

CHARLES DICKENS: ANTI-CATHOLICISM AND
CATHOLICISM

MARK ANDREW ESLICK

PHD

THE UNIVERSITY OF YORK

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Abstract

This thesis explores the role of anti-Catholicism and Catholicism in the life and work of Charles Dickens. A critical consensus has emerged that Dickens was vehemently anti-Catholic. Yet a 'curious dream' he had of his beloved dead sister-in-law, Mary Hogarth, in which her spirit appears to him in the guise of the Madonna, suggests that his overt anti-Catholicism masks a profoundly complex relationship to the 'Church of Rome'. *Dickens: Anti-Catholicism and Catholicism* therefore re-evaluates the anti-Catholic sentiments in the author's novels, journalism, and letters by contextualizing them in relation to key events of the nineteenth-century Catholic revival such as the 1850 Papal Aggression. I argue that Dickens often employs anti-Catholicism not simply as a religious prejudice, but as a mode of discourse through which he disrupts, displaces, or reinforces a range of secular anxieties. *Dickens: Anti-Catholicism and Catholicism* also uncovers and explores the often cryptic moments in Dickens's writing when Catholic motifs are invoked that suggest a strange 'attraction of repulsion' to Roman Catholicism. Catholicism seems to offer him a rich source of imaginative and narrative possibilities. Reading Dickens's fiction through the lens of Catholicism can therefore reveal a much more ambivalent relationship to the religion than his apparent beliefs as well as unearthing new ways of thinking about his work.

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this submission is entirely my own work except where due acknowledgement is given.

Note on Editions

I have used the Penguin Classics editions of Dickens's novels for their availability and ease of reference, but I have consulted with the Oxford Clarendon editions where available.

Chapter 1

Dickens and the Anti-Catholic Tradition

On a September night in 1844, Charles Dickens awoke from his sleep in the Palace Peschiere in Genoa with tears streaming down his face. A letter from the author to his friend John Forster explains the cause of this strange event:

Let me tell you of a curious dream I had ... and of the fragments of reality I can collect, which helped to make it up ... I was visited by a Spirit. I could not make out the face, nor do I recollect that I desired to do so. It wore a blue drapery, as the Madonna might in a picture by Raphael; and bore no resemblance to any one I have known except in stature. I think (but I am not sure) that I recognised the voice. Anyway, I knew it was poor Mary's spirit. I was not at all afraid, but in a great delight, so that I wept very much, and stretching out my arms to it called it "Dear." At this, I thought it recoiled; and I felt immediately, that not being of my gross nature, I ought not to have addressed it so familiarly. "Forgive me!" I said. "We poor living creatures are only able to express ourselves by looks and words. I have used the word most natural to *our* affections; and you know my heart." It was so full of compassion and sorrow for me - which I knew spiritually, for, as I have said, I didn't perceive its emotions by its face - that it cut me to the heart; and I said, sobbing, "Oh! give me some token that you have really visited me!" "Form a wish," it said. I thought, reasoning with myself: "If I form a selfish wish, it will vanish." So I hastily discarded such hopes and anxieties of my own as came into my mind, and said, "Mrs. Hogarth is surrounded with great distresses" - observe, I never thought of saying "your mother" as to a mortal creature - "will you extricate her?" "Yes." "And her extrication is to be a certainty to me, that this has really happened?" "Yes." "But answer me one other question!" I said, in an agony of entreaty lest it should leave me. "What is the True religion?" As it paused a moment without replying, I said - Good God, in such an agony of haste, lest it should go away! - "You think, as I do, that the Form of religion does not so greatly matter, if we try to do good? - or," I said, observing that it still hesitated, and was moved with the greatest compassion for me, "perhaps the Roman Catholic is the best? perhaps it makes one think of God oftener, and believe in him more steadily?" "For *you*," said the Spirit, full of such heavenly tenderness for me, that I felt as if my heart would break; "for *you*, it is the best!"¹

¹ John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, Vol. II (London: Chapman and Hall, 1873), 122-4.

Dickens's celestial vision of his beloved sister-in-law, Mary Hogarth, who died in his arms on the 7th of May 1837, has been the subject of much critical attention.² A striking feature of his dream of Mary, however, has remained largely unexplored: its religious significance. Writing in *The Life of Charles Dickens*, Forster is one of the few to have focused upon this aspect of Dickens's dream, noting that it 'strengthens other evidences, of which there are many in his life, of his not having escaped those trying regions of reflection which most men of thought and all men of genius have at some time to pass through'.³ Forster's claim that the author was undergoing an internal religious conflict at the time is supported by Dickens's doubts in the dream of a belief he consistently expressed throughout his lifetime: namely, that to 'try to do good'⁴ is the true meaning of Christianity. The dreaming Dickens asking the apparition whether 'the Form of religion does not so greatly matter',⁵ and his entreaty as to 'What is the True religion?',⁶ certainly suggests a search for spiritual certainty in formal religion. Intriguingly, though, he asks the spirit of Mary if 'the Roman Catholic is the best?'⁷ But the spirit's reply that 'for you, it is the best'⁸ is anathema to the orthodox teachings of the Catholic Church as it implies Catholicism may not be the best religion for everyone. Dickens's letter goes on to dismiss the Catholic imagery of the dream by attributing it to the religious stimuli of his surroundings. He explains that a great altar in his bedroom at which mass used to be performed, the outline of a religious picture that used to hang above the bed, and the bells of a nearby convent ringing throughout the night, had influenced his subconscious thoughts and made him think 'of Roman Catholic

² Jack Lindsay's analysis of the psycho-sexual content of the dream is particularly intriguing. Lindsay argues that Dickens's dream was stirred by the sights and sounds of mother-worship and reveals 'the whole background of infantile memories and desires for mother-union which lay behind his frustrated adult loves and which found simplest expression in his emotion for Mary'. Jack Lindsay, *Charles Dickens: A Biographical and Critical Study* (London: Andrew Dakers Ltd, 1970), 255. See also David Parker's essay that addresses speculation the dream is evidence that the relationship between Charles and Mary was erotically charged. Parker argues that their relationship was 'unremarkable' while Mary lived, but that her death 'released Mary from context into text' for Dickens, a realm where he could imagine Mary as an object of sexual desire. David Parker, 'Dickens and the Death of Mary Hogarth', *Dickens Quarterly* 13 (1996), 72 [67-75].

³ John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, Vol. II, 125.

⁴ *Ibid* 124.

⁵ *Ibid* 124.

⁶ *Ibid* 124.

⁷ *Ibid* 124.

⁸ *Ibid* 124.

services'.⁹ Yet at the end of his letter to Forster, Dickens reveals that the sign he asked for to prove the visitation was real, the extrication of his mother-in-law from distress, has been granted and exclaims: 'I wonder whether I should regard it as a dream, or an actual Vision!'¹⁰ Dickens never did embrace the Catholic religion, but his strange dream of Mary Hogarth hints toward a profoundly complex relationship with Roman Catholicism, a religion that he, and a majority of Victorian Protestants, supposedly reviled.

Anti-Catholicism, a cultural tradition in England since the Reformation, was especially pronounced in the Victorian era.¹¹ Victorian Protestants imagined the 'Romish' Church to be the 'Whore of Babylon', a monstrous system of supreme evil presided over by the Pope. Roman Catholicism was widely considered to be a superstitious and unenlightened religion. Catholic beliefs such as the sacerdotal nature of the priesthood, transubstantiation, the invocation of saints, the veneration of the Virgin Mary, popular miracles, and so on, were thought to be utterly fantastic and even wicked.¹² Protestants also supposed Catholicism to be inextricably linked with lurid practices. As E. R. Norman notes, 'Monks and nuns, confessors and popes were all popularly imagined to indulge themselves with contemptible vices'.¹³ And the Protestant tradition distrusted the political ambitions of the Catholic Church which were thought to be an ongoing threat to the freedom of England and the English. Roman Catholicism, it was believed, was being disseminated by crafty Jesuits who sought to enslave England, and English Catholics, bound by a double allegiance to Pope and Crown, were suspected of being subversives. 'Popery' seemed to threaten the body politic of Protestant England.

⁹ Ibid, 125.

¹⁰ Ibid, 125.

¹¹ For in-depth discussions of the nineteenth-century anti-Catholic tradition see E. R. Norman, *Anti-Catholicism in Victorian England* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1968); John Wolffe, *The Protestant Crusade in Great Britain 1829-1860* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); D. G. Paz, *Popular Anti-Catholicism in Mid-Victorian England* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1992); Frank Wallis, *Popular Anti-Catholicism in Mid-Victorian Britain* (Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1993); and Michael Wheeler, *The Old Enemies: Catholic and Protestant in Nineteenth-Century English Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹² For a full list see Karl von Hase, *Handbook to the Controversy with Rome*, 2 Vols., translated by A. W. Streane (London: 1909).

¹³ E. R. Norman, *Anti-Catholicism in Victorian England*, 15.

A number of historical events contributed to a revival of anti-Catholic feeling that had been subdued since the violent actions of rioters during the 1780 Gordon Riots rendered extreme expressions of anti-Catholicism the refuge of bigoted fanatics.¹⁴ Active anti-Catholicism was reawakened with the passing of the 1829 Catholic Emancipation Act. Primarily a matter of political expediency to avert the threat of civil unrest in Ireland, it revoked the majority of civil disabilities imposed upon Roman Catholics. Protestant extremists thought granting equal civil liberties to Catholics under any circumstances to be a dangerous measure. Petitions were submitted to Parliament protesting against the Bill, a multitude of tracts and pamphlets denouncing the Catholic Church were published, and a number of Protestant societies were formed in protest.¹⁵ Public reaction to the Act, however, was peaceful. Unlike the response to the earlier Catholic Relief Bill of 1778, no rioting occurred. Yet a widespread sense of anxiety was palpable among even moderate Protestants. A cartoon in the *Mirror of Parliament*, a weekly record of parliamentary debates founded by Dickens's maternal uncle, John Henry Barrow, encapsulated this anxiety by showing the men responsible for the Act, the Duke of Wellington and Sir Robert Peel, carrying rosary beads and kissing the Pope's toe.¹⁶ Fears of a Catholic conspiracy against Britain were once again aroused.

Hostility towards Roman Catholicism caused by the 1829 Catholic Emancipation Act may have subsided had it not been for the rise of the Anglo-Catholic Oxford Movement in the 1830s. Led by John Keble, John Henry Newman, and Edward Bouverie Pusey, the Oxford Movement (also disparagingly known as 'Puseyism', 'Tractarianism', or 'Newmanism') was a group of High Church Anglicans who, alarmed by what they believed to be the secularisation of the Church of England, sought a return to its apostolic heritage.

¹⁴ G. I. T. Machin notes that in the years following the Gordon Riots until the 1829 Catholic Emancipation Act anti-Catholicism had gradually receded from 'an aggressive movement into one of dormant impassivity'. G. I. T. Machin, *The Catholic Question in English Politics 1820-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 8.

¹⁵ For a detailed discussion of the Protestant reaction to the 1829 Catholic Emancipation Act see Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, Part I (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1966), 7-24.

¹⁶ *Mirror of Parliament* (26th February 1829), 6.

Through a series of pamphlets known as *Tracts for the Times*, they emphasised the Church of England's Catholic identity and called for the restoration of characteristically Catholic sacraments and rituals. By the late 1830s, Keble, Newman, and Pusey were suspected of being 'leaders of a secret papist school of divinity in Oxford'.¹⁷ Suspicions of the Oxford Movement being a Catholic Trojan Horse attempting to subvert the Church of England from within increased following the publication of Newman's controversial *Tract XC* in 1841. *Tract XC*, a work that Dickens appears to have read,¹⁸ argued that the Thirty-Nine Articles were compatible with the doctrines of Roman Catholicism defined by the Council of Trent. *Tract XC* was widely condemned in the popular press and Newman was roundly criticized as having Papist leanings. According to the *Morning Chronicle*, for example, the tract was 'highly dangerous' and Newman had 'not merely adopted the doctrines of Rome, but borrowed from the Jesuits their principle of mental reservation'.¹⁹ Newman's conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1845 seemed to confirm the suspicions of many Protestants that the Oxford Movement was a Catholic ploy to encroach upon the Protestant foundations of England.

Irish immigration also gave rise to vituperative anti-Catholicism. An influx of almost entirely Roman Catholic Irish to England during the 1830s and 1840s transformed the social profile of Catholicism and gave a face to a religion that was previously ignored. Anti-Irishness was fuelled by various factors.²⁰ But the most common charge levelled against Irish immigrants, that they were a filthy, disease-ridden people who were almost universally prone to violence and criminality, was frequently ascribed to their Roman Catholic faith. For example, two notable studies into the condition of the Irish in Britain during the 1830s, James Phillips Kay-Shuttleworth's *The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working*

¹⁷ Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, Part I, 168.

¹⁸ See Philip Collins, *Dickens and Education* (London: Macmillan & Co Ltd, 1965), 17.

¹⁹ *The Morning Chronicle* (11th March 1841), 2.

²⁰ Anti-Irish prejudice in Victorian Britain had a long and complicated history and the rise of anti-Irishness in the 1830s and 1840s is the source of some controversy. See M. A. G. Ó Tuathaigh, 'The Irish in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Problems of Integration', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, Fifth Series* 31 (1981), 149-73 for a discussion of this debate.

Classes ... in Manchester (1832) and the '1836 Report on the State of the Irish Poor in Great Britain' by Sir George Cornwall-Lewis, explicitly associated the supposed depravity and immorality of Irish immigrants with their religion. Popular newspapers and periodicals equated anti-Irishness with anti-Catholicism. *The Times*, for example, presented the 'Irish question' as a 'No-Popery' issue, and an 1836 article in the newspaper written by the future Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli argued that the Irish were hostile towards the English on account of 'our decorous liberty [and] our pure religion'.²¹ Throughout the 1840s various Protestant societies began anti-Irish campaigns and heightened anti-Catholic feeling by publishing numerous tracts denouncing the Irish as agents of the Catholic Church who were zealously exerting themselves to overthrow the Protestant character of England.²²

Anti-Catholic feeling was further exacerbated by Irish matters in 1845 with the controversy surrounding the Maynooth Question. Sir Robert Peel's Tory government proposed to treble and make permanent the annual government subsidy for The Royal College of St Patrick at Maynooth, the leading seminary in Ireland for Roman Catholic priests. Peel's legislation led to what Harriet Martineau called 'the great political controversy of the year'.²³ Opposition to the Bill was indeed fierce. An Anti-Maynooth Committee was set up by the Protestant Association with the intention of uniting Protestants of all denominations to oppose the grant. Independent of this *ad hoc* body, numerous public meetings were organised in protest throughout England. A massive petitioning campaign began and over ten thousand petitions with in excess of a million signatures were presented to Parliament. Opponents of the legislation relied heavily on anti-Catholic rhetoric as opposed to reasoned political debate. Several extracts from the *Proceedings of the Anti-Maynooth Conference of 1845* testify to the crude anti-Catholicism that fuelled the controversy. Catholic doctrines and beliefs are repeatedly derided as 'idolatrous and superstitious', the celibacy of the clergy is attacked as the 'foe of domestic virtue', horror

²¹ *The Times* (18th April 1836), 4.

²² See Sheridan Gilley, 'Protestant London, No-Popery and the Irish Poor', *Recusant History* 10 (1970), 210-30.

²³ Harriet Martineau, *A History of the Thirty Years' Peace* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1878), 247.

stories from ‘the dark annals of the Inquisition’ are retold, and ‘Popery’ is condemned as a religion that threatens the ‘liberty, property, and lives of our Protestant fellow countrymen’.²⁴ Queen Victoria’s reaction to the controversy voiced the opinion of many liberal Protestants about the Maynooth Question: ‘the bigotry, the wicked and blind passions it brings forth is quite dreadful, ... I blush for Protestantism!’²⁵ Yet the vigorous protests against the Maynooth grant demonstrated an abiding anti-Catholic feeling among a significant number of English Protestants.

Victorian anti-popery reached frenzied heights in 1850. On the 29th of September Pope Pius IX issued a brief reinstating the Catholic hierarchy in England. The Pope decreed that the Catholic Church was to install an Archbishop of Westminster and create twelve territorial bishoprics. Widespread condemnation of what became known as the ‘Papal Aggression’ immediately ensued. A celebratory pastoral letter from the newly appointed Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Nicholas Wiseman, heightened tensions further. Wiseman’s ill-judged letter, ‘From without the Flaminian Gate’, was triumphant in tone and seemed to focus more on temporal rather than theological matters, reinforcing the fears of many Protestants that the ‘Papal Aggression’ was the first stage in a bid by the Church of Rome to enslave England under Catholic rule. ‘We govern’, declared Wiseman, ‘and shall continue to govern, the counties of Middlesex, Hertford, and Essex, as ordinary thereof, and those of Surrey, Sussex, Kent, Berkshire, and Hampshire, with the islands annexed, as administrator with ordinary jurisdiction’.²⁶ A hostile reaction to the Papal Aggression was widespread. Sectarian publications such as *The Reformation Journal* spoke of the ‘power and policy of Rome’ being directed against England with ‘a view to its being subjected again to the degrading slavery of the Vatican’.²⁷ Even supposedly liberal publications were zealous in their response. *The Times* was at the forefront of the attack and launched a vicious

²⁴ A. S. Thelwall (ed), *Proceedings of the Anti-Maynooth Conference of 1845* (London: 1845), xxxvi, xlii, xlii, viii.

²⁵ A. C. Benson and Viscount Esher, *Letters of Queen Victoria 1837-1861*, Vol. 1, 1st Series (London: John Murray, 1908), 36-7.

²⁶ Quoted in *The Times* (29th October 1850), 5.

²⁷ Anon., *The Reformation Journal*, Vol. 1 (1851-2), 1.

campaign against the Pope, Cardinal Wiseman and the Catholic religion in general. Similarly, *Punch*, a magazine that had previously ridiculed cries of ‘No Popery’, began to attack the Catholic Church. One illustration in the magazine entitled ‘The Guy Fawkes of 1850, Preparing to Blow Up All England’ depicted the Pope in the crypt of the Houses of Parliament storing gunpowder in the mitres of the Archbishop of Westminster and various other Catholic bishops.²⁸ A controversial letter written by the Prime Minister, Lord John Russell, stated that, ‘There is an assumption of power in all the documents which have come from Rome; a pretension of supremacy over the realm of England’.²⁹ Queen Victoria was noticeably less tolerant than she had previously been regarding Catholic matters. Her alleged reaction to the ‘Papal Aggression’ was to enquire, ‘Am I the Queen of England or am I not?’³⁰ Mass protest meetings took place condemning the Catholic Church; numerous petitions against the Papal Bull were submitted to the crown; effigies of the Pope and Wiseman were burned; acts of violence against Catholic priests and property were reported; and an excessive number of parliamentary debates were conducted about the issue.³¹

Anti-Catholicism was therefore a significant cultural phenomenon of the Victorian era that was expressed and shaped by newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, petitions, sermons, and parliamentary debates. Fiction, though, was a primary tool in the formation of this popular prejudice. Proliferating from the late 1830s onwards, novels by evangelical anti-Catholic writers including Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, William Sewell, and Elizabeth Missing Harris warned against the increasing dangers of ‘Popery’ in England.³² A long list of other anti-Catholic novelists produced works that vilified the evils of ‘Romanism’ in general with Frances Trollope’s *Father Eustace: A Tale of the Jesuits* (1847), Jemima

²⁸ See *Punch*, Vol. 19 (1850), 197. For a detailed account of anti-Catholicism in *Punch* see Richard D. Altick, *Punch: The Lively Youth of a British Institution, 1841-1851* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1997), 466-92.

²⁹ Quoted in *The Times* (7th November 1850), 5.

³⁰ Quoted in E. R. Norman, *Anti-Catholicism in Victorian England*, 56.

³¹ See J. B. Conacher, ‘The Politics of the “Papal Aggression” Crisis of 1850-51’, *CCHA Report* 26 (1959), 13-27.

³² For a comprehensive survey and discussion of these texts see Joseph Ellis Baker, *The Novel and the Oxford Movement* [1932] (New York: Russell & Russell, 1965), 23-44.

Luke's *The Female Jesuit; or The Spy in the family* (1851) and *Beatrice; or, the Unknown Relatives* (1852) by Catherine Sinclair being among the most popular. A series of recurrent images, plots, characterizations, motifs, and themes united many of these narratives: darkness, terrifying Gothic buildings, lascivious priests, cruel nuns, conspiring Jesuits, magical relics, fraudulent miracles, debauchery, the dangers of the confessional and the cloister, the horrors of the Inquisition, and pagan ritualistic worship, to name but a few. Explicitly anti-Catholic fiction therefore forged a terrifying image of 'Romanism' in the Victorian imagination. But major literary works of the nineteenth century were also responsible for shaping anti-Catholic feeling. Novels by Walter Scott, who thought 'popery to be such a mean and depriving superstition',³³ and Charles Kingsley, who railed against Catholicism's 'anile sophistry', 'inferior deities', and 'prurient celibates',³⁴ for example, invariably featured 'manly' Protestant heroes who rescued England from the clutches of 'effeminate' Catholic priests.³⁵ And several works by female writers including Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot portrayed enlightened heroines resisting insidious Catholic (or more specifically Jesuitical) characters.³⁶ Wildly popular, Victorian narratives that dramatized the supposed evils of the Catholic religion crossed boundaries of class and taste unifying its practitioners and readers, despite its own disturbing heterogeneity, under the banner of Protestantism.

Yet these novels and stories often transcended a fear of the 'Church of Rome' as a religious and secular enemy. Jenny Franchot's thesis in her ground-breaking study of anti-Catholicism in Protestant antebellum America, *Roads to Rome*, that nineteenth-century anti-Catholic texts function as a self-critique of Protestantism, can be extended to Victorian England. 'Anti-Catholicism', writes Franchot, 'operated as an imaginative category of

³³ Walter Scott, *The Journal of Sir Walter Scott* edited by W. E. K. Anderson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 526.

³⁴ Charles Kingsley, *Charles Kingsley: His Letters and Memories of His Life*, Vol. 1 edited by Frances E. Kingsley (London: Henry S. King, 1877), 203-4.

³⁵ See, for example, Walter Scott's *The Monastery* (1820) and *The Abbot* (1820), and Charles Kingsley's *Westward Ho!* (1855).

³⁶ Most notable are Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853) and George Eliot's *Romola* (1862-3).

discourse through which antebellum American writers of popular and elite fiction and historical texts indirectly voiced the tensions and limitations of mainstream Protestant culture'.³⁷ Victorian anti-Catholic narratives, whether consciously or unconsciously, similarly employed Roman Catholic imagery to alternately displace or reinforce cultural anxieties. Anxieties about the family, gender, masculinity, the body, social order, moral and physical health, and nationhood form the subtext of much of this writing. As Susan M. Griffin shows in *Anti-Catholicism and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, a book that builds upon Franchot's work by analysing both British and American anti-Catholic fiction from the 1830s through to the turn of the century, the Protestant obsession with Rome was 'distilled to provide Victorians with a set of political, cultural, and literary tropes through which they defined themselves as Protestant and therefore normative'.³⁸ Anti-Catholic fiction therefore operated as a religious prejudice against which a healthy Protestant identity could be formed and fashioned.

Intriguingly, a conflicted response to Roman Catholicism also emerges in many of these texts. Anti-Catholic fiction frequently figured the religion as a troubling, uncanny presence persisting as a foreign otherness. Catholicism may have been different, deviant, and menacing to many Victorian Protestants, but it was also strangely familiar. Griffin proposes that the historical relationship between the two churches is the reason why a sense of the uncanny permeates much of this writing: 'Protestantism's legitimacy depends upon tracing its origins to, and differentiating itself from, Roman Catholicism'.³⁹ A secret attraction to Catholicism is certainly evident in much Victorian anti-Catholic fiction. Michael E. Schiefelbein has uncovered some of the ways in which this attraction is subtly manifested in the works of major Victorian novelists who were staunchly anti-Catholic. Schiefelbein's *The Lure of Babylon* argues that the seductive force of Catholic ritualism, iconography, and

³⁷ Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* (London: University of California Press, 1994), xvii.

³⁸ Susan M. Griffin, *Anti-Catholicism and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 292.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

mysticism provided a fascinating alternative to the austerity of Protestantism, and explores the ways in which writers were drawn to the sensuousness of Catholicism as a site of aesthetic expression. Exemplary here is his analysis of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, a work that is widely considered to be quintessentially anti-Catholic.⁴⁰ Schiefelbein agrees that *Villette* does excoriate Catholicism, especially 'priestcraft'. But he also identifies Lucy Snowe as having a powerful attraction to the sensuality of the Catholic Church that functions as a vehicle whereby she is able to project onto an institution and its representatives 'the oppressive ways in which she conceives her position in the world - namely, as a pawn of abstract forces ... Her immersion in a Catholic world allows her to escape the hell of a neurotic introspection'.⁴¹ Schiefelbein extends his discussion to Brontë herself and argues that Lucy's fascination with Père Silas mirrors Brontë's infatuation with the Catholic Constantin Heger, upon whom the character of Silas was based, and who the young Charlotte strongly identified with the Roman Church which 'embodied his double hold on her as protective teacher to whose judgements she readily submitted and as the inspiration for romantic fantasies'.⁴² Anti-Catholic fiction was therefore often irrigated with a strange sense of ambivalence towards the religion.

* * * * *

Religion figures more heavily in Charles Dickens's life and work than is generally recognised. Baptized into the Church of England, he was a 'Christian of the broadest kind'.⁴³ During the 1840s he briefly left the Anglican Church to rent a pew at the Unitarian Chapel in Little Portland Street, a decision that was influenced by the growing disputes within

⁴⁰ See, for example, Rosemary Clark-Beattie, 'Fables of Rebellion: Anti-Catholicism and the Structure of *Villette*', *ELH*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (Winter 1986), 821-47. Diana Peschier, however, has written an interesting account of *Villette* that argues Brontë employed anti-Catholic issues 'not as fact or opinion' but to represent 'concepts of isolation and surveillance'. Diana Peschier, *Nineteenth-Century Anti-Catholic Discourses: The Case of Charlotte Brontë* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 138-61.

⁴¹ Michael E. Schiefelbein, *The Lure of Babylon: Seven Protestant Novelists and Britain's Roman Catholic Revival* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2001), 138.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 141.

⁴³ Robert Newsome, 'Religion', *Oxford Reader's Companion to Dickens* edited by Paul Schlicke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 499.

Anglicanism caused by the Oxford Movement. ‘Disgusted with our Established Church, and its Puseyisms’, he told C. C. Felton, ‘I have carried into effect an old idea of mine and joined the Unitarians’.⁴⁴ Dickens had a lifelong aversion to doctrinal controversy, but, as Forster noted, ‘upon essential points he had never any sympathy so strong as with the leading doctrine and discipline of the Church of England; to these, as time went on, he found himself able to accommodate all minor differences’.⁴⁵ The importance of religion for Dickens is easily detected in his letters, many of which reflect a sense of a guiding Providential hand as a real force in his life, and in the orthodox statement of his will that commits his soul ‘to the mercy of God through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ’.⁴⁶

Religion, though he rarely offers explicit expressions of religious belief, is also central to Dickens’s fiction. In a letter written on the 8th of June 1870, the day before his death, he stated that, ‘when I exercise my art, one of my most constant and most earnest endeavours has been to exhibit in all my good people some faint reflections of the teachings of our great Master’.⁴⁷ Studies by Dennis Walder and Janet L. Larson have demonstrated the importance of religion in Dickens’s novels. Walder’s *Dickens and Religion* explores how the author’s fundamental outlook as a liberal Protestant informs his writing and is expressed in remarkably different ways at different stages of his life. Larson’s *Dickens and the Broken Scripture* uncovers the pervasiveness and increasingly complex and dissonant role of religious allusions in his work.⁴⁸ But attacks on formal religion, or rather attacks on those who corrupt what Dickens believed to be true Christian values, are also a strong feature of his writing. His antipathy to the spiritual gloominess of Dissent, for example, is well-known.⁴⁹ As early as 1836, in the anti-Sabbatarian pamphlet *Sunday Under Three Heads*, he charged Dissenting congregations as being ‘stronghold[s] of intolerant zeal and ignorant

⁴⁴ *Letters* III, 462.

⁴⁵ John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, Vol. II, 38.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 38.

⁴⁷ *Letters* XII, 548.

⁴⁸ See Dennis Walder *Dickens and Religion* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981) and Janet L. Larson’s *Dickens and the Broken Scripture* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985). Larson notes that Dickens alludes to the Bible and *The Book of Common Prayer* more than to any other texts.

⁴⁹ See, among others, Norris Pope, *Dickens and Charity* (London: Macmillan, 1978), 13-41.

enthusiasm'.⁵⁰ In his novels there are a number of fiercely satirical portraits of hypocritical Dissenters, the red-nosed Stiggins in *The Pickwick Papers* and the smoking Chadband in *Bleak House* being among the more memorable, as well as a long line of zealous females, through which Dickens paints a wholly unflattering, though generally comic, portrait of Dissent as an abhorrent deviation from normative Anglicanism.

Roman Catholicism, however, is the religion that is widely considered to have aroused Dickens's strongest religious enmities. A critical consensus has formed among biographers and critics that he was a staunch anti-Catholic. Edgar Johnson writes that Dickens 'thought the influence of the Roman Church almost altogether evil'; Humphry House argues that 'In nothing was Dickens so much of an elementary John Bull as in his hatred of Roman Catholicism'; Una Pope-Hennessy contends that he 'despised' Catholicism; according to Philip Collins the author had an 'ingrained English prejudice against ... the Catholic Church' that became 'an almost unqualified obsession'; Angus Wilson calls him a 'hearty and naïve anti-Papist'; for Malcolm Andrews 'barbarism and Catholicism' were 'synonymous conditions in Dickens's mind'; Peter Ackroyd believes that Roman Catholicism was a 'pet hate' for Dickens; Andrew Sanders that he had 'rooted anti-Catholic prejudices'; and Michael Slater speaks of his 'virulent anti-Catholicism'.⁵¹ Dickens's anti-Catholicism has therefore become a 'familiar fact'.⁵²

A review of Dickens's life and work certainly offers much evidence that he was anti-Catholic. In his early novels there are several moments that suggest he was fully aware of the growing anti-Roman Catholic sentiment in England. *Oliver Twist*, for example, includes a

⁵⁰ Charles Dickens (Timothy Sparks), *Sunday Under Three Heads* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1836), 8.

⁵¹ Edgar Johnson, *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph*, Volume One (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd), 562; Humphry House, *The Dickens World* (London: Oxford University Press, 1941), 128; Una Pope-Hennessy, *Charles Dickens* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1945), 121; Philip Collins, *Dickens and Education*, 62-3; Angus Wilson, 'Introduction', *Oliver Twist* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 11; Malcolm Andrews, *Dickens on England and the English* (Hassocks, Sussex, The Harvester Press, 1979), xv; Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens* (Aylesbury, Bucks: Minerva, 1991), 532; Andrew Sanders, *Charles Dickens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 144; Michael Slater, *Dickens and Women* (London: J. M. Dent, 1983), 86.

⁵² Dennis Walder, *Dickens and Religion*, 11.

rather odd piece of dialogue between the Maylies' doctor and Giles and Brittles that feeds into a common accusation against Catholics about them being untrustworthy. Interrogating Giles and Brittles as to whether they will give evidence against Oliver, the doctor asks if they are Protestants. On hearing the pair reply they are, he says: 'Then tell me this, ... both of you: are you going to take upon yourselves to swear that that boy up stairs is the boy that was put through the little window last night!'⁵³ And in *The Old Curiosity Shop* Dickens again registers the popular taste for the anti-Catholic in a wonderfully comic passage that describes how Mrs Jarley 'made extraordinary efforts to stimulate the popular taste, and whet the popular curiosity' with the waxwork figure of a mechanical nun that 'shook its head paralytically all day long', an exhibition greatly appreciated by a 'drunken, but very Protestant, barber ... who looked upon the said paralytic motion as typical of the degrading effect wrought upon the human mind by the ceremonies of the Romish Church'.⁵⁴

By the 1840s Dickens began to voice a real dislike of the Catholic religion. In the preface to *Barnaby Rudge* he stated that the novel's portrait of the 1780 anti-Catholic Gordon Riots is 'painted by one who has no sympathy with the Romish Church'.⁵⁵ *American Notes* contains a rather bitter commentary on Catholicism. Recalling a tale about a 'body of fanatics of the order of La Trappe' that founded a convent near the town of Lebanon and were 'all swept off by the pernicious climate', Dickens concludes that, 'few rational people will suppose, perhaps, that society experienced any very severe deprivation'.⁵⁶ This growing dislike of the Catholic clergy is found in Stave Three of *A Christmas Carol* when the Ghost of Christmas Present takes Scrooge to a market on Christmas morning. Among the sumptuous array of foodstuffs the narrator describes the only one he personifies are 'ruddy,

⁵³ Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* edited by Philip Horne [1837-8] (London: Penguin, 2003), 243. All further citations will be taken from this edition and placed in the text.

⁵⁴ Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop* edited by Norman Page [1841] (London: Penguin, 2000), 248. All further citations will be taken from this edition and placed in the text.

⁵⁵ Charles Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge* edited by John Bowen [1841] (London: Penguin, 2003), 3. All further citations will be taken from this edition and placed in the text.

⁵⁶ Charles Dickens, *American Notes* edited by Patricia Ingham [1842] (London: Penguin, 2004), 203. In the 1850 preface to *American Notes* Dickens added the sentence: 'The truth is the truth; and neither childish absurdities, nor unscrupulous contradictions, can make it otherwise. The earth would still move round the sun, though the whole Catholic Church said No'.

brown-faced, broad-girthed Spanish Onions’ that are ‘shining in the fatness of their growth like Spanish friars; and winking from their shelves in wanton slyness at the girls as they went by, ... glanced demurely at the hung-up mistletoe’,⁵⁷ an image that plays upon Protestant suspicions about the lasciviousness of the Catholic clergy.

Dickens’s anti-Catholicism was strengthened when the waves from Oxford were felt following the controversy surrounding Newman’s *Tract XC*. Profoundly irritated by the theological disputes and petty squabbles the Oxford Movement engendered within the Church of England, he believed these arguments to signal a dangerous departure from true Christianity by ignoring the Church’s secular mission. It is clear, though, that at the root of Dickens’s anti-‘Puseyism’ was a belief he shared with many Victorian Protestants that the adherents of the Oxford Movement were deluded apologists for Roman Catholicism. A satirical article he published in June 1843 in *The Examiner*, entitled ‘Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into the Condition of the Persons Variously Engaged in the University of Oxford’, viciously attacked them by employing the rhetoric of popular anti-Catholicism. The article speaks of the Oxford Movement’s ‘darkness’, of it having ‘stood still ... when all other works have advanced and improved’, and of its ‘deplorable ... ignorance and superstition ... [and] ... moral degradation’.⁵⁸ Notably, the Catholic-flavoured ritualism promoted by the Tractarians is central to the attack. ‘A vast number of witnesses being interrogated as to what they understood by the words Religion and Salvation, answered Lighted Candles’.⁵⁹ His correspondents were also treated to bitter asides against the ritualistic tendencies of ‘Puseyism’. In a letter written to Albany Fonblanque in March 1843, for example, Dickens stated that he was ‘getting horribly bitter about Puseyism’ and complained of the Oxford Movement’s emphasis on ‘what Priests shall wear, and whither

⁵⁷ Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* in *A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Writings* edited by Michael Slater [1843] (London: Penguin, 2003), 75. All further citations will be taken from this edition and placed in the text.

⁵⁸ Charles Dickens, ‘Report of the Commissioners’, *The Examiner* (3rd June 1843), 3.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

they shall turn when they say their prayers'.⁶⁰ Later in the decade he devoted a leader in the *Daily News* to Pusey's first sermon in three years. The piece explicitly accused Pusey and his fellow Tractarians of being Catholics in all but name. Tractarianism, the article stated, 'smacks of Rome' and proceeds to accuse Pusey of embracing 'tinsel and finery' and 'all the saints of the Calendar, with every rag, and stick, and stone, sanctified and worshipped by the Romish elements'.⁶¹

Dickens's year-long sojourn to the continent from July 1844 to June 1845 hardened his opposition to Catholicism. *Pictures from Italy*, the account of his experiences abroad, is widely considered to be his most anti-Catholic work. As Dennis Walder notes, the book 'reflects a more sustained and deeply felt opposition to that faith than anything previously written by him'.⁶² Dickens himself recognised its anti-Catholic tone and wrote in the preface:

I hope I am not likely to be misunderstood by Professors of the Roman Catholic faith, on account of anything contained in these pages ... When I mention any exhibition that impressed me as absurd or disagreeable, I do not seek to connect it, or recognise it as necessarily connected with, any essentials of their creed. When I treat of the ceremonies of the Holy Week, I merely treat of their effect, and do not challenge the good and learned Dr. Wiseman's interpretation of their meaning.⁶³

Catholic 'exhibitions' (6) are indeed heavily criticised throughout the book. Masses are figured as dull affairs that are scantily attended, usually by 'several old women, a baby, and a ... dog' (19). Dickens is scornful of the indulgence for pomp in Catholic ceremonies. A performance of the Last Supper in Saint Peter's, for example, is rendered a ridiculous spectacle. Each of the actors in this scene, he notes, 'carries in his hand, a nosegay, of the

⁶⁰ *Letters* III, 462-3.

⁶¹ *Daily News* (3rd February 1846), 1.

⁶² Dennis Walder, *Dickens and Religion*, 106. *The Dublin Review*, an influential Catholic periodical founded by Cardinal Wiseman, printed a scathing review of *Pictures from Italy* that called the book a 'libel on the Catholic religion' and angrily stated that, 'Everything Catholic, everything connected with the Catholic religion, is unpleasant to Mr. Dickens's eyes, is held up by him to ridicule, or contempt, or abomination'. Anon., 'Dickens's *Pictures from Italy*', *The Dublin Review* 21 (September 1846), 184-201.

⁶³ Charles Dickens, *Pictures from Italy* edited by Kate Flint [1846] (London: Penguin, 1998), 6. All further citations will be taken from this edition and placed in the text.

size of a fine cauliflower; and two of them, on this occasion, wore spectacles; which, remembering the characters they sustained, I thought a droll appendage to the costume' (154). Catholic rituals are viewed as meretricious and with a deep suspicion. Watching the pilgrims climb the Scala Santa on their knees is 'ridiculous in the absurd incidents inseparable from it; and unpleasant in its senseless and unmeaning degradation' (157). But a scathing contempt for Catholic beliefs also permeates the book. Popular miracles, for example, are mocked as ludicrous superstitions. On a visit to a church in Naples where the blood of San Gennaro is preserved, Dickens relates how it 'miraculously liquefies three times a-year, to the great admiration of the people. At the same moment, the stone (distant some miles) where the Saint suffered martyrdom, becomes faintly red. It is said that the officiating priests turn faintly red also, sometimes, when these miracle occur' (168). Scarcely a kind word is reserved for these 'officiating priests' (168). 'If Nature's handwriting be at all legible, greater varieties of sloth, deceit, and intellectual torpor, could hardly be observed among any class of men in the world' (43). And the ever-present collection-boxes and simoniacal practices of the clergy are exposed as an unholy means of extorting money from the poor. Dickens clearly believes the rapacity of the Catholic Church to be the primary cause of the 'miserable depravity, degradation, and wretchedness' (166) of the Italian people.

Catholicism is indeed heavily criticised as a debilitating religion throughout *Pictures from Italy*.⁶⁴ The careless handling of infants during baptism, the unhygienic kissing of holy statues, and the ignominious burial of the dead are shown to be symptoms of a heartless disregard which the Catholic Church displays towards its adherents.⁶⁵ Its regressive

⁶⁴ A series of letters written to John Forster in 1846 from Switzerland are also highly critical of the influence of the Catholic Church. In a letter dated 24th August 1846, for example, Dickens writes: 'I don't know whether I have mentioned before, that in the valley of the Simplon hard by here, where ... this Protestant canton ends and a Catholic canton begins, you might separate two perfectly distinct and different conditions of humanity by drawing a line with your stick in the dust on the ground. On the Protestant side, neatness; cheerfulness; industry; education; continual aspiration, at least, after better things. On the Catholic side, dirt, disease, ignorance, squalor, and misery'. *Letters IV*, 611.

⁶⁵ For a further discussion of Dickens's reaction to Italian burial customs see Andrew Sanders, *Charles Dickens: Resurrectionist* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1982), 44-6.

influence is similarly noted in laconic comments such as that about the building of a railway line between Leghorn and Pisa: ‘There must have been a slight sensation, as of earthquake, surely, in the Vatican, when the first Italian railroad was thrown open’ (110). Dirt is a master image of the book. In almost every place Dickens visits he catalogues the squalid conditions of the people that, he suggests, are brought about by Roman Catholicism. Fondi is particularly notable for its ‘filth and putrefaction’ and its ‘hollow-cheeked and scowling people’ made up of ‘beggars’, ‘miserable children’, and ‘cripple[s]’ who demand ‘charity for the love of God, charity for the love of the Blessed Virgin, charity for the love of all saints’ (163-4). Brutal visual images of the past cruelties of Roman Catholicism also work to reinforce Protestant perceptions of the tyranny of the religion. Dickens dwells upon scenes of torture and death, especially the horrors of the Inquisition. In the chapter on Venice he includes a vivid description of ‘accursed instruments of torture: horribly contrived to cramp, and pinch, and grind and crush men’s bones, and tear and twist them with the torment of a thousand deaths’ (82-3). A strong sense emerges of his disgust at such perverted religious authority; but there is also a sense in which the past atrocities of the Catholic Church are an indissoluble component of its religious programme. ‘It is’, he writes, ‘as if the Inquisition were there still’ (21).

The 1850 Papal Aggression marked a further intensification of Dickens’s anti-Catholicism. A satirical piece he wrote entitled ‘A Crisis in the Affairs of Mr John Bull’ that appeared as the leading article in *Household Words* ferociously attacked the restoration of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in England. ‘The Bulls of Rome’, he writes, are ‘insolent, audacious, oppressive, intolerable’, they are the ‘enemies of ... the whole human race ... wherever they go, they perpetuate, misery, oppression, darkness, and ignorance’.⁶⁶ The article includes almost every popular anti-Catholic prejudice. Catholicism is characterised as a religion of ‘candles and candlesticks ... [and] ... fantastic tricks’.⁶⁷ And it is portrayed as

⁶⁶ Charles Dickens, ‘A Crisis in the Affairs of Mr John Bull’, *Household Words* 2 (23rd November 1850), 194 [193-6].

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 193.

wholly degrading in comparison with Protestantism: ‘our knowledge, liberty, progress, social welfare and happiness, are wholly irreconcilable and inconsistent’ with ‘the Bulls of Rome’.⁶⁸ A large part of the essay focuses on the religion of Ireland as the cause of its troubles. The Catholicism of Ireland, represented by the figure of Miss Eringobragh, has had ‘far too much to do with her present state’.⁶⁹ Ireland’s ‘squalor and ignorance’⁷⁰ are portrayed as the inevitable consequences of embracing the Catholic religion. In his private correspondence this extreme hostility to the Papal Aggression was even more pronounced. An extraordinary letter to Miss Burdett Coutts dated the 22nd of August 1851 begins by blaming the ‘Puseyites’ for encouraging the Pope to believe there was ‘a tendency towards him in England which does not exist’,⁷¹ and concludes with an angst-ridden pronouncement on the perniciousness of Catholicism that reveals something like hysteria. In language worthy of *The Protestant Magazine*, Dickens sees the Papal Aggression as the first step to armageddon: ‘Now, a War between the Roman Catholic Religion - that curse upon the world - and Freedom, is inevitable ... Terrible things will be done and suffered, before we get out of this trouble. I believe it will produce the last great, long, direful War of the world’.⁷²

Anti-Catholic sentiment continued to punctuate Dickens’s novels until his death. Roman Catholicism is a target in *Bleak House*, especially in the novel’s opening chapter. Chancery, the ‘most pestilent of hoary sinners’, bears a strong physical resemblance to a Catholic Church with its ‘crimson cloth and curtains’, ‘wasting candles’, and ‘stained glass windows’.⁷³ The Lord High Chancellor sits with a ‘foggy glory round his head’ (14) and is the archetypal symbol of Papal authority. The malevolent Tulkinghorn is also associated with Catholicism. He is called a ‘silent depository’ (23), a phrase that links him with the

⁶⁸ Ibid, 194.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 195.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 195.

⁷¹ *Letters* XI, 466. Dickens’s hostility to ‘Puseyism’ was vigorously revived following the Papal Aggression and several of his *Household Words* articles took the opportunity to mock the Oxford Movement. See ‘The Last Words of the Old Year’, *Household Words* 2 (4th January 1851), 337-9; ‘Sucking Pigs’, *Household Words* 4 (8th November 1851), 145-7; and ‘A Sleep to Startle Us’, *Household Words* 4 (13th March 1852), 577-80.

⁷² *Letters* XI, 466-7.

⁷³ Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* edited by Nicola Bradbury [1853] (London: Penguin, 2003), 14-15. All further citations will be taken from this edition and placed in the text.

image of a Catholic priest taking confession, and his dress and manners resemble that of a stereotypically conspiring Jesuit.⁷⁴ *Little Dorrit*'s Italian passages elaborate on several of the prejudices Dickens had previously aired in *Pictures from Italy*. Mr Dorrit's meeting with a funeral procession 'which came mechanically chaunting by' led by 'an ugly priest' in 'dirty vestments',⁷⁵ for example, is punctuated with anti-Catholic rhetoric. *A Tale of Two Cities* opens with a gruesome account of the cruelty of the Catholic clergy in France, whose 'humane achievements' include the sentencing of a youth 'to have his hands cut off, his tongue torn out with pincers, and his body burned alive, because he had not kneeled down in the rain to do honour to a dirty procession of monks which passed within his view, at a distance of some fifty or sixty yards'.⁷⁶ And *Our Mutual Friend* has several allusions to the conspiratorial nature of Catholicism. For example, the waiter who serves at the wedding dinner of John and Bella, a 'solemn gentleman in black clothes', while 'conferring in secrecy with John Rokesmith on the subject of punch and wines, bent his head as though stooping to the Papistical practice of receiving auricular confession'.⁷⁷

Throughout the 1850s and 1860s Dickens's private letters and journalism similarly expressed anti-Catholic sentiments. Typical of the tone of his correspondence on the subject is a note written to W. F. De Cerjat that speaks of England's 'unconquerable opposition to ... an artfully and schemingly managed Institution like the Romish Church'.⁷⁸ This hostile anti-Catholic position was also a feature of his role as editor. *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* contain many articles criticising the Catholic Church. Indeed, Harriet Martineau actually suggests in her autobiography that *Household Words* was a deliberately 'anti-

⁷⁴ Susan Shatto has also noted that the description of mud and fog in the celebrated opening of the novel derives from the beginning of Dickens's anti-Papal Aggression article 'A Crisis in the Affairs of Mr John Bull'. See Susan Shatto, *The Companion to Bleak House* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 22.

⁷⁵ Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit* edited by Stephen Wall and Helen Small [1857] (London: Penguin, 2003), 667. All further citations will be taken from this edition and placed in the text.

⁷⁶ Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* edited by Richard Maxwell [1859] (London: Penguin, 2003), 6.

⁷⁷ Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* edited by Adrian Poole [1865] (London: Penguin, 1997), 652-4.

⁷⁸ *Letters* XII, 267.

Catholic publication'.⁷⁹ Martineau claims a story she submitted to the journal about an admirable Jesuit was rejected because Dickens told her 'he never would publish anything, fact or fiction, which gave a favourable view of anyone under the influence of the Catholic faith'.⁸⁰ She continues:

This appeared to me so incredible that Mr. Dickens gave me his "ground" three times over with all possible distinctness, lest there should be any mistake: he would "print nothing which could possibly dispose any mind whatever in favour of Romanism, even by the example of good men" and would "suppress facts advantageous to the Catholics".⁸¹

A vivid testimony by Thomas Adolphus Trollope supports Martineau's claim that Dickens had become vehemently anti-Catholic. Recalling a conversation between the two men about Italian politics, Trollope writes: 'how well I remember his arched eyebrows and laughing eyes when I told him of Garibaldi's proposal that all priests should be summarily executed!'⁸²

Yet this is only one side of the story. Dickens's opposition to Catholicism did not prevent him from having close Catholic friends. Percy Fitzgerald, whom Dickens wanted his daughter Mamie to marry, and Clarkson Stanfield, to whom he dedicated *Little Dorrit*, were both devout Roman Catholics. Even Stanfield's withdrawal from illustrating *Pictures from Italy* on account of its perceived anti-Catholic bias did not affect their friendship.⁸³ Other Catholic colleagues and correspondents the author was on friendly terms with included the former Jesuit priest Father Prout (Frances Sylvester Mahony), the illustrator Richard Doyle, and the writer and poet John Overs. Unlike many Protestants during the 1830s and 1840s,

⁷⁹ Harriet Martineau, *Harriet Martineau's Autobiography* Vol. II (London: Virago, 1983), 422. *All the Year Round* was less openly anti-Catholic than *Household Words*, but its underlying hostility remained the same, especially its inclusion of numerous articles in support of the Italian Risorgimento that frequently attacked the Papacy. See John M. L. Drew, *Dickens the Journalist* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 149-50.

⁸⁰ Harriet Martineau, *Harriet Martineau's Autobiography* Vol. II, 420.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 420.

⁸² Thomas Adolphus Trollope, *What I Remember*, Vol. I (New York: Harper, 1888), 359.

⁸³ See David Paroissien, 'Pictures from Italy and its Original Illustrator', *The Dickensian* 67 (May 1971), 87-90.

neither was Dickens hostile to the Irish on account of their religion. Indeed, as one critic notes, his often sympathetic portrayals of poor Irish immigrants, especially in *Sketches by Boz* and *Martin Chuzzlewit*, and his fondness for and frequent use of the poetry of Thomas Moore, some of which contained overt Irish nationalist sentiments, may have been ‘dangerously tolerant in anti-Catholic eyes’.⁸⁴ *Barnaby Rudge*'s condemnation of fanatical Protestantism also demonstrates that Dickens was capable of expressing sympathy for persecuted Catholics, an aspect of the novel that prompted one Protestant reviewer to complain: ‘We suspect, from the manner in which “Boz” takes the field against the “No Popery” people of half a century since, that he intends giving a “liberal” colouring to the circumstances of the times. If so, he may please a few - he must offend many’.⁸⁵ And despite the pronounced anti-Catholicism of *Pictures from Italy*, Dickens does not fail to praise ‘good’ Catholics such as San Carlo Borromeo, who, he tells us, was a ‘charitable doctor to the sick’ and ‘a munificent friend to the poor’ (95).

Similarly, in his role as editor of *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* Dickens did at least on occasion allow for more tolerant perspectives on the Catholic religion. A sympathetic view of Catholicism can be gleaned from a *Household Words* article by William Allingham entitled ‘The Irish “Stationers”’. Allingham’s piece details a Catholic pilgrimage to a holy island in Donegal, and, though he includes quips about the superstitious nature of the pilgrims, he treats the event with great respect and speaks of a Catholic priest’s sermon as ‘the right way to preach to the understanding and hearts of the uneducated’.⁸⁶ A certain respect for Catholicism can also be found in an *All the Year Round* article on medieval simony. Though the article has a distinctly anti-Catholic bias, it was qualified by Dickens with the statement: ‘while we talk of the old days of Roman sheep-shearing, [we] would

⁸⁴ D. G. Paz, *Dickens and Barnaby Rudge: Anti-Catholicism and Chartism* (Monmouth, Wales: The Merlin Press, 2006), 52. For a detailed discussion of Dickens’s attitude to the Irish see Leon Litvack, ‘Dickens, Ireland, and the Irish, Part I’, *The Dickensian* Vol. 98 No. 4 (Spring 2003), 34-59 and ‘Dickens, Ireland, and the Irish, Part II’, *The Dickensian* Vol. 99 No. 1 (Summer 2003), 137-52.

⁸⁵ *Salopian Journal* (7th July 1841), quoted in *Letters II*, 367 fn 4.

⁸⁶ William Allingham, ‘The Irish “Stationers”’, *Household Words* 2 (5th October 1850), 33 [29-33].

guard our readers against attributing to the well-educated Roman Catholic of our own day, faults that ... were as much faults of a period in the age of society as of a creed'.⁸⁷

Anti-Catholicism is therefore an important feature of Dickens's life and work. But the critical consensus that has led to his anti-Catholicism becoming 'a familiar fact'⁸⁸ has tended to overlook evidence suggesting he was not always a hearty anti-Papist. Crucially, what has also been overlooked is the complex nature of Dickens's engagement with Catholicism. Like many Victorian novelists who dwelt upon the pernicious influence of the religion, Dickens's relationship with Catholicism, as suggested in the dream of Mary Hogarth, was often fuelled by anxieties and marked by ambivalence. This study will therefore argue for a more nuanced understanding of the subject of Dickens and Catholicism by exploring its inherent complexities and profound strangeness. Chapter One 'Anti-Catholic Anxieties' considers five key moments in which Catholicism spurs his creativity: the interpolated tale of 'The Five Sisters of York' in *Nicholas Nickleby*; *Barnaby Rudge*, a novel centred around the 1780 anti-Catholic Gordon Riots; a hostile review of John Everett Millais's *Christ in the House of His Parents* entitled 'Old Lamps for New Ones'; the distinctly partisan *A Child's History of England*; and a critique of 'Puseyite' dandyism among the fashionable elite who gather at Chesney Wold in *Bleak House*. By contextualizing these moments within the historical context of Protestant responses to the Victorian Catholic revival, this extended chapter examines how Dickens employs anti-Catholicism to either displace or reinforce anxieties about Protestantism and the Protestant self.

The following chapters will uncover and analyse the often cryptic moments in his writing that suggest a strange attraction to Roman Catholicism. Chapter Three 'Purgatory: A *Christmas Carol*' explores the idea that Dickens's ghostly tale is a mine of buried Catholic sentiment as the spirit of Jacob Marley appears to reside in a purgatorial realm. Since the Reformation the Church of England had rejected the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory.

⁸⁷ Anon., 'Roman Sheep Shearing', *All The Year Round* 3 (11th August 1860), 429 [428-32].

⁸⁸ Dennis Walder, *Dickens and Religion*, 11.

Protestantism held it to be ‘a fond thing vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the word of God’.⁸⁹ Dickens himself thought the doctrine to be a piece of ‘Romish’ chicanery. During his travels in Italy he made ironic comments about the notion of Purgatory being an unholy device for extorting the money of the faithful. But the character of Jacob Marley seems to be surrounded by the poetics of purgatory and there are several textual clues that suggest the ‘Invisible World’ (52) of *A Christmas Carol* is not a vision of Hell but of an intermediary ‘third place’. Imagining a purgatorial realm that resonates with Catholic belief therefore provides Dickens with a wealth of imaginative material and allows for the exploration of the limitations of Protestant eschatology which held that a soul must either find salvation in Heaven or damnation in Hell. Crucially, this vision of an intermediate zone is deeply attractive as it enables him to envisage a less harsh interpretation of death and the afterlife than Protestantism allowed.

Chapter Four ‘Architecture: *Pictures from Italy*’ identifies Dickens’s strange attraction to the gloomy magnetism of Italian Catholic churches. *Pictures from Italy* is generally deemed to be his most anti-Catholic work. Yet the book is punctuated with peculiar moments where Catholic churches are figured as fascinating and alluring. Words loaded with theological implications such as ‘mysterious’ and ‘solemn’ are central to the text’s conception of these places of worship and suggest a deep-rooted attraction to the sombreness and sensuousness of Catholic churches as sanctified spaces that heighten religious adherence and assurance. Italian Catholic churches, however, also affect Dickens in a more cryptic sense. These edifices weirdly disorientate and eerily disturb him, and he is often subject to feelings of uncanniness among the buildings and relics of this alien, foreign, unfamiliar religion. For Dickens, and indeed for many Victorian Protestants, to be confronted with the merging of Paganism and Christianity in Italian churches is to be confronted by the historical ‘illegitimacy’ of the Protestant Church as Protestantism’s Catholic past uncannily haunts the Church of England, especially in its use of medieval churches. Furthermore, in his

⁸⁹ Quoted in Edgar C. S. Gibson, *The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England* (London: Methuen & Co., 1906), 542-3.

uncanny fear of being buried alive in the catacombs of Rome it is possible to detect a longing for a return to the womb that is symbolic of a return to the 'Mother Church'.

Finally, Chapter Five 'Mariolatry: *David Copperfield*' explores Dickens's attraction to the Virgin Mary through the character of Agnes Wickfield. Agnes's position as a vague emblematic figure in a broadly realistic novel has not been well-received. A fascinating aspect of the character, however, is that she resembles a Madonna-figure. Victorian anti-Catholics denounced the cult of the Virgin Mary to portray Catholicism as an unenlightened religion and Dickens himself was generally hostile to the worship of the Madonna. But Madonna-figures featured in many works by Protestant writers who associated female characters with the Virgin Mary to inscribe a feminine ideal. Agnes Wickfield can certainly be situated among this gallery of highly popular secularized, domestic Madonnas. Yet Dickens's portrait of the character as a kind of saintly Madonna-figure is more complex than many Protestant portraits of female Marys. Agnes, especially in the dominant motif of her 'pointing upward' and *David Copperfield*'s association of her with a stained glass window, is a figure heavily invested with decidedly Catholic-flavoured Marian traits that suggests her creator, in both his life and his art, was emotionally open to Marian imagery not found in the Church of England.

Victorian Christianity is not a simple division between a Protestant majority and a Roman Catholic minority. Throughout the age intense theological and liturgical debate, denominational divisions, and a growing secularization created a vast and complex religious landscape.⁹⁰ Linda Colley, however, stresses the centrality of Protestantism, without distinction between denominations, as a unifying factor in British life during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and how the dominant political, social, and cultural ethos of the age was Protestantism. 'Internal rivalries [between the divisions that existed within the

⁹⁰ For a detailed account of the religious life of the period see Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, 2 Vols. (London: A. & C. Black, 1966). And for a discussion of the complexity of Victorian religion and its relationship to literature see Mark Knight and Emma Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Protestant community] were abundant and serious', writes Colley, 'but they should not obscure what was still the most striking feature in the religious landscape, the gulf between Catholic and Protestant'.⁹¹ And, as Franchot demonstrates, the terms 'Catholic / Catholicism' and 'Protestant / Protestantism' functioned as 'purposeful, rhetorically charged generalizations, abstractions whose impact in large part depended on their ambivalent identification with, and sometimes violent differentiations from, one another'.⁹² This is especially true in England from the late 1830s until the 1870s, the years during which anti-Catholic feeling was most intense and when Dickens's novels were published. Therefore, in this study, because the focus on religious persuasion is primarily cultural rather than theological, the following definitions will be used: 'Catholic' will denote Roman Catholic; 'Anglo-Catholic' will be used to indicate the founders and followers of the Oxford Movement; and 'Protestant' will refer to those in the Church of England as well as Dissenters such as Baptists, Congregationalists, and Methodists, and non-denominational Protestants who identified with Protestantism and approved of the Reformation. On occasion I will also employ what were derogatory terms for Catholicism and Anglo-Catholicism such as the 'Church of Rome', 'Romish', 'Romanism', 'Papish', 'Popery', and 'Puseyism', but only within the context of emphasizing the pervasive cultural rhetoric of anti-Catholicism.

⁹¹ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 19.

⁹² Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome*, xviii.

Chapter 2

Anti-Catholic Anxieties

Victorian anti-Catholicism was marked by anxiety. Catholicism was wrongly believed to be advancing rapidly and rumours were spread about the number of Catholics in England that far exceeded their actual strength.¹ A global Catholic conspiracy became an increasingly accepted idea and the ultimate goal of ‘Popery’ was figured to be the overthrow of an enlightened government by Papal darkness and despotic oppression. Anti-Catholics also, and perhaps surprisingly, aligned Catholicism with radical politics. Chartism and the Anti-Corn Law League were associated with ‘Popery’.² Protestant responses to Catholicism verged on paranoia. Lord Shaftesbury, for example, attributed a supernatural wizardry to the Catholic religion and spoke of the Pope possessing ‘unnatural gifts’ that could ‘shake remote kingdoms and dethrone monarchs ... and set in motion half the forces of Christendom’.³

Roman Catholicism became a dark imaginary landscape in the Victorian Protestant psyche, the terrain of which was characterised by sexual deviance, political conspiracy, violence and persecution. Anti-Catholic fiction was crammed with sensational tales of young girls being kidnapped and forced into nunneries, Jesuitical intrigue, ‘Popish’ plots against England, and disturbing images of the violence and cruelty of past Catholic atrocities. Catholicism was repeatedly constructed in these texts as a religion of strangeness and wickedness that was fundamentally alien and threatening to English Protestant culture. A sense emerges from this writing, however, that Protestantism’s obsession with ‘Rome’ was heavily inflected by secular anxieties. By constructing Catholic difference as Catholic deviance and the Roman Catholic ‘other’ as a symbol of the culturally heretical, Protestant

¹ See E. R. Norman, *Anti-Catholicism in Victorian England*, 17.

² See Edward Bickersteth, *The Divine Warning to the Church, at this time, of our enemies, dangers, and duties, and as to our future prospects* (London: W. H. Dalton 1843), 25.

³ Quoted in Robert J. Klaus, *The Pope, the Protestants, and the Irish* (New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1987), 286.

novelists provided a series of social, cultural, and political oppositional images against which Victorians could assert their Protestant identity and define Protestantism as normative. Paradoxically, these stories functioned as a critique of Protestantism itself and gave Victorians a platform for the discussion of an array of secular concerns including the role of women, social order, the body, physical health, nationhood, and masculinity. Victorian anti-Catholic literature therefore employed Catholic imagery to alternately displace or reinforce tensions and anxieties about Protestantism and Protestant culture.

Dickens was a ‘spirited participant’⁴ in the anti-Catholicism of the day. Intolerant of the history, teachings, structure and political aspirations of the Catholic Church, he frequently expressed anti-Catholic sentiments in his writing. Yet though his anti-Catholic sentiments have tended to be read as simple expressions of hostility towards a religious enemy, like many other Victorian Protestant writers he employs Catholicism as an imaginary landscape through which the tensions and anxieties of Protestantism are voiced. This extended chapter uncovers and explores these tensions in five moments in Dickens’s writing that have been identified as evidence of his prejudice against the Catholic religion. Situating these texts alongside contemporary Protestant responses to Catholicism demonstrates that Dickens similarly constructs the Catholic religion as menacing, but also employs Catholic images, characterisations, plots and motifs to express a complex range of secular anxieties.

(i) *The Five Sisters of York and the Convent Issue*

On the journey from London to Dotheboys Hall in Yorkshire, the coach in which Nicholas Nickleby is travelling with Wackford Squeers is suddenly upturned. As the travellers retire to a nearby inn a grey-haired gentleman dressed in mourning clothes begins to tell a story. ‘Let us call it’, says this melancholy figure, ‘THE FIVE SISTERS OF YORK’.⁵

⁴ Robert Newsom, ‘Roman Catholicism’, *Oxford Reader’s Companion to Dickens*, 510.

⁵ Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* edited by Mark Ford [1839] (London: Penguin, 2003), 69. All further citations will be taken from this edition and placed in the text.

Michael Slater reads the interpolated tale of five orphaned sisters who live under the guardianship of the black monks of Saint Benedict as ‘a lugubrious piece of Protestant propaganda’.⁶ Anti-Catholic tones certainly reverberate throughout the narrative, especially in the characterisation of the ‘black monk’ (70) who petitions the sisters to take the veil. Yet to read the story as Protestant propaganda is too simple. Dickens’s tale is in fact a more topical piece of writing than is generally recognised. Anti-convent literature was extremely popular in the 1830s. Tracts, books, and pamphlets detailing the (supposed) lurid goings-on behind cloistered walls, the most notorious being *Six Months in a Convent* by Rebecca Reed (1835) and Maria Monk’s *Awful Disclosures* (1836), were being widely distributed throughout England and reprinted in several English newspapers.⁷ Tours by performers claiming to be reformed priests or escaped nuns, who shocked audiences with ‘true’ stories of priestly immorality in the convent, also became fashionable.⁸ It was not only in low-brow circles that anti-convent ideology was embraced and disseminated. A suspicion of convents, especially a suspicion of the sexual morals of the priests into whose care nuns were placed, was shared by the members of every class. Reverend Gathercole, the incumbent of Cleasby, for example, urged his flock to ‘keep your little daughters from the popish schools for they are nurseries out of which the handsomest may be selected for the ... seraglios of the popish priests called nunneries’.⁹ Such tales and rhetoric forged an image of the convent as a site of subterranean passages and dark dungeons where innocent young women, forced into conventual life against their will, were sexually abused, raped, and even murdered by licentious clerics. Convents, in the Protestant imagination, were little more than priests’ brothels. Anti-convent narratives therefore had an added dimension to other forms of anti-

⁶ Michael Slater, *Dickens and Women*, 95.

⁷ Anti-Catholic tales of priestly debauchery in the confessional were especially popular. Susan David Bernstein argues that in the Victorian Protestant imagination the confessional nourished ‘fantas[ies] of rampant degeneracy ... about the sexual atrocities father confessors perpetrate[d] on young women’. Susan David Bernstein, *Confessional Subjects: Revelations of Gender and Power in Victorian Literature and Culture* (University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 48.

⁸ See Philip Ingram, ‘Protestant Patriarchy and the Catholic Priesthood in Nineteenth Century England’, *Journal of Social History* 24 (1991), 783-97.

⁹ Quoted in G. F. A. Best, ‘Popular Protestantism in Victorian England’ in *Ideas and Institutions of Victorian England* edited by Robert Robson (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1967), 126-7.

Catholic expression that went beyond contempt for a religious 'other': a fixation with the idea of the Catholic priest as a sexual threat to women and girls.

Dickens's cleric in 'The Five Sisters of York' simultaneously feeds into and resists traditional anti-Catholic portrayals of a Catholic priest. A grave and gloomy 'holy man' (70), this shadowy cleric is reminiscent of the villainous Catholic priests who populated anti-Catholic gothic novels of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. But this monk, though he is a force to be resisted, is not entirely wicked. The narrator does not explicitly indicate that the monk is entirely hypocritical or that his motives are nefarious. The monk, for example, does not force the sisters into the convent and they are allowed to resist his calls for them to become nuns. Indeed, he is even shown to have benevolent feelings towards them. After the death of the youngest sister, Alice, the narrator tells us, 'the monk - even the monk - could bear with some grief here' (75). Though his religious extremism is figured as misguided, unlike many Catholic priests in anti-convent literature, he is neither monstrous nor sadistic.

Yet the tale does resonate with traditional anti-convent narratives in its subtle construction of the monk as a sexual threat. The monk's physical attraction to Alice and her sisters is easily discernible. Though he always walks 'with his eyes bent upon the ground' (70), when approaching the women he raises 'his eyes higher than was his humble wont' (70). Hinting at the lustful intent of this act the narrator says, 'Even a monk might have loved them as choice masterpieces of his Maker's hand' (70). Other moments in the text suggest that behind this attraction lurks a sexual menace. The monk's entering the sisters' orchard through a small gate in the wall, a gate being a well-known metaphor for the sexual act, is suggestive of the transgression into a woman's body. And the impropriety of this invasion of the sisters' enclosed space is reinforced by the monk's exiting through the same gate and their 'hastening into the house [to be] seen no more that day' (74). Sexual desire is



Fig. 1 'The Five Sisters of York' from *Nicholas Nickleby* by Hablot K. Browne ('Phiz')

also suggested in the monk's asceticism. He refuses to sit on a 'mossy seat' and instead 'bump[s] himself down on a very hard stone, - at which, no doubt, approving angels were gratified' (70). Many Protestants were highly suspicious of priestly asceticism because for the Catholic clergy it authorised the absolution of sin. However, as Julie Peakman notes in her study of eighteenth-century erotica, this type of asceticism was also suspect to Protestants because it was recognised as 'an activity that will sexually stimulate, even when

applied as a penance'.¹⁰ Phiz's illustration further emphasizes the monk's carnal desires by clearly showing him holding a crucifix in the position of an erect phallus, an image of sexual aggression that is intensified by the circular-shaped embroideries three of the sisters have placed upon their laps (see Figure 1).

Suspensions of the Catholic clergy as sexual predators arose from their enforced celibacy. Protestant England held 'an almost universal distaste for chastity as a deliberate and dedicated condition'¹¹ as many believed the suppression of the sex-drive to be an 'unnatural' state that must inevitably lead to sexual misdemeanours. 'Unnatural', in fact, became the nineteenth-century buzz-word for priestly celibacy. Protestant writers regularly employed the term when attacking the Catholic clergy. R. P. Blakeney's *Popery in Its Social Aspect*, a popular nineteenth-century anti-Catholic monograph, devoted an entire chapter to the subject. Blakeney speaks of Catholic priests being 'bound by an unnatural law, placed in circumstances in which their animal passions naturally become ascendant, with females in the confessional, and nuns in the cloister at their disposal', and asks, 'is it not likely that immorality will ensue?'¹² Anti-convent literature had repeatedly focused upon this theme since the eighteenth century. Matthew Lewis's clerical villain in *The Monk* (1794), an evil seducer, rapist and murderer, is a famous example of a fictional priest whose vow of celibacy is shown to be 'unnatural':

He began to feel that He was not proof against temptation; and that however Matilda might restrain herself within the bounds of modesty, He was unable to contend with those passions from which He falsely thought himself exempted.¹³

¹⁰ See Julie Peakman, *Mighty Lewd Books: The Development of Pornography in Eighteenth-Century England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 149.

¹¹ Michael Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexual Attitudes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 17-18.

¹² R. P. Blakeney, *Popery in Its Social Aspect* (London: Hamilton Adams & Co., 1856), 245.

¹³ Matthew Lewis, *The Monk* edited by Howard Anderson [1796] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 68.

Dickens's cleric in 'The Five Sisters of York' may not be as depraved as Lewis's protagonist, but this 'holy man' (70) is repeatedly shown to have an aversion to all things 'natural'. For example, we are told that although the 'Heaven above was blue, and the earth beneath was green' the 'holy man walked gloomily on' as he had no 'sympathy' with the 'beauty of the earth' (70). Later in the tale the narrator explicitly registers the monk's affiliation with the 'unnatural'. As an 'unnatural stillness' (75) descends upon the abbey where the sisters live, the scene, replete with Gothic images of bats in 'fantastic flights' and the ground 'alive with crawling things', found a quick response in [the monk's] bosom' (75).

Convents and conventual life, however, were also ideologically constructed in Victorian anti-Catholic literature as 'unnatural'. Convents were routinely portrayed as dark, sinister places and the lives of nuns were frequently referred to as 'unnatural'. Dickens himself uses the term in an 1849 letter to Angela Burdett Coutts when he rejects the idea that Urania Cottage, a home he helped establish for the redemption of prostitutes, should be modelled on a Church Penitentiary. Miss Coutts had sent him a pamphlet by the founder of 'Houses of Mercy' for penitent prostitutes that Dickens argued was written by 'somebody with one leg into the Romish Church. The suggested place is but a kind of Nunnery ... It would be difficult, to my thinking, to devise any ... scheme, of a more pernicious and unnatural nature'.¹⁴ Though the tale of 'The Five Sisters of York' does not explicitly refer to taking the veil as 'unnatural', it is significant that throughout the narrative there is a heavy emphasis upon images of nature and its opposition to the cloister. Alice and her sisters are constantly aligned with nature. Images of flowers and the sounds of birdsong accompany almost every description of them. Alice especially has a 'fervent love of all beautiful things in nature' (69). And in her rejection of the monk's advances for her and her sisters to join the convent, Alice's response implies that taking the veil is against nature and a natural life:

¹⁴ *Letters V*, 541-2. For an account of Dickens's involvement in Urania Cottage see Jenny Hartley, *Charles Dickens and the House of Fallen Women* (London: Methuen, 2008)

“Never, sisters,” cried Alice. “Barter not the light and air of heaven, and the freshness of earth and all beautiful things which breathe upon it, for the cold cloister and the cell. Nature’s own blessings are the proper goods of life, and we may share them sinlessly together. To die is our heavy portion, but, oh, let us die with life about us; when our cold hearts cease to beat, let warm hearts be beating near; let our last look be upon the bounds which God has set to his own bright skies, and not on stone walls and bars of iron! Dear sisters, let us live and die, if you list, in this green garden’s compass; only shun the gloom and sadness of a cloister, and we shall be happy” (73).

Alice’s idea of the convent is of an ‘unnatural’ space that is anathema to the ‘proper goods of life’ (73) and voices the wider Victorian Protestant image of nunneries as a site of darkened dungeons and restricted freedoms.

Portraying convent life as ‘unnatural’ was a useful tool in general for nineteenth-century anti-Catholics to discredit the Roman Catholic Church. But the context and frequency with which the term appears suggests that convents prompted a particular anxiety about the role of women in society. Lurid tales of convent abuse painted a portrait of nunneries as places of solitude and suffering. But the reality of the life of a Catholic nun in the nineteenth century was more active than contemplative.¹⁵ Convents offered women work and a vocation, as well as economic stability, thereby giving them an alternative to the cultural constraints of marriage and the family. Convent living was therefore figured as ‘unnatural’ by some Protestant writers because it challenged Victorian patriarchy and the patriarchal emphasis on the family as the core of society. As Susan P. Casteras argues, cloister life was deemed culturally heretical because Victorian society ‘idolized the sanctity of family and of motherhood, [and] it was not readily conceded that holy celibacy could be a more honourable spiritual state than matrimony - or that women possessed any right to dedicate their bodies and souls to God instead of to a husband’.¹⁶ ‘Unnatural’, in the sense it was applied to life in the convent, implied a rejection of domesticity and its attendant virtues

¹⁵ See Susan O’Brien, ‘Terra Incognita: The Nun in Nineteenth-Century England’, *Past and Present*, No. 121 (1988), 110-40.

¹⁶ Susan P. Casteras, ‘Virgin Vows: The Early Artists’ Portrayals of Nuns and Novices’, *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 24 No. 2 (Winter 1981), 164-5 [157-84].

of procreation and motherhood. Catholic sisterhoods were therefore maligned not simply because they represented a detested foreign religion, but because of a fear that female religious orders could subvert Protestant patriarchy.

Published in 1839, *Nicholas Nickleby* appeared at a time when the number of Catholic convents in England was increasing and the idea of establishing Anglican convents was being revived, a move that heightened these anxieties.¹⁷ In 'The Five Sisters of York' there is a definite sense that Dickens registers these fears. The 'natural' role of women is promoted as one dedicated to family life and domesticity. Alice, for example, has a 'devoted attachment to her sisters' (69), and the narrator consistently aligns her with the domestic. Her 'gleesome voice and merry laugh were the sweetest music of their home' (69); she gladly performs 'tasks' (71); and she speaks of 'love and duty which should bind in holy ties the children of one loved parent' (71). For Alice and her sisters, life is not to be lived shut away in the 'cold cloister and the cell' (73), but to go 'forth into the world, and mingle with all its cares and trials' (71).¹⁸ Furthermore, patriarchal fears are also registered in the monk repeatedly calling the sisters 'daughters' (70, 70, 71, 74) and their calling him 'father' (71, 71, 71, 73). Such a seemingly insignificant use of the standard nomenclature for a Roman Catholic priest signalled a dangerous conflation between Catholic (or Anglo-Catholic) and Protestant patriarchal authority by voicing a perilous supplanting by the convent of the home.

Dickens's tale therefore resonates with other Victorian anti-convent narratives by registering disquiet about the status of women in society. But it also feeds into a pervasive theme of anti-Catholic constructions of the convent as an unhealthy site of repressed sexuality and an alternative non-familial form of social organisation. Anti-Catholic anxieties

¹⁷ In 1835 Newman had advocated reviving Anglican sisterhoods to 'give dignity and independence to the position of women in society'. John Henry Newman, 'Letters on the Church of The Fathers', *British Magazine* 6 (June 1835), 667. Pusey actively encouraged this idea and in 1841 his foundation of the first Anglican sisterhood for over two hundred years in England was a significant event.

¹⁸ This idea is repeated in several of Dickens's works, most notably in *A Christmas Carol* when the ghost of Jacob Marley tells Scrooge that 'if the spirit goes not forth in life, it is condemned to do so after death'. Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, 47.

about a woman's entering the convent often focused on her removal from the marital sexual economy into a very different exploitative sexual economy. Recurring images of women's physical bodies being 'literally fortified and protected from penetration by convent walls' associated the 'imprisoning convent with a woman's failure to realize her sexual potential (and civic duty) in marriage and procreation'.¹⁹ One way anti-Catholic writers achieved this was through ironic images of cloister gardens and flowers. Julia McNair Wright's *Almost a Nun*, for example, ironically constructs the walled cloister garden as an unhealthy site because it denies a female her capacity to flower.²⁰ Similarly, the cloistered garden in 'The Five Sisters of York' is teeming with flowers and wildlife. It is filled with the 'brightest flowers' (69-70) and the 'buzz of insects' (70). Although the sisters do not take the veil, these images work as a symbol of their capacity to reproduce which is stifled by their living within the confines of this setting and being 'surrounded by a rough stone wall' (70). But as the tale progresses, the garden, which is both over-fertile and diseased, becomes an ironic reminder of their unfulfilled maternal capacity: 'A blight had fallen on the trees and shrubs ... All was silent and deserted. The boughs of the trees were bent and broken, and the grass had grown long and rank' (75). This idea of unfulfilled sexual capacity is reinforced by the emphasis the narrator places on the change of the sisters' complexions. By the end of the tale they are no longer coloured by the 'flush and pride of beauty' (75), but have 'pale ... blanched' faces (75), an image that fed into stereotypical anti-Catholic representations of wan nuns which symbolized their isolation from the outside world and its suppression of their reproduction capacity.²¹

Yet if such images feed into a Victorian Protestant concern about the convent as a site that opposes the dominant ideal of productive female sexuality, 'The Five Sisters of York' also registers a wider secular anxiety about the nature of female sexuality itself. From the

¹⁹ Maureen Moran, *Catholic Sensationalism and Victorian Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), 91.

²⁰ See Julia McNair Wright, *Almost a Nun* (London: R. Banks, 1860).

²¹ Susan P. Casteras has noted 'repressed sexuality' as a major theme of visual representations of nuns during the 1830s and 1840s, especially in their white complexions. Susan P. Casteras, 'Virgin Vows: The Early Artists' Portrayals of Nuns and Novices', 158.

very beginning of the tale the narrator focuses upon the physical attractiveness of the five sisters. 'All of surpassing beauty', the sisters have 'tall stately figures, with dark flashing eyes and hair of jet ... the fame of their great beauty had spread through all the country round' (69). It is, however, Alice, the youngest sister, who is described, in a particularly clichéd way, as the most beautiful:

The blushing tints in the soft bloom on the fruit, or the delicate painting on the flower, are not more exquisite than was the blending of the rose and lily in her gentle face, or the deep blue of her eye. The vine in all its elegant luxuriance is not more graceful than were the clusters of rich brown hair that sported around her brow (69).

Blushing, especially for the Romantic poets, is an index of sexual innocence; fruit, likewise, can be interpreted as symbolizing innocence and purity; and roses (often associated in Catholic litanies with the Virgin Mary) and lilies symbolize purity and chastity. Alice is therefore figured as chaste and virginal, an image that is reinforced by her repeatedly being associated with words that resonate with virginity. On several occasions, for example, she is referred to as being 'fair', a word meaning both 'beautiful to the eye' (*OED*, Sense 1) and 'clean, unsoiled, unstained' (*OED*, Sense 8). She is a 'fair creature' (69), a 'fair girl' (69), and a 'fair daughter' (70). Images of blushing, fruit, and flowers, however, are notoriously ambiguous. Blushing is suggestive of sexual arousal; blooming fruit may symbolize a state of sexual maturity; the rose is a symbol of love and desire; and the lily a symbol of fertility. Indeed, the narrator's description of Alice concludes with a veiled warning about her allure: 'Alice, dear Alice; what living thing within the sphere of her gentle witchery could fail to love her!' (70). 'Witchery' (70) is a wonderfully ambivalent term here. It could simply allude to Alice's 'charming or fascinating power or influence' (*OED*, Sense 2). Yet it is a word loaded with negative gender connotations and hints at a suggestion of something powerful or supernatural that must be contained.

Dickens's registering of this tension about female sexuality suggests ambivalence about the convent. Convents were certainly detested by many Victorian Protestants as sites of Catholic depravity. Yet the convent was an uncanny space. Its insistence on sexual abstinence and the regulated conduct of women both mirrored and deviated from acceptable modes of conduct for Victorian females. Thus, while the narrator of 'The Five Sisters of York' seems to sympathise with Alice's plea to the monk that 'no constraint should be placed upon our inclinations' (73), her refusal to obey the law of her 'father' (73) by not entering the convent hints at a dangerous defiance of patriarchal law that her death suggests cannot be allowed to flourish.

Victorian anti-convent narratives were driven by the anxieties of Protestant men (and women) about the symbolic threat posed by convents to a range of political, religious, sexual, and patriarchal structures of power. Throughout the 1850s and 1860s anti-Catholic opposition to religious sisterhoods intensified. A campaign led by Charles Newdegate Newdegate focused on the growing number of convents as 'the most insidious manifestation of Roman Catholic expansion'.²² But Newdegate's rhetoric, and the rhetoric of countless other dissenting voices against convents, continued to be obsessed by gender and sex. One staunchly Protestant commentator on the convent issue, for example, declared: 'God made woman to be the delightful companion and friend of man, and assigned her duty not amidst the dark shades of a cloister, but amidst the activities and enjoyments of domestic life'.²³ Dickens himself would return to the theme of conventual life in *Great Expectations* and would again reflect upon the idea of repressed sexuality through the character of Miss Havisham, a woman with more than a hint of 'witch-like eagerness'.²⁴ Satis House, where Miss Havisham lives 'a life of seclusion' (51), is a building with a strong resemblance to a Catholic convent. It has 'a great many iron bars to it' (55) and a 'high enclosing wall' (56).

²² Walter L. Arnstein, *Protestant versus Catholic in Mid-Victorian England: Mr Newdegate and the Nuns* (London: University of Missouri Press, 1982), 62.

²³ Anon., *The Bulwark, or Reformation Journal*, Vol. 1 (1851-2), 147.

²⁴ Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* edited by Charlotte Mitchell [1860-61] (London: Penguin, 2003), 302. All further citations will be taken from this edition and placed in the text.

Pip tells us the ‘passages were all dark’ (56) and that it is ‘melancholy’ (59) and ‘gloomy’ (80). Miss Havisham herself is surrounded by religious imagery that suggests Catholicism. She sits in a darkened room ‘lighted with wax candles’ and has a ‘veil but half arranged’ and a ‘prayer-book’ (57). On his final visit to Satis House, Pip remarks of Miss Havisham that:

in shutting out the light of day, she had shut out infinitely more; that, in seclusion, she had secluded herself from a thousand natural and healing influences; that, her mind, brooding solitary, had grown diseased, as all minds do and must and will that reverse the appointed order of their Maker ... Twilight was closing in when I went down stairs into the natural air (399-401).

Robert Lee Wolff has noted that a Victorian reader would have immediately recognised this passage to be comparing Miss Havisham’s spinsterhood to life in a Catholic nunnery.²⁵ Yet the passage is also loaded with suggestions that the Catholic-flavoured ‘unnatural’ existence of Miss Havisham contravenes the accepted role of a woman and plays into Protestant concerns about productive sexuality within marriage. Miss Havisham’s ‘brooding solitary’ is an especially significant phrase that would have suggested to Victorian readers if she had been ‘brooding’ in the reproductive sense of the word she may not be ‘diseased’ (399).

(ii) *Barnaby Rudge*

Barnaby Rudge is a problematic text. Critics have long struggled over the status of arguably the least read and least liked of Dickens’s novels. Strangely, the primary subject matter of the book, the anti-Catholic Gordon Riots of 1780, has often been seen as a somewhat eccentric choice. John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson have shed light on the religious topicality of the novel and its emphasis upon ‘the dangers of the unscrupulous exploiting of Protestant bigotry, and the timely relevance of this warning’.²⁶ Yet criticism of *Barnaby Rudge* has

²⁵ See Robert Lee Wolff, *Gains and Losses: Novels of Faith and Doubt in Victorian England* (London: John Murray, 1977), 3-4.

²⁶ John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson, *Dickens at Work* (London: Methuen, 1957), 83. See also Dennis Walder, *Dickens and Religion*, 93-6.

tended to focus on the work as an analogy of Chartism.²⁷ Published in 1841, however, *Barnaby Rudge* appeared at a time when anti-Catholic feeling was escalating to become a prominent feature of the social, cultural and political landscape. Lord George Gordon's Protestant Association had recently been resurrected, and its mouthpiece, *The Protestant Magazine*, sought to inflame religious tensions by speaking of a 'gigantic papal conspiracy'.²⁸ Cries of 'No Popery' could once again be heard on the streets of England. Dickens's tale of the anti-Catholic riots of 1780 therefore allowed him to analyse a potentially destructive force at work in contemporary society.

Barnaby Rudge is deeply sympathetic to the plight of victimized Catholics. Denying Catholics legal rights is shown to be absurd and unjust, especially through the principal Catholic character, Haredale, who suffers under these 'hard laws' (362). Sympathy for Catholic victims of the riots is even more pronounced. Catholic families 'terrified by the threats and warnings' (506) of their Protestant neighbours are shown fleeing their homes, and the reader is made to feel great pity for one family who sit 'trembling among their goods in the open street' as no-one will hire them a cart because they 'professed the obnoxious religion' (506). Protestant extremism is condemned as the refuge of ignorant bigots who, for the most part, have no true religious feeling and who, Dickens says, 'in their daily practice set at nought the commonest principles of right and wrong' (3). The novel also registers scepticism about Protestant fears of a Catholic conspiracy. In Chapter the Thirty-Seventh, the popularity of Lord George Gordon's Protestant Association is attributed to the 'whispers of a confederacy among the Popish powers to degrade and enslave England, establish an inquisition in London, and turn the pens of Smithfield market into stakes and cauldrons'

²⁷ See, among others: Steven Marcus, *Dickens: From Pickwick to Dombey* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), 173-5; Patrick Brantlinger, *The Spirit of Reform: British Literature and Politics, 1832-1867* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), 83-5; and Iain McCalman, 'Controlling the Riots: Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge*, and Romantic Revolution', *History* LXXXIV (1999), 458-76. However, D. G. Paz has shown that the relationship between *Barnaby Rudge* and Chartism is a matter of debate and that contemporary reaction to the novel was heavily focused on its treatment of religious conflict. See D. G. Paz, *Dickens and Barnaby Rudge: Anti-Catholicism and Chartism*, 99-120.

²⁸ Anon., *The Protestant Magazine* (January 1839), 24.

(305). But such whispers, we are told, are imaginary fears used only to incite religious hatred. They are ‘by-gone bugbears which had lain quietly in their graves for centuries’ and are only being ‘raised again to haunt the ignorant and credulous’ (305).

Paradoxically, *Barnaby Rudge* plays upon similar fears about a nightmarish vision of a sinister network of Catholics conspiring to infiltrate, destabilize and control England: the Protestant fantasy of the conspiring Jesuit. Judith Wilt has explored the idea of a Jesuitical presence in the novel. Wilt’s fascinating reading argues that Sir John Chester is the novel’s ‘conspiring Jesuit’ and, furthermore, that the continuing return of the Jesuit in literature ‘plays out an English anxiety that the “Catholic” is in fact the authentic, and the “Protestant” a masquerade’.²⁹ But there is another character in the novel irrigated with classically Jesuitical qualities; a prevaricator and cunning manipulator who engineers and orchestrates the Gordon Riots: Gashford, the malevolent secretary of Lord George Gordon. Gashford, though seemingly an extreme Protestant, is drawn through the language and images commonly used in anti-Jesuit literature and feeds into Victorian Protestant paranoia surrounding Jesuitical intrigue.

Jesuits loomed large in the Victorian Protestant imagination. Founded in 1540 by Ignatius Loyola, the Society of Jesus had long been viewed by anti-Catholics as a secretive, aggressive, militant organisation bent upon Catholic world domination. Arriving in England in 1580, the Jesuits were outlawed five years later as fears for English sovereignty focused on Jesuitism as a sign of both religious and temporal invasion. Protestant propagandists throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries continued to link the society to acts of conspiracy against the state, the most famous being the Gunpowder plot of 1605. The Jesuit order was suppressed by Pope Clement XIII in 1733, but its revival by Pope Pius VII in 1814 led to renewed and heightened suspicion of the figure of the Jesuit. The 1829 Catholic Emancipation Act encapsulated such fears. Jesuits were the only order to be named in the

²⁹ Judith Wilt, ‘Masques of the English in *Barnaby Rudge*’, *Dickens Studies Annual* 30 (2001), 75 [75-94].

Act's legislation for 'the gradual Suppression and final Prohibition'³⁰ of all Catholic brotherhoods.

Victorian anti-Catholics inherited and cultivated these suspicions. Throughout the 1840s and 1850s Protestant evangelicals created a wave of intense feeling against the society. Virulently anti-Catholic publications such as *The Bulwark, or Reformation Journal* printed rumours that Jesuits were living and working in every strata of society and laying cunning plots to subvert the constitution and stability of the nation: 'Britain, ever since the Reformation, has been the especial object of Jesuitical craft and recklessness, and perhaps never more at the present moment, and we may rest assured that no means, foul or fair, will be left untried to subvert the Protestantism of this country'.³¹ Stories of Jesuitical intrigue were also common in the mainstream press. *The Times*, for example, accused Newman, Pusey and other prominent Tractarians of being 'Oxford Jesuits'³² bent on corrupting the Established Church.

Anti-Catholic literature fed into and fuelled fears of Jesuitical intrigue. Popular works such as the anonymous *The Jesuits Exposed* (1839), the widely translated *The Wandering Jew* (1844) by Eugene Sue, and *Hidden Works of Darkness: or, The Doings of the Jesuits Exposed* (1846) by W. Osburn crystallized the image of the Society of Jesus as an object of suspicion and fear. These and many other sensationalised tales portrayed Jesuits as cunning, calculating, wicked men; smooth and suave masters of manipulation; blindly obedient abdicators of the self; sexually debauched lechers; and emissaries of Satan.³³ Victorian anti-Jesuit narratives also had an almost unqualified obsession with the idea of Jesuits being villainous spies who were secretly infiltrating England and plotting its submission to 'Popery'. One such popular work, George Stephen's 1847 novel *The Jesuit at Cambridge*,

³⁰ Quoted in E. R. Norman, *Anti-Catholicism in Victorian England*, 138.

³¹ Anon., 'Popery Absolving Murders', *The Bulwark, or, Reformation Journal*, Vol. 1 (1851-2), 212.

³² *The Times* (4th Jan 1839), 4.

³³ For a survey of the language and images used to construct a stereotypical evil Jesuit in Victorian fiction see Margaret M. Maison, *Search Your Soul, Eustace* (London and New York: Sheed & Ward, 1961), 169-82.

speaks of ‘Jesuitical intrigue, ... cajolery, and intimidation’,³⁴ and centres on a Jesuit plot to plant agents in the Anglican Church with a view to subverting the major political and cultural institutions of the nation. Such lurid tales heightened a feeling amongst the English that the Jesuits were a dangerous enemy in their midst.

A Victorian reader steeped in the anti-Jesuit literature of the day would have little trouble identifying Gashford as a Jesuitical figure.³⁵ Let us consider Dickens’s first description of the character in Chapter the Thirty-Fifth of *Barnaby Rudge*:

Gashford, the secretary, was ... angularly made, high-shouldered, bony, and ungraceful. His dress, in imitation of his superior, was demure and staid in the extreme; his manner, formal and constrained. This gentleman had an overhanging brow, great hands and feet and ears, and a pair of eyes that seemed to have made an unnatural retreat into his head, and to have dug themselves a cave to hide in. His manner was smooth and humble, but very sly and slinking. He wore the aspect of a man who was always lying in wait for something that *wouldn't* come to pass; but he looked patient - very patient - and fawned like a spaniel dog. Even now, while he warmed and rubbed his hands before the blaze, he had the air of one who only presumed to enjoy it in his degree as a commoner; and though he knew his lord was not regarding him, he looked into his face from time to time, and, with a meek and deferential manner, smiled as if for practice (293).

³⁴ George Stephen, *The Jesuit at Cambridge*, Vol. II (London: Henry Colburn, 1847), 133.

³⁵ Gashford is a Dickensian invention, but his prototype, Dr Robert Watson, may have inspired Dickens to invest the character with Jesuitical qualities. At a time when Dickens was having problems writing *Barnaby Rudge*, the author must have been intrigued by the coroner’s report he read of Watson’s suicide in *The Times* on the 22nd of November 1838. Detailing the bizarre suicide of the elderly Watson, *The Times* noted that the deceased claimed to have been Lord George Gordon’s secretary during the Gordon Riots. Dickens had chanced upon the anonymous author of his chief historical source, *The Life of Lord George Gordon* (1795), a work littered with violent indictments of the monarchy and constitutional authority. According to the article, and a follow-up piece printed the next day, Watson had led an extraordinary life. He fought for the colonists during the War of Independence and subsequently became an intimate friend of George Washington. In the early 1790s he was tried and acquitted on charges of conspiracy by the British Government. He was subsequently imprisoned in Newgate for his role in inciting the 1794 anti-crimping riots. At one time he was a high-ranking member of the radical London Corresponding Society, an organisation deeply infiltrated by establishment spies. Suspected of plotting a revolutionary uprising, Watson fled to Paris in the late 1790s where he tutored Napoleon Bonaparte in the English language and was rewarded with the role of President of the Scots College, a refuge in Paris for exiled Scottish Catholics. Later resident in Rome for several years, he frequently visited the Pope and was instrumental in recovering the Stuart Papers from the Vatican. A note found at the scene of Watson’s death added to the mystery and intrigue surrounding him. Written in French, it read: ‘A man comes to give us the secrets of government’. Watson’s life-story, very little of which can be verified, read like that of a Jesuitical conspirator. For discussions of Watson as the inspiration for Gashford see W. Forbes Grey, ‘The Prototype of “Gashford” in *Barnaby Rudge*’, *The Dickensian* (Summer 1933), 175-83 and Frank A. Gibson, ‘Gashford and Gordon’, *The Dickensian* (June 1948), 124-9.

Gashford is carefully invested with several of the stock traits commonly associated with the figure of the Jesuit in Victorian anti-Catholic writing. Physically repulsive, unswervingly subservient, animalistic, utterly hypocritical, devious and manipulative: the character exudes Jesuitical qualities. Dickens's choice of adjectives - most notably, 'unnatural', 'smooth', 'sly', and 'slinking' (293) - have a strikingly familiar resonance with other contemporary representations of a stereotypically malevolent Jesuit. Indeed throughout *Barnaby Rudge* Gashford's Jesuitness continues to be suggested through the use of terms frequently employed by anti-Jesuit writers. Gashford is called 'silky' (291), 'pliant' (297), 'humble' (298), 'stealthy' (299), 'sly' (303), 'pious' (306), 'wily' (306), 'smooth' (315), 'fawning' (356), 'submissive' (356), 'servile' (362), 'false' (362), 'crafty' (409), 'artful' (417), and 'cunning' (440). Other stereotypical Jesuitical characteristics are grafted on to the character. His speech is almost always equivocal, particularly during his conversations with the deluded Lord George Gordon. He has more than a hint of sexual deviance. Haredale, for example, reveals that when Gashford was a young man he 'robbed his benefactor's daughter of her virtue' (362). And he is figured as Satanic: 'the secretary's face ... might have furnished a study for the devil's picture' (369). Jesuitical tendencies are also suggested in the many references to the character's gaze. As Susan M. Griffin shows, in many Victorian anti-Catholic novels 'Jesuits keep custody of their eyes not in order to protect their own purity, but to mask their real identities'.³⁶ Gashford is constantly 'managing his eyes' (313) by either 'drawing his sleeve in a hasty way across his eyes' (300), or 'stealthily raising his eyes' only to let them 'drop again' when they meet another's 'steady gaze' (357). Furthermore, the narrator's frequent exposure of the seething hatred that lies just beneath the surface of Gashford's cool exterior resonates with a popular theme of anti-Jesuit literature: the idea of the Jesuit being 'exposed' or 'unmasked'. And, finally, there is a peculiar detail in Hablot K. Browne's illustration of Gashford entitled 'The Secretary's Watch' that reinforces the character's Jesuitness. Gashford is pictured sitting on a rooftop as he watches the rioters setting off to destroy the Warren, the home of Haredale. Somewhat strangely

³⁶ Susan M. Griffin, *Anti-Catholicism and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 141.

positioned directly behind the secretary is a black cat that eerily mirrors his physical posture (see Figure 2). Significantly, this is an image that Dickens would also use in *Pictures from Italy* when he condemns the Jesuits he encounters as power-hungry men who ‘muster strong in the streets, and go slinking noiselessly about, in pairs, like black cats’ (44).

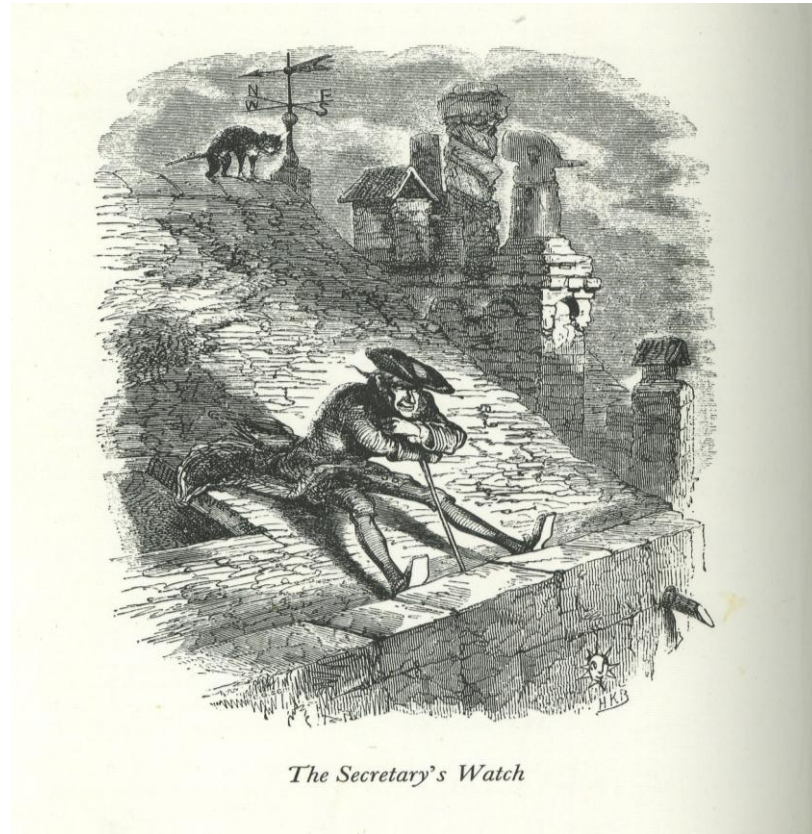


Fig. 2 ‘The Secretary’s Watch’ from *Barnaby Rudge* by Hablot K. Browne (‘Phiz’)

Representations of the Society of Jesus as loathsome primarily functioned as a Protestant tool to denigrate the Church of Rome. But the depiction of malevolent Jesuitical characters such as Gashford reveals a deeper anxiety that exceeds the question of denominational difference: the figure of the Jesuit embodies an anxiety concerning the fragility of England and English nationhood itself.

Victorian anti-Catholic writing frequently portrayed the Jesuit plot as a secular as well as religious menace. Exaggerated notions of the temporal threat of the Society of Jesus were commonplace. Jesuits were often associated with social destabilization and revolution and

Jesuitical incitement of unrest among the lower orders was a recurring theme of anti-Catholic literature. William Sewell's *Hawkstone; A Tale of and for England in 184-* (1846), for example, a text which places Jesuitism alongside anti-establishment movements such as Chartism and Fenianism, shows the villainous Jesuit Pearce cultivating upheaval and disruption among society's discontents.³⁷ Similarly, in *Barnaby Rudge*, Gashford preys upon the disenfranchised and incites their anarchic passions. He recruits and manipulates disillusioned characters such as Hugh through a cynical understanding of their frustrations. Gashford, the 'man that blows the fire' (299), also orchestrates the mob at every turn. During the attack on the Houses of Parliament he controls the violence of the mob with 'the gentlest motion of his arm' (409), and it is he who sets them upon their destruction of the Maypole and the Warren. Importantly, it is primarily through Gashford's wily manipulation of the lower orders that the deep divisions within English society are exposed. As the mob he has incited gather at Westminster to present a petition against Catholic emancipation, the narrator tells us that although the crowd is 'sprinkled doubtless here and there with honest zealots' it was 'composed for the most part of the very scum and refuse of London, whose growth was fostered by bad criminal laws, bad prison regulations, and the worst conceivable police' (407). Gashford's Jesuitical scheming therefore gives rise to reflection about the state of English society as the mob are shown to be easily susceptible to manipulation because they are completely dislocated from society. Hugh's cry to Gashford for him to 'Give us something to do with life in it - with life in it, Master' (368) is symbolic of the disenfranchisement of the rioters who are 'stimulated by their own headlong passions, by poverty, by ignorance, by the love of mischief, and the hope of plunder' (438). Detached from any sense of community, and without any formal political representation, the lower classes have been excluded from the fabric of society.

Barnaby Rudge's portrayal of a Jesuitical manipulator is therefore central to novel's theme of social fracture and works to register disquiet about the alienating structure of

³⁷ See William Sewell, *Hawkstone; A Tale of and for England in 184-*, 2 Vols. (London: John Murray, 1846).

English society. Conversely, though, the text's portrayal of a Jesuitical menace acts as a spur to the formation of English identity. As Maureen Moran argues, Victorian anti-Catholic portrayals of Jesuits created a 'figure of difference against which a healthy national identity can be imagined and articulated'.³⁸ Anti-Catholic literature did indeed tend to focus on the Jesuit as 'other' by positioning him outside the boundaries of the normal. These characters were almost always invested with a mysterious aura, a sense of strangeness, or foreignness. One way anti-Catholic novelists created this sense of 'otherness' was by employing sinister images of spiders or serpents that dehumanised the Jesuit. For example, the anonymous writer of a mid-century work called *A Glance at the Intrigues of the Jesuits, and their Allies, for the Humiliation of England, and the Extinction of the Protestant Religion*, one of the more unambiguously titled nineteenth-century anti-Jesuit texts, portrays Jesuits as 'deadly vipers in England's bosom ... twisting their horrid coils around her'.³⁹

Barnaby Rudge also plays upon this idea of the Jesuit as 'other'. Gashford is certainly invested with a sense of strangeness. He is 'unnatural' (293) and 'peculiar' (317). Like many fictional Jesuits he has an insect-like hideousness and a reptilian repulsiveness. He has 'crawled and crept through life' (362) and has a 'cold insidious palm' (402). At times he even seems to be a pseudo-magical figure. During the riots he mysteriously vanishes from view and seems to appear from nowhere. This uncanny eeriness is noted by Dennis the hangman, who says to the secretary, 'that 'ere quiet way of yours might almost wake a dead man. It is ... so awful sly!' (438). By investing the Jesuitical Gashford with a strange sense of cultural otherness Dickens subtly reinforces Jesuit antipathy to English culture and, consequently, enables expression of normative English identity through opposition.

Gashford, then, is heavily invested with the anti-Jesuit language and imagery of the day that fuelled the Victorian fear of the Society of Jesus. Dickens's Jesuitical figure,

³⁸ Maureen Moran, *Catholic Sensationalism and Victorian Literature*, 45.

³⁹ A Member of the University of Oxford, *A Glance at the Intrigues of the Jesuits, and their Allies, for the Humiliation of England, and the Extinction of the Protestant Religion* (Bristol: I. E. Chillcott, 1868), 5.

however, is a complex and over-determined one. Gashford may be Jesuitical, but he is never explicitly identified as a Jesuit. Indeed, a strange sense of ambiguity about his religious affiliations permeates the novel. Dickens achieves this by playing upon what was arguably the dominant concern of anti-Jesuit propaganda: the idea of the Society of Jesus as a network of spies. As previously noted, Victorian anti-Jesuit literature was obsessed with the idea of Jesuits being villainous spies. Gashford is similarly figured as a spy. During the riots he is seen walking ‘stealthily about, listening to all he heard, and diffusing or confirming, whenever he had an opportunity, such false intelligence as suited his own purpose’ (418). Moreover, the character is surrounded by the language of surveillance. Gashford, for example, is ‘informed’ (419), keeps a ‘solitary watch’ (446), and is denounced as a ‘fit agent’ (677). Towards the end of the novel it is no surprise when it is revealed that he has gathered information for nefarious political purposes and claims to have access to ‘very important documents’ which he has kept in ‘secret drawers, and distributed in various places’ (598). Crucially, however, the idea of Gashford being a spy for the ‘Church of Rome’ is disturbed when we are told that he ends his days working for the English Crown. Following his defeat by Edward Chester and Joe Willet, the secretary ‘subsisted for a time upon his traffic in his master’s secrets’ and ‘procured an appointment in the honourable corps of spies and eaves-droppers employed by the government’ (683).

Dickens also refuses to identify the character’s faith in a stereotypical way. Gashford’s life-story *could* read like that of a conspiring Jesuit. Born and raised in the Catholic faith, he was educated by Jesuits at St. Omer’s College in France. And his claim to have ‘abjured the errors of the Romish church’ (297) and converted to Protestantism after having been ‘stricken by the ... eloquence’ (297) of Lord George Gordon, a man he clearly regards with contempt, seems highly suspect. Cryptic moments in the text similarly hint towards his Catholicity. For example, when he arrives at the Maypole Inn the narrator draws attention to a rather odd moment that mirrors a Catholic priest drinking the last drops of altar wine following the communion service: ‘the secretary tilted the jug, and looked very hard into the

mulled wine, to see how much remained' (298). And in the scene where his plan to kidnap Emma Haredale is thwarted we are told that, 'Gashford ... crouching yet malignant, raised his scowling face, like sin subdued, and pleaded to be gently used' (598). 'Malignant' is a term that carries a specifically religious meaning as it was used by early Protestants to describe the Roman Catholic Church.⁴⁰ Yet Gashford, it seems, has actually been excommunicated from the Catholic Church. Haredale tells Gordon that the reason why the secretary has converted to Protestantism is because he detests 'the altars where his vicious life was publicly denounced' (362). Early on in the novel it is actually suggested that Gashford has no religious affiliation whatsoever. Lord George Gordon tells the secretary of a dream he had of the two men becoming Jews. Speaking aloud to himself, Gashford scorns Gordon saying: 'Dreamed he was a Jew ... After a time, and provided I lost nothing by it, I don't see why that religion shouldn't suit me as well as any other. There are rich men among the Jews; shaving is very troublesome; - yes, it would suit me well enough' (307). Purely motivated by power and greed, Gashford exploits religion, no matter what the form, for his own ends.

Victorian anti-Catholic representations of the Society of Jesus built upon long-held cultural myths and fears. *Barnaby Rudge*, through the character of Gashford, echoes contemporary anti-Catholic portraits of the Jesuit. Yet the novel also disrupts Protestant concerns of Catholic invaders seeking the destruction of society by exposing secular anxieties that lay behind these fears. *Barnaby Rudge* weirdly resists and revises the Victorian myth of Jesuitical nightmares.

⁴⁰ See *OED* (Sense 6b). Significantly, the only other occasion the word appears in *Barnaby Rudge* is when Gashford calls Gabriel Varden 'a malignant' who 'remains in outer darkness' (302) because of Varden's refusal to join the Protestant Association.

(iii) 'Old Lamps for New Ones'



Fig.3 *Christ in the House of His Parents* ('The Carpenter's Shop'), 1849-50, Oil on Canvas, by J. E. Millais

Exhibited at the Royal Academy in May 1850, John Everett Millais's *Christ in the House of His Parents*, a work depicting Jesus as a boy assisting his father in a common carpenter's shop, caused something of a stir (see Figure 3). Outraged critics railed against the painting. *The Times*, for example, stated that Millais had produced an 'uncouth production ... with a marked affectation of indifference to everything we are accustomed to seek and to admire'.⁴¹ Amidst the furore, Queen Victoria, unable to attend the exhibition due to her pregnancy, took the unprecedented step of requesting the picture be removed from the Royal Academy for a private viewing in Buckingham Palace. William Michael Rossetti, a founding member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, wrote in his diary that 'the attack on Millais has been

⁴¹ *The Times* (9th May 1850), 5.

most virulent and audacious’ and noted that the painting ‘has been the signal for a perfect crusade against the P.R.B’.⁴²

Dickens’s response to *Christ in the House of His Parents* was a satirical piece, published as the leading article in *Household Words*, entitled ‘Old Lamps for New Ones’. Aesthetically, the essay’s main objection to Millais’s painting resonated with many other hostile reviews and focused upon the excessive realism of the work. Since his Italian tour in the mid-1840s Dickens had voiced an intense dislike of excessive realism in art. His judgement of a painting, he said in *Pictures from Italy*, depended upon it ‘resembling and refining upon nature’ (95).⁴³ The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood’s rejection of the idea of elevating the beauty of a subject was therefore at odds with his artistic taste. For Dickens, Millais’s portrait of the Holy Family as emaciated figures in a dirty and messy environment was aesthetically repugnant as it violated what he deemed the acceptable conventions of academic art by deliberately substituting beauty for ugliness. He thought the painting to be a ‘low effort at notoriety’.⁴⁴ Yet the force of the language used by Dickens in his attack on *Christ in the House of His Parents* - ‘preposterous ... ridiculous ... truly contemptible ... a poor delusion’ (265) - transcends aesthetic hostility. His anger against the painting was also driven by a religious concern. Millais’s unidealized treatment of the Holy Family was not simply a travesty of religious art; it was a blasphemous attack upon ‘the faith in which we live and die’ (266).

‘Old Lamps for New Ones’ is a piece of art criticism devoid of the language of art criticism and studded with the language of religion. It is permeated throughout with religious words and phrases such as ‘our Christian Era’ (265), ‘faith’ (265), ‘the angels of GOD’ (265), ‘pure spiritual condition’ (265), ‘religious aspirations’ (266), ‘solemn’ (266), and so

⁴² William Michael Rossetti, *The P. R. B. Journal: William Michael Rossetti’s Diary of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* edited by William E. Fredeman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 70.

⁴³ For a discussion of Dickens as a critic of art see Leonée Ormond, ‘Dickens and Painting: The Old Masters’, *The Dickensian* 79 (Autumn 1983), 131-51 and ‘Dickens and Painting: Contemporary Art’, *The Dickensian* 80 (Spring 1984), 3-25.

⁴⁴ Charles Dickens, ‘Old Lamps for New Ones’, *Household Words* 1 (15th June 1850), 266 [265-7]. All further citations will be placed in the text.

on. Indeed, Dickens employs religious language to make a charge of ‘desecration’ (266) against Millais. Surprisingly, though, most of the reviews by seasoned art critics were completely devoid of conventional critical terms and were excessively steeped in religious rhetoric. Many held the painting to be a religious abomination and, like Dickens, suggested that Millais had committed an act of ‘desecration’ (266). *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine* stated that to justify their opinions on the Pre-Raphaelites they must do so ‘freed from all the jargon of art’ and accused the Pre-Raphaelites of being ‘utterly heretical’.⁴⁵ Frank Stone wrote in the *Athenaeum* that *Christ in the House of His Parents* was ‘a pictorial blasphemy’.⁴⁶ *The Morning Chronicle* denounced Millais as ‘a most obtrusive sinner’.⁴⁷ And *The Times* said the artist had ‘sunk into extravagance bordering ... on irreverence’.⁴⁸ A religious critical discourse dominated discussions of Millais’s painting.

Anti-Catholicism figured heavily in these religiously-charged attacks. One highly respected critic, Ralph Wornum, for example, wrote in the *Art Journal* that the painting was a sign of a ‘superstitious priest-ridden age’.⁴⁹ Such language was prompted by a suspicion that the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was sympathetic towards either Roman Catholicism or Tractarianism.⁵⁰ There was more than a hint of truth to these suspicions. Millais himself worshipped at St Andrews in Wells Street, London, a church renowned for its ritualistic services, and was friendly with Thomas Combe, the Superintendent of the Oxford University Press and Tractarian devotee. Moreover, the biblical quotation accompanying *Christ in the House of His Parents* is thought to have been inspired by a sermon the artist heard in Oxford given by Pusey.⁵¹ (The quotation is from Zechariah 136: ‘And one shall say unto him, What are these wounds in thine hands? Then he shall answer, Those with which I was wounded in

⁴⁵ Anon., ‘Fine Arts. The Pre-Raphaelites’, *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine* 18 (August 1851), 512 [512-3].

⁴⁶ Frank Stone, ‘The Royal Academy’, *The Athenaeum* 23 (1850), 591 [590-1].

⁴⁷ *The Morning Chronicle* (4th May 1850), 5.

⁴⁸ *The Times* (5th May 1850), 5.

⁴⁹ Ralph Wornum, ‘Modern Moves Into Art’, *The Art Journal* 12 (1st September 1850), 270 [269-71].

⁵⁰ For a discussion of the connections between the Pre-Raphaelites and Catholicism or Tractarianism see Alistair Grieve, ‘The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and the Anglican High Church’, *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 111 No. 794 (May 1969), 292-4.

⁵¹ See W. H. Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, Vol. I (London: Macmillan and Co., 1905), 194-5.

the house of my friends'). But the painting itself suggests a debt to Catholic or Tractarian ideas. For example, the flock of sheep being fenced off and prevented from entering the garden recalls the Catholic and Anglo-Catholic belief in a separation between the clergy and the laity. Although the Pre-Raphaelites denied they had anything to do with 'particular movements in the religious world - whether Roman Catholicism, Anglican Tractarianism, or what not',⁵² many Protestant critics remained suspicious of their religious motivations. Even John Ruskin, one of the few admirers of the painting, was careful to distance himself from what he perceived to be the Pre-Raphaelites 'Romanist and Tractarian tendencies'.⁵³

Dickens's hostility to *Christ in the House of His Parents* is most certainly motivated by anti-Catholicism'.⁵⁴ Like many of the works of art he had objected to during his travels in Italy, Millais's painting seemed to him to smack of Roman Catholicism. In Italy, Dickens had equated the excessive realism of many religious artworks with the malign power of the Catholic Church. 'Priestly infatuation, or priestly doggedness of purpose', he wrote, 'persists in reducing every mystery of our religion to some literal development in paint and canvas'.⁵⁵ Similarly, in 'Old Lamps for New Ones' his calling the Pre-Raphaelites a 'dread Tribunal', a 'new Holy Brotherhood', and a 'terrible police' (265), phrases which bring to mind the Inquisition, the Jesuits, and the dreaded agents of Rome respectively, connects the group with Catholic autocracy. Significant, too, is the emphasis on the 'perverse' throughout the essay, a recurring theme in many of the reviews of the painting.⁵⁶ Dickens speaks of the age being 'so perverse' (265), of the skilful painter 'becoming a little more perverted in his taste' (266), and of the 'perversity of mankind' (266). In the mid-nineteenth century the word 'pervert' - 'a person who has been perverted; *spec.* a person who has forsaken a doctrine or

⁵² W. M. Rossetti, *D. G. Rossetti: His Family Letters, with a Memoir*, Vol. I (London: 1895), 134.

⁵³ John Ruskin, *The Times* (13th May 1851), 8.

⁵⁴ J. B. Bullen has previously examined the anti-Catholic motivation of 'Old Lamps for New Ones'. See J. B. Bullen, 'John Everett Millais and Charles Dickens: New Light on Old Lamps', *English Literature in Transition 1880-1920*, Special Series No. 4 (1990), 125-44.

⁵⁵ *Letters IV*, 277.

⁵⁶ Examples include: 'Monstrously perverse', Anon., 'The Arts. The Royal Academy', *The Spectator* 23 (May 1850), 427; 'Great imitative talents have here been perverted', Frank Stone, 'The Royal Academy', *The Athenaeum* 23 (1850), 591 [590-1]; 'the perversion of great ability', *The Builder* (1st June 1850), 256; and '[a] deplorable example of perverted taste', Anon., 'Exhibition of The Royal Academy: Third Notice', *The Times* (9th May 1850), 5.

system regarded as true for one thought false, opposed to Convert' (*OED*, Sense 1) - was loaded with anti-Catholic connotations.⁵⁷ Throughout 1849 and 1850, for example, the popular anti-Catholic periodical *John Bull* registered rumoured defections of Church of England clergy to Catholicism under the banner 'Perversions to Rome'. 'Pervert' (and its derivatives) gradually became a derogatory term used to denounce the practitioners of the Catholic Church. Dickens's use of the word therefore resonated with the language of contemporary anti-Catholic propagandists. Furthermore, his hostility towards the Tractarians seems to influence his attitude towards the painting. His comment about the ignorance of the 'Young England hallucination' (265), is a reference to an aristocratic Tory splinter-group led by Benjamin Disraeli that was influenced by and had strong links with the Oxford Movement. If, however, any doubts remain as to whether Dickens's strictures against *Christ in the House of His Parents* were bound up with its religious associations, a letter he sent to Daniel Maclise explicitly reveals the intent of 'Old Lamps for New Ones':

I feel perfectly sure that you will see nothing in it but what is fair public satire on a point that opens very serious social considerations. If such things were allowed to sweep on, without some vigorous protest, three fourths of this Nation would be under the feet of Priests, in ten years'.⁵⁸

For Dickens, Millais's painting was symptomatic of the Catholic-flavoured revivalism of the age.

Anti-Catholicism also heavily informs the primary criticism Dickens has to *Christ in the House of His Parents*: namely, that it is a symbol of 'the great retrogressive principle' (266). Dickens's critique of Millais's work is structured around the concept of progress. He expresses astonishment that the Pre-Raphaelites should seek a return to medieval art: 'There is something so fascinating, to a mind capable of any serious reflection, in the notion of ignoring all that has been done for the happiness and elevation of mankind during three or

⁵⁷ The *OED* does not register the sexual definition of the noun 'pervert' until 1856. But the word had definite sexual tones before this time and it often appeared in connection with attacks upon the celibacy of the Catholic clergy and the 'effeminacy' of Tractarians.

⁵⁸ *Letters* VI, 106-7.

four centuries of slow and dearly-bought amelioration' (265). Dickens's antipathy towards harking back to the 'good old days' is well-known. But this 'retrogressive principle' (266) was also one of his chief complaints about Roman Catholicism. An 1846 letter to John Forster, for example, speaks of the retrograde nature of the 'Church of Rome' demeaning its followers and complains that 'the dissemination of Catholicity ... [is] ... the most horrible means of political and social degradation left in the world'.⁵⁹ This theme of cultural regression comes to the fore at the conclusion of 'Old Lamps for New Ones'. Dickens concocts a catalogue of other brotherhoods that may form having been stimulated by the painting, many of which are allied with Roman Catholicism or Tractarianism.⁶⁰ Included in this list are the Pre-Newtonian Brotherhood, which has been formed by a young engineer who objects to being 'bound to conduct himself according to the laws of gravitation' (266); a Pre-Galileo Brotherhood, who 'distinctly refuse to perform any annual revolution round the sun' (266), and are supported by 'educational Institutions in the neighbourhood of Oxford' (266); students from the Royals College of Surgeons are forming a Pre-Harvey Brotherhood as a 'protest against the circulation of the blood' (266); a literary brotherhood, the Pre-Gower or Pre-Chaucer Brotherhood, have formed 'for the restoration of the ancient English style of spelling; the Pre-Laurentius Brotherhood have engaged the famous Catholic architect 'MR PUGIN ... to supply characters in books that nobody on earth shall be able to read' (267); and a Pre-Henry-the-Seventh Brotherhood has reverted to 'one of the most disagreeable periods of English History, when the nation was yet slowly emerging from barbarism' (267), a clear reference to Pre-Reformation England being under the rule of Rome.⁶¹ And when Dickens

⁵⁹ *Letters* IV, 639.

⁶⁰ *The Art Journal* critic, Ralph Wornum, was equally concerned with Millais's painting being a sign of regression and also forcefully equated this to the Catholic Church. Wornum's review is similarly structured around the painting's 'retrograde character'. Ralph Wornum, 'Modern Moves Into Art', 270.

⁶¹ Interestingly, Dickens does not opt for a Pre-Henry-the-Eighth Brotherhood. Perhaps the reason for this can be found in *A Child's History of England* which calls Henry VII 'cold, crafty, and calculating' but does not castigate him for being subservient to Rome. The monarchs who precede Henry VII, however, Edward VI, Edward V, and Richard III, are all portrayed *A Child's History* as being under the influence of priests and the Papacy. See Charles Dickens, *A Child's History of England in Holiday Romance and Other Writings for Children* edited by Gillian Avery [1851-3] (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), 227 [227-37].

writes of the Pre-Henry-the-Seventh Brotherhood, Catholic rule is explicitly aligned to the spread of disease: 'We should be certain of the Plague among other advantages, if this Brotherhood were properly encouraged' (267).

Christ in the House of His Parents is therefore figured as a symbol of the malign influence of Catholicism and is anathema to Dickens's concept of progress. But the reference to the Plague is especially significant. It forms part of a larger theme of the essay that is concerned with bodily health and reveals an anxiety within the discourse of regression about the pollution of the Protestant body itself. For Dickens, Roman Catholicism fostered physical degeneration. Once again, the author's Italian experience is important. In *Pictures from Italy* he commented upon the repulsive physiognomy of the monks and priests he encountered - 'I have no knowledge, elsewhere, of more repulsive countenances than are to be found among these gentry' (43) - and left readers in no doubt that 'Romanism' was incompatible with the physical health of the Italian people. A work such as *Christ in the House of His Parents*, a potent Catholic symbol that portrayed the Holy Family in a filthy environment, therefore struck Dickens as a sign of 'Romanism' abroad in England that could signal a halt to progress and lead to poverty, disease, and the pollution of the Protestant body.

Let us consider the way in which Dickens introduces and describes the figures in Millais's painting. He begins by encouraging the reader to view the exhibit as a carnival freak show: 'Ladies and Gentlemen ... Walk up, walk up ... prepare yourselves ... for the lowest depths of what is mean, odious, repulsive, and revolting ... behold the interior of a carpenter's shop' (265). What the viewer is invited to observe is a gallery of ugly and deformed grotesques. Jesus is a 'hideous, wry-necked, blubbering, red-headed boy' (265). Mary is 'so horrible in her ugliness' and has a 'dislocated throat (265). Joseph and his apprentice are 'worthy companions of this agreeable female' (266). 'Wherever it is possible to express ugliness of feature, limb, or attitude', he writes, 'you have it expressed' (266).

Dickens's ideal of the representation of a sacred subject was of 'etherealising, and exalting to the very Heaven of Heavens, what was most sublime and lovely in the expression of the human face divine on Earth' (265). Millais's expression of ugliness of feature was offensive to him as it both contradicted his aesthetic ideal, especially in the painting of a biblical subject; but it was also physically 'repulsive' and 'revolting' (265).

Dickens was not alone in producing such a visceral response to *Christ in the House of His Parents*. Critical discussions of the painting focused heavily on Millais's representation of the body. *Blackwood's Magazine's* review was typical:

Rickety children, emaciation and deformity constitute their chief stock in trade ... We can hardly imagine anything more ugly, graceless, and unpleasant than Mr Millais' picture of Christ in the carpenter's shop. Such a collection of splayed feet, puffed joints, and misshapen limbs was assuredly never before made within so small a compass.⁶²

Adjectives such as 'repulsive', 'revolting', and 'disgusting' permeate the reviews. The *Athenaeum* critic stated that, 'we recoil with loathing and disgust'.⁶³ *The Times* critic said that the work 'is, to speak plainly, revolting'.⁶⁴ Several publications went even further and transferred the debate surrounding the painting to the sphere of medicine. *Punch*, for example, published a short satirical piece entitled 'Pathological Exhibition at the Royal Academy (Noted by our Surgical Adviser)'. Millais's figures are again called 'revolting'.⁶⁵ According to *Punch*, however, they are also riddled with disease. Jesus 'exemplifies a splendid case of rhachitis, or rickets', and other figures with 'their emaciated bodies, their shrunken legs, and tumid ancles'⁶⁶ are said to be displaying a variety of medical conditions. Such morbid anatomies, writes *Punch*, were examples of 'the consequences of transgressing the laws of health'.⁶⁷

⁶² Frederick Hardman, 'The Pictures of the Season', *Blackwood's Magazine* 68 (1850), 82 [57-93].

⁶³ Frank Stone, 'The Royal Academy', 591.

⁶⁴ *The Times* (9th May 1850), 5.

⁶⁵ Anon., 'Pathological exhibition at the Royal Academy', *Punch* 18 (1850), 198.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 198.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 198.

‘Old Lamps for New Ones’ is similarly concerned that the painting transgresses the laws of health. Paul Barlow notes that for hostile critics these deformed characters were riddled with the ‘diseases of social deprivation. This was a Holy Family from the slums’.⁶⁸ No critic displays this anxiety more than Dickens. He calls the Virgin Mary a ‘Monster’ (265) who would not be out of place in ‘the lowest gin-shop in England’ (266); Joseph and his apprentice are ‘dirty drunkards, in a high state of varicose veins ... Their very toes have walked out of Saint Giles’ (266). By carefully situating this nightmarish vision of the polluted body in the heart of London, Dickens feeds into contemporary fears about poverty and disease. In the late 1840s social reformers had brought the extent of poverty and disease in Saint Giles and other slum areas of the capital to the attention of the wider public.⁶⁹ The most notable works on this subject were the writings of William Guy and a series of letters published in 1849 by the social reformer Henry Mayhew. Significantly, the tone and language of ‘Old Lamps for New Ones’ is remarkably similar to that of Guy and Mayhew. Mayhew, for example, speaks of ‘monster[s] in human form’.⁷⁰ Also significant is how anti-Catholicism informed these discussions of poverty and disease. Guy, for example, cited Roman Catholicism as a major contributing factor to the problem and wrote that ‘the curse of Ireland reigns supreme’⁷¹ in the slums of London.

‘Old Lamps for New Ones’ rails against what Dickens thought to be a travesty of religious painting. *Christ in the House of His Parents*’ representation of sacred subjects with sallow skin and emaciated frames was, he believed, blasphemous. Anti-Catholicism and its regressive tendencies, however, were the real motive behind his attack on Millais. The language and moral tone of the essay reveals an anxiety about what he saw as the retrograde

⁶⁸ Paul Barlow, *Time Past and Time Present: The Art of John Everett Millais* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 17.

⁶⁹ Dickens was fully aware of the situation in Saint Giles and would soon write of the sickening smells and filthy squalor of the area which was populated by disease-ridden ‘infected, vermin-haunted heaps of rags’. See Charles Dickens, ‘On Duty with Inspector Field’, *Household Words* 3 (14th June 1851), 265 [265-70].

⁷⁰ Henry Mayhew, *The Morning Chronicle Survey of labour and the poor*, Vol. 2 (Trowbridge, Wiltshire: Caliban Books, 1981), 52.

⁷¹ William Guy, ‘Church Lane, St Giles’, *Fraser’s Magazine* 37 (1848), 258.

nature of Catholicism threatening to pollute society if, recalling his letter to Maclise, ‘such things were allowed to sweep on’.⁷² Deformity, disease, alcoholism, poverty: these are the images conjured up in Dickens’s mind when he viewed *Christ in the House of His Parents*. The odd mix of anti-Catholic rhetoric with the language of pathology and social reform reveals a perceived connection between Catholicism and disease, and registers alarm at the threat this may pose to Protestant England. This is why so much emphasis is placed on the semiology of *Christ in the House of His Parents*. It is a ‘tangible symbol’ (265), an ‘outward and visible sign’ (265), a ‘symbol of the great regressive principle’ (266) that may herald a return to the ‘ages of darkness, wickedness, and violence’⁷³ that Dickens so reviled and associated with Catholic rule. It is also why he places so much emphasis on the institution in which the painting was exhibited. Five times he mentions the name of the Royal Academy of Art. And twice he writes the sentence, ‘This, in the nineteenth century, and in the eighty-second year of the annual exhibition of the National Academy of Art’ (266). If a custodian of English values such as the Royal Academy had been contaminated, then it was only a matter of time, ‘ten years’⁷⁴ perhaps, before the influence of the Catholic Church would contaminate and reverse the progress made in every social, scientific, cultural, and political walk of life since the Reformation.

Later in the decade Dickens was introduced to Millais at a dinner party held by Wilkie Collins’s brother, Charles Allston Collins, a minor follower of the Pre-Raphaelites. On the following day Dickens sent Millais an article on the Russian fire brigade that had appeared in *Household Words* with a note that read:

⁷² *Letters* VI, 107.

⁷³ Charles Dickens, ‘The Chimes’, *Christmas Books* edited by Ruth Glancy [1844] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 144.

⁷⁴ *Letters* VI, 107.

I send you the account of the fire brigade, which we spoke of last night. If you have in your mind any previous association with the pages in which it appears (very likely you have none) it may be a rather disagreeable one. In that case I hope a word frankly said may make it pleasanter. Objecting very strongly to what I believe to be an unworthy use of your great powers, I once expressed the objection in this same journal. My opinion on that point has not in the least changed, but it has never dashed my admiration of your progress in what I suppose are higher and better things. In short, you have given me such great reasons (in your works) to separate you from uncongenial associations, that I wish to give you in return one little reason for doing the like by me.⁷⁵

Leonée Ormond interprets the phrase ‘uncongenial associations’⁷⁶ as a reference to the early Pre-Raphaelite style of Millais’s work.⁷⁷ Yet given the evidence to suggest that Dickens’s primary objection to Millais’s painting was a religious one, the phrase is more likely a euphemism for Roman Catholicism. Dickens became friendly with Millais and other members of the Pre-Raphaelites, but he never retracted his views on *Christ in the House of His Parents*.⁷⁸ However, his daughter, Kate Perugini, wrote in an essay on the subject of Dickens and art that she believed her father ‘regretted having published [‘Old Lamps for New Ones’] in later years’,⁷⁹ an observation that reflects a recurring feature of his prejudice against Catholicism and Tractarianism not translating to personal hostility.

(iv) *A Child’s History of England*

A Child’s History of England is something of an embarrassment to admirers of Dickens for its intemperate tone and vituperative judgements.⁸⁰ Yet the ‘little history of England’, which

⁷⁵ *Letters* VII, 517.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 517.

⁷⁷ Leonée Ormond, ‘Dickens and Painting: Contemporary Art’, 22.

⁷⁸ For an account of Dickens’s relationship with the Pre-Raphaelites see Thomas J. Tobin, ‘Charles Dickens and the Pre-Raphaelites’, *The Review of the Pre-Raphaelite Society*, Vol. 10:2 (2002), 2-16.

⁷⁹ Kate Perugini, ‘Dickens as a Lover of Art and Artists’, *The Magazine of Art*, Vol. 27 (1903), 129 [125-30].

⁸⁰ Philip Collins, for example, argues that the book was written in a ‘belligerent mood of generous indignation, with a corresponding inability to stop and think’. Philip Collins, *Dickens and Education*, 62. However, *A Child’s History* has become the subject of an interesting critical debate, especially in relation to Dickens’s use of history. Rosemary Jann has explored the work as one that challenges historical authority by ‘impos[ing] a fictionalized coherence in order to tidy up the loose ends of ideological and historical inconsistency’. Rosemary Jann, ‘Fact, Fiction, and Interpretation in *A Child’s History of England*’, *Dickens Quarterly* 4 (Dec 1987), 199-204. And Rosemary Mitchell has argued that Dickens’s ‘preference for a good story over factual concerns’ highlights his resistance to

he first proposed writing in 1843 in an attempt to prevent his son, Charley, from developing any ‘conservative or High Church notions’,⁸¹ is an important text for understanding the author’s hostility to Catholicism. *A Child’s History* is teeming with anti-Catholic prejudice. ‘Priestcraft’ is a recurring theme and a long line of priests and monks are portrayed as a band of bloodthirsty swindlers. Dickens rails against the ‘greedy and designing’⁸² Catholic clergy who throughout history have been largely made up of ‘all kinds of criminals - murderers, thieves, and vagabonds’ (79). A similar contempt is shown for a succession of Popes. Popish ‘ambition and corruption’ (166) is constantly exposed and Papal infallibility is repeatedly mocked. Other popular anti-Catholic prejudices punctuate the text. Catholicism, for example, is derided as a religion with a dangerous reliance on ‘superstitious and ridiculous practices’ (258-9), and there are references to ‘gloomy convent[s]’ (44), the ‘barbarous ... Irish’ (90), ‘dreaded ... Jesuits’ (291), and ‘Catholic plots’ (374). *A Child’s History*’s anti-Catholicism is also clearly identifiable in its gruesome descriptions of persecution. Bloody Mary is among the book’s most detestable villains and Dickens dwells upon the burning of Protestants carried out during her reign. A more benign view of Catholicism does occasionally surface however. He expresses sympathy for Catholics who ‘recoiled with horror’ from the Gunpowder Plot and were ‘unjustly put under more severe laws than before’ (310), and dismisses the accusation against Catholics of having started the Great Fire of London as ‘a malicious and stupid untruth’ (368). Yet the book remains among Dickens’s most virulent expressions of anti-Roman Catholic feeling; it is a caustic attack on the ‘Romish Church’ (274).

First serialized in *Household Words* in January 1851, *A Child’s History*’s pronounced anti-Catholicism reflects the exaggerated anti-Catholic sentiment that marked Protestant England’s response to the so-called ‘Papal Aggression’. The Pope’s dismissal of the

revisionist interpretations of English history that ‘endangered the traditional narrative’. Rosemary Mitchell, *Picturing the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 82.

⁸¹ *Letters* III, 482

⁸² Charles Dickens, *A Child’s History of England in Holiday Romance and Other Writings for Children* [1851-3] (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), 60. All further citations will be taken from this edition and placed in the text.

Established Church as ‘the Anglican schism of the sixteenth century’⁸³ and the exultant tone of Wiseman’s pastoral letter, ‘From without the Flaminian Gate’, caused widespread outrage. England was infected by ‘No-Popery’. Mass protest meetings were held, Catholic effigies were burned, and there were violent attacks on Catholics and Catholic chapels.⁸⁴ Protestant hostility to the Papal Aggression demonstrates the latent strength of anti-Catholicism in mid-Victorian England. A majority of Victorian Protestants read the Papal Aggression as a revival of Catholic temporal ambitions, perceived it as a sign of a Popish bid to enslave England, and believed the civil liberties and Protestant identity of England to be under threat.

A Child’s History resonates with these fears, especially in its images of foreign invasion that reflect a sense of peril felt by many during the crisis. Yet the exaggerated nationalism that attends *A Child’s History*’s sense of England being threatened with invasion from a foreign foe also manifests an anxiety about the fractured nature of Protestantism itself. Written at a time when fundamental disagreements between rival factions had led to a sense that ‘the present condition of Protestantism was one of deterioration brought about by years of factious disunion’,⁸⁵ the strong Protestant bias of Dickens’s history simultaneously exposes and attempts to unite the disparate forces of Anglicanism. *A Child’s History*’s fascination with historical images of Catholic torture and bloodshed, however, reveals a more pervasive Victorian anxiety. Dickens’s gruesome descriptions of Catholic persecution not only reinforce anti-Catholic notions about the tyranny and cruelty of the ‘Church of Rome’, but express a wider concern about the relationship between religious faith and secular authority.

Heightened fears about the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy are most clearly manifested in what became a central feature of the Protestant response to the Papal

⁸³ Pope Pius IX, ‘Letters Apostolic, Pius P. P. IX’ in Anon., *Roman Catholic Question*, 1st Series (1851), 1.

⁸⁴ See D. G. Paz, ‘Popular Anti-Catholicism in England, 1850-1851’, *Albion*, Vol. 11 No. 4 (Winter 1979), 333-5 [331-59].

⁸⁵ Robert J. Klaus, *The Pope, the Protestants, and the Irish*, 134.

Aggression: the idea of being invaded by a foreign enemy. *The Bulwark, or Reformation Journal* typified the rhetoric of anti-Catholics who believed that the Catholic Church was attempting to ‘reconquer Britain’. ‘It is now beyond all question that the entire power and policy of Rome is being directed against Britain, with a view to its being subjected again to the degrading slavery of the Vatican’.⁸⁶ Similarly, *Punch* spoke of the Pope having ‘invaded us’.⁸⁷ Novelists also seized upon this threat of invasion. In her 1852 anti-Catholic novel *Beatrice; or, the Unknown Relatives*, for example, Catherine Sinclair writes of an ‘invasion of foreign soldiers’.⁸⁸ The question of the re-establishment of a Catholic hierarchy became a question of warfare. ‘We wage interminable war’, thundered the Earl of Shaftesbury, ‘against the Pope and his Cardinals’.⁸⁹ Dickens himself used the language of war in his angst-ridden letter to Angela Burdett Coutts on the subject of the Papal Aggression: ‘Now, a War between the Roman Catholic Religion - that curse upon the world - and Freedom, is inevitable ... I believe it will produce the last great, long, direful War of the world’.⁹⁰ England’s war on Popery was principally a war of words, but through such language the insecurities of Protestant England about its vulnerability to Catholic infiltrators is palpable.

Images of Britons being invaded permeate *A Child’s History*. Dickens presents the history of England as a long and bloody battle against a series of invaders. From the time of the Druids, a people whose ‘strange and terrible religion’ with ‘secret ... ceremonies’ and ‘mysterious arts’ (11-12) is closely aligned with Catholicism, to the Romans and Saxons, and a number of invasions by European powers, a sense emerges of England having been constantly under threat. England’s ancient battles with the ‘Church of Rome’ are similarly figured in terms of warfare. The Pope, ‘so indefatigable in getting the world into trouble’ (238), is depicted as the central figure in a number of historical plots to invade England. It is

⁸⁶ *The Bulwark, or Reformation Journal*, Vol. I (1851-2), 1.

⁸⁷ Anon., ‘The Rev. Hugh Stowell on *Punch*’, *Punch* 20 (1851), 101.

⁸⁸ Catherine Sinclair, *Beatrice; or, the Unknown Relatives* Vol. II (London: Richard Bentley, 1852), 42.

⁸⁹ Quoted in Edwin Hodder, *The Life and Work of the Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, K. G.* Vol. II (London: Cassell & Company, 1887), 332.

⁹⁰ *Letters* XI, 466-7.

the Pope, for example, who is clearly identified as the orchestrator of King Philip of France's planned invasion of England in the thirteenth century. The Pope 'proclaimed John no longer King' and sent a party to 'the King of France to tell him that, if he would invade England, he should be forgiven all his sins' (112). Popish emissaries are also figured as warlike invaders. We hear of the 'turbulent Bishop Odo' who 'blessed the Norman army at the Battle of Hastings' (59), and of a 'mischievous maniac of a friar' who 'put himself at the head of the assault' (98) of the massacre of the Jews in York Castle.

Such images intensified the threat of invasion engendered by the Papal Aggression. But *A Child's History* simultaneously works to allay such fears. As Philip Collins notes, Dickens's history has a strong nationalistic feel: it is 'traditional drum-and-trumpet patriotic stuff. Suitably proud noises are made over the reverses of Julius Caesar and the Spanish Armada, and the reader is left in no doubt that, whatever the vices and follies of English Kings, the virtues of the English people are unmatched'.⁹¹ Resisting invasion is a central element of the book's 'patriotic stuff'.⁹² Dickens makes many comments about the 'bravery of the Britons' (12) that have fought and repelled enemies who 'expected to conquer Britain easily' (13). 'Bold Britons' and 'tough Britons', he writes, 'never knew when they were beaten. They never *did* know, I believe, and never will' (13). Throughout the book he repeatedly promotes the view that the English are 'not a people to suffer invasion quietly' (112).

A Child's History's patriotic rhetoric is typical of many Protestant responses to the Papal Aggression that worked to arouse the Protestant feeling of England against a Catholic enemy.⁹³ But such exaggerated rhetoric in the face of a Popish invasion hints at insecurities that had come to afflict Protestantism in the mid-nineteenth century. Fundamental disagreements between the many rival Protestant factions that emerged during the early

⁹¹ Philip Collins, *Dickens and Education*, 63.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 63.

⁹³ Robert J Klaus has noted the 'climate of intolerance and xenophobic nationalism which attended the Papal Aggression'. Robert J. Klaus, *The Pope, the Protestants, and the Irish*, 220.

decades of the nineteenth century had led to fears about the fractured nature of Protestantism. The Catholic *Dublin Review*, a publication founded by Cardinal Wiseman, certainly had its own agenda in 1851 when it spoke of the Church of England as a ‘gigantic compromise’ and of its ‘internal hollowness and weakness’.⁹⁴ Yet it had touched upon a growing fear among Anglicans about the disarray of the Church of England. Anglicanism was fragile. It was torn between evangelical, broad church, and high church factions, between which there were numerous contests for authority.⁹⁵ An essay in the *Quarterly Review* on the Papal Aggression betrayed this crisis of confidence among many Protestants. It spoke of the helplessness of ‘a chaos of privileged sects’ against the ‘disciplined force of the Vatican’.⁹⁶ Catholicism, for many Protestants, appeared formidable against a vulnerable Protestantism that lacked a strong central authority.

Dickens’s history exhibits a strong awareness of the unsettling condition of Protestantism. His reference to the Puritans is especially significant. He does concede a dislike for the Puritans and calls them ‘an uncomfortable people, who thought it highly meritorious to dress in a hideous manner, talk through their noses, and oppose all harmless enjoyments’ (289). But he is firmly on their side against the Catholics because the Puritans were ‘very much in earnest, and they were one and all the determined enemies of the Queen of Scots’ and he includes them as a powerful instrument of the growing ‘Protestant feeling in England’ (289) following the Reformation. Here, Dickens, a man who often complained of there being ‘too much of the Puritan spirit’,⁹⁷ is attempting to articulate a show of unity between Protestant sects that was increasingly difficult to represent. Other moments in the book similarly suggest a strong impulse to reinforce this unity. Dickens, for example, includes a paean to the English character designed to rouse the Protestant spirit:

⁹⁴ Anon., ‘Antagonistic Systems in the Anglican Church: Canterbury and Exeter’, *Dublin Review* 27 (September, 1851), 14; Anon., ‘No Popery Novels’, *Dublin Review* 31 (September 1851), 145 [144-72].

⁹⁵ See Walter Ralls, ‘The Papal Aggression of 1850: A Study in Victorian Anti-Catholicism’ in *Religion in Victorian Britain*, Vol. IV edited by Gerald Parsons (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 121-4.

⁹⁶ Anon., ‘The Ministers and the Pope’, *Quarterly Review* 88 (December 1850), 264.

⁹⁷ Charles Dickens, *American Notes*, 83.

the English-Saxon character ... [is] the greatest character among the nations of the earth ... the descendants of the Saxon race ... [are] patient, persevering, never to be broke in spirit ... Wherever that race goes, there, law and industry, and safety for life and property, and all the great results of steady perseverance, are certain to arise (27-8).

Furthermore, his repeated use of the word 'Protestant' and phrases such as 'the Protestant religion against Popery' (376) and 'this Protestant kingdom' (393) work to give a sense of the fundamentally Protestant identity of England and draw together the disparate forces of Protestantism at a time of crisis.

A Child's History, however, explores a more pervasive fear among Victorian Protestants about Catholicism as a religion of spectacular cruelty. History writing was a favourite method of attack against the Catholic Church during the nineteenth century.⁹⁸ A myriad of histories and historical tales with a strong anti-Catholic bias were published that presented readers with vivid and crude accounts of the Inquisition, Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre, Bloody Mary's reign, assassination attempts on Elizabeth I, the Spanish Armada, the Gunpowder Plot, and the Reformation, events that all feature in *A Child's History*. A defining feature of a majority of these works was the brutal persecution of 'heretics' by the Catholic Church. As the Catholic convert Augustus Pugin noted when he recalled his childhood impressions of Catholicism, such works seized the Protestant imagination: 'I was thoroughly imbued with all the popular notions of racks, faggots, and fires ... with all the tissue of falsehood so industriously propagated through the land'.⁹⁹ Grisly stories and engravings of the Inquisition and other horrific cruelties carried out by the Catholic Church

⁹⁸ For a discussion of the Protestant bias of nineteenth-century history writing see Michael Wheeler, *The Old Enemies*, 77-110. As Wheeler notes, Catholics also used history writing to counter these Protestant attacks, but these texts were in the minority.

⁹⁹ Quoted in Bernard Ward, *The Sequel to Catholic Emancipation: The Story of the English Catholic Continued Down to the Re-establishment of Their Hierarchy in 1850*, Vol. 1 (London and New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1915), 85-6.

did indeed demonize Catholics as sadistic tormentors, especially during the Papal Aggression crisis.¹⁰⁰

Violence and persecution similarly dominate the descriptions of Catholicism in *A Child's History*. Dickens speaks of the Inquisition as 'the most *unholy* and the most infamous tribunal that ever disgraced mankind' (177). He lingers over the horrible death of Joan of Arc that is attended by 'priests and bishops sitting in a gallery looking on' and rejoices that 'monkish fires that once gleamed horribly ... have long grown cold' (201). He revels in the horrific executions carried out during the reign of James II, a monarch whose 'one object of his short reign was to re-establish the Catholic religion in England' (381). We are given blood-curdling descriptions of 'bodies ... mangled, steeped in caldrons of boiling pitch and tar, and hung up by the roadsides' and of 'the sight and smell of heads and limbs, the hissing and bubbling of the infernal cauldrons' (386). *A Child's History* is therefore among a number of works that contributed to what John Henry Newman noted to be the prevailing opinion among Protestants in 1851, that 'the Catholic Church is a persecuting power; and every one of us is a persecutor'.¹⁰¹

But if the book promotes a sensationalised image of the Catholic Church as an institution of spectacular cruelty, it also manipulates historical evidence either to ignore or excuse Protestant atrocities against Catholics. Protestantism is promoted as a more tolerant and humane religion. Of particular importance to this idea are the contrasting chapters on Mary and Elizabeth, two highly contested figures in the nineteenth-century war of words between Protestants and Catholics.¹⁰² England under Mary is marked only by cruelty and

¹⁰⁰ For examples see D. G. Paz, *Popular Anti-Catholicism in Victorian England*, 54, 61.

¹⁰¹ John Henry Newman, *Lectures on the Present Position of Catholics in England* (London: Burns and Lambert, 1851), 174.

¹⁰² *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* (or *Acts and Monuments*), a text almost as familiar to the Victorians as the Bible itself, and a work that was instrumental in reinforcing ideas about excessive Catholic violence, laid particular stress on the barbarities of 'Bloody Mary'. In *David Copperfield*, Dickens's most autobiographical novel, David recalls his early fascination with an edition of *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* in Peggotty's house: 'I was chiefly edified, I am afraid, by the pictures, which were numerous, and represented all kinds of dismal horrors'. Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* edited by Jeremy Tambling [1850] (London: Penguin, 2004), 159.

bloodshed. Dickens recalls with graphic detail the horrific executions of Lady Jane Grey, Sir Thomas Wyatt and his followers, and the Protestant clergymen Cranmer, Ridley and Latimer. For Dickens, Mary should only be remembered with ‘horror and detestation’ and for the ‘THREE HUNDRED PEOPLE BURNT ALIVE WITHIN FOUR YEARS OF [HER] WICKED REIGN, INCLUDING SIXTY WOMEN AND FORTY LITTLE CHILDREN’ (277-8). England under Elizabeth, however, is marked by compassion and humanity. Elizabeth, though she was ‘vain and jealous’ (282), is portrayed as having never treated Catholics badly for their religious beliefs.¹⁰³ Upon the re-establishment of the Protestant religion we are told that on Elizabeth’s instructions ‘the Romish bishops and champions were not harshly dealt with, all things considered; and the Queen’s Ministers were both prudent and merciful’ (279). Elizabeth’s ‘moderation’ (289) is constantly lauded, especially her leniency towards Catholics during the Spanish Armada and her rejection of the idea to execute the principal English Catholics in the plot. Significantly, when any mention is made of Catholics executed during her reign it is done so without gruesome detail or reference to the Queen. Writing of the Catholic plots that followed Mary Queen of Scots coming to England, for example, Dickens simply notes that ‘A rise of the Catholics in the north ... was only checked by many executions and much bloodshed’ (287). A Protestant bias is also evident in the glossing over of other moments of cruelty towards Catholics. Oliver Cromwell’s massacre of Catholics at Drogheda is given only a brief paragraph, and the description of the massacre is devoid of detail and does not express the least sympathy for the slaughter of Irish soldiers or the slaying of innocent women and children. Indeed, Dickens seems to have a grim sense of satisfaction that ‘there were numbers of friars and priests’ (347) among the dead.

Portraits of abusive Catholic force in *A Child’s History* are therefore contrasted with Protestant tolerance to vilify Popery, but they also register alarm about Catholicism’s blurring of the distinction between religious belief and secular authority. A central focus of

¹⁰³ Works by influential Catholic historians such as John Milner, however, reminded readers of the victims of Elizabeth who ‘whilst they were alive, they were dismembered, ripped up, and their bowels burnt before their faces, after which they were beheaded and quartered’. John Milner, *Letters to a Prebendary* (Winchester: 1800), 93-4.

the book's attack on Catholic monarchs, especially 'the barbarities of Mary's reign' (278), is the idea that Catholicism contaminates the authority of law. 'Queen [Mary] and her priests', Dickens tells us, 'began their proceedings in violation of the law' (268). England under Mary is shown to employ the repugnant techniques of the Inquisition that transgress traditional boundaries of the law. Mary's imprisonment of 'chief Protestants ... who were there left rotting in darkness, hunger, dirt, and separation from their friends' (268) is done without evidence or fair hearing. Other monarchs that he views as being in the hands of the Catholic Church similarly usurp the law. James II is said to have given his 'express approval' of the Bloody Assize, an event which Dickens states was characterized by 'enormous injustice', with juries being 'bullied and frightened' until they delivered 'false verdict[s]', and the detestable Judge Jeffries finding anyone 'guilty of high treason' if they were merely 'accused by an enemy' (385-6). Indeed, the book's recurring motifs of Catholic persecution - false confessions of Protestants extracted under 'torture' (269), gruesome images of medieval instruments of death such as the 'iron stake' (274) and 'dreadful bonfires' (275), and the calling of Catholic persecutors 'demons' (177) and 'inhuman' (273) - work to paint 'Rome' as a monstrous illegal tyrant. Dickens's accounts of the victims of this tyranny further the sense of Catholicism's inappropriate interference in state matters. Protestant victims of Catholic persecution, however, are portrayed as heroic martyrs dedicated to the 'liberty' (369) of England.¹⁰⁴ Cranmer, Ridley and Latimer, for example, do not simply die for their religious beliefs, but for a 'just and a great cause' (275). Through the defiant words and actions of these men, especially Cranmer's resistance to his persecutors and his profession of the Protestant faith before being burned alive, Dickens re-iterates a central tenet of *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* that Protestants who did not hesitate to 'speak their minds very freely in the presence of their persecutors' were demonstrating a commitment to

¹⁰⁴ Michael Wheeler notes that the word 'liberty' was a key word for Protestants of all denominations who 'used it as a weapon in defence of the British constitution of Church and State against supposed attacks from Rome'. Michael Wheeler, *The Old Enemies*, 11.

the safeguarding of civil liberties and protesting against religious intolerance and imposition of ‘truth by force’.¹⁰⁵

Persecution carried out under Popish monarchs in *A Child's History* is firmly located in the political domain. But it is a tainted political domain as Dickens insists that Catholic rulers destroy civil liberty in the name of religious belief. For Dickens, however, the Protestant religion protects and enforces the law of the state. Elizabeth is shown to introduce a civilizing and protective rule of law that releases her subjects from the terror of Catholicism. She is highly praised for allowing the people to ‘inquire of themselves whether they desired to be released or not’ (279) from the unreformed religion and for her central role in the Reformation ‘which made England free’ (301). Cruelties against Catholics during her reign are shown not to be motivated by religious difference but by acts of civil disobedience. The torturing of Jesuits and priests, we are told, was only carried out on account of treasonable activities and their involvement in ‘plots ... for the destruction of [the] Queen’ (291). Here Dickens mirrors a recurring point made by many Victorian anti-Catholic writers who emphasised the view that under Elizabeth I ‘not one Papist was executed in consequence of his religious creed, but on account of treasonable practices against the state’.¹⁰⁶ Implicit in this idea is an anxiety about the idea of the law of the state being the principal authority of a stable society.

Significantly, *A Child's History* appeared at a time when enquiries by Protestant historians including Thomas Babington Macaulay focused on the ‘long struggle between our sovereigns and their parliaments’ and ‘the rights of the people’.¹⁰⁷ For Dickens, as for Macaulay, the glorious Revolution of 1688 not only signalled the religious victory of Protestantism over Catholicism, it also signalled a seminal moment in English history when an appropriate balance was formed between religious and secular authority. It is notable that

¹⁰⁵ John Foxe, *The Acts and Monuments*, Vol. 1, edited by Rev Josiah Pratt (London: Religious Tract Society, 1877), 85, 87.

¹⁰⁶ Thomas Lathbury, *The State of Popery and Jesuitism in England* (London: John Leslie, 1838), 65.

¹⁰⁷ Thomas Babington Macaulay, *The History of England* Vol. I [1849] (London: J. M. Dent, 1906), 9.

in his closing summary of the Glorious Revolution it is not religious difference that Dickens seizes upon, but that 'It was finally resolved ... that it was inconsistent with the safety and welfare of this Protestant kingdom, to be governed by a Popish prince' (393).¹⁰⁸ During the Papal Aggression episode, a time when the Church of England was seemingly being attacked from without and within, Dickens was among many Protestant writers who employed images of Catholic persecution as a forceful reminder of the distinction between individual spiritual belief and secular authority.

(v) *Bleak House*

Tractarianism enraged Dickens. Like many Victorian Protestants he thought the adherents of the Oxford Movement to be deluded apologists for Roman Catholicism. He intensely disliked their emphasis on ritual and blamed them for the Papal Aggression: 'I feel quite certain that but for the *laissez-aller* dealing with the Candlestick and Confessional matters, we never should have got to this pass - for the Pope was made, through that medium, to believe that there was a tendency towards him in England which does not exist'.¹⁰⁹ *Bleak House* is the novel that most explicitly attacks what he regarded as the malign influence of 'that preposterous abuse, Puseyism'.¹¹⁰ Mrs Pardiggle is clearly identifiable as the book's principal representative of a 'Puseyite'. In accordance with Anglo-Catholic fashion, she has named her children after the saints of the early church; she is addicted to ritual and attends 'Matins ... (very prettily done)' (125) every day; and is the most distinguished member of a ladies society who are going to 'establish in a picturesque building ... the Sisterhood of Medieval Marys' by raising money from 'five hundred thousand tracts' (123). A central theme of Dickens's portrait of the 'Puseyite' Mrs Pardiggle is an attack against what he regarded as the Oxford Movement's insensitivity to social ills. Mrs Pardiggle's intrusive charity, or, as Esther calls it, her 'rapacious benevolence' (124), though it forms part of a

¹⁰⁸ Macaulay's account of the glorious Revolution is similar to Dickens's: 'the authority of law and the security of property were found to be compatible with a liberty of discussion and of individual action never before known'. *Ibid*, 9.

¹⁰⁹ *Letters* VI, 466.

¹¹⁰ *Letters* V, 194.

larger theme of the novel about telescopic philanthropy, manifests a complete lack of sympathy for the appalling conditions of the poor. During her visit to the brick-maker's house her voice is 'business-like and systematic' (130) and her religious zeal causes her to behave like an 'inexorable moral policeman' (132). As Mrs Pardiggle harasses the illiterate brick-maker to read morally improving tracts, she is wholly unaware of the squalid conditions that he and his family are forced to live in, or even that his child is dying.

Yet there are more dangerous followers of the Oxford Movement in *Bleak House* than Mrs Pardiggle. The fashionable elite at Chesney Wold who have 'set up a Dandyism - in Religion' (189) can also be identified as 'Puseyites' who display a total insensitivity to social ills. Here, though, Dickens engages with a complex set of anxieties about manliness that were provoked by Tractarianism. Protestant attacks on Tractarian 'unmanliness' were pervasive. To many, the Oxford Movement's emphasis on celibacy and the wearing of ornate clerical vestments smacked of 'Popery'; but it also stood in opposition to what were considered the norms of Victorian manliness.¹¹¹ Focusing an attack on the Oxford Movement and its offshoot of ritualism through the lens of dandyism therefore extends beyond the simple dislike of a religious form.¹¹² *Bleak House's* treatment of 'Dandyism - in Religion' (189) resonates strongly with these gendered slurs and reflects a wider anxiety about the appearance of such dandified, effeminate men on the national stage as a sign of civic decay.

Dickens begins his attack on dandyism in *Bleak House* by distinguishing between the Regency dandy and the Victorian dandy:

¹¹¹ See John Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Harlow, England: Pearson, 2005). Tosh's study examines how the lives of men were conditioned by the ideal of 'manliness' and traces the inherent tensions of this construction.

¹¹² The exact relationship between the Oxford Tractarians and the Ritualists is a matter of debate. But as Nigel Yates argues, 'ritualism was a logical extension of the developments in ... the Oxford Movement' and the two were synonymous in the Victorian Protestant imagination. Nigel Yates, *Anglican Ritualism in Victorian Britain, 1830-1910* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 2.

Dandyism? There is no King George the Fourth now (more's the pity!) to set the dandy fashion; there are no clear-starched jack-towel neckcloths, no short-waisted coats, no false calves, no stays. There are no caricatures, now, of effeminate Exquisites so arrayed, swooning in opera boxes with excess of delight, and being revived by other dainty creatures, poking long-necked scent-bottles at their noses. There is no beau whom it takes four men at once to shake into his buckskins, or who goes to see all the Executions, or who is troubled with the self-reproach of having once consumed a pea. But is there Dandyism in the brilliant and distinguished circle notwithstanding, Dandyism of a more mischievous sort, that has got below the surface and is doing less harmless things than jack-towelling itself and stopping its own digestion, to which no rational person need particularly object? (189)

Here, the Regency dandy is ridiculed for his obsession with appearance and affectation. An odd sense of nostalgia for the surface frivolity of Regency dandyism permeates this ironic lament with its comic images of the exorbitant behaviour of extraordinarily dressed men.¹¹³ But the narrator gives a strong impression of dandyism as a state of moral opprobrium. It is solipsistic, selfish, and wholly lacking in seriousness. Old Turveydrop embodies this sense of the Regency dandy in *Bleak House*. Turveydrop is 'a fat old gentleman with a false complexion, false teeth, false whiskers, and a wig' whose neck-cloth is 'puffing his very eyes out of their natural shape' (225). He is a selfish parasite who is preoccupied by his own deportment. He has made his wife work herself to death and requires his son, Prince, who is named after the Prince Regent, to support him by doing all the work at Turveydrop's dancing academy so he can 'lead an idle life in the very best clothes' (226). Yet this form of dandyism, though parasitic and certainly worthy of ridicule, is self-contained; a sense emerges that although the dandy in the days of King George the Fourth was the epitome of selfish irresponsibility, he only caused harm to himself or those in his immediate circle by doing such ridiculous things as 'stopping its own digestion' (189).

¹¹³ Dandyism in Dickens's writing is frequently marked by ambivalence. For Dickens, who himself is known to have cut something of a dandified figure in his early years, the theatricality of the dandy has a powerful fascination. Juliet John has noted this ambivalence and argues that in Dickens's novels 'the dandy often sits uneasily on the cusp between villainy and gentility'. Juliet John, *Dickens's Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 145. See also Ellen Moers, *The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm* (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1960), 215-40 and R. D. McMaster, 'Dickens, the Dandy, and the Savage: A Victorian View of the Romantic', *Studies in the Novel* 1.2 (1969), 133-46 for general discussions of Dickens and dandyism.

Victorian dandyism is figured as something far more dangerous.¹¹⁴ It is of a ‘more mischievous sort’ that has ‘got below the surface’, and is ‘doing less harmless things’ (189). As the narrator continues, the ironic lament for the Regency dandy becomes a diatribe against the new post-Reform dandyism of the fashionable elite:

Why, yes. It cannot be disguised. There *are*, at Chesney Wold this January week, some ladies and gentlemen of the newest fashion, who have set up a Dandyism - in Religion, for instance. Who in mere lackadaisical want of an emotion, have agreed upon a little dandy talk about the Vulgar wanting faith in things in general; meaning, in the things that have been tried and found wanting, as though a low fellow should unaccountably lose faith in a bad shilling, after finding it out! Who would make the Vulgar very picturesque and faithful, by putting back the hands upon the Clock of Time, and cancelling out a few hundred years of history.

There are also ladies and gentlemen of another fashion, not so new, but very elegant, who have agreed to put a smooth glaze on the world, and to keep down all its realities. For whom everything must be languid and pretty. Who have found out the perpetual stoppage. Who are to rejoice at nothing, and be sorry for nothing. Who are not to be disturbed by ideas. On whom even the Fine Arts, attending in powder and walking backward like the Lord Chamberlain, must array themselves in the milliners’ and tailors’ patterns of past generations, and be particularly careful not to be in earnest, or to receive any impress from the moving age (189).

Far removed from the sartorial superficiality of Old Turveydrop, Victorian dandyism is more dangerous because it is no longer solipsistic or simply concerned with mere externals such as fashion or food. Worryingly, this form of dandyism impacts upon those outside of the fashionable set and is now imposing itself upon ‘the Vulgar’ (189). Dickens’s attack on this ‘newest fashion’ (198) reads like an appendix to Carlyle’s ‘The Dandiacal Body’ in *Sartor Resartus*, a work that scornfully repudiated the dandy as a self-absorbed parasite and grotesque symbol of an antiquated aristocracy.¹¹⁵ Like Carlyle, he makes dandyism a metaphor for all that is wrong with the old aristocratic ideals. ‘Dandyism’ (189) itself becomes a derisory word weighted with associations of social ruin. It symbolizes contempt

¹¹⁴ Dickens’s distinction between two types of dandies reflects an inherent ambiguity in nineteenth-century attitudes to dandyism. Edward Bulwer-Lytton, for example, similarly distinguishes between ‘the Dandy Harmless’ and ‘the Dandy Venomous’. Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *England and the English*, Vol. 1 (London: Richard Bentley, 1833), 106.

¹¹⁵ See Thomas Carlyle, ‘The Dandiacal Body’ in *Thomas Carlyle’s Works*, Vol. I, *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh* [1831] (London Chapman and Hall, 1885), 188-99.

for those who do not inhabit the fashionable world, a patronising attitude towards the poor, and support for the do-nothing dilettantism of the Boodle-Coodle-Doodle ruling class. The repetition of the phrase ‘brilliant and distinguished circle’ (the phrase appears six times during the chapter) heightens the sense of the enclosed nature of this dandified group who have no concern real concern for anyone but themselves. Indeed, the comparison of the dandyism of the ‘brilliant and distinguished circle’ with ‘the circle the necromancer draws around him’ (191) provides a ghoulish image of it being enclosed within itself and dislocated from reality. Skimpole, though he may not resemble a dandy in dress, embodies the new dandyism through his lack of emotional connection with his fellow human beings. Like the dandies at Chesney Wold, he only takes pleasure in the aesthetic quality of others and entirely disregards their misery or suffering. Consider, for example, Skimpole’s attitude to American negroes on slave plantations: ‘I dare say theirs is an unpleasant experience on the whole; but, they people the landscape for me, they give it a poetry for me, and perhaps that is one of the pleasanter objects of their existence’ (295). Dickens’s lambasting of the dandyism of the fashionable elite with its ‘immense advantages’ and ‘no contracted amount of education, sense, courage, honour, beauty, and virtue’ (188) by sarcastic adulation is a forceful reminder to the privileged classes about their social responsibility.

Victorian dandyism is therefore shown to be a symbol of an unhealthy irresponsibility on the part of the genteel classes and is one of the many forces in *Bleak House* that obstruct progress and contribute to society’s ills. It is clear, however, that the passage is specifically focused on the dandy aspects of ‘Puseyism’. Dickens’s satire of ‘Dandyism - in Religion’ (189) is remarkably similar to his most explicit attack on Tractarianism in the 1843 article ‘Report of the Commissioners’ that portrayed it as unhealthy, undemocratic, and condemned the Tractarian emphasis on superficial ‘mummeries’.¹¹⁶ A dislike of the theatricality and ritualism of Tractarianism can be detected in the comments in *Bleak House* about ‘ladies and gentlemen of the newest fashion’ putting ‘a smooth glaze on the world’ and ‘for whom

¹¹⁶ Charles Dickens, ‘Report of the Commissioners’, 3.

everything must be languid and pretty' (189). Echoing one of his favourite complaints about Roman Catholicism, the new dandyism is also associated with 'Puseyism' through its regressive tendencies. It is portrayed as either backward or in stasis. The passage is crammed with phrases that reinforce this idea and reflect Dickens's earlier criticism of 'Puseyism' having 'stood still ... when all other works have advanced and improved'.¹¹⁷ We hear, for example, of the new dandies 'putting back the hands upon the Clock of Time' and 'cancelling a few hundred years of history', and of them 'walking backward' and not receiving 'any impress from the moving age' (189).

But the attack on dandyism in *Bleak House* is complex as Dickens's gendered rhetoric resonates with accusations of 'effeminacy' that were frequently levelled against the 'Puseyites'. Since the 1830s the Tractarian emphasis on celibacy and the wearing of ornate vestments was viewed as the *beau idéal* and led to them being labelled 'unmanly'. James Stephen's 1838 review of Hurrell Froude's *Remains*, for example, spoke of the Tractarians' 'unmasculine horror of everything vulgar in belief and sentiment'.¹¹⁸ An 1843 *Edinburgh Review* article complaining of popish tendencies in the Oxford Movement went even further in its assessment of Tractarianism as effeminate: 'There is as great a difference between their tone and that of the Reformers, as between the playful tap of a coquette's fan and the vigorous stroke of a boatswain's lash'.¹¹⁹ In the wake of the Papal Aggression such portraits of Tractarians as dandified effeminates flourished. Dickens himself focused on the effeminacy of Tractarianism in *A Crisis in the Affairs of Mr John Bull* when he referred to the Puseyites as 'a parcel of ... dandy boys!'¹²⁰ And Charles Kingsley, arguably the most famous critic of the Oxford Movement, wrote in 1851 of the 'Puseyites' that, 'In ... all that school, there is an element of foppery - even in dress and manner; a fastidious, maundering,

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 61.

¹¹⁸ James Stephen, 'The Lives of Whitfield and Froude - Oxford Catholicism', *Edinburgh Review* 67 (July 1838), 528.

¹¹⁹ Henry Rogers, 'Puseyism, or the Oxford Tractarian School', *Edinburgh Review* 77 (April, 1843), 291.

¹²⁰ Charles Dickens, 'A Crisis in the Affairs of Mr John Bull', 194.

die-away effeminacy, which is mistaken for purity and refinement'.¹²¹ 'Unmanly', 'effeminate', and 'dandified' were the epithets that Protestants used to register their disapproval of Anglo-Catholic men who engaged in ritualistic worship.

A religious motive certainly lay behind these criticisms of the Oxford Movement. Indeed, Dickens's critique of 'Dandyism - in Religion' (189) in *Bleak House* is perhaps the most famous literary attack on what was viewed by many Protestants as the womanly dilettantism of Anglo-Catholicism as a form of religion that was superficial and lacking in real spirituality. Tractarian 'unmanliness', however, posed a disturbingly powerful challenge to Victorian manhood in general, a notion of manhood which celebrated vigour, courage, and forthright speech and action that was itself shaped by anti-Tractarianism and found its fullest expression in the idea of 'muscular Christianity'.¹²² Tractarian 'effeminacy', especially because the University of Oxford nurtured the future statesman of England, was viewed as a national danger. As Linda Dowling argues, the anti-Tractarian preoccupation with 'the effeminatus' echoed 'the ancient voice of civic alarm as it confronts the approach of dangers threatening the nation at its most fundamental level as a polity'.¹²³ Framed within the traditional language of civic manhood, protests such as Kingsley's against these 'sleek passionless men, who are too refined to be manly, and measure their grace by their effeminacy'¹²⁴ judged it to be a failure of vigour and courage that signalled the onset of civic incapacity and ruin. Such fears for the manly condition of England, fears bound up with notions of England's destiny, were commonplace even in the mildest attacks on Tractarians in the early 1850s. In *Punch*'s satirical sketch of Cardinal Wiseboy and his friend Newboy,

¹²¹ Charles Kingsley, *The Life and Works of Charles Kingsley*, Vol. 1 (London: Macmillan, 1902), 260.

¹²² David Newsome argues that Kingsley's 'muscular Christianity' (a term Kingsley himself disliked) was forged as 'an antidote to the poison of effeminacy - the most insidious weapon of the Tractarians - which was sapping the vitality of the Anglican Church'. David Newsome, *Godliness and Good Learning: Four Studies of a Victorian Ideal* (London: John Murray, 1961), 207-8. For a discussion of muscular Christianity, especially its impact upon Victorian novelists, including Dickens, see Donald E. Hall (ed), *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

¹²³ Linda Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1994), 46.

¹²⁴ Charles Kingsley, *The Saint's Tragedy* (London: John W. Parker, 1848), 82.

for example, the pair are lectured by Mr Punch on the progress of England under Protestantism: ‘The railroad, the newspaper, free thought and free discussion, all of which privileges we have won in spite of my Lord Cardinal’s petticoats, we intend to keep’.¹²⁵ Wiseboy’s and Newboy’s clothing taints them as ‘effeminate’. Yet the insertion of ‘boy’ for ‘man’ in their names is particularly revealing as it associates Anglo-Catholic ‘unmanliness’ with an immaturity that was viewed as anathema to the progress and enlightenment of England since the Reformation.

Bleak House’s satire of Puseyite dandyism is similarly charged with anxieties about masculinity. Though a distinction between harmless Regency dandyism and the ‘more mischievous’ (189) Victorian dandyism is made, the word ‘new’ is key as it implies that while this ‘newest fashion’ (189) may not be characterised by external excess the same moral defects and feminine traits are present. Phrases applied to the Regency dandy such as ‘effeminate Exquisites’ (189) and ‘dainty creatures’ (189) work to suggest that ‘effeminacy’ is a prevailing characteristic of these Victorian dandies.¹²⁶ But the fashionable elite’s effeminacy is also explicitly suggested in the images of ‘mirrors’ being ‘brought into action’ (188) for their arrival at Chesney Wold and of them being ‘quenched in delicate perfumes’ (188) and using ‘powder’ (189), as does their connection with ‘milliners’ and tailors’ (189).

Thus, through this series of ‘effeminate’ images, a sense emerges of the new ‘Dandyism - in Religion’ (189) being more concerned with lace and brocade than having any real religious motive. But the ‘unmanliness’ of these dandies is also clearly associated with a fear of civic decay. The dandyism of the fashionable elite is strongly characterized by ennui. It is, after all, a feeling of mental weariness and dissatisfaction brought on through a want of occupation, a feeling the narrator describes as a ‘mere lackadaisical want of emotion’ (189), that has led them to their ‘dandy talk’ (189) about how to instil faith in the

¹²⁵ *Punch* 19 (1850), 243.

¹²⁶ Juliet John makes a similar point and argues that in *Bleak House*, a novel which ‘emphasizes the interconnectedness of individuals of all types and social classes, the absoluteness of the passage’s distinction between harmless Regency dandyism and the “more mischievous” variety must be questioned’. Juliet John, *Dickens’s Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture*, 156.

lower classes. Moreover, a sense of the debilitating narcissism of this ‘dandyism (189) runs through the passage, especially in it being ‘languid’ (189) and marked by ‘perpetual stoppage’ (189), images that resonate with Carlyle’s attack on dandyism as a feeble echo of an already-enervated aristocracy. But also important here is the biblical allusion by which these dandies are introduced by the narrator. The comparison of the ‘fashionable elite’ (188) to ‘a mighty hunter before the Lord’ (188), a reference to the biblical Nimrod, who in Christian tradition is rebellious towards God and built the Tower of Babel, forges a sense of the impending chaos and ruin this distinguished set with its ‘immense advantages’ (188) could bring to what they believe to be ‘benighted England’ (181). *Bleak House*’s attack on ‘Puseyite’ dandyism therefore manifests a wider secular anxiety about the unmaking of a stable English manhood as a moral emasculation that could endanger English polity.

A curious postscript marks the debate about hostile Victorian Protestant attacks on Tractarianism that read its celibacy and theatricality as ‘effeminacy’. These attacks have come to be viewed anachronistically as homophobia. Influenced by Geoffrey Faber’s *The Oxford Apostles*, a text that dwells at length on the psychological and physical ‘effeminacy’ of the Oxford Movement, and implies their having a ‘homosexual’¹²⁷ disposition, several critics have interpreted mid-Victorian attacks on Anglo-Catholic ‘effeminacy’ as motivated by an anxiety about same-sex desire. David Hilliard, for example, argues that the charges of ‘effeminacy’ against the Tractarians represent ‘the usual nineteenth-century caricature of male homosexuality’.¹²⁸ And D. G. Paz believes that from the early 1850s ‘John Bull’s heterosexuality was ... under attack’ from Tractarian ‘unmanliness’.¹²⁹ Publications such as *Punch*, says Paz, viewed the finery and celibacy of the Oxford Movement as evidence of homosexual desire as they depicted Anglo-Catholic ritualists as ‘gushing bum-boys,

¹²⁷ Geoffrey Faber, *The Oxford Apostles: A Character Study of the Oxford Movement* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933), 218.

¹²⁸ David Hilliard, ‘UnEnglish and Unmanly: Anglo-Catholicism and Homosexuality’, *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 25 No. 2 (Winter 1982), 188 [181-210].

¹²⁹ D. G. Paz, *Popular Anti-Catholicism in Mid-Victorian England*, 278.

preening in their ecclesiastical finery'.¹³⁰ But the word 'effeminate' is a label that has no clear bearing on sexuality in the early decades of the Victorian period, and the term 'homosexual' is not registered in the English lexicon until 1892. As Alan Sinfield argues, what is now recognized as homosexuality 'occurs largely through Wilde's trials' and up to this time 'it is unsafe to interpret effeminacy as defining of, or as a signal of, same-sex passion'.¹³¹ Fears about the Tractarian corruption of manliness in the mid-nineteenth century being homophobic fears have therefore been exaggerated. But as James Eli Adams explains, what can be identified in these attacks is 'the emergence of a gendered rhetoric that facilitated the subsequent sexualizing of gender transgression, in which "effeminacy" was seen not as a public failure of forthright courage, but as the outward manifestation of a private, sexual deviance'.¹³² Dickens's attack on dandyism in *Bleak House* should not be read as homophobic; but it is intriguing that the dandy characters in the novel are surrounded with language that would later become associated with a specifically private, sexual deviance. Skimpole, especially, is invested with such rhetoric: he is 'gay and innocent' (92), has a usual 'gay strain' (253), is 'extremely gay' (497), and is called a 'queer bird' (874).

¹³⁰ Ibid, 220. Paz's example, however, is a later cartoon in *Punch* titled 'Height of Fashion' not published until 1866. The illustration depicts three Tractarians dressing in ornate clerical robes and is accompanied by a line of dialogue from one of the men to another who is posing in a mirror that reads: 'Ardent Ritualist: "Oh, Athanasius, it's charmingly becoming!"'. *Punch* 51 (1866), 258.

¹³¹ Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 27.

¹³² James Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press), 17.

Chapter Three

Purgatory

'the doctrine of Purgatory opens to the Christian poet a source of the marvellous'

François-René Chateaubriand, *The Genius of Christianity* (1802)

A Christmas Carol opens with an odd, ambiguous statement: 'Marley was dead: to begin with' (33). From the start of Dickens's ghostly little book we are introduced to a weird, liminal world in which the dead are somehow not dead, a world where objects such as candles and doorknobs come to life, a world inhabited by ghosts, phantoms, and spirits. It is a world, in the poetic sense of the word, of the marvellous. Theologically, *A Christmas Carol* is also rather peculiar. It is an eclectic mix of Christian tradition and secular gospel. Yet beneath the unorthodox theology of this divine fairytale lies a mine of buried Catholic sentiment: the ghost of Jacob Marley appears to reside in an intermediary realm between Heaven and Hell which resonates closely with the exclusively Catholic doctrine of Purgatory. Marley's ghost is heavily invested with the poetics of Purgatory, the words, images, and allusions traditionally employed in both religious and secular art and literature that envisioned this realm, and may not be languishing in a state of eternal damnation, but in a purgatorial place from which he can eventually gain salvation. Marley is, and has generally been read as, a 'magnificent synthesis of social symbolism, wild imagination, realistic detail, and grisly humour'.¹ But if this apparition has returned to haunt Ebenezer Scrooge from a purgatorial realm, he is also a figure invested with an important religious significance that not only provides Dickens with a wealth of imaginative material, but allows him to explore the limitations of Victorian Protestant eschatology which held that a soul must either find salvation in Heaven or damnation in Hell.

¹ Harry Stone, *Dickens and the Invisible World* (London: Macmillan, 1980), 121.

I

According to the historian Jacques le Goff, the ‘birth of Purgatory’² can be placed at the latter end of the twelfth century. Christianity had long offered its adherents an absolute eschatological dichotomy, Heaven or Hell. With the medieval advent of Purgatory a third possibility was introduced: an intermediate place or state of temporal punishment in which the souls of the dead who are not free from venial sin, or have not paid the satisfaction due to their transgressions, are cleansed or purified to be readied for eternal bliss in Heaven.

During the Protestant Reformation, the doctrine of Purgatory was rejected by the Church of England. Written in 1563, the same year that the Council of Trent finally established Purgatory as Catholic dogma, yet remained non-committal to its imaginary content, Article XXII of *The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion* stated:

Of Purgatory. The Romish doctrine concerning purgatory, pardons, worshipping and adoration, as well of images as of reliques, and also invocation of saints, is a fond thing vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the word of God.³

An intermediate state in which further satisfaction had to be made through suffering was incompatible with the Protestant belief that Christ saved absolutely. But it was the corruption associated with the doctrine that most angered the Reformers. An important characteristic of Purgatory was the idea that the trials of the dead could be shortened by suffrages (the intercessory prayers of the living for the departed), and also that the living themselves could reduce the time they may have to spend in Purgatory by being granted indulgences (a full or partial remission of temporal punishment for sins forgiven by the Church). Suffrages and indulgences, though, were widely abused by the Church. Masses for the dead had to be paid for; indulgences had to be bought through monetary donations.

² Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory* translated by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1. Le Goff notes that although the word ‘purgatorius’ had long been in use as an adjective, it was not until after 1170 that the noun ‘purgatorium’, denoting a specific place or state, entered into the lexicon of medieval Latin.

³ Quoted in Edgar C. S. Gibson, *The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England*, 542-3.

Purgatory, the Reformers argued, was a fraud; a concept primarily designed by the hierarchy of the Church of Rome for the corrupt purposes of exploiting the faithful.⁴

In the nineteenth century debates within the Church of England regarding an intermediate state were vigorously revived. Since the Reformation the rejection of Purgatory had caused a problem for Protestants that the doctrine had actually been invented to solve: namely, what happened to a soul from the moment of death until the Last Judgement. It was the leaders of the Oxford Movement who first attempted to address this question by promoting a view of Purgatory as a positive continuation of the salvific process. Newman delivered a lecture in 1835 entitled 'The Intermediate State' in which he argued that there was scriptural evidence for the existence of a third place.⁵ And he later argued in *Tract XC*, with a deft show of linguistic analysis, that it was not Purgatory itself the Reformers held to be an invention, scripturally unsound, and repugnant, but only 'the *Romish* doctrine'⁶ of Purgatory.

Discussions of an intermediate state were by no means restricted to nineteenth-century theologians. Many non-Catholic literary figures considered the merits of a 'third place' in the afterlife, and often did so with explicit reference to Catholic Purgatory. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for example, though he did not believe in Purgatory, thought the doctrine to have a greater effect on the morality of man than the stark alternatives of Protestantism: 'The Catholics', he wrote, 'are far more afraid of, and incomparably more influenced in their

⁴ Stephen Greenblatt argues that by the time of the Reformation the system of indulgences and pardons meant to relieve the sufferings of souls imprisoned in Purgatory had 'come to seem, for many heretics and orthodox believers alike, essential to the institutional structure, authority and power of the Catholic Church', and during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Protestants of all persuasions repeatedly returned to the idea of 'the fraudulence of Purgatory, its lack of scriptural basis, and its corrupt institutional uses'. Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 14, 35.

⁵ See John Henry Newman, 'The Intermediate State' in *The Works of Cardinal Newman: Parochial and Plain Sermons*, Vol. III [1835] (Westminster, Md: Christian Classics Inc., 1966), 367-87.

⁶ John Henry Newman, 'Remarks On Certain Passages in The Thirty-Nine Articles' in *The Works of Cardinal Newman, Via Media*, Vol. II [1841] (Westminster, Md: Christian Classics Inc., 1978), 294 [259-356]. For a discussion of the minutiae of the doctrinal issues involved in the nineteenth-century debate about Purgatory see Geoffrey Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 99-108.

conduct by the doctrine of purgatory, than Protestants by that of hell!⁷ And Anne Brontë considered the solace Purgatory offered through her heroine in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Helen Huntingdon, who says on the death of her brother, ‘thank God, I have hope, ... whatever purging fires the erring spirit may be doomed to pass - whatever fate awaits it, still it is not lost, and God, who hateth nothing that He hath made, will bless it in the end’.⁸ Dickens does not seem to have given much consideration to the doctrine of Purgatory. Only in *Pictures from Italy* does he explicitly broach the subject. His rhetoric echoes that of non-Catholics who held Purgatory to be a piece of ‘Romish’ chicanery. Travelling through Italy he notes the abundance of money-boxes ‘for the benefit of the souls in Purgatory’ that ‘stimulate the charitable’ (46). On one occasion he recalls, with more than a hint of satire, an inscription that he sees on many Roman altars: “‘Every Mass performed at this altar frees a soul from Purgatory’”. I have never been able to find out the charge for one of these services’, he writes, ‘but they should needs be expensive’ (136). Yet though he may have poured scorn on the practice of paying into the coffers of the Catholic Church for the benefit of souls of the dead, Dickens firmly rejected any absolute eschatological belief, something he vigorously stated in an 1859 letter written to a correspondent with whom he had been debating the subject of ghosts: ‘Don’t suppose’, he concludes, ‘that I am so bold or arrogant as to settle what can and what cannot be, after death. The truth is not so at all’.⁹

II

Is Jacob Marley in Purgatory or Hell?¹⁰ Marley, a horrible spectre fettered by a monstrous chain made of symbolic reminders of his earthly sins, seems to have returned from Hell to

⁷ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Vol. III 1807-1814* edited by Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 467-9.

⁸ Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* edited by Herbert Rosengarten (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 496.

⁹ *Letters IX*, 116.

¹⁰ The etymology of the name Marley is strangely relevant here. ‘Marley’ originates from Old English and means ‘meadow near the lake’. One of the most enduring images of Hell comes from the Book of Revelations in which the phrase ‘lake of fire’ is used in four verses to denote Hell. Purgatory, on the other hand, has often been represented to be a meadow. The most famous example of this occurs in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, a work that Dickens was familiar with. The topography of the descent of

haunt his old partner, Scrooge. He has, the narrator tells us, been ‘condemned’ (47) and is ‘doomed’ (47). Yet, as strange as the word may sound when used in association with this ghost, Marley is an intercessor. We are told that the spirits who appear to Scrooge for the explicit purpose of the ‘reclamation’ (56) of the old miser’s soul have been ‘despatched to him through Jacob Marley’s intervention’ (71). Intercession is by no means exclusive to Catholicism. As one late nineteenth-century critic of *A Christmas Carol* noted, however, the intercession performed by the ghost of Marley is explicitly Catholic: it corresponds to ‘the general belief among Catholics ... that the souls in purgatory can help others yet on earth’.¹¹ Marley’s intercession does indeed act as a warning to Scrooge to mend his ways. But it also resonates with the Catholic belief that souls returned to earth from the prison-house of Purgatory to obtain relief from their own torment and to lessen the term of their suffering. Marley tells Scrooge, ‘I am here to-night to warn you, that you have yet a chance and hope of escaping my fate’ (49-50), but he continues with the somewhat ambiguous statement, ‘A chance and hope of my procuring, Ebenezer’ (49-50). It may simply be that Marley is hoping to procure the soul of Ebenezer Scrooge for good. Dickens, however, leaves open the possibility that Marley is stating his own ‘chance and hope’ (50) of obtaining grace and entering Heaven.

Marley also speaks a word that suggests he is in a purgatorial realm where his suffering will ultimately end. Having told Scrooge that he has sat invisible beside the old miser on many previous nights, the ghost says: ‘That is no light part of my *penance*’ (49, emphasis added). ‘Penance’ (49) does not sit quite right with any conception of Hell as it is concerned with ‘repentance ... as a means of satisfaction for sin’ (*OED*, Sense 1a), and according to Christian teaching Hell is a place of eternal punishment in which the satisfaction of sin is unattainable. Moreover, the sense in which Marley appears to use the

Aeneas into the underworld is described in detail, and meadows are the last point before the path forks to the Hell of Tartarus or the paradise of the Elysian Fields. Dickens’s use of the name Marley, whether employed consciously or not, figuratively places the ghost outside the hell of a ‘lake of fire’ and in a nearby ‘meadow’ that corresponds with a traditional image of Purgatory.

¹¹ A. M. Grange, ‘Catholicism in Thackeray and Dickens’, *The American Catholic Quarterly Review* (Jan 1896), 145 [142-54].

word is again closely associated with a specifically Catholic notion of an intermediate realm. ‘Penance’ denotes the ‘sufferings after death as a punishment for sins; *esp.* the sufferings of purgatory’ (*OED*, Sense 1b). Since the twelfth century this meaning of ‘penance’ was widely used in theology. But the association of ‘penance’ with Purgatory also became a recurring motif in literature that either discussed or envisioned a third place in the afterlife. A preacher in Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* speaking of purgatory says that ‘Trentals ... deliuereth from penaunce Hir freendes soules’;¹² Langland speaks of the ‘penaunce of purcatorie’¹³ in *The Vision of Piers Plowman*; and Dryden’s translation of *The Aeneid* emphasizes that in Purgatory ‘penance [is] done’.¹⁴ Dickens, by having Marley say he is undergoing a ‘penance’ (49), follows both a linguistic and literary tradition that imagines a third realm in the afterlife wherein sins may be purged and the soul purified.

What, though, were Marley’s sins exactly? And did they or did they not merit his going to Hell? Several critics have concluded that Marley is in Hell. In *The Annotated Christmas Carol*, for example, Michael Patrick Hearn is very specific in placing Marley in ‘the fourth circle of Hell, that of the avaricious’.¹⁵ Undoubtedly Marley is being punished because of his avarice. In Catholic theology, however, whether avarice is a mortal or venial sin is unclear because a sin cannot be mortal, and therefore does not warrant eternal damnation, if it is not committed with full knowledge or not committed with deliberate and complete consent. In life Marley seems to have been unaware of his actions being un-Christian or offending God. Only in death does he realize that it is not enough to be ‘a good man of business’ (49): ‘Mankind was business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were, all, my business’, he cries, with a sense of ‘unavailing grief’ (49). But we also get a sense of this through Scrooge who seems

¹² Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* edited from the Hengwrt Manuscript by N. F. Blake (London: Edward Arnold, 1980), 231.

¹³ William Langland, *Piers Plowman: The A Version* edited by George Kane (London: The Athlone Press, 1960), 423.

¹⁴ John Dryden, ‘Virgil’s Aeneid’ in *The Works of John Dryden*, Vol. VI (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 542.

¹⁵ Michael Patrick Hearn, *The Annotated Christmas Carol* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2004), 43 fn 102.

oblivious to his own wrongdoing, especially because his money-grabbing ways are, in part, fuelled by a utilitarian philosophy that is applauded by certain sections of society. Indeed, it is implied that Scrooge denies having deliberately sinned when he ‘reverently disclaimed all intention to offend, or any knowledge of having wilfully “bonneted” [the Ghost of Christmas Past] at any period of his life’ (56). Since we are told that Scrooge and Marley were ‘two kindred spirits’ (38) then Marley’s earthly sins may also be viewed as having been committed unknowingly. He says as much when he laments the folly of human beings ‘not to know’ (49) the true meaning Christianity whilst on earth. ‘Yet such was I! Oh! Such was I!’ (49), he cries.

A Christmas Carol offers a further clue that the ghost of Marley may have avoided eternal damnation in its preoccupation with a theme that is fundamental to historical conceptions of Purgatory: time. The word itself appears on sixty-nine occasions in the story and the narrative is punctuated throughout by phrases relating to time. We hear of ‘dog-days’ (34), ‘of all the good days in the year’ (35), ‘the city clocks had only just gone three’ (35), ‘the long calendar of the year’ (36), ‘this very festive season of the year’ (38), ‘the whole day’ (41), ‘only for a second’ (47), ‘many and many a day’ (49), ‘at the same hour’ (50), ‘the hour had passed’ (54), ‘whole trains of years’ (56), ‘the Bell struck one’ (71), ‘the clock proclaimed the hour’ (72), ‘year after year’ (88), ‘the chimes were ringing the three quarters past eleven at that moment’ (92), ‘the night is waning fast’ (96), and so on. Indeed, what emerges is an underlying anxiety about time, the passing of time, and how life itself is regulated by a variety of time schemes such as calendar time, liturgical time, and the daily routine marked by clocks and the ringing of bells.¹⁶ This preoccupation with time is of great significance for determining if Marley is in Purgatory. ‘Purgatory’, writes Le Goff, ‘is a place, but it is also a time, since one definition of Purgatory is that it is a Hell of limited

¹⁶ Richard K. Fenn argues that anxieties about time, especially pronounced in the nineteenth century, may have been profoundly shaped by the medieval doctrine of Purgatory. See Richard K. Fenn, *The Persistence of Purgatory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

duration'.¹⁷ If, unlike the eternal realms of Heaven and Hell, a soul's term in Purgatory is spent in linear time, then Marley indicates that he exists in such a place. He speaks of having died 'seven Christmas Eves ago' (48), says he has been travelling 'the whole time' (48), and that he suffers most 'At this time of the rolling year' (49). Time, and the passing of time, is very real for Marley. That he exists in linear time is emphasized by his being on some kind of journey, another popular motif in theological and literary representations of Purgatory. His spirit is required to 'walk abroad ... travel far and wide ... [and] to wander through the world' (47). He is always 'travelling' (48) and complains that 'I cannot rest, I cannot stay, I cannot linger anywhere ... weary journeys lie before me!' (48). Paradoxically, however, there are moments in *A Christmas Carol* when the perception of time is blurred and the laws of physics warped. Most notably, this occurs when Scrooge awakens on Christmas Day from his intercourse with the Spirits and realizes that they 'have done it all in one night' (112). Yet even this strange disturbance of time resonates with traditional conceptions of Purgatory. Throughout the centuries Purgatory was envisioned as a dreamlike (or rather nightmarish) reality, a place both 'real' and 'unreal' where time in particular was distorted.¹⁸ Dickens's vision of a 'third place' is reminiscent of these earlier concepts of Purgatory. The world of Marley and the Spirits is a realm that subsists in time but is strangely outside the ordinary experience of the living.

However, it is not only in the characterisation of Marley or themes such as time that suggest a 'third place' in the afterlife is being imagined. *A Christmas Carol* owes an inspirational debt to arguably the two most famous literary works to have envisioned the realm of Purgatory: Dante's *The Divine Comedy* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Dante's *The Divine Comedy* is a very different work to *A Christmas Carol*. One is a poem composed in the first person, the other a prose work narrated in the third person. And Dante's masterpiece is a more psychologically complex tale. As Stephen Bertman notes,

¹⁷ Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, 290.

¹⁸ See *ibid*, 290-4.

however, both texts exhibit striking similarities in form and content.¹⁹ Each work is framed by a Christian holiday, *A Christmas Carol* by Christmas time and *The Divine Comedy* by Good Friday and Easter. Marley and Virgil both act as guides to Scrooge and Dante respectively. Both stories follow the spiritual regeneration of flawed men and encourage the rejection of greed and avarice in order to obtain salvation. And the two central characters, Scrooge and Dante, awake from their dream-like experiences to a renewed vision of the joy of life. Even more fascinating are the textual echoes of Dante's work in *A Christmas Carol*. This is most pronounced in the words of Scrooge in the final Stave of *A Christmas Carol* which echo those of Dante at the end of *The Divine Comedy*. Scrooge promises: 'I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future! The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me' (111). Similarly, Dante says, 'Sole in thyself that dwellest; and of thyself / Sole understood, past, present, or to come'.²⁰

But the most significant literary allusions in *A Christmas Carol* relating to Purgatory are to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. At the very beginning of Dickens's tale the narrator foreshadows the coming of Marley's ghost by alluding to the ghost of Old Hamlet:

If we were not perfectly convinced that Hamlet's Father died before the play began, there would be nothing more remarkable in his taking a stroll at night, in an easterly wind, upon his own ramparts, than there would be in any other middle-aged gentleman rashly turning out after dark in a breezy spot - say Saint Paul's Churchyard for instance - literally to astonish his weak son's mind (33-4).

¹⁹ See Stephen Bertman, 'Dante's Role in the Genesis of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*', *Dickens Quarterly* Vol. 24 No. 3 (Sept 2007), 167-77. Early reviewers of *A Christmas Carol* suspected that Dickens may have been influenced by Dante's masterpiece. Although there is no direct evidence for this, Dickens was almost certainly familiar with Dante's work. Dante is mentioned by Dickens in *Pictures from Italy* and *Little Dorrit* (both works, however, are later than *A Christmas Carol*). And in the inventory of the books Dickens owned at his death there was an anthology of Italian poetry which contained Dante's works and a book of neoclassical drawings by John Flaxman entitled *Compositions from the Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise of Dante*. However, neither book appeared in an earlier inventory of Dickens's library when he was abroad from the summer of 1844 until the summer of 1845, more than six months after the publication of *A Christmas Carol*.

²⁰ Dante Alighieri, *The Vision of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise of Dante Alighieri* translated by Henry Francis Cary [FP] [1814] (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), 357. If Dickens was familiar with *The Divine Comedy* it is Cary's translation that he would more than likely have read.

Dickens's writing is littered with Shakespearean references with *Hamlet* being the most frequently mentioned of Shakespeare's plays in his work.²¹ But this allusion provides a vital clue to the condition of Marley's ghost as the ghost of Hamlet's father appears to reside in Purgatory. When Hamlet's father first speaks he explicitly states that he is not damned for eternity but is in another realm where his sins will be cleansed:

I am thy father's spirit
Doomed for a certain term to walk the night,
And for the day confined to fast in fires
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purged away.²²

The idea that the sins committed in life can be 'purged away' (I. 5. 13) in the afterlife suggests that the ghost is in Purgatory. And the phrase 'a certain term' (I. 5. 10) is equally telling. It supports the Catholic belief in a temporary, intermediary state of punishment after death. Shakespeare gives us other evidence for this interpretation. At the conclusion of Act One, for example, Hamlet appears to acknowledge the significance of the ghost's first words when he tells Horatio: 'There are more things in heaven and earth ... Than are dreamt of in your philosophy' (I. 5. 174-5). And when the young prince responds to the ghost's plea for him to 'Swear' (I. 5. 90) revenge, he tries to calm his father's spirit with words that, as Stephen Greenblatt notes, would have been 'utterly familiar to a Catholic and deeply suspect to a Protestant':²³ 'Rest, rest, perturbed spirit' (I. 5. 190).²⁴

Thus, Dickens's invoking the name of Hamlet's father is not merely to impress upon the reader the need to suspend their disbelief or else 'nothing wonderful can come of the

²¹ For a discussion of the influence of Shakespeare upon Dickens, including a comprehensive list of Dickens's allusions to Hamlet, see Valerie L. Gager, *Shakespeare and Dickens: The Dynamics of Influence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

²² William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* edited by G. R. Hibbard (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), I. 5. 9-13. All subsequent citations will be from this edition and placed in the text.

²³ Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, 233.

²⁴ Other moments in the play that allude to the ghost being in Purgatory include when Hamlet tells Horatio that he believes the apparition to be 'an honest ghost' (I. V. 138). He does so by invoking the name of Saint Patrick. It is an apt oath as Saint Patrick is not only the patron saint of Purgatory, but it also alludes to the ancient pilgrimage site of Saint Patrick's Purgatory on Station Island in County, Donegal. According to legend, the site dates from the fifth century, when God showed Saint Patrick a cave that was an entrance to the hell. Pilgrimages to the site still continue to the present day.

story' (33) about to be told. It also operates to establish a bond between the apparitions. Indeed, the ghost of Hamlet's father and the ghost of Jacob Marley have much in common. Horatio tells Hamlet that the ghost has 'a countenance more in sorrow than in anger ... [is] very pale ... [and that it] fix'd his eyes upon [Horatio] ... most constantly' (I. 2. 231-4). Echoing this, the narrator of *A Christmas Carol* speaks of Marley's face being 'not angry or ferocious ... [having] a livid colour ... and though the eyes were wide open, they were perfectly motionless' (42). Both apparitions wear the same clothes that they did in life. Hamlet's father wears the 'very armour he had on when th'ambitious Norway combated' (I. 1. 60-1) and Jacob Marley wears his 'usual waistcoat, tights, and boots' (44).²⁵ And the bandage that Marley removes so that his lower jaw drops to his breast is reminiscent of, or rather may be a grotesque inversion of, the beaver, the lower portion of the face-guard of a helmet, that Hamlet's father 'wore ... up' (I. 2. 229) to leave his face free. But it is not only physical similarities the apparitions share. On several occasions the dialogue of Marley's ghost strangely echoes that of Old Hamlet:

Marley's ghost: 'In life I was your partner' (45)
 Hamlet's father: 'I am thy father's spirit' (I. 5. 9)

Marley's ghost: 'Doomed to wander through the world' (47)
 Hamlet's father: 'Doomed for a certain term to walk the night (I. 5. 10)

Marley's ghost: 'Hear me! ... My time is nearly gone' (49)
 Hamlet's father: 'Mark me ... My hour is almost come' (I. 5. 2-4)

Marley's ghost: 'remember what has passed between us!' (50)
 Hamlet's father: 'Adieu, adieu, adieu. Remember me' (I. 5. 91)

Another verbal parallel goes beyond mere mimicry and hints towards Marley being in the same kind of intermediate realm as Hamlet's father. The ghost in *Hamlet* tells his son: 'But that I am forbid / To tell the secrets of my prison-house' (I. 5. 13-14). Marley gives a similar response when Scrooge implores him to 'Speak comfort to me, Jacob'. 'I have none to give', Marley replies, 'Nor can I tell you what I would. A very little more is permitted to me ...

²⁵ In Chapter 49 of *The Old Curiosity Shop* Sampson Brass also speaks of 'the Ghost of Hamlet's father, in the very clothes that he wore on work-a-days' (373).

How it is that I appear before you in a shape that you can see, I may not tell' (48-9). Like the ghost of Hamlet's father, Marley is not permitted to speak of his place of torment as, it seems, he is subject to the authority of a higher power.

Is there any sense, however, that Marley's suffering may come to an end? And does Dickens leave open the possibility that the ghost will eventually be granted entry into Heaven by this higher power? As previously discussed, Marley's intercession may lead to his 'procuring' (50) forgiveness from God and shorten the time of his expiation. And if he does exist in linear time it is a logical conclusion that it must at some point end. However, one other moment points towards Marley finally entering Heaven. Though the narrator does not comment on the ghost's fate, Marley may eventually obtain suffrages from Scrooge through the form of prayer. Scrooge, now reformed, holds up his hands 'in a last prayer to have his fate reversed' (110). But when he awakens he continues his prayer and proclaims, 'Oh Jacob Marley! Heaven, and the Christmas Time be praised for this! I say it on my knees, old Jacob; on my knees!' (111). Scrooge then hears church bells 'ringing out the lustiest peals he had ever heard' (112). In Catholic tradition the ringing of church bells signifies that a call for prayers to grant a soul in Purgatory a speedy passage through its torment and a swift passage to Heaven had been answered.²⁶ Souls in Heaven had no need for such prayers as they had attained eternal bliss; neither did souls in Hell who were damned for eternity. At the conclusion of *A Christmas Carol* it may not only be Scrooge who has been reclaimed.

III

If Dickens did envisage Jacob Marley in Purgatory, or at least in an intermediate zone resembling Purgatory, then what vision of this realm does *A Christmas Carol* offer us? The most vivid portrait of the purgatorial place in which Marley resides is given at the end of Stave One. Scrooge looks from his bedroom window to see the ghost and his fellow

²⁶ See Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, 43-4.

penitents floating out upon the night air, an image that is reproduced in John Leech's illustration of these grotesque phantoms (see Figure 4):



Fig. 4 Untitled illustration from *A Christmas Carol* by John Leech

[Scrooge] became sensible of confused noises in the air; incoherent sounds of lamentation and regret; wailings inexpressibly sorrowful and self-accusatory. The spectre, after listening for a moment, joined in the mournful dirge; and floated out upon the bleak, dark night.

Scrooge followed to the window: desperate in his curiosity. He looked out.

The air filled with phantoms, wandering hither and thither in restless haste, and moaning as they went. Every one of them wore chains like Marley's Ghost; some few (they might be guilty governments) were linked together; none were free ... The misery with them all was, clearly, that they sought to interfere, for good, in human matters, and had lost the power for ever.

Whether these creatures faded into mist, or mist enshrouded them, he could not tell. But they and their spirit voices faded together; and the night became as it had been when he walked home (50-2).

Since its inception, the imaginary content of Purgatory was never specified by the Church.²⁷ Visions of Purgatory, however, especially in art and literature, were often indistinguishable from those of Hell. A dominant vision of Purgatory, for example, was of it being a hideous, black subterranean place, filled with horrible images of fire, ice, rancid smells, and the piercing screams of tortured souls, located at the centre of the earth.²⁸ One nineteenth-century example of this vision of Purgatory can be found in a particularly sadistic tract entitled *Sight of Hell* by the Reverend Joseph Furniss, a children's mission worker. In this work, widely distributed by the Catholic Church during the 1850s, Hell and Purgatory are both enclosed within the middle of the earth and filled with fire and streams of burning sulphur.²⁹ Dickens's imagining of the physical location of 'the Invisible World' (52) being above ground therefore removes the association of an intermediate realm with Hell. *The Divine Comedy* may again have provided him with inspiration as Dante also avoids equating Purgatory with Hell and is careful to stress that his purgatory is above the firmament. When Dante and Virgil exit Hell and enter Purgatory, the Poet says, 'thence issuing we again beheld the stars'.³⁰ Likewise, the phantoms in *A Christmas Carol* exist just above the earth but beneath the celestial sky, 'in the air ... upon the bleak dark night' (50-2). In the world shown to Scrooge, the traditionally frightening, repulsive properties of a 'third place' are almost entirely absent and we are shown a more benign, albeit frightening world, where suffering souls eerily appear and disappear shrouded in mist.

²⁷ Arguments about the whereabouts of the location of Purgatory and its spatial dimensions, or even if it were a physical place at all, were commonplace from its medieval beginnings through to the nineteenth century and beyond. But even though it was widely figured as a physical place by many Catholic practitioners, the envisioning of Purgatory as a place was never Church doctrine. In 1999 Pope John Paul II finally declared Purgatory to be a condition of existence as opposed to a physical place.

²⁸ For examples see Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, 64-7.

²⁹ See Joseph Furniss, *Sight of Hell* (London: 1855), 6.

³⁰ Dante Alighieri, *The Vision of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise of Dante Alighieri* translated by Henry Francis Cary [FP], 183. Scrooge's own journey from being a 'covetous old sinner' (34) to 'as good a man, as the good old city knew' (116) is also reminiscent of the topography that accompanies Dante's journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven in *The Divine Comedy*. Scrooge's moral ascent is reflected by Dickens's meteorological descriptions. When we first meet him it is 'cold, bleak, biting weather' (35); but by the time of his transformation there is 'Golden sunlight; Heavenly sky; [and] sweet fresh air' (112).

A Christmas Carol's disassociation of the topography of 'the Invisible World' (52) from that of Hell therefore offers a less severe interpretation of a purgatorial realm. This is also apparent in how Dickens figures the suffering of Marley and his fellow penitents. Purgatory, in terms of its punishments, had almost always been represented in both theological and secular literature as a temporary Hell in which the dead endured unimaginable physical torment and suffering that resembled the tortures of the damned.³¹ Dickens again offers a different vision. Yes, Marley and the other spirits are bound with chains and made to drag physical reminders of their sins such as heavy iron safes. But this is not the real cause of their torment. As the description of their suffering makes explicit, the real torment of these wretched creatures is caused by 'lament ... regret; ... sorrow, and self-accus[ation]' (50). Suffering and punishment for Marley and the phantoms is clearly psychological as well as physical. Marley's torment is certainly driven by guilt and regret. Almost every time he speaks he is self-accusatory and sorrowful: 'I wear the chain I forged in life' (47); 'in life my spirit never roved beyond the narrow limits of our money-changing hole' (48); 'Why did I walk through crowds of fellow-beings with my eyes turned down, and never raise them to that blessed Star which led the Wise Men to a poor abode?' (49). Marley sums up the psychological horror of the trial he must endure when he tells Scrooge of his 'incessant torture of remorse' (48).

Perhaps, though, the most effective way that Dickens resituates the idea of the intermediate realm as a hideous place in which souls are subject to extreme physical punishment is through his use of a theme that dominated images of purgatorial suffering: fire. Trial by fire played a crucial role in shaping the image of Purgatory as a temporary Hell. As Le Goff shows, representations of Purgatory throughout the ages are filled with 'circles of fire, lakes and seas of fire, rings of fire, walls and moats of fire, fire-breathing monsters, burning coals, souls in the form of sparks, rivers of fire, and burning mountains

³¹ See *ibid.*, 64-7.

and valleys'.³² Saint Augustine, Gregory the Great, Bishop Peter Lombard, Dante; almost all the great theologians and writers who contributed to the imaginative construction of Purgatory employed fire as a symbol that is used to cleanse the soul.³³ In the nineteenth century, although the Catholic Church did not enforce any rigid interpretation of the punishments to be endured in Purgatory, many Catholic clergy promoted the image of Purgatory as a fiery place of torment. A popular text that Catholic priests read to their flock was a work by Alphonsus Liguori, an eighteenth-century Roman Catholic Bishop from Naples, which describes the suffering of souls in the fires of hell as synonymous with that endured by souls in Purgatory:

The unhappy wretch will be surrounded by fire like wood in a furnace. He will find an abyss of fire below, an abyss above, and an abyss on every side. If he touches, if he sees, if he breathes, he touches, he sees, he breathes only fire. He will be in fire like a fish in water ... His body will become all fire; so that the bowels within him will burn, his heart will burn in his bosom, his brains in his head, his blood in his veins, even the marrow in his bones: each reprobate will in himself become a furnace of fire.³⁴

Liguori's vision of suffering is an extreme account of the horrors that must be faced in Purgatory. Yet it provides a stark reminder of the ways in which some Catholic clergy terrified their flock and used the threat of the unimaginable torture of being burned in Purgatory as an instrument of fear.

'Fire' is an ever-present image throughout *A Christmas Carol*. Dickens, though, does not use fire to terrify. Far from it: he almost exclusively presents fire as being a wholly positive symbol. Of course, as the story is set in winter we may expect to see many a roaring fire. But the prevalence of images of fire, heat, and warmth in the tale is extraordinary. For example: 'people ran about with flaring links, proffering their services to go before horses in

³² Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, 7.

³³ See *ibid*, 133-53, 345-6.

³⁴ Alphonso Liguori, *The Eternal Truths: Preparation for Death* translated by R. A. Coffin (1857), 189-90. Joseph Furniss's account of suffering in Purgatory is also dominated by fire: 'The fire burns through every bone and every muscle. Every nerve is trembling and quivering with the sharp fire. The fire rages inside the skull, it shoots through the eyes, it drops through the ears, it roars in the throat as it roars up a chimney'. Joseph Furniss, *Sight of Hell*, 15.

carriages, and conduct them on their way' (39); 'some labourers ... had lighted a great fire in a brazier, round which a party of ragged men and boys were gathered: warming their hands and winking their eyes before the blaze in rapture' (39); at Fezziwig's party 'fuel was heaped upon the fire; and the warehouse was as snug, and warm, and dry, and bright a ball-room, as you would desire to see upon a winter's night' (62); 'another scene ... full of comfort. Near to the winter fire sat a beautiful young girl' (67); 'the master of the house, having his daughter leaning fondly on him, sat down with her and her mother at his own fireside' (68); "'Sit ye down before the fire", says Mrs Cratchit to her daughter, "and have a warm, Lord bless ye!"' (79); 'Tiny Tim' is 'escorted by his brother and sister to his stool before the fire' (80); the Cratchits put 'a shovel-full of chestnuts on the fire' (81); 'as Scrooge and the Spirit went along the streets, the brightness of the roaring fires in kitchens, parlours, and all sorts of rooms, was wonderful' (84); 'a cheerful company assembled round a glowing fire' (85); the revellers at Scrooge's nephew's party 'were clustered round the fire' (88).

Fire imagery is almost wholly positive in *A Christmas Carol*; it is constantly associated with home and happiness, as a symbol of community, or as a means of sustenance. But the idea of fire as an instrument of retribution in the purgatorial realm that Marley exists in is not entirely dispensed with. Marley, it seems, has been subject to some kind of trial by fire. When he appears to Scrooge he is 'still agitated as by the hot vapour from an oven' (47). But even here, the only instance in the story that fire is construed negatively, the image we are given is extremely mild. An oven is hardly comparable to the burning fires of Hell, and being 'agitated' (47) can hardly be equated to the excruciating pain of being consumed by flames. A sense of the penal aspect of this intermediate realm is, however, retained. But if the Catholic discourse of Purgatory was 'meant not only to manage, contain, and ultimately relieve anxiety; ... [but also] to arouse it, to sharpen its intensity, to provide it with hideous imagery',³⁵ then it is the former purpose that is most

³⁵ Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, 71.

clearly emphasised by Dickens. *A Christmas Carol's* 'Invisible World' (52) is overwhelmingly purifying rather than punitive, redemptive rather than retributive.

Thus, above all, what both the spirit world and earthly world of *A Christmas Carol* offer is the hope of salvation. Marley, as previously noted, speaks of his 'hope' (50) for both himself and Scrooge being 'procur[ed]' (50). And this may also be true for the other phantoms travelling alongside Marley. We are told they 'cried piteously' because 'they sought to interfere, for good, in human matters, and had lost the power for ever' (52). But the narrator never suggests that they are excluded forever from Heaven. They too may harbour a 'chance and hope' (50) of being redeemed. Hope also becomes increasingly important to Scrooge. Early on during his intercourse with the spirits Scrooge's hope of living 'an altered life' (110) is subtly expressed through prayer. He clasps the Ghost of Christmas Past's robe in 'supplication' (56). However, by the time the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come appears to him, Scrooge, who we were introduced to as a 'squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner!' (34), openly speaks of his hope of becoming a changed man:

"Ghost of the Future!" he exclaimed, "I fear you more than any Spectre I have seen. But as I know your purpose is to do me good, and as I hope to live to be another man from what I was, I am prepared to bear you company, and do it with a thankful heart (96).

Later on, when he is shown his own gravestone, Scrooge becomes desperate in his entreaties to the spirit as to whether there is any hope of his making amends for his past sins:

"Men's courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead," said Scrooge. "But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change. Say it is thus with what you show me!"

The Spirit was immovable as ever ... "Spirit!" he cried, tight clutching at its robe, "hear me! I am not the man I was. I will not be the man I must have been but for this intercourse. Why show me this, if I am past all hope?" (108).

Scrooge, as the reader is aware, is not ‘past all hope’ (108) because through his words and his actions, especially his tears, a form of remorse that Catholic teaching holds to be sufficient to procure the forgiveness of God and avoid the eternal torments of Hell, he has shown remorse for his sins.

Does, though, the vision of a purgatorial realm in *A Christmas Carol* resonate with the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory? The question is difficult to answer. Purgatory was finally established in Catholic dogma in the sixteenth century when The Council of Trent stated that ‘there is a purgatory, and that the souls there detained are aided by the suffrages of the faithful’.³⁶ Its imaginary content, however, was never defined and, as Geoffrey Rowell argues, during the nineteenth century many different interpretations of Purgatory existed within the Roman Catholic Church.³⁷ Dickens may have attacked the corruption associated with the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory. He may have been disturbed by the Catholic Church’s graphic representations of souls frying in Purgatory that were deliberately designed to instil fear into the hearts of believers. Yet even to imagine a realm distinct from Heaven or Hell where souls are detained is, in a sense, to engage with Catholic belief. It may be argued that Dickens’s ‘Invisible World’ (52) is merely intended to mitigate the infernal visions of Hell that were being espoused by clerics of various religious persuasions in the early nineteenth century. Most Christian religious denominations, whether Anglican, Calvinist, Catholic, or otherwise, had clerics who emphasized the threat of eternal punishment to their flock by painting particularly crude accounts of Hell.³⁸ For Dickens, the language of this Hell-preaching, which was filled with sadistic images of souls screaming in pain, burning in swathes of fire, and being worried by animals, belonged to a religion of fear

³⁶ Quoted in Rev. H. J. Schroeder, *The Canons and Decrees of The Council of Trent* (Rockford, Illinois: Tan Books and Publishers, 1978), 214.

³⁷ Geoffrey Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians*, 173.

³⁸ Since the mid-seventeenth century the literal belief in Hell as a place of excruciating everlasting punishment had been gradually eroded as theologians began to view such a conception to be incompatible with a just and merciful God. But while it is a truism that during the nineteenth century the concept of Hell continued to come under attack and slowly attain a metaphorical as opposed to literal meaning, the prevalence of Hell-fire preaching cannot be underestimated. See D. P. Walker, *The Decline of Hell: Seventeenth-Century Discussions of Eternal Torment* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964).

that he had previously censured through figures such as Mr Brownlow in *Oliver Twist* who chastises ‘haughty religious people’ that ‘preach of flames and vengeance’ (384). Marley’s suffering mitigates such crude images of Hell. Yet *A Christmas Carol* reaches beyond this; it imagines a realm in the afterlife in which the possibility of redemption remained open, a realm beyond the fixed, immutable dichotomy of Protestant eschatology that preached only Heaven and Hell.

IV

A Christmas Carol is a work preoccupied by death. It provides the reader with a stark reminder of the mortality of man and that we are all ‘fellow-passengers to the grave’ (36). Images of death, both physical and spiritual, permeate the text. Consequently, Dickens’s vision of a purgatorial realm that offers the possibility of pardon and forgiveness in the afterlife works to alter the significance of death’s frontier.

The final acts of life intrigued the Victorians, with the death-bed holding a particular fascination. Death-bed scenes pervade nineteenth-century art and literature. Dickens is perhaps guiltier than most Victorian novelists of indulging in the depiction of the death-bed. One noted nineteenth-century critic, James Fitzjames Stephen, complained of Dickens:

No man can offer to the public so large a stock of death-beds adapted for either sex and for any age from five-and-twenty downwards. There are idiot death-beds, ... pauper death-beds, ... children’s death-beds ... In short, there never was a man to whom the King of Terrors was so useful a lay figure.³⁹

Stephen is certainly correct in noting that Dickens’s writing is filled with death-bed scenes, the most famous examples being those of Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Smike in *Nicholas Nickleby*, Paul Dombey in *Dombey and Son*, Barkis and Dora in *David Copperfield*, and Jo the crossing-sweep in *Bleak House*. But this critique fails to account for

³⁹ James Fitzpatrick Stephen, *Saturday Review* (8th May 1858), 6.

the narrative, thematic and structural significance of these scenes, and, perhaps more importantly, of their Christian import.

Death-beds scenes were of the utmost religious significance to the Victorians, for whom, as Andrew Sanders notes, 'the death-bed retained its ancient moral importance as the final tester of the soul'.⁴⁰ Implicit in the Victorian death-bed scene, and crucial to the idea that the state of a person's soul at the moment of death was of great importance, is whether a person had a 'good' or 'bad' death. A 'good' death usually involved having time to repent for one's sins in order to prepare the soul for entry to Heaven, and being attended by loving members of the family who would mourn a person's passing. A 'bad' death, however, was considered a sudden death which denied a person an opportunity for spiritual preparation or repentance, a death unattended, or, worst of all, a suicide. As Pat Jalland's study of death in the nineteenth century shows, the concept of a 'good' or 'bad' death was 'intimately linked to traditional Christian fear of judgement at the moment of death on the sins of life resulting in eternal punishment in hell'.⁴¹

Let us keep this in mind if we consider Scrooge's death-bed scene in *A Christmas Carol*. Scrooge's death is perhaps the least discussed of Dickens's death-bed scenes as criticism of the Christian aspect of the work has tended to focus on his redemption. Yet it is arguably the most squalid, gruesome, and harrowing scene of death that Dickens ever imagined. Scrooge's death takes place off-stage, so to speak, but we are given sufficient evidence to be aware of its horror. Initially we are shown his death to be one un-mourned as his business acquaintances who meet in the street speak of his demise with little care or affection. Gradually, though, we come to learn that its reality is much worse than simply being un-mourned. During the conversation between Old Joe, the charwomen, the laundress, and the undertaker's assistant, who have gathered to buy and sell Scrooge's possessions, we become aware that his corpse has been treated like a carcass in a butcher's shop. These

⁴⁰ Andrew Sanders, *Charles Dickens: Resurrectionist*, 31.

⁴¹ Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 59.

‘obscene demons’ (100), as Scrooge calls them, have stolen his belongings, removed the bed-curtains and sheets from his death-bed, and even undressed his dead body and taken the very shirt he was to be buried in. Scrooge’s corpse lies ‘plundered and bereft, unwatched, unwept, uncared for’ (102). Even worse, when Scrooge is looking at the cadaver the narrator tells us, ‘A cat was tearing at the door, and there was a sound of gnawing rats beneath the hearth-stone’ (103). Scrooge does not ‘dare to think ... what *they* wanted in the room of death’ (103), but it is not hard to imagine a horrific, nightmarish vision of these ravenous animals feeding on the rotting flesh of his dead body. And there is no consolation for Scrooge when he is shown his grave. Buried in a filthy, squalid city graveyard that is overrun with rank grass, weeds, and dying vegetation, and is crammed with bodies, it is ‘a worthy place!’ (108) for such an old sinner (see Figure 5). Scrooge’s ‘death’ is most certainly a bad death. But there is one aspect of Scrooge’s death that illustrates a characteristic feature of a ‘bad death’ that is particularly noteworthy: its suddenness. Scrooge, we are told, was ‘struck with Death’ (100). The laundress, Mrs Dilber, remarks upon this sudden, lonely death, and in doing so voices a widely held belief among the early Victorians: it is, she says, ‘a judgement on him’ (100).

To understand why the suddenness of Scrooge’s death may be of significance in relation to Dickens’s imagining a purgatorial realm we must turn to the death of his beloved sister-in-law, Mary Hogarth. Like Scrooge, the death of Mary Hogarth was a sudden one. In the letters Dickens sent notifying friends and colleagues of her death an anxiety about the suddenness of her passing is palpable: ‘Miss Hogarth ... was suddenly taken severely ill’; ‘she ... was taken suddenly ill in the night’; ‘the awful suddenness of her death’; ‘Judge how deeply we feel this fearfully sudden deprivation’; ‘Mrs Dickens’s sister ... was taken suddenly ill, and died in my arms yesterday afternoon’; ‘the loss independent of its fearful suddenness, is severely felt by us’; ‘She was at the Theatre with us on Saturday Night well and happy, and expired in my arms a few hours afterwards’; ‘poor Mary was in the same health and spirits in which you have often seen her - ... almost immediately after she went

upstairs to bed she was taken ill - and that next day she died'; 'The loss we deplore ... is the sudden death in this house, of our dear sister Mary Hogarth'.⁴² Of course, it is entirely understandable in the wake of such a traumatic and unexpected loss that the suddenness of Mary's death is emphasised by Dickens. And Dickens's subsequent letters on the subject of her death do begin to insist upon Mary being in Heaven. Initially, though, in the days following her death there does seem to be a certain distress in his tone about the 'awful' and 'fearful'⁴³ manner of her death. Indeed, it may be to compensate for his fears surrounding the suddenness of her death that Dickens began to extol her virtues and speak of her as a faultless, angelic girl.



Fig. 5 'The Last of the Spirits' from *A Christmas Carol* by John Leech

⁴² *Letters I*, 256; *Letters I*, 256; *Letters I*, 257; *Letters I*, 257; *Letters I*, 257; *Letters I*, 258; *Letters I*, 259; *Letters I*, 263.

⁴³ *Letters I*, 257; *Letters I*, 258.

Edgar Johnson has argued that Mary's death informs Dickens's treatment of death and death-beds in most of his subsequent fiction. Johnson writes that Mary's death was 'agonizingly present' as Dickens composed the last hours of Little Nell, that it 'suffused with tenderness the death of Paul Dombey ... [and] ... lends a dignity'⁴⁴ to the sad demise of Dora Copperfield. But there is no reason to exclude Scrooge's death from this list. Evidence exists to suggest that Mary was in his thoughts during the gestation and writing of *A Christmas Carol*. On the anniversary of Mary Hogarth's death in 1843 Dickens was given a portrait of his dead sister-in-law by her mother, Mrs George Hogarth. At the time when *A Christmas Carol* was forming in his mind, his thoughts must have returned to Mary and reawakened the sense of loss he felt. It is interesting to note that just as Marley died 'seven Christmas Eves ago' (48), when *A Christmas Carol* was being composed the seventh anniversary of Mary's death was only a few months away. If, then, Dickens did feel an anxiety about the manner of Mary's death, and if her death is, albeit grotesquely, being reconstructed in *A Christmas Carol*, then by imagining a purgatorial realm, especially one from which Scrooge receives assistance and, in a sense, defeats his 'bad' death and is not condemned to Hell, then it may have worked to alleviate any unconscious lingering fears Dickens had surrounding the destination of Mary's soul.

Imagining a purgatorial realm may perform another function for Dickens in his continued grief at the death of Mary Hogarth. In the letter of thanks Dickens sent to his mother-in-law for sending him Mary's portrait, he wrote:

After she died, I dreamed of her every night for many months - I think for the better part of a year - sometimes as a spirit, sometimes as a living creature, never with any of the bitterness of my real sorrow, but always with a kind of quiet happiness, which became so pleasant to me that I never lay down at night without a hope of the vision coming back in one shape or another ... the recollection of her is an essential part of my being, and is as inseparable from my existence as the beating of my heart is.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Edgar Johnson, *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph*, 128.

⁴⁵ *Letters III*, 484.

Stephen Greenblatt argues that the doctrine of Purgatory ‘forged a different kind of link between the living and the dead, or, rather, it enabled the dead to be not completely dead - not as utterly gone, finished, complete as those whose souls resided forever in Hell or Heaven’.⁴⁶ Perhaps this is true for Dickens. By imagining a purgatorial realm in which the dead could communicate with the living, he allowed his beloved Mary to remain somehow not beyond his reach and an essential part of his being forever.

⁴⁶ Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, 17.

Chapter Four

Architecture

'it is a land of contradictions, in everything, this Italy'
Charles Dickens, Letter to Samuel Rogers (1st September 1844)

Pictures from Italy is generally deemed to be Dickens's most anti-Catholic work. Yet his Italian travelogue manifests a strange attraction to Catholicism: the gloomy magnetism of the architecture and ornamentation of Catholic churches fascinates him and profoundly impacts upon his senses. Undoubtedly, the profusion of ornate churches and Catholic ceremonies were a peculiar sight for Victorian travellers to Italy. But Dickens's response to Italian churches transcends their mere peculiarity. In the often cryptic and, at times, oxymoronic passages of *Pictures from Italy* that detail Catholic architecture he is variously attracted, distracted, disturbed, enthralled, enchanted and repelled by these places of worship. Words loaded with theological implications such as 'mysterious' and 'solemn' are central to the text's conception of these buildings and suggest a deep-rooted attraction to the sombreness and sensuousness of Catholic churches as sanctified spaces that heighten religious adherence and assurance. Italian Catholic churches, however, also affect Dickens in a more cryptic sense. They weirdly disorientate and eerily disturb him. He is often subject to feelings of uncanniness among the buildings and relics of this alien, foreign, unfamiliar religion. For Dickens, and indeed for many Victorian Protestants, to be confronted with the merging of Paganism and Christianity in Italian churches is to be confronted by the historical 'illegitimacy' of the Protestant Church. It is a reminder that Protestantism's Catholic past uncannily haunts the Church of England, especially in its use of medieval churches. Thus, an unresolved narrative tension permeates *Pictures from Italy*: a conflict between the magnetic allure of the religion of Italy and a fear of what he called that 'monstrous institution' (24), the Roman Catholic Church.

I

First published in 1846, *Pictures from Italy* appeared at a time of widespread debate and changing attitudes towards the way ecclesiastical architecture and forms of worship embodied religious meaning. Augustus Pugin, a militant Roman Catholic and the most prominent figure of the Gothic Revival, had greatly affected church-building in England.¹ In the highly influential *Contrasts* (1836) he argued that the rise of Protestantism, or the ‘destructive principle’² as he termed it, had begun a moral decline which in turn had led to a decline in religious architecture. Pugin, who believed medieval Gothic architecture itself to be a religious text in which he found ‘*the faith of Christianity embodied, and its practices illustrated*’,³ aggressively promoted the building of medieval religious structures in an attempt to recover the lost but idyllic piety of Roman Catholicism in England. In doing so, he advocated that churches must possess certain Catholic-flavoured requisites - ornate decor, stained glass windows, a chancel set apart for sacrifice, a sacarium sedalia for officiating priests, chapels for penance and prayer, and a sacristy to contain the sacred vessels - for ‘true ... Christianity’⁴ to be restored. Pugin’s doctrine was widely disseminated, but the Roman Catholic associations of his ideas were anathema to the Protestant majority of English society. Pugin’s influence on the design of the Houses of Parliament, for example, was heavily criticised and he was charged as having ‘conspired to turn Parliament into a monastery’ where ‘the members were to wear monk’s habits’.⁵

Yet Pugin’s architectural theories were conducted to the Anglican community. By 1844, the year Dickens travelled to Italy, the Oxford Movement’s emphasis upon sacramentalism and liturgical formalism was beginning to find expression in the gradual

¹ For the influence of Pugin and the Gothic Revival see Kenneth Clarke, *The Gothic Revival: An Essay in the History of Taste* (London: Constable, 1928); Chris Brooks, *The Gothic Revival* (London: Phaidon Press, 1999); and Rosemary Hill, *God’s Architect: Pugin and the Building of Romantic Britain* (London: Penguin, 2007).

² A. W. N. Pugin, *Contrasts and The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture* [1836] (Reading: Spire Books Ltd, 2003), 21.

³ *Ibid*, 3.

⁴ *Ibid*, 58.

⁵ Kenneth Clarke, *The Gothic Revival: An Essay in the History of Taste*, 103.

restoration of more ritualistic religious ceremonies being performed by some Church of England clergy. And although the primary concern of the Oxford Movement was focused upon doctrinal matters, a sermon given by Newman in 1839, entitled ‘The Visible Church an Encouragement to Faith’, suggests that its leaders accepted the architectural principles informing the ideas of Pugin. Newman stated that: ‘the ordinances which we behold, force the unseen truth upon the senses. The very disposition of the building, the subdued light of the isles, the Altar, with its pious adornments, are figures of things unseen, and stimulate our fainting faith’.⁶ As Chris Brooks has shown, however, it was the Cambridge Camden Society that ‘brought the architectural dogmatic theology of the Oxford Movement and the equally dogmatic architectural theory of Pugin to the design of Anglican churches’.⁷ Passionately Anglo-Catholic, the Cambridge Camden Society was an exclusive group of highly influential undergraduates who sought to restore the concept of the church as a sacred site.⁸ During the early 1840s the society’s monthly publication, *The Ecclesiologist*, successfully campaigned for the building of Anglican churches in the Gothic style. And the vast majority of these churches were designed and built with many of the Catholic-flavoured interior features that Pugin had deemed essential, and which placed a greater emphasis upon the sacraments as opposed to sermonizing.

Dickens was almost certainly aware of these developments. He would definitely have had some knowledge of Pugin’s work as the controversial nature of the architect’s writing, specifically its Roman Catholic orientation, had led to his ideas being widely discussed if not well-received. Moreover, several of Dickens’s closest friends were either acquainted with Pugin or knew his theories. Carlyle had met the architect and been influenced by his work; Clarkson Stanfield was also a close friend of Pugin; and Hablot K. Browne is known to have

⁶ John Henry Newman, ‘The Visible Church an Encouragement to Faith’ in *The Works of John Henry Newman: Parochial and Plain Sermons*, Vol. III [1839] (Westminster, Md: Christian Classics Inc., 1966), 251 [236-53].

⁷ Chris Brooks, ‘Introduction’ in *The Victorian Church: Architecture and Society* edited by Chris Brooks and Andrew Saint (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 7.

⁸ For the history and influence of the Cambridge Camden Society see Christopher Webster and John Eliot (eds), *A Church as it Should Be: The Cambridge Camden Society and its Influence* (Stamford: Shaun Tyas, 2000).

studied Puginian theory during his time as an architectural draughtsman. And with regard to the Cambridge Camden Society the proliferation of architectural debates in the press would undoubtedly have brought their name to Dickens's attention. But it is *Martin Chuzzlewit*, the novel immediately preceding *Pictures from Italy*, that suggests Dickens was not only aware of but actually engaged in contemporary debates surrounding architecture and the architectural profession.⁹ *Martin Chuzzlewit* is a text dense in architectural references, imagery, allusion, and metaphor. Most notably, the hypocritical architect Seth Pecksniff is a vehicle through which Dickens conducts a satirical examination into contemporary architectural debates. But beneath the translucent satire invested in the detestable Pecksniff lurks a more profound and mysterious architectural concern about the religious values inscribed in architecture. Although the retrospective, romantic vision of the medieval world and the overt Roman Catholic sentiments of Pugin's thought were more than likely objectionable to Dickens, in the character of Pecksniff the author is voicing a similar objection about 'morality' being perverted in the architectural arena.¹⁰

Victorians who travelled to the continent during the late 1830s and early 1840s were therefore abroad at a time when architectural debates, especially the influence of Catholicism on ecclesiastical architecture and religious worship in England, occupied their minds. And Dickens was no exception.

⁹ The importance of architecture and architectural theory in *Martin Chuzzlewit* has been well documented. For the most important discussions see: Alan R. Burke, 'The House of Chuzzlewit and the Architectural City', *Dickens Studies Annual* 3 (1974), 15-40; Steven Connor, 'Babel unbuilding: The Anti-archi-rhetoric of *Martin Chuzzlewit*' in *Dickens Refigured* edited by John Schad (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 178-99; Gerhard Joseph, 'The Labyrinth and the Library: A View from the Temple in *Martin Chuzzlewit*', *Dickens Studies Annual* 15 (1986), 1-22; and Nancy Aycock Metz, 'Dickens and the Quack Architectural', *Dickens Quarterly*, Vol. XI. No. 2 (June 1984), 59-68.

¹⁰ The words 'moral' and 'morality' appear no fewer than fifty times in *Martin Chuzzlewit* and are almost exclusively spoken by the hypocritical Pecksniff. See Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit* edited by Patricia Ingham [1843-4] (London: Penguin, 2004). All further citations will be to this edition and placed in the text. It has been claimed that Pugin is the model for Pecksniff, but this is untrue. The character of Pecksniff appears to be based on the notoriously sanctimonious Samuel Carter Hall, an Irish-born journalist best known for his editorship of *The Art Journal*. See Joseph H. Gardner, 'Pecksniff's Profession: Boz, Phiz, and Pugin', *The Dickensian* 72 (1976), 75-86.

II

Dickens's descriptions of churches and cathedrals in *Pictures from Italy* are often typical of Victorian Protestant writers who portrayed these edifices as sites of a religion that is exhausted and dangerously reliant upon superstition and mummery.¹¹ In every Roman Catholic church, he writes, there is:

the same monotonous, heartless, drowsy chanting, always going on; the same dark building, darker from the brightness of the street without; the same lamps dimly burning; the self-same people kneeling here and there; ... the same priest's back, with the same large cross embroidered on it; however different in size, in shape, in wealth, in architecture, this church is from that, it is the same thing still. There are the same dirty beggars stopping in their muttered prayers to beg; the same miserable cripples exhibiting their deformity at the doors; the same blind men, rattling little pots like kitchen pepper-casters: ... the same preposterous crowns of silver stuck upon the painted heads of single saints and Virgins in crowded pictures ... [and] the same favourite shrine or figure' (135).

Dickens's heavily repetitive passage is representative of the book's portrait of Catholicism as a stagnant religion. 'Drowsy' (135), especially, reflects a series of images that suggest Roman Catholic churches and worship induce torpor and lethargy. Yet on occasion he contradicts such a portrait of Catholic places of worship: there are moments in *Pictures from Italy* when he is awestruck by Roman Catholic churches and which attest to a deep attraction for Catholic expressions of faith.

Of all the Roman Catholic churches that Dickens visits in Italy, it is Saint Mark's Cathedral in Venice that is the most alluring:

¹¹ See Kenneth Churchill, *Italy and English Literature, 1764-1930* (London: Macmillan, 1980), 129-46.

I thought I entered the Cathedral, and went in and out among its many arches; traversing its whole extent. A grand and dreamy structure, of immense proportions; golden with old mosaics; redolent of perfumes; dim with the smoke of incense; costly in treasure of precious stones and metals, glittering through iron bars; holy with the bodies of deceased saints; rainbow-hued with windows of stained glass; dark with carved woods and coloured marbles; obscure in its vast heights, and lengthened distances; shining with silver lamps and winking lights; unreal, fantastic, solemn, inconceivable throughout (80).

Undoubtedly the cathedral attracts rather than repels him. The sublimity of the architecture, the antiquity of the art, holy relics, exotic aromas, and the bright colours glittering amidst the dark atmosphere, all combine to create a superb aesthetic effect that impacts greatly upon his senses. He conveys the magnetic allure of Saint Mark's by infusing the passage with a luscious, poetic quality. The adjectives used, when grouped together, are alliterative: the edifice is 'grand ... golden ... glittering' and 'dreamy ... dim ... dark' (80). The whole passage has a wonderful assonance. Saint Mark's is a structure of '*immense proportions; golden with old mosaics; ... costly ... precious stones ... holy with the bodies of deceased saints ... woods and coloured marbles; obscure ... inconceivable throughout*' (80, emphasis added). And the focus upon the 'immense proportions' (80) of the church, its 'vast heights' and 'lengthened distances' (80), emphasise that its sheer scale is awe inspiring.

But when Dickens speaks of feeling 'a great sense of mystery and wonder' (117) in Saint Mark's, the words he employs suggest an attraction that goes beyond the mere aesthetic beauty of the church. 'Mysterious' originates from the noun 'mystery' which was first used in theology, and which still carried a deeply religious meaning in the nineteenth century, to describe a 'mystical presence' or 'a religious truth known or understood only by divine revelation' (*OED*, Sense 2a). His calling the cathedral 'solemn' (80) furthers this sense of heightened religious feeling. 'Solemn' is defined by the *OED* as meaning something 'associated or connected with religious rites or observances; performed with due ceremony and reverence; having a religious character; sacred' (*OED*, Sense 1). Indeed, the word is used in several of the descriptions of Roman Catholic churches that appear to

fascinate and intrigue Dickens. He tells us that a French cathedral is ‘very solemn and grand’ (13), the beautiful Church of the Campo Santo is a ‘solemn and lovely place’ (108), and the churches of Florence are ‘solemn and serene within’ (186). For Dickens, Saint Mark’s and other Italian Catholic churches seem to be holy, sanctified spaces.

Dickens had in fact already explored the religious context of the word ‘solemn’ in arguably his most famous fictional portrait of a church up until this point: the death-crypt of Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. ‘Solemn’ is the keynote of this ancient church. The narrator tells us it is a ‘solemn ruin’ (395), a ‘solemn building’ (401) with a ‘solemn garden’, (414) which is ‘made more solemn still’ (403) by the shadows at dusk. But it is the spiritual comfort the solemnity of the church provides for Little Nell herself that is most telling. The old building gives her a ‘solemn feeling’ (390); she senses ‘the solemn presence, within’ (393); she listens to the bells of the church with ‘solemn pleasure’ (543); and even in death it affords her a ‘solemn stillness’ (538). As the illustrations for *The Old Curiosity Shop* clearly show, the church where Little Nell dies, which ‘had been built many hundreds of years ago, and had once had a convent or monastery attached’ (354), is replete with the vestiges of Catholicism (see figures 6 and 7). It is a medieval Gothic building with ornate interiors, stained glass windows, and, on the headboard of Nell’s deathbed, a carving of the Madonna and child is prominently displayed.¹² It is surprising how similar the description of the church in *The Old Curiosity Shop* is to that of Saint Mark’s Cathedral in *Pictures from Italy*. Nell is told that ‘in the time of the monks’ the church was resplendent with ‘lamps depending from the roof, and swinging censers exhaling scented odours, and habits glittering with gold and silver, and pictures, and precious stuffs, and jewels all flashing and glistening through the low arches’ (405). Dickens, then, seems to have already considered the possibilities of the sensuousness of Catholicism. For Little Nell, the solemnity of this ancient medieval church brimming with Catholic iconography ‘fill[s] her with deep and thoughtful feelings’ and gives her ‘a purified and altered mind’ (393).

¹² The illustration in Chapter the First entitled ‘Nell in Bed’ (18), anticipates the Catholic surroundings in which Nell will die by including two figures of nuns and a crucifix.



Fig. 6 'Nell among the tombs' from *The Old Curiosity Shop* by George Cattermole



Fig. 7 'Nell Dead' from *The Old Curiosity Shop* by George Cattermole

In Genoa too, Dickens figures the architecture and ornamentation of Catholicism as deeply attractive and alluring. Sitting in the Genoa Cathedral, he writes:

Gold-embroidered festoons of different colours, hang from the arches; the altar furniture is set forth; and sometimes, even the lofty pillars are swathed from top to bottom in tight-fitting draperies ... we went into it, just as the sun was setting. Although these decorations are usually in very indifferent taste, the effect, just then, was very superb indeed. For the whole building was dressed in red; and the sinking sun, streaming in, through a great red curtain in the chief doorway, made all the gorgeousness its own. When the sun went down, and it gradually grew quite dark inside, except for a few twinkling tapers on the principal altar, and some small dangling silver lamps, it was very mysterious and effective (45-6).

Church decorations, frequently censured throughout *Pictures from Italy* as gaudy and self-aggrandizing, here produce a ‘superb ... effect’ (46). But as his account of the Genoa Cathedral unfolds it is not simply the architectural beauty or the lavish decorations that captivates Dickens. Having remained in the cathedral for the duration of sunset, his tone evokes the soothing and lulling effects that the scene has upon the senses. Again his use of language and alliteration - ‘the sinking sun streaming in’; ‘it gradually grew quite dark’; ‘a few twinkling tapers’ (46) - gives a poetic feel to the passage. And, like Saint Mark’s, his attraction to the Genoa Cathedral extends beyond its aesthetic beauty: the scene is ‘very mysterious’ (46).

But what are we to make of Dickens’s apparent apprehension of the effects of Genoa Cathedral when he concludes that ‘sitting in any of the churches towards evening, is like a mild dose of opium’ (46)? To a modern reader the comparison of the effects of a Catholic church to taking a ‘dose of opium’ (46) may seem entirely negative, especially one who is aware of the detrimental effects of the drug as shown in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Elizabeth Bridgham, for example, argues that the reference to opium suggests that Dickens believes being seduced by the extravagant ornamentation and decor of these churches is ‘as

dangerous as to be drugged'.¹³ Bridgham does make a relevant point. By qualifying his illustration of the mystical effects of the cathedral with a comparison to opiates Dickens may be guarding against the allure of what were commonly considered by English Protestants to be the superstitious trappings of Roman Catholicism.¹⁴ However, such a wholly negative analysis may not be entirely accurate. After all, the figurative meaning of taking 'a mild dose of opium' (46) in the 1840s is vastly different from its present meaning, or even the meaning the phrase assumed only a decade later. As David Paroissien shows, until the early 1850s the prevailing view of opium use was widely associated with the benefits of its anaesthetic properties, and the linguistic connotations of opium were also often used to evoke the exotic associations of the drug.¹⁵ Thus, Dickens's comparison of the effects of the church and a 'mild dose of opium' (46) may neither be disapproving nor cynical, an idea that is reinforced by his comments in a letter written during his stay in Italy in which he speaks of the 'gorgeous and wonderful reality of Venice' being 'beyond the fancy of the wildest dreamer'. 'Opium', he concludes, 'couldn't build such a place'¹⁶

Yet this semantic confusion epitomises the ambiguity surrounding several moments in *Pictures from Italy* when Roman Catholic churches and ceremonies appeal to Dickens. Always lurking behind his attraction, it seems, is an anxiety or fear of the spectre of the Roman Catholic Church. In Venice, for example, the water close by to Saint Mark's Cathedral is an ominous presence. The simile Dickens employs is that it creeps and coils round the city 'noiseless and watchful: ... like an old serpent' (85), a phrase that immediately brings to mind Satan, who is referred to in the Bible as 'that old serpent' (Genesis 3:1). And

¹³ Elizabeth A. Bridgham, *Spaces of the Sacred and Profane: Dickens, Trollope, and the Victorian Cathedral Town* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2008), 34.

¹⁴ Ruskin, for example, lambasted those who were 'lured into the Romanist Church by the glitter of it'. John Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*, Vol. IX edited by E. T. Cook & Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1903), 437.

¹⁵ See David Paroissien, 'Opium use in Nineteenth-Century England' in Charles Dickens, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* edited by David Paroissien (London: Penguin, 2002), 309-20. All further citations will be from this edition and placed in the text.

¹⁶ *Letters* IV, 217.

this idea of a Satanic presence returns in the Sistine Chapel when Dickens notices that the curtain in the doorway ‘seemed to wind itself about the unwary, like a Serpent’ (152).

One such ambiguity of Dickens’s attitude to Italian churches that has been interpreted as evidence of trenchant anti-Catholicism is his response to the theatricality of the Catholic religion.¹⁷ *Pictures from Italy* swarms with theatrical allusions and metaphors, especially in its descriptions of Roman Catholic iconography and ceremonies. A figure of the Virgin Mary is a ‘puppet’ (17); a ‘wax saint’ (17) is compared to a model in Madame Tussauds; a statue of Mary and Joseph resembles ‘two delectable figures, such as you would see at any English fair’ (133); and a supposedly miraculous figure of the baby Jesus is ‘very like General Tom Thumb’ (133), an American midget who had been exhibited in England by P. T. Barnum. But it is Saint Peter’s in Rome that the most notable allusions to the theatricality of Catholicism can be found. Saint Peter’s is ‘swathed in some impertinent frippery of red and yellow’ and looks like ‘one of the opening scenes in a very lavish pantomime’ (117). The spaces behind the altar resemble ‘boxes, shaped like those at the Italian Opera in England’ (119) and the Swiss Guard are ‘theatrical supernumeraries, who never *can* get off the stage fast enough’ (119). Moreover, the ceremonies of Holy Week in Saint Peter’s are described as ‘shows’ (151). They are an ‘eccentric entertainment’ (152) during which ‘the Cardinals, and other attendants, smiled to each other, from time to time, as if the thing were a great farce’ (156).

Such an image of Catholic theatricality was a familiar complaint among Victorian Protestants who visited Rome. Lord Shaftesbury wrote that Catholic Mass is ‘precisely like an opera. In such rites as these the soul has no share’.¹⁸ Thackeray found the churches of

¹⁷ A comment by Peter Ackroyd exemplifies this. Ackroyd argues that a central aspect of Dickens’s ‘hatred’ of Catholicism was because he thought Catholic ceremonies were ‘little more than a parade of mummers’. Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens*, 491.

¹⁸ Quoted in Edwin Hodder, *The Life and Work of the Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, K. G.*, Vol. I (London: Cassell, 1887), 184.

Rome to be like ‘shabby theatre[s]’.¹⁹ And even John Henry Newman, on a visit to the Vatican in 1831, thought the Papal Mass to be an ‘unedifying dumbshow’.²⁰ Paradoxically, though, Dickens’s profound love of the theatrical moderates his critique. His sketches of the statues, shrines, and staginess of Catholicism are neither malevolent nor malicious. Indeed, given his love of popular forms of entertainment and the theatre, these comparisons are generally used for gentle comedic effect to entertain the reader. Although it cannot be denied he is at times uneasy with, and critical of, Catholic ceremonies, some of which he condemns as a ‘dangerous reliance on outward observances’ (156), he is also often very appreciative of Catholic theatricality. During the raising of the Host at the Papal Mass, for example, he writes: ‘when every man in the guard dropped on one knee instantly, and dashed his naked sword on the ground, ... [it] had a fine effect’ (121). And when the Pope bears the sacraments in his hands surrounded by the cardinals and canons it makes for a ‘brilliant show’ (153).

Dickens, then, is a less severe critic of Catholic theatricality than many of his contemporaries and at times he actually validates and approves of the theatrical nature of Roman Catholicism. Catholic churches and cathedrals are often likened in *Pictures from Italy* to theatrical sets and are shown to be vibrant communal spaces. A ‘scene-like’ (15) cathedral in France, for example, forms the backdrop to a glorious market scene:

The market is held in the little square outside in front of the cathedral. It is crowded with men and women, in blue, in red, in green, in white; with canvased stalls; and fluttering merchandise. The country people are grouped about, with their clean baskets before them. Here, the lace-sellers; there the butter and egg-sellers; there, the fruit-sellers; there, the shoemakers. The whole place looks as if it were the stage of some great theatre, and the curtain had just run up, for a picturesque ballet’ (15).

¹⁹ William Makepeace Thackeray, ‘Notes of a Journey from Cornhill to Grand Cairo’ in *The Works of William Makepeace Thackeray*, Vol. XIV (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1869), 467.

²⁰ John Henry Newman, *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, Vol. III edited by Ian Ker & Thomas Gornall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 268.

As the cathedral hosts a market that is full of colour, bustling with people, and brimming with energy, it is shown to be a focal point of the community that unifies and entertains. Also significant is Dickens's elaborate and enthusiastic description of the carnival in Rome. He is intoxicated by the energy, absurdity, and wild abandon of the carnival spirit. But the 'gay madness' (127) of the Roman Carnival, although in stark contrast to the officiousness of religious ceremonies, was an integral part of the Holy Week celebrations and was sanctioned by the Catholic Church. If, then, we recall Juliet John's argument that 'a belief in "popular" culture was Dickens's most firmly held political view',²¹ then this licensed release is a wholly positive aspect of Roman Catholicism, especially in contrast to Protestant England, where the growing influence of evangelical Christianity had led to increased sabbatarian legislation and the suppression of carnivals such as Bartholomew Fair.²²

However, even in the moments in *Pictures from Italy* when the Catholic Church functions as a focal point of the community or as a provider of the amusements of the people, a sense of anxiety remains. The French cathedral that forms the backdrop to the glorious market scene also eerily looms over the bustling marketplace. It is 'all grim, and swarthy, and mouldering, and cold' (15). And the autocratic authority of the Catholic Church is ever-present behind the scenes of the carnival. The Pope's dragoons 'vigilantly' (122) keep watch over the festivities and 'in the wildest enthusiasm of the cry, and fullest ecstasy of the sport, the Ave Maria rings from the church steeples, and the Carnival is over in an instant - put out like a taper, with a breath' (128).²³

²¹ Juliet John, *Dickens's Villains*, 3.

²² See Paul Schlicke, *Dickens and Popular Entertainment* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1985), 10, 198, 207, 270.

²³ Although not explicitly applied to Catholicism, Dickens's description of the sights of Italy being like a 'bewildering phantasmagoria' (40) and a 'magic-lantern' (77) are also tinged with religious anxiety. As Mervyn Heard explains, the use of magic-lanterns is intimately connected to religious trickery as they were often used by Victorian missionaries in their attempts to convert the 'heathens' of foreign lands to Christianity. See Mervyn Heard, *Phantasmagoria: The Secret Life of the Magic Lantern* (Hastings: The Projection Box, 2006), 258.

III

Pictures from Italy therefore manifests a surprising attraction for Roman Catholic architecture and expressions of faith, but, at the same time, a strange, troubling undercurrent, a sense of unease regarding the oppressiveness and bloody history of the Catholic Church, is ever-present. Italian Catholicism, however, affects Dickens in a more cryptic sense: it provokes in him strange feelings of uncanniness. In *The Mediterranean Passion* John Pemble argues that for Victorian Protestant tourists to Italy the allure of Catholicism often ‘disturbed the subconscious mind with secret yearnings and strange fantasies’.²⁴ Dickens’s dream of Mary Hogarth is an obvious example of this uncanny phenomenon. But he is by no means the only Victorian to have experienced such a curious vision whilst visiting Italy. John Ruskin dreamed of becoming a Franciscan monk; the historian and Anglican clergyman Dean Arthur Penrhyn Stanley that he was elected Pope; and the sculptor Lord Ronald Gower envisaged himself as a cardinal.²⁵ Italy, for English Victorian Protestants, was a strange, romantic land; but the religion of Italy represented something stranger still. Roman Catholicism was perhaps too alien to be familiar, but too familiar not to be disturbing.

‘Strange’, ‘stranger’, and ‘strangest’ are words that appear frequently in *Pictures from Italy*, especially when images of churches are being drawn. In Rome, whilst meditating upon the effects of Catholicism, Dickens writes that ‘the scene in all the churches is the strangest possible’ (135). And on leaving a cathedral in Modena he thinks ‘how strange it [i]s, to find, in every stagnant town, this same Heart beating with the same monotonous pulsation, the centre of the same torpid, listless system’ (68). Such statements feed into the anti-Catholic tone of the book by emphasising the foreignness of Roman Catholicism. But Dickens does not merely contemplate the strangeness of Roman Catholicism. He seems to experience a

²⁴ John Pemble, *The Mediterranean Passion: Victorians and Edwardians in the South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 225.

²⁵ See Joan Evans, *John Ruskin* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1954), 350; Roland E. Prothero, *The Life and Correspondence of Arthur Penrhyn Stanley*, Vol. II (London: John Murray, 1894), 359; and Lord Ronald Gower, *My Reminiscences* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, & Co, 1883), 272.

kind of estrangement among the buildings and relics of this unfamiliar religion.²⁶ He speaks of ‘a feverish and bewildered vision of saints’ and virgins’ shrines’ (29); complains that ‘the bells of the churches ring incessantly ... in a horrible, irregular, jerking, dingle, dingle, dingle ... which is maddening’ (45); of being lost amidst ‘a vast wilderness of consecrated buildings of all shapes and fancies’ (139); and of Roman Catholic ceremonies being ‘oppressive; the noise, hubbub, and confusion, quite distracting’ (151). Kate Flint notes that the spectacle of Italy led Dickens to compare his experience to a ‘derangement of the senses’.²⁷ However, it is again in the Roman Catholic churches of Italy that this disruption of the psyche is most pronounced. Words such as ‘intoxication’ (40), ‘bewildering’ (40), ‘confounding’ (67), ‘drowsy’ (72), ‘confusion’ (77), ‘incoherent’ (77), ‘perplexed’ (79), and ‘dreamy’ (80) are used time and again to impart the strange effect these religious sites have upon the intellect. Saint Peter’s in Rome is particularly dislocating: it is ‘an immense edifice, with no one point for the mind to rest upon; and it tires itself with wandering round and round’ (119).

Little Dorrit’s descriptions of Italian churches are also worth noting here. Amy, like Dickens, seems fascinated by the sensuousness of Catholic churches. We hear of her:

rest[ing] in dark corners of great churches; where there were winking lamps of gold and silver among pillars and arches, kneeling figures dotted about at confessionals and on the pavements; where there was the mist and scent of incense; where there were pictures, fantastic images, gaudy altars, great heights and distances, all softly lighted through stained glass, and the massive curtains that hung in the doorways’ (490).

Italy, though, for Amy, is similarly marked by its strangeness. The country introduces a much needed aesthetic relief for Amy with its profusion of colour and sublime landscapes, but it makes ‘everything in [her] life ... so strange’ (492). Her experience is repeatedly described as being ‘strange ... so strange ... stranger ... far stranger’ (488). She is also

²⁶ John Chad has made a similar point. He writes: ‘Amongst the churches of Italy Dickens is sick, it seems, in the sense that they disrupt his very ability to think’. John Chad, *Queer Fish: Christian Unreason from Darwin to Derrida* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2004), 82.

²⁷ Kate Flint, ‘Introduction’ in Charles Dickens, *Pictures from Italy*, viii.

subject to a kind of psychological disorientation, especially during her visits to religious sites. Italy is ‘unreal’ and like a ‘dream’ (488). Venice is the ‘crowning unreality’ of Italy for her, and she feels ‘lost’, ‘feverish’, and ‘giddy’ in this ‘strange city’ where ‘the deathlike stillness of the days and nights was broken by no sound but the softened ringing of church-bells’ (491).

What, then, becomes apparent is the uncanny effect of Italian churches on Dickens’s imagination. He almost always invests these churches and cathedrals with uncanny qualities. In *Pictures from Italy* they are invariably anthropomorphic or animistic. They have ‘jealous’ (22) wall[s]’, ‘gaping wounds’ (24), ‘frowning’ (25) towers, and ‘winking’ (80) lanterns, and are invariably haunted by crowds of ‘phantom-looking men and women’ (67). But the uncanny is not a property of architecture or people. It is, according to Freud, the representation of the psychic state that elides the boundaries of the real and unreal to arouse a disturbing ambiguity.²⁸

A particularly striking example of this disturbing ambiguity emerges in the dream imagery of the book.²⁹ Dickens’s chapter on Venice, entitled ‘An Italian Dream’, is notable for being a dream-like vision in which he takes the reader on a journey through an ‘enchanted’ (80) dreamscape that causes the ‘greatest confusion through [his] mind’ (77) and a ‘jumble in [his] brain’ (77). Especially important for understanding this ambiguity in relation to a strange attraction of repulsion for Catholicism, however, is his ‘great dream of Roman churches’ (136). ‘To single out details from the great dream of Roman churches’, he writes, ‘would be the wildest occupation in the world’ (136). But this is exactly what he does. Dickens is appalled by the frescoes on the walls of Saint Stefano Rotundo which

²⁸ See Sigmund Freud, ‘The Uncanny’ in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XVII translated by James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1962), 219-52.

²⁹ Valerie Kennedy argues that the dream imagery in *Pictures from Italy* dramatizes the past savagery of Italy to convey a view of the present as still inhibited by the past. Valerie Kennedy, ‘Dream or Reality? Past Savagery versus Present Civilisation in *Pictures from Italy* and *Little Dorrit*’ in *Dickens and Italy* edited by Michael Hollington and Francesca Orestano (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 93-113.

depict 'such a panorama of horror and butchery no man could imagine in his sleep' (136). But he revels in the lurid descriptions of these paintings when he tells us of 'men being boiled, fried, grilled, crimped, singed, eaten by wild beasts, worried by dogs, buried alive, torn asunder by horses, [and] chopped up small with hatchets' and of 'women having their breasts torn with iron pinchers, their tongues cut out, their ears screwed off, their jaws broken, their bodies stretched upon the rack, or skinned upon the stake' (136). This church, he says, 'will always struggle uppermost in my mind' (136). The chapel of the Mamertime prisons, where according to Christian tradition Saint Peter and Saint Paul were imprisoned, also fills him with horror. 'It is very small and low-roofed; and the dread and gloom of the ponderous, obdurate old prison are on it, as if they had come up in a dark mist through the floor' (137). Again he notes a peculiar attraction. He says that it is one of 'the spots and patches in my dream of churches, that remain apart, and keep their separate identity' (139). Given Dickens's fascination with the macabre it is perhaps not surprising that he dwells upon these gruesome sites.³⁰ But they deeply disturb his mind. The upper chamber in the Mamertime prisons becomes a 'dream within a dream' in his 'vision of great churches' (137). His remarks that the chilling instruments of torture hanging upon the walls are 'at once strangely in keeping, and strangely at variance, with the place' (137), suggest that it is a most *unheimlich* place; a former home to Peter and Paul that is now a haunted house adorned with 'instruments of violence and murder ... hung up to propitiate offended Heaven' (137). Even though these places disturb his psyche, and even when he has explored so many churches and vows to 'never, of my own accord, go to church again' (129), he seems trapped in a repetitive cycle and is compulsively drawn to these unsettling sites.

Yet there are two particularly striking moments in Dickens's 'great dream of Roman churches' (136) when the uncanny arises that may afford a wider understanding of the psychic confusion which the Roman Catholic churches of Italy provoked not only in the author himself but amongst many Victorian Protestants. First, the strange sense of

³⁰ For a discussion of Dickens and the macabre see Harry Stone, *The Night Side of Dickens: Cannibalism, Passion, Necessity* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1994).

disquietude he feels when confronted with the merging of Pagan and Christian architecture, and, secondly, his pronounced fear of being buried alive in the catacombs of Rome.

Pictures from Italy repeatedly dwells on the blending of Paganism and Christianity in Italy. Dickens tells us of a driver who curiously swears both in Christian and Pagan oaths. He also notes that votive offerings ‘not unknown in Pagan Temples ... are evidently among the many compromises made between the false religion and the true’ (20). In Italy, writes Dickens, ‘Christianity ... merges into Paganism’ (64). But it is the architectural assimilation of Paganism into Christianity that most intrigues him. At one point, for example, he registers a strange fascination for the ‘vast wilderness of consecrated buildings of all shapes and fancies, blending one with another; of battered pillars of old Pagan temples, dug up from the ground, and forced, like giant captives, to support the roofs of Christian churches’ (139). Christianity’s appropriation of Pagan temples and practices had, in fact, long been a common complaint of English Protestants. Conyers Middleton’s popular *A Letter from Rome* (1729) had dissected the pagan elements in Catholicism in an attempt to show that the architecture and ritualistic ceremonies of the Church of Rome were spiritually moribund vanities inherited from heathens.³¹ Many nineteenth-century anti-Catholic tracts also invoked this anomaly to discredit the Catholic religion.³² Dickens, though, avoids explicitly commenting upon the corrupting influence of pagan elements within Christianity. Indeed, his observation of Catholicism’s inheritance of votive offerings from paganism ends with what seems like praise for the practice. ‘Gratitude and Devotion’, he writes, ‘are Christian qualities; and a grateful, humble, Christian spirit may dictate the observance’ (20).

What, though, is most significant is the sense of strangeness, or rather uncanniness, that Dickens is subject to at the sight of these edifices. Travelling through Rome by moonlight, he concludes his expedition by contemplating the ‘strange’ (151) feeling he

³¹ See Conyers Middleton, *A Letter from Rome, shewing an exact conformity between Popery and Paganism* (London: printed for W. Innys, 1729).

³² For examples of this anti-Catholic theme in the nineteenth-century see Reverend J. J. Blunt, *Vestiges of Ancient Manners and Customs, discoverable in Modern Italy and Sicily* (London: 1823) and Rev. Michael Hobart Seymour, *A Pilgrimage to Rome* (London: Seeleys, 1849).

experiences when he is confronted by the ubiquitous merging of Pagan and Christian architecture:

whether, in this ride, you pass by obelisks, or columns: ancient temples, theatres, houses, porticos, or forums: it is strange to see, how every fragment, whenever it is possible, has been blended into some modern structure, and made to serve some modern purpose - a wall, a dwelling-place, a granary, a stable - some use for which it was never designed, and associated with which it cannot otherwise than lamely assort. It is stranger still, to see how many ruins of the old mythology: how many fragments of obsolete legend and observance: have been incorporated into the worship of Christian altars here; and how, in numberless respects, the false faith and the true are fused into a monstrous union (151).

The topography of Rome with its blending together of ancient and modern architecture instils an odd sense of unease. For Dickens, the past cruelties of Italy do not simply haunt the present; they are constantly written into the present in almost every building of Rome. ‘A monstrous union’ (151) is an especially noteworthy phrase. It is a phrase that has definite anti-Catholic connotations as the word ‘monstrous’ suggests the religion of Italy is ‘unnatural’ (*OED*, Sense 1b) or ‘inhumanly wicked or depraved; atrocious, horrible’ (*OED*, Sense 4).³³ An image is conjured up of abnormally formed religious edifices with life-like attributes that are immense in size and are hideous and frightening. But Dickens’s discomfort, or more precisely his feeling ‘strange’ (151), at the sight of this ‘monstrous union’ (151) of pagan and Christian architecture is weirdly suggestive. Susan M. Griffin argues in *Anti-Catholicism and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* that Catholicism is ‘so uncannily threatening to [nineteenth-century] Protestants ... [because of] the historical relationships of the two churches. Protestantism’s legitimacy depends upon tracing its origins to, and differentiating itself from, Roman Catholicism’.³⁴ Architecture is central to this thesis. If Freud is correct and the uncanny arises from the transformation of something that once

³³ Dickens uses the word ‘monstrous’ several times in *Pictures from Italy* to attack Catholicism. Writing of the atrocities carried out during the Inquisition, for example, he calls the Catholic Church a ‘monstrous institution’ (24). He also refers to the Papal Government being a ‘a monstrous system, which had fallen of its own rottenness and corruption’ in ‘An Appeal to the English People on Behalf of the Italian Refugees’. Charles Dickens, *The Examiner* (8th September, 1849), 4.

³⁴ Susan M. Griffin, *Anti-Catholicism and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 8.

seemed homely into something unhomely, it is possible that for Dickens, and indeed for other Victorian Protestants, to be confronted by this ‘monstrous union’ (151) of paganism and Christianity is to be confronted by the realisation that Protestantism’s Catholic past uncannily haunts the Church of England, especially in its use of medieval churches. Seeing the Catholic churches of Italy that are founded upon pagan buildings brings to light this secretly familiar but repressed fact and, consequently, causes an uncanny disturbance as it threatens the ‘legitimacy’³⁵, as Griffin puts it, of Protestantism.

On a tour of the catacombs beneath the Church of San Sebastiano in Rome, the burial site of the early Christian martyrs, another significant moment of uncanniness occurs. Dickens is suddenly gripped by a terrifying thought:

A gaunt Franciscan friar, with a wild bright eye, was our only guide, down in this profound and dreadful place. The narrow ways and openings hither and thither, coupled with the dead and heavy air, soon blotted out, in all of us, any recollection of the track by which we had come: and I could not help thinking “Good Heaven, if, in a sudden fit of madness, he should dash the torches out, or if he should be seized with a fit, what would become of us!” (138).

For Freud, the dread of being buried alive is a familiar trope of the uncanny. He writes:

To some people the idea of being buried alive by mistake is the most uncanny thing of all. And yet psychoanalysis has taught us that this terrifying phantasy is only a translation of another phantasy which had originally nothing terrifying about it at all, but was qualified by a certain lasciviousness - the phantasy, I mean, of intra-uterine existence.³⁶

If we are willing to follow Freud’s hypothesis, the passage detailing Dickens’s expedition to the catacombs is highly suggestive. The description of the dark, damp caverns is indeed symbolic of a return to the womb: ‘the narrow ways and openings ... the dead and heavy air’ (138) blots out the memory of ‘the track by which we had come’ (138). Freud argues that experiences which arouse this kind of uncanny feeling occur ‘when infantile complexes,

³⁵ Ibid, 8.

³⁶ Sigmund Freud, ‘The Uncanny’, 244.

which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression'.³⁷ Thus, Dickens's fear of being buried alive in this most *unheimlich* of places is, perhaps, a displaced fear of a desire for a return to the most *heimlich* place of all: the mother's womb.

Images of the womb permeate Dickens's 'great dream of Roman churches' (136). Prior to his tour of the catacombs he dwells upon the crypts and subterranean chapels that lie beneath Rome. The descriptions of these 'secret chambers' (137) are most definitely womb-like. They are black, wet spaces, 'tremendous darknesses of vast extent, half-buried in the earth' (137). They are 'unexplorable' (137) and unable to be fully penetrated. They have 'jaws' (137), an image that conjures a mental picture of teeth that threaten castration. Womb-like images occur again in the legend of the catacombs that Dickens relates. It is a legend, he says, that is 'most appalling to the fancy' (138), but given his lurid fascination with the cruelty and violence of the past could be read as 'most app[e]aling to the fancy' (138). He tells us about the Early Christians who were held in the catacombs before being thrust forth from 'night and solitude' into the 'noon and life of the vast theatre' (138). These caves are 'prisons' (138) where they are held in 'captivity' (138). But they are also a safe haven, a refuge from the world outside where one may be devoured. At once, all of these subterranean places are both *heimlich* and *unheimlich* and suggest an anxiety between a desire for a return to the womb and a deep-rooted fear of the female genitalia.³⁸ Dickens's language compounds this uncertainty. It is, he says, 'awful ... to think' (137) of these places. 'Awful', however, can be interpreted as either 'causing dread: terrible, dreadful, appalling' (*OED*, Sense 1), 'worthy of, or commanding, profound respect or reverential fear' (*OED*, Sense 2), or 'solemnly impressive; sublimely majestic' (*OED*, Sense 3).

³⁷ *Ibid*, 249.

³⁸ The 'wild bright eye' (138) of the Franciscan friar, who is a Catholic 'Father' and the imagined doer of the deed, also seems to contribute to Dickens's uncanny feeling. Freud argues that a dread of the 'evil eye' is a widespread form of the uncanny, and that anyone possessing something valuable or fragile, and who is afraid of other people's envy, will project this envy onto others in the form of a 'look'. The 'look' of a prominent man will instil in others a fear that he has a secret intention of doing harm. Interestingly, Freud argues that this is more pronounced if a man is particularly unattractive. Dickens's description of the Franciscan friar as 'gaunt' (138) suggests he is an unattractive man who is abnormally lean and haggard. Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', 238-40.

Once again architectural origins are of paramount importance. Dickens's uncanny desire for a return to the mother's womb may also be equated with a return to 'the Mother Church' that the caverns and crypts of Rome represent. In the Catholic lexicon the word 'Mother' denoted the Catholic Church itself and Victorian Catholic writers regularly employed this usage. One notable example can be found at the conclusion of Newman's 1848 novel *Loss and Gain* when the Roman Catholic peer Willis refers to 'the Holy Roman Church, the Mother of us all'.³⁹ The Catholic origins of Protestantism are thus revived and revealed in these subterranean temples. Though Protestants disputed the authenticity of Catholicism by attacking such practices as ritualism and the intervention of priestly mediators, Protestant history could not escape that in a sense, the Catholic Church, the 'Mother Church', is the original faith from which Protestantism was born.

IV

Leaving Italy and returning home, what are we to make of Dickensian churches in England? Saint Paul's Cathedral in London, a national symbol of the Church of England, and the most frequently mentioned church in Dickens, is a good place to begin.

Since boyhood Dickens had been fascinated by Saint Paul's Cathedral. On first arriving in London aged nine he would stand in a secluded spot near his house in Bayham Street overlooking the city. He told Forster that to look from 'the dust-heaps and dock-leaves and fields ... at the cupola of St. Paul's looming through the smoke, was a treat that served him for hours of vague reflection afterwards'.⁴⁰ In an 1853 essay, 'Gone Astray', Dickens again speaks of this boyhood fascination. Imagining himself as a young boy lost amidst the labyrinthine streets of London, he writes: 'Saint Paul's arose, and how was I to get beyond its dome, or to take my eyes from its cross of gold'.⁴¹ But in the mid-nineteenth century what was most noticeable about Saint Paul's Cathedral was its failing monumentality. Though

³⁹ John Henry Newman, *Loss and Gain: The Story of a Convert* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1974), 295.

⁴⁰ John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, Vol. I, 19.

⁴¹ Charles Dickens, 'Gone Astray', *Household Words* 7 (13th August 1853), 554 [553-7].

structurally sound, the interiors of the church were chronically filthy and decaying.⁴² Moreover, the rapid expansion of London westwards meant that it was geographically dislocated from its position at the centre of the metropolis, signalling, perhaps, its dislocation as a spiritual centre.

However, Saint Paul's Cathedral remained 'a familiar, almost obsessive image'⁴³ for Dickens. Even in Italy he pauses at the sight of Rome in the distance and compares Saint Peter's Basilica to Saint's Paul's Cathedral:

the Eternal City appeared, at length, in the distance; it looked like - I am half afraid to write the word - like LONDON!!! There it lay, under a thick cloud, with innumerable towers, and steeples, and roofs of houses, rising up into the sky, and high above them all, one Dome (115).

But what is most pronounced in the various images of Saint Paul's Cathedral in the Dickens canon is of it being an emblem of the loss of true religious values and of Babylonian chaos. In *Master Humphrey's Clock* the old narrator symbolically portrays the cathedral as the 'great heart of London'.⁴⁴ But it is also inextricably linked to the moral chaos of the city: 'Wealth and beggary, vice and virtue, guilt and innocence, repletion and the direst hunger, all treading on each other and crowding together, are gathered round it'.⁴⁵ As many of Dickens's novels testify, this 'heart'⁴⁶ of the metropolis has ceased to be its spiritual or emotional centre. In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, as Nell's grandfather is leaving London he looks back at 'old Saint Paul's looming through the smoke, its cross peeping above the cloud ... and glittering in the sun; and casting his eyes upon the Babel out of which it grew' (123). And the narrator in *Bleak House* tells us that Saint Paul's is 'the crowning confusion of the

⁴² See Philip Barrett, *Barchester: English Cathedral Life in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1993), 239.

⁴³ Dennis Walder, *Dickens and Religion*, 165. Saint Paul's appears in every Dickens novel except *Hard Times* and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, as well as in many of his short stories including *A Christmas Carol*.

⁴⁴ Charles Dickens, 'Master Humphrey's Clock' in *Master Humphrey's Clock and Other Stories* edited by Peter Mudford (London: J. M. Dent, 1997), 135.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 135.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 135.

great, confused city' (315). Here, the cathedral is devoid of any true religious meaning as it neglects the poor and needy, such as Jo the crossing-sweep, for whom the cross on top of the cathedral is 'so golden, so high up, so far out of his reach' (315). What also prevails in Dickens's portrayals of Saint Paul's is a more sinister idea of the cathedral as either a prison or surveillance tower. Oliver Twist, confined in Fagin's den, has as much chance of being seen or heard 'as if he had lived inside the ball of St. Paul's Cathedral' (146). In *Martin Chuzzlewit* the cross on top of Saint Paul's is 'taking note of what [Jonas] did' (555). The narrator in *Little Dorrit* speaks of an imaginary 'solitary watcher on the gallery above the Dome of Saint Paul's' (742). And the 'great black dome of Saint Paul's bulg[es]' (165) at Pip in *Great Expectations*. Saint Paul's Cathedral in Dickens's fiction is no longer a site of religion but of government, and is merely one among the many secular institutions of London, a point he emphasizes in a late *Uncommercial Traveller* essay:

Within so many yards of Westminster Abbey, St Paul's Cathedral, the Houses of Parliament, the Prisons, the Courts of Justice, all the Institutions that govern the land, I can find ... shameful instances of neglect of children, intolerable toleration of the engenderment of paupers, idlers, thieves, races of wretched and destructive cripples both in body and mind, a misery to themselves, a misery to the community, a disgrace to civilization, and an outrage to Christianity.⁴⁷

Thus, there is no sense in Dickens's writing that Saint Paul's is a sanctified space. But this is also true of many of his other portraits of English churches, especially country churches. In *Pictures from Italy* he remarks that in Saint Peter's he feels 'no very strong emotion. I have been infinitely more affected ... in many English country churches when the congregation have been singing' (117). Yet the effect of English churches, in his fiction at least, does not provide the heightened sense of spirituality that Italian churches often do. Take, for example, the following passage in *Oliver Twist* which is a typical representation of a Dickensian country church:

⁴⁷ Charles Dickens, 'The Uncommercial Traveller: The Short-Timers', *All the Year Round* 9 (20th June 1863), 397 [397-401].

There was the little church in the morning, with the green leaves fluttering at the windows, the birds singing without, and the sweet-smelling air stealing in at the low porch, and filling the homely building with its fragrance. The poor people were so neat and clean, and knelt so reverently in prayer, that it seemed a pleasure, not a tedious duty, their assembling there together; and though the singing might be rude, it was real, and sounded more musical (to Oliver's ears at least) than any he had ever heard in church before (263).

The setting is idyllic and the dignified sincerity of this type of religious worship may be pleasurable; but it entirely lacks the 'mysteriousness' or the 'solemnity' of Italian Roman Catholic churches.

Significantly, though, ancient medieval English churches do captivate Dickens's imagination. Many of the thoughts and feelings that Italian churches inspire in Dickens can be found in his characters' response to these edifices. Salisbury Cathedral in *Martin Chuzzlewit* is 'an edifice replete with venerable associations, and strikingly suggestive of the loftiest emotions' (637). For Tom Pinch it is a building that reveals a 'deep mystery of his own heart' and gives him 'solemn' thoughts (79). Canterbury Cathedral in *David Copperfield* provides the young David with 'a calm, thoughtful, softening spirit' (570). His boyhood recollection of being in the cathedral and of 'the earthy smell, the sunless air, the sensation of the world being shut out' (275) suggests an image of a return to the womb. And the bells of the ancient cathedral in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, a building heavily invested with Catholic imagery, provides 'sanctuary' (12) and produces a 'solemn sound' (13) with a 'solemn echo' (162). Indeed, in almost the last words Dickens ever wrote, the narrator of his unfinished novel directly alludes to the gloomy attraction of the fictional cathedral in Cloisterham in a passage that is again reminiscent of *Pictures from Italy*'s description of the catacombs of Rome:

Its antiquities and ruins are surpassingly beautiful ... Changes of glorious light from moving boughs ... penetrate into the Cathedral, subdue its earthly odour, and preach the Resurrection and the Life. The cold stone tombs of centuries ago grow warm, and flecks of brightness dart into the sternest marble corners of the building, fluttering there like wings' (270).

But it is an essay entitled 'City of London Churches', which details a series of expeditions Dickens undertook to the ancient churches of London in the late 1840s, that is particularly revealing in thinking about his attraction to medieval religious architecture. Italian churches obviously occupy Dickens's thoughts in this essay. At the beginning of his 'pilgrimages'⁴⁸ to these London edifices he tells us: 'It came into my head one day, here had I been cultivating a familiarity with all the churches of Rome, and I knew nothing of the inside of the old churches of London' (85). Yet these churches, he writes, are 'unknown to far greater numbers of people speaking the English tongue, than the ancient edifices of the Eternal City' (89). The scenes inside these ancient London churches are strangely reminiscent of his portraits of Italian Roman Catholic churches. A similar sense of exhaustion pervades them that recalls the monotony and sameness he found in Catholic worship. Scanty congregations are 'exhausted' (87). Among them are an 'exhausted beadle' and an 'exhausted clerk' (87). So are the church buildings themselves exhausted: the doors, windows, and furniture, are 'in a very advanced stage of exhaustion' (87). Dickens lays the blame for this religious fatigue upon the Anglican clergy who are uncaring and hypocritical. One such preacher, who is inebriated and is of 'a prandial presence and a muffled voice' (87), only seems to be interested in his congregation when some sniggering boys disrupt a service. 'He glances up, as having an idea that somebody has said Amen in a wrong place' (87), a telling phrase that can be read as encapsulating his dislike of formal religion and its neglect of what he believed to be the true values of Christian teaching.

⁴⁸ Charles Dickens, 'The Uncommercial Traveller: City of London Churches', *All the Year Round* 3 (5th May 1860), 85 [85-9]. All further citations will be placed in the text.

However, a strange attraction for these ancient churches permeates the essay. Particularly interesting is the focus upon decay. At first Dickens is horrified by the realisation that the invisible snuff which gets into his eyes, nose, and throat may be from the decaying bodies in the ancient vaults. Yet he recovers from his initial nausea and becomes accustomed to this consumption of the dead: 'rot and mildew and dead citizens formed the uppermost scent, while, infusing into [the churches] ... a dreamy way not at all displeasing' (88). And like the bodies of dead saints that sanctify the churches of Italy, so too, it seems, do the dead who lie in the crypts of ancient London churches. Above all, however, it is his comment about the 'mysteriousness' of old London churches that contrasts them with other English churches in the Dickens canon and imparts their specifically religious effect: 'my pleasure arose out of their mystery; mysterious I found them; mysterious they shall remain' (85). Saddened by the neglect and indifference of Londoners to these ancient edifices, he implores them to explore these mysterious 'Monuments of another age' because 'they echo, not unharmoniously, to the time when the City of London really was London' (89).

Chapter Five

Mariolatry

*'the doctrine which holds that the blessed Virgin Mary, at the first instant of her conception, ... was preserved free from all stain of original sin, has been revealed by God, and is to be firmly and constantly believed by all the faithful'.
Pope Pius IX, Ineffabilis Deus (8th December 1854)*

David Copperfield's Agnes Wickfield is one of Dickens's more easily maligned creations. In Dickens's lifetime the character was criticised as a sentimental abstraction that the author had failed to realise.¹ John Forster agreed, preferring Dora, the 'child wife'² of David Copperfield, to the 'unfailing wisdom and self-sacrificing goodness'³ of Agnes. Forster's judgement has been echoed by many critics. George Orwell, for example, memorably dismissed her as 'the most disagreeable of [Dickens's] heroines, the real legless angel of Victorian romance'.⁴ In a broadly realistic novel, Agnes's position as a vaguely emblematic figure has therefore not been well-received. A fascinating observation in many of the criticisms of Agnes, however, is that she resembles a Madonna-figure.⁵ Victorian Protestants were hostile towards the Catholic worship of the Virgin Mary. But Madonna-figures were a feature of many works by Victorian Protestant writers who associated female characters with the Virgin Mary to inscribe a feminine ideal. Agnes Wickfield can certainly be situated among this gallery of highly popular secularized, domestic Madonnas. She is a fountain of gentleness, sweetness, sisterly affection, motherly nurture, domestic service, fidelity, and self-sacrifice. Yet Dickens's portrait of the character as a kind of saintly Madonna-figure is

¹ See, for example, R. H. Hutton, 'Mr Dickens's Moral Services to Literature', *The Spectator* (17th April, 1869), 474-5.

² Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* edited by Jeremy Tambling [1850] (London: Penguin, 2004), 769. All further citations will be taken from this edition and placed in the text.

³ John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, Vol. III (London: Chapman and Hall, 1873), 39.

⁴ George Orwell, 'Charles Dickens', *A Collection of Essays* [1939] (New York: 1954), 109.

⁵ For example, Michael Slater notes the 'Madonna-like presentation of Agnes' and Vincent Newey calls her a 'secular Madonna'. Michael Slater, *Dickens and Women*, 100, 254; Vincent Newey, *The Scriptures of Charles Dickens: Novels of Ideology, Novels of Self* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 155.

more complex than many Protestant portraits of female Marys. Agnes reveals a powerful attraction to a more Catholic-flavoured image of the Virgin Mary that suggests her creator, in both his art and life, was emotionally open to Marian imagery not found in the Church of England.

I

Anti-Marianism was an important strand of nineteenth-century anti-Catholicism. A marker of Roman Catholicism since the Reformation, the Virgin Mary became an increasingly controversial figure following the 1829 Catholic Emancipation Act as Marian devotion became visible in England.⁶ Victorian Catholics, emboldened by their civic status, began to invoke the Virgin Mary. Daniel O’Connell, the driving force behind Catholic emancipation, for example, could often be seen praying with rosary beads outside the Houses of Parliament, a sight unlikely to have been witnessed since 1688.⁷ During the early decades of the Victorian era the cult of Mary was more forcefully introduced to Protestants. Devotional images of the Madonna began to be displayed outside Catholic churches. Pictorial representations of Marian iconography also became more prominent. Works such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s *Ecce Ancilla Domini*, displayed at the Portland Gallery in 1850, brought Marian imagery to the attention of the Victorian public. And a crucial role in this revival belonged to the Tractarians who encouraged reverence for the Virgin Mary. Newman, for example, preached sermons honouring the Virgin Mary and controversially sought an expansion of Marian devotion within the Church of England.⁸

⁶ See Thomas S. Freeman, ‘Offending God: John Foxe and English Protestant Reactions to the Cult of the Virgin Mary’ in *Studies in Church History*, Vol. 39, *The Church and Mary* edited by R. N. Swanson (Trowbridge, Wiltshire: Cromwell Press, 2004), 228-38 and John Singleton, ‘The Virgin Mary and Religious Conflict in Victorian Britain’, *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 43 (1992), 16-34.

⁷ See Peter O. Carm O’Dwyer, *Mary: A History of Devotion in Ireland* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1988), 259-62.

⁸ One of Newman’s earliest printed sermons was dedicated to Mary. See John Henry Newman, ‘The Reverence Due to the Virgin Mary’, *The Works of Cardinal Newman: Parochial and Plain Sermons* [1832] (Westminster, Md: Christian Classics Inc., 1966), 127-38. However, an anxiety permeated the Oxford Movement about Marian devotion. In 1844, for example, John Keble was persuaded by his fellow Anglo-Catholics not to publish the poem ‘Mother Out of Sight’ for fear that it signalled an

Protestant reaction to the revived cult of the Virgin Mary was hostile. Theologically, though Mary did serve as a model of faith for Protestants, it was argued there was no basis for such worship in the New Testament and no evidence to suggest Mary was worshipped during the first four centuries of Christianity.⁹ A more persistent theological objection was that praying to Mary reduced the role of Jesus. Echoing the sentiments of a majority of Protestants, an article in the *Church and State Gazette* complained that ‘the most blessed Virgin is exalted by the Romish Church into an object of worship, and invested with a power, unwarranted by Scripture, above that held by her gracious Son, our Lord and Saviour’.¹⁰ Catholic artworks of the Madonna and Child were particularly objected to by Protestants who thought such images infantilized Jesus and magnified Mary’s power. The anti-Roman Catholic and anti-Tractarian Reverend Michael Hobart Seymour, for example, argued that ‘representing Mary as enthroned in heaven, and our Lord as a child in her arms’ was ‘ignorant, absurd, and untrue’ as it made Jesus subject to Mary’s will and ‘was an awful dishonour to Christ’.¹¹ Popular anti-Catholicism denounced Marian images and invocations as signs and symbols of a dangerous, foreign religion. It read the worship of Mary as idolatry and as evidence of ‘the absolute conformity of modern popery to ancient paganism’.¹² A common charge was that the Madonna was simply a newer version of such pagan goddesses as Juno, Isis and Minerva.¹³ Victorian anti-Catholics therefore denounced the cult of the Virgin Mary to portray Catholicism as an unenlightened and alien religion; the

association between the Oxford Movement and the Catholic Church. Newman himself, though he promoted a greater reverence for the Madonna, struggled, even after his conversion, to embrace the Catholic doctrine regarding the Virgin Mary. See J. T. Coleridge, *A Memoir of the Rev. John Keble* (Oxford and London: James Parker, 1870), 292 and Owen Chadwick, *Newman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 65-6.

⁹ See Michael P. Carroll, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1986), 4.

¹⁰ Anon., ‘Cardinal Wiseman on the worship of the Virgin’, *Church and State Gazette*, 12 (23rd September 1852), 291.

¹¹ Michael Hobart Seymour, *Mornings Among the Jesuits at Rome* (London: Seeleys, 1849), 58.

¹² R. T. Hampson, *Religious deceptions of the Church of Rome exposed* (London: C. Mitchell, n.d), iv. See also William Cunningham, ‘Mariolatry’, *North British Review* 8 (1848), 339-65.

¹³ See Michael Hobart Seymour, *A Pilgrimage to Rome* (London: Seeleys, 1848), 597; T. R. Birks *Modern Popery: its strength and weakness, as an aggressive power* (Bristol: Whereat, 1852), 19; and Catherine Sinclair, *Popish Legends, or Bible Truths* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, & Longmans, 1852), xxi.

novelist Catherine Sinclair spoke for many when she declared that, ‘The religion now taught by Romanists cannot be called Christianity, but is Mariolatry, a perfectly different faith’.¹⁴

Religious difference was not the only reason the Virgin Mary became a controversial figure. Conflict between Protestants and Catholics had persisted since the sixteenth century. Yet Marian imagery only became the subject of intense debate during the nineteenth century. As Carol Herringer Engelhardt explains, this was ‘the same period in which the feminine ideal - that contradictory, ever-evolving image of woman as the embodiment of selfless, sexless love - was ascendant’ and the ‘timing as well as the content of the Marian debates suggests that the other significant factor in inspiring them was the anxious attempt, characteristic of much Victorian discourse, to define woman’s nature and duties’.¹⁵ Victorian Protestantism’s discomfort with the Virgin Mary therefore reflects a cultural concern about the role of women, especially because she closely resembled the Victorian paradigm of the feminine ideal that became known as the Angel in the House.¹⁶ But this identification with females as secular Madonnas was problematic. Traditional Christian portraits of the Virgin Mary as a powerful woman threatened masculine authority as it challenged the limited view of female capability embodied in the idea of the Angel in the House. Thus, although Mary was still generally viewed positively by Protestants, following the Marian revival they constructed a more passive view of her as a figure who had ‘meekly ... yielded up her entire self, body, soul, and spirit, to the will of the Highest’.¹⁷ It was Mary’s virginity, however, that was the most vexed issue in the Marian controversy. Many Protestants viewed the Catholic belief in her perpetual virginity as suspect because it opposed the dominant Victorian patriarchal family values. Virginity was an important feature of the feminine ideal,

¹⁴ Catherine Sinclair, *Popish Legend, or Bible Truths*, xxi.

¹⁵ Carol Engelhardt Herringer, *Victorians and the Virgin Mary: Religion and Gender in England, 1830-85* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2008), 19-20.

¹⁶ Sally Cunneen has shown that ‘Mary seemed ... much like the Victorian [feminine] ideal’. Sally Cunneen, *In Search of Mary: the woman and the symbol* (New York: Ballantine, 1996), 256. Kimberley van Esveld Adams has also discussed how ‘the Angel of the House’ became synonymous with ‘the domestic Madonna, who is one of the most familiar icons of Victorian womanhood’. Kimberley van Esveld Adams, *Our Lady of Victorian Feminism: The Madonna in the Works of Anna Jameson, Margaret Fuller, and George Eliot* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2001), 89.

¹⁷ H. H. Dobney, *The Virgin Mary* (London: Ward & Co., 1859), 7.

but only until marriage. Protestantism, though it did not reject the idea of the Virgin Birth, repeatedly denied Mary's lifelong virginity by reference to scripture. For example, a popular pamphlet entitled *The Virgin Mary, a married woman* argued: 'No restriction whatever was placed on Joseph or Mary when the mysterious incarnation of Christ was revealed to them, but rather the contrary'.¹⁸ Therefore, competing images of the Madonna emerged in the Victorian era: a Catholic Virgin Mary who was a 'sinless virgin mother who retained her extraordinary influence with her son throughout eternity,' and a Protestant Virgin Mary who had 'a limited maternal role, bore subsequent children, and shared with all humans the guilt of both original and actual sin'.¹⁹

Dickens shared the Victorian Protestant dislike for Mariolatry. *Pictures from Italy*, for example, is generally hostile to the worship of Mary. His descriptions of Marian statues as a 'puppet' (17) and a 'blunt-nosed little Virgin ... enshrined in a plaster Punch's show' (66) would most likely have offended Catholic readers, as would the book's images of Italians praying to the Virgin that are punctuated with ironic asides, and the ridiculing of devotions to Mary such as the custom of making 'a vow to the Madonna to wear nothing but blue for a year or two' (50).²⁰ Elsewhere Dickens's representations of Mary conform to the Protestant portrait of her having a limited role in the life of Jesus. In *The Life of Our Lord*, for example, Mary is only briefly mentioned at the nativity, the marriage at Cana, and the Crucifixion. Nowhere in the book does he mention the Annunciation, the Virgin Birth, or the Assumption. Mary is never invested with qualities that lift her into the realm of the divine. She is portrayed as a kind, gentle mother-figure; but, essentially, she is an ordinary woman. At the Crucifixion she is not distinguished from the other females present and, we are told, is merely among a group of women that 'God blessed ... for their true and tender hearts'.²¹

¹⁸ Anon., *The Virgin Mary, a married woman* (London: William Macintosh, n.d), 7.

¹⁹ Carol Engelhardt Herringer, *Victorians and the Virgin Mary*, 21.

²⁰ *Pictures from Italy's* treatment of the Virgin Mary led the *Dublin Review* to state that Dickens's comments 'on the devotion of the Italian people to [the Virgin Mary]' were 'in special-degree blasphemously and freezingly sportive'. Anon., 'Dickens's Pictures from Italy', *Dublin Review*, 190.

²¹ Charles Dickens, *The Life of Our Lord in Holiday Romance and Other Writings for Children* edited by Gillian Avery (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), 469.

II

If Dickens could not submit to the Mariolatry of the Catholic Church, his fiction reveals a series of female figures, culminating in the figure of Agnes Wickfield, that resonate with a gallery of nineteenth-century fictional Madonna-figures who were revered once they were embodied in the 'semisecularized forms of sentimental heroines'.²² As Eric Trudgill shows, from the 1830s onwards a vogue began among Protestant novelists, many of them anti-Catholic, for domesticated and passive female characters who represented a patriarchal ideal of womanhood that was invested with the physical and spiritual imagery of the Madonna.²³

Agnes, unlike many of these fictional Marian-types, is not invested with the traditional bodily traits of the Madonna or explicitly connected with her. She does not, for example, have blue eyes or wear a veil. Neither does her life story reflect any of the major events in the life of Mary. But she does strongly resemble these saintly Protestant Madonna-types in other ways. Images commonly associated with the Madonna surround her. Agnes, for example, is constantly linked with the moon and the stars. David tells Uriah that Agnes is 'the moon herself' (580), Mr Micawber calls her 'the only starry spot in a miserable existence' (713), and when 'the moon is shining' we see 'Agnes with her quiet eyes raised up to it' (868). As Marina Warner explains, the moon and stars, symbols of the feminine nourishment of life, are among the most constant images associated with Mary in Christianity.²⁴ This association had been strengthened in the Victorian mind following Saint Catherine Labouré's vision of the Virgin Mary in Paris in 1830, an event widely reported in

²² Tricia Lootens, *Lost Saints: Silence, Gender, and Victorian Literary Canonization* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 53.

²³ See Eric Trudgill, *Madonnas and Magdalens: The Origins and Development of Victorian Sexual Attitudes* (London: Heinemann, 1976), 248-76. Trudgill lists various Madonna-figures in works by anti-Catholic novelists that includes, for example, Mrs Oliphant and Emma Jane Worboise. He also includes Wilkie Collin's heroine in *Hide and Seek* (1854), Lady Castlewood in William Makepeace Thackeray's *Henry Esmond* (1852), and Dorothea in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-2). But these figures, like Dickens's Agnes Wickfield, are more complex and deserve further critical attention.

²⁴ See Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 255-69.

England, in which the Madonna appeared with the moon at her feet.²⁵ Perhaps the most powerful image of this association in *David Copperfield* is at the scene of Dora's death. David notes that the 'bright moon is high and clear' (773) and, when Agnes comes to tell him that Dora is dead, the accompanying illustration shows her framed by a window through which we see a cross on a church steeple and the moon and a bright star directly above her (see Figure 8). But the identification of Agnes as a secular Madonna-figure is most pronounced through her being an 'angel'. As Kimberly Van Esveld Adams argues, the 'Victorian Angel' is the 'domestic and Protestant descendant of the Madonna'.²⁶ Dickens constantly refers to Agnes as an angel. She is David's 'good angel' (374), 'better angel' (384), and 'guardian angel' (619). And, as David himself says, she is 'the better angel of the lives of all who come within her calm, good, self-denying influence' (278). Phiz's illustrations of Agnes reinforce this image of her as an angelic figure. In two of the five illustrations in which she appears statues of angels are placed directly above her head on a hearth (see Figures 9 and 10).

Agnes therefore exudes a quasi-religious quality inherent in many traditional nineteenth-century fictional females who were heavily inflected by Marian imagery. She is similarly inscribed with the Protestant ideals of the Virgin Mary that envisioned a limited role for women and a benign femininity. She is an angelic idealization of perfect womanhood: a devoted, self-sacrificing daughter to her incompetent, alcoholic father; a faithful wife to a man she has to wait patiently for in silence until he recognizes his love for her; and, significantly, is a chaste sister-figure in David's life, for whom he repeatedly states he has a 'sisterly affection' (822) (823) (846), before she bears him children and becomes a loving mother.²⁷ Dickens constructs her through a litany of clichéd adjectives - 'placid',

²⁵ Saint Catherine Laboure's vision of the moon at Mary's feet first mirrors Revelation 12:1 which speaks of Mary being 'clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars'.

²⁶ Kimberly Van Esveld Adams, *Our Lady of Victorian Feminism*, 228 fn 8.

²⁷ David's revulsion towards Uriah Heep can be read as a symptom of a subconscious sexual desire for Agnes that is present long before he expresses romantic feelings for her. David experiences déjà vu, which he reports as 'the strange feeling (to which, perhaps, no one is quite a stranger) that all this



My child-wife's old companion.

Fig. 8 'My child-wife's old companion' from *David Copperfield* by Hablot K. Browne ('Phiz')

had occurred before, at some indefinite time' (389), when Uriah declares a sexual interest in Agnes that suggests he is repressing (or displacing) his own sexual desire for her.



Uriah persists in hovering near us, at the dinner party.

Fig. 9 'Uriah persists in hovering near us' from *David Copperfield* by Hablot K. Browne ('Phiz')



A Stranger calls to see me.

Fig 10 'A Stranger calls to see me' from *David Copperfield* by Hablot K. Browne ('Phiz')

‘sweet’, ‘bright’, ‘tranquil’, ‘staid’, ‘good’, ‘calm’, ‘pleasant’ (233) - that are repeated again and again. As Vincent Newey notes, these are at once a catalogue of ‘cardinal virtues and an inventory of limitations’.²⁸ Agnes’s subservience to male figures certainly does limit her sphere of action. She is rarely seen outside the walls of her home and is passive in the extreme. It is, however, her position as a paragon of domestic virtue that most forcefully aligns her with the feminine ideal. From the moment she is introduced in the novel, Agnes is immediately marked as a ‘little housekeeper’ (233). She has ‘a little basket-trifle hanging at her side, with keys in it’ and looks ‘as staid and as discreet a housekeeper as the old house could have’ (233). Years later, upon David’s memorable return to the Wickfield house, the keys are ‘still hanging by her side’ (845). Even when David comes to be romantically attached to her, Agnes’s consummate housekeeping is a central part of his love for her: ‘my domestic joy was perfect, I had been married ten happy years’ (871).

Thus, as Q.D. Leavis argues, Agnes can be read as a ‘willed concession to the Victorian ideal - seen always as the angel on the hearth’.²⁹ But she is a far grander conception than many domesticated portraits of female characters irrigated with Marian qualities in novels by Victorian Protestant writers. Agnes does not entirely support a constrictive domestic ideology. She is not simply a sweet-faced housewife, but is a more virtuous and more competent figure. Indeed, she has a feminist potential.³⁰ Her position as a school-teacher may be an extension of her domestic and motherly duties, but the role lifts her out of this realm. It is ‘an advance for the middle-class woman’ and ‘it is decidedly more than is achieved by the other female characters in *David Copperfield*’.³¹ Agnes’s intellectual capabilities are also beyond those of many fictional Madonna figures. She is not simply a creature of feeling rather than thought. As Betsey Trotwood says, Agnes has a ‘wise head’

²⁸ Vincent Newey, *The Scriptures of Charles Dickens*, 159.

²⁹ Q. D. Leavis, ‘Dickens and Tolstoy: The Case for a Serious View of *David Copperfield*’ in F. R. Leavis and Q.D. Leavis, *Dickens the Novelist* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973), 65.

³⁰ Kimberley Van Esveld has explored this feminist potential of secular Madonnas in the work of Anna Jameson, Margaret Fuller, and George Eliot and argues that these writers ‘were quite unusual among their English-speaking and Protestant contemporaries in seeing feminist possibilities in the Madonna’. Kimberley Van Esveld, *Our Lady of Victorian Feminism*, 2.

³¹ Vincent Newey, *The Scriptures of Charles Dickens*, 159.

(518), and, as Dora recognizes, she is ‘too clever’ (616). David also recognizes Agnes’s intellect, especially in his acknowledgment of her appetite for literature which matches his own and gives her a status as his equal or near-equal. A thinking moral agent who consciously resists her feelings for David, she is marked by a gravitas many of the other female characters in the novel lack. ‘Earnest’, for example, is an epithet that is frequently attributed to her. She is ‘always earnest’ (374), ‘very earnest’ (374), ‘her letter was earnest’ (609), is ‘so earnest’ (616), she ‘wrote a few earnest words’ (704), and so on. Neither is she simply a muse for David, but is central to his creativity. The inspirational letters she sends to him, culminating in the one he receives whilst on his journey of reflection through Europe following the death of Dora, both renew his creative urges and redefine his writing. Furthermore, we are given glimpses into her inner life, especially in her love for David. Agnes manifests erotic feelings for David when she is seen to ‘blush’ (285) at his talk of falling in love. But it is her words to him at the end of the novel, ‘I have loved you all my life!’ (868), which allow the reader to imagine the sorrow and pain she has felt since he married Dora. Dickens, though he does not show us directly, subtly inscribes for Agnes a life more complex than that of a paragon of domestic virtue or wifely attendant.

III

Agnes, as previously noted, has been much maligned. Critics have slated the character’s passivity and blandness, accusing Dickens of creating a vague, psychologically unrealised abstraction of moral perfection that lacks physical presence. Viewed as a supreme example of his obsession with domestic angels, young virgins, and, indeed, the consecrated memory of Mary Hogarth,³² Agnes has been called a ‘disaster’,³³ ‘a bit of a bore’,³⁴ and ‘too perfect even to be likeable’.³⁵ Michael Slater is particularly scathing. He calls her ‘a major

³² Agnes certainly seems to be modelled on Mary Hogarth, and the dream of Mary as an apotheosis of the Madonna adds weight to the argument that the character is heavily invested with Marian traits.

³³ Harold Bloom, ‘Introduction’ in *Charles Dickens* edited by Harold Bloom (New York and Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), 7.

³⁴ John Lucas, *The Melancholy Man: A Study of Dickens’s Novels* (London: Methuen, 1970), 198.

³⁵ Robert R. Garnett, ‘Dickens, the Virgin, and the Dredger’s Daughter’, *Dickens Studies Annual* 28 (1999), 54 [45-64].

embarrassment for Dickens's readers'. 'It would be a bold critic indeed, who would claim this character to be a success', writes Slater, who then calls Agnes 'inert' and 'passive', and criticizes her as one of several female creations invested with the 'sanctified memory' of Mary Hogarth, an association that 'invariably inhibited Dickens's prodigious powers as a creator of character'.³⁶ Yet these readings fail to recognize that Dickens is not simply a realist novelist and his writing is fascinated by extremes of character, whether good or bad. Agnes is not meant to be a lifelike representation of a real woman, as attempts to uncover a greater significance for her have shown. Alexander Welsh argues that she is an angel of death; J. Hillis Miller views her as a more general religious figure that reinforces belief in an age when belief in God was being eroded; and Stanley Friedman sees her as the inspiration for David's faith.³⁷ Valuable as these readings are, especially their recognition that the impulse which creates Agnes is fundamentally religious, they again endorse her as sterile with relatively little detailed attention paid to the particular words and figures that David and Dickens use to construct her.

A way to get beyond this rather repetitive and narrow thinking is through Agnes's Marian qualities. Agnes, though she resonates with a Victorian literary Marian-type that envisioned a limited role for women and a benign femininity, in many ways transcends the Protestant image of the secular Madonna and there are forces at play in the novel that seem to align her with a decidedly Catholic-flavoured Mariolatry. Agnes is for David, as the Virgin Mary is for Catholics, a religious icon and an object of devotion, an intercessor and spiritual guide. *David Copperfield*, especially through the dominant motif of Agnes 'pointing upward' (882) and the association of her with a 'stained glass window' (233) presents us with a Madonna-figure infused with elements of Catholic thought and experience

³⁶ Michael Slater, *Dickens and Women*, 250-1.

³⁷ Alexander Welsh, *The City of Dickens* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 180-95; J. Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1958), 156-8; Stanley Friedman, 'Dickens' Mid-Victorian Theodicy: David Copperfield', *Dickens Studies Annual* 7 (1978), 128-50.

that allows Dickens to explore fundamental questions that the schism between the competing Victorian images of the Madonna provoked.

Let us begin with the recurring motif of Agnes 'pointing upward' (883), an image that has been seized upon by critics to portray the character as a failure. Here we have an image that derives from a familiar Christian iconographic tradition. It aligns her with a decidedly Catholic-flavoured Mariolatry by suggesting that she has a role as a kind of heavenly intercessor for David.³⁸

A fundamental difference between the nineteenth-century Catholic and Protestant conceptions of Mary was of her being an intercessor. Roman Catholics prayed to the Virgin, or through her to God, because they held that 'her office above is one of perpetual intercession for the faithful'.³⁹ They believed these prayers to be effective as 'the intercession of the Most Holy Virgin Mary is a most powerful method of obtaining benefits and favours from the Majesty of God; since, ... Her dear Son will not deny Her any thing which She asks of Him'.⁴⁰ Protestants, however, did not generally believe in the efficacy of praying to Mary, and widely regarding it as idolatrous and as a symbol of Catholic ignorance and superstition. Agnes is certainly constructed as a kind of intercessor. For David she is a 'benignant, gentle angel' (432) to whom he always turns for intercession, aid, and comfort. Agnes is his 'counsellor' (278) and 'guide' (867), a constant source of 'comfort and support' (573), 'advice' (609), and 'help' (822), and is his only relief from the vague feeling he repeatedly alludes to of an 'old unhappy loss or want of something' (823). It is noticeable that whenever he does not have her to 'advise and approve', David becomes 'wild' and gets

³⁸ This image of Agnes is heavily influenced by Dickens's idealized image of Mary Hogarth. Writing to Forster in 1842 during his trip to America, Dickens spoke of feeling 'something of the presence and influence of that spirit which directs my life, and through a heavy sorrow has pointed upwards with unchanging figure for more than four years past'. *Letters* III, 35.

³⁹ John Henry Newman, 'A letter addressed to the Rev. E. B. Pusey, D. D., on occasion of his Eirenicon' in *The Works of Cardinal Newman: Certain difficulties felt by Anglicans in Catholic teaching considered*, Vol. II [1865] (Westminster, Md: Christian Classics Inc., 1969), 73.

⁴⁰ Anon., *A novena in honour of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel, Mother of God, and our Dear Lady* (London: Burns & Lambert, 1852), 3.

‘into all sorts of difficulties’ (574). As he tells her, in a passage that is inspired by the image of her ‘pointing upward’:

What I am, you have made me, Agnes ... ever leading me to something better; ever directing me to higher things ... I want you to know, yet don't know how to tell you, that all my life long I shall look up to you, and be guided by you, as I have been through the darkness that is past. Whatever betides, whatever new ties you may form, whatever changes may come between us, I shall always look to you, and love you, as I do now, and have always done. You will always be my solace and resource, as you have always been. Until I die, my dearest sister, I shall see you always before me, pointing upward! (848).

Here David recognizes that he has been, and will continue to be, sustained by the intercessory love of Agnes. But his address to her is also deeply invested with a sense of her being a divine mediator between heaven and earth, especially in the phrase ‘directing me to higher things’ (848) and the idea that she will lead him from ‘darkness’ (848). But other characters in the novel also seem to view Agnes as an intercessory or spiritual guide, and do so in an equally religious way, something David registers when he tells her that ‘Everyone who knows you, consults with you, and is guided by you, Agnes’ (284). Even Mrs Heep, following the exposure of Uriah’s deception, is seen ‘crying on her knees to Agnes to interfere in their behalf’ (764). And in a rather odd moment, when David thinks he sees Agnes aboard the ship taking the emigrants to Australia, there is a suggestion that she acts as a kind of holy guide for the fallen Little Emily. Though David is unsure whether the figure he sees is Agnes, Phiz’s illustration clearly shows her in the top left hand corner, with a finger pointing upward, sitting next to Emily wearing a shawl akin to a veil and her head bowed as if in prayer (see Figure 11).

Catholic theology regarding the Virgin Mary’s power of mediation, though, held her jurisdiction over death to be supreme. As Marina Warner explains, ‘by far her greatest function in the Catholic scheme of salvation is to reprieve the sufferings of sinners after death. She is “the mother of mercy”, the “life, sweetness, and hope” of the fallen, the

advocate who pleads for humanity's cause before the judgement seat of God'.⁴¹ Catholics therefore prayed to the merciful Mary, most notably in the best-loved prayer in Catholicism, the Hail Mary, to intercede on their behalf and 'pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death'.



Fig. 11 'The Emigrants' from *David Copperfield* by Hablot K. Browne ('Phiz')

David Copperfield is permeated with images of death. Figurative expressions relating to death occur again and again, and there is an emphasis on mortality throughout.⁴² Actual deaths fill the book, the most memorable of these being Clara Copperfield, Dora, Mr Spenlow, Barkis, Steerforth, and Ham. But the narrator, the mature David, briefly mentions

⁴¹ Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary*, 316.

⁴² See Stanley Friedman, who notes that in more than a third of the novel's pages there is 'either some direct reference to mortality or else a figurative expression using the idea of death', for a detailed account of the images of death in *David Copperfield*. Stanley Friedman, 'Dickens's Mid-Victorian Theodicy: *David Copperfield*', 128-50.

a great many other deaths during the course of the narrative.⁴³ It is indeed David's obsession with death that is most pronounced. From the very beginning, and his calling himself a 'posthumous child' (14), a sense emerges of David's morbid fear of death that will punctuate every stage of his life. On the journey to Dover he fears 'being found dead in a day or two, under some hedge' (190). He recognizes the sound of coffin-making at Mr Omer's as 'the tune that never *does* leave off' (314), and refers to death as 'that great Visitor, before whose presence all the living must give place' (444). Later, in anticipation of the death of Dora, he broods about 'the many, never old, who lived and loved and died' (747). David is immersed in thoughts of death.

Agnes's function as a Marian intercessor with a redemptive agency is most clearly focused on her jurisdiction over death and comes through the motif of her 'pointing upward'. This image first occurs following the death of Dora when Agnes comes downstairs from Dora's bedroom and signals with a 'solemn hand upraised towards Heaven' (774) that David's wife is dead. Here Agnes becomes a visible image of the holy.⁴⁴ And the significance of her gesture as a religiously-charged form of heavenly intercession is made clear as David tells us: 'when she stood before me with her upraised hand, she was like a sacred presence' and seemed to come 'from a purer region nearer heaven' (776). She offers real consolation to David's 'undisciplined heart' by 'softening its pain' (776) as, it is suggested, she has eased the transition of Dora's soul from this world to the next: 'When the Angel of Death alighted there, my child-wife fell asleep - they told me so when I could bear to hear it - on her bosom, with a smile' (776).

⁴³ The list is extensive and includes: David's father, David's infant brother, Dora's unborn child, Agnes's mother, Betsey Trotwood's husband, Emily's father and mother, Ham's father, Mrs Gummidge's husband, Mrs Chillip's first-wife, Traddles's uncle, Steerforth's father, Mrs Micawber's parents, Uriah's father, Rosa Dartle's parents, Annie Strong's father, Mr Dick's father, and Jip the dog.

⁴⁴ Robert R. Garnett makes a similar point arguing that: 'It is not really Agnes pointing up, but Dickens himself directing us to her heavenly provenance and meaning, just as medieval painters signified the Holy Spirit by a dove, or saintliness by a gilded halo'. Robert R. Garnett, 'Dickens, the Virgin, and the Dredger's Daughter', 54.

But it is Agnes as a heavenly mediator of his own death that ultimately concerns David. Even before the demise of Dora he has begun to conceive of her in this role. Watching Agnes take care of her father, David muses: 'I pray Heaven that I never may forget the dear girl in her love and truth, at that time of my life; for if I should, I must be drawing near the end, and then I would desire to remember her best' (525). And once he is married to Dora he dwells on the old 'contented days with Agnes, in the dear old house' which arise in his mind 'like spectres of the dead, that might have some renewal in another world' (703). From the time of Dora's death until his marriage to Agnes, however, he repeatedly evokes the image of Agnes 'pointing upward' as a symbol of her 'softening influence' (821) over death, especially in the chapter entitled 'Agnes'.

You remember, when you came down to me in our little room - pointing upward Agnes?' ... 'Until I die, my dearest sister, I shall see you always before me, pointing upward!' ... I had faithfully set the seal upon the Past, and, thinking of her, pointing upward, thought of her as pointing to that sky above me, where, in the mystery to come, I might yet love her with a love unknown on earth (848-9).

Alexander Welsh argues that David's dwelling upon the image of Agnes as a figure of death implies both a strange fear and attraction to this 'familiar of death'⁴⁵ as she cannot invite him to the 'sky above' (848) without inviting his death. 'Agnes', writes Welsh, 'ought instinctively to be feared as well as worshiped'.⁴⁶ Yet David's words anticipate what is the most enduring image of Agnes 'pointing upward' that comes at the end of the novel, and suggests that her divine presence will offer him divine consolation at the moment of his death.

This final image of Agnes 'pointing upward' comes in almost prayer-like form. It suggests that for David, the poor orphan who has risen to become something akin to a famous novelist with a loving wife and family, the last great problem of his life is how to face his eventual death:

⁴⁵ Alexander Welsh, *The City of Dickens*, 182.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 182.

And now, as I close my task, subduing my desire to linger yet, these faces fade away. But, one face, shining on me like a Heavenly light by which I see all other objects, is above them and beyond them all. And that remains.

I turn my head, and see it, in its beautiful serenity, beside me. My lamp burns low, and I have written far into the night; but the dear presence, without which I were nothing, bears me company.

O Agnes, O my soul, so may thy face be by me when I close my life indeed; so may I, when realities are melting from me like the shadows which I now dismiss, still find thee near me, pointing upward! (882).

David's 'prayer', which invites a double reading as it plays on the close of the novel as the close of life, reflects a persistent theme in Dickens's fiction that celebrated the redemptive powers of women, especially in the face of death. Indeed, this concluding prayer feeds into a widely-held Victorian ideology about the exalted function of women at the moment of death.⁴⁷ But the passage extends beyond an idea of virtuous womanhood with innate powers to redeem and has a specifically Marian resonance. Agnes is clearly figured as a divine consoling mediatrix at the moment of death. She is again etherealized and does not seem to be bodily present. Instead she is imagined as a kind of fuzzy 'presence' (882) and a 'Heavenly light' (882) that suggest her close relation to God. This sense of her as a spirit-figure is further emphasised by the focus on her moral radiance. She is, for David, so far 'above' and 'beyond' (882) humankind that she is detached from carnal appetites and desires. Her singularity and a sense of her permanence in that she alone 'remains' (882) link her to a more traditional Catholic interpretation. And, like Catholic prayers to the Madonna, David's concluding 'prayer' does not ask for direct action to grant the ultimate object of the 'prayer', but simply for Agnes to be an intercessor and be near him at the close of life. Death for David, accompanied by the divine Catholic-flavoured Madonna-figure of Agnes, is

⁴⁷ An 1843 article by a Mrs Edward Thomas entitled 'Woman' reflects this ideology. 'It is for woman - tender, sympathizing, watching, prayerful woman - alone to comprehend those struggles, alone to soothe them, alone to invoke mercy and forgiveness for them, alone to feel the blessed assurance that her prayers are gone up an acceptable sacrifice before the throne of the Most High, alone to indulge the hope that him she mourneth as dead has awakened to life and immortality in the cloudless realms of everlasting light'. Mrs Edward Thomas, 'Woman', *The Metropolitan*, Vol. 36 (1843), 319.

therefore transformed from a moment of terror as he no longer imagines his death as a painful transition.

David Copperfield, as Stanley Friedman argues, can be read as a novel more concerned with emphasizing ‘compensation on earth, rather than in heaven, for unmerited suffering’.⁴⁸ But through the character of Agnes Wickfield Dickens also seems to be exploring a vision of mortality steeped in Catholic thought as a Marian-type figure eases the passage of David’s soul from this world to the next by mediating between the departing spirit and God. Yet this was not the first time he had explored such a vision. Little Nell, like David, is a character who frequently dwells upon the terrors of death. Nell ‘shudder[s]’ (78) at the thought of death. And imagining the death of her grandfather, she does so in an extremely gruesome way that is ‘too horrible to dwell upon’ (78). But for Nell, who, we recall, dies surrounded by the vestiges of Catholicism with a carving of the Madonna and Child on the headboard of her death-bed, the terror of her own death is mitigated by its Catholic context. As she sits among the tombs she has a feeling of ‘calm delight’ (401) and ‘felt that now she was happy, and at rest ... What if the spot awakened thoughts of death! Die who would, it would still remain the same; these sights and sounds would still go on, as happily as ever. It would be no pain to sleep amidst them’ (403). As Malcolm Andrews notes, amidst this Catholic-inspired scene, ‘the physical realities of death seem to disappear for Nell’.⁴⁹

Let us now turn to Agnes’s association with a ‘stained glass window’ (233). This is perhaps the image that critics who deem the character to be a failure have most consistently seized upon. To (again) quote Slater, for example: ‘The fact that David’s perception of Agnes’s nature never changes from the moment in his childhood when he first sees her, also

⁴⁸ Stanley Friedman, ‘Dickens’s Mid-Victorian Theodicy: *David Copperfield*’, 147.

⁴⁹ Malcolm Andrews, ‘Introduction’ in Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop* edited by Malcolm Andrews (London: Penguin, 1972), 29. Michael E. Schiefelbein has written an intriguing essay that touches on the Marian imagery surrounding Little Nell. He argues that ‘Nell becomes, like the Virgin Mary engraved on her bed, finally elevated to the level of legendary. Just as the Virgin lives on in the popular Marian cult that celebrates her Assumption, so Nell gains immortality in the great death-bed description in which she is preserved exactly as she was in life’. Michael E. Schiefelbein, ‘Little Nell, Catholicism, and Dickens’s Investigation of Death’, *The Lure of Babylon*, 94.

as a child, and at once thinks of a figure in a stained glass window has much to do with the reader's inability to credit her with more than the single dimension such a figure has'.⁵⁰

However, this association can be read in more subtle and complex ways. David evokes the image in his very first meeting with Agnes:

I cannot call to mind where or when, in my childhood, I had seen a stained glass window in a church. Nor do I recollect its subject. But I know that when I saw her turn round, in the grave light of the old staircase, and wait for us, above, I thought of that window; and that I associated something of its tranquil brightness with Agnes Wickfield ever afterwards (233).

He returns to this image on three more occasions. Soon after meeting Agnes he says, 'I feel that there are goodness, peace and truth, wherever Agnes is; and the soft light of the coloured window in the church, seen long ago, falls on her always, and on me when I am near her, and on everything around' (242). Seeing her in London years later, he speaks of how he associates her 'face' with the 'softened beauty' of the 'stained glass window in the church' (515). And lastly, following the death of Dora, he says of Agnes: 'I began to think that in my old association of her with the stained glass-window in the church, a prophetic foreshadowing of that she would be to me, in the calamity that was to happen in the fullness of time, had found a way into my mind' (776). Far from David's perception of Agnes never changing, a definite progression marks each association, a progression that is reflected by a more general intensification of Agnes's religious significance in a catalogue of words and phrases that all but deify her for David, and which become ever more conspicuous towards the end of the novel. From her having a 'Heavenly face' (573), she becomes a 'sacred presence' (776), which David guards with 'religious care' (846).

A striking feature of David's association of Agnes with the stained glass window is that he imagines her pictorially, or, more precisely, as an iconic artwork touched by Catholic-flavoured Marian symbolism. As Michael Camille explains, in Catholic iconography, the Virgin Mary 'is the window through which Christ, the Light of the World,

⁵⁰ Michael Slater, *Dickens and Women*, 248.

entered the terrestrial realm'.⁵¹ Light, indeed, seems to always emanate from Agnes. David speaks of how her 'bright calm face light[s] up with pleasure' (239) and 'her sweet face and placid smile ... shone' (384). She has a 'bright smile (516), a 'radiant forehead' (517), 'her own pure light' (525), 'beaming eyes' (574), a 'beaming smile (620), and so on. And this imagery generally has a strong religious significance. For example, in the chapter entitled 'A Light shines on my way', Agnes's 'light' (862) seems to guide David to a renewed sense of faith. When David and Agnes become lovers he speaks of having a 'blessed calm within' (868) and says that as 'the early stars began to shine while we were lingering on' they looked up to them and 'thanked GOD for having guided us to this tranquillity' (868). Like the Catholic Mary, Agnes becomes for David an otherworldly object of veneration and a singular figure.

Yet this vague religious association of Agnes as Madonna-like remains a deeply puzzling one. What may lead us to a clearer understanding of the role and function of the character in the novel is that her identification with a stained glass window is heavily invested with a sense of her as a mother-figure and tied up with David's own memories of his dead mother, Clara Copperfield.

David's association of Agnes with a stained glass window is fused from its inception with an earlier memory that is itself inaccessible. In his first mention of the stained glass window, a passage marked by a tentativeness and simple, monosyllabic, childlike diction, and which comes directly after he has noted that Agnes bears a striking similarity to her mother, he associates her with the 'tranquil brightness' (233) of a window that he once saw but cannot remember 'where or when' (233). But there *is* a stained glass window in his past. It is a window in the village church next to his childhood home, Blunderstone Rookery.⁵² Significantly, this church plays a vital role in the young David's life as a symbol of stability

⁵¹ Michael Camille, *Gothic Art: Glorious Visions* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), 42.

⁵² Arlene M. Jackson has previously identified the window in Blunderstone Rookery as the stained glass window that he associates with Agnes. See Arlene M. Jackson, 'Agnes Wickfield and the Church Leitmotif in David Copperfield', *Dickens Studies Annual* 9 (1981), 53-65.

and is closely associated with his mother. One of his earliest childhood memories is of sitting inside the church beside his mother and Peggotty:

Here is our pew in the church. What a high-backed pew! With a window near it, out of which our house can be seen, and *is* seen many times during the morning's service by Peggotty, who likes to make herself sure as she can that it's not being robbed, or is not in flames (27).

David goes on to recall the 'sunlight coming in at the open door' and his thinking of the pulpit as 'a good place to play in, and what a castle it would make' before his 'eyes gradually shut up; and from seeming to hear the clergyman singing a drowsy song in the heat, I hear nothing, until I fall off the seat with a crash' (27-8) when he is taken out by Peggotty. The scene is infused with an idyllic sense of the innocence and security of his early life, especially before the arrival of Mr Murdstone when churchgoing becomes a thoroughly dismal affair. But it is not the window mentioned in the text that David associates with Agnes, as this is a window he clearly remembers. It is a window that is only represented in Phiz's illustration of the scene, entitled 'Our Pew at Church' (see Figure 12). High up in the illustration, behind the choir seated upstairs, can be seen a window that Phiz seems to represent as stained glass which has streams of light coming through to illuminate the congregation below. Dickens, who always collaborated closely with his illustrators and had final approval of the plates, creates an intriguing effect in this separation of text and illustration.⁵³ David's inability to recollect the subject of the window becomes apparent because it has no subject. But more importantly, by not including this window in the textual version of David's childhood memory of the church, the reader is not only alerted to the fact that there is a stained glass window in his childhood, but that his association of Agnes with this window is inextricably linked with the warmth, love, and protection of his mother.

⁵³ For a detailed account of Dickens's working relationship with his illustrators see Jane R. Cohen, *Charles Dickens and His Original Illustrators* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1980).



Fig.12 'Our Pew at Church' from *David Copperfield* by Hablot K. Browne ('Phiz')

Though the memory of a stained glass window that forms David's image of Agnes comes from his childhood, it is also inextricably bound up with Canterbury, a city dominated by a cathedral that boasts some of the oldest stained glass windows in England.⁵⁴ Once David has escaped from the Murdstone and Grinby factory and is coming to the end of his journey to find his aunt Betsey, he again associates his mother with a church motif:

⁵⁴ See Alec Clifton-Taylor, *The Cathedrals of England* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1967), 73-5 for the history of the stained glass windows in Canterbury Cathedral.

I seemed to be sustained and led on by my fanciful picture of my mother in her youth, before I came into the world. It always kept me company. It was there, among the hops, when I lay down to sleep; it was with me on my waking in the morning; it went before me all day. I have associated it, ever since, with the sunny street of Canterbury, dozing as it were in the hot light; and with the sight of its old houses and gateways, and the stately, grey Cathedral, with the rooks sailing round the towers (198).

Here, David's memory resonates with his earlier church memory. Importantly, each is preceded by him feeling 'afraid' (27) or 'frightened' (198) and ends with an image of his falling asleep to reveal a complex memory process that suggests he recalls the childhood comfort of his mother when he is threatened or anxious. David's mother, as far as we or he knows, has no connection with Canterbury. He seems, then, to be projecting the safety and stability of his earlier churchgoing experience with his mother onto Canterbury and its Cathedral.⁵⁵ David's romanticised view of Canterbury and its cathedral, however, is inseparable from Agnes. As he says, 'Strange to say, that quiet influence which was inseparable in my mind from Agnes, seemed to pervade even the old city where she dwelt ... everywhere - on everything - I felt the same serene air, the same calm, thoughtful softening spirit' (570). And it is significant that throughout the text there are subtle images which associate her with the cathedral. Even the Wickfield house is invested with several of the same architectural features of the cathedral, especially in it being filled with 'quaint little panes of glass, and quainter little windows' (228).⁵⁶ David, then, may find it 'strange' (570) that the city has the same calming effect on him as Agnes does. But through his vague memories and associations the reader gradually becomes aware that he has transferred his earliest childhood memory of being in church with his mother onto a more general church image. His attraction to Agnes is therefore forever tied to the love and security he

⁵⁵ This association is reinforced by David's later memory of Canterbury Cathedral, previously discussed in Chapter 4, of him sitting in the cathedral and feeling a 'sensation of the world being shut out' as 'the resounding of the organ through the black and white arched galleries and aisles, are wings that take me back' (275), a memory that figures the Cathedral as a womb-like refuge from the world.

⁵⁶ Canterbury Cathedral and the Wickfield House also both have gargoyles. In an almost grotesque inversion of Agnes's association with a stained glass window, David associates this frightening architectural feature with Uriah Heep who looks 'uncommonly like the carved face ... eyeing me sideways, with his mouth widened, and the creases in his cheeks' (244).

experienced with his mother as they sat in church on Sundays beneath the sunlight from the stained glass window.

Perhaps, though, the richest (and strangest) example of the association of Agnes with the stained glass window occurs immediately after the death of Dora. It is the only moment in the novel when the two dominant motifs of Agnes are juxtaposed:

I began to think that in my old association of her with the stained-glass window in the church, a prophetic foreshadowing of that she would be to me, in the calamity that was to happen in the fullness of time, had found a way into my mind. In all that sorrow, from the moment, never to be forgotten, when she stood before me with her upraised hand, she was like a sacred presence in my lonely house (776).

To try and unravel what this ‘prophetic foreshadowing’ of the ‘calamity that was to happen’ (776) is, we need to understand the relationship between David and Dora. For all Agnes’s virtues, she is not David’s first choice as wife. Instead, he marries Dora Spenlow, a ‘child-wife’ (769) who bears a strong resemblance to Clara Copperfield. Dora is physically ‘diminutive’ (399) in the same way that Clara is like a ‘wax-doll’ (15). And both are charming but inept housekeepers. David, like his father, though at first deeply attracted to Dora’s childlike innocence and impractical ways, begins to realise that the woman he has married imperils the domestic ideal she is supposed to embody and enforce, as the couple fall prey to thieving servants and exploitative tradesmen. Nevertheless, David’s falling in love with and marrying Dora can be read as an attempt to revive his relationship with his dead mother.⁵⁷ Dora’s death, however, by triggering for David another association of Agnes with the stained-glass window, suggests that the first time he saw the stained glass window in the village church may actually have been at his mother’s funeral and that he is gradually

⁵⁷ This is complicated by a small detail that David mentions when thinking back to his wedding day that suggests subconsciously he knows that Dora is not the true mother-substitute he seeks. He recalls walking down the aisle with Dora ‘through a mist of half-seen people, pulpits, monuments, pews, fonts, organs, and church windows, in which there flutter faint airs of association with my childish church at home, so long ago’ (639). David comes close here to remembering the window and its associations with his mother, but, unlike the association of Agnes with stained glass window, this memory is even more vague and general.

realising this. His association of Agnes with his mother therefore turns out to be 'a prophetic foreshadowing' (776) because she is present when Dora, the substitute for his mother, dies. The stained glass window becomes a symbol of what survives the death of the beloved mother and mother-substitute. Agnes's link with the Virgin Mary becomes clearer: she is a perfect, transcendent mother-figure who, even when the real mother is dead, lives on and remains 'wholly unaltered' (862).

Conclusion

In 1925 Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch began a lecture on Charles Dickens at the University of Cambridge by stating: ‘To begin with, we must jettison religion’.¹ For Quiller-Couch, the great religious controversies of the Victorian age that were ‘agitating men’s thoughts as with a succession of shocks of earthquake’ all ‘passed Dickens by, as little observed as felt by him: simply disregarded’.² Thankfully, a progressive critical understanding of Dickens’s awareness of religious matters and how religion informs his fiction has since emerged. Strangely, though, his relationship with Catholicism, a religion that agitated the minds of many Victorians, for the most part has remained unexplored in any serious depth. A critical consensus has formed among biographers and critics, the majority of whom have isolated one or two moments of anti-Catholic sentiment in Dickens’s writing without further investigation, that he was a staunch anti-Catholic.³ It cannot be denied that Dickens engaged with the popular anti-Catholicism of the day. ‘Popery’, he sometimes affirmed, was an ugly remnant of barbarous times, a regressive force that was an acute threat to English liberty, and his writing often employed the images and rhetoric widely used in the Victorian era to attack the ‘Church of Rome’. Yet, as this study shows, the prevailing static view that Dickens’s anti-Catholicism is a ‘familiar fact’⁴ has obscured the complexities of how and why he engages with the Catholic religion: the subject of Dickens and Catholicism does not simply involve prejudice, but is a terrain marked by anxieties and tensions, identifications and sympathies, ambivalences and attractions.

Historical contexts are of the utmost importance when thinking about Dickens and Catholicism. Anti-Catholicism was a significant phenomenon of the Victorian era.

¹ Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, *Charles Dickens and Other Victorians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1925), 72.

² *Ibid.*, 73.

³ Peter Ackroyd is a good example of this. In the middle of a discussion of Dickens’s religious beliefs, he simply writes, ‘It is clear what he did *not* like, for example. Catholicism remained a “pet hate”’. Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens*, 532.

⁴ Dennis Walder, *Dickens and Religion*, 11.

‘Romanism’, for many, was spiritually repugnant and socially, culturally, and politically menacing to Protestant Britain. A preoccupation with the threat of Catholicism was expressed in a variety of fictional and nonfictional discourses. Wild and improbable tales of Catholic evil were told through extravagant images and excessive rhetoric, in fictions full of debauchery, corruption, and treason, that amplified an atmosphere of fear and loathing around Catholicism, a trend that prompted the *Dublin Review* to complain that it was ‘one of the most formidable evidences of a return to the ancient feuds, and to the bigotry on which these feuds were founded’.⁵ Many readings of the Victorian anti-Catholic phenomenon hold that Protestant England’s revulsion at Catholicism grew as a number of ‘spectacular events ... seemed to herald renewed attempts by the Church of Rome to appropriate British culture’.⁶ Dickens’s anti-Catholicism, as I showed earlier, has generally been read as following this pattern. Dennis Walder, for example, sees the author’s response to the Catholic revival as initially being one of ‘toleration and reasonableness’ that developed into ‘powerful antipathies towards the characteristic features of the Catholic religion’⁷ as the waves from Oxford were felt and the Papal Aggression crisis erupted. Victorian ‘No Popery’, however, was responsive to the historical moment. It was inflected at different times by different religious and secular concerns. Similarly, Dickens’s anti-Catholicism does not fall into a simple narrative pattern and is often marked by undercurrents of complexity, ambivalence, and qualifications. Both anti-Catholic sentiments and expressions of sympathy for Catholics and Catholicism appear in his fiction, letters, and journalism throughout his life.

It is too simple to speak of Dickens’s ‘virulent anti-Catholicism’.⁸ Such an approach loses the complexity of his response as it suggests that when he engages with Catholicism he

⁵ Anon., ‘No Popery’, *Dublin Review* 31 (September 1851), 147 [144-72]. John Henry Newman also identified and criticised the prevalence of anti-Catholicism in ‘newspapers, magazines, reviews, pamphlets, romances, novels, poems, and light literature of all kinds’. John Henry Newman, *Lectures on the Present Position of Catholics in England*, 84.

⁶ Maureen Moran, *Catholic Sensationalism and Victorian Literature*, 6.

⁷ Dennis Walder, *Dickens and Religion*, 91-3.

⁸ Michael Slater, *Dickens and Women*, 86.

merely contributes to what one critic has called a ‘discourse of fear engendered by the rise of Roman Catholicism’.⁹ Seeking to locate new ways of thinking about the perceived anti-Catholicism in Dickens’s writing, I have situated the moments when Catholicism spurs his creativity alongside other contemporary anti-Catholic responses. It is true that he did, on occasion, engage in what appears to be reflex anti-Catholicism. *A Child’s History of England*, for example, is filled with stereotypical moments of prejudice against the ‘Romish Church’ (274). Yet, as I have shown, when Dickens employs Catholic images, characterisations, plots and motifs he often does so in rich and complex ways. Probing behind the apparent intolerance of these moments can reveal a complex set of tensions and anxieties. In his passage on ‘Dandyism - in Religion’ (189) in *Bleak House*, for example, we can uncover concerns about the appearance of dandified ‘Puseyites’ on the national stage as a sign of civic decay. But here, as in the other texts I have discussed, Dickens’s writing is also marked by ambiguity. An odd sense of nostalgia and unexpected affinities between Dickens and these ‘effeminate Exquisites’ (189) pervades the passage as the theatricality of these figures seems to fascinate him and drive the force and energy of his writing.

Barnaby Rudge is the most powerful evidence to support the claim that Dickens’s anti-Catholicism rests on a complex imaginary landscape that involves not only prejudices and anxieties, but also affirmations, identifications, sympathies, and understandings. *Barnaby Rudge* is a novel that is deeply sympathetic to the plight of victimised Catholics. At times, however, it also portrays Catholicism negatively. Haredale’s Catholicism, for example, is a defining feature of his gloomy temperament. The narrator tells us of Haredale’s home being ‘but another bead in the long rosary of regrets’ (510) and the character himself laments that he has ‘mused and brooded, when my spirit should have mixed with all God’s great Creation’ (657). As we have seen, this ambiguity is reflected by Dickens placing a character with Jesuitical qualities at the heart of Lord George Gordon’s Protestant Association. The figure of Gashford plays upon contemporary Protestant fears

⁹ Diana Peschier, *Nineteenth-Century Anti-Catholic Discourses*, 162.

about a sinister network of Catholics conspiring to infiltrate, destabilize and control England. Dickens, though, by refusing to identify the character's faith in a stereotypical way, disrupts these fears of Catholic invaders by weirdly engaging with, but simultaneously resisting and revising, the Victorian anti-Catholic myth of Jesuitical intrigue. This is a characteristic example of how Dickens's engagement with Catholicism spurs his creativity and inventiveness.

'Passionate denunciations', writes Robert Newsom, 'are often a sign of ambivalence, and Dickens's repulsions are frequently compounded with attractions'.¹⁰ This is particularly true of the author's relationship with Catholicism. He was both repelled and attracted by 'Rome'. *Pictures from Italy*'s portraits of Italian Catholic churches are especially intriguing. In a book punctuated with anti-Catholic sentiment, his descriptions of many of these places of worship manifest a strange attraction to the gloomy magnetism of Catholic architecture and ornamentation. The text's images of life-like ancient edifices and womb-like chapels, described through a series of odd metaphors, repetitions and juxtapositions, are a central part of the, at times, disquieting journey Dickens takes the reader on. Of particular note are the dream-like descriptions of these deeply alluring churches, especially Saint Mark's in Venice. Here, reality dissolves into a phantasmagoric vision of 'a Cathedral' with 'cloisters and galleries' that 'might have been the work of fairy hands' (80). Dickens acknowledges in a letter to Forster that he has been overwhelmed by the 'enchanted scene' (80) of Venice and Saint Mark's, and that he finds it impossible to capture his experience in words: 'With your foot upon its stones, its pictures before you, and its history in your mind, it is something past all writing of or speaking of - almost past all thinking of'.¹¹ Yet it invaded his imagination. 'A new mind came upon me', he told Forster, 'Venice is a bit of my brain from this time'.¹²

His dream of Mary Hogarth more than hints at this ambivalence. But, as I have tried to show, Dickens's fiction is particularly revealing in this regard. Catholicism seems to offer

¹⁰ Robert Newsom, 'Roman Catholic Church', *Oxford Reader's Companion to Dickens*, 511.

¹¹ *Letters IV*, 217-18.

¹² *Letters IV*, 217.

him a rich source of imaginative and narrative possibilities. *A Christmas Carol* is distinctly coloured by Catholicism. Jacob Marley and the strange ‘Invisible World’ (52) in which he exists are heavily invested with the qualities of Purgatory. Imagining a purgatorial ‘third place’ allows Dickens to imagine redemptive and punitive possibilities beyond the limitations of Victorian Protestant eschatology which held that a soul must find salvation in Heaven or damnation in Hell, and create a realm where the possibility of pardon and forgiveness in the afterlife works to alter the significance of death’s frontier. And by investing the character of Agnes Wickfield in *David Copperfield* with Marian qualities, a sense emerges that he was deeply attracted to a more Catholic-flavoured image of the Virgin Mary not found in the Church of England. She is a curiously Catholic character, a Madonna-like heavenly mediatrix and mother-figure, through whom we are given a greater glimpse into the inner-life of David. His rather vague association of her with a ‘stained glass window in a church’ (233) and his recurring image of her as a figure forever ‘pointing upward’ (882) reveal a complex memory process inextricably linked with the love and protection of his dead mother. Reading Dickens’s fiction through the lens of Catholicism can therefore reveal a much more ambivalent relationship to the religion than his apparent beliefs and unearth new ways of thinking about his work.

This thesis began with Dickens’s ‘curious dream’¹³ of Mary Hogarth. Perhaps the strangest and most ambiguous aspect of the dream is the moment that Dickens asks the spirit of Mary, ‘What is the True religion? ... perhaps the Roman Catholic is the best?’¹⁴

¹³ John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, Vol. II, 122.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 124.

Abbreviations

Letters: House, Madeline, Storey, Graham, Tillotson, Kathleen, et al. (eds), *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, 12 Vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965-2002)

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