

**REPRINTED FROM DICKENS: THE CRAFT OF FICTION AND THE
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NOMADIC SUBJECTS: STREETWALKERS AND SEXUAL
WANDERERS IN DICKENS AND GASKELL

I. The title of this essay is suggested by Rosi Braidotti's book *Nomadic Subjects* (1994), or, rather, by a specific imaginary figuration that she calls "nomadism". Braidotti (who teaches Women's Studies at the University of Utrecht and is a well known scholar in the field of philosophy and feminist theories) means with the term "figuration" neither a representation nor a metaphor, but a diagram or map, the political elaboration of an alternative subjectivity, "a politically informed cognitive map that reads the present in terms of one's embedded situation". She writes:

The nomad expresses my own figuration of a situated, culturally differentiated understanding of the subject [...]. Nomadism refers to the kind of critical consciousness that resists settling into socially coded modes of thought and behaviour. It is the subversion of set conventions that defines the nomad state, not the literal act of travelling: the nomad stands for the relinquishing and the deconstruction of any sense of fixed identity (Braidotti 1997: 11-12).

I want to borrow Braidotti's nomadic figuration, which belongs to postmodernity, and apply it to a nineteenth-century, European, female subjectivity: that of the prostitute and of other sexual transgressors, such as the unmarried mother and the adulteress. In adopting this conceptual category, I also take the liberty of playing with such an expression, using it in both literal and metaphorical sense. Terms like streetwalker, wanderer and vagabond are highly polysemic and allow us to discuss of a very powerful myth in Victorian times, that still intrigues historians, literary critics, feminist and cultural studies analysts.

Although in the representation of sexually compromised women in Victorian literature and art the recurring metaphors are those connected to dirt and disease (such as "the taint", infection and pollution), it is space images that most convey the idea of moral guilt and sexual sin: this type of woman is often defined as "fallen", "deviant" or "wayward". It is always a movement, either downwards ("to fall into prostitution"), or from the right

path (“to go astray”), that is implied in various descriptions of sexual transgression committed by women. Victorian culture exhibits, in both literature and visual arts, figurations of “nomadism” in the representation of “fallen women” as subjects who resist settling into socially coded modes of behaviour and, in particular, subvert set conventions regarding the doctrine of the “separate spheres”. The figure of the deviant woman is an icon of social and cultural transgression as it implies a passage from the domestic sphere (woman’s proper sphere) to the public one; a change from a condition of stasis to one of errancy and restlessness. As the nomad stands for “the deconstruction of any sense of fixed identity” (to quote Braidotti again), so the deviant woman – in the Victorian imaginary – deconstructs the identity of Woman as the Angel in the House.

Prostitution and other forms of illicit female sexuality can be perceived as nomadic conditions also in a more literal sense: streetwalkers and other sexual wanderers are always connected to the city space. These characters are often depicted as they are moving through the city, sometimes defiantly, sometimes in stealthy steps, trying to hide themselves, or in the act of being pursued.

My argument here is that Victorian culture, in order to represent female sexual transgression, was to articulate a language – both literary and visual – through which a particular relation between space and character was established. So, sexual sin is rendered through a particular posture of the woman’s body: not only prone or kneeling as a culprit and a penitent sinner, or while stepping out of the home (the father’s or husband’s), walking across the city in loneliness and despair; but also in less conventional postures: on the point of “falling” – but not quite – into the abyss, or of “rising up”, back to respectability.

So, this space language, while expressing the sense of wandering and erring, both literally and metaphorically, also contains an element that contradicts the stereotype of the fallen woman as a victim or a weak creature lacking moral agency and the autonomy and coherent identity of the normative masculine subject. This is, in fact, the figure that emerges from the rhetoric of fallenness, which is so pervasive in mid-Victorian culture; a rhetoric that “is shaped through interactions between Victorian ideologies of gender and several other historical factors: tensions between materialist and idealist understandings of the self and of the moral action, debates on social reform and character transformation, and, not least, preoccupations with the relation between social identities and aesthetic forms” (Anderson 1993: 1). We can argue that, in the representation of sexually compromised women, writers and artists could not subtract themselves to the attraction of repulsion exercised by this cultural myth. As if surrounded by an aura of mystery, this figure possessed an inexplicable power, which derived from its

embodying a contradiction: both a victim of, and a threat for, society, the fallen woman became an omnipotent symbol of the mechanistic and deterministic forces of Victorian society and part of the male imaginary of the time. The characters of fallen women that are drawn in most novels and paintings of mid-Victorian England exude a strength that openly contrasts with both the social models offered to their authors by “real” life and the Christian lesson their stories were meant to teach.

My intention, therefore, is to look at some examples of “fallenness”, taken from Dickens’s and Gaskell’s fiction, in the “nomadic” perspective I have suggested and within the context of the current critical debate.¹

II. In Victorian culture, the figuration of nomadism – in its literal meaning of leading a wandering life – is usually applied to the condition of women with no fixed home or stable and legal sexual attachments. Henry Mayhew, in a series of articles that appeared in *The Morning Chronicle* (1850), groups streetwalkers, thieves and other supposed swindlers together, asserting that “the pickpockets – the beggars – the prostitutes – the street-sellers – the street-performers – the cabmen – the coachmen – the watermen – the sailors and such like” are similar, because “these classes [...] partake more or less of the purely vagabond, doing nothing whatsoever for their living, but moving from place to place preying upon the earnings of the more industrious portions of the community” (cit. in Gallagher 1986: 90).

Terms referring to errancy, in the sense of falling into error and sin, can be found in Dickens and Gaskell when describing prostitutes, or girls victims of seduction, or women of “dubious” character. In *Oliver Twist*, the protagonist’s mother is referred to (in ch. 49) as “that erring child”; and again, at the very end of the novel, the narrator’s final comment is: “she was weak and erring”. Similarly, at the conclusion of *Mary Barton*, Gaskell defines Mary’s aunt Esther and her father John Barton as “these two wanderers”. They are deviant in terms of gender and class, respectively: the professional prostitute and the rebellious factory worker have parallel lives that end with both of them buried in a single grave. “Not identified as separate individuals, the striking worker and the “fallen” woman are characterized as children who have strayed but whom their father will forgive – a familial image that is repeated in both *Ruth* and *Hard Times*”, Elsie Michie comments (1993: 116).

¹ The most recent volume to date is by Deborah Ann Logan, *Fallenness in Victorian Women’s Writing. Marry, Stitch, Die, or Do Worse* (Columbia and London: Columbia University Press, 1998).

The connection established by Gaskell between these two marginal subjects is interesting. They epitomize loss of power, each in one's own sphere: she, as a prostitute, having lost purity and dignity, is excluded from woman's proper realm, the home; he, as a man who has broken the law and lost the respect of his master and his own companions, is put outside the respectable working classes. They both end up as outcasts, but their being defined "wanderers" has to do less with their condition of social pariahs than with that of moral deviants.

Also Lady Dedlock, in *Bleak House*, is characterized by her errancy: in terms not only of geophysical space (she is constantly travelling between "her place in Lincolnshire" and "her house in town", between Paris and London) but also of social space. She is, in fact, defined by "her ability to move from one class to another [...] and to disguise herself and move from the home to the streets and back again" (E. Michie 1993: 99). Lady Dedlock's "wandering sexuality" is dramatized most successfully in the scene in which Inspector Bucket tracks her down in his attempt to "save" and "rescue" her, indirectly compelling her to leave the safety of the Dedlock mansion and assume the status of a public woman, who dies alone on the street. "Bucket effects precisely what the policing of the period was designed to do to prostitutes" (E. Michie 1993: 101), with the passage of the Contagious Diseases Acts (the first of which in 1864): to locate, contain and control dangerously errant female sexuality.

A further element that links the character of Lady Dedlock to contemporaneous stereotypes of the prostitute is suggested by what Judith Walkowitz notes: "According to rescue workers and others, [...] a restlessness, and a desire for independence frequently characterized the young women who moved into prostitution" (1980: 20). The inability to be steady and firm and live in a quiet home, and the need to move across the city in an uncontrollable manner – that Victorian philanthropists, doctors and the law attributed to prostitutes – was not only the explanation of a supposedly innate behaviour, but also an argument in favour of a strategy which had already been adopted in France. William Acton praised it as it aimed at repressing private or secret prostitution, while encouraging public or avowed one. In this way, Walkowitz comments, "the medical and police supervision in turn created an outcast class of "sexually deviant" females, forcing prostitutes to acknowledge their status as "public" women and destroying their private association with the general community of the labouring poor" (1980: 5).

Again, the ideology behind this is the opposition between the home and the street, between a static subject (the Angel in the House) and a nomadic one (the streetwalker): the separate spheres doctrine.

III. In the representation of deviant women Dickens apparently followed the prevailing notions of his time: the figure of the prostitute is depicted with pity as well as with condemnation, and other kinds of sexual transgressors meet punishment and repentance at the end of the narrative. Yet, the typical Madonna vs Magdalen pattern, which seems to inform his novels, is highly questioned from within; this does not happen in terms of plot, though: the dark women always die or are ejected, so to say, from the novel, while the good girls get married and thrive. The problematization of fallenness is articulated through other narrative structures; first of all, through the portrayal of characters.

I shall confine my observations to *Oliver Twist*, *Dombey and Son* and *Bleak House* (even though *David Copperfield* is very relevant too, in this context). These novels exhibit a whole range of deviant female characters who contribute, by contrast, to underline the virtues of the domestic heroines. So, in *Oliver Twist* the young prostitute Nancy is the counterpart of the innocent Rose Maylie; in *Dombey and Son* it is Florence who embodies purity, while Alice Marwood is a prostitute by profession and Edith Dombey considers herself one: at first seduced, then richly married out of interest, finally on the point of becoming an adulteress, she plays all the roles of a morally ambiguous woman. In *Bleak House*, instead, good, honest Esther is dramatically opposed to her mother, Lady Dedlock, another complex figure, who, through various narrative devices (like the disguise and the double), allows the author to explore cultural constructions of sexual deviance. In these three novels, nevertheless, the conventional paradigm Madonna vs Magdalen is not confirmed by the apparent binary opposition. Catherine Waters argues that, in spite of the ideal of domesticity that Dickens depicted in set-pieces like the description of the Cratchits' Christmas dinner in *Christmas Carol*, "more often than not his fiction delineates families made memorable by their grotesque failure to exemplify the domestic ideal" (27). Here lies the paradox implied in Dickens's reputation as the celebrant of domestic bliss and his portrayal of fractured families: a paradox that marks the Victorian culture at large, with the normalising function of middle-class domestic ideology. Dickens's novel "records a historical shift in notions of the family away from an earlier stress upon the importance of lineage and blood towards a new ideal of domesticity assumed to be the natural form of the family" (Waters 1997: 27). This is evident in the shadow thrown over the rights of legitimacy and the "obscure" origins of both Rose Maylie and Esther Summerson: the fact that genealogy gives way to domesticity is an indirect way to "rescue" the figure of the unmarried mother from the ban of society. Moreover, the legitimacy of the patrilineal descendancy, on which the ideology of the family is based, is questioned by the very role that Florence plays at the end

of the novel, as the true heir of the firm: “*Dombey and Son* [...] is indeed a daughter [...] after all” (ch. 59). As for Esther, after her marriage she becomes the owner of the new Bleak House (in Yorkshire), confirming, in this way, the importance of the matrilineal descendance (Esther’s mother was a distant relative of the Jarndyce family and, consequently, was connected to the first Bleak House in Hertfordshire).

In these novels, in spite of the celebration of the family through the role of protagonist covered by the good, innocent heroine, the domestic ideal is threatened by the presence of the impure woman, who tends to occupy the narrative space thanks to her effective characterization. So, in order to have the predictable final triumph of the heroines who embody the Victorian domestic ideal, the sexually compromised female characters must be disposed of before the end of the novel. Nancy, Alice Marwood and Lady Dedlock must die and Edith Dombey is to be exiled, so that Rose Maylie, Florence Dombey and Esther Summerson, respectively, can gain the deserved happy ending. The deviant woman cannot be assimilated into the narrative, lest her very presence might mar the closure of the novel, throwing a stain over the heroine.

But what are the narrative devices through which the “fallen angels” come out as more powerfully drawn than the “Angels in the House”? Since the modality of movement – in the guise of actual travelling, or of loitering about the city, as the *flâneur* does – is a traditionally male condition and prerogative, the appropriation of the urban space, for a woman in mid-nineteenth-century England, was considered somewhat unnatural. So, it is not surprising to find that some of Dickens’s female transgressors subvert the separate spheres pattern in their assumption of almost masculine features. Both Alice and Edith, in *Dombey and Son*, display characteristics that mark them as not quite feminine. The introduction of Alice in chapter 33 (“Contrasts”) is remarkable for more than one reason. Harriet (John Carker’s sister) – described as “this slight, small, patient figure”, endowed with a “gentle, quiet and retiring beauty” – is shown while thinking of “the stragglers who came wandering into London by the great highway hard by”:

Day after day, such travellers crept past, but always, as she thought, in one direction – always towards the town. Swallowed up in one phase or other of its immensity, towards which they seemed impelled by a desperate fascination, they never returned. Food for the hospitals, the churchyards, the prisons, the river, fever, madness, vice and death, – they passed on to the monster, roaring in the distance, and were lost (562-3).

After this explicit allusion to the dangers, the evils and sins embodied by “the monster”, London, Harriet suddenly sees one of these travellers approaching. A woman, a solitary woman of “some thirty years of age: tall; well-formed; handsome; miserably dressed”. Alice is introduced to the reader as a “traveller”, then defined as Harriet’s “fallen sister”, and, farther on, as the “wanderer”. The description lingers on her “reckless and regardless beauty, a dauntless and depraved indifference to more than weather: a carelessness of what was cast upon her bare head from Heaven or earth”. The narrator mentions, more than once, “her rich, black hair”, described as wild, long and thick; then, when Alice weeps at Harriet’s kindness to her, he comments: “She wept. Not like a woman, but like a stern man surprised into that weakness; with a violent heaving of her breast and struggle for recovery, that showed how unusual the emotion was with her” (564). In the same passage the description goes back to her hair: “She held up her hair roughly, with both hands; seizing it as if she would have torn it out; then, threw it down again, and flung it back as though it were a heap of serpents” (564-5).

Alice’s gorgon-like looks are evoked also in Edith’s description as “a beautiful Medusa” (741). In Edith’s case too, the emphasis is on the bewitching energy of the woman, whose imposing looks are almost intimidating: a “disdainful and defiant figure, standing there composed, erect, inscrutable of will, resplendent and majestic in the zenith of its charms, yet beating down, and treading on, the admiration that it challenges” (523) – the true description of a *femme fatale*! Other passages in the novel confirm this image of Edith as a strong woman, with a “power” that descends from her “cold supreme indifference” (650), from her “dark pride and rage” (741), that take form in the very posture of her body: “proud, erect, and dignified” (720).

In a seminal essay, Nina Auerbach observes that, “In a series of pantomimic gestures, Edith and Alice reveal their essential masculinity in their fits of rage” (Auerbach 1976: 111): their tragic end epitomizes the triumph of love – embodied by Florence –, that “washes the angry mark of masculinity out of the universe [...], with the sea waiting to swallow the lost relics of a burn-out civilization” (112-3).

According to Nina Auerbach, Dickens never moved beyond the polarized vision delineated in *Dombey and Son*; its thorough exploration of the doctrine of the “two spheres”, “with each sex moving in a solitary orbit, inaccessible to the other one” (1976: 95), well portrays the schism between masculinity and femininity as the Victorian age defined them. Auerbach maintains that it would be unfair to denounce Dickens as a patriarch “when

his exploration of a patriarchy has produced the sexual laceration of a *Dombey and Son*" (1976: 113).

In this novel female sexuality is used as a fulcrum for social criticism, which involves its author in a critique of patriarchal values (Epstein Nord 1995: 110): through Edith, and her dramatic statement that middle-class marriage can also be a form of legalized prostitution, Dickens moves one of his most violent attacks on Victorian domestic ideology, showing the nexus between family and economic life, between the home and the street, between the hearth and the marketplace. Mr Dombey's identification of the family with the firm finds a parallel in his purchase of Edith Granger as a wife. From her part, Edith offers herself (according to her rapacious mother's plot) as a merchandise for sale on the marriage market. She bluntly acknowledges Mr Dombey's purchase and her commodification in almost Marxian terms, as she, accusingly, speaks to her mother:

You know he has bought me [...]. He has considered of his bargain [...]; he thinks that it will suit him, and may be had sufficiently cheap; and he will buy tomorrow [...]. I was a woman – artful, designing, mercenary, laying snares for men – before I knew myself, or you, or even understood the base and wretched aim of every new display I learnt [...]. Look at me, taught to scheme and plot when children play; and married in my youth – an old age of design – to one for whom I had no feeling but indifference. Look at me, whom he left a widow, dying before his inheritance descended to him [...] and tell me what has been my life for ten years [...]. There is no slave in a market: there is no horse in a fair: so shown and offered and examined and paraded, Mother, as I have been for ten shameful years [...]. Have I been hawked and vended here and there, until the last grain of self-respect is dead within me, and I loathe myself? [...]. Who takes me [...] shall take me, as this man does, with no art of mine put forth to lure him. He sees me at the auction, and he thinks it well to buy me. Let him! [...] He makes the purchase of his own will, and with his own sense of its worth, and the power of his money; and I hope it may never disappoint him. I have not vaunted and pressed the bargain [...] (472-474).

This long quotation well exemplifies Edith's awareness of her objectification and yearning for autonomy that cause her self-division.

This last point has been highlighted in two recent feminist readings too. According to Catherine Waters, "Edith is continually shown to maintain an "air of opposition" towards herself, and this self-alienation is directly attributed to her commodification" (1997: 50); for Amanda Anderson, "Edith is presented as a split self, painfully conscious of its own reification, impelled to display its struggles, disruptions, outbreaks" (1995: 85). This aspect in the construction of Edith's character reveals the way in which the ideology of the separate spheres is implicated in the constitution of female subjectivity.

The family connection between Edith and Alice (who are cousins), their physical likeness and the moral degradation they have been led to, contribute to reinforce the author's denunciation in the novel of sexual exploitation as intimately connected to both prostitution and a mercenary marriage. This nexus is often underlined by Edith who, in equating her condition of married woman to that of a prostitute, uses a very strong and effective simile: "I suffered myself to be sold, as infamously as any woman with a halter round her neck is sold in any market-place" (857).

This image evoked by Edith prefigures a similar metaphor contained in a well-known painting by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Found* (1854 - See plate 2). It represents a man, a drover bringing a calf to the market in London and there, in the early morning light, finding his former loved one. She is now a prostitute, dressed in silks, fringe and feathers, huddled in shame against a brick wall. The man tries to lift her up, but she turns away from him, averting her head. There are three figures here that occupy the scene: the woman, the man and the calf, each of them with its own story. The struggling calf is in a cart, kept from moving by a halter on her head and a white weblike net covering her body: "a clear representation of entanglement and restraint", comments Helene E. Roberts, who suggests that the net and halter might hint at the shackles which the drover would impose on a wife to force her compliance and submission, and that the restricted quality of married life induced young girls to choose the freer life of adultery and prostitution (1972: 69-70). A more literal reading of the painting – which connects it quite directly to the perception Edith has of herself as a merchandise to be offered to the best bidder – would equate the young woman to the calf: they are both brought to the market by their master/owner to be bought and sold. But this is probably a too obvious and simple explanation. Nina Auerbach, underlining the importance of the most substantial masses in the painting – the bridge, the wall, the wheelbarrow and the solid cannon beneath it –, notices that the girl's body is aligned with these masses. Though the man is the dominant human figure in the triangle, the wrinkles on his boots and the ripples in his tunic give him "a suggestion of instability, while the woman's cloak drops solidly to the ground, as if it were sculpted rather than painted" (Auerbach 1980: 44). This means that Rossetti "endows his fallen woman with the strength of the forms that surround her" (*ibidem*). For Helena Michie, instead, the woman in *Found* – like Nancy in *Oliver Twist*, "muffles her body until her clothes come to stand for herself" (1987: 77); the critic maintains, in fact, that the covering of the prostitute's body, as a way to make her invisible, almost absent from the text, is reiterated in Victorian paintings and novels.

To go back to *Dombey and Son*, the removal of Alice and Edith towards the end of the novel paves the way to Florence to restore harmony through a

reconstruction of the middle-class family; but “the very failure of the narrative to assimilate these “dark women” indicates the limits of familial ideology even as their deviance serves to highlight the virtues of the domestic woman” (Waters 1997: 52).

IV. Sexual transgression apparently endows Dickens’s female characters with a particular power, that is also the main feature of Lady Dedlock in *Bleak House*. But I want to look at her from another perspective that is fundamental in the depiction of fallen women in Victorian culture. I am referring to the representation of “impure” sexuality through metaphors of dirt and disease.

In *Oliver Twist* tainted sexuality is circumscribed to the lower classes; although the reputations of both Oliver’s dead mother and Rose Maylie are marred by the hint of sexual stain, “it is the street prostitute Nancy who embodies that stain and whose sacrifice purges the novel of danger and criminality” (Epstein Nord 1995: 81). With *Dombey and Son* and *Bleak House* fallen female sexuality is introduced upward into the middle-class: in these novels the hidden connections which determine the shape of urban existence and the structure of Dickens’s novels and link apparently unrelated individuals, classes and neighbourhoods, include not only moral and physical corruption but also tainted sexuality and disease (*id.*: 82). According to Lynda Nead, prostitution constituted an “invisible danger”, as it established a link “between slum and suburb, dirt and cleanliness, ignorance and civilization, profligacy and morality: the prostitute made it impossible to keep the categories apart” (1998: 121). Nead maintains that the sentimentalization of the prostitute in literary and visual representation was a means for her middle class to control its fear of contamination.

If the fallen woman of the lower classes could be safely sentimentalized, as a way of distancing her, her middle-class counterpart had already insinuated herself into the respectable domestic sphere: she could not merely be managed with pity, compassion or understanding, but – I argue here – with a sort of awe, a mixture of fascination, fear and even respect, as in the case of Edith Dombey and Lady Dedlock.

The neat distinction between the street and the hearth, that in *Oliver Twist* is dramatized through Nancy and Rose Maylie, respectively, begins to be blurred in *Dombey and Son* (as we have seen) with the relationship of analogy in the representation of the professional prostitute Alice and the commodified woman of the higher classes Edith. In *Bleak House* the situation is made more complex by the crossing of different social spheres on Lady Dedlock’s part: she ambiguously moves from the middle-class family in London, and from her obscure past of “illicit” love, to the

aristocratic mansion in Lincolnshire (through a mercenary, although respectable, marriage to Sir Leicester) and walks back to the urban slum in a double move of search and flight, to end up on the steps of the paupers' graveyard gate, where her former lover was buried. This is the involuted route, the twisted path, of a literally "deviant" woman's career; an example of how the separate spheres of home and street tend to dangerously mingle.

In *Dombey and Son* and *Bleak House* various threats of moral and physical contagion are clustered around images of fallen female sexuality. But what is merely suggested about the connections between urban blight and sexual contamination in the former, becomes the very machinery that drives the latter (Epstein Nord 1995: 96). The connections are explicitly established by the narrators' comments in such well known passages as those contained in chapter 47, "The Thunderbolt", in *Dombey and Son* ("Breathe the polluted air"), and in ch. 46, "Stop Him!", in *Bleak House* ("There is not a drop of Tom's corrupted blood"). In both novels it is made clear that "contagion and tainted inheritance threaten to mire in the past a society that must go forward toward renewal [...] and that the role of woman and of female sexuality is crucial: woman stands either to destroy or to re-create, to fester sterility or to make fertile, to cure pestilence or to be the agent of its circulation" (Epstein Nord 1995: 86).

The two novels exhibit important parallelisms in the crucial relationship between mother and daughter, all clustering around the image of the inheritance of tainted sexuality. Esther Summerson, in particular, will bear the traces of the taint on her own face ("a scarred face"): a wound, a mark, "the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual sin" (Zwerdling 1982: 106). But, in disfiguring Esther, in depriving her of her inheritance of looks, the novelist has prevented his heroine from being identified with her sinful mother (Sadrin 1994: 72).

Alice, Edith and Lady Dedlock, in spite of their narrative function as the means to mount a powerful critique of a proud and mercenary patriarchy, bear the indelible stain that makes their salvation impossible: the two novels enact the contradictions associated with a vision of women as dangerous if not culpable victims (Epstein Nord 1995: 95-6).

Amanda Anderson argues that Victorian representations of fallenness frequently displace new and defamiliarizing conceptions of selfhood, agency and character, which were intimately related to the emergence of social science and statistics (1993: 66). Dickens's interest in the power of social forces over character was profound and not restricted to his depiction of fallen women, of course; but fallen women in Dickens focus particular predicaments of agency. "In a rhetorical mimicry of the contagion so commonly attributed to tainted women", Anderson writes, the fallen woman is transformed "from a victim to a threat, an effect into a cause" (1993: 67).

The “public” woman, assimilated to the degrading urban milieu, has no interior self nor autonomy; the prostitute is at once determined by the environment and public, while the domestic woman is provided of self-will. Moreover, in reading herself as “fallen”, the Dickensian deviant woman “does not emerge into the transforming light of self-awareness but falls more profoundly into the [...] trap of knowing she is determined” (1993: 90).

Nancy, in *Oliver Twist*, is a good example of the dilemma of self-reflexivity. Although her impulse to save Oliver is linked to her emerging moral reflection, her latent purity is proved by the fact she knows she cannot be saved. In chapters 40 and 46, Nancy gives voice – in a melodramatic gesture of self-representation – to some of the strongest convictions about the impossibility of redeeming a fallen woman, that were part of the Victorian mythology of fallenness. To Rose and Mr Brownlow’s offer to help her to leave her degraded life, she answers: “I am past all hope, indeed [...]. I am chained to my old life. I loathe and hate it now, but I cannot leave it” (*Oliver Twist*: 354). This sort of fatalism in Nancy’s attitude further confirms the deterministic view about the prostitute’s condition which Dickens shared with his contemporaries. It is no coincidence that in Mr Brownlow’s attempt to convince Nancy to give up her old life, there is also the suggestion she might retire to “a quiet asylum, either in England, or, if you fear to remain here, in some foreign country” (*ibidem*).

V. This allusion to a rescue programme for prostitutes allows me to introduce another aspect – in this case a biographical one – connected to the representation of fallenness in Dickens’s fiction. From 1846 to 1858 Dickens managed Urania Cottage, a refuge for fallen women that was sponsored by a prominent Victorian philanthropist and close friend of the writer, Angela Burdett Coutts. Dickens’s writings relating this experience include an extensive correspondence with Burdett Coutts and various articles that appeared in *Household Words*. Among these, “A Home for Homeless Women” (1835) and “A Nightly Scene in London” (1856). But we can already find in two of the *Sketches by Boz* (1836) – “The Streets Night” and “The Hospital Patient” – descriptions of prostitutes that prefigure the characterization of Nancy in *Oliver Twist*.

Dickens and Burdett Coutts’s programme consisted in refuges characterized as “homes” to rescue fallen women, where young prostitutes followed a “penitential discipline” to prepare themselves for a new life abroad. The split, again, is between the public and the private space: the street – the prostitute’s proper sphere, so to say – and the home – the respectable woman’s realm –, or its surrogate, the refuge, where the

repentant streetwalker was looked after but also locked up. Space images recur also in “An Appeal to Fallen Women” – included in a letter to Burdett Coutts (28 October 1847) – where Dickens writes: “You know what the streets are [...]. Shunned by decent people, marked out from all other kinds of women as you walk along, avoided by the very children, hunted by the police, imprisoned, and only set free to be imprisoned over and over again – reading this very letter in a common jail – you have already dismal experience of the *truth* [...]” (*The Letters of Charles Dickens*, vol. 5: 698). The home and the prison, then, seemed the only possible spaces for women in mid-Victorian England!

Dickens noted in his letters to Burdett Coutts that the young prostitutes often found it difficult to distinguish his attempts to rescue them from society’s attempts to punish them. Actually, the programme included emigration, about which there was confusion too, since it was perceived by them as transportation (12 April 1850). As a matter of fact, the refuge admitted only those “who distinctly accept this condition: that they came there ultimately to be sent abroad” (“A Home for Homeless Women”). Dickens partly justified this policy “as a necessary capitulation to a prejudicial society, but his stress lies equally on the belief that without the “effectual detaching” of the women from their ‘old associates’, they will fall again” (Anderson 1993: 69-70). The conception of the fallen as a product of the social context – according to the Positivist view of the time – clearly emerges in Dickens and Burdett Coutt’s programme of rescuing deviant female subjects, who are, thus, equated to criminals ordinarily transported to Australia (where Magwitch too is sent by his author, in *Great Expectations*).

In contrast to Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell – who embarked in a similar project with “refuges” for fallen women in Manchester – did not consider emigration a solution to the problem of prostitution; she insisted, instead, that this class of girls could be redeemed by being taken into the domestic sphere. With this position, Gaskell anticipated and also helped to inspire a belief in what Josephine Butler, the founder of the Ladies National Association, was later to call the “home influence” (E. Michie 1993: 81; see Walkowitz 1980: 117). In her novel *Ruth* (1853), Gaskell represents a fallen woman who is not forced to emigrate but, rather, is taken into a home (a real one, not a refuge) and is enabled to “save” herself. “Seduced innocent, rather than inscribed victim, *Ruth* is both immune to and rescued from the punishing social “laws” that enforce the fallen woman’s downward path” (Anderson 1993: 116).

The character of *Ruth* exhibits innovative traits in the representation of fallenness: its author portrays a “pure” woman (in this anticipating Hardy’s Tess), whose story contradicts the deterministic discourse apparently shared by Dickens. Gaskell refuses, in *Ruth*, to separate femininity into pure and

impure halves and depicts a “fallen” woman taken into the sanctity of the domestic sphere (E. Michie 1993: 105).

The figure of the unmarried mother as a victim of seduction is a topos not only in Victorian fiction but also in the visual arts of the time. Two paintings in particular have drawn the attention of feminist critics and cultural historians: Ford Madox Brown’s *Take Your Son, Sir* (1856 - See plate 3) and Frederick Walker’s *The Lost Path* (1863). In both of them the scene is thoroughly occupied by the fallen woman with her newly born child. In *The Lost Path* they are wandering in the deep snow – a black blot on a white landscape: the mother’s body bent to the ground, her baby almost hidden in her shawl, an explicit sign of loneliness and despair. In *Take Your Son, Sir*, instead, the woman looks majestic and the naked child is fully visible: she thrusts forward her son, demanding that responsibility for the conception of the child be shared; and the baby too gazes accusingly out from the picture. “The use of the traditional Madonna and Child composition for this unorthodox purpose is clever and brave”, comments Helene Roberts (1972: 75); the mantle-like dress of the woman suggests the Madonna and even the mirror, reflecting the man she is confronting, doubles as a halo; the drapery encircling the child makes it seem as if he had just come out of her womb. The figure of the woman is free from the conventional posture of abasement (as in the case of *The Lost Path*) and the viewer is abased before her. “The source of the awe she generates is a daring combination of anatomy and religion [...]. Both conventionally holy and defiant, her pose insists upon the simultaneity of her fall and apotheosis as she grows into the magus/God of her world, mocking by her size male claims of power over her” (Auerbach 1980: 36).

Bearing in mind the dual perspective – an explicit narrative that abases the woman, an iconographic pattern that exalts her –, Nina Auerbach (in the just quoted “The Rise of the Fallen Woman”) looks at Gaskell’s Ruth, equating her to Ford Madox Brown’s accusatory Madonna: “As she moves through the novel toward exposure and death, she seems refined beyond anger, conflict, and physicality itself”. The critic compares her to Dickens’s Nancy and remarks that both characters have left the body to become not a part of the community but their overseers and scourges – like George Eliot’s Hetty Sorrell and Hardy’s Tess of the d’Urbervilles: “the transforming power of the fall lends spiritual potency to the woman it destroys” (1980: 42).

Elizabeth Gaskell had already portrayed a fallen woman in *Mary Barton*, as we have seen. Esther is much more similar to Nancy, of course, as they are both prostitutes, with a life of degradation and misery. Actually, through the character of *Ruth* Gaskell rescues the figure of the fallen woman, that, with Esther, had reached the abyss. Also in the death scenes the two women

are shown as different and complementary at the same time. *Ruth*'s death takes place in an aura of martyrdom ("though lost and gone astray, she was happy and at peace"; *Ruth*: 366), while Esther's death confirms the stereotype of the tragic end that awaits the sinner: "fallen into what appeared simply a heap of white or light coloured clothes, fainting or dead, lay the poor crushed Butterfly – the once innocent Esther" (*Mary Barton*: 464). *Ruth* is shown as a heroic figure provided with dignity and agency, while Esther is clearly represented as a victim of environment, whose bodily posture, in the last scene quoted above, recalls various visual representations of the prostitute's end, as a beggar or a suicide. Here, again, Victorian painting expands, prefigures or echoes the literary discourse, and contributes to the construction of a cultural myth around the figure of the deviant woman.

Lynda Nead, in her *Myths of Sexuality. Representation of Women in Victorian Britain*, has effectively examined the role of culture in the formation of such political issues as class and gender and in the construction of femininity, using a wide range of contemporary texts and visual material. In exploring the figuration of female deviancy, the art historian has traced the itinerary of the fallen woman as a victim of seduction, streetwalker and adulteress. I want to refer to some of these representations.

The figure of the unmarried mother, who, thrown out of her father's home, wanders in loneliness and despair, appears in such paintings as Richard Redgrave's *The Outcast* (1851), Henry Nelson O'Neil's *Destitute* (n.d.) and Rebecca Solomon's *A Friend in Need* (1856). A recurring theme is the prostitute's predictable death by water. Declensions of this motif are to be found in the illustrations to Thomas Hood's *The Bridge of Sighs* by John Everett Millais (etching, 1858) and Gustave Dorè (engraving, 1878); in George Frederick Watts's *Found Drowned* (1848-50); in Abraham Solomon's *Drowned! Drowned!* (1860) and in W. Gray's "Found" (a coloured lithograph in W. Hayward's *London by Night*, c. 1870). In all of them the woman commits suicide by throwing herself into the water: the predetermined end of a victim and an explicit symbol of purification.

The paradigmatic "progress" of an adulteress is narrated in Augustus Egg's trilogy *Past and Present* (1858), which articulates in three stages like a novel in three chapters: "Misfortune", "Prayer" and "Despair". This last painting shows the woman who huddles under one of the arches of the Adelphi theatre, the thin legs of her illegitimate child protruding from under her shawl; she looks up at the moon, full of anguish and remorse. "But Egg allows no hope of repentance for the sinner [...]. The wages of sin is death. The Adelphi arches under the Waterloo Bridge had become a symbol of the last resort for the destitute and homeless before they cast themselves into the Thames" (Roberts 1972: 72-3).

Images of nostalgia for an innocent past are provided by Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The Gate of Memory* (1857) and J.R. Spencer Stanhope's *The Thoughts of the Past* (1859), while possibilities of redemption and forgiveness are offered in H. Nelson O'Neil's *Return of the Wanderer* (1855) and Thomas Faed's *Forgiven* (1874).

But together with the usual representation of fallen women as victims, as sinner who meet a bad end or – more seldom – save themselves through repentance, we find a few specimens of a different, more problematic reading of the female deviant's future. In William Holman Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience* (1854 - See plate 4) and in Alfred Elmore's *On the Brink* (1865 - See plate 5), the protagonists occupy a central position in the paintings. From the light that is generously thrown over them; from the posture of the figures, that is not one of abasement but of uncertainty and doubt – as if searching for an answer to one's inner conflicts. From the contents itself – that tells a story of movement and change from a condition of dependence (on a lover, a libertine) to one of agency and self-awareness: from all these elements, that express a condition of liminality, there emerges the figure of a woman who is endowed with dignity (like the mother in *Take Your Son, Sir*) and can still choose her own future. We can read here that kind of female strength and pride that exudes from characters as different as Nancy and Edith Dombey, Ruth and Lady Dedlock.

VI. One final remark on the representation of streetwalkers and other sexual wanderers in Dickens's and Gaskell's fiction has to be made as regards these authors' personal attitudes towards "nomadism", in its literal and metaphorical meanings. In their own different ways, they too were "nomadic subjects".

A walker *par excellence* was, of course, Dickens himself. His intimate, physical relation with the city – both as a *flâneur* and as a companion of Inspector Field of London Metropolitan Police, whom he sometimes followed, in disguise, during his nightly missions – probably enabled him to identify with those women who publicly frequented, and almost possessed, the streets. The identification with streetwalkers, but also with other sexual transgressors, as victims of society, had probably to do with his own attitude to "victimization" and his "desire to elude it", as a consequence of the painful episode of the Blacking Factory, which Dickens was uneasy to come to terms with (Langbauer 1990: 155). Moreover his personal experience as a man who found himself involved in a sort of sexual scandal – with the break-up of his marriage in 1858 and the suspicion of a so-called incestuous relationship with his sister-in-law Georgina Hogarth and of a long-standing liaison with actress Ellen Ternan – made of him a subject of restless and wandering sexuality.

Catherine Waters has discussed the controversy surrounding the end of the writer's marriage and his public statement in *Household Words*, called "Personal": it is the public exposure of a family affair with a breaking of the distinction between the public and the private, although, paradoxically, Dickens underlines this distinction in his statement. The private is exposed in public but it is presented in a "personal statement". This sounds as an involuntary ironic comment on the separate spheres doctrine on his part, but, "rather than juxtaposing Dickens's fiction with his lived experience to discern in ironic contrast between the two, we can see here a continuity in the ideological functions served by the representations of the family involved in each case" (Waters 1997: 12).

Another, and different, case of "exposure" is the one concerning Elizabeth Gaskell's role as a professional writer. According to Elsie Michie, "the model which defines it appropriate for women to be in the home and inappropriate for them to be out in the public realm of the market-place" (1993: 79) regards not only prostitutes but also those private women in the public sphere of professional writing who could not avoid being defined deviant or wayward (1993: 98). When *Ruth* was published, Gaskell had problems with the more conservative section of her reading public and of contemporary critics; they were shocked by the characterization of a fallen woman who is fundamentally innocent and dies almost as a martyr. Gaskell attempted a breakdown of the barrier between the public and the private spheres as we have seen: by depicting a fallen woman taken into a home and in refusing the logic implicit in the argument in favour of the policing of prostitutes, she assumes a different stance from Dickens's, and a courageous one. The tone of uneasiness that pervades Gaskell's letters about *Ruth* comes from her sense that, as a professional writer, she risks internalizing the public perception of her as improper (E. Michie 1993: 83). These anxieties about being out in the public sphere emerge also in Gaskell's relationship with Dickens, when he asked her to contribute to *Household Words*. In their editorial dealings Dickens played an ambiguous role: paternalistic, exacting in matters of punctuality, authoritative, exercising a sort of masculine control over the woman writer whose work was published anonymously in a periodical "Conducted by Charles Dickens".

Elsie Michie has thus established a convincing connection between the strategy adopted by the Victorian system of surveillance of the prostitutes (through medical and police supervision), the Urania Cottage programme, Dickens's characterization of fallen women and his attitude towards Gaskell as a professional writer: surveillance and control over wayward female subjects. And yet, it was Dickens himself who endowed the sexually compromised women of his novels with such a psychological strength and narrative power as to almost elbow the domestic heroines out of the

narrative. It was him who characterized his deviant women as art objects and sex objects – object of desire, then –, through which he could “focus his investigation of adult sexual relationships and the perverted and inhibited forms they took in the patriarchal world of Victorian England” (John 1994: 67, 84).

One of the many paradoxes of this unconventional, “nomadic” writer.

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