

THE LAY WORLD OF DICKENS

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Foreword

Dare I hint at that worse time when, strung together somewhere in great black space, there was a flaming necklace, or ring, or starry circle of some kind, of which *I* was one of the beads! And when my only prayer was to be taken off from the rest, and when it was such an inexplicable agony and misery to be a part of the dreadful thing?¹

The above quotation comes from Esther's narrative in *Bleak House*: in chapter 35, not long after her recovery, the Christian heroine and co-narrator of the story evokes the nightmarish flaming necklace which haunted her feverish delirium during the dangerous illness that brought her to the verge of death. The metaphor of a jewel in a ring becomes pregnant with meaning if placed against the deterministic frame around which the novel is constructed. The conjuring of an organic chain, within which all living things are set, throws a ghastly light on the image of the necklace: out of the new positivistic science a terrible beauty was born. The implications of the development hypothesis, which informs Dickens's symbolism in his later novels, were morally devastating for the average Victorian. In disrupting the traditional Christian view of the origin of the world, the universe ceased to be anthropocentric and man became one of the mutable living beings which populated the earth. God was no longer the omniscient creator, but a culturally created myth within a unified and yet ever changing universe.

The theory was not new: from the start of the century, the pre-Darwinian scientific theories of natural development, in particular Lyell's geological interpretation of the history of creation, had gained ground and invested several fields of knowledge, including that of the arts. Evolutionism developed along two opposite lines: that of serene optimism that believed in the advancement of mankind and was current among men of science, and that of bleak pessimism that feared the degrading of mankind, prevailing among the humanists.

Despite the lacerating dispute between the clergy and the scientists, which followed the publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859, positivism prevailed and religion had to come to term with it. In time, Biblical exegesis removed all literal readings of the Scriptures and promoted a highly figurative interpretation of the myth of the origin of life. As a result, the theologians produced a Christian interpretation of natural laws of transformation, reconciling God and science. While all this was happening, Dickens, who was not particularly attracted to theoretical disputes and followed them from afar, fell under the spell of the new sciences: like most Victorians, he was both attracted and repelled by them. Above all, he feared their disruption of established beliefs and yet could not resist the fascination of temporal variation and transformation.

The slow, almost unconscious acceptance of the evolutionary pattern took time to manifest itself. Dickens, who had always been moderate in his views, was a

layman at heart and therefore open to new interpretations of the world. Lay and laity are here used in their original meaning, that is to say they stand for the principle of the autonomy of human activities that do not derive their functions from external or supernatural authority, such as divine or clerical intervention. Being a layman, therefore, does not imply being a disbeliever, but rather a tolerant and broadminded person, interested in human welfare more than in transcendental doctrines. Dickens had always disliked dogmatism of any sort: above all, he resented repression and oppression in any form of cult. Right from his early days, one can therefore talk of a lay position in Dickens, which turned secular with the passing of time. His fiction is pervaded by a profound human compassion and an enlightened social dimension, close to the Spencerian conception of a liberal society and its ethics.

His attraction to the new sciences is a good starting point to begin discussing the laicity of Dickens's fictional world. Not all critics would agree about it. He was a practising Anglican and remained a member of the Church until the end of his life. He always professed himself a Christian, even in the most dispirited times, when others, such as Thomas Huxley and Charles Darwin, like him imbued with religious spirit, turned agnostic, unable to reconcile science and faith. So it is not to his life but to his art that one must look to unveil his secular vein.

Like many of his contemporaries, he was emotionally reactive to cultural innovations outside any theoretical disquisition of new schools of thought. Dickens's view of the world changed through the slow absorption of new ideas circulating among cultivated people rather than from the shock of recognition of a different perception of reality. So the change affected his literary production more than his professed outlook: in his art he portrayed the process of secularisation in Victorian society, absorbing new modes and attitudes into his narrative, regardless of their implications on the ethics of his imaginary world.

Such profound alterations happened without trauma, as Dickens was hardly interested in the metaphysics of life. The lack of attention to theological debates is very evident in his writings. The criticism of church and chapel we come across in *Sketches by Boz*, *Pickwick Papers* and *Oliver Twist* derived from a close observation of Victorian social problems. In his severe censure of institutional religion one can detect a liberal disposition towards contemporary culture that set in motion a process of humanisation of the Bible, "a predicament that calls not for prayer and fasting as for human intervention", as Larson puts it.²

In outlining the secularisation of Dickens's art, I shall centre on *Bleak House*, the first of his dark novels and the one in which the break with his Christian past is more evident. To illustrate Dickens's changing attitude towards Christianity, I will follow three main trends in his narrative: the usage of religious language, the presence of religious syncretism, and the function of Darwinism in the construction of his late novels.

Before proceeding further, however, something must be said about Dickens's position as regards religion before and after the advent of Darwinism. In his writings ambiguities and contradictions characterise the religious question as much as they colour social and political problems. Like in any question concerning his art, nothing

happens in a straightforward way and appears in a crystal clear light: his laicism can be argued but cannot be taken for granted.

Dickens and the religious question.

Since 1976, when Angus Wilson pointed to the neglect of the Christian aspects of his art as a gap in our knowledge of the Dickensian world, Dickens and religion has been the controversial subject of much research.³ The flowering of a distinguished branch of studies has brought contrasting results: from the firm conviction of the orthodoxy of his Christian universe, as in Sanders' *Charles Dickens Resurrectionist* (1982), to the persuasion of the naturalness of the Biblical message, as in Larson's *Dickens and the Broken Bible* (1985). Now, though it is fairly easy to assess Dickens's creed from biographical sources, it is not equally easy to evaluate the Christianity of his art.

With regards to his religiosity, opinions have always varied greatly. During his lifetime, some lamented the levity with which Dickens treated holy subjects; some went so far as to doubt his being an Anglican, whereas others praised him for his love and respect for the word of God. Yet, others extolled his open-minded, non-clerical approach to the ethical question. His narrative was so receptive to contemporary discourses – – confessional or not – as to recreate on the page a polyphonic, variegated and dialogical reality:

The heterogeneous ideas and modes of consciousness that Dickens's borrowed words thus import into fiction become involved in a dialogical play of viewpoints that resists easy resolution, even when he tries to foreclose the issue with fairytale endings or biblical rhetoric. Such diversification no doubt helped to broaden Dickens's appeal – so that nominal Anglicans and devout ones, Unitarians and secular rationalists, all claim him for their own.⁴

Nominally he was a follower of the Broad Church, sharing most of the Anglican prejudices towards Catholicism and Dissent. His dislike of Catholic rites and Evangelical propaganda seem to point to his orthodoxy within the doctrine of the Church of England. He brought up his family in the Anglican faith: between 1846 and 1849 he even wrote simple prayers and a plain version of *The Life of Our Lord* for the use of his children. Like all his writings dealing with religion, *The Life of Our Lord* is not a text of theological significance, but of religious piety. As Dennis Walder has remarked, it was typical of Dickens "not to dwell on the supernatural element of Christianity, but upon its essentially moral features."⁵

After his death, his religiosity was taken for granted and the issue was set aside. Towards the middle of the twentieth-century, however, the doubts expressed by some of his contemporaries were taken up again by the critics. In 1941, writing of Tom Pinch at the organ in *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844) and Amy asleep in church in *Little Dorrit* (1857), Humphry House commented that "a theologian would find little in all this to justify the claim that Dickens was a Christian; a historian could hardly gather from his books that during the years in which they were written the English Church was revolutionised".⁶

Thirty years later, following in House's footsteps, Walder argued that one had to dig deeply below the surface to discover his faith as "Dickens's beliefs are rarely explicit, they are embodied in the texture of the work."⁷ That does not make things easier.

As is well known, the texture of Dickens's work contains a series of unsolved ambiguities: the unifying principle of his art lies in the linguistic and symbolic cohesion of his texts rather than in their ideological coherence. So it is not surprising that religious fervour and sceptical agnosticism can happily coexist inside his fiction.

Dickens usually sounded respectful of formal decorum as regards sex and religion. Moreover, he often paid lip service to the sacredness of the Church and Scriptures. Yet, if one looks closer at the texts, there are several hints that move in an opposite direction: irreverent, almost blasphemous allusions are not rare. As John Schad has remarked, they may lead us to think that for him "the Church is itself a kind of disease."⁸ In *Pictures from Italy* (1846), the disparaging notes on Catholic customs and rites reverberate on Christianity at large. Even the Church of England does not always escape the malevolent judgements passed on the Roman Church and its monuments. The mid-century Church of England was "a Church divided and disrupted from within, both by her Catholic and Dissenting others – 'here more Popery, there more Methodism', to cite Dickens again. For all their obvious differences, Victorian Catholicism and Dissent were like 'the cathedral above' and 'the lower church' in Parma, mirror-images of each other in the sense that, standing beyond 'the sacred pale of the established church', both were the object of fear and suspicion."⁹

Irreverent remarks have a jocular flavour when voiced by grotesque Dickensian characters, but they turn into a severe condemnation of religious practice when uttered by respectable speakers – especially if the speaker happens to be the author's *alter ego*. In the most autobiographical of Dickens's novels, *David Copperfield*, recalling his wedding day, observes that "the Church might be a steam-power loom, full in action, for any sedative effect it has on me."¹⁰ In *Bleak House*, the churchyard where Krook is buried is recorded as "pestiferous and obscene." Priests and reverends play a minor part in his stories: they are often portrayed in a comic light, and as a rule, they are not good Samaritans. So that the Anglican Minister in "The Shipwreck", stands out as a rare example of a charitable cleric.¹¹ Elsewhere, the Christian precept "love thy neighbour" is practised by amiable good-living people, who may happen to be good Christians. For Dickens, solidarity is rooted in natural sentiment rather than in religious practice. Conversely, professedly religious people are frequently depicted as figures of cant and hypocrisy. This is the case of Evangelicals and Catholics, but, as just mentioned, Anglicans have their rotten apples, such as the uncharitable Bumbles in *Oliver Twist* (1838) and the hypocritical Pecksniff in *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844).

Furthermore, Dickens had always considered the High Church as integrated into those sections of the Establishment that contributed to the social evils of the period. In 1836, he violently attacked the Bishop of London who proposed to forbid all

entertainment on a Sunday, thus depriving the workers of the innocent pleasure of homely life.¹² In *Bleak House* the death of Jo is blamed not only on the wealthy but also on the clergy, for their unchristian indifference to the suffering of the poor:

Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us, every day.¹³

Despite his reservations over institutional Christianity, Dickens worried about the vanishing sense of a godly life already tangible in his days among all classes of people. The blatantly professed religiousness of Victorian society did not always correspond to a heartfelt creed. The slow and yet relentless process of secularisation, which characterised the formation of modern British society, had been on the move since the early nineteenth-century. During his lifetime Dickens witnessed the advent of lay philanthropy, a forerunner of the modern welfare state. Already in 1832, as Cockshut tells us, the Utilitarians, the Latitudinarians, the High Churchmen, saw the Reform Bill as a turning point in the life of the faithful, 'setting many alarm bells ringing':

What was then being signalled at that time later history abundantly confirmed: the end of the Anglican monopoly of power, influence and access to higher education, and the beginning of the 'lay' liberal state.¹⁴

In 1834, The Poor Law Act introduced a new humane conception of public welfare, while the Education Act in 1870 opened the way to state education. In the new schools, the teaching of scriptures would eventually replace sectarian religious teaching.

Dickens sensed the waning of traditional belief as a moral and cultural loss. A glimpse of what he felt can be found in some of his journalistic reports written between 1858 and 1860. In "City of London Churches" he recalls standing one day in a suburban area, facing some hidden and forgotten Churches and not knowing which one to go to:

My state of indecision is referable to, and about equally divisible among, four great churches, which are all within sight and sound, all within the space of a few square yards.

As I stand at the street corner, I don't see as many as four people at once going to church, though I see as many as four churches with their steeples clamouring for people. I choose my church, and go up the flight of steps to the great entrance in the tower. A mouldy tower within, and like a neglected washhouse. A rope comes through the beamed roof, and a man in the corner pulls it and clashes the bell – a whity-brown man, whose clothes were once black – a man with flue on him and cobweb. He stares at me, wondering how I come, and I stare at him, wondering how he comes there.¹⁵

The ghost-like atmosphere accompanies his profound nostalgia for the faith of the good old times. Dickens was aware of the growing detachment from Christianity in British society, a relentless process, in spite of the proclaimed religiosity of the

Victorians.

There are few more striking indications of the changes of manners and customs that two or three hundred years have brought about, than these deserted churches. Many of them are handsome and costly structures, several of them were designed by WREN, many of them arose from the ashes of the great fire, others of them outlived the plague and the fire too, to die a slow death in these later days. No one can be sure of the coming time; but it is not too much to say of it that it has no sign in its outsetting tides, of the reflux to these churches of their congregations and uses.¹⁶

The growing secularisation in contemporary society was never a central issue in his works, as Dickens's artistic interests lay elsewhere. In his stories, Dickens favoured charitable practice over religious meditation. What Dickens drew from Christian doctrine on a large ecumenical scale was the moral teaching: his heroes and heroines are pervaded with a heartfelt love for the suffering of the world. In that, he shared the view held by most nineteenth-century congregations that deeds and not faith were the distinctive feature of good Christians. Only the Oxford movement and the Catholic revival preserved a wide interest in theological speculation over religious practice. Both of them are alluded to ironically in Dickens's writings. In his later novels, where divine Providence recedes into the background, the accepted rules of good and evil according to current morality still hold. The ethics of his imaginary world did not change where private lives were concerned. A specific example of his conformity to current standards is the presence of angelic female characters in the works of his maturity, such as Agnes in *David Copperfield* (1850). One may wonder whether Dickens's celestial heroines were a manifestation of Christian womanhood, or whether they belong to the stereotyped social cliché of "the angel of the hearth" that distinguished virtuous from fallen women.

The inner disquiet of many tormented believers found but a tepid echo in his characters. Their sense of guilt usually originated from violating socially accepted moral codes, not from a confessional dilemma, as we find, for instance, in George Eliot's *Scenes from Clerical Life*. Neither was Dickens ready for Samuel Butler's pitiless analysis of religious education nor Edmund Gosse's compassionate description of his believing father.

Though he lived through a period of great religious turmoil and theological debates, Dickens usually eschewed them. In his fiction, religious controversies are in most cases ironically exploited, as manifestations of excessive devotion – witness the ironic references to the Tractarian movement, to the revival of Anglo-Catholicism, and the parodic representations of Evangelicalism and its preaching.

Dickens was also a severe judge of missionary propaganda, which he blamed for ignoring the desperate conditions of the poor in Britain, pretending to save the souls of savages by making them wear flannel waistcoats in the Caribbean. Telescopic philanthropy appeared to him a mental deviation from that sound common sense rule that charity begins at home. The dislike Dickens felt for religious fanaticism extended to any form of dogmatism, whether clerical or secular. Above all it affected his judgement on contemporary forms of the so-called "modern education", as we see in his savage satire of Bell and Lancaster's school system in Gradgrind's theory of

education in *Hard Times* (1854).

The inflated usage of religious language.

If one were to judge Dickens from the frequency with which his narrative discourse is imbued with religious allusions, one should draw the conclusion that he was a very pious man. With a frequency equal to or slightly below that of Shakespeare, the Bible is the most quoted text in his narrative. Paradoxically the profusion of biblical reference in the text remains one of the main sources to explore the laity of his world.

For the sake of brevity, I will include under the term "biblical" the sacred texts that together with the Old and New Testaments, formed the education of the typical Anglican and which Dickens freely quoted from, that is to say *The Common Book of Prayers*, *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *The Lives of the Saints*.

One of the major problems in tackling Biblical intertextuality is to distinguish between the common run of the mill and the innovative and creative usage on the part of the author. In both cases, a line must be drawn between the religious and the profane utilisation of the Bible. As Brock illustrated in his study of Dickensian language, "the characters who are most fond of quotations are not as a rule those who are intellectually outstanding".¹⁷ In Dickens, one must in fact distinguish between the employment of religious language by individual characters and by the authorial commentary. When the speaker is not the narrator, commonplaces take the upper hand and that often leads to gentle parody. Citations become subtle and intriguing, sometime even cryptic, when the voice is that of the writer:

The author's references to passages in books are generally concealed quotations incorporated into descriptive or narrative passages in such a way that a reader unfamiliar with their source might not realise that they are quotations.¹⁸

So the novelty lies not in the explicit use or abuse of Biblical expressions but in the author's reworking which often turns them into new figures of thought charged with novel, unexpected connotations. We shall draw some examples of Dickens's strategies from *Bleak House*.

In *Dickens and the Broken Scripture*, Larson has already pointed out the battle of biblical books underlying Esther's narrative. Biblical teaching has been at the root of her childish unhappiness, by creating in her a sense of guilty innocence. When little Esther would ask the Calvinist aunt who brought her up about her mother, she would sternly blame the unhappy child for her illegitimate birth by citing a well-known passage from the *Old Testament*: "Pray daily that the sins of the others be not visited upon your head, according to what is written", omitting the Lord's promise of "mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments" (Exodus 20:6). One day Esther is reading of Jesus's merciful words for the adulterous woman: "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her." The severe aunt stops her by quoting an apocalyptic passage from the *New Testament*: "Watch ye,

therefore! Lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping. And what I say unto you, I say unto all, Watch!" (Mark 13: 35-37). The dramatic tension is then deflated by a stroke of bitter irony: the angry woman dies struck by her own prophetic violence. Both Esther and her aunt faithfully quote from the original, though with diverging intentions.¹⁹

While in Esther's narrative biblical references are correct citations from the original, the external narration offers some interesting examples of split quotations, as the Nimrod case exemplifies. As the time of his death, Esther's natural father, Captain Hawdon, who lives poorly in Chancery earning his living as a law copyist, lives under the assumed name of Nemo, but is known to the neighbours as Nimrod. The misnaming derives from a slip of the tongue of Mrs Snagby who can't pronounce his name properly. So the poor, weak man, who dies of an overdose of opium, is known by the name of the founder and builder of the Tower of Babel, *a mighty hunter before the Lord* (Genesis 10.9). The allusion to Nimrod would be known even to churchgoers of humble extraction, while the Latin Nemo would remain a mystery to them. The completion of the quotation is inserted in the following chapter, set at Chesney Wold, Lord Deadlok's country place, during the hunting season. There his guests are ironically presented as "the fashionable intelligence, a mighty hunter before the Lord, hunts with a keen scent, from their breaking cover at the Court of St. James's to their being run down to death."²⁰ Through broken and split quotations, Dickens manages to trace a thick web of affinities, creating new verbal paths whose hidden meaning demands an active response from his readers to be discovered.

The Bible, like Shakespeare a cryptic, ambiguous text, allows a full range of discordant interpretations. Ironic deformation of original quotations drawn from the sacred monsters in English culture, Shakespeare and the Bible, perform a verbal dance in the Dickensian texts, which leads to *la mise en question* of traditional values.

Like Shakespeare, the Bible is often turned to parodic uses. Right from the earlier works, namely from *Pickwick Papers*, we come across Dickens's exploitation of "the comic possibilities of religious inflation".²¹ An early example can be found in the episode of Sam's stepmother's religious mania. Old Weller thus relates his wife's infatuation for the Methodist Reverend Stigging: "She's got hold of some invention from grown up people being born again, Sammy, the new birth, I think they calls it." The reference is to a passage of St. John in the New Testament, rendered in good cockney.²²

Malapropisms and coarse use of the English language in the Reverend Stiggings' preaching open the way to a typical Dickensian device, that of biblical misquotations by uncultivated characters whose religious practice leaves much to be desired: Bumble in *Oliver Twist*, Pecksniff in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Mrs Jelleby and Chadband in *Bleak House*.

Misreadings of the original are not infrequent: in *Great Expectations* (1861), in relating Magwitch's death, Pip comments on the event by citing a famous passage from the Gospel:

Mindful, then, of what we had read together, I thought of the two men who went up into the Temple to pray, and I knew there were no better words that I could say beside his bed than "O Lord, be merciful to him, a sinner".²³

The original reads "be merciful to me". The piousness of the quotation appear appropriate to the moment, and yet the change from *me* to *him* reflects Pip's presumption of his own superiority over a man to whom he owed much and who he despised.²⁴

Religious syncretism and popular tradition

Mrs Oliphant's statement that Dickens was "the first to find out the immense spiritual power of the Christmas turkey", is a good starting point to introduce the question of Dickens's Christian sensibility. Of course, enjoying the material goods of the Christmas festivities does not make one a misbeliever. The nativity celebrations have always fused the religious with the magic and profane, eventually reaching out to consumerism. Dickens was no exception. So it is not the turkey's praise that the good Christians should lament but the lack of balance in the space given to the spiritual side of religious manifestations, to counterbalance the merry portrayal of a feast made up of songs, dances and good food.

Dickens himself was aware that something was amiss when, in *Pickwick Papers*, telling of the Christmas festivities at Dingley Dell, he entitled chapter 28 as follows:

*A good-humoured Christmas Chapter, containing an Account of a Wedding, and some other Sports beside: which, although in their way, even as good Customs as Marriage itself, are not quite so religiously kept up, in these degenerate Times.*²⁵

Dickens's Christianity belongs to the world of a generic religiousness rather than to that of religiosity. He often tried to fuse industrial reality with old popular customs, mixing new social theories and old traditions. As Graham Smith has remarked:

Dickens's world was essentially urban, but had not quite severed links with its ancient past through that amalgam of fairy and folk tales, city ballads, Christianity, proverbs and lore of the streets, Shakespeare and melodrama, pantomime and the circus, that made up so much of the urban consciousness.²⁶

The Christmas Stories are peopled by creatures drawn from northern mythologies of Celtic and Germanic origin, from fairy stories of medieval and Arabic derivation. Ghosts, goblins and genii populate his books more frequently than angels. So the Christian tradition just happens to be one of the items in the list of folkloristic legends. God is mentioned as a vague fatherly figure; human virtues take up more room than spiritual mysticism. Prayers and festive church celebrations are evoked, but rarely depicted. Whether we deal with the tales or the major novels, the churchyard and the funeral are the most frequented religious places and functions. The cemeterial scenario brings with it the mysterious presence of ghosts. In Dickens,

they appear both as terrifying creatures, derived from the tradition of the revenants, and as the emanation of the self, in an ambiguous mixture of Christianity and pagan cult mingled with current spiritualism.

The most famous of them, Scrooge's and Marley's in *A Christmas Carol*, stand as semiconscious projections of the human self and not of a supernatural world, a typical spiritualistic approach connected with occultism. A. H. Miller reminds us that Dickens was, despite himself, deeply influenced by spiritualism:

Responsive to a skepticism inspired by spiritualist epistemology, Dickens recapitulated the move effected by spiritualism itself: he presents his subjection to internal 'impressions and apprehensions' as an indication of the possible existence of objective and external spirits. And, although he would become increasingly hostile to the factual claims of spiritualists, his novels regularly depended upon such uncertain exchange of internal impressions and external apparitions. Dickens's books exploited the spiritual machinery which, outside of his fiction, he actively disdained.²⁷

Another recurrent theme, which is profane and Christian at the same time, is that of the family reunion. We read in *Pickwick Papers*:

And numerous indeed are the hearts to which Christmas brings a brief season of happiness and enjoyment. How many families, whose members have been dispersed and scattered far and wide, in the restless struggles of life, are then reunited, and meet once again in that happy state of companionship and mutual good-will, which is a source of such pure and unalloyed delight, and one so incompatible with the cares and sorrows of the world, that the religious belief of most civilised nations, and the rude tradition of the roughest savages, alike number it from the first joys of a future condition of existence, provided for the blest and the happy!

Happy, happy Christmas, that can win us back to the delusions of our childish days; that can recall to the old man the pleasures of his youth; that can transport the sailor and the traveller, thousands of miles away, back to his own fire-side and his quiet home!²⁸

The centrality of the happy family in all nativity stories reflects the shift in the Victorian age from the importance in the family of lineage to the new ideal of domesticity assumed to be the natural form of home life. It may be noted that serene domesticity is always a sort of dream-like experience in Dickens's novels, as the majority of his heroes and heroines belong to broken families.²⁹ So the theme of homely happiness belongs to the fairy-tale quality of Christmas.

The novelist fuses and juxtaposes the magic and the religious even in works that seem very far from the pastoral atmosphere of the Christmas tales. In *Bleak House* Esther Summerson's vicissitudes find their analogues in two apparently contrasting stories: that of Cinderella from fairy tales, and that of Queen Esther from the Bible. In the best tradition of compared mythology, the two stories are brought together: in the fusion, it is the biblical narrative that becomes fairy-like and not the fairy story that turns Christian.

Nativity, death and resurrection are fundamental manifestations of the Christian faith. They also stand as the archetypal myths in man's history. Death and resurrection are the central theme in the life of John Hammon in *Our Mutual Friend*. There, as elsewhere, death is often degraded to a macabre show, like that of the body

snatching Lizzie and her father perform on the river. The gloomy vision of the Thames seems to murmur the horrifying omen: "fear death by the water". With the exception of some serene passings away, like Nell's in the *Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), figures of mortality do not display much Christian compassion, but nourish physical horror of the decay of the flesh.

Darwinism and the receding of Christianity

As Gillian Beer has pointed out, mid-Victorian narrative was heavily conditioned by the shift in ontological perception of the outer world:

The question of congruity between language and physical order is evidently related to teleological issues, just as narrative order brings sharply into focus the question of precedent design. Victorian novelists increasingly seek a role for themselves within the language of the text as observer and experimenter, rather than as designer or god. Omniscience goes, omnipotence is concealed.³⁰

Writers modelled structure and language on the scientific narration of the origin of life: some did it deliberately in agreement with the new theories, others almost unconsciously. Dickens's experience stands midway between adherence to the patterns imposed by evolutionism and confidence in the creative structure of biblical origin, that is to say between neutral observation and omniscient narration. Like most humanists, Dickens distrusted positivistic optimism in the evolutionary perfecting of the world, but did not totally reject the possibility that the survival of the fittest might be a sign of progress.

Long before he became acquainted with Darwin, Dickens had nourished a keen interest in natural sciences: in his younger days, he was a passionate reader of Lyell's geological papers. The taste for science reflects in the later fiction: the dark novels are pervaded by biological and geological metaphors, which enrich the symbolic dimension of literary representation. He was fascinated by the symbolism the developmental stories supplied. At the same time, he dreaded the displacement of the human element from the centre in natural history. The best evidence of such unsolved inner conflict can be found in *Bleak House*, written in 1852 seven years before the publication of *On The Origin of Species*, and in *Our Mutual Friend*, published six years after in 1865: in both novels, events are governed by laws which neither man nor God can control.

Darwin's narrative, like Lyell's prose and Erasmus Darwin's poetry, supplied imaginative repertoires from which the artists drew excellent material for their virtual worlds. Even when it ceased to be religiously inspired the account of the origin of life remained a wonderful story to tell on which all stories were modelled. Traditional fiction had found a narrative model in the Edenic narration of the creation of man and the adventures and misadventures, which befell mankind; the author himself was seen as a mundane projection of God Omniscient. So eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century novels mirrored the Christian pattern of human life, whereas late Victorian and Modernistic novels reflected the evolutionary interpretation of social

reality. In Darwinism, the structure of the world depended on organic sequences predetermined by universal laws in their temporal and spatial evolution. Their interrelations were not always easily perceived by the human eye: there were missing links in the Darwinian hypothesis that allowed for a free play with the intricate web of affinities that characterised variations and transformations.³¹

In literary criticism, the distinction between intuitionism and positivism postulated by Lawrence and elaborated by Hirsch, on which the transition from Victorian to modernistic fiction was modelled, corresponded to two contrasting readings of reality, the religious and the secular. As Daldry sums up in his study on Dickens:

These two approaches correspond to our literary terms of 'genre' and 'structure'. Intuitionism places faith in the spirit of the work, and initially in the spirit of the Bible, the received word of God. This becomes the source, as Lawrence recognises, of generic authority, the speech that is not individual. Positivism, meanwhile, depends upon analysis of language and structure.³²

Daldry goes on to argue that the division between the generic and the structural, 'a modern concern, attributable to the strictly secular nature of the form', was already present in Dickens's later works. Once again, we return to *Bleak House*: Esther's individual voice speaks for generic authority, while the impersonal narrator is neutral and up to a point objective. While Esther tells her story in the past tense, as any traditional storyteller would do, the impersonal voice, which speaks in the present, is immanent to the world it portrays. Thus the narrator loses his/her omniscience and becomes a subjective storyteller or a neutral observer. The two narrating voices stage the conflict between a society of believers traditionally anchored to the old creed, and a secular society, that of the agnostic observer, scientifically and socially minded.

As in all later Dickensian novels, *Bleak House* dramatises the sense of crisis in religious authority. The process is acted out on two parallel levels: on a first level, as just said, it invests the uses of the narrative voices, on a second level it portrays the social structures as the outcome of a predetermined conditions. All existing creatures fall into a deterministically organised reality, sedimented through time in social and human layers. The geological metaphorical structure of the novel testifies how much Dickens was indebted to Lyell's conception of cosmic uniformity, a vision of the world that caused dismay both to the author and to his readers.³³

In effect Dickens feared deterministic materialism and yet could not turn his eyes from it. As Arnold said, "How does one get to feel much about any matter whatsoever? By dwelling upon it, by staying our thoughts upon it, by having it perpetually in our mind."³⁴ After 1850, Dickens's imagination lingered on the evolutionary cycles, which he transferred from the natural to the social world. He looked with a growing sense of horror and disgust on the conditions of urban life. Such horror was made flesh in bestial and geological metaphors. Human suffering and the social gospel had always been foremost in his mind, whilst the evangelic gospel had loomed in the background. But now the epistemological background against which such sufferings were projected was changing. In earlier narrative, love for one's neighbour and faith in a providential force that drove the world were a

comfort to mankind. In his later fiction, ontological preoccupations became prevalent, as transpires from the portrayal of the ineluctable fate of the human species stratified into evolving layers whose time of mutation transcended historical times. In *Bleak House*, the neutral narrator and the compassionate Esther come together in portraying the complexity of a polyphonic world, not because their views coincide, but because they cannot escape from the underlying laws that knit together a world governed by the mysterious rules of hidden evolutionary structures:

Evolutionism has been so imaginatively powerful precisely because all its indications do not point one way. It is rich in contradictory elements which can serve as a metaphorical basis for more than one reading of experience: to give one summary example – the ‘ascent’ or the ‘descent’ of man may follow the same route but the terms suggest very diverse evaluations of the experience.³⁵

In Dickens, profusion and diversity are key words to understanding his narrative. Moreover, the all-inclusiveness of his imaginary world incorporates ambiguities and contradictions as fundamental notions in his fictive construction. While attacking Victorian *laissez faire* political economy, Dickens praises self-made man and woman; while fighting Darwinism, he turned its concrete biological determinism into literary tropes. When evolutionary symbolism entered his works, Dickens did not do away with the earlier myth of stability and permanence in human existence. So his narrative discourse embedded religious allusions into an evolutionary frame. The allusions acquired an a-religious value, while his undertext was heavily infused with biological references that in turn acquired an almost religious status as emblems of ‘stable mutability’.

Occasionally, patched-up happy endings seem to supply a glimpse of human happiness that the story cannot paint or portray. In the earlier novels, comfort could be found in the belief in the existence of a merciful God or in some form of natural piety among mankind. Dickens was very sensitive to whatever was moving in the world of ideas. He had a porous mind which absorbed whatever oozed through from current circulation of ideas and promptly turned it into fictional texture. His novels display brilliant intuitions of the emotions raised in Victorians sensibility by the pervading influence of evolutionary theories.

His dark novels, starting from *Bleak House* are founded on a gloomy view of a genetically structured universe, against which he tried to fight. As Fulwiler remarked:

Although Dickens’s vision of human society in *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) is analogous to Darwin’s vision of the natural world in *The Origin of the Species*, the purpose of the former is quite different from that of the latter: it is to demonstrate how human values should be made to triumph over the dismal swamp.³⁶

Dickens wanted to prove that ‘hidden relations may work either for hidden harm or for hidden good’, but could not demonstrate how human values could be made to triumph. He succeeded however in exploiting hidden relations to give coherence to his fiction. Dickens was fighting a desperate battle against the gloomy, dark vision of

the human condition governed by physical mutation. Whereas he had to accept the biological faith in evolution, he did not believe in the moral growth of genetic transformation: his novels offer several instances of the victims of evolutions. Like Zola and the naturalists, he refused the idea of progress embedded in the survival of the fittest, and preferred to linger on the death of the weakest. *Bleak House*, which marks the transition from a benevolent to a desolate world, well mirrored the barrenness of contemporary society. As Sanders reminds us, Ruskin was one of the firsts to grasp Dickens's denial of moral progress in modern society:

Ruskin estimated that *Bleak House* included nine deaths though it was not a 'tragic, adventurous or military story: its death-rate, he concluded, was merely a reflection of a 'properly representative average of statistics of civilian mortality in the centre of London'. Ruskin's useful observation that Dickens links the spiritual and sanitary problems of a Victorian city to a pervasive study of decay and death, is amplified by his awareness that in *Bleak House* the moral threat to urban man presses as urgently as the social one.

Ruskin was using the novel to prove a particular point in his own moral thesis; Dickens, he argued had denied his characters heroism, and had sought to illustrate modern theology that the appointed destiny of a large average of the population was 'to die like rats in the drain, either by trap or poison' .³⁷

Some deaths in *Bleak House* are very telling about the weaker vessels of mankind: the even too well-known demise of Jo for one and that of the mason's infant, just to quote two of the most pitiable episodes. There are of course those who are destined to survive the struggle and seem to have in store their share of happiness: Esther and Alan, Bell and John Hammon. Individuals may be rescued, but they represent exceptions in life rather than the progress of the species. For Dickens, the evolution of the natural and social world did not correspond to moral advancement. Esther's new home bears the same name as the older one, *Bleak House*, a premonition that nothing really changes for the best. For Belle and Hammon to find their happiness, many had to die, much suffering to be undergone.

Human nature itself acquires a different quality. The animal like presentation of a large majority of his characters is the best testimonial of Dickens's embittered, darkened view of the world. The fairy-tale happy endings in *Bleak House*, as in *Our Mutual Friend* would seem to atone for such a gloomy vision. What they actually succeed in doing is making the reader forget the discrepancies of the narrating voices. And Christianity is squeezed in between a lay, agnostic narrator and pious, religious characters. Dickens's new outlook was not so much a move against religion, but a strengthening of his lay view of life. He was prepared to receive new scientific interpretations as a contribution to knowledge, and was able to reconcile them with his broad Christianity, as 'nothing could be discovered without God's intention and assistance'.³⁸

So, despite the difficulty of seeing clearly through the maze of Dickensian thought, it seems quite evident that his art had definitely moved towards a joyless laicism. Refuting Mark Spilka's claim in *Dickens and Kafka* (1969) that even in *Bleak House*, 'Dickens gives a pseudo-religious cast to the law which magnifies its horrors', Graham Storey had spoken about how "the horrors of Chancery – Miss Flite's madness, Gridley's obsession and death, Richard's ruin and death also – are bleak enough; but it is a *secular bleakness*, born of the coils of human nature at its

worst.”³⁹

Thus old and new ideology blurred together in portraying a sad, desolate world, reified in the London fog, the dust of legal papers, the deadly river carrying body snatchers and corpses on its stream. The Golden Dustman, Boffin, is the great puppeteer of such dismal surrounding.

The unsolved dilemma about who was right between Darwinism and Christianity led Dickens to a post-Christian, post-Darwinian position in his last unfinished novel. There, where even Darwinism seems to recede, the world loses any coherent pattern, whether of spiritual or materialistic origin. *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* opens with a phantomatic vision of the Cathedral in the dimmed mind of the opium eater, and it moves to the actual site of the Cathedral, equally hazy in the mist, equally gloomy in representation:

Whosoever has observed the sedate clerical bird, the rook, may perhaps have noticed that when he wings his way homeward towards nightfall, in a sedate and clerical company, two rooks will suddenly detach themselves from the rest, will retrace their flight for some distance, and will there poise and linger, conveying to mere men the fancy that it is of some occult importance to the body politic, that this artful couple should pretend to have renounced connection with it.

Similarly being the service over in the old Cathedral with the square tower, and the choir scuffling out again, and divers venerable persons of rook-like aspect dispersing, two of these latter retrace their steps, and walk together in the echoing Close.⁴⁰

The dual setting of the story, London and Cloisterham, subverts pre-established conventions. In the first place, it annuls the pastoral juxtaposition of country and city, of provincial and urban life. That is to say that Dickens was opening to new horizons in his work, not necessarily more cheerful than before. Far from being a twin-sister to the Trollopian Barchester, Cloisterham is a dangerous place to live in: one must escape from it to find refuge in the metropolis. So London, that very hell-like London turns into a place of security, but not of peaceful serenity. Moreover, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* also overthrows some of the standard Dickensian stereotypes: in the gloom, suspicious and tenebrous atmosphere of the Cathedral town we come across two exemplary figures belonging to the clergy and law, two social sets usually deprecated by Dickens: that of the generous Canon Crisparkle and the good lawyer Mr Grewgious. As Angus Wilson pointed out, in Dickens's earlier novels "all lawyers had been villains or, at least, ambiguous characters, and until his previous novel *Our Mutual Friend*, so had all clergymen."⁴¹ Frank Milvey, the curate, and Mr. Riah, the venerable Jew in *Our Mutual Friend* complete the picture of good religious people. Their introduction reflects Dickens's growing indifference to his characters' clerical or lay extraction, and outlines his increasing interest in the individual to the detriment of social issues.

What so far said is true for his late fiction, not for shorter and lighter writings. In his mature age Dickens made different use of imagination in the pieces written for the magazines and in his major novels, as if he had two audiences in minds: those who like him could face the torment of a new perspective of reality, and those who had to be treated like sons and daughters and kept in ignorance of the new ontological

monster, evolutionary positivism.

In his tales he preserves his older humour, abandoning himself again to pleasing fancy and a maternal view of nature, preserving the faith in an omniscient amorous Father guiding life and the universe. Bearing this in mind, in this key one can endorse Ackroyd's statement that, in part at least, Charles Dickens:

remained faithful to the broad beliefs of the typical mid-nineteenth century gentleman; in this, as in other matters, he was not afflicted by the doubts which exercised many of his contemporaries. In any case, his attachment to his audience, and his belief in its reality as one extended family, would have effectively prohibited him from espousing non-Christian or anti-Christian precepts.⁴²

Notes

¹ *Bleak House*, London: Penguin, 1995, 556.

² J. L. Larson, *Dickens and the Broken Scripture*, Athens: Georgia University Press, 1985, 314.

³ Dennis Walder, *Dickens and Religion*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1981; I. Andrews Sanders, *Charles Dickens Resurrectionist*, London: Macmillan, 1982.

⁴ J. L. Larson, *op.cit.*, 35.

⁵ Walder, *op.cit.*, 13.

⁶ Quoted in Walder, 2.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ J. Shad, "Dickens's Cryptic Church" in *Dickens Refigured: Bodies, Desires and Other Histories*, ed. J. Schad, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996, 11.

⁹ *Ibidem*, 5-6.

¹⁰ Quoted in Shad, 11.

¹¹ "The Shipwreck", *The Uncommercial Traveller and Reprinted Pieces*, Oxford University Press, The Oxford Illustrated Dickens, 1994 (I ed. 1958), 3-17.

¹² *Ibidem*, "Sunday under three heads", 635.

¹³ *Bleak House*, 734.

¹⁴ A.O.J. Cockshut, "Faith and Doubt in the Victorian Age", in *The Victorians*, ed. A. Pollard, London, Penguin, 1993, (I ed. 1969), 25.

¹⁵ "City of London Churches" *The Uncommercial Traveller*, 85.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 92-3.

¹⁷ G. L. Brook, *The Language of Dickens*, Deutsch, London, 1970, 190 *et passim*.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*

¹⁹ *Bleak House*, 32.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, 170, 188.

²¹ Walder, *op. cit.*, 10.

²² John. iii 4-5. *Pickwick Papers*, London, Penguin 1985, 379.

²³ *Great Expectations*, London: Penguin, 1985, p.470

²⁴ H. House. *The Dickens World*, Oxford University Press, 1960, (I ed. 1941), 106.

²⁵ *Pickwick Papers*, 457.

²⁶ G. Smith, *Dickens: A Literary Life*, London, Macmillan 1996, 168.

²⁷ A.H. Miller "The Specters of Dickens's Study", *Narrative*, vol 5, n.3, October 1997, 326.

²⁸ *Pickwick Papers*, 458.

²⁹ See C. Waters, *Dickens and the Politics of Family*, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

³⁰ G. Beer, *Darwin's Plots. Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin. George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, London, Arp Paperbacks, 1983, 45.

³¹ *Ibidem*, 149-180.

³² G. Daldry, *Charles Dickens and the Form of the Novel*, London: Croom Helm, 1987, 2.

³³ See U. Fabietti, "I viaggi della scienza", *L'impero di carta. La letteratura inglese del secondo Ottocento*, ed. C. Pagetti, Roma: Nuova Italia, 1994, 205-220.

³⁴ M. Arnold, quoted in R. upRoberts, *Arnold and God*, Berkeley, California University Press 1993, 194.

³⁵ G. Beer, *op.cit.*, 8-9.

³⁶ H. W. Fulweiler, "'A dismal swamp': Darwin, Design and Evolution in *Our Mutual Friend*," *Nineteenth-Century*

Literature, vol.49, n.1, June 1994, 54.

³⁷ Sanders, *op. cit.*, 131-2. .

³⁸ Quoted in P. Ackroyd, *Dickens*, London: Sinclair Stevenson, 1990., 506

³⁹ G. Storey, *Bleak House*, Cambridge University Press 1987, 104.

⁴⁰ *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, ed. Angus Wilson, London, Penguin 1974, 40.

⁴¹ Angus Wilson, Introduction, in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, 24.

⁴² P. Ackroyd, *op. cit.*, 507.