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DOUBLES, DREAMS AND DEATH IN *LITTLE DORRIT*

A poignant story about perverted roles and shifting identities, *Little Dorrit* (1855-57) is an emblematic starting point when attempting an analysis of the forms and the meanings of the double trope in Dickensian texts and, more generally, in the Victorian period. With its considerable use of double characters, double narratives and doubling techniques, the novel, which belongs to Dickens's mature period, incisively condenses several creative ways in which the writer handles doubles and doubling at the different levels of characterisation, setting, plot and language. It thus provides fresh and unsettling insights into the Victorian construction of identity and culture and highlights the peculiar contribution Dickens made to the nineteenth-century literature of the double, a continuous line passing from Mary Shelley through James Hogg and the Brontë sisters to Stevenson and Conrad. Such a contribution still awaits a comprehensive exploration not only of the unprecedented figurative, textual and linguistic forms by which Dickens managed to verbalise his perception of duplicity and doubleness, but also of his specifically imaginative re-writing of the double theme in the context of the Victorian age.

Though the double can boast a remarkable mythic, religious and artistic ancestry, its cultural relevance increases in times of profound epistemic changes. Nineteenth-century culture invested it with new signification, so that it became a multi-accentual sign of the deepest conflicts of the age. On the one hand, it expressed the plight of post-Romantic subjectivity, torn between a lost organic relationship with nature and subsequent nostalgia and challenged by the decline of communal life and the onslaught of capitalism; on the other hand, it emblematised the pressure of the strict interdicts of a self-righteous and hypocritical age on the individual and collective unconscious. In this way the double paradigm dramatised new narratives about the self that paved the way to the breakthrough of psychoanalysis.

Little Dorrit is intrinsically a 'double' narrative as a whole, since its quiet happy ending leaves unanswered the many questions raised by a far-ranging representation of Victorianism which is anything

but complacent. It is a text that unseals an imaginative repertoire capable of voicing criticisms and verbalising emotions that would not otherwise find an outlet, given their unsuitability with the outspoken values of the Victorian symbolic order. Here, as elsewhere in Dickens's disruptive narratives, Victorianism is exposed as an ideological fiction whose irretrievable contradictions are concealed behind a mask of moralising ethics, rationality and triumphant optimism. A reversed mirror image of the Victorian world, Dickensian representation of it underlines the age's ambiguous self-perception and its most dysfunctional traits, its corruption, melancholy and pessimistic feelings of decadence and decline.

This mixture of ambivalent emotions accounts for the heterogeneity of moods that pervade Dickens's work – irresistible comicality, biting satire, pervasive irony down to metaphysical gloom – and, consequently, its different registers. Comicality and even satire, through which Dickens unleashes his mordacity against the ills of his age – above all, duplicity – are intellectual attitudes that scrutinise contradictions as objects of criticism external to the self. They produce a brilliantly entertaining, even aggressive prose that employs Bakhtinian heteroglossia with devastating irony.

Melancholy, on the other hand, is a self-reflexive feeling, nurtured by loss and longing, whose main object of analysis is, in the first place, the same self and its contradicting emotions. The melancholic mood, therefore, tends to produce an intimate kind of writing, reactive to the ways the world is taken in by subjectivity. A self-centred feeling, melancholy is different from mourning, as Freud argued, in that it is not related to a specific loss but rather expresses the general fear felt by the self when facing existential instability and historical change. Since death is the most powerful among the agents that frustrate man's doomed attempt to gratify desire permanently, melancholy relates indeed to the apprehension of death, but does so only indirectly, anaesthetising the impasse of grief by means of compensating activities like fantasising, in "a state of passivity in which the awareness of changes, decay, and end is filtered through a specific bittersweet reverie" (Balus: 1998, 414). In *Little Dorrit*, in particular, it is Arthur Clennam, the hypersensitive middle-aged hero, who is evidently prone to depression and melancholy. Clennam is a "dreamer" (*LD*, Bk. I, Ch. 3, 80; Bk. I, Ch. 13, 206) whose recurrent death wish is manifest in the several references he makes to himself as a perfect "nobody"¹ and in his self-defeating dreams about impossible happiness.

¹ Originally Dickens intended to title his novel *Nobody's Fault* with an obvious

Why should he be vexed or sore at heart? It was not his weakness that he had imagined. It was nobody's, nobody's within his knowledge; why should it trouble him? And yet it did trouble him. And he thought – who has not thought for a moment sometimes – that it might be better to flow away monotonously, like the river, and to compound for its insensibility to happiness with its insensibility to pain (*LD*, Bk. I, Ch. 16, 244).

In the Victorian period, when the perception of living in a time of decline is a widespread feeling, melancholy becomes a social malady. A combination of overlapping and mutually influencing discourses, both philosophical and scientific, reinforces the pessimistic view of a declining world, marching towards death because of its irretrievable waste of energy. Significantly Kristeva's definition of melancholy as the black sun of the soul, though it belongs to psychoanalytic discourse, recalls at the same time the typical Victorian obsession with the death of the sun and a world getting irredeemably cold, inside and outside, thus suggesting an interplay of fascinating correspondences between microcosm and macrocosm within the symbolism of modernity².

As for the gloomy notes of Dickens's fiction that coexist with unbound comicality in the same texts, psychoanalysis has shown that laughter and anguish are separated only by a thin boundary, which is easily crossed whenever the power of rationality is withheld and with it the self's imagined mastery over its experiences. Loss of control and apparently indecipherable signs are typical of dreams and, in fact, it is significant to observe how several parts of Dickens's writings are imbued with an oneiric quality that confers a sense of estrangement to what could otherwise be considered rational and objective if regarded in a different light. Finally, when the voyage into the night discloses uncanny revelations that the self is no longer able to contain, madness appears as a lucid attempt to tackle with despair. The schizoid self, another quite frequent Dickensian double, is a personality unable to live with its own lacerations.

This heterogeneity of feelings explains why Dickens's own in-

satirical reference to the irresponsibility of institutions like the Circumlocution Office (Yeazell: 1991, 33). Later the title became *Little Dorrit*, but "nobody" remained a key word in the text and for both the public and the private plots. With regard to the latter it is mostly Arthur Clennam who employs the term. This defeatist anti-hero, who is making a sorrowful balance of his past life on his return from the Far East and is unhappily in love with Pet Meagles, often defines himself as "nobody" in his melancholic reveries.

² I am referring to Julia Kristeva's *Soleil noir: dépression et mélancolie*, Paris, Gallimard, 1987.

cessant rewriting of the double motif takes on a variety of typologies, often combining diverging narrative techniques within the same texts and shifting narrative focalisation all the way from an extroverted to an introverted perspective. It would be possible to trace an imaginary trajectory in his fiction ranging from a satirical to an increasingly symbolic and psychologically enigmatic presentation of character and setting. By following this line, we would first meet his bitter criticism of hypocrites and parasites and of the social world they inhabit, then the parallel or contrastive representation of equivalent characters, next the sudden and inexplicable metamorphoses of the self and, finally, the portrait of the split personality. Plots, too, are shaped according to doubling effects since, in his increasingly complicated narratives, Dickens embeds what Gillian Beer has called “ghost plots” (1983, 240), that is, virtual and subversive ‘double’ plots evoking “the desires, ambitions, or future plans of the characters” and alluding to “things which might have happened and are written in as possibilities, but which do not occur” (Ingham: 1992, 14). Finally, language itself keeps evoking fictional images that are ‘other’ than one would expect.

By the use of doubling patterns and of a wide set of discursive techniques such as the polyphonic juxtaposition of voices, irony, de-familiarising symbolism and estranging tropes, Dickens’s rhetoric mobilises novelistic conventions and stylistic registers, subverting linguistic as well as cognitive expectations. Though the widening of experience is true of language in general, and of literary language in particular, it is nevertheless a fact that the writer’s twisting of the novel format and critical reading of Victorianism strike the reader as being particularly defiant of literary and cultural conventions

Turning now to characterisation³, we can see that the first type of Dickensian doubles, composed of hypocrites, parasites, misers and braggarts, belongs to Dickens’s vein as a moralist and reformer of social *mores* and can be traced back to eighteenth-century literature, especially to Fielding and Swift, and from there to an ultra-centennial theatrical tradition including Ben Jonson, Plautus, Terence and Menander. Such characters, who show evident connections with the stock figures of classic drama, have a mainly satirical function, be-

³Evidently Flintwinch and his secret twin, or the villain Rigaud who hides himself under the different names of Blandois and Lagnier in the course of the novel, but is always recognisably himself thanks to a few stereotypical physiognomic traits – the moustache and the chin –, are not very interesting forms of the double, but rather mechanical novelistic devices.

cause they embody the irretrievable duplicity of man as a social being and, by metonymic extension, the uselessness and corruption of institutions, which are inevitably the sum of large numbers of inauthentic individuals. From the highest rung of the social ladder down to the lowest, people in charge who should care for the collective good – politicians, bureaucrats, lawyers, bankers, teachers, and obviously parents – are in fact irresponsible, narcissistic and ruthless, as well as obsessed with money. Religion itself works as a particularly perverted form of duplicity, as for Mrs Clennam's Calvinism. Overall, society is shown to be not just historically, but essentially irredeemable, looming like a carceral mechanism spreading in all directions where it is manifestly impossible to preserve moral and psychological integrity.

'Double' means here 'acting with duplicity' and refers to individuals regarded as social agents. Double characters experience a structural gap between their libidinal drives and their public images, a gap that makes them act under perpetual disguise. They are fascinated with themselves and are often the first victims of their lies, because they half-believe them. Hypocrites lie about feelings, parasites about work, misers about money and braggarts about success. Braggarts and misers are just specialised forms of the first two typologies, while hypocrisy, parasitism, greediness and vanity are frequently mixed in the same character, sometimes with a fair dose of dullness, sometimes with deliberate cynicism. In this latter case double characters show a worrying lack of scruples about the fracture between their emotional investment and their insincere self-representations.

As the several intertwined narratives of *Little Dorrit* demonstrate, hypocrites and parasites belong to every class, profession and social background: the confined world of the Marshalsea – the debtors' prison – the working-class neighbourhood of Bleeding Heart Yard, the secluded atmosphere of the commercial Calvinist house of the Clennams, the impoverished but arrogant aristocratic families of the Barnacles and the Gowans and, finally, high society in its power relationship with finance and government. Dickens, however, seems particularly concerned with the teeming universe of fake middle-class respectability and takes up the well-known eighteenth-century criticism of the ineptitude of aristocracy to expand it to his investigation of middle-class behaviour. Such an ideological attitude calls for a rethinking of Dickens's populism, especially if one considers his unflattering treatment of the lower-middle class, often described as a disconcerting army of disheartened or grotesque derelicts, represented without any idealising embellishment.

One of them is doubtless the pathetic Pancks. He works unwillingly as a relentless rent-collector for Casby, an apparently benevolent Victorian patriarch who is in fact the ruthless landlord of the impoverished working-class tenants of Bleeding Heart Yard, a neighbourhood of dilapidated tenement houses. Pancks is evidently unhappy with his double life and his 'dirty' and dehumanising job. This, however, has become so ingrained that he is unable to think of himself as capable of doing something totally different.

He had dirty hands and dirty broken nails, and looked as if he had been in the coals; he was in a perspiration, and snorted and sniffed and puffed and blew, like a little labouring steam-engine (*LD*, Bk. 1, Ch. 13, 190).

Mr Pancks, who was always in a hurry, (...) referred at intervals to a little dirty notebook which he kept beside him (*Ibid.*, 199-200).

“I like business,” said Pancks, getting on a little faster. “What’s a man made for?”

“For nothing else?” said Clennam.

Pancks put the counter question, “What else?” (*Ibid.*, 201).

In the end Pancks will be able to free himself from Casby’s control and side with the good people in the novel. However, most of Dickens’s swindlers are in fact irredeemable, here as in other texts. Mr Merdle, the enigmatic financier who goes bankrupt after his reckless speculations and commits suicide in the end, is certainly the most conspicuous example of the indecipherability of the cunning hypocrite – “the greatest Forger and the greatest Thief that ever cheated the gallows” (*LD*, Bk. II, Ch. 25, 777). Things, however, do not fare any better in humbler places, such as the Marshalsea, where the greater proximity to hardships and suffering does not appear to teach authenticity. The parasitical Mr Dorrit, the “father of the Marshalsea”, refers to himself and to the other inmates as to “collegians” in a sophisticated attempt to deny reality through rhetoric. False coinage and verbiage make forgery – which is doubling by counterfeiting – the central material and immaterial practice in this novel which is obsessed with the circulation of money and images.

With an effective stylistic choice which recurs elsewhere in *Little Dorrit* and in other polycentric novels, such as *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend*, society is represented through what Bachtin names the pluridiscursive device of parodic stylisation. It is a linguistically heterogeneous technique that aims to deflate, sometimes through ridicule, the emphatic situation that is being represented. In other words Dickens describes the duplicity of society with a language

which is itself split between self-contradicting voices, as in parodic discourse, where carnivalesque freedom unmasks pretence, blurs class hierarchies, and subverts the reader's conventional literary and ideological expectations.

That illustrious man and great national ornament, Mr Merdle, continued his shining course. It began to be widely understood that one who had done society the admirable service of making so much money out of it, could not be suffered to remain a commoner. A baronetcy was spoken of with confidence; a peerage was frequently mentioned. Rumour had it that Mr Merdle had set his golden face against a baronetcy; that he had plainly intimated to Lord Decimus that a baronetcy was not enough for him; that he had said, "No: a Peerage, or plain Merdle" (*LD*, Bk. II, Ch. 24, 756).

Little Dorrit, which thematises the corrupting power of money, is divided into two books titled antithetically "Poverty" and "Riches", while its overall design appears to be built on a series of doubling paradigms – freedom/imprisonment, past/present, sunshine/shadow, truth/appearance, poverty/wealth, action/passivity. The symmetrical correspondences thus created and foregrounded from the start – the first chapter is titled "Sun and Shadow" – are grafted into a narrative organisation that could actually be visualised as a set of concentric frames, each developing the common themes in the distinct spheres under investigation, from the family to finance and government. Similarly, in order to emphasise the fragmentation and emptiness of deceitful society the discourse of the novel often employs doubling linguistic techniques, from anaphora and parallelism for ironic purposes to the estranging focalisation on details through tropes such as synecdoche, metonymy, and allusive symbolism.

The bosom moving in Society with the jewels displayed upon it, attracted general admiration (*LD*, Bk. I, Ch. 21, 293)⁴.

There was a dinner giving in the Harley Street establishment (...) and there were magnates from the Court and magnates from the City, magnates from the Commons and magnates from the Lords, magnates from the bench and magnates from the bar, Bishop magnates, Treasury magnates, Horse Guard magnates, Admiralty magnates – all the magnates that keep us going, and sometimes trip us up (*Ibid.*, 294).

⁴ The "bosom" is the vain and ostentatious Mrs Merdle who likes wearing low-cut dresses and jewels. Another piquant detail about her rapacity is that her left hand is larger than her right hand.

Mrs Merdle was at home, and was in her nest of crimson and gold, with the parrot on a neighbouring stem watching her with his head on one side, as if he took her for another splendid parrot of a larger species (*LD*, Bk. I, Ch. 33, 441).

Dickens is a fine ironist who knows how to connote characters through their speech styles and to exploit all possible double meanings of language in order to dramatise duplicity. In so doing he behaves not as a prescriptive, but as a descriptive linguist, interested in the phenomenology rather than in the norms of language⁵. The intriguing verbal performances of Dickensian doubles involve several demonstrations of what linguistics calls the interpersonal level of language, that is, its function as communication in social exchange⁶. For example, Casby looks like the most benevolent Victorian patriarch and his idiolect is polite and suave, but ironically his soft-spoken circumlocutions serve only the purpose to enhance his greediness and hypocrisy and show how manners can disguise corruption:

Arthur Clennam moved to attract his attention, and the grey eyebrows turned towards him.

“I beg your pardon,” said Clennam, “I fear you did not hear me announced?”

“No, sir, I did not. Did you wish to see me, sir?”

“I wished to pay my respects”.

Mr Casby seemed a feather’s weight disappointed by the last words, having perhaps prepared himself for the visitor’s wishing to pay something else. “Have I the pleasure, sir,” he proceeded – “take a chair, if you please – have I the pleasure of knowing –? Ah! truly, yes, I think I have! I believe I am not mistaken in supposing that I am acquainted with those features? I think I address a gentleman of whose return to this country I was informed by Mr Flintwinch?”

“That is your present visitor”.

“Really! Mr Clennam?”

“No other, Mr Casby” (*LD*, Bk. I, Ch. 13, 187-88).

⁵ On Dickens as linguist see Randolph Quirk (1974). On the argumentative practices of political discourse in Dickens’s fiction and non-fiction, see Marina Bondi Paganelli (1989). Political jargon was quite naturally a main focus of Dickens’s satire, since he had experienced it directly as a young man working as a shorthand writer and parliamentary reporter, but in general his entire fiction shows his impatience at the misuse of language.

⁶ In linguistic description (Fairclough: 1992) the ‘ideational’ and the ‘interpersonal’ levels are those two functions of language that answer its two main purposes of cognition and communication respectively.

As for Mrs Merdle, she is a fatuous snob who nourishes the illusion to be the interpreter of wealthy upper-class *mores*. In her pompous utterances, this self-proclaimed “Priestess” keeps shifting from the pronoun “I” to the plural “we” in a sort of empathic, oracular and absolutely presumptuous identification with the chosen few.

“I wish Society was not so arbitrary, I wish it was not so exacting – Bird, be quiet!”

The parrot had given a most piercing shriek, as if its name were Society and it asserted its right to its exactions.

“But,” resumed Mrs Merdle, “we must take it as we find it. We know it is hollow and conventional and worldly and very shocking, but unless we are Savages in the Tropical seas (I should have been charmed to be one myself – most delightful life and perfect climate, I am told), we must consult it. It is the common lot” (*LD*, Bk. I, Ch. 20, 285).

In addition to the ‘relational’ function that is exemplified above, the interpersonal level of language involves one more component, which linguistics defines as the ‘identity’ function. The ‘identity’ function has to do with the fact that the mental attitudes and behaviour promoted by speech in its proactive creation of new meanings also shape the self socially. In other words, with its ideological assumptions and discursive practices any society – but also smaller private and public institutions, like schools and workplaces – posits the profile of its subjects⁷. Power controls individuals through language, especially so in a capitalist society where authority, which no longer lies in rank or is ratified once forever, has apparently become a self-referential business, based not on principles but on audience. A few loud people give orders to others who obey, or pretend to do so, because they are not allowed to voice their opinion. Individuals in power change, but the overall mechanism repeats itself and continues its blind course, with no orientation except selfish interests and money.

Dickens knows very well that private and public forms of authority are essentially based on assertive language, coming from speakers who, more often than not, have no real grounds for – or sound claims to – what they assert. In his novels he almost invariably at-

⁷ The linguistic construction of social relations and the self (Fairclough: 1992, 137-68) is a main area of investigation of critical discourse analysis that should enhance the awareness of the historical and therefore provisional character of any hegemonic configuration.

tacks several forms of preposterous authority, ‘denaturalising’⁸ the manipulative and selfish discursive practices that are employed to preserve it. In *Little Dorrit* the focus is on the impersonal dictatorship of bureaucracy. The institutional Leviathan looming at the centre of the novel is called significantly the Circumlocution Office, a clever definition which suggests the link between inane language and inaction. The Office is a black hole for any new ideas and projects, which are hindered not by deliberate repression but by sheer incompetence, neglect and verbosity.

The Circumlocution Office was (as everybody knows without being told) the most important Department under Government. No public business of any kind could possibly be done at any time without the acquiescence of the Circumlocution Office. Its finger was in the largest public pie, and in the smallest public tart (...).

It is true that How not to do it was the great study and object of all public departments and professional politicians all round the Circumlocution Office. It is true that every new premier and every new government, coming in because they had upheld a certain thing as necessary to be done, were no sooner come in than they applied their utmost faculties to discovering How not to do it (*LD*, Bk. I, Ch. 10, 145).

The Office is also the feeding ground of the extended Barnacle family⁹ of inept aristocrats¹⁰ who have fallen down the backward path of ‘devolution’, losing their humanity and degenerating into lower forms of being, human parasites. Above all, it is an ominous prophecy of the impersonally destructive power of modern administrations and of the corrupt use of language for double purposes.

The second type of Dickensian doubles is represented by parallel or oppositional characters who shadow each other’s personality. Mr Dorrit and his brother Frederick, for example, are two morally

⁸ Fairclough (1995) argues that “in so far as conventions become naturalized and commonsensical, so too do these ideological presuppositions. Naturalized discourse conventions are a most effective mechanism for sustaining and reproducing cultural and ideological dimensions of hegemony. Correspondingly, a significant target of hegemonic struggle is the denaturalization of existing conventions and replacement of them with others” (p. 94).

⁹ A barnacle is a parasitical crustacean which usually sticks to keels. The human Barnacles are glued in shoals to the ship of Government with nefarious results (*LD*, Bk. I, Ch. 34, “A Shoal of Barnacles”, 450).

¹⁰ Some upper-class public officials, among them Sir James Fitzjames Stephen (Virginia Woolf’s uncle), found Dickens’s criticism of the Civil Service ungenerous, but they were too steeped in their class privileges to be open to its devastating satire (Wall: 1991, XV).

opposed father figures, the former parasitical and subtly exploitative, the latter independent and noble-hearted; Cavalletto and Rigaud are a curious pair of inmates, the one kind and the other devilish. Splitting is a powerful, expressionistic way of dramatising psychic processes and handling metamorphosis by externalising the inner conflicts that take place within the self. Intrapsychic activity – which Jung calls the dialectics between the self and its shadow, necessary for the structuring of adult consciousness – is transposed theatrically outside and projected onto separate characters, sometimes with the dreamlike effects that derive from the contemporaneous coexistence of the approved and the forbidden self. In a fascinating play of difference and repetition, division and multiplication, the double is either represented as a positive model that can enhance the formation of one's identity by promoting improvement or as a negative figure from whom the main character needs somehow to differentiate in order to cope with his conflicts and to control his dangerous drives¹¹.

Good doubles reinforce self-esteem and provide idealised (and therefore masochistic) images of one's personality. They are hard-working, pacific, modest, reliable, faithful, and erotically unprepossessing. Dark doubles are lazy, aggressive, ambitious, devious, greedy, and lusty. Characteristically, they are often brutal womanisers who win the girl and then abuse her: Steerforth with Rosa Dartle and then Little Emily, Henry Gowan with Miss Wade and then Pet Meagles, Drummle with Estella. However, the most surprising thing in these unhappy liaisons is that the Victorian angel girl seems very willing to be deceived into yielding to her despicable partner in spite of his bad reputation¹².

To a post-Freudian reader good doubles appear to be evidently modelled after paradigms of self-esteem and moral and social acceptability, while bad doubles, like Stevenson's Hyde, are fascinatingly disturbing effigies, icons of repressed Eros and violence, deviating forbidden passions from censored representations of the self

¹¹ Herdman (1990) calls such characters "quasi-doubles". Oppositional quasi-doubles, like Steerforth in *David Copperfield* (1849-50), or Orlick in *Great Expectations* (1860-61), dramatise unsolved inner conflicts of the personality they mirror. It is evident, for example, that both Steerforth and Orlick provide oblique insights into the protagonist's drive for violence, which, though repressed, is nevertheless there.

¹² In her brilliant and convincing analysis of Dickens's representation of women Patricia Ingham (1992) shows on the basis of accurate linguistic evidence that, in spite of the surface textual reticence, Dickens's women are more knowing than they are thought.

and thus acting out that symbolic substitution of desire which is for Freud the main function of art. Dark doubles hint at possibilities that are not available to acceptable characters because of the vetoes imposed on them by moral and social interdicts. “With so much of his imaginative self invested in his violent and vicious characters, and so much of the self he approved of vowed to the service of home and family life, Dickens has a particular weakness for villains whose express intentions it is to smash up happy homes” (Carey: 1973, 17).

There has always been a close link between doubles and death in mythic narratives. As Otto Rank observed, the oldest and most frightening double in human culture were animated shadows, that took on a life of their own and somehow endangered, with their ‘other’ parallel existence, the permanence in life of the people they had detached from. Shadows were often believed to be the souls of the dead, threatening the living. From the very beginning, then, the encounter with the double as shadow has been imagined as deadly. When finally faced with the persecuting shadow he has unsuccessfully attempted to get rid of, the student from Prague in Rank’s essay attacks and tries to kill it, but in doing so he in fact commits suicide. Killing one’s shadow is killing oneself, which is what happens both to Dr Jekyll and to Dorian Gray, because the shadow is part of one’s identity.

On the other hand, integrating one’s shadow is an essential developmental step towards adulthood, as it implies coming to terms with one’s dark side and accepting it. Identity is always a dynamic process, where growing up and surviving are an incessant and sobering sequence of symbolic deaths of one’s doubles, that is, of inadequate states of being, regressive fears, self-aggrandising images and idealised projections. This is sometimes dramatised in Dickens by means of dead siblings: David Copperfield’s little half-brother lying dead on his dead mother’s bosom, or Pip’s “five little brothers (...) who gave up trying to get a living, exceedingly early in that universal struggle” (*Great Expectations*, Ch. 1, 35). Their premature deaths launch the survivor with enhanced speed into the challenges of isolation and loneliness. In *Little Dorrit* it is Minnie Meagles, appropriately nicknamed “Pet”, that has survived her twin sister, her ghostly, pre-adolescent double, who would never have disappointed her father by marrying the wrong man.

“Pet had a twin sister who died when we could just see her eyes – exactly like Pet’s - above the table, as she stood on tiptoe holding by it. (...) Pet and her baby sister were so exactly alike, and so completely one, that in our thoughts we have never been able to separate them since” (*LD*, Bk. I, Ch. 2, 58).

“Arthur,” said Mr Meagles, much subdued, “I carry that fancy further to-night. I feel to-night, my dear fellow, as if you had loved my dear child very tenderly, and had lost her when she was like what Pet is now” (*LD*, Bk. I, Ch. 28, 387).

In *Little Dorrit* the male protagonist, Arthur Clennam, is emblematically opposed to his dark double Henry Gowan, paired with honest, hard-working Daniel Doyce and indirectly parodied in the comic figure of John Chivery, the son of the Marshalsea’s turnkey and Amy Dorrit’s unsuccessfullover. Henry Gowan is the reckless, brutal, fallen down aristocrat who steals Pet Meagles away from Clennam, thanks to an erotic appeal the depressed and repressed Arthur can hardly hope for¹³. As is easily foreseen, given the utter incompatibility of the two mismatched partners and also Dickens’s imaginative inability to conceive convincing affective and erotic companionship, the marriage turns out to be an unhappy one, with Pet apparently resigned to suffer and be still, but consoled by motherhood. Gowan’s aggressiveness is obviously disturbing, but so is Arthur’s pusillanimity for different but equally weighty reasons, both personalities being worryingly unable to engage with life fruitfully, as is exemplified by their common lack of a serious profession. Moreover, when compared with Clennam’s unnerving passivity, Gowan’s sadism appears as a sort of return with a vengeance of what was usually repressed in the prototype of the correct and uptight Victorian gentleman, and thus anticipates the paradigmatic text of the double, Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886).

Daniel Doyce, an intelligent and energetic engineer, is a good double of Arthur Clennam’s and the only positive “do-er” (Yeazell: 1991, 35) in a novel about inaction. Both are middle-aged, solitary, reflexive and single and when they set up a business together, becoming the symbiotic “Doyce and Clennam”, they seem to seal a pact of mutual dependence and reliability. However, in spite of the surface parallelism between the two partners, both belonging to the “congenial society” (Frye: 1970, 220), their relationship seems in truth subtly antagonistic. The depressed Clennam lacks Doyce’s devotion to work while, at a personal level, he is unable to repress his exogamous desire in the face of a friendship that sounds subtly homoerotic (Doyce lives a monadic and nomadic existence without a woman

¹³ The “not doing it” that recurs as a negative refrain throughout the novel has certainly sexual overtones, as Yeazell remarks in her article which focuses on both the erotic and vocational senses of the phrase (1991, 39).

and his “oddity” is mentioned three times in the text)¹⁴.

When Clennam squanders all the firm’s assets in a ruinous speculation with Merdle, his financial move appears so mindless in a man who should be provided with good business sense as to appear almost deliberate. The guilt deriving from the consciousness of his intention to get rid of Doyce could account for Clennam’s insistent search for punishment and his shouldering of all legal responsibilities up to his imprisonment in the Marshalsea, in a sort of regressive return to a womb looking more like a tomb, from which only Little Dorrit’s love will rescue him. In the end, when Arthur marries Amy Dorrit, Doyce returns to the foreground, this time acting the father’s role in giving away the bride and so playing his part in the family tableau that usually closes Dickens’s novels. The subtle misalignment between Clennam and Doyce seems to imply that identity (of aspirations, of purposes, of views) is temporarily possible only when there is an exceptional amount of relational energy. Though falling in love ought to provide such energy, the high number of dysfunctional marriages in Dickens’s fiction bears witness to his disenchantment on this point.

As for female characters, the set of Clennam’s women – Flora, Pet, Amy – is still closely depending on a male gaze, which shapes women according to men’s desires, and on a strongly autobiographical note, as Slater has shown¹⁵. While Flora is the parodic and revengeful version of the young fickle lover, now turned ugly, ridiculous and too old for love according to doubtful Dickensian standards, Pet is the erotically attractive but psychologically unsuited girl like Dora in *David Copperfield*, the ghost of eternal youth, whose more or less domesticated profile returns again in Dickens’s later fiction (in Estella in *Great Expectations* and in Bella Wilfer in *Our Mutual Friend*). Finally, there is Amy, the heart-warming and reassuring companion that brings the “dozing and dreaming” Arthur Clennam back to life (*LD*, Bk. II, Ch. 29, 824) after the symbolic death he undergoes once he crosses the prison threshold and falls ill. Like all Dickens’s female angels, she possesses regenerating powers and shows a sometimes irritating lack of anger, which is the result of the writer’s heavy didacticism and cosy sentimentality. That anger, however, circulates in the novel and surfaces in the portraits of other less

¹⁴ *LD*, Bk. 1, Ch. 17, 254; Ch. 23, 311; Ch. 34, 451.

¹⁵ Slater (1983) first discusses Dickens’s biography, then analyses the fictional reworking of his female images and stereotypes, the child, the angel, the doll, the Magdalene.

idealised women, showing Dickens's awareness of adult frustration and utter despair, whose violence is felt to be particularly upsetting in female characters, because it should be "repressed and disavowed through feminisation" (Coates: 1990, 53).

The second set of women is composed of daughters – Amy and Fanny Dorrit, Pet Meagles, the adopted orphan Tattycoram and Miss Wade. While Amy, the "child of the Marshalsea", is the paragon offspring, Fanny is a more realistic portrait of a sensitive young woman embittered by suffering. Pet Meagles is the spoiled girl who will mature only through the exaggerated punishment Dickens imposes to the less-than-angels. Tattycoram is an orphan girl adopted by the Meagleses, but kept in a state of second-class daughter – she is not even endowed with a decent name and works as Pet's maid – a situation that obviously aggravates her. Miss Wade and Tattycoram are first united by a sadly similar story of childhood neglect and by the common contempt for what they interpret correctly as their benefactors' patronising, self-justifying attitude. They are then separated by Tattycoram's refusal to become a "self-tormentor" like Miss Wade (*LD*, Bk. II, Ch. 21, 725) and, therefore, by her decision to run away from home.

"I have had Miss Wade before me all this time, as if it was my own self grown ripe – turning everything the wrong way, and twisting all good into evil" (*LD*, Bk. II, Ch. 33, 880).

Tattycoram's abrupt change of mind is doubtless another remarkable example of Dickens's plot-twisting due to the implacable call of poetic justice. Since he finds difficulty in dealing with change, his characters are not realistically treated and therefore do not usually alter in a psychologically plausible way. Metamorphoses are sudden and melodramatic like in fairy tales, bending to the needs of the plot and of the happy ending rather than patiently adapting to mimesis. Alternatively, characters obtain a new identity by experiencing a sort of symbolic death which makes them better, stronger people: in *Little Dorrit* this is what illness works for Arthur Clennam.

In terms of narrative design the mirror-like relationship between Tattycoram and Miss Wade shows very well how double characters can provide an expressionistic representation of change, which has a 'diachronic' dimension, by means of the 'synchronic' presentation of different states of self. Besides, parallelisms and contrasts enrich the panoramic technique of the multi-plot novel that Dickens might have borrowed from Darwin's theories and from his interest in the species rather than in the individual. Like the Victorian scientist, Dick-

ens seems to explore the different developments of the same animal types – that in his case are humans – while they engage in a fit or unfit relationship with their environment. By showing the intertwining lives of characters who are apparently quite similar in the beginning, but who develop distinctly and meet different destinies later on, he exemplifies several possible variations and deviations from the norm, which reach out to the parodic and the grotesque. He shares with Darwin an anarchic and vitalistic interpretation of change and, like him, he feels that the break with the past may disclose new possibilities and unforeseen (genetic and human) interactions.

Dickens's interest in split personalities, his most daring attempt to describe doubleness, increases in the later part of his career when devastating portraits of radically unreconciled individuals – Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*, Bradley Headstone in *Our Mutual Friend*, or John Jasper in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* – are disturbingly frequent. In *Little Dorrit* the despairing Miss Wade, who perceives love as an aggression and an extreme form of hatred, resembles a characteristically Laingian divided self¹⁶. So is Mr Dorrit, scared of life to such an extent that for him the prison door has the double function of “shutting out danger and shutting in the prisoner” (Fludernik: 1999, 50). The most psychotic personality is, however, the menacing Mrs Clennam, another Victorian madwoman confined by an invalidating illness to the upper room of her crumbling house. After the shock of the exposure of her secrets – she is not Arthur's real mother, a nameless “little beauty” (*LD*, Bk. II, Ch. 30, 848) who “drooped away into melancholy” (847) after her forced separation from her child, and she is also responsible for Mr Dorrit's financial ruin – Mrs Clennam temporarily regains the functions of her limbs and hastens to ask Little Dorrit for forgiveness. After that she falls apart, literally and metaphorically: a sudden stroke makes her an inanimate dummy while her house, which has been creaking for the entire novel and which stands expressionistically for her own fragmented self on the basis of the exquisitely Dickensian analogy between dwellings and their owners¹⁷, crumbles into pieces.

¹⁶ An interesting analysis of R. D. Laing's construction of insanity (especially in women) is carried out in Showalter's *Female Malady* (1987) along a historical perspective that connects Victorian medical practice to modern psychiatry.

¹⁷ *LD*, Bk. I, Ch. 3, 71: “An old brick house, so dingy to as to be all but black, standing by itself within a gateway. (...) It was a double house, with long, narrow, heavily-framed windows. Many years ago, it had had in its mind to slide down sideways; it had been propped up, however, and was leaning on some half-dozen gigantic crutches”.

Mrs Clennam's sudden and temporary recovery is another mysterious Dickensian metamorphosis that should certainly be read as a typical plot-twisting device. At the same time, however, it reminds the reader of the nexus between paralysis and hysteria in female patients and of "Breuer and Freud's ground-breaking *Studies on Hysteria* (1895)" by which "women's voices, stories, memories, dreams, and fantasies enter the medical record" (Showalter: 1987, 155). In other words, here as elsewhere in his texts, Dickens represents madness not just as a single instance of mental derangement, which would be inexplicable if taken as such, but as a complex phenomenon brought about by personal as well as cultural causes and deserving an explanation and, consequently, its own narrative. At the level of individual psychology Dickens shows how easy it is for the self to lose control and plunge into well-organised madness, when faced with its "heart of darkness", while in the domain of culture he exposes madness as historically connoted. Though the main cause of Mrs Clennam's insanity is clearly an extreme form of Calvinism, religion should not obliterate her trauma in the face of her husband's insincerity (he loves another woman, has a child by her, but he has been forced to marry his present wife by his stern uncle). Behind Mrs Clennam's unhappy marriage and her heartless revenge loom those patriarchal values that dictate the subjection of the younger generation to the arbitrary will of the older, the repression of feelings and the blind cult of money and status. In this sense it is legitimate to claim that her madness – which is truly the destruction for herself and her closest relatives of whatever precious and provisional happiness can be enjoyed in life – is indeed a social construction. Unlike Foucault's insane, however, Mrs Clennam is not institutionalised because her mental illness, along with her wealth, does not challenge the hegemonic symbolic order, which runs its course regardless of individual fulfilment.

A melancholic story about false self-images, deceitful language, buried pasts, frustrated hopes, lost opportunities and dreams, *Little Dorrit* shows how Dickens's imagination is deeply haunted by the irreconcilable dichotomies of selfhood and Victorian culture and how the "revolutionary", "subversive", "almost nihilistic quality" (Frye: 1970, 240) of his fiction is nourished by a subterranean tension between virtuosity and transgression, order and anarchy, law and desire¹⁸ which makes of Dickens a genuine son of the French Revolu-

¹⁸ As Carey (1973, 16) argues, "Dickens, who saw himself as the great prophet of cosy, domestic virtue, purveyor of improving literature to the middle classes, never

tion. Once his fiction is interpreted as deeply disruptive, the double must be read accordingly as a site of his most controversial imaginative and ideological nuclei, recording all the excitement, the pain and the 'great expectations' of the Victorian subject in its increasingly lonely and delusive strife.

A site of disturbing self-images of the individual and of his society, the double works as a distorting mirror of epochal illusions, first of all the promise of unceasing social progress as a consequence of the success of scientific thought¹⁹. It veils and at the same time discloses the irresistible appeal of Eros in the sexually repressed Victorian culture, but also of what is socially censored by the dominant patriarchal, capitalist, middle-class values: upward mobility, women's emancipation, working-class visibility, a less rapacious relationship with money, free artistic expression. By creating surrogate characters living all sorts of often intertwining lives, the double hints at several virtual possibilities of existence and, in so doing, it circulates an incredible amount of energy. In a society which is registering the dehumanising effects of industrialisation, the double undermines the Romantic cult of identity by showing that anyone is easily replaceable and by voicing the fear of utter anonymity. It counterpoints the dubious ascent of the self-made man and his obsession with status and it deflates the myths of his success, insinuating the suspicion that in spite of all their self-aggrandising efforts everybody will remain forever a prisoner of their darker, neurotic double, that is, of their insecurities and fears. Finally, in its increasingly hallucinatory representation of a schizoid self and a fragmented society, the double shows that the heart of Victorian England is dark and anguished, that, psychologically and historically, its "centre does not hold".

seems to have quite reconciled himself to the fact that violence and destruction were the most powerful stimulants to his imagination".

¹⁹ According to Starobinski (1999, 302), a special role in this interpretation of history was played by the triumph of Newton's mechanics.

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