victorians were still overwhelmingly religious:

> I do not want to overemphasize the move to secularity in Victorian culture. If among the intellectual elite there was a large exodus from conventional religion, and among the elite scientists and popularizers of science, like the scientific naturalists, there was a strong effort to displace religion from its cultural, intellectual, and even moral authority, the dominant cultural phenomenon was religion itself, which produced an enormous volume of literature, far beyond that which science produced in the same period.[11]

This comment, although it acknowledges the pervasiveness of religion at the time, still erects an implicit barrier between religion and social, political and scientific concerns. This approach has been challenged by critics of Victorian religion. In *Nineteenth Century Religion and Literature* (2006), Mark Knight and Emma Mason counsel against the

[10] Kucich, "Intellectual Debate in the Victorian Novel: Religion, Science, and the Professional", in *The Cambridge Companion to The Victorian* Novel, ed. Deirdre David, p. 213.
[11] Levine, *Realism, Ethics and Secularism: Essays on Victorian Literature and Science*, p. 16, n. 10.

fallacious tendency to isolate religion from other concerns in the period, arguing that "Theological debate was almost inseparable from philosophical, scientific, medical, historical, and political thought in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" and that there is a "continual slippage between the sacred and the secular" in Victorian thought.[12]

James Eli Adams concurs that religious faith is an "inescapable dimension of Victorian experience" and suggests that even "non-belief is typically felt as resistance to orthodoxy rather than its mere absence".[13] Adams draws attention to the sharp doctrinal controversies in the decades immediately following Catholic emancipation, and attributes these tensions to the fact that British social order was still felt to "rest on Protestant faith".[14] The political dimensions of these religious controversies, the connection between Protestantism and English national identity, have been well documented by critics; for the purposes of my argument it is only necessary to draw attention to the impossibility of separating Victorian identity, ethics and policies from their religious sensibilities.

The second reason why one should avoid overstating the progressive decline of faith in the face of social and scientific advances is the risk of oversimplifying and homogenising religious expression: Mark Knight and Emma Mason argue that it is important not to gloss over the subtle differences and tensions between religious beliefs, many of which had found a voice in the early Victorian period. They suggest that "different Christian traditions sought God in different places, from the realm of feeling to the realm of rational thought, from conservative to radical politics, and from practical action through doctrinal purity to the realm of aesthetics".[15] It was principally through fictional narratives, rather than tracts or theological documents, that the general populace experienced and understood matters of faith, and novels were therefore accorded a special moral and spiritual authority, reflecting the increasingly multifarious approach to spirituality that characterised the age.

In *Victorian Reformations: Historical Fiction and Religious Controversy, 1820 – 1900* (2014), Miriam Elizabeth Burstein has recently made the point that religious fiction was a popular genre during the Victorian period and provided a challenge to the secular

---

[12] Mark Knight and Emma Mason (eds.), *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature: An Introduction* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 3.
[13] James Eli Adams, *A History of Victorian Literature* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p.120.
[14] Ibid., p. 121.
[15] Knight and Mason (Introd.), *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature*, p.4.

understanding of history emphasised by a certain group of more traditionally realist novels in the canon, such as those of George Eliot, Anthony Trollope or Elizabeth Gaskell, which tend to foreground social questions. She focuses on the plethora of popular religious narratives written at the time, suggesting that, by drawing on providential narratives, such novels challenge the argument of an emerging modernity which upholds the idea that "the past and present must be different, that the past is necessarily the pre-history of modernity and not identical to it".[16] These authors push secularity to its breaking point by bringing the past to life through an overtly religious process of "storytelling, memorialisation and re-enactment".[17]

But spiritual concerns were not restricted to novels dealing explicitly with religious themes: indeed, Hilary Fraser has noted the difficulty of "drawing boundaries around a strictly conceived category of religious fiction",[18] showing how many authors whose primary concern was social still incorporated religious questions into their work or expressed an unorthodox spiritual sensibility. She is concerned with the way in which Victorian language is still steeped in religious codes and symbols and how the different religious traditions variously shape the style and preoccupations of authors in the period: she notes how Elizabeth Gaskell, strongly influenced by the Evangelical and Nonconformist tradition, privileges the social over the doctrinal, the realist above the transcendental, and traces stories of individual conversion, placing them at the heart of social and political reform.[19] By vesting faith in the individual's power to make judgements, Charlotte Brontë is also echoing an important aspect of Evangelical faith.[20] Fraser goes further: even George Eliot's humanist "despiritualised" narratives are described by her as drawing on "traditional religious forms and language" to reinforce their moral vision.[21]

---

[16] Miriam Elizabeth Burstein, *Victorian Reformations: Historical Fiction and Religious Controversy, 1820–1900* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), p. 6.
[17] Ibidem.
[18] Hilary Fraser, "The Victorian Novel and Religion", in *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. Patrick Brantlinger and William B. Thesing (Massachusetts, Oxford and Berlin: Blackwell Publising, 2002), p. 101.
[19] Ibid., p. 102.
[20] Ibid., p. 110.
[21] Ibid., p. 111.

Fraser views the Victorian language as a spiritual storehouse for novelists, an antidote to failing faith: she points out that they shape myths from the emblems and parables of seventeenth century Puritan spiritual biography, emblem books and, most notably, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678). Significantly, as their faith falters, the novels more and more strongly evoke Bunyan linguistically, revealing their determination to "shape the facts of this world into a religious topography, making a path towards social unity in this world an analogue to Christian's progress towards the Celestial City".[22]

Like Fraser, Norman Vance emphasises the recurring religious emblems and tropes in Victorian literature, the way in which spiritual biographies, autobiographies and pilgrim narratives are absorbed into narratives about the inner life. He further notes the Biblical "visions, poetry, and prophetic utterance" and the influence of German Romance on influential texts such as Carlyle's Sartor Resartus, all of which gave more scope to the supernatural and the numinous in English Fiction.[23] "Typological symbolism" thus becomes a way for novelists to affirm spiritual significance without undermining an equally authentic chain of secular events.[24]

From the above survey one can conclude that rather than simply expressing a loss of faith, Victorian novels express a complex and changing faith, complicated by the voices of various religious outlooks – ideologies that become inseparable from a novelist's style and social agenda. Fraser emphasises the parable-like dimension of Victorian spirituality which is evident in their language;[25] Jude V. Nixon has shown that this is interlinked with an aesthetic dimension, by drawing attention to the symbolism of the Pre-Raphaelites in "which art is at once presentational, representational, and symbolic".[26] This suggests that Victorian writers were attuned to a metaphoric and metonymic reading of spiritual truths.[27] I concur with these critics, but I want to

---

[22] Fraser, "The Victorian Novel and Religion", in *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. Patrick Brantlinger and William B. Thesing, pp. 111–112.
[23] Norman Vance, "Religion and the Novel", in *The Nineteenth-Century Novel 1820–1880*, ed. John Kucich and Jenny Bourne Taylor, Vol 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 481.
[24] Ibidem.
[25] Fraser, "The Victorian Novel and Religion", in *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. Patrick Brantlinger and William B. Thesing, p. 112.
[26] Jude V. Nixon, *Victorian Religious Discourse: New Directions in Criticism* (New York, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 15.
[27] Ibidem.

emphasise another aspect of spiritual sensibility which is discernible in some Victorian novels, but which has largely been overlooked by critics: the dramatic.

By "dramatic" I am referring to certain theatrical passages that are characterised by the expressive and the spectacular, pushing language away from the descriptive and towards the performed and embodied. This language is invested with a summoning power and a formalised quality that can be described as ritualistic. My understanding of ritual elements in the novels adheres to the definition of C. Gauvin who describes ritual as a series of symbolic actions traditionally associated with religious performance. He suggests that the symbolic gesture in the Catholic Mass has the power to actualise a past or anticipated event within the space of the ceremony and so affirm its communal value.[28] The ritual power of realising or bringing spiritual truths into being, the language of praise and prayer with its emphasis on utterance and embodiment, continually resurfaces beneath the veil of emerging realist discourse. In this way it disrupts the analytical and objective veneer of the novels by suggesting a dramatic and metaphorical dimension to language, its allegorical pull towards the metaphysical.

In *The Disappearance of God*, J. Hillis Miller suggests that the movement away from a sacramental Christianity in English society parallels the "transformation" in literature away from the "old symbolism of analogical participation" and towards the "modern, poetic symbolism of reference at a distance".[29] This means that the language of a non-sacramental culture cannot do more than gesture towards a remote significance rather than calling ideas into being in the manner of the Catholic Eucharist. For Hillis Miller this kind of language has been emptied of its dramatic power and is consequently incapable of creating a sense of immediacy or of performing the connectedness between the spiritual and material realms of experience. He argues that words have been "gradually hollowed out" and no longer participate in "material or spiritual reality"; instead they are more illustrative in character, pointing towards "something which remains somewhere else, unpossessed and unattainable".[30]

---

[28] C. Gauvin,"Rite et jeu dans le theatre anglais du Moyen Age", Revue d'Histoire du Theatre 29 (1977): 128–40 (p. 131).
[29] Miller, *The Disappearance of God*, p. 6.
[30] Ibidem.

I intend to argue that in the mid-Victorian period writers were far more attuned to the sacramental potential of language than has generally been acknowledged, although they were deeply ambiguous about its effects. I suggest that one reason for this is the fact that, since the Catholic emancipation in 1829, English Catholics had a far greater presence and voice than before and that Catholicism was disconcertingly present in English religious, social and political life. Writers responded to the liturgical dimension of the Catholic faith, which exerted an aesthetic and sometimes spiritual fascination over them, even while they sought to dismiss it as pure superstition. The possibility that spirituality can be dramatically understood and enacted was also explored by a movement from within the High Church of England which was initially termed the Oxford Movement and later became known as the Tractarian Movement after a series of *Tracts for the Times* was published between 1833 and 1845. Some novelists reflect this attraction to a dramatic spirituality, partly because of the not untroubled fascination which the theatre held for them.

As can be deduced from the suspicion that literary critics show for Victorian "staginess" and "sentimentality", it is not always easy to draw the line between the dramatic and the melodramatic in the novels, and dramatic language is often poised on the brink of histrionics; but at times it also seems to be associated with a genuinely felt spiritual sensibility. The Victorians' sense of the ambiguous power of drama – its ability either to evoke or to obstruct the spiritual, is analogous to and affected by their feelings about Catholicism in the 1840s and 50s, when the tensions between Protestantism and Catholicism were at their highest.

Jonas Barish in his still indispensable, *The Anti-theatrical Prejudice* (1981), explicitly makes the connection between Puritan anti-theatricality and anti-Catholic prejudice in his discussion of the Reformation: he points out that the term "theatrical" only acquired the pejorative connotations of "exhibitionism" in the 1649 Oxford dictionary, when already under attack by the Reformers.[31] Barish catalogues "similar objections" which are levelled against Catholic liturgy by the likes of Becon in his

[31] Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1981), p. 156.

treatise, *The Displaying of the Popish Mass*.[32] He concludes that for the Puritans, "the religion of the Papists always comes down to a version of theatre" and that the theatre and the Mass were considered equally disingenuous.[33]

In the Victorian Period, partly because of the evangelical revival, the Puritan mistrust of the theatrical lingers, and feelings about Catholic liturgy remain tangled up with anti-theatrical prejudice. I want to suggest, though, that because of the legal recognition of Catholicism in the early part of the century as well as the growing doubt about long held Protestant beliefs, which were themselves undergoing a transformation, writers were more ambiguous about the dramatic spirituality expressed in Catholic rites. Miriam Elizabeth Burstein has shown how Catholic beliefs challenged Protestant trust in a history based principally on Biblical narrative, offering as an alternative "organic communities organised around the sacraments".[34] The response of novelists to this sacramental culture will be an important feature of my study.

In the early to mid-Victorian period, attitudes to the stage were also more forgiving: Barish has attributed this to "secularisation", citing Schiller's "Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man" where he argues that play in all its variety should be accepted as a central characteristic of the human species.[35] This might have been one reason that made writers more open to the experience of the theatre, but I will argue that the Victorian response to the theatre is not entirely secular: rather, their sense of the dramatic can become so intense that it acquires a spiritual quality, suggesting that writers were conscious of this aspect of theatre although their response to this was troubled.

I will be focussing on the 1840s and early 50s, a period when anti-Catholic feeling had become particularly explosive in England. Reinforced by Walter Scott and the Gothic novel tradition, Protestants of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries tended to associate their faith with modernity and to oppose it to Catholicism which was considered retrograde and superstitious. After the Emancipation of the Catholics and in the face of what seemed like the political onslaught of Rome, however, this comfortable division between a Catholic past and a Protestant present was no longer tenable and

---

[32] Ibid., p. 159.
[33] Ibid., p. 176.
[34] Burstein, *Victorian Reformations*, p. 17.
[35] Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, p. 298.

Catholic culture and beliefs suddenly had a very real and fearful presence in England. This put pressure on writers' and commentators' deeply held religious convictions which they were forced to reconsider in the light of this fascinating yet repulsive religious "other" in their midst.[36]

To reiterate: reading Victorian novels of the 1840s and 50s in terms of a direct opposition between scientific, detached objective writing and the metaphoric, spiritual or religious, oversimplifies the case. What is understood by the "religious" in these novels needs to become more nuanced: it is true that as novels became more "realist" they were increasingly preoccupied with what John Kucich refers to as a "highly self-conscious attempt to produce knowledge of the real world" and that this involved a suspicion of "the poetic, the ideal, or the metaphysical".[37] But I want to suggest that this rationalist faith in the role of language as a mirror, the unambiguous window into truth, echoes the Protestant belief in the unadorned word of God, a faith in a simple, direct language free from the seduction of metaphor and spectacle; therefore the "pull" of symbolic and dramatic discourse is both a challenge to the Protestant idiom and a highly attractive alternative. Jonas Barish suggests that a certain element of Romanticism, lingering on throughout the early Victorian period and helping to shape realist thought, echoes Puritanism in its emphasis on "inwardness, solitude and spontaneity" and its mistrust of "mimicry, ostentation and spectacle".[38]

Evidently, theatrical expression was deemed a threat to a pure, Protestant faith, to the inward concerns of the Romantic and to the practical aims of the emerging realism. This suggests that although the realist was preoccupied with the material or concrete and although she directed her energies towards secular and social concerns, her theories were still sufficiently grounded in a Protestant faith. This informed her confidence in the power of language to illuminate and clarify rather than to embody or perform truths.

---

[36] Burnstein, *Victorian Reformations*, p. 21.
[37] Kucich, "Intellectual Debate in the Victorian Novel: Religion, Science, and the Professional", in *The Cambridge Companion to The Victorian Novel*, ed. Deirdre David, p. 218.
[38] Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, pp. 299, 326. This is only one strand of Romanticism: many critics have observed that the movement's preoccupation with the Gothic and with poetic symbols also contributed towards the interest that some early to mid-nineteenth century writers and commentators show in the expressive and the metaphorical, significant aspects of the theatre. Heavily influenced by Romanticism, the members of the Oxford Movement also drew on Romantic writers' dramatic qualities in their exploration of a ritualised spirituality.

My study, then, will involve an exploration of the connections and tensions between anti-Catholicism, anti-theatricality and emerging realist discourse. Despite their overt adherence to detached scientific and descriptive language as opposed to the expressive, metaphorical and performed, I want to show that the Victorians wrote obsessively about the stage and that they were both appalled and dazzled by the symbolic and expressive potential of performance. Perversely, the dramatic, though viewed with suspicion by realists and Protestants alike, is also associated with inexplicable spiritual energies, which writers and commentators overtly suppress or trivialise. These connections become more explicit in anti-Catholic narratives where writers can pursue their fears of and yearnings for a dramatically realised supernatural world without being subject to social or religious censure: such narratives dwell on the blend of theatricality and mystical power in formal Catholic ceremonies as well as the magician-like powers of priests. Further, the Oxford Movement's increasing emphasis on enhancing faith through the performed and poetical, is testimony to the powerful spiritual attraction that theatricality exerted over the minds of many Victorians.

Some theoretical Perspectives

In this study I shall not be aligning myself with any particular theoretical position. My argument emerges from an empirical reading of relevant texts and comprises two dimensions: first, it will involve a survey of opinions of theatre and anti-Catholicism, maintaining historical accuracy as far as possible. The second dimension of my study will involve an attempt to examine the manner in which anti-Catholicism and anti-theatricality manifest themselves in literary form and shape the movement of realism.

Although my emphasis is empirical, the studies of certain writers who are concerned with theatre and ritual have been useful in shaping my argument. Ritual has been the subject of significant anthropological studies such as Victor Turner's discussion of rites of passage or what he terms the "liminal" condition,[39] and René Girard's work on the concept of triangular desire. Both writers explore the spiritual implications of ritualistic actions, which are examined from an anthropological perspective. Turner's

[39] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1969), p. 94.

empirical study of the Ndembu ceremonies leads him to conclude that rituals are always overladen with a sense of mystical enchantment and symbolic richness, qualities which often combine to achieve catharsis for the participants.[40] Girard examines ritualistic societies as well as behaviour in the secular world where he finds the same patterns, masked by secular decorum. For Girard the ritual sense of the sacred is misplaced and usually masks repetitive violent patterns, victimisation and scapegoating. There is a buried theatrical dimension to ritualistic behaviour as Girard describes it because of its repetitive and imitative nature, but this dimension is not the focus of his theory.[41]

Turner makes a more explicit, tantalizing connection between theatre and ritual: in *Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality*, he defines liminality in ritual as a space apart, a space "full of experiment and play".[42] This connects ritual with theatre, which, Turner suggests, is a playful space defined by qualities such as "escape from the classifications of everyday life, symbolic reversals, destruction – at a deep level – of social distinctions".[43] But he is also at pains to clarify that, as part of what he terms liminoid activities, the theatre is ultimately discernible from rituals because it is not a social compulsion but is instead made up of subjective performances which attempt to attract audiences for pleasure. This means that it is far more idiosyncratic and not as closely tied into the social, religious and political structure of society as a ritual would be.[44]

The prominent twentieth century theologian, Hans Urs Von Balthasar has made a direct association between the theatrical and the spiritual: in his *Prolegomena* to the *Theo-Drama*, he employs the theatre as a metaphor to describe the dramatic encounter between God and humanity through the person of Christ:

> In the theatre man attempts a kind of transcendence, endeavouring both to observe and to judge his own truth, in virtue of a transformation – through the dialectic of

---

[40] Ibid., p. 185.
[41] René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 1–2.
[42] Victor Turner, "Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality", *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 6.4 (1979): 456–499: (p. 466).
[43] Ibid., p. 491.
[44] Ibid., pp. 492–493.

> the concealing-revealing mask – by which he tries to gain clarity about himself. Thus, parabolically, a door opens to the truth of the real revelation.[45]

In this passage, the theatre is described as a res media between time and eternity, unveiling our own dualistic identities, our simultaneous desire for self-hood and self-transcendence. For Balthasar theatre and religion are analogous and of all the secular, social activities in which we engage it is in the theatre alone where we sense the "uncanny nearness of the religious dimension".[46] But the theatre is ultimately a metaphor for Balthasar, a way of explaining his belief in the dynamic nature of spiritual truths, the way in which the divine emerges in and through the material. He emphasises the fact that this revelation is dramatic rather than progressive, and only emerges at moments of critical communion.

My study turns on the interrelationship between theatre, religion, and ritual and the way in which this is reflected in certain novels of the 1840s and 50s, but my approach and emphasis is neither anthropological nor theological. My study raises two related questions: what is the nature of theatrical language in the novels under consideration and in what ways could such language be said to acquire a spiritual dimension or transcendent reach? In his ruminations on the nature of the theatre, *The Empty Space* (1968), Peter Brook attempts to articulate these concerns in a manner that will throw some light on my argument.

In *The Empty Space* Brook observes that words in the theatre should not be taken at face value: theatrical language depends on symbolic gestures as well as on the interaction between actors and their audience to convey the full force of its meaning. Rather than being the sole source of meaning then, words in this context become a "small visible portion of a gigantic unseen formation".[47] This unseen context operates from within the words themselves, which a playwright always imagines as spoken rather than written: thus, dramatic words contain "pitch, pause, rhythm and gesture as part of their meaning".[48] Dramatic truth is also powerfully symbolic: when discussing Beckett, Brook

---

[45] Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), p. 12.
[46] Ibid., pp. 10–12.
[47] Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (1968; rpt London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2008), p. 15.
[48] Ibid., p. 15.

notes that his plays "are symbols" but not in an obscure sense. Rather, in the space of the theatre these symbols become objects, sharply defined. Such images are specific and accurate, the "only form a certain truth can take".[49]

Of course a novel differs from the theatre in that it depends more heavily upon the descriptive function of words to convey its meaning; but I shall argue that at certain points in the novels which I will be examining, language is charged with these expressive qualities, and that at such instances symbols themselves no longer point towards meaning, but embody it. In this way, the novels gesture beyond the illustrative and towards a dramatic pattern.

An important aspect of dramatic language is its formalised quality, its ability not merely to convey but to heighten and give shape to meaning: Brook notes that "unrealistic" speech has long been accepted as a liberating convention in the theatre: he cites a monologue as an example of an artificial convention which gives a character the freedom to express profound emotions, allowing ideas to "dance where they will" while the actor is simply standing still.[50] In such instances, language attempts to cross the barrier between the outer person whose behaviour is governed by the demands of the everyday and the "inner man whose anarchy and poetry is usually expressed only in his words".[51]

Brook also emphasises the need for "form" in acting, the notion that a true "action" can only occur if an actor is capable of harnessing his passions to a "new form which would be a container and reflector for his impulses".[52] Actors are not merely going through the motion of acting: rather they are responding to an invisible movement within themselves so that the "idea suddenly envelops the whole in an act of possession".[53] This power to conjure the invisible and realise it by arranging it in a distinct pattern or design, to provide form to formlessness, is central to my understanding of theatrical language in the novels under consideration.

For Brook the theatrical contains an element of the enigmatic, something that escapes definition and rises above the literal or even the psychological dimensions of

---

[49] Ibid., p. 65.
[50] Ibid., p. 58.
[51] Ibidem.
[52] Ibid., p. 57.
[53] Ibid., p. 127.

experience. The power of a particular scene cannot necessarily be explained in an accurate and scientific manner but it nevertheless reveals "the dramatic fact of a mystery we can't completely fathom".[54] This element of mystery in the theatrical, the way in which it strives beyond the parameters of language, connects it with the spiritual.

Brook speaks of a "Holy" theatre: the stage is a space where "the invisible can appear"; it connects us with those aspects of experience which escape our senses and which "we can only begin to recognise when they manifest themselves as rhythms or shapes".[55] These patterns lie distinctly outside of the realm of the day-to-day, for the theatre is a "space where idealism is open to question" and where audiences seek an experience that transcends "daily drabness".[56] In this sense the stage is a ritual space, capable of dramatically transforming the performer, who, under the influence of his art, becomes a conduit for forces beyond himself. In this way he prompts his audience to an awareness of an indefinable rhythm in which they share: like a priest, the actor is called upon to lay "bare what lies in every man – and what daily life covers up".[57] Revelation, transformation, the power to rupture the limits of the acceptable, to reach simultaneously beyond and into the self: I will attempt to identify and explain these potentially mystical implications of dramatic language in the novels under discussion.

But the experience of quasi-divine communion, or what Brook terms the "visible-invisible", is only possible "given certain conditions".[58] Some theatrical devices could be used in order to create the right atmosphere where a dramatic revelation could take place. Brook speaks of the power of a "Happening" in a play, a term coined by Allan Kaprow to describe a dramatic event or occasion which combines elements of painting, music and theatre and often manifests itself as a series of mild shocks. This is in order to "make a dent in a spectator's reflexes, so that he is suddenly more open, more alert, more awake".[59] For Brook the Happening fails to deepen the perception of the spiritual dimension behind the surface of the play. Yet, even in its superficiality, he suggests that it still reveals a hankering after the spiritual by responding to the need to see and feel anew.

---

[54] Ibid., p. 93.
[55] Ibid., p. 47.
[56] Ibid., p. 48.
[57] Ibid., p. 67.
[58] Ibid., p. 63.
[59] Ibid., p. 62.

The theatre term Happening was first used in the early 1950s and yet in certain melodramatic passages and scenes in the novels that I shall discuss, a similar effect occurs – the violent disruption of ordinary or acceptable behaviour, the pull towards a more penetrating truth. In his thoughts on Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, Brook speaks about the "joy in violent shocks", the groping towards a "theatre more violent, less rational, more extreme, less verbal, more dangerous".[60] There is something about the theatrical, then, that confounds language itself, an underlying ferocity that pushes past the brink of rationality and tolerance, forcing one to look at something from a different angle. It is, paradoxically, through the violent destruction of an accepted paradigm that one becomes most open to the dramatic intervention of the divine.

Although Brook's thoughts about the Holy theatre resonate with my argument about the transcendent possibilities of the dramatic for mid-nineteenth century writers, ultimately they have not been very useful in helping me to formulate a language in which to describe what I perceive to be the pull between a detached, objective realist style and highly patterned melodramatic language in mid-Victorian novels. This is because Brook is not concerned with the nineteenth century novel or with creating a theory of the dramatic; rather he is simply recording his thoughts and observations about the theatre in the early to mid-twentieth century. These ideas have helped to refine my thoughts about the way in which drama can enhance and transcend ordinary experience but they have not provided much of a theoretical framework in which to articulate this. René Girard's thought has provided me with some insight into the false rituals of rivalry enacted by Lucy and her enemies in *Villette* (1852), but his argument ultimately follows different lines to mine. This is also true of Hans Urs Von Balthasar's comments on the nature of drama: while he acknowledges the connection between the spiritual and the dramatic, he is wary of taking this much further, subordinating it to theological concerns.

I have found Gerard Manley Hopkins's ideas about "instress" and "inscape" more helpful in attempting to articulate the rhetorical power of language in mid-Victorian fiction, its dramatic possibilities and transcendent reach. This will form a significant part of my Conclusion where I will use Hopkins's thought to bring to light the linguistic and spiritual tensions in the novels under discussion.

---

[60] Ibid., p. 61.

Brief introduction to the novels

I shall examine a spectrum of novelists writing in the 1840s and 50s, their response to the powerful imaginative attraction-repulsion of Catholic symbolism and ritual, and how this affects their style: John Henry Newman's *Callista* (1859), Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1852), Charles Dickens's *Barnaby Rudge* (1841) and *Pictures from Italy* (1846). I have chosen these authors because they deal explicitly with Catholic culture and practices and because each of them explores the ambiguously transcendent possibilities of the dramatic. They are therefore preferable to other writers of the period, such as Elizabeth Gaskell, who adhered more to a Protestant distaste of the uncanny and the spectacular.

In each novel that I have chosen, the tensions between emerging realist discourse and the dramatic have a slightly different emphasis: in *Villette* I will attempt to explain the unresolved conflict between the novel's two voices – a realist derision for the excesses and extravagances associated so closely with the Catholic culture and religion of Belgium, and a haunting theatrical energy which colours everything from the dramatic performance of the enigmatic "Vashti" to the ritual festivities in the Park. In *Barnaby Rudge* I will be concerned with ritual as a feature of Dickens's melodramatic style, the way in which the novel's precarious claims of historical accuracy are undermined by the ritual patterns in the language, which suggest the ghostly presence of a sacramental worldview. In *Pictures from Italy*, I will focus more generally on Dickens's impressions of Catholic culture – the potential of its ceremonies to disrupt his removed, condemnatory journalistic voice and force him partially to acknowledge the irrational, mystical pull of drama. In counterpoint to Brontë and Dickens, I will examine Newman's didactic defence of Catholic ritual in *Callista* and his foregrounding of the dramatic as the most effective means of invoking the mystical.

In my study of these writers, I will argue that the concept of drama and the contradictory responses that it inspires is central to understanding the particular blend of realism and spiritual sensibility in their novels. As I have suggested, common attitudes to theatricality at the time are analogous to attitudes to Catholicism, connections that I will be examining in relation to the instability in realism. Both the stage and the Mass are

viewed with a combination of fear and fascination, usually for the same reasons: the writers that I will be examining are alive to the possibility that drama offers for breaking down boundaries, not only between actors and spectators, but between the individual's social or secular roles and the drama that she senses playing out in a transcendent dimension beyond her, and in which she is subsumed.

Definition of terms

In this thesis I shall be examining attitudes to spirituality and theatricality in the works of certain English writers from the 1840s and 50s. I classify these writers as "mid-Victorian": it is necessary to clarify at the outset of my argument that I am aware that the Victorians were a varied group of people and that I do not intend to oversimplify their views by placing them all within a single category. For the purposes of my discussion the term "mid-Victorian" will denote the intellectual society of the middle and upper-middle class in the 1840s and 50s, which is a fairly homogeneous culture with a degree of conformity regarding their responses to religion, theatre and the role of fiction. This grouping does not necessarily include those with specialised, scientific knowledge but rather refers to educated and often literary laymen and women in many of whose lives religion still played a significant role.

In the second half of the nineteenth century the term "realism" was first conceptualised for an English readership by George Eliot.[61] I shall use the term in an historical rather than a philosophical sense in order to indicate a turn in fiction towards a more secular and sociologically verifiable outlook, a quality evident in writers of the early to middle part of the century who begin to express a set of assumptions about the nature and purpose of fiction. In my discussion of particular novels of this period the term "realism" will refer to a specific type of subject matter– the increased focus on political, social and secular concerns. It will also be used when indicating certain stylistic qualities of these novels such as writers' tendency to convey a sense of an endlessly variable experience, controlled and mediated by the privileged, supposedly objective gaze of the narrator. I shall make a distinction between what I define as the realist inclination to

---

[61] George Eliot, *Adam Bed*e (1859), ed. Carol A. Martin (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), c. xvii, p. 159.

report on events and the opposing dramatic qualities of the theatre. The above qualities of writers during this period – a commitment to objectivity, a focus on the social and material world –can be broadly classified as "realist" in the sense that they intuitively pre-empt Eliot's more philosophical privileging of the objective, perceptive and deductive qualities of fiction.

In contrast to the realist impulses of the writers under discussion, I now turn to what I describe as the "theatrical" and "ritual" qualities of their novels. These two terms are very closely related, as I shall show, with the theatrical always approaching ritualised expression. As I have already suggested, the terms "theatrical" or "dramatic" will be used to refer to passages in the novels that are defined by stylised, expressive and symbolic language that blurs the boundaries between the narrated and the enacted. "Melodrama" is a related term that I will use when discussing instances in the novels where dramatic language appears wooden and unnatural, and authentic meaning is sacrificed to histrionic display. This term will also be useful to denote the features of the popular nineteenth century dramatic genre with its particular characteristics such as exaggerations, staginess, doubling and surprising coincidences.

The terms "ritual" and "ritualistic" will be used to refer to those dramatic passages that, through heightening theatrical techniques such as rhythm, repetition and symbolism, push beyond the boundaries of descriptive language and invoke and mimic the style of religious rites. In this way they bring language to the point where its dramatic quality develops into a type of incantation. I shall further make use of these terms to discuss the highly stylised, non-realistic or mannered description of specific relationships between characters, or to suggest moments where these figures are enhanced to the point where they take on a larger-than-life and mythic presence and significance.

CHAPTER ONE: The Attraction/Repulsion of the "Visible Invisible": a Survey of Mid-Victorian Anti-Theatricality and Anti-Catholicism.

In her *Life of Charlotte Brontë* Elizabeth Gaskell records a letter written by Patrick Brontë about the peculiar manner in which he educated his children:

> When my children were very young, when, as far as I can remember, the oldest was about ten years of age, and the youngest about four, thinking that they knew more than I had yet discovered, in order to make them speak with less timidity, I deemed that if they were put under a sort of cover I might gain my end; and happening to have a mask in the house, I told them all to stand and speak boldly from under cover of the mask.[62]

This letter is striking for its faith in the theatrical as a means of revealing and expressing the truth of the children's hidden feelings. Thus, for Brontë, the mask has a power which extends beyond mere words: while it seems at first to conceal or to disguise the children's true faces, performance is paradoxically able to enhance their most profound feelings, their true selves which they would normally be too timid to express.

When describing a mask that he received as a child for Christmas, Dickens also acknowledges the allure of the theatrical, but his response is not unmixed with a kind of supernatural dread:

> When did that dreadful Mask first look at me? Who put it on, and why was I so frightened that the sight of it is an era in my life? It is not a hideous visage in itself; it is even meant to be droll, why then were its stolid features so intolerable? Surely not because it hid the wearer's face. An apron would have done as much; and though I should have preferred even the apron away, it would not have been absolutely insupportable, like the mask. Was it the immovability of the mask? The doll's face was immovable, but I was not afraid of HER. Perhaps that fixed and set change coming over a real face, infused into my quickened heart

[62] Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 2 vols (London: Smith elder & Co, 1857), 1: 59.

> some remote suggestion and dread of the universal change that is to come on every face, and make it still? Nothing reconciled me to it. No drummers, from whom proceeded a melancholy chirping on the turning of a handle; no regiment of soldiers, with a mute band, taken out of a box, and fitted, one by one, upon a stiff and lazy little set of lazy-tongs; no old woman, made of wires and a brown-paper composition, cutting up a pie for two small children; could give me a permanent comfort, for a long time. Nor was it any satisfaction to be shown the Mask, and see that it was made of paper, or to have it locked up and be assured that no one wore it. The mere recollection of that fixed face, the mere knowledge of its existence anywhere, was sufficient to awake me in the night all perspiration and horror, with, "O I know it's coming! O the mask!" [63]

The child's fear of the "fixed face" is infused with a misleading horror of death: in this description, the artificial mask – associated with and evoking the stilted melodramatic language of the stage – is brought into stark contrast with the natural expressions of the face that might wear it. The mask seems to inhabit a ghostly space between life and death: it is preternaturally alive in the way in which it looms over all of the other toys. Like a thing possessed with a diabolical energy, it is impossible to contain or to explain away. Once he has laid eyes on it, the child Dickens is unable to banish it from his memory and it haunts him during the night. But it is also less than alive: in its fixed expression it is closer to a dead face than to a living one and is fearful for the power that it seems to possess over whoever might wear it, its ability to control and even to extinguish life.

This childish fear should not be exaggerated or taken out of context; yet it does reveal something about the paradoxical attraction-repulsion of the theatre in some of the fiction and cultural imagination of the 1840s and 50s: despite the emergence of new scientific and empirical theories of perception and description, many writers were inexplicably drawn to and haunted by the theatre, the space of the expressive, the gothic, the spectacular and the sensational: Dickens, Collins, Brontë, Eliot, Ruskin, Tennyson,

---

[63] Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Tree* (1850), *Christmas Stories From "Household Words" and "All The Year Round" By Charles Dickens*, introd. Ernest Rhys (1910; rpt London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1917), p. 5.

Thackeray –all were intensely interested in the actors and productions of the time and Dickens and Collins famously dabbled in their own amateur theatricals. But the theatre had an uncanny way of stepping off the stage into writers' thoughts, lives and fictions: David Copperfield, Pip, Becky Sharp and Lucy Snow attend the theatre, Lucy acts in one. The theatre's relationship with the lives of the protagonists of these novels is profoundly affecting and often ambiguous. It infuses style too: Richard W. Schoch argues that in *Past and Present*, Thomas Carlyle creates a sense of history as enacted rather than written. He suggests that Carlyle instinctively prefers theatrical to "text-based" histories and that, rather than simply writing about the past, he attempts to conjure it in the manner of Orpheus.[64] John Henry Newman's semi-autobiographical *Loss and Gain* (1848) contains dramatic elements such as the Mass that Charles Reding attends just after his conversion, a performance that impresses upon him the profundity of his new spiritual awareness.[65] One explanation for the attraction to the theatre expressed by these novelists is that the day-to-day behaviour of the Victorian middle class was particularly histrionic: Malcolm Andrews argues, for example, that people were especially preoccupied with social identity which led them to engage in "fairly earnest role-playing . . . in . . . ordinary social life".[66]

The prominence of Shakespearean allusions in novels and writings during this period is well-documented: Adrian Poole comments that Shakespeare's expressions and characters provided writers with a language in which to frame their understanding of themselves and others.[67] But writers were not merely seeking greater eloquence and self-knowledge, a way of engaging more thoughtfully with their own concerns by drawing them into a conversation with Shakespeare: they were expressing their sense that "writing is itself a performance" in an attempt to find "new ways of making writing dramatic *outside* the theatre".[68] This sense of the closeness between narrative and drama is constantly suggested by writers in this period: at the Royal General Theatrical Fund on

---

[64] Richard W. Schoch, "'We Do Nothing but Enact History': Thomas Carlyle Stages the Past", *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 54.1 (1999): 27–52 (p. 38).
[65] John Henry Newman, *Loss and Gain* (London: James Burns, 1848), pp. 381–382.
[66] Malcolm Andrews, *Charles Dickens and His Performing Selves*: *Dickens and the Public Readings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 36
[67] Adrian Poole and Gale Marshall (eds), *Victorian Shakespeare: Literature and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 5.
[68] Ibid., p.4.

March 29, 1858, Dickens emphasised the sensational quality of his art in his well-known words, "every writer of fiction, though he may not adopt the dramatic form, writes in effect for the stage".[69] This sentiment is echoed by that of Wilkie Collins in his preface to *Basil* (1852) where he wrote that "the Novel and the Play are twin-sisters in the Family of Fiction".[70] Deborah Vlock has made much of the connection between narrative and drama at the time, arguing that the nineteenth century novel cannot be separated from the broader theatrical impulses of the society, and affirming that people tended to read novels "through the lens of popular performance". Therefore, she asserts, it would be more accurate to view the novel as "merged" with drama rather than departing from it.[71]

These confident assertions do not reveal the troubling ambiguities and contradictions inherent in the Victorian understanding of theatre and its relationship with the novel. In his discussion of nineteenth century anti-theatricality, Jonas Barish speaks about the uncomfortable recognition among writers of the time "that the actor, or imposter, practises a perilous art and tempts other men to do the same";[72] he suggests that in the nineteenth century consciousness, the theatrical is viewed as dazzling and deceptive, opposed to morality, propriety and religious sensibility.[73] The notion that the theatre is in some sense anti-Christian is a recurring trope among novelists and commentators of the time. I mean to show, however, that, despite their denials, writers occasionally respond to the dramatic in an unexpectedly spiritual manner.

Critics have emphasised authors' ambivalent attitude to the dramatic. When discussing theatricality in Dickens, John Glavin notes the paradoxical attraction-repulsion of dramatic passages, part of what he calls an "anti-performative" element of Dickens's work. He argues that Dickens uses theatre as a mask to deflect the attention of his readers from himself, as if he were commanding them to "look not for me, but look away at that which is not myself which I choose to display".[74] Theatre is therefore half-heartedly

---

[69] *The Speeches of Charles Dickens*, ed. Kenneth J. Fielding (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), p. 262.
[70] Wilkie Collins, *Basil* (1852) (London: Sampson Low, 1862), p. v.
[71] Deborah Vlock, *Dickens, Novel Reading, and the Popular Victorian Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 3.
[72] Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1981), p. 317.
[73] Ibid., p. 348.
[74] John Glavin, *After Dickens: Reading, Adaptation and Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 79.

invoked as a cloak, disguise or mask for the truth about the author himself. The full implications of dramatic revelation are suggested and then avoided as indecorous and dangerously exposing.

Joseph Litvak and Nina Auerbach have eloquently argued for the Victorians' paradoxical attitudes to the dramatic in their respective discussions of theatricality in Victorian fiction, which are still considered authoritative in the field. For Litvak novels document a fall from theatricality into domesticity, subjectivity and psychology, a world that seems to have no place for the grand spectacles of the stage. And yet, he maintains, here theatrical behaviour is not lost but masked, "subtly diffused throughout the culture that would appear to have repudiated it".[75] He defines these theatrical elements as contradictory – related to surveillance on the one hand and to the anarchic potential of carnival on the other: in this way power structures are undermined and challenged by unsettling elements of disguise and displacement.

Auerbach is less concerned with power dynamics than she is with what theatrical motifs suggest about the Victorian cult of the individual: Victorian writers, "with nothing left to believe in but their lives" transform their experiences into dramas or rituals "in order that [life] might have meaning in and of itself": this is the reason for the dramatic rendering of scenes of birth and death and marriage, the desire to give to the "shape of lives . . . the spiritual authority [that] the universe withheld".[76] Behind these powerful sensational moments of "meaning" then there lurks a subtle insecurity, an acute spiritual crisis, the fear that in the wake of God's withdrawal from the universe, his creatures might likewise evaporate into airy nothings. This crisis was all the more agonising because the more theatrical a passage – the more it sought to dramatize significant moments in a life, to make them sacred, the less it could be trusted. Like Litvak, Auerbach makes much of Victorian anti-theatricality, the sense of the theatre as an "alluring pariah" which "came to stand for all the dangerous potential of theatricality to invade the authenticity of the best self".[77] She differs from Litvak in that she is not concerned with explaining the novels' theatricality in terms of power dynamics but rather

---

[75] Joseph Litvak, *Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1992), p. x.
[76] Nina Auerbach, *Private Theatricals: The Lives of the Victorians* (Cambridge, MA, London: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 3.
[77] Ibid., p. 8.

attempts to connect it with authors' waning spirituality. Ultimately, though, her conclusions resonate with Litvak's: theatrical passages in Victorian fiction dazzle, disguise, distract, mislead and confound.

The notion that theatricality is mainly presented as misleading, mystifying and confounding by writers of the period is more closely questioned in the work of Lynn M. Voskuil. By examining the complex theories of "natural acting" expressed by the theatre critics, William Hazlitt and G. H. Lewes, Voskuil argues that "Victorian fascination with spectacle was far more than an illicit attraction to the sordid underside of respectability" and describes Lewes and Hazlit as incapable of conceiving of "self . . . [or] society as apart from the stage".[78] This suggests that, despite their obvious prejudices, the theatre was at the heart of the Victorian understanding of selfhood and self-expression. From her analysis of the term "natural" as it is applied to acting by these critics, Voskuil concludes that they saw theatricality as occasionally capable of revealing a "timeless, innate self" which was separate from an inauthentic, performing self.[79] I take this suggestion further to argue that the theatre opens up the possibility for writers to reach beyond themselves, allowing a kind of possession of the self by another, transcendent presence. This is evident in William Hazlitt's definition of "nature" in the theatre, which is explained in his essay entitled "Madame Pasta and Mademoiselle Mars": "[by nature is meant that] the mind identifies itself with something so as to be no longer master of itself".[80]

Although Nina Auerbach ominously reiterates the Victorian fall into a godless world, she makes a tantalizing connection between spirituality and the theatre in the Victorian imagination by suggesting that the more that writers chase their disappearing God through the pages of their fiction, the more theatrical their writing becomes. This is the point of departure for my study of the emerging realism of the 1840s and 50s. Fiction of this period is a fiction of paradox: Protestant horror of the expressive or extraordinary often mingles with a dramatic sensibility so intense that it becomes tinged with spiritual fervour. The notion that questions of faith cast their shadow over the works of most

---

[78] Lynn M. Voskuil, *Acting Naturally: Victorian Theatricality and Authenticity* (Virginia, VA: University of Virginia press, 2004), p. 11.
[79] Lynn M. Voskuil, "Acting Naturally: Brontë, Lewes, and the Problem of Gender Performance", *ELH* 62.2 (1995): 409–42 (p.410).
[80] William Hazlitt, "Madame Pasta and Mademoiselle Mars", in *The Plain Speaker: Opinions on Books, Men and Things*, 2 vols (London: Henry Colburn, 1826), 2: 318.

Victorians is a critical commonplace: I am concerned here with the ritual shape that narratives assume at moments of emotional intensity, whether or not they are describing distinctly spiritual experiences. At such moments characters and scenarios become more stylised – the symbolic, rhythmic and musical qualities of the language recall and even summon echoes of mythical and religious patterns. This shows the influence of melodrama with its resonances of the Christian pattern of innocence-fall-redemption.

To understand this peculiar aspect of style one needs to be aware of the context and attitudes that inform it – attitudes to religion and to the theatre. As has already become evident from this discussion, the Victorian discomfort with the theatre is widely known: William Hazzlitt's 1817 essay "On Actors and Acting" was written in defence of the theatre; yet even when he is at his most positive, Hazlitt reveals an underlying uneasiness about theatrical ideas:

> Players are "the abstracts and brief chronicles of the time;" the motley representatives of human nature. They are the only honest hypocrites . . . [81]

Here Hazlitt refers to actors as the "only honest hypocrites" and cannot quite exonerate them from critics' accusations of depravity, arguing that they are only that way because critics make them so. Hazlitt's theatre has an immensely seductive power over its audience who passively emulate its "lessons": if these lessons are good and moral its effects are positive but Hazlitt feels the need to add that "bad" productions such as George De Lillo's *The History George Barnwell* might inspire the exact opposite of their intentions.[82] Thus, underlying Hazlitt's defence is a Protestant fear that any form of display is duplicitous, degrading and insidiously disempowering to audiences.

Nina Auerbach observes that not even Shakespeare is exempt from the Victorian desire to purge the world of theatricality.[83] This is evident in her discussion of Thomas Carlyle's *On Heroes and Hero Worship*: in this text, Carlyle describes Shakespeare's works as arising "from the unknown depths within him" in the same way as the "oak-tree

---

[81] William Hazlitt, "On Actors and Acting", in *Hazlitt Selected Essays*, ed. George Sampson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1917), p. 72.
[82] Ibid., p. 73, on George De Lillo, *The London Merchant Or The History of George Barnwell* (London: Henry Lintot, 1754).
[83] Auerbach, *Private Theatricals: The Lives of the Victorians* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: Harvard University press, 1990), p. 4.

grows from the Earth's bosom, as the mountains and waters shape themselves; with a symmetry grounded in Nature's own laws, conformable to all Truths whatsoever".[84] Auerbach argues that this suggests an attempt to connect Shakespeare with an immovable "Nature", revealing a profound mistrust of the performed and the expressive. This extends to a mistrust of any kind of eloquence, including language itself. As Auerbach so succinctly puts it, "This Shakespeare belongs to nature, not the theatre; he is revered for his roots, not his words . . . His talents, actions, achievements, fade into his enigmatic presence".[85]

Auerbach suggests that Victorians like Carlyle and Arnold take comfort in the fact that Shakespeare is a "force of nature" or more "mass than man".[86] I want to build on these observations to suggest that the "nature" presented in these descriptions is so aloof from the human world that it appears as more of an absence than a presence: instead of enhancing Shakespeare's heroic stature, the tree imagery inevitably diminishes him so that he fades away behind the natural scenery. Arnold's poem on Shakespeare (1849) has a similar effect: Arnold speaks of Shakespeare as a distant mountain, completely wrapped up in himself, "Self-schooled, self-scanned, self-honored, self-secure" and only present to others in his "victorious brow".[87] This may be because the Nature of Carlyle and Arnold has lost the power vested in it by the Romantics: deprived of dramatic presence it is no longer capable of defining let alone sanctifying the individual. Shakespeare's invisibility is thus a dubious strength, synonymous with a ghostly withdrawal from the world.

Shakespeare resurfaces as a comforting tree in G. H. Lewes's ruminations in *Spanish Drama* (1846). Made uncomfortable by the "spirited outlines" of Lope De Vegas' distinctly foreign drama, Lewes takes refuge in Shakespeare, describing him in the following manner:

> Our Shakespearian drama is a majestic oak whose roots strike deep down into their mother earth, whose branches stretch high and wide into the air, beneath whose shade thousands may retire from the world, to contemplate its workings at

[84] Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes and Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1840), in *Sartor Resartus and On Heroes and Hero Worship* (London: J.M. Dent, 1967), p. 340.
[85] Auerbach, *Private Theatricals*, p. 5.
[86] Ibid., p. 7.
[87] Matthew Arnold, *The Poetical Works of Matthew Arnold* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1897), p. 3.

> their ease. This oak is the grandest of trees: strength, beauty, usefulness, delight, variety, and grace, unite in it. It is of eternal substance. The gnarled, twisted branches are tipped with leaves of unexampled grace, and amidst those leaves are clustered acorns, every one of which would in its turn produce a forest. It is this "World within a World" –this prodigality of potential existence–which is Shakspere's endless charm.[88]

Where Lope De Vegas relishes the bold, the dramatic and the fleeting, Shakespeare is made into the master of a less disorienting natural world to which people can "retire" and contemplate at their ease. It may be noted that the observers in this scene are entirely passive and complacent and Shakespeare's works are bereft of their dramatic immediacy – they are reduced to examples of "potential existence" only. The image of the tree looms so large over this description, that Shakespeare himself seems completely overshadowed by it. Lewes, in the same manner as Carlyle and Arnold, manages to drown out any troubling dramatic qualities of Shakespeare, transforming him into a static, eternal symbol. But in Lewes's description one can hear the first notes of an emerging realism – a world of infinite complexity and variety made unthreatening by the controlling and analytical gaze of the observer who is always at one remove from the action.

This is not the world of the theatre, where the spectator himself is drawn into the play, his responsiveness determining the success of the production. It does have some affinities with Thackeray's puppet show theatre in *Vanity Fair* (1847–8). Here the manager first looks into a Fair filled with dizzying variety; but his Production soon brings it all under control:

> What more has the Manager of the Performance to say?-- To acknowledge the kindness with which it has been received in all the principal towns of England through which the Show has passed, and where it has been most favourably noticed by the respected conductors of the public Press, and by the Nobility and Gentry. He is proud to think that his Puppets have given satisfaction to the very best company in this empire. The famous little Becky Puppet has been pronounced to be uncommonly flexible in the joints, and lively on the wire; the

[88] G. H. Lewes, *Lope De Vegas and Calderon* (London: Charles Knight, 1845), p. 90.

> Amelia Doll, though it has had a smaller circle of admirers, has yet been carved and dressed with the greatest care by the artist; the Dobbin Figure, though apparently clumsy, yet dances in a very amusing and natural manner; the Little Boys' Dance has been liked by some; and please to remark the richly dressed figure of the Wicked Nobleman, on which no expense has been spared, and which Old Nick will fetch away at the end of this singular performance.[89]

Shakespeare's famous lines "All the world's a stage",[90] undergo a strange evolution here: no longer is the stage a powerful representation of reality, conjuring the audience to acknowledge its relevance and themselves as participants in its vision. Instead the "stage" has become a diminutive world, small enough to be amusing. The characters are all idiosyncratic (recalling the variety of Lewes's acorns) but they are also entertaining in their diversity. Thackeray's satire conforms to the realist mistrust of the theatre: he both acknowledges the theatricality of life – the fact that all of his characters are actors, playing roles for the benefit of the audience – and diminishes the power of theatre in his novel. His characters are specimens for our dissection: the disguises and displays of "the little Becky puppet" are not as frightening as they might be because she is just a puppet and so is subject to the disempowering gaze of the narrator and the readers. In this way the theatre metaphor is used to undermine its traditional associations: rather than drawing us into its drama, Thackeray's puppet show encourages us to maintain an amused and analytical distance from what we observe. Further, while we are made to recognise the theatricality of the puppets, it is this very theatricality of which the novel will ultimately invite us to disapprove.

Thackeray's suspicion of the theatrical when left unchecked by the discerning eye of the satirist is most evident in his criticism of Dickens in a letter written to David Masson on the 6th of May 1851:

> I think Mr. Dickens has in many things quite a divine genius so to speak, and certain notes in his song are so delightful and admirable, that I should never think of trying to imitate him, only hold my tongue and admire him. I quarrel with his

[89] William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair: A Novel Without a Hero* (1847–48), ed. John Carey (London: Penguin Classics, 2001), pp. 5–6.
[90] William Shakespeare, *As You Like It* II. vii. 140, ed. Juliet Dusinberre (London: Arden, 2006).

> Art in many respects: **wh** I don't think represents Nature duly; for instance Micawber appears to me an exaggeration of a man, as his name is of a name. It is delightful and makes me laugh: but it is no more a real man than my friend Punch is: and in so far I protest against him . . . holding that the Art of Novels is to represent Nature: to convey as strongly as possible the sentiment of reality – in a tragedy or a poem or a lofty drama you aim at producing different emotions; the figures moving, and their words sounding, heroically: but in a drawing-room drama a coat is a coat and a poker a poker; and must be nothing else according to my ethics, not an embroidered tunic, not a great red-hot instrument like that Pantomime weapon. But let what defects you (or rather I), will, be in Dickens's theory-there is no doubt according to my notion that his writing has one admirable quality – it is charming – that answers everything. Another may write the most perfect English have the greatest fund of wit learning & so forth – but I doubt if any novel-writer has that quality, that wonderful sweetness & freshness **wh** belongs to Dickens.[91]

Thackeray's use of "Nature" here is typically realist: he speaks of the artist's obligation to "convey the sentiment of reality". Such a "sentiment" is distinctly anti-theatrical: whereas plays and poems might aim at the heroic or the lofty, the novelist has a humbler prerogative: his is the "drawing room drama" where there is no space for exaggeration or for experimenting with the effects of different emotions; in the drawing room "a poker . . . [is] a poker" and should never be anything else. One can hear in these lines echoes of the writings of George Eliot on the subject: the increasingly commonplace assertion that the novel must be a mirror of "life", which is emphatically defined as a world bereft of symbols but crowded with mundane articles. Such articles – such as the poker – are at least easy to define and explain, and this is the novelist's scientific task. Moreover Thackeray's "real" world, just like the puppet show theatre in *Vanity Fair*, is a small one: it is defined within the narrow limits of the drawing room. It seems both undesirable and impossible to represent the world in its entirety, let alone against the mystical backdrop of eternity. Such a task could only be attempted in the theatre and even there Thackeray

[91] *The Critical Heritage: Charles Dickens*, ed. Philip Collins (1986; rpt London and New York: Routledge, 2005.), p. 265.

would be suspicious of it, for the theatre aims at loftiness which in Thackeray's definition always falls short of reality.

Thus whereas for Lewes the theatrical Shakespeare fades away behind a somewhat vague and unthreatening "Nature", for Thackeray, the theatre must be tamed to fit the demands of a domestic world. Lewes, Carlyle and Arnold replace the dramatic action of the theatre with the far more stable images of a tree and a mountain. Thackeray goes one step further: symbols are themselves theatrical and cannot be trusted. His domestic world is made up of easily identifiable objects and people: although it is aristocratic in character, it is still a world rooted in realities, which have been divested of emotional colouring. His argument is not unlike Ruskin's in his essay *Of The Pathetic Fallacy* (1856):

> So, then, we have the three ranks: the man who perceives rightly, because he does not feel, and to whom the primrose is very accurately the primrose, because he does not love it. Then, secondly, the man who perceives wrongly, because he feels, and to whom the primrose is anything else than a primrose: a star, or a sun, or a fairy's shield, or a forsaken maiden. And then, lastly, there is the man who perceives rightly in spite of his feelings, and to whom the primrose is for ever nothing else than itself – a little flower, apprehended in the very plain and leafy fact of it, whatever and how many soever the associations and passions may be, that crowd around it. And, in general, these three classes may be rated in comparative order, as the men who are not poets at all, and the poets of the second order, and the poets of the first; only however great a man may be, there are always some subjects which *ought* to throw him off his balance; some, by which his poor human capacity of thought should be conquered, and brought into the inaccurate and vague state of perception, so that the language of the highest inspiration becomes broken, obscure, and wild in metaphor, resembling that of the weaker man, overborne by weaker things.[92]

[92] John Ruskin, "Of the Pathetic Fallacy", in *The Literary Criticism of John Ruskin*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Anchor Books, 1965), p. 66.

Ruskin's realist theory of perception suggests that in order to see clearly a poet should be aware both of his own emotions and of the character of the object that he is looking at, and should never confuse the two. The "true poet" understands his own feelings and while he is drawn to what he sees, he is also able to remain at a rational distance and accept that material things have validity in and of themselves. Ruskin's horror of what he terms weak minded poets' tendency to transform a "primrose" into "a star, a sun, or a fairy's shield" speaks of a horror of metaphor itself with its associated suggestions of image and transformation.

In *The Abolition of Man*, C.S. Lewis argues that by reducing something simply to an element of nature, by stripping away its "qualitative properties" and seeing it only in terms of its functionality, one in fact risks reducing it to an abstraction, something artificial, that lacks true substance and reality.[93] An aspect of this reality for Lewis is unquestionably spiritual: he argues that the "stars lost their divinity as astronomy developed".[94] In this way he suggests that by thinking metaphorically one allows for a spiritual perspective and so deepens one's own sense of reality. These mystical and symbolic possibilities are lost on Ruskin who reduces the argument to a psychological conflict between reason and emotion. This war on symbols is analogous to a war on the traditional understanding of the theatre which according to the traditional idea of Theatrum Mundi so often dramatized by Shakespeare, was itself a symbol of the world, the actors embodying the lives of the spectators and placing them within the broader perspective of eternity. One imagines that the literal-mindedness that Ruskin encourages in his essay would never be able to accept the necessary on-stage transformation of an actor into his role.

But this fall out of the symbolic realm of the stage into the material and domestic remains fraught with contradictions. Wilkie Collins in his preface to *Basil* struggles to express what he means by "true-to-life". Impelled by the necessity of explaining the dramatic and extraordinary incidents in his work to an audience who would question their plausibility, he creates the following defence. First, he argues that the "real" and the "ideal" are interrelated:

---

[93] C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (1944; rpt New York: HarperCollins, 1974), p. 70.
[94] Ibid., p. 70.

> . . . the more of the Actual I could garner up as a text to speak from, the more certain I might feel of the genuineness and value of the Ideal which was sure to spring out of it. Fancy and Imagination, Grace and Beauty, all those qualities which are to the work of Art what scent and colour are to the flower, can only grow towards heaven by taking root in earth. Is not the noblest poetry of prose fiction the poetry of every-day truth?[95]

He implies that the everyday is in fact the source of the extraordinary: the words "Actual", "Grace" and "Beauty" are all put in the upper case giving them a certain spiritual authority. Collins seems simultaneously to be trying to bring his writing down to earth and striving towards ideal and divine truths: in this description the everyday fades into the ideal so that it is difficult to tell them apart. It soon becomes apparent that the impulse towards the ideal is also a theatrical impulse for Collins:

> Believing that the Novel and the Play are twin-sisters in the family of Fiction; that the one is a drama narrated, as the other is a drama acted; and that all the strong and deep emotions which the Play-writer is privileged to excite, the Novel-writer is privileged to excite also, I have not thought it either politic or necessary, while adhering to realities, to adhere to every-day realities only. In other words, I have not stooped so low as to assure myself of the reader's belief in the probability of my story, by never once calling on him for the exercise of his faith. Those extraordinary accidents and events which happen to few men, seemed to me to be as legitimate materials for fiction to work with – when there was a good object in using them – as the ordinary accidents and events which may, and do, happen to us all. [96]

Here Collins's desire to adhere to the "probable" gives way to the fascination of the dramatic which, Collins maintains, can excite far deeper emotions than purely day to day experience. In fact Collins defends the "extraordinary accidents" that he has chosen to present not for their 'reality' but for their effectiveness: they are just as legitimate as more ordinary events. Collins's belief in fiction as a "drama narrated" is nevertheless

---

[95] Wilkie Collins, *Basil* (1852; rpt London: Sampson Low, Son & Co, 1862), p. v.
[96] Ibidem.

defended in realist terms: he goes on to explain why his villainous characters are an accurate feature of metropolitan life. This wavering between what seems to be a deeply felt sense of drama as something that transcends the everyday and touches more profound sensibilities, and an almost journalistic obligation to write about observable social and domestic experience, is a feature of many writers' beliefs about fiction at the time.

Let me return to Thackeray's letter. Even while he attempts to be dismissive of Dickens's theatrical art, Thackeray is attracted to it: Dickens is a "divine genius", capable of sounding "certain notes" that Thackeray does not dare to imitate. Also although Micawber is an "exaggeration" of a man, Thackeray cannot help finding him amusing. Finally, grudgingly and a little patronizingly, he admits that despite his complaints about Dickens, there is something "charming" and fresh about Dickens's writing.[97] Not too much can be made perhaps of these muted concessions made to his rival but they do suggest that Thackeray's idea of the theatrical might be more complicated than it appears to be. It is of some interest that he refers to Dickens's writing as a "song":[98] this immediately associates it with the art of dramatic expression and suggests its emotive and moving quality which seems to be beyond explanation let alone imitation. These "notes" are extraordinarily powerful as Thackeray admits when he says that he was inadvertently affected by the portrayal of Micawber. There is a suggestion that Thackeray is a little more than delighted by Dickens's art – it draws him to marvel at it and respond to it despite his better judgement. In this way the inexplicable power of the theatrical takes on a quasi-mystical dimension.

This sense of a hidden mystical quality in the dramatic is also noticed by Hazlitt in the essay, "On Actors and Acting", to which I have referred briefly before:

> Players are "the abstracts and brief chronicles of the time;" the motley representatives of human nature. They are the only honest hypocrites. Their life is a voluntary dream; a studied madness. The height of their ambition is to be beside themselves. To-day kings, to-morrow beggars, it is only when they are themselves, that they are nothing. Made up of mimic laughter and tears, passing

[97] *The Critical Heritage: Charles Dickens*, ed. Philip Collins (1986; rpt London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 265.
[98] Ibidem.

> from the extremes of joy or woe at the prompter's call, they wear the livery of other men's fortunes; their very thoughts are not their own. They are, as it were, train-bearers in the pageant of life, and hold a glass up to humanity, frailer than itself. We see ourselves at second-hand in them: they show us all that we are, all that we wish to be, and all that we dread to be. The stage is an epitome, a bettered likeness of the world, with the dull part left out: and, indeed, with this omission, it is nearly big enough to hold all the rest.[99]

The actor is both more and less than himself in this description – he strives always to reach beyond himself, to become more than what he is. Hazlitt is also very conscious of the *Theatrum Mundi* metaphor – of life itself as a "pageant", and of the theatre as a representation of life. Ultimately, Hazzlit's essay is not concerned with the metaphorical or spiritual associations of theatre but rather with rehabilitating the theatre in the eyes of society. Even so, it is clear that he is aware of and somewhat affected by the "magic" of acting.

The quasi-religious experience of outreaching oneself in the theatre is best conveyed by the memoirs and diary entries of the acclaimed actor William Charles Macready. Below is a description of one of his first experiences of acting when he played the role of Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet*:

> There was a mist before my eyes. I seemed to see nothing of the dazzling scene before me, and for some time I was like an automaton moving in certain defined limits. I went mechanically through the variations in which I had drilled myself, and it was not until the plaudits of the audience awoke me from the kind of waking dream in which I seemed to be moving, that I gained my self-possession, and really entered into the spirit of the character and, I may say, felt the passion, I was to represent. Every round of applause acted like inspiration on me : I "trod on air," became another being, or a happier self; [100]

---

[99] William Hazlitt, "On Actors and Acting", in *Hazlitt Selected Essays*, p. 72.
[100] William Macready, *Macready's Reminiscences and Selections from his Diaries and Letters*, ed. Sir Frederick Pollock (New York, Franklyn Square: Harper & Brothers, 1875), p. 30.

Macready describes himself as coming slowly to life on the stage, being awakened from a mechanical state by the "plaudits of the audience" and becoming a "happier self" buoyed up by his own inspiration. His transformation onstage is a kind of ritual summoning act in which both he and his audience are involved – these emotions work him up to such a degree that he feels not just in possession of himself but in the possession of another being, a spirit that he can sense and whose passions he can feel, making him more than himself. One could argue that this is evidence of what Nina Auerbach referred to as the Victorian tendency to ritualise the self, to enhance one's life with theatrical grandeur in order to compensate for the loss of contact with a spiritual realm.[101] But this seems to be more than that, more than the fervour into which Tennyson could place himself by repeating his own name: Macready is expressing the mysterious loss of himself and transformation into another – what Hazlitt, in "On Actors and Acting" notices and admires as the actors' ability to be "beside themselves".[102] Macready repeats the same sense of spiritual feeling much later in his diary entry on the 2nd of November 1850:

> November 2d. Acted King Lear in my best manner; I do not know that I ever played it altogether better. I was careful and self-possessed and not wanting in power; I felt the mighty character. The audience seemed impressed with it. Called. Forster came round. Manby and Webster came into my room. My whole frame feels the work I have been undergoing. Thank God one week has passed so well.[103]

Here once again he describes himself as "feeling" the "mighty" character – this is the source of the power that he describes: he is aware of the character as if it were another being, a being that seems greater than himself and that he brings to life with an almost physical effort.

This spiritual reaching out beyond selfhood becomes clearer in Macready's admiration for Mrs Simmons: it is her ability to lose herself completely in the role that

---

[101] Auerbach, *Private Theatricals*, p. 3.
[102] William Hazlitt, "On Actors and Acting", in *Hazlitt Selected Essays*, ed. George Sampson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1917), p. 72.
[103] Ibid., p. 619.

she is playing, her "unity of design, the just relation of all parts to the whole that made us forget the actress in the character she assumed".[104]

The passionate assumption of her character is so affecting that it is beyond the kind of description that a writer could offer:

> . . . or will any verbal account of the most striking features of "the human face divine" convey a distinct portraiture of the individual! How much less can any force of description imprint on the imagination the sudden but thrilling effects of tone or look, of port or gesture, or even of the silence so often significative in the development of human passion![105]

Macready distinguishes between events as reported and events as experienced: a writer who has only the power to describe can never create perfectly real or accurate portraits, for he will always be incapable of rendering the power of a look, a gesture or even of silence. This is a theory directly opposed to that of Thackeray or Ruskin and the emerging realist school: according to Macready it is in action, sound and presence that one becomes witness to a more profound reality. It is not an accident that when writing to Pollock on the 9th of August 1853 Macready refers to Mrs Simmons as a "marvel, I might almost say a miracle".[106] It seems that only religious language can describe the full effect of her power on stage, her ability to frustrate description or definition. One could suggest that these exclamations are an example of the trivialisation of religious language that was becoming commonplace at the time; but trivial melodrama and exaggerated language is not really possible to distinguish from truly felt spiritual sensibility – and it is evident that Macready, a man who took his art very seriously, was deeply impressed by Mrs Simmons to the point that he could not remain detached when recalling her.

The performed presence or power goes beyond accurate or detailed description but it is not necessarily something only encountered on the stage. This is Macready's description of the effect of reading Racine's play, *Mithridate*, at the end of his Diary of 1833:

---

[104] Ibid., pp. 40–1.
[105] Macready, *Macready's Reminiscences and Selections from his Diaries and Letters*, p. 40.
[106] Macready, *Macready's Reminiscences and Selections from his Diaries and Letters*, p. 669.

> No one will deny the dramatic power of Racine after the perusal of that act [Act Three]. I should quote it as a master-piece of tragic composition. The remainder of the play does not maintain an equal pitch; the scenes which follow are merely declamatory, which, although spirited, passionate, and often poetical, do not bring the actors in form and gesture and in speaking looks palpably before us. We follow the argument with more or less pleasure as the verse is smooth and strong, or languid and harsh, but we read it ourselves as we would a course of reasoning on any scientific question. In such scenes as those of the third act, we are auditors and spectators even while we hold the book in our hands at least our imaginations are possessed with the view of the action before us.[107]

The tragic pitch achieved by the third act of this play is more than merely spirited: it has the power to bring the action before us and to make us spectators of the scene. It is interesting to note that Macready describes the polished and "poetical" fourth act as similar to a "course of reasoning or any scientific question". This suggests a suspicion of the scientific, a sense that no matter how beautifully composed or convincing a scene is, it ultimately needs more than reason to become true art. In order to rise above scientific discourse a scene needs to have a conjuring power, a magical ability to make itself present to the reader, to make of him more than a reader, just as the art of acting makes the actor more than himself. What Macready celebrates is the power of the words to make the reader imaginatively step beyond himself and become a spectator outside the space of the theatre.

Macready was of course particularly attuned to the requirements of his art. But as has already been suggested, the power of performance was not completely lost on his spectators. In *On Actors and Acting* Lewes compiled some of his most popular essays collected from his theatre criticism during the 1840s and 50s. One can hear an echo of Macready in Lewes's praise of Charles Kean:

> . . . it was impossible to watch Kean as Othello, Shylock, Richard, or Sir Giles Overreach, without being strangely shaken by the terror, and the pathos, and the passion of a stormy spirit uttering itself in tones of irresistible power. His

[107] Ibid., p. 293.

> imitators have been mostly ridiculous, simply because they reproduced the manner and the mannerism, but could not reproduce the power which made these endurable.[108]

The power by which Kean made these roles come alive, and through them touched his audience, is clearly beyond imitation. His power was "irresistible" suggesting that an audience became completely susceptible to him although the manner by which this was achieved remained mysterious and unknowable. This element of mystery in Kean's art leads Lewes to admit elsewhere that such qualities can only be described as "transcendent".

Lewes is not as comfortable as Macready is with the mystical echoes that such descriptions conjure up. In his critique of the inimitable Rachel, he is at pains to describe her as "natural". This is evident in his description of her in the role of Lady Tartuffe:

> I thought her graceful, lady-like, and diabolical — very admirable in the way she thoroughly identified herself with the character, making its odiousness appear so thoroughly easy and unconscious that you almost doubted whether after all the woman were so odious. The manner in which Rachel walked to the fireplace, placed her gloves on the mantelpiece, and her right foot on the fender, as she began the great scene with her lover, was of itself a study. The sleek hypocrisy of the part was not exaggerated, nor was the cruel irony colder or cruder than seemed natural to such a woman . . .[109]

Here Rachel is decidedly not guilty of any of the extremities of artificiality associated with the theatre. She is perfectly believable and excusable in her portrayal of vice. Lewes is also attempting to protect Rachel from the charges of indecency that hovered over the reputation of any woman who was too expressive, particularly one so adept at playing villains. But he shows a genuine suspicion of the sensational here that has become more acute because the actress being discussed is a woman. Lynn Voskuil has suggested that Lewes's idea of natural acting is not as simple as might at first be believed: she argues

---

[108] George Henry Lewes, *On Actors and the Art of Acting* (London: Smith Elder & Co, 1875), p. 3
[109] Lewes, *On Actors and the Art of Acting*, p. 31.

that he finds the idea of direct verisimilitude unimaginative and instead praises actors for presenting the ideal as real.[110]

Elsewhere, Lewes cannot restrain himself from expressing his admiration and horror at the spectacle of Rachel. He describes her as panther-like and suggests that "there always seemed something not human about her".[111] Her acting is described in the following manner:

> Scorn, triumph, rage, lust and merciless malignity she could represent in symbols of irresistible power; but she had little tenderness, no womanly caressing softness, no gaiety, no heartiness. She was so graceful and so powerful that her air of dignity was incomparable; but somehow you always felt in her presence an indefinable suggestion of latent wickedness. By the side of Pasta she would have appeared like a beautiful devil beside a queenly woman: with more intellect, more incisive and impressive power, but with less soul, less diffusive and subduing influence.[112]

Leaving aside for the moment Lewes's prudish horror of a woman performer, what is suggested powerfully here is his sense of being in a realm beyond the human when in the presence of Rachel's acting. She is not "womanly" but more like a "devil" possessed of "latent wickedness". Only language charged with infernal significance appears to be strong enough to convey the impression that she makes on the critic. She is like Kean in that her "power" is "irresistible" and inexplicable. It is something that is sensed or felt – closer to music than to words: this is evident in Lewes's description of her elocution as "musical and artistically graduated to the fluctuations of meaning. Her thrilling voice, flexible, penetrating, and grave, responded with the precision of a keyed instrument".[113] Her greatest performance of Phèdre's apostrophe to the sun "produced a thrill which vibrates still in memory".[114]

---

[110] Lynn Voskuil, *Acting Naturally: Victorian Theatricality and Authenticity* (Charlottsville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2009), pp. 43, 45.
[111] Lewes, *On Actors and the Art of Acting*, p. 23.
[112] Ibid., p. 24.
[113] Ibidem.
[114] Ibid., p. 26.

This description of Rachel's acting suggests a performance so intense that it both encompasses and surpasses music, transforming into a ritual celebration of the senses. It is also of interest that Lewes describes this experience as "symbolic": Rachel is representing her emotions in "symbols of irresistible power".[115]

In his essay on Charles Kean, Lewes develops the idea of acting as a symbolic discipline which aims at a combination of representation and feeling:

> Voice, look, and gesture are the actor's symbols, through which he makes intelligible the emotions of the character he is personating. No amount of sensibility will avail unless it can express itself adequately by these symbols. It is not enough for an actor to feel: he must represent. He must express his feelings in symbols universally intelligible and fleeting.[116]

The actor's own body and physical features are his means of emblematic expression, the way in which he makes his feelings palpable and intelligible to the audience. In *Shakespeare As Actor and Critic*, he expounds on this idea:

> The poet may tell us what is signified by the withdrawal of all life and movement from the face and limbs, describing the internal agitations or the deadly calm which disturb or paralyze the sufferer; but the painter, sculptor, or actor must tell us what the sufferer undergoes, and tell it through the symbols of outward expression – the internal workings must be legible in the external symbols; and these external symbols must also have a certain grace and proportion to affect us aesthetically. All art is symbolical. If it presented emotion in its real expression it would cease to move us as art; sometimes cease to move us at all, or move us only to laughter. There is a departure from reality in all the stage accessories. The situation, the character, the language, all are at variance with daily experience.[117]

The theatre is in a space apart from reality, a space where not all of the rules of realist representation can apply. Like Macready, Lewes emphasises the differences between the detached description of the poet and the engaged art of the actor. Significantly the

---

[115] Ibid., p. 23.
[116] Ibid., p. 95.
[117] Ibid., p. 99.

spectators do not expect the actors to express emotions that are truly felt but to represent them in the "symbols of outward expression". In the space of the stage everything including the actor himself becomes emblematic – actors and spectators are focused on the aesthetic effects of the scene rather than on the realistic details of narration. Thus the experience of the theatre involves a different way of reading which is almost allegorical, a conscious looking at and beyond the figures on the stage. This would not have seemed so remote to Lewes's readers for whom modern standards of verisimilitude did not apply – Macready played the role of Hamlet well into middle age and it was not uncommon for actresses to perform while pregnant.

Theatre, Tractarianism and anti-Catholicism

It has become clear in my discussion that Victorian distaste for theatricals emerges from a perceived opposition between reason and the imagination, sentiment and practicality, exaggeration and moderation. It is important to add that this realist discourse has a distinctly religious dimension to it, a Puritanical distrust of the ostentatious or performed: in 1797, William Wilberforce published his tract entitled *A Practical view of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians* which explicitly equates religious impropriety with theatrical indulgences, an opinion that was shared by many Protestant thinkers of the time such as John Witherspoon and Jeremy Collier, and which persisted well into the Victorian period:

> There has been much argument concerning the lawfulness of theatrical amusements. Let it be sufficient remark, that the controversy would be short indeed, if the question were to be tried by this criterion of love to the Supreme Being. If there were anything of that sensibility for the honour of God, and of that zeal in his service, which we shew in behalf of our earthly friends, or of our political connections, should we seek our pleasure in that place which the debauchee, inflamed with wine, or bent on the gratification of other licentious appetites, finds most congenial to his state and temper of mind? In that place, from the neighbourhood of which, (how justly termed a school of morals might hence alone be inferred) decorum, and modesty, and regularity retire, while riot

> and lewdness are invited to the spot, and invariably select it for their chosen residence! where the sacred name of God is often prophaned! where sentiments are often heard with delight, and motions and gestures often applauded, which would not be tolerated in private company, but which may far exceed the utmost licence allowed in the social circle, without at all transgressing the large bounds of theatrical decorum! where, when moral principles are inculcated, they are not such as a Christian ought to cherish in his bosom, but such as it must be his daily endeavour to extirpate; not those which Scripture warrants, but those which it condemns as false and spurious, being founded in pride and ambition, and the over-valuation of human favour! where surely, if a Christian should trust himself at all, it would be requisite for him to prepare himself with a double portion of watchfulness and seriousness of mind, instead of selecting it as the place in which he may throw off his guard, and unbend without danger![118]

Wilberforce concurs with other moralists of his time in his belief that the theatre is the site of debauchery and moral laxity. Significantly what most appals him about it is its expressive character – the subversive sentiments, motions and gestures that are beyond the control of a disciplined Christian heart. In the space of the theatre, audiences can indulge in transgressive emotions that would otherwise be unacceptable in a civilised context. From this harangue the theatre emerges as a place of overindulgence and uncontrolled self-expression, a strangely seductive space that exists apart from the strictures of ordinary society and threatens to overwhelm the careful restraint of the Christian citizen. The theatrical is more dangerous because it is duplicitous – a world of masks and appearances that can easily mislead and confound the truth. Although it is alluring in this description, the theatre lacks mystical appeal: its attractions are wholly worldly and decadent.

Yet I have attempted to show that for many writers and thinkers of the nineteenth century such suspicion is not untouched by ambiguity. The writers that I have discussed are intuitively drawn to the magical power of the theatre, often expressing this in spiritually charged language. This intuitive sense of a connection between the spiritual

---

[118] William Wilberforce, *A Practical view of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians* (London: printed for T. Cadell, Jun. and W.Davies, 1798), p. 316.

and the theatrical is hardly ever made explicit by commentators on the theatre, but it is partially suggested in observations about theatrical symbolism and transformation as well as in the awed reception of renowned actors such as Rachel or Kean.

Ironically, despite the Protestant desire to deprive the theatre of authenticity, the dramatic dimensions of the mystical would ultimately became a subject of religious meditation during the early to mid-nineteenth century: the connection between the transcendent and the theatrical was more fully explored by the Tractarian movement. The movement emerged in Oxford University in the 1830s with John Keble's "National Apostasy" sermon and continued to gain prominence under the dynamic leadership of Keble, John Henry Newman, Edward Bouverie Pusey, and James Anthony Froude. Whereas commentators in the tradition of Wilberforce were suspicious of the expressive or symbolic, Tractarianism embraced the aesthetic: Mark Knight and Emma Mason note that the movement's understanding of religion was "grounded in poetics as much as theology" and for this reason notable poets and writers like William Wordsworth and Christina Rossetti were attracted to its ranks.[119]

The doctrinal intricacies of the Tractarians are hard to grasp, specifically because there is much disagreement between the movement leaders over the central dogmas of the Eucharist, Confession, Incarnation and so on. What can be asserted with more certainty is that as the movement developed it became less concerned with doctrinal subtleties and more preoccupied with the ritual or ceremonial aspects of faith. Ritual was a potent term for the Tractarians and was used to refer to Church ceremonies as well as the words of the liturgy.[120] These ritual practices were understood as an extension of poetry in their ability to ignite the emotions and to encourage true religious feeling. But they were also modelled on an aesthetic and spiritual appreciation of the medieval liturgy, resonating with the Gothic revival.[121]

Ritualism emerged as a coordinated movement in the 1860s but the seeds of this belief were already present in early Tractarian thought: John Keble's deep commitment to sacramental religion was evident in his frequent celebrations of the Eucharist at Hursely

---

[119] Mark Knight and Emma Mason, eds. *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature: An Introduction* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 12.
[120] Ibid., p. 87.
[121] Ibidem.

where he also introduced Daily Matins and Evensong. Keble emphasised the fact that the service was not recreational but was for the specific purpose of communication with God. Ritual was therefore not merely artistically pleasing but of a very serious character – symbolic of the communion between the spiritual and the material.[122] For Pusey the communion between self and God through the sacraments took on a distinctly mystical character, symbolising the "divine indwelling in the human heart".[123] Newman spoke of the "Sacramental system" or "real things unseen":[124] thus ritual was a way of affirming the reality of the supernatural by performing it, of proving the miraculous as fact. A lot of attention was paid to the nature and aesthetic effects of the rituals: they were meant to recall a "baroque" or "Laudian ceremonial" but they also drew on gothic liturgy in the sung service as well as their "use of altar lights, candles and veils, the kneeling of the congregation at the consecration, prayers for the dead, the burning of incense, the mixing of water and wine in the chalice, and the elevation of the Eucharist".[125]

It is a commonplace that Tractarianism's preoccupation with a "religion of feeling" had Romantic origins: this is evident in Keble's views about a poetics of theology, his suggestion that religious thought should begin intuitively and with imaginative warmth.[126] In Tract 89, Keble defends the allegorical language of the Church fathers by arguing that the poetic performs a mystical function and that it is God's "vehicle of revelation", a way of channelling the sacred and enlightening the populace "until God himself can be made manifest in the flesh".[127] The ritualistic harmony of sentiment and thought stressed in Tractarian writings, the concept of divine revelation and epiphany as well as the belief in the power of symbols, have affinities with what is commonly regarded as the "Romantic" strand in nineteenth-century culture. As I have shown, these ideas about the aesthetic and poetic quality of religion were put into practice in the Tractarian Church service, which, apologists argued, did not detract from but rather enhanced its emotional and spiritual character, the sense of the sacred in religious life.

---

[122] C. Brad Faught, *The Oxford Movement: A Thematic History of Tractarians and their* Times (Pennsylvania, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), p.49.
[123] Ibidem.
[124] John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1865), ed. Ian Ker (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 15.
[125] Faught, *The Oxford Movement*, p. 107.
[126] Gregory H. Goodwin, "Keble and Newman: Tractarian Aesthetics and the Romantic Tradition", *Victorian Studies* 30.4 (Summer 1987): 475–494 (p. 481).
[127] *Tracts for the Times*. 6 vols. Oxford: James Parker, 1868.

But Tractarian ceremonies extend Romantic thought in their distinctly dramatic and performed character. This is evident in the short treatise on Anglo-Catholicism written in 1844 by William Gresley, the English Divine who attempted to popularise Tractarian feeling. While Gresely does not argue for a return to the gaudy "superstition" of Rome, its "outward observances and excessive ceremonial", he does criticise the English Church for its "irreverence", the result of the Reformers "tearing down . . . idols from their Churches" and destroying much "that was beautiful and holy".[128] In the following passage Gresley compares the behaviour of a Protestant congregation with their Catholic counterparts by emphasising the importance of performing one's faith:

> The Romanist on entering God's house dips his finger in the consecrated water, and signs the sign of the Cross on his breast, or forehead in order to remind himself of that which is the great object of our faith; then kneels, or humbly bows, to the high altar, and in taking his place, bends on his knees and prays silently for some while. The Protestant walks in with a careless, nonchalant air, looks for a moment into his hat, flings himself carelessly into the corner of a pew and not infrequently begins smiling and bowing to his acquaintances.
>
> Now without expressing approval of the particular doings of the Romanist on entering the Church, it is obvious to remark that he has at least the appearance of greater devotion than the other.[129]

The "worldly" behaviour of the Protestants suggests that they "have no knowledge of the proprieties, or even the meaning, of the service" and deadens their ability to commune with God so that Gresley scornfully remarks that "to say that these people are praying to God is absurd".[130] For Gresley, the appearance of reverence in the ceremonial enactment of prayer and devotion enhances rather than distracts from the congregation's connection to the divine. He argues that such practices are essential in dispelling the habitual "unnatural and constrained coldness" of the Protestant congregation, encouraging them to

---

[128] William Gresley, *Anglo-Catholicism: A Short History of the English Church* (London: James Burns, 1884), pp. 171–2.
[129] Ibid., p.176.
[130] Ibid., p. 177.

"exhibit some sign that we really are worshippers of God, instead of mere passive listeners".[131]

The distinction that Gresley makes here between passive contemplation and active engagement is a defining characteristic of the Tractarian service: if the congregation goes to Church with the "desire to join – *really to join* – in holy worship" then they will be instrumental in cultivating the "spirit of true devotion" which, once admitted into the heart of the individual, spreads with an almost supernatural power from "soul to soul, drawing even the indifferent into the sacred vortex, and lighting up a heavenly flame in hearts which before had not been touched".[132] In this way the performed, ritualised and theatrical has a mystical dimension to it: in ritual communion with others, the individual transcends him or herself and becomes mysteriously conscious of and possessed by the divine flame of faith.

The fact that faith should be an active rather than a passive principle forms a significant part of the Tractarian doctrine. Newman suggests as much in a letter written to James Stephen in 1835 concerning the ceremonial practices of Bishop Butler:

> I conceive his wonderfully gifted intellect caught the idea which had actually been the rule of the primitive Church, of teaching the more sacred truths by rites and ceremonies. No mode of teaching can be imagined so public, constant, impressive, permanent and at the same time reverential than that which makes the forms of devotion the memorial and declaration of doctrine – reverential because the very posture of the mind in worship is necessarily such. In this way Christians receive the Gospel literally on their knees, and in a temper altogether different from that critical and argumentative spirit which sitting and listening engender.[133]

In this account Newman describes ritual as a didactic theatre in which the congregation is involved both as actors and as spectators: it is a public performance which is striking to the eye and engages one physically, mentally and emotionally. It is therefore profoundly affecting to the soul, through a combination of spectacle and enactment. The word

---

[131] Ibid., p. 181.
[132] Ibid., p. 194.
[133] Newman to James Stephen, 16 March 1835, *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, ed. Thomas Gornall S.J. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 5: 46.

"posture" used to indicate the reverential frame of mind into which the worshiping Christian is placed, also conjures up associations of "pose" or "stance" suggesting the physical positioning of the actor's body on a stage. For Newman ritual encourages more than detached observation: Christians receiving the Gospel on their knees are not coolly critical but intensely involved in the realities of their faith. In this way ritual for Newman draws on the power of the theatre to unite physical realities with existential truths – it is a way of reinforcing the intuitions of the mind and soul and making them physically manifest. Here he makes use of dramatic elements in order to cultivate a certain spiritual fervour – a feeling that, as has been shown, was not unknown to the theatre critic whose emotions were excited to an almost transcendent pitch when revelling in a particularly evocative performance.

It is true that ritual and theatre are not synonymous in Newman's mind and in fact he does not make an overt association between them in this letter. Newman generally acknowledged that he was suspicious of the purely theatrical; yet he was conscious of its potential as a means of accessing the mystical. This becomes evident in his early essay on Aristotle's poetics: here Newman argues against the notion that plot is the essence of tragic drama. By plot Newman means a sequence of logical events culminating in a catastrophe. Instead, he maintains that the power of Greek Tragedy is in its ritual appeal to the senses. The drama is stirring for the very fact that it is not degraded to a series of "every-day events". Rather than creating a believable and detailed scenario, or upholding a "scientific principle", drama can only truly move us if we are willing to "listen to . . . [its] harmonious and majestic language, to the voices of sorrow, joy, compassion, or religious emotion, – to the animated odes of the chorus".[134] For Newman the rational remains detached but the dramatic actively draws one in to a harmony of sounds. It further has Platonic virtues and cultivates "grace, fancy, pathos and taste", achieving these through the "respective media of representation and sound". This brings it very close to a religious experience, for religion is "especially poetical" in its cultivation of the intellect and the "moral nature".[135]

---

[134] John Henry Newman, *Poetry with Reference to Aristotle's Poetics,* ed. Albert. S. Cook (Boston: Ginn & Company, 1891), p. 4.
[135] Ibid., p. 24.

From the above it is evident that Tractarians acknowledge a mystical quality in drama which connects it with religion. In fact while they distinguish ritual from drama, they also suggest that ritual's dramatic qualities elevate it above other forms of expression. John Keble argues in one of his lectures on poetry that poetry is subsumed in and transformed through ritual: "Poetry lends Religion her wealth of symbols and similes" and "Religion restores these again to Poetry, clothed with so splendid a radiance that they appear to be no longer mere symbols but partake (I might almost say) of the nature of sacraments".[136] Thus, for Keble, ritual enhances the significance of symbols by drawing them into performance. This emphasis on the heightening symbolic power of the performed is also evident in Keble's book of verse, *The Christian Year*, where he develops post-Romantic ideas about the mystical qualities of poetry: in this collection, Larry H. Peer notes, Keble places the liturgical at the heart of poetic experience as the true conduit for divine meaning.[137]

But the Tractarian preoccupation with the poetic and the performed was viewed with suspicion by many of their fellow Churchmen. This was largely because their ritual innovations were seen as dangerously close to Catholic practices. Anglican and Evangelical sermons were often directed at perceived Tractarian excesses such as Pusey's reintroduction of the confessional or the Tractarian emphasis on the significance of Baptism. The association in the Protestant mind between the Tractarian movement and the Catholic faith meant that the movement was often represented as gothic, superstitious and excessively theatrical. The strikingly anti-theatrical nature of such criticism is evident in a comment by the Earl of Shaftesbury about the service at St Albans in 1866, which is recorded by Mark and Emma Mason. The Earl complains of the "melodrama" of ritual, the "theatrical gymnastics, of singing, screaming, [and] genuflections".[138] One can hear an echo here of Wilberforce's prudish disapproval of the apparently arbitrary and excessive gestures of actors in the theatre.

Tractarian rituals were accused of being more than absurd and histrionic. They were also seen as poisonous, vulgar and even satanic, seducing the congregation with an

---

[136] John Keble, *Lectures on Poetry: 1832–1841*, trans. Edward Kershaw Francis, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), 2: 481.
[137] Larry H. Peer, *Romanticism and the Object* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 155.
[138] E. Hodder, *The Life and Work of the Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, K.G.*, 3 vols (London: Cassell, 1886), 3. 213, qtd. in *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature*, ed. Mark Knight and Emma Mason, p.107.

empty show of faith. Charles B. Taylor, the rector at St. Peter's Chester, published a number of sermons in 1844 which express the view that Tractarianism is "not of God". His suspicion of ceremony is evident in his many sermons on Baptism where he expresses his fear that an "opinion is now rapidly gaining ground, that preaching is not so important a matter as some good men would make it;. . . [and] that ordinances, especially that of baptism, are the alone channels of grace".[139] This direct opposition between the divinely inspired Word of God which places the preacher in a position of authority over the congregation and the formal practice and "show" of faith is extended in Sermon VIII:

> But Baptism is too generally to careless, or to carnal eyes, almost the only important part, for a plain and natural reason, but a very bad one, because it is the only visible part of the transaction. To those who walk by sight and not by faith, it is all in all.[140]

Whereas the spoken word, repeated by the preacher, appeals unambiguously to the higher intellectual and spiritual faculties, ritual appeals only to the sense of sight – it does not extend beyond the realm of the immediately visible and therefore remains base and instinctual. Worse: by giving "undue importance to the outward sign and form of the ordinance" the Tractarians encourage a moral laxity in their congregation and reassure "ungodly" parents in the belief that "all is right" after Baptism.[141] Ultimately, in Sermon X, Taylor argues that Tractarian ritual innovations are merely a disguise for "perverse" Roman Catholic beliefs: they mar the "pure and reformed Church" with the "most mischievous errors of the Romish heresy", and put the "excellence and beauty" of ceremony "in place of Christ". This is because the "tangible part of religion" on which the Tractarians lay such a gross emphasis can be easily "perver[ted] and abus[ed]" by the "carnal mind".[142]

Such fears recur in a more melodramatic way in *Steepleton* (1847), a partly fictional narrative written by Stephen Jenner in an attempt to defend the Church against Tractarian doctrine. The manuscript follows the story of the allegorical figure Frank

---

[139] Charles B. Tayler, *Tractarianism Not of God: Sermons* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1844), p. 74.
[140] Ibid. p. 140.
[141] Ibid., pp. 153–4.
[142] Ibid., pp. 191–2.

Faithful as he makes his way through the maze of High and Low Church politics and comes to reject Tractarianism. In this narrative the Tractarian service is corrupt because it is dramatic: this is made explicit in a conversation between Faithful and a parishioner about the Church service of the nefarious Mr Wheeldriver:

> " . . . Last Christmas he was out all night with these men, singing carols about the parish. The whole choir went in procession, carrying lights before them; and Mr. Wheeldriver went with them. They were out from ten o'clock at night till six o'clock the next morning; and then they had to finish dressing up the church before the service on Christmas-day. They dressed it up with festoons of flowers winding around all the pillars, up to the very ceiling, and crosses made of flowers and evergreens, in every part; so that it looked like a fairy-bower rather than a church."
>
> . . .
> "Oh many people like it," Roger said, "and our church was .filled for several Sundays afterwards with all the young girls in the neighbourhood. They said one to another, "Oh, do come and see Cherrydale church; it is so beautiful; and the singing there is as fine as you would hear at any theatre!"
>
> "Ah there lies the evil of these things, Roger : it is turning religion into a mere musical or theatrical entertainment; and the end must be complete dissipation of mind if not dissipation of morals."
>
> "There you have hit the nail on the head," Roger replied ; "we have already plenty of proof that it does lead to dissipation. You never saw such a loose set as the boys that belong to the choir are becoming. They are often kept up at the rectory till eleven or twelve o'clock at night, to practise; and other nights they go out to sing at some gentleman's house in other parishes, for which they get a supper and

> plenty of drink ; and this makes them so fat and idle, that they will not take the trouble even to wash their hands. I know not what our parish is coming to".[143]

In this conversation, ritual is exposed as indistinguishable from theatre and therefore stands accused of the same moral and social irregularities. Significantly the "festoons and flowers" that Mr Wheeldriver uses to dress up his Church for Christmas day have the effect of transforming it into a fantastical paradise – a fairyland entirely removed from the unembellished real world and the more sombre realities of worship. Further, the decorations are completely overdone, covering every inch of the Chapel; the fact that they are still in place when the service begins suggests that theatricality has invaded and perverted the sacred. The Chapel becomes a place of theatrical excess, attracting local village girls who are only interested in the quality of the music rather than the truths of a faith that can only be intellectually realised. This critique echoes the distaste that writers like Thackeray expressed for the sensational indulgences of drama, its striving towards "ideal" rather than mundane or probable pictures of life. Finally, in this passage the choristers become indistinguishable from actors who are stereotypically associated with immoral and improper behaviour. The writer of this book here reiterates a traditional Puritan opinion: anything touched by the expressive world of the theatre is irredeemably corrupt.

Jenner and Taylor's reaction to Tractarian rites resonate with Victorian anti-theatrical writings in three ways: first, the fear that rites might distort and even usurp the "true" word of Christ betrays a fear of the seductive powers of ritual which interfere with and obscure the authority of "authentic" protestant preachers who rely solely on their language to move a congregation. Second, ritual practices are presented as gross, sensual and sinful, exciting base instincts and so distracting the mind from more elevated moral pursuits. The prudish fear that ritual can easily slide into base revelry is also evident in Victorian attitudes to the theatre, as I have shown. Finally, for Taylor and Jenner ritual is deceptive and misleading, a destructive tool in the hands of ruthless and duplicitous clergymen who play on the weaknesses of a susceptible public. The Victorian theatre

---

[143] Stephen Jenner, *Steepleton: Or High Church and Low Church: Being the Present tendencies of Parties in the Church, Exhibited in the History of Frank Faithful* (London: Longman Brown, Greens, and Longmans, 1847), pp. 258–9.

evidently had a similar effect on many commentators who fear yet are drawn to it, who lose rational control over themselves in the presence of a powerful actor, but are concerned about the overwhelming power of drama over the thoughtless masses.

The Tractarians believed that spirituality was enhanced and brought into being in and through the theatrical; but for their critics drama threatened to corrupt the "truth" of a faith which could exist in words alone, and which thus depended entirely upon rational discourse for its justification. Where rationality failed, so did morals, and where morals failed, so did faith. The theatre, working through the more immediate senses of sight and sound and evoking a powerful and inexplicable feeling of transcendence, could not be allowed to touch religion for fear that words would crumble in the face of it and that logic would be confounded.

Anti-Catholicism

As has been shown, Tractarianism or the Oxford Movement had an ambiguous status in the Protestant England of the mid nineteenth century: its commitment to enhancing religious life through poetry and drama was considered attractive and effective; yet, paradoxically, its concern with performance was also regarded with suspicion for its perceived affinities with the Roman Catholic faith. In fact the emergence of the Oxford movement did much to intensify anti-Catholic feelings which were rife in England at the time: The "Tracts for the Times" written over a period of eight years considered questions which touched on age-old Catholic practices such as the necessity of consecrating the Eucharist. In Tract 90 – what Diana Peschier terms the "most controversial of the tracts", Newman attempted to defend the Council of Trent.[144]

The movement's insistence on the Catholicity of the national Church, its medievalism and sense of Christ as an incarnated presence within worship, as well as its emphasis on what Newman referred to as the "super" natural or miraculous elements of Christianity, seemed to make the religion of Rome appear disconcertingly close and

[144] Diana Peschier, *Nineteenth Century Anti-Catholic Discourses: The Case of Charlotte Brontë* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 3.

consequently more threatening in its ability to seep into even the most sacred spaces of English life.[145]

The origins of anti-Catholic prejudice go back to the Reformation. But anti-Catholic feelings were particularly explosive in the 1840s and 50s, for a number of reasons: after the emancipation of Catholics in the 1829, converts to Catholicism were on the rise and the Church of Rome was growing visibly stronger in Britain: the conversion of prominent religious figures, such as John Henry Newman who left the Anglican Church to become a Catholic in 1844, further intensified religious insecurities. This phenomenon was especially acute in the mid-1800s and was found extremely disturbing by the predominantly Protestant population which was irrationally afraid that the Vatican was using conversion as a means of regaining control over England.

Such anxieties about what was termed "The Papal Agression" were exacerbated in 1850 when, in response to the needs of the increasing Irish immigrant population who had recently fled the famine, Pope Pius IX established dioceses and reinstated the "hierarchy of the Catholic Bishops" in England. The English were suspicious of the new leading Bishop, Cardinal-Archbishop Nicholas Wiseman, who was regarded as combative and hostile. Wiseman's first move was to rename his diocese Westminster which, as Maureen Moran notes, seemed, "symbolically, to snatch the heart of British governance for the seat of a foreign power".[146] She further comments that the Bishop's letter to English Catholics was not encouraging to the English Protestant Population in its insistence that the Roman Church was the seat of temporal and religious authority.[147] This letter provoked the population in its confident assertion that the dioceses and not the Queen ruled over England, and prompted a series of No Popery demonstrations throughout England during the period of 1850–1. During these processions the windows of Catholic Churches were broken and Wiseman's effigy was burnt,[148] but they never did reach the intensity of the anti-Catholic riots of the late eighteenth century.

---

[145] Maureen Moran, *Catholic Sensationalism and Victorian Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), p.7.
[146] Ibid., p.7.
[147] Ibidem.
[148] Peschier, *Nineteenth Century Anti-Catholic Discourses*, pp. 2–3.

Marianne Thormählen explains that Victorian feelings about Catholicism were bound up with their sense of national pride:[149] the interdependence of church and state in England was threatened by what appeared to them as the Pope's despotic power over every aspect of secular life. Further, anti-Catholic feelings were inflamed by the xenophobic mistrust of the growing group of Irish Catholics in England. Catholicism was thus seen as the enemy of individual freedom, an alien invader that sought utterly to crush British intellectual and religious autonomy.[150]

The war against Catholicism was largely carried out in language: the Press enthusiastically took up the Anti-Popery cry and provided a forum for some of the most vitriolic attacks on the religion. Catholic culture was construed as the ultimate "other": opposed to British and Protestant virtues of honesty, truth, moderation and prudence, Catholicism was associated with duplicity, political depravity, superstition and excessive worldliness. Common tropes included stories about conniving priests who used confession or the poetry and music of the Mass to tempt young, sensitive women away from their male guardians into a life of seclusion in a nunnery, horrific tales about the sinful excesses indulged behind the secluded walls of the nunnery or monastery, and tales of Jesuitical duplicity.[151]

The sensational language in which these "factual" accounts were written blurred the boundaries between fact and fiction, creating what Maureen Moran refers to as an "imaginary landscape" where excess and perversities – of plot, character and language– were indulged, a landscape peopled with "representations of . . . extremism and strangeness".[152] The same stereotypes and gothic blend of realism and fantasy, the factual and the melodramatic, occur in the anti-Catholic fiction of the period. Such novels are replete with echoes of the gothic tradition of eighteenth century romance: the "imprisoning cloisters" with despotic nuns and priests, Catholic duplicity as well as the Satanic Gothic evildoer, all are brought into the ambiguous, psychological realm of the domestic.[153]

---

[149] Marianne Thormählen, *The Brontës and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 25.
[150] Ibidem.
[151] Moran, *Catholic Sensationalism*, p. 29
[152] Ibid., p. 1.
[153] Ibid., pp. 13–14.

For Moran the sensationalist discourse of anti-Catholic novels frees Victorian writers from the rigid expectations of realist fiction and Protestant propriety and allows them to explore subversive questions about sexuality, politics and religion, free from censure. Her primary concern is with gender politics and the way in which this gothic Catholic landscape is used as a mirror, a way for writers to explore the sexual and social taboos that British women faced.[154] This is also the focus of Diana Peschier's comprehensive study of the anti-Catholic literature of the nineteenth century: Peschier notes the gendered nature of anti-Catholic tropes – recurring tales of imaginative and sensitive girls at the mercy of manipulative and attractive priests,[155] fears that women might be seduced away from the control of the pater-familias and subjected to the Panopticon-like scrutiny of the Catholic convent, fears about the seductive nature of the confessional where women were encouraged to spill the secrets of their most intimate, private lives into the ears of an unmarried stranger. In these accounts Catholicism is far from disempowered: instead it is granted a magical allure, an imaginative power through which it deceives and seduces its victims by theatrically parading as something that it is not.

Devon Fisher has emphasised the way in which Catholic cultural practices, especially the veneration of the saints, provided a language in which writers could confront and work through their feelings about the rapid transferral of authority from state and Church to individuals. The fear and suspicion of a growing liberalism caused some writers to turn to the stories of the saints as vehicles "for a conservative cultural critique".[156] The saints and Catholic culture as a whole were compelling and "deeply desirable" for their promise of a more "unified authority on upon which Victorians could model their own lives, social arrangements, and beliefs" but they were simultaneously considered a frightening example of theological error and the subject of "apocalyptic fantasies of the destruction of a nation by a papal army" that would use the seductive narratives of the saints in order to subdue and deceive the populace.[157] Fisher is concerned with the way in which the narratives of the saints are reinvented by the

[154] Ibid., p. 78.
[155] Peschier, *Nineteenth Century Anti-Catholic Discourses*, p. 15.
[156] Devon Fisher, *Roman Catholic Saints and Early Victorian Literature: Conservatism, Liberalism and the Emergence of Secular Culture* (England: Ashgate, 2012), p. 2.
[157] Ibid., p.1.

Victorians in order to inscribe their own culture with a renewed significance: for my purposes it is necessary to emphasise the imaginative quality of these narratives, their power to challenge the social and religious norms of the period through the paradoxical attraction-repulsion of a radically different spirituality.

These arguments do have some relevance to my discussion but my concern here is not with the way in which Catholic practices were used to explore the dynamics of gender politics or with the relationship between social and cultural insecurities and the attraction of Catholicism. Rather I am interested in the dramatic nature of anti-Catholic discourse, its preoccupation with and ambiguity about the aesthetic and the staged.

Even the most vitriolic attacks on Catholicism are described in such a way as to recall the melodrama of the Victorian stage. Frances Trollope's anti-Catholic novel *Father Eustace* explores the aesthetic and distinctly dramatic quality of Catholic practices. The novel begins like the opening scene of a play:

> There are few spectacles more impressive than the death-bed of a Roman Catholic, when attended by all the forms appointed by his picturesque and hieroglyphic faith, and accompanied by enough of ecclesiastical splendour to atone to the imagination, or rather to the senses of the spectator, for superseding the tragedy of nature, by the pomp and solemnity of ceremonious rites. Such was the scene presented at Cuthbert Castle, when Richard Randolphe de Morley, its wealthy and long-descended owner, was about to breathe his last. The chamber was one of considerable magnificence, both from its dimensions and the stately and massive style in which it was fitted up ; but neither the lofty crimson velvet bed, nor the hangings of the same gorgeous material which adorned the walls, though with much rich gilding to set them off, would have produced the effect they did, had not a pair of folding doors, now thrown widely open at the bottom of the room, displayed to view a small, but highly decorated, Romish chapel, the altar of which, resplendent with gems, was illuminated by a multitude of tapers.[158]

The deathbed scene is described as a theatrical set, so gorgeous that it distracts one from the dreadful reality of death. The majesty of the setting is emphasised by the many signs

[158] Frances Trollope, *Father Eustace: A Tale of The Jesuits* (London: Henry Colburn, 1847), 1: 1–2.

of wealth and especially by the artfully placed "Romish Chapel" that can be seen through the folding doors. Trollope's use of the word "spectacle" to describe the scene is significant: "spectacle" is associated with theatre in that it suggests a public display designed to impress and entertain an audience (*OED*). But in its suggestion of an exhibition on a grand scale, the word specifically emphasises the outward and ostentatious qualities of theatre. In the mid-nineteenth century the word was used in this way by H. Reed in a lecture on English Literature, where he suggests that a spectacle is ultimately an empty show (*OED*); it is an interpretation that resonates with Trollope's critique of Catholic theatricality: in the scene quoted above, Catholic symbols are arranged to dazzle and impress the senses but are simultaneously vacuous and morally questionable, important because of their material rather than their symbolic value. Trollope's critique hearkens back to a Post-Reformation anxiety about the theatrical sign: in a study of the Medieval *Corpus Christi* cycle Sarah Beckwith has argued that in the Post-Reformation period, a lively "sacramental theatre" was replaced with a "theatre of epistemological doubt" where signs threatened to become "mere signs", without their earlier symbolic richness.[159] Trollope draws on these fears about theatricality in her depiction of Catholic sacramental culture: she presents the Catholic world as flashy and hollow, encouraging readers' impulse to admire while playing to anxieties that performance might deliberately confound meaning.

Protestant fiction, newspapers and speeches often encourage contradictory responses to Catholic theatricality. Readers are at times encouraged to revel in the histrionic appeal of Catholicism and at other times to dismiss it as absurd and excessive. In his sensational orations, the ex-priest Father Gavazzi, plays to Protestant disdain for theatricality:

> I will now prove by facts that you have nothing of spirit or truth in the Catholic processions, and that the nature of them is Pagan. I call to mind some of those processions in my native country. The procession of Corpus Domini, or the body of Christ, is the greatest in all Catholic countries. What is it in Naples, for instance? All English travellers at Rome go to Naples after Easter, in order to

[159] Sarah Beckwith, *Signifying God: Social Relation and Symbolic Act in the York Corpus Christi Plays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 152.

> enjoy this beautiful procession, because English people do not like to lose a good spectacle. The great square of St. Peter is converted into a great pit, with boxes at the sides; it becomes the greatest theatre in the world, because it is the theatre in which plays the Pope himself. Drapery, carpets, velvet, and silk decorations, citron and orange trees, flowers are arranged with the utmost precision and taste, such as is displayed by good stage managers. What is the spectacle of the Prophet at Covent-Garden to this procession, my dear brethren? Nothing. Boys, priests, bishops, prelates, and cardinals arrayed in dresses, costly with gold and jewellery, and attended by servants in red liveries; and after all comes the Pope himself—the successor of St. Peter (laughter)—carried upon the shoulders of his servants, and adoring Christ in the water. It is all a farce, and therefore the Pope must adore the water in the presence of the people, though I do not think he believes in it. But after him, approach the noble papal guard, on horseback, dressed in splendid uniform, accompanied with silver trumpets and a great flag embroidered with velvet and gold. This concludes the procession; and all, especially the lovely women who are spectators, are very much excited to devotion by the noble guard (laughter and applause).[160]

Gavazzi emphasises the superficially "dramatic" impact of the ceremony of the Corpus Christi: the stage is deliberately set for the arrival of the Pope and elaborate sets are tastefully arranged with careful attention to the effects produced on bystanders. It is a spectacle not of faith but of lavish materialism where bright costumes and glittering jewellery are displayed. The whole procession is described as a farce with the Pope as the most laughable actor. The Pope's act of worship is an absurd show for the benefit of those who are watching for he himself does not believe in his own actions. Only a gullible female observer would be drawn in to the show of devotion of the papal guard and the carefully crafted emotional effects of the scene. Gavazzi's words appeal here to the puritan association between theatricality and debauchery – the world of the theatre is distinctly irrational, mediocre and superficial. It therefore transforms faith into a mockery. True faith is, by implication, intellectual and detached.

---

[160] Alessandro Gavazzi, *Six Lectures* (Toronto: Donough and Brother, 1853), p. 236.

This tawdry ceremonial, divested of any authentic spiritual and emotional content, contrasts with some accounts of the liturgy which admit a powerful and dangerous mystical allure. The secret attraction that Catholic aesthetics exerted over the writers of the period has been well documented. Maureen Moran notes that Neo-medievalism and Pugin's Gothic revival which swept through England at this time meant that Catholic architecture and art was viewed as "glamorous and fashionable".[161] This, coupled with the Anglo-Catholic revival of medieval liturgy, introduced a note of ambivalence into descriptions of the Catholic Mass and ceremonial. Mysterious and sensual, appealing to the emotions rather than the intellect (or so the common stereotype maintained), Catholic liturgy was seen as the ultimate symbol of the debauchery of the Catholic Church. Sensational anti-Catholic novels are haunted by rituals – particularly confession and the ordination of nuns – that are often associated with the secluded convent environment, the site of horrible crimes and atrocities.

Eliza Smith, in her personal story about the few years that she spent as a novice in a Catholic convent, describes the allure of a Catholic Mass in the following way:

> The whole scene to me was as novel as inspiring; and my not quite understanding the meaning of any part of it, perhaps if anything rendered it more so. The white habits and flowing veils of the sisters, contrasted by the black, monkish costume of the brothers, as headed by the pale intellectual-looking priest, they slowly swept around the church, revived many a glowing imagination of olden time. And when at last, pausing, they all knelt before the altar, and the deep rich voice of the priest intoned one of the church's anthems, which was immediately taken up by the effective and well-arranged choir, the illusion was at its height; and with a bounding heart and flushed cheek, I mentally exclaimed, "Surely this is no other than the house of God and the very gate of heaven".[162]

Like Gavazzi, Smith draws attention to the theatrical details and effects of the scene but here the result is imaginatively powerful rather than ludicrous: the participants in the Mass are presented as actors in costume. There is a stark visual contrast between the

---

[161] Moran, *Catholic Sensationalism*, p. 7.
[162] Eliza Smith, *The Progress of Beguilement to Romanism: a Personal Narrative* (London: Seeley's, 1850), p. 28.

white habits of the nuns and the black costumes of the monks and their every action (sweeping around the Church and then dramatically kneeling together before the altar), is designed to have an impact on the congregation. These actions are accompanied by the deep singing of the priest and choir – a concert of sight and sound that work together to produce a ritualistic heightening of emotion. It is significant that this display is deceptive: it creates an illusion of heaven by confounding logic. Smith experiences it as if in a dream, only partly understanding the proceedings.

Yet the magic of Catholic ceremonial extends beyond mere imagination: its power is the power of the anti-Christ. Smith closes her narrative with a desperate warning: with a "show of beauty" Catholicism tempts sensitive souls onto the "brink of a precipice". It is a system of "foul abuses" which "cannot be the religion of God" but which stems from the "one source from which all evil springs".[163] Perversely then, Catholic theatre is not a mere show but a conduit for real demonic presences, which take hold of the mind and corrupt the soul.

The priest is the most dangerous actor in the Catholic drama. This extract from William Hogan's *Popery As It Was and As It Is, Auricular Confession, Popish Nunneries* expounds on the demonic behaviour of priests in the confessional:

> The priest as a confessor, possesses the secret of a woman's soul; he knows every half-formed hope, every dim desire, every thwarted feeling. The priest as spiritual director, animates that woman with his own ideas, moves her with his own will, fashions her according to his own fancy. . .[164]

The sexual overtones of this description – the fear that a woman might become the slave to a sensuously minded man – have been discussed by Diana Peschier. I am more concerned with the dramatic power of the priest, the fact that his role as spiritual director becomes synonymous with the role of a director of a play. But his spiritual authority makes his dramatic power more complete: forcing the woman to act in his drama, the priest moves her at will like a puppet master.

---

[163] Ibid., p. 114.
[164] William Hogan, *Popery As It Was and As It Is, Auricular Confession, Popish Nunneries* (Hartford: Silas Andrus & Son, 1853), p. 258.

In *Nineteenth Century Anti-Catholic Discourses*, Diana Peschier records a passage by an anonymous writer of *History of the Confessional* which characterises priests in a similar fashion:

> He is a moral skunk, whose offensive properties and destructive habits make the creature at once an object of dread, loathsomeness and aversion. He is an embodiment of brute and demon combined in one character, the Cobra that defiles and destroys. He is an unscrupulous *mesmerist*, exposing the nakedness and perverting the faculties of those who put themselves under his influence. He is the most venomous nondescript, an agent of Satan for transforming men and women into useless or malignant beings.[165]

The priest is both much less and much more than human: his moral ineptitude and carnal nature make him brutish, but he is also satanic, a cobra that "defiles and destroys". He is not simply a director of a drama but a magician – possessed of supernatural powers to hypnotise and expose those under his influence. His powers extend beyond those of the director to encompass those of the playwright or artist: he does not merely control but also transforms those in his power into "malignant beings".

The artful, theatrical, quasi-magical power of Catholic priests is embodied in a popular figure of the Victorian anti-Catholic imagination, the Jesuit. Stereotypically the Jesuit was depicted as a spy with a keen insight into the psychological and emotional condition of his victims. A master of disguise, he would be able expertly to play a variety of roles in order to gain power over his unsuspecting victim: his sharp intelligence and duplicity meant that he would easily come into possession of the secrets that he needed in order to further his nefarious ends. In the hands of a Jesuit, privacy would no longer be sacred and his victim's most guarded thoughts would be subjected to the surveillance of Rome.

The attractive mystical powers of the Jesuit are therefore distinctly dramatic: Thackeray explores this trope in the figure of Father Holt in *The History of Henry Esmond, Esq* (1852) which was set in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century.

---

[165] Anon., *History of the Confessional*, qtd. in *Nineteenth Century Anti-Catholic Discourses: The Case of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. Diana Peschier (N.Y: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 12. Source Untraced.

The young Harry Esmond is brought up by his tutor, Father Holt, who inspires great awe in the child with his miraculous appearances and disappearances and his variety of disguises. Father Holt makes a great show of his supernatural powers of omniscience as well as his "magical" entrances and exits through complex contraptions. Here Thackeray describes the surprising appearance of the Father in the Chaplain's room at four o clock in the morning:

> Harry jumped up, thinking for certain it was a robber, or hoping perhaps for a ghost, and, flinging open his own door, saw before him the Chaplain's door open, and a light inside, and a figure standing in the doorway, in the midst of a great smoke which issued from the room.
>
> "Who's there?" cried the boy who was of a good spirit.
>
> "Silentium!" whispered the other; "tis I, my boy!" and, holding his hand out, Harry had no difficulty in recognizing his master and friend, Father Holt. A curtain was over the window of the Chaplain's room and looked to the court, and Harry saw that the smoke came from a great flame of papers which were burning in a brazier . . . After giving a hasty greeting to the lad . . . the Father continued burning his papers, drawing them from a cupboard over the mantel-piece wall, which Harry had never seen before.
>
> Father Holt laughed, seeing the lad's attention fixed at once on this hole.
>
> "That is right, Harry," he said, "faithful little famuli, see all and say nothing. You are faithful, I know".[166]

This passage draws on some of the gothic stereotypes: the Father appears mysteriously in the night and, magician-like, is capable of revealing a secret cupboard. Henry's discovery of the Father amongst the billowing smoke from the suspicious papers that he is burning dramatically enhances the gothic mood of the scene. But what is interesting about the mysterious aura hanging over the Father is that it is self-consciously fashioned: the Father

[166] William Makepeace Thackeray, *The History of Henry Esmond* (Chicago: Scott Foresman and Company, 1902), pp.75–6.

makes much of the burning papers, inviting Henry to read them and melodramatically enacting his duplicitous role in his explicit advice to the child to see all and say nothing. That the Father is self-consciously playing the role of the Jesuit becomes evident when, in displaying his variety of costumes to Henry, he comments that if his pursuers find them they'll "tell no tales, except that Father Holt wore more suits than one. All Jesuits do. You know what deceivers we are Harry".[167]

Exciting and dazzling as the child finds Father Holt, there is something absurd about his penchant for mystery, surprises and deceptions. Later, Henry comes to realise what a Thespian his old friend is and that even his supposed omniscience is suspect: he only knows part of the truth which he then dresses up as the whole truth in order to impress his former pupil. There is a touch of Falstaff-like energy and pathos in the old Father who "loved to make a parade of mystery, as it were, and would appear and disappear at our quarters as suddenly as he used to return and vanish in the old days at Castlewood".[168] In his characterisation of the priest, Thackeray draws on characteristics of the stereotypical Jesuit; but the portrait also deviates from the standard stereotype: like a Dickensian character, the Father dramatically performs his role with evident enjoyment. There is nothing malevolent in his behaviour, however, and his performances lack the satanic magnetism often associated with Jesuits: instead his penchant for drama is more of an idiosyncratic character trait or eccentricity. In this way Catholic theatricality is demystified: it is not to be feared or marvelled at – only a child would be truly moved by it. It is true that the Father does succeed in making a convert out of Frank Castlewood and so his machinations are not unsuccessful on the young and susceptible. Yet unfortunate as this turn of events is deemed to be, the Father is far less threatening to rational adults: from this perspective his "deceptions" appear as a mostly benign game of role-play, curious and entertaining for its oddities, but nothing more.

This contrasts with Frances Trollope's sensational exploration of the machinations of the troubled Jesuit Priest, Father Eustace, in his plot to seduce the young heiress, Juliana de Morley, into a nunnery. Here the Jesuit's work is not merely an oddity but an art-form: he is a powerful actor and a playwright – spinning dramas in which he

[167] Ibid., p. 76.
[168] Ibid., p. 328.

entices his victims to act. This fact about the nature of Jesuits is most succinctly brought home by the Nun – Sister Agatha – whose job it is to keep an eye on Father Eustace and ensure that he does not fail in his task:

> Truly, my good cousin, there is much of amusement mingled with the utility which our professional duty calls upon us to perform. I never make one of the commanded pilgrimages which, like the present, leads me from my convent into the world, without thinking of a phrase used by a worldling, who was rather valued by me in my days of sin. Do you remember that honest exclamation of the Jesuitical Puck? 'Good Lord ! What fools these mortals be!' Does it never come into your head, when you are amongst them?"[169]

By claiming that Puck is Jesuitical, Sister Agatha links the Jesuit with a dramatic tradition of playwright figures, who act both within and outside of the particular drama of the characters. In performing a number of dramatic functions simultaneously – actor, director, playwright and audience – the Jesuit elevates him or herself above everyday life and becomes possessed of a superhuman insight into events. Trollope elsewhere clarifies that Jesuits (as the ultimate symbols of the Catholic faith) are only interested in worldly power and that they unscrupulously use the seductive arts of acting, music and poetry to achieve this end. But this does not explain the magical aura that they are capable of conjuring: their power is the power of drama and the expressive arts, which possess a supernatural quality in themselves. Therefore the fact that the Jesuit is a master performer also makes him a master of the souls of his victims.

This is most evident when Father Eustace, in his disguise as Mr Stormont, charms Juliana and her family with his performance on the organ:

> Mr. Stormont immediately made his way to the dark curtain, and instantly applying his hand to the cord which drew it aside, disclosed the keys of the instrument, which were opened ready to his touch, and without pausing for a moment, he sat down, and caused such a mighty stream of harmony to swell

[169] Trollope, *Father Eustace*, 2: 319.

> through the lofty room, as never before had blessed the ears of the astonished and entranced Juliana.
>
> Even the languid spirits of Lady Sarah were roused to admiration, by sounds so unexpected and inspiring; nor could the assumed apathy of Mr. Wardour resist them long ; he looked at Lady Sarah, and she at him, with a degree of wonder that almost approached alarm. "Who and what is he?" she exclaimed; but Mr. Wardour, who alone heard her, only replied, by repeating, perhaps unconsciously, her words.
>
> But when the seemingly inspired performer added his magnificent voice to the charm he was throwing over them, the emotions he produced were stronger still. Solemn, slow, and most divinely sweet, were the notes he breathed. The words were Latin; but none there could fail to discover that it was a requiem for the dead.
>
> Why he should have chosen such a subject for his first performance on the instrument, was a question which at that moment neither of his auditors seemed at leisure to ask themselves or each other. The silence was as perfect as that of the grave itself; and the long-drawn sigh by which each bosom relieved itself when he ceased, spoke more eloquently than any words could have done, how powerful had been the effect which he had produced upon them.[170]

The Jesuit is such a skilled performer that he is able to transform the music that he is playing into a spell, an enchantment cast over his listeners: this ritual is similar to the Mass described by Eliza Smith in its power to confound logic, leaving the company speechless and incapable of understanding his unusual choice of music and thereby discovering his true identity. It also contains a certain kind of gothic power – it is a requiem for the dead which produces a death-like effect on the company. This ambiguously suggests the destructive effects of Father Eustace's art but also invokes a ghostly dimension by bringing the listeners to the very brink of the afterlife.

---

[170] Ibid., 2: 163–5.

The ritual sound of the music, mingled with the Jesuit's voice, is so moving that its effects are supernatural: it is described as "blessing" the ears of Juliana – only language saturated with divine associations seems capable of describing its profound and soulful effects on the listeners. Through his power of performance the Jesuit is able to transform himself into a superhuman presence, something that has stepped out from the realm of the uncanny, so that Lady Sarah and Mr Wardour are completely awe-struck and terrified by him.

In both Thackeray and Trollope's depictions, the Jesuit has a charmed existence that arises from his power as a performer. But Thackeray mocks the Jesuit's performance by reducing it to a child's game and so attempts to keep his readers at an objective distance from its effects: this, however, does not deprive the portrait of Father Holt of imaginative life, and his playful penchant for acting and mystery-making grants him a larger-than-life quality. Trollope, by contrast, plays up the seductive power of Jesuitical performance, bringing its mystical qualities to the fore even while she denies its legitimacy.

Conclusion

I have surveyed attitudes to drama, realism, and ceremonial faith in various texts of the mid-Victorian period and have attempted to examine the complex and often contradictory ways in which these categories coincide. I suggest that while the theatre is generally described as artificial, misleading and exaggerated, these perceptions are often inextricable from a sense of an indefinable magic or mystical power of the performed: even while commentators condemn the actor for his duplicity, they also understand this in terms of a supernatural power of self-transcendence. Significantly, commentators and writers seem to find themselves incapable of defining this sense of the supernatural in the performed and the dramatic. It is felt intuitively and "experienced" rather than described: the challenge that this mysterious dimension of the dramatic poses to logical thought, often inspires fear or mistrust among writers, who attempt to distance, deflate, trivialise and control it– reactions that resonate with the realist impulse to bring the inexplicable within the realm of reason.

Tractarian thought about the value of ceremony and the ways in which it subsumes and transcends poetry makes explicit the connection between dramatic and mystical elements, the ritual power of the performed, which is intuitively perceived by contemporary critics of drama. I have shown that contradictory attitudes to the dramatic are sharpened when writers approach the ceremonial culture of the Catholic faith: Catholic theatricality is presented as ludicrous and excessive and yet somehow impossible to hold at a distance. This is because it seems able to transgress the boundaries of traditional theatre and even of the Church and so draws ordinary people under its spell, blurring the distinctions between art and life. Descriptions of the Jesuit figure attest to the mystical power of performance to transform reality: these figures can be described as magician-like, drawing on the power of drama and rendering it impossible to rationalise or contain.

Evidently the relationship between the mystical and the theatrical in mid-Victorian fiction is more complex than it might at first appear to be: despite the prevalence of anti-theatrical feeling, theatricality in these writings cannot quite be described as an artificial substitute for a more authentic spirituality; nor does it unambiguously channel the sacred. The dramatic – whether experienced in the theatre or whether associated with a sacramental Catholic culture – is felt to be paradoxically mystical and vacuous; it is connected to the powers of the magician who conjures presences out of nothing and whose art is never quite authentic. In the next few Chapters I turn to the thought and work of Charles Dickens for whom the ambiguities around realism, drama, spirituality and triviality are subsumed in a melodramatic vision: in the next Chapter I will survey Dickens's passion for the theatre and its association in his mind with the child's world of play. This will be considered alongside a survey of his at times histrionic responses to the spiritual.

CHAPTER TWO: Pantomimes, Games and "Amens in the right place": Dickens, Theatricality and Religion – the Biographical Evidence

Dickens and the theatre

Ever since he was a small boy, Dickens learned to appreciate theatrical productions: when he was seven and eight years old in 1819 and 20, he recalled being taken to watch the performance of the famous clown, Joe Grimaldi, in the little Theatre Royal Rochester; it was here where he also became familiar with the acting of Edmund Kean and the great comic actor and mimic, Charles Mathews, on whom he was later to model his own style.[171]

The figure of Grimaldi in particular inspired his admiration throughout his childhood and adult life: in his *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi* he declares rapturously that, when remembering the clown, all the "delights – the ten thousand million delights of a pantomime – come streaming upon us now".[172] This love of the comic and the pantomimic is central to Dickens's conception of the theatre. In his *Sketches by Boz* Dickens includes an article entitled "The Pantomime of Life" that was published in the *Bentley's Miscellany* in March 1837. Here he describes his attachment to pantomimes in the following manner:

> We revel in pantomimes – not because they dazzle one's eyes with tinsel and gold leaf; not because, like Christmas-day, and Twelfth night, and Shrove Tuesday and one's own birthday, they come to us but once a year; – our attachment is founded on a graver and very different reason. A pantomime is to us, a mirror of life; nay, more, we maintain that it is so to audiences generally, although they are not aware of it, and that this very circumstance is the secret cause of their amusement and delight.[173]

---

[171] Edgar Johnson, *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph,* abridged edn (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 25.
[172] Charles Dickens, *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi* (London, New York: G. Routledge and Sons, 1875), p. v.
[173] Charles Dickens, "The Pantomime of Life" in *Sketches by Boz* (Philadelphia, PA: Lea and Blanchard, 1839), c. xiv, p. 264.

There is thus something frivolous and even absurd about life for Dickens. He sees life as both attractive and empty: morality has become a farce where good and evil are reduced to buffoonery for the amusement of an audience. He is particularly fascinated by the "strange tricks" of the harlequin who, merely by waving a wand in front of a man's face, is able to "dispossess his brains of all the notions previously stored there, and fill it with an entirely new set of ideas".[174] But the piece does not simply celebrate life's triviality: in the manner of Erasmus's *Praise of Folly* (1509), Dickens also uses the pantomime to expose the pretentions of his society: the real-life clowns, he tells us, are the politicians who, compelled by the "irresistible influence of the wand of office",[175] undergo all sorts of bizarre behaviours which do not fall short of "most fantastic contortions, . . . even grovelling on the earth and licking up the dust", a procedure that he finds "rather disgusting than otherwise".[176] In this way the article moves between pure superficial enjoyment of life's eccentricities, and the graver sense that the language of pantomime is the only language in which one can express one's experience of a life that has been reduced to a pageant of fools.

Dickens's love of the pantomimic and melodramatic is at the heart of what some critics find so troubling about his approach in the novels: in an article published in the Sunday Times in 1857 which was entitled, "Mr Dickens as a Politician" James Fitzjames Stephen complained that it was as "foolish to estimate [Dickens's] melodramatic and sentimental stock –in trade gravely as it would be to undertake a refutation of the jests of the clown in a Christmas pantomime".[177] It is true that Dickens often seems to be fascinated by the trivial surfaces of things and that for his whole life he was attracted by the playful and the performed: as a boy, Dickens engaged in theatrical pranks with his friends, begging from old ladies in Drummond Street and then, when they reacted with shock, running away as fast as he could while bursting with laughter.[178] This penchant for taking on roles is explored in another piece called "Gone Astray" (August, 1853) where Dickens writes of himself as a small boy who, having become lost in London, wanders

---

[174] Ibid., p. 268.
[175] Ibidem.
[176] Ibidem.
[177] James Fitzjames Stephen, "Mr Dickens as a Politician" (*Saturday Review*, 3 January 1857), in ed. Philip Collins, *Charles Dickens The Critical Heritage* (1986; London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 358.
[178] John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens* (1872–74), 2 vols (London: Chapman and Hall, 1876), 1: 49.

into a theatre where he dramatically enacts a scene for the benefit of curious onlookers: "whenever I saw that my appearance attracted attention, either outside the doors or afterwards within the theatre, I pretended to look out for somebody who was taking care of me, and from whom I was separated, and to exchange nods and smiles with that creature of my imagination".[179]

These examples suggest that Dickens tended to behave in a clownish manner, seeing life as a theatrical game, which inspired trivial trickery and pretence. He was also conscious of the influential effect of such behaviour: through his pranks he was able to elicit powerful responses from people – whether it was anger or mirth. Similarly, when lost in the theatre, he became conscious of his own powers of manipulation – using drama to confound the perception of spectators. But effective as he found this type of behaviour to be, he was always aware that it was primarily both silly and entertaining. Contemporaries remember Dickens as a man of high theatrical spirits: Peter Ackroyd speaks of the memory "of his good humour" among friends and acquaintances who recalled his "inimitably funny way" or "strangely grotesque glances".[180] Ackroyd further notes that Dickens "loved to act out the gestures and tricks of the clown, and on more than one occasion improvised a whole dialogue between clown and pantaloons in approved pantomimic style".[181]

Eleanor Picken left an account of a flirtation with Dickens when he invited her to join him and his wife and family on a holiday in 1840 when she was 19:

> He put his other arm round this, and exclaimed in theatrical tones that he intended to hold me there till "the sad sea waves" should submerge us. "Think of the sensation we shall create! Think of the road to celebrity which you are about to tread! No, not exactly to tread, but to flounder into!" Here I implored him to let me go, and struggled hard to release myself. "Let your mind dwell on the column in the "Times" wherein will be vividly described the pathetic fate of the

[179] Charles Dickens, *The Works of Charles Dickens: Miscellaneous Papers Plays and Poems* (New York: Bigelow, Brown & co, 1916), p. 388.
[180] Ackroyd, *Dickens*, p. 265.
[181] Ibid., p. 265.

> lovely E. P., drowned by Dickens in a fit of dementia! Don't struggle, poor little bird; you are powerless in the claws of such a kite as this child!" [182]

Here Dickens throws himself into the flirtation with such violent enjoyment that he becomes quite terrifying: he declares that he will drown them both in the waves and theatrically elaborates on the spectacle that this will create, the great splash the story will make in the newspapers. But the frightening manner in which he behaves is ultimately a game to him, a bizarre act for the benefit of Eleanor and perhaps also for the benefit of his wife and those who were watching from the beach.

Dickens had a healthy appetite for enjoyment and, throughout his life, "continued to take huge pleasure in games, charades, conjuring tricks, cricket races, quoits and other boyish amusements".[183] But the theatre was the game that fascinated him most and he was drawn to it throughout his life: George Lear described Dickens's love of acting while he was still a clerk at Ellis and Blackwell's, suggesting that he excelled "in mimicking the popular singers of that day, whether comic or patriotic; as to his acting he could give us Shakespeare by the ten minutes, and imitate all the leading actors of the time".[184] He wrote a few theatrical pieces and engaged in amateur theatricals with great gusto: examples of some of the pieces that he wrote in early life were the musical "The Village Coquettes" and "The Strange Gentleman", both of which were performed in St James theatre in 1836, where Dickens made the ill-advised decision of responding to a curtain call. This incident reveals Dickens's sometimes-vulgar obsession with pure spectacle to the exclusion of propriety.[185] Dickens also put on a private theatrical performance of his own in 1833 and around this time wrote the comic performance "O'thello". Throughout the 1840s and 50s he engaged in a number of amateur performances as actor-director, among them a number of farces, two comedies by Ben Jonson and Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor*.[186]

But he seldom took the theatre seriously. Even in his well-known letter to Forster written in 1844, when he confesses that as a young man he applied for an audition at

---

[182] 'Eleanor Picken's Diary', qtd in Tomalin, *Charles Dickens: A Life*, p. 119. Source Untraced.
[183] Tomalin, *Charles Dickens: A Life*, p. 31.
[184] Ackroyd, *Dickens*, p. 120.
[185] Johnson, *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph*, p. 119.
[186] Tomalin, *Charles Dickens: A Life*, p. 171.

Drury Lane, he qualifies that he "had never thought of the stage but as a means of getting [money]".[187] He had a sharp sense of the absurdity and artificiality of acting and even as a young child he was very aware of the imperfections in a production of *Macbeth*, remarking comically to Forster that the witches "bore an awful resemblance to the thanes and other proper inhabitants of Scotland; and that the good king Duncan couldn't rest in his grave, but was constantly coming out of it and calling himself somebody else".[188]

Dickens's son remarked that his father was "the quickest to see the ludicrous aspect of any situation",[189] and, indeed, part of the attraction of attending the theatre for Dickens seemed to involve the fun of seeing through the illusion: as his parodies of acting in *Nicholas Nickleby* and later in *Great Expectations* suggest, Dickens took great pleasure in exposing the ridiculous, banal and sometimes histrionic nature of bad plays. At such times he would retain a realist's detachment from the action, and meticulously catalogue the actors' failings. This is evident in a letter that he wrote to Forster in 1851 when he complained of a French production of *As You Like It* that "nobody had anything to do but to sit down as often as possible on as many stones and trunks of trees as possible".[190]

Nicholas Nickleby could be seen as one of the most theatrical of Dickens's novels in the sense that the novel's plot is highly stylised and large sections of its content are devoted to Nicholas's experience with Mr Crummles and his party of actors; yet it is here where Dickens's parody of the theatre and theatrical is also the most uncompromising. One example is when Nicholas tells Mr Lenville how to go about acting the denouement of a melodrama that they are about to produce:

> "You pause," said Nicholas; "you recollect to have heard a clock strike ten in your infancy. The pistol falls from your hand – you are overcome – you burst into tears and become a virtuous and exemplary character for ever afterwards."

---

[187] Madeline House and Graham Storey, *et al*, eds, *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, 12 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965–2002), 4: 244.
[188] Forster's *Life*, 1: 32.
[189] Ackroyd, *Dickens*, p. 265.
[190] Forster's *Life*, 1: 11.

> "Capital!" Said Mr Lenville:"that's a sure card, a sure card. Get the curtain down with a touch of nature like that, and it'll be a triumphant success".[191]

These are the worst and most absurd qualities of melodrama: great emotional revelations and transformations that are completely hollow but spectacularly staged, exaggerations clearly calculated to garner an emotive response from audiences but that are also ultimately implausible in the extreme. The novel's mockery of the theatre even extends to the theatre enthusiasts: Mrs Wititterly's pretensions to high society are expressed through her professed love of the performing arts. Her husband declares rapturously of her that she is "sought after and courted by glittering crowds, and brilliant circles. She is excited by the opera, the drama, the fine arts . . .".[192]

It is true, as Michael Slater argues, that Dickens's parodies "derive not from scorn but from love",[193] and Ackroyd notes that his understanding of "appearance, of gesture, of speech and of character [in the novel] has been very strongly influenced by his experience of acting".[194] But the love of acting expressed here is a love of the game – the spectacular, playful and superficial qualities of theatre. People's behaviour in the novel (whether on or off the stage) is melodramatic in the sense that it is pretentious, artificial or absurd: like the story on the Pantomime the novel draws on drama both to reveal the superficiality of society and also because it is greatly enjoyable for its own sake.

In these instances Dickens seems to value the anarchic potential of theatrical behaviour– the manner in which the dramatic undermines and trivialises meaning rather than upholding it: dramatic behaviour seems to be opposed to any true sense of tragedy, meaning or spirituality. This is how Dickens describes the burning down of a theatre in Bologne to Wilkie Collins in September 1854:

> Last Sunday as ever was, the theatre took fire at half-past eleven in the forenoon. Being close by the English church, it showered hot sparks into that temple through the open windows. Whereupon the congregation shrieked and rose and

---

[191] Charles Dickens, *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1839), c. xxiv, p. 226.
[192] Ibid., c.xxi, pp. 201–2.
[193] Michael Slater (ed.), "Nicholas Nickleby", appended to his edition of *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* by Charles Dickens (London: Penguin English Library, 2012), p. 1024.
[194] Ackroyd, *Dickens*, p. 283.

> tumbled out into the street; Groves benignly observing to the only ancient female who would listen to him, "I fear we must part;" and afterwards being beheld in the street – in his robes and with a kind of sacred wildness on him – handing ladies over the kennel into shops and other structures, where they had no business whatever, or the least desire to go. I got to the back of the theatre, where I could see in through some great doors that had been forced open, and whence the spectacle of the whole interior, burning like a red-hot cavern, was really very fine, even in the daylight . . . Elliotson reports that the great conjuror lives at his hotel, has extra wine everyday, and fares expensively. Is he the devil?[195]

The theatre and the church both become part of a spectacular display of infernal violence. And yet awe-struck as Dickens clearly is at this intense expression of spiritual energy, he also finds something dubious and even ludicrous about religious figures and ceremonies. The church is simply a place filled with desperate old ladies who don't want to be disturbed and the clergyman's efforts to save the congregation are pantomimic in their extremity. By applying the language of religion to theatrical figures such as the "conjuror" Dickens threatens to make nonsense of both the world of the church and the world of the stage: Satan is no longer a threatening reality but has become a thespian in Dickens's theatre of the absurd.

But Dickens's attitude to drama and the dramatic is not uniformly dismissive: there are times when he acknowledges the magic of performance. In a letter to Forster in 1856, Dickens describes a play called "Thirty years of a rambler's life" which was put on at the Ambigu-Comique in Paris:

> Old Lemaître plays his famous character, and never did I see anything, in art, so exaltedly horrible and awful . . . he did the finest things I really believe, that are within the power of acting. Two or three times, a great cry of horror went all round the house. . . such an extraordinary guilty, wicked thing as he made of a knotted branch of a tree which was his walking-stick, from the moment when the idea of the murder came into his head![196]

---

[195] *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, 7: 424.
[196] Forster's *Life*, 2: 196.

The story of a man who has fallen into wickedness and whose staff becomes symbolic of his own twisted evil resonates with the old medieval morality play tradition in its symbolic portrayal of vice. Here spectacle has symbolic value and spiritual overtones which Dickens does not dismiss as pretension but finds very powerful. He is further affected by the spontaneous cry of horror that the acting elicits from the audience: he and the audience are completely drawn in to the production, feeling and experiencing the inner spiritual life of the character as if they too were living it.

In this instance the power of the performance rests not just in its ability to portray horrifying spiritual truths but in its ritual power to draw the audience in so that they become involved in it, more than passive spectators. Dickens was especially conscious of the power of performance to "possess" one emotionally, mentally and spiritually: he became a follower of the shows of the mesmerist Dr John Elliotson, befriending him after he had been exposed as a fraud and ultimately going on to practice mesmerism himself.[197] Dickens used mesmerism as a form of spiritual healing and became particularly interested in the case of Augusta De La Rue who he met while in Italy in 1844–5 and who suffered from extreme mental anxiety. During his sessions with her Dickens created a dramatic narrative, telling her that they were "engaged in a struggle between the evil phantom intent on controlling her mind and himself, her good champion, offering her freedom and health".[198] Thus it was through the dramatic that Dickens became aware of and connected with what he felt were raw spiritual energies.

In a letter to Edward Bulwer Lytton written on 5 January 1851, Dickens shows himself to be open to the transformative powers of acting. He explains that he is attracted to the art because "assumption has charms for me I hardly know for how many wild reasons so delightful, that I feel a loss of, oh! I can't say what exquisite foolery, when I lose a chance of being someone in voice, etc., not at all like myself".[199] This desire to lose himself in another presence, to transform into something altogether different, suggests the power of the enigmatic or the mysterious element of theatre that Peter Brook speaks about in his discussion of the Holy Theatre – the desire to make the invisible visible. Of course Dickens is not speaking about a spiritual experience here but his

[197] Tomalin, *Charles Dickens: A Life*, p. 99.
[198] Ibid., p. 163.
[199] *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, 6: 257.

awareness of this ineffable theatrical magic, of this mysterious "other" that he can bring into being, does connect with mystical experiences.

The ability to take on the voice and emotions of another was part of the art of the mimic and Dickens was particularly talented at mimicry, modelling his style on that of Charles Mathews who used to create what he called "monopolylogues", one man shows in which he played multiple parts.[200] Claire Tomalin records an incident when Dickens and one other young man were the only two who happened to turn up at a meeting of a particular society: Dickens made "all the resolutions and speeches of the various members in a voice appropriate to each and with the "appropriate gravity never departed from".[201] This ability actually to *become* friends and acquaintances, to fill up spaces and silences with presences and voices, is evident in the novels and it is this that gives his characters a hauntingly dramatic reality.

Dickens had always experienced narrative as a dramatic art. From early on he was a storyteller and Forster commented that he "told a story offhand so well, and sang small comic songs so especially well, that he used to be elevated on chairs and tables, both at home and abroad, for more effective display of these talents".[202]

His experience of reading as a child was not passive but rather resulted in dramatic enactment: he was inspired with hope and belief not simply by reading books but by acting out the characters: "I have been Tom Jones (a child's Tom Jones, a harmless creature) for a week together. I have sustained my own idea of Roderick Random for a month at a stretch, I verily believe".[203] Ultimately with his organised reading tours, he would use the mesmeric power of his own voice, his ability to call beings to life through his words and to hold a whole audience in thrall. In fact he was aware of this power earlier in his career and it was *The Chimes*, the Christmas story that he wrote while in Italy, that first inspired him with the idea of reading out loud to a group of friends: he wrote to Forster that he was planning a clandestine trip to London in order to "inflict the

[200] Johnson, *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph*, p. 34.
[201] Tomalin, *Charles Dickens: A Life*, p. 268.
[202] Forster's *Life*, 1: 10.
[203] Ibid.,1: 9.

little story on [Carlyle] and on dear old gallant Macready with my own lips, and to have Stanny and the other Mac sitting by".[204]

Dickens is further aware that this power of the dramatic to possess, transform and reveal has a spiritual dimension: this is evident in a passage from *David Copperfield* (1850) where he describes David's response to a production of *Julius Caesar*:

> To have all those noble Romans alive before me, and walking in and out for my entertainment, instead of being the stern taskmasters they had been at school, was a most novel and delightful effect. But the mingled reality and mystery of the whole show, the influence upon me of the poetry, the lights, the music, the company, the smooth stupendous changes of glittering and brilliant scenery, were so dazzling, and opened up such illimitable regions of delight, that when I came out into the rainy street, at twelve o'clock at night, I felt as if I had come from the clouds, where I had been leading a romantic life for ages, to a bawling, splashing, link-lighted, umbrella-struggling, hackney-coach-jostling, patten-clinking, muddy, miserable world.[205]

Here the theatre is a transcendent space where David is able to connect with truths that go beyond reason or facts – the Romans are more present to him in the theatre than they ever were in the schoolroom. In this space David's sense of the mystical is so heightened that he is disappointed to come out again into the cluttered, fallen world. David has a similar experience of a pantomime where he comments that "it was, in a manner, like a shining transparency, through which I saw my earlier life moving along".[206] In this context theatre is a space of revelation: it becomes a lens through which David experiences his own life but which heightens and imparts transcendent meaning to his experiences.

From the above discussion it is evident that drama was a magician's art for Dickens: from one perspective it could only ever be a game, easy to see through, to mock and to deflate by remaining aloof and exposing its mechanisms: in such a mood nothing was sacred and the theatre could at best only mirror the world in its banality and

---

[204] Ibid., 1: 396.
[205] Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, ed. Jeremy Tambling (1850; London: Penguin Classics, 2004), c. xix. p. 284.
[206] Ibidem.

triviality. But on the other hand, and in a different mood, Dickens found it possible to step into the magic circle of the theatre and to come under its power: from this angle all of its absurdities and impossibilities seemed to fall away and he was instead open to the presence of the "visible-invisible",[207] and its power to extend, transcend and transform.

Dickens, religion and ritual

Until relatively recently, Dickens's writing has been dismissed as religious only in the most superficial sense. Humphry House complained that Dickens's "emotions were more powerful than [his] beliefs" and that his use of "Christian imagery" was simply a mask "to conceal some inability to control or express his emotion".[208] In *The Violent Effigy* John Carey celebrated Dickens's irreverence, suggesting that he did not "seriously accept" that the "ceremonies of Christianity had a vital meaning" and could not "take the doctrines of Christianity either".[209] He concurs with House that any serious attempts by Dickens to embrace religious significance could only result in mawkish and clichéd rhetoric.[210] House's comment is particularly damning: not only does he imply that Dickens lacks religious conviction but also that he lacks the expressive power to give convincing shape to his emotions. According to this account Dickens uses Christian platitudes to disguise his lack of intellectual rigour as well as dramatic skill. Carey acknowledges Dickens's imaginative attraction to the exaggerated or melodramatic aspects of religious practice. But he suggests that this comic sense is fundamentally anarchic, resistant to all meaning and particularly averse to the symbolic, allegorical or ritual elements of religion.

Since Dennis Walder's still seminal *Dickens and Religion*, critics have attempted to rethink Dickens's approach to and understanding of spiritual matters. Walder emphasised Dickens's Unitarian-influenced, liberal brand of Christianity. He suggested that Dickens's was a popular religion which incorporated elements of fairy-tale and melodrama, drawing on well-known images and tropes but decidedly lacking an orthodox

---

[207] Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (1968; rpt. London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2008), p. 63.
[208] Humphry House, *The Dickens World* (1941; rpt London, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 132.
[209] John Carey, *The Violent Effigy: A Study of Dickens's Imagination* (1973; London: Faber and Faber, 1991), p. 56.
[210] Carey, *The Violent Effigy*, pp. 13, 16.

dimension: it is a religion in which the "role of priest and church is minimal" and in which the Bible is treated loosely as a "guide to those elements in the Christian ethic . . . which Dickens most admired".[211] Walder argues that rather than concerning himself with orthodox or doctrinal issues Dickens is concerned primarily with human relationships: Church ritual is therefore only significant in that it formally acknowledges relationships, the fact that there is "something hallowed about human ties".[212]

Writing shortly after Walder, Janet Larson argued that Dickens was in fact more steeped in Biblical culture than he might have appeared to be and that he used the "Bible as a paradoxical code" through which to voice "contradictory interpretations of experience".[213] She further suggests that Dickens was aware of religious debate among the various sects of the Church even while he deplored what he understood as petty quarrels.[214] More recently Carolyn W. de la L. Oulton has built on Larson's point about Dickens's understanding of doctrinal issues, arguing that Dickens engaged critically with the evangelical thought that was so prevalent in the Victorian religious consciousness, and that at times he even drew on this tradition in his novels. She suggests that Dickens's emphasis on work ethic echoes evangelical teaching and that he could be said to evoke the evangelical notion of Atonement insofar as he believed in Christ's death could "offer salvation from an unspecified judgement".[215] But she acknowledges that he also reacted against the stricter evangelical doctrines, ultimately upholding Broad Church notions when writing *The Life of Our Lord* for his children in 1846.[216] For both Walder and Oulton, Dickens is clearly immersed in the religious discourse and sensibilities of his age and feels very strongly about spiritual matters. But they both suggest that he only loosely associates himself with the Church and ultimately rejects the more rigorous Christian practices of Evangelicalism and High Church Anglicanism in favour of a liberal, tolerant and humanist Christianity.

---

[211] Dennis Walder, *Dickens and Religion* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), p. 2.
[212] Ibid., p. 28.
[213] Janet Larson, *Dickens and the Broken Scripture* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1985), p. 3.
[214] Ibid., p. 9.
[215] Carolyn De la L. Oulton, *Literature and Religion in Mid-Victorian England: From Dickens to Eliot* (London: Macmillan, 2003), p. 31.
[216] Ibid., p. 32.

This is certainly the ideal that Dickens himself upholds in his correspondence and life: in a letter written in 1861 he expresses his frustration with the theological wrangling of the day, asserting that "I ask no man how he settles for himself questions of theology (on which it is easy for any number of men to say they are agreed, but very difficult for any two men to be really agreed) . . .".[217] This dislike of doctrine and the belief that it gives rise to more argument than it does agreement, goes hand in hand with a suspicion of all ceremony: when asked in August 1869 to comment on the inauguration of Leigh Hunt's Bust, he wrote that "the idea of ever being the subject of such a ceremony myself is so repugnant to my soul, that I must decline to officiate";[218] and when his youngest son left for Australia he wrote to him, reminding him of the religious instruction that he received at home, the fact that he had "never at home been harassed about religious observances, or mere formalities", and urging him never to "abandon the wholesome practice of saying your own private prayers, night and morning".[219] This suggests that Dickens's was a largely private religion, deeply and sincerely felt but not professed or displayed in the presence of others: his son, Sir Henry Fielding Dickens, wrote of his father that "he made no parade of religion",[220] and in a letter to John Makeham Dickens protested that "I have always striven in my writings to express veneration for the life and lessons of our Saviour . . . but have never made proclamation of this from the housetops".[221]

At the heart of these words is a deep distrust of the performed element of religion, a belief that theatre in a religious setting is always staged and insincere, distracting rather than symbolic. In 1843 Dickens wrote a scathing essay in *The Examiner* criticising the education system at Oxford and particularly the ritualistic emphasis of the Oxford movement. He complained that the boys educated at Oxford had no real understanding of the meaning of "justice, mercy, charity, kindness, brotherly love, forbearance, gentleness,

---

[217] *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, 9: 557
[218] Forster's *Life*, 2: 470.
[219] Ibid., 2: 468.
[220] Sir Henry Fielding Dickens, *The Recollections of Sir Henry Dickens* (London: W. Heinemann, 1934), p. 41.
[221] Forster's *Life*, 2: 469.

and Good Works",[222] arguing that this was because they were taught to value the outward display of religion at the expense of its symbolic value and even of sense:

> A vast number of witnesses being interrogated as to what they understood by the words Religion and Salvation, answered Lighted Candles. Some said water; some, bread; others, little boys; others mixed the water, lighted candles, bread, and little boys all up together, and called the compound, Faith.[223]

In this conclusion Dickens satirically reduces the faith taught at Oxford to a clutter of objects that seem to have very little relation to one another and are divested of any symbolic significance. Rather than enhancing the meaning of the words "religion" and "salvation" for the boys, these practices empty out their significance and diminish them to an absurdity. This is typical of the belief of the majority of Protestants of the time – the fear that ritual and performance could come to efface meaning and that a true faith would need to be relatively free of ceremony.

In the same year on the 2nd of March Dickens expressed his distaste with the "Puseyisms" of the Established Church and declared that he was seriously considering becoming a Unitarian:[224] it has been remarked that the 1840s was a period of spiritual disruption for Dickens and his attraction to the Unitarian Church at this time has been well-documented.[225] It is of some interest to note, however, that while Dickens was sympathetic to the Unitarian cause, he seems finally to have remained within the Anglican fold. Gary Colledge has argued convincingly that *The Life of Our Lord* (1846) which has often been taken as a declaration of Dickens's Unitarian sentiments at the time, is consistent with the beliefs of the typical Anglican layman: where Unitarians emphasise Jesus's humanity rather than his divinity, in this book for his children Dickens goes out of his way to suggest that Jesus was indeed divine by including a reference to Christ's appearance to Thomas in John 20. 24 –29. Colledge remarks that this is significant as it was common for Anglicans in Dickens's day to see this episode as a "liturgical

---

[222] Charles Dickens, "Report of the Commissioners Appointed To Inquire into the Condition of Persons Variously Engaged in the University of Oxford" in *To be Read at Dusk, and Other Stories, Sketches and Essays* (London: Redway, 1898), p. 47.
[223] Ibid., p. 48.
[224] *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, 3: 455.
[225] Gary Colledge, *Dickens, Christianity and The Life of Our Lord* (New York: Continuum, 2009), p. 1.

confession, an act of worship", thereby confirming both Christ's divinity and acclaiming him "worthy of worship".[226] This also suggests that despite Dickens's protestations, he did not entirely dismiss the symbolic and spiritual value of certain liturgical practices.

When attempting to understand Dickens's response to the ritual elements of faith, one needs to tread carefully: certainly there is ample evidence to suggest that Dickens was vociferously opposed to ceremonies – both Anglican and Roman Catholic. His 1867 preface to *Pickwick Papers* clearly states his intention when dealing with matters of faith in his fiction:

> Lest there should be any well-intentioned persons who do not perceive the difference . . . between religion and the cant of religion, piety and the pretence of piety, a humble reverence for the great truths of Scripture and an audacious and offensive obtrusion of its letter and not its spirit in the commonest dissensions and meanest affairs of life, to the extraordinary confusion of ignorant minds, let them understand that it is always the latter, and never the former, which is satirized here.[227]

The religion that Dickens objects to is falsely theatrical in that it imposes itself on others and exalts in pretence, appearance and the symbols of faith at the expense of its spirit or meaning. Dickens often classes religious rituals with the pretentions that he so abhorred among the faithful. As has already been suggested, he does not reserve his scorn for the Catholics, and in 1843 in a letter to Albany Fonblanque, he expresses his frustrations with what strike him as the trivial and ultimately dangerous enactments of the Tractarians:

> I find I am getting horribly bitter about Puseyism. Good God to talk in these times of most untimely ignorance among the people, about what Priests shall wear, and whither they shall turn when they say their prayers. – They had best not discuss the latter question too long, or I shrewdly suspect they will turn to the right about: not easily to come back again.[228]

---

[226] Ibid., p. 103.
[227] Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers* (1836–7), ed. Mark Wormald (1999; rpt London: Penguin, 2003), p. 763.
[228] *The Letters of Charles* Dickens, 3: 462–3.

Despite this strongly worded reproof, there are moments when he seems partially to acknowledge the affective power of such ceremonies. In an essay recorded in *The Uncommercial Traveller* which is entitled, "The City of London Churches", Dickens responds in a paradoxical manner to a High Church service. He mocks the "melodramatic style" of the service and finds the many "tawdry decorations" to be reminiscent of "extinct London Maypoles".[229] But he is impressed by the vitality and theatricality of the congregation, commenting laughingly on the pleasant smell of "pomatum" and noting the sharp distinction between the religious play-world and the apocalyptic dreariness of the city: he finds the effect the same as "if you should take an empty counting-house on a Sunday, and act one of the old Mysteries there".[230] The play is incongruous and somewhat anachronistic, but its vividness in the otherwise dull surroundings and passion of the participants is nevertheless fascinating if a little confounding.

When it came to religion, Dickens was particularly defensive and was certainly not easily inclined to embrace religious practices that seemed to go against his notion of a simple, unadorned faith. In fact he was less guarded in the theatre and, as I have shown, was more inclined to respond to the spiritual dimension of the dramatic in this setting than if he had been in a Church. But despite his sometimes savage condemnation of ritual practices, Dickens was not completely impervious to the theatrical effects of religion. In an interesting essay called "Two Views of a Cheap Theatre" which was published in *The Uncommercial Traveller* in 1860, he considers the Sunday practice of preaching in Britannia Theatre, Hoxton, alongside an ordinary experience of attending a drama in the same place:

> There was a supposititious working-man introduced into the homily, to make supposititious objections to our Christian religion and be reasoned down, who was not only a very disagreeable person, but remarkably unlike life — very much more unlike it than anything I had seen in the pantomime. . . Now, could I help asking myself the question, whether the mechanic before me, who must detect the preacher as being wrong about the visible manner of himself and the like of

[229] Charles Dickens, "The City of London Churches", in *The Uncommercial Traveller* (London: Riverside Press, 1869), p. 132.
[230] Ibid., p. 132.

> himself, and about such a noisy lip-server as that pauper, might not, most unhappily for the usefulness of the occasion, doubt that preacher's being right about things not visible to human senses?[231]

In this extract Dickens is highly critical of the effects of this attempt at melding a sermon with drama, objecting principally to the false propaganda of the clergyman – the fact that the workmen at whom the sermon is aimed are falsely represented and self-righteously preached at so that the overall effect is inferior to that of the pantomime. He is immediately conscious of the Churchman's agenda which is exposed in the drama and interferes with its effects. But later on in the essay he does admit the powerful theatrical effects of the experience, writing that, once the "clock had struck the hour" a "hymn was sung . . . and its effect was very striking".[232] He further does not disparage the Sunday meetings in the Theatre provided that the preachers are not arrogant or averse to the "natural inborn desire of the mass of mankind to recreate themselves and to be amused".[233] Finally he suggests that the New Testament contains "the most beautiful and affecting history conceivable by man" and that the dramas would be far more effective if the clergymen were to set "forth the history in narrative" for then "You will never preach so well, you will never move them so profoundly, you will never send them away with half so much to think of".[234]

From the above discussion one can draw the following conclusions: firstly, Dickens is not so much offended by a dramatized religion as he is suspicious of the way in which dramatic elements might be used to control and manipulate a congregation. He admits however that performance can have a powerful, moving effect as the hymn and preceding silence did; but he suggests that the dramatic is most effective when it takes on an entertaining dimension. This emphasis on entertainment should not be taken as a desire to dilute the serious spiritual purpose of the sermons but rather suggests that for Dickens true spirituality was not divorced from the vivid excitement of lived and enacted experience.

---

[231] Charles Dickens, "Two Views of a Cheap Theatre", in *The Uncommercial Traveller*, p. 56.
[232] Ibid., p. 60.
[233] Ibidem.
[234] Ibid., pp. 60–1.

Finally, Dickens's caution that the New Testament is ultimately a more powerful preaching tool is not simply a Protestant privileging of the words of the Bible over dramatic enactment: rather Dickens is positive about the theatrical potential and effects of the New Testament and even suggests turning it into a dramatic narrative for the purpose of reaching those people who are unable to read. It is important to note here that in his letter to John Makeham where he defends the nature of his faith, he argues that he "rewrote [the history of our Saviour] for my children – every one of whom knew it from having it repeated to them, long before they could read, and almost as soon as they could speak".[235] The fact that he did not mean this little book to be read by his children in solitude but that it was something that he read to and performed for them, suggests that he was aware of the power of conveying spiritual truth through the spoken and expressed.

In his novels Dickens often mocks Church ceremonies, particularly baptisms and funerals, as generally pretentious occasions where artificial formalities replace true sentiment. This is certainly true of the funeral of Anthony Chuzzlewit in *Martin Chuzzlewit*:

> So through the narrow streets and winding city ways, went Anthony Chuzzlewit's funeral; Mr Jonas glancing stealthily out of the coach-window now and then, to observe its effect upon the crowd; Mr Mould as he walked along, listening with a sober pride to the exclamations of the bystanders; the doctor whispering his story to Mr Pecksniff, without appearing to come any nearer the end of it; and poor old Chuffey sobbing unregarded in a corner. But he had greatly scandalized Mr Mould at an early stage of the ceremony by carrying his handkerchief in his hat in a perfectly informal manner, and wiping his eyes with his knuckles. And as Mr Mould himself had said already, his behaviour was indecent, and quite unworthy of such an occasion; and he never ought to have been there.[236]

Here the funeral has become a theatrical procession carried out for the benefit of the bystanders: Jonas Chuzzlewit is acutely conscious of its effects on the crowd and Mr Mould, the undertaker, is personally gratified by the responses of onlookers as if he were

---

[235] Forster's *Life*, 2: 469.
[236] Charles Dickens, *Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843–44), ed. Patricia Ingham (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 312.

the director of a play. Only Mr Chuffey responds with sincere grief and this ironically is felt to be out of place because Mr Chuffey has not observed formal proceedings. The rituals of the funeral ceremony are therefore imposed from without and are completely out of keeping with any sincere feeling. What is striking about this funeral is that it is an entirely secular affair and that those involved are concerned more for themselves than for the departed: the only "moral reflections and spiritual consolation" is offered by the hypocritical Mr Pecksniff and the guests all indulge heartily in "creature comforts" before the ceremony officially takes place.[237] One could suggest that in this scene Dickens is not averse to ritual as such but rather that he objects to the way in which it has been perverted and manipulated by the self-serving: the satire arises from the fact that the display of grief has become divorced from the emotion, resulting in a general tone of disrespect and an utter inability to understand let alone embrace the sacred.

In the famous episode of Paul's Christening in *Dombey and Son*, Dickens makes this opposition clearer:

> Presently the clerk (the only cheerful-looking object there, and he was an undertaker) came up with a jug of warm water, and said something, as he poured it into the font, about taking the chill off; which millions of gallons boiling hot could not have done for the occasion. Then the clergyman, an amiable and mild-looking young curate, but obviously afraid of the baby, appeared like the principal character in a ghost-story, "a tall figure all in white;" at sight of whom Paul rent the air with his cries, and never left off again till he was taken out black in the face.
>
> Even when that event had happened, to the great relief of everybody, he was heard under the portico, during the rest of the ceremony, now fainter, now louder, now hushed, now bursting forth again with an irrepressible sense of his wrongs. This so distracted the attention of the two ladies, that Mrs Chick was constantly deploying into the centre aisle, to send out messages by the pew-opener, while Miss Tox kept her Prayer-book open at the Gunpowder Plot, and occasionally read responses from that service . . .

[237] Ibid., p. 309.

> It might have been well for Mr Dombey, if he had thought of his own dignity a little less; and had thought of the great origin and purpose of the ceremony in which he took so formal and so stiff a part, a little more. His arrogance contrasted strangely with its history.[238]

John Carey has expressed his impatience with this episode, declaring that Dickens indulges "in a little preaching" and that, despite the weighty tone that he employs here, "the 'great purpose' of Baptism was, for him, merely social".[239] This position seems to carry some weight if one considers the words of John Forster who declared that the only meaning that still remained in a Christening for Dickens was that it enabled him to "form a relationship with friends he most loved".[240] But to read this episode superficially as a social event is to pass over much of its symbolic force which is derived from the dramatic blend of the spiritual and the trivial. The satire works by gesturing towards profound spiritual meaning which is simultaneously comically undermined: for example the powerful ghostly appearance of the curate is undercut by his effeminate and ridiculous behaviour and Paul's preternatural terror is counterbalanced by the ladies' distracted bungling up of the service. The comical blunders made in the ceremony would be far less effective satirically if they were not juxtaposed with an urgent ritual call to spiritual awareness and awakening in Mr Dombey, which is brought to bear upon the reader through the haunting cries of Paul that accompany the ceremony. The narrator's admonitory tone is entirely consistent with this.

Surprised by Dickens's overt, orthodox claim about the meaning of ritual in this scene, many critics have nevertheless responded to its spiritual dimension: Dennis Walder has argued that the 'great purpose' of the ceremony hearkens back to the "regeneration 'of water and of Spirit'" in John 3.5 and that this suggests Dombey's need for a "radical change in personality along spiritual lines".[241] Natalie B. Cole agrees that Dickens is making a valid religious point, asserting that the purpose of this scene is to

---

[238] Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son* (1848), ed. Andrew Sanders (London: Penguin, 2002), c. v, pp. 72–3.
[239] Carey, *The Violent Effigy*, p. 57.
[240] Forster's *Life*, 1: 167.
[241] Walder, *Dickens and Religion*, p. 129.

emphasise "humility as a cornerstone of Christian conduct".[242] I concur with these critics and further suggest that Dickens's foregrounding of the ritual elements of the Christening goes beyond simply exposing artificial pretentions: rather the absence of any true spiritual meaning in the ritual paradoxically conjures spiritual energy, the possibility of a revitalised ritual dimension.

Despite the growing body of literature on Dickens's religious views, his most effusively spiritual moments still tend to embarrass critics. Speaking of his enraptured response to the Niagara Falls and his ecstatic assertion that the dead Mary Hogarth "has been here many times . . . since her sweet face faded from my earthly sight",[243] Claire Tomalin writes that it is unlikely that he believed his words and that he "sometimes allowed himself to wander into feeble fantasies when he approached spiritual matters".[244] This assessment does not do justice to Dickens's ardent and somewhat inexplicable attachment to Mary's memory throughout his life. It seems far more likely, as Peter Ackroyd suggests, that "he did truly believe her [Mary Hogarth] to be a spirit looking down on him from some place of eternal repose".[245] His desire to imagine her as present in his most intense moments and as wandering the earth in spirit form is perhaps a bit childish and simplified but it does attest to his need to conjure her spirit into being, dramatically. In fact his response to her death was dramatic from the start: he took a ring from her finger that he wore for the rest of his life and kept all her clothes, taking them out years later to look at them.[246] Further his memory of her death was one of intense spiritual communion with her: he wrote to Forster, "Thank God *she died* in my arms, and the very last words she whispered were of me".[247] It is also significant that after her death Dickens believed himself to be haunted by her and began to attend the chapel of the Foundling Hospital in Great Coram street nearby,[248] suggesting that his grief for her passing became to him associated with what appears to be a search for a more expressive

---

[242] Natalie Bell Cole, "'Amen in a Wrong Place': Charles Dickens Imagines the Victorian Church" in *Victorian Religious Discourse: New Directions in Criticism*, ed. Jude V. Dixon (New York, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 212.
[243] Forster's *Life* 1: 287.
[244] Tomalin, *Dickens: A Life,* p. 137.
[245] Ackroyd, *Dickens*, p. 366.
[246] Ibid., pp. 225–6.
[247] *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, 1: 259.
[248] Ackroyd, *Dickens*, pp. 226, 228.

and formalised way of experiencing spirituality. Mary became a constant figure in Dickens's spiritual and imaginative universe, a spirit that "pointed upward with unchanging finger".[249] This is how Dickens describes her to Forster and it is a description that is repeated in the figure of Agnes in *David Copperfield* and, more interestingly, the Ghost of The Christmas Yet to Come in *A Christmas Carol,* which "pointed onward with its hand".[250] Mary seems to represent an aspect of Dickens's faith that goes beyond the simple, unembellished belief that he preaches: she straddles the divine and human dimensions and allows him to express emotions that he might at other times find excessive or artificial. Dickens's veneration of Mary Hogarth comes close to ritual worship and I will show that in his dream in Italy he mixed the image of Mary up with the Catholic symbols and practices around him. Although it has been contended that Mary has been the source of some of his most uninteresting female characters, it can't be doubted that she inspired him with a vision of goodness which remained vivid to him and central to the moral universe of his novels.

I have not attempted a survey of Dickens's understanding of Church doctrine or his various responses to Biblical passages in his novels and writings – this has been meticulously done by Janet Larson, Gary Colledge and Carolyn Oulton among others. My purpose here has been to review Dickens's paradoxical response to theatrical and ritual dimensions of faith, viewed against his experience of theatre more generally. In a searching exploration of Dickens's response to Churches, Natalie Cole argues that Dickens sees Churches as part of the dramatic city landscape and therefore constantly invites a comparison between the theatre and the Church:[251] she suggests that sometimes this reflects badly on the Church but at other times it enriches its symbolic significance for Dickens. In her discussion of *David Copperfield*, for example, Cole argues that Dickens makes the Church both "a private refuge and a public stage" and observes that it is connected to the genesis of "David's ability to rescue himself through storytelling".[252] Cole is aware of Dickens's suspicion of religious ceremony but, referring to Walter and Florence's marriage in *Dombey and Son*, she argues that the "ceremony is redeemed by

---

[249] Forster's *Life*, 1: 207.
[250] Charles Dickens, "A Christmas Carol"(1843), in *A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Books*, ed. Robert Douglas-Fairhurst (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 63.
[251] Cole, "Amen in a Wrong Place", in *Victorian Religious* Discourse, p. 221.
[252] Ibid., p. 216.

the authentic love of the participants" and Captain Cuttle's hearty Amens.[253] She suggests that this search for "Amens in the right place" is at the heart of Dickens's obsessive exploration of London's Churches.[254]

I concur with Cole that while Dickens sees religion and its symbols as somewhat jaded, he still holds out the possibility of religious rebirth from within the space of the Church – the fact that ritual itself could come to have a more profound meaning if it were to be revitalised by sincere emotions and meaningful language. Thus the bareness and formality of the Church, by its very lack, paradoxically gestures towards a more authentic theatricality, a drama of true emotions that could lift one above the human and ordinary and, like Dickens's passion for Mary Hogarth, approach the transcendent.

Theatricality in the novels

"[Fagin] is such an out and outer that I don't know what to make of him".[255] These words were written by Dickens about the principal villain in *Oliver Twist* (1839), and provide some insight into the nature of the author's style. Fagin is a particularly pertinent example of Dickens's ability to create figures that exist on the margins of the acceptable or realistic, and that, in their extremity, exert a mystical attraction over readers. Fagin became more than a character sketch for Dickens: Michael Slater describes him as reaching levels of perversity that are not "comprehensibly human".[256] This suggests an almost supernatural power about this figure: certainly Dickens himself was aware of its talismanic appeal, writing to Forster that he "had great difficulty in keeping my hands off Fagin and the rest of them in the evenings".[257]

This quality is not unique to Fagin: contemporary readers of Dickens's novels were so taken with the characters that they took to repeating what they said. Forster describes this tendency among readers to imitate the characters as evidence of the "reality" of Dickens's creations, a sign that they were "so surely revealed by

[253] Ibid., p. 213.
[254] Ibidem.
[255] Forster's *Life*, 1: 100.
[256] Slater, "Nicholas Nickleby", appended to *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 1038.
[257] Forster's *Life*, 1: 91.

themselves".[258] This suggests that the power of these figures was in their dramatic appeal, the fact that it was not really possible to speak about them in a detached manner; rather they came alive in the spoken word, through dramatic impersonation: words seemed to summon them, to speak them into being, and they in turn took possession of readers' imaginations.

One contemporary commented that it was impossible "to believe that there never were any such persons as Mr. Pickwick and Mrs. Nickleby and Mrs. Gamp. They are to us not only types of English life, but types actually existing . . . And yet they were idealized in the sense that the reader did not think that they were drawn from the life. They were alive; they were themselves".[259] This writer experiences Dickens's characters as paradoxically familiar and strange, both existing among ordinary people and yet somehow elevated above them. Rather than sharing our world, they occupy an 'idealised' space which seems in this context to suggest a dramatically enhanced reality where the characters possess an authentic life of their own. Forster himself echoes these sentiments when describing the effect of *Pickwick Papers* on its audiences:

> Genial and irrepressible enjoyment, affectionate heartiness of tone, unrestrained exuberance of mirth, these are not more delightful than they are fleeting and perishable qualities; but the attention eagerly excited by the charm of them in *Pickwick* found itself retained by something more permanent. We had all become suddenly conscious, in the very thick of the extravaganza of adventure and fun set before us, that here were real people. It was not somebody talking humorously about them, but they were there themselves.[260]

The experience of reading *Pickwick* is, for Forster, both a game and not a game: while he takes delight in the comedy of manners, the playful exposé of the eccentricities of particular individuals, he is conscious of another dimension of experience that has been reached: the characters of *Pickwick* appear to cross the line between pretence and embodiment and Forster insists on their "reality" as if they are living beings. But they also seem somehow to be more alive than ordinary people, to possess a mysterious

---

[258] Forster's *Life*, 1: 109.
[259] Ibid., 1: 109.
[260] Ibid., 1: 84.

energy that tends towards the supernatural: Forster explains that something about the characters "left a deeper mark",[261] and later, when describing the effects of the early novels, he suggests that "with wiser purposes, [Dickens] superseded the old petrifying process of the magician in the Arabian tale, and struck the prisons and parish abuses of his country, and its schools of neglect and crime, into palpable life forever".[262] Dickens's figures are thus rendered immortal, more vivid than the reality on which they have been modelled. This quality of Dickens's characters was also noticed by A.O.J. Cockshut, who did much to rectify our appreciation of the melodramatic nature of Dickens's imagination when he argued that Dickens's creations reveal "new abysses of absurdity, fantastic and yet hypnotically real to the reader".[263]

Michael Slater attributes Fagin's power to his mythical qualities, the fact that he taps into a "more ancient folklore ancestry".[264] But this alone is not what renders Fagin or even Mrs Nickleby larger-than-life: as Forster and other contemporaries of the author noticed, Dickens's characters come alive ritualistically – they do not merely echo old mythologies but they enact new ones. Through the expressive magnification of personal idiosyncrasies, Dickens's characters unveil the universal qualities of his Victorian experience.

Dickens's close involvement with the theatre has long been acknowledged by critics, to the point that remarks about the theatricality of his writings have become something of a critical cliché: in her recent biography of Dickens, Claire Tomalin states that all Dickens's "writing is theatrical, his characters are largely created through their voices, and in due course he re-created them for public performance and spoke their lines on stage himself. His plots tend towards the theatrical and melodramatic".[265] Peter Ackroyd concurs with this point when he argues that there is "not one work of Dickens which is unaffected by the vision of the stage which he had had as a child and as a young man".[266]

---

[261] Forster's *Life*, 1: 84.
[262] Ibid., 1: 103.
[263] A.O.J. Cockshut, *The Imagination of Charles Dickens* (London: Collins, 1961), p. 18.
[264] Slater, "Nicholas Nickleby", appended to *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 1034.
[265] Claire Tomalin, *Charles Dickens: A Life* (London: Viking, 2011), p. 47.
[266] Ackroyd, *Dickens*, p. 283.

But this theatricality paradoxically inspires critical censure as well as admiration: later in the same work, Tomalin expresses her distaste for Edith in *Dombey and Son*, dismissing her as a "leading lady in a melodrame" whose "scorn and bad temper make you doubt that any man could have contemplated sexual relations with her either in or outside marriage".[267] She further argues that Nancy of *Oliver Twist* fails because she acts "like an actress in a bad play" and that much of *Barnaby Rudge* is "crude melodrama": as an example of this she cites Barnaby's father who, she argues, is rendered implausible by his habit of addressing himself with "rhetorical questions".[268] Michael Slater has expressed a similar concern about the theatrical world of *Nicholas Nickleby* in his essay appended to a recent edition of that novel: he speaks of the "brazen artificiality" of the main plot and suggests that figures like Fagin and Quilp are more convincing than Ralph Nickleby, whose rhetoric is "literary" in the sense that it is "drawn from the standard villain of the Elizabethan stage", and who therefore cannot "command our imaginations or work upon our deepest fears".[269]

Complaints about the artificiality of the Dickens theatre go as far back as his own contemporaries: George Eliot commented in an 1856 essay that Dickens "scarcely ever passes from the humorous and external to the emotional and tragic, without becoming as transcendent in his unreality as he was a moment before in his artistic truthfulness";[270] and in his novel, *The Wardon*, Anthony Trollope satirised Dickens as "Mr Popular Sentiment" who is more concerned with "imaginary agonies… than true sorrows".[271] But what was considered sentimentality by some was praised for its emotive power by others. John Forster praised the last section of *Barnaby Rudge* highly:

> . . . there are few things more masterly in his books. From the first low mutterings of the storm to its last terrible explosion, the frantic outbreak of popular ignorance and rage is depicted with unabated power. The aimlessness of idle mischief by which the ranks of the rioters are swelled at the beginning; the recklessness induced by the monstrous impunity allowed to the early excesses; the

[267] Tomalin, *Charles Dickens: A Life*, pp. 194–5.
[268] Ibid., p. 122.
[269] Slater, "Nicholas Nickleby", appended to *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 1034.
[270] George Eliot, "The Natural History of German Life", *Westminster Review* (July 1856) in ed. Nathan Sheppard, *The Essays of George Eliot* (New York: Funk &Wagnalls, 1883) p. 146.
[271] Anthony Trollope, *The Warden* (New York: Dick and Fitzgerald, 1862), pp. 210–211.

> sudden spread of drunken guilt into every haunt of poverty, ignorance, or mischief in the wicked old city, where such rich materials of crime lie festering".[272]

The fact that concerns about the plausibility of Dickens's novels have persisted even after Robert Garis's *The Dickens Theatre* (1965) and A.O.J Cockshut's *The Imagination of Charles Dickens* (1961), which revolutionised our appreciation of the dramatic qualities in Dickens's art, suggests that they require closer attention. That critics do not always concur on which characters or scenes should be privileged as 'authentically theatrical' and which of them are to be dismissed as falsely melodramatic, suggests that all of the characters are really part of the same theatrical universe, which is simultaneously powerful and precarious.

All of Dickens's characters were dramatically conceived – his daughter noted that he would impersonate them in front of a mirror before putting them down on the page.[273] In the light of this knowledge, Peter Ackroyd's cryptic comment that Dickens's gift lay in "symbolic narrative rather than in dialogue",[274] is difficult to sustain as it is almost impossible to separate symbolic language from the expressive and the dialogic aspect of the novels. Malcolm Andrews speaks of Dickens's narrative voice, which he suggests has an "acoustic" resonance to it. Later he argues that the characters share this auditory quality, coming into being spontaneously, as if "caught in performance". [275] Glavin also notices this performed power of the novels and suggests that Dickens's written style approaches speech in its use of parataxis and onomatopoeia, its tendency to point towards meaning rather than to replace it.[276]

I concur with these critics that Dickens conceived of his universe theatrically but intend to emphasise that his attitude to the dramatic was not straightforward: these paradoxical feelings about theatre and theatricality inform his writings and create a universe that is simultaneously trivial and transcendent.

---

[272] Forster's *Life*, 1: 221.
[273] Ackroyd, *Dickens*, p. 38.
[274] Ibid., p. 188.
[275] Malcolm Andrews, *Charles Dickens and His Performing Selves*: *Dickens and the Public Readings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 30, 102.
[276] John Glavin, *After Dickens: Reading, Adaptation and Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 19.

In the following Chapter I shall explore this tension between mystical elements and trivial details in Dickens's early historical novel, *Barnaby Rudge*. I will concern myself with the disjunction between Dickens's dramatic language which comprises gothic and medieval Christian patterns, and his seeming preoccupation with the social cause and consequences of the anti-Catholic riots of 1780: this raises the question of how far the novel can be said to deal seriously with the religious implications of the riots, a question that will be considered in relation to the ways in which social, moral and spiritual perspectives intersect.

CHAPTER THREE: "Ghosts of ghosts of ghosts": Melodrama in Barnaby *Rudge* (1841).

Regardless of recent scholars' attempts to rehabilitate its reputation, *Barnaby Rudge* remains the least popular of Dickens's novels – even those critics who are conscious of its merits are quick to point out what they consider to be its flaws. Objections to the novel can be divided into two categories: those who find its gothic subplot incompatible with its historical elements; and those who argue that Dickens's characterisation – particularly of Barnaby – is weak and implausible. For Kathryn Chittick both of these objections suggest the poverty of the novel's moral vision: she argues that the most effective passages in the novel are those that are concerned with social inequalities – Sir Chester's brutal disregard for the Caliban-like Hugh, for example.[277] But she complains that the brilliance of Dickens's social critique is not matched by the moral complexity of his characters: in fact the "romantic reconciliations are hurried, as so much stage business at the end of a farce where couples are brought out from their hiding places to join hands for the final curtain".[278]

This narrow focus on the ways in which Dickens uses history to address class conflict, ignores the possibility that he is more deeply concerned with questions of religion and spirituality in this novel. In fact Chittick barely mentions Dickens's exploration of the anti-Catholic riots of the late eighteenth century, choosing instead to dwell on his implied treatment of contemporary Chartism and how far the grievances of the lower classes can be taken seriously. Kim Ian Micasiw also ignores Dickens's exploration of the Protestant and Catholic conflict, suggesting that Hugh's transformation of the cry, "no Popery", into "no Property", makes his political program both more authentic and more dangerous.[279] Rosemary A. Peters goes so far as to assert that religion is a "grand and vague word for what happens in *Barnaby Rudge*" and that the "anti-

[277] Kathryn Chittick, *Dickens And The 1830s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 169.
[278] Ibid., p. 174.
[279] Kim Ian Micasiw, "Barnaby Rudge: The Since of The Fathers", *ELH*. 56. 3 (Autumn 1989): 571–592 (p. 587).

Catholic specifics of the 1780s riots are unimportant; these could be protests against any social body or organism". For Peters Dickens's "true" focus is social unrest.[280]

Revealing as an examination of Dickens's critique of social class in England is, it passes over some unsettling undercurrents in this novel. A.E. Dyson is perhaps closer to the heart of the novel when he describes it as full of "abysses of creative evil", a world where figures are driven by a mysterious hatred that has no logical explanation and that feeds on social situations rather than being caused by them.[281] For Dyson the demonic nature of Dickens's characters is endlessly fascinating and probes deep spiritual and ethical questions.[282] The social upheaval in *Barnaby Rudge* certainly does not have a single explanation. Rather, many of the figures are haunted by unresolved quarrels and jealousies, feelings that threaten to explode into arbitrary violence that goes far deeper than superficial religious differences. This is evident in the conflict between Haredale and Chester which looms throughout the narrative but which only reaches violent expression after the anti-Catholic riots have been resolved. This suggests that the resolution of the religious conflicts does not really address or overcome the spiritual malaise that sparked them in the first place. The secular response to the riots is clearly superficial, addressing the symptoms rather than the cause of the disease. But, more ominously, religion itself has been emptied of its power to reach a deep moral centre, leaving intense emotions to run riot and become diseased: Haredale and Chester's fight is so passionate that it takes on a ritual dimension, recalling and perverting the spiritual nature of religious ceremonies.

Regardless of the far-reaching ethical questions that this novel raises, Chittick's point about the spiritual flat-footedness of Dickens's principal characters cannot be so easily passed over. The notion that Dickens's characters are exaggerated and somewhat superficial is a critical commonplace. Critics have found this accusation particularly apt with regard to this novel: Chittick argues that Dickens is unable to create a convincing hero and that the final speeches of Barnaby and Hugh sound hollow and unpersuasive. Andrew Sanders also finds Barnaby implausible, suggesting that he is far too sentimental

---

[280] Rosemary A. Peters, "The Individual in the (Catholic) Mass: Restoration, Self and Community in Liturgy and Literature", *Gramma: Journal of Theory and Criticism* 10 (2010)**:** 49–66 (p. 52).
[281] A.E. Dyson, *The Inimitable Dickens: A Reading of the Novels* (London: Macmillan, 1970), pp. 52–3.
[282] Ibid., p. 52.

a figure to achieve real pathos.[283] These characters are certainly not subtle but their theatricality and seeming superficiality recalls Dickens's love of pantomime as expressed in an article in *Sketches by Boz* where he modifies the Shakespearean stage metaphor to suggest that "we are all actors in the pantomime of life".[284]

The world of pantomime where nothing is serious and where opinions have neither gravity nor permanence is also the world of *Barnaby Rudge.* This novel constantly raises ethical questions and yet simultaneously threatens to make nonsense of them. This is why critics have been so troubled by characters like Barnaby: although he is given the poignant plot suitable for one of Dickens's sentimental heroes, there is something so absurd about him that he cannot seem entirely to live up to this. Rather than 'failing' to make a profound point, Dickens's climax seems satirically to undermine the very significance that it gestures towards, unsettling us with the feeling that life may have been reduced to a series of bizarre and empty ceremonies.

I mean to argue that the world of *Barnaby Rudge* is haunted by the ghost of religion. Religious forms and ceremonies have been perverted into rituals of violence that have become meaningless while retaining all the intensity and fervour of a spiritual experience. It is the tension between the seriousness of Dickens's themes and the often ironic manner in which they are described that makes his realisation of a godless world more unsettling.

The Raven

Barnaby's pet Raven, Grip, is a disconcerting figure, which points obscurely towards an allegorical dimension. Readers often speculate about the possible symbolic significance of Barnaby's constant companion: Edgar Allan Poe saw the raven as a "prophetic" figure and suggested that it would have been more effective had its humorous elements been played down.[285] More recently Valerie Pedlar has argued that Grip seems to be a shadowy projection of Barnaby's hidden motives and desires, an "other self" that

---

[283] Andrew Sanders, *The Victorian Historical Novel* (London: Macmillan, 1978), p. 81.
[284] Charles Dickens, "The Pantomime of Life" in *Sketches by Boz* (Philadelphia, PA: Lea and Blanchard, 1839), c. xiv, p. 264.
[285] Edgar Allan Poe, "Review of Barnaby Rudge" (February 1842), in *Essays and Reviews*, ed. G.R. Thompson (New York: Literary Classics, 1984), p. 243.

conjures up the guilty past of his father. But she is unsure whether this interpretation has more purchase than a more comic significance: she further argues that Grip is closer to a "*reductio ad absurdum* of Barnaby" and that he dramatises the absurdity of Barnaby's involvement in serious social movements such as the anti-Catholic riots.[286] This uncertainty points to the fact that, regardless of its symbolic suggestiveness, the figure of the raven is also elusive: in his introduction to the 2003 Penguin edition of *Barnaby Rudge*, John Bowen comments that Grip cannot be pinned down to one definition, generating more questions than he does answers.[287]

Aside from the occasional comment, no extended study has to my knowledge been conducted on Dickens's use of the raven in *Barnaby Rudge*. This is unfortunate as it is clearly a central element in Dickens's conception of this novel: in fact Dickens opens his preface to the cheap edition of 1849 with a lengthy epistle to the 'original' Grips, two pet ravens that he had recently owned. The fact that he sees the need to place this description before mentioning the anti-Catholic riots or the injustice of the legal system, which together form the kernel of this novel, suggests that Grip is far from incidental to his plot. It is worth examining the account in the preface in some detail. Dickens describes his first raven as a bird of "preternatural sagacity" who was able, "by the mere superiority of his genius", to "walk off unmolested with the dog's dinner, from before his face".[288] What attracts Dickens to this bird is the way in which it appears surreally intelligent in ridiculous situations – stealing food from a dog becomes an occasion for a theatrical display of its brilliance. This combination of human-like qualities with a brute's appetite – the *appearance* of humanness, seems to be its defining characteristic. After the first bird dies from an unfortunate paint-swallowing accident, the second bird continues the tradition of the "Sage" and takes the achievements of the first bird even further. Dickens describes its greatest accomplishment thus:

> Once I met him unexpectedly, about half-a-mile from my house, walking down the middle of a public street, attended by a pretty large crowd, and spontaneously

[286] Valerie Pedlar, *The Most Dreadful Visitation: Male Madness in Victorian Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), p. 42.
[287] John Bowen (introd.), Charles Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge: A Tale of the Riots of 'Eighty* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. xxviii.
[288] Charles Dickens, "Preface to the Cheap Edition of 1849", in *Barnaby Rudge: A Tale of the Riots of* Eighty, ed. John Bowen (London: Penguin Books, 2003), Appendix III, p. 699.

> exhibiting the whole of his accomplishments. His gravity under these trying circumstances I can never forget, nor the extraordinary gallantry with which, refusing to be brought home, he defended himself behind a pump, before being overpowered by numbers.[289]

The bird becomes an actor, exhibiting its talents for the admiration of a crowd. Dickens further uses the bird to mock the qualities of the English gentleman when it displays "extraordinary gallantry" by defending itself from behind a pump. Like the figures in the pantomime, the bird simultaneously displays and trivialises human characteristics such as intelligence and bravery. After he has expounded at length upon Grip's predecessors, Dickens goes on to include the words from his original preface, expounding upon the Gordon Riots, which he characterises as born of "intolerance and persecution". He argues that what is often falsely termed a "religious cry" is "easily raised by men who have no religion, and who in their daily practice set at naught the common principles of right and wrong".[290] Like the raven, then, those who justify persecution under the banner of religion are profaning sacred truths by bringing them into the realm of the illogical. Thus in a bizarre reversal of the medieval moral hierarchy, a brute mimicking a human is not easy to tell apart from actual humans. This is why critics like Pedlar are unable to decide whether Dickens's raven is serious or comic: through figures like Grip Dickens simultaneously evokes and mocks serious moral questions, creating a sense of a precarious world that is constantly threatening to degenerate into theatrical absurdity.

This paradoxical combination of lofty human ambitions with the absurd and the ridiculous is what makes the figure of Grip so disquieting. His first appearance in the novel is an interesting case in point: the raven first appears when Edward Chester is describing to Gabriel Varden, the locksmith, the events of the night before in which he had encountered a 'robber'. Edward's allusion to the ghostly figure who – as we later discover – turns out to be Barnaby's murderous father, is immediately followed by a "hoarse voice" crying "Halloa!" and "bow wow wow" (c. vi, p. 60). In some ways this figure recalls the grim reaper: the fact that it draws attention to itself just as Varden is probing the mystery of the shadowy murderer, gives it a ghostly aura as if it were some

[289] Ibid., p. 700.
[290] Ibidem.

demonic emissary from the dead. Varden certainly reacts to it as if it were, starting as if it were "some supernatural agent" (c. vi, p. 60).

But the allegorical undertones of violence associated with Grip are immediately undercut: the raven's words are not prophetic but silly and nonsensical. While this could suggest a sinister madness, Dickens seems to enjoy the frivolousness of Grip's behaviour for its own sake, momentarily abandoning the intense melodrama of before in favour of a more light-hearted comic style. The raven is "perched upon the top of the easy-chair" and had listened "with a most extraordinary appearance of comprehending every word, to all they had said up to this point; turning his head from one to the other as if his office were to judge between them, and it were of the very last importance that he should not lose a word" (c. vi, p. 60). In this image something of an infernal judge like Dante's Minos is suggested and simultaneously parodied. The bird *appears* thoughtful, as if he were assessing the situation and coming to a reasoned conclusion. His words have a ghostly life of their own and appear to drift through his "thick feathers" rather than "out of his mouth" (c. vi, p. 60). Yet what emerges from him is not a prophetic speech of damnation or an exposition of the suppressed violence of this gothic world but instead a string of meaningless clichés culminating in the puzzling, "I'm a devil, I'm a devil, I'm a devil", after which he begins to whistle (c. vi, p. 61). The bird is first and foremost a parody of solemnity: after Varden has noticed him, he enacts a little ritual, a "sort of grave dance" and flaps his "wings against his sides as if he were bursting with laughter" (c. vi, p. 61). This delights Barnaby so much that he almost rolls upon the ground in an "ecstasy" of enjoyment. Barnaby and Grip's childlike interaction recalls the light-heartedness of the pantomime in its innocent theatricality. And yet it does not entirely banish the dark allegorical suggestion, which is present in the bird's constant repetition of the words "I'm a devil". The fact that he does not quite live up to the more ominous symbolic qualities that he evokes, leaves the moral world of evil and judgment hovering about him in a ghostly half-life. Even Varden, impressed as he is by Grip, finds him disconcerting and is "divided between admiration . . . and a kind of fear of him" (c. vi, p. 60).

The uncomfortable combination of comedy and moral allegory in this figure gives a satirical edge to Dickens's humour. But the episode is not entirely satirical either: the little details of the bird's behaviour such as the way in which he walks towards Barnaby

in a “pace like that of a very particular gentleman with exceedingly tight boots on, trying to walk fast over loose pebbles” (c. vi, p. 61), are comic primarily because of the dramatic manner in which they conjure to mind the farcical walk of the raven, accentuating his incongruity. This adds another element to Dickens’s irony – the sense that for all its seeming prominence, the figure of the raven may indeed be trivial, just another silly creature in a world that has ceased to be meaningful.

The presence of Grip, with all his contradictory associations of profound moral significance and vacuity, provides a prism through which to view various situations. Different characteristics of the raven are emphasised in different situations: the episode in which Barnaby and his mother come upon a magistrate during their vagrant wanderings is an interesting example. The appearance of the magistrate is sudden and a bit disorienting. He is “very loud, hoarse, and red-faced” and decides on the spot that Barnaby and his mother are “vagrants” who are up to no good (c. xlvii, p. 388). This accusation is not supported by any evidence and simply gives him an excuse to bully Barnaby and his mother in the name of the law.

Interestingly Grip’s behaviour mirrors that of the magistrate: when he is produced for the gentleman’s amusement he cries out in a raucous manner, in some ways echoing the gentleman’s blustering speech. He describes himself as “Grip the clever, Grip the wicked, Grip the knowing” (c. xlvii, pp. 388–389). This is interesting when one considers the description of the magistrate a bit later on: he and his friends consider him “a fine old country gentleman” and a “thorough-bred English gentleman” and that it is a “pity” that there are “no more like him” (c. xlvii, p 390). Although he is barely literate, he is so “knowledgeable” about “horseflesh” that he is “almost equal to a farrier” (c. xlvii, p. 390). He surpasses “his own head groom” in “stable learning” and outmatches every pig on his estate in gluttony (c. xlvii, p 390). His pride in these questionable accomplishments is something like Grip’s assertion of his own brilliance, which amounts to his ability to dance, ‘draw corks’ and string a few nonsensical phrases together. Grip also mirrors and parodies the magistrate’s distrust of the travellers by eyeing him “with surprising insolence of manner”, and “screwing his head so much on one side that he appear[s] desirous of screwing it off upon the spot” (c. xlvii, p. 389).

In this episode Grip is particularly capricious: when initially coaxed to repeat his tricks, he turns a "deaf ear to the request and [preserves] a dead silence" (c. xlvii, p. 389). Later on, when already at the gentleman's house, he becomes more amicable and condescends "upon Barnaby's solicitation, to repeat his various phrases of speech, and to go through the whole of his performances with the utmost success" (c. xlvii, p. 391). His good humour does not last, however, and he soon gets into his "basket and positively refus[es] to say another word, good or bad" (c. xlvii, p. 391). His behaviour is reflected by the magistrate who is initially suspicious of the travellers, then invites them into his house to perform for him and finally casts them out onto the street when he discovers that their raven is not for sale.

The raven, unsettling as his behaviour sometimes is, is, in this encounter, far less threatening than the magistrate. His sudden turns of mood are petulant and amusing. The magistrate's erratic behaviour is more upsetting: when he does not get his way he becomes enraged and expresses the violent desire to send the travellers to prison or to the stocks (c. xlvii, p. 393). The way in which the bird mimics and trivialises the magistrate's characteristics throws the authority of the law into question. But the bird's antics also overshadow the potentially serious nature of the magistrate's abuse of his position: when Barnaby and his mother are thrown out of the house Dickens does not dwell on the moral unfairness of the episode but rather diverts our attention to Grip who, "excited by the noise, [draws] corks enough for a city feast" and "appear[s] to congratulate himself beyond measure on having been the cause of the disturbance" (c. xlvii, p. 393). In this way the presence of Grip dramatically brings to light social injustices that it simultaneously distracts one from pursuing too far or considering too deeply.

John Bowen has commented that whereas in earlier novels such as *The Old Curiosity Shop* the theatre functioned as a "safe haven" where characters could retreat to escape threatening social and political realities, in this episode entertainment itself is "foolish and potentially deadly" as can be seen when Grip's performance for the magistrate brings the travellers in danger of imprisonment.[291] Here Bowen is concerned with Grip's theatricality in the context of Dickens's biting political critique of the Tory magistrate. I want to take this in a slightly different direction to suggest that part of the

[291]John Bowen, introd., *Barnaby Rudge*, p. xxiv.

reason why performance is so frightening in this novel is that the theatre is brought disturbingly close to lived experience: although Grip is supposedly the only performer in this incident, I have argued that one cannot help the sense that his theatrical accomplishments are aped by his audience. Thus illogical and melodramatic occurrences are no longer confined to the safe space of the stage or the circus and therefore cannot simply be dismissed as an impressive piece of "stage business". In this way, one is forced to examine them more closely and to realise that life and the theatre mirror one another in their paradoxical blend of meaning and vacuity.

Grip's theatrical quality also enforces the ritualistic dimension of Dickens's view of history, the sense that history is not simply linear but is made up of recurring ritual patterns. This is certainly true in relation to Barnaby's own personal history: Barnaby and his father are opposites – the father is associated with the guilty past whereas the son in some ways represents the ignorant present. Yet in the episode in which they encounter one another in the prison yard, there is a strong sense in which they are bound together in a symbolic continuum where each reflects the other. This is suggested by the presence of Grip: when Barnaby realises that the murderer is his father, he springs towards him and puts "his arms around his neck, and [presses] his head against his cheek" (c. lxiii, p. 520). But the father does not respond to his son's affection and retains a stony silence. Grip's reaction here is worth quoting in full:

> Not a word was said in answer; but Grip croaked loudly, and hopped about them, round and round, as if enclosing them in a magic circle, and invoking all the powers of mischief (c. lxiii, p. 520).

The magic ritual that Grip enacts binds the two together in an evil circle: the son is not freed from the sins of the father but rather trapped by them so that the cycle of evil continues to repeat itself across generations. Within such a symbolic context, Grip's croak takes on an ominously prophetic significance.

Dickens further uses Grip to suggest the connection between the anti-Catholic riots and the time in which he is writing: the parting impression of the novel is of Grip. For a year after the riots, Dickens comments, although Grip "recovered his looks" he remained "profoundly silent" except for the occasional "grave, decorous croak" (c. lxxxii,

p. 680). This change seems initially to be a permanent effect of the time of upheaval that he has been through. But after the year is up he is heard "addressing himself to the horses in the stable, upon the subject of the Kettle". He is also heard to "laugh" and advances "with fantastic steps to the very door of the bar" where he cries "'I'm a devil, I'm a devil, I'm a devil!" with extraordinary rapture" (c. lxxxii, p. 680). The fact that he miraculously recovers his power of speech only to repeat the same old ludicrous theatrics, throws into question the suggestion that something as traumatic as the anti-Catholic riots can leave a lasting impression on the psyche. Instead, like everything else in this novel, such emotional and moral scars are fleeting. Rather, illogicality ultimately triumphs: Grip goes on improving his skills in the "vulgar tongue" until the "present time" (c. lxxxii, p. 680), suggesting that history is made up of a succession of nonsensical events and that this passion for the irrational is the only thread that connects the past to the present.

I have argued that Grip is a figure poised between fantasy and reality, the supernatural and the absurd. His language is both nonsensical and suggestive and seems partially to perform an allegorical function – summoning a ghostly religious and moral dimension that he nevertheless is incapable of embodying fully. He can be considered a 'haunting' figure in the sense that he seems to inhabit the margins of the human world, reflecting and parodying human characteristics and so rendering them uncanny. In this way he constantly disturbs the boundaries between the acceptable and knowable, and the unknowable and mysterious.

Barnaby

Like many of Dickens's eponymous heroes and heroines, Barnaby is not often viewed favourably by the critics, most of whom do not find him worth much discussion: Kathryn Chittick argues that his "emergence into moral complexity" at the novel's conclusion is implausible.[292] Paul Marchbanks agrees, commenting that Barnaby's "intellectual faculties, self-awareness, or language shift to meet the changing demands of the plot".[293] According to this view, Barnaby is simply a puppet in a melodrama and

[292] Chittick, *Dickens and the 1830s*, p. 174.
[293] Paul Marchbancks, "From Caricature to Character: The Intellectually Disabled in Dickens's Novels", *Dickens Quarterly* 23.3 (Sept. 2006): 169–179 (p. 175).

lacks the presence and the autonomy to drive his own story. In his discussion of the Victorian historical novel, Andrew Sanders argues that Barnaby fails to live up to his promise: at his most convincing, Barnaby combines the pathos of the abused innocent with a sense of "eeriness and essential blankness".[294] But, Sanders suggests, he ultimately falls short of this because at moments of intended pathos, such as the conversation in prison between Barnaby and his mother, he comes across as too eloquent, sane and sentimental to be plausible.[295] What Sanders objects to is evidently not Barnaby's madness or childlike passivity but rather Dickens's failed attempt to invest him with wisdom.

At certain moments in the novel the figure of Barnaby does seem to evoke the tradition of the Wise Fool. The Holy Fool is a figure from Christian and particularly Catholic tradition who combines madness with wisdom. The concept was derived from the writings of Saint Paul who coined the term "fools for Christ" to describe people who gave up their worldly possessions in order to dedicate themselves to God (1 Cor. 2.10) and legend has it that St Francis of Assisi called his followers "the jesters of the lord".[296] The trope became popular in the literature and drama of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: Desiderius Erasmus wrote symbolically of the simpleton-fool in his *Praise of Folly* (1509): here Folly defends herself by citing the writings of St Paul, the fact that he "imputes a kind of folly even to God himself",[297] and one could argue that the fool in *King Lear* performs a similar function.

When talking to his mother in prison, Barnaby's somewhat artificial perspicacity seems to be in keeping with portrayals of the Holy Fool:

> "They will not harm you," she said, her tears choking her utterance. "They never will harm you, when they know all. I am sure they never will."
>
> "Oh! Don't be too sure of that," cried Barnaby, with a strange pleasure in the belief that she was self-deceived, and in his own sagacity. "They have marked me from the first. I heard them say so to each other when they brought me to this

[294] Andrew Sanders, *The Victorian Historical Novel* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1978), p. 81.
[295]Sanders, *The Victorian Historical Novel*, pp. 81–2.
[296] A. J. Close, "Sancho Panza: Wise Fool", *Modern Language Review* 68.2 (April 1973): 344–357 (p. 351).
[297] Desiderius Erasmus, *In Praise of Folly* (1509) (New York: Cosimo, 2007), p. 65.

> place last night; and I believe them. Don't you cry for me. They said that I was bold, and so I am, and so I will be. You may think that I am silly, but I can die as well as another. – I have done no harm, have I?" he added quickly.
>
> "None before Heaven," she answered.
>
> "Why then," said Barnaby, "let them do their worst. You told me once—you—when I asked you what death meant, that it was nothing to be feared, if we did no harm—Aha! mother, you thought I had forgotten that!" (c. lxxiii, pp. 607–608).

Barnaby's incorruptibility and bravery in the face of death in this scene comes across as a surprising kind of wisdom. But it is a wisdom that appears to be 'put on', a staged eloquence, as Sanders has noted: Barnaby insists on his own wisdom and innocence to the point that it appears false and dishonest. One could even go so far as to suggest that Dickens takes refuge in the stereotype of the Wise Fool here in order to avoid confronting the complex psychological questions that Barnaby's earlier destructive behaviour has raised. In this way the potentially transcendent is reduced to the banal.

The false theatricality of this episode brings to light the ambiguity at the heart of the novel, the interplay between transcendent Christian symbolism and vacuity, which is dramatized by the figure of Barnaby. There are countless other scenes where Barnaby inverts the tradition of the Holy Fool that he invokes: a good example is the manner in which he relates to Stagg, another figure who ultimately parodies and inverts the biblical stereotype on which he appears to be modelled. Christianity is a religion preoccupied with blindness. According to John Hull the blind man is an ambiguous figure in Christian tradition: on the one hand blindness can be taken as a symbol of spiritual ineptitude – Christ's healing of the blind was meant to show the spiritual inadequacy of the world that he had come to enlighten. On the other hand the fact that Christ was himself blindfolded sanctifies the disability by suggesting that the "grace of God is experienced in weakness".[298] Stagg consciously evokes this latter tradition in order to mislead Barnaby into believing that his advice is wisdom.

---

[298] John Hull, "A Spirituality of Disability: The Christian Heritage As Both Problem And Potential", *Studies in Christian Ethics* 16.2 (2003): 21–35 (p. 30), referring to 2 Cor. 12.9.

When he first encounters Barnaby and his mother in their garden he acts the role of a medieval pilgrim in search of enlightenment. He is described as follows:

> This was a man with dusty feet and garments, who stood, bare-headed, behind the hedge that divided their patch of garden from the pathway, and leant meekly forward as if he sought to mingle with their conversation, and waited for his time to speak. His face was turned towards the brightness, too, but the light that fell upon it showed that he was blind, and saw it not (c. xlv, p. 375).

His simple, poor dress suggests that he is humble. Further, the way in which his eyes are turned towards the light symbolically evokes the Christian journey of the soul, creating a sense that the beggar is seeking grace and illumination. The biblical associations of this figure are strengthened by his speech: when he hears the voices of Barnaby and his mother, he exclaims benevolently, "A blessing on those voices" (c. xlv, p. 375), and later he refers to Barnaby's mother as a "lady" explaining that he does not judge her worth by her dress but by her gentle manner (c. xlv, p. 376). But the vacuity of this stereotype of the wise blind man is soon exposed: Stagg turns out to be an actor, one who is driven by greed rather than by the supposed spiritual virtues that he seems initially to profess. He demands money from Mrs Rudge and sows the first seeds of folly in Barnaby himself, commanding him to drink from his bottle and encouraging him to leave his mother in pursuit of riches. One could argue that Dickens's reproduction of the Christian trope of the blind pursuit of wealth in this scene is so clichéd that it lacks any emotional purchase. Barnaby is here drained of religious as well as emotional significance: he is not present when Stagg reveals his villainy and when he is present he does not say much, except to enthuse about the possibility of becoming rich.

Yet there is a great irony implicit in the very flatness of this scene: the Christian parables of redemption, once so authentic and affecting, are now simply a convenient disguise to hide Stagg's true purpose, something that presages the rioters' abuse of Christian ideology. Barnaby's passivity is also not without interest: unlike the "holy fool" who uses his "madness" as a means of guiding others to the truth, Barnaby's madness is simply passive folly. Although he inhabits a world which is still full of Christian echoes, he is unable to distinguish false wisdom from true and allows himself to be swept along

by the designs of others. Barnaby's weakness as a character leaves an emptiness at the heart of Dickens's plot: one is left wanting more from him or wishing that somebody more complex were filling his role instead. This is more consistent with the general effect of the novel than it might initially seem to be: this is a novel obsessed with vacancies – the empty spaces left by religion in an increasingly secular age, or the ghostly secrets of a past that has become buried in the course of time. As John Bowen so astutely points out, this novel is haunted by the "ghosts of ghosts of ghosts".[299]

What most interests Dickens about Barnaby is not his innocence or potential insight or even his folly, but rather his "absence of the soul" (c. iii, p. 35). In some senses Barnaby is more in tune with the ghostly emptiness at the heart of his society than the other characters are. This fact has led to some of the novel's most interesting passages. Here is a description of Barnaby watching the clothes on the line as they blow in the wind:

> "Look down there," he said softly; "do you mark how they whisper in each other's ears; then dance and leap, to make believe they are in sport? Do you see how they stop for a moment, when they think there is no one looking, and mutter among themselves again; and then how they roll and gambol, delighted with the mischief they've been plotting? Look at 'em now. See how they whirl and plunge. And now they stop again, and whisper, cautiously together—little thinking, mind, how often I have lain upon the grass and watched them. I say what is it that they plot and hatch? Do you know?"
>
> "They are only clothes," returned the guest, "such as we wear; hanging on those lines to dry, and fluttering in the wind."
>
> "Clothes!" echoed Barnaby, looking close into his face, and falling quickly back. "Ha ha! Why, how much better to be silly, than as wise as you! You don't see shadowy people there, like those that live in sleep – not you. Nor eyes in the knotted panes of glass, nor swift ghosts when it blows hard, nor do you hear

[299] Bowen (introd.), Charles Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge*, p. xxvi.

> voices in the air, nor see men stalking in the sky – not you! I lead a merrier life than you, with all your cleverness. You're the dull men. We're the bright ones. Ha! ha! I'll not change with you, clever as you are, – not I!" (c. x, p. 94).

Here Barnaby invests the lifeless clothes with a vivid presence, imagining that they are involved in a wild and mischievous sport, a secret game that is reserved only for the times when nobody is watching them. They are involved in more than just a simple dialogue – they seem to share a secret ritual away from the prying eyes of the less imaginative population. But Barnaby is engaged in more than a frivolous flight of the imagination here: he is grimly conscious of that other world of non-being which, in his eyes, gains a dramatic and even threatening presence: every sound and sight becomes for him part of a shadowy community that haunts his dreams, taps against his windows and stalks through the very air. Such a vision is far more powerful than Sir John Chester's glib realist retort that they are "only clothes".

It is not wisdom that allows Barnaby to see beyond the more concrete realist vision of the world. Rather, like the clothes that he admires, he is a figure lacking in substance, one of the many half-lives that flicker through the pages of the novel. Paradoxically, his very ghostliness in this scene has a vibrancy about it that allows him to summon a suppressed dimension of shadows and spectral presences fleetingly to life. His merry laughter at those "clever" people who are not aware of this, momentarily lifts the horizon of meaning, and suggests that the complacent notion of reality as only existing within the bounds of the empirical and the known presupposes the death of another reality: a vision of mystical presences that are sensed dramatically behind the veil of the material world. But in Barnaby's world these mystical visions have been reduced to a series of empty rituals enacted by clothes on the washing-line and are only capable of haunting the secret recesses of the imagination.

When Barnaby is placed on death row for his part in the anti-Catholic riots, his last moments echo the crucifixion. Like Christ, Barnaby has been condemned to death as a result of the miscarriage of justice. Dickens describes his sentence in the following manner:

> Barnaby was to die. There was no hope. It is not the least evil attendant upon the frequent exhibition of this last dread punishment, of Death, that it hardens the minds of those who deal it out, and makes them, though they be amiable men in other respects, indifferent to, or unconscious of, their great responsibility. The word had gone forth that Barnaby was to die. It went forth, every month, for lighter crimes. It was a thing so common, that very few were startled by the awful sentence, or cared to question its propriety. Just then, too, when the law had been so flagrantly outraged, its dignity must be asserted. The symbol of its dignity,—stamped upon every page of the criminal statute-book,—was the gallows; and Barnaby was to die (c. lxxvi, p. 633).

It is an injustice that has become so commonplace that it does not move anyone to question its "propriety". It is ironic that the gallows are a symbol of the law's "dignity". Like Christ's death, Barnaby's hanging is meant to be taken as a sign of the corruption of the world that persecutes him rather than of his own inadequacy.

Yet the Christ-like characteristics of Barnaby in this scene are strained. Up until now Dickens has constantly thwarted our search for a deeper spiritual quality to Barnaby's vacuous character. But Dickens attempts to invest Barnaby in his last moments with angelic characteristics. Like little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), the sufferings and torments that Barnaby undergoes no longer have the power to touch him: he stands "apart" from his fellow prisoners and responds to Hugh's encouragement in the following manner:

> "Bless you," cried Barnaby, stepping lightly towards him, 'I'm not frightened, Hugh. I'm quite happy. I wouldn't desire to live now, if they'd let me. Look at me! Am I afraid to die? Will they see ME tremble?"
>
> Hugh gazed for a moment at his face, on which there was a strange, unearthly smile; and at his eye, which sparkled brightly; and interposing between him and the Ordinary (c. lxxvii, p. 643).

There is something contrived about his tone here as he tries to pacify Hugh. His "unearthly smile" and sparkling eye – signs that he has now joined Dickens's vapid

"blessed" characters who are elevated above mortal concerns – jar with earlier representations of him as childish and inane.

I want to suggest, though, that in this instance Dickens is not simply wallowing in mawkish Christian platitudes. Rather Barnaby's passage towards death here invokes Christian mythology in a quasi-ironic light, always hovering on the edge of absurdity. Dennis and Hugh are to be executed on the same day as Barnaby like the two thieves in the Gospel. Barnaby's supposed last moments are witnessed by a hostile crowd. But in the Gospel accounts of Christ's death the crowd is bent on his persecution – agitating for him to be put to death while Barabbas is freed. In Dickens's account the crowd is primarily curious rather than aggressive:

> While it was yet dark, a few lookers-on collected, who had plainly come there for the purpose and intended to remain: even those who had to pass the spot on their way to some other place, lingered, and lingered yet, as though the attraction of that were irresistible. Meanwhile the noise of saw and mallet went on briskly, mingled with the clattering of boards on the stone pavement of the road, and sometimes with the workmen's voices as they called to one another. Whenever the chimes of the neighbouring church were heard—and that was every quarter of an hour—a strange sensation, instantaneous and indescribable, but perfectly obvious, seemed to pervade them all (c. lxxvii, pp. 638–639).

The irresistible allure of the place of execution is so powerful that it draws the people away from the mechanical half-lives that they lead in the city. The contrast between the background noises of the workers and the growing sense of anticipation is quite marked. The power that the gallows have over the crowd is so intense that it resembles a spiritual fervour: the very first people who gather are pervaded by a "strange sensation" the moment that the neighbourhood church chimes, indicating the approaching hour of execution. But the almost magical power of attraction that the gallows exert over the people only *resembles* religious passion – it is the theatrical power of the gallows that draws the crowd and it is ironic that the chiming of the church bells, which might once have suggested the spiritual role of the Church within the community, now only signifies the passing of time and approaching death of the felons. The crowd – with their insatiable

curiosity and penchant for spectacle – seem to be the audience of theatre rather than witnesses of an execution.

This is how the crowd is described just before the prisoners are brought out:

> Three quarters past eleven! Many spectators who had retired from the windows, came back refreshed, as though their watch had just begun . . . Then, a profound silence replaced the tumult that had so long been gathering, and a breathless pause ensued. Every window was now choked up with heads; the house-tops teemed with people—clinging to chimneys, peering over gable-ends, and holding on where the sudden loosening of any brick or stone would dash them down into the street. The church tower, the church roof, the church yard, the prison leads, the very water-spouts and lampposts—every inch of room—swarmed with human life (c. lxxvii, p. 642).

Here the passion of the crowd has become a frenzy: people are so driven by their curiosity that they put themselves in danger by climbing up precarious chimneys which threaten to come apart beneath their hands. Their disregard for dignity and safety robs them of their humanity. The crowd is both more and less than human: it has become a single uncontrollable monster that chokes up every space with heads – something far more formidable and powerful than a single human being could be. It has also lost some of humanity's more superior qualities, most notably its spirituality. Here every part of the church – its tower roof and yard – has become buried beneath the frenzied crowd. In the face of the people's insatiable curiosity moral concerns are reduced to mere platitudes: the cries of "Hats off poor fellows" lose their moral force somewhat as they simply form part of the terrible roar of excitement. The biblical crowd is defined by its blatant perversity but Dickens's crowd is more threatening even than that: it is a chaotic, amoral force driven by a lust for pure spectacle without substance.

As he himself acknowledges, Dickens is not immune to the allure of spectacle and theatricality and sometimes indulges in it for its own sake. He certainly plays to what he assumes to be his readers' theatrical tastes, sometimes at the expense of plausibility. Hugh's last eloquent speech could be taken as an example of this:

> "I'll say this," he cried, looking firmly round, "that if I had ten lives to lose, and the loss of each would give me ten times the agony of the hardest death, I'd lay them all down—ay, I would, though you gentlemen may not believe it—to save this one. This one," he added, wringing his hand again, "that will be lost through me".
>
> . . .
>
> "That gentleman yonder –" pointing to the clergyman – "has often in the last few days spoken to me of faith, and strong belief. You see what I am—more brute than man, as I have been often told – but I had faith enough to believe, and did believe as strongly as any of you gentlemen can believe anything, that this one life would be spared. See what he is! – Look at him!" (c. lxxvii, p. 646).

There are significant ironies in this speech. Hugh's remorse calls to mind the acknowledgement of the penitent thief on Calvary, who acknowledges Christ's blamelessness and his own sinfulness: "we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss" (Luke 23:40–2). But, unlike the thief, he is not in the least penitent. Nor is Barnaby divine. Ultimately he does escape execution and enjoys a form of "life after death" in the closing pages of the novel. But unlike Christ's resurrection, which is the central emphasis of the Christian message, Dickens does not dwell on the details of how Barnaby cheated death, so that the fact comes as quite a surprise and appears farfetched. In fact Barnaby's escape from death threatens to undermine the significance of his former suffering, reducing him to a figure of no substance that mechanically fulfils the demands of a sensational plot.

The evocation of Christian motifs ritually affirms the emptiness of Barnaby's world. In the story of *Barnaby Rudge* the grand narrative of Christianity has unravelled and all that remains is a series of empty ceremonies enacted by an idiot. Barnaby is far from a perfect character but the very fact that he fails to live up to the motifs that he invokes is consistent with the mood of the novel: the bizarre world of *Barnaby Rudge* is a world without direction, uncomfortably suspended between meaning and vacuity. Nothing captures this better than a vacuous fool whose most profound moments turn out, paradoxically, to be his least plausible.

The anti-Catholic riots

In his essay entitled, "A Dead Poet", G. K. Chesterton attempts to argue for the power of religious ritual, and Catholic ritual in particular, as opposed to empty worldly ceremonies:

> It is the mark of religious forms that they declare something unknown. But it is the mark of worldly forms that they declare something which is known, and which is known to be untrue. When the Pope in an Encyclical calls himself your father, it is a matter of faith or of doubt. But when the Duke of Devonshire in a letter calls himself yours obediently, you know that he means the opposite of what he says. Religious forms are, at the worst, fables; they might be true. Secular forms are falsehoods; they are not true.[300]

For Chesterton, the distinction between the sacred and the profane is quite clear: religious ritual, however remote and fanciful it may appear to be, always holds out the hope of spiritual enrichment. But when it has a completely secular function, ritual is so bizarre and trivial that it is almost blasphemous.

Puzzling as it is in a novel that purports to depict anti-Catholic prejudice, Dickens never directly confronts the question of religious ritual in *Barnaby Rudge*. And yet his language is replete with ritual patterns that become most marked in the violence of the crowd scenes. But Dickens does not distinguish as clearly as Chesterton does between worldly and sacred rites: the kind of ritual that Dickens's Protestant fundamentalists enact is not obviously religious; neither is it completely secular: possibly because of its theatricality, the crowd seems to occupy the shadowy space between the sacred and the mundane, conjuring up a realm of infernal energies while simultaneously engaging in absurd and inexplicable behaviour.

When Hugh first joins their cause, this is how the rioters are described:

> It was remarkable, too, that whenever they happened to stand where there was any press of people, and Hugh chanced to be looking downward, he was sure to see an

[300] G.K. Chesterton, "A Dead Poet", in *All Things Considered* (New York: J. Lane, 1909), pp. 279–280.

> arm stretched out—under his own perhaps, or perhaps across him—which thrust some paper into the hand or pocket of a bystander, and was so suddenly withdrawn that it was impossible to tell from whom it came; nor could he see in any face, on glancing quickly round, the least confusion or surprise. They often trod upon a paper like the one he carried in his breast, but his companion whispered him not to touch it or to take it up,—not even to look towards it,—so there they let them lie, and passed on .
>
> . . .
>
> Before putting his lips to the liquor which was brought for them, Dennis drank in a loud voice the health of Lord George Gordon, President of the Great Protestant Association; which toast Hugh pledged likewise, with corresponding enthusiasm. A fiddler who was present, and who appeared to act as the appointed minstrel of the company, forthwith struck up a Scotch reel; and that in tones so invigorating, that Hugh and his friend (who had both been drinking before) rose from their seats as by previous concert, and, to the great admiration of the assembled guests, performed an extemporaneous No-Popery Dance (c. xxxviii, pp. 318–319).

The crowd's actions in this scene mimic ritual in the sense that they follow a mysterious and ostensibly meaningful pattern of behaviour that has no rational explanation: each member of the crowd is aware intuitively of the other so that they barely need to speak except to say a word or two in an undertone. United by this secret understanding, the members of the crowd seem magically to transform into one body: it matters very little who passes the papers except that papers are passed about by arms that Hugh notices are stretched across him or beneath him. Although its motives are at this stage obscure and secretive, the crowd is also animated by an appetite for performance, so that Hugh and Dennis, invigorated by the proceedings of the day, execute a spontaneous No-Popery Dance to the tune of a fiddle. There is such liveliness, such vigorous enjoyment in these actions that they leave one reluctant to acknowledge their potentially disturbing implications.

Such ceremony has no other function than to mystify the crowd's true purpose, veiling the absurdity of their cause. Without questioning the meaning of what he sees in

the streets, Hugh declares himself prepared for a "good hot piece of work" (c. xxxviii, p. 319), substantiating his viewpoint by cursing the Papists. Dramatic and significant as these actions may seem, then, they are in fact completely trivial and arbitrary, suggesting that anti-Papal protests simply provide characters like Hugh and Dennis with a convenient outlet for their sadistic desires. This juxtaposition of potentially meaningful ceremony with individuals' lunatic lust for violence is reinforced if one considers that Dickens's original plan was to have the storming of the Newgate prison undertaken by madmen escaped from Bedlam.

The dark underside of this ritualised sense of community is elaborated on elsewhere when Dickens warns of the dangers of veiling the absurd or the monstrous with an air of mystery and so magnifying its importance in the eyes of the ignorant. In such an instance, Dickens argues, false notions are given a mythological power through a dramatic ritual of secrecy:

> . . . when terrors and alarms which no man understood were perpetually broached, both in and out of Parliament, by one enthusiast who did not understand himself, and bygone bugbears which had lain quietly in their graves for centuries, were raised again to haunt the ignorant and credulous; when all this was done, as it were, in the dark, and secret invitations to join the Great Protestant Association in defence of religion, life, and liberty, were dropped in the public ways, thrust under the house-doors, tossed in at windows, and pressed into the hands of those who trod the streets by night; when they glared from every wall, and shone on every post and pillar, so that sticks and stones appeared infected with the common fear, urging all men to join together blindfold in resistance of they knew not what, they knew not why;—then the mania spread indeed, and the body, still increasing every day, grew forty thousand strong (c. xxxviii, p. 305).

In this environment, half-formed and ill-considered ideas are resurrected from the dead past and given a ghostly and threatening life of their own so that everything, whether object or person, seems to be tainted by a general feeling of paranoia that drives people inexplicably towards violence.

Later on, the secret magic of fear and hatred that underlies the rioters' destructive behaviour becomes more manifest:

> They had torches among them, and the chief faces were distinctly visible. That they had been engaged in the destruction of some building was sufficiently apparent, and that it was a Catholic place of worship was evident from the spoils they bore as trophies, which were easily recognisable for the vestments of priests, and rich fragments of altar furniture. Covered with soot, and dirt, and dust, and lime; their garments torn to rags; their hair hanging wildly about them; their hands and faces jagged and bleeding with the wounds of rusty nails; Barnaby, Hugh, and Dennis hurried on before them all, like hideous madmen. After them, the dense throng came fighting on: some singing; some shouting in triumph; some quarrelling among themselves; some menacing the spectators as they passed; some with great wooden fragments, on which they spent their rage as if they had been alive, rending them limb from limb, and hurling the scattered morsels high into the air; some in a drunken state, unconscious of the hurts they had received from falling bricks, and stones, and beams; one borne upon a shutter, in the very midst, covered with a dingy cloth, a senseless, ghastly heap. Thus—a vision of coarse faces, with here and there a blot of flaring, smoky light; a dream of demon heads and savage eyes, and sticks and iron bars uplifted in the air, and whirled about; a bewildering horror, in which so much was seen, and yet so little, which seemed so long, and yet so short, in which there were so many phantoms, not to be forgotten all through life, and yet so many things that could not be observed in one distracting glimpse—it flitted onward, and was gone (c. l, p. 419).

The crowd is made so wanton with their success that they allow themselves to be driven by a demonic fury, which leads them indiscriminately to destroy everything in their path. In fact they relish chaos and destruction to such a degree that they strip everything that they handle of its uniqueness: sticks and iron bars, once part of some structure, are flung up into the air with wild abandon.

The more intense this violence becomes, the more Dickens clothes it in a veil of mysticism reminiscent of religious rite. Here Dickens offers us a glimpse of a satanic

realm: the crowd is transformed into a "vision" of "demon heads and savage eyes", floating out of the "flaring, smoky light". In Catholicism, spiritual realities are affirmed through performance: for example the story of Christ's death is constantly reanimated through ritual actions, suggesting that Christ is dynamically present in the world rather than consigned to an obscure past. In a similar manner the actions of the crowd conjure up a world of hell-like passions that transcends ordinary reality. But this description has very different effects from that of Catholic rite: the purpose of Catholic ceremonies is to make God's presence in the world more deeply felt and experienced but the ritualistic behaviour of Dickens's crowd makes the rioters appear more and more ghostly until it they are reduced to a fleeting vision. Although the rioters are fascinating and grotesque, they also have no real power to hold our gaze and soon whirl away like a terrible hallucination. This suggests that by making themselves the mouthpiece for a mad and meaningless philosophy, the crowd is also removing themselves from reality – they have become part of a partial, nightmarish world which, while it is frightening, is also fleeting. But this strange mystification of the crowd's behaviour could also be read as an attempt by Dickens himself to evade confronting the question of their anti-Catholicism in any detail. This is the only time in the novel when any allusion is made to Catholic places and symbols of worship but Dickens does not give the implications of the crowd's contempt for Catholic institutions much consideration. By making the protesters appear increasingly unreal, Dickens also avoids confronting the very real and uncomfortable question of anti-Catholic prejudice.

As I will show in the next chapter, Dickens was not himself immune to anti-Catholic sentiments; even in the 1849 preface to *Barnaby Rudge* he includes a section of the original preface in which he acknowledges that he has "no sympathy with the Romish Church" although he hastily adds that he has "some esteemed friends among the followers of its creed".[301] This comes across very much as a clichéd liberal white-washing of intolerance and in fact there are instances when Dickens is not as careful about giving offence and is far more open about his distaste for Catholicism: in a letter to M.de Cerjat in 1869 he describes the Catholic Church as an "artfully and schemingly

[301] Charles Dickens, "Preface to the Cheap Edition of 1849", of *Barnaby Rudge: A Tale of the Riots of 'Eighty* (1841), ed. John Bowen (London: Penguin Books, 2003), Appendix III, p. 700.

managed institution",[302] and in P*ictures From Italy* he describes a Catholic ceremony as "droll and tawdry" with "nothing solemn and effective about it" (*Pictures From Italy*: "Rome", p. 173).

The Catholics in *Barnaby Rudge* are not a clearly defined community. Rather they consist of a few sketchily drawn individuals, who, at best, are never outspoken about their faith or, at worst, are criminals and hypocrites like the melodramatic Gashford. Of all the ghosts in the novel the Catholics are perhaps the most ghostly: Haredale, the only noticeable benevolent Catholic, is also a shadowy figure, fiercely private and mysterious and haunted by the guilt of a murder that he did not commit. Haredale also bears the collective guilt of the Protestant community who stigmatise him for being Catholic. But Dickens is wary of confronting the full implications of Haredale's situation as a victim of religious intolerance.

There is only one incident where Haredale directly faces the crowd's wrath:

> They [the crowd] were not silent, however, though inactive. At first some indistinct mutterings arose among them, which were followed by a hiss or two, and these swelled by degrees into a perfect storm. Then one voice said, "Down with the Papists!" and there was a pretty general cheer, but nothing more. After a lull of a few moments, one man cried out, "Stone him;" another, "Duck him;" another, in a stentorian voice, "No Popery!" This favourite cry the rest re-echoed, and the mob, which might have been two hundred strong, joined in a general shout.
>
> Mr Haredale had stood calmly on the brink of the steps, until they made this demonstration, when he looked round contemptuously, and walked at a slow pace down the stairs. He was pretty near the boat, when Gashford, as if without intention, turned about, and directly afterwards a great stone was thrown by some hand, in the crowd, which struck him on the head, and made him stagger like a drunken man.

---

[302] Madeline House and Graham Storey, et al (eds), *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, 12 vols (Oxford: Clarendon
Press, 1965–2002), 12: 267.

The blood sprung freely from the wound, and trickled down his coat. He turned directly, and rushing up the steps with a boldness and passion which made them all fall back, demanded:

“Who did that? Show me the man who hit me.”

Not a soul moved; except some in the rear who slunk off, and, escaping to the other side of the way, looked on like indifferent spectators.

“Who did that?” he repeated. “Show me the man who did it. Dog, was it you? It was your deed, if not your hand – I know you.”

He threw himself on Gashford as he said the words, and hurled him to the ground. There was a sudden motion in the crowd, and some laid hands upon him, but his sword was out, and they fell off again.

. . .

“Never mind, sir,” said a man, forcing his way between and pushing him towards the stairs with friendly violence, “never mind asking that. For God's sake, get away. What CAN you do against this number? And there are as many more in the next street, who'll be round directly,” – indeed they began to pour in as he said the words—“you'd be giddy from that cut, in the first heat of a scuffle. Now do retire, sir, or take my word for it you'll be worse used than you would be if every man in the crowd was a woman, and that woman Bloody Mary. Come, sir, make haste – as quick as you can.”

Mr Haredale, who began to turn faint and sick, felt how sensible this advice was, and descended the steps with his unknown friend's assistance. John Grueby (for John it was) helped him into the boat, and giving her a shove off, which sent her thirty feet into the tide, bade the waterman pull away like a Briton; and walked up again as composedly as if he had just landed.

There was at first a slight disposition on the part of the mob to resent this interference; but John looking particularly strong and cool, and wearing besides Lord George's livery, they thought better of it, and contented themselves with

> sending a shower of small missiles after the boat, which plashed harmlessly in the water; for she had by this time cleared the bridge, and was darting swiftly down the centre of the stream.
>
> From this amusement, they proceeded to giving Protestant knocks at the doors of private houses, breaking a few lamps, and assaulting some stray constables. But, it being whispered that a detachment of Life Guards had been sent for, they took to their heels with great expedition, and left the street quite clear (c. xliii, pp. 363–365).

There is an abrupt shift, at the outset of this episode, from the growing ferocity of the crowd who incite one another into a rage with shouts such as, "stone him", and "duck him" to their skulking silence when confronted with the question of their culpability. In fact the moment that Haredale tries to confront them about it directly, the crowd's violence melts away and loses its force and power: they look on dispassionately while Haredale gives vent to his wrath so that his reaction seems too extreme for the situation. Gashford and Chester, who are responsible for inciting the crowd to hostility, respond passively to Haredale's accusation: Gashford says nothing and Chester suggests that Haredale is overreacting. By denying their own responsibility for the incident these two men, and indeed the whole crowd, evade the problem of violence which is so evident in the blood on Haredale's forehead.

The way in which this episode unfolds suggests that Dickens himself is unwilling to interrogate the significance of anti-Catholic prejudice too deeply: the mounting tension is defused by the timely arrival of John Grueby who hastens to remove Haredale from the scene before things get out of hand. The crowd's attempt to stone Haredale when he climbs into the boat can only be described as tentative and lame and ultimately they content themselves with petty vandalism. The description of the "Protestant knocks" at the doors of "private houses" has the effect of deflating the potentially harmful character of the rioters by mocking their militant Protestantism. In this way Dickens keeps us at a distance from the moral questions raised by the attack on Haredale. Haredale's intense response to the attack is out of step with the generally flat and passive atmosphere of the scene and this draws our attention to the rhetorical and artificial quality of his language.

In a different atmosphere such language might serve to heighten the emotional and spiritual effects of the scene but here it comes across as stilted: the outward show of Haredale's outrage is emphasised but readers are kept at a distance from truly feeling and experiencing this. By evading the question of violence that this scene evokes, Dickens creates a ghostly narrative, haunted by the unresolved tension between Haredale and the crowd.

The crowd is far more openly violent later when destroying Haredale's mansion. Here their aggression is so intense that it takes on a perverse ritual dimension:

> Some searched the drawers, the chests, the boxes, writing-desks, and closets, for jewels, plate, and money; while others, less mindful of gain and more mad for destruction, cast their whole contents into the courtyard without examination, and called to those below, to heap them on the blaze. Men who had been into the cellars, and had staved the casks, rushed to and fro stark mad, setting fire to all they saw—often to the dresses of their own friends—and kindling the building in so many parts that some had no time for escape, and were seen, with drooping hands and blackened faces, hanging senseless on the window-sills to which they had crawled, until they were sucked and drawn into the burning gulf. The more the fire crackled and raged, the wilder and more cruel the men grew; as though moving in that element they became fiends, and changed their earthly nature for the qualities that give delight in hell (c. lv, p 460).

Dickens turns naturally to religious language in order to give full expression to the horrific actions of the crowd: they are described as engaged in "demon labours" and are driven by a lust for destruction that is so intense, it appears supernatural. The bonfire into which they throw all the spoils of their war on the mansion becomes a perverse altar at which they worship. Some are so drawn to it that even their greed cannot stop them from toppling everything that they find into the flames. Those who aren't quick enough to save themselves from the burning building hang perversely from the window-sills before they are swallowed by the fiery gorge below: this, coupled with the savage cries and exaltations of the crowd, suggests a wild, primitive ritual in which lives are sacrificed to a brutal cause.

But, despite the demonic overtones, there is nothing specifically religious about what they are doing. In fact many of them are driven by materialistic desires, to raid the chests, boxes and closets for jewels and gold. They are bathing in a sea of things – movables, window-panes, flooring, rafters, writing-desks, closets and so on – none of which is sacred in character. Thus the crowd's dramatic actions ultimately create a secular ritual of destruction. The demonic nature of their behaviour is reflected by the frenetic pattern of the language, which builds in intensity, juxtaposing the growing fire with the increasingly perverse behaviour of the crowd and culminating in their transformation into fiends. The rhetorical force of the narrative, coupled with the use of religious imagery to describe the crowd's behaviour, means that the question of religion and particularly Catholicism is not entirely banished from the scene; and yet it remains an unspoken presence.

This is how Dickens describes the remains of the house:

> The burning pile, revealing rooms and passages red hot, through gaps made in the crumbling walls; the tributary fires that licked the outer bricks and stones, with their long forked tongues, and ran up to meet the glowing mass within; the shining of the flames upon the villains who looked on and fed them; the roaring of the angry blaze, so bright and high that it seemed in its rapacity to have swallowed up the very smoke; the living flakes the wind bore rapidly away and hurried on with, like a storm of fiery snow; the noiseless breaking of great beams of wood, which fell like feathers on the heap of ashes, and crumbled in the very act to sparks and powder; the lurid tinge that overspread the sky, and the darkness, very deep by contrast, which prevailed around; the exposure to the coarse, common gaze, of every little nook which usages of home had made a sacred place, and the destruction by rude hands of every little household favourite which old associations made a dear and precious thing . . . (c. lv, p 461).

The ruins are spectacular – the combination of the lurid glare of the flames and the dark night sky strikes an apocalyptic note.

But the allusion to religion is never made explicit: the destruction of the house is sacrilegious but only because of the sacred associations of home life. Dickens never

mentions the Catholic paraphernalia that would no doubt be among the belongings of a Catholic household, nor does he make any allusions to the ceremonies that would have been part of the daily lives of the family. The inhabitants of the house are either not present or barely mentioned: although the women apparently pull the alarm bell, they remain unseen and we are told that they are eventually carried away in the mayhem. Haredale is not at home. This attempt to expose the horror of the anti-Catholic riots whilst occluding the specificity of Catholic practice, creates a sense of incompleteness: while the language invokes a mystical sensibility, the description of the riots never fully acknowledges or interrogates spiritual matters.

Stripped by their author of their Catholic characteristics and denied participation in Catholic rituals, the Catholic characters are banished to a ghostly half-life which is best epitomised by Haredale amidst the ruins of his mansion. Yet he has his own power: like the shadows that Barnaby imagines amongst the clothes on the line, Haredale is compelling precisely because he is not fully alive and seems more connected to the mysterious world of the dead.

On the night when the mansion is burnt to the ground, Haredale seems to be a figure that has stepped out of a nightmare: he and Solomon Daisy speed towards the ruins of his home in a cloud of dust and appear to be "hunters from a dream." The scene is hallucinatory, recalling the dark underworld of Gothic melodrama: the two men find themselves standing amidst a heap of ashes and the rising moon reveals the bizarre remains of the staircase, "winding upward from a great mound of dust and cinders. Fragments of the jagged and broken steps offered an insecure and giddy footing here and there, and then were lost again, behind protruding angles of the wall, or in the deep shadows cast upon it by other portions of the ruin"(c. lvi, p. 486). Here the staircase is more than a ruin: it is so vivid in the way in which it magically rises out of the pile of ashes that it almost seems to be alive. These ruins are so vivid that they appear to consume everything around them including Haredale, who, bent on uncovering the murderer, melts away into this eerie terrain as if he were a ghost. Thus, paradoxically, the Catholic world is both absent and intensely present – it is a part of that haunting gothic world of empty spaces which is infused with a mystical fervour, granting it a dramatic presence that it may have lacked in a more studied and accurate historical account.

The scene of Rudge's capture possesses a mesmeric appeal:

Again the ashes slipped and rolled – very, very softly – again – and then again, as though they crumbled underneath the tread of a stealthy foot. And now a figure was dimly visible; climbing very softly; and often stopping to look down; now it pursued its difficult way; and now it was hidden from the view again.

It emerged once more, into the shadowy and uncertain light – higher now, but not much, for the way was steep and toilsome, and its progress very slow. What phantom of the brain did he pursue; and why did he look down so constantly? He knew he was alone. Surely his mind was not affected by that night's loss and agony. He was not about to throw himself headlong from the summit of the tottering wall. Solomon turned sick, and clasped his hands. His limbs trembled beneath him, and a cold sweat broke out upon his pallid face.

. . .

Again the ashes slipped and crumbled; some stones rolled down, and fell with a dull, heavy sound upon the ground below. He kept his eyes upon the piece of moonlight. The figure was coming on, for its shadow was already thrown upon the wall. Now it appeared – and now looked round at him – and now –
The horror-stricken clerk uttered a scream that pierced the air, and cried, "The ghost! The ghost!"

Long before the echo of his cry had died away, another form rushed out into the light, flung itself upon the foremost one, knelt down upon its breast, and clutched its throat with both hands.

"Villain!" cried Mr Haredale, in a terrible voice – for it was he. "Dead and buried, as all men supposed through your infernal arts, but reserved by Heaven for this – at last – at last I have you. You, whose hands are red with my brother's blood, and that of his faithful servant, shed to conceal your own atrocious guilt – You, Rudge, double murderer and monster, I arrest you in the name of God, who has delivered you into my hands. No. Though you had the strength of twenty men,"

> he added, as the murderer writhed and struggled, "you could not escape me or loosen my grasp to-night!" (c. lvi, p 469–470).

Dickens draws on all the patterns of gothic melodrama for effect: the mystery, suspense and fear, building up to the dramatic revelation of the villainous Rudge. Solomon Daisy reacts to all that he sees with a mixture of wonder and horror, as if he were in a trance. Like a participant in the Catholic Mass, he is a witness of a grand revelation: but rather than the saving resurrection of Christ, he watches the mock 'resurrection' of Rudge, who had feigned his own death to conceal his crime. The revelation is momentous for the plot – now Haredale is cleared in our minds of the supposed crime of his brother's murder.

It also has rhetorical force. The intense, repetitive quality of the narrative mimics a religious experience: the recurring echoes in the phrases, "Again the ashes slipped and rolled" and "again the ashes slipped and rumbled", invests the language with a powerful musical and trance-like dimension. In this melodramatic atmosphere Haredale's language, his repetition of the word "You" as he accuses Rudge, has a summoning magic to it that could appear stilted in a more objective, realist narrative. His melodramatic cry of "Villain" and his assertion that he arrests Rudge "in the name of God" echoes the language of the Victorian stage in its exaggerated invocation of the infernal and the divine. Significantly, though, dramatically momentous as this discovery seems to be, it never develops the moral or spiritual implications that it initially gestures towards: it does not free Haredale from his dark conscience and he remains condemned to play out a pattern of revenge in his conflicts with Chester, finally banishing himself to a monastery. Haredale is therefore incapable of true transformation as a character and is forever trapped in an insubstantial world of violence and ritualised rivalry.

Conclusion

In this discussion I have focused on three elements in *Barnaby Rudge* that gesture towards transcendent significance but that ultimately tease and disappoint the reader: the ghostly figure of Grip, the trope of the "holy fool" evoked by Barnaby, and the ritual behaviour of the rioters. These three elements all have in common a gesturing beyond the

social and political confines of the novel and towards a moral dimension of embodied passions and supernatural presences.

John Bowen speaks of the "ghostly quality" of fiction, the fact that it "conjure[s] up the presences of things where there is nothing there".[303] This comment inspired my thoughts in this chapter, which has focused on the summoning power of Dickens's language and narrative, its symbolic and rhythmic qualities, and its larger-than-life figures and storylines that recall Gothic and melodramatic narratives. The novel has all of the overblown qualities that Peter Brooks describes as seminal to melodramatic narratives: "Hyperbolic figures, lurid and grandiose events, masked relationships and disguised identities, abductions, slow-acting poisons, secret societies, mysterious parentage".[304] These features, though frequently artificial and stilted, are also surprisingly the source of its power as, through them, history is reconfigured and experienced as "constitutively sublime".[305] Bowen elaborates on this idea in his chapter on the novel in *Other Dickens*, suggesting that certain defining events, such as the supposed death of Rudge senior, seem to occur extra-temporally in a mythic space, impervious to the fluctuations of history.[306]

In his discussion of *Barnaby Rudge's* unique approach to history, Bowen refers to the "temporally dislocating . . . forces of the Gothic",[307] and it is this sense of a powerful dislocating force at work – the dissolving of boundaries both temporal and social, the push towards the excessive and the inexplicable, that have formed the basis of my discussion in this chapter. I build on Bowen's suggestion that the ghostly in this novel appears as "an anomalous and repetitious presence",[308] to argue that ghosts have a ritual quality in *Barnaby Rudge*: through these marginal, partially realised figures and suggestions, the present, the past, the temporal and the eternal are drawn into a conversation, a type of musical harmony. This is enhanced by the narrative's trance-like tendency to "repeat and repeat",[309] bringing out the latent symbolic drive of the language.

---

[303] Bowen (Introd.), Charles Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge*, p. xxvi.
[304] Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), p.3.
[305] John Bowen, *Other Dickens: Pickwick to Chuzzlewit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 175.
[306] Ibid., p. 176.
[307] Bowen (Introd.), Charles Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge*, p. xvi.
[308] Ibid., p. xxvi.
[309] Ibid., p. xvi.

The ceremonial aspect of the novel is a feature of its dramatic quality. Peter Brook's ruminations about the power of drama ritually to transform and disrupt an individual's most strongly held ideals are useful here: Brook speaks about the power of the actor to "lay . . . bare", to reveal the invisible forces within and beyond every man and woman. The fact that the theatre is an "ideal" space, made more vivid, more real because it is dramatically enhanced, means that it encourages actors and audiences to rise above themselves, so opening themselves up to the possibility of spiritual transcendence.[310] If read in this way the dramatic passages of the novel can be seen as an attempt to break beyond the social confines of Barnaby's world into a genuine spiritual landscape where good and evil are no longer reducible to social constructs defined by the criminal justice system or the social tensions between rich and poor, but exist above and beyond this as profound moral absolutes.

But I have argued that *Barnaby Rudge* is more melodramatic than it is dramatic and this affects the manner in which spiritual and religious echoes are evoked. The formalised, repetitive, exaggerated and dramatic qualities of the narrative are also characteristics of religious ritual: yet, in the melodramatic context of the novel, Christian patterns are ambiguously presented and come uncomfortably close to parody. Dickens seems at times to be driven by a relish for pure spectacle without substance, substituting theatrical clichés and appearances for the truly embodied and enacted. The gesture towards the transcendent in *Barnaby Rudge* is therefore constantly deferred and deflated, creating the sense of ghostly presences that trouble the secular boundaries of the text but that are never quite capable of breaking away from its margins.

The interplay between sacramental, social and political perspectives is also evident in Dickens's travelogue, *Pictures From Italy* (1846), which was stimulated by a supposedly false religious environment but which nevertheless shares *Barnaby's* sense of a deferred gesture towards the mysterious. In the light of an actual encounter with Catholicism, the tension between the rational and the theatrical in Dickens's writing receives a different emphasis and sharper colouring, which I will explore in the following chapter. This discussion will also involve an awareness of the journalistic voice of the

[310] Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (1968; rpt. London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2008), p. 67.

narrator, which attempts to remain aloof and concerned with superficies in the face of a disorienting and intrusive theatricality.

CHAPTER FOUR: Catholic Culture and Intrusive Theatricality in *Pictures From Italy* (1846)

"GOD be thanked: a ruin!"[311] This is what Dickens exclaims when describing the Coliseum and its dark history of Roman atrocities. It also seems to be his opinion of Catholicism – after his visit to Rome he describes the city dismissively as "a proud church and a decaying ruin" and makes no secret of his antipathy towards the Pope, St Peter's and the various Catholic ceremonies and Masses that he witnesses there ("A Rapid Diorama", p. 233). His opinions of the Church are not unique among Victorian Protestants who criticised Catholicism for its corruption and materialism and who saw its indulgence in ritual and cult of relics as remnants of a superstitious past: Dickens does not hide his delight in mocking relics like the bizarre Bambino doll that he sees at a Church in Rome and that does more damage than good when it is carried in ceremonial procession to visit the sick. These opinions reinforce Protestant stereotypes of the time and seem to justify Peter Ackroyd's words in his biography of Dickens:

> Not for him any understanding of the terrible consolations of the faith, nor of the history that supported its elaborate framework of worship. He was so out of sympathy with the Catholic Church that he saw only its surface. He saw its comedy. In this regard, at least, he had no real cultural or theoretical sensibility; he saw only the illusions and idiocies of the present, not the presence of the past.[312]

Dickens himself, addressing his Catholic readers in "The Reader's Passport", his preface to *Pictures*, attempts to excuse his opinions by emphasising their superficiality:

> I hope I am not likely to be misunderstood by Professors of the Roman Catholic faith, on account of anything contained in these pages. I have done my best, in one of my former productions, to do justice to them; and I trust, in this, they will

[311] Charles Dickens, *American Notes and Pictures From Italy* (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1846), "Rome", p. 168.
[312] Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1990), p. 456.

> do justice to me. When I mention any exhibition that impressed me as absurd or disagreeable, I do not seek to connect it, or recognise it as necessarily connected with, any essentials of their creed. When I treat of the ceremonies of the Holy Week, I merely treat of their effect, and do not challenge the good and learned Dr. Wiseman's interpretation of their meaning. When I hint a dislike of nunneries for young girls who abjure the world before they have ever proved or known it; or doubt the ex officio sanctity of all Priests and Friars; I do no more than many conscientious Catholics both abroad and at home ("The Reader's Passport", p.3).

He argues that his are merely impressions, "shadows in the water" (*The Reader's Passport*, p. 2); they do not and are not meant to indicate a profound philosophy of Catholicism. They are the passing opinions of an outsider, a foreigner, and he therefore cannot be held accountable for them. Yet Dickens's words here ring insincere, as if he is attempting to distance himself, to avoid confronting the question of Catholicism directly, emphasising the fleeting nature of his encounters with the faith rather than acknowledging that it moved him in any meaningful way. Peter Ackroyd takes Dickens at his word, suggesting that he "only saw the surface of things" in Italy and that it simply reinforced his social and religious prejudices.[313]

It would of course be a bit too extreme to suggest that Dickens ever consciously considered converting to Catholicism but taking his words in the preface at face value can also be misleading. Dickens's Italian experiences cannot be separated from his impressions of Catholicism – the religion is wedded to every aspect of his life and thought in Italy and its effects on him should not be underestimated. It is true that he associates the Church with a primitive and superstitious past, finding its ceremonies strange, absurd and mind-numbing, bizarre behaviour often used as a veil to disguise corruption and mercenary designs. But he is also drawn to them – despite his insistence on the monotony and repetitiveness of Churches and Masses, he constantly and obsessively returns to them in writing and in thought. He painstakingly describes the details of various ceremonies and processions. Catholic culture exerts a magnetic, magical attraction over him, drawing him into a trance-like stupor that could transform

[313] Ackroyd, *Dickens*, p. 460.

into a delirious nightmare but also has the potential to be elevated into dream vision, as is evident from his descriptions of Venice.

Dickens's responses to Catholicism in *Pictures* can be divided roughly into three categories: firstly, like his contemporaries, Dickens emphasises the theatrical splendour of the Catholic world as well as its apparent superficiality: Catholic rituals hover precariously between mere pantomimes and puppet shows, superficially fascinating but somehow less than human, and something with the potential to move the spirit to a sense of the divine through the masterful manipulation of emotions. His desire for a spiritual experience in Italy is evident in the style of his writing: the repetitive nature of his prose – the recurring images and scenes – gives it a ritualistic quality that makes it reminiscent of medieval dream visions. Dickens's response to the Catholic world is bound up with his experience of the Italian language and culture as a whole: he finds the Italian language both alienating and inviting and his efforts to learn it show a desire to engage more closely with the culture while still holding himself aloof. This ambivalence is also apparent in his attitude to Catholicism – he is driven by a contradictory urge to make sense of this alien belief while not yielding to its power over his mind. The third aspect of Dickens's engagement with Catholicism is the haunted nature of his writing in *Pictures.* Contrary to Ackroyd's assertion that Dickens is only concerned with visions of the present, *Pictures* is haunted by the ghosts of the Catholic past. And yet these ghosts are not consigned to the shadowy past but are alive, constantly breaking in to Dickens's musings. The Catholic world is filled with living ghosts: even the faded pictures on the walls of a church seem to transform into a gruesome community of arms and legs. In the light of this there might be a note of desperation in Dickens's confident words, "God be thanked, a ruin!" because in *Pictures* ruins refuse to remain in the past and are constantly threatening to be reborn again in the present. Catholic Italy is crowded, chaotic and vital and, as much as Dickens harps on its ruin and decay, it becomes for him, paradoxically, a place of rebirth, both spiritually and imaginatively.

The Catholic Church is not an ordinary theatre for Dickens – it often strikes him as incapable of creating the spectacular effects that it attempts and is reduced to a bizarre pantomime, a parody of itself. The puppet-show-like character of Catholic relics and

ceremonies fascinates Dickens even before he reaches Italy. He describes his experience of seeing a clock at a Cathedral in Lyons in the following way:

> If you would know all about the architecture of this church, or any other, its dates, dimensions, endowments, and history, is it not written in Mr. Murray's Guide-Book, and may you not read it there, with thanks to him, as I did!
>
> For this reason, I should abstain from mentioning the curious clock in Lyons Cathedral, if it were not for a small mistake I made, in connection with that piece of mechanism. The keeper of the church was very anxious it should be shown; partly for the honour of the establishment and the town; and partly, perhaps, because of his deriving a percentage from the additional consideration. However that may be, it was set in motion, and thereupon a host of little doors flew open, and innumerable little figures staggered out of them, and jerked themselves back again, with that special unsteadiness of purpose, and hitching in the gait, which usually attaches to figures that are moved by clock-work. Meanwhile, the Sacristan stood explaining these wonders, and pointing them out, severally, with a wand. There was a centre puppet of the Virgin Mary; and close to her, a small pigeon-hole, out of which another and a very ill-looking puppet made one of the most sudden plunges I ever saw accomplished: instantly flopping back again at sight of her, and banging his little door violently after him. Taking this to be emblematic of the victory over Sin and Death, and not at all unwilling to show that I perfectly understood the subject, in anticipation of the showman, I rashly said, "Aha! The Evil Spirit. To be sure. He is very soon disposed of." "Pardon, Monsieur," said the Sacristan, with a polite motion of his hand towards the little door, as if introducing somebody – "The Angel Gabriel!" ("Lyons, the Rhone and the Goblin of Avignon", pp. 18–19).

He does not dwell on the architectural splendour of this Church as many of his contemporaries did, dismissing that as a subject better suited to Mr Murray's Guide Book. Rather he is drawn to the mechanical nature of the clockwork figures – their inhuman, jerking motion. The Sacristan's desire to make this show appear mystical by tapping the figures with a magic wand is rendered ridiculous by the figures' absurd

behaviour. In fact the spiritual message is completely lost on Dickens who misunderstands the meaning of the "drama". In refusing to expound on the architectural marvels of Catholic culture, Dickens separates himself from his contemporaries. The fact that he chooses instead to dwell on diminutive clockwork figures as emblems of Catholic culture is arguably even more demeaning than the more common approach of acknowledging the artistic superiority of Catholicism whilst asserting its moral inferiority. Reduced to an absurd, clockwork show, the spectacular aspect of Catholicism is stripped of its power over Dickens and he can safely turn his misunderstanding of the scene into a joke at the expense of the Catholics. But, despite all this, one is still left with an impression of the lively figures and the enjoyment that the Sacristan's gravity inspires in Dickens. Dickens's attitude to this clockwork display is very similar to that of a child fascinated by a new toy – he is drawn to it notwithstanding his disapproval of its irrationality.

Dickens refuses to allow this production to have any religious credibility but it still retains a kind of magic that is tied up with his love for toys and for the theatre. Dickens's love for diminutive theatres was evident from childhood: Peter Ackroyd describes how, as a child, Dickens used his toy theatre to enact dramas like "The Miller and His Men and Elizabeth, The Exile of Siberia" while his "brothers moved the little players".[314] His love of diminutive theatres is further attested to by his son, Charles, who spoke of a toy theatre that he was given as a boy during the mid-forties around the time when Dickens wrote *Pictures*:

> But the size of my theatre fascinated my father, and, in conjunction with Clarkson Stanfield, who had been distinguished as a scene painter before he became a member of the Royal Academy, he set to work to produce the first piece. This, I remember, was a spectacle called the "Elephant of Siam," and its production on a proper scale of splendour necessitated the designing and painting of several new scenes . . . [315]

[314] Ackroyd, *Dickens*, p.38.
[315] Charles Dickens, Jr., "Glimpses of Charles Dickens", *The North American Review*. 160. 462 (May 1895): 525–537 (p. 527).

There are a number of things evident from this description: the first is that Dickens is attracted to the theatre principally because of its small size. But he is also fascinated by the magic of the game, becoming completely absorbed in its power. The theatre is both a childish pastime over which Dickens has complete control and a dramatic spectacle with a magnetic power over him.

This is also evident in his response to the theatre of Marionetti in Genoa which resonates with his earlier impression of the clockwork figures at Lyons:

> It was unspeakably ludicrous. Buonaparte's boots were so wonderfully beyond control, and did such marvellous things of their own accord: doubling themselves up, and getting under tables, and dangling in the air, and sometimes skating away with him, out of all human knowledge, when he was in full speech – mischances which were not rendered the less absurd, by a settled melancholy depicted in his face. To put an end to one conference with Low, he had to go to a table, and read a book: when it was the finest spectacle I ever beheld, to see his body bending over the volume, like a boot-jack, and his sentimental eyes glaring obstinately into the pit. He was prodigiously good, in bed, with an immense collar to his shirt, and his little hands outside the coverlet. So was Dr. Antommarchi, represented by a puppet with long lank hair, like Mawworm's, who, in consequence of some derangement of his wires, hovered about the couch like a vulture, and gave medical opinions in the air. He was almost as good as Low, though the latter was great at all times – a decided brute and villain, beyond all possibility of mistake. Low was especially fine at the last, when, hearing the doctor and the valet say, "The Emperor is dead!" he pulled out his watch, and wound up the piece (not the watch) by exclaiming, with characteristic brutality, "Ha! ha! Eleven minutes to six! The General dead! and the spy hanged!" This brought the curtain down, triumphantly ("Genoa and its Neighbourhood", pp. 71–2).

Once again he is not as interested in the actual story as he is in the absurd inhuman acrobatics of the puppets. He is also struck by the incongruity of the play: Napoleon's "sentimental" expression jars with his alacrity and energy. Just like the clockwork theatre that Dickens saw in Lyons, this production has a pantomimic energy that undermines its

own meaning and which Dickens enjoys immensely. But the puppet theatre is not quite safely vanquished. The image of the puppet is a potent one for Dickens in *Pictures*: David Ellison suggests that it is more disruptive than it appears to be. When discussing the theatre of the Marionetti in Genoa, Ellison comments that Napoleon's acrobatics are threatening or even superhuman as if he were a figure acting of his own volition, a puppet whose "strings are cut".[316] These toys refuse to "abide by the promise of the necessity of their inertia". They "threaten a liveliness, [and] . . . revel in aerobic legs and monstrous behaviour: cruel, small, weak and terrible all at once".[317] There is clearly something disconcerting about these figures, something that cannot be controlled. Ellison links this to Dickens's ambiguous attitude to Napoleon who haunts him in the form of a puppet even though he is now long dead. The power of this figure that seems to defy the strings that hold him is particularly disconcerting to Dickens who sees himself as a puppeteer rather than a puppet.

That Dickens would describe one of his first encounters with European Catholicism in terms of an absurd clockwork theatre suggests a few things about his reaction to the faith: by depicting its theatrical effects as ludicrous, he is able to distance himself from it and to avoid responding to it spiritually. His fascination with the inhuman characteristics of the clockwork figures suggests that there is something inferior and less than dignified about the faith that they represent. He does not focus on the meaning of the drama, drawing our attention rather to the preposterous mechanisms by which it is carried out: this undermines the potential seriousness of the episode reducing it to a silly game, a joke that empowers Dickens, who is able to expose its absurdity, at the expense of the Catholics. In this way, by marginalising the spiritual overtones of the drama, Dickens is able to declare himself completely unaffected by Catholicism, less so even than his contemporaries for whom its artistic achievements were praise-worthy. But, like the Marionetti, these figures also have the power to discompose Dickens: there is something menacing about the "ill-looking" puppet with his lively lunges that gives one the sense that, small though he may be, he is not as ineffectual as he seems. Thus elements of the

[316] David Ellison, "Inimitable Marionettes: Dickens with Napoleon in His Eyes", in *Dickens and Italy: Little Dorrit and Pictures from Italy*, ed. Michael Hollington and Francesca Orestano (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), p. 118.
[317] Ibid., p. 127.

Catholic faith defy Dickens's attempts to control it, and make it leap out at him like a puppet full of a super-human vitality, demanding to be recognised.

Yet with typical energy Dickens continues to deny its power. Throughout his travels in Italy, he constantly attempts to marginalise and trivialise the religious element of Catholic rituals. Even when he acknowledges that they are effective he is quick to belittle and mock them, reducing their participants to dolls or animals. This is how he describes a festival of the Virgin's mother in Genoa:

> Not long ago, there was a festa-day, in honour of the Virgin's mother, when the young men of the neighbourhood, having worn green wreaths of the vine in some procession or other, bathed in them, by scores. It looked very odd and pretty. Though I am bound to confess (not knowing of the festa at that time), that I thought, and was quite satisfied, they wore them as horses do - to keep the flies off ("Genoa and its Neighbourhood", p. 43).

Dickens finds this ceremony pleasant but is very quick to undermine its effects by comparing the young men to horses warding off flies. By emphasising the animal, reflexive behaviour of the participants he is able to turn his own misunderstanding of the practice into a sign of his superiority. Elsewhere Dickens describes a Christening in a country church at San Martino in the following way:

> I saw the priest, and an attendant with a large taper, and a man, and a woman, and some others; but I had no more idea, until the ceremony was all over, that it was a baptism, or that the curious little stiff instrument, that was passed from one to another, in the course of the ceremony, by the handle - like a short poker - was a child, than I had that it was my own christening. I borrowed the child afterwards, for a minute or two (it was lying across the font then), and found it very red in the face but perfectly quiet, and not to be bent on any terms ("Genoa and its Neighbourhood", p. 62).

Once again he emphasises his incomprehension of proceedings – he is not even aware that it is a Christening until it is over. This distances him from the ritual by characterising him as an outsider, an observer rather than a participant. But the ceremony itself is all the

more alienating because the principal actor – the child – seems to have transformed into an inanimate doll, an idol that is passed around and that quite stubbornly refuses to be bent. This creates the sense that the ceremony is no more than a game with a doll, rather than a serious spiritual entry into the Catholic faith. Dickens examines the doll-child as if it was a curiosity rather than a human being and finds it very amusing. This description empties the ceremony of its mysticism and power and prevents the reader from engaging emotionally with the spectacle so that he identifies instead with Dickens as puzzled spectator. In an insightful essay entitled "Dolce Far Niente" Nicola Bradbury describes Dickens's sense of "radical dislocation" in Italy, his feelings of exile are intensified by his encounters with an unfamiliar language.[318] Like Italian, Catholicism is a mysterious language, a game of which Dickens struggles to understand the rules. His response to his own feelings of displacement can be interpreted as a typically Protestant aloofness: this is how Eleanor Macnees reads it when she describes the "invitation to spectacle, followed by a frequently derogatory commentary" as a reinforcement of "Protestant superiority". In order to win his readers to his side of the debate, Dickens positions them as spectators rather than participants in what is described as frequently "inferior" and "false pageantry". [319]

Despite their doll-like, mechanical qualities, the Catholics threaten to intrude beyond the boundary of spectacular theatre and into the lives of the Protestant spectators. When describing a 'perverse' ceremony involving a Bambino doll that he sees at the sacristy of the Ara Coeli church, Dickens does not make a distinction between English and Italian Catholics, placing non-Italians among the unenlightened community who were taken in by the performance of the monks: thus, for Dickens, the Catholic world does not remain safely contained within the foreign Italian culture but threatens to become familiar, encroaching on and tainting the English way of life ("Rome", p. 190). The description is further significant for the perverse power that it grants the Catholic community: I have shown that Catholics constantly transform into dolls, but in this episode dolls and idols threaten to transform into animate beings that have the power to

[318] Nicola Bradbury, "Dolce Far Niente", in *Dickens and Italy*, ed. Michael Hollington and Francesca Orestano, p. 19.
[319] Eleanor McNees, "Accounts for the Arm-Chair Traveller: The Italy of Badham and Dickens", *The Victorians and Italy: Literature, Travel, Politics and Art*, ed. Alessandro Vescovi, Luisa Villa, Paul Vita, (Milan: Polimetrica, 2009), p. 50.

step out of the Catholic ceremony. Dickens describes his repulsion with the Bambino doll in the following manner:

> The hollow – cheeked monk, number One, having finished lighting the candles, went down on his knees, in a corner, before this set-piece; and the monk number Two, having put on a pair of highly ornamented and gold-bespattered gloves, lifted down the coffer, with great reverence, and set it on the altar. Then, with many genuflexions, and muttering certain prayers, he opened it, and let down the front, and took off sundry coverings of satin and lace from the inside. The ladies had been on their knees from the commencement; and the gentlemen now dropped down devoutly, as he exposed to view a little wooden doll, in face very like General Tom Thumb, the American Dwarf: gorgeously dressed in satin and gold lace, and actually blazing with rich jewels. There was scarcely a spot upon its little breast, or neck, or stomach, but was sparkling with the costly offerings of the Faithful. Presently, he lifted it out of the box, and carrying it round among the kneelers, set its face against the forehead of every one, and tendered its clumsy foot to them to kiss – a ceremony which they all performed down to a dirty little ragamuffin of a boy who had walked in from the street. When this was done, he laid it in the box again: and the company, rising, drew near, and commended the jewels in whispers. In good time, he replaced the coverings, shut up the box, put it back in its place, locked up the whole concern (Holy Family and all) behind a pair of folding-doors; took off his priestly vestments; and received the customary "small charge," while his companion, by means of an extinguisher fastened to the end of a long stick, put out the lights, one after another. The candles being all extinguished, and the money all collected, they retired, and so did the spectators ("Rome", pp. 190–1).

There is much in this description that draws on Protestant stereotypes. The emphasis on material wealth, on the Bambino doll as a glittering idol not unlike Volpone's shrine of riches, as well as the sense in which the entire performance has been enacted for the purpose of collecting money from the devoted, are commonplaces familiar from Reformation era critiques by Erasmus, Luther and others. But it is striking for the life-

likeness of the Bambino doll which reminds Dickens of an American Dwarf. The act of kissing and being "kissed" by this deformed creature is both ludicrous for the profound reverence with which it is performed and slightly unsettling because of the way in which this clumsy figure emulates the actions of living human beings. After the monks have finished the performance, the Bambino, along with the entire holy family, is safely shut up behind some doors. This episode both emphasises the false theatricality of Catholicism and attempts to hold it at a distance – after the Bambino is shut up and the money is collected, the "performance" is decidedly over and has no lasting effects on the observers.

But the Bambino does not remain within the space of the sacristy: not long afterwards Dickens meets it in the street going "in great state, to the house of some sick person" ("Rome", p. 191). Suddenly animated, the Bambino has the power to intrude into the lives and intimate spaces ordinary people. Attempting to placate the Catholics, Dickens turns his horror at its power to venture beyond the Church walls, into a quarrel among Catholics themselves about whether it should be welcomed in or kept out: he speaks of a learned gentleman who, on the advice of a Priest, kept it and its followers out of the home of a very sick lady because he felt that its presence would kill her. The purpose of this argument is to suggest that such ceremonies are recognised as irrational even by many Catholics and are therefore entirely superstitious and passé. This is of course in keeping with Protestant sentiments about Catholic rituals. But it does not succeed in dismissing the Bambino as entirely irrelevant: rather we are left with a sense of it as dangerously powerful and present even in the world beyond the Church. Dickens does not of course see this in a positive light: in fact he presents it as having such alarming power that more than one sick person to whom it was brought has died for fright. Yet he cannot keep it (or the Catholic rituals of which it forms part) under control: absurd and monstrous as this creature is, it also has the power to encroach on and overwhelm the more "sensible" elements of the population by refusing to observe the boundaries between theatre and ordinary life.

Pictures from Italy is populated with Catholics who refuse to honour the boundaries between animate and inanimate, religion and daily life, religion and theatre, drama and pantomime and who, because of this, are dangerously subversive. Dickens's

disappointment with Rome makes his depiction of Catholic rituals all the more vicious: the episode of the Bambino is echoed by the performance of High Mass at St Peter's.

> I must say, that I never saw anything, out of November, so like the popular English commemoration of the fifth of that month. A bundle of matches and a lantern, would have made it perfect. Nor did the Pope, himself, at all mar the resemblance, though he has a pleasant and venerable face; for, as this part of the ceremony makes him giddy and sick, he shuts his eyes when it is performed: and having his eyes shut and a great mitre on his head, and his head itself wagging to and fro as they shook him in carrying, he looked as if his mask were going to tumble off. The two immense fans which are always borne, one on either side of him, accompanied him, of course, on this occasion. As they carried him along, he blessed the people with the mystic sign; and as he passed them, they kneeled down. When he had made the round of the church, he was brought back again, and if I am not mistaken, this performance was repeated, in the whole, three times. There was, certainly nothing solemn or effective in it; and certainly very much that was droll and tawdry. But this remark applies to the whole ceremony, except the raising of the Host, when every man in the guard dropped on one knee instantly, and dashed his naked sword on the ground; which had a fine effect.
>
> The next time I saw the cathedral, was some two or three weeks afterwards, when I climbed up into the ball; and then, the hangings being taken down, and the carpet taken up, but all the framework left, the remnants of these decorations looked like an exploded cracker ("Rome", pp. 172–3).

Like the Bambino, the Pope is a doll whose effect on the faithful depends on the exertions of others who carry him around so that he can bless the population. But there are differences: the Bambino seemed capable of defying its inanimate status whereas the Pope is reduced to a giddy doll, in danger of losing his mask and therefore being exposed as a fraud. Our parting impression of the scene is of its garish remains. In this way Dickens parodies Catholic Rome by mocking its sombre associations with the past: instead of being part of the remains of a grand city, the Catholic Church is reduced to the remains of a cracker in a kitschy festival. This gives the impression that the Church is

incapable of cultivating the solemnity of religious awe and does not deserve the respect that it attempts to inspire in its followers.

But despite Dickens's mockery of the Mass, these scenes are also characterised by a restlessness, playfulness and energy that has a subversive attraction of its own. Dickens describes the congregation as comprising of a "perfect army" of Cardinals and priests as well as crowds of people engaged in ridiculous behaviour: they are all "talking to each other: staring at the Pope through eye-glasses; defrauding one another, in moments of partial curiosity, out of precarious seats on the bases of pillars: and grinning hideously at the ladies" ("Rome", p. 171). There are also people who are kneeling and tripping others "with their own devout legs" ("Rome", p. 171). The congregation is presented as irreverent, juvenile and anarchic. They are grotesque in their curiosity about the Pope as well as their disrespect for one another. Yet, despite his disapproval of the Mass's lack of spiritual solemnity, Dickens is attracted to its vitality – as if the whole thing were an absurd game with the Pope-doll at its centre.

Catholic ceremonies are frivolous games for Dickens, as puerile and nonsensical as they are vibrant and dynamic. He finds the Scala Santa or Holy staircase on Good Friday particularly absurd. Here Dickens is at his most vitriolic, describing the staircase and the actions of the penitent as "ridiculous" and "unpleasant"; rather than an act of symbolic meaning, he believes the climbing of the staircase to be an act of "unmeaning degradation" ("Rome", p. 225). He watches the penitents with amused interest, noting the energy of the "school of boys" that are avoided by the rest of the company on account of the "recklessness in the management of their boots" ("Rome", p. 225). Notwithstanding Dickens's blatant horror and disgust at these proceedings, character sketches like the one mentioned above are so endearing that one is left with the people's sense of enjoyment and vitality: his Catholics may be completely misguided and ridiculous but they are still vibrant human beings in whom we take an interest. Even so, descriptions such as this one are undeniably hostile to Catholic rituals and further show Dickens's stubborn insistence on reading them literally rather than symbolically. This certainly does seem to give credence to Dickens's suggestion in his preface that he is only concerned with the forms of things rather than their meaning.

There are moments, however, even in Rome, where Dickens's description of Catholic rituals goes beyond the mere surface of the "game" to admit a more subtle interpretation. The ceremony of the Last Supper enacted by the Pope and some priests for the benefit of the congregation is a case in point. Here, as elsewhere, Dickens draws our attention to the absurdity of the ritual: although he finds some of the acting (particularly of Judas) very good, he emphasises the superficiality of proceedings – nobody is very interested in the reading from the Bible which cannot, anyway, be heard, the Pope finds the ceremony quite exhausting, and the Cardinals treat the production "as if the thing were a great farce" ("Rome", p. 224). But there is also a suggestion that part of the reason that the ceremony fails to probe deep spiritual sentiments is because of the ignorance and arrogance of the audience, at the foreground of whom are the English foreigners: Dickens mentions the reaction of an English gentleman who directs all his energy into discovering whether there is any mustard on the table and is most impressed by the presence of vinegar and oil. This man, obsessed with the trivialities of food, has no concept of a deeper spiritual significance to the "play". This episode could be read as a satirical commentary on the ignorance of the Protestant British public that is incapable of understanding the spiritual and symbolic significance of Catholic rituals. Of course Dickens's momentary insight into the shortcomings of his compatriots does not extend to himself and even in this description he remains naively unaware of the moments when his own judgements of Catholicism are intolerant and superficial. Nevertheless descriptions such as this one do blur the stereotypical distinctions between Catholic inferiority and Protestant superiority somewhat, creating a space where the supposedly artificial character of Catholic ceremonies is at least open to question.

During the celebrations of the Carnival on the week before Easter, Dickens almost entirely abandons his reservations about Catholicism and allows himself to be swept along by the sheer vitality of the people and the magnificence of the ceremonies. Here the ritual "games" come close to transforming from something that is highly engaging and enjoyable into something that is truly meaningful and potentially spiritual.

> The carriages were now three abreast; in broader places four; often stationary for a long time together, always one close mass of variegated brightness; showing, the whole street-full, through the storm of flowers, like flowers of a larger growth

themselves. In some, the horses were richly caparisoned in magnificent trappings; in others they were decked from head to tail, with flowing ribbons. Some were driven by coachmen with enormous double faces: one face leering at the horses: the other cocking its extraordinary eyes into the carriage: and both rattling again, under the hail of sugar-plums. Other drivers were attired as women, wearing long ringlets and no bonnets, and looking more ridiculous in any real difficulty with the horses (of which, in such a concourse, there were a great many) than tongue can tell, or pen describe. Instead of sitting in the carriages, upon the seats, the handsome Roman women, to see and to be seen the better, sit in the heads of the barouches, at this time of general licence, with their feet upon the cushions - and oh, the flowing skirts and dainty waists, the blessed shapes and laughing faces, the free, good-humoured, gallant figures that they make! There were great vans, too, full of handsome girls - thirty, or more together, perhaps - and the broadsides that were poured into, and poured out of, these fairy fire-shops, splashed the air with flowers and bon-bons for ten minutes at a time. Carriages, delayed long in one place, would begin a deliberate engagement with other carriages, or with people at the lower windows; and the spectators at some upper balcony or window, joining in the fray, and attacking both parties, would empty down great bags of confétti, that descended like a cloud, and in an instant made them white as millers. Still, carriages on carriages, dresses on dresses, colours on colours, crowds upon crowds, without end. Men and boys clinging to the wheels of coaches, and holding on behind, and following in their wake, and diving in among the horses' feet to pick up scattered flowers to sell again; maskers on foot (the drollest generally) in fantastic exaggerations of court-dresses, surveying the throng through enormous eye-glasses, and always transported with an ecstasy of love, on the discovery of any particularly old lady at a window; long strings of Policinelli, laying about them with blown bladders at the ends of sticks; a waggon-full of madmen, screaming and tearing to the life; a coach-full of grave mamelukes, with their horse-tail standard set up in the midst; a party of gipsy-women engaged in terrific conflict with a shipful of sailors; a man-monkey on a pole, surrounded by strange animals with pigs' faces, and lions' tails, carried

> under their arms, or worn gracefully over their shoulders; carriages on carriages, dresses on dresses, colours on colours, crowds upon crowds, without end. Not many actual characters sustained, or represented, perhaps, considering the number dressed, but the main pleasure of the scene consisting in its perfect good temper; in its bright, and infinite, and flashing variety; and in its entire abandonment to the mad humour of the time - an abandonment so perfect, so contagious, so irresistible, that the steadiest foreigner fights up to his middle in flowers and sugar-plums, like the wildest Roman of them all, and thinks of nothing else till half-past four o'clock, when he is suddenly reminded (to his great regret) that this is not the whole business of his existence, by hearing the trumpets sound, and seeing the dragoons begin to clear the street ("Rome", pp. 177–9).

The intense colour and life of this scene grows more vivid with each passing moment until it is bursting with vitality. Far from confusing Dickens as they do in the Mass at St Peter's, here the crowds of people excite him into an absolute frenzy of love that resembles a religious fervour: the endless carriages, dresses and colours are described in a manner that echoes the English translation of the conclusion to the Gloria Patri, "... As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen" (*Book of Common Prayer*). Dickens constantly emphasises the apparent eternity of the good-humoured festivities giving the impression that they and the emotions that they inspire extend beyond the fleeting or merely human. The colours are so brilliant that they seem almost to transform into light, suggesting something quasi-divine about the experience. The carnival is characterised by an explosion of life and energy as well as a sense of freedom from the ordinary power-structures and hierarchies, something that Dickens appreciates: he is attracted to the "abandonment" to "mad humour" as well as the freedom from social norms that allows the women to sit upon the heads of the barouches rather than inside the carriages ("Rome", p. 179). But the effects of this are not morally degrading – here a sense of good-will and companionship is created through freedom of expression: significantly this erotic celebration of life is not understood as a freedom from Catholic culture per se. In fact rather than symbolising an oppressive and ludicrous belief, Catholic symbols become in this context indistinguishably part of the ritual of good-will to which Dickens responds so positively: thus Dickens laughs at and with the

people who empty buckets of confetti on top of one another; later on, he responds with admiration to the game of the Mocoletti where the people attempt to extinguish one another's candles in a burlesque mourning for the end of Carnival even while he is aware of the fact that the candle is a significant symbol of Catholic grief. Finally the end of the festivities is signalled by the sound of Church bells playing the Ave Maria, indicating the Carnival's association with the Easter rituals in the Church calendar.

Dickens is attracted to the festival because of what he interprets as its "innocent vivacity" and "almost childish . . . simplicity and confidence" ("Rome", p. 184), something that makes it so compelling that it seems almost a pity once it is all over. By emphasising the moral purity of this celebration, Dickens suggests that it is a spiritually uplifting experience. But it is true that he does not place a huge emphasis on the Catholic character of the celebrations, declaring himself not particularly interested in its origins (which stem from a mix of Christian and Roman influences). Nevertheless it does share some elements in common with the more traditional Catholic Mass: paradoxically, qualities that attract Dickens to the carnival are often similar to those that repel him from the Catholic Mass. Where in the Carnival he is attracted to the endless crowds, colour and variety, in the Mass he is quite bemused by the amount of people, describing it as completely chaotic: in St Peter's one finds a confusing mix of crafty Jesuits and priests of every denomination, aimless Englishmen from the Youth of England wandering about and some devout persons dressed in black and poring over missals ("Rome", p. 171). There is a disturbing lack of order and control about these Catholic crowds: in a Mass in Albaro Dickens notes the way in which people are constantly tumbling over the men who are kneeling in the aisles ("Genoa and its Neighbourhood', p. 44).

One of the most attractive things about the Carnival for Dickens is the way in which it unites people from vastly different walks of life:

> . . . a waggon-full of madmen, screaming and tearing to the life; a coach-full of grave mamelukes, with their horse-tail standard set up in the midst; a party of gipsy-women engaged in terrific conflict with a shipful of sailors; a man-monkey on a pole, surrounded by strange animals with pigs' faces, and lions' tails, carried under their arms, or worn gracefully over their shoulders . . . ("Rome", p. 179).

But this positive unifying quality of the Carnival crowd cannot be found in the Mass: here Dickens is constantly commentating on the mystifying mix of people which is, at best, disorienting, and, at worst, disquieting, such as when he notes the ubiquitous presence of beggars in and around most of the Churches in Italy. He is horrified by the "dirty beggars" who beg between "muttered prayers", the "cripples exhibiting their deformity at the doors" and the "blind men, rattling little pots like kitchen pepper-castors" ("Rome", p. 193). Whereas he welcomes the crippled and the morally questionable as part of the Carnival's spirit of forgiveness and communion, the presence of similar individuals in the Mass is seen as a sign of its moral perversity.

The way in which the Carnival playfully combines the secular fun of the people with more spiritual symbols and motifs does not in the least bother Dickens. But he is quite shocked by the fact that the Catholic Mass appears to blur the boundaries between secular and religious life: he notes with disgust how in "one church, a kneeling lady got up from her prayer, for a moment, to offer us her card, as a teacher of Music; and in another, a sedate gentleman with a very thick walking-staff, arose from his devotions to belabour his dog, who was growling at another dog: and whose yelps and howls resounded through the church, as his master quietly relapsed into his former train of meditation - keeping his eye upon the dog, at the same time, nevertheless" ("Rome", p. 194). Rather than suggesting that spiritual truths are not separate from but coexist with ordinary life, as the Carnival seems to do, here Dickens implies that the banal concerns of the people interfere with their sacred meditations, making their spiritual life less genuine.

While the Carnival attracts Dickens to the magic of ritual, the ritual practices in the Mass bemuse and overwhelm him, putting him into a trance. He speaks of the repetitious nature of his experience of the Catholic culture in Bologna:

> Again, brown piles of sacred buildings, with more birds flying in and out of chinks in the stones; and more snarling monsters for the bases of the pillars. Again, rich churches, drowsy Masses, curling incense, tinkling bells, priests in bright vestments: pictures, tapers, laced altar cloths, crosses, images, and artificial flowers ("Through Bologna and Ferrara", p. 99).

The same sights, the same Catholic images, the same ideas occur and reoccur in Dickens's imagination. Later, in Rome, his description of Masses echoes his earlier words:

> The scene in all the churches is the strangest possible. The same monotonous, heartless, drowsy chaunting, always going on; the same dark building, darker from the brightness of the street without; the same lamps dimly burning; the selfsame people kneeling here and there; turned towards you, from one altar or other, the same priest's back, with the same large cross embroidered on it; however different in size, in shape, in wealth, in architecture, this church is from that, it is the same thing still ("Rome", p. 193).

Once again the emphasis is on the recurring images and experiences as well as on the gloomy, sleepy atmosphere that is created by the weak light and colourless chanting. The music in the Churches is always described as tedious and enharmonic whereas the repeated cries of "Senza Moccolo" in the Carnival are so invigorating that the shouts transform into a kind of music, "a gigantic chorus of those two words, mingled with peals of laughter". This is evident in the description of the music in the Albaro Mass:

> The band played one way, the organ played another, the singer went a third, and the unfortunate conductor banged and banged, and flourished his scroll on some principle of his own: apparently well satisfied with the whole performance. I never did hear such a discordant din ("Genoa and its Neighbourhood", pp. 44–5).

Evidently, for Dickens, there is something exhausting, jarring and monotonous about the Catholic Mass that numbs the senses and puts one into a dangerously passive state. Dickens expresses his weariness of Churches when in Rome, complaining that he had seen so many churches that he "abandoned that part of the enterprise at last, lest I should never, of my own accord, go into a church again, as long as I lived" ("Rome", p. 184). But much as he complains about the monotony of the Catholic Church, Dickens is far from indifferent to it: in fact he inescapably returns to the experience of the Mass with a morbid obsession. The Mass might not be as light-hearted as the Carnival but it has a magic of its own that draws Dickens to it despite himself. This magic is disorienting and

potentially dangerous: Dickens speaks of the "great dream of Roman churches" out of which it is impossible to extract details apart perhaps from one or two grotesque scenarios ("Rome", p. 195). Here the word "dream" is used to suggest the elusiveness of these churches – they seem to be simultaneously present and absent and escape reason by being impossible to understand or to describe. His response to this mystifying experience of the Catholic Mass emphasises his vulnerability to it: in the passages cited above the very rhythm of his language becomes chant-like, imitating the language of the Mass: the repetition of "same" at the beginning of consecutive clauses in the first passage and several parallel phrases in the sentence beginning "The band played one way".[320] The monotonous rhythm of these passages suggests Dickens's fear of the impossibility of clear, rational thinking when under the influence of Catholic ritual; but the fact that his very language takes on a ritualised quality when contemplating the Mass also suggests that it affects him at a more profound level than he cares to admit.

There is a further argument that casts doubt on Ackroyd's assertion that Dickens only responds to the superficies of the Catholic faith: Catholicism is inescapably wedded to his experience of the Italian culture. Thus Dickens's attempts to make sense of an alien language and culture cannot really be separated from questions of faith. This is Dickens's first impression of Albaro:

> I never in my life was so dismayed! The wonderful novelty of everything, the unusual smells, the unaccountable filth (though it is reckoned the cleanest of Italian towns), the disorderly jumbling of dirty houses, one upon the roof of another; the passages more squalid and more close than any in St. Giles's or old Paris; in and out of which, not vagabonds, but well-dressed women, with white veils and great fans, were passing and repassing; the perfect absence of resemblance in any dwelling-house, or shop, or wall, or post, or pillar, to anything one had ever seen before; and the disheartening dirt, discomfort, and decay; perfectly confounded me. I fell into a dismal reverie. I am conscious of a feverish and bewildered vision of saints and virgins' shrines at the street corners –

[320] Cf. the repetitive phrasing of the *Gloria*: "Laudamus te, benedicimus te, adoramus te, glorificamus te, gratias agimus tibi e propter magnam gloriam tuam", translated in the *Book of Common Prayer* as "We praise thee, we bless thee, we worship thee, we glorify thee, we give thanks to thee for thy great glory".

> of great numbers of friars, monks, and soldiers – of vast red curtains, waving in the doorways of the churches – of always going up hill, and yet seeing every other street and passage going higher up – of fruit-stalls, with fresh lemons and oranges hanging in garlands made of vine-leaves – of a guard-house, and a drawbridge – and some gateways – and vendors of iced water, sitting with little trays upon the margin of the kennel – and this is all the consciousness I had, until I was set down in a rank, dull, weedy court-yard, attached to a kind of pink jail; and was told I lived there.
>
> I little thought, that day, that I should ever come to have an attachment for the very stones in the streets of Genoa, and to look back upon the city with affection as connected with many hours of happiness and quiet! But these are my first impressions honestly set down; and how they changed, I will set down too. At present, let us breathe after this long-winded journey ("Avignon to Genoa", pp. 36–7).

This is a crowded world, so full that it is quite overwhelming. It also completely frustrates Dickens's expectations: the "dirty houses" are inhabited by "well-dressed women" ("Avignon to Genoa", p. 36). The incongruity of the representation extends also to his experience of religion: he is confused by the presence of religious symbols and personages amidst the clutter and politics of secular life – the "saints and virgins' shrines" and priests mingle in with the presence of soldiers, red flags, fruit-stalls, streets and vendors ("Avignon to Genoa", pp. 36–7). He describes his first sight of these Catholic symbols as a "feverish and bewildered vision" ("Avignon to Genoa", p. 36). This suggests an impression so powerful that it is hallucinatory. These symbols are at once intensely present and somehow elusive as if they were produced by a fevered brain: Dickens feels like he is suffering from a powerful illness against which his reason his defenceless. Like his description of the Mass, the sight of these striking realities of Catholic culture puts Dickens into something like an opium-induced trance, "a dismal reverie" that culminates in a feeling of imprisonment when he is led up to the "pink jail" where he is to stay ("Avignon to Genoa", p. 37) . This portrayal of Albaro reveals a few important things about Italian culture: firstly Italian culture cannot be separated from

Catholicism – it is a culture that constantly transgresses boundaries, among them that between the secular and the religious. It is profoundly illogical, paralysing reason but inducing an overwhelming emotional response in one. This emotional response can reach such a degree that it has a quasi-spiritual quality: this is evident in the way in which Dickens's sense of confusion and disorientation transforms into a fervent attachment to his Italian home. In a letter to Maclise from Albaro he describes himself as an "exile, a banished commoner, a sort of Anglo-Pole", someone who has been sent away from his own nation for "something great; something virtuous and heroic".[321] His reward for this heroism is to be in Italy, looking out over the Mediterranean Sea.[322] In this way Italy becomes a spiritual home, a place where the good and gallant soul can take refuge – it may be alien but it is not entirely alienating. In fact Dickens's attachment to Genoa suggests that there is something about Italy that satisfies a spiritual yearning within him.

But Dickens's experience of Italy and particularly of Catholicism is often described as a dream, suggesting that it is also elusive or unreal. Valerie Kennedy identifies different types of dream imagery in *Pictures*:

> The dream may suggest a generally pleasant sense of irresponsibility and drifting, a confused enjoyment of new, exotic, unfamiliar sights (or sites) and sounds . . . But it may also evoke the idea of apathy, torpor, or lethargy . . . induced either by climate, or, more negatively, by the influence of Roman Catholicism . . . For Dickens the inquisition and the present-day Roman Catholic Church symbolise past savagery and present obscurantism.[323]

It is true, as has already been noted in this discussion and as Kennedy so astutely observes, that Catholic ceremonies and symbols are often associated with a lethargic, semi-conscious state. This suggests that Catholicism is inferior and also dangerous because it encourages an unenlightened, unthinking obedience in its congregation, keeping them in a passive, powerless state. But, however this may be, Kennedy's assertion that Dickens's dream imagery unambiguously emphasises Catholicism's "past

---

[321] John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, 2 vols (1872–74; rpt London: Chapman and Hall, 1876), 1: 365.
[322] Ibidem.
[323] Valerie Kennedy, "Dream or Reality? Past Savagery Versus Present Civilisation in *Pictures from Italy* And *Little Dorrit*", in *Dickens and Italy*, ed. Michael Hollington and Francesca Orestano, pp. 94–5.

savagery and present obscurantism" strikes me as a little too definitive. Of course Dickens makes no secret of his dislike for many of the Catholic practices but there is something more to these "dream" sequences, something that connects them with ghosts. In Parma Dickens describes the "grotesque monsters" and "dreamy-looking creatures" carved in marble and stone ("To Parma, Modena and Bologna", p. 91). These dream-like figures create a "silent presence" that is mirrored by the congregation who are closed away in the "dark confessionals" with their heads bowed ("To Parma, Modena and Bologna", p. 91). Later he describes the way in which the disfigured frescoes seem to transform into a crowd of beggars, "phantom-looking men and women, leading other men and women with twisted limbs, or chattering jaws, or paralytic gestures, or idiotic heads, or some other sad infirmity" ("To Parma, Modena and Bologna", p. 92). Here the dream-like character of what Dickens sees transforms into a nightmare, haunted by deformed and debased figures that seem to occupy the hinterland between death and life. Horrified as Dickens is by this vision of corrupt Catholic culture, he can't deny its haunting presence. Even before he sees the beggars, the sight of the frescoes makes him think of the "Souls of Painters" that are "perishing and fading away, like human forms" ("To Parma, Modena and Bologna", p. 91). The past does not remain in the past and nor do the frescoes remain on the wall – they leap out at him and demand to be noticed in all their gory deformity.

The Mass in Albaro is less nightmarish but not less ghostly: here Dickens describes the long white veils that the women wear – the mezzero – that makes the whole congregation appear "gauzy" and "ethereal-looking" ("Genoa and its Neighbourhood", p. 44). This allusion to the ghostliness of the people coexists paradoxically with a lively description of the crowded church and the men who are playing boles outside. Thus the Catholics are ghosts – they are elusive figures belonging to a distant and sometimes savage past but they are also intensely present and alive. No matter how much Dickens complains about the dreariness and mindlessness of Catholicism, he also finds it impossible to ignore – it is a living ghost with the power to transgress into the space of the modern and reasonable world. The fact that it inhabits the liminal space between the unconsciousness and consciousness makes it all the more powerful because it escapes definition: one cannot help feeling that, if it had been stripped of its ghostly, elusive

character and forced into the realm of logical explanations, Dickens might have found it easier to conquer. But it stubbornly eludes him, remaining, like the rest of Italian culture of which it forms part, poised between the real and the fantastic, and threatening to unravel the whole rational world in which Dickens has so much faith. Here he describes the scenes in Strada Nuova and Strada Balbi but it applies just as well to his experience of the Catholic Church:

> . . . so lively, and yet so dead: so noisy, and yet so quiet: so obtrusive, and yet so shy and lowering: so wide awake, and yet so fast asleep . . . A bewildering phantasmagoria, with all the inconsistency of a dream, and all the pain and all the pleasure of an extravagant reality! ("Genoa and its Neighbourhood", p. 52).

The Catholic culture is only half alive – it exists in the space between the real and the imagined, the living and the dead. But this is also the region to which Dickens is most attracted: this space, free from the confines of rational reality, possesses a subversive flexibility that makes it rich in imaginative energy.

In his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* Cardinal Newman speaks of the ghost of Catholicism, that doubt that arose in his mind about whether he was, after all, right about his prejudice against Rome. Even though he attempts to overcome it, he never can banish it again for, "[h]e who has seen a ghost, cannot be as if he had never seen it".[324] Like Newman, Dickens was haunted by this Catholic ghost, even if he does not make very much of this in *Pictures*. In Genoa he speaks of the incessant and disquieting sound of Church bells:

> Meanwhile (and especially on festa-days) the bells of the churches ring incessantly; not in peals, or any known form of sound, but in a horrible, irregular, jerking, dingle, dingle, dingle: with a sudden stop at every fifteenth dingle or so, which is maddening. This performance is usually achieved by a boy up in the steeple, who takes hold of the clapper, or a little rope attached to it, and tries to dingle louder than every other boy similarly employed. The noise is supposed to be particularly obnoxious to Evil Spirits; but looking up into the steeples, and

[324] John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1865), ed. Ian Ker (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 94.

> seeing (and hearing) these young Christians thus engaged, one might very naturally mistake them for the Enemy ("Genoa and its Neighbourhood", p. 59).

This sound is unwanted and infuriating. Like the music of the Catholic Church Service, the sound of the bells is jarring and disquieting rather than melodic – far from achieving their aim of warding off the evil spirits, the bell ringers irritate Dickens so much that he is inclined to believe that they themselves are the "Enemy". The bells intrude into Dickens's privacy, solitude and sanity, affecting his ability to think clearly– he cannot remain indifferent to them even if the primary feeling that they incite in him is one of hostility.

But their effects on him extend beyond this passage and *Pictures*. They are the inspiration for his Christmas story, *The Chimes*, written during his stay in Italy. The one-sentence quotation sent to Forster at the beginning of October after he had his idea for the story, "We have heard THE CHIMES at midnight, Master Shallow",[325] suggests a revelation, a sense that there is meaning hidden beneath the uncomfortable cacophony of the bells. Dickens's response to the Genoese bells – confusion, hostility, giving way to interpretation and enlightenment is similar to his response to the Italian language and culture. Nicola Bradbury describes his excitement at learning a new language and eagerness to try it out in the streets even when he is aware of his limitations– an effort which is both "spectacular and dangerous".[326] While he threw himself into learning the language, Dickens was also inclined to hold himself aloof from Italian citizens, noting to Forster with perplexity, that their manner of conversing made them seem "on the verge of stabbing each other forthwith" and commending himself for his reluctance to "receive" natives notwithstanding the letters of introduction that he had brought with him.[327] This sense of confusion and need to remain at a distance, coupled with a sincere desire to make sense of the language that he encounters, evidently also characterises his response to the Genoese bells. They speak a kind of language to him and one that, by inspiring *The Chimes*, ultimately awakens his poetic spirit.

---

[325] Forster's *Life*, 1: 384.
[326] Bradbury, "Dolce Far Niente", in *Dickens and Italy*, ed. Michael Hollington and Francesca Orestano, p. 22.
[327] Forster's *Life* 1: 371.

Although it was written in Italy, *The Chimes* is one of Dickens's most radical commentaries on the politics of London and on the injustice of the new Poor Law. It was certainly taken by his contemporaries as one of the most controversial pieces that he had written.[328] Critics have generally responded to *The Chimes* as a sociological comment, much more "realistic" in tone and intent than its "sentimental" predecessor, *A Christmas Carol*. [329] Both Roger L. Tarr and Peter Ackroyd emphasise Dickens's debt to Carlyle: Ackroyd suggests that Dickens borrowed his friend's "worried, apocalyptic manner",[330] while for Tarr the Christmas book's stern insistence on combating injustice by overcoming "indifference and apathy" has the same flavour as Carlyle's *Past and Present*.[331] Topical, radical and staunchly English in flavour, the Christmas Book has led critics like Clotilde De Stasio to assert that Dickens "never really left London".[332] But undeniable as the sociological emphasis of *The Chimes* is, it has also caused critics to downplay the centrality of the symbol of the bells and the spiritual suggestions associated with this. I want to suggest that Dickens's Italian experiences are not absent in *The Chimes*: through the fertile image of the bells one is able to glimpse the heightened sense of spiritual disorientation as well as a desire for revelation and enlightenment which are also characteristic of his Italian travels.

In *The Chimes* Dickens is not speaking directly about the bells that he hears in Genoa but rather about an old London belfry. Nevertheless they are evidently connected with the Italian bells and with the Catholic echoes that so disturb him throughout his travels in Italy: Dickens describes the Chimes as centuries old and clearly originating in Catholic culture:

> Centuries ago, these Bells had been baptised by bishops: so many centuries ago, that the register of their baptism was lost long, long before the memory of man, and no one knew their names. They had had their Godfathers and Godmothers, these Bells (for my own part, by the way, I would rather incur the responsibility

[328] Ackroyd, *Dickens*, p. 443.
[329] Rodger L. Tarr, "Dickens's Debt to Carlyle's 'Justice Metaphor' in *The Chimes*", *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 27.2 (Sept. 1972): 208–215 (p. 210).
[330] Ackroyd, *Dickens*, p. 443.
[331] Rodger L. Tarr, "Dickens's Debt to Carlyle's 'Justice Metaphor' in *The Chimes*", pp. 214–15.
[332] Clotilde De Stasio, "The Traveller as Liar: Dickens and the 'Invisible Towns' in Northern Italy", *The Dickensian*, 450.96 (2000): 5–13 (p. 9).

> of being a Godfather to a Bell than a Boy), and had their silver mugs besides. But Time had mowed down their sponsors, and Henry the Eighth had melted down their mugs and they now hung, nameless and mugless, in the church-tower.[333]

The Catholic history of the Bells is clearly indicated by the allusion to the practice of assigning Godparents to the Chimes and to the traditional Christening gift of a silver cup. This Catholic past has been erased since Henry the Eighth melted down the mugs in his war against the religion. But, like the churches and relics that Dickens saw in Italy, the Bells still have a ghostly life about them. In fact they refuse to be silent: Dickens describes them as far from "speechless" with "clear, loud, lusty sounding voices" that can be heard "far and wide" upon "the wind".[334] And they exercise a complete fascination over the mind of the simple Trotty, the protagonist of the story and a member of London's abused poor class. Trotty is drawn to the Chimes and his high regard for them and suspicion of those who believe them to be haunted by evil spirits strangely contradicts Dickens's frustrated complaint in *Pictures* that the Genoese bell-ringers must be evil incarnate. Like the Catholic culture that Dickens experiences in Italy, the bells are ghostly symbols from a distant and forgotten past and yet are intensely present, with a kind of magic that exercises a mesmeric attraction over those who hear them.

Significantly, the Chimes are easily misunderstood: after he has heard the argument of the supposedly progressive politicians, Trotty becomes more and more convinced that as a poor person, he has no right to be happy and he hears his own thoughts and the retrogressive policies of the London government reflected in the bells, "Good old Times, Good old Times! Facts and Figures, Facts and Figures! Put'em down, Put 'em down!".[335] But, on the night when he is summoned into their presence, the Chimes reproach him for his misinterpretation of their message: although they are ancient Phantoms the bells insist that they stand for progress, for the "Voice of Time . . . cries to man, Advance".[336] They reprimand Trotty for hearing in them a voice that advocates the mistreatment of the poor and downtrodden and insist that as representatives of "Heaven

---

[333] Charles Dickens, *The Chimes* (1844) in *A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Books*, ed. Robert Douglas-Fairhurst (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 88.
[334] Ibidem.
[335] Ibid., p. 106.
[336] Ibid., p. 128.

and man, of Time and . . . eternity",[337] their message speaks of compassion. The strong Carlylean overtones of progress and the need to learn from past mistakes are complemented by a sense in which Trotty's experience is a vision of divinity – a Christian truth that stands above and beyond the vicissitudes of time and that can be heard and understood if one were truly to "Listen!" . . . "Listen!" . . . "Listen!"[338] Central to this story is a call to stand against the social abuses of Victorian London and one cannot, of course, take it as a defence of Catholicism. But Dickens's feelings about Catholic culture – the constant emphasis on his own incomprehension of proceedings, the desire for clarity and spiritual truth, reoccur forcefully in this context. The sound of the bells is more than just a sound, it is a prophetic call to hear the message of Truth, one so powerful that it can change the course of History – after Trotty's appeal for mercy, their joyful ringing for the New Year banishes the dark vision of Meg's suicide. The sound of the bells with its rhythmic repeated phrases of "Listen", or "you have done us wrong",[339] a sound poised between words and music, recalls the ritualistic power of the Mass: they may put Trotty into a trance but it is one that lifts him above his ordinary life and that yields to divine vision: here sound transforms into images and together they reveal truth. In this way the Chimes magically transform thoughts and words into substantial and affecting realities.

Tarr sees Trotty's dream-vision as serving a merely functional purpose. It is, he argues, "the vehicle" for "Dickens's support of Carlyle's dictum that Justice will be served only when a common bond of understanding between the classes is achieved".[340] This argument does not take into account the almost frenzied power of this dream-state – a kind of trance to which Dickens was particularly sensitive after his overwhelming experience of Italian culture and faith. When Totty first climbs up into the tower, the goblin bell-ringers recall Dickens's sense of the sharp contradictions of Italian life. These "dwarf phantoms" are creatures of formidable liveliness that are "leaping, flying, dropping, pouring from the Bells without pause".[341] They appear in endless different shapes and express a variety of emotions: "He saw them ugly, handsome, crippled,

---

[337] Ibid., p. 129.
[338] Ibidem.
[339] Ibidem.
[340] Tarr, "Dickens's Debt to Carlyle's 'Justice Metaphor' in *The Chimes*", p. 213.
[341] Dickens, *The Chimes*, in *A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Books*, p. 125.

exquisitely formed. He saw them young, he saw them old, he saw them kind, he saw them cruel, he saw them merry, he saw them grim".[342] These creatures of endless variety and moods are everywhere, among the sick and the well and sometimes engaged in fantastic and incomprehensible actions. These energetic figures recall the streets of Italy and the crowded Catholic churches, bursting with absurd vitality but simultaneously insubstantial. They coexist with the sombre goblins of the bells, figures that are striking for their silence and watchfulness – a different kind of presence, less fleeting and more demanding and unnerving. Altogether, there is something so magnetic about these phantoms, something so vivid and yet so disturbing, that they appear to be more substantial than the figures that Trotty encounters in his ordinary life in London. Thus while it is important to keep in mind that Trotty's dream is meant to be a social commentary, one should not undermine its power as dream-vision, an extraordinary experience that sets it apart from day-to-day life and that reflects Dickens's heightened emotional and mental state when writing in Italy.

The ending of *The Chimes* invokes again the motif of dream:

> Had Trotty dreamed? Or are his joys and sorrows, and the actors in them, but a dream; himself a dream; the teller of this tale a dreamer, waking but now? If it be so, oh Listener, dear to him in all his visions, try to bear in mind the stern realities from which these shadows come; and in your sphere . . . endeavour to correct, improve, and soften them.[343]

Like Trotty, Dickens describes himself here as a "dreamer", writing in a trance from which he is only just awakening. There is a note of urgency that although these figures are merely the ghosts of Dickens's fantasy, the reader must take them seriously in order for necessary change to come about. Dreams are therefore shadowy and insubstantial but simultaneously they are, like allegories, symbols of deeper truths. There is obviously something very powerful in the subconscious state of dream, something that has caused Dickens to create potent images that can have a real impact on the state of society.

---

[342] Ibidem.
[343] Ibid., p. 161.

Dreams and ghosts –insubstantial and yet hauntingly present – they constantly trouble Dickens in his encounter with Catholic culture and faith. The most urgent appearance of the ghost of Catholicism is in a dream that Dickens had while in Genoa, the account of which has been carefully left out of *Pictures*. He describes it in detail in a letter to Forster:

> Let me tell you of a curious dream I had, last Monday night; and of the fragments of reality I can collect, which helped to make it up . . . Observe that throughout I was as real, as animated, and full of passion as Macready (God bless him!) in the last scene of *Macbeth*. In an indistinct place, which was quite sublime in its indistinctness, I was visited by a Spirit. I could not make out the face, nor do I recollect that I desired to do so. It wore a blue drapery as the Madonna might in a picture by Raphael; and bore no resemblance to anyone I have known except in stature. I think (but I am not sure) that I recognised the voice. Anyway, I knew it was poor Mary's spirit. I was not at all afraid, but in a great delight, so that I wept very much, and stretching out my arms to it called it "Dear." At this, I thought it recoiled; and I felt immediately, that not being of my gross nature, I ought not to have addressed it so familiarly. "Forgive me!" I said. "We poor living creatures are only able to express ourselves by looks and words. I have used the word most natural to *our* affections; and you know my "heart." It was so full of compassion and sorrow for me – which I knew spiritually, for, as I have said, I didn't perceive its emotions by its face – that it cut me to the heart; and I said, sobbing, "Oh! give me some token that you have really visited me!" "Form a wish," it said. I thought, reasoning in myself, "If I form a selfish wish, it will vanish." So I hastily discarded such hopes and anxieties of my own as came into my mind, and said, "Mrs Hogarth is surrounded by great distresses" – observe, I never thought of saying "your mother" as to a mortal creature – "will you extricate her?" "Yes." "And her extrication is to be a certainty to me, that this has really happened?" "Yes." "But answer me one other question!" I said in an agony of entreaty lest it should leave me. "What is the True religion?" As it paused a moment, without replying, I said – Good God in such an agony of haste, lest it should go away! – "You think, as I do, that the Form of religion does not so greatly matter, if we try

> to do good? or," I said observing that it still hesitated, and was moved with the greatest compassion for me, perhaps, "the Roman Catholic is the best? perhaps it makes one think of God oftener, and believe in him more steadily?" "For *you*," said the Spirit, full of such heavenly tenderness for me, that I felt as if my heart would break; "for *you*, it is the best!" Then I awoke, with the tears running down my face, and myself in exactly the same condition as the dream.[344]

This dream is overtly Catholic in character – the figure of Mary Hogarth is dressed like the Madonna and may well be she: Dickens admits that although he "knows" it to be his sister in law, he does not recognise the spirit's face or voice. Dickens fervently asks this figure to extricate Mrs Hogarth from her suffering in a similar manner to the Catholic practice of asking the Virgin and Saints to intercede for them. Finally Dickens questions the figure about whether the Roman Catholic is the "true" religion and gets told that, for him, this is so. This sounds very much like Newman's ghostly doubt about Rome.

But it is a dream and Dickens is quick to find rational explanations for it: he explains that there is a Catholic altar in his room where "some family who once inhabited this palace had mass performed" and above this there is a "mark on the wall . . . where a religious picture used to be",[345] leading him to conjecture what it might have been like. Finally he argues that the sound of the "convent bells" to which he had been listening had probably made him think of the Catholic service and so contributed to the Catholic quality of the dream. But this does not quell the Catholic ghost summoned by the dream: despite his sensible explanations for it, the dream has a haunting reality for him, so powerful that he tells Forster that, should his wish come true, he will begin to regard it as a Vision. The dream's effects also last long after Dickens has woken up – he awakens as if he were a convert, with the "tears running down [his] face",[346] and feels the need to repeat it to Catherine a number of times in order to ensure that he captures its meaning correctly. This need for rehearsal might also unconsciously echo the Catholic Mass where truths are made apparent through repetition. Further, the Catholic altar, convent bells and absent religious picture are made more hauntingly alive by the thought that they inspired

---

[344] Forster's *Life*, 1: 387–8.
[345] Ibid., 1: 389.
[346] Ibidem.

Dickens's moving dream: instead of merely an abandoned relic from the distant past, the altar has the power to lead Dickens subconsciously to emulate Catholic practices; and the absent picture seems to transform into the Spirit of Dickens's dream – a real, and affecting presence rather than merely a space on the wall.

Peter Ackroyd argues that the dream's Catholic character is largely incidental and that the dream reveals more about Dickens's hidden psychology, his need for a mother, which is bound up with an attachment to young virginal women very similar to the Catholic Virgin Mary.[347] But the ethereal atmosphere and Dickens's sense that he is speaking to something that is above mortal concerns, emphasises the spiritual quality of the encounter and brings religious questions to the fore. Forster is quick to pick up on the obvious question of religious doubt, seeing the dream as evidence, "one of many in [Dickens's] life, of his not having escaped those trying regions of reflection which most men of thought and all men of genius have at some time to pass through".[348] For Forster, then, the dream is evidence of an intense religious turmoil that is not new to Dickens.

Dickens probably felt that his affecting dream of Mary Hogarth was of too personal a nature to include in *Pictures* – it certainly does probe emotions that go beyond the passing impressions that he intended to create in his travelogue. Another reason that he did not consider including the letter in *Pictures* could be that it would give too powerful a voice to the Catholic phantom which he had been attempting to wrestle and hold at bay during his Italian voyages but which, like the Chimes in his Christmas story, would not remain silent.

The possibility that Dickens was not impervious to a Catholic-influenced spirituality is reinforced by his response to Alessandro Manzoni's *I Promessi Sposi* (1827) which he was reading with his Italian instructor while in Genoa. In a letter to Samuel Rogers dated 1 September 1844, Dickens shows quite a lively interest in this novel, describing it as a "clever book" with which he is "quite charmed".[349] He is particularly moved by "the whole idea of the character and story of Padre Cristofero":[350]

---

[347] Ackroyd, *Dickens*, p. 440.
[348] Forster's *Life*, 1: 389.
[349] *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, 4: 189.
[350] Ibid., 190.

the fact that Dickens found the saintly priest so moving is significant because it suggests that, despite his prejudices, he was not unaffected by the idea of a performed spirituality in which a priest undertakes a central symbolic role. In the light of his intolerance for Catholic culture and religion, one cannot perhaps make too much of his appreciation for this novel; but, when this is coupled with the strange dream of Mary Hogarth, it does reinforce the suggestion that Dickens was imaginatively drawn to an expressive faith.

In *Pictures* sacramental culture emerges as undeniably dramatic in the sense that it is possessed of a diabolical vivacity, refusing to remain contained or to be subject to Dickens's controlling gaze, no matter how deformed or insubstantial it might appear to be. Here theatrical elements take on phantom-like qualities. Yet in their very ghostliness they gesture towards a different dimension of reality, which emerges in a language of sound and spectacle that cannot fully be captured by the written word. Because of its theatricality Catholic culture refuses to remain a space of absences and meaninglessness – even partial and deformed figures are constantly drawn into performance, a performance that at times confounds the narrator, and at other times yields to a sense of enhanced poetic and spiritual sensibility.

In the next Chapter I will consider this contradictory blend of the theatrical, the spiritual and the ghostly from the perspective of Charlotte Brontë in *Villette* (1853): I will address Brontë's dramatic sensibiltiy as it developed in her childhood playacting and her haunting world of Angria; I will further examine her vociferously expressed aversion particularly to the "performed elements" of Catholic culture. An important line of enquiry that I shall follow in the discussion of *Villette* will be the attempt to understand persistent references to spectres and ghosts and the ways in which this resonates with Catholicism, ritual, and theatricality: finally, paying scrupulous attention to the conflict between a demystifying, logical voice and these unassimilated dramatic elements, I will offer a possible reading of the sham Nun that haunts Lucy for much of the novel.

CHAPTER FIVE: A "mighty revelation": Catholic Ghosts and the Ambivalent Attraction of Sham Theatre in *Villette* (1852)

"Our Plays": Charlotte Brontë's attitudes to the theatre

The ambivalence and fascination of the dramatic is a constant preoccupation in the life and work of Charlotte Brontë.

The singularly theatrical nature of the Brontës' childhoods has been the subject of much critical interest ever since Mrs Gaskell was puzzled by the realms of juvenilia, what Charlotte referred to affectionately as "our plays". In her 'History of 1829', the twelve year old Charlotte Brontë recorded the dramas that the children were currently creating:

> Our plays were established Young Men June 1826 Our fellows July 1827 islanders December 1827. those are our three great plays that are not kept secret Emily's and my Bed plays where Established the 1st December 1827 the other March 1828 Bed plays means secret plays they are very nice ones all our plays are very strange ones there nature I need not write on paper for I think I shall always remember them, the young men play took its rise from some wooden soldiers Branwell had Our fellows from Esops fables and the Islanders from several events which happened I will skecth out the origin of our plays more explicitly if I can 1 Young mens papa bought Branwell some Soldiers at Leeds when papa came home it was night and we where in Bed. so next morning Branwell came to our Door with a Box of Soldiers Emily and me Jumped out of Bed and I snatched up one and exclaimed this is the Duke of Wellington it shall be mine, when I had said this Emily likewise took one and said it should be hers and when Ane came down she said one should be hers Branwell likewise took one to be his Mine was the prettiest of the whole and the tallest and perfect in every part Emilys was a

> grave looking fellow and we called him Gravey Ane's was a queer little thing much like herself he was called waiting Boy Branwell chose Bonuparte.[351]

Here she describes a seminal event in the creative lives of the young Brontës: the arrival of the toy soldiers which the children would transform into the dramatis personae of their subsequent Byronic tales. Heather Glen has emphasised the fact that these dramas were not arbitrary flights of fantasy but that they were concerned with current events, "shaped and constrained by the specificities of a quite particular culture" with which the children were critically engaged.[352] This implies that the Brontës were not disconnected from other writers of their time even at such a young age, sharing with them a more realist desire to examine and critique social events. But significantly the children did not simply content themselves with reporting on the events of the day with the discernment and ironic distance of the realist (even if this is also a quality of Charlotte's writing at this time). Rather, they imaginatively transformed these events into dramas, summoning them in the context of their own lives and fancies. This quality is reflected in the History: in reporting on the game of the soldiers, Charlotte is able to give the episode a feeling of immediacy as if it were evolving before the eyes of the readers, itself part of the play world in which they were all so intently engaged.

Charlotte's style in the History probably reflects the manner in which the plays themselves were developing: Edward Chitham notes that the children took to acting out the role of the soldiers by themselves without needing "the physical puppet to be present".[353] Through play-acting, therefore, the fantastical was made to come to life dramatically in the real world, blurring the boundaries between the two. A later diary paper of Emily's written on the 24th of November 1834, testifies to this manner of bringing fantastical beings so close to the real that they become interchangeable with it: in the midst of a description of the daily events occurring in the kitchen of the Parsonage, Emily suddenly writes that the Gondals are busily "discovering the interior" of Gaaldine. Since Emily and Anne were at that moment engaged in peeling potatoes, Chitham

---

[351] Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 2 vols (London: Smith elder & Co, 1857), 1: 90.
[352] Heather Glen, *Charlotte Brontë: The Imagination in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 7.
[353] Edward Chitham, *A Life of Emily Brontë* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1987), p. 52.

concludes that the drama of the Gondals must have unfolded orally, as part of a conversation between Emily and Anne: the girls were probably dramatically engaged in this, "talking in pretended Gondal voices", one of them taking on the character of the mysterious Lady Juliet who also appears in the diary paper.[354]

On June the 31st 1829, when Charlotte records the genesis of the "Island Plays", the dramatic quality of the children's creativity becomes so intense that Charlotte's writing begins to take the form of a play script:

> Anne. "And mine shall be Guernsey".
>
> Branwell. "I'd rather do anything than that."
> Branwell. "If we had I would choose the Island of Man."
> Charlotte. "Why are you so glum tonight, Tabby? Oh! Suppose we had each an island of our own."
> Charlotte. "And I would choose the Isle of Wight."
>
> Emily: "The Isle of Arran for me."
>
> Tabby. "Wha ya may go t'bed."
>
> A long pause succeeded, which was at last broken by Branwell saying, in a lazy manner, "I don't know what to do." This was echoed by Emily and Anne.[355]

Spontaneously then, in a rapid exchange of words, the children begin to talk their worlds into being. They draw them from real geographical places and people them with significant cultural and political figures of the time. But these figures and places are given a new immediacy and presence by the children and coexist alongside haunting fictitious places that are "more the work of enchantment than anything real".[356] Elizabeth Gaskell has commented on the "graphic vividness" of this fragment, which comes alive by evoking a powerful combination of sights and sounds.[357] Edward Chitham echoes her praise in his discussion of the style of the History, recognising its theatrical flavour when

---

[354] Ibid., p. 83.
[355] Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 1: 89.
[356] Ibid., 1: 88.
[357] Ibidem.

he comments that the fragment is notable for its "sharp visualisation and dramatic flair".[358]

In her History of 1829 Charlotte also hints at a different kind of play that she and Emily were engaged in: nothing is known about these "Bed plays" except for this one cryptic allusion.[359] The most significant thing about them is their mysterious quality, the fact that they are a secret kept from the other children. The dramatic thus contained an element of mystery for the children, something that sanctified it, setting it apart from ordinary social activities.

Play-acting was not a flippant activity for Charlotte and she did not experience it as one would a game. The world of Angria which she shared with her brother, Branwell, had such a powerful hold over her mind and imagination that she felt possessed by it. At a low point in her life, as a teacher at Roe Head School on the 11th of August in 1836, she described the experience of Angria creeping up on her and momentarily enlivening a very dull classroom situation:

> Then came on me rushing impetuously all the mighty phantasm that we had conjured from nothing from nothing [sic] to a system strong as some religious creed. I felt as if I could <have> written gloriously – I longed to write. The Spirit of all Verdopolis – of all the mountainous North of all the <woodland the> woodland West of all the river-watered East came crowding into my mind. If I had <it> time to indulge it I felt that the vague sensations of that moment would have settled down into some narrative better at least than any thing I had ever produced before. But just then a Dolt came up with a lesson. I thought I should have vomited.[360]

Angria was therefore not simply a world that she wrote about, it was a world that "happened" to her, a real, living dynamic world that drew her in to its drama and seemed to have the power to transport her away from her oppressive surroundings at the school. The notion that something can come to life, can transform from the imagined to the performed, is also suggested in an anecdote in Elizabeth Gaskell's biography of Charlotte

---

[358] Chitham, *A Life of Emily Brontë*, p. 53.
[359] Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 1: 89.
[360] Juliet Barker, *The Brontës* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1994), p. 255.

Brontë: Gaskell speaks of overhearing a conversation between Charlotte and a sceptic who disbelieved the climax of Jane Eyre where Jane hears Mr Rochester's voice crying out to her despite the distance between them. Charlotte responded to this objection by drawing in her breath and declaring, "But it is a true thing; it really happened". This puzzles Mrs Gaskell who attributes the response to what she perceives as Charlotte's extreme loneliness.[361] A more compelling possibility is that the scene might have once been realised as part of Charlotte's play-world, that it had a dramatic life before it was recorded. Whatever the case, the response suggests that Charlotte felt her imaginative tales as if they were happening and this quality of the performed gave them the force of truth.

The early stories of Charlotte's fantasies had, by her own admission, the power of a "religious creed".[362] To her mind, her plays triggered a spiritual fervour, becoming more real than real and interfering with all of the mundane daily realities of her life. In another diary entry at Roe Head, she describes her imaginings as if they were a spiritual revelation:

> . . . and as I sat by myself in the dining room while the rest were at tea, the trance seemed to descend on a sudden, and verily this foot trod the water-shaken shores of the Calabar, and these eyes saw the defiled and violated Adrianopolis shedding its lights on the river from the lattices whence the invader looked out.[363]

Here the experience of Angria is described as a divine unveiling and the word "verily" with its strong biblical echoes puts one in mind of a biblical dream vision. Charlotte seems to be physically transported to this realm and becomes a pilgrim in the midst of it. She is only brought back to the reality of the school by the sudden entrance of the headmistress. Elizabeth Gaskell notes this quality of Charlotte's early writings, the way in which her impressions became "magnified by them into things so deeply significant" that they are taken as "actual personifications, or supernatural visions".[364] Mrs Gaskell sees the need to downplay this visionary tendency, emphasising instead Charlotte's

---

[361] Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 2: 148.
[362] Barker, *The Brontës*, p. 255.
[363] Ibid., p. 249.
[364] Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 1: 95.

practicality and desire to control these fevered imaginings with a hearty dose of common sense.[365] Most critics have followed her lead, discussing the way in which such visionary raptures and extremities exacerbated Charlotte's psychological sufferings and impeded her creativity. While it is true that Charlotte herself was afraid of her visions, viewing them as signs of her own emotional fragility, their significance cannot be limited to this. Violently breaking through the polite veneer of her middle class life, they are associated with rupture, revelation, transformation – all features of the dramatic that open one up to the possibility of a force or power beyond oneself. This suggests that Charlotte was not simply an overly emotional and immature writer, allowing her imagination to run away with her. Rather, it speaks of her dramatic cast of mind – her ability to conjure presences that impel her beyond herself and into a heightened realm.

But, like many of her contemporaries, Charlotte was at least overtly suspicious of embracing the dramatic. Her father, Patrick Brontë, had written disapprovingly about the stage in his book *The Maid of Killarney* (1818), and in some respects Charlotte shared his views. In *The Professor* Frances believes that Hunsden Yorke will not marry the actress he loves, Lucia, precisely because of her dramatic talents:

> "Lucia has trodden the stage," continued Frances. "You never seriously thought of marrying her; you admitted her originality, her fearlessness, her energy of body and mind: you delighted in her talent, whatever it was, whether song, dance, or dramatic representation; you worshipped her beauty, which was of the sort after your own heart: but I am sure she filled a sphere whence you would never have thought of taking a wife".[366]

Although Lucia's talents are fascinating and alluring, they also somehow taint her: because her ability makes her extraordinary, she can have no role in the ordinary domestic world where she is not considered respectable.

In 1849 Charlotte was taken to the London theatre by her publisher, George Smith, where she saw William Charles Macready perform *Othello* and *Macbeth*. She found his acting style "false and artificial" and at the subsequent dinner party she

---

[365] Ibidem.
[366] Charlotte Brontë, *The Professor* (1857; rpt. London and New York: Harper & Brothers, 1900), pp. 266–267.

attacked the theatre in general, complaining that actors were only capable of farcical performances and were unable to do justice to tragedy or Shakespeare.[367] Thus while she admits that a true drama is possible, she feels that it all too often becomes absurd – a false and misleading parody of itself.

Even supposedly "true" and "natural" acting profoundly unsettles and troubles Charlotte. Her ambiguity becomes more pronounced in a letter to Ellen on the 24th of June, 1851 where she describes the performance of the acclaimed French actress Elisa Rachel Felix:

> . . . a wonderful sight, 'terrible as if the earth had cracked deep at your feet and revealed a glimpse of hell' . . . She made me shudder to the marrow of my bones: in her some fiend has certainly taken up an incarnate home.[368]

This comment suggests the extent to which Rachel's power affects and transforms both the actress herself and Charlotte, who feels physically shaken by her. Disturbingly, this power is also described as blatantly wicked. From this one can deduce that Brontë is repelled by the theatre and cannot help but see it as immoral. Yet she is also deeply affected by it, drawn to its transcendent qualities despite her misgivings.

Villette: Vashti and M.Paul's Vaudeville

In the famous Vashti chapter in *Villette* (1852) Brontë's feelings about the theatre become clearer. Lucy's description of the enigmatic actress, whose performance she goes to see with Dr John, is based on Brontë's own experience of Rachel's acting:

> For a while – a long while – I thought it was only a woman, though an unique woman, Who moved in might and grace before this multitude. By-and-by I recognised my mistake. Behold! I found upon her something neither of woman nor of man: in each of her eyes sat a devil. These evil forces bore her through the tragedy, kept up her feeble strength – for she was but a frail creature; and as the action rose and the stir deepened, how wildly they shook her with their passions of the pit! They wrote HELL on her straight, haughty brow. They tuned her voice

[367] *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. Margaret Smith, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 2: 344.
[368] *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, 2: 648.

> to the note of torment. They writhed her regal face to a demoniac mask. Hate and Murder and Madness incarnate she stood.
>
> It was a marvellous sight: a mighty revelation.
> It was a spectacle low, horrible, immoral.
> . . .
> I have said that she does not *resent* her grief. No; the weakness of that word would make it a lie. To her, what hurts becomes immediately embodied: she looks on it as a thing that can be attacked, worried down, torn in shreds. Scarcely a substance herself, she grapples to conflict with abstractions . . . Her hair, flying loose in revel or war, is still an angel's hair, and glorious under a halo. Fallen, insurgent, banished, she remembers the heaven where she rebelled. Heaven's light, following her exile, pierces its confines, and discloses their forlorn remoteness.[369]

Here the biblical echoes of the story of Queen Vashti become completely subsumed in the actress's art: in fact it is unclear whether Lucy is speaking of the actress or of her role – the two have so completely become one. In becoming the Queen Vashti, the actress is able to transcend herself and her own mortality, becoming an infernal being. She is merely a wisp of a person – somehow insubstantial – but in her role she is able to embody an emotion so completely, so utterly to become her grief that she begins to "wrestle with abstractions" in an allegorical drama that resembles the medieval morality play: thus the more intense, the more pure the actress's acting becomes, the more it approaches a ritualistic engagement with universal spiritual values. The actress's art is able to infuse Queen Vashti's banishment with such intense spiritual energy that she seems to become representative of Satan himself: Brontë's language powerfully echoes the myth of Satan's fall in *Paradise Lost.*

Lucy is completely absorbed in this vision: the theatre here becomes the means of revelation for her – freeing her into a realm where spiritual realities are more intense, embodied and enacted. It is a realm that is completely beyond the understanding of the worldly yet benevolent Dr John, who, Lucy notes with crushing certainty, is only able to

[369] Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (1853), ed. Helen M. Cooper (London: Penguin, 1994), c. xxiii, pp. 339–340.

judge the actress as a woman rather than an artist. Yet she is appalled by the spectacle: the same power that allows the actress to infuse the fallen Queen with such vitality is also something low, immoral and evil. In this way the dazzling display is not entirely uplifting but somewhat tainted, even dangerous.

It is evident that Lucy is drawn to the ritualistic elements of this production, even while she partly recoils from it. Brontë's description of Rachel's acting as "genuine" falls short of this apparition and Lucy does not use this word to describe Vashti: this truth is far from simply natural – it is clearly supernatural and superhuman, and its effects extend beyond the stage to touch and engage the spectator. Its power over the spectators is suggested in the unfounded fire scare that then consumes the audience:

> Just then a stir, pregnant with omen, rustled behind the scenes – feet ran, voices spoke. What was it? demanded the whole house. A flame, a smell of smoke replied.
>
> "Fire!" rang through the gallery. "Fire!" was repeated, re-echoed, yelled forth: and then, and faster than pen can set it down, came panic, rushing, crushing – a blind, selfish, cruel chaos (c. xxiii, p. 342).

The actress, with her intense spiritual energy, is capable not merely of representing dramas but of creating them: her passion seems literally to inflame the theatre and, with the threat of the fire, the space between the real and the ideal is ruptured. No longer is the theatrical safely contained on the stage but instead, ominously, it becomes part of the real world. The fire is not real, yet in the minds of the audience it grows to terrifying proportions and the whole theatre is consumed with panic. In the same manner, the actress brings Vashti to life, conjuring her up out of nothing with a force that is superhuman. The theatre is therefore a space where complacency is shattered and where all boundaries – between the actress and her role, the actress and her audience, the real and the imagined, the natural and the supernatural– fall away.

Throughout the novel, Lucy is constantly yearning for the spiritual intensity that this production seems momentarily to achieve. But most of the time it is beyond her grasp, partly because she herself cannot fully endorse it. This is evident when she acts in M. Paul's Vaudeville. On stage Lucy experiences a rebirth. Realising that it is her own

voice that she fears, she discovers its "natural tone" and is consequently able to speak convincingly. From this point onwards she puts more and more of herself, her secret desires and hopes, into her role. Transformed by her role, she is now able to "rival and [outrival] . . . [Dr John]" who is represented to her by the "Ours" or "sincere lover" (c.xiv, p. 210). It is almost as if for the duration of the play Lucy has imaginatively swapped roles with Dr John – now he is "outcast" and she can "please" (c.xiv, p. 210). Subsumed in the theatrical, these secret feelings acquire a new intensity and Lucy is completely possessed by them, so that she has no conscious control over her actions. Her role has the force of a spiritual experience and she is as surprised by how events unfold as she would have been if she had been "lifted in a trance to the seventh heaven" (c. xiv, p. 211).

Lucy is afraid of the theatre's power of revelation and desperately attempts to hide behind her own garments, refusing to put on the costume of the male lover that she is playing. This may be because, in assuming the persona of another, Lucy feels that she is in danger of becoming more vulnerable and exposed to other influences or presences than before. Yet, because she refuses to give in entirely to the power of the role, colouring it with her own identity, she is not capable of giving herself up to the force of transcendent passions as Vashti had seemed to do: instead, she unveils and ritualistically enacts a world of petty and secret rivalries and jealousies in which she herself is implicated. Even so, she is quick to shy away from the stage: afraid that her "keen relish for dramatic expression" has been too revealing, she puts by "the strength and longing" of her desire to act, believing that "it would not do for a mere looker-on at life" (c. xiv, p. 211). Thus, rather than a personal triumph as some have argued, Lucy's decision to put aside acting is, like her decision to remain in her woman's clothing, an evasion of the truth of her own power for dramatic and spiritual transformation as well as a denial of the veiled violence of her middle-class world.

Charlotte Brontë and Catholicism

Charlotte Brontë's opinion of the theatrical in *Villette* is further complicated by her religious antipathy to the staged or performed. I have shown that in Protestant

England at this time tirades against the expressive or theatrical within religious circles often took the form of anti-Catholic prejudice: Brontë was no exception to this rule.

Charlotte's contempt for the Catholic Church is well-known and it is an attitude that was shared by family. Patrick Brontë had written a vitriolic attack on the indulgences of Catholicism in *The Maid of Killarney* and, although he did eventually come to accept Catholic emancipation, it was only on condition that Catholics be strictly regulated. He argued that "without the safest securities, it would be rash, it would be hazardous in the extreme, to permit Roman Catholics to have a share in our Legislation".[370]

In an early diary paper written at the time of the Catholic Emancipation, Charlotte writes intensely about the family's melodramatic fears of the Catholic threat:

> I remember the day when the Intelligence Extraordinary came with Mr Peel's speech in it containing the terms on which the Catholics were to be let in! With what eagerness papa tore off the cover and how we all gathered round him, and with what breathless anxiety we listened as one by one they were disclosed and explained . . . and how aunt said she thought it was excellent and that the Catholics could do no harm with such good security . . .[371]

The exaggerated fear with which the family gathers around, desperate to hear the verdict, the depiction of the Catholics as dangerous, ruthless and potentially violent, are all familiar responses to the Emancipation. Brontë also draws heavily on anti-Catholic stereotypes in *The Professor* when she describes the fate of the Belgian schoolgirl, Sylvie, whose good qualities have been perverted by her religion: her "whole soul was warped to a conventual bias" and her "independence of thought and action" was given into the "hands of some despotic confessor".[372] This common belief that Catholicism threatened the Protestant sense of identity, that it was capable of the powerful overthrow of selfhood, making the individual vulnerable to the control of a corrupt person or institution, was particularly odious to Charlotte, who made a quasi-religion out of the cult of the self in *Jane Eyre*.

---

[370] Barker, *The Brontës*, p. 158.
[371] Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 1: 92
[372] Brontë, *The Professor*, p. 103.

Like her contemporaries Charlotte often stresses the false theatricality of the Catholics. On the 16 June 1851 she went to see the feared Cardinal Wiseman addressing the Roman Catholic Society of St Vincent de Paul. On the following day she described the scene to her father:

> He came swimming into the room smiling, simpering, and bowing like a fat old lady, and say down very demure in his chair and looked the picture of the sleek hypocrite . . . the Cardinal spoke in a smooth whining manner, just like a canting Methodist preacher. The Audience seemed to look up to him like a god.[373]

Later she attended the Spanish Ambassador's Chapel to see the Cardinal Wiseman holding a confirmation and dismissed the scene as "impiously theatrical".[374] In the above description the cardinal's theatricality is exaggerated to the point that it becomes farcical – his smiles and salutations are described as unctuous and artificial as if he is consciously performing the role of the hypocrite. His voice is smooth and whining, hitting a false note which grates on the ears. Further, it is frightening that such an obvious fraud, whose pretentions are unattractively overt, should be viewed with awe by the congregation. This tendency to parody the sensuality and duplicity of the Catholic priest is of course a common trope of the time.

Aware that many of her contemporaries admitted a certain fascination with Catholic ritual and ceremony, Charlotte forcefully declared herself to be beyond such temptations. This is an extract from a letter to Ellen Nussey in July 1842:

> People talk of the danger which protestants expose themselves to in going to reside in Catholic countries - and thereby running the chance of changing their faith - my advice to all protestants who are tempted to anything so besotted as turn Catholic - is to walk over the sea on to the continent - to attend mass regularly or a time to note well the mummeries thereof also the idiotic, mercenary, aspect of all the priests and then if they are still disposed to consider Papistry in any other light than a most feeble childish piece of humbug let them turn papists at once that's all - I consider Methodism, Dissenterism, Quakerism

[373] Barker, *The Brontës*, p. 678.
[374] Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 2: 217.

> and the extremes of high and low Churchism foolish but Roman Catholicism beats them all.[375]

Here Catholic ritual life is emptied of its mystical attraction and becomes a parody of itself: the serious meaning of the Mass is reduced to ridiculous, exaggerated ceremonies, a laughable staginess that is similar to a childish game; it is very far from the effect produced by the enigmatic Rachel or Vashti as she became in *Villette*. Charlotte expresses a similar opinion of the Carnival in Brussels, dismissing it as "nothing but masking and mummery".[376] The masks that M. Heger took her to see are also dismissed as "nothing" although she acknowledges that it was "animating to see the immense crowds and the general gaiety".[377] Charlotte does not go into a detailed description of the symbolic dimension of the Carnival – this will emerge in a new and haunting guise in the Park scene of Villette. But in her letter she seems hardly to be aware of this, sweepingly affirming her belief that Catholic rites are a hollow theatre without substance or attraction.

Yet there is evidence to suggest that Charlotte was not as impervious to the dramatic power of Catholicism as her invectives would have us believe. Elizabeth Gaskell admits as much when she describes Charlotte and Emily arriving in Brussels for the first time:

> The Great solemn Cathedral of St. Gudule, the religious paintings, the striking forms and ceremonies of the Romish Church – all made a deep impression on the girls . . . And then they were indignant with themselves for having been susceptible of this impression, and their stout Protestant hearts arrayed themselves against the false Duessa . . .[378]

The extent of Charlotte's attraction to these expressive forms of religious faith is hinted at in a strange letter written to Emily in a few years later, in 1843, when Charlotte had returned to Brussels to attend the Pensionnat Heger alone. In a state of deep loneliness Charlotte found herself entering a Catholic Chapel and, not wishing to leave and return to

---

[375] *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, 1: 289.
[376] Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 1: 285.
[377] Ibidem.
[378] Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 1: 247.

the school, took "a fancy to change myself into a Catholic and go and make a real confession to see what it was like".[379] This she subsequently did despite the objections of the priest. What this confession was remains a tantalizing mystery as she does not reveal it to Emily, respecting the confidentiality of a practice that she claims to abhor. Juliet Barker sees this episode as evidence that Charlotte really was tempted to convert to Catholicism at that moment, suggesting that hers "was the hatred of one who had been severely shocked by her own receptiveness to temptation".[380] At the very least, Charlotte found Catholicism attractive in its repulsiveness, something that is suggested by the fact that she returned to watch Cardinal Wiseman performing confirmations even when her previous experience of him had convinced her of his triviality.

Anti-Catholicism in Villette

It is not accidental that Brontë chose to set her last novel in a Catholic city and that it concerns itself with a confused mingling of the theatrical and the spiritual in the mind of Lucy as well as in the world that she observes. For while she claimed to find Catholic ritual absurd, it was only in this context that Brontë could freely express her sense of experience as profoundly dramatic without exposing herself to realist censure and rationalist scepticism (her own as well as that of her fellow Protestants): against the backdrop of Catholicism, Brontë freely explored her ambivalent feelings for the theatrical, her sense of being suspended between emotion and thought, expression and description.

Charlotte's experience of a Catholic confessional is reproduced in *Villette* at the commencement of Lucy's spiral into despair. Significantly, Lucy does not simply stumble upon the confessional and playfully decide to emulate Catholic practices, as Charlotte would have Emily believe she herself did. Rather she is impelled towards it by an inexplicable but profoundly spiritual sense that "the trial God had appointed me was gaining its climax, and must now be turned by my own hands, hot, feeble, trembling as they were" (c.xv, p. 232). She does not decide at random that this trial must lead to the Church but is summoned there by the bells that "arrested [her] in passing" and "seemed

[379] *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, 2: 329.
[380] Barker, *The Brontës*, p. 424.

to call [her] in to the salut" (c.xv, p. 232). Oddly, Lucy admits that what she craves is ritual – a "solemn rite", or "spectacle of sincere worship", for this would be a way in which she could appeal to God, something that is as necessary to her as"bread to one in extremity of want" (c.xv, p. 232). Therefore, what she seems to desire is the dramatized spiritual communion that is lacking in her common-sense faith. This wish for an expressive, intense holy communion is emphasised in the fact that Lucy is relieved to pour out her sufferings to the priest, not simply because his ear is "human and sentient" but because it is also "consecrated" (c.xv, p. 234).

In some respects this moment fleetingly offers Lucy the relief that she longs for. The exchange between the Priest and the confessor has some refreshing qualities that surprise Lucy: first, Père Silas is not the sly conniving priest figure of anti-Catholic melodrama but is a "kind" man with a "compassionate eye" (c.xv, p. 234). His suggestion that Lucy become Catholic apparently arises from his genuine concern for her rather than from demonic ulterior motives: he would have her meet him at his own house because the Church is "too cold" (c.xv, p. 234), and, after her collapse, it is he who brings her to Doctor John. Second, the confession itself is not a meaningless formula or charade: although Père Silas has become a slave to duty, he is surprised into attentiveness by Lucy's heartfelt words and wishes to consider them deeply so that he can do his best to help her.

John Maynard sees this episode as proof that Lucy "had not been looking for a religious path, only for psychological support".[381] This is a little too simple in my opinion. The "psychological support" that Lucy admits she receives from Père Silas is not sufficient to fortify her against her subsequent sufferings and nor, ultimately, is the company provided by Dr John. Lucy is looking for a compassionate relationship that is so intense it achieves a quasi-divine fervour. The pity she seeks is not the disinterested, secular concern of her physician but a god-like power to love. This exchange is ultimately not dramatic enough for Lucy: the profound sense of divine intervention and revelation that she so wished to experience is replaced here with a muted compassion that is more human than celestial.

---

[381] John Maynard, "The Brontës and Religion", in *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, ed. Heather Glen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 210.

The experience is made more ambiguous by the fact that the scene is crowded with anti-Catholic stereotypes which obscure the significance of the "truth" that Lucy encounters and confound both her and the reader. The Church is ghostly and shadowy, and the "holy quiet" is contrived by closing the windows and doors (c.xv, p. 233). Ominously this makes the place even more suffocating and entrapping, like a tomb. Further, the only other people in the church are women in ardent need of comfort: Lucy notices one penitent who "after a space, breathless and spent in prayer", goes to the confessional and returns, "consoled" (c.xv, p. 233). The confessional that attracts emotionally fragile women who seek reassurance is a common trope in sensational tales about the dangers of confession.

Immediately after the confession Lucy reinterprets it as an insidious attempt to convert her and declares forcefully that she would sooner walk into "a Babylonish furnace" than return to the old priest and that, had she taken his suggestion, she is afraid that she would have landed up "counting my beads in the cell of a certain Carmelite convent on the Boulevard of Crécy, in Villette" (c.xv, p. 235). The fear of the cloister was also a common trope in anti-Catholic writing where priests were depicted as using the expressive and seductive quality of their faith to mislead and entrap nubile young women into a convent. When she first spoke to Père Silas, Lucy noted that he was venerable but now she describes his "sentimental French kindness" as dangerously alluring, painting a picture of a devious priest to whom she is "not wholly impervious" (c.xv, p. 235). Initially his kindness was refreshing but now it becomes part of a subtly satanic performance, designed to trap Lucy into a secret inferno. This description has led critics like Maureen Moran to assert that Père Silas is an "unctuous confessor" who "watches and listens in order to subordinate Lucy, override her personal independence of mind, and convert her by appealing to her neediness".[382]

Thus Brontë's description of the Catholic confessional hovers ambiguously between the falsely theatrical and the potential for the truly dramatic and transformative. This approach to Catholic culture forms a significant part of Brontë's exploration of the

[382] Maureen Moran, *Catholic Sensationalism and Victorian Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), p. 101.

precarious nature of truth in Lucy's middle-class world. In the world of the novel, logic is always poised on the brink of insanity. John Maynard has acknowledged this when he suggests that "[p]eople in Villette suffer from an entire range of psychological disturbances . . . highly nervous states, Hypochondria as a form of melancholy or depression, hysteria, or the kind of break-down experience (clearly indicated if still not here given a technical label) that Lucy endured".[383] The illnesses suffered by these people are symptomatic of a wider disease: reason itself is precarious, and truth is always threatening to dissolve into lies.

At certain points in the novel, Brontë uses Catholic theatricality to dramatize her society's feeble grasp of the truth: a good example of this is the episode in which Lucy is sent on an errand to visit Madame Walravens. The whole experience is reminiscent of a gothic fantasy: Lucy imagines that the place is an "enchanted castle", whose towers might easily be inhabited by "three mystic sages of a dead and dark art" (c.xxxiv, p. 482). The spell that it wields over her is the spell of "elf-land" so that she imagines that "that cell-like room, that vanishing picture, that arch and passage, and stair of stone, were all parts of a fairy tale" (c.xxxiv, p. 481). Madame Walravens herself is described as a "sorceress", an "evil fairy" who possesses a "wand-like ivory staff" (c.xxxiv, p. 481). The fairy-tale echoes in this scene give it a haunting quality but also make it appear remote and artificial. There is, further, something contrived about the fact that a storm rages outside while Lucy hears the story of M.Paul's past. Lucy relishes the description of the deluge of rain which pours down as if it were a revelation from heaven:

> . . . this storm had gathered immediately above Villette; it seemed to have burst at the zenith; it rushed down prone; the forked, slant bolts pierced athwart vertical torrents; red zigzags interlaced a descent blanched as white metal: and all broke from a sky heavily black in its swollen abundance (c.xxxiv, p. 482).

But, despite the storm's quasi-divine power, one cannot escape the sense that as narrator Lucy is intentionally manipulating her description in order to achieve maximum effect. Within the walls of the convent, then, the "truth" is subject to exaggeration – truth and

---

[383] Maynard, "The Brontës and Religion" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, ed. Heather Glen, p. 210.

tales, facts and contrivances, blend confusedly into one another. This is made especially evident in the story of Paul's past that Père Silas tells Lucy. She describes his story as "quite a little romantic narrative, told not unimpressively, with the accompaniment of the now subsiding storm" (c.xxxiv, p. 484). The story is suspicious because of the melodramatic way in which it is narrated with "French, Rousseau-like sentimentalizing and wire-drawing" (c.xxxiv, p. 484), exaggerated in order to manipulate its listener. In this environment nothing is quite what it seems to be and it is no longer possible to have the naive realist's trust in the revelation of truth. When Lucy catches the priest's eye she becomes aware that the experience has been contrived by him and that it is not as arbitrary or as spontaneous as she at first believed: despite Lucy's assertions to the contrary, the artificial and manipulative way in which events have unfolded somewhat taint the credibility of Paul's story.

Yet despite this description of Catholic theatricality as artificial and misleading, a rational approach does not sufficiently capture Lucy's passionate yearning for a transcendent truth. The nature of this truth is suggested by M. Paul after an argument with Lucy about whether Catholicism is "more right" than Protestantism:

> How seem in the eyes of that God who made all firmaments, from whose nostrils issued whatever of life is here, or in the stars shining yonder – how seem the differences of man? But as Time is not for God, nor Space, so neither is Measure, nor Comparison. We abase ourselves in our littleness, and we do right; yet it may be that the constancy of one heart, the truth and faith of one mind according to the light He has appointed, import as much to Him as the just motion of satellites about their planets, of planets about their suns, of suns around that mighty unseen centre incomprehensible, irrealizable, with strange mental effort only divined (c.xxxvi, p. 517).

This vision of goodness free from petty human quarrels and so powerful that it is like the motion of the planets around the sun, recalls the passionate harmony of Dante's divine love in the *Paradiso* with its Neoplatonist overtones. The love of Lucy and Paul perhaps comes closest to imitating this ideal but even so it is merely human and is ultimately vanquished by time and death. This ideal is Christian, even medieval in its search for an

eternal love that exists beyond the individual and is nevertheless reflected in the individual.

But it is also elusive, so elusive that John Maynard argues that in *Villette* Charlotte's agenda is primarily social and secular and that, like a Carlyle or a Darwin, her use of spiritually-charged language only gives rhetorical force to a worldly vision.[384] It is true that *Villette* is saturated with religious language, particularly language of Apocalypse and revelation: in the book of Revelation the last days are described as filled with frightening signs in the heavens and on earth, which forecast the second coming (Revelation 6:12 – 13). Interestingly, these images are recalled in the context of a Catholic carnival: Lucy's surreal wanderings on the night of the celebrations of Saint John the Baptist are described in the following way:

> I took a route well known, and went up towards the palatial and royal Haute-Ville; thence the music I had heard certainly floated; it was hushed now, but it might re-waken. I went on: neither band nor bell music came to meet me; another sound replaced it, a sound like a strong tide, a great flow, deepening as I proceeded. Light broke, movement gathered, chimes pealed – to what was I coming? Entering on the level of a Grande Place, I found myself, with the suddenness of magic, plunged amidst a gay, living, joyous crowd.
>
> Villette is one blaze, one broad illumination; the whole world seems abroad; moonlight and heaven are banished: the town, by her own flambeaux, beholds her own splendour –gay dresses, grand equipages, fine horses and gallant riders throng the bright streets. I see even scores of masks. It is a strange scene, stranger than dreams. But where is the park? – I ought to be near it. In the midst of this glare the park must be shadowy and calm – there, at least, are neither torches, lamps, nor crowd? (c.xxxviii, p. 549).

The swelling sound of music, the brilliant flashes of light in the sky, the peel of chimes, all suggest the announcement of a grand and violent second-coming. Instead Lucy is plunged into the midst of a joyous crowd who are enjoying the festivities. She is startled

---

[384] Maynard, "The Brontës and Religion" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, ed. Heather Glen, p. 212.

not by profound spiritual realities but instead by the "splendour" of the town which shines "by her own flambeaux" (c.xxxviii, p. 549). The material world has replaced "moonlight and heaven" which are "banished" (c.xxxviii, p. 549). A similar pattern is repeated when Lucy attempts to read the signs in the sky that announce M. Paul's return whilst repeating, "he is coming", "he is coming" (c.xlii, p. 595). Paul's return here becomes synonymous with that of Christ in the second-coming. And yet the last words of the novel do not celebrate the "union and happy succeeding life" of M. Paul and Lucy but are instead permeated by the gloom of his untimely death (c.xlii, p. 596). The saintly M. Paul is not as successful as his materialist friends, Madame Beck, Père Silas and Madame Walravens, who "prosper . . . all the days of [their lives]" (c.xlii, p. 596).

Yet both of these episodes imply a tension between the material and spiritual worlds that John Maynard, with his insistence on the positive triumph of secularism, does not acknowledge. In the carnival the "scores of masks", "horses and gallant riders", "gay dresses", and "grand equipages" (c.xxxviii, p. 549), are ambiguously presented: on the one hand they overwhelm the senses with colour and variety, blotting out the true signs of God in the sky, so that Lucy feels the need to escape desperately towards the quiet park where there are no "torches, lamps, [and] crowd" (c.xxxviii, p. 549). It is a dazzling scene – so gorgeous and theatrical that it blinds Lucy. But these signs are not entirely meaningless: as in a play, their ceremonial character and power to enchant and draw a spectator into the activities, is attractive and suggests the potential for a spiritual revelation. Yet it is a significance that remains obscure and only confuses Lucy.

This may be because of Lucy's scepticism of ritual: when Père Silas tries to convert her, she responds to the Catholic ceremonies that he shows her in the following way:

> My third temptation was held out in the pomp of Rome – the glory of her kingdom. I was taken to the churches on solemn occasions – days of fête and state; I was shown the Papal ritual and ceremonial. I looked at it.
>
> Many people – men and women – no doubt far my superiors in a thousand ways, have felt this display impressive, have declared that though their Reason protested, their Imagination was subjugated. I cannot say the same. Neither full

> procession, nor high mass, nor swarming tapers, nor swinging censers, nor ecclesiastical millinery, nor celestial jewellery, touched my imagination a whit. What I saw struck me as tawdry, not grand; as grossly material, not poetically spiritual (c.xxxvi, p. 515).

This association of ritual with idolatry, a gross materialism totally opposed to true spirituality, was a common stereotype amongst Protestants, who often associated the Catholic Church with excessive worldliness. Here Lucy denies even the imaginative appeal of such ceremonies: they are merely filled with meaningless clutter – "swarming tapers" and "swinging censers" that create the impression of arbitrary chaos rather than impressive order. These tarnished visions are neither poetic nor spiritual. Despite this firm denial of the power of ritual, Lucy is nevertheless completely brought under its sway during the festival at the park where the ceremony is not particularly Catholic in character but rather encompasses all the cultures of the world: she describes the area in which she sees her protestant friends as "a region, not of trees and shadow, but of strangest architectural wealth—of altar and of temple, of pyramid, obelisk, and sphinx: incredible to say, the wonders and the symbols of Egypt teemed throughout the park of Villette" (c. xxxviii, p. 550). The awe with which she contemplates this exotic wealth which is so abundant that it appears to bring the whole of Egypt into the midst of Villette, suggests that her former declamations were not quite truthful. It also suggests that ritual is not confined to Catholicism but is a central feature of all societies, Protestant or even Egyptian. In this scene Lucy is no longer the cynical disinterested observer of Catholic rite. Instead she becomes a participant, part of the ceremony as a secret worshipper of the golden idols that fill the park. Admittedly she is under the effects of Madame Beck's powerful drugs and so not in her right mind. But one cannot help questioning whether her former firmly held opinions are any more reliable than her drug-induced wonder.

Heather Glen is perhaps more discerning than John Maynard is when describing the biblical echoes in *Villette*: she suggests that such language is invoked with an ironic inflection in the novel in order to question and undermine the confident religious clichés of the period: Madame Walravens for example is not simply a symbol of the Church as the "Great Harlot of the Apocalypse" which was often emphasised in millenarianism but rather an ironic parody of this in her extreme ugliness and decadence. Glenn also notes

that the "great city" of the Apocalypse is in the novel reduced to the less impressive little town, Villette.[385] The effect of this irony, she maintains, is not flippant, but is instead agonised in its insistence on the godlessness of Lucy's world where spiritual truth does not make itself apparent.[386]

The notion that religious language is used paradoxically to reveal the absence of any true spirituality seems to me to be more plausible than the idea that Brontë draws on religious discourse simply to dramatise the "inner psyche". But the irony is more subtle and complex than a mere debunking of religious motifs as Brontë's exploration of the carnival suggests: it is not so much that there is no God in Lucy's world. Rather, hers is a world that is incapable of seeing God, whose presence is obscurely and fleetingly felt within dramatic patterns of behaviour.

Lucy's attitude to Paulina and Graham is a good example of the way in which she and her society confound spiritual and material values. She believes them to be part of the spiritual elect, not "pampered, selfish beings" but "harmonious and benign; men and women mild with charity, kind agents of God's kind attributes" (c. xxxvii, p. 532). And yet a significant aspect of their "spiritual" worth is their wealth and worldliness. Paulina is described as a pearl whose "setting" Graham cannot forget (c. xxxii, p.459). But loving her for her worldly value does not diminish but rather increases his worth in Lucy's eyes:

> Had he seen Paulina with the same youth, beauty, and grace, but on foot, alone, unguarded, and in simple attire, a dependent worker, a demi-grisette, he would have thought her a pretty little creature, and would have loved with his eye her movements and her mien, but it required other than this to conquer him as he was now vanquished, to bring him safe under dominion as now, without loss, and even with gain to his manly honour, one saw that he was reduced; there was about Dr. John all the man of the world; to satisfy himself did not suffice; society must approve – the world must admire what he did, or he counted his measures false and futile. In his victrix he required all that was here visible – the imprint of high cultivation, the consecration of a careful and authoritative protection, the adjuncts that Fashion decrees, Wealth purchases, and Taste adjusts; for these conditions his

[385] Glen, *Charlotte Brontë: The* Imagination *in History*, p. 281.
[386] Ibid., p. 263.

> spirit stipulated ere it surrendered: they were here to the utmost fulfilled; and now, proud, impassioned, yet fearing, he did homage to Paulina as his sovereign (c. xxxii, pp.459–60).

The fact that “Fashion”, “Wealth” and “Taste” are in the upper-case makes them float out at the reader as if they have been imbued with a spiritual presence: this suggests that not only are they guiding principles in Dr John’s life but they also take precedence over all other conditions for Lucy as well. Lucy’s respect for Dr John cannot be denied: like the rest of society whose opinion means so much to him she admires his “proud” and “impassioned” nature; but this admiration is also bound up with envy: she tells the story of John and Paulina’s happy lives, ending with the words, “these two lives of Graham and Paulina were blessed, like that of Jacob’s favoured son, with "blessings of Heaven above, blessings of the deep that lies under." It was so, for God saw that it was good” (c.xxxvii, p. 533) The pious picture of their happiness is immediately undercut in the next chapter by the bitter reminder that “it is not so for all” and that for most of us the way stretches “dark through the wilderness of this world” (c.xxxviii, p. 534). Lucy is so caught up with the superficial difference between John and Paulina’s cheerful lives and her own misery that she is unable to acknowledge what she fleetingly suggests elsewhere – that their lives, although superficially bright, blessed and free of suffering, are also somehow artificial, lacking in profundity and insight: Paulina, for all her grace and good manners, reminds Lucy of M. Paul’s pretty little spaniel, suggesting that there is something trivial about her accomplishments; like Polly Dr John inhabits a petty world – he is incapable of appreciating the actress Vashti’s skill, criticising her as a woman rather than as an artist.

Yet this trivial world conceals a spiritual wilderness that becomes dramatically apparent to Lucy at moments of intense prophetic fervour. On the night when she is driven to the Catholic confessional, she is alone in Madame Beck’s school when a horrifying vision suddenly unveils itself before her: the empty beds in the dormitories seem to transform into “spectres” before her eyes, spectres that are crowned with a “death’s-head”, a skull with “gaping eyeholes” in which she can see the “dead dreams” of a “mightier race” (c. xv, p. 232). One could argue with critics like John Maynard that such imagery is indicative of psychosis – that in her loneliness Lucy creates monsters out

of her fear, that hers is a tormented consciousness. But Lucy's insistence that she is not delirious cannot be passed over: besides, these symbols suggest something more pervasive than inner turmoil. As she watches the beds, Lucy appears to see beyond them into the soul of her society: she sees a fallen world, whose grand aspirations have become dust, a community damned to a horrible half-life in which any hope is a "false idol" (c. xv, p. 232). This fallen world takes on more powerfully biblical associations when Lucy stumbles through the city after she has left Père Silas: the narrow streets of "picturesque, ancient, and mouldering houses" (c. xv, p. 235), suggests a moral degradation so extreme that it overwhelms Lucy and she falls, feeling as if she is pitching "headlong down an abyss" (c. xv, p. 236).

I have attempted to show that in *Villette*, the rhetorics of anti-Catholicism and anti-theatricality coincide in paradoxical ways; that is, in the process of denial they find a way of affirming or gesturing beyond. Religious theatre, though overtly emptied of meaning, contains a ghostly residue of spiritual power that is not quite suppressed: the Catholic symbols and myths that Lucy ironically dismisses as jaded and artificial are, at times of heightened emotional fervour, capable of conjuring presences, of bringing to life. This dramatic power to enhance and realise the invisible, to bring it into being, runs against the novel's overt rationalist rhetoric, creating a gap out of which ritual emerges afresh, disarmingly real.

The Nun of Villette – the gothic, realism and theatricality

Traditionally, *Villette* has been read as an anti-Catholic novel with critics pointing towards obvious anti-Catholic stereotypes such as Madame Beck's satanic Jesuitical behaviour or Brontë's attitude to Catholic ritual. More recently critics have challenged the assumption that Catholicism is the primary subject of the novel: Diana Peschier has argued that "whilst the division between Protestantism and Catholicism is crucial to the writing of Charlotte Brontë, it is of secondary importance to the underlying discourse of alienation, repression and desire which that writing articulates".[387] John Maynard concurs with this when he argues that *Villette* "makes its business with religion that of emptying

[387] Diana Peschier, *Nineteenth Century Anti-Catholic Discourses: The Case of Charlotte Brontë* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 9.

out all religious theatre and turning its force only to better understanding of our personal and social life in this world". [388] Perhaps the most powerful element of religious theatre is the ghostly Nun that haunts Lucy throughout the novel and that is ultimately proven to be a hoax. This would seem to justify Maynard and Peschier's position that the Catholic features of the novel only help Brontë to express more relevant psychological and sociological traumas. I want to suggest that the sub-plot of the ghostly Nun does not simply uphold Brontë's psychological realism at the expense of ritual: instead it brings to the forefront the contradictions surrounding theatre, ritual and spirituality which illuminate the nature of Lucy's crisis.

Lucy describes her triumph over the gothic spectre that has been haunting her thus:

> In a moment, without exclamation, I had rushed on the haunted couch; nothing leaped out, or sprung, or stirred; all the movement was mine, so was all the life, the reality, the substance, the force; as my instinct felt. I tore her up – the incubus! I held her on high – the goblin! I shook her loose – the mystery! And down she fell – down all around me – down in shreds and fragments – and I trode upon her.
>
> Here again – behold the branchless tree, the unstabled Rosinante; the film of cloud, the flicker of moonshine. The long nun proved a long bolster dressed in a long black stole, and artfully invested with a white veil..." (c. xxxix, p. 569).

The irony of these words is unmistakable – the menacing figure of the Nun is emptied of its power and is revealed to be merely the facetious disguise of a gentleman in a love affair in which Lucy has no part. Most critics have recognised the debunking of this figure as part of Brontë's jibe at the Gothic tradition which features so prominently in *Jane Eyre*. If the cynical narrator of *Villette* can be believed, realism has gained the upper-hand in Charlotte's last novel, dispelling the demons of fantasy once and for all: Lucy's initial opinion that the story of the ghostly nun is "romantic rubbish" appears ultimately to be vindicated. This is certainly the way in which Robert A. Colby reads this scene when he announces triumphantly that "Lucy Snowe, destroying the empty

[388] Maynard, "The Brontës and Religion" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, ed. Heather Glen, p. 212.

vestments of the nun, is the heroine of the "new" realistic novel sloughing off the trappings of the shadowy heroine of the "old" romantic novel".[389]

Such arguments appear to be supported by Charlotte Brontë herself: her well-known "Farewell to Angria" in which she admits that she longs to quit the "burning clime" of Angria and turn to a "cooler region", [390] has been taken by some critics such as Karen Chase, as a definitive step away from the exaggerated fantasy of her former years.[391] This movement away from the fantastical appears to be borne out in the preface to *The Professor* where Brontë explains that she had "got over any such taste as I might once have had for ornamented and redundant composition, and come to prefer what was plain and homely".[392] This is also the case with *Shirley* (1849) where Brontë urges her readers not to expect "sentiment, and poetry, and reverie" but something "real, cool, and solid . . . something as unromantic as Monday morning".[393] But Charlotte's supposed preference for the "homely web of truth" is misleading: recently critics like Heather Glen have noted the theatrical quality of Brontë's novels and especially of *Villette*, suggesting that the novel does not merely demystify the spectacular; indeed, Glen admits that despite Lucy's ironic attitude, some of the novel's most powerful scenes have a quasi-hallucinogenic quality to them.[394] Thus even as Lucy cynically undermines romance and melodrama, she paradoxically carnavalises the world around her, giving it a dramatic, surreal quality like a particularly vivid play.

What, then, can one make of the nun? Is it, as critics like Chase would have us believe, a deflating device used by Brontë to expose the shortcomings of the gothic tradition that she had inherited? Is it perhaps, as Lucie Armitt argues, a narrative decoy to distract our attention from the true source of Lucy's anguish?[395] Or is it a symbolic manifestation of Lucy's "highly nervous state" as Doctor John believes? The question of whether the nun is a projection of Lucy's repressed emotions is swept away the moment

---

[389] Robert A. Colby, "*Villette* and the Life of the Mind", *PMLA* 75.4 (Sept. 1960): 410–419 (p. 419).
[390] Charlotte Brontë, *Tales of Glass Town, Angria and Gondal: Selected Early Writings*, ed. Christine Alexander (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 314.
[391] Karen Chase, *Eros & Psyche: The Representation of Personality in Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, and George Eliot* (New York and London: Methuen, 1984), p. 8.
[392] Brontë, *The Professor*, Preface, p. xvi.
[393] Brontë, *Shirley* (1849; rpt Oxford: Oxford University press, 1979), p. 1.
[394] Glen, *Charlotte Brontë: The Imagination in History*, p. 217.
[395] Lucie Armitt, "Haunted Childhood in Charlotte Brontë's '*Villette*'", *Children in Literature*, ed. Karin Lesnik-Oberstein, *The Yearbook of English Studies* 32 (2002): 217–228 (p. 218).

that the banal reality underlying the illusion is revealed; this makes the other two possibilities – that the nun is merely a red herring to distract us from Lucy's anguish or that it is a device skilfully used by Brontë to reveal the falsity of melodrama – seem more plausible. But credible as these ideas are, they do not account for the nun's dramatic power or for its demonic aura which permeates all other aspects of Lucy's life.

I mean to argue that Lucy's society is more theatrical than it might appear to be and that, because of this, the nun cannot be taken as a simple repudiation of melodrama; nor is it a peripheral concern of the novel. The nun is ambiguous precisely because of its dramatic nature: it both obscures and reveals the hidden truths of Lucy's cosy middle class society. As I have mentioned, the demonic aura that the nun conjures up evades psychological explanation. Instead, I mean to argue that it dramatically reveals a suppressed spiritual dimension to Lucy's world. This dimension is not unambiguously presented, however: as I will show, it is obscured by petty bourgeoisie jealousies and rivalries, transforming religion into a charade and masking the profane as sacred.

Before she sees the "phantom" Lucy indulges in telling the story of the ghostly nun, the spirit of a girl who had supposedly been buried alive for "some sin against her vow" (c. xii, p. 172). But even as she sets the scene for a gothic romance, she delights in exposing its falsity, insisting on the fact that the legend is "unconfirmed and unaccredited" and finally dismissing it as "romantic rubbish" (c. xii, p. 173). This has the same effect as the climactic revelation of the "truth" about the nun: melodrama is invoked only to be ironically debunked and emptied of its power. This suggests a decisive turning away from the sensational in favour of a more controlled, rational approach.

But despite the similarities between Lucy's recounting of this story and the actual appearance of the phantom nun, there are significant differences that cannot go unmarked: whereas Lucy ponders the story of the dead girl whilst at her leisure in the convent gardens, the first time that she encounters the nun she is in a far less detached mood. When the phantom materialises, Lucy is hidden in the grenier, attempting to savour the bliss of Dr John's letter which she has just read – she is in a state of emotional ecstasy. So extreme is her state that the letter takes on preternatural powers of fulfilment: she feels as if a "passing seraph" had "rested beside [her], leaned towards [her] heart, and reposed on its throb a softening, cooling, healing, hallowing wing"(c.xxii, pp. 324–5).

The nun's dramatic appearance therefore is consistent with her excited emotional state which is so extreme that it resembles religious zeal: the letter seems to her to have been written by a god and she worships every word, feeling, as she reads, "happier than most queens in palaces" (c. xxii, p. 324). To dismiss the nun as merely a childish illusion does not account for the emotions that it excites in Lucy, nor for the demonic characteristics that she attributes to it. It is a far more palpable and disturbing presence in Lucy's life than the ghost in the legend which she describes as a "vague tale" (cxii, p. 172).

The manner of the Nun's appearance is unsettling:

> Something in that vast solitary garret sounded strangely. Most surely and certainly I heard, as it seemed, a stealthy foot on that floor: a sort of gliding out from the direction of the black recess haunted by the malefactor cloaks. I turned: my light was dim; the room was long – but as I live! I saw in the middle of that ghostly chamber a figure all black and white; the skirts straight, narrow, black; the head bandaged, veiled, white (c. xxii, p. 325).

It materialises slowly – first as an obscure sound and then as a figure, more and more clearly defined. The Nun therefore belongs to the evocative world of drama: it is associated with enchantment, revelation and invocation and suggests the possibility of the transcendent. The first time that it appears, Lucy wonders if there are "wicked things, not human, which envy human bliss? Are there evil influences haunting the air, and poisoning it for man?" (c. xxii, p. 325). This suggests that the nun is a supernatural presence inexplicably adverse to Lucy's love for Dr John. It is described as demonic in character with eyes that are "cold and fixed" (c. xxii, p. 332). No psychological explanation is adequate to describe it: Dr John's explanation that it is a projection of Lucy's "nervous state" seems to her insufficient to explain its reality (c. xxii, pp. 329, 330). Although the nun is ultimately a real person, the way in which it affects Lucy suggests a more profound truth than this, something that extends beyond Lucy herself: the terror it causes is infectious so that Lucy causes great consternation in Madame Beck's sitting-room when she announces that there is "something in the grenier" (c. xxii,

p. 325). The mad search for explanations – that it is a robber or an emanation of Lucy's internal torment –serves to make it appear even more formidable, larger than life.

The nun is ultimately a false theatre, a sham. But the intense dramatic energy that it conjures up suggests the potential for a grand spiritual revelation which is never achieved. This sense in which everything is working up to a grand climax, a final exorcism of spiritual energies, permeates other aspects of the novel, on which the nun sheds some light. It is powerfully linked to Lucy's relationship with Madame Beck. The second time that Lucy thinks she sees the nun she is in the carrè on a dark and moonless night. She describes the moment thus:

> . . . I own my heart quaked, my pulse leaped, when I suddenly heard breathing and rustling, and turning, saw in the deep shadow of the steps a deeper shadow still—a shape that moved and descended. It paused a while at the classe-door, and then it glided before me.
>
> Simultaneously came a clangor of the distant door-bell. Life-like sounds bring life-like feelings: this shape was too round and low for my gaunt nun: it was only Madame Beck on duty.
> "Mademoiselle Lucy!" cried Rosine, bursting in, lamp in hand, from the corridor,
> "
>
> . . .
> Madame saw me, I saw Madame, Rosine saw us both: there was no mutual recognition. I made straight for the salon. There I found what I own I anticipated I should find – Dr. Bretton; but he was in evening-dress (c. xxiii, p. 336).

Although Lucy is relieved that the shadowy figure is not the nun but "only" Madame Beck, the narrative paints a very different picture of the scene. Although she is not "gaunt" like the nun but "round and low", Madame Beck shares characteristics with the phantom that cannot be so glibly passed over in the manner that Lucy does: like the nun she is a secretive figure whose motives are obscure; and like the nun she is ghostly and even demonic – she does not walk but glides in an inhuman manner and the sight of her incites fear in Lucy. What is unspoken in this scene is just as significant as that which Lucy chooses to mention: Lucy knows instinctively that Dr John is there and that

Madame Beck is a rival for his affections. And yet she does not admit this outright, certainly not to Madame Beck: when Madame sees her Lucy is terrified and escapes away, relieved that she did not recognise her. All that is hidden in Lucy's attitude to Madame is theatrically revealed in her attitude to the nun – fear, mistrust, enmity.

Like the Jesuits in anti-Catholic fiction, Madame Beck is an actress, possessed of all the magic and fascination of the theatre as well as its ability to obscure and disguise. In her description of Madame Beck, however, Lucy suppresses this theatrical, almost superhuman quality of her character, describing her as stout and fairly ordinary if a little idiosyncratic: Lucy's first impression of her is of "a motherly, dumpy little woman, in a large shawl, a wrapping-gown, and a clean, trim nightcap" (c. vii, p. 127). Yet these satanic undertones are suggested ritualistically in the way that the women behave around one another, their obsessive watching of one another which takes on a more intense, disturbing dimension when Madame Beck goes through Lucy's things carefully while the latter is supposedly asleep.

The women's secret ritualistic obsession with one another finally reaches its climax in the "sole, flash-eliciting, truth-extorting rencontre" that happens in the schoolroom (c. xxxviii, p. 544). The language with which Lucy describes this encounter is so powerful that it suggests a religious epiphany. Certainly the way that Lucy reacts to Madame Beck in this instance suggests a profound change in her: for the sole time in the novel she is passionate and assertive. She becomes more and more forceful, starting by refusing to "check [her] walk" (c. xxxviii, p. 543), and, when Madame comes in her way, "put[ing] her out of it" (c. xxxviii, p. 543), and ultimately warning her to "Leave [her]" and to "keep [her] hand off [her], [her] life and [her] troubles" (c. xxxviii, p. 544). Unlike before, she does not attempt to underplay Madame Beck's scheming and openly and bitterly accuses her of villainy: she tells her that in her hand there is "both chill and poison" and that she "envenom[s]" and "paralyse[s]". This deprives Madame Beck of her habitual power over Lucy and Lucy feels as if she can see through the "holes" in the latter's "habitual disguise" to a being who is "heartless, self-indulgent and ignoble" and who, "unless with an inferior . . . must ever be a rival" (c. xxxviii, p. 544). She acknowledges that Madame Beck is her rival, posing as her benevolent school principal,

and this acknowledgement of the true nature of her relationship with her employer seems to empower her.

And yet, powerful as this revelation seems to be, it has absolutely no lasting effect on the relationship between the two women: they never mention "that fiery passage" again (c. xxxviii, p. 545), and it does not "one whit change [Madame Beck's] manner to [Lucy]" (c. xxxviii, p. 544). The next evening in fact Madame succeeds in administering her sedative and the women slip back into the roles of teacher and headmistress, victim and victimiser. The encounter is therefore a failed exorcism and is conquered by the banal nature of the world that the women inhabit. The nature of the revelation itself is not as profound as the language used to describe it: two women becoming rivals for the same man is a common enough occurrence in bourgeoisie culture. Neither woman is capable of rising above this behaviour which becomes obsessive to the point that it develops into a perverse ritual, invoking heightened spiritual energies. Ironically though, these energies are out of place in this banal context: ritual becomes perversely entrapping, its transcendent dimensions only capable of heightening the rivalry from which it offers no true escape.

Things go on as usual and neither Lucy nor Madame Beck has fully faced up to the underlying satanic forces that compel their behaviour. The confrontation between the two women is in some ways similar to the revelation of the sham nun: in both cases the truth is not enough to banish underlying demonic energies. Instead, these revelations create a vacuum which calls for another level of reality, the possibility of breaking away from social and psychological relationships, and of being truly transformed.

Conclusion

In *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* Rene Girard holds that the novel's opposition between self and others is in fact artificial and that the hero's desire to set herself above others actually conceals a perverse need to emulate them. The novel's notion of the self, in this view, is based on a concealed obsession with the other or "mediator" whose desires are sanctified and imitated, leading to rivalry and sometimes conflict. In such conflicts the "other" appears as both the sacred possessor of an object of desire and the

demonic obstacle to it.[396] One can identify this pattern of behaviour in the relationship of Lucy and Madame Beck, as I have shown. Girard argues that such behaviour creates a sense of "deviated transcendency", a false sense of the spiritual, which, he suggests, can only give way to true "symbols of vertical transcendency", once it is renounced.[397] He therefore views this type of behaviour in a negative light as masking the true violent, destructive nature of desire behind a veil of spiritual fervour. I have emphasised the theatrical aspect of this behaviour by drawing parallels between Lucy's reaction to Madame Beck and her response to the melodramatic Nun. I further argue that although their true significance is never fully acknowledged, these false rituals gesture towards the possibility of an authentically experienced spirituality: this is because of the fact that this behaviour takes the shape of religious rite and consequently has a heightening theatrical power.

The moment when Lucy conquers the phantom nun, she declares that she "defie[s] spectra" (c. xxxix, p. 569). The ghostly is rendered powerless once taken apart by her analytical eye so that the only mystery that remains to her is the paltry question of who has "contrived" the "artifice" (c. xxxix, p. 569). Lucy's narrative, supported by the mantra of her creator, is a common-sense assault on the mystical. Constantly she dismisses potentially supernatural elements as "falsities" and "figments" opposed to the "homely web of truth" (c.xxxix, p. 563). Ritual (an age-old way of engaging with a spiritual dimension) is found unconvincing by Lucy and associated with the seductive yet anachronistic and debauched Catholic faith.

But despite this realist disapproval for the illusory nature of ceremony, the novel is haunted by ritualistic patterns that are capable of revealing more about society than the scientific approach of Lucy (and Dr John) can do. Beneath its comfy middle-class realism, this text is apocalyptic. It creates a sense of a world fallen, a society that is incapable of explaining its own disease. Rational explanations constantly fail to satisfy; but there are moments when one can glimpse the heart of Lucy's world – through ritualistic behaviour patterns, unresolved emotional excitement and penetrating symbolic representations of the social condition.

---

[396] René Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore, London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1961), p. 7.
[397] Ibid., p. 312.

In the world of *Villette* people relate to one another ritualistically rather than realistically: Madame Beck and Lucy, for example, mimic each other and scrutinise each other's movements as if they were watching or participating in a play. But it is also ghostly: it has become a fallen world which is incapable of transcending its own disease – a ritualistic parody of its religious origins. This is particularly evident in the hallucinatory scene in the park: here Lucy encounters her old friends, the Brettons and de Bassompierres. Tinged strangely with mystical fervour, these figures are both larger than life and somehow unreal: Paulina Mary recalls the Virgin, "compassed with the triple halo of her beauty, her youth, and her happiness" (c. xxxviii, p. 549); she is dressed in "gala elegance" and her drapery floats about her with dream-like beauty (c. xxxviii, p. 549). But although Paulina's goodness appears intensified in this ethereal setting, the whole experience is poised on the edge of illusion: Lucy's friends vanish like a "group of apparitions" and the scene is "impressed with a dream-like character: every shape [is] wavering, every movement floating, every voice echo-like – half-mocking, half-uncertain" (c. xxxviii, p. 551). This is telling: the place is invested with an intense dream-like spirituality, reminiscent of medieval dream-allegories; yet rather than affirming a greater truth in the manner of Dante's dreams in *Purgatorio*, the dream-like character of the scene suggests an uncertainty at the core of being. Nothing can be trusted – not a voice, not a shape, not a movement.

The society of *Villette* has evidently become so superficial and materialistic that there is no place in it for the profound feeling which is expressed in religion and of which only Lucy is capable. Even Lucy's English friends, though genial, are incapable of the ardent, redemptive goodness that she needs: although they think of her kindly and wish that she could have joined them that night, they are not aware of her suffering, the "rack of pain" that drove her "almost into fever, and brought her out, guideless and reckless, urged and drugged to the brink of frenzy" (c. xxxviii, p. 554). Their kindness is, like them, pleasing and superficial. It is far less intense than Lucy's response to them. Graham keeps a place for Lucy in the "goodly mansion" of his heart, but it is only a "little closet, over the door of which was written 'Lucy's Room'" (c. xxxviii, p. 555), it can never come near the feelings that she cherishes for him which, like the tent of "Peri-Banou" is carried in "the hollow of [her] hand – yet released from that hold and constriction" could

have been "magnified into a tabernacle for a host" (c. xxxviii, p. 555). The mysticism with which Lucy's fevered imagination clothes her friends is thus somewhat out of place in their cheerful yet mundane world.

If Paulina Mary and Dr John fall somewhat short of the divine qualities with which Lucy invests them, Madame Beck and Père Silas do not quite live up to the extreme perversity with which they present themselves to Lucy's mind: Désirée Beck looks like some little demon, "twisting herself round on her heel, swinging from her conductress's hand, flinging herself from side to side with wanton and fantastic gyrations" (c. xxxviii, p. 556). Madame Walravens is described as a "strange mass, bearing no shape, yet magnificent" (c. xxxviii, p. 558): although she has a "face and features" these are "cadaverous" and "strangely shaped" so that it looks as if she is a "head severed from its trunk" and "flung at random on a pile of rich merchandise" (c. xxxviii, p. 558). She is grotesque and ghoul-like, a "witch-like" creature with a "gold-knobbed cane" that she uses to deliver a sound beating to Désirée (c. xxxviii, p. 558). Like the nefarious figure of fairytales, she gives the impression of being the embodiment of corruption and depravity rather than a real woman. The figure of Père Silas who is one of the "troops" of priests that were encouraged to attend the celebrations (c. xxxviii, p. 558), further contributes to the feeling of depravity and decadence: he stands "in the shade" with a "stooping attitude", a humble aspect that in its extremity is false and fawning (c. xxxviii, p. 557).

The party resembles a fascinating "basilisk with three heads" (c. xxxix, p. 559), that recalls serpent in the Garden of Eden. This suggestion is reinforced by the fact that they are in a "canopy of entwined trees", which lift a "thick canopy of shade above a green knoll, crowned with a seat" (c. xxxix, p. 559). With horror Lucy admonishes their materialism– their "alpha is Mammon, and its omega Interest" and for money reasons they all worship Madame Walravens as if she were a "Hindoo idol" (c. xxxix, p. 559). But, regardless of the strong religious overtones of villainy, Lucy's "enemies" belong to the same monotonous, materialistic world as do her friends: the part of the park in which Lucy finds them is full of burgher families, and their conversation mainly revolves around the "easy, desultory, familiar gossip" of the middle-classes (c. xxxix, p. 561). Elsewhere Lucy has acknowledged the materialistic ambitions of Dr John – his desire to

marry into a higher class cannot after all be seen as too remote from Madame Beck's worship of a rich old woman.

Because of their preoccupation with the mundane and the material, these characters all lack the awareness of the dramatic dimension of their own lives to which Lucy is so sensitive and to which the novel bears testimony: relationships are driven forward by secretive ritualistic patterns of rivalry. But ritual is present elsewhere and in different ways: at times an intense feeling of the sacred is not described but invoked; it is called into being through language laden with a symbolic and transformative significance: it is sometimes framed as a prayer, sometimes encountered in the theatre (as was evident in the description of Vashti). It is always heightened with dramatic or theatrical colouring. Realism is evidently limited: it amounts to a denial that society is theatrical by attempting to make even the most bizarre incidents appear dull. I have tried to show that the gap in the novel between Lucy's ardour and the banal realist world that she inhabits creates a kind of negative energy, which re-vitalises the discredited and emptied-out images of Catholic religion.

Brontë's intuitive sense of the inadequacy of rational language, its inability to give shape to a spiritually enhanced passion, is also a central concern of John Henry Newman's didactic defence of ritual in *Callista*, which will be discussed in the following Chapter. My discussion will involve a consideration of Newman's views concerning the dramatic and symbolic qualities of the imagination and the way in which they connect with the ceremonial culture of the Mass or Church Service. I will then turn to *Callista* in which Newman undertakes a consistent exploration of the nature and efficacy of religious rite through an examination of its relationship with other aspects of performance that are subsumed in it. An important aspect of my discussion will focus on the questions that the novel raises about the possibility of expressing the inexpressible and the need for a truly embodied language.

CHAPTER SIX: An Apologia for Ritual in Newman's *Callista* (1859)

"Ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem" – out of unreality into reality: these are the words inscribed on Newman's memorial-tablet.[398] These words, chosen by Newman himself, embody the allegorical nature of his perception of reality – the sense in which the visible world is a sign or reflection of a greater truth, without which it is shadowy and empty. This is the philosophy behind his second novel, *Callista*, completed in 1855, a few years after his conversion to Catholicism. Critics of the novel are generally struck by its powerful insistence on the double nature of experience: Ian Ker describes the passages of Callista's conversion as born from the need "for some external reality to give actuality to one's own personal identity".[399] In her comparative reading of *Callista* and Kingsley's *Hypatia*, Susann Dorman presents a more nuanced reading of the interaction between visible and transcendent realities in Newman's novel: in contrast to Kingsley's belief that the human unequivocally reflects divinity, she argues that for Newman divine intercession is always miraculous and superhuman in intensity and significance.[400]

The notion explored by Dorman that Newman's novel constantly impels one beyond physical reality has led some critics to emphasise the novel's depiction of the material world as fundamentally deficient and unworthy of the divine. Alan G. Hill notes the "Byronic flavour" of the heroine's "nostalgic songs" which are "utterances of an unsatisfied soul pining for a deeper philosophy of life". The only answer to this emptiness is, paradoxically, a Christian death, which would impel the believer into a more meaningful realm.[401] George Levine is more critical: Newman is not, in Levine's opinion, qualified to be an exceptional novelist because of his insistence on a complete "divorce between the human and the divine" which leads him to question whether even the greatest literature is capable of expressing more than "the condition of the natural

---

[398] Ian Ker, *John Henry Newman: A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 745.
[399] Ibid., p. 421.
[400] Susann Dorman, "*Hypatia* and *Callista*: The Initial Skirmish Between Kingsley and Newman", *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 34. 2 (Sept. 1979): 173–193 (p. 186).
[401] Alan G. Hill, "Three 'Visions' of Judgement: Southey, Byron, and Newman", *The Review of English Studies* 41.163 (August 1990): 334–35 (p. 341).

man".[402] Citing Callista's rejection of human love and life as well as the sensual depiction of the swarm of locusts, Levine argues that it is Newman's "revulsion from the flesh and fear of the self," that makes him incapable of engaging with the secular and psychological realities that are the novel's greatest strength.[403] Thus he suggests that Newman's reticence and aloofness about earthly experiences ultimately undermines the novel's dramatic impact.

Yet while it is evident that Newman considers the earthly and heavenly cities ultimately incommensurate, one also cannot ignore his attempts to give spiritual truths a vital presence in the earthly world. This dynamic and even human presence of the divine in the mortal world is mediated by the imagination: in *Callista* the imaginative energy of spiritual truths is present in poetry and in ritual. This leads one to a consideration of the significance of the imagination in Newman's perception of reality.

Newman and the Imagination: the importance of poetry in the life of the soul

Brontë and Dickens describe the real world as haunted by a ghostly supernatural energy that cannot be dispelled. But for Newman it is the real world itself that is ghostly. This is how he describes his experience of life as a child in the *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1865):

> I thought that life might be a dream or I an Angel, and all this world a deception, my fellow-angels by a playful device concealing themselves from me, and deceiving me with the semblance of a material world.[404]

The material world is thus a cloak behind which a more intense spiritual reality can be discerned. Newman expresses similar sentiments when describing the early death of his sister, Mary, the presence of whom he believes he can sense behind the Oxford countryside around him. He writes, "Dear Mary seems embodied in every tree and behind every hill. What a veil and curtain this world of sense is! beautiful but still a veil. . ." [405]

---

[402] George Levine, "Newman's Fiction and the Failure of Reticence", *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 8.3 (Autumn 1966): 359–373 (p. 367).
[403] Ibid., p. 372.
[404] John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1865), ed. Ian Ker (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 1.
[405] Ker, *John Henry Newman: A Biography*, p. 30.

This suggests that spiritual truths have an imaginative presence in the physical world to which one needs to be attuned.

In his *Apologia* Newman describes the dramatic powers of the imagination as arising from a passionate engagement with the other, something that is also an element of communion with the divine. This idea is echoed by his cardinal's motto, "cor ad cor loquitur".[406] The irrepressible need for human connection, for a dynamic relationship that transcends impersonal words on a page, even if the book is the Holy Bible, is what draws Newman to the Catholic Church. He describes it as "a vast assemblage of human beings with wilful intellects and wild passions, brought together into one by the beauty and the majesty of a superhuman power".[407]

The *Apologia* depicts the life of the individual as a dynamic movement of the mind rather than as a factual history. This theatrical quality of Newman's prose caused some of his contemporaries to criticise him for being too prone to flights of the imagination and not capable of writing a convincing factual argument. But, rather than distracting from the logic of his discourse, the dramatic elements of the *Apologia* bring abstract ideas vividly to life by creating the impression that Newman is in conversation with himself. The magnetic, speaking voice of the *Apologia* is hauntingly present before the reader and brings him, ritualistically, into communion with the writer's philosophical dilemmas.

For Newman, then, dynamic imaginative energy gives ideas an emotional component and therefore makes them more convincing. His moment of doubt about the supposedly misleading nature of the Catholic Church made a "vivid impression upon [his] imagination" and he was therefore unable to ignore its power.[408] This does not mean that he dissociates the creative impulse from rational arguments. After his moment of religious doubt Newman asserts that he was "determined to be guided, not by my imagination, but by my reason" and, later, he suggests that the Catholic Church draws "both the reason and the imagination of men to her".[409] Yet the way in which Newman describes his encounter with the ghost of Catholicism suggests that imagination is the

---

[406] Ker, *John Henry Newman: A Biography*, p. 745.
[407] Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, p. 203.
[408] Ibid., p. 94.
[409] Ibid., p. 95.

more powerful of the two impulses and that it is more directly in tune with the divine. Reason without imagination is evidently crippled. The imagination manifests itself in many ways – sometimes it is merely an impression, an intuitive sense of the otherworldly, but it is also a language, forming part of what Newman refers to in an early essay on Aristotle's *Poetics* as the "transcendent spirit of poetry".[410]

Newman's approach in the *Apologia* is a sophisticated example of his belief that the artistic impulse – the poetic and musical element of the imagination – is an indispensable part of the language of truth. He sees life as inevitably intertwined with poetry – a spiritual drama resulting in salvation or damnation. In his essay on Aristotle's *Poetics*, Newman defines the poet in Platonic terms: he argues that a "right moral state of heart is the . . . condition of a poetical mind" and that there is a "connection between want of religious principle and want of poetical feeling".[411] This elevating, symbolic power of poetry is thus part of the Christian language. In this essay Newman draws a clear distinction between writing that is purely rhetorical and poetry that, without being too ornamental, is an expression of an intense inner music, which it is able to harmonise with the divine.[412] Later he was to reconsider this rigid distinction between style and content, arguing in *The Idea of a University* that "Thought and speech are inseparable from each other . . . style is a thinking out into language".[413] Despite this development in his thought, the initial distinction made between theatrical "exhibition" and the truly poetical is important: Newman values the theatrical qualities of fiction above the specifics of plot or detail but the need to distinguish between simple oratory and an authentic drama of the soul is part of his belief that spiritual truths become physically manifest, a belief that led him to a greater appreciation of ritual.

In his *An Essay of Christian Doctrine*, Newman argues that in order to be authentic an idea must grow into an entire ethical code, a whole system of images and arguments – a "body of thought".[414] Elsewhere he suggests that poetry, with its vivid

---

[410] John Henry Newman, *Poetry with Reference to Aristotle's Poetics,* ed. Albert. S. Cook (1829; rpt Boston: Ginn & Company, 1891), p. 4.
[411] Ibid.*,* pp. 23–4.
[412] Ibid., p.28.
[413]John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University Defined and Illustrated* (1852; rpt London, New York and Bombay: Longmans, Green & Co, 1905), p. 276.
[414] John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845; rpt London, New York, Bombay and Calcutta: Longmans, Green & Co, 1909), p. 38.

visual quality, is one way in which one can give expression to the dramatic life and development of ideas, particularly spiritual arguments. This is because religion itself is poetic in character: in the essay on Aristotle's *Poetics* Newman argues that "Revealed Religion" should be "especially poetical".[415] The Christian paradigm reinforces one's allegorical sense of a double reality, encouraging one to colour "all things with hues of faith, to see a Divine meaning in every event, and a superhuman tendency".[416] Ritual is similar to poetry in the way in which it makes "ceremonies and observances to be signs, seals, means, and pledges of supernatural grace". [417] Like poetry, it is one of the most striking examples of the fact that the "world, the Bible, the Church, the civil polity, and man himself, [are] archetypes, and, in their degree and place, representatives and organs of an unseen world, truer and higher than themselves".[418]

Poetry and Ritual

Although *Callista* was set in the time of the early Christian Church, it is intended to reflect on the condition of Catholics in the nineteenth century. Newman makes this analogy clear when describing the symbols of worship in Agellius's cottage:

> . . . on one side of the room was rudely painted a red cross, with doves about it, as is found in early Christian shrines to this day. So long had been the peace of the Church, that the tradition of persecution seemed to have been lost; and Christians allowed themselves in the profession of their faith at home, cautious as they might be in public places; as freely as now in England, where we do not scruple to raise crucifixes within our churches and houses, though we shrink from doing so within sight of the hundred cabs and omnibuses which rattle past them (c.iii, pp. 25–6).

Suggestively, Newman defines Catholics – whether they are of the early or contemporary Church – by their ritualistic symbols and practices. This places ritual at the centre of

---

[415] Newman, *Poetry with Reference to Aristotle's Poetics*, p. 24.
[416] Ibid., p. 25.
[417] John Henry Newman, "Milman's view of Christianity", in *Essays Critical and Historical*, 2 vols (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1914), 2: 193.
[418] Ibid., p. 193.

Catholic identity and draws attention to the explosive debate in the English Church around the significance and relevance of ceremonials.

Since the period of the early reformation, Protestantism can be described as a war on symbols: in 1547, when the young King Edward VI ascended to the throne, Churches were stripped bare of their adornments. Peter Ackroyd describes the religious policy of the new King thus: "Every picture was to be removed from the walls [of the Churches], and every image of saint or apostle was to be put away . . . Rosaries were no longer to be used. The "lighting of candles, kissing, kneeling, decking of images" were denounced as superstitious; processions to shrines were no longer permitted, and in the more radical parishes of London stained glass windows were smashed or removed".[419] In their movement away from the symbolic Church, reformers inevitably discarded ritualistic practices, denouncing all of the "great seasonal festivities of the old Church" as "relics of popery". [420] Yet people were not unanimously agreed upon this point and many of them still subscribed to the old veneration of images as became evident in the subsequent reign of Queen Mary I.[421]

This ambiguous combination of deep suspicion of symbolic practices and fear that perhaps something had been lost in their removal was ingrained in the English consciousness by the nineteenth century. In his earlier career as an Anglican priest Newman was troubled by rituals: in a letter written to Robert Belaney written on the 7th of September 1842, he expresses his distaste for ritualistic innovations, declaring that "there are after all things of greater consequence than ceremonies".[422] One of the reasons for his dislike of Catholicism was his inability to accept the Roman veneration of the Virgin Mary. But Newman was also one of the most influential members of the Oxford Movement, which, in response to the increasing secularisation and degradation of the English Church, attempted to reanimate its spiritual life through the introduction of a few rites from the early Church in an attempt to cultivate a greater appreciation for the sacred.

---

[419] Peter Ackroyd, *The History of England Volume II: Tudors* (London: Macmillan, 2012), p. 190.
[420] Ibid., p. 191.
[421] Ibid., p. 247.
[422] Francis J. McGrath, Gerard Tracey, et al, eds, *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 9: 84.

As I have shown in an earlier chapter, The Oxford movement, later dubbed Ritualism, was at the heart of the debate about the necessity of rites in Church services. Its new focus on the liturgy and emphasis on its magical and ritualistic potential was seen as a way of deepening and protecting doctrinal beliefs.[423] Yet, as I have argued, it was considered dubious by many who were wary of showiness in the Church because they wanted their religion "simple" rather than glamorous. In *Callista* part of Neman's intention is to affirm the centrality of ceremonies in the Catholic spiritual life and to exonerate Catholic ritual from its associations with superstition and paganism in the Protestant mind.

In a postscript to a later edition of *Callista* published between February 2, 1881 and October, 1888, Newman emphasises the significance of "devotions, representations, and doctrines, declaratory of the high dignity of the Blessed Virgin" as a central feature of the early Church and of Catholicism in general.[424] He refers his readers to an earlier letter to Pusey, written in 1866, where his defence of this practice is extended into an apologia for ritualism.

The letter is worth looking at more closely: firstly it defends the ritual celebration of Mother and Child by emphasising its historical validity. Such practices, Newman argues, are not bizarre or fabricated but are definitive aspects of early Christianity:

> The Virgin and Child is not a mere modern idea; on the contrary, it is represented again and again, as every visitor to Rome is aware, in the paintings of the Catacombs. Mary is there drawn with the Divine Infant in her lap, she with hands extended in prayer, He with His hand in the attitude of blessing. No representation can more forcibly convey the doctrine of the high dignity of the Mother, and, I will add, of her power over her Son. Why should the memory of His time of subjection be so dear to Christians, and so carefully preserved? The only question to be determined, is the precise date of these remarkable monuments of the first age of Christianity. That they belong to the centuries of what Anglicans call the "undivided Church" is certain; but lately investigations have been pursued, which

[423]Alec R. Vidler, *The Church in an Age of Revolution: 1789 to the Present Day* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1962), p. 160.
[424] John Henry Newman, *Callista: A Tale of the Third Cenury* (1859; rpt London, New York: Longmans, Green, & Co, 1891), Postscript, p. ix.

> place some of them at an earlier date than anyone anticipated as possible. I am not in a position to quote largely from the works of the Cavaliere de Rossi, who has thrown so much light upon the subject; but I have his "Imagini Scelte", published in 1863, and they are sufficient for my purpose. In this work he has given us from the Catacombs various representations of the Virgin and Child; the latest of these belong to the early part of the fourth century, but the earliest he believes to be referable to the very age of the Apostles.[425]

Here the image of Mary and Jesus has become more than an image: it is an infallible expression and confirmation of divine presence, to which believers constantly turn throughout Christian history. At the centre of Catholic ritual life is the image which takes on a superhuman life of its own and unites all believers in communal prayer and understanding: elsewhere in the same letter Newman refers to this inexplicable power of the doctrines when made tangible, bringing Catholics together by a kind of instinct.[426]

From the above one can deduce that, for Newman, ritual representations are necessarily poetic in the sense that they have aesthetic and emotional impact. Their aesthetic appeal contains both a human and a divine dimension: they are the most natural response to religious impulses but they also propel individuals beyond themselves and the material world and towards a communal apprehension of supernatural truths.

This raises once more the question of the relationship between poetry and ritual, which Newman develops in this letter and which is directly relevant to his approach in *Callista.* Here he follows a similar argument to that of Dante who, in the letter to Can Grande, makes a distinction between the "allegory of theologians" and the "allegory of poets".[427] Poetic allegory, according to Dante, is a metaphorical form of writing where the truth is hidden beneath the fiction or what he in the Convivio terms the "bella menzogna" or "beautiful lie".[428] This sets it apart from theological allegory, which is true

---

[425] John Henry Newman, *A Letter to Rev. E.B. Pusey On His Recent Eirenicon* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader & Dyer, 1866), pp. 59–60.
[426] Ibid., p. 56.
[427] Dante Alighieri, *Dante's Epistle to Cangrande*, ed. and trans. Robert Hollander (1993; rpt Michigan, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1996), p. 90.
[428] Dante Alighieri, *Il Convivio*, eds. Michele Barbi, Antonio Enzo Quaglio (Firenze: Felice le Monier, 1968), p. 97.

on the literal as well as the metaphorical level of experience.[429] Newman's analysis of Catholic worship resonates with Dante's argument about the nature of allegory:

> Scripture is not fond of allegories. We have indeed frequent figure there, as when the sacred writers speak of the arm or sword of the Lord; and so too when they speak of Jerusalem or Samaria in the feminine; or of the mountains leaping for joy, or of the Church as a bride or as a vine; but they are not much given to dressing up abstract ideas or generalizations in personal attributes. This is the classical rather than the Scripture style. Xenophon places Hercules between Virtue and Vice, represented as women; Aeschylus introduces into his drama Force and Violence; Virgil gives personality to public rumour or Fame, and Plautus to Poverty. So on monuments done in the classical style, we see virtues, vices, rivers, renown, death and the like, turned into human figures of men and women. I do not say there are no instances at all of this method in Scripture, but I say that such poetical compositions are strikingly unlike its usual method. Thus we at once feel its difference from Scripture, when we betake ourselves to the Pastor of Hermes, and find the Church a woman, to St. Methodius, and find Virtue a woman, and to St. Gregory's poem, and find Virginity again a woman. Scripture deals with types rather than personifications. Israel stands for the chosen people, David for Christ, Jerusalem for heaven. Consider the remarkable representations, dramatic I may call them, in Jeremiah, Ezechiel, and Hosea: predictions, threatenings, and promises, are acted out by those Prophets. Ezechiel is commanded to shave his head, and to divide and scatter his hair; and Ahias tears his garment, and gives ten out of twelve parts of it to Jeroboam. So too the structure of the imagery in the Apocalypse is not a mere allegorical creation, but is founded on the Jewish ritual. In like manner our Lord's bodily cures are visible types of the power of His grace upon the soul; and His prophecy of the last day is conveyed under that of the fall of Jerusalem. Even His parables are not simply

[429] Dante Alighieri, *Dante's Epistle to Cangrande*, p. 90.

> ideal, but relations of occurrences, which did or might take place, under which was conveyed a spiritual meaning.[430]

In this extract Newman makes a distinction between the method of classical poetry and the method of Scripture. He argues that the classical authors, like Virgil and Plautus, give human qualities and characteristics to abstract ideas: they are not writing about real humans but about ideas or ideals in the guise of humans, in order to make them more relatable.

The writings of Scripture, by contrast, deal in real people, "Persons" rather than "Personifications":[431] these figures come to represent wider spiritual patterns of meaning but never lose their essential reality or dramatic presence, which exists over and above any symbolic significance that is attached to them. Newman's argument reinforces Dante's hypothesis that Scripture is an "allegory of theologians" because of the fact that its symbolic dimension coexists with its literal, historical dimension. He further suggests a connection between writing and ritual: the language of scripture is lifted above the language of mere poetry because it arises out of ritual. Like ritual it is dramatic – its power lies in the presentation of real relationships between people and in its invitation to the community of believers to interact with it dramatically through images and prayer. In this way, through dynamic communal participation, the individual is able to enter into a symbolic and finally more authentically spiritual reality.

Callista

Poetry is merely a shadow of ritual, regardless of the fact that they share salient qualities. It is in his fiction that Newman attempts to explore the subtle differences between the language of ritual and the language of poetry, fiction and the performing arts. In his first novel *Loss and Gain*, he describes the effects of a Catholic Mass from the perspective of the principal character, Charles Reding, in the following manner:

> Though Reding had continued standing, no one would have noticed him; but he saw the time was come for him to kneel, and accordingly he moved into a corner

[430] John Henry Newman, *A Letter to Rev. E.B. Pusey On His Recent Eirenicon*, pp. 63–4.
[431] Ibid., p. 62.

> seat on the bench nearest him. He had hardly done so, when a procession with lights passed from the sacristy to the altar; something went on which he did not understand, and then suddenly began what, by the Miserere and Ora pro nobis, he perceived to be a litany; a hymn followed. Reding thought he never had been present at worship before, so absorbed was the attention, so intense was the devotion of the congregation. What particularly struck him was, that whereas in the Church of England the clergyman or the organ was everything and the people nothing, except so far as the clerk is their representative, here it was just reversed. The priest hardly spoke, or at least audibly; but the whole congregation was as though one vast instrument or Panharmonicon, moving all together, and, what was most remarkable, as if self-moved. They did not seem to require any one to prompt or direct them, though in the Litany the choir took the alternate parts. The words were Latin, but every one seemed to understand them thoroughly, and to be offering up his prayers to the Blessed Trinity, and the Incarnate Saviour, and the great Mother of God, and the glorified Saints, with hearts full in proportion to the energy of the sounds they uttered. There was a little boy near him, and a poor woman, singing at the pitch of their voices. There was no mistaking it; Reding said to himself, "This is a popular religion". He looked round at the building; it was, as we have said, very plain, and bore the marks of being unfinished; but the Living Temple which was manifested in it needed no curious carving or rich marble to complete it, "for the glory of God had enlightened it, and the Lamb was the lamp thereof." "How wonderful," said Charles to himself, "that people call this worship formal and external; it seems to possess all classes, young and old, polished and vulgar, men and women indiscriminately; it is the working of one Spirit in all, making many one".[432]

Reding notes that the priest's words are barely audible. This does not, however, suggest that the Mass is inferior to speech – rather, it transcends words. Everybody is brought together by a shared understanding, a knowledge made up of an "energy of sounds", that moves them as if they were "one vast instrument or Panharmonicon". The poetic features

[432] John Henry Newman, *Loss and Gain* (London: James Burns, 1848), pp. 381–382.

of the Mass – the magical "procession of lights", the hymn and the prayers – are all subsumed in a spiritual language and energy that has the power to unite everybody no matter their class or gender. In ritual the union between the material insignia and spiritual truth is complete and this is the source of its power for Reding and for Newman.

This quest for genuine spiritual communion is also a central concern in *Callista*. When speaking of the novel's philosophical and theological value in a letter to William Oates on 3 July 1872, Newman commented, "I don't think Catholics have ever done justice to the book; they read it as a mere story book – and I think Protestants are more likely to gain something from it".[433] *Callista*, then, is not intended simply as a display of artistry, for a work of pure artistry seems to invite the reader to remain detached. Yet what Newman suggests is that he intends the novel to be read as part of a shared experience of truth rather than of fiction. I want to suggest that in *Callista* Newman depicts the search for truth as a search for an authentic spiritual language: the need for greater substance and reality presents itself through various discourses in the novel – political, secular, poetical and ceremonial. Among these, Christian ritual is the most powerful. This is because it is more than words: it is an embodied language and is therefore able to break out of spoken language, which remains a realm of shadows, and into a luminously present spiritual terrain.

First, I will examine Newman's use of poetic discourse: when describing Agellius's farm, Newman consciously omits passages from "Latin poets" who "have hymned in their beautiful but heathen strains" (c.i, p.6) and invokes instead an excerpt from *Paradise Lost* VII. Newman's use of a Christian poem to illuminate the concerns of a novel set in the pagan past is significant: through poetry Newman attempts to connect his readers with a divine perspective, to emphasise the universal spiritual significance of his message over and above its historical authenticity.

On the one hand Newman's prose gives us the impression of a characteristically Roman lifestyle: he mentions the slaves scattered about the landscape, battling the heat as they engage in the task of cutting off the useless twigs from the vines. But this is a season of plenty, a time when Mother Nature "manifests herself anew" (c.i, p. 6). The

[433] *The Letters and Diaries* 26: 129–130 (p. 130).

moment of rebirth is given poetic life by the passage from Milton which describes the creation of the world:

> "When the bare earth, till now
> Desert and bare, unsightly, unadorned,
> Brings forth the tender grass, whose verdure clads
> Her universal face with pleasant green;
> Then herbs of every leaf, that sudden flower,
> Opening their various colours, and make gay
> Her bosom, swelling sweet; and, these scarce blown,
> Forth flourishes the clustering vine, forth creeps
> The swelling gourd, up stands the corny reed
> Embattled in her fields, and the humble shrub,
> And bush with frizzled hair implicit; last
> Rise, as in dance, the stately trees, and spread
> Their branches hung with copious fruit, or gem
> Their blossoms; with high woods the hills are crowned
> With tufts the valleys, and each fountain side
> With borders long the rivers; that earth now
> Seems like to heaven, a seat where gods might dwell,
> Or wander with delight, and love to haunt
> Her sacred shades" (c.i, pp. 6–7, quoting *Paradise Lost* vii: 313–331, with some changes of tense).

Life springs up in a dance of grandeur – a coronation ceremony where nature is glorified and becomes the dwelling place of the gods. The effect of this passage on the narrative is twofold: firstly we are made aware of the uncomfortable relationship between the earthly and spiritual realms: nature is a reflection and a creation of heaven and yet it also has the power to distract one from heavenly pursuits: nature is sensuous and pagan and offers the possibility of a worldly paradise, making it easy to lose sight of its celestial origins. This tension prepares us for the introduction to Agellius who for most of the novel is uncomfortably suspended between his earthly desires and his divine conviction.

The second effect of the passage is to cast the tale in a spiritual light: we are encouraged to interpret Agellius's world as a pre-Christian Eden, holding within it the potential for spiritual growth as well as spiritual destruction. In this way Newman provides us with a double perspective, using prose to provide historical authenticity to his tale and using poetry to give intense dramatic life to spiritual concerns and to bring them to the forefront of his narrative.

Newman's Neo-Platonic belief in the divine potential of poetry in this novel is not, however, presented without ambivalence. It is through the figure of Callista herself that he explores the paradoxical power and limitations of the artist. Agellius is attracted to Callista because she is both intelligent and creative: he enjoys the "pleasure of mental exercise and excitement" (c. ix, p.95) that he experiences while debating with her and her brother about his religion. Her intelligence delights him but on "lighter occasions of intercourse" (c.ix, p.95) he is also drawn to her creativity is if by magic.

Significantly, Callista is a performer capable of bringing music and poetry to life through her voice and expressions: she has a "sweet thrilling voice" and accompanies "herself on the lyre" (c.ix, p.96) She is also an "improvisatrice", acting out episodes from Greek mythology (c.ix, p.96). Her acting is so convincing that it does not simply represent episodes but also transforms them into lessons: Agellius is struck by the didactic quality of her art, the fact that she "could relate how the profane Pentheus and the selfglorious Hippolytus gave a lesson to the world of the feebleness of human virtue" or "teach how the chaste Diana manifests herself to the simple shepherd Endymion, not to the great or learned"(c.ix, p.96). But the wisdom of these tales is ultimately questionable. Their power lies in their emotional impact so that "The very allegories which sickened and irritated [the Christian apologist] Arnobius when spouted out by Polemo, touched the very chords of poor Agellius's heart" (c.ix, p.96).

Callista is also a brilliant actress, able to throw herself into the role of Medea or Antigone in order to enliven the conversation. Agellius marvels that she acts with a "force of truth" which far surpasses the "effect produced by the male and masked representations of those characters at the theatre" (c.ix, p. 96) This emphasis on the nature of "truth" in performance is worth mulling over: part of the "realism" of Callista's performance, what sets her apart from the masked actors of allegorical drama, is her

ability to bring a sense of powerful human presence to a role. The living presence of the characters that she plays is so overwhelming that Agellius is made uncomfortable by her rendition of Thais, the courtesan, as the power of the acting overshadows the moral repugnance of the role. It is also significant that Callista's acting arises naturally out of her conversations – it is a dynamic and interactive performance without the presumed distance implied by the formal environment of classical theatre.

From the above one can deduce that poetic art, specifically when it is being performed, is an intensification of natural experience, it is conversation at its most eloquent and engaging. But it can also be used as a mask, a way of disguising morally ambiguous attitudes, or a distraction from the commonplace. Performance of this kind may have the power to refine emotions but it can be as misleading as it is attractive.

Although Callista's performances are overwhelmingly convincing, her art does not necessarily have a spiritual dimension. Agellius makes the mistake of confounding Callista's theatrical power with spiritual truth, inspiring his misguided desire for marriage: he has a "vision of Callista as a Christian" (c.ix, p. 101), and tries to convince himself that her creativity must be a suggestion of her spiritual longing: "Could not a clever girl throw herself into the part of Alcestis, or chant the majestic verses of Cleanthes, or extemporize a hymn upon the spring, or hold an argument on the *pulchrum* and *utile*, without having any leaning towards Christianity?" (c.ix, p. 108).

The tendency to confound artistic grace with spiritual grace is a mark of Agellius's naivety. Yet he is right in seeing something in her that sets her apart from her brother, his uncle and other well-meaning pagans. In his marriage proposal he speaks of their common language, a mysterious shared sympathy despite their differences in opinions and upbringing. He moves in a "different sphere . . ." from Aristo and Jucundus – there exists a barrier between them that prevents meaningful communication and that no amount of talking can eliminate. But there is a magical understanding between himself and Callista (c. xi, p. 128). It is significant that he describes their shared sympathy as a language: it is, like Callista's poems and plays, an art, a mode of expression. Yet it is also something mysterious and inexplicable, something that transcends words. Intuitively Agellius shares with Callista a desire for meaning and permanence that extends beyond the worldly desires of the pagans. But his understanding of this spiritual language is only

partial – he remains dazzled by Callista herself and by her art so that he is unable to separate his worldly desires from his spiritual consciousness.

It is for this reason that Callista finds his offer shallow: she was hoping to see him aim beyond her at his God, to stand above the desires of ordinary men, in order to prove to her that this is possible. She is conscious of Christianity as a promise that extends beyond the commonplace. Yet for her it remains unreal, like a fable: she interprets Christ's promise of eternal life poetically as suggesting that he must live on "some fortunate island" (c. xi, p. 129). Thus, although she is attracted to the imaginative power of Christianity, she is only vaguely aware of its philosophical dimension and is unable fully to grasp or appreciate this.

Callista's art thus both facilitates and impedes her understanding of the divine. Poetry and song help give shape and meaning to her sense of emptiness. Before Agellius asks for her hand in marriage she takes refuge in a song, rather than responding to Aristo's solicitations. She sings a song entitled "Heathen Greece" which was composed by Newman himself:

> Where are the islands of the blest?
> They stud the Ægean sea;
> And where the deep Elysian rest?
> It haunts the vale where Peneus strong
> Pours his incessant stream along,
> While craggy ridge and mountain bare
> Cut keenly through the liquid air,
> And, in their own pure tints arrayed,
> Scorn earth's green robes which change and fade,
> And stand in beauty undecayed,
> Guards of the bold and free
>
> For what is Afric but the home
> Of burning Phlegethon?
> What the low beach and silent gloom,
> And chilling mists of that dull river,

> Along whose bank the thin ghosts shiver,
> The thin, wan ghosts that once were men,
> But Tauris, isle of moor and fen;
> Or, dimly traced by seaman's ken,
> The pale-cliffed Albion? (c. x, p. 121).

Through these words Callista expresses her longing for an elusive heaven, for a world of permanence and beauty that remains unaffected by earthly concerns or the passage of time. But her heart is in exile: the Utopia of the Elysian Fields is unattainable in Africa. Instead she finds herself in the ghostly world of Styx, a dead world haunted by the memory of those who were once alive. Callista understands her feelings as home sickness and believes that her song is an allegory for her desire to return to Greece. But the language in which she expresses this, her evocation of Styx and of Paradise, suggests a more profound spiritual longing of which she is only partly aware and to which her brother, who implores her to hear reason, is completely unresponsive.

Through her song she can express her vague consciousness of and longing for the divine, but it is not enough to cure her spiritual malaise: she feels as if she is in a realm of shadows in which even the promise of Christianity is too unreal to be believable. Agellius's proposal, with its emphasis on worldly delights, only makes the spiritual realm appear more ghostly to her, so that she complains that the religion of her slave, Chione, was, after all, "a dream" and that all is "Vanity and hollowness" (c. xi, p. 130). Later, in her discussion with St Cyprian, she expounds upon her sense of the simultaneously poetic and elusive nature of the Christian faith. She argues that its maxims seem "too beautiful . . . to be anything else than a dream" (c. xix, p. 216) It appeals as an idea, as a "most beautiful imagination" (c. xix, p. 216), but it is not practical in the real world; it seems to defy logic. Thus Callista's loneliness is a result of her inability to grasp the reality and palpable presence of the Christian message.

But, through the words that he gives to St Cyprian, Newman suggests that Christianity can be raised above the elusive realm of poetic allegory: first, the priest argues, one ought to express one's spiritual desires in a tangible way, just as one expresses one's love for music by playing an instrument and one's love of knowledge by learning. Without a real, perceptible outlet for one's emotions, it is easy to become shut

up inside oneself and to experience the "madness" of solitary confinement (c. xix, p. 219).

This leads him to his second point, which proceeds from the acknowledgement that the soul "needs external objects to rest upon" (c. xix, p. 220). The Christian God is the ultimate object of affection: he has a presence, verified by our spiritual desires and needs, which makes him more than simply an idea. Rather than a mystical being in some distant untraceable location as Callista had imagined, God is very human in the way in which he engages with his followers: St Cyprian describes him as the only "Lover of Souls" who satisfies all of our longings because he is "Unchangeable" and therefore more real than the ephemeral lovers and loves of this world (c. xix, p. 222). From this argument Callista understands that God is an ideal, "yet embodied in a substance" (c. xix, p. 222). This suggests that God is both an imaginative construct and a human presence, an idea come to life. The living presence of God animates the material world of the believer; but those who are not aware of God are damned to a realm of shadows: this is why the Greeks cannot escape eternal Tartarus – not because God willingly punishes them for being pagans but because their pagan beliefs cannot offer anything more solid or real than the Christian hell – a ghostly place without the vision of God (c. xix, p. 220).

What the priest suggests, then, is that the Christian universe is solid and tangible. It also expresses itself through powerful human emotions and relationships. This makes it something more than poetry: the poetry of Callista's songs can express a sense of the mystical but it is not enough to bring it fully to life; this is why her feeling of emptiness persists. The only way in which one can truly engage with the promise of divinity is through a ritualistic expression of the divine.

This is evident if one compares Callista and Agellius. Like Callista, Agellius also has moments of loneliness when he feels as if he doesn't belong in the world, his sense that he is "nothing to anyone", a "hermit . . . without the call to be one" (c. iii, p. 28). But, unlike Callista, his faith offers him the possibility of relief through its ceremonies: Newman suggests that his misery could have been assuaged if he had "been able to recur to sacramental confession" (c.iii, p. 27). However, failing this, he is easily comforted by his habitual acts of worship. His home is full of representations of his faith:

> Under the cross were two or three pictures, or rather sketches. In the centre stood the Blessed Virgin with hands spread out in prayer, attended by the holy Apostles Peter and Paul on her right and left. Under this representation was rudely scratched upon the wall the word, "Advocata," a title which the earliest antiquity bestows upon her. On a small shelf was placed a case with two or three rolls or sheets of parchment in it. The appearance of them spoke of use indeed, but of reverential treatment. These were the Psalms, the Gospel according to St. Luke, and St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, in the old Latin version, The Gospel was handsomely covered, and ornamented with gold (c.iii, p. 26).

These are not merely ornaments, they are living symbols with which he is able to interact. He feels the comforting words of God, the sense that "there is One that cares for [him], and loves [him]" because of his "faith" and "purity" (c.iii, p. 29). Agellius's response to this intuitive sense of a speaking God is not simply to smile but to worship:

> He signs himself with the holy cross, and sweet reviving thoughts enliven him. He names the sacred Name, and it is like ointment poured out upon his soul. He rises; he kneels down under the dread symbol of his salvation; and he begins his evening prayer (c.iii, p. 29).

Agellius's behaviour here is not arbitrary; rather, every action is a meaningful communion with a divine presence and results in an uplifting response. In this scene Newman emphasises the importance of the sacramental dimension of faith, the sense that one can only truly feel God's presence if one interacts with him. Ritual is therefore a language that links one to the divine: it is significant that after he becomes aware of God, Agellius does not agonize over explanations for his condition. Instead he finds peace through ceremonial behaviour in which he engages with "more of heart" and less of "mechanical habit" than he has shown in a long time(c.iv, p. 30). Thus ritual may descend into custom but it also possesses great power to renew one's relationship with God. Callista lacks this language and she therefore can only seek logical and philosophical explanations for her dilemma. She complains that Caecillius and Agellius are too reticent about the meaning of their faith, partly because she does not share in their consciousness of its dramatic presence in their lives. It is only after she has received the

sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and the Holy Eucharist that Callista can truly understand and participate in the mystery of faith.

After she has been converted, she has a dream in which her dramatic and artistic skills are subsumed in a wider ceremonial engagement with Christianity: she sees a celestial vision, "myriads of bright images" and the glorified features of the slave that she had loved (c. xxxii, p. 354). But what is significant about this vision is that she is asked to participate in it through song and dance. A Marian figure, at once virginal and maternal, invites her to perform a dance "unlike all dances of earth", a dance that is accompanied by the singing of the words, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (c. xxxii, p. 355). The singing of the Trinitarian formula invokes the ceremony of baptism, transposing it, through song, into a higher key of intense communion with divinity.

In Callista's meeting with Christ, the reality of Christian suffering and redemption is affirmed emblematically: Christ himself is a dramatic figure whose wounds are very visible and are reflected by those around him, including Callista herself. Finally the refrain, "Rejoice with Me, for I have found My sheep" is repeated, recalling the parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15:3–7. This "dream" is therefore not an elusive vision of paradise but a highly symbolic and dramatic experience of spiritual home-coming, which, by appealing to all of the senses, resonates with and enlivens biblical tradition (c. xxxii, p. 356).

Callista is now beyond needing logical explanations for her faith: her belief is so strong and real that she no longer needs to distinguish between imagination and reality and the two become one in her mind. In her dream, symbolism is not confined to the nebulous world of poetry but it is something in which she participates: through the symbolism of Christ, Callista's life and death is given a greater significance – it is transformed into a ceremony of divine marriage. The experience is poetic but it is not the solitary, contemplative experience of post-Romantic poets – it is an interactive experience of community, of shared faith as well as an Eden-like celebration of life. This is evident in the natural imagery: there are "grottoes and glens and woods" (c. xxxii, p, 354), all of them filled with divine beings. The beautiful scenery, the singing and dancing, puts one in mind of Dante's *Purgatorio*: this is the realm of the "sante Muse" or

sacred Muses where Dante attempts to find God through the voices of a community of poets, as well as his own imaginative genius.[434]

Pagan and Christian ritual

This does not de facto imply that ritual cannot be idolatrous. Part of Newman's intention in *Callista* is to interrogate Christian ceremonials by comparing them with what he and his readers consider pagan idolatry.

The Roman culture is a visual one: it is born of "an age when the pride of architecture had been indulged to the full"(ci, p. 3). This is evident in the presence of many "edifices, public and private, mansions and temples, [which] ran off far away from each market-town or borough, as from a centre" (ci, p. 3). Many of the hills and crags are crowned with "basilicas and temples" (ci, p. 3), all of which are described as signs or symbols of Rome's grandeur. The architectural splendour of Rome is part of a wider theatrical language in which Roman culture is steeped. Even Callista's final trial is described as a play for which the scene has been lavishly set: the tribunal is a "high throne", surrounded by purple curtains and the "Book of Mandates" is put on display on a carpeted table as a sign of justice (c.xxxiii, p. 359). Furthermore, Newman quotes the proceedings of the trial, or *Acta Proconsularia* of her passion, which are set out like an Act in a play, including stage directions:

> Cneius Messius Decius Augustus II., and Gratus, Consuls, on the seventh before the Calends of August, in Sicca Veneria, a colony, in the Secretary at the Tribunal, Martianus, procurator, sitting; Callista, a maker of images, was brought up by the Commentariensis on a charge of Christianity, and when she was placed,
>
> MARTIANUS, the procurator, said: This folly has been too long; you have made images, and now you will not worship them.
>
> CALLISTA answered: For I have found my true Love, whom before I knew not (cxxxiii, pp. 360–361).

[434] Dante Alighieri *Purgatorio* I. 7–12, in *La Divina Commedia*, ed. F. Mariani and F. Gnere (1996; rpt Torino: Loescher, 2001).

Newman's inclusion of these touches – the description of the tribunal which is based on an alto-relief that was uncovered in the remains of Sicca, and the *Acta Proconsularia* – has two effects: the first is to emphasise the historical validity of Callista's martyrdom and the second is to draw attention to the dramatic quality of Roman political and social life.

Like the Catholics and early Christians, then, the Romans express their culture symbolically, which makes them more inclined towards ceremonial activity. These practices, as Newman describes them, have two significant features: the first characteristic of pagan ritual is its close association with worldly activities. While the symbols of Agellius's faith are kept secret in his home and bring him closer to God, the symbols of the Roman faith are unabashedly linked to a culture of acquisitiveness: Jucundus's shop is overflowing with images which are made with a market in mind, to suit "all tastes" whether popular or sophisticated, or whatever denomination a buyer might be (c.v, p. 39). Most of these objects, such as the "unmeaning blocks of stone with human heads" are marked by their deformity and lack of artistic taste (c.v, p. 40). Furthermore, the emphasis is on quantity rather than quality and the miscellaneous collection of articles – portable gods and goddesses are sold alongside "preternaturally ugly" demons and skeletons – ultimately renders them all meaningless material artefacts (cv, p. 40).

The Roman sense of the divine is evidently tainted with materialism so that there is no clear distinction between the heavenly and the worldly: theatrical displays are often accompanied by acts of worship which arise naturally as part of the language of Rome. Cornelius describes the dazzling effect of the Secular Games which he has attended the previous year. The games have a mystic origin: they began when a Sabine man was asked to sacrifice to the deities of the underworld in order to save his sick children. But they only inspire a worldly patriotism in Cornelius who declares that the "wonderful pageant" embodied the "eternity" of Rome and the "genius of the emperor" (c.v, pp. 42–3). He describes a world full of colour and variety:

> There's nothing that isn't there. Do you want the grandest temples in the world, the most spacious porticoes, the longest racecourses? there they are. Do you want

> *gymnasia*? there they are. Do you want arches, statues, obelisks? you find them there (c.v, p. 43).

Cornelius catalogues the rich diversity of what he witnesses, elaborating on "every temple to and fro, every bath, every grove, [which were] gleaming with innumerable lamps and torches" (c.v, p. 44). This overflowing, opulent world is reminiscent of the world of Jonson's *Volpone* where the characters bathe in a sea of possessions but have no moral or spiritual centre. Cornelius makes no attempt to separate the temples of worship from other buildings with a more secular function. He seems incapable of responding to his world in a spiritual manner, choosing instead to privilege its spectacular qualities for their own sake.

No distinction is made in the Roman mind between the dazzling pageant – which involves impressive gladiators, boxers and wrestlers– and religious ritual practice: the "solemn sacrifices" of "victims" are only appreciated for their visual splendour, the way in which the "clear red flame [shoots] up" as they burn (c.v, p. 44). Their deaths are part of the Roman theatre and are succeeded by a dance. There is no consciousness of their suffering or of the spiritual or moral implications of their deaths. In fact nothing sets the ritual sacrifice apart from other activities which celebrate the glory of Rome.

For Jucundus the Roman ritual is a language of praise for the glory of Rome. This rhetorical power of ritual is evident in the kind of speech in which Cornelius recalls it: his powerfully emotive words transform the pageant into a patriotic discourse – it is not merely entertainment but a "feast, the feast of all the Romans" (c.v, p. 44). He is so dazzled by the power of Rome that he is unable to heed the wise words of Aristo, who warns him that "other cities have been eternal before Rome". Like the words that Jucundus uses, pagan ritual is simultaneously very flashy and very hollow. In fact the Romans themselves are conscious of the hollowness of their ceremonies and their gods: the young atheist Arnobius explains to Jucundus that he doesn't believe "one syllable of all the priests' trash" and yet he will continue to sacrifice to the gods for "in their worship was I born, and in their worship will I die" (c.viii, p. 88): in this way he reduces worship to a meaningless routine, a cultural practice with no religious significance. Although Jucundus is perhaps a little more sincere in his belief that worship is a central part of Roman life, he approves of Arnobius's sentiment that the "true principle" is the "genius

of Rome" (c.viii, p. 88). This suggests that Romans make no distinction between cultural practices and religious ritual: ritual is for them a fashion of speech or expression, a mark of national pride rather than a means of creating a spiritual connection with the divine. The Romans thus privilege the theatrical dimension of ritual, detaching the outward display from the inner life that it is meant to nourish.

This becomes more evident if one compares their behaviour to that of the Christians: although Agellius's house is filled with the symbols of his creed, his mode of worship is far more modest and personal than that of his pagan contemporaries. There is a sharp contrast between the "ungodly turmoil" of the pagan celebrations outside and the "deep stillness" of Agellius's home (c.iii, p. 27). For Agellius, ritual is a quiet, dignified way of communing with God and refreshing his spirit. It is a kind of speaking, a way of responding to his "loving parent" (c.iii, p. 29); yet it is without the almost oratorical brilliance and detachment of the Roman variety: it is a quiet yet intense affirmation of divine presence. This is not to deny the theatrical and symbolic elements of Christian ritual: when Agellius experiences a Mass for the first time, he is struck by the "transporting" sound of the ecclesiastical chant which "burst[s]" upon his ear (c. xxx, p. 336), and he is aware of the symbolic richness of his surroundings, an indication of the "instinctive…principle of decoration" in the Christian mind (c. xxx, p. 338). Yet the effect of the music and symbols is different from that of pagan rituals: whereas Jucundus is completely stunned by the Roman celebration, Agellius feels a sense of familiarity and relief, of a home regained: now that he has "found" his "father's house", he is certain that he never wants to leave it again (c. xxx, p. 336).

Second, pagan ritual is described as madness, an illogical frenzy that is exacerbated by a misreading of the signs of heaven. Even before the terrible plague of locusts descend, there is a certain recklessness associated with Roman ritualistic practices: the only part of the "solemn feast-days of Astarte" that the reader witnesses is the drunken belligerence of its aftermath (c.i, pp.10–11). The "band of revellers" that assault Agellius on his way home is reminiscent of Dante's infernal Furies in the way in which they mock and abuse him (c.i, p.10–11). Like Dante's Furies who self-destructively beat their own breasts and symbolically perpetuate spiritual blindness by

calling on the Gorgon to turn the pilgrims to stone,[435] the revellers that assail Agellius are both ignorant and dangerous. They accuse Agellius of various barbaric ritual practices, that he "sucks blood" and will turn them "all into beasts" (c.i, p. 12). They whip one another up into a frenzy of hatred and contempt, eventually flinging a stone at him (c.i, p.12). This violence is impulsive and uncalled for and emphasises the irrational nature of the pagan mind which is capable of justifying horrific abuse, both mental and physical, with very little motive.

To the pagans Christian ritual appears as a childish lunacy: Arnobius describes it as a "frenzy" that will die out very soon (c.viii, p. 89), and for Jucundus it is an "impudent fee-fa-fum" (c. ii, p. 21). Yet, ironically, the Christians remain quiet and dignified and this kind of language better describes the behaviour of the pagans, particularly after the attack of the locusts:

> "O wretched minds of men! O blind hearts!" truly cries out a great heathen poet, but on grounds far other than the true ones. The true ground of such a lamentation is, that men do not interpret the signs of the times and of the world as He intends who has placed these signs in the heavens; that when Mane, Thecel, Phares, is written upon the ethereal wall, they have no inward faculty to read them withal; and that when they go elsewhere for one learned in tongues, instead of taking Daniel, who is used to converse with Angels, they rely on Magi or Chaldeans, who know only the languages of earth. So it was with the miserable population of Sicca now; half famished, seized with a pestilence which was sure to rage before it assuaged, perplexed and oppressed by the recoil upon them of the population whom they had from time to time sent out into the surrounding territory, or from whom they had supplied their markets, they never fancied that the real cause of the visitation which we have been describing was their own iniquity in their Maker's sight, that His arm inflicted it, and that its natural and direct interpretation was, "Do penance, and be converted." On the contrary, they looked only at their own vain idols, and at the vain rites which these idols demanded, and they thought there was no surer escape from their misery than by upholding a lie,

[435] Dante Alighieri, *Inferno* IX. 49–52, in *La Divina Commedia*, ed. F. Mariani and F Gnere (1996; rpt Torino: Loescher, 2001).

> and putting down all who revolted from it; and thus the visitation which was sent to do them good turned through their wilful blindness to their greater condemnation (c. xvi, pp. 178–179).

The rites in which they engage are a blatant misunderstanding of the signs of God. Because they remain deaf to a spiritual language (the signs of which are self-evident), they condemn themselves by turning instead to their "vain idols" and rites and upholding a "lie". This suggests that pagan ritual perverts true conversation: it is a miscommunication, a mistaken response to a message from God. This is because it has recourse only to the "languages of the earth", rather than to the exalted language of Daniel, who is "used to converse with Angels". Further, such practices deny the importance of the inner life – the private and instinctive spiritual conscience that encourages a true response to symbols of the transcendent. Instead of an expression of the inner life, pagan rituals are a kind of mask, a denial of the truth rather than an affirmation of it.

Pagan rituals do not clarify spiritual truths, then, but, instead, intensify the ignorance and fear which initially gave rise to them. The seeming indifference of the heavens to the people's acts of worship, propels them into more and more bizarre behaviour: they seek out "old crones" with their "strange rites, the stranger the more welcome" (c. xvi, p. 180). The rituals are therefore valued not for their truth but for their strangeness and "in despair" the people take refuge in blatantly superstitious activities such as fortune telling (c. xvi, p. 180). Newman lists the miscellaneous articles that are buried in sacrifice to the infernal gods in order to emphasises the futility of the act: "amulets, rings, counters, tablets, pebbles, nails, bones, feathers, Ephesian or Egyptian legends, were in request, and raised the hopes, or beguiled and occupied the thoughts, of those who else would have been directly dwelling on their sufferings, present or in prospect" (c. xvi, p. 180).

This kind of behaviour creates an environment in which sense quickly unravels and rituals descend into a parody of themselves. This is most evident in the arbitrary behaviour of the mob, which eventually settles on the Christians as convenient scapegoats for the people's misfortunes. This group of half famished peasants has much in common with the persecuting mob in *Barnaby Rudge* in the way in which it combines

violence with absurd behaviour, echoing and perverting religious practices. It both is and is not a religious movement: on the one hand the more respectable religious institutions such as the "Temple of Mercury, the Temple of the Genius of Rome near the Capitol, the hierophants of Isis, the Minerva, the Juno, [and] the Esculapius" are horrified by the uprising and refuse to associate themselves with it (c. xvii, pp. 190–1). On the other hand it subsumes many features of the popular religious practices in a chaotic parade:

> The vast homestead of Astarte, which in the number and vowed profligacy of its inhabitants rivalled the vaults upon the Forum; the old rites, many and diversified, if separately obscure, which came from Punic times; the new importations from Syria and Phrygia, and a number of other haunts and schools of depravity and crime, did their part in swelling or giving character to the concourse. The hungry and idle rabble, the filthy beggars who fed on the offal of the sacrifices, the drivers and slaughterers of the beasts sacrificed; the tumblers and mountebanks who amused the gaping market-people; dancers, singers, pipers from low taverns and drinking-houses; infamous creatures, young and old, men and boys, half naked and not half sober . . .
>
> There you might see the devilish emblems of idolatry borne aloft by wretches from the great Punic Temple, while frantic forms, ragged and famished, wasted and shameless, leapt and pranced around them. There too was a choir of Bacchanals, ready at a moment with songs as noisy as they were unutterable. And there was the priest of the Punic Saturn, the child-devourer, a sort of Moloch, to whom the martyrdom of Christians was a sacred rite; he and all his attendants in fiery-coloured garments, as became a sanguinary religion. And there, moreover, was a band of fanatics, devotees of Cybele or of the Syrian goddess, if indeed the two rites were distinct. They were bedizened with ribbons and rags of various colours, and smeared over with paint. They had long hair like women, and turbans on their heads. They pushed their way to the head of the procession, being quite worthy of the post of honour, and, seizing the baker's ass, put their goddess on the back of it. Some of them were playing the fife, others clashing cymbals, others danced, others yelled, others rolled their heads, and others flogged themselves.

> Such was the character of the frenzied host, which progressed slowly through the streets, while every now and then, when there was an interval in the hubbub, the words "Christianos ad leones" were thundered out by some ruffian voice, and a thousand others fiercely responded (c. xvii, pp. 191–2).

There is a disorganised mix of secular and religious customs which are all outlets for "depravity and crime": a colourful array of debauched individuals are attracted to the obscure cults alongside dancers, mountebanks and other dissipated entertainers. Here ritual slides into revelry: there is no distinction between worship and entertainment and there is no place for piety. Both religious and theatrical practices are marked by a lack of control and structure: it all becomes indiscriminately part of an unruly nightmare, which is as senseless as it is powerful.

There is a feverish energy to these "frantic forms" who leap and "prance" about the "devilish emblems of idolatry". Whipped up in this fervour the crowd engage in fantastic movements, a superhuman agility which makes them appear demonic. The cacophonous mix of yelling, singing and clanging of cymbals further enhances the meaningless furore. The crowd's behaviour is overtly satanic and immoral as they engage in violence against themselves and others – a predilection for victimisation which is symbolised by the priest of the Punic Saturn or child-devourer and his followers. These individuals as well as other religious fanatics are garishly theatrical, clad in fiery garments, ribbons and rags and "smeared" with paint. In this way the mob invokes and corrupts the power of ceremonial practices: music, dance and costumes become part of a destructive chaos, emptied of meaning, and driven onwards by the single-minded and illogical desire to feed the Christians to the lions.

By contrast Christian ritual follows a very specific pattern, is conducted with meticulous control and elicits a more personal and refined response from the congregation. Agellius does not as yet understand the proceedings of the Mass and the ceremony of confirmation but it has a profound effect on him and the moment he enters the Mass he kneels and weeps (c. xxx, p. 336). The Mass is described in scrupulous detail. Below is a description of the holy sacrifice, the bidding prayers and the Lord's Prayer:

> The celebrant then advanced: he stood at the further side of the altar, where the candles are now, with his face to the people, and then began the holy sacrifice. First he incensed the *oblata*, that is, the loaves and chalice, as an acknowledgment of God's sovereign dominion, and as a token of uplifted prayer to Him. Then the roll of prayers was brought him, while the deacon began what is sometimes called the bidding prayer, being a catalogue of the various subjects for which intercession is to be made, after the manner of the *Oremus dilectissimi*, now used on Good Friday. This catalogue included all conditions of men, the conversion of the world, the exaltation of Holy Church, the maintenance of the Roman empire, the due ripening and gathering of the fruits of the earth, and other spiritual and temporal blessings, – subjects very much the same as those which are now called the Pope's intentions. The prayers ended with a special reference to those present, that they might persevere in the Lord even to the end.
>
> And then the priest began the *Sursum corda*, and said the *Sanctus*. The Canon or *Actio* seems to have run, in all but a few words, as it does now, and the solemn words of consecration were said secretly. Great stress was laid on the Lord's Prayer, which in one sense terminated the function. It was said aloud by the people, and when they said, "Forgive us our trespasses," they beat their breasts (c.xxx, pp. 340–1).

Unlike the actions of the pagan mob, the celebrant's actions are not arbitrary and are carefully explained: the loaves and chalice are raised as a symbol of God's dominion and a token of prayer to him. These actions are therefore a way of interpreting the Christian message and communicating with the Christian God. The congregation is also swept up in a powerful, symbolic emotion – the way in which they beat their breasts when they call on God to forgive them is indicative of the pain of sin. But it is a co-ordinated action, a sign of communal suffering and redemption, unlike the violent self-inflicted pain of the rabid pagan mob. These expressive actions are also noteworthy for their universality: Newman makes a point of emphasising that the "bidding prayers" are very much like the "Pope's intentions" for contemporary Catholics. Thus the ritual is not inspired by the frenzied emotions of the moment: it is born out of a quiet sense of communal suffering

and sin and a universal need to communicate with the divine and the transcendent which extends across time and space.

Christian ritual is therefore very like a complex, refined language – solemn and affecting. It is far more sensible and meaningful than any other behaviour. In fact to deny Christianity is to condemn oneself to absurdity: this is evident in the fate of Juba who, having had experience of Christianity, now stands stubbornly against it, feeling a "gratification in his independence of mind" (c.ii, p. 22). Even before his crippling madness, there is something ridiculous about his attitude that makes him more animal than human. He is a "wild-looking" youth (c. iv, p. 30) and when he unceremoniously interrupts Agellius's worship, his behaviour is ludicrous:

> He was holding his head on one side as he sat, and his face towards the roof; he nodded obliquely, arched his eyebrows, pursed up his lips, and crossed his arms, while he gave utterance to a strange, half-whispered laugh (c. iv, p. 30).

His expressions here are exaggerated and melodramatic making it difficult to take him seriously. In his quarrel with Agellius his arguments are forceful but ultimately selfish, illogical and inane: this is evident in his fervent assertion that if he wants to be a hog he will be one without a thought for what it means to be a hog strikes one as inane (c. iv, p. 34). After his proud dismissal of Christianity, he refuses to take the ordinary path and instead plunges into the "thick and wet grass, and scramble[s] through the ravine" with a savage, half insane energy reminiscent of the half-witted Hugh in *Barnaby Rudge* (c. iv, p. 34). Like the pagan mob which is driven by an irrational rebellion, Juba has no clear philosophy that governs his movements and behaviour: he is therefore only capable of parodying the true sense of higher purpose and inner power embodied by Christians such as the priest Caecillius.

Juba's pride can be understood as short-sightedness, an inability to engage with spiritual presences or to acknowledge their power within and beyond himself. This leaves him vulnerable to demonic beings which, in possessing him, ironically force him to admit the "fullness of beauty and blessing with which he was so little in tune" (c. xxiv, pp. 269–70). Significantly, the only way that he can be saved from this acute spiritual malaise is through direct engagement with the divine, in a Christian ritual of exorcism: the hymn

and the touching of Callista's feet makes him calm and finally he is restored by Callista to his right mind so that he can ask for baptism before he dies (c. xxxvi, p. 382). Christian ritual therefore brings a sense of peace and ultimately of clarity to a disturbed mind. This contrasts directly with pagan ritual which draws on the power of performance and theatricality to mystify and confound and which is ultimately not a cure but a disease, an obstacle to true knowledge, both of the self and of the divine other. It therefore impedes the harmonious communion and inner transformation that can be achieved through Christian ritual.

Conclusion

After she has been apprehended for her supposedly "heretical" beliefs, Callista tries to understand what it is that draws her to Christianity:

> As to philosophy, it dwelt only in conjecture and opinion; whereas the very essence of religion was, as she felt, a recognition of the worshippers on the part of the Object of it. Religion could not be without hope. To worship a being who did not speak to us, recognise us, love us, was not religion. It might be a duty, it might be a merit; but her instinctive notion of religion was the soul's response to a God who had taken notice of the soul. It was loving intercourse, or it was a name. Now the three witnesses who had addressed her about Christianity had each of them made it to consist in the intimate Divine Presence in the heart. It was the friendship or mutual love of person with person. Here was the very teaching which already was so urgently demanded both by her reason and her heart, which she found nowhere else . . . (c. xxvii, p. 293).

She seeks a conversation, a dialogue between the worldly and the divine, a dramatic exchange that will unite people both with each other and with God. Speaking with God must be a reciprocated experience – one both invokes him and hears his response. Here Callista is conscious of a divine voice which manifests itself in the private space of the heart: this voice engages with her and persuades her of the Christian message through "promises" and "eternal views" despite her "denials", "dismissals" or the "contempt, reproach, and persecution which the profession of it involved" (c. xxvii, p. 294).

Although this is a mutual conversation, then, the voice of God is the more powerful of the two: it can transform one's perspective, ultimately raising one completely above earthly concerns.

This discussion has shown that personal communion with God is at the heart of the Christian understanding of ritual – the individual is engaged and transformed through spiritual dialogue. But ritual also goes beyond this: it is a symbolic language – communicating, through emblems, the sense of a superhuman or divine presence. In her life, Callista sought a personal relationship with God but in her death, her body has become more than simply physical – it is transformed into a symbol of faith through which God is able to reach out to the people. After her death the people are awed by her body: "they cannot come near it without falling under some strange influence, which makes them calm and grave, expels bad passions, and allays commotion of mind. Many come again and again, for the mysterious and soothing effect she exerts upon them" (c. xxxv, p. 372). This mysterious presence is felt in other more tangible ways too such as the miraculous delivery of Juba from his madness, after a ritual in which he is brought close to her. In this way ritual provides an important avenue for the numinous to enter into and transform material reality.

Christian ritual encompasses all aspects of engagement with God, moving between the tangible and the intangible, the personal and the figurative, persons and ideas. One might here recall George Levine's criticism of this novel, his argument that it fails because Newman lacks faith in the largely secular activity of writing. This statement has its truth if one attempts to read *Callista* solely as fiction; but Newman himself argued that it was meant as something a little more than a "mere story book": in it he unashamedly attempts to stretch language to its limits and to dramatise an encounter with the divine. *Callista* is about expressing a shared experience of faith, it is an attempt to make ritual come alive so that the reader can accept its power as an essential dimension of Christian faith. But it also reveals the limitations of the very medium in which it is written: like the language of poetry and theatre, the language of the novel seems to lack an essential mystical element of the performed religion that it is celebrating. Callista's rapturous encounter with faith is testimony to the fact that this mystical quality can only truly be felt and appreciated if it is experienced and communed with. While the

descriptive language of fiction is evidently capable of gesturing towards the spiritual by incorporating elements of the poetic and the performed and harmonising them with rational discourse, it is ultimately not expressive or inclusive enough to convey this fully.

Unencumbered by his contemporaries' suspicions of Catholicism and performed religion, Newman is consequently open to ritual as the most authentic way of invoking and communing with a divine dimension: this also influences his view of language, leading him deliberately to acknowledge the connection between its dramatic dimensions and its spiritual reach. In this he anticipates Hopkins who attempted to invoke the presence of God through the rhetorical power of his words. In the final Chapter I will draw together my deductions about Brontë , Dickens and Newman in the light of ideas about instress and inscape as they emerged in Hopkins's thought and poetry. Finally I will suggest ways in which this study could contribute to the literary debate around realism and theatricality in mid-Victorian novels.

CONCLUSION

Instress and inscape in Hopkins's thought and poetry

"What you look hard at seems to look hard at you":[436] Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote these words in his journal in March 1871 to explain his sense of instress, of the dynamic and divine communication between the perceiving subject and the world of nature – the object of his gaze. Like George Eliot and the realist school, Hopkins is a very careful observer of nature: his poems and his prose all pay an almost scientific attention to detail, to nature in its particularity and individuality, what Hopkins in a letter to Bridges, written on February 15 1879, terms, "design, pattern" or "inscape".[437] In his journal entries Hopkins scrupulously describes each natural scene that he observes, in a quasi-Darwinian manner: in his diary entry of March 17 1871 for example he mentions the "clouds chalky and milk-coloured, with remarkable oyster shell moulding" and provides an accompanying sketch to enhance the precision of the description. Towards the end of March and beginning of April of the same year he describes the "swelling buds" of the "spraying trees": The "male ashes are very boldly jotted with the heads of the bloom which tuft the outer ends of the branches. The staff of each of these branches is closely knotted where buds are or have been, so that it is something like a finger which ties up a string and keeps marks".[438] In his *Principium sive Fundamentum* on the twentieth of August 1880, Hopkins glorifies the particularity of nature: "I consider my selfbeing, my consciousness and feeling of myself, that taste of myself, or *I* and *me* above and in all things, which is more distinctive than the taste of ale or alum, more distinctive than the smell of walnutleaf or camphor, and is incommunicable by any means to another man".[439] The objective scrutiny of the material world and the consciousness of the uniqueness of each living thing suggested by Hopkins's writing have caused some critics to question whether he was able to reconcile his keen observation of detail with his sense

[436] Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Major Works*, ed. Catherine Philips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 204.
[437] Ibid., p. 235.
[438] Ibid., p. 205.
[439] Ibid., p. 282.

of a transcendent world of absolutes, and whether his work was closer to the more scientific school of literary realism than he cared to admit.

But as is evident in his comment about the power of instress, there is something that sets Hopkins's realism apart from the dominant philosophy of the nineteenth century realists. For Eliot, the artist is a spectator who creates a mirror of the world. This does not mean that the artist replicates the world exactly for that can never be great art, as she suggests deprecatingly when describing Flemish paintings as "beautiful paintings of still life" or comparing Dutch realism to "sausage sandwiches and beer posset".[440] Rather it is the artist's mind that is the mirror of nature, as is evident in her famous description in *Adam Bede*:

> I might refashion life and character entirely after my own liking; I might select the most unexceptionable type of clergyman and put my own admirable opinions into his mouth on all occasions. But it happens, on the contrary, that my strongest effort is to avoid any such arbitrary picture, and to give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. The mirror is doubtless defective, the outlines will sometimes be disturbed, the reflection faint or confused; but I feel as much bound to tell you as precisely as I can what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box, narrating my experience on oath.[441]

This mirror may be 'defective' and the artist's perception is of course inevitably biased. But her subjectivity could also be her strength: in an essay in *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1878), Eliot describes the "powerful imagination" or "intense inward representation", which is susceptible to the "veriest minutiae of experience" and which is thus capable of "bringing into light the less obvious relations of human experiences".[442] Yet what strikes one most about Eliot's subtle portrait of the artist, whether in *Adam Bede* or in her later writings, is her emphasis on vision. In the passage quoted from Adam Bede the writer is a witness or observer of the world of which she creates an accurate picture or

---

[440] "Belles Lettres," Westminster Review , 66 (Oct. 1856), 576, qtd. in Darrel Mansell, Jr, "Ruskin and George Eliot's 'Realism'", *Criticism* 7.3 (Summer 1965): 203–216 (p. 208).
[441] George Eliot, *Adam Bed*e (1859), ed. Carol A. Martin (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), c. xvii, p. 159.
[442] George Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1878; rpt Iowa, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1994), p. 110.

reflection. This has been refined in *Impressions of Theophrastus* where vision takes on a prophetic dimension: she writes that the imagination "is always based on a keen vision, a keen consciousness of what *is*, and carries the store of definite knowledge as material for the construction of its inward visions" (p. 109). She describes the writer or poet as a "seer" who, like Dante, is capable of discerning between the "*cose che son vere* outside the individual mind, and the *non falsi errori* which are the revelations" (p. 111). The writer's greatest strength then is that she is a spectator of life and, although her vision is enhanced by her imaginative sympathy with her subject matter, her somewhat objective distance is what elevates her understanding above that of other people who remain trapped within the drama of their individual lives.

But for Hopkins vision transforms into communion, a powerful spiritual drama of being. This is the significance of intress – what Carol Christ refers to as the "dynamic interaction between the perceived and the perceiver" for it is the "viewer's intensity [which] makes the individual pattern of the object into a dynamic, communicative force".[443] To perceive for Hopkins is also to utter – the true presence of divinity in nature can only be apprehended if it is invoked in words or music. In a letter to Bridges written on the 21 August 1877 he affirms that his "verse is less to be read than to be heard", that it is "oratorical".[444] It is through utterance then that Hopkins "tries to make words themselves into active particular experiences rather than passive vehicles".[445]

The language of poetry is analogous to that of music in Hopkins's mind and his journals and letters abound with musical metaphors: in a letter written to Bridges on the 15th of February 1879, Hopkins argues that just as "air, melody, is what strikes [him] most of all in music" so "design, pattern or what [he is] in the habit of calling 'inscape' is what [he] above all aim[s] at in poetry".[446] Further Hopkins studied the concept of "counterpoint" in music and it was a term that obsessed him and that, as Dennis Sobolev convincingly argues, he applied in his own poetry by harmonising sometimes seemingly

[443] Carol T. Christ, *The Finer Optic: The Aesthetic of Particularity in Victorian Poetry* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1975), p. 132.
[444] Hopkins, *The Major Works*, p. 229.
[445] Christ, *The Finer Optic*, p. 133.
[446] Hopkins, *The Major Works*, p. 235.

contradictory strains of materialism and spirituality.[447] The strong musical feeling of his verse and inclination suggests that for him language is incantatory, a kind of summoning. And indeed it is in the almost ritualistic expression and communication of nature and the individual that Hopkins finds God.

This is evident in an extract from his *Principium Sive Fundamentum* written on the 7th of August 1882:

> God's utterance of himself in himself is God the word, outside himself is this world. This world then is word, expression, news of God. Therefore its end, its purpose, its purport, its meaning is God and its life or work to name and praise him. Therefore praise before reverence and service . . . the world, man, should after its own manner give God being in return for the being he has given it or should give him back the being he has given.[448]

The emphasis is on expression through utterance. Every form of expression whether verbal or physical conveys a sound, the news of itself, and it is in this sound that God becomes incarnate. For Hopkins, praising God is a way of giving him being, of breathing spiritual presence into the world: natural life is a pattern, a ritual dance that invokes God in its expression. For humans this expression is more obviously verbal – through praise, language becomes more than language, it becomes spiritually infused or embodied. This is what Hopkins attempts in his poetry:

> As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
> As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
> Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
> Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
> Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
> Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
> Selves – goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
> Crying *Whát I dó is me: for that I came.*

---

[447] Dennis Sobolev, "Semantic Counterpoint and the Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins", *Victorian Literature and Culture* 35.1 (2007): 103–119 (p. 108).
[448] Hopkins, *The Major Works*, p. 282.

I say móre: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: thát keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is –
Chríst – for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.[449]

The electric presence of God in all things ignites an active ritual of praise in which, despite their distinctiveness, all natural things are united. Existence itself becomes a hymn of creation where each entity, whether animate or inanimate, finds "tongue to fling out its broad name" to "speak . . . and spell . . ." the word "myself". The emphasis is on speaking and this is evident in his use of onomatopoeia and in the rhythm of the words. But humans must "say more": the "just man" must strive against the limitations of nature to create a new more forceful kind of justice. This is mirrored by the language of the poem which strives against the limits of conventional language to convey a more intense meaning: instead of using the verb 'judges', Hopkins modifies the noun 'justice' into a verb, suggesting a transformation of being into action, of saying into doing. In this way utterance becomes act and through spiritual imitation Christ is invoked, entering the world and becoming omnipresent, "lovely in eyes and in limbs not his".

Hopkins uses language ritualistically to transform perception into action, the passive observer into an active participant in the spiritual drama of life. This is very closely related to his Catholic theory of transubstantiation, on which he elaborates in a letter to his father on the 16th of October 1866: "I shall hold as a Catholic what I have held as an Anglican, that literal truth of our Lord's words by which I learn that the least fragment of the consecrated elements in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar is the whole Body of Christ born of the Blessed Virgin, before which the whole host of saints and angels as it lies on the altar trembles with adoration".[450] Through the Eucharist, God enters the Mass and it is his tangible presence that inspires acts of worship and praise. This ritualistic enactment is also closely related to the incarnation, when Christ became

[449] Hopkins, "As Kingfishers Catch Fire", in *The Major Works*, p. 129.
[450] Hopkins, *The Major Works*, p. 223.

man, and which is for Hopkins the essence of existence: he writes in his retreat notes on the 1st of January 1889, "my life is determined by the Incarnation down to most of the details of the day".[451]

But the way in which Hopkins's God is present in the world has troubled critics: Maria R. Lichtmann argues that "Hopkins's particular version of the Incarnation denies God not only divinity but humanity as well, tumbling God from the height of infinity through intelligence and life down to mere Being alone".[452] Because of Hopkins's preference for the Eucharistic incarnation over and above Christ's historical incarnation as man, Lichtmann understands Hopkins's God as "almost total absence".[453] She sees Hopkins's preoccupation with ensarkosis or the emptying of self in the transformation of the divine into the material, as resulting in Christ lying "hidden, and inert in the matter of [Hopkins's] poems".[454] I'm inclined to disagree with Lichtmann's thesis: rather than emptying the spiritual world of almost all of its power and reality, Christ's presence in the insentient world of Hopkins's poetry has an animating effect. It is not inert but dynamic: it has an electric, magical vibrancy that inspires everything into a performance of praise, a dance that invigorates the material and the spiritual realms alike. This presence is made all the more mysterious and compelling by the fact that it is supernatural rather than material, the fact that Christ becomes pure Being rather than a creature of the earth. Lichtmann doesn't fully acknowledge the incantatory power of the incarnation for Hopkins, the way in which it invokes, or calls spirituality into being in the unlikeliest of places. This is evident in *God's Grandeur*, written in 1877:

> The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
> It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
> It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
> Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
> Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
> And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

---

[451] Hopkins, *The Major Works*, p. 304.
[452] Maria R. Lichtmann, "The Incarnational Aesthetic of Gerard Manley Hopkins", *Religion & Literature* 23.1 (Spring 1991): 37–50 (p. 40).
[453] Ibid., p.44.
[454] Ibid., p. 43

> And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
> Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.
> And for all this, nature is never spent;
> There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
> And though the last lights off the black West went
> Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
> Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
> World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.[455]

God's spirit animates all things so that the whole world is charged with it: in this poem it is humanity that is closer to Lichtmann's lifeless God; humanity has a mechanical, sluggish existence, half alive and unresponsive to the call of the spiritual realm. Because people cannot heed God's anger at their negligence, they are also unaware of and untouched by his miraculous presence in the world. But the poem ultimately bears witness to this presence: the appearance of "morning, at the brown brink" is a sign of God's redemptive activity in nature and ultimately in the human heart. By acknowledging this presence in nature, the "dearest freshness deep down things", Hopkins attempts to lift the veil between himself and God: in the last line he is no longer contemplating nature but the "bright wings" of the "Holy Ghost" itself which "broods" over the "bent/ World" and which inspires a rebirth in Hopkins, dramatically vocalised in the word "ah!" of the final line. Thus it is not simply by describing nature but by invoking the powerful presence that he feels behind and within it, that Hopkins seeks to transform himself and his readers.

But there is something worth examining further in Lichtmann's claim that Hopkins's God is "almost total absence",[456] although the way that she defends this conclusion is not entirely convincing. Hopkins's God is unquestionably a hidden presence: in his Retreat Notes written at St Stanislaus' College, Tullaberg on the 2nd of January 1889, Hopkins describes the spiritual promise of eternal life, a happiness hereafter, in the following manner: "It is as if we were dazzled by a spark or star in the dark, seeing it but not seeing by it: we want a light shed on our way and a happiness

[455] Hopkins, "God's Grandeur," in *The Major Works*, p. 128.
[456] Lichtmann, "The Incarnational Aesthetic of Gerard Manley Hopkins", p. 44.

spread over our life". In this image the spiritual world seems remote, a sudden and inexplicable vision without the accompanying sense of communion. This fear that God may recede almost completely from human touch and understanding is more painfully present in the terrible sonnets:

> I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.
> What hours, O what black hours we have spent
> This night! what sights you, heart, saw; ways you went!
> And more must, in yet longer light's delay.
> With witness I speak this. But where I say
> Hours I mean years, mean life. And my lament
> Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent
> To dearest him that lives alas! away.
>
> I am gall, I am heartburn. God's most deep decree
> Bitter would have me taste: my taste was me;
> Bones built in me, flesh filled, blood brimmed the curse.
> Selfyeast of spirit a dull dough sours. I see
> The lost are like this, and their scourge to be
> As I am mine, their sweating selves; but worse.[457]

Here Hopkins laments his own sense of separateness from God. The heavy darkness of his mind traps him within himself so that his selfhood, at other times a way of invoking and celebrating God's presence in the world, has become like a poison, the solitary damnation of the "lost". God is present but only at a distance: he is "away" and Hopkins's cries to him become "dead letters" no longer capable of the animating power of true communion with the divine. In both examples Hopkins is struck not by the complete absence of God but by his disturbing indifference; or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it is Hopkins and not God who is unresponsive. Wrapped up in the "bitter" taste of "me" and convinced that this state is God's punishment for him, he is to be out of tune with nature and the spiritual presence within it – he feels as if it has been

[457] Hopkins, "I wake and feel the fell of dark", in *The Major Works*, p.166.

"years" of darkness, a "life" of suffering so that the glorious words of *God's Grandeur* seem to belong to another lifetime, or poet. But it is he who has cut himself off from his spiritual life and only he who can break out of this cycle through the rhetorical power of his own voice: this is evident in 'Carrion Comfort' when he declares that he will "not feast on" despair and that the darkness in which he "lay wrestling" with God is "now done". God can be reclaimed through powerful language but with an almost physical force of will: so powerful is the poet's sense of alienation and solitariness that even the memory of it overpowers and possesses him.

I want to suggest that Hopkins's Catholic-influenced philosophy of inscape and instress – his search for the divine through dynamic, transformative prose, his efforts to tune himself to a ghostly spiritual presence, can throw some light on frequently passed over elements of the emerging realism of the 1840s and early 50s that I have been discussing.

The terms inscape and instress can now be defined in ways that apply to realist prose-fiction: Hopkins uses both terms to suggest a heightened perception. Inscape refers to the artistic patterns in nature – a visual harmony and design that can be discerned by close, scientific observation. The inscape of an object is its own peculiar and unique voice – by discerning the uniqueness within an object or creature Hopkins also invests it with a greater presence and vitality: in this way inscape suggests the presence of the divine in nature and the potential for a greater spiritual elevation.[458] But this in itself is not enough: Instress is the point at which observation transforms into communion. It is the divine interaction between the observer and the observed, the energy that flows through and around material reality and that connects it with the celestial. This process is echoes ritual in the sense that it grants observation a conjuring power, conceiving of experience as an allegorical drama through which the individual invokes and connects with an objective spiritual presence behind the veil of the material world.

---

[458] Inscape is a particularly slippery term and it has been suggested that Hopkins derived this philosophy in part from the thinking of the medieval scholastic philosopher, John Duns Scotus. Bernadette Waterman Ward argues that Hopkins's inscape corresponds to Scotus's formalitas, which refers to the intelligibility of all levels of experience and being, an "infinitude of meanings that can be shared because they refer to a world whose real intelligibility makes a common language possible". In this way Hopkins uses poetic language sacramentally to reveal the patterned and unifying 'truth' of experience (Bernadette Waterman Ward, "Philosophy and Inscape: Hopkins and the Formalitas of Duns Scotus", *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 32. 2 (Summer 1990): 214–239 (p. 232)).

Brontë

In Chapter Nineteen of *The Professor*, Charlotte Brontë in the character of her protagonist, William Crimsworth, writes a defence of realism which can be read alongside George Eliot's famous passage in *Adam Bede*:

> NOVELISTS should never allow themselves to weary of the study of real life. If they observed this duty conscientiously, they would give us fewer pictures chequered with vivid contrasts of light and shade; they would seldom elevate their heroes and heroines to the heights of rapture--still seldomer sink them to the depths of despair; for if we rarely taste the fulness of joy in this life, we yet more rarely savour the acrid bitterness of hopeless anguish; unless, indeed, we have plunged like beasts into sensual indulgence, abused, strained, stimulated, again overstrained, and, at last, destroyed our faculties for enjoyment; then, truly, we may find ourselves without support, robbed of hope. Our agony is great, and how can it end? We have broken the spring of our powers; life must be all suffering – too feeble to conceive faith – death must be darkness – God, spirits, religion can have no place in our collapsed minds, where linger only hideous and polluting recollections of vice; and time brings us on to the brink of the grave, and dissolution flings us in – a rag eaten through and through with disease, wrung together with pain, stamped into the churchyard sod by the inexorable heel of despair.
>
> But the man of regular life and rational mind never despairs. He loses his property – it is a blow – he staggers a moment; then, his energies, roused by the smart, are at work to seek a remedy; activity soon mitigates regret. Sickness affects him; he takes patience – endures what he cannot cure. Acute pain racks him; his writhing limbs know not where to find rest; he leans on Hope's anchors. Death takes from him what he loves; roots up, and tears violently away the stem round which his affections were twined – a dark, dismal time, a frightful wrench – but some morning Religion looks into his desolate house with sunrise, and says, that in another world, another life, he shall meet his kindred again. She speaks of that

> world as a place unsullied by sin – of that life, as an era unembittered by suffering; she mightily strengthens her consolation by connecting with it two ideas – which mortals cannot comprehend, but on which they love to repose – Eternity, Immortality; and the mind of the mourner, being filled with an image, faint yet glorious, of heavenly hills all light and peace – of a spirit resting there in bliss – of a day when his spirit shall also alight there, free and disembodied – of a reunion perfected by love, purified from fear – he takes courage – goes out to encounter the necessities and discharge the duties of life; and, though sadness may never lift her burden from his mind, Hope will enable him to support it.[459]

At the outset Brontë's words sound remarkably like Eliot's. Like Eliot she stresses the writer's obligation to study 'real' life and not to spoil her picture by exaggeration. She emphasises the importance of a balanced picture, not "chequered" with "vivid contrasts of light and shade". But the words that follow quickly unravel these careful observations. Our attention is arrested by the powerful qualifier, "unless", as Crimsworth begins to explain the conditions in which it is almost impossible to observe this reasonable approach to life and to art. He creates a picture of sinful desperation where those who have been "plunged like beasts into sensual indulgence", experience infernal suffering, where "God, spirits, religion" can have no place and where the lost soul, trapped in his "collapsed mind…" is ultimately "tramped into the churchyard sod by the inexorable heel of despair".

These words have a dramatic force that overpowers the initial balanced realist claim; and their invocation of an absent God is echoed in Hopkins's fraught spiritual despair in the terrible sonnets. As in Hopkins's sonnets there is a fevered sense of a degraded being, no longer capable of sensing God, but instead consumed by passions which have no spiritual outlet. The state of mind of these 'sinners' who have given in to their desires is not simply described but enacted before the reader's imagination: the adjective "collapsed" conjures up the verb and gives one the sense of a mind crumbling before one's eyes: the powerful verbs "flings" and "stamped" create the impression of an

[459] Charlotte Brontë, *The Professor* (1857; rpt London and New York: Harper & Brothers, 1900), c. xix, p. 163–164.

infernal struggle with an unresponsive divinity out of which the victim emerges, conquered.

It is true that Crimsworth is not at all concerned with a spiritual crisis here but rather with the realities of earthly love, and lust; his ultimate purpose is to show himself able to cope with the fact that the woman in whom he has an interest has been dismissed from his presence by the jealous Mlle. Reuter. He goes on to describe the strength of will of the man "of regular life and rational mind" who does not succumb to despair and who trusts in the "faint, yet glorious" promise of religion to give him "hope". He celebrates the fact that he is a "steady, reasonable man" and that he does not "allow the resentment, disappointment, and grief, engendered in my mind by this evil chance, to grow there to any monstrous size; nor did I allow them to monopolize the whole space of my heart".[460] There is, nevertheless, almost a disjunction between Crimsworth's measured, rational response to his difficulties and the consciousness of the powerful evil forces at work around and within him. His pale religion and enviable self-control don't fully explain the spiritually charged abysses of evil that hover on the periphery of his vision and understanding and that are called into being by his words.

In *Villette*, as I have shown, this disjunction between the detached, analytical eye of the protagonist who is committed to a rational and scientific manner of explaining her world, and the inexplicable spiritual energy that flows through and around her words, is more marked and complex. Even as Lucy attempts to divest her language of what she considers the distorting effects of romance and imagination (which she associates with Catholic ritual and ideology), she is unable to dispel the traces of a past, ritualistic world that haunts her writing and her thoughts.

The word 'haunted' is central to an understanding of *Villette's* realism: it is a haunted text and Lucy herself is a haunted protagonist. The word suggests an enthralling magical power, a kind of possession; but it also connotes the insubstantial or illusory. In *Villette*, these compelling supernatural presences, or partial presences, are veiled, like Hopkins's God and one gets the sense that Lucy's is a world out of tune with them.

One cannot deny that the subject matter of the novel is overtly secular and its scope, largely domestic. Topical issues of the day particularly anti-Catholicism are

[460] Ibid., p. 164.

present but, as Heather Glenn suggests, they are treated with a mock-heroic irony, and everything, down to the attempt to convert Lucy to Rome, is "seen through the prism of a deflating common sense".[461] But as I argue, this is not the whole picture: despite her strict self-discipline, Lucy is particularly sensitive to the spiritually tinged imaginative energy around her, which constantly demands her attention and casts its shadow across her experience.

It would not be accurate to suggest that Lucy only demystifies her world or that Brontë unequivocally favours the rational in this novel: I have shown that the impulse towards demystification coexists awkwardly with an impulse towards the numinous – that the language Brontë employs blends the detached descriptive style of the emerging realism with an incantatory style, pre-empting Hopkins. Apart from Lucy's rationalising, one is struck by two other modes of discourse in the novel: the first is the hallucinatory prose of Lucy's most inward and tortured self, a visionary rambling overladen with spiritual echoes that strives to break free of the restrictive secular thinking with which she is comfortable. After the death of Miss Marchmont, for example, when she finds herself alone in London without any employment, she finds her common sense as "chilled and bewildered as all [her] other faculties" (c. v, p. 106). Under its guidance she bears the indignities of her treatment at the hands of the supercilious chambermaid: but while common sense teaches her to ignore the painful reality of her situation, Lucy is summoned by another more ominous voice: when she is alone in her bed, she is struck by the "low, mighty tone" which "swung through the night" a sound that she at first does not recognise. After the "twelfth colossal hum and trembling knell," however, she becomes aware that she is lying "in the shadow of St Paul's" (c.v, p. 107). This melodic sound has a far greater power than Lucy's wavering common sense. It is – like Hopkins's musical verse – incantatory, capable of summoning a supernatural presence into Lucy's midst, a presence that powerfully announces her social and spiritual alienation. Yet its significance in Lucy's life remains obscure – although it is pregnant with an ominous almost apocalyptic significance, it is not related to anything more substantial and it is not revisited in the following chapter.

---

[461] Heather Glen, *Charlotte Brontë The Imagination in History*, p. 204.

It comes almost as a surprise to the reader much later when Lucy finds herself abandoned at Madame Beck's school, and the same hallucinatory prose resurfaces more forcefully than before. Although she claims that the "religious reader" could not truly understand the state of her mind, her "avenging dream" certainly has the overtones of a spiritual crisis: the dream "wring[s] [her] whole frame with an unknown anguish" and "confer[s] a nameless experience that ha[s] the hue, the mien, the terror, the very tone of a visitation from eternity" (c.xv, p. 231). Significantly, the nature of Lucy's suffering is nameless and mysterious but is tinged with the language of apocalypse. Lucy refrains from telling us what the dream was about but its meaning seems to reside in its 'tone', the sound and feel of it, which gives it a vivid presence and reality and suggests a "visitation from eternity" (c. xv, p. 231), communion with the infinite. But the experience is too obscure and terrifying to free Lucy from her suffering – she finds herself unable to frame words in a prayer apart from the isolating, "From my youth up Thy terrors have I suffered with a troubled mind" (c.xv, p. 232). Like Hopkins in 'Carrion Comfort' she struggles with herself in the face of a truth that is more unfathomable and incomprehensible than anything she has experienced in her mundane daily activities. The dream is like a vision of some terrible transcendent reality, only partially apparent – its ghostliness makes it in that moment both less and more than real.

But this is not the only place where the magic of the text resides: there are other more sinister kinds of rituals which affect all the characters and of which none of them are fully conscious. The most obvious example is the pattern of behaviour of Madame Beck. As I have shown, there is something mysterious and eerie about Madame Beck's interest in Lucy and Lucy's interest in Madame Beck – the obsession of both women for one another is uncanny and inexplicable and develops into a hypnotic fascination. More than once Lucy describes Madame Beck's espionage as a kind of 'magic' and she herself retains an awed silence in the presence of her rival's secret machinations which, in its intensity, is akin to religious awe.

Yet the ritualistic and mystical echoes in *Villette* are never fully embodied – they remain mere echoes capable only of disturbing the surface of Lucy's objective discourse. Often they are associated with tired stereotypes and romances – such as the tale that Lucy has heard of the nun, or the actions of the Priest, Père Silas, who, after what seems like a

moment of clear insight and true spiritual communion with Lucy, ultimately follows the stereotyped devious Catholic desire to "convert" his enemy by whatever fantastical means possible. Where references to the spiritual or the ritualised are present, then, they are often dismissively or ambiguously represented: it is important not to overstate the occurrence or effects of this type of writing.

But it is equally dangerous to ignore it for the moments that are not fully articulated or described, but suggested, invoked, enacted, are also the moments charged with a compelling energy. It is the tension between Lucy's self-assured analysis of her situation – her presumed understanding of and scorn for the Catholic world that she inhabits – and the inexplicable patterns by which she and the others are moved, that gives the text a possessed and bewitching quality: for in a world where the observations of the analytical eye cannot be fully trusted, one is encouraged to look harder, to feel more powerfully every bizarre or supernatural suggestion.

Lucy's world is charged with a kind of instress, a call to a greater and more intense spiritual communion that is never satisfied. But instress ultimately fails for Lucy because it depends on the power of words not merely to describe but to bring a spiritual reality to life in one's language and thoughts; Lucy's cautious commitment to the rational or the verifiable and her fear of expressiveness ironically makes her inarticulate: more than once she is silent when she should speak, effacing rather than facing herself and her needs. She consciously chooses to be an observer rather than an actor in her own life and she believes this to make her more insightful than Ginevra Fanshaw or even Dr John, caught up in their personal dramas. Yet her 'objective distance' is also her weakness – her isolation from sympathetic communion with others takes the form of spiritual alienation. She is aware of her misery but she does not possess the language with which to frame her prayer: her partially expressed longing for the divine is evident at times but because she cannot fully articulate what is wrong with her or what is lacking in her world, she is therefore also incapable of calling into being a godly presence free of the cynical stereotypes with which she dresses Catholic Belgium. For this reason she can do nothing but battle phantoms in the dark.

Brontë's realism, then, is not quite what she asserts. It is a promiscuous mixture of rational and ritualistic discourse: by rational I mean measured or analytical – the sober,

deflating observation of daily experience which leads to psychological extrapolations carefully devoid of emotional colouring. This reason by which Lucy governs her life is itself ambiguously represented – she describes it as a hard task master which has a strangle hold on her mind and which forbids her from expressing her feelings for Dr John in a letter.

By ritualistic I mean an intense feeling of the sacred that is not described but invoked; it is called into being through language laden with a symbolic and transformative significance and which is often framed as a prayer. Just after her illness Lucy proclaims in a secret appeal,

> Herald, come quickly! Thousands lie round the pool, weeping and despairing, to see it, through slow years, stagnant. Long are the "times" of Heaven: the orbits of angel messengers seem wide to mortal vision; they may enring ages: the cycle of one departure and return may clasp unnumbered generations; and dust, kindling to brief suffering life, and through pain, passing back to dust, may meanwhile perish out of memory again, and yet again. To how many maimed and mourning millions is the first and sole angel visitant, him easterns call Azrael! (c. xvii, p. 252)

In this agonised cry Lucy attempts to summon a heavenly presence into her midst, a 'herald' who will bring salvation to a despairing mortal race. In her prayer she recasts her experience in terms of a tragic ritual drama where the "maimed and mourning millions" are visited by Azrael, the angel of death. In this way her despair is elevated from a personal and formless sensation and becomes an allegory of the lost soul seeking to commune with a distant and inexplicable divine presence.

This kind of language, with its tendency towards allegorising and incantation, recalls ritual practice in which, Victor Turner argues, symbols are used to reveal both social and religious values and, because of their reference to the supernatural, have the power to "act on" and change the individual involved in the performance. The ritualistic is also present in the ceremonial behaviour of the characters who follow mimetic patterns which have no logical explanation. Victor Turner argues that all rituals or ritualistic behaviours in the arts and the theatre "celebrate or commemorate transcendent powers".

While one cannot perhaps make this much of the strange behaviour of the people of *Villette*, their actions certainly lie within the realm of the mystical, the ritualised and the inexplicable.

I have shown that Hopkins's theory goes some way towards explaining how this kind of language operates in Brontë's novel: instress or the power of the perceiving self to bring spirituality into existence through sound, language or sense, is suggested though never fully realised. Brontë's novel is, like Hopkins's poetry, "charged" with an intense supernatural presence; but in *Villette* this presence is not fully embodied, nor is it fully divine. There is also a form of inscape in Lucy's world – she is irrepressibly drawn to the theatrical colour and variety of everyday experience, to the point that each person she observes is invested with a magical aura or energy. But there is no musical counterpoint of these two themes; no attempt is ever made to harmonise the elements of instress and inscape in this novel: in fact it gives one the impression of an experience profoundly out of joint with itself.

Dickens

In *Barnaby Rudge* and *Pictures from Italy*, Dickens creates an effect similar to Brontë's – a sense of a world fallen into materialism and banality yet replete with echoes of an intense spiritual nature. But he achieves this effect in a slightly different way to Brontë. In *The Violent Effigy*, John Carey famously saw Dickens's novels as infused by a powerful sense of the physical world – he claimed that Dickens celebrates the chaotic variety of material experience, that he is driven by an almost scientific obsession with dissection, a passionate drive towards the annihilation of symbolic meaning. By contrast, any attempts that Dickens makes to embrace figurative and particularly religious significance dilute the vitality of his prose which becomes, in these instances, hackneyed and sentimental.[462]

Without denying the presence of such sentimental passages and symbols in Dickens's fiction, I think it is true to say that one cannot so neatly separate the "material"

[462] John Carey, *The Violent Effigy*: *A Study of Dickens's Imagination* (1973; rpt London: Faber and Faber, 1991), pp. 13, 16.

from the symbolic in Dickens's writing as Carey does: obsessed by puppets, birds, clockwork figures and buffoons, Dickens is constantly drawn to a world of partial presences – creatures that are not-quite-human, or human beings that cannot be taken entirely seriously; things that are not quite alive or dead, or a religion that is ghostly in its presence and effects. In Dickens's chaotic, carnivalesque universe, the spiritual is wedded to the material, the animate to the inanimate. Traces of rituals and symbolism are subsumed in a materialistic secular vision, and a Darwinian passion for variety coexists with a vague hankering after spiritual absolutes.

In this world, the echoes of a ritualistic past have a haunting vitality, which cannot easily be passed over. It is important to differentiate between ritual as an element of Dickens's style and narrative and his response to the non-fictional rites of the Catholic Church. As I have shown, Dickens is repelled by the Catholic religion – its association in his mind with materialism, corruption and anachronistic superstitions – and yet its power over him is in the fact that it is ghostly and inexplicable, both less and more than human. Like the cast of dolls and manikins that people the pages of Dickens's fiction, Catholic symbols and icons in *Pictures from Italy* jump out at the reader with grotesque vitality and demand to be acknowledged: Catholicism is thus a living ghost for Dickens – even while he attempts to hold himself aloof, it insists that he engages with it.

I have shown that Dickens responds to two aspects of the ritualistic culture that he encounters in Italy: first, he recognises in Catholic ritual and ritualistic symbols a powerful sense of animation, a vibrancy that draws him in despite himself. Beneath the numbing formalism of the Mass, he senses the sometimes perverse celebration of life in its promiscuous blend of the spiritual and the physical, the sacred and the secular. The power of Catholic ritual to bring people together in festivity is its most compelling feature for Dickens.

This power cannot be felt if one observes it from the outside: when contemplating the Catholic Mass, Dickens remains unaffected and even repelled by what he considers an assault on his senses and judgement. But it is when he becomes involved in the carnival celebrations himself that he gives way to its electric, unifying energy. Ritual is most powerful and affecting for Dickens as an experience rather than as a performance: it is the power of communion with and participation in the divine and the material, a kind

of instress, that attracts him most. Yet in *Pictures* Dickens remains a journalist: he always stands on the margins of such ceremonies, simultaneously laughing at and with the participants. He is driven by a realist obsession with observation, dissecting the minutest details of what he sees: because of his tendency to observe and demystify ritual proceedings, ritual is for him a paradox – both affecting and often absurd or empty. But its absurdity saves it from too harsh a realist critique: Dickens's ultimate opinion of it seems to be that it is too bizarre to withstand analysis and this paradoxically grants it creative authority at times.

Instress also manifests itself as a call to a closer communion with the divine. This call is most pronounced in the sound of bells which conjure up ghostly associations with a Catholic past; it also emerges in the speaking voice of the ambiguous Mary figure in Dickens's dream (which tellingly is left out of *Pictures* possibly because it would bring Dickens too close to the Catholic world that he observes). The dream is striking for its clarity: it does not suggest a nebulous consciousness of a divine presence but deliberately and theatrically enacts Dickens's engagement with questions of Catholicism and the spiritual. It is ritualistic in the sense that it involves the dreamer in a symbolic encounter with Catholicism, and appeals to his physical and mystical senses. In this way for Dickens, as for Brontë, the ritual space is allegorical, a meeting place between the material and the transcendent realms of experience where the spiritual becomes physically manifest. For Hopkins these ghosts have become real presences interacting with and through the individual. But in *Pictures* Dickens's sensitivity to the dynamic ritual possibilities inherent in everything that he observes is never fully embraced, for as a narrator and journalist he remains a partially disinterested observer and relegates ritual practice to the realm of the ludicrous, the uncanny and the inexplicable.

Unlike Dickens's *Pictures from Italy*, *Barnaby Rudge*, despite its concern with Catholicism, does not directly engage with questions of ritual as a distinct feature of religion and particularly of Catholicism. Nevertheless, stylistically the novel is abounding in ritualistic patterns and echoes that unsettle and confound the logic of its plot: when, for example, Haredale encounters Chester in the ruins of his old mansion, one is given the distinct impression that the characters are not autonomous but are moved by powerful destructive forces beyond their ken: Chester rises up out of the ruins like an apparition of

Haredale's own consciousness – it is a summons that Haredale seems incapable of ignoring and they proceed to enact an allegorical drama of rivalry. Significantly this only happens after the story has largely been resolved and immediately undermines the illusion of complex character development and growth implied by Haredale's forgiveness and acceptance of his niece and the honourable Edward Chester. Haredale is not entirely conscious of or in control of who he is and in fact that question seems less important than the evil forces that control him and impel him to action. This adds another dimension to the ritualistic impulses of Dickens's fiction: the ritual call or fascination of spiritual forces in *Pictures* is here a compulsion, a monstrous perversion of instress where the individual is unwittingly caught up in dynamic forces and moves according to patterns of which he is not fully aware. As I have argued in my discussion of the raven, Grip, these magical impulses are all the more troubling because of their apparent triviality: in a world of unprecedented faith in psychological and historical explanations, ritual or religion has been banished to the puerile world of animals and idiots where it exists in a perverse form, bereft of its grandeur and authority, but paradoxically capable of enchantment.

Thus, I have shown that Christian motifs are invoked and partially enacted only ultimately to be undermined by the novel's own melodrama. This is a universe poised on the brink of absurdity where the profound messages of Christianity are confounded by the inexplicable violence and irrationality of the secular world. I have argued that in this novel nothing is free from the drive towards demystification, not even Christian echoes or ritualistic behaviours which are constantly pushed towards parody. But, as in *Villette*, these suggestions are still powerful enough to create a gap in the historical, realist description; a space out of which a different and only partially realised narrative emerges, a drama of passions, charged, as in Hopkins's poetry, with an intense energy that seems to emerge from a divine or demonic presence outside of the characters themselves.

Barnaby Rudge is remarkable for its view of history: rather than trusting in the power of observation and faithfulness to factual details to render a true picture of events, Dickens creates a world of shifting voices – the representative and the hypnotic, where each constantly destabilises the other. In the journalistic *Pictures* Dickens is an observer of Catholic ritual life, remaining somewhat detached and analytical; but here he barely acknowledges it, shrouding the lives of his Catholic characters in mystery. Ritual is

suppressed as an historical reality but the novel fluctuates between realism and a melodramatic mode replete with ritualistic patterns. Because the ritualistic is here part of an indefinable imaginative style rather than an observable space, Dickens does not attempt to control and resist its effects, allowing it on occasion to obscure and overwhelm the social and topical concerns of his text.

I have been attempting to identify a certain quality of Brontë and Dickens's fiction, a feature that manifests itself in the narrative as well as in the style of description: both *Villette* and *Barnaby Rudge* turn obsessively to ceremonial passages – inexplicable patterns of behaviour characterised by rhetorical language and theatrical actions. Both suggest the presence of a nebulous spiritual or moral dimension which has an objective existence outside of the secular concerns of the plot but which is partially summoned into being by the incantatory power of words, sounds, senses and actions. For Brontë this ritual quality echoes and recalls the poetry of Romanticism although it gives it a more traditional, religious shape. For Dickens such passages are more directly theatrical – arising out of a melodramatic understanding of history. In both novels these outcroppings of religious sensibility are not fully assimilated into the realist framework and so demand attention and explanation. I have suggested that this dramatic 'energy' in the language can be described in terms of Hopkins's instress – the process of realising the numinous through dynamic, aural and sensory interaction. In this way these elements can be understood as ritualistic as opposed to realistic, freeing them of associations with psychological complexity and faith in the historical, verifiable and observable.

Newman

It is important not to overstate the occurrence of ritualistic elements in Brontë and Dickens: they are always partial, echoes among more explicit secular and social concerns. I have attempted to detect these features and the way in which they are held in tension with a more objective and descriptive prose and approach, constantly disturbing the dominant narrative with a theatrical undercurrent of unresolved passions and an expressive language redolent of religious rite.

Newman, for whom ritual is a central process through which the divine can be understood and accessed, brings it into focus as the subject matter of *Callista*, a novel

that in some ways can be taken as an apologia for ritual practices and Catholic ritual in particular. It is of interest that Newman chose the novel form rather than his usual discursive essays in order to convey this message. This fact suggests two things about Newman's understanding of ritual: first, it is, or should be, accessible to the common man or woman. Rather than occupying a secret space apart from the social world, ritual is the language of ordinary people and should occupy their minds at least as much as the topical issues of the day which were commonly explored in literature.

Second, Newman's choice of a novel in which to frame a defence of ritual, emphasises its affinities with the arts. I have argued that *Callista* becomes a forum for a comparison between Catholic ritual and a number of literary and dramatic arts such as poetry and theatre. In this way Newman attempts to identify the qualities that Catholic ritual shares with other arts and, more importantly, to establish what it is that ultimately sets ritual apart.

Newman sees elements of divine communion in poetry and theatre: he associates poetry with the platonic impulse towards the numinous. As I have shown, it is only in poetry that Callista is able to express her undefined longing for a world of divine absolutes, her sense of spiritual alienation and exile. But poetry lacks an important element of drama – the ability to realise passions and emotions by embodying them: Callista is drawn towards embodied presences and can act roles with such passion that she becomes and even creates personalities. This power to transform and realise an idea has a quasi-spiritual effect on both actor and observer: through her acting Callista appears larger than life and awakens a corresponding passion in Agellius's breast that turns out to be the promptings of a more intense religious calling. There is already an obscure sense of instress in these art forms, a vague expressive impulse away from self-enclosed individual emotions and towards a communal ritual drama of being.

But ritual is not poetry or theatre – it shares in common with both of these a certain rhetorical formalism and appeal to the emotional life of the individual; it also shares with them an intense consciousness of and impulse towards a transcendent realm. Yet Newman clearly differentiates ritual from both of these: ritual includes rhetorical elements; it is a language with the power to move one emotionally and spiritually. But it is not pure rhetoric – that belongs quite clearly to the fallen theatrical world of Rome

where words and sights are deliberately used to dazzle and confound. Rather, every word in the Catholic faith has moral and spiritual weight and is connected to a complex system of relationships between material and divine which it conjures to life in the utterance. In this way ritual is not simply dramatic but allegorical: it creates a symbolic space where the otherwise distinct categories of the material and the spiritual meet and interact; words in this space become both sound and pictures – they are intimately connected to the system of symbols and symbolic interaction where divine presences become embodied. Further, Catholic ritual is not a performance for Newman – unlike the false rituals and celebrations of Rome, it does not draw attention to itself, nor is it calculated to incite people into an emotional frenzy. Christian ritual for Newman is always directed away from itself and toward God. It is a language, not a show. Its effects are therefore slightly different from those of drama. The individual is deeply affected by ritual in the way that he would be affected by a conversation with God: he becomes enlightened, reflective and deeply touched. Ritual is thus a process or experience in an individual's life which connects him more closely with himself and with God.

Unlike Newman, Dickens does not clearly differentiate ritual from theatre: ritualistic features for him arise largely as a dimension of theatre and the theatrical. He is drawn to the staged and the rhetorical behind and through which he senses the possibility for interaction with transcendent presences. But these patterns are infused by melodrama, making them at times compulsively formulaic – characters are constrained to act out their part in the drama, creating the impression of a world at the mercy of often dark forces.

Brontë also perceives rituals as occupying a theatrical space but for her they are tinged with a romantic visionary colouring combined with a deep realist mistrust of the fantastical. The fear also exists for Brontë that rituals or ritualistic impulses might completely overpower an individual's reason, placing her at the mercy of illogical forces beyond her control: for example the theatre in *Villette* is a space of intense emotional and ritualistic engagement (Lucy is able to lose her inhibitions when on stage and she is deeply affected by the actress Vashti when a member of the audience) but it is also a potentially destructive space as is proven by the sudden fire scare in the midst of Vashti's performance. Thus for Brontë and Dickens, ritual is ambiguously presented – it both offers the possibility of a deeper psychological and spiritual interaction and growth, and

threatens to degenerate into pure performance, dazzling, overwhelming and ensnaring those who witness or participate in it.

For Newman, rituals are always an impulse, never a compulsion. They are the natural expression of the soul's desire for God and they have the effect of liberating the individual into a more authentic selfhood, which is elevated and divine. Newman's understanding of this dynamic relationship between individual and celestial is in some ways more explicit than that of Hopkins: although he is not a Neo-Thomist, he has a very clear, Thomistic notion of the nature of the divine dimension, so much so that his writing about it often becomes dogmatic: this is the case with Callista's dream vision which is very specific in its Christian emphasis, clearly demonstrating the doctrine of martyrdom and salvation.

For Hopkins the presence of God or the Godly is intuitive: although God becomes physically manifest in the material universe as either a loving or a judging being, one cannot understand or interact with him if one is incapable of hearing, sensing or conjuring him into being. For Newman, by contrast, the spiritual dimension has an objective and clearly defined reality outside of the physical world, one that is not beyond the power of language to define; he constantly explains and describes the otherworldly with exactitude. In fact he at times too readily assumes that people are capable of looking beyond the veil or dream of mortal life into a more concrete spiritual realm. This assumption that he is dealing with realities already more demonstrable and tangible than the physical, means that Newman does not explore the ways in which language can be used to sense and summon spiritual presences, a central preoccupation of Hopkins.

It is evident from Newman's *Apologia* when he describes the appearance of the Catholic ghost in his mind that he was aware of and himself experienced a kind of instress, a call to interaction with the divine. In *Callista* he explores ways in which the divine can be accessed and actualised and the central role of ritual in this process. But despite his unshaken faith in the power of ritualised communion with God, in *Callista* such passages are generally described rather than enacted, creating a sense of detachment.

Or perhaps it would be more precise to say that Newman is so conscious of the accurate presentation of doctrinal details that dramatic passages become too direct and dry in their preoccupation with specifics, undermining their emotional and sensory

impact: Callista's dream vision before her death recalls the details of Christ's martyrdom. But the vision is almost too scientific: rather than a mystical revelation of meaning, the significance of the dream is declared from the outset – Callista's prayer, the Our Father, is called a "good beginning of the sacrifice" and followed shortly by a description of the wounds on Christ's hands and feet which become Callista's wounds also (c. xxxii, p. 355). It is hard in the course of this description to remember that this is a dream, a visionary encounter with the divine, and not a dogmatic Catholic treatise on martyrdom. Similarly, Juba's madness is a little too forced: this is partly because one never fully connects with his plight. It seems almost as if Juba is a specimen which Newman uses to define the nature of demonic possession and ritualistic salvation, rather than a human being dramatically participating in a drama of fall and redemption. His bizarre behaviour – the singing of songs, the terrorising of children and so on, is reported in the detached, almost journalistic style of a witness. What it lacks is the sense of presence, the dramatic moment of contact with the supernatural. Thus, Newman is ironically more comfortable exploring the ritualistic in a discursive, objective style, more removed and analytical than that of Brontë or Dickens.

Callista acknowledges and celebrates the centrality of ritual performance in faith; Newman goes further: any contact with or sense of the supernatural necessarily takes on a ritualistic dimension for ritual is the most elevated form of expression, a point where perception gives way to enactment and finally to communion. But Newman's own writing never quite breaks free of the discursive mode and is not able to employ instress in the way that Hopkins does in his poetry. Although Newman acknowledges the imaginative dimension of spirituality – its connection with poetry and theatre and finally (in its most profound form) with ritual, he treats it as solid fact, an inverse mirror of the material world. This detailed and perhaps too rigid picture of the numinous deprives it of imaginative life.

Instress, ritual and realism

Instress bridges the gap between the observer and the observed – it is the process by which latent potential is realised through interaction. From this one can deduce that Instress is Hopkins's way of invoking or applying ritual in his poetry, a process that bears

affinity with and provides new insight into ritualised passages in Brontë and Dickens. Newman writes about ritual both as a central feature of institutional faith as well as a dimension of a spiritually enhanced life. While Newman describes and defines ritual, in *Villette* and *Barnaby Rudge* Brontë and Dickens partially enact it. Dickens's approach is closest to Newman's in the *Pictures from Italy* where he is writing in a journalistic style and considering the question of Catholic ritual practices with a certain cynicism and objectively. But even here, as I have shown, despite his attempts to deflate the effects of the ritualistic culture that he observes, it inspires or encourages a conjuring power in his writing that cannot quite be banished.

George Levine defines the realist movement as a movement towards demystification: he notes the objective of naturalists to expose "the metaphysics implicit in our conventional way of talking about ''self,'' and demystify . . . the language of ''spirit''.[463] Levine's picture of the realist novel does admit a diluted form of spiritual sensibility apparent even in the "pervasive tendency towards secularity"; but its scope is modest: it is simply "energy for moral growth" and "for the possibility of coming to know the other".[464] I have argued that this definition does not account for the sense of spiritual presence in the writing of Brontë and Dickens, the summoning of a power or being that disturbs complacent realist rhetoric and cannot be ignored.

George Eliot once spoke disparagingly of Dickens as an artist "gifted with the utmost power of rendering the external traits of our town population" and incapable of an equivalent power of rendering psychological complexity.[465] But it is in the externalised and the enacted that Dickens connects with the presence of the supernatural: the spiritual sensibility in the novels that I have been discussing is more than simply a moral consciousness – it is realised through performance, communion, feeling, hearing, instress. These features make it ritualistic rather than analytical and removed, and give it a haunting life. But trying to explain ritualistic elements in Brontë and Dickens is like trying to capture a ghost: they remain elusive and sporadic, hovering always on the outskirts of the dominant realist narrative. This ironically gives them an evocative

---

[463] George Levine, *Realism, Ethics and Secularism: Essays on Victorian Literature and Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 19.
[464] Ibid., 127.
[465] George Eliot, "The Natural history of German Life", in *The Essays of George Eliot*, Complete, ed. Nathan Sheppard (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1883), p. 83.

imaginative reality: more like Hopkins's God than Newman's, the numinous in Brontë and Dickens is most powerful when it is sensed, felt, heard, and communed with, rather than when it is simply viewed or described.

Concluding thoughts about theatricality, realism and ritual

My discussion of mid-nineteenth century responses to the theatre brings to light two dimensions of the dramatic to which Dickens, Newman and Brontë were receptive – first, its power to heighten experience by inspiring people to feel more acutely; second its drive towards realising the invisible by conjuring or bringing to life partially felt presences, a sense of a magical or mystical truth that is beyond objective description but yet is capable of being invoked or performed. In this way the dramatic is brought close to religious rite.

This insight into the nature of dramatic language could help to enrich the broader critical debate around Victorian realism. Critical literature dealing with Victorian realist attitudes tends to overstate the powerful drive towards the secular and to overlook the mystical potential of dramatic language in these novels. In his essay collection *Realism, Ethics and Secularism* George Levine argues compellingly that the predominant realist impulse among Victorian writers involves the attempt "to enter the beings of others and feel what they feel, know what they know, be what they are".[466] This empathetic striving beyond selfhood is, however, an entirely secular impulse for Levine, who argues that the "great Victorian trick" was to "feel the sacredness of each individual life without invoking the sacred".[467] In this way the sacred is divested of its dramatic presence and becomes instead an element of the psychological and the emotional aspects of interpersonal relationships.

While I concur with Levine and other commentators such as Fredric Jameson that an important feature of realism is an outreaching, an attempt to break beyond the boundaries of the self,[468] I suggest that such impulses contain within themselves the potential for transformation along dramatic lines, a breaking away not only from selfhood

[466] Levine, *Realism, Ethics and Secularism: Essays on Victorian Literature and Science*, p. 9.
[467] Ibid, p. 6.
[468] Fredric Jameson, "The Experiments of Time: Providence and Realism", in ed. Franco Moretti, *The Novel*, 2 vols (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 2: 122.

but from the norms and expectations of society. A dramatic transformation would involve more than simply an imaginative suspension of disbelief in order to enter into the consciousness of the other: it would involve instead a heightening of emotion and expression giving way to a conversion of heart and soul, a 'becoming' that can only take place in the space of the stage or within the context of a ritual – a rising above oneself to engage with an enhanced, mystical dimension.

In *Practicing New Historicism* Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt argue that the boundaries between the secular and the sacred are frequently blurred in novels of this period because of their tendency to entertain materialist and metaphysical perspectives simultaneously.[469] The authors stress the novel's "rhetoric of uncertainty",[470] but suggest that, because of its fictional status and the fact that it invites readers to suspend disbelief, it is paradoxically open to otherwise incredible possibilities which take on an imaginative vitality if only "inside the terms of this discourse".[471] Greenblatt and Gallagher's argument admits the visionary and hallucinatory quality of these novels, by suggesting that they create images that are in some sense alive; but these critics are ultimately preoccupied with the ambivalence and skepticism from which these gestures arise. For them the novel is engaged in a game of appearances in which readers are complicit but where illusion is never broken.[472] While I concur broadly with these ideas, I suggest that the dramatic language of the novel adds a more concrete dimension to this experience, a language that propels one beyond mere words to include a sense of sights and sounds, creating an almost incantatory effect. I suggest that these moments in the novels fleetingly break away from the free play of ideas encouraged by the author and reader's cynical suspension of disbelief and threaten to rupture the boundaries between the fictional and real worlds, the spiritual and the material. At such moments these imaginative visions are no longer kept at a safe distance from readers, as Greenblatt and Gallagher imply, but are brought closer through the summoning power of language, which unexpectedly transforms them into quasi-embodied presences.

---

469 Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 195.
470 Ibidem.
471 Ibid., p.204.
472 Ibid., p. 169.

From my discussion of Brontë and Dickens it can be deduced that the translation of spiritual energies into secular terms was far from a direct and simple process: the novels that I have discussed are testimony to the conflicts generated by the realist attempt to cut language off from its dramatic and ritual roots. There is a disjunction between the social and political preoccupations of the novelists and the language used to represent this – language steeped in dramatic biblical rhetoric and in Melodrama, which comprises traces of the Medieval Morality Play tradition and a sense of cosmic presences, somewhat incoherently mixed with social and gender stereotypes. I have argued that this gap between the subject matter of the novels and, at times, the use of heightened theatrical language, generates a negative energy, paradoxically invoking a remote ritual dimension of experience.

It is when the novelists approach the question of Catholicism and its ceremonial culture that this linguistic conflict is heightened and given a sharper spiritual colouring. For these novelists and their contemporaries Catholic culture embodies a feminised, anarchic energy, appealing to the emotions rather than to the reason and so disarming Protestant and realist defences. In this way it encourages a loss of control, a vulnerability to powerful, inexplicable forces, a drive towards transformation, which could take on a spiritual dimension. But what is most disarming about Catholic rite is not its alien characteristics but its unacknowledged familiarity – the fact that it plays to the writers' own theatrical sensibilities, to the dramatic potential contained within the very fabric of their language. It therefore unleashes suppressed energies, ghostly echoes of a sacramental past that are called to life in the expressive, the excessive, the exaggerated and the performed.

It is of interest to note that Brontë and Dickens, like most of their contemporaries, find the conventions of ritual averse not only to logic but also to language: at times these spaces are experienced as dreary, monotonous – a strangely silent kind of noise; at other times they are places of cacophony, of meaningless and disorienting sounds. In this they share a kinship with Victorian melodrama in which words were felt to be formulaic, exaggerated and empty of any real significance. Yet, contained within the outward show of theatre and ritual, in its assault on the logical structure and shape of language, there exists the potential for linguistic rebirth: when this negative language makes its way into

the novels, it ruptures, displaces and unsettles objective realist rhetoric, constituting a kind of "Happening",[473] by drawing attention dramatically to its own rhythms and patterns. Closer attention to it suggests that it does not merely signal a breakdown of realist language, an emptying out of meaning, but that it suggests the shift towards a different language which engages and excites the senses: its rhythmic and patterned quality gives the impression of something taking shape – an outward manifestation of an "invisible movement".[474] This pull towards the invisible – the push beyond the boundaries of meaning, suggests a different kind of outreaching from the imaginative reinvention of the self that George Levine has noticed: it is this quality of the dramatic that Newman attempted to bring to the surface in *Callista* – its call to a deeper spiritual expression and communion; it is also this which informs Hopkins's thoughts about instress when he attempts to use the rhetorical power of words to conjure presences. The language of the novels is therefore divided against itself – the realist impulse to control through observation is set against the dramatic impulse to express, perform and involve. The two voices are held in tension, so that the spiritual potential of drama is at once invoked and held at a distance.

These findings have implications for the critical discussion of theatricality in Victorian fiction: while it is important not to downplay the artificial and confounding aspects of the dramatic in novels of the mid-Victorian period, it is also important to acknowledge another possibility – the fact that the dramatic has the potential to contain an authentically felt spiritual impulse. This helps to deepen one's understanding of episodes in the novels that might otherwise appear sentimental, implausible or contrived. Rather than simply dismissing such moments as failed attempts to hold on to an elusive God as Levine and others do, I have suggested that the vivid melodrama of these moments has an unexpected conjuring power, a power that emerges in the very excesses of the language. It is impossible to separate inauthentic theatricality from an authentic spiritual drama in the novels that I have discussed – each gives rise, paradoxically, to the other and I have tried to show that it is in the moments when language is its most

[473] Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (1968; rpt. London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2008), p. 62.
[474] Ibid., p. 127.

formulaic that it also contains potential to disturb and transform accepted ways of seeing, feeling and experiencing, and to invoke a suppressed sacramental dimension.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ackroyd, Peter. *Dickens's London: An Imaginative Vision*. London: Headline, 1987.

----------. *Dickens.* London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1990.

----------. *The History of England Volume II: Tudors.* London: Macmillan, 2012.

Adams, James Eli. *A History of Victorian Literature*. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

Alighieri, Dante. *Dante's Epistle to Cangrande*. Ed. and trans. Robert Hollander. 1993; rpt Michigan, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1996.

----------. *Il Convivio*. Ed. Michele Barbi and Antonio Enzo Quaglio. Firenze: Felice le Monier, 1968.

----------. *La Divina Commedia*. Ed. F. Mariani and F. Gnere. 1996; rpt Torino: Loescher, 2001.

Allingham, Philip V. "Charles 'Carlo' Dickens In and Out of Italy in 1844: *The Chimes*". *Dickens Studies Annual* 41 (June 2010): 127–49.

Andrews, Malcolm. *Charles Dickens and His Performing Selves*: *Dickens and the Public Readings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Armitt, Lucie. "Haunted Childhood in Charlotte Brontë's '*Villette*'". *Children in Literature*. Ed. Karin Lesnik-Oberstein. Special issue of *The Yearbook of English Studies* 32 (2002): 217–28.

Arnold, Matthew. *The Poetical Works of Matthew Arnold.* New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Company, 1897.

Auerbach, Nina. *Private Theatricals: The Lives of the Victorians*. Cambridge, MA, London: Harvard University Press, 1990.

Austin, Linda M. "Emily Brontë's Homesickness". *Victorian Studies* 44. 4 (Summer 2002): 573–96.

Axton, W.F. *Circle of Fire: Dickens's Vision and Style and the Popular Victorian Theatre.* Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1966.

Balthasar, Hans Urs. *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*. Trans. Graham Harrison. San Franscisco: Ignatius Press, 1988.

Barish, Jonas. *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1981.

Barker, Juliet. *The Brontës*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1994.

Beckwith, Sarah. *Signifying God: Social Relation and Symbolic Act in the York Corpus Christi Plays*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

Bertman, Stephen. "Dante's Role in the Genesis of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*". *Dickens Quarterly* 24.3 (Sept. 2007): 167–75.

Bishirjian, Richard J. "Carlyle's Political Religion". *The Journal of Politics* 38.1 (Feb 1976): 95–113.

Booth, Michael R. *English Melodrama*. London: Herbert Jenkins, 1965.

Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1961.

Bottum, Joseph. "The Gentleman's True Name: *David Copperfield* and the Philosophy of Naming". *Nineteenth Century Literature* 49.4 (March 1995): 435–55.

Bowen, John. *Other Dickens: Pickwick to Chuzzlewit*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Brannan, Robert Louis. *Under The Management of Mr. Charles Dickens: His Production of* "*The Frozen Deep*". Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1966.

Brantlinger, Patrick and William B. Thesing, eds. *A Companion to The Victorian Novel*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002.

Brontë, Charlotte. *The Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë* 1833–1834. Ed. Christine Alexander. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991.

----------. *Shirley* (1849). Ed. Herbert Rosengarten and Margaret Smith. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.

----------. *Tales of Glass Town, Angria and Gondal: Selected Early Writings*. Ed. Christine Alexander. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

----------. *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*. 2 vols. Ed. Margaret Smith. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995.

----------. *Selected Letters of Charlotte Brontë*. Ed. Margaret Smith. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

----------. *The Professor* (1857). London and New York: Harper & Brothers, 1900.

----------. *Villette* (1853). Ed. Helen M. Cooper. London: Penguin, 1994.

Brooks, Peter. *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976.

Brook, Peter. *The Empty Space*. 1968; rpt London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2008.

Burstein, Miriam Elizabeth. *Victorian Reformations: Historical Fiction and Religious Controversy, 1820–1900*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014.

Canuel, Mark. "'Holy Hypocrisy' and the Government of Belief: Religion and Nationalism in the Gothic". *Studies in Romanticism* 34. 4 (Winter 1995): 3–24.

Capps, Donald. "Newman's Truth: Irony and Metaphors of the self in the *Apologia*". *Religion & Literature* 29.2 (1997): 1–25.

Carey, John. *The Violent Effigy: A Study of Dickens's Imagination*. 1973; rpt London: Faber and Faber, 1991.

Carlyle, Thomas. *Past and Present* (1838). Ed. P.G. Woodhouse. 1912; rpt London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1970.

----------. *Sartor Resartus and On Heroes and Hero Worship* (1841). 1908; rpt London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1964.

Chase, Karen. *Eros & Psyche: The Representation of Personality in Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, and George Eliot*. New York and London: Methuen, 1984.

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

----------. *All Things Considered*. New York: J. Lane, 1909.

----------. *The Victorian Age in Literature*. London: Butterworth, 1936.

Chitham, Edward. *A Life of Emily Brontë*. Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1987.

Chittick, Kathryn. *Dickens and the 1830s*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Christ, Carol T. *The Finer Optic: The Aesthetic of Particularity in Victorian Poetry.* New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1975.

Clarke, Micael. M. "'Jane Eyre' and the Grimms' Cinderella". *Studies in English Literature.* 40.4 (Autumn 2000): 695–710.

Clifford, Gay. *The Transformations of Allegory.* London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974.

Close, A. J. "Sancho Panza: Wise Fool". *The Modern Language Review* 68. 2 (April 1973): 344–57.

Clubbe, J. *Carlyle and His Contemporaries. Essays in Honour of Charles Richard Sanders.* North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1976.

Cockshut, A.O.J. *The Imagination of Charles Dickens.* London: Collins, 1961.

Colby, Robert A. "The Poetical Structure of Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*". *The Journal of Religion* 33.1 (1953): 47–57.

----------."*Villette* and the Life of the Mind". *PMLA* 75.4 (Sept. 1960): 410–19.

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *The Philosophical Lectures of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Hitherto Unpublished*. Ed. Kathleen Coburn. London: Pilot Press, 1949.

Colledge, Gary L. "*The Life of Our Lord* Revisited". *Dickens Studies Annual* 36 (2005): 125–51.

----------. *Dickens, Christianity and The Life of Our Lord*. New York: Continuum, 2009.

Collins, Philip, ed. *Charles Dickens: The Critical Heritage*. 1986; London and New York: Routledge, 2005.

Collins, Wilkie. *Basil*. 1852; rpt London: Sampson Low, Son & Co, 1862.

Collins, Philip, ed. *The Critical Heritage: Charles Dickens*. 1986; rpt London and New York: Routledge, 2005.

Cox, John D. and David Scott Kastan. *A New History of Early English Drama.* New York, Chichester, West Sussex: Colombia University Press, 1997.

David, Deirdre, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to The Victorian* Novel. 2001; rpt Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Davies, Horton. *Worship and Theology in England*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961–75.

Davis, Earle. *The Flint and the Flame.* Columbia: Missouri University Press, 1963.

De Lillo, George. *The London Merchant Or The History of George Barnwell*. London: Henry Lintot, 1754.

De Stasio, Clotilde. "The Traveller as Liar: Dickens and the 'Invisible Towns' in Northern Italy". *The Dickensian* 450.96 (Spring 2000): 5–13.

Dickens, Charles. *A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Books.* Ed. Robert Douglas-Fairhurst. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

----------. *American Notes and Pictures From Italy*. London: Bradbury & Evans, 1846.

----------. *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859). Ed. George Woodcock. 1970; rpt London: Penguin Books, 1988.

----------. *Barnaby Rudge: A Tale of the Riots of Eighty* (1841). Ed. John Bowen. London: Penguin Books, 2003.

----------. *Bleak House* (1853). Intrtod. J. Hillis Miller. Harmondsworth: Penguin English Library, 1971.

----------. *Christmas Stories From "Household Words" and "All The Year Round" By Charles Dickens*. Introd. Ernest Rhys. 1910; rpt London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1917.

----------. *David Copperfield* (1849–50). Ed. Jeremy Tambling. London: Penguin Books, 1997.

----------. *Dickens's Journalism: Sketches by Boz and other early papers 1833-39.* Ed. Michael Slater. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1994.

----------. *Dombey and Son* (1848). Ed. Andrew Sanders. London: Penguin books, 2002.

----------. *Great Expectations* (1860–61). Ed. Angus Calder. 1965; rpt London: Penguin Books, 1985.

----------. *Hard Times* (1854). Ed. David Craig. 1969; rpt London: Penguin Books, 1974.

----------. *Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843–4). Ed. Patricia Ingham. London: Penguin, 2002.

----------. *Little Dorrit* (1857). Ed. Stephen Wall and Helen Small. Rev. edn. London: Penguin Books, 2003.

----------. *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi* (1838). London; New York: G. Routledge and Sons, 1875.

----------. *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838). Ed. Michael Slater. London: Penguin English Library, 2012.

----------. *Oliver Twist* (1838). Ed. Peter Fairclough. 1966; rpt Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977.

----------. *Sketches by Boz* (1836). Philadelphia, PA: Lea and Blanchard, 1839.

----------. *The Letters of Charles Dickens.* 12 vols. Ed. Madeline House and Graham Storey, *et al*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965–2002.

----------. *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* (1838). London: Chapman and Hall, 1839.

----------. *The Mystery of Edwin Drood & Other Stories*. Ed. Peter Preston. 1998; rpt London: Wordsworth Classics, 2005.

----------. *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841). Ed. Angus Easson. Introd. Malcom Andrews. 1972; rpt London: Penguin Books, 1985.

----------. *The Pickwick Papers* (1837). Ed. Mark Wormald. 1999; rpt London: Penguin, 2003.

----------. *The Selected Letters of Charles Dickens*. Ed. Jenny Hartley. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

----------. *The Speeches of Charles Dickens*. Ed. Kenneth J. Fielding. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960.

----------. *The Speeches of Charles Dickens: A Complete Edition.* Ed. K. J. Fielding, Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988.

----------. *The Uncommercial Traveller.* London: Riverside Press, 1869.

----------. *The Works of Charles Dickens: Miscellaneous Papers Plays and Poems*. New York: Bigelow, Brown & Co., 1916.

----------. *To be Read at Dusk, and Other Stories, Sketches and Essays*. London: Redway, 1898.

Dickens, Charles, Jr. "Glimpses of Charles Dickens". *The North American Review* 160. 462 (May 1895): 525–37.

Dickens, Sir Henry Fielding. *The Recollections of Sir Henry Dickens*. London: W. Heinemann, 1934.

Dixon, Jude V., ed. *Victorian Religious Discourse: New Directions in Criticism*. New York, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

De la L. Oulton, Carolyn. *Literature and Religion in Mid-Victorian England: From Dickens to Eliot*. London: Macmillan, 2003.

Doody, Margaret Anne. *The True Story of the Novel.* New Jersey, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996.

Dorman, Susann. "*Hypatia* and *Callista*: The Initial Skirmish Between Kingsley and Newman". *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 34.2 (Sept. 1979): 173–93.

Duthie, Enid. L. *The Foreign Vision of Charlotte Brontë*. London: Macmillan, 1975.

Dyson, A.E. *The Inimitable Dickens: A Reading of the Novels*. London: Macmillan, 1970.

Eagleton, T. *Literary Theory: An Introduction.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1996.

----------. *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës*. London: Macmillan, 1975.

---------. *The English Novel: An Introduction*. Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.

Eigner, Edwin M. *The Dickens Pantomime*. Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1989.

Eliot, George. *Adam Bede* (1859). Ed. Carol A. Martin. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

----------. *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1878). Iowa, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1994.

----------. *Middlemarch* (1871–2). Ed. W.J. Harvey. 1965; rpt Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975.

----------. *The Essays of George Eliot*. Ed. Nathan Sheppard. New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1883.

----------. *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). Ed. A. S. Byatt. 1979; rpt London: Penguin Books, 1982.

Erasmus, Desiderius. *In Praise of Folly* (1509). New York: Cosimo, 2007.

Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays. Ed. A.C. Cawley. London: Everyman's Library, 1970.

Faught, C. Brad. *The Oxford Movement: A Thematic History of Tractarians and their Times*. PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003.

Ferguson, Susan L. "Dickens's Public Readings and the Victorian Author". *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 41.4 (Autumn 2001): 729–49.

Fletcher, Jefferson. B. "The Allegory of the *Vita Nuova*". *Modern Philology* 11.1 (July 1913): 19–37.

Fisher, Devon. *Roman Catholic Saints and Early Victorian Literature: Conservatism, Liberalism and the Emergence of Secular Culture.* England: Ashgate, 2012.

Forster, E.M. *Aspects of the Novel and Related Writings* (1927). London: Edward Arnold, 1974.

Forster, J. *The Life of Charles Dickens* (1872–74). 2 vols. London: Chapman and Hall, 1876.

Frank, Katherine. *Emily Brontë: A Chainless Soul*. London: Penguin Books, 1990.

Gallagher, Catherine and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Garis, R. *The Dickens Theatre: A Reassessment of the Novels.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965.

Gaskell, Elizabeth. *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*. 2 vols. London: Smith Elder & Co, 1857.

Gauvin, C. "Rite et jeu dans le theatre anglais du Moyen Age". *Revue d'Histoire du Theatre* 29 (1977): 128–40.

Gavazzi, Alessandro. *Six Lectures.* Toronto: Donough and Brother, 1853.

Gilead, Sarah. "Liminality, Anti-Liminality and the Victorian Novel". *ELH* 53.1 (Spring 1986): 183–97.

Gilman, Donald. *Everyman & Company: Essays on the Theme and Structure of the European Moral Play.* New York: AMS Press, 1989.

Ginsburg, Michal Peled. "The Case Against Plot in *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend* ". *ELH* 59.1 (Spring 1992): 175–95.

Girard, René. *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*. Trans.Yvonne Freccero. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1961.

----------. *To Double Business Bound: Essays on Literature, Mimesis, and Anthropology.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.

----------. *Violence and the Sacred*. Trans. Patrick Gregory. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977.

Glavin, John. *After Dickens: Reading, Adaptation and Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Glen, Heather, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

----------. *Charlotte Brontë: The Imagination in History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Goldberg, Michael. *Carlyle and Dickens.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1972.

Goodwin, Gregory H. "Keble and Newman: Tractarian Aesthetics and the Romantic Tradition". *Victorian Studies* 30.4 (Summer 1987): 475–494.

Gordon, Lyndall. *Charlotte Brontë: A Passionate Life*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1994.

Grant, D. *Realism.* London: Methuen, 1974.

Gresley, William. *Anglo-Catholicism: A Short History of the English Church.* London: James Burns, 1884.

Hadley, Elaine. *Melodramatic Tactics: Theatricalised Dissent in the English Market Place: 1800–1885.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995.

Hardin, Richard F. "'Ritual' in Recent Criticism: The Elusive Sense of Community" *PMLA* 98. 5 (Oct. 1983): 846–62.

Hardy, Barbara. *Forms of Feeling in Victorian Fiction.* London: Methuen, 1986.

----------. *The Moral Art of Dickens.* London: The Athlone Press, 1970.

Harris, J. W. *Medieval Theatre in Context: An Introduction.* London, New York: Routledge, 1992.

Hazlitt, William. *The Plain Speaker: Opinions on Books, Men and Things*. 2 vols. London: Henry Colburn, 1826.

----------. *Selected Essays*. Ed. George Sampson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1917.

----------. *A View of the English Stage or a Series of Dramatic Criticisms.* London: Robert Stodard, 1818.

Headlam Wells, Robin, Glenn Burgess and Rowland Wymer, eds. *Neo-Historicism: Studies in Renaissance Literature, History and Politics*. Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000.

Hill, Alan G. "Three 'Visions' of Judgement: Southey, Byron, and Newman". *The Review of English Studies*: 41.163 (August 1990): 334–35.

Hogan, William. *Popery As It Was and As It Is, Auricular Confession, Popish Nunneries.* Hartford: Silas Andrus & Son, 1853.

Hollington, Michael and Francesca Orestano, eds. *Dickens and Italy: Little Dorrit and Pictures from Italy.* Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009.

Hopkins, Gerard Manley. *The Major Works*. Ed. Catherine Philips. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Houghton, Walter. E. *The Victorian Frame of Mind*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1957.

----------. *The Art of Newman's* "*Apologia*". London : H. Milford, Oxford University Press, 1945.

Houliston, V. H. "That Most Excellent Gift: Dickens's use of Religious Material in the Treatment of the Theme of Charity". Diss., University of Cape Town, 1982.

House, Humphry. *The Dickens World*. 1941; rpt London / Oxford / New York: Oxford University Press, 1969.

Hughes, Felicity. "Narrative Complexity in *David Copperfield". ELH* 41.1 (Spring 1974): 89–105.

Hull, John. "A Spirituality of Disability: The Christian Heritage As Both Problem And Potential". *Studies in Christian Ethics* 16.2 (2003): 21–35.

Hyde, William J. "George Eliot and the Climate of Realism". *PMLA* 72.1 (March 1957): 147–64.

Hynes, Joseph A. "Image and Symbol in *Great Expectations*". *ELH* 30.3 (Sept. 1963): 258–92.

Jenner, Stephen. *Steepleton: Or High Church and Low Church: Being the Present tendencies of Parties in the Church, Exhibited in the History of Frank Faithful.* London: Longman Brown, Greens, and Longmans, 1847.

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

Johnson, Edgar. *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph.* Abridged edn. New York: Penguin Books, 1986.

Jonson, Ben. *Volpone or The Fox*. Ed. Brian Parker. 1983; rpt Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999.

Jordan, J.O., ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Kaplan, F. *Dickens: A Biography.* New York: William Morow, 1988.

Keble, John. *Lectures on Poetry: 1832–1841*. Trans. Edward Kershaw Francis. 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912.

Ker, Ian. *John Henry Newman: A Biography.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988.

----------, and Terrence Merrigan, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to John Henry Newman*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

----------, and Alan G. Hill, eds. *Newman after a Hundred Years.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990.

Kilgarriff, Michael. *The Golden Age of Melodrama.* London: Wolfe Publishing, 1974.

Kingsley, Charles. *His Letters and Memories of His Life*. 2 vols. Ed. Frances Eliza Kingsley. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Knight, Mark and Emma Mason, eds. *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature: An Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Kucich, J. *Excess and Restraint in the Novels of Charles Dickens.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1981.

----------, and Jenny Bourne Taylor, eds. *The Nineteenth-Century Novel 1820–1880*. Oxford History of the Novel in English 3. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Kurnick, David. *Empty Houses: Theatrical Failure and the Novel*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012.

Lane, Christopher. "Charlotte Brontë on the Pleasure of Hating". *ELH* 69.1 (Spring 2002)

Larson, Janet L. *Dickens and the Broken Scripture*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1985.

Leavis, F. R. and Q. D. Leavis. *Dickens: The Novelist*. Second rev. edn. London: Chatto & Windus Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1970.

Lee, Alison. *Realism and Power: Postmodern British Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1990.

Levine, George. *The Boundaries of Fiction: Carlyle, Macaulay, Newman*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968.

----------. *Realism, Ethics and Secularism: Essays on Victorian Literature and Science.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

----------. “Newman’s Fiction and the Failure of Reticence”. *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 8.3 (Autumn 1966): 359–73.

Lewes, George Henry. *On Actors and the Art of Acting*. London: Smith Elder & Co, 1875.

----------. *Lope De Vegas and Calderon*. London: Charles Knight & Co, 1845.

Lewis, C.S. *The Abolition of Man* (1943). 1944; rpt New York: Harper Collins, 1974.

----------. *The Allegory of Love* (1936). London: Oxford University Press, 1975.

----------. *The Discarded Image* (1964). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.

Lichtmann, Maria R. “The Incarnational Aesthetic of Gerard Manley Hopkins”. *Religion & Literature* 23.1 (Spring 1991): 37–50.

Linder, Cynthia. A. *Romantic Imagery in the Novels of Charlotte Brontë*. London: Macmillan, 1978.

Litvak, J. *Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth Century English Novel.* Berkeley/ Los Angeles/Oxford: University of California Press, 1992.

Mackay, Carol Hanbery, ed. *Dramatic Dickens.* London: Macmillan Press, 1989.

MacKenzie, Norman and Jeanne. *Dickens: A Life.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.

Macready, William. *Macready’s Reminiscences and Selections from his Diaries and Letters*. Ed. Sir Frederick Pollock. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1875.

Madson, D. L. *Rereading Allegory: A Narrative Approach to Genre.* New York: Satin Martin’s Press, 1994.

Mansell, Darrel, Jr. “Ruskin and George Eliot’s ‘Realism’”. *Criticism* 7.3 (Summer 1965): 203–216.

Marchbancks, Paul. “From Caricature to Character: The Intellectually Disabled in Dickens’s Novels”. *Dickens Quarterly* 23. 3 (Sept. 2006): 169–79.

Mason, Emma. “‘Some God of Wild Enthusiast’s Dreams’: Emily Brontë’s Religious Enthusiasm”. *Victorian Literature and Culture* 31. 1 (2003): 263–77.

McGowan, John P. “The Turn of George Eliot’s Realism”. *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 35.2 (September 1980): 171–92.

----------. “*David Copperfield*: The Trial of Realism”. *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 34.1 (June 1979): 1–19.

Meckier, Jerome. *Hidden Rivalries in Victorian Fiction: Dickens, Realism, and Revaluation*. Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1987.

Micasiw, Kim Ian. "*Barnaby Rudge*: The Since of The Fathers". *ELH*. 56. 3 (Autumn 1989): 571–92.

Milbank, Alison. *Dante and the Victorians.* Manchester, New York: Manchester University Press, 1998.

Miller, J. Hillis. *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels.* Cambridge, MA: 1958; rpt London: Oxford University Press, 1968.

----------. *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers*. 1963; rpt Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000.

Moran, Maureen. *Catholic Sensationalism and Victorian Literature*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007.

Moretti, Franco, ed. *The Novel*. 2 vols. Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006.

Newcomb, Mildred. *The Imagined World of Charles Dickens*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1989.

Newman, John Henry. *A Letter to Rev. E.B. Pusey On His Recent Eirenicon.* London: Longmans, Green, Reader & Dyer, 1866.

----------. *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845). London/New York/Bombay Calcutta: Longmans, Green & Co, 1909.

----------. *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1864). Ed. Ian Ker. London: Penguin, 1994.

----------. *Callista: A Tale of the Third Cenury* (1859). London, New York: Longmans, Green, & Co, 1891.

----------. *Essays Critical and Historical* (1877). 2 vols. London: Longmans, Green, 1914.

----------. *Loss and Gain.* London: James Burns, 1848.

----------. *Newman: Prose and Poetry*. Ed. Geoffrey Tillotson. London: R. Hart-Davis, 1957.

----------. *Poetry with Reference to Aristotle's Poetics.* Ed. Albert. S. Cook. Boston: Ginn & Company, 1891.

----------. *Sermons: Chiefly on the Theory of Religious Belief Preached Before the University of Oxford*. London: J.G.F. & J. Rivington, 1843.

----------. *The Idea of a University Defined and Illustrated*. London, New York and Bombay: Longmans, Green & Co, 1905.

----------. *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*. Ed. Francis J. McGrath, Gerard Tracey, et al. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

----------. *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*. Ed. Thomas Gornall, S.J. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981.

Nixon, Jude V. "'[M]any Jewels set in dirt': The Christology, *Pictures from Italy*, and Pre-Raphaelite Art". *Dickens Studies Annual* 41 (June 2010): 81–125.

----------. *Victorian Religious Discourse: New Directions in Criticism*. New York, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

Nockles, Peter B. *The Oxford Movement in Context: Anglican High Churchmanship 1760–1857*. 1994; rpt Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Nuttall, A.D. *Two Concepts of Allegory.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967.

Pedlar, Valerie. *The Most Dreadful Visitation: Male Madness in Victorian Fiction*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007.

Peschier, Diana. *Nineteenth Century Anti-Catholic Discourses: The Case of Charlotte Brontë*. Basingstoke, New York: Macmillan, 2005.

Peters, Rosemary A. "The Individual in the (Catholic) Mass: Restoration, Self and Community in Liturgy and Literature". *Gramma: Journal of Theory and Criticism*. 10 (2010)**:** 49–66.

Poe, Edgar Allan. "Review of *Barnaby Rudge*", *Graham's Magazine* (Feb 1842). Ed. G.R. Thompson. *Essays and Reviews*. New York: Literary Classics, 1984.

Poole, Adrian and Gale Marshall, eds. *Victorian Shakespeare: Literature and Culture.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

Potter, Robert. *The English Morality Play: Origins, History and Influence of A Dramatic Tradition.* London, Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975.

Quilligan, M. *The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre.* Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1979.

Rem, Tore. "Fictional Exorcism: Parodies of the Supernatural in Dickens". *Dickensian* 96.450 (Spring 2000): 14–28.

Richards, Eliza. "Outsourcing 'The Raven': Retroactive Origins". *Victorian Poetry* 43. 2 (Summer 2005): 205–221.

Rollinson, Phillip. *Classical Theories of Allegory and Christian Culture.* Pennsylvania, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1981.

Rogers, Philip. "Tory Brontë: 'Shirley' and the 'MAN'". *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 58.2 (Sept. 2003).

Rosen, David. "*A Tale of Two Cities*: Theology of Revolution". *Dickens Studies Annual* 27 (1998): 171–85.

Ruskin, John. *The Literary Criticism of John Ruskin*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Anchor Books, 1965.

Sanders, Andrew. *Charles Dickens: Resurrectionist*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982.

----------. *The Short Oxford History of English Literature.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

----------. *The Victorian Historical Novel.* London: Macmillan, 1978.

Schiefelbein, Michael. "Little Nell, Catholicism, and Dickens's Investigation of Death". *Dickens Quarterly* 9.1 (1992): 115–25.

----------. *The Lure of Babylon: Seven Protestant Novelists and Britain's Roman Catholic Revival*. Georgia, GA: Mercer University Press, 2001.

Schoch, Richard W. "'We Do Nothing but Enact History': Thomas Carlyle Stages the Past". *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 54.1 (June 1999): 27–52.

Schwarzbach, F. S. *Dickens and the City.* London: The Athlone Press, 1978.

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

Shakespeare, William. *As You Like It* (1599). Ed. Juliet Dusinberre. London: Arden, 2006.

Silverton, Theodore. "Allegory and Literary Form". *PMLA* 82.1 (March 1967): 23–32.

Skilton, David. *The Early and Mid-Victorian Novel*. London: Routledge, 1993.

Slater, Michael. *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Dickens*. London: Duckworth, 1999.

Smalley, Barbara. *George Eliot and Flaubert: Pioneers of the Modern Novel*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1974.

Smith, Eliza. *The Progress of Beguilement to Romanism: a Personal Narrative.* London: Seeley's, 1850.

Smith, G. *Charles Dickens: A Literary Life*. New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1996.

Smith, James L., ed. *Victorian Melodrama*. London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1976.

Smith, Karl Ashley. *Dickens And The Unreal City*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

Sobolev, Dennis. "Semantic Counterpoint and the Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins". *Victorian Literature and Culture* 35. 1 (2007): 103–119.

Sroka, Kenneth M. "A Tale of Two Gospels: Dickens and John". *Dickens Studies Annual* 27 (1998): 145–69.

Stonehouse, John Harrison. *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.

Schwarzbach, F.S. *Dickens and the City*. London: Athlone, 1978.

Sullivan, Garret A. Jr., Patrick Cheney and Andrew Hadfield, eds. *Early Modern English Drama: A Critical Companion*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Tarr, Rodger L. "Dickens's Debt to Carlyle's 'Justice Metaphor' in *The Chimes*". *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 27.2 (Sept. 1972): 208–215.

Tayler, Charles B. *Tractarianism Not of God: Sermons.* London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1844.

Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.

Taylor, Jerome and Alan H. Nelson, eds. *Medieval English Drama Essays Critical and Contextual*. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1972.

Thackeray, William Makepeace. *Vanity Fair: A Novel Without a Hero* (1847–8). Ed. John Carey. London: Penguin Classics, 2001.

----------. *The History of Henry Esmond* (1852). Chicago: Scott Foresman, 1902.

Thormählen, Marianne. *The Brontës and Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Tillotson, Kathleen. *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955.

Tomalin, Claire. *Charles Dickens: A Life.* London: Viking, 2011.

Tracts for the Times. 6 vols. Oxford: James Parker, 1868.

Trollope, Anthony. *The Warden* (1855). New York: Dick and Fitzgerald, 1862.

Trollope, Frances. *Father Eustace: A Tale of The Jesuits.* London: Henry Colburn, 1847.

Turner, Victor. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1974.

----------. "Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality". *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 6.4 (1979): 456–499.

----------. *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York: Performing Arts Journal, 1982.

----------. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure.* Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1969.

Van Dyke, Carolynn. *The Fiction of Truth: Structures of Meaning in Narrative and Dramatic Allegory*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985.

Vescovi, Alessandro, Luisa Villa, Paul Vita, eds. *The Victorians and Italy: Literature, Travel, Politics and Art.* Milan: Polimetrica, 2009.

Vicinus, Martha. "'Helpless and Unfriended'": Nineteenth-Century Domestic Melodrama". *New Literary History* 13.1 (Autumn 1981): 127–143.

Vidler, Alec R. *The Church in an Age of Revolution: 1789 to the Present Day*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1962.

Vlock, Deborah. *Dickens, Novel Reading, and the Popular Victorian Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Vogel, Jane. *Allegory in Dickens*. Alabama, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1977.

Voskuil, Lynn M. *Acting Naturally: Victorian Theatricality and Authenticity*. Virginia, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2004.

----------. "Acting Naturally: Brontë, Lewes and the Problem of Gender Performance". *ELH* 62.2 (Summer 1995): 409–442.

Walder, Dennis. *Dickens and Religion*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981.

Ward, David A. "Distorted Religion: Dickens, Dissent, and *Bleak House*". *Dickens Studies Annual* 29 (2000): 195–32.

Waterman Ward, Bernadette. "Philosophy and Inscape: Hopkins and the Formalities of Duns Scotus". *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* (Summer 1990): 214–249.

Welsh, A. *The City of Dickens*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971.

Whitman, J. *Allegory: The Dynamics of an Ancient and Medieval Technique*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987.

Wilberforce, William. *A Practical view of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians*. London: T. Cadell, Jun. and W. Davies, 1798.

Wilson, A.N. *The Victorians*. London: Norton, 2003.

Wilt, Judith . "'*Shirley*': Reflections on Marrying Moores". *Victorian Literature and Culture* 30.1 (2002).

Winters, Warrington. "Dickens and the Psychology of Dreams". *PMLA* 63.3 (September 1948): 984–1006.

Woods, Leigh. "'As If I Had Been Another Man'": Dickens, Transformation, and an Alternative Theatre". *Theatre Journal* 40.1 (March 1988): 88–100.

Wolff, Robert Lee. *Gains and Losses: Novels of Faith and doubt in Victorian England*. New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1977.

Woolf, R. *The English Mystery Plays*. London, Southampton: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972.

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