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# 1

## ‘A revelation by which men are to guide themselves’: Dickens and Christian Theology

If we are to read Dickens’s London as a symbolic means for exploring broadly religious themes, some knowledge of the writer’s personal religious views will be required. It is not my intention here to write a comprehensive account of Dickens’s relationship to the various Christian orthodoxies – Catholic, Evangelical, Liberal-Anglican or otherwise. This would require a book in itself, with a rather broader focus than my own, and in any case, many of the critics quoted below have made useful attempts to label Dickens’s position on a scale of contemporary beliefs. Rather, my intention is to summarise briefly Dickens’s opinions as stated in primarily extra-fictional sources, such as the letters, speeches and *The Life of Our Lord*, about the matters the following chapters read his depiction of the city as addressing. These include the presence or absence of divine revelation and a Providential plan, the nature of mankind’s death and decay and how it may be remedied.

Having done so, the main question will be how these are to be measured against the message given by the experience of reading the novels regarding these issues – after all, the tale and the teller frequently send out different signals about a piece of work. What Dickens consciously believed is not always the impression conveyed to the reader about what he felt to be true. This is not to say that Dickens did not know his own mind. Such discrepancies may arise for a number of reasons, including a need to conform to the conventions of the genre and the liberation in fiction from binding plot to the perceived laws of the universe. Most importantly, problems are resolved differently when they are engaged in imaginatively, rather than at the level of linear thought.

Dennis Walder, in *Dickens and Religion*, warns that ‘Dickens articulates his beliefs by the methods of a novelist’ and finds ‘significant moments, images, themes’ a more fruitful source of information than ‘the easily

abstractable, surface reflections of his views which have generally been accepted as a complete version of them'.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, in practice, he generally views the fiction as a more profound expression of the beliefs already articulated in the private and public declarations of faith. *Little Dorrit*, for example, is said to be

a sustained attempt by Dickens to show that one can free oneself from the imprisoning forces associated with a narrow Old Testament belief ... by means of the broadly redemptive, loving spirit of the New ... But it is expressed in terms which transcend the immediately personal or social.<sup>2</sup>

Andrew Sanders too, in *Charles Dickens Resurrectionist*, encourages the reader to take seriously the author's defensive claims that he aimed 'to inculcate some Christian lessons in books':<sup>3</sup>

It is a mistake to assume that Dickens is simply condemning the mercenary and social values of mid-Victorian England ... he is, more trenchantly, opposing a picture of a society with false values, values symptomatic of spiritual death, to those redeemed characters who offer hope of a continuing process of re-birth and regeneration ... the reality of the hope that the resurrected few may show the way to the many.<sup>4</sup>

Sanders, then, sees the fiction as a whole as decisively recommending a supernatural Christianity whose discourse has something positive to offer.

Not all writers on the subject, however, agree that the novels present beliefs broadly harmonious with the extra-fictional statements. Janet L. Larson, in *Dickens and the Broken Scripture*, reads the author's use of biblical texts as both supporting and undermining his stated views. Sometimes this is done consciously, she implies, sometimes unconsciously, but the effect is the same. Dickens explores at a creative level the texts upon which consolatory belief is based and suggests that often they are found wanting. Although his allusions give stable meanings within the Christian scheme of things to some events, at other times, the contrast between the words and the modern situations they are enlisted to describe can give an uncomfortable sense of their inapplicability – even meaninglessness – in the nineteenth century. According to Larson, Dickens establishes a complex dialogic between these uses of scripture.<sup>5</sup> The teller asserts religious faith in Providential justice and life beyond

death through plot and commentary, yet finds himself resisted by the tale's constant tendency towards an agnostic pessimism, wherein 'the rituals of the church and the Bible ... no longer had the power to order feeling and inspire hope'.<sup>6</sup> The same conflict is to be found in Dickens's evocation of images from Christian symbolic discourse that are explored in my own study.

Larson's approach is a mirror image of Alexander Welsh's view, fifteen years previously, that the voice of the teller was Dickens's Broad Church rationalism, undermined by tales that came closer to endorsing the ideas of the more orthodox Christianity rejected by the tale in Larson's reading. Quoting Humphrey House's (problematic) remark that 'Dickens's deep and bitter hatred of Evangelicalism was not usually directed against any of its typical Christian doctrines',<sup>7</sup> Welsh pointed to examples of decisive transformations in Dickens's works depending on grace and faith in something outside of the self rather than good works.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, both Larson and Welsh challenge the received wisdom on the religious stance of Dickens's novels, arguing for a rigorous interrogation of the author's formal beliefs, including the symbols by which those beliefs were explored, when they were drawn into the creation of his imaginative world. The novels clearly do contain other ideas about death, new life and the sources of both than Dickens's consciously held views could allow, whether because they conflicted with his Christian orthodoxy or with his almost secular humanism. The main focus of this book is on how the symbol of the metropolis participates in the novel's discussion of these themes. In the London of his novels, Dickens constructs a symbolic microcosm of the universe which allows him to explore imaginatively the process by which things come about, sometimes in ways harmonious with his declared convictions, sometimes in ways that diverge from them.

## **I. Dickens and revelation**

Dennis Walder begins his study by speaking of his subject's 'fundamental outlook as a liberal Protestant with radical, Romantic leanings'.<sup>9</sup> At first glance, this seems rather a specific identification for a man who famously insisted upon his freedom from sectarianism and doctrinal partisanship. Dickens, after all, ended his will with the desire that all his 'dear children' should live according to 'the teaching of the New Testament in its broad spirit, and ... put no faith in any man's narrow construction of its letter here or there'.<sup>10</sup> His respect for the personality and teachings of Jesus as recorded in the gospels was incontestable.

Equally clearly, he felt he was holding His faith in its pure form in a way that could not be reduced to denominational or sectarian labels.

Nevertheless, in the face of twenty centuries of theology, it is almost impossible to make any meaningful statement about Jesus Christ without revealing views that can be identified as siding with one existing opinion and against another. To consider the form of particular sacraments as unimportant, to take one obvious example, places one automatically in opposition to those who believe such sacraments within a particular communion necessary for salvation. Moreover, although Dickens avoided telling his children with which Christian groupings they should align themselves, he was equally adamant about which branches they should not join. He famously told Douglas Jerrold that 'I don't know what I should do, if [his son, Charley] were to get hold of any conservative or High church notions'.<sup>11</sup> He may have defended the rights of Catholics in *Barnaby Rudge*, but he also wrote to Angela Burdett-Coutts of 'the Roman Catholic Religion – that curse upon the world'. What he principally objected to was its restrictions upon 'Freedom' and curtailment of individual civil liberties in countries where it was practised.<sup>12</sup> If revelation of any order or design in the universe were to be found, it was most emphatically not going to be exclusive to any one church tradition.

His objection to the notion that observance of ritual makes a person right with God, however, did not lead him to seek revelation in the more direct forms of Christianity. The extempore prayers and sermons of the Evangelical chapels are dismissed in the 1836 pamphlet *Sunday Under Three Heads* as exhibiting a 'disgusting and impious familiarity' with the Almighty.<sup>13</sup> As will be seen later on, Dickens also objected to some of the characteristic doctrinal as well as stylistic features of Evangelicalism. The philanthropist George Moore saw Dickens's beliefs as sufficiently like his own to say, 'I found him a true Christian without great profession',<sup>14</sup> but other Evangelical readers felt Dickens's ideas of salvation to be too divergent from their own to be sufficiently Christian.<sup>15</sup>

He certainly did not share their conviction that the Bible was the infallible word of God, the ultimate means by which God had revealed his plan for the ages. For Dickens, it was merely a series of books in which imperfect human apprehensions of God were recorded for posterity. Annie Fields, his American hostess, recalls him speaking in March 1868 of even his beloved gospels having been assembled from 'some anterior written Scriptures – made up, perhaps, with additions and interpolations from the *Talmud*'.<sup>16</sup> In this conversation, Dickens also

spoke intelligently of the possibility that some of the figures of speech attributed to Jesus in the gospels were anachronistic.

If Dickens could not regard the received text of the Bible as authoritative, he also saw some parts of it as more important than other parts. He felt that the Old Testament presented a different, more vindictive code than the New. In *Little Dorrit* this becomes one of the crucial points of the novel's message. The heroine works for a change in Mrs Clennam by telling her to abandon Old Testament precedents of human vengeance on the sinful in favour of New Testament mercy:

let me implore you to remember later and better days. Be guided only by the Healer of the sick, the raiser of the dead, the friend of all who were afflicted and forlorn, the patient Master who shed tears of compassion for our infirmities. We cannot but be right if we put all the rest away, and do everything in remembrance of Him.

(II 31 p. 770)

In this Dickens follows Dean Stanley's idea of 'progressive revelation',<sup>17</sup> by which a partial insight had been recorded by the patriarchs and a fuller one by those who had the benefit of contact with Christ. As science uncovered more knowledge about the world, revelation was continuing into Dickens's own time. He wrote to Walter de Cerjat:<sup>18</sup>

what these bishops and such-like say about revelation, in assuming it to be finished and done with, I can't in the least understand. Nothing is discovered without God's intention and assistance, and I suppose every new knowledge of his works that is conceded to man to be distinctly a revelation by which men are to guide themselves.

His conception of the means of revelation may thus be expected to be more inclusive than that of contemporary fundamentalists of whatever persuasion. This optimistic view of a Providential scheme releasing more and more wisdom upon mankind as the centuries went by and the race matured to receive it is therefore an influence upon the ordered system of revelations made to the characters and readers in his novels.

Since he did not see the words on the page of the Bible as the permanent and enduring word of God, he was not particular about insisting on its doctrines about the nature of God and of Christ. His brief spell as an attender at the Little Portland Street Unitarian chapel

between 1842 and 1847 is well known and his vagueness of phrase concerning the deity of Christ at the beginning of *The Life of Our Lord* is often taken as evidence of anti-Trinitarian belief:

There is a child born today in the city of Bethlehem ... who will grow up to be so good that God will love him as his own son; and he will teach men to love one another ... and his name will be Jesus Christ; and people will put that name in their prayers, because they will know God loves it, and will know that they should love it too.<sup>19</sup>

This, however, is probably merely a simplification and avoidance of controversy for the benefit of his children. Elsewhere, for example, he calls Sunday the Jewish Sabbath,<sup>20</sup> although his fiction (for example *DS* 13 p. 162) shows him to be well aware that Saturday was their day of rest. What is really significant is that Dickens considered it more important for his children to grasp the moral relationship between Jesus and God the Father, evidenced in their behavioural resemblance, than that they should understand the exact theological relationship between them.

The same values probably lie behind his Unitarian sympathies *per se*. His 'conversion' to Unitarianism came at a time when he was dissatisfied with the lack of social action being taken within the Church of England to care for the poor in imitation of Christ. His new co-religionists, as he wrote to Cornelius Felton, 'would do something for human improvement if they could; and ... practise charity and toleration'.<sup>21</sup> His rejection of High Church Tractarianism and Evangelicalism is probably referable to the fact that in the former salvation depends upon ritual, and in the latter, upon belief in the achievement of Christ. Neither places a saving value upon works. Dickens is bound to have feared that both could encourage complacency and provide insufficient obligation to perform the real Christian business of doing good. This is where the whole emphasis of *The Life of Our Lord* lies. The book concludes with the words:

Remember! – It is christianity<sup>22</sup> TO DO GOOD always – even to those who do evil to us. ... It is christianity to be gentle, merciful, and forgiving, and ... to shew that we love Him by humbly trying to do right in everything. If we do this ... we may confidently hope that God will forgive us our sins and mistakes, and enable us to live and die in peace.<sup>23</sup>

The real revelation of order in the universe was to be found in the character of Christ as represented in his work and teachings. He seems to have left it to others to worry about the question of how this is to be apprehended if neither church tradition nor the Bible may be regarded as an accurate or authoritative reflection of these.

Dickens then can be said to belong to the Broad Church movement, within the Church of England (to which he returned in 1847). Humphrey House,<sup>24</sup> Dennis Walder<sup>25</sup> and Janet Larson<sup>26</sup> all use this phrase to describe the writer's position. The term was said to have been coined by A. H. Clough in conversation in the late 1840s as an alternative to High and Low Church and it soon gained national currency. Dean Stanley, whose Pauline commentaries with Jowett in the 1850s attempted to provide some scriptural grounding for the party's ideas, had popularised the term. It described a conscious movement firmly within the established Church towards greater inclusiveness of opinion, while retaining an emphasis on Jesus as the supreme example to mankind and pointer towards God. Characteristically liberal themselves, Anglicans of this school stressed, as we have seen Dickens did, the importance of the New Testament at the expense of the Old, and a special value was placed on the gospel narratives and the Sermon on the Mount in particular. Working to remedy social ills and caring for the needy were seen as the most important part of Christ's teaching and these were exactly the aspects emphasised in person and in the fiction by Dickens. In a letter to de Cerjat, the author resoundingly endorsed one of the movement's major manifestos, Benjamin Jowett and John Colenso's *Essays and Reviews* (1860):

the importance of timely suggestions such as these ... is that the Church should not gradually shock and lose the more thoughtful and logical of human minds; but should be so gently and considerably yielding as to retain them, and through them, hundreds of thousands.<sup>27</sup>

Other leading figures in the Broad Church movement were admired by – and themselves admired – Dickens. Stanley preached a sermon devoted to the writer in Westminster Abbey the Sunday after his death. When the Dean published *The Life and Correspondences of Thomas Arnold*, his still more influential mentor, Dickens wrote to Forster that 'Every sentence that you quote from it [rather than the Bible itself] is the text-book of my faith'.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, Arnold was personally much

more insistent than Dickens on doctrinal specificity, speaking in one sermon of the 'many' who

habitually lose sight of [Jesus's] office of Saviour and Mediator, and regard him only as a teacher ... their opinions ... are more those of the disciples of John the Baptist, who preached repentance, than of the Apostles of Christ, who taught together with repentance towards God, faith towards Jesus Christ our Lord.

As Larson points out,<sup>29</sup> the opinions of the 'many' here closely resemble those recommended to Dickens's children in *The Life of Our Lord*. By this measure, Dickens's views seem rather broader than even those of this most representative Broad Churchman.

In any case, a term defined by a desire to eschew precise theological distinctions, even as a conscious stance, can be of only limited use in describing Dickens's religious thought. It will be of more practical benefit to this study to ask what Dickens thought about the theological issues that have to do with the mystery of regeneration.

## II. Dickens and regeneration

The New Testament writers, as understood by most contemporary theology, both Protestant (whether Reformed or non-Reformed) and Catholic, discussed death in three aspects. Firstly, there was the present 'empty' deadness of existence with no benefit to God or to the self, from which believers are 'redeemed ... with the precious blood of Christ' (1 Peter 1:18–19). In response to this condition, Jesus said, 'I am come that they may have life and that they might have it more abundantly' (John 10:10). Secondly, there was physical death, presented as the inevitable consequence of mankind's disobedience to God: 'For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord' (Romans 6:23). Finally, there was eternal separation from God for those who rejected his offer of mercy: 'And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death' (Revelation 20:14). Christ's sufferings in the hours of darkness on the cross were regarded as a concentrated version of the torments of Hell experienced by Him in substitution for mankind:

For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

(2 Corinthians 5:21)

As can clearly be seen from this selection of verses, Peter, Paul, John and John's Jesus are unanimous in declaring death of all three types to be referable to human sin. For this reason, they are equally unanimous in declaring Jesus Christ to be the remedy to this death. Because Christ endured all three types of death (temporal isolation from God, physical decease and the punishment of the second death) on the cross on behalf of each individual, the Apostles taught that full life on earth, bodily resurrection and life in the heavenly realm were available to all. To grasp this in faith was a revelation that provided a threefold regeneration.

Dickens's thought engages with all three of these aspects of death, but does not necessarily agree with mainstream theology as to the problem or its solution. Clearly most of Dickens's fiction is taken up with the question of how dead lives are to be made truly alive. The tendency for people to be reduced to mere inanimate things in his work has been frequently remarked upon.<sup>30</sup> This is symptomatic of novels such as *Dombey and Son*, where Paul, looking at the lifestyles around him, can ask, 'Floy, are we *all* dead, except you?' (16 p. 223), and *Our Mutual Friend*, where the sterility of modern life is terrifyingly universal.

Moreover, it hardly requires demonstration that physical death is a dominant issue in his writings. People of all ages, from Little Johnny to Betty Higden, must learn to confront it. The novels often narrate a search for a means of transcending it, both for those who themselves die, and also for the survivors. Dickens, like almost all other human beings, had had to deal with the death of loved ones throughout his working life. The loss of his sister-in-law, Mary Hogarth, in 1837 affected him profoundly and is frequently cited as the stimulus behind his explorations of the deaths of the pure and innocent. To this might be added the passing of his sister, Fanny, in 1848; his baby daughter, Dora, in 1851; and his son, Walter Landor Dickens, in 1863. In 1852, his friends Richard Watson, Catherine Macready (wife of the actor William) and Count D'Orsay all died within a few months of one another. No wonder he spoke of the 'tremendous sickle' that was cutting down his circle of friends.<sup>31</sup> There is little evidence that the second death formed any real part for him of the problem of death that had so urgently to be overcome. Humphrey House notes that

The Devil and Hell are frequently referred to in passing, but ambiguously; they might be either literal or metaphorical ...<sup>32</sup>

Certainly Hell is invoked in the fiction for its concept of a Providential justice operating in a larger arena than that of this world only. When,

for example, Fagin, with his 'gasping mouth and burning skin', writhes 'in a paroxysm of fear' on his last night alive and 'his unwashed flesh crackled' as if with exposure to fire, it seems an anticipation of the state into which he shall shortly pass. This is reinforced when Oliver and Brownlow arrive, hoping to 'recall him to a sense of his position' (OT 52 pp. 361, 364).

At other times it is used metaphorically to describe godless values and fearful conditions that characterise this present world in a way that leaves it unclear whether this, or the supernatural place alluded to, is itself the actuality of Hell. When Dickens speaks of slum dwellers as having been 'born, and bred, in Hell!' (DS 47 p. 737), he may be saying that their current atmosphere erodes their morals and has a bearing on their eternal destiny. Equally, he may simply be saying that the actual environment in which they live is as terrible and hopeless as the Hell that presents itself to religious imaginations.

If Dickens shared the typical views of his Broad Church allies, he is likely to have had a liberal reluctance to believe in a literal Lake of Fire. Frederick Denison Maurice, for example, a leading preacher of the social gospel ideas, was famously removed from his chair in Theology at King's College, London, for rejecting everlasting damnation in his *Theological Essays* in 1853. Tennyson, too, was a universalist who could not believe that anyone would be excluded from salvation. Such views, however, were increasing in popularity in these middle years of the nineteenth century.<sup>33</sup>

While Hell is an uncertain place in Dickens's writings, death does seem to have its origins in a world that has sinned against God. Although House quotes Acton as saying that 'Dickens knew nothing of sin when it was not crime',<sup>34</sup> the novels are full of behaviour that is legally respectable, but morally horrifying. The sense that human beings have transgressed a divine standard is overwhelming. One of the two situations in which religion enters the plot of Dickens's novels most directly<sup>35</sup> is when the offer of repentance is being held out to sinners, usually fallen women. Nancy speaks of her 'life of sin and sorrow' and speculates that her self-destructive love for Sikes might be due to 'God's wrath for the wrong I have done' (OT 40 p. 274).

Equally, Martha in *David Copperfield* correctly sees the hero's search for her as an earnest quest 'to save a wretched creature for repentance' (47 p. 585) and Harriet Carker has assumed this role for Alice Marwood with the narrator's full backing in *Dombey and Son*. Even the murderous father in *Barnaby Rudge* is urged by his wife, speaking of 'the retribution which must come, and which is stealing on you now', to 'repent'.

Whereas Rudge refuses to do so, however, Alice, Martha and Nancy recognise their position as sinners. Nancy breathes 'one prayer for mercy to her maker' (*DC* 47 pp. 322–3), explaining to her murderer that 'It is never too late to repent'.

Such widespread portrayal of sin does not, of course, mean that Dickens accepted the doctrine of original sin. Indeed he violently repudiated it. This can most clearly be seen in that its most vigorous adherents are deeply unsympathetic characters like Mrs Clennam, who notes that 'every one of us, all the children of Adam' have 'offences to expiate and peace to make' (*II* 30 p. 350). Mrs Barbary's insistence too that Esther has been 'born with' a fault inherited from her parents (*BH* 3 p. 31) is also taken to task by the novelist. Dickens's major objection to this doctrine seems to be the perceived long-term effects upon children such as Arthur and Esther, who believe that they are fundamentally wicked before they are able to make moral choices.

By contrast, many of the children of his novels, although by no means all,<sup>36</sup> seem fundamentally good. It is impossible to imagine *Oliver Twist* or *Little Nell* as inheritors of Adam's blighted nature. In the face of this, Paul's teaching seems blasphemous to Dickens's religion. Nevertheless, in adulthood such unspoiled characters are striking exceptions rather than representative human beings in Dickens's world, and they are evoked to show a spoiled world how to escape the effects of sin and death.

What, then, is the means of transcending death that Dickens and his novels recommend? Pauline Christianity insisted that a death of the old sinful and dying identity was necessary so that a sinless and deathless one could be given. The significance of the cross was that Jesus Christ had undergone the sinner's death and punishment for sin. In the Christian scheme, Calvary reverses the effects of Adam and Eve's choice to reject their relationship of love with God and afterwards with each other. There, Christ embraced the death and the terrible isolation from the life of God that human beings suffer as a result of their separation from God, which resulted in the cry from the darkness, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' (*Matthew* 27:46) The unpaid debt incurred by the parents and shared by the descendants was at last paid on their behalf, returning the proper system of relationships. Where mankind sought a self-absorbed happiness that excluded God and eternal life, God did the opposite, reaching out and renewing the vital connection. The cross is an act of complete altruism, the offended party suffering punishment for the offender, displaying God's complete love for a fallen world. By surrendering the old self, each person could

identify with that death as having taken place for him or her. Christ could then identify his risen life with him or her. To help them remember this, new Christians underwent the ceremony of baptism, a symbol which, as we shall see, particularly in the chapters on the railway, the river and the crowd, was to be recast and critically re-examined for the modern world throughout Dickens's representations of London. In the submergence and re-emergence from the water, this act of self-burial and hoped-for resurrection was vividly mimed (Romans 6:1–11). Paul triumphantly declared, 'I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me' (Galatians 2:20), but does any vestige of this aspect of the traditional understanding of the work of Jesus remain in Dickens?

In *Little Dorrit*, he makes it clear that he considers the ascetic form of self-crucifixion at any rate utterly inadequate. Mrs Clennam feels that by restricting her enjoyment of life and by suffering the effects of her disability, she is 'balancing her bargains with the Majesty of heaven' (*LD* I 3 p. 48). Her harsh treatment of Arthur's real mother, 'through ... present misery ... to purchase her redemption from endless misery' (II 30 p. 755), is justified by this same curious doctrine that suffering embraced in this life cancels out sins and reduces punishment in the hereafter. That this teaching is so obviously a mask for her own vindictiveness exposes the falsity of her own reliance upon it to cover her own sins.

It is a point worth making because it is often overlooked that Mrs Clennam is not an Evangelical. For such Christians, the idea that the sacrifice of Christ was insufficient by itself to redeem or buy back the human being from a lost eternity and that it needed to be supplemented by additional suffering would have been as deeply blasphemous as it was to Dickens. Suffering that did not directly benefit others is shown in this book to be not an identification with Christ's death but a perversion of its fundamental purpose. Arthur Clennam understands this and insists upon 'Duty on earth, restitution on earth, action on earth' in contrast with Mrs Clennam's system of reparation. Such a path is 'far straiter and narrower than the broad high road paved with vain professions and vain repetitions ... all cheap materials costing absolutely nothing' (I 27 p. 311). As Larson perceptively notices, this refers to a text in the Sermon on the Mount conventionally used by Calvinists to demonstrate the fewness of the elect, subverting it to show that the truly difficult path is that of doing practical good.<sup>37</sup> Larson, however, goes on to claim that even this attitude is infected with Mrs Clennam's insistence upon repayment and 'contains telltale remnants of his childhood's legalistic themes'.<sup>38</sup> A life of renunciation alone, Larson claims,

cannot bring happiness to these characters. It is only when Arthur and Amy recognise and requite their need of each other that they find a means of transcending their world.

Little Dorrit herself at least teaches a lesson of grace, mercy and forgiveness that refuses any monetary repayment. Even if this represents an advance on Arthur's attitude, however, it is difficult to imagine the act of burning the codicil having the same meaning had Mrs Clennam not embraced something of the desire to make restitution on earth in authorising the heroine to look at its contents. For Dickens, repentance in action and reception of grace are rather more intertwined as a means of salvation than Larson's analysis allows. This is very much in the spirit of characters in the gospels such as Zacchaeus, who responds to the grace of Jesus and instantly restores fourfold the money of which his deceit has deprived others (Luke 19:8). Little Dorrit's conversation with Mrs Clennam here is one of the key points of the novel and is explicitly presented as a triumph of the heroine's New Testament theology over Mrs Clennam's Old Testament one (II 31 p. 770).

The idea of rebirth is important in Dickens and is often effected through repentance and a change of heart. Mr Dombey, Ebenezer Scrooge and Eugene Wrayburn may all be said to undergo conversions when confronted with death in one form or another, and to be reborn into an entirely new style of life.<sup>39</sup> It is important to remember that Dickens's novels are not tracts and that in dramatising a dimension of religious experience, the author is not obliged to exemplify a theological truth naturalistically, but may rather provide images that make the reader feel the reality of it in other ways. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that many of the characters that have to confront death are made to do so explicitly with reliance upon the work of Christ. Stephen Blackpool's death in *Hard Times* evokes the traditional Victorian deathbed confession of faith:

The star had shown him where to find the God of the poor; and through humility, and sorrow, and forgiveness, he had gone to his Redeemer's rest.

(III 6 pp. 291–2)

This orthodox statement is still somewhat ambiguous. Is the saving 'forgiveness' Stephen's forgiveness of his oppressors, for example, or God's forgiveness of Stephen? How and when has Christ redeemed Stephen and from what? Nevertheless, the knowledge that somehow He has done so seems to vitalise Stephen here in the face of death.

*Our Mutual Friend* provides a more explicitly Christian death in the end of Betty Higden's flight from so-called charity. The reader is told that the countryside in the rural reaches of the Thames 'brought to her mind the foot of the Cross,<sup>40</sup> and she committed herself to Him who died upon it' (*OMF* III 8 p. 505). Here, Dickens comes close to portraying Christ's death as being on behalf of the dying person. In the following chapter, he shows unease in the notion that Betty really is a sinner in need of salvation. When Milvey tries to console Sloppy with the thought that 'we were all a halting, failing, feeble, and inconstant crew', he responds, '*She warn't, sir*' (III 9 p. 508). Despite these misgivings about the hated doctrine of Original Sin, however, Dickens clearly feels that Christ's death has enabled Betty Higden to accept and transcend her own.

In *Bleak House*, the 'great Cross on the summit of St Paul's Cathedral' is the expression of the city's hidden meaning. Hidden by the 'red and violet-tinted smoke', it is 'the crowning confusion of the great, confused city' (19 p. 315). The implication is that 'that sacred emblem' holds the answer to the darkness and bondage which Jo's life in the mud and smog impose upon him, but that these metropolitan conditions prevent him from apprehending it. In its own architecture, the city contains the regenerating information he needs, but other aspects of the city conceal it from his view. In the same way, the Bibles carried here by the church-goers contain the same message, but Jo does not know how to read it. Jo may be prevented from apprehending its significance by men like Chadband and by all that is represented by the London fog, but it must surely have a profound meaning or else it would not strike the reader as scandalous or pathetic that it should be denied to him. Directly within his line of vision is something that might potentially give him the ability to transcend death that it provides for Betty Higden.

So what *should* the cross mean in *Bleak House*? Here, it seems to be a symbol of altruistic self-giving. What Chadband is said to obliterate is the story of Christ's 'deeds done on this earth for common men' (*BH* 25 p. 415). In so far as anyone enlightens Jo, it is Woodcourt, who shows him what Christlike altruism is, instead of imparting theological information. His recognition that the fragmented phrases of the Lord's Prayer are 'wery good' recalls their spiritual kinship with the generosity of Nemo: 'He wos wery good to me, he wos!' (11 p. 181). This works on the same principle as Alice Marwood's equation of the gospel narrative with Harriet Carker's care for her in *Dombey and Son*: 'Lay my head so dear, that as you read, I may see the words in your kind face' (48 p. 785).

The Bible and Harriet Carker's face are, then, two means of telling an identical story. Such people have earned their right to speak the message of Christianity, just as Esther's words of comfort about 'Our Saviour' are acceptable to the brickmaker's wife, whereas Mrs Pardiggle's are not (*BH* 8 p. 134). The Bible, then, is not merely a convenient text for abuse by hypocrites such as Chadband. *Oliver Twist* reads its pages with delight (*OT* 32 p. 211). Alice Marwood finds her place in its story (*DS* 48 p. 765), and Pip reads its pages to Magwitch as he faces death (*GE* III 17 p. 456). Acts of human kindness, including the systematic social reform the novels call for, are, then, religious acts. They are the divine operation of divine love in the world, which, to Dickens, finds its clearest expression – one might even say incarnation – in the charity of human beings. The cross seems to Dickens to be fundamentally an exemplary act of altruism, where Jesus was able to forgive His executioners, rather than the altar of a sacrifice for sin. Nevertheless, it is difficult to imagine how its apparently random suffering could have had any altruistic purpose without its redemptive element. In *The Life of Our Lord*, Dickens told his children that the disciples 'carried crosses as their sign, because upon a cross He had suffered Death', without further explanation of the significance of that death.<sup>41</sup> The crucifixion is also narrated without reference to Christ's suffering for mankind's sin, although Jesus's promise to the dying thief is faithfully and lovingly recorded.

It would seem, then, that if Dickens's method of participating in Christ's cross is primarily sharing in His life of self-giving practical action, then the author's religion is one of salvation by works, rather than by faith. This is the overwhelming impression created by *The Life of Our Lord*, which promises his children that 'if they did their duty, they would go to Heaven'.<sup>42</sup> There is, of course, forgiveness for the last-minute penitent, as was reflected in the fiction:

people who have done good all their lives long, will go to Heaven after they are dead. But ... people who have been wicked, because of their being miserable, or not having parents and friends to take care of them when young and who are truly sorry for it, however late in their lives, and pray to God to forgive them, will be forgiven and go to Heaven too.

Two distinct categories emerge here: those who are good and need no salvation and those who are wicked and do. Dickens almost certainly saw himself most of the time in the former category. If this comes dangerously close to the complacent Pharisee and the tax collector of Luke 18:9–14, *both* of whom required justification before God, it is

worth remembering that his own will concluded by committing his 'soul to the mercy of God through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ'.<sup>43</sup>

Even when Dickens seems most firmly to insist that innate goodness rather than imputed righteousness is the means of salvation, however, the nature of salvation is always essentially based on the idea of conversion from one state into another:

the most ugly, deformed, wretched creatures that live will be bright Angels in Heaven if they are good here on earth.<sup>44</sup>

The same hope and consolation that Dickens gave his own children is repeated to Florence after the death of her mother in the contemporaneous *Dombey and Son*. Her mother has been:

buried in the ground where the trees grow ... where the ugly little seeds turn into beautiful flowers, and into grass, and corn, and I don't know what all besides. Where good people turn into bright angels, and fly away to Heaven!

(DS 3 p. 26)

This emphasis on transformation *via* death uses almost identical vocabulary to that of *The Life of Our Lord*, where the 'ugly' are made into 'bright angels' after death through having been 'good'. This borrows the agricultural metaphor of the Apostle Paul, who likens the buried body to a seed or 'bare grain' (1 Corinthians 15:37) that emerges from the earth as something beneficial, saying:

So also is the resurrection from the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption.

(v. 42)

The same faith in bodily resurrection to a heavenly state is expressed, but Dickens guards against the assumption that this is an exact statement of his theology by semi-fictionalising the account ("Once upon a time", said Richards ...) and putting it in the mouth of 'a strange nurse that couldn't tell it right' (I 3 pp. 26–7). Nevertheless, the rest of the book reinforces this tale of resurrections, whether it be through Walter's reappearance from the shipwreck, the transformation of Dombey himself or Little Paul's dying vision of his mother and Jesus waiting for him beyond the sea of death (16 p. 225). Within the context of the novel's world, at least, Mrs Toodles seems to have got it right.

In a less explicit way, Paul's resurrection metaphor is present behind the more Romanticised death of Little Nell. She prepares to encounter death by thinking of 'the growth of buds and blossoms out of doors' (OCS 53 p. 413) and, having looked down the deep well which 'looks like a grave', her last living thoughts are of the time of new growth:

'The birds sing again in spring,' thought the child, as she leant at her casement window, and gazed at the declining sun. 'Spring! a beautiful and happy time!'

(55 p. 430)

Here the idea is rather that nature continues, even if Nell does not. Her death contributes to a natural cycle that causes other things to grow. Perhaps this is because this book's focus, unlike that of *Dombey and Son*, is primarily upon how to survive the death of a loved one, rather than upon how to transcend death and deadness. If anything metaphorically grows from the burying of the body-seed in the earlier novel, it is virtue arising in the hearts of the bereaved from memory of the dead. The schoolmaster insists that

There is nothing ... no, nothing innocent or good, that dies, and is forgotten. ... oh, if the good deeds of human creatures could be traced to their source, how beautifully would even death appear; for how much charity, mercy, and purified affection, would be seen to have their growth in dusty graves.

(54 pp. 421–2)

Nevertheless, having tested this secularised version of what grows from graves, he ultimately finds it wanting. In a letter to John Forster of 8 January 1841, he confessed that the writing of Little Nell's death reminded him painfully of his bereavement of Mary Hogarth and that 'I can't preach to myself the schoolmaster's consolation, though I try'. His intense doubts of this comfort can be seen in *The Old Curiosity Shop* as he attempts to re-iterate its precepts when Nell's passing is discovered:

Oh! it is hard to take to heart the lesson such deaths will teach, but let no man reject it, for it is one that all must learn, and is a mighty universal Truth. When death strikes down the innocent and young, for every fragile form from which he lets the panting spirit free, a hundred virtues rise, in shapes of mercy, charity, and love, to walk the world, and bless it. Of every tear that sorrowing mortals shed on

such green graves, some good is born, some gentler nature comes. In the Destroyer's steps there spring up bright creations that defy his power, and his dark path becomes a way of light to heaven.

(72 p. 659)

It clearly remained no easy matter for Dickens to learn this lesson instead of rejecting it.

It seems that the Pauline application of the seed-into-plant analogy of the later novels, which promises bodily resurrection and reunion, had more enduring comfort for Dickens than the schoolmaster's consolation, after all. Dickens's wife, Kate, had had this hope at Mary's death. In a letter to his friend Richard Johns, dated 31 May 1837, Dickens said that she 'looks forward to being mercifully permitted one day to rejoin her sister in that happy World for which God adapted her better than for this'. The same consolation seems to have become increasingly effective for Dickens himself, and when Forster's brother died, his condolences mix the schoolmaster's doctrine of memory with a confident assertion of the Christian hope that

That end [is] but the bright beginning of a happier union, I believe; and have never more strongly and religiously believed (and oh! Forster, with what a sore heart I have thanked God for it) than when that shadow has fallen on my own hearth ...<sup>45</sup>

With every apparent sincerity, the writer testifies to a faith that death can be turned into the means of entering a new and transformed life available for each individual eventually to share.

### III. Dickens and Providence

Dickens, then, held to a hope that revelation of God and a form of regeneration from Him were still available to modern humanity, even if his degree of trust in the traditional symbols by which these were made known varied considerably. Equally, when his trust in the reality of these benefits faded, he seems able to reapply the traditional symbols when necessary to the context of his more unorthodox thoughts. But did Dickens see the individual struggling through the universe, searching for meaning and renewal alone, or did he see an overarching scheme governing these revelations and renewals? The question becomes important when considering the tension between the exuberant and terrifying randomness of his city and the occasional suggestion

that it may be governed by an inscrutable (if not necessarily benign) system. Before exploring what such representations say about the presence or absence of order in the universe as Dickens conceived it, it will be useful to discuss how Providence itself was an ongoing part of his thought. This is more directly applicable to the fiction, as most of his strongest statements on the issue come from the novels themselves.

At first glance, it may appear that Dickens did not take Providence<sup>46</sup> very seriously at all. Often it is reduced to the level of conversational commonplace, most memorably when Sam Weller comforts his father after the death of Mrs Weller by saying (after several minutes spent trying to think of something better), 'There's a Providence in it all' and his father replies, 'O' course there is. ... Wot 'ud become of the undertakers without it, Sammy?' (*PP* 52 p. 806). The humour here belies a serious concern that Providence may simply be what we should now call an ideological construct that any group in society, such as the undertakers in this case, may evoke to naturalise their position.

Dickens's satires on pseudo-religious hypocrisy and self-interest often focus on characters who abuse the notion of Providence and employ it as an excuse for inactivity at both a personal and an institutional level. The most obvious example is the fabricated letter from Mr Squeers, saying that Graymarsh's maternal aunt

Would have sent the two pair of stockings as desired, but is short of money, so forwards a tract instead, and hopes Graymarsh will put his trust in Providence.

(*NN* 8 p. 159)

Similarly, the narrator of *American Notes* explains that the American stagecoach 'has only one step, and that being about a yard from the ground, is usually approached by a chair: when there is no chair, ladies trust in Providence' (*AN* 9). Providence seems to be little more than an imaginary concept for making a threadbare attempt to cover the absence of human provision.

*Barnaby Rudge*, with its wider concern with self-interested appropriation of religious vocabulary, shows this concept to be very elastic. Its characters unreflectingly assume that their own habits, modes of thought and way of living are guaranteed by this higher power. John Willet, for example, believes it 'a thing quite settled and ordained by the laws of nature and Providence, that anybody who said or did or thought otherwise [than himself] must be inevitably and of necessity wrong' (*BR* 1 p. 45). Mr Dennis complacently assumes that the riots are

providing him with criminals to be hanged by a dispensation like that underlying the agricultural cycle of the seasons:

As he walked along the streets with his leather gloves clasped behind him, and his face indicative of cheerful thought and pleasant calculation, Mr Dennis might have been likened unto a farmer ruminating among his crops, and enjoying by anticipation the bountiful gifts of Providence.

(BR 70 p. 629)

Only the more knowing Sir John Chester, however, is aware that people subconsciously, but no less wilfully for that, conflate a hidden divine edict with the random circumstances leading to their own getting on at the expense of others. Calling the presence in court of the Lord Mayor's brother to testify against Barnaby 'a good stroke of chance (or, as the world would say, a providential occurrence)', he shows his willingness to do so deliberately and cynically himself (BR 75 p. 671).

To take a final example from the earlier fiction, Isaac List in *The Old Curiosity Shop* observes that Mrs Jarley 'has money, and does keep it in a tin box when she goes to bed, and doesn't lock her door for fear of fire'. Encouraging Nell's grandfather to regard this as provision for gambling stakes, he considers this 'quite a Providence – I should call it, but then I've been religiously brought up' (OCS 42 p. 327). Dickens's later work explores more subtle versions of this self-deluding tendency to naturalise the exploitation of one class or individual by another with reference to a divinely underwritten scheme of things. Here, however, it is expressed in its simplest form.

Mr Pecksniff offers the first sustained indication that society may be callously invoking Providence to cover its own evasion of duty to provide in his 'short and pious grace, invoking a blessing on the appetites of those present, and committing all persons who had nothing to eat, to the care of Providence: whose business (so said the grace, in effect) it clearly was, to look after them' (MC 9 p. 147). Dickens insists that this satirical portrait has a political and not merely a personal dimension, saying of Pecksniff's statement that 'a special Providence – has blessed my endeavours':

A question of philosophy arises here, whether Mr Pecksniff had or had not good reason to say, that he was specially patronised and encouraged in his undertakings. ... Now, there being a special Providence in the fall of a sparrow, it follows (so Mr Pecksniff might

have reasoned perhaps), that there must also be a special Providence in the alighting of the stone, or stick, or other substance which is aimed at the sparrow. And Mr Pecksniff's hook, or crook, having invariably knocked the sparrow on the head and brought him down, that gentleman may have been led to consider himself as specially licensed to bag sparrows, and as being specially seized and possessed of all the birds he had got together. That many undertakings, national as well as individual – but especially the former – are held to be specially brought to a glorious and successful issue, which never could be so regarded on any other process of reasoning, must be clear to all men. Therefore the precedents would seem to show that Mr Pecksniff had (as things go) good argument for what he said and might be permitted to say it, and did not say it presumptuously, vainly, or arrogantly, but in a spirit of high faith and great wisdom.

(20 pp. 329–30)

The quotation from *Hamlet* upon which this caricatured reasoning is based is of course itself derived from Matthew's Gospel, in which Jesus insists upon the Father's knowledge of the suffering of all creation. In context, this general statement highlights the particular idea of the verses immediately before and after, namely, that the disciples' suffering of persecution is noted and honoured above. There is a strong implication too that the persecutors are also noted and will be held accountable (10:28–32). In choosing these words as the basis for Pecksniff's spurious argument, Dickens implies that those personal and national undertakings that justify their gain at the expense and suffering of others on the grounds that circumstances have enabled them to do so are equally accountable. The concept of Providence provides an apparently religious excuse for lack of care based on a wilful misunderstanding of the Bible.

Dickens later develops this idea that appeals to Providence are part of a culpable national ideology of superiority by making the word central not only to the vocabulary of Pecksniffery, but also of Podsnappery. Mr Podsnap perhaps believes his own rhetoric, but Dickens characterises the cynicism of a nation when he observes that 'he always knew exactly what Providence meant. ... And it was very remarkable (and must have been very comfortable) that what Providence meant, was invariably what Mr Podsnap meant' (*OMF* I 11 p. 132). Podsnap draws upon the sentiment behind such songs as 'Rule Britannia' to assert his confidence that Britain has a right to world dominance and that its ways of governing came directly from God, saying, 'We Englishmen are Very Proud of our

Constitution, Sir. It Was Bestowed Upon Us By Providence'. Dickens shares the scepticism of the Frenchman listening, who laughingly remarks, 'It was a little particular of Providence ... for the frontier is not large' (p. 137). Even Dickens's good characters share this tendency to attribute their own insularity to Divine decree, as when Miss Pross exclaims, 'If it was ever intended that I should go across salt water, do you suppose Providence would have cast my lot in an island?' (*TTC* I 4 p. 59).

What Dickens objects to most, however, is Podsnap's nationalisation of Pecksniff's grace, which vilifies any suggestion that the nation should provide for the poor as a rejection of God's order of dispensation. Like his predecessor, he justifies his stance by quoting Christ's words in Matthew's Gospel (26:11), this time to mean that Providence has guaranteed continuation of poverty – therefore there is no need to identify and deal with its causes:

'And you know; at least I hope you know;' said Mr Podsnap, with severity, 'that Providence has declared that you shall have the poor always with you'

The meek man also hoped he knew that.

'I am glad to hear it,' said Mr Podsnap with a portentous air. 'I am glad to hear it. It will render you cautious how you fly in the face of Providence.'

The narrator calls this an 'absurd and irreverent conventional phrase', and the sympathetic 'meek man' says he has 'no fear of doing anything so impossible' (*OMF* I 11 p 144). Dickens could not have made his feelings on such usage of this frequently invoked concept clearer.

Nevertheless, Dickens's satires on such absurdities must not lead us to suppose that he did not believe in the concept itself. The very same novel balances Podsnap's rhetoric with characters who unaffectedly read just such a heavenly hand in the events of the novel themselves. Lightwood says to Wrayburn, for example, 'I solemnly believe, with all my soul, that if Providence should mercifully restore you to us, you will be blessed with a noble wife in the preserver of your life, whom you will dearly love' (*OMF* IV 10 p. 723 ). Even Bradley Headstone, in a moment of classic tragic *anagnorisis*, recognises it in the fact that his very act of trying to separate Lizzie and Eugene by murder has led directly to their marriage:

For, then he saw that through his desperate attempt to separate those two for ever, he had been made the means of uniting them. That he

had dipped his hands in blood, to mark himself a miserable fool and tool. That Eugene Wrayburn, for his wife's sake, set him aside and left him to crawl along his blasted course. He thought of Fate, or Providence, or be the directing Power what it might, as having put a fraud upon him – overreached him – and in his impotent mad rage bit, and tore, and had his fit.

(OMF IV 15 p. 771)

There is a force at work that turns even actions intended for harm to good.

Occasionally Dickens mocks characters' interpretation of the novel's events as acts of Providence. Mr Pumblechook in *Great Expectations*, for example, says that in Pip's 'being brought low'

he saw the finger of Providence. He knowed that finger when he saw it, Joseph, and he saw it plain. It pinted out this writing, Joseph. *Reward of ingratitude to earliest benefactor, and founder of fortune's.*

(III 19 p. 473)

But perhaps he has a point? If we regard Joe rather than Pumblechook as Pip's true 'earliest benefactor', Pip seems to see his own downfall as an act of justice of this sort. It gives him, after all, the opportunity to return to a proper footing with Joe and to make a new start by his own work that ultimately serves him as a blessing.

Dickens in fact saw the process of his plots as directly mimetic of the operations of a benign Providence operating in the external world, solemnly declaring to Wilkie Collins in 1859:

I think the business of art is to ... shew ... what everything has been working to – but only to SUGGEST, until the fulfilment comes. These are the ways of Providence – of which ways, all Art is but a little imitation.<sup>47</sup>

Narrative existed to embody this gradual revelation of a bigger picture, whereby a force larger than the individual human being's field of vision is bringing punishment to the wicked and peace to the good. At THE END, whether the dénouement of the novel, the end of life or the end of time, this process will become clear. Dickens's conceptualisation of the novelist's art here would seem to subscribe to a vaguely defined but firmly Christian conception of history.

London, with its apparent randomness and suggestion that it forms a total system beyond the individual's power to view, becomes a crucial

vehicle for exploring these Providential beliefs, showing at various times Dickens's anxieties about the reality of any overarching scheme and his desire to assert that there was one. We will also look for occasions when Dickens seems to fear that the mysterious systematisation his depiction of London invites readers to take comfort in is merely justifying the *status quo*, much as Providence itself was subject to abuse.

Enough, then, has been said to form a working idea of Dickens's stated beliefs and the beliefs expressed directly in his fiction. It is now possible to address the real subject matter of the book. It is time to enter Dickens's London, exploring the Babel of signals his novels send to the reader about the presence or absence of a Providential scheme; about revelation and concealment of meaning; and transcendence of death, new life and resurrection. The question of how Dickens engaged with the vocabulary and symbolism of Christianity here becomes crucial. Does its reflection signal belief in its enduring power or point to its inadequacies? Or is it merely an opportunistic seizure of Christian vocabulary to illustrate a secular revelation in terms to which his readers could relate like, say, Clement of Alexandria's exploitation of the mystery religions understood by his audience to illustrate a very different form of revelation? Raymond Williams certainly thinks so, arguing that

Dickens ... uses the language of popular religion ... when he makes his related plea for change. ... Yet it is clear that what he has in mind is always human and social intervention, in the spirit of innocence. He rejects or seems not to know the alienated religious versions of redemption or salvation.<sup>48</sup>

As we examine the complex process of his engagement with religious images and modes of regeneration, the spiritual and social forms of revelation will be seen to have a more dialogic relationship in the mind and work of Dickens than Williams's diametric opposition allows.

Ephraim Sicher's recent study *Rereading the City, Rereading Dickens*<sup>49</sup> has paved the way here by comparing Dickens's work to other contemporary attempts to represent the city across a range of discourses, including those of sanitary reform, apocalyptic religious pamphlets, Romantic art and poetry, and eighteenth-century satire. Sicher's conclusions point to a writer actively promoting a literal regeneration of London's physical and human waste matter by means of engineering and social rehabilitation, yet drawing his sense of the final value of such transformations from a latent religious sensibility. He demonstrates the co-presence in *Our Mutual Friend* of archetypal religious structures and

observation of the need for ontological and societal reform valuable for their own sake:

the major symbolic patterns of this novel place [Harmon's] staged death and 'resurrection' in a mythical mode that nonetheless loses none of its contemporary social relevance, not least for the question of moral and personal identity in the city.<sup>50</sup>

Lizzie Hexam provides a neat example of the relationship between these discourses. She is able to provide a raising of the dead indebted to her father's socio-economic transformation of dead matter into value, but higher than it in terms of its spiritually redeeming results. The reason for this is its motivation in unselfish love, without which all other kinds of retrieval from deadness are worthless.<sup>51</sup> Jenny Wren and Venus too seek to recycle the dead by-products of city life into attempts to represent them in life once again, however much some elements, like Wegg's leg, seem to resist it. Sicher sees this as emblematic of the novelist's function, Dickens's ultimate expression of faith in the possibility of restoring life to the city by representing it as it is and as it might be through the revitalising power of imaginative empathy:

The novelist too must ... conjure up an act of resurrection that will animate the drowned man, like Venus 'the articulator' who puts skeletons into artistic and anatomical shape. This secular resurrection restores the body to meaning as semantic sign in the plot and in the city's necropolis ...<sup>52</sup>

Dickens's very ambiguities about which type of regeneration he is providing as he undertakes this role of resurrectionist in his novels are presented as a self-conscious polyphony of discourses that allows him to explore them all by jarring contact. Nevertheless, he adds that this,

far from distancing itself in despair at any stable meaning in an unredeemed world, does not preclude belief in another world beyond empirical verification and in a Creator to whom there is moral responsibility. On the contrary, it suggests the possibility of transcendence, as well as the consequences of blindness to it.<sup>53</sup>

The reader's very difficulty in separating the discourses that have formed their architectural and verbal representations signals a division between those who can see the promise of transcendence they contain

and those blind to it. Indeed the form of his novels seems designed to emphasise that the onus is upon the reader to be among those who can salvage some adequate form of revelation from the polyphony for themselves. This integrated approach, recognising that Dickens interacted with social, ontological and religious forms of revelation, is reflected in my study of his London, although its focus is on his re-evaluation of specifically religious symbolism. Each chapter examines the various discourses engaged within a particular symbol which forms part of London and that, in its respective novel, plays a part in the narrative's tension between denying the possibility of transcendent revelations and working towards them. Both resistance to and restatement of the religious dimensions implicit in London's mysterious aspects will be apparent in these dramatisations of concealment and discovery of meaning.

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