NECESSARY EVILS:
AUTHORSHIP, ETHICS, AND THE READER
IN BLAKE, DICKENS, AND JOYCE

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Abstract

This thesis examines the ways in which William Blake, Charles Dickens, and James Joyce construct their ethical status as authors. Each of these writers became more and more aware, as his career progressed, of the weight of moral responsibility which he imposed upon himself by writing about social and individual ills which paralleled the experience of real people. As a result, each came to incorporate misgivings about his own moral authority into his writings in vivid and alarming ways. In each case, the author, or the idea of the author that the reader is encouraged to hold, becomes a microcosm or synecdoche of wider moral problems that exercise that author. The fact that Blake, Dickens, and Joyce have doubts about their own benignity does not disqualify them from entering the discourse of right and wrong behaviour, the examination of moral concepts which constitutes ethics: rather it is the necessary symptom of rigorous and powerful ethical thought, and offers the opportunity of making moral problems fully tangible and alive. The central argument of this thesis, in summary, is that Blake, Dickens, and Joyce earn a special credibility for the role of the author as moral observer and ethical thinker through linking a scrutiny of themselves to a similar scrutiny of the world around them. The main body of the thesis is devoted to exploring some of the many ways in which this linkage is achieved in individual texts. The thesis concludes with the claim that its ethically attuned approach to literary criticism is distinctly more realistic and challenging than many earlier humanist perspectives.
Contents

Texts and Quotations 4
A Note on Style 4
Introduction 5

Part I: Blake

Chapter 1: Melancholia, Moral Ambiguity, and the Search for a System in Blake’s Early Works 13

Chapter 2: Blake as Educator and Tormentor of the Innocent: The Songs and The Book of Thel 46

Chapter 3: Images of Authorship and Experiments with Ethics in the Shorter Prophetic Books 64

Chapter 4: The Four Zoas, Milton, and Jerusalem: Blake as the Analyst and Agent of Wrongs 93

Part II: Dickens

Chapter 5: Ethical Challenges and Jovial Evasions, Heroes Indulged and Debunked: From Sketches by Boz to Nicholas Nickleby 116

Chapter 6: Moralistic Allegory and Pathologic Vision: The Old Curiosity Shop and Barnaby Rudge 140

Chapter 7: Narratorial Independence and Disruptiveness in Martin Chuzzlewit and Dombey and Son 158

Chapter 8: Weak but Decent Heroes, Altruistic but Unfathomable Texts: David Copperfield and Bleak House 176

Chapter 9: Flatness and Ethical Scepticism in Hard Times, Little Dorrit, and A Tale of Two Cities 197

Chapter 10: The Visionary Dickens: Characters, the Author, and the Outer World in Great Expectations, Our Mutual Friend, and The Mystery of Edwin Drood 224

Part III: Joyce

Chapter 11: The Uses and Abuses of Blake and Dickens in Joyce’s Early Works 247

Chapter 12: Paralysis and Neglect: The Terror of Ulysses 265

Conclusion 283

Bibliography 287
Texts and Quotations

Blake

Quotations from Blake, unless stated otherwise, are taken from The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake, ed. David V. Erdman, newly revised edn. (New York, 1988). Page references, both to Blake's texts and to Erdman's important textual notes, are given as E plus the page number. In addition, Blake's plate or manuscript page numbers, followed by line references, are given for all works except short poems. But it should be noted that due to the variations between different copies of some Prophetic Books, notably Milton, the use of these references with other editions may be difficult. For Blake's illustrations to his engraved texts I give page references to the reproductions in William Blake's Writings, ed. G. E. Bentley, Jr., 2 vols (Oxford, 1978). These references are expressed as B plus the page number.

Dickens

The Clarendon Dickens currently provides the standard texts for eight novels: The Pickwick Papers, Oliver Twist, Martin Chuzzlewit, Dombey and Son, David Copperfield, Little Dorrit, Great Expectations, and The Mystery of Edwin Drood. For Dickens's other works I have selected whichever edition seemed the most authoritative available. Full details appear in footnotes and the bibliography.

Joyce

Dubliners and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man are quoted from the Viking Critical editions, which are not in print in the United Kingdom, but which are otherwise the most useful for scholarly purposes. My references to Ulysses use the episode and line numbers first employed in Hans Walter Gabler's critical edition (New York, 1984). These numbers also appear in the Penguin 'Student's Edition' and the Bodley Head edition of 'the Corrected Text' with a preface by Richard Ellmann (London, 1986). This last, which is a corrected printing of Gabler's reading text, is the source for all my quotations. For further details of these and Joyce's other works, see footnotes and the bibliography.

A Note on Style

This thesis has been prepared using conventions set out in the MHRA Style Book: Notes for Authors, Editors, and Writers of Dissertations, 3rd edn., ed. A. S. Maney and R. L. Smallwood (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 1981). First references to a book or article within a given chapter appear in footnotes and include full bibliographical details. Subsequent references appear in the shortest intelligible form, either in a footnote or, if no ambiguity is possible (for example, if no other work by the same author is mentioned in the thesis), as a page reference in parentheses within the main text (see Sections 10 [b] and [c] of the Style Book). All texts cited also appear, together with all other texts which have directly influenced or are especially relevant to the thesis, in the bibliography.
Introduction

The works of William Blake, Charles Dickens, and James Joyce contain a great deal of imaginative recreation and scrutiny of, on the one hand, the helpful or benevolent behaviour of human beings towards one another, and, on the other, their oppressive or destructive interactions, whether in a domestic context or in such fields as politics, commerce, the law, education, industry, or warfare. Such forms of behaviour are of pressing and constant concern in real life: people are doing things all the time that we feel inclined to applaud, and other things that we deplore. And we have to select our own actions too, according to our sense of what is desirable or undesirable, or, as we are likely to think and say, 'right' or 'wrong'. Our decisions in these matters, even if we do not believe in a morality grounded on anything more than contingency, expediency, or self-interest, can be said to be governed by moral concepts: ideas of how to behave when we find ourselves in certain relations to other individuals, relations which affect their happiness or well-being. In so far as we reflect upon, question, and theorize these moral concepts we may be said to be engaging in moral philosophy or ethics. It is in this sense that this thesis concerns itself with ethics in Blake, Dickens, and Joyce.

No piece of writing which shows human beings interacting in any but the most superficial ways can avoid implicating itself in the moral concerns and ethical debates to which I have just alluded. And to a certain extent my choice of Blake, Dickens, and Joyce as subjects could be said to be arbitrary. I draw many specific parallels, in the ensuing chapters, between the respective works of these authors, but this is not an influence study: I am interested in describing causal links between Blake, Dickens, and Joyce only in so far as this helps me to study a particular set of attitudes to authorship, which could be found in the work of many writers, but for which Blake, Dickens, and Joyce provide

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outstandingly strong examples. Each of these authors, I shall argue, became more and more aware, as his career progressed, of the weight of moral responsibility which he imposed upon himself by writing about social and individual ills which paralleled the experience of real people, and this led, within his texts, to an increasingly sceptical and ironic sense of the author. As a result, Blake, Dickens, and Joyce all came to incorporate misgivings about their own moral authority into their writings in vivid and alarming ways: in each case, the author, or the idea of the author that the reader is encouraged to hold, becomes a microcosm or synecdoche of wider moral problems that exercise that author. The fact that Blake, Dickens, and Joyce have doubts about their own benignity does not disqualify them from entering the discourse of right and wrong behaviour, the examination of moral concepts which constitutes ethics: rather it is the necessary symptom of rigorous and powerful ethical thought, and offers the opportunity of making moral problems fully tangible and alive. The central argument of this thesis, in summary, is that Blake, Dickens, and Joyce earn a special credibility for the role of the author as moral observer and ethical thinker through linking a scrutiny of themselves to a similar scrutiny of the world around them. The following pages are chiefly devoted to exploring some of the many ways in which this linkage is achieved in individual texts.²

I begin, in the first chapter, with a discussion of Blake's early writings, from Poetical Sketches to Tiriel. In my reading, these relatively neglected works are more serious, sombre, and challenging than is often supposed. Through a simultaneous examination of lyrics, fictional narratives, and theoretical writings, I draw attention to a range of epistemological and ethical ambiguities and inconsistencies, which in turn are related to Blake's explicit efforts, during this

² There has been a distinct reawakening of critical interest in the relations between literature and ethics in the last few years. I have found the following works particularly helpful and stimulating: Murray Krieger, 'In the Wake of Morality: The Thematic Underside of Recent Theory', New Literary History, 15 (1983--84), 119--36; Warner Berthoff, Literature and the Continuances of Virtue (Princeton, New Jersey, 1986); J. Hills Miller, The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin (New York, 1987); Laurence S. Lockridge, The Ethics of Romanticism (Cambridge, 1989); and Frank Palmer, Literature and Moral Understanding: A Philosophical Essay on Ethics, Aesthetics, Education, and Culture (Oxford, 1992) (see especially pp. 168--74: 'The Artist and Moral Responsibility').
period, to depict or define the author, whether in the disintegrated self-portraiture of *An Island in the Moon* or in enthusiastic concepts of the ‘Poetic Genius’.

The second chapter examines *Songs of Innocence* and *of Experience* and *The Book of Thel*. Here I draw attention to sinister elements in Blake’s depiction of ‘Innocence’, and to ways in which both the narrator and the poet himself can be seen as knowingly implicated in the evils of ‘Experience’. I argue that these works show signs of an energetic didacticism which makes them comparable to the moralistic tracts of authors such as Anna Laetitia Barbauld and Mary Wollstonecraft, but that they also contain elements of negativity and violence which seem radically to conflict with a conventional didactic purpose.

In the third chapter I discuss Blake’s shorter Prophetic Books, together with some of his Notebook lyrics, drawing special attention to what I take to be their presentation, sometimes obviously and sometimes in a covert manner, of parodic images of the author. At the same time I discuss Blake’s half-sympathetic depiction of mythic and historical villains in these poems, thus developing further my conception of Blake as an author whose works tend to disclaim moral superiority to the evils which they describe.

The last Blake chapter attends to *The Four Zoas*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem*, paying particular attention to Blake’s literary treatment of events from his own life. The humanitarian, redemptive message which these epic works project is contrasted with Blake’s handling of personal resentments, and I demonstrate that Blake did not always transcend the violence and oppression that he execrates in society at large. I conclude my survey of Blake by claiming that the reader’s awareness of apparent lapses from ethical responsibility, on Blake’s part, which Blake makes no effort to conceal, positively strengthens his work as a vehicle for productive ethical debate.

I begin my survey of Dickens, in Chapter Five, by looking at his earliest published works, paying particular attention to the unpredictable mixture of light entertainment and moral portentousness which they contain, and to the way in which Dickens’s attitude towards his first fictional heroes, especially Oliver Twist and Nicholas Nickleby, seems
to waver. I argue that while Dickens's handling of plot seems usually to have these characters' interests at heart there are other elements in the surrounding texts which criticise and mock them. Like the implied Blake of Songs of Experience, the narrators in these early works sometimes seem uncomfortably close to the points of view which Dickens nominally attributes to his fictional villains.

The sixth chapter consists of readings of The Old Curiosity Shop and Barnaby Rudge, concentrating on Dickens's experimentation, in these novels, with pastoral, with moralistic allegory, and with psychotic modes of perception. Dickens's deviations from the language and imagery of everyday life for the purposes, first, of quasi-Christian pastoral didacticism and, secondly, of a recreation of mad or criminal states of mind, is here contrasted. I argue that it is the second, morally suspect, purpose, analogous to the Orcian violence of the Prophetic Books, in which Dickens is most successful.

Chapter Seven consists of readings of Martin Chuzzlewit and Dombey and Son. I draw attention to ways in which the apparently central concerns of these novels, the overcoming of selfishness and acquisition of independence in Chuzzlewit, and Mr Dombey's change of heart, are complicated by a growing eccentricity on the part of Dickens's narrators. Perverse and iconoclastic elements in Dickens's depiction of characters and social phenomena are seen to complicate what might otherwise be an off-puttingly simplistic and sanctimonious moral didacticism.

My readings of David Copperfield and Bleak House, in Chapter Eight, emphasize the different ways in which these two novels carry still

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1 Much of the understanding of textual mechanics and the function of the author in this thesis is in accord with Philip J. M. Sturgess, Narrativity: Theory and Practice (Oxford, 1992). My readings may often be described as attending to the 'narrativity' which, according to Sturgess, 'determines not only the chronology of a novel's story, but equally every interruption of that story, and every variation in the mode of representation of that story' (p. 22). I am aware of no reason why this concept, which gives 'the writing author' (p. 63) credit for many of the 'flaws' which deconstruction has tended to present as the critic's personal discovery, should not be as applicable to Blake's narrative poems, for example, as to the novels upon which Sturgess concentrates. The 'implied author' to whom I often explicitly or implicitly allude derives in part from Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago, 1961) but is also well described by Sturgess (especially pp. 169--71). My thesis discusses the ethical significance of three actual authors -- Blake, Dickens and Joyce -- chiefly through an examination of the narrativity of their texts, a narrativity which in each case includes the author's manipulation of implied versions of himself.
further Dickens's problematizing of the sense of social purpose and moral value in his work. *Copperfield* is considered as a conspicuously autobiographical work -- a novel, on one level, about the making of a writer -- which both presents a flattering and likeable authorial image and stresses the writer/hero's weakness and alienation. *Bleak House*, similarly, is shown to be a novel in which the implied author's vast social vision is inextricably bound up with a sense of helplessness, and a sceptical attitude towards writing itself.

In Chapter Nine I discuss the emphasis on failure, guilt, and disillusionment in *Hard Times*, *Little Dorrit*, and *A Tale of Two Cities*, and the corresponding sobriety and flatness that characterizes many aspects of Dickens's late style. I draw particular attention to Dickens's tendency to distance himself from mainstream and respectable aspects of Victorian life in these later novels, and to his habit of leaving carefully constructed moral dilemmas half buried but agitatingly unresolved.

The last Dickens chapter begins with a reading of *Great Expectations* in which I stress the complexity of the relationship of hero to author in this novel, a relationship in which the reader too is implicated, and which is charged with a sombre ethical significance. Here and in the readings of *Our Mutual Friend* and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* which conclude the chapter, I attempt to demonstrate that Dickens continued till the last to find new ways to make his narrators and his implied authorial presence morally suspect and, as a result, ethically provocative.

The last two chapters of this thesis, which are primarily devoted to James Joyce, do not seek to be as comprehensive as the Blake and Dickens sections, and serve a slightly different function. Whereas many Blake and Dickens texts lend themselves to my argument in distinctly differing ways, the Joyce canon is, for present purposes, dominated by *Ulysses*, and it is that particular novel which I wish to compare, finally, in its handling of authorship, ethics, and the reader, with the attitudes whose more diffuse and gradual evolutions I trace in Blake and Dickens.

The penultimate chapter, nevertheless, discusses Joyce's work prior
to Ulysses. This is partly because, as widely acknowledged in Joyce studies and implied by Joyce himself, it is arbitrarily reductive to sever the intertextual links between Ulysses and Joyce's other works. Moreover, I have a special interest in Joyce's quasi-autobiographical depiction of Stephen Dedalus, which undergoes important changes in the move to Ulysses from A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, and which is anticipated, to a certain extent, even in Dubliners. Also, it is especially useful for the closing stages of my argument to be able to draw attention to parallels and divergences between Joyce's early formulations of his own artistic role and the critical essays on Blake and Dickens which, fortuitously, he wrote in 1912. The influence of Blake and Dickens upon Joyce is not my main concern, as already explained, but these essays are very helpful in my attempt, in these last chapters, to demonstrate an essential sympathy of interests and approach between the three authors. Paradoxically, this demonstration involves the argument that Joyce subjected Blake and Dickens to aggressive misreading and unreasonable disparagement.\footnote{My use of the concept of misreading, here and later in the thesis, owes something to Harold Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry (New York, 1973) and A Map of Misreading (New York, 1975). I am not, however, presenting Blake, Dickens, and Joyce as constituting a 'prophetic tradition' comparable to that which Bloom outlines.} Joyce's treatment of the earlier writers, that is, participates in the wider ethical problematic, involving the relationship between authorship and moral categories such as goodness and fairness, which it is the main purpose of this thesis to explore.

The final chapter applies Blakean and Dickensian perspectives to Ulysses itself, considering it as a novel which alludes movingly and engrossingly to many forms of human suffering, which raises many important moral and ethical dilemmas, but which at times seems pointedly casual and heartless in its tone, construction, and narrative point-of-view, and in which images of the author are promoted which impel the reader to think about Joyce's own relation to the warmth or coolness, kindness or cruelty of his text, and hence to respond to that text as a live and pressing repository of ethical doubts and challenges. In this way, Ulysses is seen as a brilliant and frighteningly uncompromised
expression of what is essentially the same fruitful mixture of self-doubt and moral earnestness which animates the work of Blake and Dickens.

The thesis ends with a short conclusion consisting of the following elements: first, I briefly review my main findings with regard to each author; secondly, I summarize the important respects in which these findings go beyond recent work by other critics of Blake, Dickens, and Joyce; and, finally, I briefly outline what I understand to be the special character, significance, and value of the critical approach which the whole thesis has endeavoured to express.
Part One:

WILLIAM BLAKE
CHAPTER 1

Melancholia, Moral Ambiguity, and the Search for a System in Blake's Early Works

William Blake characteristically impresses himself upon us as someone we need to listen to for the sake of our moral and spiritual well-being. His work is full of voices which exhort someone -- a 'Reader', for instance, or the reader's nation personified -- to wake up, before it is too late: 'Mark well my words! they are of your eternal salvation,' cries the Bard in Milton (2.25; E96). But how confident can we be in Blake as a source of wisdom?

One potentially alarming feature of Blake's writings is that many of them portray their author as a visionary, in the extreme sense of one who holds conversations with ghosts and angels. We might feel that this is a rhetorical device, but it must be taken into account that Blake's annotations to Swedenborg, his private testimony as relayed by the early biographers Frederick Tatham, Henry Crabb Robinson, and Alexander Gilchrist, and the comments of his friends all imply that he really did undergo what appeared to be supernatural eidetic experiences, and that he took them very seriously. The spirit world, real or imaginary, is an unavoidable presence in his work, and a contributory factor in his reputation, even among the majority of his own close friends, for unworldliness and blissful simplicity.

And yet, it is consistently evident in Blake's work that he is deeply interested in the society around him, that he has an extraordinary understanding of many of its faults, and that he has ideas which oppose and might help to alleviate real constraint and suffering on every level from the personal to the international. It appears, therefore, that there is a tension in Blake between, on the one hand, the immateriality of spirits, or of a philosophical system that makes matter subject to imagination, and, on the other, historical actuality: a tension that is comparable to the strange status of Blake's 'spectres' and 'emanations', which tend to be fluidly mutable in Blake's texts, but which appear in

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1 Compare the 'Introduction' to Songs of Experience, 'Hear the voice of the Bard! / Who Present, Past, & Future sees' (E18), and, in Jerusalem, 'England! awake! awake! awake! / Jerusalem thy Sister calls!' (pl. 77; E233).
his drawings to be exceedingly muscular and solid. Similarly, there is a tension between the complex and bewildering nature of Blake’s ‘Prophetic Books’ and his advocacy of a clear outline in visual art, together with his professed contempt for generalization, and his interest in ‘minute particulars’.

Contraries, devils and angels, ‘the Prolific’ and ‘the Devouring’, are of course acknowledged by Blake, inherited by him from Swedenborg (The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, pl. 16; E40). The fact that two ideas conflict with one another need not result in a vacuum; it may produce creative energy. ‘Without Contraries is no progression’ (The Marriage, pl. 3; E34). Blake, when he appropriates material from religion, literature or philosophy, may not do justice to his sources’ generally accepted meanings, but that does not reduce the impact of what he has to say. He subsumes a deep knowledge of the Bible, and presents himself as a devotee and explicator of Jesus, and yet he abhors organized religion, and has no apparent fear of blasphemy in far surpassing Milton in the practice of submitting scriptural authority to radical revision. Schism and heresy are not a problem for Blake: his own imagination apparently reconciles and justifies all. Similarly, he was an avid consumer of the work of other philosophical and theological writers, tending to adopt their ideas and terminology; but he was a severe critic of some who were most useful to him, from Swedenborg to Locke. ‘I must Create a System, or be enslav’d by another Mans,’ declares Los in Jerusalem (10.20; E153): in his use of his sources Blake’s own system is often that of an idealistic enslaver.

The contradictions or paradoxes suggested above lead us towards further incongruities within the ostensible meanings of Blake’s work, and disparities between that work and his extra-literary behaviour: this is significant in the context of Blake’s presentation of himself as a character in his own narratives, and given the tendency of Blakeans to look upon his quiet life as inseparable from his art, and almost equally instructive. For example, Blake’s writings typically contain praise of energy, youth, rebellion and some form of revolution; and yet, his apparent opposition to liberalizing and democratic philosophy, as represented by Locke, and to modern science, as represented by Newton,
could, like his ideas about art, be described as somewhat reactionary. He spoke against oppressive, institutionalized authority, but he was not one to practice any kind of civil disobedience, and, when he needed the support of law and the judiciary, on being arraigned for sedition, he was grateful enough for their fairness. He denounces war and slavery, but at the same time seems to approve of anger, and enters into the 'mental fight' and its concomitant literary representations of violence with extraordinary vigour. His theory of the necessity of contraries seems itself to be opposed by his claim that 'Mutual Forgiveness of each Vice' is the route to salvation (For the Sexes [Prologue]; E259). In some of Blake's verse, notably in such morally charged lyrics as 'The Little Black Boy' and 'The Chimney Sweeper' (in Songs of Innocence), while we may feel that we know intuitively, or from a broad experience of his work, where the poet's sympathies lie, the solutions that are offered to social ills are notoriously susceptible to contrary interpretations, from the platitudinous to the cynical, from the saintly to the sadistic. And as much could be said of the attitudes that we are invited to adopt towards many of the characters and events in the Prophetic Books.

Ambiguity figures substantially in Blake's texts, but often it is very hard to tell whether the ambiguity is intended, or how we are to associate the ambiguity with the authorial personae within the text. Part of the difficulty of Blake is that he often seems to present us with the contents of his mind entire and unresolved, which can be frustrating for a reader who is hoping to find an idea that will not disintegrate as soon as it is removed from its immediate, Blakean context. For the Blake canon is, as I shall try to demonstrate, much less a unified radical manifesto than a various, partial, contingent, often wholly admirable, but occasionally obnoxious history of self-dramatization. But this idiosyncratic waywardness, I shall also argue, is a main source of Blake's radical strength.

* * *

'The productions of our youth and of our maturer age are equal in all essential points,' claimed Blake in the Descriptive Catalogue of 1809 (pp. 65--66; E550). If this is so, then it suggests that we are born with innate propensities which experience merely refines. This view, in
particular as it relates to innate genius, formed one of Blake's chief fields of contention with both John Locke and Sir Joshua Reynolds. Locke, in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, argues that our knowledge of general principles, morality, God, and everything else is acquired through experience, while Reynolds maintains that art is an acquired taste and an acquired skill, provoking Blake's expostulation, 'Knowledge of Ideal Beauty is Not to be Acquired It is Born with us. Innate Ideas are in Every Man Born with him. they are truly Himself. The Man who says that we have No Innate Ideas must be a Fool & Knave. Having No Con-Science or Innate Science.' The philosophical or biological question as to whether we are really born with particular knowledge or intellectual predispositions is not essential here: anything that Blake or even Locke has to say upon that subject has been superseded by genetics. Or rather, any such rationalist approach to the matter -- this would not be innate science -- would repel Blake; it has nothing to do with him. What is important is that it seems to be necessary to Blake to feel that his life has a basic consistency and particularity, that he is not merely a product of circumstances, but an original being who can impose himself upon the outside world. He is ready to admit fluctuations in his state of mind, but insists upon an unchanging essence that unites them. Or, as he wrote in mid-career, in 1798, 'Opinion is one Thing. Princip[le] another. No Man can change his Principles Every Man changes his opinions.' This is a belief, or doctrine, which would have grown with Blake's experience of his own creativity, since even some of his earliest writings display many of the characteristics of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* and of the Prophetic Books.

The Blake canon begins with a 'fourfold vision', the lyrics dedicated to the seasons in *Poetical Sketches*, a collection published in 1783 but allegedly written by the time Blake was twenty. Critics have often observed that Blake's 'Seasons' represent an advance on James Thomson: in Thomson's *Seasons* the allegory is entertainment, conventional

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3 Marginalia: Watson, *Apology for the Bible*, p. 3; E613.

4 See the prefatory 'Advertisement', reprinted in Erdman's bibliographical notes (E846).
and quaint, while Blake injects much more feeling, offering a form of
allegory, or vision,⁵ that demands employment as a commentary on
pressing human concerns.⁶ Thus his ‘Winter’ clearly displays many
attributes which, from a later Blakean standpoint, we recognize as
‘Urizenic’:

O Winter! bar thine adamantine doors:
The north is thine; there hast thou built thy dark
Deep-founded habitation. Shake not thy roofs,
Nor bend thy pillars with thine iron car.

He hears me not, but o’er the yawning deep
Rides heavy; his storms are unchain’d; sheathed
In ribbed steel, I dare not lift mine eyes;
For he hath rear’d his sceptre o’er the world.

Blake uses ‘Adamantine’ only here and in The Four Zoas; when Urizen
assumes dominion in eternity he is banished to ‘a place in the north’
(The Book of Urizen, 2.3; E70); deafness, the closing of the senses, is
characteristic of his rule. There is a complex of preoccupations here
which points to a debt to King Lear. But this is the Gothicized,
eighteenth-century Lear, with all the emphasis upon his madness: the Lear
who upset Dr Johnson, and who appears in the paintings of Blake’s
friends, Barry and Fuseli. Blake discovers a figure of universal
significance in the mad tyrant who brings destruction upon himself --
Winter is subsequently ‘driv’n yelling to his caves’ -- and will develop
it through Tiriel, Urizen and Nobodaddy. From the start, this image of
evil is a constituent of Blake’s intellectual baggage.

Likewise, the description of the speaker ‘sheathed / In ribbed

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⁵ Blake usually claimed that ‘allegory’ was inferior and that he
practised ‘vision’ instead: see, for example, [Vision of the Last
Judgement] Notebook, p. 68; E554. The distinction makes a crucial point
for Blake, in so far as he was thinking of allegory as the pernicious
abstraction of arbitrary signs from their living referents. In a more
neutral sense, however, much of Blake’s own work can still be called
allegorical. For a fuller discussion of Blake and allegory see Jon Mee,
Dangerous Enthusiasm: William Blake and the Culture of Radicalism in the

⁶ See Margaret Ruth Lowery, Windows of the Morning: A Critical Study
152--54; Michael J. Tolley, ‘Blake’s Songs of Spring’, in William Blake:
Essays in Honour of Sir Geoffrey Keynes, ed. Morton D. Paley and Michael
Phillips (Oxford, 1973), pp. 96--128; Robert F. Gleckner, Blake’s Prelude
(Baltimore, 1982), pp. 57--75. Gleckner, whose book is the fullest study
of the Sketches to date, rightly warns against reading too much of
Blake’s later thinking into these early poems (pp. 2--3), but is
nevertheless struck by ‘the continuity of conception’ which Blake
‘inaugurated’ in them (p. 74).
steel', a warrior besieged by the elements, a heroic or tragic contender against adversity, is typically Blakean, involving a synthesis of adopted tradition (Lear and the address to the seasons), intense psychological insight dramatically projected (the mental storm of the humanized elements, like the 'howling storm' of 'The Sick Rose'), and vocabulary drawn, as David Erdman has shown, from the militaristic brutalities of Blake's own time. In fact, much the same image is to be found in a specifically military context in 'King Edward the Third' (1.19; E424), and it reappears as late as Jerusalem: 'For Bacon & Newton sheathed in dismal steel, their terrors hang / Like iron scourges over Albion' (15.11; E159). So, all in all, a poem ostensibly about the weather is already, in Blake's hands, strikingly polyvalent, embodying many forms of dread, and referable to many forms of suffering. As well as anticipating Urizen, Blake's Winter is analogous to Blake's Tyger in the way that it expands beyond its mundane role while still being vividly realized as a natural phenomenon.

A very different but equally characteristic Blakean fusion of nature with human concerns makes an early appearance in the prelapsarian plenitude of 'To Autumn':

'The narrow bud opens her beauties to
'The sun, and love runs in her thrilling veins;
'Blossoms hang round the brows of morning, and
'Flourish down the bright cheek of modest eve,
'Till clust'ring Summer breaks forth into singing,
'And feather'd clouds strew flowers round her head.'

(E409)

'The bright cheek of modest eve', even without Blake's exceptional sensitivity to names, would inevitably suggest 'Eve', and together the last four quoted lines parallel the passage in Paradise Lost, Book IX, where Satan sees Eve,

Veiled in a cloud of fragrance, where she stood,
Half spied, so thick the roses bushing round
About her glowed.

(IX, 425)

In Blake too, the paradise, or state of innocence, is liable to decay. The bud, opening 'her beauties to / The sun' is another anticipation of 'The Sick Rose', where Summer is corrupted by Autumn, or, in a contrary

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interpretation that will be supported by ‘Ah! Sun-flower’ and by the example of Oothoon in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. Spring is sexually penetrated by Summer. ‘To Autumn’ seems a bright, untroubled poem in the main, but already there are sinister intimations: Autumn is ‘stained / With the blood of the grape’, and blood is obtruded in the ‘thrilling veins’ of the bud and the ‘bright cheek’ of eve, in a way that anticipates the ecstatic but possibly appalling harvests of *Milton* and *Jerusalem*.®

‘The poems in the *Poetical Sketches* are happy poems,’ according to Margaret Lowery, ‘a prelude to the fuller expression of happiness in the *Songs of Innocence*’ (p. 202). I shall be challenging the idea that the *Songs of Innocence* themselves are uncomplicatedly happy in due course, but will simply note here that Lowery’s position reflects the genial assumption, still rarely challenged, that Blake must have had a very happy childhood, which in turn is part of the well-established image of Blake as peculiarly blessed -- not mad, but some variety of holy fool. In fact, elsewhere in the *Poetical Sketches*, there is evidence that the young Blake was attracted by a kind of melancholic introspection that tends to be associated with Romantic poets who were born in the last decades of the eighteenth century -- around the time when this collection was published. Take, for example, these lines from the song ‘Memory, hither come’:

I’ll pore upon the stream,
Where sighing lovers dream,
And fish for fancies as they pass
Within the watery glass.

(E415)

F. R. Leavis appositely mentions Shakespeare’s Jaques in connection with these poems,⁹ but the primary model is Narcissus: Blake’s protagonist haunts a place of lovers, but is merely reflexive in his own affections, departing with his Echo.

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® Compare Nelson Hilton’s note on portentous stirrings in the vocabulary of ‘To Spring’, which ‘progresses from “morning” to “morn” to “mourns”’ (lines 2, 11, 12) and shows the germ of the idea that “morning dew” may be seen on another level as the “dewy tears” of mourning’ (*Literal Imagination: Blake’s Vision of Words* [Berkeley, California, 1983], p. 46).

Walking along the darken'd valley,
With silent Melancholy.

This may seem conventional, and not typically Blakean, but it certainly relates to Blake's later contempt for the concept of art as passive mimesis, his excoriation of selfhood, and his distrust of the natural world, the darkened valley unlit by vision which is all that is to be seen in 'the Looking-Glass of Enitharmon' (Jerusalem, 63.38; E214).

In 'The Couch of Death', one of the short prose poems which end the Sketches, the sufferer is not merely gazing into a pool, but is actually lying in it: a drowning Narcissus, whose mother and sister stand by his deathbed 'like reeds bending over a lake', weeping profusely, until the youth cries out, 'The damps of death fall thick upon me!' and, as he is washed towards his final dissolution, 'O for a hand to pluck me forth!' (E441). This final cry has been taken to represent a redeeming appeal to God, but the text as a whole seems far less concerned with any idea of heaven than with a watery immersion in earthly suffering.

The atmosphere at the end of 'The Couch of Death' is as close as Blake ever came to the literary equivalent of his own woodcuts for Thornton's Virgil or of the pregnantly crepuscular paintings of his disciple Samuel Palmer: 'The moon hung not out her lamp, and the stars faintly glimmered in the summer sky; the breath of night slept among the leaves of the forest; the bosom of the lofty hill drank in the silent dew, while on his majestic brow the voice of Angels is heard, and stringed sounds ride upon the wings of night' (E442). 'The moon hung not out her lamp' is a strange way of saying that the moon was not visible. There is a Moon who 'hung out her light' in the 1664 editions of Butler's Hudibras, but if this is Blake's source the negative form remains his peculiar innovation. It was conventional in the art which descended from the Virgil woodcuts to show the crescent moon within a faint outline of the full moon, offering a sense of something missing, or in suspension, and the moon that both is and is not there in 'The Couch of

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11 See, for example, Blake's Virgil woodcut no. 6, pl. 607 in The Complete Graphic Works of William Blake, ed. David Bindman (London, 1978). Coleridge describes the same phenomenon, and gives it supernatu-
Death’ contributes to a similar feeling of ghostliness and transience.

Blake describes the dying youth as a traveller: ‘The traveller that hath taken shelter under an oak, eyes the distant country with joy!’ (E442). This image is recalled in the two versions of Blake’s mysterious emblem book, The Gates of Paradise: in the phrase, ‘The Traveller hasteth in the Evening’ (For Children, 14; E33; For the Sexes, 14; E266), and in the epilogue to the second version, which is addressed ‘To The Accuser who is / The God of This World’:

Tho thou art Worshipd by the Names Divine
Of Jesus & Jehovah: thou art still
The Son of Morn in weary Nights decline
The lost Travellers Dream under the Hill

(E269)

These lines are accompanied by an illustration of Satan rising from the recumbent body of the traveller, anticipating the picture of a woman vegetating beneath a monstrous spectre on plate 37 of Jerusalem. Thus, there is a recurrent idea in Blake’s work of humanity somehow sunken or embedded, like a pool, or under a hill, or turning into a plant, beneath the ambiguous potential of night, which may represent a welcome rest, heaven, something to be hastened towards, or a malign subjection, addressing in either case an enhanced mode of being, in the sense that Blake seems to show the mind drawn away from mundane considerations and poised between contraries in a kind of fertile limbo, comparable to the becalmed, visionary states of Keats’s ‘Nightingale’ or Coleridge’s ‘Frost at Midnight’.

‘Night’ and ‘black’ are key words in the Sketches, as they are throughout Blake’s work, anticipating the primitive, psychogenic depths...
represented in the benighted jungle of 'The Tyger'. The spectre of negativity which threatens the soul of the hastening traveller in 'The Couch of Death', like the murderer lurking in ambush in the design to plate 4 of *Europe*, appears to have monopolized the imagination of the speaker in 'When early morn walks forth in sober grey', who goes, cursing his 'black stars', through a darkening vale, leaving

that sweet village, where my black ey'd maid
Doth drop a tear beneath the silent shade,

where shade on shade is gloomily compounded and black eyes are no mere physical attribute but reflections of a pervading mystery and melancholia, suggesting Berowne's mistress and the Dark Lady of the Sonnets. But in fact this speaker's personality, far from being sympathetically lovelorn, comes across as spiteful, making him a potential lurking murderer himself:

... if at her side
A youth doth walk in stolen joy and pride,
I curse my stars in bitter grief and woe,
That made my love so high, and me so low.

O should she e'er prove false, his limbs I'd tear,
And throw all pity on the burning air;
I'd curse bright fortune for my mixed lot,
And then I'd die in peace, and be forgot.

And this woe, again, is 'pleasing'!

In the 'Mad Song', the same type of negative propensity, of compulsive self-tormenting, is made tangible to a degree that confirms that Blake, at this early stage, apprehended the destructive and chaotic elements of the human mind almost as vividly as he ever did:

Like a fiend in a cloud
With howling woe,
After night I do crowd,
And with night will go;
I turn my back to the east,
From whence comforts have increas'd;
For light doth seize my brain
With frantic pain.

The way that the speaker's torment takes place 'in a cloud' seems comparable to the images of pool, hill and vegetation already noted as

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symbolic of oppressed mental states. In the fourth line of the poem, the speaker begs sleep to 'infold' his griefs -- not unfold (the printer’s error which Blake corrected)\(^{15}\) and certainly not dissolve, for grief is perversely desired here, almost treasured. The tiger in the jungle, the storm-battered protagonist sheathed in steel, or the child lost in a wood -- hence Blake’s interest in Milton’s Comus -- can be seen as belonging to the same class of ominously infolding terms. Comus was influenced by A Midsummer Night’s Dream, and Blake’s imagery, here, and later in the Songs, is suggestive not only of the penetration of the unconscious which can be taken to be represented by the dreams and missed paths of that play, but also of the primeval terrors evoked by the murderous forest of Macbeth.

Taken as a whole, the world of the Sketches is, in a phrase from Experience, a ‘dangerous world’ (‘Infant Sorrow’, E28), where the lovers of ‘To the Evening Star’ shut out a night in which ‘the wolf rages wide / And the lion glares thro’ the dun forest’ (E410), and in which the wives and children of the poor, in ‘Gwin, King of Norway’, are seen ‘Howling like ghosts, furious as wolves / In the bleak wintry day’ (E418). And, as we have seen, there are a number of protagonists in the Poetical Sketches who appear to have a correspondingly diseased and dangerous attitude to life. How does this affect our sense of Blake’s message when he turns to a political subject?

In fact, the ‘sketches’ which present themselves as drawing on English history have proved to be susceptible of widely divergent readings. It has been debated, for example, whether ‘A War Song to Englishmen’ is to be taken as being in praise of war or against it:

\[
\text{Prepare, prepare, the iron helm of war,} \\
\text{Bring forth the lots, cast in the spacious orb;} \\
\text{Th’Angel of Fate turns them with mighty hands,} \\
\text{And casts them out upon the darken’d earth!} \\
\text{Prepare, prepare. (E440)}
\]

And so it continues. Erdman points out that the ‘War Song’ is rightfully part of ‘King Edward the Third’, where, according to Northrop Frye,

\(^{15}\) See Erdman’s textual note, E847. Compare the protagonist of ‘Contemplation’, who perceives himself ‘wrapped in mortality’ (E442) and the ‘inchained soul’ in America, ‘shut up in darkness and in sighing’ (6.8; E53).
'Industry, commerce, agriculture, manufacture and trade are the gods directing the conflict, but the conflict is glorious and the gods worthy of worship. There seems to be no use looking for irony here.' Erdman, on the other hand, finds a great deal of irony: for him Blake's fragment is a highly responsible exposure of a deplorable moment in England's history. But while Erdman's marshalling of historical materials is illuminating, in his reading of 'King Edward the Third' as throughout the Blake canon, there are times when the sheer weight of this material, much of which cannot conclusively be said to have been known to Blake, seems to overwhelm the presence of Blake's own writing: occasionally Erdman seems to decide a priori what Blake would have been thinking, and then to go to Blake's text for confirmation.

Thus the available histories would have told Blake that Edward's generals 'were little better than brigands', and 'if we recognize that Blake was setting up his heroes in order to knock them down later . . . we can see why he could draw heavily on Shakespeare for the blustering talk of warriors before battle yet show no interest at all . . . in the elements of dramatic action'; and thus it is that Blake's 'Black Prince, a Hotspur without brains, chatters that 'It is my sin to love the noise of war' and day-dreams happily about the "thousand deaths" soon to be heaping "this fatal field of Cressy"'. But the last characterization is a travesty. This is the speech in question, in which the Prince addresses Sir John Chandos:

Now we are alone. Sir John, I will unburden, And breathe my hopes into the burning air, Where thousand deaths are posting up and down, Commission'd to this fatal field of Cressy; Methinks I see them arm my gallant soldiers, And gird the sword upon each thigh, and fit Each shining helm, and string each stubborn bow, And dance to the neighing of our steeds. Methinks the shout begins, the battle burns; Methinks I see them perch on English crests, And roar the wild flame of fierce war, upon The thronged enemy! In truth, I am too full; It is my sin to love the noise of war. Chandos, thou seest my weakness; strong nature Will bend or break us; my blood, like a springtide, Does rise so high, to overflow all bounds Of moderation; while Reason, in his

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17 *Prophet Against Empire*, pp. 65, 68, 69.
Frail bark, can see no shore or bound for vast
Ambition. Come, take the helm, my Chandos,
That my full-blown sails overset me not
In the wild tempest; condemn my 'ventrous youth,
That plays with danger, as the innocent child,
Unthinking, plays upon the viper's den:
I am a coward, in my reason, Chandos.

(3.220; E432)

There is something more interesting happening here than either Frye or Erdman, from their opposite positions, suggest. This Prince is no chatterer: his imagery is consistent and powerfully cumulative: this 'burning air', infested by harpy-like flying 'deaths', sent up from the 'wild flame' of war and of ambition, which blows up his sails, military ardour, or delusions of grandeur (for the breath comes from him), and threatens to take him to destruction, argues that he has a sense of his own monstrosity, while he is still infatuated with his dangerous undertakings, which makes him a true if comparatively small descendent of Macbeth. And, after that, 'I am a coward, in my reason' is not only false modesty, ornamental self-deprecation, or homage to his own animalistic unreason (though it includes all these), but also a touching cry for help.

Chandos, on the other hand, answers the Prince's doubts with platitudes. 'Your heat / Is the effect of youth, and want of use,' he says (3.245--46; E432): it is something that simply has to be worked through, grown out of. 'Then if we must tug for experience,' the Prince says (an original and unpretentious phrase; again, not chatter), 'let us not fear to beat round Nature's wilds,' even if the rewards of battle may not be fair:

This is philosophy;
These are the tricks of the world; but the pure soul
Shall mount on native wings, disdaining
Little sport, and cut a path into the heaven of glory,
Leaving a track of light for men to wonder at.

(3.262, 271; E433)

Here the Prince has succumbed to heroic cliche, and here, tragically, he is abetted by Chandos's inadequate response: the Prince will look back on his deeds with complacency, 'not forlorn if Conscience is his friend' (3.293; E433).

The point I wish to make concerns structure as much as diction. Blake, in fact, does have a little of Shakespeare's dramatic sense: in the interchange between the Prince and Chandos there is something of the
tragic inequality that we find in the exchanges of Hamlet and Polonius. It is in this context that we should consider the untrustworthy courtly mode in which the characters of 'King Edward the Third' frequently speak. When Lord Audley salutes the morning, for example, we can see the living personification of 'To Morning' being instantly vulgarized, turned into little more than a self-consciously orotund way of saying hello to a fellow soldier:

Good morrow, brave Sir Thomas; the bright morn
Smiles on our army, and the gallant sun
Springs from the hills like a young hero
Into the battle, shaking his golden locks
Exultingly; this is a promising day.

(3.1; E427)

The addressee here is Sir Thomas Dagworth, who 'love[s] to hear war-songs', according to the would-be clown, Peter Blunt (4.50; E435): from this, Erdman deduces that the 'War Song' is Dagworth's idea of a good thing, and certainly not Blake's. But it is Dagworth too who jokes, on his way to prepare his troops for battle, that he and they 'will sing, like the young housewives busied / In the dairy' (3.148; E430). This glaringly inappropriate simile is sinister, but suggests that Dagworth is ironical and complex. Like the Prince, he is adrift in a sea of unresolved terminology and competing insights.

Blake has picked a moment in history which could have been thought to call for the fiercest satirical treatment, but he opts more for pathos than for outright condemnation. There is much military bombast in the language of the play, but also much good sense and much imaginative perception of the enormity of war. And the distribution of these various modes between the different characters is not such as to allow them to be grouped into the lost and the saved -- belligerent chatterers and ineffectual monitory clowns. The characters are not two-dimensional, and the fact that most of them are soldiers does not stop Blake from paying them sympathetic attention.

So is the 'War Song' meant by Blake as jingoistic? Or is it supposed to wear its vileness on its sleeve? In a way, these are foolish questions. When we look at one of Stubbs's pictures of a lion devouring a horse we may wonder, but will never be able to conclude, whether Stubbs preferred horses or lions. According to The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, 'The tygers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction' (9.44;
E37), but the Tyger of *Songs of Experience* is a terrible creature, and, conversely, while Blake's paintings of Nelson and Pitt show them directing the serpentine machinations of man-eating monsters, these figures are at the same time made awesome and resplendent: gilded icons which declare that Blake found a kind of glory in destructive power. Blake, like Stubbs, can seem to be expressing an imaginative response to what he sees that is beyond moral judgement.

In each of the four poems on the seasons, Blake took an immutable natural phenomenon and expressed it in terms of human behaviour; in the 'War Song' the opposite process seems to be under way: a particularly dangerous form of human behaviour is generalized and naturalized in such a way as to dissolve the option of resistance. War has almost become a season:

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Bring forth the lots, cast in the spacious orb;
Th'Angel of Fate turns them with mighty hands,
And casts them out upon the darken'd earth!
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(E440)

This reads as the expression of a mind which apprehends war as irresistibly powerful and engrossing. To say that it is either an incitement to the reader to hold a similar view, or a prompting to the reader to turn against it and say that war is not irresistible, is to add something that is entirely our own to what Blake has given us.

F. R. Leavis, whose essay on Blake is stimulating in its reluctance to treat him differently from anybody else, discusses the heuristic nature of his art, the sense in which meaning appears to be discovered through execution, rather than existing as a non-artistic theoretic premise which the art is manipulated to express. Blake was himself insistent upon the indivisibility of execution and meaning: 'Michael Angelos Art Depends on Michael Angelos Execution Altogether.' Blake would not think it desirable to adjust his artistic statements in a spirit of calculated polemic, but would trust meaning to arise as a

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19 'Justifying One's Valuation of Blake', p. 21.

spontaneous reflection of his whole character. Thus Los, in Jerusalem, struggling to overcome the impositions of his 'Spectre', his Jaques or Narcissus-like deathly and uncreative contrary: 'I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create' (10.21; E153). Accordingly, just as Blake concentrates on the madness in King Lear, his 'history poems' show a non-judgemental imaginative response to the vividly emotive aspects of Shakespeare's histories. In the 'Prologue to King John', for example, while Blake seems to be expressing a sense of the monstrosity of his country's imperialistic militarism (not by reasoned accusations, but, as in the Pitt and Nelson apotheoses, by presenting vivid incarnations of destructive power), he simultaneously adopts something very like John of Gaunt's patriotic vision of England from Richard II, and begins to transform it into his own sublime conception of Albion as a universalized condition of human divinity thrown into conflict with itself: 'Brother in brother's blood must bathe, rivers of death! O land, most hapless! O beauteous island, how forsaken! Weep from thy silver fountains; weep from thy gentle rivers! The angel of the island weeps!' (E439).

And what -- to go back for a moment to Erdman's militantly pacifist readings of Blake's histories -- of the completely unsuccessful attempts at humour in 'King Edward the Third'? And why are these poems bound up with 'Fair Elenor', which seems to be very little more than a Gothic-horror entertainment? This is not a well organized collection, of course, and it is possible that Blake resigned editorial authority to the friends who arranged for its publication, but already there are signs that Blake was making a point of confronting the reader with alternative views and clashing atmospheres, as a way of not underestimating life's complexity. Thus, if 'When early morn walks forth in sober grey' could be said to be a prototypical Song of Experience, it has an innocent counterpart in 'Fresh from the dewy hill' -- which speaks, indeed, of 'times of innocence', and ends with a vision of what can easily be taken as the same 'black-ey'd maid' in the same 'sweet village', only not crying and not about to be unfaithful:

So when she speaks, the voice of Heaven I hear
So when we walk, nothing impure comes near;

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Each field seems Eden, and each calm retreat;
Each village seems the haunt of holy feet.

But that sweet village where my black-ey'd maid,
Closes her eyes in sleep beneath night's shade:
Whene'er I enter, more than mortal fire
Burns in my soul, and does my song inspire.

(E416)

In fact, the polarity between this poem and its dismal twin is more extreme than that between most of the more famous pairs which are split between the contrary states of Innocence and Experience.

Thus, in Poetical Sketches, many of Blake's characteristic themes emerge in the form of archetypes or paradigms of the positive and negative, genial and destructive aspects of human nature, with negativity tending to predominate, together with a system of imagery, derived from tradition, which suggests a very modern interest in unconscious motivation, and which is responsive towards an uncertainty or darkness in these matters which generates ambiguity. An image of the poet comes across in these poems as someone who can be warmly exultant; who can feel an earnest sympathy for people in moral quandaries, or basking in reciprocated love, or fearful of their own wayward impulses; but who is also alive to the most garish and frightening aspects of mind and society -- blood, steel, blackness; more pagan than Christian; not especially pacific; and quite intimately aware of fear, aggression, and madness.

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In Blake's next important text, the untitled fragment which we know as An Island in the Moon and which probably dates from 1784, an image of the author is broken up and scattered. It is widely believed that this burlesque piece is a type of miniature roman à clef, capable of resolution into a series of identifiable portraits of Blake's friends and acquaintances, and including one portrait of the poet himself. Support for this view is found in the second sentence, which ends: 'you would think you was among your friends' (E449). Many critics assert that Blake is represented by Quid, but the evidence for this is weak, consisting

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chiefly of the final severed fragment in which one of the characters, who is not named, talks about a revolutionary printing method and about being isolated and envied in society. These are characteristic Blakean themes, occurring as much in the letters as in explicitly imaginative writings, and the speech can certainly be read as a commentary upon Blake himself. It has been assumed that the speaker is Quid because of the way in which the speech (and the whole work) comes to an end: 'I'll hollow and stamp & frighten all the People there & show them what truth is -- at this Instant Obtuse Angle came in Oh I am glad you are come said quid' (E465). But this is the only time that Quid’s name is mentioned after the manuscript’s hiatus. Given the jerky style of the whole work, and Blake’s precipitate introduction of characters, it seems quite possible that the seven words directly ascribed to Quid are the first that he has uttered for some time. The characters in An Island show little respect for one another, so it is just as likely that one of them, having listened to an eccentric harangue on printing, would express pleasure at an arrival which brings the speech to a close, as that the speech-maker himself would break off to extend a less selfish welcome.

It is true that there are other occasions in An Island when Quid resembles Blake: his phrase 'English Genius for ever' (p. 11; E460) suggests the burlesqued Blake of the Notebook poem on Klopstock (E500); Miss Gittipin’s deleted accusation that Quid ‘always spoils good company’ (p. 12; E460) accords with some Blake records; and Quid sings ‘O father father where are you going’, which is one of several songs in An Island which were to be reworked as Songs of Innocence or Experience (p. 15; E463). But there are as many instances of Quid voicing sentiments which seem foreign to Blake: against Shakespeare -- ‘too wild’ -- whose wildness Blake had put to such good use in Poetical Sketches (p. 7; E455); against marriage, in the sarcastic song, ‘Hail Matrimony made of Love’ (p. 11; E460); and in favour of acquired genius as opposed to innate genius, where his almost Lockean attitude provokes Suction into

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a response that is more credibly Blake's own: 'why said Quid I think that
[a del] any natural fool would make a clever fellow if he was properly
brought up -- Ah hang your reasoning said the Epicurean I hate reasoning
I do every thing by my feelings -- ' (p. 6; E454). Moreover, Quid is
introduced as one of the three gloom-spreading philosophers, and his
association with the banter of Hamlet and Polonius -- 'Dont you think I
have something of the Goats face says he' (p. X; E465) -- not to mention
his Latin interrogative name, suggests that he might be just another idle
originator of perpetual queries.

The important point here is not so much that Quid is not Blake as
that Blakean accomplishments, propensities and traits are liberally
distributed throughout the dramatis personae of An Island. Suction, for
element, repeats his denunciation of philosophical premeditation: 'do all
by your feelings and never think at all about it' (p. 7; E456). This
resembles the immoderate pronouncements of The Marriage of Heaven and
Hell. Etruscan Column objects to Voltaire, one of Blake's pet monsters,
in terms of Blake's idea of the inadequacy of sense-perception: 'Voltaire
was immersed in matter, & seems to have understood very little but what
he saw before his eyes' (p. 2; E451). Obtuse Angle, likewise, expresses
a low opinion of Voltaire, as well as doubting the usefulness of queries
(compare the 'idiot Questioner' in Milton, 41.12; E142), and appearing
with his pockets stuffed with 'a vast number of papers', which was
apparently typical of Blake. He also sings two of the most morally
provocative songs, 'To be or not to be' (on the philanthropist, Sutton)
and 'Upon a holy thursday' (pp. 12, 14; E460, E462). Steelyard applauds
the latter song, goes on to sing one of his own which can be interpreted
as a satire on English hypocrisy, 'This city & this country has brought
forth many mayors' (p. 13; E461), and applies himself, like Blake (as
well as Flaxman), to the works of Hervey and Young (p. 8; E456). Mrs
Nannicantipot sings what is virtually the final version of the 'Nurse's
Song' of Songs of Innocence (p. 14; E463). Even Inflammable Gass has a
Blake-like trait in his interest in fleas and other small organisms (p.
13; E462). Unity of character, therefore, is only sporadically observed

24 'I seldom carry money in my pockets they are generally full of
paper' (Marginalia: Lavater, Aphorisms, no. 612; E599).
in An Island in the Moon: while specific caricature may once have been Blake's conscious intention, it is subordinated to his over-riding interest in his own opinions (which, as we know, can go in opposite directions) and in the idea of himself as a voicer of opinions.

The fact that many of Blake's dearest causes are addressed by this motley assortment of speakers, most of whom pass the remainder of their time in mutual backbiting, serves to detract from their polemical conviction. Social disorders, whether they consist in Lockean material-ism or in the plight of the orphans who are led to the altar of St. Paul's, and consequently Blake's repudiation of such things, do not seem quite real when they are interspersed with verses of a merely scurrilous, scatological, or nonsensical character. The 'serious' songs are mostly ambiguous in themselves: is 'Upon a holy thursday' really a celebration of the generosity of beadles, or should we, with Erdman, anticipate the 'Holy Thursday' of Songs of Experience, and, if the latter, is Obtuse Angle aware of the irony? On the last point at least it is impossible to be certain, which is much the same situation as had obtained in 'A War Song to Englishmen'.

A sense emerges, in An Island in the Moon, of Blake as an author who possesses strong insights about society, but who is unable or unwilling to organize these insights into moral propositions or any kind of social programme. His view of the outside world seems distorted by mocking self-mistrust, a sense of negativity left over from the Poetical Sketches (in the misanthropic satires on surgery and marriage, for example), fear of petty jealousies, and irrepressible levity. This is compounded by the disturbing presence of abstract philosophy. Locke is mocked in a shallow way by Scopprell ('An Easy of Huming Understanding by John Lookye Gent'), Descartes likewise through Aradobo: 'whenever I think I must think myself -- I think I do -- In the first place' (pp. 8, 5; E456, E453). There is a suggestion, in the satirical poem on Dr Johnson, that

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25 Prophet Against Empire, pp. 121--22.

26 Cf. Brenda S. Webster, who argues that Blake in this work is hopelessly imbrued in childhood psycho-sexual distresses: he 'represents experience in modes too close to the child's -- a stream of good and bad feelings punctuated by tantrums and lacking the organising insights of later life' (Blake's Prophetic Psychology [London, 1963], p. 29).
Blake prefers the immaterialist philosophy of Berkeley:

O ho Said Doctor Johnson
To Scipio Africanus
If you dont own me a Philosopher
I'll kick your Roman Anus

Johnson's actual recorded references to Scipio are more respectful than these lines suggest, but his coarse conception of epistemology is commemorated in Boswell's account of the Doctor's use of a kick to 'refute' Berkeley.27

Berkeleian immaterialism, like Swedenborgian spiritualism, is potentially a hindrance to action in what we take to be the real world, and it may be partly in response to this that Blake, in An Island in the Moon, presented himself and his ideas in this disintegrated fashion.28 As such it is a fascinating and disconcerting text. But Blake aspired to much grander, more ideologically persuasive forms of utterance. He was in need of 'a system', and, shortly afterwards, he began to create one.

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It is clear from his annotations to Lavater's Aphorisms on Man (1788) that Blake, in his early thirties, was looking about for instruction on how to lead an honourable life. He was sure that he was a man of genius and wanted to know how such a man ought to behave. Or at least, he wanted to find some confirmation for his own opinions on this subject. Thus, he underlined the following phrases from Lavater's aphorisms nos. 23, 93 and 432: 'who can produce what none else can, has genius'; 'Intuition of truth, not preceded by perceptible meditation, is genius'; 'the more genius you have, the more easily you bear the imputation of mediocrity' (E585, E587, E593). After no. 94, 'The degree of genius is determined by its velocity, clearness, depth, simplicity, copiousness, extent of glance (coup d'oeil), and instantaneous intuition of the whole


28 See, however, Richard G. Martin, 'Material Differences: The Immaterialism of Berkeley and Blake', English Studies in Canada, 13 (1987), 391--405. 'Berkeley's target might better be called "matter-ism"', whereas 'Blake's is "materialism" in its broadest sense: what he would call the "corporeal" understanding of the corporeal world; the belief that the world of the senses is all that exists' (pp. 397--98).
at once', Blake echoes, summarizing, what he presumably takes to be the key to genius-identification: 'copiousness of glance' (E587). The paradoxically flattering no. 203, also underlined, 'Who seeks those that are greater than himself, their greatness enjoys, and forgets his greatest qualities in their greater ones, is already truly great', which suggests that there is a community or tradition of complacent geniuses waiting to absorb the newcomer, brings out a certain sheepish vanity: 'I hope I do not flatter myself that this is pleasant to me' (E588).

In An Island in the Moon Blake had shown the desire for genius in a satirical light: 'Honour & Genius is all I ask', sings Quid, 'And I ask the Gods no more' -- to which the three philosophers return the chorus, 'No more No more / No more No more' (p. 4; E452). But then, as Blake was later to assert, 'More! More! is the cry of a mistaken soul, less than All cannot satisfy Man' (There is No Natural Religion [b], V; E2). Blake seems intermittently aware that to set himself up as possessing genius is a provocative thing to do -- but at times that seems to be the point of it. To claim genius is like claiming to believe in innate ideas: it gives an eccentric, subjective view of the world precedence over the institutional views of, for example, the Royal Academy, or the scientific community as Blake perceives it, or the structures of political control. But, on the other hand, there is a less tactical and more private aspect to Blake's treatment of Lavater. Here and with Swedenborg, whose work he was annotating at about the same time, Blake enters into an imaginary personal relationship with his master. If they are in agreement, then he shows his approval and affection, as in the heart drawn on Lavater's title-page. The oddness of this becomes apparent if one tries to imagine Shakespeare or Milton, Wordsworth or even Keats behaving in the same way. Eventually Blake came to develop such feelings into a grandly universalized humanism, as in Jerusalem, where

the Worship of God, is honouring his gifts
In other men: & loving the greatest men best, each according
To his Genius: which is the Holy Ghost in Man; . . .

(91.7; E251)

but in his earlier and less public utterances there is something unsophisticated and amateurish about Blake, ingenuous and impressionable.

But although many of Blake's most striking ideas can be shown to have roots in Lavater, he was by no means a slavish proselyte. On the
contrary, he defines himself increasingly, towards the end of the Aphorisms, by opposition. He accepts Lavater’s emphasis upon a code of noble behaviour, but his conception of what nobility entails is more reckless and extreme. For example, aphorism no. 409 states that ‘he alone is good, who, though possessed of energy, prefers virtue, with the appearance of weakness, to the invitation of acting brilliantly ill’, to which Blake responds: ‘Noble But Mark Active Evil is better than Passive Good’ (E592). Blake explains the basis for this view on the fly-leaves at the end of the book, where he claims that Lavater considers Man to be essentially sinful -- ‘he makes the vicious propensity not only a leading feature of the man but the Stamina on which all his virtues grow’ (E600--01) -- whereas Blake himself maintains that all human ‘Act’, if it occurs instinctually and without interference, will be virtuous. This connects with Blake’s stress upon the innateness and continuity of genius, the unchangeable ‘Principle’ of an individual’s character, and with the heuristic nature of Blake’s writing: work which is understood to spring from a fundamentally virtuous ‘inner Man’ can presumably be trusted not to need rational analysis and revision. The tendency to trust the spontaneous products of one’s unconscious, without deliberate ratiocination, leads to the impression that one is, in a sense, not responsible for the writings that emerge -- which Blake frequently claimed. This intimation of divine supervision acts, in turn, as an argument that Man is directed towards the greatest good. Thus Blake’s conception of the relationship between God and Man is cyclical and acts as a self-sustaining apologetics for his own imagination, or a kind of artistic pre-destinarian heresy, for all that Blake in other ways opposed the Calvinist ‘Elect’.31

This approach is first expounded systematically in the brief illuminated tractates, There is No Natural Religion and All Religions are

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29 The emphasis, in this case, indicates Blake’s underlining.

30 See, for example, the letter to Butts of 10 January 1803, where Blake claims to be ‘under the direction of Messengers from Heaven Daily & Nightly’ (E724).

31 For further clarification of Blake’s complex relationship with various forms of antinomianism, including Calvinism, see Mee, p. 57 ff., and E. P. Thompson, Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 10--21.
One, which were probably composed in the same year as the Lavater annotations. There is No Natural Religion consists of two interactive sets of propositions. It is important for our interpretation of Blake's attachment to contraries that both sets can be understood as representing his beliefs. The first set, series [a], expounds a rationalist epistemology based upon the physical senses. There is no implication, at this stage, that the sense-limited world is a bad thing: the illustration to the first proposition in series [a], for example, of man and dog engaging in 'natural perception', is very attractive (B4). The 'Argument' states that 'Man has no notion of moral fitness but from Education' (E2), which is close to Locke's position. However, does not appear to be a concept of which Blake approves. For, according to the Lavater annotations, Blake believes that innate 'propensities' are representative of true virtue, so that anything that hinders such propensities, such as an imposed morality, will be 'negative' in the derogatory sense, fostering an artificial concept of 'Sin':

Every man's leading propensity ought to be call'd his leading Virtue & his good Angel But the Philosophy of Causes & Consequences misled Lavater as it has all his cotemporaries. Each thing is its own cause & its own effect Accident is the omission of act in self & the hindering of act in another, This is Vice but all Act [from Individual propensity del] is Virtue. To hinder another is not an act it is the contrary it is a restraint on action both in ourselves & in the person hinder'd. for he who hinders another omits his own duty, at the time.

Murder is Hindering Another
Theft is Hindering Another
Backbiting. Undermining C[i]rreventic & whatever is Negative is Vice
But the or[il]gin of this mistake in Lavater & his cotemporaries, is, They suppose that Womans Love is Sin. in consequence all the Loves & Graces with them are Sin

(E601)

This passage is not amoral. It expresses concern about forms of behaviour which moralities customarily seek to regulate. It speaks of 'duty', and classifies murder and theft as undesirable phenomena. But Blake refuses to countenance the restriction of any activity that does not obviously 'hinder' another human being: hence the 'mistake' of sexual

32 'The truth of all . . . moral Rules, plainly depends upon some other antecedent to them, and from which they must be deduced, which could not be, if either they were innate, or so much as self-evident' (John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, ed. Peter H. Nidditch [Oxford, 1975], I. iii. 4).
morality. As it stands, this is simply the apogee of idealistic liberalism, open to accusations of naivety and impracticality. As Laurence Lockridge notes, 'no social or political structure for mediating among conflicting wills is envisaged here; Blake's political position is anarchistic'. More fundamentally, as Sloss and Wallis, Middleton Murry, and others have hinted, Blake does not explain the origin of the 'Vice' of 'hindering' in a universe that is supposed to be governed by 'Virtue'. 'Bad . . . spirits' apparently exist, with whom it is possible for humans to 'converse' (B600), but this implies a division of purpose in the forces controlling the universe which ought to conflict with Blake's trust in 'leading propensities', and hence with his belief that his own preferences for human behaviour are universal, not contingent, and not, in their own way, part of a scheme of 'moral fitness'.

The figure standing on the left of the first plate of series [b] of There is No Natural Religion appears to be a representation of Christ, showing Him in the act of raising up a man who has been existing in a state of sense-bound perception. This accords with the message of series [b] as a whole: that Man is capable of a much more rewarding mode of being than that which is described by Lockean philosophy or by a deistic 'natural' religion which purports to apprehend God from objects which are limited to their expression in sense-data. To see God, claims Blake in the 'Application', it is necessary to see 'the Infinite in all things' (E3). Murry, in what is still one of the fullest commentaries on these texts, glosses this assertion as follows:

By 'seeing the infinite in all things', one has no doubt at all, Blake meant the same thing as to see

A world in a grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower;
or to do what he once described in the words: 'I can stare at a knot in a piece of wood until I am frightened of it.' To 'see the infinite in all things' is to be aware, by imagination or Spiritual Sensation, of things in their incommensurable individuality.

(p. 22)

This evaluation is supported by the first 'Principle' of All Religions

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are One, which states that 'the forms of all things are derived from their Genius' (El). But few will be prepared to agree with Murry or with Blake that it is really a function of the wood's 'incommensurable individuality' that it should be frightening. Rather, it is an imposition of the perceiver's imagination, which governs his perceptions of all things, generating that unity which Blake describes as the 'Infinite'. Blake does not distinguish, in effect, between his own imagination and God: he believes he is as God in so far as he uses imagination to personalize reality, rather than accepting a 'Ratio' which is the mean of all men's individualities, and hence not individual at all. But, further than this, Blake implies that having the 'Prophetic character' he is capable of apprehending the 'truth' of the things that he perceives in a way that makes them more real than they would be if perceived in strictly Lockean terms. This enhanced reality consists, essentially, in an enhanced significance to Blake: he sees more because he transforms all objects of perception -- like the grain of sand or the famous 'guinea sun'\textsuperscript{35} -- into mirrors, narcissistically one might say. In short, he is arguing for a way of looking at the world that is exactly as partial as a given artist's style in paint or print. Blake says that 'He who sees the Ratio only sees himself only',\textsuperscript{36} but in attempting to see the 'Infinite' he is seeing a different kind of self, one that is imaginatively rather than corporally oriented, subsuming reality into the perceiver instead of seeing himself, as perceived by others, as a mere constituent of an objective universe. It is important to understand that Blake's 'Infinite' is reality expressed according to his own terms of reference or 'propensities', not some independent, sacred entity.

In accordance with Blake's belief that his way of seeing has a transcendent validity, he extrapolates the idea of 'the Poetic or Prophetic Genius' which is present in There is No Natural Religion towards the wider concept of 'the Spirit of Prophecy' which appears in All Religions are One (El). In doing so, he identifies himself with Christ, as opposed to the legalistically and moralistically moribund Old


\textsuperscript{36} There is No Natural Religion [b], 'Application'; E3.
Testament, and commences his revelation of the 'true . . . source' of religion with a representation of John the Baptist (B15) which in turn is iconographically related to his subsequent depictions of Los, who can frequently be read as an eternized self-image. Thus, Blake may be seen as evolving a unified account of human history which will logically come to involve historical or quasi-historical individuals who have themselves concentrated experience into an imaginative vision -- such as Isaiah, Christ, and Milton -- from his own tendency to exist in intellectual autonomy, by making the latently solipsistic, a priori identification of his own imagination with truth. Although this engulfing attitude is now leading Blake towards a description of the widest human issues, it can be seen as related to the melancholic introspection in Poetical Sketches, the uncontrolled subjectivism of An Island in the Moon, and Blake's failure, thus far, to account for the origin of the evil aspects of humanity which he cannot discover in the self-image which determines his perception of the Poetic Genius and hence of the orientation of history.

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Tiriel, thought to have been written around 1789, represents a considerable progression from the rudimentary definition of epic types in the 'Seasons' of Poetical Sketches towards the complexity of the large Prophetic Books. In undertaking this poem, Blake was faced with the difficulty of effective characterization in a more portentous context than in An Island in the Moon, and also with the problem of establishing a coherent account of the origin of evil. The result was a work of a solemnity and gloom that could never have been predicted from the exuberant theorizing of the 1788 tractates.

Blake's debt to King Lear, already noted in Poetical Sketches, is much more obvious in Tiriel. But although Blake has clearly taken character-types from Shakespeare (Hela being analogous to Cordelia, for example, and Ijim to Edgar), as well as a particular kind of vituperative rhetoric -- 'Serpents not sons'; 'My sons have left me did thine leave

37 Compare B94, B125, B129, B364, B427, B468.

38 For the problematical dating of this work see Blake, Tiriel, ed. G. E. Bentley, Jr. (Oxford, 1967), pp. 50--51.
thee' (1.21 and 4.63, 3.16; E276 and E281, E279) -- he uses these elements for ends that are distinctively his own. Two differences from Lear are obvious at the start of the poem: Tiriel has a wife, and whereas Lear at first imagines that he will find comfort and security with his offspring, Tiriel and the dying Myaratana are cast from the start in violent opposition to their children, whose very presence, it appears, has made 'their once delightful palace' unbearable (1.4; E276).

The precise cause of this breach between parents and children in Tiriel is left unclear: Blake chooses to express it simply as the mutual hatred of two generations. Thus Heuxos, Tiriel's eldest son, complains in general terms of his father's tyranny, but reviles him with specific reference to his age:

> Old man unworthy to be calld. the father of Tiriels race
> For evry one of those thy wrinkles. each of those grey hairs
> Are cruel as death. & as obdurate as the devouring pit

(1.12; E276)

Heuxos appears directly to associate the symptoms of age with oppression and with the active threat of death. Tiriel, conversely, rails at his sons as though they had killed their mother just by being born, by taking her milk, by being children:

> Ye worms of death feasting upon your aged parents flesh
> Listen & hear your mothers groans. No more accursed Sons
> She bears. she groans not at the birth of Heuxos or Yuva
> These are the groans of death ye serpents These are the groans of death
> Nourishd with milk ye serpents. nourished with mothers tears & cares
> The serpents sprung from her own bowels have draind her dry as this

(1.22, 31; E276--77)

This is an attack on the biological realities of the human condition, the facts of life, as much as on Tiriel's offspring.

Despite the sweeping nature of his vision, Tiriel is monstrously egotistical, a kind of anti-Job, clinging to his dying wife, denying his children's interest in her or in him, and wishing to hold onto his faded dominion by destroying his heirs. Such is his mania of subjectivism that to him 'the bright moon was now a useless globe' (2.2; E277), whereas, really, it is his eyes that are the useless globes. Blake here anticipates the crucifixion of Luvah, through the political and philosophical falling-off of Albion, in Jerusalem: 'The sun was black & the moon rold a useless globe thro Britain!' (65.11; E216). These images in Tiriel and Jerusalem can both be seen as apocalyptic expansions of the pastoral melancholia in Poetical Sketches, where 'the
blindness, by 'he that leadeth all' (2.4; E277), which suggests the intervention of Providence, but, given the sense of doom that prevails throughout the poem, it might just as well be Nemesis, or an indifferent playing-out of the consequences of human defect. And the destination to which this force leads Tiriel is delusory: it possesses some of the superficial attributes of paradise, but the state of innocence in which Har and Heva (Tiriel's parents) exist within that paradise is pathological.

Nevertheless, Har's perception of Tiriel is vivid and uncanny:

Then Har said O my mother Mnetha venture not so near him
For he is the king of rotten wood & of the bones of death
He wanders, without eyes, & passes thro thick walls & doors
Thou shalt not strike my mother Mnetha O thou eyeless man

(2.22; E278)

The mixture of childishness and morbid supernaturalism here recalls the ravings of Poor Tom; and, as it transpires, Har too is projecting his unconscious guilt and fears. For we learn that Har was as bad a parent as Tiriel; and his grotesque clinging to a mother who appears, in Blake's accompanying drawings,40 to be younger than himself, represents the same mad selfishness that denies the evolution of new life.41 But Har has decayed further than Tiriel. Tiriel remains in anguish at his own violence, whereas Har has declined into an oblivious senility, anticipating the many 'delusive' shades of Beulah in The Four Zoas and Jerusalem, losing all dignity with the memory of his sins. The 'vale of Har' recalls the vales and pools of Poetical Sketches: this is the psychogenic morass under the spectre of selfishness, and Tiriel himself is the lost traveller tempted to subside into a dream under the hill.

Heva, a prototype of the 'Female Will', while not accepting that Tiriel is her son, attempts to draw him into a vile state of sentimental dotage, reducing him to his pathetic pate:

Go not for thou art so like Tiriel. that I love thine head
Tho it is wrinkled like the earth parchd with the summer heat

(3.22; E279)

vale darkens at [the] pensive woe' of the protagonist of 'When early morn walks forth in sober grey' (E416).

40 Reproduced in Bentley's edition (Blake, Tiriel).

41 It also suggests the Oedipus complex. For a persuasive Freudian reading of Tiriel see Webster, Blake's Prophetic Psychology, pp. 31--48.
Tiriel's wrinkles (vales in themselves) are as puzzling to Har and Heva as they are ominous to Heuxos. They are like Job's boils, signs of great suffering, and, potentially, of a tragic stature that makes him an exemplary or universal man. And indeed, he retains something of Job's dignity, being by no means simply an embodiment of abstract evil qualities. It is to Tiriel's credit, a remission in his madness, that he refuses to be seduced into staying with Har and Heva, and his rebuff to Mnetha would have borne Blake's approbation as an assertion of intellectual independence, a voice in the wilderness:

Then Tiriel frownd & answerd. Did I not command you saying
Madness & deep dismay posses[s] the heart of the blind man
The wanderer who seeks the woods leaning upon his staff

Then Mnetha trembling at his frowns led him to the tent door
And gave to him his staff & blest him. he went on his way

(3.30; E279)

Tiriel's resistance to the attraction of the Vale is soon shown to be well-founded. His parents' solicitude evaporates: 'they soon forgot their tears' (3.36; E279).

At this stage of the poem, it is reasonable for the reader to anticipate Tiriel's redemption. He has made a tragic mistake in alienating his children, but has since become a suffering pilgrim. The precedents of Sophoclean and Shakespearean tragedy suggest imminent catharsis, some kind of painful enlightenment, then death. But instead Tiriel is accosted by his wild brother Ijim and his trials continue. Ijim's outcast state seems to be another manifestation of the general familial disaster (the enslavement of Zazel is a further example) of which Tiriel is perhaps the primary instigator, though the plotting is not very clear. And so it may be appropriate that Ijim acts as the unconscious agent of Tiriel's punishment. Ijim's refusal to believe that Tiriel is who he claims to be is like the Fool's desperate teasing of Lear. It is an exacerbating adjunct to the tragic destiny to which Tiriel is resigned: 'for Ijims words were as the voice of Fate' (4.26; E280). 'Ijim' was the name used by Swedenborg to represent 'diabolical Love' or 'Love of Self':^2 these are terms that could equally be applied to Har or to Tiriel himself; but Ijim is a figure of inferior grandeur.

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beside Tiriel, a man who cannot cope with human evil and so is driven into the wilderness with the beasts, taking refuge from the 'mental storm' in a paradoxically self-tormenting way.

The sense of progress in Blake's narrative disappears after Tiriel's return to his palace, giving way to ponderously melodramatic hectoring, as in Tiriel's cursing of his sons:

And aged Tiriel stood & said where does the thunder sleep
Where doth he hide his terrible head & his swift & fiery daughters
Where do they shroud their fiery wings & the terrors of their hair
Earth thus I stamp thy bosom rouse the earthquake from his den

. . .

let his fiery dogs
Rise from the center belching flames and roarings. dark smoke

(5.1, 6; E282)

Tiriel is a fiery dog himself here: there is no particularly sharp or apposite imagery, but merely a conglomeration of unpleasant things. He is supposed already to have cursed his children at the start of the poem, and there seems to be no good reason why this second curse should prove to be so much more effective. In fact, Blake repeats himself thoroughly, having Tiriel depart once more for the Vale of Har, undoing the sense of development in the first half of the poem and making the episode with Ijim seem like a gratuitous interruption. The character of Tiriel degenerates into a caricature of ranting malevolence, and his final confession and accusation of Har appears without dramatic logic and is couched in terms that have no special relevance to Tiriel's own experience as we have observed it. The question, 'Why is one law given to the lion & the patient Ox', for example, sits naturally beside the 'Proverbs of Hell', but in Tiriel it sounds just like what it is: the author's theoretical formula thrust into the narrative in defiance of dramatic verisimilitude or consistency (8.9; E285).43

Thus, any expectations that we might have had of Tiriel as a neo-Shakespearean dramatic poem give way to the realization that Blake is actually intending an allegory upon a very restricted theme, one that limits and tends to desiccitate both plot and characterization. This theme is expounded in Tiriel's generalized account of the human condition:

The child springs from the womb. The father ready stands to form
The infant head while the mother idle plays with her dog on her couch

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43 Compare The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, pl. 24; E44.
The young bosom is cold for lack of mothers nourishment & milk
Is cut off from the weeping mouth with difficulty & pain
The little lids are lifted & the little nostrils opend
The father forms a whip to rouze the sluggish sense to act
And scourges off all youthful fancies from the newborn man
(8.12; E285)

This is an authorial summation of the rivalry and hatred observed between parents and children at the start of Tiriel. It is a Blakean theme which has already found vivid expression in Quid's songs in An Island in the Moon -- 'O father father where are you going' (p. 15; E463) -- and which will reappear throughout Songs of Innocence and of Experience and in the symbolism of the bound Orc in the Prophetic Books. Blake is using the character of Tiriel as a symbol of an emotional and spiritual deprivation which he sees as a contemporary and universal problem.

Tiriel blames his own sinfulness upon his father, and the terms he uses invoke the Fall:

Compelld to pray repugnant & to humble the immortal spirit
Till I am subtill as a serpent in a paradise
Consuming all both flowers & fruit insects & warbling birds
And now my paradise isfalln & a drear sandy plain
Returns my thirsty hissings in a curse on thee O Har
Mistaken father of a lawless race my voice is past
(8.23; E285)

This could be Milton's Satan, or Blake's admiring reinterpretation of that figure, railing against a God who has mismanaged creation, making goodness impossible. It depicts an Eden in which Man is forced to be the evil creature that supposedly tempts him. The only reference to God in Tiriel, apart from a deleted line ('Thy God of Love thy heaven of joy'), occurs in the phrase 'God bless', which is used five times by the senile Har and Heva (2.32--33, 3.5; E278, E279). Tiriel does not profit by this blessing, any more than his own blessing helped his children: 'His blessing was a cruel curse' says Heuxos (1.17; E276).

Thus, within the world of the poem, God seems little more than a tale told by idiots. It is true that Tiriel can be read as a false prophet, to be contrasted with figures both in the Bible and in Blake's later writing who are in touch with God, but his nihilism and implicit atheism have intellectual substance, and there seems to be nothing in his

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See Erdman's textual note to 8.8 (E815).

world to contradict them.

The bleakness of *Tiriel* suggests that the assertions of the tractates may have been a matter of attempted self-persuasion rather than resolute belief. The optimistic humanism of the Lavater annotations meets a misanthropic counterblast in *Tiriel*'s depiction of a world in which evil is ingrained in human relations. Blake's idealistic self-promotion seems, at this stage, to hover over a vale of uncertainty in which we cannot determine whether Creation is benign or diabolical.

The latter possibility will still haunt Blake in *Jerusalem*:

> From every-one of the Four Regions of Human Majesty,
> There is an Outside spread Without, & an Outside spread Within
> Beyond the Outline of Identity both ways, which meet in One:
> An orbed Void of doubt, despair, hunger, & thirst & sorrow.
> (18.1; E162)
CHAPTER 2

Blake as Educator and Tormentor of the Innocent:

The Songs and The Book of Thel

The drawing of a piper which accompanies the fourth proposition of There is No Natural Religion, series [a] -- 'None could have other than natural or organic thoughts if he had none but organic perceptions' (E2; B6) -- is reckoned by Keynes to represent a 'natural': 'Foster Damon . . . noted that Blake used a plumed hat as the badge of an idiot in the illustrations to Young's Night Thoughts, 1797.' In Tiriel, senile dementia, a sinister kind of idiocy, is described in terms which suggest the conventional innocence of pastoral:

Playing with flowers. & running after birds they spent the day
And in the night like infants slept delighted with infant dreams
(2.8; E277)

Blake's Songs of Innocence, which were formerly regarded by many as idiotic, or 'innocent' in a pejorative sense, open with a picture of the poet himself -- or, at least, of someone with Blake's face -- as another piper, at ease among his flock, within the natural world, visited by the 'infant dream', as it were, of a baby on a cloud (B22). In Poetical Sketches we observed 'a fiend in a cloud', offered as representative of the state of mind of the speaker of the 'Mad Song', who is a demented traveller seeking after night (E415). In 'Night', the poet-piper of Songs of Innocence makes his way towards a nocturnal refuge where violence threatens to oust the pastoral of flowers and sheep from the centre of the reader's consciousness. A dominant characteristic both of the speaker and of the child-subjects of Songs of Innocence might be said to be 'innocence' in the sense of 'silliness': 'silliness' with the old pastoral meaning of affecting vulnerability, but with an element of

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2 Among the reviews which greeted B. H. Malkin's A Father's Memoirs of his Child (1806) -- a work which praised Blake and reprinted several of his poems, including 'Holy Thursday' (Innocence) and 'The Tyger' -- were those of the Literary Journal, which condescended to notice Blake so as to 'relieve our readers with a lighter subject, with a touch, indeed, of the ridiculous', and of the British Critic, to whom Blake seemed 'chiefly inspired by that, -- Nurse of the didactic muse, Divine Nonsensia. -- ' (reprinted in G. E. Bentley, Jr., ed., William Blake: The Critical Heritage, The Critical Heritage Series [London, 1975], pp. 44--45).
foolishness, self-deception, and even self-destructiveness.

The close of day in 'Night', just as in 'The Couch of Death', suggests mortality, the speaker addressing his pastoral life in the perfect tense, as though that whole mode of being were now concluded:

Farewell green fields and happy groves,  
Where flocks have took delight;  

(E13)

A sense, as here, of valediction is generally characteristic of the Songs of Innocence. 'The Ecchoing Green', for example, opens with springlike exuberance, but quickly fades to a general devitalization, which could be read simply as the succession of the literal, unambiguous night-time, were it not for the bluntness of the terminating couplet, which ought to have sobered and overcast the mind of any child who had read it with understanding:

And sport no more seen,  
On the darkening Green.  

(E8)

Blake's abrupt substitution of 'the darken Green' for 'the Ecchoing Green', the phrase that gives the poem its title and that ends the first two stanzas, casts a shadow over all that goes before.3 This darkening can be read as an anticipation of the more explicit spoiling of 'The Garden of Love' in Experience (E26), and the decay of Tiriel's paradise is another analogue (8.22--27; E285). That is not to say that it invalidates the state of community and 'play' that Heather Glen admires in the earlier part of the poem, but it makes the contingency of that state supremely palpable. Glen speaks of the poem as an affirmation of the 'Eternal Now' of 'shared images', of an imaginative spirit which can be assimilated to Blake's 'Spirit of Prophecy' and which will survive 'individual and even communal extinction'.4 But such an abstracted immortality is not very consoling, and Blake allows melancholia to prevail in the poem, so that the 'echoing' has a wistfulness about it, a sense of regret for perpetual loss, that is more than equal to the joy of perpetual renewal.

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Like the protagonist of 'Night', the children of 'The Ecchoing Green' retire 'like birds' to 'their nest'. This image, which is suggestive, in the present context, of the body retiring to the grave, also appears in 'The Blossom', where it is often read as a representation of sexual intercourse. Sex is intimated in the design of 'The Ecchoing Green', where a youth in a tree passes a bunch of grapes to a girl standing below, as if in a guiltless replay of the Fall, while younger children are led away. This illustration comes at the end of the poem, when the green is darkening. There is a suggestion that sexuality comes as a reflex to the imminence of decay, and that life should be pursued with death in mind. That would explain the remarkable blend of erotism, physical violence, funerary symbolism, and tender consolation that is compacted in 'The Blossom', where ejaculation is lacrimation, and penetration, murder:

Merry Merry Sparrow
Under leaves so green
A happy Blossom
Sees you swift as arrow
Seek your cradle narrow
Near my Bosom.

Pretty Pretty Robin
Under leaves so green
A happy Blossom
Hears you sobbing sobbing
Pretty Pretty Robin
Near my Bosom.

(E10)

Here, the arrow-wound, vagina, or grave of the 'blossom' is also a 'cradle', an image that connects significantly with many of the other Songs.

In 'Night', once the 'happy groves' (analogous to the 'ecchoing green') have been left behind, we pass into a cradled state where the innocent are seen as patients, receiving anaesthetic ministrations which draw attention to the imminence of pain and danger, and which seem, moreover, to curtail free will, describing a Providence that is enveloping and claustrophobic:

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6 For an extended discussion of this design see Zachary Leader, Reading Blake’s Songs (London, 1981), pp. 82--86.
If they see any weeping,  
That should have been sleeping  
They pour sleep on their head  
And sit down by their bed.  

(E14)

This magically administered stupor, like the supernaturalism of Poetical Sketches, recalls A Midsummer Night's Dream and Comus, and looks forward to Blake's concept of 'Beulah', the 'threefold' or second-best level of perception, with its 'Realms / Of terror & mild moony lustre', its 'soft sexual delusions / Of varied beauty, to delight the wanderer' (Milton, 2.2; E96). And much the same element of aerially impending delusion, beguiling, and pastoral 'silliness' is present in the narcotic atmosphere of 'A Cradle Song':

Sweet smiles in the night,  
Hover over my delight.  
Sweet smiles Mothers smiles  
All the livelong night beguiles.  

(E12)

This smiling proves to be a pretence that the mother cannot long sustain: 'moans' and 'sighs' creep into the song, she begins to identify her child with the suffering Christ, and then weeps over him, just like the mother in 'The Couch of Death'. Blake's design for the poem has a suffocating stasis, with heavy furniture and heavy drapery, the mother bending over with conspicuous anxiety, the child so swaddled and boxed-in that you might think that he would never get on his feet, and the whole scene backed by a kind of looming bat-wing shroud. The mother places a fervent emphasis on the child's sleeping, far beyond the requirements of any ordinary lullaby, as though sleep, oblivion, were the only happiness, while she herself is kept awake by her imponderable adult experience, fretting over nameless horrors:

Sleep sleep happy child.  
All creation slept and smil'd.  
Sleep sleep, happy sleep,  
While o'er thee thy mother weep.

The 'Cradle Song' of Innocence has a very interesting companion in the Notebook 'Cradle Song' that seems to have been designed for inclusion in Experience. Here, the mother's primary motive for encouraging her infant's slumber is not fear for him but fear of him, for his face

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7 Reproduced on B38. The form of the 'curtain-screen', as Bentley calls it, anticipates the pterodactyl-like spectre on pl. 37 of Jerusalem (B495). See also pl. 6 (B427).
betrays the marks of weakness and of future strife, and his heart is the Tyger's heart:

When thy little heart does wake
Then the dreadful lightnings break

(E468)

It is not immediately clear whether the mother's fear is altruistic or selfish, realistic or neurotic. Her attitude to the child is entranced and not without a kind of tenderness, but if we consider the inter-generational antagonism broached in Tiriel and, more immediately, the discontent that is plainly expressed in the 'Nurse's Song' of Experience, then it is apparent that there is an element of envy here:

Sweet Babe in thy face
Soft desires I can trace
Secret joys & secret smiles
Little pretty infant wiles

As thy softest limbs I feel
Smiles as of the morning steal
O'er thy cheek & o'er thy breast
When thy little heart does rest.®

Christopher Ricks, analyzing a passage from Keats's Endymion, has discussed the potentially embarrassing situation of watching someone else sleeping, noting that it is delightful when that embarrassment is pre-empted by the watcher's love for the sleeper.® In Blake's poem, the stealing of what is perhaps a rosy suffusion across the fondled person of the sleeping baby evokes embarrassment while at the same time vividly communicating the nascent sensuality of the child, in a manner that matches vernal blossomings throughout the Songs of Innocence. The mother's part in this is ambiguous: to her, the child is 'sweet', seductive, but also furtive and insidiously enclosed within himself, guarding 'secret joys', absorbing pleasure into his hidden world of sleep. Her ambivalence suggests the confusion of embarrassment: this is an uneasy poem, describing rivalry at least as much as love.

The two Cradle Songs and the two Nurse's Songs exemplify an

® I have used G. E. Bentley, Jr.'s version of the last line quoted (B998). Other editors, including Erdman in his Notebook facsimile, print 'Where' instead of 'When' as the first word. Bentley's reading introduces a significant contrast with line 15 (Erdman's numbering), 'When thy little heart does wake', displaying the infant's dual, deceptive nature, and I believe (after examining the facsimile) that it is almost certainly correct. For a similarly charged contrast within an individual song, see 'A Poison Tree', 11. 1--4 (E28).

archetypal situation, involving a child or a traveller sleeping, dying, being bewitched or beguiled under a female eye, that is evidently of the utmost importance to Blake. It appears, as we have seen, in Poetical Sketches, where it relates to melancholia and narcissism; in Tiriel, in the protagonist’s relations with Heva and Mnetha; and it will be recalled repeatedly in the Prophetic Books, taking dogmatic form in the ‘Female Will’. Sleep -- and most of the children in Innocence are either sleeping or going to bed -- is loaded in these poems with disturbing implications, appearing both as a refuge, an innocence that is blissful ignorance, and as an ominous latency, an innocence that precedes malignity.

Thus, the oblivion offered by the angels in ‘Night’ is not unequivocally salubrious. Its supposed answer to earthy suffering is comparable to the notoriously platitudinous last line of ‘The Chimney Sweeper’, ‘So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm’ (E10). The ‘duty’ of the sweeps in cleaning chimneys is insupportable, the sort of thing that, to Blake’s way of thinking, ‘Puts all Heaven in a Rage’ (‘Auguries of Innocence’, l. 6; E490), but the religious ‘duty’ to sleep or to acquiesce in earthly suffering on the supposition of a heavenly reward is also uneasy, having connotations of blackmail:

And the Angel told Tom if he’d be a good boy,  
He’d have God for his father & never want joy.

These lines, taken literally, are odious: is God not the child’s father anyway? If we consider ‘The Little Boy Lost’ (in Innocence), with its representation of moral or psychical crisis arising from paternal neglect, it is evident that the angel’s proposition should be treated with suspicion. Tom Dacre only apprehends freedom in a dream, and the humane and ironical Blake would have known that in such circumstances faith was really too much to ask. Faith has little to support it in ‘Night’, where the angels are poor guardians, ultimately incapable of staving off the ‘dreadful’ assaults on their charges. Paradoxically, ‘Night’ ends with the destroyer become protector, the lion watching ‘o’er the fold’, and yet, with the lion turned benign there should be no need for a fold. A sense of captivity persists in the ‘new worlds’ which the victims are supposed to have inherited. Is heaven to be merely another Eden, restrained by a leonine covering cherub? Must the saved remain
sheep-like, ignorant and weak? But then, Blake is not really talking about heaven at all.

The lion-spirit of 'The Little Girl Lost' and 'The Little Girl Found', poems which were transferred to Experience having originally been published in Innocence, is like a god of the Underworld: Dis to the girl's Proserpina, or Comus to the girl's bloom of Ludlow Castle. For she is not led to paradise but to a 'palace deep' in 'a lonely dell' (E22), not to the positive sexual awakening or catharsis of experience that is often inferred, but to a comatose subsistence, away from life's pressures, to a state of protection that is imprisonment and exile. The scene of children and wild beasts gathered together on the last plate of the poem is idyllic (B58), but, as we know from his later theorizing, in particular the concept of the 'fourfold vision', Blake believed that the world could be perceived on mutually independent planes, and he is alive to a kind of perfection on all these levels: there is a Urizenic or devouring splendour (Pitt, Nelson, or the Tyger), there is an Edenic, paradisiac sublime (not fully realized until The Four Zoas), and there is a beauty independent of moral evaluation in that sunken state, part Beulah, part Generation (these concepts are as yet imperfectly formulated), which characterizes the darker passages of the Songs of Innocence.

Explicit moral and religious viewpoints yield precedence in these poems to a sense of the 'dangerous world' ('Infant Sorrow', E28) and its attractiveness, an apprehension of the dramatic possibilities of human vulnerability. The children of Innocence exist in a victimized transience which Blake intensifies by the deliberate 'silliness' of envisaging a salvation that is pointedly unreal, as with the solicitous carnivores of the Little Girl poems, or in the assertions of 'On Anothers Sorrow', which, by protesting too much, seem to prompt a contrary and negative reading:

And can he who smiles on all
Hear the wren with sorrows small,
Hear the small birds grief & care

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11 See, for example, Leader, pp. 186-89.
Hear the woes that infants bear --

And not sit beside the nest
Pouring pity in their breast,
And not sit the cradle near
Weeping tear on infant tear.

And not sit both night & day,
Wiping all our tears away.
O! no never can it be.
Never never can it be.

(E17)

Here again the cradled infant languishes in what is quite literally a vale of tears. The children of Innocence are vehicles for pathos: to sympathize with them is to assume a naivety that invites the depredations of wild beasts or of the bestial aspects of Man. The state of being that Glen describes as the realization of human 'potentia' is more a kind of Limbo: a state of dependency and protection, within a fold, under the guard of either of those bizarrely reconciled seeming-contraries, a lion or a nurse; in which victims huddle together for mutual consolation, like the sweeps, or the lamb and child, or the Little Black Boy, shading his white companion in a spirit of self-sacrifice or martyrdom; where sex is a tearful comforting, pity the primary emotion and God merely a god of endurance: the perpetual victim's patron, or, in the words of Fuzon in The Book of Ahania, the 'King of Sorrow' (2.13; E84).

The assertion of a pathetically unsupported faith in 'On Anothers Sorrow',

O! no never can it be.
Never never can it be.

is stylistically related to, and complemented by, the awed interrogation, half incredulous and half rhetorical, of the Tyger:

Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

(E25)

Blake's sense of the appeal of destructive power, which we noted in relation to Poetical Sketches, and which reaches a peak in 'The Tyger', can be seen as feeding upon his idea of innocence. Just as 'On Anothers Sorrow' is like a prayer voiced to keep away the fear of an

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unbearable reality, so ‘The Tyger’ is not so much a critical exposure of human violence and cruelty as a spell, the conjuration of an evil spirit.\(^{13}\) And in ‘The Sick Rose’ Blake is, to all appearances, of the Tyger’s party, as Glen implies when she refers to ‘the gloating emphasis that falls upon the colloquial “found out”’ (p. 145):

\[
\begin{align*}
0 & \text{ Rose thou art sick.} \\
& \text{The invisible worm,} \\
& \text{That flies in the night} \\
& \text{In the howling storm:} \\
& \text{Has found out thy bed} \\
& \text{Of crimson joy:} \\
& \text{And his dark secret love} \\
& \text{Does thy life destroy.}
\end{align*}
\]

(E23)

This could be read as a lament, but the contrary aspect of cruel relish and sexual aggression is obvious if we remember that phrase, ‘found out’, when we read Blake’s otherwise insignificant and rather boorish notebook fragment,

When a Man has Married a Wife he finds out whether Her knees & elbows are only glued together (E516)

It is as though, throughout the Songs, Blake is constantly aware of mind-forged delusions and constraints in the human life around him, of a failure to realize a more adult ‘potentia’, perhaps, than Glen’s ‘play’; as though he tolerates these inadequacies uneasily through Innocence, which he has set apart as a kind of probationary zone where capital punishments cannot be applied and where he is inclined, idealistically, to give the benefit of the doubt, ‘presenting,’ as Nick Shrimpton has observed, ‘in their most adequate form those best defences which themselves incorporate something of value in the human spirit’;\(^{14}\) but loses patience in Experience, where he precipitates his subjects into an apocalypse. ‘London’, in particular, is a poem in which the corruption of the outer world is matched by the violence of the poet, who

\(^{13}\) These lines from ‘On Another’s Sorrow’ and ‘The Tyger’ typify a recurrent device in Blake’s poetry of rapidly repetitive hammering clauses, as if to dominate and daze the reader. Other examples include the evocation of a Tyger-like Christ in ‘The Everlasting Gospel’ ([f] 76–80; E522), and the technique can be seen in its infancy in the would-be spine-chilling last stanza of ‘Fair Elenor’ (E412).

imposes stigmata on the city in a kind of Pentecostal visitation, 'marking' its inhabitants transitively:

I wander thro' each charter'd street,
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow.
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

(E26)

Here again we have the insistent repetitions and thumping metre of 'The Tyger', and, once more, Blake is casting his speaker in a Tyger-like role. He is not implying that the speaker is the first cause of the weakness and the woe, but the much-discussed play on 'mark' suggests that the recognition of such things is dependent upon an active, imaginative participation: that there is a sense in which the speaker is accountable for what he sees. Blake himself, as an artist, a maker of marks, brings a weight of creative perception to bear on features that, without him, would remain latent. It is Blake, as an accusor, who is blackening the churches and casting blood on palace walls, and the last stanza, the blasting of the marriage hearse, is a vehicle for Blake's own cursing of the satanic city which his eschatological imagination has brought to life.

Glen, too, has discussed the 'marking' in 'London': 'What the speaker sees is fatally linked to the way in which he sees it ... . The triple beat of 'mark' -- an active verb materializing into two plural nouns -- registers a new consciousness of this "I"'s implication in the world "thro'" which he wanders. What he observes is the objectification of his own activity' (p. 210). From this, Glen infers Blake's radical critique of London as a form of social organization that compromises anyone who becomes involved with it, taking 'the speaker' to be an impersonal figure.\(^\text{15}\) I would go further, however, and suggest that Blake is here acknowledging that his perceptions of evil engender within him feelings of rancour and destructiveness, that he is positively corrupted by his material, and that the altruism which imposed idyllic visions upon an undeserving world in *Innocence* is mingled with impatience, misanthropy, a desire to sweep all corruption and weakness

\(^{15}\) For more on the oppressive connotations of 'mark' see Stuart Peterfreund, 'Blake on Charters, Weights, and Measures as Forms of Social Control', *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 22 (1989), 37--59.
ruthlessly aside, so that the 'contrary states' of Blake's title page are in part his own moods, benevolent and unforgiving respectively.

In 'Ah! Sun-flower', according to Harold Bloom, 'Blake . . . is a little weary of his own pity for those who will not learn to free themselves from the ascetic delusion -- the dualistic hope that a denial of the body's desires will bring about "that sweet golden clime", a heaven for the soul'.

Indeed, Blake represents these people as though they were terminal anorexics, or almost suicides. It is not that Blake wrote aggressive or indulgent songs according to particular moods that may be supposed to have possessed him at the time of composition: on the contrary, these poems show very great control (Blake's meticulousness is evident from the notebook drafts). Rather, he seems systematically to have compiled a series of poems which explore the contrary impulses which he discovered within himself, in such a way that they illuminate and inform against one another. This is a refinement of the situation in the Notebook, where we find poems that individually seem calculated to make the reader denounce the poet as recklessly cruel. 'A Painful Case', for example:

The Villain at the Gallows tree
When he is doom'd to die
To assuage his misery
In Virtues praise does cry

So Reynolds when he came to die
To assuage his bitter woe:
Thus aloud did howl & cry
Michael Angelo Michael Angelo

Blake is posthumously executing Reynolds here, combining torture with humiliation, the animus being easy to associate with Blake's comments about his own position as an unfashionable and neglected artist. Perhaps he would never have considered the poem for publication, but it shows that poetry could act for Blake as a personal purgative, and this should be set alongside the humanitarianism which he displays elsewhere.

Much has recently been written to the effect that Blake's Songs are a reaction to the prescriptive children's literature produced by such writers as Anna Laetitia Barbauld. And yet, as I have been attempting to show, Experience, explicitly, and Innocence, under the surface, have

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a severity that is not wholly dissimilar to the tone of such works. Barbauld’s prose can be very impressive in its thunderous, pastiche--biblical way:

Child of mortality, whence comest thou? why is thy countenance sad, and why are thine eyes red with weeping?

I have seen the rose in its beauty; it spreads its leaves to the morning sun -- I returned, it was dying upon its stalk; the grace of the form of it was gone; its loveliness was vanished away; the leaves thereof were scattered on the ground, and none gathered them again.

A stately tree grew upon the plain; its branches were covered with verdure; its boughs spread wide and made a goodly shadow; the trunk was like a strong pillar; the roots were like crooked fangs -- I returned, the verdure was nipt by the east wind; the branches were lopt away by the ax; the worm had made it's way into the trunk, and the heart thereof was decayed; it mouldered away, and fell to the ground.17

The parallels between this passage and 'The Sick Rose' and 'A Poison Tree' are obvious. In the case of Barbauld, the decay is meant to be counteracted by piety, by the children saying their prayers, eschewing vice, and behaving nicely to their elders. In Blake’s case, there is no prospect of redemption: the post-mortuary heaven is an anti-human delusion, and the reader is prompted towards a new sense of the value and all too easily wasted potential of human life, together with an avoidance of psychical and institutional constraint which would clearly offend Barbauld in many of its liberal ramifications. But Blake is no less didactic -- or splenetic -- than Barbauld: both writers give the impression of wanting to shake up, and hence reform, their readers.

Blake’s closest contact with the commercially successful juvenile literature of his day arose when he was commissioned by the radical bookseller Joseph Johnson (who was also Barbauld’s publisher) to illustrate the 1791 edition of Mary Wollstonecraft’s Original Stories from Real Life. This is a work that out-Barbaulds Barbauld, being an account of the teachings of a governess, Mrs Mason, whose educational programme boils down to a daily regime of nasty surprises. Here again there are passages which use a symbolism very close to that of Blake’s Songs:

But the night will overtake us, we must make haste home -- Give me your hand, Mary, you tremble; surely I need not desire you to remember this story -- Be calm, my child, and remember that you must attend to trifles, do all the good you can the present day, nay

hour, if you would keep your conscience clear. This circumspection may not produce dazzling actions, nor will your silent virtue be supported by human applause; but your Father, who seeth in secret will reward you.\(^18\)

There is an irony here of which Wollstonecraft seems pitifully unaware. Mary and her sister Caroline have been entrusted to Mrs Mason by a bereaved father 'who found them very troublesome at home': they have lost their real parents and must make do instead with a 'Father' who operates in darkness, secrecy and silence like some kind of sinister police. Blake's 'The Little Boy Lost' and 'The Little Boy Found', in *Innocence*, seem to have been written as an antidote to passages such as these, exposing the pernicious father / Father duality, using Wollstonecraft's own genre of the cautionary tale to attack abstraction.

Wollstonecraft and Barbauld are writers who perceive the critical malleability of the growing child and, with good intentions, repressively exploit it. Blake is equally conscious of the awesome power of education and can seem to be equally earnest in effecting his own very different ends: instilling, above all, the imaginative self-determinism that circumvents imposed moral and religious dogmas. It is typical of Blake to commandeer the other writer's genre, perfect it, and then turn it against them. But here, as elsewhere in the *Songs*, Blake shows an aggressive and opportunistic spirit which sets up alarming parallels between his own artistic activity and the ills which he detects in the world around him.\(^19\)

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A striking commentary on Blake's *Songs* can be extracted from *The Book of Thel*, which, although dated 1789 on the title page, was probably completed in 1791, and hence coincides roughly with the shift of Blake's attention from *Innocence* to *Experience*.\(^20\) The central figure of this poem resembles a female version of the narcissistic solitaries of the

\(^{18}\) Mary Wollstonecraft, *Original Stories from Real Life; with Conversations, Calculated to Regulate the Affections, and Form the Mind to Truth and Goodness* (London, 1791), p. 94.

\(^{19}\) For more on the *Songs* as both reacting against and imitating didactic children's literature see Alan Richardson, 'The Politics of Childhood: Wordsworth, Blake, and Catechistic Method', *ELH*, 56 (1989), 853--68.

\(^{20}\) See Erdman's bibliographical notes, E790.
Poetical Sketches. At the start of the poem she is seen wandering by a river called 'Adona' -- a feminized Adonis -- suggesting that she might be a priestess at the altar of her own beauty (1.4; E3). She is also like the 'pale Virgin' of 'Ah! Sun-flower' (E25):

The daughters of Mne Seraphim led round their sunny flocks.
All but the youngest; she in paleness sought the secret air.

This 'paleness' is syntactically bivalent. It might refer to Thel's complexion, or alternatively to the morning mist that she is delving into: so that she is a paleness within a paleness, a 'pale Virgin shrouded in snow' (which again suggests the infolding imagery of the Sketches). Having found her place by the river, she goes into a 'gentle lamentation' which is really a rhapsodic sequence of competing self-definitions:

Ah! Thel is like a watry bow. and like a parting cloud.
Like a reflection in a glass. like shadows in the water.
Like dreams of infants. like a smile upon an infants face,
Like the doves voice, like transient day, like music in the air;

This is beautiful, but we know from the Sketches that reflections can be wells of despondency; from Tiriel that infant dreams can be pathological; and from the Notebook 'Cradle Song' that infant smiles can cause distress.

Thel concludes her opening speech thus:

Ah! gentle may I lay me down, and gentle rest my head.
And gentle sleep the sleep of death. and gentle hear the voice
Of him that walketh in the garden in the evening time.

The word is 'gentle', not 'gently'. Thel is not thinking of action (and adverbs) at all, but simply saying, 'I am gentle; I am gentle'. The repetitions caress one another. Thel passes her time in conventual quietness and reflection, and he 'that walketh in the garden' is perhaps to be taken as God, but in the context of all the foregoing this deity seems likely to be nothing more than a 'lost Travellers Dream' by the river.

Subsequently, Thel speaks to a Lily, whose positive role in life she

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21 There is a more solid link with Tiriel: Thel is 'the mistress of the vales of Har' (2.1; E4). Cf. 3.18 (E5), 6.22 (E6).

22 Cf. Genesis 3. 8: 'And they heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day.'
BLAKE 60

seems to envy:

Thel answerd. O thou little virgin of the peaceful valley,
Giving to those that cannot crave, the voiceless, the o'ertired.
Thy breath doth nourish the innocent lamb, he smells thy milky
garments,
He crops thy flowers, while thou sittest smiling in his face,
Wiping his mild and meekin mouth from all contagious taints.

(2.3; E4)

Here Thel sounds partly like the insular and ineffectual Marie Antoinette
-- 'I vanish from my pearly throne' (2.12; E4) -- dreaming of having a
real job, as a shepherdess. On the other hand, the Lily, despite being
a virgin (and this is not just Thel's assumption: compare 1.22; E4),
sounds sexually generous: her complaisance towards the lamb could be
interpreted, especially with reference to later Blake, as a sinless
perpetual ravishment, making her the 'soul of sweet delight' that 'can
never be defil'd' (The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, 9.53; E37). The
Lily's virginity, that is, could be taken as spiritual rather than
physical. This accords with the familiar reading of the poem in which
Thel, unlike the Lily, ends up retreating fearfully from life in general
and sex in particular.21

If we see Thel as resembling a child of Innocence or Little Girl
Lost, then it makes sense that she should find herself confronted by
pious educationalists, and, sure enough, when she makes the logical move
from self-admiration to the crippling fear of mortality, she meets a sort
of male Barbauld (or Mrs Mason) in the Cloud:

Then if thou art the food of worms. O virgin of the skies,
How great thy use. how great thy blessing; every thing that lives,
Lives not alone, nor for itself: fear not and I will call
The weak worm from its lowly bed, and thou shalt hear its voice.

(3.25; E5)

Thel views this Worm with astonishment at its fragility and nakedness,
but it is quickly embraced and protected, cherished 'with mothers smiles'
(4.6; E5), like the child of the Innocence 'Cradle Song', by a Clod of
Clay. For this, the Clod is rewarded, and cherished in her turn, by 'he
that loves the lowly' (5.1; E5), another inexplicit reference to God, or
Christ.

But how this is sweet maid, I know not, and I cannot know,

21 See, for example, Peter F. Fisher, The Valley of Vision: Blake as
Prophet and Revolutionary, ed. Northrop Frye (Toronto, 1961), p. 206, and
I ponder, and I cannot ponder; yet I live and love. (5.5; E6)

Thel herself is trying to ponder, and not getting very far: she is the 'pensive queen' (3.29; E5). In the Songs, a considerable stress is laid on pondering, or thinking, and a failure to think is worrying. For example, the speaker of 'The Fly' concludes,

If thought is life
And strength & breath:
And the want
Of thought is death;

Then am I
A happy fly,
If I live,
Or if I die.

That is, the speaker thinks that he will be happy, when dead, because he will be thoughtless. 'The self-defeating nature of his ambiguous logic,' as Andrew Lincoln notes, 'suggests unconscious irony'. Dead 'happiness' requires a complete evacuation of what we generally understand by that word, and, moreover, it casts a shadow on the living happiness, where 'thought' seems simply to be something like electrical noise or a fly-like buzz -- something, in any case, which can be switched off just like that. We might be put on our guard, likewise, by the retirement to the 'thoughtless nest' in 'Night' (E14), and perhaps the pure, thoughtless mirth of 'Laughing Song' (what are they laughing about?) is a little frightening as well as charming.²⁵

So there is a suggestion that Thel's interlocutors, despite projecting themselves as moral teachers (not adherents of a 'moral code' perhaps, but still quite clear about what they believe to be right and wrong forms of conduct), are somewhat mindless, seduced by the platitudes of Innocence, believing in a deity who loiters in the background and does not state his name. Perhaps we should not be surprised, therefore, to find the world of the Worm, the Cloud, and the Clod evoked in the 'Rapturous delusive trance' of Enitharmon in The Four Zoas:


²⁵ Cf. Norma A. Greco's reading of this poem as 'a provocative and important comment on the limitations of innocence and artistic creation in a fallen world' ('Blake's "Laughing Song": A Reading', Concerning Poetry, 19 [1986], pp. 67--72 [69]).
Arise you little glancing wings & sing your infant joy
Arise & drink your bliss
For every thing that lives is holy for the source of life
Descends to be a weeping babe
For the Earthworm renews the moisture of the sandy plain

And even if we set this belated danger-sign aside, it seems somewhat
over-confident and irresponsible of the discontinuously pondering Clod
to say to Thel, 'fear nothing', as she invites her to visit her
subterranean domain (5.17; E6).

The last plate of the poem, which was executed later than the rest,
opens with a resounding Urizenic blast: 'The eternal gates terrific
porter lifted the northern bar' (6.1; E6). And hereafter everything
goes wrong for Thel. She undergoes a revelation of universal pain,

Of every heart on earth infixes deep its restless twists:

... where the fibrous roots
and then has to confront her own grave, which voices a litany of dismal
complaints, starting with a highly apposite 'Why cannot the Ear be closed
to its own destruction?' (6.11; E6). Thel would have done well, it
seems, to have closed her ear to the Clod. For it is not so much that
she lacks the courage to descend into the underworld of Experience, but
rather that she has been completely misled as to what it might be like.
The Clod's affection for the Worm now seems to have been a charade; the
Clod's advice, a trick. This world under the flowery surface, with all
its unassuaged grievances, has absolutely nothing to do with 'him that
walketh in the garden' and 'smiles on all' and 'loves the lowly' (1.14,
1.19, 5.1; E3, E4, E5).

So the familiar view, as expressed by Harold Bloom, for example,
that 'Thel's pathetic fate is the consequence of her weakness in will,
and [that] her failure to carry her pastoral innocence into the world of
experience is a failure of desire', is unfair. She is hardly like the
protagonists of 'The Angel' or 'My Pretty Rose Tree', in Experience, who

26 Compare the opening of 'To Winter' (E410).

27 Cf. K. D. Everest's essay 'Thel's Dilemma', in which the Lily,
the Cloud and the Clod are read as the indoctrinating agents of socio-
sexual repression (Essays in Criticism, 37 [1987], 193--208).

28 Harold Bloom, commentary to The Complete Poetry and Prose of
p. 895.
are offered, and sadly refuse, perfectly transparent, unsinister overtures of love. Rather, Thel is the victim of a cruel farce. Up to the last plate of the poem she seemed to be learning, opening up, becoming less self-centred. In fact, it seems very likely that Blake, functioning as it were in the Innocence mode, at one stage planned a happy ending, which might have come at the end of plate 5. But then, just as Blake can seem, in Experience, to have turned against his own creation of Innocence, and to be wrecking his own appealing visions, so here he seems to have decided that Thel's world was a saccharine joke, and, consequently, he tore it to pieces. Blake could behave like a bully or vandal within his own texts.

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29 For a complementary reading of Thel, in which 'systems limited to natural signs, even in their mildest guises [like the Cloud and the Clod], provide no way to raise semiosis or consciousness above their systemic limitations', see Robert N. Essick, William Blake and the Language of Adam (Oxford, 1989), pp. 125--26.
CHAPTER 3
Images of Authorship and Experiments with Ethics in
the Shorter Prophetic Books

I concluded, with regard to the 1788 tractates, that Blake seemed to
expound an artistic predestinarianism, whereby his belief in the goodness
of the forces underlying Creation, and thus of his supposedly innate
‘propsensities’ or ‘principles’, gave him confidence in his statements,
as though they were eruptions of the truth which he merely channeled onto
the page. In The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (1790--93) this position
is revisited in a more sophisticated and self-consciously provocative
spirit.

In the Marriage, Blake offers an elaborate portrait of himself as
author, visionary and controversialist. He presents himself as licenced
to say whatever he likes, to whomever he chooses to accost, notoriously
demanding of Isaiah and Ezekiel ‘how they dared so roundly to assert.
that God spake to them’ (pl. 12; E38). This is a question which Blake
himself clearly invites. And thus, as in An Island in the Moon -- and
the Marriage is in part a reversion to the earlier work’s burlesque --
Blake is now experimenting with hostile views of his posture as poet and
prophet, glorying, as it transpires, in his ability to defend himself.

Isaiah replies, ‘my senses discover’d the infinite in every thing,
. . . I cared not for consequences but wrote.’ Isaiah, a role-model that
Blake, paradoxically, has created in his own image, subscribes to Blake’s
attitude: if we do not ‘reason and compare’, or censor, our original
promptings, then what we have to say will be sound. The right approach,
Blake implies, is to express ‘principles’ and let ‘opinions’ take care
of themselves: ‘Enough! or Too much’, it does not matter (10.70; E38).
We might think that this is foolish, especially when we read such
excessive ‘Proverbs of Hell’ as ‘Sooner murder an infant in its cradle
than nurse unacted desires’ (10.67; E38). But as a metaphor this is
reasonable: to nurse unacted desires is, as Blake constantly maintains,
to murder an infant, or a post-Swedenborgian ‘inner man’, in favour of
some alternative, spectral, unfulfilled being. Moreover, Blake’s excess
here is deliberate, and he goes on to explain the sense of this in his
theory of ‘the Prolific’ and ‘the Devouring’ (pl. 16; E40), an oscillat-
ing system in which the good of Creation is understood to inhere, and of which he, as a poet, is only called upon to represent the ‘Prolific’ component. That is to say, Blake relies upon the continued existence of the same conservative, rationalist and repressive element in human society that he devotes so much energy to attacking. Just as Blake is given self-confidence by ‘divine’ direction — the God present in himself — so he is further reassured by the principle that any excess in his pronouncements will be absorbed in a larger process and will simply augment the global reserves of vital energy.

As society stands, in the Marriage, the equilibrium is loaded disproportionately in favour of the ‘Devouring’. The ‘perilous path’ of ‘The Argument’, which might be described as the fulcrum of the healthy oscillation of contraries towards which Blake aspires, has been usurped by repressive political and religious institutions (2.3; E33). Consequently, it is desirable that the ‘Prolific’ should assert itself with considerable vigour: an idea which could partly explain and excuse the violence of many of the Songs of Experience, where Blake may be seen as composing packages of ‘excessive’ thought which he knows will be met and partly deflated by those repressive aspects of society that are themselves superabundant.

The fact that Blake has licensed himself to be excessive means that we must hesitate before taking him literally. This has interesting consequences for his status as a visionary. The visions in the Marriage are described as ‘memorable fancies’, suggesting that they are jokes at Swedenborg’s expense.1 Furthermore, as we have seen in the case of Blake’s Isaiah, they are imaginative constructs in which Blake tests out his convictions. Had Blake been asked whether, outside his texts, he really held conversations with Old Testament prophets, he might have found it impossible to deny it, because his whole artistic achievement and, in so far as we can tell, his whole personality made use of an ideological refusal to distinguish between imagination and reality. And yet, even when his art expresses itself as ‘vision’, it is meticulously constructed, following an intellectual programme: and we have only to

glance at the Notebook to see that Blake, in preparing his manuscripts, actually reasoned and compared a good deal.

The 'visions' in the *Marriage* are vehicles for intellectual games in which Blake turns received ideas on their heads and contrives to thrust himself into prominence, delighted with the enjoyments of his own genius: thus Blake, as a character within his text, gets the better of the Angel who had proposed to guide him through the infernal regions, and becomes a Dante who leads his Virgil instead of being led. The *Songs of Experience* may encourage readers to think that they should organize their own destinies instead of accepting other people's laws, and, in the *Marriage*, Blake can be seen as flaunting his intention to twist reality and literature to suit himself. In doing this, Blake runs the risk of alienating his audience, and yet the *Marriage* is widely regarded as one of his most approachable works. What saves it is the fact that Blake's aggressive and egoistic presence within the text can easily be read as being itself a product of deliberate excess, so that what we are offered is less a self-portrait than a self-caricature; and this encourages the reader to be rebellious or eccentric in his or her turn. The *Marriage* is a celebration of Blake's imagination that seems meant to inspire by example, and whose frequent facetiousness makes the more grandiose aspects of Blake's 'Poetic Genius' seem so much humbug. Thus Samuel Palmer, in one of the most vivid and accurate pieces of Blake criticism ever written:

> The ever fluctuating colour the spectral pigmies, rolling, flying, leaping among the letters; the ripe bloom Of quiet corners -- the living light & bursts of flame, the Spires & Tongues of fire vibrating with the full prism, made the pages seem to move and quiver within its boundaries; and you lay the book down tenderly, as if you had been handling something which was alive.

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2 Cf. Erdman's observation that Blake 'employed every [available] . . . means to keep his poems in motion' (E789). Such are the variations between individual copies that an interpretation that works for one example of an illuminated work may not work for another, and these variations were entirely of Blake's choosing, not imposed by customers (see Joseph Viscomi, 'The Myth of Commissioned Illuminated Books: George Romney, Isaac D'Israeli and 'ONE HUNDRED AND SIXTY designs . . . of Blake's', *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly*, 23 [1989--90], 48--74). This contributes to the difficulty of identifying Blake with specific attitudes or policies: a situation which, on the evidence of the *Marriage*, Blake would have welcomed.

An individual like Palmer who went away and produced works of comparable imaginative power was using the *Marriage* in the spirit in which it was written.

The 'Song of Liberty' which occupies the last three plates of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is exuberant and exhilarating. It contains fourteen exclamation marks, and draws to a close with enlarged characters and ideograms of prancing horses. Each of the twenty clauses into which it is divided recounts or enjoins some lively process, and the jagged sequence of these clauses suggests reckless spontaneity:

5. Cast thy keys O Rome into the deep down falling, even to eternity down falling,
6. And weep!

(pl. 25; E44)

In keeping with the 'Prolific' doctrine of the preceding pages, Blake, in this last section of the *Marriage*, appears to give unqualified support to the revolutionary activity which, although a 'new born terror' (pl. 25, no. 7; E44), is seen as a manifestation of Christ, 'the son of fire in his eastern cloud' (pl. 27, no. 19; E45), bringing a *dies irae* in which priests and kings will be consumed. And yet, this is scarcely the equivalent of a speech by Paine or Washington. Blake would not have declared, 'France rend down thy dungeon' (pl. 25, no. 3; E44), we may reasonably suppose, if she had not already done so, a few years before, in the storming of the Bastille. For except in the vaguest terms -- 'O citizen of London. enlarge thy countenance' (pl. 26, no. 12; E44) -- Blake offers no vision of social transformations which he desires to see in the future. Moreover, by the end of the 'Song of Liberty', Blake is no longer discussing political revolution at all, but has drifted onto general problems of public morality -- problems which he addresses in ways that the pioneers of American and French democracy, of whom large numbers were respectively puritan and Catholic, would not be likely to support: 'Let the Priests of the Raven of dawn, no longer in deadly black, with hoarse note curse the sons of joy. . . . Nor pale religious letchery call that virginity, that wishes but acts not!' (pl. 27; E45).

Blake does not bring his imagination to the service of politics. Rather,

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politics, like literature, like philosophy, is subsumed by the idiosyncratic preoccupations which seem to have been present in his earliest writing. That is not to say that Blake is apolitical. Far from it. He offers a strong challenge to accepted values and policies precisely because he is uncompromisingly himself. He presents us with the embodiment of a particular ideal of human life, through his disclosures of himself as creative individual, and leaves us with the task of imagining social forms that could happily accommodate such a life.

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The Marriage of Heaven and Hell is extremely original in terms of its form. It partly resembles some of Swedenborg’s tracts, but they were not explicitly literary. The idea that such an unruly and composite text could be a finished work of art was adventurous. The French Revolution (dated 1791) represents a reversion to something more like established genre, and, accordingly, it betrays forceful literary influences: that of Milton, which has been noticed, and that of Shakespeare, which has gone largely unobserved. Also, Blake is drawn back towards the mode of those of his own works which had already owed most to the dominant strain of literary tradition: Tiriel and even Poetical Sketches. Thus, the description of the French King in the first lines of the poem, with its images of cold, strength, sceptre and mountains, seems little more than a hanging of the phrases of ‘To Winter’ upon a human frame, and this king follows King Tiriel closely in misperceiving the landscape in his own blighted image, so that he sees ‘old mountains’ (which a few lines before were ‘mild’ and ‘flourishing’) ‘like aged men, fading away’ (1. 9; E286). The Governor of the Bastille, too, resembles Tiriel in his wanderings ‘from court to court’ (1. 23; E287): he appears as a prisoner in his own fortress, ‘Tugging his iron manacles’ (1. 25; E287). Doubtless these are ‘mind-forged’ manacles, but they give the Governor a tragic status comparable to that of his victims. Like Tiriel again, the Governor is magnificent as well as monstrous: ‘he stalk’d like a lion from tower /

Jonathan Bate’s Shakespeare and the English Romantic Imagination (Oxford, 1986) contains the most important discussion to date of Shakespeare’s presence in Blake’s work (pp. 117--56), but Bate does not aspire to comprehensiveness, and makes no reference to The French Revolution.
To tower' (1. 21; E287). The tyrant caged within his own walls has a Shakespearian paradigm in Macbeth, and the plausibility of this influence is enhanced by other passages.

In ‘A Song of Liberty’, the king and his councillors fall, like Milton’s apostate angels, into a fiery underworld:

16. Falling, rushing, ruining! buried in the ruins, on Urthona’s dens.
17. All night beneath the ruins, then their sullen flames faded emerge round the gloomy king,
   (The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, pl. 26; E44)

In The French Revolution, king and councillors enact what is evidently an emulation, not a parody, of Milton’s ‘Pandaemonium’. Blake is famously sympathetic towards the devils of Paradise Lost, and, accordingly, the ‘Nobles of France’ are truly noble, no merely decadent oligarchy. The King, the Governor, and the Duke of Burgundy are all described as ‘strong’, contrary to the familiar notion of the ancien régime as idle and effeminate (11. 3, 23, 168; E286, E287, E293). Erdman reads Blake’s Duke of Burgundy as a blood-thirsty fiend. Certainly, the vinous imagery associated with this figure implies blood, but it is also conspicuously attractive, suggesting that what we see is not so much a group of evil men besieged in their bunker, as a splendid twilight of the gods: ‘his words fall like purple autumn on the sheaves’ (1.88; E290).

Also, few revolutionaries would have expected Louis XVI to have been troubled by the ‘cries of women and babes’, nor subject to ‘tempests of doubt’ (11. 113--14; E291). The Blake who was later to include particularly noble-looking portraits of Charlemagne, the Black Prince and Henry V in one of his sketchbooks had a certain respect for kings, even a romantic ideal of kingship, and a general tendency in The French Revolution is for the tyrants and their victims to be drawn together as equal repositories of human interest: the wasting prisoners, too, are ‘strong’ (1. 30; E287); both Burgundy and ‘the man in the iron mask’ are

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7 This is the recently rediscovered ‘larger Blake-Varley sketchbook’, in which even Mary Queen of Scots seems to be sympathetically depicted. The drawings are reproduced in Christie, Manson, and Woods, Ltd., The Larger Blake-Varley Sketchbook, catalogue for the auction on 21 March 1989 (London, 1989), pp. 24, 37, 45--46.
leonine (11. 32, 107; E287, E290). There is no absolute distinction between heroes and villains in Blake's writing, for both are aspects of the 'Eternal Man': Urizen is a decayed form of Orc, and should be pitied.

But priests, because they restrain desire, hindering others, to use Blake's word from the Lavater annotations, are a different matter. Thus, the Archbishop of Paris appears in a 'rushing of scales' (1. 127; E291). The inspiration for this figure includes not merely the serpent but also the supposedly serpent-stung: Old Hamlet. The Archbishop, 'Sleeping at midnight in my golden tower' (1. 129, E292; compare Hamlet, I. 5. 35, and 59), woke to feel 'a cold hand passed over my limbs' (1. 130; compare I. 5. 70--73). What he sees (now like Young Hamlet) is a portentous ghostly figure come, as it emerges, to tell him that much is rotten in the state of France. Rottenness for the Archbishop is the sort of charnel house equality which Hamlet remarks on at the graveside, a mingling of princely, clerical and commoners' remains. And the spectre of Old Hamlet returns to haunt Blake again, twenty lines later, when the ghost of Henri IV rises in support of the republican cause (an apparition which may also owe something to the 'glazing' lion of Julius Caesar, I. 3. 21):

  .  .  . a dark shadowy man
  Of King Henry the Fourth walks before him in fires, the captains
  like men bound in chains
  Stood still as he pass'd, .  .  .

(1. 164; E293)

The Shakespearian influence is by and large better assimilated in The French Revolution than it was in the similarly structured 'King Edward the Third', where there were many over-polished images which seemed to have less to do with the presentation of character than with Blake's desire to sound Shakespearian. In The French Revolution, Blake leaves behind what for him were perhaps the alien intricacies and opportunities of blank verse, in favour of the seven-stress line and a grandiose monotony which seems much more his natural voice. What remains of his rapport with Shakespeare is now more an ethical than a stylistic influence: above all in his half-sympathetic portrayal of anti-heroes, such that the King, the Governor and Burgundy are not condemned, but shown languishing titanically under a fate that seems more heavy than anything for which they could individually be responsible; which seems, in fact, to come from outside the human sphere. The King's fatal decree,
that he will only yield to the republicans if the Bastille gets up and moves of its own accord, suggests, as Erdman says, 'Macduff's Birnam Wood maneuver', and the King resembles Macbeth (and Hamlet) in that he almost suicidally precipitates his doom in a grand gesture, making it a natural disaster of extraordinary opulence:

He ended; the wind of contention arose and the clouds cast their shadows, the Princes
Like the mountains of France, whose aged trees utter an awful voice, and their branches
Are shatter'd, till gradual a murmur is heard descending into the valley,
Like a voice in the vineyards of Burgundy, when grapes are shaken on grass;
Like the low voice of the labouring man, instead of the shout of joy;
And the palace appear'd like a cloud driven abroad; blood ran down the ancient pillars,
Thro' the cloud a deep thunder, the Duke of Burgundy, delivers the King's command.

(1. 241; E297)

The Miltonic down-falling which animates these lines seems to be the key trajectory of this period of Blake's creative activity. Miltonic too are the great number of images of combustion, gloom and heaviness in The French Revolution, where the word 'mountains' occurs fourteen times, 'fire(s)' twenty times, and 'cloud(s)' no less than thirty-two times. But the poem is only occasionally indigestible, thanks to a visionary optimism that goes far beyond the factional attitudes which gave rise to the Terror. For, in Blake's conception of the revolutionary struggle, the status quo is not an immutable evil that must be destroyed in favour of another party. Rather, the oppressed and their oppressors are two severed, suffering halves which must be brought together in repentance and reconciliation. Blake's egalitarianism, in effect, runs to a recognition of the equal rights and equal humanity even of those who presently defy the egalitarian ideal.

Having established this, it is quite possible, and appropriate, to find common ground between Blake and another commentator on the French Revolution who is generally taken to be his opposite: Edmund Burke. Consider this, from the Reflections on the Revolution in France, as a commentary on Blake's poem:

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8 Prophet Against Empire, p. 171.

9 The occurrences in Paradise Lost are as follows: 'mountain(s)', 21; 'fire(s)', 68; 'cloud(s)', 21.
... the ordinary actors and instruments in great public evils are kings, priests, magistrates, senates, parliaments, national assemblies, judges and captains. You would not cure the evil by resolving, that there should be no more monarchs, nor ministers of state, nor of the gospel; no interpreters of law; no general officers; no public councils. You might change the names. The things in some shape must remain. A certain quantum of power must always exist in the community, in some hands, and under some appellation. Wise men will apply their remedies to vices, not to names; to the causes of evil which are permanent, not to the occasional organs by which they act, and the transitory modes in which they appear.  

Burke's position, here, resembles Blake's in so far as Blake does not treat historical individuals as uniquely responsible for evil, but rather as temporary representatives of enduring human qualities: qualities which are just as much the concern of Blake's Songs as of his ostensibly historical poems. Burke believes in permanent human institutions, or their differently named equivalents, which is somewhat different, but in both writers, on the surface at least, there is a similar reluctance to discover scapegoats. For Blake completely to have demonized the King or Burgundy, in The French Revolution, would not have been constructive, and the sense we have of Blake, from the Songs particularly, is of a thinker who would anyway be distrustful of his condemning impulses.

According to Erdman, 'Burke in his Reflections had, in Paine's interpretation, expressed ... mistaken pity for the plumage of a dying order, and Burke is never far from Blake's mind when he thinks of negative Pity as a reactionary social force.' Some of the arguments adduced by Erdman for thinking that Blake took this line are convincing, but the material that he uses most heavily actually comes from Blake's deletions. The key text here is not The French Revolution itself, but a Notebook poem of slightly later date ('some time after Oct 25 1792' [E861]) which can be seen as an offshoot from it. This untitled work concerns the activities of Lafayette, who attempted to keep the monarchy going in France and generally to moderate various aspects of the

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11 For a discussion of a 'Burkean sensibility' sometimes detectable in Blake, despite these authors' extreme ideological differences, see V. A. De Luca, 'Blake and Burke in Astonishment!', Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly, 23 (1989-90), 100-04 (103).

12 Prophet Against Empire, p. 184.
revolutionary process -- an attempt which eventually led to imprisonment and ruin. ‘As Blake and other Jacobins saw it,’ writes Erdman, ‘La Fayette had betrayed equality and the wheaten loaf, and the happy morrow of a republic.’ Thus, Blake starts out by writing the following on page 99 of the Notebook:

Fayette Fayette thourt bought & sold
For well I see thy tears
Of Pity are exchange for those
Of selfish slavish fears

But this and two other stanzas, the first of which describes ‘Fayette’ as accessory to a tyrannic King Louis, and the second as seduced by a pestilential Queen, can be seen to have been vigorously crossed out in the manuscript.

After this, Blake made a new start on page 98 of the Notebook, ‘abandoning everything on p 99 that he did not repeat here’ (E862). Of the new material, two passages are again deleted: the first describing Lafayette attended by ‘captains false’, the second asking,

Who will exchange his own hearts blood
For the drops of a harlots eye

If we think of these last lines alongside ‘London’ their moral overtones become complex -- Blake is not normally a despiser of ‘harlots’ -- but clearly thus far Blake’s tendency has been to suggest that Lafayette was a corrupted sycophant, susceptible to cheap sexual appeals, and an instrument of violent oppression. However, the poem that survived all the deletions in the Notebook reads in its entirety as follows:

Who will exchange his own fire side
For the stone of anothers door
Who will exchange his wheaten loaf
For the links of a dungeon floor

Fayette beheld the King & Queen
In curses & iron bound
But mute Fayette wept tear for tear
And guarded them around

O who would smile on the wintry seas
& Pity the stormy roar
Or who will exchange his new born child
For the dog at the wintry door

13 Prophet Against Empire, p. 184.

If we forget the deletions (or remember that they are deletions) it will not be difficult to read this as making a hero of Lafayette. It sounds as though he has made great sacrifices, and his attitude to the King and Queen is purely protective: he seems to have nothing to gain from their favour. In fact this Lafayette seems to emanate from the part of Blake's brain that produced the lion in 'Night', whose eyes flow in response to the cries of others, and whose final vocation is to 'guard oe'r the fold' (E14).

In other words, Blake's poem seems to have drifted through revision from the state of Experience towards the state of Innocence. The 'negative Pity' that Erdman says that Blake deplores both in Lafayette and in Burke can be seen to be shading into the pity of the Innocence 'Holy Thursday': 'Then cherish pity, lest you drive an angel from your door' (E13). If we take the whole world of Innocence as a sham, then it might be that the last version of the Lafayette poem is just meant to dramatize a bad state of sentimental weakness; but I have suggested that Blake encourages us to think that he may be going too far in the opposite direction in Experience, giving us a version of himself as would-be destructive monster. So Innocence might be a complex of just aspirations, and Lafayette might not simply be a historical name that can be savaged in the literary equivalent of a Gillray cartoon. This will be worth bearing in mind when we come, with Milton and Jerusalem, to examine Blake's handling of his own traumatic immersion in a crisis of contemporary history.

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The subject of imprisonment, affectingly raised in the case of the Bastille inmates of The French Revolution, but detectable from the start of Blake's career -- as in the self-inflicted, mind-forged imprisonment

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15 The idea of exchanging a new born child for a homeless dog perhaps seems outrageous, but no more so than 'Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires', which, if we do not take it quite literally, seems to carry a typically Blakean message. And compare The Four Zoas, 36.3: 'It is an easy thing . . . / To hear the dog howl at the wintry door, the ox in the slaughter house moan' (E325).
of the speaker of the 'Mad Song'\textsuperscript{16} -- was obviously of great importance to Blake. It was also a theme characteristic of his radical milieu, with its anti-slavery agitation and tentative prison reforms, and it gained literary prominence in the genre of the Gothic novel. In Blake's America we find a state of imprisonment that is at least as dark and disturbing as anything in Anne Radcliffe or 'Monk' Lewis, and a prisoner who is as violent as his captors. Here the instinctual is still beyond reproach, 'the soul of sweet delight can never be defil'd' (8.14; E54), and the liberation of Orc is achieved by rape, where 'America' is a virgin territory of carnal topography:

\begin{quote}
On my American plains I feel the struggling afflictions
Endur'd by roots that writhe their arms into the nether deep:
(2.10; E52)
\end{quote}

The speaker here, 'the Daughter of Urthona', the jailor's daughter who brings Orc his food, is both the epic personification of a fettered nation and a more universal type of sleeping princess, awakened unromantically by Orc's 'fierce embrace' (1.10; E51), a sick rose attacked by the worm.

In The French Revolution, fiery military activity impacted against the would-be dampening Priesthood to produce an ebullition of very strong writing, in a passage that marks the brilliant climax of the elaborate system of natural imagery upon which that whole poem is suspended:

\begin{quote}
On pestilent vapours around him flow frequent spectres of religious men weeping
In winds driven out of the abbeys, their naked souls shiver in keen open air,
Driven out by the fiery cloud of Voltaire, and thund'rous rocks of Rousseau,
They dash like foam against the ridges of the army, uttering a faint feeble cry.
(1. 274; E298)
\end{quote}

Something similar happens in America, as a consequence of Orc's erotic momentum:

\begin{quote}
The doors of marriage are open, and Priests in rustling scales
Rush into reptile coverts, hiding from the fires of Orc,
That play around the golden roofs in wreathes of fierce desire,
Leaving the females naked and glowing with the lusts of youth
(15.19; E57)
\end{quote}

Orc, in these lines, is a ruthless conqueror, a Pyrrhus sacking Troy, an incendiary libertine who burns away his victims' clothes and roasts them

\textsuperscript{16} Here the whole world is a prison: 'Lo! to the vault / Of paved heaven, / With sorrow fraught / My notes are driven' (E415).
to a shine. In both passages, exuberant artistic and sexual expression (for the French Revolution imagery could be read as orgasmic) seem inextricably bound up with feelings of destructive animus and contempt. And in both cases these feelings find a convenient target in the morally repressive figures of the priests.

According to Brenda Webster, Blake, at the start of America, is explosively enacting infantile fantasies of incest, with Orc engendering a new version of himself upon his sister. In fact, the family connection can only be imposed retrospectively, from the genealogy of the later Prophetic Books. But comparable psychosexual elements become explicit in Blake's later works, particularly in the Notebook and Four Zoas, so it is very likely that such preoccupations underlie the aggressive and troubled nature both of the text of America and of the accompanying illustrations. Webster goes on to remark of the ensuing usually deleted lines, beginning 'The stern Bard ceas'd, asham'd of his own song' (2.18; E52), that they express 'anxiety and guilt aroused by the clear expression of such an aggressive sexual fantasy'. This seems both suggestive and reductive. The Bard's harp has a 'shining frame' and is 'dash'd . . .  in glittring fragments' (2.19--20), so its destruction is perhaps not such a good thing. On the copies where the controversial lines appear, their design is ornate and entirely in harmony with the remainder of the plate, which is not what one would expect if this were really Blake's impulsive subversion of his own manifesto.

Later in the poem we read,

Hid in his caves the Bard of Albion felt the enormous plagues.
And a cowl of flesh grew o'er his head & scales on his back & ribs;
(15.16; E57)

This Bard too recoils from the flames of Orc: he is a Tiresias-like figure, a seer of the old dispensation who anticipates, despite himself, the fall of his corrupt society. The earlier controversial lines make

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18 'It is conceivable that the "harp-shattering" lines (2.18--21) of the Preludium were composed as late as 1795, expressing despair in the Prophecy -- momentarily, for Blake removed these lines from all but two of the copies he printed' (Erman's notes, E802). The plate is reproduced with lines 18--21 intact on B121, where it will be seen that the style of lettering, complete with florid curlicues, is exactly the same throughout.
BLAKE

sense if we look upon the whole ‘Preludium’ as a ‘prophetic’ vision which is more precisely **prognostic** and which takes place in the mind of this reactionary alter-ego, a figure linked to Blake both as narrator and by parallel with the visionary commencement of **Europe**: a Blake-like figure who stands for the victims of the violent change that Blake, elsewhere, ostensibly supports. Just as in The French Revolution, where the tyrants were strangely equivalent to their antagonists, the historical process in **America** turns in on itself, and Orc is as much a horror as a hero.

Elsewhere in **America**, as Blake published it, there is little sympathy for Orc’s opponents. But, as is often the case, Blake seems to have wavered in his allegiances during the process of composition. Thus, in the cancelled plate c, George III’s forces, just like the King’s army in The French Revolution, seem impressive:

> In glittring armour, swift as winds; intelligent as clouds; Four winged heralds mount the furious blasts & blow their trumps . . .
> Angels of cities and of parishes and villages and families, In armour as the nerves of wisdom, each his station holds.

(c.13, 18; E59)

The phrases ‘intelligent as clouds’ (altered from the marginally less strange ‘intelligent as flames’; E803), and ‘In armour as the nerves of wisdom’ are hard to understand, but they do seem to point to some inner resource in the forces of Empire, in addition to their material strength. Perhaps ‘intelligent’ is to be understood as ‘sensitive’ or ‘flexible’. In any case, these lines conflict with the despondent words of Albion’s Angel, in the finished poem, when he imaginatively if masochistically enters into the spirit of Orc’s ravages and says, ‘my punishing Demons terrified / Crouch howling before their caverns deep like skins dry’d in the wind’ (9.2; E54). Just as in the ‘Prologue to King John’, Blake in the cancelled plate seems to show susceptibility to a kind of patriotism. He continues thus:

> . . . so the Angels of Albion hung, a frowning shadow, like an aged King in arms of gold, Who wept over a den, in which his only son outstretched’d By rebels hands was slain; his white beard wav’d in the wild wind.

(c.24; E59)

This is not an attractive image of the King, any more than Tiriel was attractive. But, like Tiriel, this King, whom we must associate with George III, has a temporary tragic grandeur and seems not wholly to blame for his disasters. The scene described is suggestive of an apocalyptic
sunrise, but it also has echoes of Lear with the dead Cordelia, and of the
appalling fate of Ugolino in Dante's Inferno. More than this, the
King is here envisioned as having a just complaint against the 'rebels',
the forces of Orc's revolution.

So Webster is right in stressing the private and possibly irrational
workings of the poem at the expense of political direction. Oothoon, in
Visions of the Daughters of Albion, is able to promulgate notions of
ideal harmony, albeit fruitlessly, from a state of captivity, but in
America there is only unresolved struggling: Blake seems fixated upon the
violence of nascent revolution, the conflict against an authority still
strong enough to hold onto a tortured and tarnished dominion. Orc, after
all, is an enfant terrible, a rebellious child. Nevertheless, the poem
ends with the sense that an irresistible revolutionary and libidinal
force has been unleashed:

They slow advance to shut the five gates of their law-built heaven
Filled with blasting fancies and with mildews of despair
With fierce disease and lust, unable to stem the fires of Orc;
But the five gates were consum'd, & their bolts and hinges melted
And the fierce flames burnt round the heavens, & round the abodes
of men

(16.19; E58)

In fact, the American Revolution had long since been concluded when Blake
wrote this. But Blake is not interested in representing that triumph.
Rather he chooses to end the poem with a generalized threat.

The anarchism of the Marriage seemed fairly innocuous. In America,
where, according to Paley, 'Energy hovers between redemptive potentiality
and the will-to-power', it is harder for the reader to feel satisfied and
comfortable. For 'the imagery of Orc oscillates from the sublime to the
grotesque, reflecting his paradoxical potentiality of either redeeming
human energy or betraying it to the cycle of history'. And we might
wonder why Blake enters into the most lurid aspects of the revolutionary

19 Compare the popular painting and subsequent engraving of Lear and
Cordelia by Blake's friend James Barry (reproduced in William L. Pressly,
of Ugolino in his dungeon was one which Blake repeatedly depicted (see
S. Foster Damon, A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William
Blake, revised by Morris Eaves [Hanover, New Hampshire, 1988], p. 97),
notably in emblem 12 of The Gates of Paradise (B656), the first version
of which is dated 1793, like America.

20 Morton D. Paley, Energy and the Imagination: A Study of the
process with such imaginative vigour, and why he is not equally keen to come up with prospects of post-revolutionary democratic harmony.  

* * *

So despite his insight into real social and political problems, Blake cannot be looked to for the simple endorsement of any one faction in his historical moment. He is more a semi-detached recorder of the emotional energy of that moment, or a compulsive explorer of extreme emotional states who finds recent history a convenient battleground. The fact that he thinks of the King imprisoned in his iniquity as well as of the physically imprisoned victims of oppression shows the way in which historical contingencies are subordinated in his work to general ideas of the human condition, for all that Blake may say that 'To Generalize is to be an Idiot'. Really, Blake generalizes and particularizes at the same time, because he treats all male individuals -- women are usually a different matter -- as though they were aspects of himself. It is for this reason that Blake's direct representations or imitations of himself in his writing are particularly fruitful and interesting. In fact, they are at the heart of his enterprise.

One of the most remarkable occasions of this sort is found in the introductory poem that occurs in some copies of Europe (1794). This begins with a stanza which appears to be a statement of Blake's warmest attitude to sexuality. The 'cavern'd Man', we are to understand, could communicate with 'the eternal world' if only he would use the fifth 'window' of touch or sex which he has at his disposal (supplementary to the nostrils, ears, mouth, and eyes), 'but he will not; / For stolen joys are sweet, & bread eaten in secret pleasant' (iii.1, 4--6; E60). We are being warned here against the perverse enjoyments of self-denial, as perhaps personified by the narcissists of Poetical Sketches, the priggish Angel of The Marriage, or Theotormon in Visions of the Daughters of

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21 Compare P. H. Butter's recent commentary on The French Revolution in which he stresses Blake's preference for rewriting history and his ambiguous attitude to warfare: 'a choice has to be made that the visionary idealist is very unwilling to face. Is he to have faith that mental fight alone will in the end win against physical force? Or is he to resort to war, to the weapons which he regards as belonging especially to his opponents?' ('Blake's The French Revolution', Yearbook of English Studies, 19 (1989), 18--27 [25]).

22 Marginalia: Reynolds, Works, p. xcvi-xcvi (E641).
Albion. But the second stanza of the Europe introduction starts with a surprise: we have not been listening to Blake himself as libertarian moral teacher, but rather to 'a Fairy mocking as he sat on a streak'd Tulip' (iii.7). This is, as it were, a burlesque revisiting of the Innocence frontispiece with its baby on a cloud. Perhaps Blake would have wanted us to bear that precedent in mind when, in the later poem, he has his speaker knock down the Fairy 'as boys knock down a butterfly' (iii.9) -- an act which, in his drawing for emblem 7 of For Children: The Gates of Paradise, Blake had very recently treated as no joke at all (B652). It is certainly disconcerting to think of the Innocence piper grounding the cloud-borne baby in this manner, and then subjecting it to an interrogation:

Then tell me, what is the material world, and is it dead? 
He laughing answer'd, I will write a book on leaves of flowers, 
If you will feed me on love-thoughts, & give me now and then 
A cup of sparkling poetic fancies; so when I am tipsie, 
I'll sing to you to this soft lute; and shew you all alive 
The world, when every particle of dust breathes forth its joy.

I took him home in my warm bosom: as we went along 
Wild flowers I gather'd; & he shew'd me each eternal flower: 
He laugh'd aloud to see them whimper because they were pluck'd. 
They hover'd around me like a cloud of incense: when I came 
Into my parlour and sat down, and took my pen to write: 
My Fairy sat upon the table, and dictated EUROPE. 

(iii.13; E60)

This Fairy is somewhat Puck-like, endearing but a little cruel. He causes the speaker to pluck flowers out of the natural world into the world of Blakean imagination, and in so doing commits a kind of rape, like an infant Orc (consider, once again, 'The Sick Rose'). This is the opposite of Wordsworthian vision, 'that inward eye / Which is the bliss of solitude', where flowers are passively (and kindly) left to get on with their lives, and where the poet has to use his memory. And yet Blake himself comes in for some satirical treatment here: 'sparkling poetic fancies', for example, seems particularly sarcastic, given the sombre tone prevailing in the Prophetic Books at this time. In fact, this whole poem functions as a counterpoise of seeming frivolity vis-à-vis the very grim and portentous utterance which the Fairy is supposed to be dictating. One effect of this, in keeping with the Songs, might be to make us wonder whether Blake's didactic speeches are ever to

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23 'I wandered lonely as a cloud', 1. 21.
be taken as representative of a single central policy, rather than just as the work of a temporary, put-on voice; another is to suggest that his grimness might be uncalled-for; another is surely to make us more than ever dubious of the whole visionary process, which seems, here, to be spoofed.

On the other hand, this poem can be read as a celebration of everything that Blake is generally taken to be standing for: Blake, in being fanciful and unscientific, childlike and irresponsible, in dabbling irreverently with the natural world, and having a joke at the expense of the reader's possibly over-respectful expectations of him, is precisely illustrating his belief in the superiority of imagination and inner promptings over whatever the outer world expects. Only, it seems odd that this is coupled to material which functions so differently, where it is required that we should take the writer seriously as someone with urgent views about all that is wrong with the human race, and has been for the last 'Eighteen hundred years' (Europe, 9.2; E63).

Blake seems to have intended a similar introduction for 'The Everlasting Gospel':

I will tell you what Joseph of Arimathea
Said to my Fairy was not it very queer
Pliny and Trajan what are You here
Come listen to Joseph of Arimathea
Listen patient & when Joseph has done
Twill make a fool laugh & a Fairy Fun

([m].1; E518)

Who is the 'fool' here? The reader perhaps? Again the seriousness of Blake's whole undertaking seems to be undercut. But at the same time it is moving. When, later in the poem, we read that Jesus

acts with honest triumphant Pride
And this is the cause that Jesus died
He did not die with Christian Ease
Asking Pardon of his Enemies
If he had Caiphas would forgive
Sneaking submission can always live

([k].25; E519)

where the Gospels are amazingly resuscitated, not as religious texts but as a pressing, present scandal, we might wonder whether Blake's jokiness is not some kind of neurotic inversion of anger and disgust, or whether he is not putting on a demented persona polemically -- as the only state which fits the misguided world around him.

On other occasions Blake and his Fairy seem to be chiefly out to
amuse or to mollify. 'The Phoenix to Mrs Butts' (first published in 1984) is a pleasant example of this:

I saw a Bird rise from the East  
As a Bird rises from its Nest  
With sweetest Songs I ever heard  
It sang I am Mrs Butts's Bird  
And then I saw a Fairy gay  
That with this beauteous Bird would play  
From a golden cloud she came  
She calld the sweet Bird by its name  
She call'd it Phoenix! Heavens Dove!  
She call'd it all the names of Love  
But the Bird flew fast away  
Where little Children sport & play  
And they strok'd it with their hands  
All the cooe's it understands  
The Fairy to my bosom flew  
Weeping tears of morning dew  
I said: Thou foolish whimpering thing  
Is not that thy Fairy Ring  
Where those Children sport & play  
In Fairy fancies light & gay  
Seem a Child & be a Child  
And the Phoenix is beguild  
But if thou seem'st a Fairy thing  
Then it flies on glancing wing

Why should the Fairy need to be like a child? If Mrs Butts's bird represents her inclinations, then it sounds as though she was unhappy with Blake's vision-enhanced world, and preferred to celebrate the world of the physical senses. She and Blake seem to have enjoyed conversing with one another; perhaps she told him to pull himself together and come down to earth. The last lines of the poem echo a famous quatrain from 'Several Questions Answer'd':

He who binds to himself a joy  
Doth the winged life destroy  
But he who kisses the joy as it flies  
Lives in Eternity's sun rise

In the case of the Butts poem, the speaker seems to be in danger of missing 'Eternity's sun rise' through taking his visionary role too seriously. Unusually, the Fairy in this case is female, and the way in which she retreats to the speaker's bosom suggests that she is functioning as Blake's emanation. (It seems more than usually fair to say

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24 The attribution of this poem has been questioned, but for what seems conclusive support for Blake's authorship see Robert N. Essick, 'William Blake's "The Phoenix": A Problem in Attribution', Philological Quarterly, 67 (1988), 365--84.

‘Blake’s’ here because this poem is a personal message to a named individual.) In this sense, Blake’s admonitions to the Fairy are memoranda to himself.

In each of these cases except the last, but including the *Innocence* frontispiece, the spectacle of vision taking place, and the participation of ethereal and airborne beings, seems to be calculated to advance a particular sense of the poet, setting a tone, establishing a pose for the less obviously personal material that follows. In the Butts poem, it appears that a new picture of the inspirational process can be produced to fit external demands. What we think about the poet, as a person, is in all these cases an emphasized dimension of the reading experience. Even as Blake may seem to be arrogating the role of universal spokesman he wants to remind us that these are the words of a specific individual.

* * *

Blake’s foregrounding of a quirky sense of his own personality can seem a highly responsible device for avoiding too-easy acceptance by a credulous reader. On the other hand, it can seem vainglorious and megalomaniac: he can seem to be a person who has too little time for the voices of other individuals. Hence, in particular, Blake’s representation of women, for which, in recent years, he has often been adversely criticized. For although Blake presents himself as a commentator on the human condition as a whole, the active figures in his universe are all male, all one exemplary and almost uncharacterized male, appearing in a range of states distinguished by terms such as ‘Orc’ and ‘Urizen’. There is a comparable female range, from Rahab to Oothoon, but these are invariably defined by their relation to the male, and the imposition of the ‘Female Will’ seems to be the ultimate disaster. And yet, on closer examination, the situation is not quite so straightforward.

In *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, published in 1793, Oothoon has all the best speeches and is a much more advanced and admirable human

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27 See, for example, Anne K. Mellor, ‘Blake’s Portrayal of Women’, *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly*, 16 (1982--83), 148--55. (Also Webster, *Blake’s Prophetic Psychology*, passim.)
being than either of the poem’s principal males, Bromion and Theotormon. But, having been raped by one of these, it seems that her ambition is to sacrifice herself to the other, the jealous desponder, procuring him alternative consorts, loving and being silent:

Oothoon shall view his dear delight, nor e’er with jealous cloud
Come in the heaven of generous love; nor selfish blightings bring.
(7.28; E50)

This is obviously a sacrifice. Paradise consists in a renunciation of jealousy, specifically on the part of women. Their highest contribution appears to be one of self-denial and mortification: this is supported by the images, here and in America, of women prostrate, preyed upon by eagles, ‘generously’ standing in for Prometheus -- who might be Orc, who remains free to go about his fiery and rapacious business. Theotormon, it seems, will have no need to renounce jealousy; jealousy will not arise, as he will plainly disport in ‘lovely copulation’ with whomsoever he desires (7.26; E50).

Except that he will not do this, because Oothoon’s offer will not be accepted: the poem ends with Theotormon still sitting ‘Upon the margind ocean conversing with shadows dire’ (8.12; E51). Oothoon, on the other hand, before she held out the prospect of ‘lovely copulation’, had just been talking about the ‘happy copulation’ that she herself enjoys in simply looking about:

And does my Theotormon seek this hypocrite modesty!
This knowing, artful, secret, fearful, cautious, trembling hypocrite.
Then is Oothoon a whore indeed! and all the virgin joys
Of life are harlots: and Theotormon is a sick mans dream
And Oothoon is the crafty slave of selfish holiness.

But Oothoon is not so, a virgin fill’d with virgin fancies
Open to joy and to delight where ever beauty appears
If in the morning sun I find it; there my eyes are fix’d
In happy copulation; if in evening mild, wearied with work;
Sit on a bank and draw the pleasures of this free born joy.
(6.16; E49--50)

After this, the paradise that Oothoon proposes to concoct for Theotormon seems a simplification, adapted to his less advanced nature. Or, rather than being an ideal policy, it is a dramatic gesture of compensation, rhetorically excessive. Elsewhere in the poem, Oothoon’s psychological observations are dauntingly sharp: what she has to say about ‘The virgin / That pines for man’, for example, shows that she has completely mastered the essence of ‘Ah! Sun-flower’ and is able to translate that
vision into a practical system of psychopathology (7.3; E50). And she is completely apprised of Theotormon's weakness: to say that he is a 'sick man's dream' establishes a connection with the lost Traveller and with the sinister dreams of Tiriel and the Songs, but also, more simply, it is a way of saying that Theotormon is a sick man. Theotormon looks backwards, is possessed by memory; Oothoon is both a would-be doctor and a visionary, an artist even. Does she 'draw the pleasures' with a pencil? And does the absence of a subject pronoun in 'Sit on a bank and draw the pleasures of this free born joy' mean that she is advising the reader to do likewise?

But this is how the poem ends:

Thus every morning wails Oothoon, but Theotormon sits
Upon the margind ocean conversing with shadows dire.

The Daughters of Albion hear her woes, & eccho back her sighs.

The End

(8.11; E51)

It seems strange to say that Oothoon has been wailing. 'Woes' and 'sighs' have been amply counterbalanced both by her expressions of joy and by her tough-minded counselling. The narrator ends in a way that makes him almost comparable to Bromion and Theotormon, in so far as he has misinterpreted or underestimated his chief character. In fact, as the poem fizzes out, the lingering voice could really be said to be that of Theotormon himself, misinterpreting other people's emotions through the grey soup of his own. Many dynamic things have been said in the poem -- about, for example, the evils of slavery -- but the most revolutionary voice is finally abruptly dampened.

And yet Oothoon has even referred to herself as 'A solitary shadow wailing on the margin of non-entity' (7.15; E50); she herself still has to fight against despondency. This seems an inconsistency in the characterization, symptomatic of much that is unresolved or paradoxical in Blake's thinking on sexuality and gender. Thus, Ooothoon's final song, which ends 'Arise and drink your bliss, for every thing that lives is holy!' (8.10; E51) and which seems entirely positive and admirable, will reappear (just like the words of the Cloud and the Clod from Thel) as newly sinister and delusive in the voice of Enitharmon in The Four Zoas (34.79--80; E324). Enitharmon is something like Oothoon seen by
Theotormon: it is perhaps no accident that the first and the last of these names are close to being anagrams of one another. And likewise, for the Blake who fears the female will, Oothoon’s very rapture is a kind of wailing.

* * *
The subordinate status of women in much of Blake’s work and the lack of fine differentiation between the males both accord with Blake’s predestinarian sense of artistic election. Just as a great number of his drawn and painted figures have the poet’s own physiognomy, so his literary imagination is deeply egocentric. It is for this reason that the quadripartite project consisting of America, Europe, ‘Africa’, and ‘Asia’ ultimately founders. America and Europe justify their titles by the sporadic incorporation of facts and ideas from the American and French revolutions, but there is nothing African about ‘Africa’, and nothing Asian about ‘Asia’. Even the blackness of the African skin, paradoxically, is made symbolic and hence generalized:

Adam shudderd! Noah faded! black grew the sunny African  
When Rintrah gave Abstract Philosophy to Brama in the East:  
(The Song of Los, 3.10; E67)

We were warned about abstract philosophy and the closing of the senses in There is No Natural Religion, Tiriel, Thel, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, and Visions of the Daughters of Albion, but this same theme remains at the heart of the four ‘Continental’ poems, and is expressed in very familiar imagery, as here in ‘Africa’,

Thus the terrible race of Los & Enitharmon gave  
Laws & Religions to the sons of Har binding them more  
And more to Earth: closing and restraining:  
Till a Philosophy of Five Senses was complete  
Urizen wept & gave it into the hands of Newton & Locke  
(The Song of Los, 4.13; E68)

and in ‘Asia’,

Shall not the Counsellor throw his curb  
Of Poverty on the laborious? . . .  
And the privy admonishers of men  
Call for Fires in the City . . .

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28 Compare Nancy Moore Goslee, who criticizes Blake for moving away, in Visions of the Daughters of Albion, from the specific horrors of slavery to a universalized vision of mind-forged constraint, permitting the reader’s moral attention to wander: ‘At each level of inclusiveness . . . the primary evils become less vivid’ (‘Slavery and Sexual Character: Questioning the Master Trope in Blake’s Visions of the Daughters of Albion’, ELH, 57 [1990], 101--28 [124]).
To cut off the bread from the city,
That the remnant may learn to obey.

That the pride of the heart may Fail;
That the lust of the eyes may be quench'd:
That the delicate ear in its infancy
May be dull'd; and the nostrils clos'd up;

(The Song of Los, 6.15, 19, 7.1; E68--69)

and in Europe:

... then turn'd the fluxile eyes
Into two stationary orbs, concentrating all things.
The ever-varying spiral ascents to the heavens of heavens
Were bended downward; and the nostrils golden gates shut
Turn'd outward, barr'd and petrify'd against the infinite.

(10.11; E63)

None of these passages is without a number of virtues, and it would be
easy to select others that are very impressive indeed from any of the
shorter Prophetic Books, but there does seem to be a correlation that is
more than coincidental between Blake's denunciation of curbs, closure,
and mental inwardness, and the tight, melancholy sphere within which his
own thoughts appear, at this stage, to revolve. History had moved on,
but Blake was still a prisoner, and his writing tended to atrophy
accordingly: image became symbol, and symbol, dogma.

Throughout the Prophetic Books, there are long passages in which
each line demands to be taken at maximum intensity, as if it had an
exclamation mark at the end of it. This is tiring, especially since
imagery of commensurate vitality is comparatively scarce. As a
substitute, words like 'awful' and 'terrific', 'loud' and 'heavy',
'shriek' and 'curse' seem overused. According to Erdman, in his
introduction to the Blake concordance, 'we may have expected to find MAN,
LOVE, ETERNAL, and EARTH among Blake's most used words, but not DEATH so
near the top or NIGHT so far ahead of DAY'. This might have been true
for Blake's readers and commentators during the first half of this

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29 Jon Mee has recently added much to our understanding of the
context and origins of Blake's rhetorical style, suggesting that it
carried a politically challenging antinomian force which is not obvious
to the twentieth-century reader (Dangerous Enthusiasm: William Blake and
the Culture of Radicalism in the 1790s [Oxford, 1992], especially pp. 35
ff.). But even when Blake was writing it seems that the enthusiastic
elements in his texts deterred most of the readers whom they were
arguably supposed to stimulate. His work can only flourish in an
extremely industrious and accommodating critical culture, such as our
own.

30 David V. Erdman and others, A Concordance to the Writings of
century, but the psychoanalytic approach exemplified by Brenda Webster has led, recently, to an understanding that neither Blake’s life nor his art are to be looked upon as unfailingly beatific. There is plenty of darkness even in the Poetical Sketches; but in poems like America, where the ‘Prolific’ energies of Orc seem intimately involved with the ‘Devouring’, pressurized atmosphere of his gloomy surroundings, it begins to appear that the evils Blake identifies in the outside world may in part be projected from his own psyche. It is dismaying, in a way, that the Blake Concordance and Blake Dictionary are so effective, finding so much repetition and cross-reference, allowing us to reason, compare, and extract a ‘ratio’ of Blake’s usages. Blake himself has Urizenic qualities, and his writing is peculiarly apt to inspire further ‘Bibles of Hell’, or tomes of arcane, uncritical exegesis. Much of Blake’s ‘prophetic’ writing, prior to The Four Zoas, Milton and Jerusalem, represents, for this reader, a stage in Blake’s artistic development which may have been necessary but which is in itself unsatisfying: it is more the repetition than the general complexity that makes this work hard to read, and often it looks to have been hard to write, in so far as so much of it is formulaic, involving a reiteration of familiar arguments and a redeployment of stock characters, suggesting a profoundly bookish, Swedenborg-like proselytizing industry rather than spontaneous thought.\(^{31}\)

Often, Blake seems to be aware of this tendency. Hence the negative images of writing, engraving, and publishing that emerge through the character of Urizen, as here in Europe:

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\(^{31}\) My comments here may seem to resemble F. R. Leavis’s statement that ‘none of the elaborated prophetic works is a successful work of art’, a judgement recently quoted and praised by E. P. Thompson (‘Blake’s Tone’, London Review of Books, 15.2 [28 January 1993], 12--13 [12]). Leavis wrote well on Blake’s early lyrics, but, like T. S. Eliot, seemed to find the Prophetic Books so artistically unsuccessful that he could not spare the time to read them (cf. Eliot, ‘William Blake’ [1920], revised and reprinted in Selected Essays, 1917--1932 [London, 1932], pp. 317--22). Obviously, this is not my view. I believe that most of the Prophetic Books contain elements without which they would be more widely enjoyed and no less intellectually challenging, but I do not believe that a work of art has to be perfect to be successful. In fact, I am often in accord with the deconstructionist tendency of finding most to say about textual elements that could be regarded as flaws. A balance of post-structuralist scepticism about the originary, integral text and a neo-Leavisite willingness to find ethical significance and to say that certain texts are more or less interesting than others suggests the ideal of critical practice to which I mean this dissertation to conform.
And the clouds & fires pale rold round in the night of Enitharmon
Round Albions cliffs & Londons walls; still Enitharmon slept!
Rolling volumes of grey mist involve Churches, Palaces, Towers:
For Urizen unclasped his Book: feeding his soul with pity
(12.1; E64)

There can be few of Blake's readers who have not sometimes felt that the
Prophetic Books themselves are 'volumes of grey mist', and we may
remember that after feeding his soul with pity in Songs of Innocence
Blake goes on to besmirch churches and palaces in 'London'. This
unclasping of Urizen's book occurs in the context of Enitharmon's dream
-- the fulfilment of the Female Will that Blake so detests, but which,
as I have tried to suggest in my readings of Thel and the Visions, may
involve the twisting of what was formerly a benign vision, on Blake's
part. So Blake might be thought to be offering an image of himself, here, as a sort of anti-visionary or spoiler.

Robert Essick has noted that there are some essential differences
between Urizen's texts and Blake's:

It is of great significance that Urizen does not print his books. The reversal inherent in the printing process makes all the
difference, just as it does in various forms -- turning around, converting a state into its contrary, transforming finite into
infinite -- at key points in the journey towards apocalypse in Blake's poetry. One can say with equal justice that Urizen's books
are reversals of Blake's. In that sense they are parodies of the illuminated books -- unprinted, unvarying, and unintelligible.

But it is not always necessary to parody Blake's books to make them, for
a long time, unintelligible. And his work is full of reversals, or
contraries, which can be taken as equally true. If Urizen's books are
parodies of Blake's, then that can be read in two ways: either as
suggesting how benign and undogmatic, by comparison, Blake's books are
(Essick's position), or, on the contrary, as suggesting that Blake sensed
a Urizenic drive within himself towards oppressive solidity, felt that
this needed to be studied, and decided to promote this study by
presenting himself, not for the first time, in caricature form. In
Jerusalem, Los speaks of 'Giving a body to Falshood that it may be cast
off for ever' (12.13; E155): in exposing the worst in himself, through
Urizen and other anti-heroes, Blake is doing just that, in the most personal way.

And that accords with the sympathy Blake seems to project for his most destructive characters, especially Urizen himself:

3. Most Urizen sicken'd to see
   His eternal creations appear
   Sons & daughters of sorrow on mountains
   Weeping! wailing! first Thiriel appear'd
   Astonish'd at his own existence
   Like a man from a cloud born, . . .

4. He in darkness clos'd, view'd all his race
   And his soul sicken'd! he curs'd
   Both sons & daughters; for he saw
   That no flesh nor spirit could keep 
   His iron laws one moment.

5. For he saw that life liv'd upon death
   The Ox in the slaughter house moans
   The Dog at the wintry door
   And he wept, & he called it Pity
   And his tears flowed down on the winds

   (The Book of Urizen, 23.8, 22; E81--82)

Urizen here has initiated a process from which he cannot escape: he sees how wrong he was, but there is nothing to be done about it. More and more defective creations -- the first of them called, as it were, Thiriel -- keep appearing, and out of his weakness and failure a textual system which is called Religion but which is perhaps analogous to The Works of William Blake tragically grows.

Formerly, Urizen was a splendid figure -- as Ahania, his emanation, testifies. She is to him as Oothoon is to Theotormon: for if the worst destruction in Blake may seem to arise from the Female Will, so also, quite paradoxically, the best hope of restoration may reside in women's love:

4: Weeping I walk over rocks
   Over dens & thro' valleys of death
   Why didst thou despise Ahania
   To cast me from thy bright presence
   Into the World of Loneness

5: I cannot touch his hand:
   Nor weep on his knees, nor hear
   His voice & bow, nor see his eyes
   And joy, nor hear his footsteps, and
   My heart leap at the lovely sound!

   (The Book of Ahania, 4.60; E88--89)

Why Urizen should have forfeited this devotion is not obvious. Perhaps, Theotormon-like, he has mistaken Ahania's love for something sinister -- which would again be Blake (perhaps inadvertently) critiquing his own anti-feminism. In fact, throughout the Prophetic Books, the Fall seems to be initiated irrationally, in such a way as to suggest that the spoiling tendency is too close to the writer for him to get it in
perspective. Prominent characters, Zoas particularly, develop morbid, repressive, miserly sides to their nature, and bring paradise crashing down to earth. They seem unhappy with life as it is, they resist the challenge of new generations, they fear contingency, they become suspicious and jealous, and they hunger for the fixity and law that Urizen's books represent.

Ore is the primary embodiment of an opposing tendency, breaking up the Urizenic codes:

The fiery joy, that Urizen perverted to ten commands,  
What night he led the starry hosts thro' the wide wilderness:  
That stony law I stamp to dust; and scatter religion abroad 
To the four winds as a torn book, & none shall gather the leaves;  
(America, 8.3; E54)

But, as we have seen, Blake does not make Ore any easier to approve of than Urizen. Ore, like the Tyger, is simultaneously splendid and horrible. Ore is benign if he is thought of as an expression of the restless, revolutionary and sceptical impulse which caused Blake to make every coloured copy of his illuminated books different, but Ore is frightening if he represents the angrily destructive tendency that seems to underlie many of Blake's deletions, his bizarre narrative twists and reversals of opinion, and the pleasure that seems to be expressed in Blake's most gruesome apocalyptic images. The struggles between Ore and Urizen, then, can be read as an allegory (or vision) of the conflicting purposes and predilections which are not necessarily anything to do with the ostensible subjects of Blake's works but which tend to give them all their life.

In The Marriage of Heaven and Hell it is observed that 'All Bibles or sacred codes, have been the causes of ... Errors' (pl. 4; E34). Blake goes on to enumerate these errors, which reduce essentially to the idea that energy and the body are bad. A set of 'Contraries' is immediately provided: 'Man has no Body distinct from his Soul'; 'Energy is Eternal Delight'. The parallelism of the two sets tempts the reader to wonder whether the second set, too, is not being held up as a sacred code. It is 'The voice of the Devil' that we are listening to, so presumably these are precepts from a Bible of Hell. Something like an Innocence / Experience opposition has been established: Blake has ensured that there is a tension in his text which will maintain its energy.
Principle 6 of All Religions are One states, 'The Jewish & Christian Testaments are An original derivation from the Poetic Genius. this is necessary from the confined nature of bodily sensation' (E1). Blake himself is at least sometimes susceptible to the confined nature of bodily sensation: the Notebook poems and the letters testify to all manner of frustrations. Hence, while his texts may vigorously oppose other texts that are pernicious, they themselves cannot be perfect.

Jerome McGann maintains that Blake consistently intended his texts to be distrusted -- read and then discarded:

Blake waged war on the Selfhood continually, knowing that his visions were not ours any more than his own perceptions were ritually repeatable. Thus he developed an intensely private mythology, to protect both himself and us: for we can live in that mythology only to Blake’s shame and our destruction. For himself, he had continually to subject his own visions to revisions and imaginative renewals.  

Blake critics like to think well of their subject. Thus McGann implies that the rebarbative nature of the Prophetic Books is always in our best interests. Blake’s images of Urizen’s literary pains seem to contest this. And, according to McGann’s principles, a very large number of Blake’s readers have failed to get the point. McGann’s Blake is the Blake who abhors possessiveness, but there is another who desperately fears division: hence the contradictory nature of Blake’s attitude to the sexes. There is the Blake of the Europe introduction, whose Fairy proposes to write a book ‘on leaves of flowers’. But there is also a Blake who is busily constructing a canon of extremely dense, infolding texts which force the reader to do a great deal of not very spiritual or visionary work.

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CHAPTER 4

The Four Zoas, Milton, and Jerusalem: Blake as the Analyst and Agent of Wrongs

Blake’s commencement of Milton and Jerusalem (probably in 1804) seems to have involved an access of energy and an artistic rebirth. Milton’s authoritative preface, addressed to the ‘Young Men of the New Age’, the clear, upbeat ‘Jerusalem’ lyric, and the imperious invocation of the Muses, or ‘Daughters of Beulah’, all bespeak optimism, confidence and -- one would think -- spiritual equilibrium (E95--96). From The Book of Urizen onwards, Blake’s work had shown a continued movement away from the specifics of the historical moment towards something at once more personal and more universal. Imagery from the French Revolution persists in so far as the immortals’ ‘Great Solemn Assembly’, ‘the Assembly dark & clouded’, suggests the revolutionary gatherings at Paris (Milton, 8.46, 13.15; E102, E107), but when, in Jerusalem, we read,

. . . thine eyes beheld
The dungeons burst & the Prisoners set free. (77.34; E233)

what is at issue is no longer the fall of the Bastille, but the grand idea of which the Bastille was merely an appealing image: the general harrowing and reformation of the globe.

In place of specific historical references, Blake now displays a new and extraordinary range of imagery, of a kind faintly prefigured in the vineyards and cloudbursts of The French Revolution, used sporadically in the most grotesque passages of The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, and given its first free rein in The Book of Urizen: imagery that is based upon nature, but which is lurid, apocalyptic, almost psychedelic. A principal source for this imagery appears to be the scientific poetry of Erasmus Darwin,¹ but there is also a vast contribution both from the Bible and from the Biblical rewritings to be found in Paradise Lost, where words are used so portentously, as objective correlatives of celestial grandeur -- as in this enrichment of Ezekiel:

The chariot of paternal deity,
Flash ing thick flames, wheel within wheel undrawn. (VI. 750--51)

¹ See Desmond King-Hele, Erasmus Darwin and the Romantic Poets (Basingstoke, 1986).
'Wheel within Wheel', according to Jerusalem, 'revolve in harmony & peace' the works of Eden (15.17--20; E159). Globes and their evolutions, polypi, an imagery that seems to draw upon the microscopic physiology of conception and gestation, making the whole universe intimately human: all this is characteristic of late Blake, and yet it depends upon an assimilation of Paradise Lost that is constantly disclosed by Blake’s vocabulary: in the words 'conglobed' and 'conglobing', for example.²

Blake and Milton are alike in so far as their vastly ambitious literary designs involve a blasphemous compulsion to find words for, and so materialize, the spiritual: an aim that places them in competition with the Bible. In both writers, ideas that claim divine sanction are represented in earthly terms that can seem absurd (Milton’s war in heaven) or sublime. Both writers, despite what Blake says about Newton, conceive of engines to represent the primum mobile. Blake’s winepresses, mills, and the forge of Los parallel Milton’s artificial, eclectic cosmography. But there is a fundamental difference between Milton and Blake. Beneath the artistic exuberance of Paradise Lost, Milton is striving to articulate a religious message which he believes to be much greater than himself: an aim which sometimes leads him into logical contortion. In Blake, conversely, there is no God to be ‘justified’ apart from the human imagination: Blake is free to make his own truth. If there are inelegances, he has, in a sense, secured himself against recrimination: his theory of the imagination is its own alibi.

Morton Paley has identified a flaw in the structure of Milton: namely, the omission of the promised liberation of Orc. But Orc, as Paley subsequently acknowledges, is a diabolical creature, the amoral personification of the processes of revolution, ‘the fallen form of Eros... domination and the will-to-power’.³ As such he has no place in the transcendental atmosphere of Milton, except as a representative of the lower world, beneath Blake’s preferred visionary plane, where he

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² See Paradise Lost, VII. 239, 292. Further examples of Milton’s Blake-like turns of phrase include ‘thy voice is past’ (III. 227) and the Urizenic ‘black tartareous cold infernal dregs’ (VII. 238).

lives in symbiosis with his consort, the Shadowy Female: a relationship which now, more than in America, does seem incestuous, and sadomasochistic to boot. And, throughout much of Milton, the fiery eruptions of Orc which were a principal driving force in the earlier works seem to have lost place to the most gentle developments of the natural world, as encapsulated supremely in the dawn flight of the Lark (31.28--45; E130--31).

However, Milton's Satan, a discontented child of Eternity, threatens to give way to the gloomy allurements of Orc's sunken world (a leaning which can be referred back as far as the narcissistic and melancholy protagonists of Poetical Sketches), thereby infecting the Edenic world of Los, the artistic creator-God, and his consort Enitharmon. They, much like Tiriel and Myratana, had been hoping for a quiet retirement in Eternity, and are dismayed to see their difficult offspring going to the bad:

Then Los & Enitharmon knew that Satan is Urizen
Drawn down by Orc & the Shadowy Female into Generation
Oft Enitharmon enterd weeping into the Space, there appearing
An aged Woman raving along the Streets (the Space is named Canaan) then she retournd to Los weary, frightened as from dreams

Los and Enitharmon, through Tiriel and Myratana, have almost turned into Har and Heva. There is a sense of shattered illusions and a falling-off. 'Generation' is the troubled, materialistic world familiar from Experience, the world of real contemporary wrongs, and that environment is further recalled by this plate's illustration (B337), in which the distraught Enitharmon is supposed to be running through the streets of Canaan -- but it might as well be London, in Blake's poem of that name. The poet's imagination seems already to be resident in a New Jerusalem, but he is constrained to look back from time to time, just like the misguidedly complacent Los, towards the mundane strife and historical particularity which had formerly dominated his writing.

Blake's Milton, being dead, inhabits continuously a higher imaginative state, or 'Eternity'. When Milton decides that he must descend from Eternity to correct his errors upon the Earth, his journey

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4 Blake's by now rather appalled attitude towards Orc is further suggested by the name of the 'dreadful' lowest state of 'Humanity in its Repose': 'Or-Ulro' (Milton, 34.8, 13; E134).
is obviously based upon that of the historical Milton's own Satan, who leaves a state of comparative ease to struggle across the Cosmos. But his descent also suggests a return to an earlier form of Blakean discourse:

They saw his Shadow vegetated underneath the Couch Of death: for when he enter'd into his Shadow: Himself: His real and immortal Self: was as appeared to those Who dwell in immortality, as One sleeping on a couch Of gold: and those in immortality gave forth their Emanations Like Females of sweet beauty, to guard round him & to feed His lips with food of Eden in his cold and dim repose! But to himself he seemed a wanderer lost in dreary night.

(15.9; E109)

Milton goes to the 'Couch of death', becoming a lost Traveller, and Blake descends to an atmosphere that echoes Poetical Sketches, in a spirit of tragic magnificence. And the self-sacrificial grandeur of the whole proceeding is only deepened when Milton arrives on Earth and has to confront the tyrant Urizen. This has the makings of a dragon-slaying situation, but it is played out, rather, in terms of conflicting systems of devotion, rival readings of Christianity:

Silent they met, and silent strove among the streams, of Arnon Even to Mahanaim, when with cold hand Urizen stoop'd down And took up water from the river Jordan: pouring on To Miltons brain the icy fluid from his broad cold palm. But Milton took of the red clay of Succoth, moulding it with care Between his palms: and filling up the furrows of many years Beginning at the feet of Urizen, and on the bones Creating new flesh on the Demon cold, and building him, As with new clay a Human form in the Valley of Beth Peor.

(19.6; E112)

'Milton's struggle,' notes Paley, 'is not to destroy Urizen but to make him part of a whole human identity', while 'Urizen attempts to baptize Milton into ... "Druidical" religion with the icy waters of abstraction and materialism'. Milton's actions involve the sculpting of 'a new Adam', but they seem also to be inspired by a most intimate and humble form of baptism, Christ's washing of the feet of his disciples ('beginning at the feet of Urizen'), and, in this scene, Blake seems to extend ceremonious absolution towards the furrowed heroes of his literary past, such as Tiriel, sundry historical kings, and earlier versions of Urizen himself, a forgiveness which, as I have tried to demonstrate, was never especially remote. This is why the Job engravings form such a fitting culmination to Blake's career.

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Blake claims an extratemporal identity with Milton, as an incarnation of the Poetic Genius, and, through Milton, he articulates a doctrine of the creative artist as one who sacrifices himself. Hence the relative ascendancy of Los’s conflicts with his Spectre, in *The Four Zoas*, *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, over the less personal, more political, opposition of Urizen and Orc. Milton had thought fit to include a short account of his own sufferings in the invocations of *Paradise Lost*, most movingly in the invocation to Urania:

> Standing on earth, not rapt above the pole,  
> More safe I sing with mortal voice, unchanged  
> To hoarse or mute, though fallen on evil days,  
> On evil days though fallen, and evil tongues;  
> In darkness, and with dangers compassed round,  
> And solitude.

(VII. 23--28)

Milton’s invocations are frequently echoed in *The Four Zoas*. Thus the fall of Urizen, which was already pathetic in *The Book of Urizen*, now acquires a tragic lustre by association with the blind poet’s struggle with his epic:

> And if Eternal falling I repose on the dark bosom  
> Of winds & waters or thence fall into a Void where air  
> Is not down falling thro immensity ever & ever  
> I lose my powers weakened every revolution till a death  
> Shuts up my powers then a seed in the vast womb of darkness  
> I dwell in dim oblivion.

(The Four Zoas, 73.5; E350)

This suggests both a fallen Milton, wandering erroneously and forlorn, and Milton’s fallen Satan. The *Paradise Lost* invocations themselves set up an association, through patterns of imagery, between Milton and Satan, but it is not clear how far Milton meant this association to be a salient feature of his work. In *Milton*, on the other hand, Blake brings the latent Milton / Satan parallels into the open, in what is partly a satirical reversal (even a joke) in the manner of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, but also a sympathetic evocation of the philosophical and theological problems in Milton’s own predicament which the earlier poet either failed fully to perceive or was more hesitant to broach. Urizen, as we have seen, can often be taken as a commentary on Blake’s own artistic enterprise; and, in the passage just quoted from *The Four Zoas*, we can see Blake, Milton, Urizen, and Satan all linked together as grand figures, titanically labouring, who are each susceptible to the risk of corruption and failure. Hence the pathos of a scene like the confronta-
tion of Milton and Urizen, where both opponents and the implied author are, in fundamental ways, alike.

The real, historical Milton goes on to anticipate Blake, in the invocation to Urania, by setting up his own self-comparison with a former persecuted poet, 'the Thracian bard' Orpheus (VII. 34). This self-identification with a poetic or prophetic heritage, in Milton's case as in Blake's, functions as a kind of defence, and is supplemented by the awesome presence of epic diction, which seems calculated to overwhelm the hostile utterances of the 'evil tongues' or the 'False Tongue' (in Paradise Lost [VII. 26], and Milton [2.10; E96], respectively). Thus, Blake invokes the muses magisterially, like Prospero calling up spirits: 'Come into my hand / By your mild power; descending down the Nerves of my right arm' (Milton, 2.5; E96). And yet he too senses enemies, to the point of paranoia.

In 'A Poison Tree', Blake had written,

I was angry with my friend;
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe;
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

(E28)

This is a poem which can easily be read as being in favour of openness and against the harbouring of grudges. However, Blake must as usual have known the contrary state, for in the composition of Milton he harboured and nurtured his grudge against his amiable but unremarkable 'friend' William Hayley (under whose patronage the Blakes lived at Felpham, Sussex, between 1800 and 1803) until it attained preposterous dimensions. The rivalry in the poem between Satan and Palamabron, with its origin, apparently, in Hayley's attempt to get Blake to produce work that would be less individualistic and more saleable, is presented as comparable to the rivalries of Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau; and it derives its portentous idiom from these and similar Old Testament tales.

Blake had undertaken the move to Felpham (the only trip away from London, as far as we know, that he ever made) with high expectations.

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6 Blake linked himself with Prospero in a typically aggrieved and pugnacious Notebook fragment: 'old acquaintance well renew / Prospero had One Caliban & I have Two' (E508). He appears to have been referring to his corporeal friends / spiritual enemies, Flaxman and Stothard. See D. V. Erdman, Blake: Prophet Against Empire: A Poet's Interpretation of the History of His Own Times, 3rd edn. (Princeton, 1977), p. 459 n.
'I have begun to Work,' he wrote in September 1800 to another friend, Thomas Butts, '& find that I can work with greater pleasure than ever. Hope soon to give you a proof that Felpham is propitious to the Arts.' Butts's reply from London suggests that this friend at least was hoping that the disturbing side of Blake's genius, as expressed perhaps through Orc or in the Notebook epigrams, would give way to something more docile and emollient: Whether you will be a better Painter or a better Poet from your change of ways & means I know not; but this I predict, that you will be a better man -- excuse me, as you have been accustomed from friendship to do, but certain opinions imbied from reading, nourish'd by indulgence, and rivetted by a confined Conversation, and which have been equally prejudicial to your Interest & Happiness, will now, I trust, disperse as a Day-break Vapour, and you will henceforth become a Member of that Community of which you are at present, in the opinion of the Archbishop of Canterbury, but a Sign to mark the residence of dim incredulity, haggard suspicion, & bloated philosophy -- whatever can be effected by sterling sense, by opinions which harmonize society and beautify creation, will in future be exemplified in you, & the time I trust is not distant, and that because I truly regard you, when you will be a more valorous Champion of Revelation & Humiliation than any of those who now wield the Sword of the Spirit; with your natural & acquired Powers nothing is wanting but a proper direction of them, & altho' the way is both straight and narrow I know you too well to fear your want of resolution to persevere & to pursue it -- you have the Plough & the Harrow in full view & the Gate you have been prophetically told is Open, can you then hesitate joyfully to enter into it? This is a remarkable sentence -- and not only for its length. It is rather stern and sanctimonious, and it is perhaps surprising that Blake should have replied to it as he did, in an extremely genial spirit. In this reply, Blake picks up Butts's strange 'Revelation & Humiliation' (which seems to have more to do with the old demonic Blake of whom Butts disapproves), amends it to the orthodox 'Religion & Humility', and promises to devote himself to both. He also contributes in a small way to the harmonizing and beautifying of the earthly state by including poetical eulogies on the Buttses' marriage, in return for his friend's recent poem on the Blakes. Clearly, Blake meant to behave himself at Felpham. He had a sense of responsibility towards his supporters and himself. He was grateful for Butts's advice, and not


9 Blake to Butts, 2 October 1800; Letters, pp. 27--30.
offended that someone of vastly inferior talents should be addressing him, in artistic and intellectual matters, on more or less equal terms. Above all, he seems to acknowledge that his powers might, hitherto, have been partly misdirected.

The way in which Blakean ideas, images and vocabulary ('the Plough & the Harrow', for example), came to be engendered collectively through Blake's exchanges with his dilettante friends deserves close examination, and this letter from Butts in particular can be seen as intertextually enriching Blake's subsequent creative activity, and gaining a resonance of its own which its author could not have anticipated. For, as it transpired, Felpham was not a great success after all. That is, unless we think that Blake's work needed to be fed by crisis. When we consider that he was a writer who had joyfully envisioned the apocalyptic transformation of whole nations, and who seems to have cared little for domestic luxuries, Blake's discomposure, when offended in his private life, seems extraordinary. In particular, it is obvious that he was amazed by the malice of Private Scholfield, the abusive dragoon whom Blake famously expelled 'by the Elbows' from his Felpham garden.

The trial for sedition which followed this action was genuinely dangerous, but it is ironic that Blake, who is typically thought of as a tirelessly militant opponent of the Establishment, should be so upset, even sorry for himself, when real conflict arose. Above all, it is revealing of Blake's detachment from practical politics that his anger is targeted far more precisely on Scholfield and his immediate allies and abettors than on the law of sedition -- which Coleridge, on the other hand, had opposed with much dedication. The degree to which Blake was transfixed by the incident is suggested by Scholfield's appearance in Milton and Jerusalem with his name spelt no less than six different ways: 'Schofield', 'Scholfield', 'Scofeld', 'Scofield', 'Skofeld', and

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11 Terry Eagleton, for example, claims that 'Blake is England's greatest revolutionary artist' (Editor's Preface, in Larrissy, p. ix).

‘Skofield’. Perhaps Blake was trying to avoid the magic, empowering word, using spellings like spells; perhaps the misspellings were a type of calculated insult; or perhaps Scholfield really appeared to him as a multiple being, and the man had become, through Blake’s obsession, all-pervasive and supernaturally elusive, not one drunken soldier but a Legion. In Jerusalem, Blake shows ‘Scofield’ threatening to topple the citadel of art and reason:

He is like a mandrake in the earth before Reubens gate:  
He shoots beneath Jerusalem’s wall to undermine her foundations!  
(11.22; E154)

Is this not the image of an obsession which was threatening to unbalance Blake’s own mind? In earlier works, above all in Songs of Experience, Blake had shown tremendous powers of vision, in the sense of seeing into real social problems; but at times it seems as though all the information that he absorbed has congealed and formed a kind of insulation. Thus his ‘journey on the Earth’ can be more of a triumphal march than an exploration (Milton, 15.26; E109). He is the reverse of ‘the camelion Poet’ of Keats’s letters: wherever he goes the world changes to resemble him. Despite his denouncement of Selfhood, he was a more dedicated exponent of the ‘egotistical sublime’ than Wordsworth, often propounding a radical form of individualism that seems to give a low significance to human ties:

The nature of infinity is this: That every thing has its Own Vortex; and when once a traveller thro Eternity.  
Has pastd that Vortex, he perceives it roll backward behind His path, into a globe itself infolding; like a sun:  
Or like a moon, or like a universe of starry majesty,  
While he keeps onwards in his wondrous journey on the earth  
Or like a human form, a friend with whom he livd benevolent. . . .

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13 Even G. E. Bentley, Jr.’s Blake Records Supplement: Being New Materials Relating to the Life of William Blake, Discovered Since the Publication of ‘Blake Records’ (1969) (Oxford, 1988) uses three different spellings of the name: ‘Scofield’ (p. xlv), ‘Schofield’ (p. 26) and ‘Scholfield’ (index, p. 148). Perhaps ‘Scholfield’, which appears in some trial documents (in Bentley’s transcription; Supplement, pp. 24, 28), is correct, but other documents have ‘Scolfield’.

14 The further ramifications of Blake’s paranoia, which becomes positively Othello-like when he appears to conjecture that Hayley may (i) have had designs on Catherine, and (ii) hired Scholfield as a hit-man, can be traced in Notebook poems such as ‘And his legs carried it like a long fork’ (E503--04) and ‘On H---ys Friendship’ (E506). See Northrop Frye, Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake (Princeton, 1947) for a sympathetic and largely plausible reconstruction of the thought behind these utterances (pp. 329--31).
Thus is the earth one infinite plane, and not as apparent
To the weak traveller confin’d beneath the moony shade.
Thus is the heaven a vortex pass’d already, and the earth
A vortex not yet pass’d by the traveller thro’ Eternity.

(Milton, 15.21, 32; E109)

Hayley was one such receding, sometime benevolent friend, a casualty in
the ‘Mental Fight’ which, for Blake, was a necessary form of self-
propulsion. There is a remarkable equanimity in this passage, which
makes it clear that Blake could no longer worry about immediate politics
in the way he had before. All things now centre on the individual
consciousness. A ‘Pulsation of the Artery’ has become the standard of
time in Milton, ‘a red Globule of Mans blood’ the standard of space
(29.3, 19; E127). The ‘globe itself infolding’ suggests the benign and
harmonious running, ‘Wheel within Wheel’, of Blake’s (and Milton’s)
highest spiritual states, but ‘infolding’, it is salutary to recall, was
a dubious concept in Poetical Sketches, where self-sufficiency was
morbid. To ‘The Sons of Eden the moony habitations of Beulah, / Are from
Great Eternity a mild & pleasant Rest’ (30.13; E129), and to Blake, who
can now range imaginatively between all the different spheres, the
earthly state too seems comparatively insignificant, a place that he can
visit but which he habitually transcends.

In this context, our mortal existence becomes a little unreal, and,
accordingly, Milton is problematical if we try to think of it as a
morally engaged work. The winepress of war, for example, has an abstract
sublimity that makes it another spectacle in the ‘wondrous journey’ —
a monstrous phenomenon which, like the dangers of Experience, but without
Experience’s ironies, Blake is capable of relishing:

How red the sons & daughters of Luvah! here they tread the grapes.
Laughing & shouting drunk with odours many fall oerweared
Drownd in the wine is many a youth & maiden: those around
Till they revive, or bury them in cool grots, making lamentation.

This Wine-press is call’d War on Earth . . .

(Milton, 27.3; E124)

The Battle of Trafalgar was fought during the composition of Milton, and
Waterloo during the writing of Jerusalem. Blake was fully aware of these
events, and the Napoleonic Wars are certainly treated as earnestly, in
Blake’s late universalizing mode, as the American and French revolutions
were in his poems of the 1790s. Nevertheless, in so far as war is imaginatively simulated in the epic poems it often seems to be an orgy, in which people die laughing. The suffering is generalized; the reader is habituated; war becomes part of an organic whole, just as death and life, death-in-life, are harmoniously iconized in Blake's portrait of an insect: 'the Grasshopper that sings & laughs & drinks: / Winter comes, he folds his slender bones without a murmur’ (Milton, 27.19; E124).

Blake continues his wine-press passage like this:

But in the Wine-presses the Human grapes sing not, nor dance
They howl & writhe in shoals of torment; in fierce flames consuming,
In chains of iron & in dungeons circles with ceaseless fires.
In pits & dens & shades of death: in shapes of torment & woe.
The plates & screws and wracks & cords & fires & cisterns
The cruel joys of Luvahs Daughters lacerating with knives
And whips their Victims & the deadly sport of Luvahs Sons.
(Milton, 27.30; E124--25)

This is more like a real coming to terms with war, it may be argued. But the creative energy has gone more into the cruel devices and the minds of the torturers than into the feelings of the victims. The aggression, just as in the activities of Orc or even the satire of the Marriage, is attractively energized. War is the subject, but so are the passions in general; and the wine-harvest is, after all, an inherently intoxicating and celebratory procedure. Luvah, in Milton, and in the earlier versions of the winepress passages that are to be found in Night IX of The Four Zoas (pp. 135--37; E403--05), starts out as a god of love, associated with Christ. But when he falls into conflict with the materialist Urizen his polarity is reversed and he becomes an Orc-like agent of purgative hate. The Winepress, therefore, is justified for Blake: it is a necessary element of the apocalypse. In this respect Blake has not travelled very far from the original context of the winepress in Revelation 14.

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15 See Erdman, Prophet Against Empire, especially pp. 462--71.

16 Cf. P. H. Butter on the Winepress: 'Angry Blake takes vicarious delight in seeing the enemy writhe . . . . The main thrust is to insist that corporeal war without mental fight to annihilate the Selfhood will not achieve liberation; but the question whether the mental fighter may ever resort to corporeal war is evaded' ('Blake's The French Revolution', Yearbook of English Studies, 19 (1989), 18--27 [27]). According to David Aers, the 'espousal of violence' in The Four Zoas, Night IX, 'involves a failure that is imaginative, moral, and, profoundly so, political', when viewed alongside the 'ethic of care' which he finds in the Songs and at the close of Night VII ('Representations of Revolution: From The French Revolution to The Four Zoas', in Critical Paths: Blake and the
War is discussed more directly as part of the wide-ranging vision of earthly suffering in Enion’s song in The Four Zoas:

It is an easy thing to laugh at wrathful elements
To hear the dog howl at the wintry door, the ox in the slaughter house moan
To see a god on every wind & a blessing on every blast
To hear sounds of love in the thunder storm that destroys our enemies house
To rejoice in the blight that covers his field, & the sickness that cuts off his children
While our olive & vine sing & laugh round our door & our children bring fruits & flowers

Then the groan & the dolor are quite forgotten & the slave grinding at the mill
And the captive in chains & the poor in the prison, & the soldier in the field
When the shattered bone hath laid him groaning among the happier dead

Harold Bloom describes this as ‘possibly Blake’s most poignant Song of Experience’. It is also, perhaps, a self-reproach. Blake’s attention to the plight of people in worse states than himself does seem to be intermittent, and it is not always easy to reconcile such sympathetic insights with the vaulting trajectory of his artistic mission. ‘Experience’ has to be forgotten, in a way, if an inspiring vision is to be generated, and the exuberance of Blake’s art is sometimes heartless.

Scholfield, in both Milton and Jerusalem, is called up and pressed into service as a depersonalized embodiment of war, as well as being Blake’s own persecutor. Thus, when Scholfield first appears, it is as a minion of Tirzah:

Where is the Lamb of God? . . .
His Images are born for War! for sacrifice to Tirzah!
To Natural Religion! to Tirzah the Daughter of Rahab the Holy!
She ties the knot of nervous fibres, into a white brain!
She ties the knot of bloody veins, into a red hot heart!
Within her bosom Albion lies embalmed, never to awake
Hand is become a rock! Sinai & Horeb, is Hyle & Coban:
Scofield is bound in iron armour before Reubens Gate!

(Milton, 19.50, 53; E113)

Tirzah’s is the hand, it seems, that wields the sinews and can frame the symmetry of the Tyger. Part of Scholfield’s awesome presence, that is, comes from his fitting into a picture of mingled horror and awe that had

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Argument of Method, ed. Dan Miller, Mark Bracher, and Donald Ault [Durham, North Carolina, 1987], pp. 244--70 [269--70]). But this violence is not a sudden aberration: it had always been there in Blake, even in Innocence.

always been present in Blake’s iconography. Scholfield is Winter, and the Tyger, and Pitt, and Nelson, and the singer of War Songs, and even Orc made flesh, and one could almost say that, had he not appeared in Blake’s garden, Blake would have needed to invent him -- which obviously he still did, to a very great extent. Blake’s engagement with war in earlier works like ‘King Edward the Third’ and The French Revolution was such as to make a clear pacifist reading unworkable. The anti-war impulse which seems to be directed against Scholfield in Milton and Jerusalem uses extraordinary psycho-symbolic rhetoric and imagery (as in the Tirzah passage above) to raise genuinely revolutionary insights into human aggression, but here too Blake’s moral relation to these arguments is complicated.

For example, little that Blake says about Scholfield seems to acknowledge the dangers that might be looming for that real human being in rather bigger fights than the one in the garden at Felpham. Blake produced a few moving passages in Jerusalem which show that he could, if he tried, call to mind many of the horrors of a nineteenth-century soldier’s life. ‘We were carried away in thousands from London’, lament the Spectre Sons of Albion,

& in tens
Of thousands from Westminster & Marybone in ships closed up:
Chain’d hand & foot, compel’d to fight under the iron whips
Of our captains; fearing our officers more than the enemy.
(65.33; E216--17)

And there is some horror, though not really any pity, here:

This is no warbling brook, nor shadow of a mirtle tree:
But blood and wounds and dismal cries, and shadows of the oak:
And hearts laid open to the light, by the broad grizzly sword:
And bowels hid in hammer’d steel rip’d quivering on the ground.
(65.50; E217)

Perhaps the most poignant example of Blake’s distinction between ‘Mental’ and ‘Corporeal War’ (Milton, pl. 1) occurs when these last lines are echoed in the dawning of ‘Eternal Day’ which ends Jerusalem:

And the Bow is a Male & Female & the Quiver of the Arrows of Love,
Are the Children of this Bow: a Bow of Mercy & Loving-kindness:
laying
Open the hidden Heart in Wars of mutual Benevolence Wars of Love
(97.12; E256)

The extremely different openings of the heart in these two passages illuminate one another’s character astoundingly -- just like the mutual echoing of Innocence and Experience. But, despite the supremacy of the
benign vision at the end of Jerusalem, there is no reason, any more than with the earlier 'Contrary States', for the reader finally to associate the author of this text with one tendency and to distance him from the other.

For elsewhere in Jerusalem we can find an illustration of 'Skofeld' (B526), in which the dragoon, 'head shaven and wearing his mind-forged manacles', 'suggests either a convict or a madman'. That is, Blake has chosen to portray this person as the sort of social victim for whom he is usually thought to have had so much sympathy: 'the slave grinding at the mill / . . . the captive in chains' (The Four Zoas, 36.9; E325). The manacles in this case are actually Blake-forged. This is a signal instance of the process that is treated with such irony in Experience, where the process of 'marking' suffering can make the perceiver / delineator both pitying and venomous at once. Elsewhere in Jerusalem 'Scofield' appears as 'Adam . . . the Ninth / Of Albions sons, & the father of all his brethren in the Shadowy / Generation' (7.42; E150). That 'Adam' should be represented as a sinister figure suggests the way in which Blake's imagination intermittently revolts against the created world. If Scholfield is Adam, then Blake, in ejecting Scholfield from his garden, is the angry deity, and he is not so much undoing Milton's errors as compounding them.

Milton and Jerusalem, in describing Blake's labours and drawing directly on events in his life, are poems which encourage us to form a vivid picture of their author. They clearly invite biographical

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20 Cf. David Worrall, who hints at another way in which the Scholfield incident may have been morally awkward for Blake: 'it is . . . possible that Blake may have experienced some sense of discomfort, and even alienation, at having these two soldiers so firmly remind him that, whatever radical causes he had espoused in his poems of the 1790s . . . , Blake was now explicitly detached from his artisan roots and living under the patronage of a person perceived by the soldiers as belonging to the minor gentry' (Radical Culture: Discourse, Resistance and Surveillance, 1790-1820 [Hemel Hempstead, 1992], pp. 73-75).
readings, and many critics have provided them. Paul Youngquist, for example, sees Milton as an exploration of pathological disorders on Blake’s part which the poet can eventually transcend: ‘it is in writing about his experience that Blake comes to terms with it, masters it’.\(^{21}\) But this notion of mastery over one’s own experience is potentially a delusory and dangerous one -- it smacks of the Selfhood -- and I would emphasize, by contrast, moments, such as the vindictive manipulation of Scholfield, when Blake seems to let experience master him, and when he makes it quite easy for the reader to see that this is so. Similarly, Elizabeth Stieg reads Blake’s canon as a series of investigations into the nature of prophecy -- Blake’s own vocation -- which, again, reach a vindicating end: ‘Tiriel at the beginning of his poetic / prophetic career shows the tragic nature of false prophecy, and Jerusalem, at the end of his career, shows the nature of triumphant true prophecy.’\(^{22}\)

But, in fact, this smooth transition is not really there. Tiriel is not so clearly exposed. His railing against Har carries conviction; his rhetoric is sometimes identical to that which we find in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell. It is ‘the prophet who asserts power over others, even in God’s name,’ according to Stieg, that is ‘false and destructive’. Certainly this is often the case with Tiriel, but Los and the speaker of the epic poems can be equally egotistical and coercive.

Northrop Frye makes a comparison between Blake and Goya: ‘In both cases the charge of ugliness is irrelevant, and intensity, honesty, a grim resolve to portray experience as it is regardless of its horror, and a passionately sincere clairvoyance, are the prophetic qualities involved.’\(^{23}\) This, it seems to me, is substantially wrong. Only infrequently, in Enion’s song and in a few scenes in Jerusalem, does Blake offer the gunpowder and entrails that Frye seems to be talking

\(^{21}\) ‘Criticism and the Experience of Blake’s Milton’, Studies in English Literature 1500--1900, 30 (1990), 555--71 (567). See also Andrew M. Cooper, Doubt and Identity in Romantic Poetry (New Haven, 1988), which presents Blake’s work (and Milton in particular) as describing the painful overcoming of self-doubt and self-division in the author through creative interaction with an imagined reader (especially pp. 54--76 and 95--102).

\(^{22}\) ‘Reinterpreting the Old Testament: Blake’s Tiriel as Prophet’, Studies in Romanticism, 29 (1990), 273--96 (296).

\(^{23}\) Fearful Symmetry, p. 358.
about. Goya's powers of empathy and characterization are immeasurably
greater. It is evident that, for Goya, the disasters of war were a
source of torment. The Blake of the long Prophetic Books is more like
Hieronymus Bosch. These works are like Bosch's Hell and Garden of
Earthly Delights combined: full of very real horrors, full of a kind of
detail that we might not ordinarily think of as very painterly (or
poetic), and full of intellectual perversities (nature mingled with
machinery, for example, and anthropomorphized weeds), but subordinating
the whole to an artistic vision which imposes its own abstract pattern,
creating a kind of parallel world; so that, really, there is no ugliness:
certainly, there would have been none in Blake's eyes. In Goya, on the
other hand, the 'ugliness' and 'horror' are all-important, because
ugliness and horror were dominating features of the world as he saw it.
And he had no visions of an apocalyptic solution.

* * *

Blake's professed abnegation before a greater 'Saviour' or 'Spirit' in
Jerusalem is misleading:

O Saviour pour upon me thy Spirit of meekness & love:
Annihilate the Selfhood in me, be thou all my life!
Guide thou my hand which trembles exceedingly upon the rock of ages,
While I write of the building of Golgonooza, & of the terrors of
Entuthon:
Of Hand & Hyle & Coban, of Kwantok, Peachey, Brereton, Slayd &
Hutton:
Of the terrible sons & daughters of Albion. and their Generations.

Scofield! Kox, Kotope and Bowen, revolve most mightily upon
The Furnace of Los: before the eastern gate bending their fury.
(5.21; E147)

Even as he requests the annihilation of his 'Selfhood', Blake invokes
inflated personalities whose full significance can only be appreciated
by a reader intimately acquainted with his personal life. He is
incongruously using the framework of a national re-foundation epic to
settle old scores. But he is less rancorous now than he had been in
Milton, and, in Jerusalem's final 'revelation', Blake himself does
implicitly achieve a new peace of mind, as a selection of his former
idols and enemies are reconciled in the sky:

The innumerable Chariots of the Almighty appeard in Heaven
And Bacon & Newton & Locke, & Milton & Shakspeare & Chaucer
A Sun of blood red wrath surrounding heaven on all sides around
Glorious incomprehensible by Mortal Man & each Chariot was Sexual
Threefold

And every Man stood Fourfold. each Four Faces had. One to the West
One toward the East
One to the South
One to the North, the Horses
Fourfold
And the dim Chaos brightend beneath, above, around! Eyed as the
Peacock
According to the Human Nerves of Sensation, the Four Rivers of the
Water of Life

(98.8; E257)

'Art & Science' are united in the address 'To the Christians' (pl. 77;
E232), and Blake seems to imply -- something that he had never admitted
before -- that Bacon, Newton, and Locke are great individuals who have
a part to play in the splendid totality of the human condition. But this
is somewhat capricious: Blake seems to forgive and forget the social ills
that these individuals formerly represented within his writings. He does
not explain how they have changed to make themselves acceptable.
According to Peter Otto,

It is important to recognize . . . that Blake is not suggesting that
Locke, Bacon, and Newton are wrong in their descriptions of fallen
humanity. . . . Fallen existence is a world in which one isolated
self is pitted against another. Bacon, Newton, and Locke therefore
all can be seen to play an important role in the consolidation of
Error. . . . Their influence is pernicious, however, because they
contend that the world that they (correctly) trace is the only
world.24

This is true, but it does not quite account for the erroneous trium­
virate's appearance alongside Milton, Shakespeare, and Chaucer.
Presumably, Blake could have written three poems called Locke, Bacon and
Newton, in which those worthies would have recognized their errors, come
down from their eternal stations, and redeemed their earthly legacies;
but the intellectual contortions that would have been involved in this
process are only hinted at.

All in all, the closing pages of Jerusalem involve a tremendous
tying up of loose ends. Through the implied Blake who narrates the poem,
or through Los, or through Albion, Blake suppresses his contraries,
incorporates his Emanation, subdues his Spectre (who becomes a sort of
Ariel to his Prospero), and engages generally in an allegory of
self-perfecting. The violence which Blake had addressed and in which he
had vigorously participated, earlier in the poem, is not resolved but
comes to be avoided, along with other forms of conflict. Sexual
conflict, for example. The Blakean post-revelation woman, in Jerusalem,

24 Constructive Vision and Visionary Deconstruction: Los, Eternity,
and the Productions of Time in the Later Poetry of William Blake (Oxford,
is really a city, the projection of masculine intellect, taking the place
of Vala, who is woman independent and fractious. Blake, the imputed
proponent of free love, looks forward to a kind of post-sex, where

Embraces are Cominglings: from the Head even to the Feet;
And not a pompous High Priest entering by a Secret Place.

(69.43; E223)

The 'Cominglings' probably draw upon the refined heavenly couplings to
which Raphael refers in Paradise Lost (VIII. 622--9), but Milton does not
use such negative images of ordinary sexual intercourse.

Often, Blake gives the impression that he is quite happy with the
world as it is; or, at least, with the natural world raised to a high
pitch of intensity through the imaginative input of that other natural
entity, the human mind. Hence the rapt absorption in a passage such as
this:

Thou seest the gorgeous clothed Flies that dance & sport in summer
Upon the sunny brooks & meadows: every one the dance
Knows in its intricate mazes of delight artful to weave:
Each one to sound his instruments of music in the dance,
To touch each other & recede; to cross & change & return

(Milton, 26.2; E123)

Blake here has the empirical attentiveness of a natural scientist.

'But', he continues, 'we see only as it were the hem of their garments
/ When with our vegetable eyes we view these wond'rous Visions' (26.11).

And yet, Blake has clearly used his vegetable eyes very keenly in
gathering the data for this 'vision', and the way that he commends it to
us is an incitement for us to use our own herbaceous senses. Nature and
imagination often coexist peaceably in Blake, but he is persistently
tempted to exalt the second at the expense of the first. To be content
with nature would be like settling for the Innocence view of life, and
Blake's fear of this state, which sometimes reads like a fear of madness,
drives him to repudiate some of his most vivid and attractive inventions.

That may have been the case in Thel, as I have argued, and it continues
to be the case in the epic poems. Hence the shocking decay of Vala's
paradise in The Four Zoas, which moves from 'a Sweet & pleasant Land'
(128.21; E397) insidiously towards a recreation of the Vale of Har, with
Vala as Mnetha, and Tharmas and Enion as Har and Heva. 'O Vala I am
sick', cries Enion, '& all this garden of Pleasure / Swims like a dream
before my eyes' (131.1; E399). No stable state of community exists
benignly in Blake's work; all the 'prophecies' end with redemption
imminent or just begun. 'The sooner one admits the disruptive and repetitive nature of Blake's visionary series,' writes Catherine Haigney, '(the dream of Vala's garden being just one model), the sooner one can cease trying to make one's peace with The Four Zoas and its false peace of male supremacy in the Beucolic [sic] idyll.' Jerusalem ends with another false peace, raising the vision of a form of life beyond the human weaknesses and conflicts in which its own author remains demonstrably and knowingly mired.

Some of Blake's friends, as we have seen in the letter from Butts, were capable of wishing that he should become 'a better Man'. Blake himself, or the implied author of Jerusalem, announces that he is 'perhaps the most sinful of men!' (pl. 3; E145), and subsequently presents an affecting image of himself, not just as an unjustly neglected genius, slighted friend, or victim of baseless persecutions, but also as an independently fallible mortal who may have taken on more than he can manage. 'Trembling I sit day and night, my friends are astonish'd at me'; 'my tears fall day and night' (5.16, 5.36; E147, E148). Milton, according to Blake, has to acknowledge his own evil before he can undo his errors (Milton, 14.30; E108), and Blake can be seen as making a similar gesture in anticipation. Like Los, he must struggle to keep himself free from 'the stubborn structure of the Language' (Jerusalem, 36.59; E183), from received ideas, and even from the ubiquitous habit of warfare: the fact that he has committed himself to paper does not mean that he perfectly knows his own mind. In fact, Blake's own theorizing implies that he is likely to be in several minds about everything. I am thinking particularly of the doctrine of Individuals and States, which is always present to a greater or lesser degree in Blake's works, but which achieves its fullest expression in Jerusalem:

Why did you take Vengeance O ye Sons of the mighty Albion?
Planting these Oaken Groves: Erecting these Dragon Temples


26 Cf. Alicia Ostriker, who identifies 'four Blakes', each with a different 'coherent and persuasive if not ultimately "systematic"' attitude to sex and gender ('Desire Gratified and Ungratified': William Blake and Sexuality', Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly, 16 [1982--83], 156--65 [156]).
Injury the Lord heals but Vengeance cannot be healed: 
As the Sons of Albion have done to Luvah: so they have in him 
Done to the Divine Lord & Saviour, who suffers with those that 
suffer: 
For not one sparrow can suffer, & the whole Universe not suffer 
also, 
In all its Regions, & its Father & Saviour not pity and weep. 
But Vengeance is the destroyer of Grace & Repentance in the bosom 
Of the Injurer; in which the Divine Lamb is cruelly slain: 
Descend O Lamb of God & take away the imputation of Sin 
By the Creation of States & the deliverance of Individuals Evermore 
Amen 

Thus wept they in Beulah over the Four Regions of Albion 
But many doubted & despaird & imputed Sin & Righteousness 
To Individuals & not to States, and these Slept in Ulro. 
(25.3; E170--71) 

Ulro is itself a State. So those who at present fail to understand 
Blake’s theories may be regenerated despite themselves. Nobody, Blake 
implies, is beyond redemption, because everybody is capable of taking on 
a new and better form. There is no fixed ‘Individual’ with an unchange-
able cast of mind onto whom we can project our hostile feelings. 

Hence the sympathy and generosity that Blake often displays towards 
his ‘villains’. But, as we have seen, Blake is capable of great 
ferocity. This too can be reconciled with the doctrine of Individuals 
and States. Blake is not fixed, he is capable of assuming different 
attitudes: sometimes he will be the author of this passage from 
Jerusalem, and sometimes he will find himself in a State in which his own 
doctrines are opaque to him. He does not cut himself off from any form 
of energy, however negative. It is this synecdochic relation in which 
Blake stands to the world as he perceives it -- whereby there is no 
‘outside’, no form of mental experience to which he denies himself access 
-- that allows him to write so persuasively of human conflict. As Hazard 
Adams writes, ‘in the very fabric of synecdoche, a warp and woof of 
infinite magnitude and the infinitesimal as well, there lies everywhere 
the principal ethical pattern we constitute from Blake’s work: the need 
for annihilation of the self-hood, for sympathetic expansive identity to 
include the other.’ 27 But it is a vital part of Blake’s synecdochic 
function, his representativeness as a human subject, that this will to 
identity with the other sometimes fails, and that he sometimes seems 
selfish and unfair. Thus, my point in drawing attention to signs of 

27 Hazard Adams, ‘Synecdoche and Method’, in Miller, Bracher, and 
Ault (1987), pp. 41--71 (69).
weakness in Blake, moments when he appears to act or speak in opposition to certain principles which he may have propounded in other places and at other times, has not been in any way to condemn or diminish him as a human being, an artist, or a thinker: if anything, they make him greater, more complete.  

Recent Blake criticism shows something of a consensus that Blake's doctrines should not be trusted too far, but that his methods are highly instructive, revealing the inadequacy of finite intellectual concepts and the need for perpetual self-correction. But we should not underestimate Blake's struggle to say specific things about moral issues. And likewise due attention should be paid to the traces of guilt, anger, and frustration in Blake's work which testify to crises of confidence in his own authority and worthiness. Blake takes himself as a symptom of universal problems: Innocence and Experience, the Prolific and the Devouring, Urizen and Orc are constantly present as conflicting impulses in his artistic activity, and his work is strongest when it acknowledges this.

Blake as systematic, superhuman guru is an oppressive delusion; Blake as self-consciously flawed and fallen poet is interesting. His work repays attention not just because it points to the general insufficiency of language, or to the contingency of the whole human state, but also because it refers to many wholly tangible human problems, throwing them into an outstandingly charged and controversial arena. Blake talks about these problems, but, at the same time, he is these problems. Blake's anger, his impulse to revenge, is a principal subject of Jerusalem and of many of his other works: without this they might be ideologically persuasive but they would lose all of their intimately

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28 For a fuller discussion Blake's doctrine of Individuals and States see Paley, Energy and the Imagination, especially pp. 155--56, 231--32.

disconcerting power. Blake may have thought that he was advancing 'Mental' and depressing 'Corporeal War', but the reader has to wonder sometimes whether Blake really keeps the two apart, whether he does not have an appetite for both. Blake's work is always self-consciously experimental, heuristic, reckless, and most imperfectly self-censored, and we should not be afraid of violently disagreeing with much of it. If we are really Blakean, our copies of his Works, like Blake's of Reynolds's, will be etched with their readers' acid remarks.
Part Two:

CHARLES DICKENS
CHAPTER 5

Ethical Challenges and Jovial Evasions, Heroes Indulged and Debunked: From Sketches by Boz to Nicholas Nickleby

In 1824, Charles Dickens, aged twelve, was working in the blacking warehouse at Hungerford Stairs, the Strand. At the same time, the sixty-six year old William Blake was illustrating Job and Dante at Number Three, Fountain Court: at the other end of the Strand, half a mile away. Later, Dickens knew Fountain Court well. It provides a setting for the meetings of John Westlock and Ruth Pinch in Martin Chuzzlewit. And it is conceivable that Blake and the 1824 Dickens passed one another in the Strand. If so, Blake might have been reminded of his own lines from 'The Chimney Sweeper':

A little black thing among the snow:
Crying weep, weep, in notes of woe!
Where are thy father & mother? say?
They are both gone up to the church to pray.

Dickens's father and mother were not at church, but at the Marshalsea Prison -- a situation for which Blake would have had much more sympathy. But Blake died several years before Dickens began to write, and it is probable that Dickens never heard of his neglected predecessor. And yet, these two authors had much in common.

Blake too experienced arduous employment at an early age, though nothing so unpleasant as the blacking warehouse. Both writers came to be much interested in the plight of other young people in worse conditions, and in the subject of children generally. Both wrote with great exuberance, but both were drawn, in their writing, towards violence, imprisonment, insanity, and death. Of the two, Blake is commonly regarded as the more advanced proponent of social change, and yet, while Dickens came to be infinitely more successful in material terms, it was Dickens again who had the more direct experience of the

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abuses that revolution might be expected to extinguish. Like Blake, Dickens was contemptuous of parliamentary politics; but that did not stop him from exerting a political influence -- on, for example, George Bernard Shaw: 'One of the greatest books in the English language is *Little Dorrit*, and when the English nation realizes it is a great book and a true book there will be a revolution in this country. One of the reasons I am a revolutionist is that I read *Little Dorrit* when I was a very small boy.' He might have been referring to *Jerusalem*.

The critic who has drawn the most significant comparisons between Blake and Dickens is F. R. Leavis:

One can say that [Dickens's] genius, entailing a completeness of interest in human life . . . spontaneously took those promptings of the complex romantic heritage which confirmed his response to early Victorian England; confirmed the intuitions and affirmations that, present organically in the structure and significance of *Hard Times* and *Little Dorrit*, make one think of Blake.

I have in mind, of course, the way in which the irrelevance of the Benthamite calculus is exposed; the insistence that life is spontaneous and creative, so that the appeal to self-interest as the essential motive is life-defeating; the vindication in terms of childhood, of spontaneity, disinterestedness, love and wonder; and the significant place given to Art.*

The essence of Leavis's approach is 'tradition': a cumulative process, in which Blake and Dickens are both seen as advocates of flexible, liberal virtues, in defiance of scientific impersonality and the concomitant social restraint. Leavis himself is part of a Cambridge tradition of interpretation along these lines. Thus, Raymond Williams is another who links Blake and Dickens as instinctive opponents of impersonal systems, and as romantics: 'to give that kind of value to human longing and need, to that absolute emphasis on commitment to another, is to clash as sharply with the emerging system, the emerging priorities, as in any assault on material poverty'.^ And Heather Glen's 'potentia' represents a comparable stand, on the part of English literature, against the present-day depredations of utilitarian economics.

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Blake and Dickens were both heavily indebted to Shakespeare. Neither had much time for organized religion. Both were confirmed Londoners, and the metropolis figures very largely in their writing. Dickens tended to write about a time some fifty years before his own, and so the London of his fiction is, in part, contemporary with Blake's. Both regarded London with a mixture of affection and horror. Both were fascinated by names. Both have received critical reprimands for their depictions of women. These and other similarities will be discussed below, but the main thrust of my argument will be to show that Dickens, like Blake, was acutely aware that his authorial stance involved him in ethical problems, and that, as his career progressed, he made this awareness more and more an explicit feature of his writing, displaying it, again like Blake, through the use of morally dubious intimations of himself as an author and as a private individual. This process, I shall argue, is what gives Dickens's writing, like Blake's, its special credibility as a vehicle for ethical debate.

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Blake's career, like Dickens's, began with 'sketches'. But the closest Blakean parallels both to Sketches by Boz and to Dickens's first novel, The Pickwick Papers, are to be found in An Island in the Moon. These three works are alike in their intermingling of serious issues and unsophisticated humour, and in the sense that each puts forward an idea of its author as fitfully brilliant but also, at times, as purposeless, detached, and amoral. Thus, Dickens represents 'Boz' exploring London in a promiscuous hunt for literary raw material, looking for characters and situations that will permit him to display his descriptive talents, acting like a freelance journalist with no specific brief: 'Somehow, we never can resist joining a crowd.' The prevailing tone is correspondingly inconsequential. And yet, the preoccupations of the Sketches are mostly grim, including vanity, superciliousness, inter-familial rivalry,

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the snobbery of *nouveaux riches*, social climbing, futile matrimonial ventures, confidence tricks, crime, sickness, and death. These themes were characteristic of the literary periodical establishment that Dickens was working for, but he took them up with exceptional readiness.

One favourite subject is the abuse of women by their drunken husbands: this is the main theme of 'The Hospital Patient' and 'The Drunkard's Death', and appears in 'The Pawnbroker's Shop'. It reappears in the sombre stories that are incongruously positioned amongst the jollities of *The Pickwick Papers*, in 'The Stroller's Tale', 'A Madman's Manuscript', 'The Queer Client', and, as here, 'The Convict's Return': 'The recollection of what he had been to her, awakened feelings of forbearance and meekness under suffering in her bosom, to which all God's creatures, but women, are strangers.'

That is a lazy sentence, complacently generalizing the specific crime, making it seem sad but inevitable -- in which case the literary depiction can only be lugubrious. 'The Queer Client' meets with a frivolous reaction from the Pickwickians (p. 325), while the similarly tragic 'Clergyman's Tale' has a 'somniferous influence' upon them (p. 93), recalling the sleepiness and boredom to be discovered among the inhabitants of Blake's morally noncommittal Island. Elsewhere in *Pickwick*, the horrible and the trivial are linked in Sam's 'Wellerisms'.

Dickens's ability to dwell heavily on suffering and then suddenly to forget it is symptomatic of a general secondariness of response. In *Sketches by Boz*, observation, especially the observation of emotion, tends to be undercut by cold bathos, and by a way of putting an imaginary frame around a scene, transferring it from life to a lifeless kind of art: 'And Mr. Cymon Tuggs and all the ladies forthwith fainted away, and formed a tableau.' This is a joke at the expense of the Tuggs circle, anticipating all Dickens's subsequent attacks on affectation, but Dickens himself does not yet give the impression of naturalness and moral soundness which he seems to be reaching after, much of the time, in his later authorial presence. His sharpness is not yet harnessed to any

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9 'The Tuggses at Ramsgate', *Sketches*, p. 354.
reforming aspiration. Moreover, there is already a relish for the kind of ghoulish, cannibalistic, and dehumanizing conceit detailed in John Carey’s *The Violent Effigy*, as in this admiration of babies: "Oh! what dear little arms!" said a fourth, holding up an arm and a fist about the size and shape of the leg of a fowl cleanly picked." Even beauty is made odd, distant, and disquieting by being tipped into a grotesquely paradoxical context: "Nice figure, Amelia", whispered the stout lady to a thin youth beside her." We do not see Amelia here, but rather the hungry images of her admirers. Amelia is made contingent: a projection, or, to use Blake’s phrase, a ‘ratio’, without absolute value.

But despite this bathetic, cynical style of humour, the young Dickens is capable of warmth and sympathy, the qualities that ensured him his early success. For example, number XV of *The Pickwick Papers* concludes with a short scene of obvious sentimental appeal, which Dickens, through his already very skilful manipulation of character and timing, makes fresh and realistic. Sam Weller has just had his father arraign him for debt, so that he can remain with Pickwick in the Fleet, despite Pickwick’s self-sacrificing wishes to the contrary:

‘You arrested for debt!’ exclaimed Mr. Pickwick, sinking into a chair.

‘Yes, for debt, Sir,’ replied Sam; ‘and the man as put me in ‘ull never let me out, till you go yourself.’

‘Bless my heart and soul!’ ejaculated Mr. Pickwick. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Wot I say, Sir,’ rejoined Sam. ‘If it’s forty year to come, I shall be a pris’ner, and I’m very glad on it; and if it had been Newgate, it vould ha’ been just the same. Now the murder’s out, and damme, there’s an end on it.’

With these words, which he repeated with great emphasis and violence, Sam Weller dashed his hat upon the ground, in a most unusual state of excitement; and then, folding his arms, looked firmly and fixedly in his master’s face.

(p. 674)

Sam’s ‘murder’ and ‘violence’ suggest a way of provisionally reconciling Dickens’s literary immersion in crime with his apparent admiration for the kind and the good: like Blake, he approves of energy, and will tend to make the actively evil as engaging as the passively good, and, furthermore, to express good actions in the language of evil. Sam’s

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'murder' is comparable to Blake's 'Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires'. Both examples warn us against taking their authors too literally, as moralists.

The silence that follows Sam's impassioned declaration (a month, for the novel's first readers) works well. Pickwick, at the beginning, was a caricature: just a mild, innocent, overweight eccentric. Sam Weller, at his first appearance, was a wag, a 'specimen of London life', executing modest flights of imaginational prestidigitation, classifying the guests at the White Hart according to their boots (pp. 145--46) -- very like the Boz of 'Meditations in Monmouth Street'. But, in the passage above, Dickens catches them both in a moment of convincing development: their mutual understanding is suddenly enriched, and they behave in a way which is new and yet consistent. They are warmly realizing a mutual indispensability, and, from this point, although more conventional amours are in the offing, their romance could be seen as the book's principal concern.

Some critics have argued that The Pickwick Papers carries a redemptive, almost millenarian message which it would be easy to compare with the prophetic impulse in Blake. Joseph Rosenblum, for example, writes that Pickwick 'is full of the laughter of the mock-heroic, but it is also charged with the epic theme of man's ability to transcend his imperfections'. Certainly, Pickwick goes far beyond the picaresque eighteenth-century mode of adventitious happenings suggested by Chapman and Hall's 'Nimrod Club . . . out shooting, fishing, and so forth, and getting themselves into difficulties'. And it does this primarily through the relationship of Pickwick and Sam Weller, which is dynamic, bringing development on both sides. But this relationship suffers no significant reverses. Dickens indulges himself, his readers, and his characters. Take, for example, Joe, the Fat Boy, the 'wonderfully fat boy', the 'corpulent intruder' (pp. 826, 833): he represents pure sensual

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14 Quoted in the introduction to The Pickwick Papers, ed. Kinsley, pp. xvii--xviii.
enjoyment, for us as well as himself. And when Dickens comes up with such charmingly self-congratulatory drolleries as the image of Joe and Sam Weller exercising themselves upon the ice 'in a very masterly and brilliant manner' (p. 452) he is gorging on the equivalent of a 'prime' plum pie, and presuming, as he does so, on our jovial acquiescence.

In *Pickwick*, Dickens does not attempt to cover up social iniquities, but he is not prepared to involve himself in them heavily. Pickwick pays his way out of his troubles, and those of his friends and acquaintances, but feels no compulsion to undertake the 'telescopic philanthropy' of doing good to total strangers. While Pickwick is in the Fleet, the prison begins to resemble a hotel; when he leaves, it will obviously revert. The world is a big place, full of trouble, the novel implies, and we should not let it worry us too much. We should care for human beings without addling our heads for humanity. So Pickwick is not really the paragon that he is sometimes made out to be, within the novel and without. He is a fairly ordinary good old man: unpretentious, frequently ridiculous, old-fashioned, and a little shabby (almost, at times, a fool). The esteem in which he is held by his associates is a touching matter of faithful enthusiasm. When Pickwick dispatches Sam Weller in pursuit of Winkle, with the words, 'You have my full authority, Sam' (p. 582), Dickens seems to invite us to ask what, exactly, Pickwick's 'authority' is -- apart from the good will of his friends. Dickens's most convincing heroes all have flaws, and their best attributes include the ability to call forth the virtue of tolerance in those around them.

'Everything' in *Pickwick* is 'concluded to the satisfaction of everybody' (title, p. 870). Even the supposedly disagreeable characters are nasty in an engaging way: Fogg, the solicitor, goes 'He! he! he!' as he contemplates his abominable sharp practice, and 'then both the partners laughed together -- pleasantly and cheerfully, as men who are going to receive money often do'. These are not villains to put beside Quilp or Carker, let alone Tulkinghorn. The epilogue (pp. 875--77) reveals that Dodson and Fogg escape the comeuppance that had always seemed to be looming, while Sam Weller marries Mary and stays with Pickwick, the novel concluding with the 'reciprocal attachment' of master
and man, which 'nothing but death will sever' (p. 877). Only the Fat Boy, last seen being pummelled by Sam for his presumption in admiring Mary (pp. 869–70), fails to have his cake and eat it.

The Pickwick Papers was the first volume to appear in the first collected edition of Dickens's works, the 'Cheap Edition'. For this, in 1847, Dickens wrote a preface which attaches a new seriousness to the novel, clearly indicating that he now saw himself as an instrument for social reform, not merely an entertainer:

Who knows, but by the time [the Cheap Edition] reaches its conclusion, it may be discovered that there are even magistrates in town and country, who should be taught to shake hands every day with Common-sense and Justice; that even Poor Laws may have mercy on the weak, the aged, and unfortunate; that Schools, on the broad principles of Christianity, are the last adornment for the length and breadth of this civilized land; that Prison-doors should be barred on the outside, no less heavily and carefully than they are within; that the universal diffusion of common means of decency and health is as much the right of the poorest of the poor, as it is indispensable to the safety of the rich, and of the State; that a few petty boards and bodies -- less than drops in the great ocean of humanity, which roars around them -- are not to let loose Fever and Consumption on God's creatures at their will, or always to keep their little fiddles going, for a Dance of Death!

(p. 888)

It is unlikely that Dickens saw any of Blake's Prophetic Books. But the Blake-like imagery of Dickens's concluding sentence signifies a shared Biblical and radical heritage, and a shared disposition towards the grandly metaphorical. 'Loud sport the dancers in the dance of death', in Milton, accompanied by 'Timbrels & violins' (24.62, 27.11; E121, E124); and Dickens's 'Fever and Consumption' recall the 'fogs' and 'plagues' emanating from the strongholds of tyranny in The French Revolution or America.

Blake's denunciations are usually fiercer, more freely eccentric, as in The Song of Los:

These were the Churches: Hospitals: Castles: Palaces:
Like nets & gins & traps to catch the joys of Eternity
And all the rest a desart;
Till like a dream Eternity was obliterated & erased.

(4.1; E67)

The Pickwick preface, by contrast, could be an inspirational parliamen-
tary speech, such as Dickens, the young reporter, might have had occasion to transcribe. Dickens makes frequent forays, throughout his writing, into the imaginative extravagance and aggressive wit that is Blake's element, but, in the early works which currently concern us, he always returns to a cruising altitude of level-headedness, showing a deference
towards his readership, and a sense that he knows exactly what he is doing with his literary style: suggesting that writing is a professional skill, to be switched on or off, turned up or down, as the occasion demands, and not the imperative natural process, independent of publishers and audience, that it can seem to have been for Blake.

Steven Marcus has maintained that *The Pickwick Papers* keep their composure by never really allowing the worlds of the successful and the poor to intermingle. *Oliver Twist*, on the other hand, throws these contraries upon one another, and displays an answering style:

The opening chapters of *Oliver Twist* are quite unlike anything that had ever before been known in English prose, including the prose of Dickens himself. If they remind one of anything it is possibly the *Songs of Experience*. Written in abrupt, truncated chapters, in a style utterly unlike the playful, graceful fluency of the narrative pages of the *Pickwick Papers*, the early scenes of Oliver’s life seem bitten off rather than composed.15

Marcus does not pursue the Blakean comparison any further, but his other observations on the novel do nothing to discourage it. For instance, he asserts that *Oliver Twist* . . . issues from what we might call a generic imagination -- an imagination . . . primarily employed in the dramatization or symbolization of abstract ideas' (p. 63), and that Oliver himself is accordingly an exemplary, Bunyanesque figure, 'the lusus naturae, a Christian child' (p. 82). In fact, throughout Dickens's work, and despite the superficial diversity of his characterization, a number of such archetypes keep recurring, among whom the cruel father (or father-substitute) and the helpless, neglected child have a precedence comparable to that of their still more standardized counterparts in Blake.

In Blake's *Songs*, the helpless child is surrounded by darkness, confusion and danger. In *Oliver*, according to Marcus, 'the controlling view of society at large . . . is that of a "great beaste", the mob, which, featureless and materializing out of nowhere, is always ready to pursue, surround and inflict its casual impersonal outrage' (p. 79).

Blake’s treatment of the threatened child is never laughably or contemptibly pathetic. Dickens’s sometimes is; but, at its best, it is

infused with an unsettling toughness. The new-born Oliver is a good example of this, being subjected, even as his mother expires, to the rude awakening of Dickens's satire:

After a few struggles, Oliver breathed, sneezed, and proceeded to advertise to the inmates of the workhouse the fact of a new burden having been imposed upon the parish, by setting up as loud a cry as could reasonably have been expected from a male infant who had not been possessed of that very useful appendage, a voice, for a much longer space of time than three minutes and a quarter.\textsuperscript{16}

Dickens makes the extent of Oliver's problems clear, but he does not weaken that impression with overt, cloying sympathy, or with the kind of platitude which lets the wife-beaters off the hook in \textit{Sketches by Boz}.

Compare Blake's 'Infant Sorrow':

\begin{quote}
My mother groaned! my father wept.
Into the dangerous world I leapt:
Helpless, naked, piping loud;
Like a fiend hid in a cloud.

Struggling in my father's hands:
Striving against my swaddling bands:
Bound and weary I thought best
To sulk upon my mother's breast.
\end{quote}

Here, the lowering of key from 'hands' / 'bands' to 'best' / 'breast', and the shift from the sharp, dynamic participles 'struggling', 'striving' to the ponderous 'sulk', wonderfully convey energy, not exhausted but resigned, and anger, not appeased but hoarded, so that we are left with a fractious, bloody-minded and alarmingly physical baby.\textsuperscript{17}

Blake is not condescending towards his generic but sharply realized infant: he allows the child to participate in its author's indignation, so that it is immediately political, drawing attention to its rights. The same can be said of Dickens's treatment of Oliver.

Dickens's investigations into infantile psychology deepen, in \textit{Oliver}, when the child begins work with Sowerberry, the undertaker, and has to sleep in a room full of coffins: 'He wished, as he crept into his narrow bed, that that was his coffin; and that he could be laid in a calm and lasting sleep in the churchyard ground: with the tall grass waving gently above his head: and the sound of the old deep bell to soothe him


\textsuperscript{17} Cf. Alicia Ostriker, \textit{Vision and Verse in William Blake} (Madison, Wisconsin, 1965), pp. 84--85.
in his sleep' (p. 26). Here, as in Dickens's later novels (especially The Old Curiosity Shop), a rustic situation is identified with peace, through death and oblivion, in contradistinction to the living hell of town.

In Blake's 'Chimney Sweeper', in Songs of Innocence, another benighted working child has a vision of peace, through death in the country, in which coffins similarly loom. The speaker in Blake's poem has a friend, Tom Dacre, who seems to suffer still more, and must be comforted:

There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head
That curl'd like a lambs back, was shav'd, so I said.
Hush Tom never mind it, for when your head's bare,
You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair.

This white hair suggests the boy's pure soul, which will be undefiled despite corporeal degradation: at least, we may choose to believe that. But it is also a sign of physical beauty, his defining characteristic and the focus of his friendship with the speaker. In the context of the other Songs, it seems reasonable to say that this poem has an erotic element to it, something which brings it even closer to the experience of Oliver and, in particular, to Oliver's relationship with his doomed friend and fellow victim, the insubstantial, spiritual, very Tom Dacre-like Dick:

'Hush, Dick!' said Oliver, as the boy ran to the gate, and thrust his thin arm between the rails to greet him. 'Is any one up?'
'Nobody but me,' replied the child.
'You mustn't say you saw me, Dick,' said Oliver. 'I am running away. They beat and ill-use me, Dick; and I am going to seek my fortune, some long way off. I don't know where. How pale you are!'
'I heard the doctor tell them I was dying,' replied the child with a faint smile. 'I am very glad to see you, dear; but don't stop, don't stop!'
'Yes, yes, I will, to say good-b'ye to you,' replied Oliver. 'I shall see you again, Dick; I know I shall. You will be well and happy!'
'I hope so,' replied the child. 'After I am dead, but not before. I know the doctor must be right, Oliver, because I dream

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18 'The Little Black Boy' is another poem in which the mutually protective and consolatory alliance of two children has a homoerotic suggestiveness, through a kind of displaced narcissism, also centring on hair: 'I'll shade him from the heat till he can bear, / To lean in joy upon our fathers knee. / And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair, / And be like him and he will then love me' (E9). An instructive contrast is offered by the conduct of Dickens's Mrs Squeers: 'Smike shuffled out with the basin, and Mrs. Squeers having called up a little boy with a curly head, and wiped her hands upon it, hurried out' (Nicholas Nickleby, ed. Michael Slater [Harmondsworth, 1978], p. 154).
so much of Heaven and Angels; and kind faces that I never see when I am awake. Kiss me,' said the child, climbing up the low gate, and flinging his little arms round Oliver's neck: 'Good-b'ye, dear! God bless you!' (p. 43)

According to Marcus, Oliver and the other outcast but favoured children in Dickens's novels speak, in defiance of all probability, exquisitely well-bred English' (p. 80). Jo, the crossing-sweeper in Bleak House, who is an outcast, and deserves to be favoured, is an exception to this rule, but Oliver and Dick, like Blake's sweeps, certainly do speak in a way that is too good to be true: in a juvenile fantasy-language of amatory tenderness. Since Freud, we are familiar with the idea that a child commonly passes through a phase of more or less rarefied homosexuality, irrespective of his or her subsequent orientation; and it seems that Blake and Dickens discover this fact for themselves. The discovery is probably unconscious for Blake, and almost certainly so for Dickens, though it has been claimed that Dickens went on to describe a much more elaborate childish homosexual attachment in the case of David Copperfield and Steerforth.19 Here, in Oliver Twist, we may well feel that Dickens does not escape a painful sentimentality, and that his view of childhood is tainted by adult morality and religion -- in so far, above all, as he accepts the consolation of a heavenly reward, which Blake, in 'The Chimney Sweeper', leaves starkly dubious. But there is an emotional undercurrent in the depiction of Oliver which remains essentially child-like, and this is what is most remarkable in both Oliver Twist and the Songs, underlying their imaginative strength: the perpetuation within the terms of reference of an otherwise adult writer of an almost pristine infantile mentality. It is this that saves the Songs, invariably, and Dickens, most of the time, from soppiness and kitsch.

The idea of Oliver as a lusus naturae does not allow for his troubled dreams and real emotions.20 And similarly, Marcus has an oversimplified approach to Oliver's enemies, going along with the familiar view that Dickens's characters divide straightforwardly between

19 See Carey, p. 172.

20 For more on Oliver's distinct propensity for dreaming, and the wider psychological concerns to which this relates, see Mary Anne Andrade, 'Wake into Dream', Dickensian, 86 (1990), 17--28.
the morally black and white. In fact, Fagin’s world has a good deal of
colour, not least in the form of verbal wit, which tends to make Oliver’s
politeness look stuffy and dull:

“We are very glad to see you, Oliver -- very,” said the Jew.
“Dodger, take off the sausages; and draw a tub near the fire for
Oliver. Ah, you’re a-staring at the pocket-handkerchiefs! eh, my
dear? There are a good many of ‘em, ain’t there? We’ve just
looked ‘em out, ready for the wash; that’s all, Oliver; that’s
all. Ha! ha! ha!”

Fagin squeals on his associates. He kidnaps Oliver and is instrumental
in the death of Nancy. But Oliver is fairly well treated, fed, and kept
amused, and Nancy, a grim, Sketches by Boz-type, fatally
all-enduring woman, was evidently going to fall foul of her beloved,
brutal Sikes sooner or later. Of the child crooks towards whom Fagin
acts as a fence but also, as above, as a kind of sausage-frying
scoutmaster, Charley Bates, always likeable, emerges finally as a model
citizen (p. 367), while the Dodger succumbs to transportation with such
panache that it is hard to think of him as a failed human being (pp.
298--301).

The Dodger, in fact, has much of the intelligence and self-reliance
of Sam Weller, and makes a point of exposing the lack of these qualities
in Oliver: “‘Go!’ exclaimed the Dodger,’ when Oliver evinces a desire to
leave Fagin. ‘Why, where’s your spirit? Don’t you take any pride out
of yourself? Would you go and be dependent on your friends?’ (p. 117).
This is harsh, considering Oliver’s age; and the Dodger himself enjoys
the benefits of a supportive community, albeit held together by
self-interest. But it is a cutting remark -- one that Dickens will echo
in many subsequent dilemmas of dependency -- and Oliver lacks the wit to
answer in kind, just as he lacks the initiative to escape from his
disorganized, less than competent captors.

While he is with the Fagin crew, Oliver seems to regard himself as
a Gulliver among the Yahoos. His attitude to Nancy, for example, has a
priggish condescension that seems to have more to do with class than
crime: ‘Oliver could see that he had some power over the girl’s better
feelings; and, for an instant, thought of appealing to her compassion for
his helpless state’ (p. 131). The assumption that he has ‘power’ even
when he is ‘helpless’ must come from an inward sense of superiority, to
which, in fact, Nancy seems to respond, putting herself in jeopardy for his sake because he seems to have fallen so far below his social level. Dickens seems to regard the upper-middle-class refinements which give Nancy this impression as innate. Thus, when Oliver first meets the Dodger, before he has had any contact with genteel society, he can already resist his new friend's apparent (half genuine) warmth and candour in favour of shrewd calculations on how to derive the best advantage from such common types: 'he secretly resolved to cultivate the good opinion of the old gentleman [Fagin] as quickly as possible; and, if he found the Dodger incorrigible, as he more than half suspected that he should, to decline the honour of his farther acquaintance' (p. 48).

Even in his twenties Dickens was so good at exposing pretentiousness, and so fond of unpretentious characters, that he must have been aware that such thoughts, on Oliver's part, have a distasteful aspect to them, unless he projected this awareness into the novel's 'bad' characters, thereby exorcising himself. For in addition to the Dodger's sharp criticism, there is Monks, who denounces his half-brother as a 'two-legged spaniel' (p. 273). In addition, Dickens as narrator tends to subject the boy to undignified, debunking, Welleresque comparisons: 'Oliver was not altogether as comfortable as the hungry pig was, when he was shut up, by mistake, in the grain department of a brewery' (p. 35). And there are numerous occasions when Oliver's posh vocabulary comes over as inconveniently limited -- liable to be shown up and blown away by the demotic fluency of his inferiors:

'A drain for the boy,' said Toby, half-filling a wine-glass. 'Down with it, innocence.'

'Indeed,' said Oliver, looking piteously up into the man's face; 'indeed, I --'

'Down with it!' echoed Toby. 'Do you think I don't know what's good for you? Tell him to drink it, Bill.'

James A. Davies writes of Pip's tendency, in Great Expectations, to slip into the jargon of commerce: 'Even when he fights the young Herbert in Satis House garden and the latter butts him, he comments on Herbert's head: 'I had a right to consider it irrelevant when so obtruded on my attention' [Great Expectations, ed. Margaret Cardwell, The Clarendon Dickens (Oxford, 1993), p. 91]. Suddenly we are far from boys fighting and in a world of high desks, scratching pens and formal communications' (The Textual Life of Dickens's Characters [Basingstoke, 1989], p. 98). Oliver, in his dealings with the Dodger, effects a similar shift from boyishness to middle-aged prudence. The business language is particularly fitting in Pip's case, but it is merely the perfected expression of a character-undermining ploy that Dickens had at his disposal at a much earlier stage.
'He had better!' said Sikes, clapping his hand upon his pocket. 'Burn my body, if he isn't more trouble than a whole family of Dodgers. Drink it, you perverse imp; drink it!' (p. 141)22

Thus far, I have been reading Oliver 'in the infernal sense', as Blake would say. Marcus refers to 'the tempters, the Fagins and the charming Dodgers' (p. 87), and, as a reader, one has to be careful not to be tempted, and conned, oneself. Dickens was sincere in his attacks upon the Poor Law and was clearly very fond of his Oliver.23 But he invests a great deal of energy in the depiction of Oliver's persecutors, and gives them many good lines: in Fagin's indoctrination of young Claypole, for example: 'Some conjurers say that number three is the magic number, and some say number seven. It's neither, my friend, neither. It's number one' (p. 293). Following Fagin's example, the Dodger preaches self-reliance and talks the financial cant of one who has become immersed in a materialistic system which he finds thoroughly congenial: 'I'm at low-water-mark myself -- only one bob and a magpie' (p. 47). This is suggestive of the 1980s City discourse of 'monkeys', 'ponies' and the like; and together with free-enterprise Fagin, this artful proto-Yuppie represents a whole anti-social social philosophy, one that will in due course be relaunched by Quilp from his undesirable residence in the undeveloped Docklands -- beside Blake's chartered Thames.

Fagin's conviction that self's the man is diametrically opposed by the community and mutual assistance of the Brownlow circle, and there can be little doubt that Dickens consciously intended us to prefer this second type of social organization. Fagin, after all, comes to a premature bad end. But Brownlow and his friends, including Oliver, have

22 Cf. Michal Peled Ginsburg, who differentiates between 'marked' and 'unmarked' language in this novel ('Truth and Persuasion: The Language of Realism and of Ideology in Oliver Twist', Novel, 20 [1986--87], 220--36). Oliver, Ginsburg argues, uses a plain, standard, 'unmarked' language that is 'equated with natural, innate morality and goodness, since things that are natural are always true and do not depend on circumstances' (p. 229). But I would say that in passages where Oliver's language falters, as above, it begins to seem just as contingent, context-bound, and partial as the more obviously 'marked' cant of the thieves.

23 See Dickens's response of 8 April 1841 to a fan-letter from the Rev. Thomas Robinson, a sometime workhouse boy, in which authorial emotion shades into the paternal: 'I feel it a great tribute . . . to receive your letter. . . . I thank you for it heartily, and am proud of the approval of one who suffered in his youth, even more than my poor child' (Letters, Pilgrim Edition, II [1969], 257).
an air of coming to a premature good end. Brownlow and Mr Grimwig anticipate Jarndyce and Boythorn as a pair of ancient bachelors, the first stoical but disappointed in the world, the second cynical, excellent at heart, but, on the surface, somewhat deranged. Their ménage is completed by a housekeeper, Mrs Bedwin, who is equally ancient and multiply bereaved. The future, for all these characters, seems to hold nothing more than placid retrospection. And there is little indication that more will be expected of Oliver: the question of his future employment comes up only once -- with what is, for Dickens, a characteristically vague and deprecatory reference to being a writer (p. 85).

Perhaps Oliver himself will rapidly metamorphose into a Brownlow or a Grimwig. For his place, in terms of love and sexuality, is left undecided. Will he find a Copperfieldian Agnes, or will he settle into a life-long celibate convalescence? One could say that Oliver is too young for this to be a legitimate concern, but there is some reason to think that Dickens, to his dismay, found a love-interest sprouting between Oliver and Rose Maylie -- who proves to be his aunt. That would explain Dickens's rejection of Cruikshank's first plate, 'Rose Maylie and Oliver', which shows two attractive young people looking merrily and fondly into one another's eyes, in favour of a later version in which Rose has aged dramatically (and to the ruin of the plot), to become a solemn Betsey Trotwood to Oliver's David.\(^4\) Thirty years later, editing the 1867 Charles Dickens Edition, Dickens apparently compounded this censorship by altering the 'mutual love' of Rose and Oliver -- too close for comfort, presumably -- to 'their love for one another' (p. 367 and n.).

The rescued Oliver, all in all, is an unsatisfactory, composite figure, with his childish vulnerability and adult sobriety.\(^5\) This

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\(^4\) Both plates are reproduced in the Clarendon Oliver: the first version facing p. xxiv, and the second facing p. 368.

\(^5\) Cf. John Watson, who notes a discrepancy, earlier in Oliver's career, between 'slow naivety [which] makes for a telling, believable contrast with the intelligent thieves' and 'improbably altruistic thoughts'. Oliver is 'not a large enough character', says Watson, to match other strong elements in the novel, particularly the villains ('Laughter, Imagination and the Cruelty of Life: A View of Oliver Twist', in Colin Gibson, ed., Art and Society in the Victorian Novel: Essays on Dickens and his Contemporaries [Basingstoke, 1989], pp. 1—15 [9]). But Oliver's self-contradictions are psychologically interesting. He is not
compromise, and the sense of resignation to be found in the Brownlow household, suggest a 'devouring', censoring, fatalistic aspect to Dickens's imagination, to be contrasted with the Blakean 'prolific' of Fagin, with his 'inexhaustible stock' (p. 80). And, while Dickens the public figure was convincingly campaigning for the good, in Oliver, it is perhaps not redundantly tautological to say that Dickens's creative demon was chiefly of the devils' party.

* * *

There is a lot of devil in Dickens's next young hero, Nicholas Nickleby -- and a lot of humbug too. Nicholas is the first representative of a juvenile élite whose later principals include the younger Martin Chuzzlewit, Florence Dombey, Richard Carstone, Ada, Pip, and Estella. The males in this group start out with far more egregious pretensions than poor Oliver's, and the narratives in which they find themselves are designed to kill or cure. All except Richard survive, but the success of the other members tends to entail ancillary sacrifices.

Dotheboys Hall is one of many Dickensian communities, variously benign or sinister, which appear to be as autonomous as desert islands. Like Oliver at Fagin's, Nicholas at Dotheboys Hall thinks like a Gulliver, or a Robinson Crusoe -- among savages, and with no doubt of his superiority. Viewing the brutish and ridiculous practices of Squeers, Nicholas withdraws into a state of uncommunicative contempt: he is as much offended by the vulgarity of his surroundings as distressed by the plight of his pupils, and cannot wait for an excuse to leave. When he does go, it is a matter of good fortune that Smike catches up with him.

'Nicholas charges ahead,' as Joseph Gold observes, 'encountering and discarding various communities'. Gold admires this restlessness (for him, the novel indicates 'that what is required is the structuring of new societies out of new impulses'), and so, by and large, does

such a small character if we do not assume that he is meant to be angelic -- an assumption which Dickens only insists upon after Oliver's rescue.


Michael Slater: Nicholas ‘is a brave and active, ingenuous jeune premier (very much in the Scott tradition) and cannot assume for us the qualities of a passive Blakean innocent like Oliver or Little Nell’. And yet, Nicholas’s activity is often reckless, and, if he can be ingenuous, he can also be self-deceiving.

Nicholas finds it relieving at the school to mutter satirical interjections, which only he has the education to interpret (p. 155, for example). His case is paralleled by that of his sister, Kate, when she is thrown into the humble and quaint society of Miss La Creevy, who paints her portrait:

‘I think I have caught it now,’ said Miss La Creevy. . . . ‘It’s a very nice subject -- a very nice subject, indeed -- though of course, something depends on the mode of treatment.’

‘And not a little,’ observed Kate.

‘Why, my dear, you are right there,’ said Miss La Creevy, ‘in the main you are right there; though I don’t allow that it is of such very great importance in the present case. Ah! the difficulties of art, my dear, are great.’

‘They must be, I have no doubt,’ said Kate, humouring her good-natured little friend.

(p. 179)

It is not easy to disentangle Kate’s patronizing of Miss La Creevy from Dickens’s here. Kate and Nicholas are treated differently from the other characters in the novel: with a reduced sense of perspective. They are put forward as an exemplary pair, hero and heroine. They cannot have permanent faults, or even eccentricities, like those of the secondary, more colourful characters around them. This complicity between Dickens and the central pair unbalances the novel quite severely.

However, Dickens’s loyalties are divided: his satirical genius is reluctant to let anyone go scot-free, and his closeness to Nicholas and Kate gives him a affectionately critical interest in their thoughts. Kate’s humouring of Miss La Creevy recalls the disparity between Oliver’s low opinion of the Dodger and his diplomatic speech; and it becomes increasingly apparent that such divergences of thought and word interest Dickens greatly, and that he delights in showing how individuals try to fool each other and end up fooling themselves.

An instance of refreshing mockery in the treatment of Nicholas himself occurs when the hapless youth, Joseph Andrews-like, is assailed

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28 Introduction to Nicholas Nickleby, ed. Slater, p. 25.
by an infatuated Fanny Squeers:

It happened that that particular time, comprising the short daily interval which was suffered to elapse between what was pleasantly called the dinner of Mr Squeers's pupils and their return to the pursuit of useful knowledge, was precisely the hour when Nicholas was accustomed to issue forth for a melancholy walk, and to brood, as he sauntered listlessly through the village, upon his miserable lot.

(p. 206)

This passage seems to be informed by the introspective individualism of romantic literature -- something which, as I have suggested in the case of Blake's Poetical Sketches, can be indebted to Shakespeare. But one cannot be a Joseph Andrews and a Jaques at the same time, and the robust and vital Nicholas makes a much less convincing promeneur solitaire than the humourless, half-mad speaker of 'When early morn walks forth in sober grey'. His romanticism, in fact, is a laughable affectation: of a kind that will be examined with greater rigour in Bleak House, where it finds its embodiments in Richard Carstone and -- poignantly -- in Harold Skimpole.

The romantic self-image is uncomfortably at variance with Nicholas's poverty, and provokes the contempt of his uncle -- 'your liberal, thoughtless, generous, dashing folks' (p. 838). Ralph is a wicked misanthrope, but his hostility is not irrational, and it feeds on qualities in Nicholas that Dickens's narrator is also prepared to attack, albeit more softly. Ralph, like Scrooge, regards himself as a person who works hard to keep society running, regardless of ethics, for people like his nephew to idle in. In effect, he implies an objection that the reader might wish to make: that Dickens extends an undue favouritism to young, glossy, unproductive types, while taking for granted the social superstructure. Moreover, Nicholas can be thoroughly hypocritical: 'I say, what a good-looking gal that was, wasn't she?' says the ugly employment office clerk. 'What girl, sir?' retorts Nicholas, 'sternly', who has just stopped ogling her himself (p. 258).

The good-looking gal proves to be Madeline Bray, who drives

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29 'Nicholas,' remarks Gold, 'is ... a comic version of Hamlet' (p. 68). Gold's argument that the novel is directly influenced by the play is persuasive, though he goes on to attribute a moral positivism to both works which I find simplistic (pp. 68--71, 82--83). Critics have found bad characteristics in Hamlet, such as vacillation (obviously) and vanity, and good ones in Claudius, such as daring and decisiveness; and this can be extended to Nicholas and Ralph.
Nicholas to new depths of disingenuousness as he tries to justify accepting the commission to liaise between Madeline and her would-be benefactor, Charles Cheeryble:

‘Has not this excellent man a right to my best and heartiest services, and should any considerations of self deter me from rendering them?’

Asking himself such questions as these, Nicholas mentally answered with great emphasis ‘No!’ and persuading himself that he was a most conscientious and glorious martyr, nobly resolved to do what, if he had examined his own heart a little more carefully, he would have found, he could not resist. Such is the sleight of hand by which we juggle with ourselves, and change our very weaknesses into staunch and most magnanimous virtues!

(p. 695)

The perils of Madeline, and of Kate, transform Nicholas’s vanities into something much more serious.

According to Humphry House, ‘the whole atmosphere in which Oliver lived in London would have been drenched in sex; but Dickens does not even obscurely hint at such a thing’: a statement which House allows to characterize the Dickens world in general.\(^{30}\) And yet, in *Nickleby*, there is a very real sense of sexual threat. This comes over in the persecution of Kate at the hands of Mantalini, Mulberry Hawk, and even Ralph himself, but it is most powerfully displayed in Madeline’s suitor, Arthur Gride, whose motives are far from being exclusively financial: ‘Arthur Gride, whose bleared eyes gloated only over the outward beauties, and were blind to the spirit which reigned within, evinced -- a fantastic kind of warmth certainly, but not exactly that kind of warmth of feeling which the contemplation of virtue usually inspires’ (pp. 716--17). It would be conventional to say that Dickens is being mealy-mouthed here, and yet, in the broader context of Victorian literature, a depiction of sexual gluttony which is really so intelligible is daring.

Nicholas and Madeline’s reaction to the threat of Gride is hopelessly inadequate. Dutiful Madeline resolves to frown and bear it: ‘If I cannot in reason or in nature love the man who pays this price for my poor hand, I can discharge the duties of a wife: I can be all he seeks in me, and will. He is content to take me as I am’ (p. 797). It is obvious that Gride is after more than Madeleine’s ‘poor hand’, and the last sentence is preposterously naive. Madeleine’s prim diction simply

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cannot meet the fact that she is being sold as a sexual convenience to an exceedingly dirty old man. And Nicholas cannot cope with it either -- which Gride realizes, leading to a savage taunting which demonstrates that the younger characters are expressing their own innocence and prudery, not Dickens's at all. Dickens, in fact, is manipulating sexual tensions in a very knowing way:

'Strange hound!' said Nicholas, 'if you were but a younger man -- '

'Oh yes!' sneered Arthur Gride, 'if I was but a younger man it wouldn't be so bad, but for me, so old and ugly -- to be jilted by little Madeline for me!'

'Hear me,' said Nicholas, 'and be thankful I have enough command over myself not to fling you into the street, which no aid could prevent my doing if I once grappled with you. I have been no lover of this lady's. No contract or engagement, no word of love, has ever passed between us. She does not even know my name.'

'I'll ask it for all that -- I'll beg it of her with kisses,' said Arthur Gride. 'Yes, and she'll tell me, and pay them back, and we'll laugh together, and hug ourselves -- and be very merry -- when we think of the poor youth that wanted to have her, but couldn't, because she was bespoke by me!'

( p . 805)

'And be very merry', between dashes, stands out as a vicious euphemism. Nicholas pretends to have no carnal interest in Madeline, but Gride knows better, and makes his point: exit Nicholas, outraged.

Nicholas's weaknesses are sharply exposed in his dealings with Gride, but that affair is resolved fortuitously, by the death of Madeline's father. Dickens withdraws from the prospect of a realistic Bildungsroman (which he was to take up in David Copperfield and Great Expectations), and the novel remains essentially an account of its hero's 'Adventures', in which chance has nearly as much precedence over psychological compulsion as it has in the novels of Fielding. In The Pickwick Papers, happiness was allowed to triumph despite a sense of evil in the world, and the same is still more true in Nickleby. Nicholas's 'first act', when he achieves wealth, is to guard against unforeseeable future dangers by setting up his own secure, continuing stronghold -- by purchasing his father's house (p. 932). This has a familiar air of retiring nostalgia, and could be taken as excessively self-protective.

Weak as he may be, Nicholas, as Slater says, is not 'a passive Blakean innocent'. But Smike is. In fact, Smike belongs to an entirely different imaginative world from that of the obstreperous Nicholas and the various London eccentrics. The dangers which Smike undergoes recall
those of Blake’s threatened travellers. And Smike, like Dick in Oliver Twist, is associated with a gloomy kind of pastoral, as here when he and Nicholas are walking towards Godalming:

The day wore on, and all these bright colours subsided, and assumed a quieter tint, like young hopes softened down by time, or youthful features by degrees resolving into the calm and serenity of age. But they were scarcely less beautiful in their slow decline than they had been in their prime; for nature gives to every time and season some beauties of its own, and from morning to night, as from the cradle to the grave, is but a succession of changes so gentle and easy, that we can scarcely mark their progress.

(p. 349)

Nature here contains an allegory of death; and Smike, on his deathbed, babbles about gardens (p. 864). Smike expires, and so does the young Nicklebys’ safe, innocent childhood, a time conjured up, again, by Blake-like scenes:

Once Kate was lost, and after an hour of fruitless search, they found her fast asleep under that tree which shades my father’s grave. He was very fond of her, and said when he took her up in his arms, still sleeping, that whenever he died he would wish to be buried where his dear little child had laid her head.

(p. 859)

Kate, like Blake’s Little Girl Found, and unlike Smike or the Little Boy Lost, has the good fortune to be recovered by a loving father. Taken in conjunction with the real danger apparent in the various lusts to which Kate is later exposed, this scene has a certain power, although the contrast with all the affectation and petty vices remorselessly catalogued in the more urban and urbane sections of the book can make the pastoral scenes look like kitsch or self-conscious antiquarianism.

Throughout Nickleby, in fact, it can be hard to take Dickens seriously (except in the case of the school, which is deeply impressive because we know that such places existed). Despite the novel’s conspicuous exposures of its villains, the narrator’s moral standpoint seems insecure and inconsistent: often we cannot tell whether he is satirizing Nicholas’s absurder attitudes or condoning them, and the whole structure is backed by the vaguest of beliefs. Take, for example, these narratorial reflections on spiritual communion: ‘It would almost

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seem as though our better thoughts and sympathies were charms, in virtue of which the soul is enabled to hold some vague and mysterious intercourse with the spirits of those whom we dearly loved in life' (pp. 652--53).

Just as Nicholas was unable to cope with Arthur Gride, so he lacks the ability to form a lasting connection with the suffering, poetic Smike: an awkwardness from which Dickens protects him. As they flee from the school, the economic status of the two youths is essentially the same -- neither has anything -- but it is taken for granted that Smike will follow and defer. Dickens seems not to have approved of the excessive propriety which nearly destroys the romance of Kate and Frank Cheeryble; he draws the line, however, at an affair between Kate and Smike. Smike chooses not to tell his love until it is too late, and Dickens clearly presents this as sensible conduct. Charles Cheeryble, who is blandly presented as a pattern of virtue in all respects, pronounces this epitaph: 'Every day that this poor lad had lived, he must have been less and less qualified for the world, and more unhappy in his own deficiencies. It is better as it is, my dear sir' (p. 898). This is preposterous -- and not only by present-day standards. Smike had acquitted himself with distinction on stage, with the Crummleses, and had been well liked. But Dickens allows himself to forget about that, just as he had clumsily redesigned Rose Maylie in Oliver Twist, so as to avoid an embarrassing development. Such is Dickens's involvement with the jeunes premiers, it seems, in this and later hero-centred narratives, that the little people who facilitate their progress, with selfless devotion, are almost expendable. Dick's death, in Oliver, was an important event, responsibly handled: one that will affect Oliver's life in an earnest, Copperfieldian way. Smike, on the other hand, is pusillanimously dismissed with Cheeryble's platitude, while Newman Noggs is stowed away like an ornamental hermit, in a cottage at the foot of Nicholas's garden (p. 932). In these ways, the Blake-like challenges which the novel seemed likely to offer to its readers' complacency about
real victims of social neglect are comfortably defused.  

32 My criticism of Dickens's early long fictions makes the assumption that the novel is the genre to which they should be assigned. Kathryn Chittick has recently argued that they were not originally thought of in this light, by Dickens or by his readers (Dickens and the 1830s [Cambridge, 1990], passim), and it is true that features which might be seen as structural defects (such as repetition, or anticlimactic endings) in a single, autonomous text might not appear that way when spread over many months. My criticisms reflect the point of view of a present-day reader with the whole text in front of him, and should not be taken as denying that Dickens sometimes had good reasons for writing in ways which, from this perspective, seem defective.
Neither Blake nor Dickens spent much of their time in the country, but each has a version of pastoral. Innocence, in Blake’s *Songs*, tends to be associated with the country, and hard experience with the city; but dangerous nature appears in ‘Night’ and ‘The Tyger’, and the chimney-sweeps can inhabit both *Innocence* and *Experience* without quitting their urban employment, except in vision or dream. Tom Dacre and his friend seem able, by the exertion of love and faith, to bring the country into the city; except that their love and faith may have no basis in reality: their paradisiac vision may, like the Holy Thursday outing, be nothing more than a fleeting gloss over lives of otherwise unrelieved drudgery. On the other hand, Blake is certainly not suggesting that anyone who wishes to be happy should quit the town. Blake’s horror at the various kinds of social disease that show themselves in ‘London’ suggests his love for that particular city: the poem is not about in-built evils but new developments, things going wrong; and *Jerusalem* conforms to the biblical and pre-biblical belief that a kind of city-living is the highest state to which man can aspire -- that heaven is a human city.¹

The relation between the country and the city in Dickens’s *Old Curiosity Shop* suggests, at first, a less ambiguous system of innocence and experience -- or simply of good and bad. London, for Little Nell, is a place of bad experiences, whereas the country contains scenes of innocence presented as the rustic norm: not, as in Blake, through an explicitly ideal, ‘visionary’ mode of perception. Dickens’s idea of the country is far less developed, intellectually, than his representations of the city, and that goes for Dickens’s heaven as well. The country and religion are inextricably entwined for Dickens.

In *Oliver Twist*, after the killing of Nancy, Sikes wanders into an agonized limbo, between the city and the country, in the region of

¹ Cf. Raymond Williams, who states that ‘the innocence and vice are in and of’ Blake’s London, ‘in its factual and spiritual relations’, leading to ‘a precise prevision of the essential literary methods and purposes of Dickens’ (*The Country and the City* [London, 1973], pp. 148--49).
Hampstead Heath. Tired of indecision, at length he enters a pub, in the village of Hatfield. Here this burnt-out specimen of city life meets his opposite, in prodigies of rustic longevity:

The conversation of the men assembled here, turned upon the neighbouring land, and farmers; and when these topics were exhausted, upon the age of some old man who had been buried on the previous Sunday: the young men present considering him very old, and the old men present declaring him to have been quite young -- not older, one white-haired grandfather said, than he was -- with ten or fifteen year of life in him at least -- if he had taken care; if he had taken care.

Dickens's view of country life owes more to literary tradition than to real experience. This is made obvious, two sentences later, when Autolycus bursts in -- 'an antic fellow,' that is, 'half pedlar and half mountebank', who resembles his Shakespearean ancestor even in a slightly risqué style of patter: 'This is the infallible and invaluable composition for removing all sorts of stain . . . . If a lady stains her honour, she has only need to swallow one cake and she's cured at once -- for it's poison.' The pedlar tries to apply his composition to Sikes's blood-stained hat; Sikes flees, and continues his tormented wandering. The idea here is that city vice will soon expose itself, once it emerges from the city smog: that the country is a place of truth, of revelation.

Nell and her grandfather, in The Old Curiosity Shop, are refugees from the city, figures from an almost lawless England where individual vendettas could be pursued unchecked, but which still seemed big and wild enough to hide in. Nell's goodness, like Sikes's sin, becomes all the more apparent out in the open air. So when the wanderers reach another ideal pastoral community they are very well received. This community centres on a school presided over by a master whose libertarian principles are quite in the spirit of Blake's 'School-Boy'. His class is full of clowns and dunces, but that does not seem to matter: the real centre of their lives is in sunlight and play -- in the echoing green, in fact, which can be seen in Phiz's illustration, over the grandfather's shoulder. Blake's 'Ecchoing Green' ends, in my reading, with intimations of mortality, and similarly the games of Dickens's children are made poignant by the fast-fading state of the master's only promising

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scholar, and, in due course, by the death of Nell herself. This makes Dickens's choice of the schoolroom as focal point seem more than coincidental. Like many earlier forms of pastoral, Dickens's is didactic: the countryside does not need to be treated realistically in his novels because it is not meant to tell us about itself, but about ourselves -- the sophisticated urban readership accustomed to deciphering parables.

This didactic element is something that Dickens shares with Blake, but also with the likes of Anna Barbauld; and a similarly heavy-fisted female moralist appears in The Old Curiosity Shop in the person of Miss Monflathers, who denounces Nell as a 'waxwork child', and hence a sinner, citing Dr Watts (p. 308). Dickens's ridicule of Miss Monflathers is a measure of his disapproval of any such adult designs for imposing moral burdens on the young. And yet, he himself uses young people to make moral points in a way which owes much to emblem books and religious manuals:

Some young children sported among the tombs, and hid from each other, with laughing faces. They had an infant with them, and had laid it down asleep upon a child's grave, in a little bed of leaves. It was a new grave -- the resting place, perhaps, of some little creature, who, meek and patient in its illness, had often sat and watched them, and now seemed to their minds scarcely changed.

(p. 490)

The child in the grave is not the same as the schoolmaster's favourite pupil, and the child on the grave is different again; but all are linked with patience and death. It is as though the village is stricken with some ghastly epidemic, and the children's sports are important, and indulged, precisely because their elders can sense the shadows closing in. The child in its peculiar 'bed of leaves' recalls the frontispiece, 'What is Man!' of Blake's emblem book, The Gates of Paradise, which shows an infant as a chrysalis, reposing on a leaf (B644). In Blake, we find the hope that the child will grow to flourish briefly as a kind of human butterfly, before proceeding resolutely through 'Death's Door'. Blake may not have believed in the preservation, after death, of the individual

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"To come across Dickens at work on the subject of education," writes John Lucas, "is to recognize that of all English writers who have had anything to say on the matter, only Blake comes near him in sheer enlightened compassion" (The Melancholy Man: A Study of Dickens's Novels [London, 1970], p. 161)."
consciousness; immortality -- 'the Eternal' -- is achieved, rather, through the continuance of archetypes: 'the Oak dies as well as the Lettuce but Its Eternal Image & Individuality never dies. but renews by its seed.'

This could make one death seem much like another. And in Dickens too there is a tendency to generalize when confronted with mortality. 'Here in The Old Curiosity Shop,' remarks Peter Coveney, 'the death of the schoolboy has no meaning within the work. It is merely an occasion for Dickens's impulse towards self-pity to focus and reach its logical conclusion in the morbidity of the child's death.'

The boy's death reinforces Little Nell's, in fact, but does nothing more. Dickens aspired to something like the Shakespearean patterning of variations on a common theme in his works -- all occasions informing on a main concern, like blindness in King Lear and 'self' in Martin Chuzzlewit -- but he only has one angle on the death of children, and he repeats it frequently.

Dickens can seem to be intimating that the village enjoys divine supervision: 'The sky was serene and bright, the air clear, perfumed with the fresh scent of newly-fallen leaves, and grateful to every sense. The neighbouring stream sparkled, and rolled onward with a tuneful sound; the dew glistened on the green mounds, like tears shed by Good Spirits over the dead' (p. 490). The dew is like tears, though; the 'Good Spirits' function as a metaphor for what is, in fact, plain inanimate nature: this is not what one says if one believes that good spirits really exist. In Blake's 'Night' we find ineffectual angels, similarly pitying, who create an uneasiness about the justification for earthly suffering. But there is no such uneasiness in the Dickens passage, any more than in that earlier digression, in Nicholas Nickleby, where he postulates a 'vague and mysterious intercourse' between deceased souls and the minds of their affectionate survivors.

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4 [A Vision of The Last Judgment] Notebook, p. 69; E555. However, Blake's position on the afterlife is not very clear or consistent. The address 'To the Christians' on pl. 77 of Jerusalem mentions 'Eternal or Imaginative Bodies' which we shall occupy 'when these Vegetable Mortal Bodies are no more' (E231).

Nell, in the curiosity shop itself, 'seemed to exist in a kind of allegory' (p. 56), and, at the village, she is the subject of an artificial, allegorical plan which anticipates Alice in Wonderland. Her conversations with the Sexton and his elderly assistant provide light instruction into the mysteries of age and time, from which Nell departs, mentally, into Alice-like reflections on paradox, the foibles of the old, and the general curiousness of things, 'thinking as she went how strange it was, that this old man, drawing from his pursuits, and everything around him, one stern moral, never contemplated its application to himself; and, while he dwelt upon the uncertainty of human life, seemed both in word and deed to deem himself immortal' (p. 493). Nell, in fact, has the same kind of imperfectly ingenuous, inwardly satirical intelligence that we find in Oliver, and in the junior Nicklebys, and she is partly like a Hamlet to these grave-diggers, who, in their clownish conversation, also show an obvious Shakespearean influence -- another thing that The Old Curiosity Shop has in common with Alice. As Empson says, 'much of the technique of the rudeness of the Mad Hatter has been learned from Hamlet. It is the ground-bass of this kinship with insanity, I think, that makes it so clear that the books are not trifling, and the cool courage with which Alice accepts madmen that gives them their strength.'

Nell is less cool than Alice; she is altogether nicer, in a way that puts off many twentieth-century readers. This is because her niceness takes the form of what Blake might have described as '[Female deleted] Infant wiles & [female deleted] infant smiles', through which Dickens seems to deface and trivialize his purported paragon. Her domestic pushiness, in particular, clashes with her exemplary status and subsequent canonization. For example, she 'ventured to say grace' having just arrived at the Jolly Sandboys (p. 202); ventures, having just arrived at the schoolmaster's house, to spring-clean it for him, in his absence (p. 252); and is eventually 'formally invested' with 'a little

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7 The Blake line is from the Notebook 'Cradle Song' (E468, E852). Cf. Michael Steig, 'The Central Action of Old Curiosity Shop or Little Nell Revisited Again', Literature and Psychology, 15 (1965), 163--70, where Nell is compared with Blake's Thel (pp. 169--70).
bundle of keys’ (p. 490). It is this sort of thing that makes A. E. Dyson’s assertion, that Nell is ‘a more humane Cordelia’, slightly disturbing. It is all too obvious that she is having the time of her life. But, like Alice, she is surrounded by grotesques: even her burial is attended by ‘the living dead in many shapes and forms’ (p. 658); and Empson’s idea of the ‘child-cult’, as a late, beleaguered form of pastoral, an escape, and a way of addressing the unconscious, is particularly applicable.

In this context, the unrealistic representation of the village is not a fault: rather, it is a way of achieving symbolic intensity, just like the wilful fallacies, the piping shepherds, the friendly lions, of Blake’s Songs. Blake and Dickens both try to confront suffering and death through their pastorals. In Dickens’s case, we know that this relates to Mary Hogarth, the sister-in-law who died suddenly in 1837, aged seventeen, and, further, we now know that Dickens deliberately worked up his feelings about this incident to stimulate his literary imagination. Mary actually died in Dickens’s arms, but you would hardly think so from the literary derivative. ‘Rather than condemning Dickens,’ notes Dennis Walder, ‘we should try to understand The Old Curiosity Shop by reading it with a due sense of the expectations it was intended to satisfy.’ But it must be conceded, too, that the ideas of

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9 Karl Miller has discussed the sinister aspect to isolation in the novel: ‘Quilp’s separation from mankind is evidently (though enjoyably) monstrous: but there is a taint of hostility in Nell’s grandfather too, which shows itself when he is “separated” from her in spirit by his compulsion’ (Doubles: Studies in Literary History [Oxford, 1985], p. 193). Nell’s own isolation, in her incessant, uncommunicated thought, and her way of helping herself unbidden to domestic pleasures, gives a comparable impression of a character ultimately out for her own ends. And her isolation as the object of scrutiny and threat can hardly be overstated: for in addition to those twin grotesques, Quilp and the grandfather, there is Master Humphrey himself -- the crippled old man who is understood to be reading Nell’s exploits to his withered and morbid cronies.


11 Dennis Walder, Dickens and Religion (London, 1981), pp. 83--84. But see also Marilyn Georgas, who seeks to refute the view that Dickens’s imagination, in The Old Curiosity Shop, was ‘in service to stock situations that were sure to please readers’ (‘Little Nell and the Art of Holy Dying: Dickens and Jeremy Taylor’, Dickens Studies Annual, 20
religion, death, and the future life that Dickens works with and seems to condone in this novel are very uncertain and unfocussed. This becomes especially apparent when Nell turns away from the Tweedledum and Tweedledee of the grave-diggers, as it were, only to confront the Caterpillar: 'the schoolmaster, who was sitting on a green grave in the sun, reading' (p. 502). The motto of this community seems to be *il faut cultiver notre cimetière*, and the schoolmaster is its Pangloss. 'There is nothing,' he says, 'no, nothing innocent or good, that dies, and is forgotten' (p. 503). And here is what is perhaps a fundamental difference between Blake and Dickens: Blake professes to deplore memory and revels in what he takes to be the eternal present of his visionary perception, whereas, for Dickens, retrospection, nostalgia, is all. Both authors seem to imply an extinction of the personality at death, but whereas Blake rejoices in the whole process of creation and decay, the Prolific and Devouring oscillation, Dickens consoles himself -- and supposes he consoles his characters -- with a clinging to the past, with the thought not that we will in any sense continue to live but that somebody, somewhere will now and then remember us.¹²

To Blake, this second line of thinking, and the death-fixated village of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, would suggest the Vale of Har. Indeed, Nell and her grandfather derive, like Tiriel and Hela, from Lear and Cordelia, and Dickens seems to be venturing into a realm of epic calamity. When we see his heroes shored up in a ruin and besieged by snow, suggests Malcolm Andrews, we are being encouraged to think of the nativity, and to expect some vast social indictment;¹³ and there are, in fact, some pages on manufacturing towns that anticipate *Hard Times* (p. 422 ff.). But although the early readers of *The Old Curiosity Shop* responded in a way few would now care to emulate to the death of Nell herself, they seem to have detected little social significance in the tale. The informed and influential Thomas Hood, for example, reviewing

¹² For a recent account of Dickens's tentative and uncommitted use of religious reference and imagery in this novel, see Michael Schiefelbein, 'Little Nell, Catholicism, and Dickens's Investigation of Death', *Dickens Quarterly*, 9 (1992), 115--25.

the first volume of *Master Humphrey's Clock*, remarked, 'it is quite certain that one-half of London is not aware of even the topographical existence of the other; and, although remote from our personal experience, there may be such persons as Quilp about the purlieus and back slums of human nature, as surely there are such places as the Almonry and Rat's Castle.' There may be Quilps about, but it is hardly a matter of pressing concern.

The pastoral Dickens is more remote than Blake from a workable reality, more of an escapist. But *The Old Curiosity Shop* ranges between two different imaginative worlds, and in the second Dickens's manner is practical, efficient, lively and cheerful. The world of the village dissolves with the death of Nell, like a bad dream. Or Nell and Quilp -- two bad dreams, equally remote from everyday experience -- cancel one another out, and we are left with characters who are as solid, if eccentric, as Sam Weller or the Nicklebys.

Smike died, I have suggested, for Nicholas's convenience. Nicholas is privileged in Dickens's imaginative hierarchy, while Smike belongs to a second, much less realistic system of characters, a pastoral type, a sentimental vehicle. Nell is another character of this latter type -- a passing object lesson for her more real acquaintances.

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Recent critics and biographers, with a few exceptions, have been less eager than their predecessors to think of William Blake as mad. Analysts of Dickens, on the other hand, have shifted gradually away from sweetness and jollity, towards ever darker psychological terrain. The extent to which either author actually suffered from mental disorders is not my present concern. But what I do wish to demonstrate, among other things, is that, for Blake and Dickens alike, the assumed appearance of madness, together with malice or criminality, can be an important element within the authorial or narrative presence.

Madness was a matter of such absorbing interest to Dickens that his first visit to the New World, recounted in the *American Notes* of 1842,

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became a single-minded quest for the nearest asylum (or prison, at best): officious behaviour which insulted his hosts, and which has been attributed to some kind of 'psychic collapse'.\textsuperscript{15} But by this time an American specialist in madness, Edgar Allan Poe, had already discovered in Dickens the inspiration for his most famous effusion, the blackly comical 'Raven'; and the blackly comical inspiration was \textit{Barnaby Rudge}.

\textit{Barnaby Rudge} is an idiot, a simpleton; and Barnaby's physical appearance and style of dress, as described by Dickens, and as drawn by Phiz,\textsuperscript{16} closely resemble those of Blake's 'natural', the piper in \textit{There is No Natural Religion} (B6). Blake accompanies his piper with an aphorism: 'None could have other than natural or organic thoughts if he had none but organic perceptions' (E2). Barnaby is obviously a 'natural' too, covered with vegetable ornaments, who communes with nature in the form of the raven, Grip.\textsuperscript{17} But his perceptions range far further. Grip, to Barnaby, is wholly the equal of a human being; and Barnaby spontaneously animates even something as insubstantial as his shadow:

'Oho' cried Barnaby, glancing over his shoulder, 'He's a merry fellow, that shadow, and keeps close to me, though I am silly. We have such pranks, such walks, such runs, such gambols on the grass! Sometimes he'll be half as tall as a church steeple, and sometimes no bigger than a dwarf. Now, he goes on before, and now behind, and anon he'll be stealing on, on this side, or on that, stopping whenever I stop, and thinking I can't see him, though I have my eye on him sharp enough. Oh! he's a merry fellow. Tell me -- is he silly too? I think he is.'

(p. 94)

Barnaby is, in a Blakean sense, an artist: one whose seeing is not delimited by rational, remembered terms. It is often said that he imitates Madge Wildfire -- Scott's Ophelia-like singing lunatic -- and Wordsworth's Idiot Boy. But Barnaby's poetic eloquence is obviously a great advance on the 'burr, burr, burr' of Wordsworth's Johnny,\textsuperscript{18} even though the two characters' weird inner worlds are similar. Barnaby is

\textsuperscript{15} 'A sense of spiritual strain and chaotic feeling, of an upheaval of personality, is difficult to suppress' (Introduction, \textit{American Notes for General Circulation}, ed. John S. Whitley and Arnold Goldman [Harmondsworth, 1972], p. 35).

\textsuperscript{16} See, for example, the plate of Barnaby with his raven reproduced in \textit{Barnaby Rudge}, ed. Gordon Spence (Harmondsworth, 1973), p. 192.

\textsuperscript{17} See Jerome H. Buckley, "'Quoth the Raven': The Role of Grip in \textit{Barnaby Rudge}', \textit{Dickens Studies Annual}, 21 (1992), 27--35.

\textsuperscript{18} 'The Idiot Boy', 1. 115.
a traditional and unrealistic figure -- an 'innocent folk-fool', as James Gottshall remarks'" -- but an exceptionally perspicacious one, whose simplicity allows him to see and speak the truth; and Dickens uses Barnaby, just as Blake uses his 'innocents', to judge sophisticated society and find it wanting.

Barnaby seems to suspect his shadow of being a trickster, who needs to be watched. This is prophetic of the real evils which Barnaby subsequently witnesses, and of the link which Dickens makes between Barnaby's insanity and the more insidious insanity that hedges him on every side. Dickens's use of Barnaby is superstitious -- drawing, like *The Old Curiosity Shop*, on hoary pastoral conventions -- but also psychologically acute. The idiot is haunted, in a way that must have interested Poe, by images of blood, metonyms of the murder that was perpetrated by his father (whom Barnaby has not seen since) before his infant eyes. This remains an unconscious trauma until the cathartic end of the book, when a soon-to-be-reprieved Barnaby meets his condemned father, who is subsequently hanged. Barnaby himself never quite shakes off his imbecility, but he becomes much happier: so that, unlike Oliver Twist, Barnaby is not just restored to his home but restored to himself, and the whole book is, on one level, a satisfactory psychoanalytic case-history, or a type of reverse *Bildungsroman*, dissecting as opposed to synthesizing, in which the solution of crime is more a matter of health than legal justice.

Barnaby's insight is not limited merely to the crimes of men. Alone among the novel's characters, he shows a philosophic interest in things outside the human sphere -- an honest, enquiring, attractive interest, quite unlike the melancholy quietism of *The Old Curiosity Shop*. "'Hush!' said Barnaby . . . . 'See, when I talk of eyes, the stars come out! Whose eyes are they? If they are angels' eyes, why do they look down here and see good men hurt, and only wink and sparkle all the night?'" (p. 74). This is like the innocent questioner -- silly, like a sheep -- of Blake's 'The Tyger':

> When the stars threw down their spears

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19 James K. Gottshall, 'Devils Abroad: The Unity and Significance of *Barnaby Rudge*', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 16 (1961--62), 133--46 (141).
And water'd heaven with their tears:  
Did he smile his work to see?  
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?  

Blake’s stars are like Milton’s apostate angels, but viewed half-sympathetically: resigning their weapons in disgust, perhaps, when a tyrant god produces cruelty. Barnaby’s stars are almost as powerful, in a different way: horribly cheerful and coquettish in the face of our despair. Dickens’s shaky confidence in heaven seems to have collapsed completely in this nightmarish, nocturnal book.

‘Like Wordsworth’s Idiot Boy,’ as Gordon Spence points out, Barnaby ‘has a devoted mother, distressed by cares that he is free from.’

Exactly the same can be said of the children in Blake’s Cradle Songs. All these innocents have a kind of blissful ignorance that paradoxically makes them seem, in a way, sane, calm and balanced, while the world around them goes to pieces. All live in an isolated pastoral environment. Such an environment, for Blake, is delusive, like the Vale of Har, something that must give way to the city-vision of Jerusalem. And, for Dickens, in The Old Curiosity Shop, the pastoral world was a gloomy, backward area, much less real than the city: a place where sick people went, as in Tiriel or Lear. Lear is recalled once more, in Barnaby, when the blind man, Stagg, calls at Mrs Rudge’s isolated cabin (p. 420), whereupon city crime intrudes upon pastoral retirement, and Barnaby is drawn into a new world that corresponds closely to Blake’s Experience. The echoing of Lear intimates the novel’s large social perspective, and suggests its dominating theme of inter-generational hostility.

The Barnaby society is one in which the young and old are mutually distrustful, leading to a collective insanity. Idiots, in Blake and Dickens, resemble adult infants, and John Willet, innkeeper, contributes to the general decay by treating his grown son as a child: ‘My belief is that there an’t any boys left -- that there’s nothing between a male baby and a man -- and that all the boys went out with his blessed Majesty King George the Second’ (p. 53). Subsequently, the son, Joe Willet, proves himself decidedly a man, whereupon The father himself becomes an infant, reduced to murmuring one phrase, respecting his son’s heroic amputation:

20 Introduction to Barnaby Rudge, ed. Spence, p. 15.
'It was took off . . . at the defence of the Salwanners, in America, where the war is' (p. 700). Dickens makes this very funny, and the reader's first feelings towards Old Willet are likely to be more affectionate than otherwise. He is rather like Old Weller: a mountain of flesh, with a small brain stuffed with idées fixes, who expresses himself with unconscious felicity; and when, on the point of death, he rallies to declare, 'I'm a-going, Joseph . . . to the Salwanners' (p. 737), we get a taste of the real Welleresque unflappability and aplomb. But, at the same time, Willet is a monster, and, after the destruction of the Maypole, an all-too-palpable living ghost. 'From truckling knave to trickling blood is always a very short jump in Dickens's world,' notes Susan Horton, à propos of the rioters' assault on Haredale, 'and just at the point when the reader might feel that he is free to lapse into a self-indulgent or sentimental response to Dickens's melodrama, that melodrama is transformed into something quite serious, and to which a sentimental or melodramatic response is neither appropriate nor sufficient.' Similarly, there is always a very fine line between Dickens's endearing simpletons and his dangerously vacuous delinquents. Toots and Traddles, for example (in Dombey and David Copperfield, respectively), are comically feckless, but fortunately good; the Fat Boy, Noah Claypole, John Willet, and Sim Tappertit show stupidity tending progressively towards the bad; and, had chance been less favourable, Barnaby himself could very easily have become at least accessory to murder, through his participation in the riots. Dickens's humour, more often than not, seems predicated on the observation that the world is full of irrational beings, whose workings cannot be fathomed; and, if this makes the world amusing, it suggests that only luck can make it safe.

Evil, in Barnaby, must be left to burn itself out; and a sense of the unassailableness of bad people is one of the strongest impressions that Dickens's writing offers. Take the infuriating Mr Chester: the fastidious aristocrat who thwarts his legitimate son's affections, is indifferent when his illegitimate son, Hugh, goes to the gallows, and

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encourages the riots out of spite. All that would be forgivable in a (literary) character like Quilp, who has real enthusiasm for his crimes. But Chester is just bored and cynical. He recognizes his own evil, but he is so lazy and desiccated that he carries on out of habit, idly mocking the empty air and with it the reader: 'Still, in every page of this enlightened writer [he is reading Chesterfield], I find some captivating hypocrisy which has never occurred to me before, or some superlative piece of selfishness to which I was utterly a stranger' (p. 233). He is a great character, with real power to raise the reader's hackles, and one of a type that Dickens uses over and over again: Gride was partly similar, but with a mitigating hint of Quilp; Ralph Nickleby had the same spite and obstinacy, but with a trace of Dombey-like patrician principle; Skimpole has the same way of juggling with moral terms without deferring to their meaning; and Pecksniff is the sort of smiling, smiling villain who, no matter how vigorously you oppose him, contrives to retain an attitude of smirking superiority, which pains you horribly even though you know that it is groundless. All these characters share with Chester the same disgusting containment, the same way of shielding themselves from reason, generating a sense of futility familiar from the Gothic novel, where the scenario of the premature burial is its crudest and most perfect form.

The presence of people like Chester within a novel necessitates a compensating force of expansion and release. In the present case, this is provided partly by Barnaby's free-spirited dementia, but the main release of tension comes in the Gordon Riots themselves; and Dickens enters into them whole-heartedly. In the Preface he was able to take a high moral tone, denouncing the 'shameful tumults' (p. 40), but, within the novel, artistic and emotional dynamics take over, with prolific, Quilpian fervour: 'I have just burnt into Newgate,' wrote Dickens in September 1841 'and am going in the next number to tear the prisoners out by the hair of their heads.' Just as the coldness and restraint of

22 Letters, Pilgrim Edition, I (1965), 349. Dickens is probably echoing Holcroft's Narrative of the Late Riots: 'The activity of the Mob was in this instance, as well as every other, amazing. They dragged out the prisoners, many of them, by the hair of the head, by the arms or legs, or whatever part they could lay hold of' (Thomas Holcroft, as 'William Vincent', A Plain and Succinct Narrative of the Late Riots and
Chester has its counterpart in the tyrants and prisons of the Gothic novel, so too Dickens’s anarchy suggests that frantic genre. If we seek precedents for Dickens’s sack of Newgate, as a vivid, violent phantasmagoria and as a brilliant commentary on crowds and power, we must look to the Edinburgh riots in Hogg’s Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner (1824), or Monçada’s auto da fé in Maturin’s Melmoth the Wanderer (1820). Beyond the novel, the closest parallels are to be found in Blake.

Dickens attributes a greedy sensationalism to the London populace: ‘Tidings were everywhere received with that appetite for the marvellous and love of the terrible which have probably been among the natural characteristics of mankind since the creation of the world’ (p. 492). This sounds like the response elicited by the latest number of a Dickens novel. And indeed, Dickens was capable of providing some sensational material: sex, as suggested in the perils of Emma and Dolly; and lurid violence, as in the case of the rioter’s skull, dissolved by molten lead (p. 508). So Dickens does not exactly pale at the riots. But nor does he underestimate their significance. The scene in which the rioters debauch and kill themselves, around the pool of burning alcohol, recalls Milton’s devils on the sulphureous lake. This has been noted. But not enough has been said about the epic portentousness of the scene, the way it raises the particular historical event to the status of a full-scale eruption of hell:

From the burning cellars, where they drank out of hats, pails, buckets, tubs, and shoes, some men were drawn, alive, but all alight from head to foot; who, in their unendurable anguish and suffering, making for anything that had the look of water, rolled, hissing, in this hideous lake, and splashed up liquid fire which lapped in all it met with as it ran along the surface, and neither spared the living or the dead. On this last night of the great riots -- for the last night it was -- the wretched victims of a senseless outcry, became themselves the dust and ashes of the flames they had kindled, and strewed the public streets of London. (p. 618)

Dickens’s ideas of hell, like most people’s, are a great deal sharper than his ideas of heaven, and it is hardly surprising that this scene is


'fixed indelibly' in Barnaby's mind, a new trauma to supplement the old. Barnaby, as protagonist, and as a visionary figure, feels some of the hypnotic influence which draws the rioters to their deaths, and his viewing of the riot parallels Dickens's and ours. The garish quality of Barnaby's imagination sets the tone for the whole description of the scene, so that our experience of the novel seems to involve a temporary madness. Dickens is making the kind of connection between imagination and anarchism that we find in the transitive 'marking' of Blake's 'London': both works indulge their authors in a fantasy of the desecration of their city. This is particularly unnerving, because we are presented with feelings deeper than mere disgust at the actions of others; both authors seem to be calling up their own aggression, and expressing what seems an almost suicidal need to look horrors in the eye.\(^{24}\)

It is well known that the interest in reform to be found in nineteenth-century bourgeois writers was partly fuelled by the fear of revolution. That certainly comes across in Sim Tappertit's 'Prentice Knights', or 'United Bulldogs'. But Dickens shows that the principal rioters are in different ways society's responsibility: Barnaby is the innocent inheritor of crime; Hugh becomes an animal because he has been treated as one; Dennis, the hangman, who executed Hugh's mother, is a murderer on society's behalf. Evidently, the riots are not important as a consequence of Lord Gordon's folly and fanaticism, but as the just deserts of a neglectful status quo, whose evil is returned in kind. Thus the Maypole Inn is comparable to Falstaff's Boar's Head, a symbol of Merry England gone bad (much more obviously so in Dickens's case): a place that we may be fond of but which will have to be sacrificed for the general good.

'The events of 1836--41 made [Barnaby Rudge] almost journalistically apt,' note John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson,\(^{25}\) and the

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\(^{24}\) Compare Kim Ian Michasiw, 'Barnaby Rudge: The Since of the Fathers', _ELH_, 56 (1989), 571--92, which reads this novel as a study in Oedipal struggle (Dickens's own and his male characters'), and draws Blakean parallels (pp. 586--87).

laws and practices that Dickens execrates -- such as capital punishment -- were still there to be attacked. Nevertheless, the historical form of the novel lends security: Dickens does not openly have to admit a belief, or desire, that any such transformation could or should happen in the present. This applies equally to Blake, who, as we have seen, relived 1789 in works such as The French Revolution and America, and entered gleefully into recent history's most violent aspects through the character of Orc, working up to a grandiose epic perspective which ultimately leaves the immediate political context behind. Both authors make their social and political opinions plain elsewhere, but, in the heat of literary invention, these seem subordinated to a free -- even irresponsible -- expression of excitement.

Dickens, it is clear, was very much aware of the emotional effect of his writing, and he structures this novel, in particular, with a view to making the reader's head spin. In terms, simply, of the novel's success as an entertainment, the explosion of the riot is very well prepared for, if not necessitated, by the variously stultifying and selfish worlds of Chester and Old Willet. Once that explosion has taken place it makes sense, emotionally, and, for Dickens and his publishers, economically, to conclude with a celebration of peaceful domestic values. And it is in these terms that the riot, finally, comes to seem deplorable, as when Haredale goes to view the Warren, his bleak -- shattered -- house:

How much more sad the crumbled embers of a home: the casting down of that great altar, where the worst among us sometimes perform the worship of the heart; and where the best have offered up such sacrifices, and done such deeds of heroism, as chronicled, would put the proudest temples of old Time, with all their vaunting annals, to the blush!

(p. 725)

The hearth, here, is a type of golden calf, indicating Dickens's investment of faith in earthly things. Accordingly, Haredale seems to be destroyed through his property; and his reaction, as is usual in cases

26 See the letter to John Landseer appropriately dated 5 November 1841 in which Dickens, making himself sound very much like a rioter, discusses his intention 'to select the striking points and beat them into the page with a sledge-hammer', and 'to convey an idea of multitudes, violence, and fury; and even to lose my own dramatis personae in the throng, or only see them dimly, through the fire and smoke' (Letters, Pilgrim Edition, II [1969], 417–18).
of Dickensian disaster, is to retreat -- to an extreme degree that the modern reader may find comical:

Repairing straight to a religious establishment, known throughout Europe for the rigour and severity of its discipline, and for the merciless penitence it exacted from those who sought its shelter as a refuge from the world, he took the vows which thenceforth shut him out from nature and his kind, and after a few remorseful years was buried in its gloomy cloisters.

(p. 731)

There is no spiritual factor to be considered here, any more than if Haredale had joined the Foreign Legion. The contentious phrase 'merciless penitence', in particular, is an indicator of Dickens's insensitivity to Christian ideas; and it is clear also that Dickens has derived his understanding of monasteries from, again, the Gothic novel, where they are often confused with prisons. And the ruling spirit of the closing pages of the book is, in effect, a jailor: the locksmith, Varden, who refuses to open Newgate to the rioters, and who leads the benign Mafia that snatches Barnaby from death. Varden, as Carey notes, 'stands for law and order -- and prisons -- in a novel which is torn between the glamour of anarchy and the terror of it'.

Freud might have seen Varden as the repressive super-ego, and Blake might have called him Urizen.

However, Dickens puts Haredale's aristocratic, abdicating gesture, like the airs and graces of Oliver Twist, in an ironic perspective, switching his attention with little delay to the burlesque affairs of the humbled and crippled Sim Tappertit and his mock-heroic marriage to 'the widow of an eminent bone and rag collector, formerly of Millbank' (p. 734). This kind of irreverence makes Dickens's solemnity, elsewhere, look suspiciously theatrical; and in the closing pages of Barnaby Rudge there is a sense of moral slippage and disorientation. Chester, just before he is dispatched by Haredale, denounces the 'sickening cant of honesty and truth' (p. 729); and, indeed, he has never claimed to be better than he is. Conversely, Dickens speculates about the residues of human kindness in 'the worst among us' (p. 725), and shows Lord George Gordon unexpectedly philanthropic in his latter days in prison: 'There are wise men in the highways of the world who may learn something, even

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from this poor crazy lord who died in Newgate' (p. 733). Gordon is put in a sympathetic light by the warm regard that momentarily flickers between him and that other 'poor crazy', Barnaby; and, as with Barnaby, Dickens is more interested in Gordon's unhappy psychology than in his crime and punishment.28

The dramatic core of *Barnaby Rudge*, therefore, seems to contain a sympathy with madness, and is enriched by a madman's obsessive way of seeing. The novel does not really differ, in this respect, from earlier works such as *Oliver Twist* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*, which involve a protagonist dropped suddenly into phantasmagoric dangers, and persecuted by devilish beings -- circumstances which could be read as an allegory of mental illness. The solution of the protagonist's difficulties, in those novels, was less than convincing, and, in *Barnaby* too, emergence from the gripping nightmare seems to involve the imposition of an artificial peace. Varden's celebration tea (p. 714), for example, suggests a bulimic overcompensation for the negotiated straits. And there is an analogous sense of stodgy consolidation in the industrious breeding of Dolly and Joe: 'It was not very long, counting by years, before there was a red-faced little girl, another red-faced little boy, and a whole troop of girls and boys . . . more small Joes and small Dollys than could be easily counted' (p. 735). There is a humorous episode in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, among the circus people, when we learn that the dwarves are waited on by decrepit giants: an absurd vision of a declining Golden Age. A similar sense of absurdity is hard to avoid, in *Barnaby*, when we realize that the likes of the giant 'centaur', Hugh, have been exterminated, and that the world is about to be colonized by these mass-produced, unquantifiable infants. In his effort to remain a respectable author, demonstrably right-thinking, healthy, and benign, Dickens seems to be forcing himself into increasingly grotesque and unpersuasive narrative manoeuvres.

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CHAPTER 7

Narratorial Independence and Disruptiveness in

Martin Chuzzlewit and Dombey and Son

'I was always sure I could make a good thing of Barnaby,' Dickens told
Forster, 'and I think you'll find that it comes out strong to the last
word.'¹ This sounds like the heroic Mark Tapley, from Dickens's next
novel, Martin Chuzzlewit: always ready to 'come out strong' if only he
could meet with suitable adversity. The connection here between
suffering, perseverance and literary success is one which Dickens
advances more directly elsewhere: Miss Knagg, in Nicholas Nickleby,
remarks of her brother, 'I often say, I think his disappointment a great
thing for him, because if he hadn't been disappointed he couldn't have
written about blighted hopes and all that; and the fact is if it hadn't
happened as it has, I don't believe his genius would ever have come out
at all.'² This is satirical, for Knagg is a wretched writer, but the
same idea is presented straightforwardly in David Copperfield, where the
hero's reverses are understood to furnish the material and the disposi­
tion for a literary career. Copperfield is famously autobiographical;
and so, in a way, it proves its own point. And Dickens's direct
addresses to his readers imply similar views of what makes up an author.
Thus, in his 1841 advertisement for Chuzzlewit, Dickens comes out strong,
like a one-man cottage industry: 'On the First of November, eighteen
hundred and forty-two, I purpose, if it please God, to commence my new
book in monthly parts, under the old green cover, in the old size and
form, and at the old price.'³ What a mixture of galloping self­
confidence, imputed heroics, and artless pragmatism: 'I am not only a
fine and dependable author,' he seems to be saying, 'but also excellent
value for money!' Addresses of this kind encourage the reader to form
an admirable and friendly image of Dickens the author, a useful sales

¹ Dickens to John Forster, probable date 11 August 1841; The Letters
of Charles Dickens, ed. Madeline House and others, The Pilgrim Edition

298.

³ Reprinted in John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson, Dickens at Work,
strategy. Increasingly, however, Dickens would come to project versions of his authorial presence which are much more difficult to reconcile with commercial self-promotion.

This second, more perplexing, class of implied author is certainly not to be found in the first chapter of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, which consists of a very light spoof of genealogical pretension, and which has little in common with the main body of the novel. But the narrative proper, and a very different narratorial standpoint, begins in the second chapter, with a fluctuation in a fog:

> It was pretty late in the autumn of the year, when the declining sun, struggling through the mist which had obscured it all day, looked brightly down upon a Wiltshire village, within an easy journey of the fair old town of Salisbury.

> Like a sudden flash of memory or spirit kindling up the mind of an old man, it shed a glow upon the scene, in which its departed youth and freshness seemed to live again.*

The reference to an old man recalls Master Humphrey, and Nell’s grandfather; and there is a new old man to whom we shall shortly be introduced -- the elder Martin Chuzzlewit. For a thirty-year-old, Dickens seems strangely eager to use senescent ways of seeing.

The springtime in *Chuzzlewit* might be expected to have a compensatory, rejuvenated bounce. On the contrary:

> It was a lovely evening, in the spring time of the year . . . .

> It was a time when most men cherish good resolves, and sorrow for the wasted past: when most men, looking on the shadows as they gather, think of that evening which must close on all, and that to-morrow which has none beyond.

> 'Precious dull,' said Mr. Jonas, looking about. 'It's enough to make a man go melancholy mad.'

(pp. 331–32)

Jonas Chuzzlewit’s mind is the mind of an imminent murderer, but here his thought connects with an indifference to nature which often lurks in Dickens’s abstracting piety. Surely summer will bring relief from this introspective, retrospective mode? Not for Pecksniff, anyway. He seems to enjoy nature, but it is the enjoyment of sentimental self-indulgence:

The summer weather in his bosom was reflected in the breast of Nature. Through deep green vistas where the boughs arched over-head, and showered the sunlight flashing in the beautiful perspective; through dewy fern from which the startled hares leaped up, and fled at his approach; by mantled pools, and fallen trees, and down in hollow places, rustling among last year’s leaves whose scent was Memory; the placid Pecksniff strolled.

(p. 479)

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Pecksniff's placidity is not a good thing. It allows him to smile through the remonstrances of Mary, whom he amorously accosts a few moments later. But, when Mary has made her escape, the placidity crumbles, and Pecksniff undergoes a series of unsightly transformations, which reveal him as a serpent in a paradise:

He seemed to be shrunk and reduced; to be trying to hide himself within himself; and to be wretched at not having the power to do it. His shoes looked too limp; his hat looked too little; his features looked too mean; his exposed throat looked as if a halter would have done it good. For a minute or two, in fact, he was hot, and pale, and mean, and shy, and slinking, and consequently not at all Pecksniffian.

(pp. 483--84)5

Pecksniff, as he shrivels and wilts, participates in a pattern of contracting self-involvement that runs throughout the novel.® Jonas takes this process to the extreme, after the murder, when his mind seems to consume itself. Dickens's descriptions of nature, which are not unattractive, reproach the villains' self-absorption, but also reflect it -- in their emphasis on gloom and memory. Just as the idiot's vision took over in Barnaby, at the passages of greatest intensity, so here the narration is submerged in the consciousness of the characters, who are dangerous because they infect, disseminating moral plagues.

Jonas comes to be tormented by the idea that he is dividing, becoming his own assailant. Pecksniff appears, paradoxically, to make himself more conspicuous as he shrinks. The collapse of his facade of virtue exposes a huge void of insecurity. Pecksniff, usually such a competent fiend, becomes momentarily a poor devil. This process is paralleled in the narrator's celebrated meditation on the view from the roof of Todgers's hotel:

After the first glance, there were slight features in the midst of this crowd of objects, which sprung out from the mass without any reason, as it were, and took hold of the attention whether the spectator would or no. Thus, the revolving chimney-pots on one great stack of buildings, seemed to be turning gravely to each other every now and then, and whispering the result of their separate observation of what was going on below. Others, of a crook-backed shape, appeared to be maliciously holding themselves askew, that they might shut the prospect out and baffle Todgers's. The man who was mending a pen at an upper window over the way, became of paramount importance in the scene, and made a blank in it, ridiculously disproportionate in its extent, when he retired.

® Cf. Paradise Lost, IV. 114--30.
The gambols of a piece of cloth upon the dyer's pole had far more interest for the moment than all the changing motion of the crowd. Yet even while the looker-on felt angry with himself for this, and wondered how it was, the tumult swelled into a roar; the host of objects seemed to thicken and expand a hundredfold; and after gazing round him, quite scared, he turned into Todgers's again, much more rapidly than he came out; and ten to one he told M. Todgers afterwards that if he hadn't done so, he would certainly have come into the street by the shortest cut: that is to say, head foremost.

(p. 132)

The threatened topple from eminence could be the fall of Satan, or the 'Jonsonian exposure' and defeat of overreaching Pecksniff. Dorothy Van Ghent finds a symbolic crisis, here, in which objects lose their usual significance, while J. Hillis Miller undergoes 'a double disintegration of the self'. David Trotter observes a more static 'framing', and a revelation of the city 'as a conundrum, a play of presence and absence'. However, the passage is powerful enough simply as an evocation of vertigo: the withdrawing pen-mender creates a vacuum that sucks us outwards; the chimney-pots do not just turn, but turn 'every now and again', attacking in waves; the tumult suddenly asserts itself, suggesting that the watcher's hearing had gone dead, without his knowledge. It is a fiendish predicament, all in all, reminiscent of Dickens's original intention to set the beginning of the novel at the top of a lighthouse.

Dickens had recently suffered an all-too-real vertiginous attack during his voyage to America (said to have been the worst crossing for decades):

The water-jug is plunging and leaping like a lively dolphin; all the smaller articles are afloat, except my shoes, which are stranded on a carpet-bag, high and dry, like a couple of coal-barges. Suddenly I see them spring into the air, and behold the looking-glass, which is nailed to the wall, sticking fast upon the ceiling. At the same time the door entirely disappears, and a new one is opened in the floor. Then I begin to comprehend that the

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state-room is standing on its head." This passage resembles the view from Todgers’s in its near-surrealism and its suggestion of the victim being mesmerized, brought by the crisis to a new intensity of perception. But such effects occur in Dickens’s earlier work too: the fires in *Barnaby Rudge*, for example, which seize the gaze, undermine the reason, and draw people to their deaths. The sack of the Maypole is another instance of a mesmeric inversion and scattering of familiar things. And a celebrated case of an individual actually thrown to his death by a hallucination occurs with the death of Sikes in *Oliver Twist*. So the theme of a sudden loss of control, both of the self and of perceived reality, is a pervasive one in Dickens. Disconnected, as it seems to be, from the plot of *Chuzzlewit*, the view from Todgers’s is, to the novel as a whole, what the fit in the wood is to the personality of Pecksniff: it suggests that the narrative itself might not be grounded in a stable apprehension of the world.

The Pecksniff home, on the other hand, is a model of decorum and fixity, an extension of its owner’s mask of calm. Its rituals may be mean but they are regular. So when the young Martin Chuzzlewit, a Nicholas-like bumptious youth, arrives and helps himself to Pecksniff’s bacon, the effect upon the great man’s permanent retainer is devastating:

He even seemed to think that he was doing quite a regular thing, and to expect that Mr. Pinch would follow his example, since he took occasion to observe of that young man ‘that he didn’t get on’: a speech of so tremendous a character, that Tom cast down his eyes involuntarily, and felt as if he himself had committed some horrible deed and heinous breach of Mr. Pecksniff’s confidence. Indeed, the agony of having such an indiscreet remark addressed to him before the assembled family, was breakfast enough in itself, and would, without any other matter of reflection, have settled Mr. Pinch’s business and quenched his appetite, for one meal, though he had been never so hungry.

(pp. 85--86)

Martin’s initiative shocks Tom, rather as Oliver’s asking for more shocks the beadle; the two communities in question are so highly strung that the merest irregularity ushers in the threat of chaos. Tom is put off his food, as if he felt sick: for him, looking beyond the safe, small, tyrannized world of the Pecksniff home is like stepping onto Todgers’s roof.

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Martin, on the other hand, has 'been bred up from childhood with great expectations' (p. 94) -- like Pip, Nicholas Nickleby, Richard Carstone or Edward Chester -- only to be faced with a hollow inheritance. There are few more important social factors at work in this or any other Dickens novel than the prolonged dependence of middle-class Victorian children on their parents or guardians. This gives rise to a dominant Dickensian emotion -- petulant resentment -- which takes a dreadful form in the would-be patricide, Jonas. The cure for this situation, it might be thought, would be found in independence: and that is what Dickens seems to imply. Thus, Jonas, in his father's office, is faced with a monitory image of human nature reduced to the minimum, in the dependent person of the clerk, Mr Chuffey:

Such as he was, he came slowly creeping on towards the table, until at last he crept into the vacant chair, from which, as his dim faculties became conscious of the presence of strangers, and those strangers ladies, he rose again, apparently intending to make a bow. But he sat down once more, without having made it, and breathing on his shrivelled hands to warm them, remained with his poor blue nose immovable above his plate, looking at nothing, with eyes that saw nothing, and a face that meant nothing. Take him in that state, and he was an embodiment of nothing. Nothing else.

(p. 178)

This, in its remorseless diminuendo, its gradual extinguishing of signs of life, represents an opposite pole, in the life of the novel, to the view from Todgers's. Dickens can show moribund stasis just as powerfully as chaotic transformation: the one seems to entail the other.

Jonas clearly should have heeded the warning, turned away from his wretched father and found fresh air elsewhere. Martin seems to be doing something like this when he sets off for America, but here, as in American Notes, Dickens gives the impression that anyone who crosses the Atlantic is misguided. Martin does not make his own fortune, but simply learns a certain power of endurance, a rather pointless lesson since the challenge to his resources is eventually withdrawn: his grandfather delivers the cash, in what Dickens presents as an ideally happy ending.\footnote{Cf. Sylvère Monod, 'Martin Chuzzlewit', Unwin Critical Library (London, 1985), pp. 28--29.} Dickens, despite his emphasis in Chuzzlewit on 'self' and self-determination, seems partly to sympathize with the oppressive 'placidity' of the Pecksniffian domestic plan: the distaste for ambition, the reluctance to
rock boats, even when they have patently run aground.

In earlier sections of the novel, Martin was exposed, in his dependence, through the long-suffering, patronized good offices of Tom and Mark (members of Dickens's worthy secondary class, who cater to the juvenile élite): there is much to be said, in fact, for John Lucas's view that 'in Chuzzlewit Dickens sees through the sort of hero he celebrates in Nicholas Nickleby'. But I have suggested that Dickens actually saw through Nicholas, from time to time; and, conversely, Dickens does not press the attack on Martin, and what he stands for, home. Towards the end of the novel, Martin's friend, John Westlock, and Dickens himself, are faced with the problem of accommodating the unattached Tom 'without any sense of dependence' (p. 815), and they fail dismally: John makes plans on Tom's behalf and installs him as an adjunct to his connubial ménage. Dickens was capable of some very wishful thinking with regard to happy households, thinking which depends upon a grossly simplified view of human emotions. It was all very well, in Oliver Twist, for old Mrs Maylie to take up 'her abode with her son and daughter-in-law, to enjoy . . . the greatest felicity that age and worth can know -- the contemplation of the happiness of those on whom the warmest affections and tenderest cares of a well-spent life, have been unceasingly bestowed', but it stretches the credulity when Dickens attaches such selfless sentiments to the young. A kind of jealousy does appear in the novel, in the case of Augustus Muddle, the youngest boarder at Todgers's, but he is simply a joke, and his claim 'that the deadly Upas tree of Java had blighted him' is intended as mock-heroic (p. 506). It is salutary to recall that the Upas was probably an inspiration for Blake's 'A Poison Tree'.

Thus, a novel which has had much to say about the dangers of dependence concludes, once again, with an unlikely but comforting retreat into idealised domesticity, and Dickens returns, through his narrator, to a predictable and reassuring authorial position, taking good care of

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all the characters about whom a sensitive reader might otherwise have worried. But the scepticism and narratorial unpredictability which Dickens reveals in passages like the view from Todgers's would not go away, and would begin to demand a less rigid sense of where a novel should take its readers and of the state in which it could leave them at the end.

* * *

Dombey and Son, in many ways a more unified and persuasive work than Chuzzlewit, has some important points in common with Blake's 'A Little Boy Lost', from Songs of Experience, and it is worth quoting that poem in full, as an introduction to the novel.

Nought loves another as itself
Nor venerates another so.
Nor is it possible to Thought
A greater than itself to know:

And Father, how can I love you,
Or any of my brothers more?
I love you like the little bird
That picks up crumbs around the door.

The Priest sat by and heard the child.
In trembling zeal he seiz'd his hair: He led him by his little coat:
And all admir'd the Priestly care.

And standing on the altar high,
Lo what a fiend is here! said he:
One who sets reason up for judge
Of our most holy Mystery.

The weeping child could not be heard. The weeping parents wept in vain:
They strip'd him to his little shirt.
And bound him in an iron chain.

And burn'd him in a holy place,
Where many had been burn'd before:
The weeping parents wept in vain.
Are such things done on Albions shore.

The children in Dombey are sacrificed to Mammon, not to God; but the god who is implied in Blake's poem is plainly a base, materialistic one (a priestly imposition), while his victim is more truly spiritual -- Joseph-like and Christ-like. And, as we shall see, Dickens comes to express the worship of financial gain in terms of primitive religion. Money, in fact, is Dombey's 'Mystery', and Paul upsets his father with

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15 Cf. Genesis 37. 5--11; Luke 2. 46--47.
the reasonable question, 'Papa! what's money?' (p. 93). Dombey cannot provide a satisfactory answer; he cannot explain why it is that money, or the abstract ideal of 'Dombey and Son', should overshadow and divide the two human beings, Mr Dombey and his son. Blake-like, Dickens presents this error as a tragedy for the father as much as for the child: Dombey is not to be blamed for his sinfulness, but pitied, like Urizen, for his self-mortifying delusions.

Self, the avowed theme of Chuzzlewit, is still central in Dombey. Father and son, immediately after the birth, on the first page of the novel, are clearly each in their own little worlds, Dombey resplendently lustrous as he contemplates this fruition of his heartfelt commercial plan, and Paul, like (once again) the child of 'Infant Sorrow', emerging in an attitude of self-defence:

Dombey, exulting in the long-looked-for event, jingled and jingled the heavy gold watch-chain that depended from below his trim blue coat, whereof the buttons sparkled phosphorescently in the feeble rays of the distant fire. Son with his little fists curled up and clenched, seemed, in his feeble way, to be squaring at existence for having come upon him so unexpectedly.

(p. 1)

Florence, the elder child, innocently shares our perception of Dombey as a man reduced to his material accessories, one who has, as Blake would say, 'become what he beholds': 'The child glanced keenly at the blue coat and stiff white cravat, which, with a pair of creaking boots and a very loud ticking watch, embodied her idea of a father' (p. 3). Dickens clearly supports the Romantic notion (which will have had more to do with Wordsworth's influence than Blake's) of the child as a being who sees truly, without learned distortions. And the assumption of a childish way of seeing, like Barnaby's mad way of seeing, offers Dickens a way into profound psychological observation. Thus, at the scene of Paul's christening, Dickens draws Dombey's slick exterior to a point: 'Arrived at the church steps, they were received by a portentous beadle. Mr. Dombey dismounting first to help the ladies out, and standing near him at the coach door, looked like another beadle. A beadle less gorgeous but more dreadful; the beadle of private life; the beadle of our business and our bosoms' (p. 58). This offers an almost Freudian intimation of

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a negating, restraining element, amounting almost to a separate personality, in all our minds. And Dickens's beadle, a favourite subject, appearing in the Sketches, Pickwick, Oliver Twist, Bleak House and Little Dorrit, seems in this particular passage to have something of the power, insidiousness and universality of Blake's Spectre.

Time is another delimiting element which in Dombey, as in Blake, is anthropomorphized:

Beneath the watching and attentive eyes of Time -- so far another Major [like Major Joey Bagstock] -- Paul's slumbers gradually changed. More and more light broke in upon them; distincter and distincter dreams disturbed them; an accumulating crowd of objects and impressions swarmed about his rest; and so he passed from babyhood to childhood, and became a talking, walking, wondering Dombey.

This passage shows a probing interest in the mental processes underlying the growth of consciousness, together with a strong sense of the formative power of early experience. It is appropriate, therefore, that Dickens should react fiercely against unenlightened educational programmes.

Alicia Ostriker has noted that Blake's 'A Little Boy Lost' suggests a poem by Isaac Watts called 'Obedience to Parents':

Have ye not heard what dreadful plagues
Are threatened by the Lord,
To him that breaks his father's law
Or mocks his mother's word? . . .
The ravens shall pick out his eyes,
And eagles eat the same.  

Dickens attacked Watts, as we have seen, in The Old Curiosity Shop, and Watts's type of scare-mongering, involving animal avengers, reappears at Paul's otherwise comfortable private Brighton school:

It being a part of Mrs. Pipchin's system not to encourage a child's mind to develop and expand itself like a young flower, but to open it by force like an oyster, the moral of these lessons was usually of a violent and stunning character: the hero -- a naughty boy -- seldom, in the mildest catastrophe, being finished off by anything less than a lion, or a bear.

Paul is a more independent-minded child than Little Nell, however. Like Blake's Little Boy he is not afraid to challenge adults. And, through

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Paul, Dickens seizes the central principle of the Watts or Barbauld method -- the principle of learning from impressive images -- and turns it against its practitioner, much to her amazement and discomfiture: 'Paul, eschewing the companionship of Master Bitherstone, went on studying Mrs. Pipchin, and the cat, and the fire, night after night, as if they were a book of necromancy, in three volumes' (p. 107). Watts and Barbauld try to anticipate children, moulding them subliminally. Dickens's cleverness, here, is in showing that under-estimation of the child redounds to the educator's discredit, who, like old John Willet, is made speechless by the reversal. Blake's Little Boy, we note, makes the priest tremble.

Blake was influenced, as much as repelled, by the practice of harrowing children into a perception of their sinfulness. His Songs would have confronted their child readers (had there been any) with powerful images of mortality. Elsewhere in his work, Blake returns again and again to deathbed scenes; and these are equally important to Dickens. Mrs Dombey's death is possibly Dickens's best. It is certainly very different from Little Nell's, having no sense at all of a Christian prognosis. In place of the panacea of heaven, this death is dominated by the burden of Time: 'There was no sound in answer but the loud ticking of Mr. Dombey's watch and Doctor Parker Pep's watch, which seemed in the silence to be running a race' (p. 10). 'The two watches "running a race",' says F. R. Leavis; 'with what a sharp precision that peculiarly and impertinently insistent noise is evoked, giving us in immediacy the stillness of the death-chamber, and giving it as the fact and presence of death.' Moreover, the noise is reflected and amplified by the names of the attendant ladies -- tick, tock, Chick, Tox. This is clearly deliberate: a few pages later Dickens refers to the 'unlooked for checks from Mrs. Chick' (p. 15), and there are other aural effects, elsewhere in the book, of unprecedented neatness. The voice of Dr Blimber, for example, seems to be taken up by his clock, which 'continued to repeat "how, is, my, lit, tle, friend, how, is, my, lit, tle, friend!"' (p.

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In the deathbed scene, these mechanical circumstances point a moral for Mr Dombey -- it is later than he knows -- but also fend off sentiment. Even the removal of the distraught daughter, effected by a loving servant, comes over as a jerky, clock-work paroxysm: 'With these words, Susan Nipper, in a transport of coercion, made a charge at her young ward, and swept her out of the room' (p. 29).

Leavis takes the mechanical to be wholly a hostile force in Dickens, sticking up for the 'organic'. In particular, he supports Dickens's mockery of Mr Chick, whose response to the immediate requirements of the motherless baby was 'Couldn't something temporary be done with a teapot?' (p. 12):

If a solution of the tea-pot kind could have been found, Mr. Dombey would have been spared his painful and characteristic inner conflict. Actually, of course, the cruel irony of the situation for Mr. Dombey is that, to save the baby's life, what is needed is a living agent, a woman and a mother, and that, if she can be found, she will inevitably, in the nature of the case, be of the lower orders.20

This is essentially true; but just as Blake has scientific interests, and sets more store by 'reason' than sometimes is supposed, so Dickens is attracted to inanimate devices. Certain 'things' in Dombey come to exert a presence that makes them almost 'characters': the Wooden Midshipman, for example, Captain Cuttle's glazed hat, and the Last Bottle of Madeira. And Dickens's sense of the mechanical in the organic is responsible in this novel, as throughout his work, for some of the funniest passages. For example,

Mr. Toots appeared to be involved in a good deal of uncertainty whether, on the whole, it was judicious to button the bottom button of his waistcoat, and whether, on a calm revision of all the circumstances, it was best to wear his wristbands turned up or turned down. Observing that Mr. Feeder's were turned up, Mr. Toots turned his up; but the wristbands of the next arrival being turned down, Mr. Toots turned his down. The differences in point of waistcoat-buttoning, not only at the bottom, but at the top too, became so numerous and complicated as the arrivals thickened, that Mr. Toots was continually fingerling that article of dress, as if he were performing on some instrument; and appeared to find the incessant execution it demanded, quite bewildering.

(p. 195)

Note how Mr Toots's name -- Toots -- comes into its own here: a stupendous synthesis.

Just as a human being is liable to take on the character of a

20 Dickens, p. 5.
machine in Dickens, or to decline, like Chuffey, into inanimation, so locks, clocks, trains, chimney-pots and a great many other unpromising objects are liable to spring into life. This life all comes from Dickens’s imagination, which he scatters about with a minimum of prejudice. Everything, potentially, is holy for Dickens, and yet everything can be mocked, debased for artistic purposes. There is very little, in Dickens, of what Blake took to be the false dichotomy of internal and external worlds, and very little sense of the author trying to conform to normative perceptions or values, except in the most superficial sense of avoiding what, by the standards of the time, would have constituted blatant indecency.

Moral opinions, in fact, can be effectively advanced by an apparent flouting of conventional niceties. Thus, the terse designation of Paul as ‘Son’ (as in Dombey and Son) in the childbirth / deathbed scene recalls Dickens’s rough handling of baby Oliver, and comes across as an ironic cover for indignation. There is real pathos too (not curiosity-shop kitsch) in the mother’s death: ‘Thus, clinging fast to that slight spar within her arms, the mother drifted out upon the dark and unknown sea that rolls round all the world’ (p. 11). There is something of the gloom and apprehension, here, that was to appear in Arnold’s ‘Dover Beach’; and the imagery foreshadows the nautical Walter, who will rescue the ‘slight spar’ -- who is Florence. Considering Dickens’s own recent maritime adventures, it is remarkable how important, and benign, voyages become in his work. The Peggotty in Copperfield, and Woodcourt in Bleak House, resemble Walter, Sol Gills and Captain Cuttle, as nautical people who have a freshness and freedom which allows them to ease other characters from their land-locked (or time-clocked) dilemmas.

For the fading Paul, the sea represents a hoped-for escape -- something which Dombey, who never looks outwards, misses: ‘Oh! could he but have seen, or seen as others did, the slight spare boy above, watching the waves and clouds at twilight, with his earnest eyes, and breasting the window of his solitary cage when the birds flew by, as if he would have emulated them, and soared away!’ (p. 170). This is a weird

and uncomfortable scene: Paul is looking forward, perhaps, to a reunion with his dead mother, who, in a faint anticipation of Stephen Dedalus, he identifies with the sea (p. 151); but, more than that, he seems half in love with death. The words 'slight spare', in particular, sibilantly intimate his easy, eager slipping through the bars and out of life (and have an eerie sibling affinity with Florence's 'slight spar').

Dickens seems awed and intoxicated by the prospect. In The Old Curiosity Shop, Nell's caged bird pathetically suggested her isolation, captivity, and brevity of life, and, in Bleak House, the stifled birds of the ironically-named Miss Elite have a similar message for the wards in Jarndyce. It is a message which echoes Blake.

How can the bird that is born for joy,
Sit in a cage and sing

asks Blake's School Boy; and, in 'Ah! Sun-flower', innocents aspire, or 'soar away', in the dualistic way that Harold Bloom and Karl Miller have variously mentioned, to an escape that is also extinction.

Paul is an even less natural child than Oliver Twist. Like many Dickensian characters, he seems -- in another kind of duality -- to combine the attributes of youth and age. In fact, he wants to be taken for an adult:

There he would sit or lie in his carriage for hours together: never so distressed as by the company of children -- Florence alone excepted, always.

'Go away, if you please,' he would say, to any child who came to bear him company. 'Thank you, but I don't want you.'

Some small voice, near his ear, would ask him how he was, perhaps.

'I am very well, I thank you,' he would answer. 'But you had better go and play, if you please.'

Then he would turn his head, and watch the child away, and say to Florence, 'We don't want any others, do we? Kiss me, Floy.'

There is more than a suggestion, here, of Oliver's hauteur, and of

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22 For another study of ways in which the language of this novel, in particular, repays minute analysis see Patrick J. McCarthy, 'Dombey and Son: Language and the Roots of Meaning', Dickens Studies Annual, 19 (1990), 91--106.

23 Harold Bloom, as already noted, reads 'Ah! Sun-flower' as an attack on 'the ascetic delusion -- the dualistic hope' that life in heaven will compensate for life on earth (Blake's Apocalypse [London, 1963], p. 139); Karl Miller does not discuss this poem, or Dombey, but both works fall in readily with his system of 'steal and soar' (Doubles: Studies in Literary History [Oxford, 1985], pp. 56--84).
Martin's, or even of Nell's grandfather's, selfishness, with Florence as Nell herself. There is little occasion for pitying Paul, because he seems to be approaching death in a languid and luxurious frame of mind. Dombey, viewing Paul solely in the light of a future business-partner, has contributed to the suppression of his childishness; but there is also the superstitious sense that Paul, fated to die young, is prematurely leading a potted adult life. He can seem to be a kind of angel: a transient figure like Nell or Smike, sent down to expose adult weakness; but he is also slightly monstrous, in that he shows adult emotions and intelligence active within what we take to be an unformed, innocent exterior. His feeling for his sister, in particular, is unusually warm and proprietorial; he is unusually conscious of her beauties. She dances and sings for him (pp. 198--99). His deathbed, through her attentions, becomes distinctly like a marriage-bed:

>'You are always watching me, Floy. Let me watch you, now!' They would prop him up with cushions in a corner of his bed, and there he would recline the while she lay beside him: bending forward oftentimes to kiss her, and whispering to those who were near that she was tired, and how she had sat up so many nights beside him. (p. 221)

Paul's affection for Florence is a reproach to Dombey's awful self-denial in the denial of his daughter. So the sibling warmth fulfils a deliberate function. It can also be seen as a vent for the sexual feeling which, as Carey says, 'is not banished but driven underground, to emerge in perverted and inhibited forms' (p. 154), though 'perverted' seems an unnecessarily tendentious word. Certainly, there is no such intimacy perceptible in Florence's subsequent romance with Walter: the affection there is ridiculously chaste, as though Dickens were writing with his Child's History hat on: 'Walter picked up the shoe, and put it on the little foot as the Prince in the story might have fitted Cinderella's slipper on' (pp. 77--78). Chick and Tox are, from one angle, just the ugly sisters; but Florence, overall, is a far more substantial figure than Cinderella.

Good people, in Dombey, tend to inhabit a fog. Thus Toodle, the engine driver, tries to think about his wayward son: 'I starts light with

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Rob only; I comes to a branch; I takes on what I finds there; and a whole train of ideas gets coupled on to him, afore I knows where I am, or where they comes from. What a Junction a man's thoughts is... to be sure!' (pp. 512--13). Toodle tries to impose some order on a turbulent world through the terms of his profession. Similarly, for Captain Cuttle, intellectual shipwreck is always looming: 'a man's thoughts is like the winds, and nobody can't answer for 'em for certain, any length of time together' (p. 525). Cuttle is a comic spoof Odysseus, with his Circe or Siren in Mrs Macstinger, who holds him in hallucinatory thrall. Retired and never leaving London, Cuttle still gives the impression of being a lost wanderer as he circumnavigates Sol Gills's shop in his errant arm-chair, 'that frail bark' (p. 656). Cuttle, Toodle, ocean-gazing Paul, the 'slight spar' (Florence), Mrs Dombey drifting into death, and her insular husband: these characters are all 'at sea', a situation only aggravated by sharks like Carker.

The irrational attraction which Cuttle feels, despite himself, for Mrs Macstinger, fits in with the novel's wider emphasis on loneliness and the need for mutual support: Cuttle's fear of this attraction echoes Dombey's exclusion of Florence, and Paul's rejection of his playmates. But the most extreme images of isolation in the novel attach to Mrs Skewton, wicked mother of the 'fallen' Edith. Dickens savages the affectations of this would-be 'Cleopatra', but his description of her last days carries a horrified sympathy:

Such is the figure that is often wheeled down to the margin of the sea, and stationed there; but on which no wind can blow freshness, and for which the murmur of the ocean has no soothing word. She lies and listens to it by the hour; but its speech is dark and gloomy to her, and a dread is on her face, and when her eyes wander over the expanse, they see but a broad stretch of desolation between earth and heaven.

(p. 561)

Death is envisioned and confronted, here, and in the unsentimental demise of Mrs Dombey -- as previously in the death of Anthony Chuzzlewit and the moribundity of Chuffey -- with considerable fortitude, and it is in this

25 This is not the only instance in Dickens of a faint Homeric influence (anticipating Joyce). Old Weller could be seen as another mock Odysseus, avoiding suspect widows, inspiring wry but otherwise Telemachan affection in his wandering son, and at last managing to rout triumphantly the absurd suitor of his feeble-minded Penelope. *Dombey* contains the only direct reference to Homer in Dickens's fiction: Dr Blimber has a bust of him over his door (p. 145).
context that the lonely predicament of Dombey himself becomes affecting.

Dickens is ruthless in identifying Dombey’s distancing manoeuvres: his renaming the proletarian nurse Polly Toodle ‘Richards’, for example, and communicating with his unsatisfactory second wife by way of Carker. Dombey’s relationship with Carker clearly echoes Othello’s with Iago, not least when Dombey is thrown from his horse, knocked out, and gloated over by this scheming lackey (p. 576). Dombey is hardly a Shakespearean tragic figure, however, as he lacks grandeur and talent. This novel, like all Dickens’s novels, is essentially domestic, and concerned with relatively unexceptional people: there is little sense of tragic predetermination here, but rather a sound exploration of the consequences of common human error. It is perfectly reasonable, for example, that Dombey’s striking of his daughter, coming at the pivotal moment between his complacent power and his precipitate decline, should become a mental fixation and the seed of a whole revaluation of his past mistakes.

There are times when Dombey’s behaviour has an exhausting awfulness, a dumb, unassailable turpitude, like that of Mr Chester, but it seems, nevertheless, that Dickens has some respect for his character’s ‘respectability’. The invasion of Dombey’s house by auction-men and buyers is recounted with feeling (p. 790); and Miss Tox feels compelled to go and sit in the building (p. 795), as though it were not so much an abandoned house as a failed Utopia (a place that could have been Bleak House). Florence, for whom the house has been a place of solitary confinement, begs forgiveness of her father (p. 802). She and the other sympathetic characters seem desperately to will the illusion of Dombey to be real; and Dickens himself seems sufficiently conservative earnestly to desire that the rich patriarch will come right, and prove worthy of his station.

‘Just like Lukács,’ writes Anny Sadrin,

Dickens sharply perceived the withering of the critical faculties on the part of the educated bourgeoisie and their imitators which would lead them, if they were not careful, to their destruction.

26 Cf. Othello, IV. 1.

27 Cf. Nancy Klenk Hill, ‘Dombey and Son: Parable for the Age’, Dickens Quarterly, 8 (1991), 169--77, a recent, upbeat account in which the ‘change of heart’ is seen as symbolic, exemplary, and highly didactic.
But whereas the theorists of Marxism would denounce the reification of the proletariat, the novelist devotes himself to the satirical depiction of bourgeois reification, and the bourgeois individual, as character and reader, is both his target and his hope. While Marx and Lukács wanted to hasten the emancipation of one faction, Dickens was more concerned to penetrate the deafness of the other.

But that is not the whole story. Dickens does seem to have some admiration for the pomp of Dombey's mansion: 'The saying is, that home is home, be it never so homely. If it hold good in the opposite contingency, and home is home be it never so stately, what an altar to the Household Gods is raised up here!' (p. 478). But the admirable Susan Nipper subsequently declines 'to be a worshipper of graven images' (p. 589), and even Carker astutely remarks that Dombey 'goes yoked to his own triumphal car like a beast of burden' (p. 601), an image which recalls some Blake plates and Blake's version of Nebuchadnezzar, the man steeped in materialism to the point of losing all humanity. The decline of Dombey's business is evidently the saving of the man himself. So Dickens's respect for bourgeois consolidation exists alongside a desire to see the destruction of such order and complacency -- the desire that can be detected in the sacking of the Maypole and the Warren, and in the dissolution of the Pecksniff and Chuzzlewit communities.

Dickens continues, in *Dombey and Son*, to carry out his longstanding authorial function as a vindicator of Victorian middle-class domestic values, but elements of iconoclastic, revolutionary psychology, as in the reification of Dombey and the premature adulthood of Paul, put that function in serious jeopardy. And the linguistic playfulness of *Dombey*, like the narratorial quirkiness to which I have drawn attention in *Chuzzlewit*, discloses Dickens's further development of an authorial presence whose distinct personality interacts in puzzling and disruptive ways with the ostensible matter of the plot.

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29 See *Jerusalem*, pl. 46; B516.
CHAPTER 8

Weak but Decent Heroes, Altruistic but Unfathomable

Texts: David Copperfield and Bleak House

It could be said that Dickens looked back upon his childhood benevolently, as though it were somebody else's. Dickens's inward cossetting of his 'poor child', Oliver, for example, has often been read as self-consolation for the early indignities and parental neglect; as much could be said of Paul Dombey. In David Copperfield, the work of Dickens's late thirties, the compulsion to revisit these personal distresses appears at its most naked, but Dickens, through David, manages to see it as a virtue, and a symptom of psychical health:

I think the memory of most of us can go farther back into such times than many of us suppose; just as I believe the power of observation in numbers of very young children to be quite wonderful for its closeness and accuracy. Indeed, I think that most grown men who are remarkable in this respect, may with greater propriety be said not to have lost the faculty, than to have acquired it, the rather, as I generally observe such men to retain a certain freshness, and gentleness, and capacity of being pleased, which are also an inheritance they have preserved from their childhood.

This is perhaps the most favourable of self-analyses, given the facts of Dickens's case. One might equally conjecture that the 'freshness, and gentleness, and capacity of being pleased', the simple geniality that Dickens always exalts, might be signs of weakness, instability, inassertiveness: signs which, to reverse Dickens's causality, might be traced to an inability to free himself from the events and the mentality of childhood. This seems an unfriendly line of speculation, but an awareness of these contrary possibilities is actually written into Dickens's later fiction.

David Copperfield's numerous formative mortifications are incontestably vivid. Take, for example, the moment when Mr Murdstone insinuates himself between the boy and his mother: 'He drew her to him, whispered in her ear, and kissed her. I knew as well, when I saw my mother's head lean down upon his shoulder, and her arm touch his neck -- I knew as well that he could mould her pliant nature into any form he

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1 See, for example, Morris Golden, 'Dickens, Oliver, and Boz', Dickens Quarterly, 4 (1987), 65--77.

chose, as I know, now, that he did it’ (p. 39). David has just reported his banishment to a distant bedroom, and it is hard to believe that Dickens was not at least partly aware that he is describing the boy’s sense of a physical, sexual pliancy in his mother -- something from which he is bitterly excluded.¹

Dickens is still highly sympathetic to the pain of childhood: this experience of David’s is presented with remarkable immediacy, with a sense of anger and jealousy unmoderated by adult commentary or censorship. But some of David’s other experiences are treated more artfully. In *Dombey*, we noted the pattern of aural echoes -- the clocks, in particular -- that seemed to accompany suffering childhood, suggesting both a childish, hypersensitive perception and Dickens’s imposed moral commentary. Echoes seem to be equally important in David’s imaginative life. For example, he notices a bankrupt and supposedly shattered Micawber get into a coach, shake off his melancholy, and avidly start eating a bag of walnuts (p. 226). The inconsequentiality of this works well: we can sense and sympathize with David’s momentary insight into the oddness of adult behaviour. Micawber sets off, and no more is said about the walnuts. On the next page, however, we find David reviewing his school days and an early infatuation -- an experience that for some reason also centres on nuts: ‘Why do I secretly give Miss Shepherd twelve Brazil nuts for a present, I wonder? They are not expressive of affection, they are difficult to pack into a parcel of any regular shape, they are hard to crack, even in room doors, and they are oily when cracked; yet I feel they are appropriate to Miss Shepherd’ (p. 227). The slightly guilty pleasure of indulging even a literary appetite for food (which Dickens often does) is comparable to the pleasure of affectionately reviewing one’s own past history. In this passage, these two pleasures are linked: the curiosity of the brazils, like the walnuts, stands for David’s, and probably Dickens’s, slightly embarrassing sentiment, ‘what a quaint and delightful little fellow I was’. This coyness is as characteristic of the novel, and of its protagonist, as is

¹ See Mary Anne Andrade, ‘Pollution of an Honest Home’, *Dickens Quarterly*, 5 (1988), 65–74, for an extended discussion of this scene, and of analogues to it throughout the novel.
the unselfconscious pain of the incident I mentioned first.

In fact, there seems to be a definite strand of confectionery humour throughout the early stages of *David Copperfield*. Miss Mowcher, the dwarf, surprises David with this pun: 'Ha! ha! ha! What a refreshing set of humbugs we are, to be sure, ain't we, my sweet child?' (pp. 280--81). These might seem trivial matters, but they are the kind of matters that occupy David's mind. Like Dickens, David has a great ear, and eye, for echoes, and this contributes to our impression of him as a lateral and unprogressive thinker; an observer, not an actor; one who might very credibly have a loose sense of his own personality, and might doubt his centrality as, as he says, 'the hero of my own life' (p. 1).

This insecurity is further expressed in the numerous reproofs David has to accept -- like this, from Miss Mowcher once again: "You are a young man," she said, nodding. 'Take a word of advice, even from three foot nothing. Try not to associate bodily defects with mental, my good friend, except for a solid reason' (p. 396). Of course, physique and physiognomy often declare the man in Dickens (notably in the case of Uriah Heep -- in this novel), so there may be some authorial self-reproach here, which would fit in with the novel's generally neurotic tone. David's lapse in tact is of a kind that is almost ubiquitous in Dickens's novels (compare, particularly, Nicholas Nickleby, Richard Carstone, and Pip). Again and again, Dickens shows characters who bear a clear resemblance to his own young self being exposed as hasty, callow, and inconsiderate. The kind of debunking processes that were applied surreptitiously to Oliver are here applied obsessively by the protagonist

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4 According to OED2, 'humbug', in the sense of a refreshing boiled sweet, was only current, at the time *Copperfield* was written, in Northern dialect, while 'sweet' itself, as an item of confectionery, did not occur until 1851 (just too late), when it appeared in Mayhew's *London Labour*. However, a second citation for 'sweet' comes from *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), and these modern meanings add a great deal of interest to Mrs Mowcher's observation. Without them, it seems improbably bland, in the context of the general vitality and polyvalency of Dickens's writing at this time.

5 Ironically, Dickens later received an angry letter from a dwarf of his acquaintance, who believed (quite correctly) that she had been used as a model for Miss Mowcher -- a use which she considered most unflattering (John Forster, *Life of Dickens*, ed. A. J. Hoppé, 2 vols [London, 1966], II, 99). But see Michael Hollington, 'Physiognomy in *Hard Times*, *Dickens Quarterly*, 9 (1992), 58--66, for a persuasive argument that Dickens's treatment of physical appearance later came to surpass and subvert traditional prejudices.
himself. The resultant dissolution of personality expresses itself in David's trouble with his names, which represent the great bundle of personae foisted upon him by the other much more unified, efficient people in the novel: Copperfield, Murdstone, Trotwood, Trot, David, Davy, Daisy, Doady. And these are not all: 'Mrs. Crupp always called me Mr. Copperfull: firstly, no doubt, because it was not my name; and secondly, I am inclined to think, in some indistinct association with a washing-day' (p. 341). Employment at the laundry was a shattering disgrace for Kate Nickleby, and the joke that David finds, here, in Mrs. Crupp's association of ideas, is partly at his own expense. Here again we have the reduced circumstances of an up-market young man -- such an infallible occasion for pathos in the Dickens world. Efficient, artful Uriah Heep calls David 'Master Copperfield' when it should, theoretically, be 'Mister' (p. 519, for example): that might simply show Heep's oleaginous one-upmanship, but when David reports it to us as a persistent irritation it begins to seem that Heep has really found a weak spot in his victim's personality. 'You must learn your value, sir,' as Mrs Crupp says (p. 341).

Steerforth, David's idol, is the reverse projection of this inferiority, not a doubtful, backward-looking, conscience-stricken youth, but the opposite, a nihilistic Übermensch:

The sun sets every day, and people die every minute, and we mustn't be scared by the common lot. If we failed to hold our own, because that equal foot at all men's doors was heard knocking somewhere, every object in this world would slip from us. No! Ride on! Rough-shod if need be, smooth-shod if that will do, but ride on! Ride over all obstacles, and win the race!' (p. 364)

The knocking foot is fairly preposterous: Dickens's heart is clearly not in this kind of thing. Steerforth darts about, having ill-defined adventures on the continent, but his activity seems, from the start, suicidal. Little Em'ly, likewise, shows an appetite for things outside the homely world of David and the Peggottys, but is portrayed as

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6 Compare James A. Davies's remarks on the alternative names which undermine Young Bailey in Chuzzlewit (The Textual Life of Dickens's Characters [Basingstoke, 1989], p. 47). See also Juliet McMaster's commentary on Dr Strong's lexicography, where the fact that he gets as far as the letter D and no further is to be taken as a good sign for David ('Dickens and David Copperfield on the Act of Reading', English Studies in Canada, 15 [1989], 288--304 [301]).
self-destructive -- sporting, as a toddler, to David’s horror, next to the engulfing waters of which she claims to be afraid (pp. 29--31). Compare the fruitless Icarean longings suggested by the feeble-minded Mr Dick: ‘I parted from him, poor fellow, at the corner of the street, with his great kite at his back, a very monument of human misery’ (p. 428).

To wish to soar above the mundane, to have any definite project for one’s life, seems, through David’s way of seeing, to be absurd or alien. Hence the painful coarseness of Rosa Dartle, for example, as a literary conception: supposedly a woman of obsessive passion, but in fact a Gothic harpy and irredeemable lunatic, with her Captain Ahab-like symbolic disfigurement. Steerforth, Rosa Dartle: the names sufficiently declare their impulsive, overbearing personalities, to be contrasted with picturesque, bucolic Copperfield, or Trotwood, and with the childish inoffensiveness of ‘Mr Peggotty’.

Despite his sensitivity, therefore, David is a vacuum, contemplating the decision and activity of others. It is often remarked that his first wife, Dora, resembles his mother -- this was part of Dickens’s design, part of his conscious study of David’s mistakes -- but David’s superficial indulgence of this wife, and his secret exasperation (which, as in several of Dickens’s earlier narratives, finds a convenient relief in the offending party’s premature death) encourages a further parallel: beneath all his uncertainties, David has something of the hidebound inflexibility of the tyrant Murdstone. As Barbara Hardy says, Dickens takes very great pains to show David’s painful attempts, after intolerant and demanding mistakes, to accept Dora as she is, and the tolerance and compromise are clearly meant to be seen as meritorious. In a sense they are, but what we, as modern readers, are likely to do is to set aside the limited assumption that every man deserves a good housekeeper, and sympathize with the undated and moving residue -- David’s difficult decision to accept another human being for what she is, which is not what he wants or needs.  

Dickens makes ‘David’s difficult decision’ much easier to handle, it has to be said, by severely curtailing the period in which he must live with its consequences. Of course, David is not unpleasant in the Murdstone way, but even his self-abnegating kindness is paradoxically lethal. And Agnes could be compared with Murdstone’s sister, siding with David,

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implicitly criticizing and finally ousting her inadequate predecessor, meant to be a sympathetic angel, but coming over as a hypocrite, sticking her umpire's finger in the air to register Dora's impeccably clean dismissal (p. 658).

But David is more dissatisfied with himself than he is with Dora. Shortly before he marries her, he hears of her father's death, and this precipitates a crisis of guilt:

What I cannot describe is, how, in the innermost recesses of my own heart, I had a lurking jealousy even of Death. How I felt as if its might would push me from my ground in Dora's thoughts. How I was, in a grudging way I have no words for, envious of her grief. How it made me restless to think of her weeping to others, or being consoled by others. How I had a grasping, avaricious wish to shut out everybody from her but myself, and to be all in all to her, at that unseasonable time of all times. (p. 475)

David is constantly debilitated by the struggle to judge himself honestly. 'No one has ever exceeded the penetration and deftness of Dickens's exposure of so many varieties of what existentialist philosophy has called mauvaise foi,' claims Geoffrey Thurley. But, at the same time, few writers have exceeded Dickens's own susceptibility to this same disorder.

David's doubts find no resolution in the novel. As usual, the most taxing dilemmas, having been expounded most affectingly, are simplistically dispensed with: difficult Dora dies; insufferable Steerforth dies; hapless Ham Peggotty fatalistically concludes that Em'ly's downfall leaves him no future, and dies; Em'ly herself, corrupted, unfit for the pure new world of David, Agnes and their children, is transported to Australia. There had been passages in the novel where David had seemed to confront his emptiness and fears; and, if Dora had not died, we would seem to have been in for a tragedy of repetition, with David realizing that he was reliving the mistakes that had led to his own, original displacement. Indeed, the sense of insecurity is hidden much less effectively in this conclusion than in Dickens's earlier works. 'In order for the novel's final vision to be realized,' writes Robert E. Lougy, David

must become increasingly more alienated from that deeper voice and

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vision he has heard and seen. When David enters those spaces where 'everything was as it used to be, in the happy time,' where Agnes has been busy 'in keeping everything as it used to be when we were children,' we witness the silencing of a profound imagination. . . .

Dickens gazes deeply into the inner regions of the self and hears from within image-haunted winds, but what he sees and hears sends him back toward the protection of definition and form. There he must deny, or attempt to deny, those demonic voices that sing of freedom and its terrors.*

Lougy does not mention Blake, but his last sentence shows a Blakean influence. David, on this account, resembles the Angel in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, or Thel as she is commonly constructed -- perceiving a challenging truth, then fleeing back into wilful ignorance. Both Blake and Dickens react to their fears of death and of the delusions of selfhood by inventing a myth of repetition: a myth which in Dickens's case, as we have seen, has a dark alternative in the repetition of evil, or the horrible stasis of a Chester, or the Urizenic, self-destructive grasping of a Dombey.

Blake probably believed in an eternity of human archetypes which made individual extinction an irrelevance. Dickens, lacking this transcendental confidence, falls back upon notions which seem more materialistic, and hence more vulnerable -- notions of the simple continuity of generations, rather sadly represented, here, as in Pickwick, Barnaby, or Dombey, by the last-minute spawning of a new generation with the names of all our favourite characters (p. 748), as though Dickens really wants to pretend that David, Betsey Trotwood, and Dora, among others, will be instituted as permanent features of the human scene, having proved delightful the first time around. This seems a frail support, and this novel has challenged its validity too far: Dickens will have to come up with a more substantial set of aspirations and projections. In Dickens's next novel, in fact, the need for continuity will be expanded into a vast social perspective, calling up a regenerative vision that bears comparison with Blake's Jerusalem.

* * *

There are an awful lot of children in Bleak House, most of whom think

that they are adults. Young Richard, for example, acts the Romantic youth, but counts on painless elevation to fulfillment and security, by way of the twin conveniences of a marriageable cousin and a family inheritance which, he assumes, has been waiting for him through its dormancy of many generations. Jarndyce, the apparently benign supervisor of Richard's fortunes, exercises characteristic diplomacy in flattering Richard's pretensions to maturity, treating him with respect while noting his inadequacies and quietly attempting to correct them. In the eyes of the Law, however, Richard is nothing more than a 'vexatious and capricious infant' (p. 300), and, in this particular at least, the Law is perceptive.¹⁰

Richard's talents are strictly bound to the immediate present. He is good at whimsical bons mots: he notes that the Chancellor's fire winks 'like a drowsy old Chancery lion' (p. 31) -- without thinking that it will one day gobble him up; and then, later in Richard, Ada, and Esther's exuberant first day, it is he who identifies Mrs Jellyby's gaze as belonging to one who 'could see nothing nearer than Africa!' (p. 37). 'I am quoting Richard again,' says Esther, who is always keen to give credit, but goes out of her way in Richard's case because the opportunities for praising him are scarce. Even his spontaneous characterizations and witty remarks tend to misfire. His observation that Miss Flite is mad is embarrassingly overheard: '"Right! Mad, young gentleman," she returned so quickly that he was quite abashed' (p. 34); and, on the next page, when he talks to Kenge, his ostentatiously impertinent dismissal of Mr Jellyby, whom he has not yet met -- '"A nonentity, sir?" said Richard, with a droll look' (p. 35) -- is squashed by the solicitor's solemn and vague reply, anticipating the way in which all Richard's youthful energies will be suffocated in Chancery fog until, in keeping with his Romantic pretensions, he succumbs to TB.

Richard's first meeting with Jarndyce shows him at his best, when he takes his cousin's two hands with 'an intuitive mixture of respect and frankness' (p. 60), but the 'intuitive mixture' ends up as hopeless confusion, for want of any real strength of character, and, faced with

unfamiliar adversity, Richard inverts his feelings, and comes to see Jarndyce as a tyrant. Other young men in the novel seem to inform against him: Guppy and Young Smallweed, the latter seeming old when he really is a child, are suspicious and contemptuous of Richard's legal aspirations: he has no business intruding on their close, intricate, and unforgiving world. Guppy and Smallweed are not worthy individuals, but they do have some consistency and self-control, like Dodgers to Richard's Oliver, or Heeps to his David. Richard, dissociating himself impetuously from the cushioned environment of Bleak House, tries to establish himself in an alien element, and so comes to nothing, taken for a ride by Vholes, who is native and professional. This failure is characteristic of the whole novel, which is marked out into distinct communities: Chancery, Chesney Wold, Bleak House, the ironmaster's industrial North, Tom All Alone's: nobody is wholly successful in crossing from one to another.

Given Richard's uncertain ambitions and his faulty economics, it is not surprising that he should take pleasure in the society of Skimpole, but given the Chancellor's opinion of Richard, it is ironic that he should call Skimpole 'the dear old infant' (p. 459): both are very much mixed up when it comes to age. When Esther describes Richard in his premature decline -- 'There is a ruin of youth which is not like age; and into such a ruin Richard's youth and youthful beauty had all fallen away' (p. 722) -- we hear an echo of her first observations of Skimpole, who 'had more the appearance, in all respects, of a damaged young man, than a well-preserved elderly one' (p. 65). It is obvious that Skimpole's picturesque debility is an ostentatious pose, 'his neck-kerchief loose and flowing, as I have seen artists paint their own portraits', betraying Bohemian pretensions that are hardly justified by his leisurely tinkering with the arts. Richard too seems to put on an artificial manner, looking at a late stage like 'the portrait of Young Despair' (p. 484), and earlier disguising his fecklessness with pleasantries and ornamental self-deprecation, although, to his credit, he appears to feel a little sheepish when he does so, as here in his first substantial speech, addressed to Esther:

'Our dear little old woman is such a capital old woman,' Richard would say, coming up to meet me in the garden early, with his pleasant laugh and perhaps the least tinge of a blush, 'that I can't get on without her. Before I begin my harum-scarum day --
grinding away at these books and instruments, and then galloping up hill and down dale, all the country round, like a highwayman -- it does me so much good to come and have a steady walk with our comfortable friend, that here I am again!'

(p. 103)

'Comfortable' Esther puts up with a lot of insipid raillery from Richard, Ada, and even Jarndyce, notably in the form of a repertory of nicknames which would be offensive to anyone but her, suggesting as they do that she is prematurely old (again the confusion of youth and age), homely, predictable, unromantic, and boringly sensible, setting her quite apart in kind from Richard and Ada: for they are the model pair, the ideals of 'youth, and hope, and beauty', as Miss Flite puts it (p. 34), the official 'wards in Jarndyce', while Esther is an illegitimate dependant on Jarndyce's charity, who is quite overwhelmed by the way of life that is thrust upon her: 'This was the beginning of my being called Old Woman, and Little Old Woman, and Cobweb, and Mrs. Shipton, and Mother Hubbard, and Dame Durden, and so many names of that sort, that my own name soon became quite lost among them' (p. 90). Esther, like David Copperfield, is impressed by other people's many versions of herself, and tends to follow their example, addressing herself in similar terms -- as being, for example, 'generally a methodical, old-maidish sort of foolish little person' (p. 85). As with David, again, the fragmentation of exterior personae seems to go along with rampant introspection, so that Esther comes to seem more than a little neurotic, always abasing herself, but doing so in language which is full of latent vanity. 'It seems so curious to me to be obliged to write all this about myself!' she says (p. 27) -- a good joke on Dickens's part since he never suggests how or why Esther does come to be writing her autobiography.

Similarly, Esther apologizes throughout the book for reporting other people's praise of her goodness, but never fails to detail their compliments in full, always marveling aloud how it is that everybody seems to love her so. The show of modesty only heightens the impression of her worthiness. At least, that is what she seems unconsciously to intend, although it tends to make her appear, in her own way, as muddle-headed as Richard. Dickens is aiming at pathos here, contrasting Esther's bad start in life, when she 'felt so poor, so trifling, and so far off' (pp. 17--18), with the overwhelming comfort and security of
Bleak House, and trying to represent the inextricably confused feelings that this miraculous reversal entails: 'but the pleasure of it, and the pain of it, and the pride and joy of it, and the humble regret of it, were so blended, that my heart seemed almost breaking while it was full of rapture' (p. 27). This is like something out of Pamela, or The Mysteries of Udolpho, or -- satirically -- Northanger Abbey: a study of feeling and nascent sensibility closed-in and intensified by unfamiliar circumstances; an experiment in portraying shifting, involuntary states in a disoriented and pressurized mind; an intrusion into the character's thoughts beyond the point at which the character understands herself, attempting to trap the character in her misapprehensions and vanities, tending through pathos towards the sensational and voyeuristic.

It is 'difficult to ignore the sadism in this depiction,' notes Anny Sadrin of the scene in Dombey where Florence is forced to strip by 'Good Mrs Brown', 'or the double game of this perverse moralist who deplores the situation but who allows himself, with an untroubled conscience, to deplore it at a lingering pace'. ¹¹ This idea of the 'double game' seems widely applicable in Dickens's novels, in the conflicting forces of destruction and domestication, for example, and in the satirical undermining of leading characters like Oliver, or Nicholas, or David; and it takes an especially conspicuous form in the double structure of Bleak House, where the alternation of 'Esther's Narrative' with the more detached narrative of the implied author makes the text ambiguous, sometimes suggesting that Esther is being deliberately evasive and teasing (as when she coyly intimates, in the conclusions of several chapters, her growing interest in Woodcourt), drawing the reader into a world of secrets, clues, self-deception and hollow protestations, a world which only a master detective, like inspector Bucket, can confidently negotiate.

However, Esther seems earnest in her attempts to establish the correct relations of duty and gratitude between herself and her environment, which is why she is so disapproving of Skimpole, although Dickens has chosen not to give her the intelligence, or not to allow her

to show that she thinks she has the intelligence, to express her
disapproval in logical form, leaving her to make hints, which compromise
with Dickens's own ironic perspective and which consequently do not seem
quite ingenuous:

It seemed to me that his off-hand professions of childishness and
carelessness were a great relief to my guardian, by contrast with
such things [as the Jellyby circle], and were the more readily
believed in: since, to find one perfectly undesigning and candid
man, among many opposites, could not fail to give him pleasure.
I should be sorry to imply that Mr. Skimpole divined this, and was
politic: I really never understood him well enough to know.
(pp. 183--84)

Jarndyce has a notable peculiarity of his own in his intolerance
of gratitude. This may be virtuous, but from the start of the book it
seems a little ridiculous as well, another neurotic symptom, akin to
Richard's ill-judged witticisms and Esther's self-deprecating vanities.
Jarndyce has a tendency to dissolve into incoherent states of feeling:
when his 'child', Skimpole, disgraces him over the Coavinses episode, he
reacts inarticulately, childishly, 'alternately putting his hands into
his pockets, as if he were going to keep them there for a long time; and
taking them out again, and vehemently rubbing them all over his head' (p.
74). At the end of the novel, when Jarndyce's marriage to Esther falls
through, he is careful to reassert his independence and to guard against
impending gratitude: 'Let no one thank me any more; for I am going to
revert to my bachelor habits, and if anybody disregards this warning,
I'll run away, and never come back!' (p. 753). There is something
unstable and immature about Jarndyce -- an emotional weather vane, ever
on the point of being knocked sideways by a sudden East Wind -- which
recalls the vertiginous tendencies noted in Chuzzlewit, and the
debilitating fears of Copperfield.

The generosity that makes Jarndyce overlook Skimpole's designing
selfishness, seeing only a candidate for charity who eschews 'vulgar
gratitude' (p. 67), is a misguided and obfuscating virtue. Skimpole and
Jarndyce complement one another's weaknesses: Jarndyce sustains
Skimpole's indolence and listens appreciatively to his heartless
sophistries, while Skimpole consciously panders to Jarndyce's fear of a
two-way transaction with the world. Mr Snagsby's response to anything
he sees which pricks his conscience and gives him pain is to offer half
a crown, a formulaic response which keeps him apart, interposing the coin
between himself and suffering. Jarndyce is not dissimilar: inexhaustibly generous with money, but afraid of an involvement that would put him in emotional jeopardy. So Skimpole is by no means completely wrong when he records in his memoirs, wrathfully quoted by the perfectly grateful and flattering Esther, that 'Jarndyce, in common with most other men I have known, is the Incarnation of Selfishness' (p. 729).

Likewise, Richard has some reason for his distrust of Jarndyce, whose attempts to keep him out of Chancery could seem claustrophobically paternalistic, as though Jarndyce wants to keep the young man out of life and make him an old, blustering, great-hearted, unstable, despairing recluse like himself, not trusting himself in the outside world, but taking refuge in the prison / paradise of Bleak House: a plan which fails in the case of Richard, but may succeed with Woodcourt, to whom Jarndyce presents -- unsolicited -- a replica Bleak House, identical down to the flower-beds and the distribution of the ornaments, complete with Esther, his own chief votarist, who has modelled herself for years on the pattern of his desires.

However, if Jarndyce is selfish, Skimpole is certainly no less so, and indeed he would not claim that he was. He sees the world as a system of interlocking self-interest, in which all is ultimately for the best, a system which he calls 'poetry'. His expositions of this system are slick, and superficially clever: 'My butcher says to me, he wants that little bill. It's part of the pleasant unconscious poetry of that man's nature, that he always calls it a "little" bill -- to make the payment appear easy to both of us' (p. 184). At his best, Skimpole can resemble Oscar Wilde (rather more than Leigh Hunt), as a blackly-comical cynical aphorist; but it is all too apparent that he believes his own sophistries -- or that he does not care what he believes, and is Chester-like: intellectually untouchable. The feather-brained, weather-cock instability of his disposition, and the nothingness within, make Skimpole the personification of the voids of fear and unbelief in Dickens -- the uncertainties that Jarndyce and his like are required to bury under domestic frivolities and actual masonry.

Contrast to Skimpole's false, designing 'childishness' is provided by simple, industrious characters like the troopers George and Bagnet,
with regard to whom, however, it is doubtful 'whether there are two more simple and unaccustomed children, in all the Smallweedy affairs of life' (p. 422), the Smallweeds being a dynasty of born old fogeys who, like other characters in the novel who consistently betray the signs of age -- Vholes, Tulkinghorn, and Krook -- are given over to avarice, secrecy, and scheming. George's shooting gallery offers another parallel to Bleak House, presented as an oasis of charity in an inhuman world; and George himself, his life overshadowed by regret that he abandoned his mother, is another isolated and impeded character, vulnerable, like Jarndyce, to being used, preferring for years to nurse his sense of failure rather than acting the prodigal son, and then content to sacrifice the remainder of his life in devoted servitude to the once 'great' Sir Leicester, who has been brought down to the same level of helplessness that unites so many characters in this novel: a 'poor infant', according to the haughty, whorish, and tense Hortense, whom George 'takes . . . in his arms like a child' (pp. 653, 696).

Just as George returns to the forgiveness and security of his childhood home, and to his mother, joining her in creating a familial warmth within which to cocoon the isolated and distraught Sir Leicester, so Jarndyce contrives, nearer the beginning of the book, to create a fostering environment for the displaced Richard and Ada, aided by Esther, who from the start adopts a maternal role -- Ada is her 'child' (p. 614). The way Jarndyce and Esther convene over the engagement of the two wards, dictating how they should conduct themselves so as to ensure the maximum happiness, gives to Ada and Richard an exemplary or mythic status, as though they were a new Adam and Eve. Perhaps this crossed Dickens's mind when he selected Ada's unusual name. Skimpole, projecting as usual, calls Ada 'the child of the universe' (p. 68), and she seems a medium (with Richard) for redeeming the lamentable Chancery-blighted past; except that Jarndyce's social experiment fails, Richard is sucked into the family evil, and Esther, a much more ambiguous, robust and realistic heroine, in partnership with the active Woodcourt, has to take over the mission of reforming the world, while Ada joins the similarly abandoned Jarndyce in the original Bleak House, which is now, effectively, a home for invalids.
Apart from Woodcourt, almost all the characters in Bleak House seem to be locked into some kind of compromised relationship with the matrix of their environment, all of them children towards whom society behaves like a cruel and negligent parent. Even Lady Dedlock, who seems strong and dignified among all the surrounding comic types, is subject to the vagaries of 'the fashionable intelligence', and is put in her place by her tradesmen: 'There are deferential people, in a dozen callings, whom my Lady Dedlock suspects of nothing but prostration before her, who can tell you how to manage her as if she were a baby' (p. 14). But Lady Dedlock is also held in a much more sinister kind of social bondage, deriving from the extra-connubial conception of Esther; or at least the novel makes this phenomenon appear sinister, and Lady Dedlock dies for it, succumbing to a familial blight like Jarndyce and Richard.

Esther inherits some of the punishment for what society regards as her mother's failure, and Dickens extricates her from this inheritance by way of moral fairy-tale: told, as an infant, that she must bear her mother's guilt, she expects almost nothing from life, but is inexplicably rescued, finds herself being offered plum cake on board a carriage, and is suddenly elevated to a position of maternal responsibility over exemplary young people whom she immediately loves. She embarks on a career of good works in this new soft world, is given a servant as a medieval compliment by her benefactor, as well as the keys to this Englishman's castle -- becoming, in fact, a 'kept woman' in a very real sense, a willing Radcliffean captive. In the course of her good works, as she gets closer to the truth about her parentage, she has to suffer disease, disfigurement, a kind of martyrdom, until she becomes a new enlightened self, supposedly without illusions. Her parentage comes to light, and to a traumatic conclusion, coordinated by the great fixer, Bucket; and this conclusion seems somehow to exonerate her, clearing the way for a prosperous future, as she settles down as wife to Mr Woodcourt (the physician who had attended the corpses of both her parents) and as a force for good in the world. This is a puritanical fable: one that was substantially anticipated by Mary Wollstonecraft, in her Blake-illustrated Original Stories, where Mrs Mason tells the story of a pretty, vain girl who catches smallpox, loses her looks, becomes miserable, but
soon shows signs of moral rejuvenation and enhanced peace of mind, becoming a philanthropist, philosopher, and general boon to all her friends and acquaintances, concluding that her disease was rather a blessing than otherwise.¹²

Neither Wollstonecraft nor Dickens gets to grips with the physical realities of small-pox, any more than the death of Little Nell drew upon the physical realities of the death of Mary Hogarth. Esther's deferred confrontation with the mirror imparts a considerable frisson, as a pointed exploitation of her privacy, but, by the end of the novel, Esther herself is cryptically hinting that the disease may have actually reformed her frumpy visage to rather good effect, so that she seems to be supplanting the failed female sex-symbol, Ada, rather as Agnes had supplanted, under a screen of piety, the more conspicuously pretty Dora: so that the moral fable seems to be subverted, and led astray, by an element of half-confessed sex-comedy -- a very 'double game' indeed.

But Esther's sudden pulchritude is not necessarily real.¹³ Perhaps Woodcourt is deceiving her in this particular, or perhaps she is deceiving herself: the book ends with Esther amusing herself mistrusting her own feelings in a way that casts a degree of doubt over the whole of her preceding narrative, adding a layer of imponderable caprice to what might otherwise have been an overwhelmingly portentous moral tale. Her own story involves a great triumph over adversity, but an impression is left of the arbitrariness both of her good fortune and of her suffering, with invincible forces involving the innocent and guilty alike. This, together with Dickens's damning exposure of Skimpole's self-serving, quietist philosophy, suggests that Dickens would not now wish to identify

¹² Mary Wollstonecraft, *Original Stories from Real Life; with Conversations, Calculated to Regulate the Affections, and Form the Mind to Truth and Goodness* (London, 1791), pp. 60--63. Wollstonecraft's book also contains Pardiggle-like visits to deserving hovels.

¹³ For the argument that Esther is physically beautiful all along see Diane L. Jolly, 'The Nature of Esther', *Dickensian*, 86 (1990), pp. 29--31. Anny Sadrin, on the other hand, in an unusually approving feminist reading of *Bleak House*, suggests that Dickens demonstrates, through Esther, that 'the right to plainness is no longer the prerogative of men' and that 'Dickens's greatest gift to his heroine was this disfigurement' (‘Charlotte Dickens: The Female Narrator of *Bleak House*’, *Dickens Quarterly*, 9 [1992], p. 55). Dickens seems to have designed Esther in such a way that it is particularly easy for critics to look in her face and see their own desires personified.
himself with the pious schoolmaster in The Old Curiosity Shop. The simplistic desire for consolidation, and repetition, persists in Jarndyce, and in the idea of a succession of Bleak Houses, which can be imagined spreading over the country like a chain of hotels, or like a network of prisons; but it is constantly destabilized by comparison with other social groupings, and even, as deconstructionists have hinted, by comparison with the text itself, as a tangible artifact:

The account of the 'delightfully irregular' house in which 'you go up and down steps out of one room into another, and where you come upon more rooms when you think you have seen all there are, produces just the same problematic contrast of part and whole that the novel does, with the details of the description leading the reader metonymically from part to part without providing enough information to allow the whole house to be conceived at once, so that, like Esther, the reader is led back to the beginning but is left 'wondering how you got back there, or had ever got out of it'.

The name, 'Bleak House', is open to deconstruction by itself, being either candid or misleading, according to Jarndyce's moods -- his contrary states -- and according to whether we choose to regard either the protective or the restrictive attributes of the house as paramount.

'If the "victims" of Bleak House are no longer strictly victims at all (as Oliver, Nell, Smike, and even Paul Dombey were), but really victims of themselves,' writes Thurley, 'so the villains are not strictly villains, but rather devourers, in the Blakean sense of the word' (p. 330).

There are many Biblical references in Bleak House (see Susan Shatto, The Companion to 'Bleak House', The Dickens Companions, 3 [London, 1988]), but it is hardly a Christian text. Dickens's Chancery is the heart of the New Babylon -- 'the sixth seal mentioned in the Revelations is the Great Seal' (p. 34) -- and Richard is run down by 'the gaunt pale horse' of the apocalypse (p. 471), but organized religion is discredited in the novel through Esther's early bad experience of it, and Bleak House, as sanctuary and as moral school ('Bleak House Academy' was considered as a title for the novel) may be seen as having usurped the Church's role.

Steven Connor, Charles Dickens, Rereading Literature (Oxford, 1985), pp. 86--87, quoting Bleak House, p. 63. The origins of this style of Dickens criticism seem traceable to J. Hillis Miller, for whom 'Bleak House is a document about the interpretation of documents' ('The Interpretive Dance in Bleak House', in Harold Bloom, ed., Dickens's 'Bleak House', pp. 13--36 [13]). See also Daniel Sheridan, 'The Unreadable Dombey', Dickens Quarterly, 6 (1989), 142--49, for a recent discussion of the creatively obstructive qualities of Dickens's texts, particularly in their lavish provision of detail. A thought-provoking rebarbariveness emerges here which is analogous to that which many critics find in the Prophetic Books. See McMaster, 'Dickens and David Copperfield on the Act of Reading' for the problematizing of language in Dickens's later texts.
Neither he nor Tulkinghorn enjoy evil in the way that Fagin does, or Quilp, or Gride: the Chancery denizens simply perpetuate a system which gives nothing of value to anybody, however 'good' or 'bad' they may be. So Dickens may be seen as moving closer to the Blakean view that nobody is a permanent enemy, anyone can be reformed, reassimilated. But Blake, as I have suggested in commenting on 'London', 'The Tyger', and the character of Orc, was capable of taking up a devouring posture himself: his 'marking' seemed to involve both the diagnosis of external ills and the expression of destructiveness within himself and within the writing process. And a very similar apprehension has been detected in Bleak House:

The vocabulary of stain, spot, mark, and trace ... consistently refers in Bleak House to this conjunction between language and disease: such words represent the marks of writing, grammatical signs, as well as the symptoms and effects of disease. Lady Dedlock tries to hold back from the 'stains contaminating her' [p. 202] at the law-writer's grave, but the contaminating stain -- an inky disorder that is the ubiquitous 'black drizzle' that covers London -- is inescapable: it marks the law-writer's desk, his grave, and all his relations.

Dickens's description of the Tom-All-Alone's cemetery, and of the surrounding houses, 'on whose walls a thick humidity broke out like a disease' (p. 713), suggests the bloody and sooty surfaces of 'London': the images in both works are true, no doubt, to the backstreet realities of the Georgian and early Victorian metropolis. But Ragussis's analysis seems to imply the same aforementioned complicity of writing in the ills that it describes. Dickens himself refers to Shakespeare's 'dyer's hand' sonnet in the Preface to Bleak House (p. 3), but this is probably a coincidence: he does not confess to suffering, himself, from any 'inky disorder'. And it is easy enough to take Chancery as a sufficient source of these infections. For example: 'Chesney Wold is shut up, carpets are rolled into scrolls in corners of comfortless rooms' (p. 356). Here the dry 'scrolls' suggest lawyers' offices, and when, a few pages later, Tulkinghorn appears -- 'this rusty lawyer, with ... his dull black

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breaches tied with ribbons at the knees' (p. 359) -- it seems that even his legs are law-papers.

However, there are other signs, in Bleak House, which suggest that Dickens has a wary sense of the ambiguities of artistic representation. He is not averse, in fact, to a little amateur deconstruction, as in his cold-eyed account of Sir Leicester's collection of 'Fancy Ball School' paintings, 'which would be best catalogued like the miscellaneous articles in a sale. As, "Three high-backed chairs, a table and cover, long-necked bottle (containing wine), one flask, one Spanish female's costume, three-quarter face portrait of Miss Jogg the model, and a suit of armour containing Don Quixote"' (p. 357). If we think back to the deliberately unreal tableaux of Sketches by Boz, it is clear that Dickens was a writer who would not necessarily be taken in by any affectations of unity or truth in his own fictions. Richard, as we have seen, looked like 'the portrait of Young Despair' (p. 484), and Ada like 'the picture of Truth' (p. 211); Jarndyce, at one stage, looks 'the picture of a good man' (p. 762); and, of course, at the end of the novel, we do not know what Esther looks like at all.

According to Jerome McGann, 'Truth for Blake does not exist, it has to be created. Once it is brought into being, however, Blakean truth immediately discovers -- calls attention to -- its own precise and objective limits.' And again,

Blake's poetry is 'true' because, in his typical practice, it executes a more comprehensive definition of the mind's activities than do other types of human discourse. Unlike philosophical or scientific work, poetic forms do not seek to establish those many types of abstract control (categories, rules, methodologies, etc.) which are necessary to science, history, philosophy. On the contrary, the only 'rule' of poetic work is that it develop as rich a field of concretions and details, as complex a network of relations (similarities and differences alike) as can be imagined."

As we have seen, there is a very extensive network of relations, echoes and parallels in Bleak House, which discourage us from taking any fixed view of the novel. All the talk of pictures and portraits might seem to be a warning, in this context, of the author's subjectivity; likewise the unwholesome images of writing. The associating power of Dickens's

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imagination is certainly much more in evidence, in Bleak House, than any 'categories, rules, methodologies', and this is generally true of his oeuvre, where the comparatively weak endings seem to defer signification from one novel to the next.

'What the Victorians valued in . . . [Bleak House], ' writes Clotilde de Stasio, 'was presumably the writer's capacity to give a voice to their doubts and their fears, and at the same time to offer them some comfort. In our own century it is possible that the reader only knows how to appreciate "the quality of its doubt" [T. S. Eliot]. '19 In other words, it may be our modernist prejudice to underestimate the idealism of the novel in favour of its ironies. Certainly, I would say that the moral positivism of, for example, Joseph Gold is only partly fallacious:

To speak in terms of suffering, self-knowledge and redemption when we come to Bleak House is not in any sense strange. What is Bleak House itself but an image of the world? What order and meaning and joy can be brought to it, if not from the sympathies of its occupants, out of perceptions arising from an unobscured vision of the here and now, unfogged by evasion, illusion or rationalization, unmuddled by 'compound interest', untroubled by doubts as to the design of the whole? Only such perceptions can discover in the world those beauties and those joys that we have wished to find there all along.

(pp. 194--95)

There is actually 'evasion, illusion', and flawed 'rationalization' to be found in all the major characters of the novel, as in most of the major characters of Dickens's earlier work, but this would not be nearly so important or interesting if the novel did not also have a powerful drive towards something like Gold's 'unobscured vision'. And here is the parallel with Blake's Jerusalem: for, despite their very different forms, both works combine an idea of social regeneration, reaching after immensely wide applicability, with a quirky self-consciousness. Just as Blake punctuates his prophecy with reminders of its immediate origin in the mind of one eccentric, imperfect individual -- an Individual who may, at any time, be one of a number of States -- so Dickens moderates, complicates, and enriches the ostensible drift of Bleak House, and its implicit moral judgements upon individuals and institutions, with a sense

of the author as one who is daunted and perplexed by his own undertaking, who does not quite know what it is that he describes, and whether it is external or part of himself. But, as with Jerusalem, these complications only magnify the significance of the text. Dickens’s vision, like Blake’s, aims to be so comprehensive that it must include the author himself. And, since the vision has so much to say about the rights and wrongs of the world that it depicts, the author necessarily submits himself to moral scrutiny.
CHAPTER 9

Flatness and Ethical Scepticism in Hard Times, Little Dorrit, and A Tale of Two Cities

Hard Times is perhaps the most obviously Blake-like of Dickens’s novels. Dickens’s attack on Bentham, Malthus, and Mill seems closely related to Blake’s on Bacon, Newton, and Locke. Dickens’s opponents are nearer to the front line of social discontent, but the gist of the conflict in either case is much the same: imagination and the free growth of the mind against restrictive or levelling intellectual tendencies. And Hard Times is Blake-like in the way that it leaps from the description of specific abuses towards universal gloom: ‘The deadly statistical recorder in the Gradgrind observatory knocked every second on the head as it was born, and buried it with his accustomed regularity.’ This recalls the instantaneous blighting of the new-born Oliver Twist, the oppressive power of time in Dombey, and the many Dickensian characters who are in one way or another consigned to permanent states of withdrawal or remorse. Hard Times is a novel which seeks to address some of the real iniquities of Victorian Britain, but at the same time it is tied to the generalized sense of emotional suffering to which Blake and Dickens both consistently return.

It is typical of the didactic posture of this novel that Sissy Jupe is made to argue the defence of the imagination that Esther Summerson had merely embodied. There is a blatancy in Dickens’s approach which led F. R. Leavis to describe Hard Times quite approvingly as a ‘moral fable’, but which many readers find wooden and off-putting. It is so obvious that Dickens has arrived at what he regards as unimpeachable rules of psychology and that he is determined that the dullest reader shall be similarly enlightened. ‘When from thy boiling store [of facts] thou shalt fill each jar brimful by-and-by,’ says the righteously indignant


narrator, 'dost thou think that thou wilt always kill outright the robber
Fancy lurking within -- or sometimes only maim him and distort him?' (p. 12). Sure enough, in Tom, 'whose imagination had been strangled in his
cradle' (a phrase appropriately suggesting Blake's *Marriage*), we soon
find 'its ghost in the form of grovelling sensualities' (p. 101).

'Grovelling sensualities' points to a limitation in the novel that
accentuates its childishness. Tom does develop into a sinister and
despicable young man, but his manifest sins consist merely of gambling
-- a subject of rich potential, upon which this newly sombre Dickens
lavishes no creative ingenuity -- and a joyless hunger for cash. Dickens
invokes a Blake-like sense of psychical harm in the making, but he is
inhibited from inducing Tom into appropriately dark experience, even as
his excessively palpable moral design compromises Sissy's innocence, at
times suggesting (as so often with Dickensian heroines) that she is
archly fausse-naive. *Oliver Twist*, in which sin can seem attractive, and
where Dickens is apparently aware of some ambiguity in his hero's
innocence, is really a more affecting 'moral fable'. In *Hard Times*,
Dickens presents Sissy's fancy (with its dubious concomitants of
smallness, dutiful behaviour, and chronic innumeracy) as automatically
worthy of applause, and any kind of 'vice' as automatically reprehensible,
in a way that sends the reader's ethical intelligence to sleep.

Blake's *Songs* stimulate the ethical intelligence by presenting
emotional attitudes, variously tender and cruel, in a non-evaluative way,
so that it is possible, for example, for readers to surprise themselves
revelling in the savagery of the Tyger. Such a dilemma is disquieting,
but also, in a way, ennobling. Too often, in the later work of Dickens,
readers finds themselves subject to the wearisome presumption that they
are incorruptibly bien pensant, and fair game for Dickens's appeal to
stock liberal virtues.

However, Dickens has the compensating skill of expanding, when he
cares to, the symbolic figures of 'moral fable' into discrete, believable
characters. In this respect, Louisa Gradgrind is a notable achievement.
She could be read as a realistic embodiment of the emotional conditions
described in Blake's 'Ah! Sun-flower', the personification of a
psychological principle, achieved with sympathy and without vulgariz-
ulation: 'What I have learned has left me doubting, misbelieving, despising, regretting, what I have not learned; and my dismal resource has been to think that life would soon go by, and that nothing in it could be worth the pain and trouble of a contest' (p. 162). This is a chilling account of the common human error of building mansions in suppositious eternity from the ruins of real time -- an analysis that could have been applied, valuably, to many of Dickens's earlier creations. Louisa, through the fantasy of being useful to her brother, makes a 'wild escape into something visionary' (p. 162): not, obviously, the phrase that Blake would use (except in the context of the delusory visions engendered by his Spectre), but quite cognate with Blake's view that people all too readily devote themselves to a vacuum materialized (in the Church and allied institutions) instead of reality spiritualized -- or objective experience made personal by imaginative perception. Louisa is alienated by impersonality, by ratios of fact.

'It was even the worse for her at this pass, that in her mind -- implanted there before her eminently practical father began to form it -- a struggling disposition to believe in a wider and nobler humanity than she had ever heard of, constantly strove with doubts and resentments' (p. 125). The tautology -- 'struggling . . . strove' -- imports a wholly appropriate discomfort; or, if it is a mistake, it is perhaps indicative of Dickens's strenuous concentration on psychical causality, something which contrasts violently with the fallacious incorruptibility of the book's proletarian heroes, Stephen, Sissy, and Rachael. Clearly, Dickens has written this book for the bourgeoisie, who are again, as Sadrin says, 'his target and his hope'.

Nevertheless, there is at least one moment when a working-class character rises above his flat, Smike-like, monitory role: when Stephen Blackpool thinks of his wife's useless degradation, and of Rachael's useless self-denial, and of the unjust social structures which prevent the alleviation of these things. 'Filled with these thoughts -- so filled that he had an unwholesome sense of growing larger, of being

placed in some new and diseased relation towards the objects among which he passed, of seeing the iris round every misty light turn red -- he went home for shelter' (p. 65). Stephen might be making and marking his way through the diseased city of Blake's 'London' here, festering with all that poem's sense of lost moral bearings, frighteningly illuminated by a red, tigrish, evil eye. Not only is Stephen here admitted to the full, fallible humanity of a Louisa Gradgrind: he is also accorded real prominence in the conceptual life of the novel, evoking with forceful simplicity the same problems of representation, including the writer's possibly diseased relation to his material, that tortuously seem to enhance the mysteries of Bleak House. This sentence, which really does not belong in the same book as Sissy Jupe, concludes a weekly number and might have left its original readership with the expectation of explosive developments to come.

As it transpires, that was a uniquely lively moment for Stephen Blackpool. He subsequently dreams that his loom has turned into a scaffold (p. 68), but that does not mean that he becomes a Luddite -- just that he is a pathetic sufferer who will have to die. And the death itself is notoriously unconvincing. Dickens does not begin to come to terms with the horror of Stephen's fall, let alone with his two weeks at the bottom of the pit. Dickens could write good death scenes by now: Mrs Gradgrind's, for example, which is a satisfying mixture of close observation, pity, and jaded mockery (pp. 149--50), but, in the case of Stephen, Dickens is waylaid by religiosity. For a time it had seemed that Stephen might become an atheist. There are narratorial outbursts in the novel which suggest a thorough disillusionment with the sort of organized religion which is designed to keep the workers docile: 'Body number three, wrote leaden little books for them [the workers of Coketown], showing how the good grown-up baby invariably got to the Savings-bank, and the bad grown-up baby invariably got transporting', and 'Coketown cast ashes not only on its own head but on the neighbourhood's too -- after the manner of those pious persons who do penance for their

5 CF. Stanley Friedman, 'Sad Stephen and Troubled Louisa: Paired Protagonists in Hard Times', Dickens Quarterly, 7 (1990), 254--62, which argues that Dickens sought to explore similar psychological problems in both characters.
own sins by putting other people into sackcloth' (pp. 42, 195). But Stephen, in the pit, seems to have swallowed the sedative dogmas whole, and his iteration of them is meant to be inspirational: 'Often as I coom to myseln, and found it shinin on me down there in my trouble, I thowt it were the star as guided to Our Saviour's home. I awmust think it be the very star!' (p. 202). Barnaby Rudge's indifferent stars were much more vivid and persuasive. And yet the last sentence of Stephen's final chapter is ambiguous: 'The star had shown him where to find the God of the poor; and through humility, and sorrow, and forgiveness, he had gone to his Redeemer's rest' (p. 202). Is 'the God of the poor' an illusion -- like Blake's 'Human Abstract' -- which poor people are driven to believing in? Or is Dickens saying that Stephen is really on his way to heaven? As Stephen says, it is 'aw a muddle'.

In fact this novel resembles many of its Dickensian predecessors in being a tissue of platitude and compromise torn just occasionally by exciting instances of danger, moments which, like the unsatisfied promise of Tom's 'sensualities', reveal far greater depths in Dickens's emotional engagement than could ever be inferred from the plot. Thus, it is often said that Louisa's sexual discontent is latently a major theme of the novel, repressed into an ill-defined incestuous leaning towards Tom. I am sure that this is true, but I would like to argue that here, as in Nicholas Nickleby, there is a more conscious and clever handling of the sexual atmosphere, on Dickens's part, than is generally supposed.

Louisa, in fact, is in much the same position as Madeleine Bray -- afflicted with an elderly and nasty suitor. We first encounter this suitor, who is Bounderby, in conversation with Gradgrind. He seems bombastic, but direct and affable enough. But then, as he prepares to leave the Gradgrind house, kissing a frosty Louisa in the hall, he seems suddenly much less urbane, much more unpleasant: "Always my pet; ain't you, Louisa?" said Mr. Bounderby' (p. 21). This swift drop to a lower, Quilp-like, sarcastic conversational register seems very sinister, and true: in a moment it reveals how Bounderby is undercutting Gradgrind, knowingly preparing to take a wife who hates him, while her father (the

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6 See, for example, Daniel P. Deneau, 'The Brother-Sister Relationship in Hard Times', Dickensian, 60 (1964), 173--77.
old innocent) is simply impervious to such unmathematical considerations, and would presume Bounderby to be impervious too. This intensely revealing moment is echoed in the sentence which impressively ends Book One of the novel, where the spineless Tom expresses his triumphant verdict on Louisa's engagement to his employer: 'AN'T it uncommonly jolly now!' (p. 84, Dickens's capitals). Here we have the same uncharacteristic, ugly slip into abbreviated discourse by one of the great folks, the same distorted word as in Bounderby's sarcastic aside, and again it draws attention to the book's main crime, which is not at all the petty robbery, of course, but the selling of the daughter.' This gives a richer perspective on Dickens's use of dialect elsewhere in the novel, and helps support one of my general contentions about Dickens -- that the minute particularity of his verbal effects is easy to underestimate.

Similarly, there is great subtlety in Dickens's study of the mutual embarrassment and infliction of pain in the relations of Louisa and Gradgrind, where fable and realism are played against one another, the father living in an abstract dream-world of figures and simplistic ideals, while the daughter brokenly articulates her much deeper and sadder understanding of her predicament and his:

'Father, I have often thought that life is very short.' -- This was so distinctly one of his subjects that he interposed. 'It is short, no doubt, my dear. Still, the average duration of human life is proved to have increased of late years. The calculations of various life-assurance and annuity offices, among other figures which cannot go wrong, have established the fact.'

'I speak of my own life, father.'

'O indeed?' Still,' said Mr. Gradgrind, 'I need not point out to you, Louisa, that it is governed by the laws which govern lives in the aggregate.'

'While it lasts, I would wish to do the little I can, and the little I am fit for. What does it matter?'

Mr. Gradgrind seemed rather at a loss to understand the last four words; replying, 'How, matter? What matter, my dear?'

'Mr. Bounderby,' she went on in a steady, straight way, without regarding this, 'asks me to marry him. The question I have to ask myself is, shall I marry him? That is so father, is it not? You have told me so, father. Have you not?'

'Certainly, my dear.'

(p. 78)

Gradgrind, who was every inch a caricature at the start of the novel, becomes touchingly blind and foolish in the context of Louisa's reckless

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7 Bounderby, it may be objected, said 'ain't'; but in the MS and first edition both he and Tom say 'an't' (see the Norton Hard Times, p. 239, textual note 21.34).
speech; and Louisa, who at times is nothing more than a hackneyed type of the hysterical woman, like Edith Dombey or Rosa Dartle, becomes understandably bitter and depressive in the context of Gradgrind's stiff mentality.

*Hard Times* is essentially a novel about the relations between family life and social conduct, between the management of the home and of the larger community. But Dickens's talents are better suited to showing the friction between different individuals than to the abstract thinking that might have made *Hard Times* a more politically significant tract. He does not show any substantial insight into the ways in which the oppression of the workers might be alleviated, and his trade-unionist, Slackbridge, is an appalling advertisement for the rights of labour. But just as Dickens allows the faultiness of Gradgrind's relationship with his daughter to expose itself spontaneously, through dialogue, so the unnatural constraint imposed by the existing social hierarchy is made plain in the way that Bounderby and Gradgrind talk to their social inferiors. For example, when Gradgrind makes his fruitless trip to see Sissy's father, he finds himself saying, 'in what he meant for a reassuring tone, as they turned down a narrow road, "And this is Pod's End; is it, Jupe?"' (p. 26). Simply calling her 'Jupe', especially when we think of that name's reductive, metonymic derivation, is clumsy enough, surpassing Dombey's 'Richards', and Dickens elsewhere forcefully attacks metonymy, as a symptom of the general undervaluing of poor people: that is, when he refers to 'the multitude of Coketown, generically called "the Hands,"' -- a race who would have found more favour with some people, if Providence had seen fit to make them only hands' (p. 52). But when Gradgrind has to enunciate the idiotic name, 'Pod's End', and later 'Merrylegs', we can see how the moneyed individuals, too, can find their dignity impinged upon, with only themselves to blame. Dickens sentimentalizes the poor, but he is wonderfully good at expressing their

8 This is not to say that Dickens's concentration on small-scale conflicts does not have a political significance of its own, albeit a rather fatalistic one. See John Holloway's recent revaluation of the novel, in which he notes the preponderance of *duologue*, suggesting 'human communication ... at a nadir', and hence society in crisis ('Form and Fable in *Hard Times*', in *Art and Society in the Victorian Novel: Essays on Dickens and His Contemporaries*, ed. Colin Gibson [Basingstoke, 1989], pp. 29--42 [38]).
plight indirectly, through the embarrassment of the worthies who have to encounter them. It is not really important that Dickens is guilty of the same prejudiced ineptitude that he ridicules in Gradgrind -- that it is Dickens, after all, who has encumbered his heroine with the name 'Sissy Jupe', and consigned her to the ludicrous 'Pod's End'. Like Blake, Dickens seems to be at his most insightful and dynamic when he is criticizing failings and deficiencies to which he is susceptible himself.

I suggested earlier that the conversational inelegances of Tom and Bounderby should influence our thinking about Dickens's use of dialect, by which I meant that Dickens's imagination is strongly egalitarian: if he can make Stephen Blackpool sound like a simpleton he is perfectly happy to make a rich man sound like a boor. Similarly, Sleary's circus is counterbalanced in the novel by a socially more elevated analogue. Coketown itself is a circus, a garishly satanic one 'of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage', complete with 'interminable serpents', and even -- something which Sleary's seems to lack -- performing elephants (p. 22). Within this circus Gradgrind stands as an unknowing ringmaster, while Stephen Blackpool languishes as the put-upon straight man. It is a situation which erupts in a final irony when the more exalted master's son, Tom, is virtually tarred and feathered at Sleary's (p. 207), while Bitzer, the boy who, to Gradgrind's complacency, had given the model definition of a horse in the pedagogical sandpit of Coketown, but who, like Bounderby, is really just an opportunist making the most of Gradgrind's innocence, stands in the arena at Sleary's -- the 'Horse-Riding' -- and, asked if he has a heart, delivers to the broken Gradgrind a lesson on circulation (p. 210). Dickens is doing something more revolutionary here than simply saying that utilitarianism needs to be supplemented by fantastical, irrational entertainments. He is suggesting that all institutions might be constructed upon some kind of fantasy or wish-fulfilment. The superstructure of factories and machines has proved to be no more effective than a circus tent as a defence against pathos, embarrassment, satire, and ridicule.

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Dickens's earlier novels usually end with the principal characters finding a home, a physical refuge from their problems. In late Dickens,
characters tend to have to fall back, more movingly, on the resources of a toughened mind, and they have to be prepared to forgo tangible rewards. Louisa Gradgrind represents a bleak version of this renunciation. In Little Dorrit, however, something of the cheerful perseverance of Mark Tapley -- which, in Chuzzlewit, condemned that individual to being comic and secondary -- can be detected in the readiness of Arthur Clennam to give up his present life and 'begin the world':

The shadow of a supposed act of injustice, which had hung over him since his father's death, was so vague and formless that it might be the result of a reality widely remote from his idea of it. But, if his apprehensions should prove to be well founded, he was ready at any moment to lay down all he had, and begin the world anew.\(^9\)

This romantic notion originates, for Dickens, with the dying Richard's promise to 'begin the world' in the antepenultimate chapter of Bleak House,\(^10\) but some comparable form of redemption, rescue, or reformation of the character had always been required of the Dickens hero. A constant desire is manifest in the novels to make up for a bad past -- for which the protagonist may be to blame, or for which he or she, like Esther Summerson, may just be persuaded that they are to blame. Nicholas Nickleby, with his unsatisfactory parents, is perhaps the first character who consciously undertakes to begin the world in this way, but even Oliver may be seen as going through a punishing, educating process as a function of his inauspicious birth.

This redemptive drive connects with Dickens's sense of his own early history, but also with the rhythm of his artistic practice. New beginnings were an occupational hazard of Dickens's work, and the extent to which he lived each work, and lived, above all, with its characters, must have made him feel as though he were passing through a series of incarnations. A few days before finishing Hard Times, having just disposed of Stephen Blackpool, Dickens wrote as follows to John Forster:

I am three parts mad, and the fourth delirious, with perpetual rushing at Hard Times. . . . I have been looking forward through so many weeks and sides of paper to this Stephen business, that now -- as usual -- it being over, I feel as if nothing in the world, in the way of intense and violent rushing hither and

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thither, could quite restore my balance.\(^{11}\)

This was not just a pleasantry. A few months later, writing to Mrs Richard Watson, he said this:

Why I found myself so 'used up' after Hard Times I scarcely know, perhaps because I intended to do nothing in that way for a year, when the idea laid hold of me by the throat in a very violent manner, and because the compression and close condensation necessary for that disjointed form of publication gave me perpetual trouble. But I really was tired, which is a result so very incomprehensible that I can't forget it.\(^{12}\)

Here we have a picture of the novelist which is intimately related to the epistemology, social views, and emotional tone of the novels. In the writing process, it seems, one can get waylaid and lost -- caught up, like Oliver by the Fagin gang, or like a bystander at the riots in Barnaby. And this is a state of affairs that does not get any easier with practice. Starting Little Dorrit seems to have been just as deranging an experience as starting Hard Times:

\[\begin{align*}
\text{YOU} & \text{ I suppose are fat and rosy.} \\
\text{I} & \text{ am in the variable state consequent on the beginning of a new story.}\(^{13}\)
\end{align*}\]

In earlier letters and prefaces Dickens had seemed very much in control of his career. In the 1841 advertisement for Martin Chuzzlewit the burden of novel-writing is accepted with pride and flamboyance. But, later, Dickens comes more and more to confess that his career gets on top of him, that he is almost lost within it. Perhaps this is partly the consequence of age, but it is also a significant outgrowth both of Dickens’s imagination and of his social insight: a realization in the man himself of the implications of his fictional worlds.

In keeping with this sense of being overwhelmed, of being at the mercy of destiny despite his appearance of power and success, is Dickens’s increasingly considered and solemn treatment, in the later novels, of the ways in which the course of an individual’s life can be adversely determined by past events. This is a psychologically


\(^{12}\) 11 November 1854; Letters, Nonesuch, II, 602.

\(^{13}\) Dickens to W. H. Wills, 18 September 1855; Letters, Nonesuch, II, 691.
sophisticated development of the more murky, superstitious link between
the origins of Oliver, Nell -- even Esther -- and their subsequent
trials. Stephen Blackpool, for example, is haunted by the inescapable
past in the shape of his spouse, 'the evil spirit of his life' (p. 117).
This is eerie, but it is also realistic, and it can be taken as part of
a serious critique of the laws of divorce. Deliberately unrealistic
spirits, on the other hand, are to be found, at an earlier stage of
Dickens's career, in _A Christmas Carol_, where we are cheered by a fantasy
of the short-circuiting of the past -- something which, when we compare
it with the all too unfantastical bondage of someone like Stephen,
becomes extremely poignant. The earlier Dickens was prone, at times, to
confuse psychological verisimilitude with fairy-tale wish-fulfilment, as
in Dombey's easy second chance at being a good father, but these were
platitudes which belied Dickens's clear perception of the unsolved social
problems which individuals like Dombey represent.

In _Little Dorrit_ the fatalistic view of life is firmly grounded in
social observation. Thus Clennam's religiously oppressed childhood
suggests Blake's _Experience_ -- in its social detail as well as in its
vigorously bitter tone. Consider, as a parallel to Blake's 'Holy
Thursday' or 'The School Boy', this reflection on Sundays:

There was the dreary Sunday of his childhood, when he sat with his
hands before him, scared out of his senses by a horrible tract
which commenced business with the poor child by asking him in its
title, why he was going to Perdition? . . . There was the sleepy
Sunday of his boyhood, when, like a military deserter, he was
marched to chapel by a picquet of teachers three times a day,
morally handcuffed to another boy; . . . . There was the interminable
Sunday of his nonage . . .

(p. 30)

Here Dickens prosecutes further his struggle, in which he is aligned with
Blake, against didactic/destructive children's literature and its
unwitting distribution of mind-forged manacles ('morally handcuffed to
another boy'). What is most striking about this novel is that these bad
childhood influences are seen to be controlling the life of a middle-aged
man.

In some respects Arthur Clennam could be said to be Walter Gay
matured and Alan Woodcourt brought to life, his financial failure being
comparable -- in a blighted, jaded way -- to their ennobling shipwrecks.
For he is essentially a well-intentioned, just, and helpful man. But he
is also a morbid, tongueless sort of poet: as here, where Clennam, after losing Miss Meagles to the glamorous waster Gowan, has just cast his flowers on the river:

The lights were bright within doors when he entered, and the faces on which they shone, his own face not excepted, were soon quietly cheerful. They talked of many subjects (his partner never had had such a ready store to draw upon for the beguiling of the time), and so to bed, and to sleep. While the flowers, pale and unreal in the moonlight, floated away upon the river; and thus do greater things that once were in our breasts, and near our hearts, flow from us to the eternal seas.

Just so, 'Pet' -- Miss Meagles herself -- 'glided away' from Clennam a few paragraphs before. The echo is a little too exquisite, the moral is a trifle glib, and the sadness is somewhat picturesque. Is there not a touch of Skimpole's posing here -- on Clennam's part and, possibly, the narrator's?

Clennam's failure seems to be related to his kindness, in a way that links him with characters like Jarndyce, Trooper George, David Copperfield, and Pip. All these individuals seem too hurt and chastened to be able to function in any powerful position, let alone aggressively. Self-confidence is reserved for Boodles and Buffys, Pecksniffs and Pumblechooks, Barnacles and Veneerings. Clennam's river is the same one into which the self-confident Gowan is discovered to be tossing stones, thereby disclosing his cruel nature, when we first meet him. Clennam here, and Dickens (who appeals for his readers' reassurance) seem to be nervous persons, quick to spot signs of danger in those around them: 'Most of us' the narrator claims, 'have more or less frequently derived a similar impression, from a man's manner of doing some very little thing: plucking a flower, clearing away an obstacle, or even destroying an insentient object' (p. 197). Elsewhere in the novel, the same need to identify dangerous people appears in more vulgar forms, in the physiognomic diagnosis of Miss Wade, for example, who broadcasts her embitterment in 'a smile that is only seen on cruel faces: a very faint smile, lifting the nostril, scarcely touching the lips, and not breaking away gradually, but instantly dismissed when done with' (p. 324). It is a hard world, apparently, containing irredeemably wrong-headed individuals -- an idea that can be traced back to *The Pickwick Papers*. But the hopelessness of trying to do anything about other people is all the more
impressive, in *Little Dorrit*, because it is bound up with the protagonist’s inability to do much about himself. And here I will come back to what may have seemed a reckless reference to Skimpole.

Clennam is a kind and sentimental man; Skimpole is a horror -- lethally selfish and terrifyingly frivolous. But we apprehend something important about Dickens’s later work if we see that Dickens was aware that these two can be assimilated into a single, complex but coherent account of human nature. Skimpole’s self-confidence is obviously neurotic, trembling on the brink of self-parody. That does not make him any less repellent, but actually more so. He is not a purely fictional grotesque, but rather an image of what we (or people we know) might be like, should we (or they), in a certain way, go mad. If Esther really ends up thinking that Skimpole is wholly cynical, a calculating actor, then she is grossly simple-minded -- but she is not, and Dickens, through Esther, sensitively leaves Skimpole with his morally erosive power, his resistance to full categorization, intact. Clennam presents a reversal of these conditions. In place of Skimpole’s irresponsibility, Clennam is over-responsible, agonizing about himself (like David or Pip) in a way that limits him severely. His focusing on pathetic images -- the flowers, the stones -- is a form of paralysis, and is sickly dandified in its own way. Clennam’s fear of Gowen’s cruelty, or more generally Dickens’s fear of the untender and unhinged (Skimpole, Chester, Miss Wade, Miss Havisham, and others), binds him as they are bound.

So how, in *Little Dorrit*, is this state of affairs to be endured? By the cultivation of sympathy, through the relation of others’ failings to one’s own. Thus Clennam’s exploded dream of his sometime beloved, Flora:

> With the sensation of becoming more and more lightheaded every minute, Clennam saw the relict of the late Mr. F enjoying herself in the most wonderful manner, by putting herself and him in their old places, and going through all the old performances -- now, when the stage was dusty, when the scenery was faded, when the youthful actors were dead, when the orchestra was empty, when the lights were out. And still, through all this grotesque revival of what he remembered as having once been prettily natural to her, he could not but feel that it revived at sight of him, and that there was a tender memory in it.

(p. 147)

There are Shakespearean echoes here: the poor player, dusty death, the insubstantial pageant faded. It is very serious stuff. But it is not
clear whose 'tender memory' is being referred to in the last sentence. Is it Flora's of Clennam, or Clennam's of Flora? This ambiguity is of the essence. Clennam sees his own limitations and absurdities reflected in Flora, and the gravity of the change that he witnesses, and the way in which it echoes a great number of instances of deterioration and folly throughout the novel, make specific mocks and recriminations quite inappropriate. Flora, whose spirit could be felt to preside over the flowers that Clennam later throws on the water, for all her absurdity, has a symbolic presence equal to, though pathetically opposite to, her mythological namesake.¹⁴

The effect on Clennam of this encounter with Flora is not so much depressing as clarifying and simplifying. Clennam is confronted with a completely irreparable loss which gives him a newly sharp picture of what he himself is, and of what he cannot any longer have (an experience that is merely repeated in the loss of Miss Meagles). This expresses itself in Dickens's writing through an ascetic-seeming calmness and orderliness of diction:

> When he got to his lodging, he sat down before the dying fire, as he had stood at the window of his old room looking out upon the blackened forest of chimneys, and turned his gaze back upon the gloomy vista by which he had come to that stage in his existence. So long, so bare, so blank. No childhood; no youth, except for one remembrance; the one remembrance proved, only that day, to be a piece of folly.

(p. 157)

Like Louisa Gradgrind, Clennam has been the victim of a dreadfully misguided education, but has emerged with a sort of grave uprightness, of a personal and undogmatic type -- mirrored in Dickens's sober cadences -- which, while it is not much fun, is nonetheless worthy of respect. Hence the grim figure of Clennam's mother is not just reviled -- she made Clennam what he is, principled as well as miserable -- but held in awe. Her religiousness is not completely alien to Dickens's sensibility, any more than Blake was completely out of sympathy with Barbauld, but it has become tragically reified. She is another icon of failure, like Flora; less ridiculous, but, in her own way, just as pitiful:

> The shadow still darkening as he drew near the house, the melancholy room which his father had once occupied, haunted by the appealing face he had himself seen fade away with him when there

¹⁴ A reference to the goddess Flora appears in Bleak House, p. 540.
was no other watcher by the bed, arose before his mind. Its close
air was secret. The gloom, and must, and dust of the whole
tenement, were secret. At the heart of it his mother presided,
inflexible of face, indomitable of will, firmly holding all the
secrets of her own and his father's life, and austerely opposing
herself, front to front, to the great final secret of all life.
(p. 526)

Mrs Clennam's is another fixed state, about which nothing can be done.
The great misfortune is that she has usurped a position of centrality in
Clennam's life. She is at the heart of the house and seems to have
infiltrated her son's heart too, whose romances are thereby condemned to
go wrong. Her influence on him cannot be undone; she has discredited the
spiritual and material highroads of life (for she is poisonous in
commerce as well as in religion), and so he can only make his own way
modestly, at the social periphery. Which is where Little Dorrit comes
in.

Amy Dorrit is really rather odd. Odd and flat. 'Of all the trying
sisters a girl could have,' thought Fanny Dorrit, 'the most trying sister
was a flat sister' (pp. 570--71). Fanny seems to mean that Amy is
unfashionable, lacking in glamour, devoid of frivolity, and that her very
inoffensiveness is provoking: 'and the consequence resulted that she was
absolutely tempted and goaded into making herself disagreeable. Besides
(she angrily told her looking-glass), she didn't want to be forgiven.
It was not a right example, that she should be constantly stooping to be
forgiven by a younger sister' (p. 571). Dickens presents these
sentiments as though he means to be wholly on Amy's side. Fanny is a
self-contradictory feather-brain, whose petty self-concern implicitly
makes Amy's pragmatic, nurse-like and housekeeperly attentions all the
more commendable. But Fanny's remarks suggest misgivings which are

15 Neither the flatness that Fanny is referring to here nor the
flatness that I am putting forward as a general characteristic of
Dickens's late work is to be confused with E. M. Forster's well-known
discussion of 'flat' and 'round' characters (Aspects of the Novel, ed.
Oliver Stallybrass [Harmondsworth, 1976], pp. 73--81). Clennam and
Little Dorrit are not caricatures, but are flat in the way that a real
acquaintance might strike us as flat -- having lost their fizz. Forster
maintains that 'Dickens's people are nearly all flat' and that 'Pip and
David Copperfield attempt roundness, but so diffidently that they seem
more like bubbles than solids' (p. 76). But what Forster fails to
appreciate is that the insubstantiality which he detects in Pip and David
is a leading theme of their respective novels. See also Michael Squires,
'The Structure of Dickens's Imagination in Little Dorrit', Texas Studies
in Literature and Language, 30 (1988) 49--64, on 'flat but split
characters' (p. 51).
applicable to the whole sequence of Dickensian good little women to which Amy is merely the latest addition. Agnes, for example, could be said to have a flatness (sobriety, reliability) that reproaches and ultimately supplants Dora, while drab Esther fares much better than lustrous Ada Clare.

So, paradoxically, the neglected and put-upon Amy has a kind of power. While flat in certain respects, she is also a rather angular and provocative sister. She is the sort of girl who, in Dickens, turns out to be so successful that her vaunted virtues begin to jar. This is an aspect of Dickens’s work that puts many readers off, but it has an admirable side to it. For just as Esther’s oscillations between vanity and self-belittlement can be taken as invigorating -- her weakness as an individual (if we are looking for a paragon) being her strength as a ludic narrator -- so Amy’s combination of dowdiness and efficiency can be disconcerting in a healthy way. I am thinking, in particular, of what must have seemed, in the 1850s, her startlingly forward handling of Clennam, to whom she in effect proposes marriage twice: once disguisedly, when she thinks that she will be wealthy (p. 738), and then again, quite blatantly, when that pecuniary obstacle to Clennam’s self-respect has proved to be illusory (p. 792). This, by the standards of the time, is a subversion of the popular notion of a love story, just as Clennam is a deviation from commonplace ideals of the hero. Amy’s businesslike proceeding would not do if she were to be paired off with a Nicholas Nickleby; it presupposes a complex but essentially stricken male lead.16

But it is important to recognize that Dickens means Amy to be odd. The name, ‘Little Dorrit’, is ugly enough in itself. Amy drags it

16 Cf. Ronald Thomas’s comparative reading of Great Expectations and Jane Eyre, where he argues ‘that the female protagonist more successfully imagines her selfhood as something to be achieved, whereas the male protagonist is inclined to think of it as something to be endowed’ (Dreams of Authority: Freud and the Fictions of the Unconscious [Ithaca, New York, 1990], p. 189). This idea can be applied fruitfully to various leading males and females who are in one way or another paired within individual Dickens novels: not just Estella and Pip, Amy and Clennam, but also Esther and Richard, for example. See also Nancy Metz, ‘The Blighted Tree and the Book of Fate: Female Models of Storytelling in Little Dorrit’, Dickens Studies Annual, 18 (1989), 221-42: ‘with Amy . . . Dickens’ insights outran his more limited intentions’ (p. 233). And compare Jay Clayton, who talks of Amy as a visionary figure and a ‘liminal entity’ who disrupts and redeems a Blakean-sounding ‘iron chain of narrative’ (Romantic Vision and the Novel [Cambridge, 1987], pp. 122-39).
through the incarcerating novel like a ball and chain. As Flora says, ‘and of all the strangest names I ever heard the strangest, like a place down in the country with a turnpike, or a favourite pony or a puppy or a bird or something from a seed-shop to be put in a garden or a flower-pot and come up speckled’ (p. 265). Dickens could be reproaching himself here, through Flora, for ‘Little Nell’, ‘Sissy Jupe’, and Esther’s ugly names (‘Cobweb’, ‘Dame Durden’, and the others). The ‘place down in the country with a turnpike’ could be Pod’s End. In fact, this style of naming comes to a crisis in *Little Dorrit*, where we also find ‘Pet’ Meagles and the Meagles’ servant, ‘Tattycoram’, who, after an abortive rebellion, eventually begs for the restoration of her nickname (p. 787). It would be easy to be indignant and dismissive about this, and to write Dickens off as incorrigibly patronizing towards young women. But there is more to it than that.

In particular, Little Dorrit’s name is just one among a range of weird accessories which Dickens has chosen to attach to her. The most conspicuous of these, and the most disturbing, is her friend, dependant, and ‘child’, Maggy, the twenty-eight-year-old who thinks that she is ten, and whose ‘face was not exceedingly ugly, though it was only redeemed from being so by a smile; a good-humoured smile, and pleasant in itself, but rendered pitiable by being constantly there’ (p. 96). Like Miss Mowcher in *Copperfield*, Maggy is a moral challenge to whoever she meets. And we might well be disturbed by Dickens’s intermingling of pity, in his treatment of her, with surreal comedy; not least in her first appearance: ‘Little Dorrit stopping and looking back, an excited figure of a strange kind bounced against them . . . , fell down, and scattered the contents of a large basket, filled with potatoes, in the mud’ (p. 95). Maggy pops up here like an absurd, unlooked-for, thoroughly bathetic supernumerary who simply will insert herself into Amy and Clennam’s embryo romance.

The links between Amy, Maggy, and the process of naming, which are intimate and crucial, come out particularly clearly when Amy tentatively and complicatedly approaches the task of thanking Clennam -- in this book which is riddled with false thanks, flagrant ingratitude, and all manner of emotional bad debts -- for his payment of her unworthy brother’s bail:

‘Before I say anything else,’ Little Dorrit began, . . . ; ‘may I tell you something, sir?’
'Yes, my child.'
A slight shade of distress fell upon her, at his so often
calling her a child. She was surprised that he should see it, or
think of such a slight thing; but he said directly:
'I wanted a tender word, and could think of no other. As
you just now gave yourself the name they give you at my mother's,
and as that is the name by which I always think of you, let me
call you Little Dorrit.'
'Thank you, sir, I should like it better than any name.'
'Little Dorrit.'
'Little mother,' Maggy (who had been falling asleep) put in,
as a correction.
'It's all the same, Maggy,' returned Little Dorrit, 'all the
same.'
'Is it all the same, mother?'
'Just the same.'
Maggy laughed, and immediately snored.

Amy resembles David Copperfield here, in so far as the multiplicity of
alternative names foregrounds her multiple existence as the projection
of other people's disparate needs. Maggy's absurdly exaggerated
acceptance of the naming problem as solved simply points out what a live
issue it really is.

In The Old Curiosity Shop, it will be recalled, Little Nell is the
subject of a great deal of oppressive scrutiny -- from her grandfather,
from Quilp, from Master Humphrey and his friends, and, not least, from
an excessively doting author. In Bleak House, Esther often seems to be
playfully (or perhaps worryingly?) interfered with by her fellow narrator
and by Dickens -- given a certain amount of eccentric freedom, but with
her mind laid open in its foibles and its fears. Similarly, in Little
Dorrit, the heroine is obsessively watched by the author and by the male
protagonist. For just as Dickens marks or morally handcuffs Amy with an
odd name and an odd companion, so Clennam manages to detect the sole
'spot' of 'prison atmosphere' on his future wife -- when she repines,
momentarily, at her father's still having to pay his debts after so many
years in prison (p. 409). Such is Clennam's propensity for finding
gloomy symbols, mementi mori like the flowers on the river or like Flora
gone-to-seed, that for him to be able to look at Amy in this way seems
a natural prerequisite for their alliance: her freakishness, or small
spiritual disability, is precisely what he needs. This makes Clennam
worryingly similar to Amy's father, whose dependence upon her tempts
Dickens into conjuring up a scenario that is unusual both in its
recondite classicism and because it is (albeit gingerly) erotic:

There was a classical daughter once -- perhaps -- who ministered
to her father in his prison as her mother had ministered to her. Little Dorrit, though of the unheroic modern stock, and mere English, did much more, in comforting her father’s wasted heart upon her innocent breast, and turning to it a fountain of love and fidelity that never ran dry or waned, through all his years of famine.

(p. 222)

Dorrit taking his daughter as his mother, Clennam calling his future wife a child, Maggy being the ‘child’ of a mother younger than herself -- all these, despite Dickens’s consciousness, from time to time, of their frightening aspects -- are hopelessly intermingled with the obsessions of the narrator and of Dickens himself. Hence the motif of the small child carrying the outsize baby, which not only appears repeatedly in the main narrative (pp. 100, 130), but also turns up, apparently taken straight from the life, in Dickens’s 1857 Preface (pp. lix--lx).

More and more, in Dickens’s later work, the polyvocal worlds of the novel become subdued to a single eccentric way of seeing, in which the boundaries between protagonist and narrator fade away.17 Frequently this process is imaged microcosmically within the text. For instance, in Clennam’s blighted vision as he approaches his mother’s house:

As he went along, upon a dreary night, the dim streets by which he went seemed all depositories of oppressive secrets. The deserted counting-houses, with their secrets of books and papers locked up in chests and safes; the banking-houses, with their secrets of strong rooms and wells, the keys of which were in a very few secret pockets and a very few secret breasts; the secrets of all the dispersed grinders in the vast mill, among whom there were doubtless plunderers, forgers, and trust-betrayers of many sorts, whom the light of any day that dawned might reveal; he could have fancied that these things, in hiding, imparted a heaviness to the air.

(p. 526)

Clennam, like Stephen Blackpool at the end of the first book of Hard Times, can usefully be thought of as ‘marking’ here, in the Blakean double sense. Just so, Clennam is marking weakness and woe in Amy, when

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17 My use of ‘polyvocal’ derives mainly from Bakhtin. See Mikhail Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, Texas, 1981), and, for sustained applications of Bakhtinian and related theory to Dickens, Kate Flint, Dickens, Harvester New Readings (Brighton, 1986), pp. 47--67; James A. Davies, The Textual Life of Dickens’s Characters (Basingstoke, 1989), passim; and Wendell V. Harris, ‘Bakhtinian Double Voicing in Dickens and Eliot’, ELH, 57 (1990), 445--58. My argument at this point is, in a sense, anti-Bakhtinian: the apparent heteroglossia of the late Dickens novel is limited by the fact that narrator and central characters come to express themselves in similar, typically jaded and alienated, ways. Dickens becomes progressively more monologic. For a sophisticated argument to the effect that all novels ‘at the most encompassing level’ are monologic see Phillip J. M. Sturgess, Narrativity: Theory and Practice (Oxford, 1992), pp. 45--51 (48).
he spots the 'spot', with just the active/passive ambiguity, the
generality of spoiled perception, that we know from Blake's poem. More
than this, Clennam seeing Amy's 'spot' parallels Amy seeing Clennam's
error in too often calling her 'child': this binding together in a shared
weakness is what makes this Dickens's most impressive, least idealized
love story to date.

And *Little Dorrit* is far more than just a love story. It takes an
exceptionally wide view of society, while intimately relating that view
to the cast of mind of the central characters, so that Amy, for example,
is exactly right for the world of her novel -- whereas Sissy Jupe was not
at all right for hers. Sissy was designed to embody some sort of
childish pastoral ideal, but Amy, as we have seen, is quite non-standard.
Accordingly, *Little Dorrit* betrays a thorough disillusionment with the
standard or ideal in society at large, and with most of society's
defining institutions. Hence, just as in *Bleak House*, good developments
in *Little Dorrit* seem to require the offices of an eccentric freelance
agent -- Pancks, in this case, standing in for Bucket. Pancks and Bucket
are the wonderful opponents of inertia, the vanquishers of circumlocu-
tion, but they are almost fairy-tale beings, the sort that cannot be
relied upon to exist, suggesting a mismanaged society in which it will
simply be a very lucky turn of events if one finds happiness and success.

The collapse of confidence in civic values, in *Little Dorrit*,
engenders a great efflorescence of jaded wit. This passage, for example,
contains what is probably the best pun in Dickens: 'Clennam found that
the Gowan family were a very distant ramification of the Barnacles; and
that the paternal Gowan, originally attached to a legation abroad, had
been pensioned off as a Commissioner of nothing in particular somewhere
or other, and had died at his post with his drawn salary in his hand,
nobly defending it to the last extremity' (p. 201). The heroically
self-sacrificing warrior/diplomat (drawn sword) collapses instantly into
the pathetic money-grubber: it is hard to imagine a neater deflation of
the Imperial British ideal. But that the ruling cadres should have been

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18 See Darin E. Field, ""Two Spheres of Action and Suffering":
Empire and Decadence in *Little Dorrit*, *Dickens Quarterly*, 7 (1990),
379--83, for more on the ways in which the central plot and the social
commentary of this novel support one another.
reduced to Barnacles, even though it occurs in the words of the impersonal narrator, is not quite to be taken as Dickens's considered opinion. It fits too well with the vision of the disenchanted protagonist. That, and not society itself in any objective sense, seems to be the focus of Dickens's late books. And, in Little Dorrit, the disenchanted vision amounts to something like an inversion of the Blakean sublime, as in this spoofed apotheosis upon the return of the civil servant Sparkler from Italy to England:

The land of Shakespeare, Milton, Bacon, Newton, Watt, the land of a host of past and present abstract philosophers, natural philosophers, and subduers of Nature and Art in their myriad forms, called to Mr. Sparkler to come and take care of it, lest it should perish. Mr. Sparkler, unable to resist the agonised cry from the depths of his country's soul, declared that he must go. (p. 585)

This, just like the very different exaltation of much the same group of distinguished individuals -- 'Bacon & Newton & Locke, & Milton & Shakspear & Chaucer' -- towards the end of Jerusalem (98.9, E257), is not meant to be temperate or rational. What is crucial is the emotional state of the speaker, as the reader can deduce it. Dickens's social criticism is all the more effective for the quirkiness with which it is expressed -- whether on Clennam's part or the narrator's. To attempt to communicate in a straightforward way would be to suggest that the social malaise was not pervasively corrupting, whereas in fact Little Dorrit reads as the authentically deranged, if elegantly crafted, product of a declining civilization.¹⁹

The plot of Little Dorrit is often said to be one of Dickens's weakest. But that is in keeping with the book's aesthetic of flatness and its disillusioned spirit. A solidly constructed, clear, compelling

¹⁹ For a complementary reading of this novel see Lewis Horne, 'Little Dorrit and the Region of Despair', Dalhousie Review, 69 (1990) 4, 533--48. Parallels with my Blakean approach should be apparent in Horne's use of Flannery O'Connor, whose "statements point to something we find in Little Dorrit more strongly . . . than in any of Dickens's other novels -- that is, (1) his "prophetic vision," meaning "a matter of seeing near things with their extensions of meaning and thus of seeing far things close up," and (2) an implied view that the reader is, at least in part, one whose "sense of evil is diluted or lacking altogether, and so he has forgotten the price of restoration" and must be reminded of it through bizarre, even violent, actions in the novel" (p. 534, quoting O'Connor, 'Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction', in Mystery and Manners, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald [New York, 1969]). I would simply add that there is the strangeness of the narrator's or implied author's stance to be considered too.
plot would have been insensitive. Dickens partakes of Clennam’s careful unassertiveness. The sense of precariousness, and of the uncommonness of the right circumstances conspiring to bring happiness, is echoed in Dickens’s wariness of strong literary form, as much as in his lack of interest in the ancient, the venerated, and the foreign (Rome and Venice, for example) -- anything that distracts from the here and now, or that belittles the human scale. On both these counts, Dickens could be accused of philistinism, but it is rather that he is being faithful to his own artistic voice, which, despite the great magnitude of his texts, becomes, in details, more and more fastidious and thoughtfully controlled. And this control is ultimately accountable, as much as the debunking of Oliver Twist or David Copperfield, to Dickens’s ethical awareness of the responsibility that his authorial status entails.

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One of the most impressive aspects of Blake’s work consists in the way that it draws quite different areas of experience together and shows them to be interdependent. In Visions of the Daughters of Albion, for example, slavery and rape are enlisted as metaphors for one another, and there is a fertile suggestion that, in a sense, they are much the same thing. Dickens’s imagination had a similar morally revealing connective power. Thus it is typical that the sort of language that Dickens had used in Hard Times to describe the perverting of the minds of the Gradgrind children should reappear when, in A Tale of Two Cities, he came to address what might seem to be a social aberration of a wholly different order: the Guillotine.

Along the Paris streets, the death-carts rumble, hollow and harsh. Six tumbrils carry the day’s wine to La Guillotine. All the devouring and insatiate Monsters imagined since imagination could record itself, are fused in the one realisation, Guillotine. And yet there is not in France, with its rich variety of soil and climate, a blade, a leaf, a root, a sprig, a peppercorn, which will grow to maturity under conditions more certain than those that have produced this horror. Crush humanity out of shape once more, under similar hammers, and it will twist itself into the same tortured forms. Sow the same seed of rapacious licence and oppression over again, and it will surely yield the same fruit according to its kind.  

To see the similarities with the social vision of Hard Times, simply

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replace the Guillotine with 'Fact'. The Guillotine is not considered as a specific invention or historical phenomenon in this passage. The imagery is hardly evocative of its mechanical presence. It is more like a Blakean wine-press (note the word 'devouring'), or a poison tree: a symbol of the outgrowth of evil which can occur in human societies -- even societies as small as the Gradgrind family -- at any time and in any place. That Dickens was capable of writing about the Guillotine in a very different way is clear from the unnervingly clinical account in *Pictures from Italy* of a decapitation in Rome in 1845, which he characteristically made a point of witnessing. But in *A Tale of Two Cities*, for all his repeated reading of the facts as assembled by Carlyle, Dickens was firmly in a universalizing mode.

It is customary to criticize *A Tale of Two Cities* for not doing justice to the French Revolution. There is a certain vulgarity on Dickens's part, it has been suggested, in arranging the narration of immensely influential historical events around what, coming after Clennam and Little Dorrit, is an amazingly perfunctory, lifeless and saccharine love story. No full apology can sensibly be made for Charles Darnay and Lucie Manette. But the Guillotine passage suggests ways in which we might reconcile ourselves to Dickens's sense of history. For his purpose, just as in *Barnaby Rudge*, is more to explore a range of violent emotional states which might be associated with revolution than to provide the reader with facts, and his imagination is attuned to the conflation of the general and the particular. Thus, while it is often said that there is one strong character in *A Tale of Two Cities* -- Sidney Carton -- and that the remainder of the book pales beside him, it is possible to read this one character as microcosmically embodying, just like the abstracted Guillotine, a wide vision of society and history.

Also, Carton provides a link with the central Dickensian preoccupations from which *A Tale of Two Cities* might seem to be an exotic diversion. That is, he is a wounded protagonist: arguably a version of Dickens himself, but certainly a figure who has much in common with David Copperfield or Clennam. Like them, he is a sensitive and -- in all but

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his final gesture -- indecisive sufferer. His inaction in a world that is characterized by precipitate extremes of action, and in particular by the casual extinguishing of lives, seems, like Clennam's fecklessness in a voraciously monetarist environment, to be a kind of disguised good. On the other hand, he is remarkably dissolute. His alcoholic consumption is the nearest Dickens ever came to realizing Tom Gradgrind's 'grovelling sensualities' in an essentially likeable character. So Carton is a mixed individual, appropriate to his times: the best of men, and the worst of men.

The contrast between Carton's complexity and the shallowness of Lucie and Darnay, viewed simply, is disappointing. But if we think of Carton as being, like the Guillotine, rather more than his physical presence amounts to -- as being an embodiment of large historical and philosophical preoccupations on Dickens's part -- then the aesthetic weakness can become intellectually arresting. As is so often the case, Dickens is responsibly attentive to the defects of the characters who superficially seem to be his favourites, and there are times when, through Carton, Dickens seems to belittle his own inventions. Thus, in the very brilliant fourth chapter of the second book -- 'Congratulatory' -- Carton has a dialogue with his double, Darnay, in which the latter is completely out-talked, rather as Oliver is out-talked by the Dodger, and shown to be tiresomely conventional and unforthcoming. The chapter ends with Carton sharply puncturing Darnay's self-regard -- 'Don't let your sober face elate you . . .; you don't know what it may come to' -- and muttering sarcastically to himself about his instant dislike of the man (p. 116).

There is the suggestion that Carton is far more contemptuous of himself than of Darnay, of course, and that the dislike is simply jealousy, but Dickens, by putting far more energy into the characterization of Carton, has certainly given the reader a good opportunity to take a dim view of Darnay. Later in the book Carton apologizes to Darnay for his attitude during this first conversation, but this simply leads to new opportunities for Darnay's conventional falsity, and Carton's anti-circumlocutory honesty, to be glaringly demonstrated:

'Mr Darnay,' said Carton, 'I wish we might be friends.'
'We are already friends, I hope.'
'You are good enough to say so, as a fashion of speech; but I don't mean any fashion of speech.' . . .

'On the drunken occasion in question (one of a large number, as you know), I was insufferable about liking you, and not liking you. I wish you would forget it.'

'I forgot it long ago.'

'Fashion of speech again!'

Similarly, while Carton seems through most of the book to be wholly devoted to the vacuous Lucie, he is capable, at one point, of describing her with great precision: 'a golden-haired doll!' (p. 121). These may be obnoxious contributions on Carton's part, but they also have a strong appearance of truth.

So does this mean that the end of the novel, where Carton sacrifices his interesting life for the stereotypical young romantic pair, is just oblivious and lazy? On the contrary, Carton, as his parasitic colleague Stryver says, is 'Memory' (p. 118) -- 'Memory Carton' was one of Dickens's odder alternatives as a title for the novel and, as the book ends, he comes into his own, not just as a disconcertingly non-standard individual among conventionally sanctified types, but also as a personification of the strangeness and unthinkability of history.

Carton's own memory will be preserved, he seems to think, in the usual Dickensian way: he believes that Lucie will see that her son, and even her son's son, will be given his name (p. 404). Also, Carton expects to live (or to be 'recalled to life') as a tragic but heroic figure in the minds of his beneficiaries. In particular, he takes pains to ensure that Lucie herself has a suitably vivid image of him, and that she knows that she is privileged to receive it:

'In the hour of my death, I shall hold sacred the one good remembrance -- and shall thank and bless you for it -- that my last avowal of myself was made to you, and that my name, and faults, and miseries were gently carried in your heart.'

'. . . within myself, I shall always be, towards you, what I am now, though outwardly I shall be what you have heretofore seen me. This last supplication but one I make to you, is, that you will believe this of me.'

'Try to hold me in your mind, at some quiet times, as ardent and sincere in this one thing... O Miss Manette, when the little picture of a happy father's face looks up in yours, when you see

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your own bright beauty springing up anew at your feet, think now and then that there is a man who would give his life, to keep a life you love beside you!'

He said, 'Farewell!' said 'A last God bless you!' and left her.

(pp. 182--83)

Carton's desire to be remembered has a good deal of pathos. It is likely that Dickens expected it to be read mainly in a naive spirit, to be wept over like the death of Little Nell. But if we think about the situation that is left at the end of the novel, we must see that there is a much more disruptive sense of memory active here. After all, Carton decides the fates of Lucie and Darnay without consulting them. Darnay is actually tricked -- in what might, subsequently, seem to have been a highly humiliating way. It is no accident that we never hear another word from Darnay after he has succumbed to Carton's chloroform -- for what could he say? When he wakes, the rescued Darnay is very much in danger, if we think in terms of Dickens's pervasive interest in debt, dependency, blame, and guilt, of feeling like a Clennam (or, even more, a Pip), in so far as he may be forced to acknowledge a sense of implication in the unhappy past -- specifically, Carton's death -- which cannot be shaken off even though it is not really his fault, so that he is forever hugely in the debt of a benefactor who did not particularly like him, and who is now permanently unavailable either for thanks or for reproach.23

Dickens, we may say, did not understand history. He was not interested in the facts and personalities of the French Revolution. He wanted to write a love story instead. But more impressive, perhaps, than any single theory of the causes and consequences of particular historical events is the morally and politically disruptive sense of a permanent unpredictability and danger in human affairs, and of hopes for the future that may be dogged forever by the residual past, a sense that comes across more vividly in the difficult person of Carton than it does in Dickens's sweeping observations about mixed-up times -- 'the epoch of belief, . . . the epoch of incredulity' (p. 35) -- or in simpler, less

23 For a related survey of insoluble moral predicaments in Dickens's shorter fictions of this period see Deborah A. Thomas, 'In the Meantime: Dickens's Concern with Doubling and Secret Guilt between A Tale of Two Cities and Great Expectations', Dickens Quarterly, 3 (1986), 84--89.
insidious incarnations of human destructiveness such as Madame Defarge or The Vengeance. Carton is attractive: like the colourfulness of historical narrative, he lures the reader into him. But when inside, just as when we saw through the eyes of mad Barnaby, we no longer know quite where we are.

A wonderful fact to reflect upon, that every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other. A solemn consideration, when I enter a great city by night, that every one of those darkly clustered houses encloses its own secret; that every room in every one of them encloses its own secret; that every beating heart in the hundreds of thousands of breasts there, is, in some of its imaginings, a secret to the heart nearest to it! Something of the awfulness, even of Death itself, is referable to this. No more can I turn the leaves of this dear book that I loved, and vainly hope in time to read it all. No more can I look into the depths of this unfathomable water, wherein, as momentary lights glanced into it, I have had glimpses of buried treasure and other things submerged. It was appointed that the book should shut with a spring, for ever and for ever, when I had read but a page. It was appointed that the water should be locked in an eternal frost, when the light was playing on its surface, and I stood in ignorance on the shore. My friend is dead, my neighbour is dead, my love, the darling of my soul, is dead; it is the inexorable consolidation and perpetuation of the secret that was always in that individuality, and which I shall carry in mine to my life's end. In any of the burial-places of this city through which I pass, is there a sleeper more inscrutable than its busy inhabitants are, in their innermost personality, to me, or than I am to them?

This is the sonorous exposition, in Dickens's late, elegantly stoical, Clennam-like style, of the world view an author who fears the inscrutability of fate, but loves it. Sydney Carton, with his yearning for security and peace, his instinct for leaving more problems than he solves, and his not inconsiderable glamour, is a fine embodiment of Dickens's eager wariness of closure. And A Tale of Two Cities, despite its romantic plot and its historical setting, does belong with Dickens's other late narratives as a sporadically rigorous attack on simple ideas of good and bad conduct, and as a powerful undermining of the notion that society, for all its diligent self-chronicling, has the least idea of where it is going.
CHAPTER 10

The Visionary Dickens: Characters, the Author, and the Outer World in Great Expectations, Our Mutual Friend, and The Mystery of Edwin Drood

A Tale of Two Cities has things to say about history and about the society of Dickens's own day, but many of its most widely ramifying points emerge from the exchanges of a few characters, rather than from public scenes. Invariably the most successful vehicle for Dickens's subtle and complex speculations is the individual protagonist -- and almost always, with Esther Summerson and Amy Dorrit as partial exceptions, this means the male protagonist. The most elaborated and convincing of these figures is Pip, in Great Expectations.

To be as central to a narrative as Pip is, however, is burdensome. And just as the potentially repellent character of the self-advertisement in Dickens's previous great, first-person, heavily autobiographical novel, David Copperfield, is undercut by the hero's immediately obvious self-doubt, so Pip too is an unstable and ironized focus of interest. Very typically for Dickens, the boy's very name is enlisted against him. Meeting him for the first time, Pip's friend Herbert Pocket declines to call him 'Philip . . . for it sounds like a moral boy out of the spelling-book'.

Various ironies attach to this. First, Pip is yet another victim of bad educational practices: Pumblechook has burdened him with the idea that 'a moral boy', in the sense of a morally good boy, is virtually a contradiction in terms. Then, Pip will come to have his own sense of his moral worth deflated on numerous occasions -- until it would be hard to take him as a positive example for anybody. It is as though Dickens were presenting his hero as a would-be paragon, a worthy subject for fifty-nine chapters, and then suggesting that such prominence is unsustainable and absurd. The novelist's great expectations of Pip as a literary phenomenon, as a product to satisfy the reader, are advanced with self-conscious pathos. As Angus Wilson has it,

There is surely some doubt, in this great novel of self-revaluation, of [Dickens's] own great genius; above all, in the fierce attack upon those who make puppets of others or mould them into

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idols (Jaggers, Magwitch, Miss Havisham, Pip's own treatment of Estella) there is surely some doubt about that exercise of will which Dickens must have come with all his family trouble to question in himself; with that egotistic will that tore down his wife and children he may surely have come to associate the whole power of shaping real life into fictions.\(^1\)

But it is debatable whether these biographical hints are really necessary, or whether Dickens was not becoming more and more sceptical about the epistemological and didactic status of the novel through sheer concentration on the rigours of the form.

Dickens's handling of Pip involves a mixture of intimacy and distance, of warm solicitude and the punishing manipulativeness of an author who views the writing of fiction as a slightly grisly recreation. On the one hand, Pip is an attractively energetic, often ingenuous young person, whose good fortune seems to be held up for our rejoicing, so that he seems, like Oliver, to be Dickens's 'poor child', nurtured by the author and eventually rewarded with what looks like quite a happy future. On the other hand, in the culmination of another process which had also begun with Oliver, Dickens subjects the hero to repeated mortifications. In fact this second process, by now so well established in Dickens's work, takes on an appearance of ritual inevitability.

Take, in particular, Pip's lonely walk along the High Street of the village in Book Two, Chapter Eleven, the very centre of the novel, where he is mercilessly ridiculed by Trabb the tailor's histrionically gifted apprentice:

I had not got as much further down the street as the post-office, when I again beheld Trabb's boy shooting round by a back way. This time, he was entirely changed. He wore the blue bag in the manner of my great-coat, and was strutting along the pavement towards me on the opposite side of the street, attended by a company of delighted young friends to whom he from time to time exclaimed, with a wave of his hand, 'Don't know yah!' Words cannot state the amount of aggravation and injury wreaked upon me by Trabb's boy, when, passing abreast of me, he pulled up his shirt-collars, twined his side-hair, stuck an arm akimbo, and smirked extravagantly by, wriggling his elbows and body, and drawling to his attendants, 'Don't know yah, don't know yah, pon my soul don't know yah!' The disgrace attendant on his immediately afterwards taking to crowing and pursuing me across the bridge with crows, as from an exceedingly dejected fowl who had known me when I was a blacksmith, culminated the disgrace with which I left the town, and was, so to speak, ejected by it into the open country.

(p. 246)

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Pip's ordeal, here, is raised in significance by the fact that it takes place in the artery of the village, with a representative chorus of inhabitants in appreciative attendance, and by Pip's foolish resolution to proceed on foot, as if he were making an epic descent into the underworld. Above all, the incident is enriched by the adversarial parallelism of Pip and his tormentor, who might even have seemed a marginally more genteel class of apprentice than Pip himself, had Pip stayed at the forge with Joe. And so this becomes very credibly a formative experience, the sort of compact and intense revelation of the protagonist to himself, via the outside world, that marks him for the remainder of his days. This is all the more the case when we think of the cardinal significance of other streets in Dickens's late novels: the fog-bound street in Coketown through which Stephen Blackpool marks his way, for example, and the fretful streets into which Amy and Clennam resolutely proceed at the end of *Little Dorrit*.

And yet Pip's confrontation with Trabb's boy is also tremendously silly and amusing -- so that the very notion that the protagonist's spiritual education is of engrossing interest, which in the case of Clennam was never doubted, becomes open to jocular scrutiny. Similarly, the credibility of the educative process is subverted, elsewhere in the novel, by Pip's perpetual backsliding. Thus, the chapter after the confrontation in the High Street, when the reader might expect Pip to be thoroughly cured of his habit of despising or patronizing people less polished or fortunate than himself, opens with his extended send-up of provincial acting, in which, while he is not exactly malicious, he certainly distils from every pore conscious superiority and a lust for the ridiculous:

> On our arrival in Denmark, we found the king and queen of that country elevated in two arm-chairs on a kitchen-table, holding a Court. The whole of the Danish nobility were in attendance; consisting of a noble boy in the wash-leather boots of a gigantic ancestor, a venerable Peer with a dirty face who seemed to have risen from the people late in life, and the Danish chivalry with a comb in its hair and a pair of white silk legs, and presenting on the whole a feminine appearance. My gifted townsman [Wopsle] stood gloomily apart, with folded arms, and I could have wished that his curls and forehead had been more probable.  

(pp. 252--53)

And so it continues -- at great length. 'We had made some pale efforts in the beginning to applaud Mr Wopsle,' notes Pip at the end of the show,
but they were too hopeless to be persisted in. Therefore we had sat, feeling keenly for him, but laughing, nevertheless, from ear to ear. I laughed in spite of myself all the time, the whole thing was so droll; and yet I had a latent impression that there was something decidedly fine in Mr Wopsle’s elocution -- not for old associations’ sake, I am afraid, but because it was very slow, very dreary, very up-hill and down-hill, and very unlike any way in which any man in any natural circumstances of life or death ever expressed himself about anything.

(p. 255)

There is just a suggestion here that Wopsle was really quite impressive -- if one likes that kind of thing. Pip does not, and Pip puts much pressure on the reader to adopt the same response. But since we have been given the hint that this is a matter of individual taste on Pip’s part -- that is to say, Wopsle subscribes to another aesthetic, with a certain dignity of its own -- then we might think that Pip is being somewhat provincial himself: just as when, most ironically, he had failed to comprehend Herbert Pocket’s cultivated allusion to ‘The Harmonious Blacksmith’ (p. 177).

The confrontation in the High Street had seemed to be devastatingly effective. In particular, the paragraph quoted above, ending with Pip ejected by the town (not just by Trabb’s boy), would not have been retailed by Pip if he were not prepared to look at himself in a salutary bad light. But, on the other hand, if Pip is so culturally deprived, so provincial, that he collapses in giggles at a display of acting which something within him still perceives to be ‘decidedly fine’, would he not be capable of undervaluing the theatrical vitality of Trabb’s boy, of somehow glossing over the exposure of himself on the High-Street stage, and of emerging from that episode, indeed, with precisely the feeling that Trabb’s boy derisively attributes to him -- that it is the village that is contemptible? In an extraordinary way, the lesson that Pip seems to be taught so resoundingly in Book Two, Chapter Eleven ends up making him seem even worse.

So to think of Great Expectations as a spiritual or moral progress is quite inadequate: the very idea of progress is often undermined in the novel. What is more, the reader is insidiously drawn into complicity with the faults that the narrative is supposedly directed to expunge. When Pip mocks Wopsle, for all that Pip as mocker has been discredited by the more penetrating mocks of Trabb’s boy, he does so for the direct entertainment of the reader: the reader is expected to share Pip’s
chortles at Wopsle's expense. Or at least the reader, thanks to the peculiar dominion of an imperfect, evolving, first-person narrator, is gravely in danger of slipping over to the naive side of an equilibrium between, on the one hand, sympathetic identification -- which is necessary if we are to care enough about Pip to put up with him for hundreds of pages -- and, on the other hand, critical judgement -- which involves a sense of Dickens, as distinct from Pip, as author, and which is necessary if we are to emerge from the book with our intellectual respectability intact.

'One is not permitted to lose sight of the actual author' of Great Expectations, wrote George Gissing; 'though so much more living than Esther Summerson, Pip is yet embarrassed, like her, with the gift of humour. We know very well whose voice comes from behind the scenes when Pip is describing Mr. Wopsle's dramatic venture.' But this is an over-simplification. Dickens is bound up with Pip in such a complicated way that it would make as much sense to complain that Dickens had somehow infected his own person with fictionality, through his quasi-autobiographical stories, as to make the opposite point, with Gissing, that the fictional character seems to be usurped by the historical man. In fact Dickens, in his late texts, increasingly calls into question the integrity and consistency of any individual. In A Tale of Two Cities the narrator had asserted 'that every human creature is constituted to be [a] profound secret and mystery to every other'. Now, in one of those lucid, honest intervals which we cannot, it seems, rely upon, Pip talks of the mystery and deception that he produces for himself: 'All other swindlers upon earth are nothing to the self-swindlers . . . . Surely a curious thing. That I should innocently take a bad half-crown of somebody else's manufacture, is reasonable enough; but that I should knowingly reckon the spurious coin of my own make, as good money!' (p. 225--26). This is Pip himself casting a great deal of doubt on the unity of character that Gissing thinks that it is reasonable and unprob-

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lematical to expect.

Just as the loose structure of *Little Dorrit* fitted that novel's picture of a shambolic and disintegrating society, it is conceptually appropriate, in *Great Expectations*, that the boundaries between the actual author and the fictional author, between the character that we or Dickens think that Pip should be and the person that we or Dickens might think that Dickens himself was, should be so uncertain. It has not been usual, until very recently, to regard Dickens as an intellectually sophisticated writer, so it is not surprising that Gissing, rather like E. M. Forster with his 'flat' and 'round', should have raised objections which elevate taste or artistic illusion -- the consistency of characterization -- over abstract thinking. But really, Dickens was so much involved with problems of psychology, and with psychology's constraints upon representation, that he must naturally have been drawn away from the old-fashioned practice of fabricating characters which were recognizably complete and self-contained ('round'). He knew that to do so would have involved a drastic reduction of his own sense of what it is to be human. To represent adequately the problems which interested him he had to make the mind of the protagonist as unbounded -- and hence coextensive with his own mind -- as possible. It is for this reason, at least as much as on account of any deliberate autobiographical delving or working-through, that Dickens's strongest characters, like David or Clennam or Pip, seem so much like the Dickens that we know from the non-fiction writings and from the biographers' reports.

So the ideas and experiences in *Great Expectations* are distributed, for the reader, between a protagonist who makes mistakes, a fictional author who is supposed to be that protagonist grown up, but who still seems to make the same mistakes, and a real author about whom we make various guesses based, in part, upon external materials. The impossibility of fully separating the actual from the fictional author means that it is often very difficult to decide whether Dickens really intended some of the mistakes that we are inclined to diagnose. So that finally we cannot say whether Dickens was laughing at Wopsle as much as Pip was, or not. Dickens was not that superhumanly cognizant of his own motivations or so complacent about his own moral standing, nor does he pretend to be.
'The patterns of culpability in *Great Expectations,*' notes G. Robert Stange, are so intricate that the whole world of the novel is eventually caught in a single web of awful responsibility. The leg-iron, for example, which the convict removed with the file Pip stole for him is found by Orlick and used as a weapon to brain Mrs. Joe. By this fearsome chain of circumstance Pip shares the guilt for his sister's death. Profound and suggestive as is Dickens' treatment of guilt and expiation in this novel, to trace its remoter implications is to find something excessive and idiosyncratic.\(^5\)

This ubiquitous, inescapable guilt is quite consistent with Dickens's complex handling of characterization and authorial responsibility. By making the author, whether Pip or himself, such a shifting quantity in *Great Expectations* Dickens casts doubt on our abilities to see the limits of our own effect on the world. If the human mind has such a unreliable hold on itself then everyone is a bit of a monster. This implication had emerged obscurely in *A Tale of Two Cities,* where Carton seems to think that he is dying a saint, even though he may be storing up torment for Darnay and Lucie. A far more vivid realization of potential monstrosity seems to project itself, in *Great Expectations,* onto Magwitch, who starts as a wholly external, almost supernatural, nightmare figure, but who, later in the novel, seems intimately bound up with Pip's own weakness, in just the way that Mary Shelley's monster is bound up with Frankenstein:

> With these fears upon me, I began either to imagine or recall that I had had mysterious warnings of this man's approach. . . . That, his wicked spirit had somehow sent these messengers to mine, and that now on this stormy night he was as good as his word, and with me. Crowding up with these reflections came the reflection that I had seen him with my childish eyes to be a desperately violent man; . . . . Out of such remembrances I brought into the light of the fire, a half-formed terror that it might not be safe to be shut up there with him in the dead of the wild solitary night. This dilated until it filled the room, and impelled me to take a candle and go in and look at my dreadful burden.

(p. 321)

Magwitch, for Pip, is the unchangeable past made flesh -- the consequence, by a train of circumstances that make a mockery of self-determination, of his earliest, trivial misdemeanours. Magwitch, as Pip at this time perceives him, is all the wickedness that must be denied, squeezed

out — in Pip’s word, ‘ejected’ — if one is to maintain an idea of human
time as integral and perfectly dignified. Magwitch is the fabrication
not just of social prejudice or snobbery but also of an unrealistic
aspiration towards self-knowledge.\(^6\)

Just as with *A Tale of Two Cities*, there has been much negative
criticism of the ending of *Great Expectations* -- the supposedly upbeat
ending which Dickens substituted on the advice of Bulwer Lytton.
Christopher Ricks, for example, says this:

> It is a matter for at least dismay that Dickens changed the
original ending and allowed Pip to marry Estella; everything that
we know of Miss Havisham and her bringing up of Estella is made
hollow by this softening of Estella, since we find, not that we
must forgive the tragic Miss Havisham, but that there was not
really anything to forgive.\(^7\)

It is true that the old ending was impressively sombre, and even rather
poignantly absurd, especially when Estella asks to kiss young Pip, the
son of Joe and Biddy, under the mistaken impression that this is the
child of the elder Pip himself, or so the latter suspects, although he
cannot find the heart, or the energy, to disabuse her.\(^8\) But there is a
distinctly anticlimactic slant to the final version, too. As A. E. Dyson
says, ‘it is ambiguous in meaning, yet not in tone’.\(^9\) And this tone is
essentially flat, just like the end of *Little Dorrit*:

> ‘We are friends,’ said I, rising and bending over her, as she rose
from the bench.
> ‘And will continue friends apart,’ said Estella.
> I took her hand in mine, and we went out of the ruined
place; and, as the morning mists had risen long ago when I first
left the forge, so, the evening mists were rising now, and in all
the broad expanse of tranquil light they showed to me, I saw no
shadow of another parting from her.

(p. 480)

If Pip and Estella do stay together their marriage will be somehow
posthumous. Or it is as though Pip had been forced to settle on marrying
someone else. For their dialogue at the end clearly has none of the

\(^6\) For a study of *Great Expectations* as a ‘rewriting’ of
*Frankenstein*, albeit one which strikes me as too optimistic about Pip’s
development, see Iain Crawford, ‘Pip and the Monster: The Joys of

\(^7\) ‘*Great Expectations*’, in *Dickens and the Twentieth Century*, ed.

\(^8\) This appears in Appendix A in Cardwell’s edition, p. 482.

\(^9\) A. E. Dyson, *The Inimitable Dickens: A Reading of the Novels*
vitality of their adolescent confrontations. It was the haughty, stinging Estella that Pip was in love with, not this earnest and thoughtful person. The wicked Estella, like the monster Magwitch, belongs to an era in Pip's thinking when people could be splendidly complete and independent, when he might even have been the hero of his own life. The Estella who could be a future Mrs Pirrip belongs to a realistically burnt-out world in which everyone is small and fallible.

* * *

Each of Dickens's last seven novels opens in grimly sensational circumstances: most of them with a form of nightmare vision or phantasmagoria. That is -- for the novels already discussed -- the Chancery fog, the mad vista of Coketown, the prison cell at Marseilles, the nocturnal coach ride to Dover, and Pip's churchyard confrontation with Magwitch. As we see in *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens felt society to be highly unstable and history to be more or less beyond control: for him to plunge into life for the beginning of a novel was to open himself up to chaos. The grotesqueness of so many Dickens characters discloses not only the author's desire to entertain through exaggeration but also the uncharted wilderness that Dickens understood the human world to be. It is no accident, therefore, that the opening of *Our Mutual Friend* should seem proto-Conradian: for Dickens, the River Thames is one of the dark places of the earth.10

The description, in the first pages of the novel, of the recovery from the river of what is supposedly the body of John Harmon is remarkable for its atmosphere of foreboding and superstitious awe:

it happened now, that a slant of light from the setting sun glanced into the bottom of the boat, and, touching a rotten stain there which bore some resemblance to the outline of a muffled human form, coloured it as though with diluted blood. This caught the girl's eye, and she shivered.

Lizzie's father . . . slowly lighted a pipe, and smoked, and took a survey of what he had in tow. What he had in tow, lunged itself at him sometimes in an awful manner when the boat was checked, and sometimes seemed to try to wrench itself away, though for the most

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10 Conradian comparisons may be ominous for some Dickensians. According to S. J. Newman, for example, 'the self-consciousness of modernism seems very near: the pathological word-play of Joyce, the sterility of Eliot, the despair of Yeats' ('Decline and Fall Off? Towards an Appreciation of Our Mutual Friend', *Dickensian*, 85 [1989], 99--104, [100]). But I hope to show that a self-consciousness of this kind is both exciting and necessary to Dickens.
part it followed submissively. A neophyte might have fancied that
the ripples passing over it were dreadfully like faint changes of
expression on a sightless face; but Gaffer was no neophyte and had
no fancies.\textsuperscript{11}

Dickens's narrator clearly \textit{does} have fancies, and they are of a very
gloomy turn. The 'rotten stain', and the sense of the corpse as still
active and threatening, however amorphous and dehumanized it may be,
recall the discovery of the incinerated Krook; and the whole passage
resembles \textit{Bleak House} further in its propagation of a moral fog: that is,
Dickens is making a point of not describing the scene too sharply; he
wants to convey evil by implying that there is something here that cannot
adequately be set down on paper. Dickens's London, here, is very similar
to the London of blood and plagues and curses that we know from Blake.

Individuals and institutions that would deny this super­
natural-seeming sickness at the heart of civilization, in \textit{Our Mutual
Friend}, meet with little patience. For example, Dickens has no time for
the 'grimly ludicrous pretence that every pupil' at Headstone's school
'was childish and innocent' (p. 263). This is Dickens's Experience
school, as it were, to be contrasted with the Innocence school that Nell
and her grandfather visit in \textit{The Old Curiosity Shop}. It is no wonder
that Dickens should now be realistic and severe on this subject, since,
as we know from his \textit{Household Words} article of 1852, 'A Sleep to Startle
Us', he had considerable experience of the 'ragged schools'. In this
article he describes visiting a school in which the pupils were
distinguished by 'an evil sharpness' and 'seemed possessed by legions of
devils'.\textsuperscript{12} On a subsequent visit to the school's dormitory, however, he
receives a different impression:

\textit{... a moving of feet overhead announced that the School was
breaking up for the night. It was succeeded by profound silence,
and then by a hymn, sung in a subdued tone, and in very good time
and tune, by the learners we had lately seen. Separated from
their miserable bodies, the effect of their voices, united in this
strain, was infinitely solemn. It was as if their souls were
singing -- as if the outward differences that parted us had fallen
away, and the time was come when all the perverted good that was
in them, or that ever might have been in them, arose imploringly}

44, 47.

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Miscellaneous Papers}, ed. B. W. Matz, 2 vols, Gadshill Edition,
additional vols 35 and 36 (London, 1908), I, 359.
The overhead floor acts for Dickens, here, as a facilitating agent for a kind of wishful thinking: relieved of the physical presence of these juvenile horrors he can think them into cherubs. But this is not all self-deception: the article ends with an earnest request for action from the nominal Christians who were all too preoccupied, at this time, with schismatic wrangles. In fact, the beatific vision of the children, in which the other, squalid section of their lives is not forgotten, works like Blake’s Innocence ‘Holy Thursday’, or ‘The Chimney Sweeper’: it is movingly pathetic in the need for consolation that it expresses.

In Our Mutual Friend a similar split between pitiful earthly circumstances and an imagined better world is found in Fanny Cleaver (or ‘Jenny Wren’), the crippled child who works as a dolls’ dressmaker but who has visions of angels who ‘used to come down in long bright slanting rows, and say all together, “Who is this in pain! Who is this in pain!”’ (p. 290). Jenny Wren’s predicament, as Michael Cotsell notes, is very like that of a bird-seller who was interviewed by Henry Mayhew, and of whom Dickens may have read during the writing of this novel: "'I dream sometimes, sir,' the cripple resumed in answer to my question, 'but not often ... I've never seemed to myself to be a cripple in dreams. Well, I can't explain how, but I feel as if my limbs was all free like -- so beautiful.'" This could be Tom Dacre speaking, and the further parallels between Mayhew’s cripple, or Dickens’s, and numerous other characters from the Songs hardly need to be stressed. In Blake we often seem to be encouraged to doubt the validity of the consoling vision -- for it might be nothing more than the feu follet pursued by The Little Boy Lost. And in Our Mutual Friend likewise there are occasions when dreams and visions are ridiculed. For example: "'After an interval almost convulsive, Baby curled her little hands in one another and smiled. ... Could it be, I asked myself,' says Mrs Veneering, looking about her for her pocket-handkerchief, 'that the Fairies were telling

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13 Miscellaneous Papers, I, 363.

Baby that her papa would shortly be an M.P.?” (p. 305). Jenny Wren herself, on Riah’s rooftop, becomes a little too ham-prophetic, but Dickens probably meant her performance to be weird in the same way that he meant Amy Dorrit to be odd -- only more so. ‘Come up and be dead!’ she calls. ‘Come up and be dead!’ (p. 335). ‘Death’ here is to be understood as a refreshing detachment, up on the roof, from the zombie-like life of the late-Dickens street, but this is still a worrisome invitation. Jenny Wren’s visionary faculty is the religion of a very sick society.¹⁵

Elsewhere in the novel there seem to be appeals to more orthodox religious support. When, for example, we see the dying orphan Johnny in the Great Ormond Street Hospital:

Johnny had become one of a little family, all in little quiet beds . . . : and on all the little beds were little platforms whereon were to be seen dolls’ houses, woolly dogs with mechanical barks in them not very dissimilar from the artificial voice pervading the bowels of the yellow bird, tin armies, Moorish tumblers, wooden tea things, and the riches of the earth.

As Johnny murmured something in his placid admiration, the ministering women at his bed’s head asked him what he said. It seemed that he wanted to know whether all these were brothers and sisters of his? So they told him yes. It seemed then, that he wanted to know whether God had brought them all together there? So they told him yes again. They made out then, that he wanted to know whether they would all get out of pain? So they answered yes to that question likewise, and made him understand that the reply included himself.

(p. 384)

Dickens expects the reader to take it, it seems, that the ministering angels or nurses will make good their promises (more reliably than the angels of Blake’s ‘Night’), and will at length remove Jenny and Johnny from their respective states of pain. But just as Jenny’s hopes are shackled with gaucheness and queer turns of phrase, so Johnny’s prospects of an authentic Christian heaven are gently subverted by Dickens’s humanistic efforts to provide something else, something more immediate and tangible. Hence we see Johnny happily lodged in a little heaven while he is still on this earth, blessed with ‘the appearance on his own little platform in pairs, of All Creation, on its way into his own particular ark: the elephant leading, and the fly, with a diffident sense of his size, politely bringing up the rear.’ The toys in the hospital

suggest an imperial acquisitiveness -- 'the riches of the earth' -- and the assembly of 'All Creation' adds not only a return to the plenitude of Eden but also a faintly Darwinian sense of man as part of a greater terrestrial system.

Some direct influence from Darwin is likely to have occurred: On the Origin of Species had appeared in 1859, and its influence can probably be seen to be at work -- more balefully -- in Mr Venus's shop, with its promiscuous intermixture of human and non-human remains. On the other hand, Johnny's toys can be taken as essentially Biblical. But this is Biblical material that has been appropriated by the secular world. Dickens himself is a type of novelistic Noah, and his books are overpopulated unwieldy vessels, drifting uncertainly for a period of months, ending very often under the glow of a metaphorical rainbow. These books -- nautical Dombey especially -- are to be contrasted with the 'wicked Noah's ark' represented by the prison hulk in Great Expectations (p. 41). Hence Dickens's hospitality towards the socially outcast, which is quite different from Blake's. Blake tries to be all-embracing, but through symbols, perfect archetypes, whereas Dickens seems to want to take on board all sorts of quirky individuals -- with an urgency which really militates against the religious idea that those who are completely neglected on earth will have it all made up to them in some other, ethereal sphere.

The comforting objects on Johnny's platform represent a completely benign accumulation, to be contrasted with the morbid Krook-like accumulations of Venus, Boffin's misers, and, above all, the dust-heaps. It is not that Dickens is against material possessions, just that he feels that they should be warm, humanely useful possessions. In fact it is exactly the need for good things in the Dickens world that makes dust and lucre so obnoxious. Bella's palatial house at the end of the novel is a lapse in this respect: it is as though Dickens is undoing the great work which he had achieved in the second financial collapse of William Dorrit: not for Bella the 'modest life of usefulness and happiness' looked forward to by Clennam and Amy. Indeed, that her accession to wealth should be presented as such a happy consummation tends to legitimize the miserliness that so much of Our Mutual Friend excoriates.
More than that, it is an affront to the whole tone of the novel. For this, most of the time, is another very flat book, in which everything central in society has been discredited, and where Dickens attends to the periphery. Take the conception of Mr Venus. Momentarily becalmed towards the end of the second monthly number, Dickens had to think of a new subject: 'While I was considering what it should be, Marcus [Stone] who has done an excellent cover, came to tell me of an extraordinary trade he had found out, through one of his painting requirements. I immediately went with him to Saint Giles's to look at the place, and found -- what you will see.' And what he found, in fact, was Mr Willis's taxidermy shop -- something sufficiently odd, and out of the way, and independent, it seemed, of society in general. Similarly, the house on the corner near Cavendish Square is blank and inexpensive (pp. 87--88), all the interest residing in the very odd specimen (Silas Wegg) who is posted on the pavement outside. Elsewhere in the novel, the oppressively main-stream is evaded in frivolous outings, like Bella and her father's trip to Greenwich. Dickens tries to narrate central love stories with conventionally romantic characters, but the prevailing character of the book is such that these become twisted and weird: Bella Wilfer is wooed by a man who is pretending to be somebody else, while she is in the care of a guardian who is putting on a false personality to test her; Lizzie Hexham is doggedly pursued by a man whom she finally consents to marry when he appears to be dying, but is not. The same sort of subterranean uneasiness lurks in these arrangements as in Carton's stage-managing of Lucie and Darnay's future. Paradoxically, it is the twisted and weird characters in Our Mutual Friend, like Sloppy (a sort of reclaimed Fat Boy) and Jenny (an Amy Dorrit extrapolated to the limit of quirkiness), who end up enjoying the nearest thing to a straightforward, undesigning courtship.  

Book III, Chapter 16 of Our Mutual Friend, 'The Feast of the Three


17 Cf. Philip Collins's discussion of the large moral significance of an ostensibly peripheral and minor character -- Mr Grumble -- in Bleak House: 'Some Narrative Devices in Bleak House', Dickens Studies Annual, 19 (1990), 125--46 (144--45).
Hobgoblins’, commences with another of Dickens’s solemn, implicitly heroic, sweepingly observant progresses along urban thoroughfares:

The City looked unpromising enough, as Bella made her way along its gritty streets. Most of its money-mills were slackening sail, or had left off grinding for the day. The master-millers had already departed, and the journeymen were departing. There was a jaded aspect on the business lanes and courts, and the very pavements had a weary appearance, confused by the tread of a million of feet. There must be hours of night to temper down the day’s distraction of so feverish a place. As yet the worry of the newly-stopped whirling and grinding on the part of the money-mills seemed to linger in the air, and the quiet was more like the prostration of a spent giant than the repose of one who was renewing his strength.

(p. 667)

The presence of adjectives like ‘jaded’ and ‘weary’ contribute to making this a very characteristic slice of late Dickens. Just as in Hard Times or Little Dorrit, the character’s view and the narrator’s view (and Dickens’s view as we know it from social pronouncements in Household Words and elsewhere) fuse into one another, and the jaundiced individual becomes coextensive with the social malaise that he or she describes. In its imagery, the passage is suggestive of the prostrate England, or Albion, that we know from the Prophetic Books, and the parallel extends to our sense of the author’s relation to his subject and to his writing. Jerusalem gives evidence of malaise, suffering, and some self-distrust on Blake’s part, at the same time that it reports bad conditions in society: with Milton, it describes a social regeneration which centres in the relief, through creative effort, of one person — the author. Likewise, through Dickens’s concentration on the vividly perceptive individual, with whom he frequently identifies himself to the point — as Gissing noted in relation to Pip — of forgetting unity of character (indeed, in the last passage quoted, Bella’s personality hardly impinges), a sense emerges in his works of the artist as having an inner world the health of which is intimately related to the health of the society which he perceives. This leads to an enrichment both of the social criticism and of the self-exploratory psychology of Dickens’s work.

This fusion of inner and outer worlds is similar to what is most valuable and interesting in the ‘visionary’ Blake. Dickens, no doubt, would have been wary of the supernatural visionariness, the conversing with spirits, with which Blake, in the nineteenth century, was chiefly
associated. But if we concentrate on the ethically rigorous and often uncomfortable linkage of the author's idiosyncratic mind with the world he writes about, which is the very rational and courageous process which the spirit world in Blake often accompanies, then Dickens can be called a 'visionary' too.  

* * *

Dickens’s last novel, the one without an end, is also the one with the most disconcerting beginning. Dickens's visionary propensity here takes a pathological and sinful turn. In fact it is possible to read the first paragraph of The Mystery of Edwin Drood and not at all to know what is going on:

An ancient English Cathedral Town? How can the ancient English Cathedral town be here! The well-known massive grey square tower of its old Cathedral? How can that be here! There is no spike of rusty iron in the air, between the eye and it, from any point of the real prospect. What IS the spike that intervenes, and who has set it up? Maybe, it is set up by the Sultan's orders for the impaling of a horde of Turkish robbers, one by one. It is so, for cymbals clash, and the Sultan goes by to his palace in long procession. Ten thousand scimitars flash in the sunlight, and thrice ten thousand dancing-girls strew flowers. Then, follow white elephants caparisoned in countless gorgeous colors, and infinite in number and attendants. Still, the Cathedral tower rises in the background, where it cannot be, and still no writhing figure is on the grim spike. Stay! Is the spike so low a thing as the rusty spike on the top of a post of an old bedstead that has tumbled all awry? Some vague period of drowsy laughter must be devoted to the consideration of this possibility.

In the next paragraph we learn that this has been an opium vision. Eventually we discover that the visionary, or indulger, is John Jasper. But in the meantime Dickens has sent his narrator on a wild debauch and

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18 Cf. Patrick McCarthy, 'Designs in Disorder: The Language of Death in Our Mutual Friend', Dickens Studies Annual, 17 (1988), 129--44. McCarthy seems to draw on Blake for his reading of this and other late Dickens novels. Thus, he speaks of Dickens's 'primordial myth of the nature of existence', his 'primary vision' (p. 129), which includes Pip's need to free himself from 'his own mind-chains' (p. 132). I agree with McCarthy's reading of the redemptive and regenerative powers of death and near-death in the 'myth' of Our Mutual Friend, but cannot fully assent to his reading of the end of the novel as benign. See also Carol Hanbery MacKay, 'The Encapsulated Romantic: John Harmon and the Boundaries of Victorian Soliloquy', Dickens Studies Annual, 18 (1989), 255--76, for explicit comparisons between Our Mutual Friend and Blake's Prophetic Books (pp. 259, 267). However, Dickens's likely reaction to the esoteric elements in Blake's visionary self-image and mythic system can probably be gauged from his description of the 'goggle-eyed gentleman of a perplexed aspect' who takes dictation from spirits in the 1859 Christmas story 'The Haunted House' (Christmas Stories, intro. Margaret Lane, The Oxford Illustrated Dickens [Oxford, 1956], p. 226).

committed a cavalier abuse upon the reader. For although this is not a
first-person narrative, it is the narrator, in this initial paragraph,
who is effectively caught up in the action. Unless it is the reader.
For, not having the benefit of any prior explanation, the reader is
actually compelled to experience the narcotic disorientation, the popping
up of absurd and inexplicable images, for himself. What is more, a
reader who is attached to English culture, or architecture, let alone
Christianity, is likely to consider this influx of orientalism, this
egregious, obtruding spike, to be a veritable act of vandalism. And is
it the reader who is supposed to set aside time for ‘drowsy laughter’?
This is a shocking way for an author to behave.

How the narrator’s and the reader’s relationships with Jasper would
have developed in the entire novel can only be guessed at, but it would
have been a logical development of Dickens’s late practice for these
relationships to have remained very close, despite the fact that Jasper
is probably a murderer. For although *Edwin Drood* does not appear to be
designed to have anything like the breadth of social reference of *Little
Dorrit* or even *Great Expectations*, it still seems to be a text that is
dominated more by certain authorial preoccupations than by the personal­
ities of discrete characters, and Jasper in particular often seems to be
a manifestation of a wider process. This can be seen in Dickens’s
attitude to the cathedral. Jasper, as wicked choirmaster, might be
presumed to have imported everything that is bad in an otherwise benign
and sacred building, but when the narrator describes the cathedral he
seems to add negative associations of his own:

Old Time heaved a mouldy sigh from tomb and arch and vault; and
gloomy shadows began to deepen in corners; and damps began to rise
from green patches of stone; and jewels, cast upon the pavement of
the nave from stained glass by the declining sun, began to perish.
Within the grill-gate of the chancel, up the steps surmounted
loomingly by the fast darkening organ, white robes could be dimly
seen, and one feeble voice, rising and falling in a cracked
monotonous mutter, could at intervals be faintly heard. In the
free outer air, the river, the green pastures, and the brown
arable lands, the teeming hills and dales, were reddened by the
sunset: while the distant little windows in windmills and farm
homesteads, shone, patches of bright beaten gold. In the Cathed­
ral, all became grey, murky, and sepulchral, and the cracked
monotonous mutter went on like a dying voice, until the organ and
the choir burst forth, and drowned it in a sea of music. Then,
the sea fell, and the dying voice made another feeble effort, and
then the sea rose high, and beat its life out, and lashed the
roof, and surged among the arches, and pierced the heights of the
great tower; and then the sea was dry, and all was still.

(p. 73)
Jasper seems to be drowned in his iniquity, or by his hallucinations. The deathliness of the building, amidst the life of the countryside, corresponds to his self-destructive personality. But, just as in the first paragraph of the novel, Dickens seems to allow Jasper to dictate the whole emotional orientation of the scene: his evil and his suffering are clearly expressed, but not externalized. Jasper is not an independently mobile, precisely defined, and distant criminal like Sikes or Quilp.

For Dickens to have made the cathedral the focus of iniquity in this story was a bold move. It is provocatively blasphemous, and is perhaps the culmination (in terms of symbolic intensity rather than of intellectual subtlety or political usefulness) of his attacks on social institutions. Jasper is Dickens's device, it sometimes seems, for attacking the cathedral from the inside. To attack it from the outside he has Deputy, the belligerent urchin who refers to it as the 'Kinfreeddrell' (p. 111). To be 'kin-free' is to lack relatives: Deputy is an orphan. He does not exactly come across as someone who needs looking after -- he is not like Jo in Bleak House -- but his aggressive behaviour should have been pre-empted by a caring church, and seems very much that institution's responsibility. All his petty outrages are committed literally beside its walls, so that he seems part of the establishment, an animated gargoyle. In filling him with vitality, just as when he gave Trabb's boy free rein, Dickens can be seen as sponsoring a measure of anarchy and vandalism within the outwardly respectable and organized structure of his own texts.

But, as in Our Mutual Friend, the unhealthy edifice or accumulation of matter (taking the cathedral as a type of dust heap) is counterbalanced by a benign opposite. This is solidly present as Mrs Crisparkle's dining-room closet:

It was a most wonderful closet, worthy of Cloisterham and of Minor Canon Corner. Above it, a portrait of Handel in a flowing wig beamed down at the spectator, with a knowing air of being up to

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20 Compare other meaningful mispronunciations in Dickens, like Sissy Jupe's 'stutterings' for 'statistics' (Hard Times, ed. George Ford and Sylvère Monod, Norton Critical Edition, 2nd edn. [New York, 1990], p. 48), or Joe's 'coddleshell' for 'codicil' (Great Expectations, p. 461). Other outbreaks of word-play in Edwin Drood include 'plum buns and plump bumptiousness' (p. 42) and 'pen-and-ink-ubus' (p. 73).
the contents of the closet, and a musical air of intending to combine all its harmonies in one delicious fugue. No common closet with a vulgar door on hinges, openable all at once, and leaving nothing to be disclosed by degrees, this rare closet had a lock in mid-air, where two perpendicular slides met: the one falling down, and the other pushing up. The upper slide, on being pulled down (leaving the lower a double mystery), revealed deep shelves of pickle-jars, jam-pots, tin canisters, spice-boxes, and agreeably outlandish vessels of blue and white, the luscious lodgings of preserved tamarinds and ginger. Every benevolent inhabitant of this retreat had his name inscribed upon his stomach. The pickles, in a uniform of rich brown double-breasted buttoned coat, and yellow or sombre drab continuations, announced their portly forms, in printed capitals, as Walnut, Gherkin, Onion, Cabbage, Cauliflower, Mixed, and other members of that noble family. The jams, as being of a less masculine temperament, and as wearing curlpapers, announced themselves in feminine caligraphy, like a soft whisper, to be Raspberry, Gooseberry, Apricot, Plum, Damson, Apple, and Peach. The scene closing on these charmers, and the lower slide ascending, oranges were revealed, attended by a mighty japanned sugar-box, to temper their acerbity if unripe. Home-made biscuits waited at the Court of these Powers, accompanied by a goodly fragment of plum-cake, and various slender ladies' fingers, to be dipped into sweet wine and kissed. Home-made biscuits waited at the Court of these Powers, accompanied by a goodly fragment of plum-cake, and various slender ladies' fingers, to be dipped into sweet wine and kissed. Lowest of all, a compact leaden vault enshrined the sweet wine and a stock of cordials: whence issued whispers of Seville Orange, Lemon, Almond, and Carraway-seed. There was a crowning air upon this closet of closets, of having been for ages hummed through by the cathedral bell and organ, until those venerable bees had made sublimated honey of everything in store; and it was observed that every dipper among the shelves (deep, as has been noticed, and swallowing up head, shoulders, and elbows), came forth again mellow-faced, and seeming to have undergone a saccharine transfiguration.

Dickens has a habit, when he wishes to attribute a special thought-provoking gravity to a passage, even if it is essentially a funny passage, of echoing Shakespeare. And here, in the last sentence, as in the description of Flora in *Little Dorrit*, Dickens seems to be thinking of *The Tempest*, and, in particular, of lines from Ariel's songs. That is, 'Where the bee sucks, there suck I' (V. 1) and

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Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.
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(I. 2)

Just as Jenny Wren's unorthodox visions provided a necessary escape-route in *Our Mutual Friend*, so the magic and exoticism of the Crisparkle Closet is to be taken as an antidote to a native, ecclesiastically overloaded culture that has grown stale. And just as the toy Ark in the Children's Hospital represented a humane and sensible recourse to earthly comforts, so this great repository of foodstuffs -- of fuel for the living -- stands against the engulfing hollowness of Dickens's cathedral, with its cavities for the dead. The domestic store-cupboard, which is cathedral-like in having its own Music Master in the accessible, convivial
person of Handel, is more to be trusted, in its peripheral quirkiness, than the whole community's institutional centre-piece. Jasper's form of sea-change, involving excessive indulgence oscillating with excessive gestures towards expiation, seems inevitably to submerge him, according to the imagery associated with the cathedral, while the sea-changes of an indulger in the Crisparkle Closet, with its tropical-island appurtenances, consist merely in the maintenance of ordinary good health and spirits.  

Jasper, it seems, requires some benevolent facilitator to lead him from a bad habit of making things hard for himself towards a brave new world (or 'The Dawn Again', as in the title of the last chapter that Dickens wrote) of brightness and equanimity. It is a ghastly paradox -- which Dickens fully exploits -- that it is the very person best formed for effecting 'a saccharine transfiguration', namely Miss Rosa Bud, who seems to be the innocent pretext for Jasper's moral decay. But it seems conceivable that Rosa and Jasper might have had more to do with one another later in the book. Certainly there is an antipathy here towards obvious, conventional romances, while Edwin's early remarks on Rosa represent a belated exposure of the contrived, devious liaisons that Dickens seemed content with in Our Mutual Friend:

In some few months less than another year, you know, I shall carry Pussy off from school as Mrs. Edwin Drood. I shall then go engineering into the East, and Pussy with me. And although we have our little tiffs now, arising out of a certain unavoidable flatness that attends our love-making, owing to its end being all settled beforehand, still I have no doubt of our getting on capitally then, when it's done and can't be helped.

(p. 13)

When we put this sceptical handling of marriage together with Dickens's irreverence towards the cathedral we can see that there would not have been many institutions left in society that would be completely safe, at this late stage, from his constantly developing critical propensities.

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21 'Like a well, like a vault, like a tomb', writes Dickens at the start of Little Dorrit, the prison in Marseilles in which Rigaud and Cavalletto are found 'had no knowledge of the brightness outside; and would have kept its polluted atmosphere intact, in one of the spice islands of the Indian ocean' (Little Dorrit, ed. Harvey Peter Sucksmith, The Clarendon Dickens [Oxford, 1979], pp. 4-5). The cathedral in Drood is an analogous structure, both in so far as it houses a murderer (probably) and in its failure to be refreshed by the spice island represented by the Crisparkle closet and the other benign elements of the community. See Dennis Walder on the religious symbolism of the Marseilles prison (Dickens and Religion [London, 1981], pp. 179-81).
In fact it is possible that together with the leaning towards simple, instant, physical comforts represented by the Crisparkle closet, Dickens was finally developing, in this rustically-situated novel, a more convincing image of nature as a healer of city-bred or institutionally-imposed disorders, than had been the case in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Thus, in the last chapter that he wrote, Dickens revisits the cathedral under ideally revivifying weather conditions, and finds, rather in the manner of Wordsworth's 'St Paul's', that the place is softened and brought down from its stony eminence to the needs of transient man:

A brilliant morning shines on the old city. Its antiquities and ruins are surpassing beautiful, with the lusty ivy gleaming in the sun, and the rich trees waving in the balmy air. Changes of glorious light from moving boughs, songs of birds, scents from gardens, woods, and fields -- or, rather, from the one great garden of the whole cultivated island in its yielding time -- penetrate into the cathedral, subdue its earthy 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.

(p. 215)

It is as though the monster-cathedral and the Crisparkle closet had been harmoniously combined into one. And yet, just as in Wordsworth's poem, the reader is made to sense that this is a temporary recovery. Dickens's cathedral remains a sepulchre: life invests it sometimes, but does not emanate from it. The refreshing light comes like Jenny Wren's angels ('brightness . . . like wings'), and so the emphasis is cast upon subjective vision. This is one way of looking at the cathedral, and at the world, but John Jasper's vastly different perceptual mode has already proved to be capable of arresting the narrator and saturating the text. Dickens could have been heading into a late phase of sunny visionariness. On the other hand, he may have intended to pepper the rest of *Edwin Drood* with horrors.

Dickens's later novels, taken as a group, show a number of distinctively provocative or obstructive features. They tend to look to the social periphery, to concentrate on quirky characters, and to downgrade the institutional and the sanctified. Typically, they end with an uneasy situation, not properly resolved, and with a sense of trouble brewing in the future. They involve an ever more circumspect treatment of the concept of the hero, a scepticism that extends to the roles of the
narrator and of the author himself. They show a slippage towards a criminal or diseased mentality, and include dabblings with varying kinds of visionariness, dream-states, and hallucinations. And the narrator's tone is often mocking, sarcastic, or evasive. All these elements militate against the author's appearance of moral authority, and yet they all provoke moral vigilance and speculation. It is at this advanced level of philosophical and psychological enquiry, much more than in the biographical facts of political affiliation or reforming activity, that Dickens's enterprise can appropriately be compared to Blake's. What is most impressive in both authors, despite their very different historical circumstances and the very different audiences that they were able, in their lifetimes, to command, is their sense of heavy responsibility as the originators of public texts, their audacity in putting forward idiosyncratic visions, and, at the same time, their rigour in emphasizing that idiosyncratic is precisely what these visions are. In both cases there is an ethically motivated reluctance to deceive, and a hard-won critical self-awareness, which goes far beyond the constraints and demands of their immediate circumstances.

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22 Cf. Patrick O'Donnell's assertion that Dickens, in Our Mutual Friend, discovers that 'what founds the making of novels and the projection of voice into character is quite different from any version of intention or identity he could possibly authorize. . . . He finds that to be an author -- a father of identities -- is to confront the facelessness of one's own identity' ('"A Species of Chaff": Ventriloquy and Expression in Our Mutual Friend', Dickens Studies Annual, 19 [1990], 247--79 [274]).

23 Cf. David E. Musselwhite's original and important reading of Dickens's development in Partings Welded Together: Politics and Desire in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel (London, 1987). Musselwhite contends that 'it is possible to see the whole trajectory of Dickens's career from the Sketches onwards as a series of attempts to break with [Boz's] radically decentered and aggregatively collective, rhizomic, style and espouse instead a more authoritative and collected narrative control', and that this 'did not necessarily make him a better writer' (p.181). There is much truth in this as it applies to the early and middle stages of Dickens's career, but, as I have tried to show, all sorts of decentering and self-undermining narrative devices are active in the last novels, counteracting what Musselwhite sees as their political softness. It is significant that he offers no readings of novels later than Bleak House.
Part Three:

JAMES JOYCE
CHAPTER 11

The Uses and Abuses of Blake and Dickens in Joyce's Early Works

It is unfortunate that we have lost both the beginning and the end of the lecture on Blake which James Joyce delivered in March 1912 at the Università Popolare Triestina, but from what remains it seems that, from a purely academic point of view, he was ill-qualified to speak on this theme. For he was content, throughout much of the lecture, to paraphrase The Real Blake by Edwin Ellis, a book which is now remembered for very little apart from its assertion that Blake was really an Irishman called O'Neill.\(^1\) Moreover, most of Joyce's own critical observations in the lecture seem quite obtuse, like this on 'London': 'Looking at St. Paul's cathedral, Blake heard with the ear of the soul the cry of the little chimney sweep, who symbolizes oppressed innocence in his strange literary language. Looking at Buckingham Palace, he sees with the eye of the mind the sigh of the hapless soldier running down the palace wall in the form of a drop of blood.'\(^2\) That is a distant and dandified reading. Blake wrote this:

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How the Chimney-sweepers cry
Every blackning Church appalls,
And the hapless Soldiers sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls
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(E27)

Of course, the chimney sweep does not merely 'symbolize', but is 'oppressed innocence': his cry could be apprehended readily enough with -- and, more to the point, could not be avoided by -- the physical ear.\(^3\)

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\(^1\) For full details of Joyce's borrowings from Ellis see Robert F. Gleckner, 'Joyce's Blake: Paths of Influence', in William Blake and the Moderns, ed. Robert J. Bertholf and Annette S. Levitt (Albany, New York, 1982), pp. 135--63. (This is the major existing study of connections between Blake and Joyce.)

\(^2\) '[William Blake]', in The Critical Writings of James Joyce, ed. Ellsworth Mason and Richard Ellmann (Ithaca, New York, 1959), pp. 214--22 (215). The text given here is the editors' translation, which is exact and uncontroversial. A facsimile of Joyce's Italian manuscript is to be found in The James Joyce Archive, ed. Michael Groden and others, 63 vols (New York, 1977--80), Notes, Criticism, Translations.

Where then is the 'strange literary language'? In the Prophetic Books, no doubt, but not in this most succinct, tactile, and forceful lyric. And why does Joyce see only 'a drop' of blood? Blake's 'sigh' suggests a broad diffusion, the soldier giving up his lifeblood. Similarly, the 'blackning Church' encourages the reader to think of the real presence of soot on city architecture, an overall covering, not a speck here and there; and this reflects upon our reading of the next two lines ('appalls' -- a pall of soot or blood -- anticipating the 'Marriage hearse'), so that the walls seem to be covered in a ghastly revelation by the city of its masters' secret iniquities.

Probably, the 'drop of blood' comes from a very different Blake poem, namely Milton, which Joyce evokes towards the end of his lecture:

Dionysius the pseudo-Areopagite, in his book De Divinis Nominibus, arrives at the throne of God by denying and overcoming every moral and metaphysical attribute, and falling into ecstasy and prostrating himself before the divine obscurity, before that unutterable immensity which precedes and encompasses the supreme knowledge in the eternal order. The mental process by which Blake arrives at the threshold of the infinite is a similar process. Flying from the infinitely small to the infinitely large, from a drop of blood to the universe of stars, his soul is consumed by the rapidity of flight, and finds itself renewed and winged and immortal on the edge of the dark ocean of God.4

This is much more an account of Stephen Dedalus than of William Blake, and it will be profitable to juxtapose a passage from A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man:

Towards dawn he awoke. O what sweet music! His soul was all dewy wet. Over his limbs in sleep pale cool waves of light had passed. He lay still, as if his soul lay amid cool waters, conscious of faint sweet music. His mind was waking slowly to a tremulous morning knowledge, a morning inspiration. A spirit filled him, pure as the purest water, sweet as dew, moving as music. But how faintly it was inbreathed, how passionlessly, as if the seraphim themselves were breathing upon him! His soul was waking slowly, fearing to awake wholly. It was that windless hour of dawn when madness wakes and strange plants open to the light and the moth flies forth silently.

An enchantment of the heart! The night had been enchanted. In a dream or vision he had known the ecstasy of seraphic life. Was it an instant of enchantment only or long hours and days and

The annihilation of time in the last sentence, here, is arguably Blake-like, but the 'dewy' quality is not. Stephen's exaltation seems to involve a kind of surrender, with even sexual connotations: 'Gabriel the seraph had come to the virgin's chamber' (p. 217), a nocturnal visitation with the possibly inadvertent suggestion of a nocturnal emission: a mixing of the epiphanic with the messily mundane which later comes to seem characteristically Joycean.® What we have, indeed, is a state of Elizabethan 'dying' here, with a trace too of the medieval dream poem, combined with an adolescent and highly self-deceiving form of religioso fervour. It is a surrender different from the sullied prostration discovered by Joyce in the Jesuit faith, which Stephen has now renounced, but heavily influenced by it nevertheless, and it points to an aesthete's relish for the ascetic life and a self-serving kind of monkishness.

Stephen's visionary state, that is, seems to involve a version of the 'consuming' of the soul that Joyce believed took place in Blake. Blake's own idea of the 'visionary', however, represents him more as the consumer than the consumed, and Joyce's reference to Blake's renewal beside 'the dark ocean of God' is particularly inappropriate since, in Milton, Blake contrasts the dynamic enterprise of the 'traveller thro' Eternity' with Albion's pathological subjection to 'the Sea of Time & Space':

First Milton saw Albion upon the Rock of Ages,
Deadly pale outstretch'd and snowy cold, storm cover'd;
A Giant form of perfect beauty outstretch'd on the rock
In solemn death: the Sea of Time & Space thunder'd aloud
Against the rock, which was inwrapped with the weeds of death

(15.36; E109--10)

Similarly, the hopeless 'Theotormon sits / Upon the margind ocean
conversing with shadows dire' (Visions of the Daughters of Albion, 8.11; E51).


® Cf. Maud Ellmann: 'As onanistic as the Wake is incestuous, the rhythms of A Portrait are not those of fluid interchange, but the rhythms of ejaculation in the loneliness of exile' ('Disremembering Dedalus: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man', in Untying the Text: A Post-structuralist Reader, ed. Robert Young [Boston, 1981], pp. 193--206 [205]).
So Joyce’s Blake is enfeebled and diluted, wearing, as Gleckner says, ‘the masks of Shelley and the early Byron’. Joyce’s Blake has little interest in the world around him, and has an inappropriately priestly air of impenetrable mystery. Joyce came to reject Blake, according to Gleckner, because ‘Blake flew too often and too far into the beyond, and that excess led finally not to wisdom but to a thud against the unyielding hardness of reality -- for Joyce the reality of Dublin and, in Finnegans Wake, of all human history’. But this, I would add, was partly Joyce’s own fault, because he chose to emphasize and exaggerate the ‘beyond’ in Blake; and moreover the status of ‘reality’ in both author’s works is often considerably more problematical than Gleckner’s comparison suggests.

Joyce’s eccentric reading of Blake is just one symptom of what was, in many ways, a wilfully peculiar cast of mind, and just as Blake provokes unusually passionate and partisan critical responses, so Joyce can stir his commentators in intimate emotional ways. ‘I’m not sure of liking Joyce,’ Jacques Derrida, for one, has confessed, ‘of liking him all the time’. This is because Derrida perceives literature in general, but particularly Joyce’s later work, as a trick and a trap: ‘that act of writing by which whoever writes pretends to efface himself, leaving us caught in his archive as in a spider’s web’, an image which is neatly echoed and brought up-to-date in Derrida’s subsequent depiction of a Ulysses / Finnegans Wake compound as ‘this 1000th generation computer’, beside which our most technologically sophisticated methods of decipherment remain ‘a bricolage of a prehistoric child’s tools’, quite incommensurable with ‘the quasi-infinite speed of the movements on Joyce’s cables’. While one can admire Derrida’s gusto, I am not sure


of liking, or believing in -- any of the time -- his superhuman, if not
inhuman, conception of Joyce, and I hope to show that more can usefully
be said about his texts than Derrida implies. But Derrida’s imagery
echoes the imagery of Blake and Joyce, and Derrida’s attitude towards
Joyce’s later works emphasizes their affinities with the later works of
Blake. Only Finnegans Wake can stand beside The Four Zoas, Milton, and
Jerusalem as an acknowledged major work of English literature widely held
to be unreadable, and ‘Blake studies’ closely resembles ‘Joyce studies’
in its spinning-out of self-effacing exegetical directories.

And yet, curiously, Blake and Joyce are each responsible for some
of the simplest lyric poetry in the language. Consider, for example,
Stephen’s villanelle from the Portrait:

Are you not weary of ardent ways,
Lure of the fallen seraphim?
Tell no more of enchanted days.

Your eyes have set man’s heart ablaze
And you have had your will of him.
Are you not weary of ardent ways?

Above the flame the smoke of praise
Goes up from ocean rim to rim.
Tell no more of enchanted days.

(p. 223)

And so on. This is a very rapt, idealistic, pleasant enough piece of
work, but it hardly qualifies Stephen as a distinguished artist. Some
critics have regarded the presentation of this and of Stephen’s various
other febrile rhapsodies as ironic. A. Walton Litz, for example, notes
that Stephen repeats to himself a Ben Jonson song which intermittently
resembles the villanelle in phrasing but is very much more sophisticated,
and concludes: ‘by contrasting Jonson’s controlled lines with Stephen’s
imitative, fin-de-siècle weariness, Joyce has subtly criticized his
hero’. However, the contrastive process in the Portrait is far less
direct than it is in Litz’s commentary, and Litz is assuming, for no good

compared Joyce to ‘a sea anemone’ (Ellmann, James Joyce, p. 630 and n.).

10 Introduction to Joyce, Poems and Shorter Writings, ed. Richard
5. See also Robert Scholes, ‘Stephen Dedalus, Poet or Esthete?’, PMLA,
89 (1964), 484–89, and Bernard Benstock, ‘The Temptation of St. Stephen:
Scholes finds a great deal of meaning in the villanelle, but only through
linking it ingeniously with much other Joycean material, whereas both
Stephen and the narrator of the Portrait seem to admire it as a thing in
itself.
reason, that the young Joyce was as discerning, or as canonical, in his poetical tastes as Litz himself. The villanelle has a great deal in common, moreover, with the poems in Chamber Music. And Joyce's great affection for the Elizabethan songwriters -- an affection shared by the Stephen of Ulysses -- points to an appreciation of the simplest sentiments presented in charming, ornamental ways.  Similarly, Joyce's dreamy vision of Blake, and the dreamy visionariness that Joyce attributes to Blake, are quite at one with this archaic and self-conscious order of poetry. There are certainly occasions when Joyce mocks the absurdities of Stephen in a way that suggests that he is mocking himself, but it is an acknowledged problem in Joyce studies that this process is rarely thoroughgoing, and that Joyce tends to linger over his own imputed deficiencies with affectionate nostalgia.

One can understand that Joyce might want to write the Portrait wholly from Stephen's point of view, without himself being taken in by it -- which seems to be Hugh Kenner's position on the novel. Indeed, I am sure that this is what Joyce is doing much of the time, and it is a remarkable thing. But then why should Joyce lecture on Blake from Stephen's point of view? Is it not the case that Stephen's point of view continues to be Joyce's intermittently? The title of the Portrait is significantly ambiguous: is it A Portrait of the Artist as [he was as] a Young Man or A Portrait of the Artist as [he is as] a Young Man? After all, according to Stanislaus Joyce's Dublin diary, the idea for the novel, and its title, originated on 2 February 1904, James's twenty-second birthday. Joyce certainly understood the part of himself that was Stephen amazingly well, and saw its limitations, but it was a state

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11 In 1926 -- after Ulysses -- Joyce wrote to Harriet Shaw Weaver of his hope that 'something I have written may bear comparison with [John Dowland's] Come silent night for instance' (Letters of James Joyce, ed. Richard Ellmann and Stuart Gilbert, 3 vols [London, 1957 and 1966], III, 138). See also Myra Russel, 'The Elizabethan Connection: The Missing Score of James Joyce's Chamber Music', James Joyce Quarterly, 18 (1980--81), 133--46. Dowland is another individual who has spuriously been claimed as an Irishman. Joyce's slightly rueful acknowledgement of the weakness of this claim, in a letter of 1939, suggests both how he might have wanted to believe in Ellis's Irish Blake and how he might have known, in his heart, that it was nonsense (Letters of Joyce, III, 449).


into which he would continue to relax himself, now and then, throughout
his career.

But there are other songs or rhymes in the Portrait of a very
different kind -- the songs associated with Stephen's earliest incarna-
tion, as 'baby tuckoo'. For example:

Pull out his eyes,
Apologise,
Apologise,
Pull out his eyes.

Apologise,
Pull out his eyes,
Pull out his eyes,
Apologise.

This song, as Don Gifford notes, is a reductio ad absurdum of 'Obedience
to Parents' by Isaac Watts (itself an expansion of Proverbs 30. 17) --
a poem that was probably used and satirized, as we have seen, by Blake, and which is exactly the sort of material pedalled by Miss Monflathers in The Old Curiosity Shop and Mrs Pipchin in Dombey. And, like Blake and Dickens, Joyce is using this crude didactic imagery to point to a separation of adult and childish imaginative worlds. In contrast to the earlier writers, however, Joyce's emphasis is not so much on adult injustice or misunderstanding as on childish eccentricity and obsession. 'Baby tuckoo' is not a naturalistically observed infant, and certainly not an exemplary one, but more a miniature protagonist of the absurd, whose melancholy verses will be recalled by Vladimir's song at the start of the second act of Waiting for Godot, which circulates remorselessly before contracting to the single line, 'And dug the dog a tomb', imparting an infantile comfort through its lugubrious consonance. There are parts of Joyce's Portrait that look forward to a modernist, disintegrated future, that is, just as much as other parts seem to look back, decadently, towards an adolescent's imaginatively indolent pseudo-past.

Just as Beckett's tramps express themselves as hypersensitive

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15 For another examination of 'baby tuckoo' as a significant version of Stephen see Bruce Comens, 'Narrative Nets and Lyric Flights in Joyce's A Portrait', James Joyce Quarterly, 29 (1991-92), 297-314.
sentimentalists, now and then, despite their coarse, filthy, and even murderous exteriors, so baby tuckoo, or the young Stephen, can be curiously delicate. That is, his imagination, which is consuming, not as yet a typically Stephen-like object of consumption, meets with unexpected checks -- exposures of his self-solicitude and pomposity which are strongly reminiscent of the set-backs of Dickensian figures of similar age and fortune. For example, it is hard to take very seriously the school bully, 'Nasty Roche', who 'called the Friday pudding dog-in-the-blanket' (p. 8), like a malevolent Fat Boy, or Claypole, or a Dodger to Stephen's Oliver. The debunking effect here is very close to that exerted on the Stephen of Ulysses by the irreverent Buck Mulligan; and a conspicuous softness continues, in the Portrait, as an element in the life of the adolescent Stephen, when he loiters about Queen's College with those other strange youths who conduct sub-Socratic dialogues and characterize one another, not quite convincingly, as 'emotional fellows' and 'excitable bloody men'. The Stephen of the Portrait is a chronically self-absorbed, often self-pitying figure, one who deserves to be compared and contrasted, in these terms, with the heroes of other authors who have made a kind of autobiography their primary business.

Wordsworth is in this latter category, and his Fenwick note on the 'Immortality Ode' soberly and regretfully expounds a solipsistic tendency of mind -- as revealed often in The Prelude -- very like that which seems to envelop and insulate Stephen: 'I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence, and I communed with all that I saw as something not apart from, but inherent in, my own immaterial nature.'\(^\text{16}\) 'Communed': like Stephen’s ‘enchantment’, this has a dreamy, thought-free feeling, and would have struck Blake, whose attacks upon materialism were sharply formulated and ideologically driven, as the pernicious sleep of Selfhood.

Wordsworth, in due course, awoke from his sleep and paid close attention to things beyond himself, but what about Philip Larkin? 'The argument about Larkin,' according to Christopher Ricks, 'is essentially

as to whether his poems are given up to self-pity or given to a scrutiny of self-pity and in particular to an alert refusal of easy disparaging definitions of it.' Ricks settles for the second alternative, invoking along the way Larkin's good endings, and a bivalent, 'hinged' quality in his verse, a sensitivity 'to the importance of elsehow' which is analogous both to the 'trembling of the imagined on the brink of the real' that Ricks finds, with Geoffrey Hartman, in the best poetry of the mature Wordsworth, and to Keats's 'negative capability'.^17 The controlled state of being in doubt which unites these poets, or their open-endedness, which can be a matter, as Ricks shows, of individual lines as much as complete poems, is very different from the 'immaterial nature' of Wordsworth's childhood, and different too from the Joycean state that it might, at first, appear to resemble -- the alienation or solipsism or mental paralysis in Stephen that will culminate in the 'ineluctable modality' of Ulysses (3:1 and passim). And the difference, essentially, is in the author's implicit moral attitude towards himself or his autobiographically constructed protagonist: for, just as Wordsworth is critical of his younger self, so Joyce -- only in a more complex way -- makes Stephen's self-absorption and uncertainties, and with them the open-endedness of the literary text, increasingly problematical in their moral implications.

In this respect, Joyce is very much a successor to Dickens -- who was particularly committed and ruthless in his handling of 'Self'. But the comparatively weak endings of Dickens's earlier works can, I have argued, suggest a kind of selfishness, a determinist narrowing of possibilities despite a deep feeling of ineluctable modality, or contingency, or of the immanent chaos of death, as though Dickens were negatively incapable. This quietist tendency keeps being punctured, however, more or less deliberately, by events like Bounderby's sarcastic remark to Louisa, or Pip's humiliation in the High Street -- events which could be described as 'epiphanies' (to use Joyce's word), providing just the sudden intimation of reality which Joyce seems perpetually to have

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striven for, while consistently overlooking its presence both in Dickens and in Blake.

One of the most sophisticated recent reflections on Joyce's early work appears in J. C. C. Mays's introduction to his edition of *Poems and Exiles*:

The poems of *Chamber Music* are in the end distinguished from the fashion in which they participate by the way they turn negative energy, the instigation to be different, into positive pastiche. . . . Joyce mastered the manner for which Yeats and Pound praised him to the extent that his use becomes a critique. He writes so completely within the style that the style is literally written out of -- in the sense of on to the outside, wholly away from him -- his personality. It is utter to an extreme by means of which it is made outer; the mimicry is intense to the point where it liberates the mimic. Joyce is thereby able to detach himself from what he wrote, and his judgement on its application and merits is independently open to change, even reversal. . . . The poems are no more good or bad than Stephen Dedalus in the *Portrait* is a hero or a fool, his theories true or hollow, his villanelle evidence of achievement or pretension.18

This has much in common with the passage which I quoted from Derrida: it presents another view of a spidery, all-involving, rather frustrating Joyce, who can never be called to account, who imposes himself on your attention but somehow makes you feel that his presence is all your own fault: almost the writer as Pecksniff. Or even the writer as Mr Chester, because this idea of Joyce, which is eminently transferable to later works, will be found to be vastly disabling of moral significance.

It seems unlikely that we will read about Stephen Dedalus in a way that totally excludes interest in whether, at any given time, he may be thought to be being pretentious and vacuous or, on the other hand, admirable and profound. Similarly, it seems probable that the reader will want to speculate about what is actually happening -- what is the human predicament described -- in this eerie poem from *Chamber Music*:

The twilight turns from amethyst
    To deep and deeper blue,
The lamp fills with a pale green glow
    The trees of the avenue.

The old piano plays an air,
    Sedate and slow and gay;
She bends upon the yellow keys,
    Her head inclines this way.

Shy thoughts and grave wide eyes and hands
    That wander as they list --
The twilight turns to darker blue

With lights of amethyst.\textsuperscript{19} This is not just an abstract assembly of what are referred to in \textit{Ulysses} as 'art colours' (4.370). It is not that neutral. In order to make sense of the feeling of automatism, the fading, and the wandering, it is necessary to receive the poem into some sort of human context. In fact, while the poem seems to set itself up as an autonomous and heartless artifact, a well-wrought (and funerary) urn, and while, like so many of the popular songs of which Joyce was fond, it seems designed to leave the reader unsatisfied and wistful, it nevertheless speaks very eloquently of much the same tangible human environment -- the rather sad and out-of-date world of the Dublin bourgeoisie -- which is addressed with so much feeling and precision in 'The Dead'.\textsuperscript{20}

There seem to be two main versions of Joyce, in so far as a sense of this author is obtruded on the reader of his texts: the one who plays games, pares his fingernails, and lounges into the arms of the most abstruse, enervated, and self-mocking forms of post-structuralism; and the one who is persistently interested in the psychology of moral shocks, and in characters who are themselves stuck with questions as to whether they are good or bad, heroes or fools. Joyce's work is full of emotion, intimacy, and pathos, but there are times when he seems to make a point of presenting or depicting himself as an unfeeling or even an untalented writer, and to derive some satisfaction from doing so. He can easily be made to seem a nostalgic sentimentalist, or, conversely, a cynical and heartless mocker. This is a situation that is analogous, I shall argue, to the 'contrary states' of Blake.

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Joyce's essay on Dickens, written at the University of Padua in April 1912, a few weeks after the Blake lecture, was not undertaken by choice, but was actually part of an unsuccessful attempt to gain Italian teaching qualifications, and its approval of Dickens is rather lukewarm.

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Chamber Music}, II; Poems and Shorter Writings, p. 14.

Nevertheless, Dickens was necessarily in Joyce’s mind while the Portrait was work in progress, and Dickens appears to have had a greater influence than Joyce suspected, or wanted to acknowledge. In fact, there is a strong Dickensian element in Joyce’s prose from the start.21

Dubliners resembles Sketches by Boz, not only in being a first collection of short prose studies preceding novels which spin out similar material to very great length, but also in its subjects and its tone. In both collections city life is shabby and grim, and seems, often, to be coldly observed. As John Bayley has said, the Dickens of Sketches by Boz impresses the reader as ‘a tough case’.22 He seems quite at home in a world of sharp operators, perpetrating various kinds of ‘gammon’, or, as Joyce’s equally slangy young Dubliners would have it, of ‘cod’. Joyce’s collection is more sentimental, and more thoughtfully humane than Dickens’s, but there is nevertheless an emphasis on the rotten and the corrupt in Dubliners, and a pervasive stiffness. This can be related to the first stirrings, under a range of pseudonyms, of Stephen Dedalus, who will unhappily combine a fascination with his fellow Dubliners and a desire to cast them all aside. For example: ‘Little Chandler quickened his pace. For the first time in his life he felt himself superior to the people he passed. For the first time his soul revolted against the dull inelegance of Capel Street. There was no doubt about it: if you wanted to succeed you had to go away. You could do nothing in Dublin.’23 Little Chandler, of course, does not go away; all he does is shout at a baby, and this anti-climax is both typical of this particular collection and anticipatory of Joyce’s later, more ambitious work.

A further parallel with Dickens, and also with Blake, occurs in

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21 The Dickensian influence does not reveal itself, however, in many direct allusions. The standard guide to allusions in Joyce’s earlier works notes only ‘distant music’ in The Dead, and ‘considering cap’ in ‘A Little Cloud’ (both very dubious), as echoes of David Copperfield and Our Mutual Friend respectively (Gifford, Joyce Annotated, pp. 69, 123).


Joyce’s premature interest in decrepitude. Consider, for example, the opening paragraph of ‘Ivy Day in the Committee Room’:

Old Jack raked the cinders together with a piece of cardboard and spread them judiciously over the whitening dome of coals. When the dome was thinly covered his face lapsed into darkness but, as he set himself to fan the fire again, his crouching shadow ascended the opposite wall and his face slowly re-emerged into light. It was an old man’s face, very bony and hairy. The moist blue eyes blinked at the fire and the moist mouth fell open at times, munching once or twice mechanically when it closed.

(p. 118)

The integration of the old man and the hearth fire, apparently fading away together, the man’s own ‘whitening dome’ reflected metaphorically in the ash, recalls numerous Dickensian scenes, and in particular that in which Little Nell’s grandfather, demented by her death, is discovered by Kit Nubbles:

The dull, red glow of a wood fire -- for no lamp or candle burnt within the room -- showed him a figure, seated on the hearth with its back towards him, bending over the fitful light... The form was that of an old man, his white head akin in colour to the mouldering embers upon which he gazed. And the failing light and dying fire, the time-worn room, the solitude, the wasted life, and gloom, were all in fellowship. Ashes, and dust, and ruin!  

Likewise, the slow movement into and out of the shadow in the passage from Joyce’s short story recalls the eerily hovering consciousness of Chuffey in Martin Chuzzlewit. But such images are common enough in the literature of old age, and I would not go so far as to say that the Old Jack passage could not have existed without Dickens. It would be possible, however, to make such a claim for the following:

A person resembling a poor clergyman or a poor actor appeared in the doorway... His face, shining with raindrops, had the appearance of damp yellow cheese save where two rosy spots indicated the cheekbones. He opened his very long mouth suddenly to express disappointment and at the same time opened wide his very bright blue eyes to express pleasure and surprise.

The mock-naivety of that last sentence, with its very palpable design of amusing through drawing our attention to the author’s own deliberate suspension of common sense and sympathy, is quintessentially Dickensian, and it prompts that constant worry of the old-fashioned kind of Dickens reader: is this too coarse, broad, jokey, and undisguised to qualify as real literature?


25 ‘Ivy Day in the Committee Room’, Dubliners, p. 125.
Joyce deploys a similar trick in 'A Mother', describing Mr Kearney: 'His conversation, which was serious, took place at intervals in his great brown beard' (p. 137). This is like Mrs Gradgrind, dying, sensing a pain 'somewhere in the room': it makes the character mildly ridiculous by disrupting his or her spatial integrity. Joyce, here, is dabbling with the dehumanizing effect which, for some readers, is Dickens's damning flaw. And Joyce is equally keen to pursue the opposite process -- of seeming to humanize the inanimate -- which is equally Dickensian. This sentence from 'Araby', for example, would be at home in any Dickens novel (indeed, something very like it appears in most of them): 'The other houses of the street, conscious of decent lives within them, gazed at one another with brown imperturbable faces' (p. 29). If that sentence occurred in Ulysses it would be part of an elaborate pastiche.

The Dickensian influence in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man is much more profound and essential, and overlaps to some extent with the Blakean element. For instance, a notable shock, an intrusion of the real that puts the cozy, homey world of baby tuckoo in perspective, comes in the pandy-batting incident. This may remind us of Nicholas Nickleby (though Father Dolan lacks the charm of Squeers), and, although Stephen's pain is realistically, painfully presented, it comes across in words that are oddly suggestive of Pecksniff in Martin Chuzzlewit: 'Stephen knelt down quickly pressing his beaten hands to his sides. To think of them beaten and swollen with pain all in a moment made him feel so sorry for them as if they were not his own but someone else's that he felt sorry for' (p. 51). And compare David Copperfield's beating by Mr Murdstone: 'Then he was gone; and the door was locked outside; and I was lying, fevered and hot, and torn, and sore, and raging in my puny way, upon the floor.' And then, 'I crawled up from the floor, and saw my face in the glass, so swollen, red, and ugly, that it almost frightened me.'

The Joycean incident resembles the Dickensian one in the way that the pain is explored through the protagonist's self-consciousness, ironically. But, whereas David's quick recovery and self-scrutiny point, as John Jones has it, to 'the tough little life always pressing up from beneath

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the buffeting, with its unquenchable curiosity and self-concern, with its ultimate pertness which is almost blitheness’ -- a quality which makes self-pity rough, astringent, and surprisingly easy to swallow -- Stephen still seems a little sickly here. The image from *Chuzzlewit*, in which Pecksniff is seen ‘warming his hands before the fire, as benevolently as if they were somebody else’s, not his’, was meant to emphasize Pecksniff’s hypocrisy and selfishness, and although Joyce’s narrator, by contrast, seems to be essentially on Stephen’s side, the phrasing in the *Portrait* does have a distancing effect, so that Joyce fails wholly to persuade the reader that Stephen would really have felt equally sorry for anybody else’s hands. I say ‘fails’, but perhaps this is not a failure: perhaps Joyce means Stephen to seem as much of a hypocrite as Pecksniff. It is very hard to be sure, and there is no good reason to assume that Joyce would have been sure himself.

Similarly, one can compare young Stephen’s lonely visit to the rector (to make his complaint about the pandy-batting), which is performed with an odd mixture of timidity and obstinate courage, with Oliver asking for more; and Stephen’s attitude to his peers is strikingly like Paul Dombey’s: ‘The noise of children at play annoyed [Stephen] and their silly voices made him feel, even more keenly than he had felt at Clongowes, that he was different from others’ (pp. 64--65). ‘"Go away, if you please," [Paul] would say, to any child who came to bear him company. "Thank you, but I don’t want you".’ Here, in Stephen, we have the self-consciously special child who is so familiar from Dickens.

It would probably not be possible to prove that Joyce was or was not directly influenced by Dickens in any one of these cases. But the general resemblance, the way in which Joyce is repeating analogous situations and exploring comparable emotions, is clear. Like Dickens, Joyce had a sentimental notion of his own childhood, and this could be

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mildly embarrassing, but the essence of the similarity between Joyce and Dickens here (and the factor that links both of them to the Blake of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*) is in the presentation, through what seems an amazingly authentic rendition of a child’s mentality, of a precocious sense of pity -- of the dangers and sadness of life. And in later Joyce, just as in Dickens, this leaning towards pity can become highly exacting, not merely self-directed and self-indulgent.

This brings us back to spiders. Derrida, as we have seen, identifies the author with the spider. Blake has mixed feelings about spiders. But Blake’s pity for the spider in *The Four Zoas* is not self-pity:

> The Spider sits in his labourd Web, eager watching for the Fly  
> Presently comes a famishd Bird & takes away the Spider  
> His Web is left all desolate, that his little anxious heart  
> So careful wove; & spread it out with sighs and weariness.

(18.4; E310)

There is a pathetic fallacy in the notion that the spider is so anxious and unhappy, although it is richly suggestive of a spider’s real behaviour, as we perceive it. But Blake’s idea of the spider is emblematic of a vastly comprehensive idea of the world, in which all animals, and even weeds, may be represented as on the same level as mankind -- where a lamb, or a tiger, or the ghost of a flea does more than represent human qualities allegorically, being, in itself, infused with interest through an idea of the imagination which attributes high value to every perceived entity. Thus, quite apart from all the symbolical meanings that can be elicited from ‘The Tyger’ it is a poem which can enhance our perception of tigers, the very beasts themselves. Blake’s immaterialism, when he is not being provoked by the likes of Hayley or Scholfield into egotistical rage, is of a kind that does not devalue the outside world (as unreal, unknowable) but elevates it, *en masse*, by making it coextensive with the perceiver’s mind. So that for Blake to despise a spider would be tantamount to rejecting a portion of himself, or stopping up one of the many windows, to use a Blakean image, which admit light to the Platonic cave in which we would otherwise be languishing.

This Blakean digression is appropriate in a discussion of Joyce because Joyce too aspires to a comprehensive world view which remains
inalienably personal, and in his later work we can find an attitude to non-human living things which is very much akin to Blake's. Dickens too wrote well on animals, and I have discussed the well-known interchangeability between human and non-human entities which characterizes his imaginative world. An all-embracing hospitality of the imagination is among the most striking qualities of all three authors.

In Joyce's early writing there is already an impulse towards a comprehensive vision: Stephen takes his self-pity and tries to extrapolate from it a grand theory of tragedy. But this is absurdly unconvincing, its callowness only accentuated by the willingness of Stephen's friends to hang upon his words:

-- Pity is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the human sufferer. Terror is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the secret cause.
-- Repeat, said Lynch.
Stephen repeated the definitions slowly.
-- A girl got into a hansom a few days ago, he went on, in London. She was on her way to meet her mother whom she had not seen for many years. At the corner of a street the shaft of a lorry shivered the window of the hansom in the shape of a star. A long fine needle of the shivered glass pierced her heart. She died on the instant. The reporter called it a tragic death. It is not. It is remote from terror and pity according to the terms of my definitions.

(pp. 204--05)

The death would have been tragic from the mother's point of view, presumably. And then if, as Stephen implies, the tragedy would have inhered in the girl's pain and/or her awareness of approaching death, what if she had undergone these feelings -- through a slight re-routeing of the splinter -- but had recovered completely in a month? Would that have been tragic? It is very convenient for Stephen that his passive interlocutors do not raise objections of this kind. But then, all sorts of people are improbably cooperative with Stephen. Take, for example, his profoundly sentimental foray into in the Dublin brothel district, where there is not the least suggestion that this very cheery and maternal prostitute will be wanting to be paid (pp. 100--01).

To show that Stephen's unrealistic and confused notions of death, and of women, were not necessarily transparent to Joyce, one need only turn once again to the essay on Blake, to whom, apparently 'Death came . . . in the form of a glacial cold, like the tremors of cholera, which possessed his limbs and put out the light of his intelligence in a
moment, as the cold darkness that we call space covers and extinguishes the light of a star. He died singing in a strong, resounding voice that made the rafters ring. These two sentences seem grossly incompatible with one another. Joyce projects his own cold aesthetics onto Blake, together with a range of prejudices. He speculates, for example, that Blake preferred ‘(if you will allow me to borrow a commonplace from theatrical jargon) the simple woman, of hazy and sensual mentality’. The parenthesis seems particularly disingenuous.

Stephen presents himself as ‘a priest of the eternal imagination, transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everliving life’ (p. 221). This is perhaps what Joyce would have thought that Blake was trying to do, but it was not. Blake does not deliberately ‘transmute’ but simply expresses the form that an element of experience manifests towards him, rejecting the duality with a putative but not perceptible ‘daily bread’ of non-subjective experience. Blake’s vision is personal, but he does not believe that an impersonal vision is possible. Stephen’s and, to a great extent, the young Joyce’s feeling for things beyond himself is saturated by the personal — not the would-be universalized personal of Blake, but the particular young Dublin scholar in all his selfhood. Thus the hallucinatory nature of the political references in the Portrait: just as Stephen, in Ulysses, suggests that Ireland is important because it belongs to him, Parnell seems to be important to the young Joyce because he reminds him of himself. This points again to what, for the purposes of this dissertation, is the central theme that links Joyce’s work with Blake’s and Dickens’s: the wavering and ambiguous nature of the artist’s moral commitment to the society whose real conditions and events he chronicles. And this is a theme which I shall examine more closely in the fertile context of Ulysses.

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30 Critical Writings, p. 219.
31 Critical Writings, p. 217.
Chapter 12

Paralysis and Neglect: the Terror of Ulysses

Joyce's 1912 paper on Dickens includes hardly any detailed reference to the novels, but abounds in sweeping judgements. For example:

Examined from the standpoint of literary art or even from that of literary craftsmanship he hardly deserves a place among the highest. The form he chose to write in, diffuse, overloaded with minute and often irrelevant observation, carefully relieved at regular intervals by the unfailing humorous note, is not the form of the novel which can carry the greatest conviction.¹

This was scarcely a controversial view of Dickens at the time,² and makes a kind of sense coming from the author of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, which is spare and rather single-minded, and where the humour is quirky and sporadic. But does Joyce contrive to make Ulysses carry a more than Dickensian conviction? And if so, are not his methods such as to recall upon himself precisely his earlier objections?

Just as Blake tended to reject authors and thinkers from whom he had learned a great deal, so Joyce had a spidery way of obscuring his paths of influence. As Ellmann notes, 'Joyce was close to the new psychoanalysis at so many points that he always disavowed any interest in it'.³ In fact, Ulysses not only contains a large number of direct references to Dickens, but is capable of sensible and constructive evaluation in terms very like those that one would chose to apply to the earlier novelist.⁴

² See, for example, the generally laudatory survey in the 11th edn. of Encyclopaedia Britannica (New York, 1910--11): 'Dickens had no artistic ideals worth speaking about. . . . As to the books themselves, the backgrounds on which these mighty figures are projected, they are manifestly too vast, too chaotic and too unequal ever to become classics' (VIII, 183).
⁴ Weldon Thornton's handbook, Allusions in 'Ulysses': An Annotated List (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1968), confines itself to direct verbal echoes, and lists Pickwick, Old Curiosity Shop, Chuzzlewit, Copperfield, Bleak House, Little Dorrit, Tale of Two Cities and Our Mutual Friend. Don Gifford, in 'Ulysses' Annotated: Notes for James Joyce's 'Ulysses', 2nd edn. (Berkeley, California, 1988), adds Great Expectations to the list. Among these novels, Bleak House and Copperfield are known to have been in Joyce's Trieste library, which also contained Barnaby Rudge, Nicholas Nickleby, and Oliver Twist: see Richard Ellmann, The Consciousness of Joyce (London, 1977), pp. 97--134, for a catalogue of the library in 1920. In other words, there is evidence to suggest that Joyce was familiar with all of Dickens's completed novels
In the first place, the character-types that I noted as Dickensian in the Portrait are repeated here. The relationship of Stephen with Buck Mulligan is essentially the same as the much younger Stephen’s with Nasty Roche, or indeed that of the two children in ‘An Encounter’: ‘While we were waiting he brought out the catapult which bulged from his inner pocket and explained some improvements he had made in it. I asked him why he had brought it and he told me he had brought it to have some gas with the birds. Mahony used slang freely, and spoke of Father Butler as Bunsen Burner.’

In each of these cases, a conspicuously Joyce-like protagonist is shown as thoughtful, soulful, and quiet -- liable to be pained, embarrassed, shocked, or even physically hurt by his companion, while the companion nevertheless enjoys a kind of rough glamour or brilliance. This is very much the relationship of an Oliver to a Dodger, or a David to a Heep or a Steerforth. In Joyce’s case, as in Dickens’s, there is reason to believe that the repetition of this type of relationship partly reflected the author’s paranoia, that it was in fact a deliberate commentary on various real or imagined stresses in his own interpersonal dealings. As Ellmann says, ‘his art became a weapon which had an immediate effect upon his circle of acquaintances, and so altered the life it depicted. . . . He waited in trepidation for Cosgrave, Gogarty, and others to betray him as he imagined Byrne had done, and so to earn their places in the circles of his hell.’ ‘Like Blake, he saw his private quarrels writ large on a symbolic screen.’

But Joyce’s attack on Gogarty, through Mulligan, is far more ambiguous than Blake’s on Scholfield or Hayley -- ‘Telemachus’ would be a ponderous chapter indeed without Mulligan’s satirical interjections, his feverish good spirits contrasting not unfavourably with the angst-riddled Stephen. Blake, on the other hand, while he was capable of presenting an anxious or despairing self-image, particularly in Notebook poems like ‘William

apart from Dombey and Son, and even Dombey may be echoed, as I indicate in the previous chapter and later in this one, in both Ulysses and the Portrait.


6 James Joyce, pp. 149, 338.
Bond' -- to which Stephen appropriately alludes in the *Portrait* -- never really shows himself as weak or despicable, even though we may think that such feelings appear in his work in a projected or sublimated form. It is in keeping with Joyce's distorted representation of Blake as a dreamer that he should attempt to surpass Blake in being ruthlessly self-analytical even as he follows Blake in caricaturing his various enemies. There is a more than coincidental link between Joyce's persecution complex and Blake's, as we shall see, but Joyce's apparent desire to challenge and even humiliate himself, through the medium of Stephen Dedalus, is much more Dickensian.

In Joyce as in Dickens this neurotic quality can seem to relate to fears even more profound and disquieting than that of faithless friends. I suggested earlier that there is a parallel between Stephen's predicament and that of the seaward-staring orphan, Paul Dombey, and this parallel is considerably reinforced when we find, in 'Telemachus', that Stephen's vulnerability to Mulligan is a function of the hypnotic force exerted upon him by the memory of his mother's death:

Stephen, an elbow rested on the jagged granite, leaned his palm against his brow and gazed at the fraying edge of his shiny black coatsleeve. Pain, that was not yet the pain of love, fretted his heart. Silently, in a dream she had come to him after her death, her wasted body within its loose brown graveclothes giving off an odour of wax and rosewood, her breath, that had bent upon him, mute, reproachful, a faint odour of wetted ashes. Across the threadbare cuffedge he saw the sea hailed as a great sweet mother by the wellfed voice beside him. The ring of bay and skyline held a dull green mass of liquid. A bowl of white china had stood beside her deathbed holding the green sluggish bile which she had torn up from her rotting liver by fits of loud groaning vomiting.®

Realism is contained in this passage, but is not dominant. The bowl of bile might make the reader think of Flaubert -- this is one of the nastiest literary deaths since Emma Bovary's -- but there is also a strong resemblance to the narcotic hallucinations of *A Portrait*, and it is possible to detect the surprising influence of Classical and Renaissance traditions of erotic lyric verse, in which the poet's muse or lover can appear in a vision, bringing reproach or forgiveness. In *Stephen Hero*, death is more straightforward and more frightening: the

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death of Isabel is virtually a transposition of the death of Joyce's brother George -- an epiphany which required no heightening. But here in Ulysses Stephen's other preoccupations, which are mainly artistic and erotic, are made to intrude between the horrible reality and his earnest, priest-like desire to mourn. To generalize and approximate a little, the realism of Stephen Hero and the narcissism of the Portrait are thrown in Ulysses into dynamic opposition.

The 'threadbare cuffedge', for example, stands out as a particularly jarring dandyish accessory, recalling Hamlet's customary suits, diverting attention towards the self-conscious mourner and away from the deceased. Dickens was similarly aware of the paradoxical picturesqueness of the down-at-heel or shabby-genteel, and Stephen here may be suspected of masquerading, like Richard Carstone, as 'the portrait of Young Despair'. Hugh Kenner reminds us that Stephen has broken his spectacles, and hence is actually unable to focus beyond his sleeve, but although this draws attention to the ingenuity of Joyce's planning it does not alter the psychological implications of the passage. No fact in Ulysses can be treated as neutral, and Stephen's physical myopia simply reinforces, through metaphor, his more emotional perceptual difficulties, as when he interrogates himself in the mirror proffered by Mulligan: 'Stephen bent forward and peered at the mirror held out to him, cleft by a crooked crack. Hair on end. As he and others see me. Who chose this face for me? This dogsbody to rid of vermin. It asks me too' (1:135--37).

The pathetic situation of the young human signifier -- to use the Lacanian metaphor -- searching vainly for a signified in his own reflection in the mirror, trying thereby to resolve his fragmented sense of self into something solid and reliable, acts in the case of Stephen much as it does for David Copperfield, who also looks into mirrors while

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living within a web of disjointed perceptions (not to mention a disjointed narrative). 'Doady' himself appears in 'Oxen of the Sun', as part of an inexact parody of Dickens which is more satisfactorily to be regarded as a general satire on Victorian values. Here Joyce mocks the bourgeois conformity that was one of Dickens's intermittent traits -- showing itself, in particular, in the sense we often have that Dickens's interesting young protagonists, even Pip, will overcome their troubles only to settle for an empty or at best very dull future career:

And as her loving eyes behold her babe she wishes only one blessing more, to have her dear Doady there with her to share her joy, to lay in his arms that mite of God's clay, the fruit of their lawful embraces. He is older now (you and I may whisper it) and a trifle stooped in the shoulders yet in the whirligig of years a grave dignity has come to the conscientious second accountant of the Ulster bank, College Green branch.

(14:1319--25)

Joyce, who reminded his brother of Steerforth, effectively rides roughshod over the fine points of Copperfield's psychology. In flaunting the modernity of Ulysses, Joyce exaggerates the datedness of a novel that, in its status as a troubled, circulating, indefinite sort of Bildungsroman, is very much Ulysses's precursor.

Dickens's narratives have a diffuseness to match their heroes' perplexity, and it is sometimes to be supposed that Dickens intended this correspondence. But in Ulysses the form is much more deliberately expressive of the characters' 'inner lives'. Thus, the conversation of Stephen and Kevin Egan, as transmitted by the former's disoriented state of mind, seems to flare and gutter like a match:

The blue fuse burns deadly between hands and burns clear. Loose tobacoshreds catch fire: a flame and acrid smoke light our

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13 Stanislaus Joyce, My Brother's Keeper, ed. Richard Ellmann (London, 1958), p. 78. This was not the only case of Joyce being taken -- or taking himself -- as a Dickensian figure: 'Mr Yeats seemed to have described me to Mr Pound as a kind of Dick Swiveller' (letter to Harriet Shaw Weaver, 24 June 1921; Selected Letters of James Joyce, ed. Richard Ellmann [London, 1975], p. 282). Such comparisons may have been a regular feature of the Joyce household. In his diary entry for 29 February 1904 Stanislaus reports, 'My sister Eva reminds me of the "Marchioness" in The Old Curiosity Shop' and 'the younger Miss Nolan wears her hair very tastefully in an old-fashioned style ... . She is pretty and looks as if she had stepped out of a Cruickshank illustration to Dickens. I have nick-named her "Dora" (The Complete Dublin Diary of Stanislaus Joyce, ed. George H. Healey [Ithaca, New York, 1971], pp. 14, 13).
corner. Raw facebones under his peep of day boy’s hat. How the head centre got away, authentic version. Got up as a young bride, man, veil, orangeblossoms, drove out the road to Malahide. Did, faith. Of lost leaders, the betrayed, wild escapes. Disguises, clutched at, gone, not here.

Egan’s remarks, we gather, may be intriguing to Stephen, but they float away from him finally, just as Gallaher’s Parisian boasts float away from Chandler in ‘A Little Cloud’, because they belong to a world from which he is irretrievably separate. In the earlier works of Dickens, the separate consciousness tends eventually to be absorbed, albeit unconvincingly, into a simplified concept of the happy ending. In this respect, Joyce’s approach resembles a type of deconstruction of the early Dickensian novel, or a redeployment of the resources of that kind of novel without the ending -- and hence a belated replication of the more uncertain type of ending that Dickens himself eventually developed. If the young Dickens had read Ulysses, he would presumably have regarded it as ill-judged and unsatisfying in so far as it fails to provide Stephen with a last-minute legacy and wife; but, if he had been able to overcome some superficial elements of culture shock, the Dickens of Little Dorrit should have found Joyce’s novel quite congenial: Clennam’s alliance with Amy is not really any more conventional than Stephen’s with Bloom. Joyce is absolutely following the later Dickens’s lead in making a hero of the eccentric individual -- for Bloom (or ‘Hunter’) was originally thought of as a character no more universal or exemplary than any inhabitant of Dubliners¹⁴ -- and hence withdrawing from the pretension that his text is representative of a widely shared world-view -- a pretension that irks the modern reader sometimes (and clearly irked Joyce), in the earlier Dickens’s confident appeals to middle-class morality.

So Stephen Dedalus’s myopia is echoed by a consciousness of finite scope that is characteristic of Ulysses as a whole, even though it often seems to be a work powered by a would-be all-engulfing energy, a ‘chaffering allincluding most farraginous chronicle’ (14:1412). Stephen’s visions in the Portrait had suggested the type of mentality

which, while oppressively conscious of its own originality and power, 
chooses to be overwhelmed or 'consumed' by ideas rather than striving to 
effect any change in the world outside. Similarly, the busy, fascinating, public world of Ulysses keeps being seized by fits of arrested time, 
in which a mood of passive contemplation supervenes and life begins to 
dwindle or go around in circles. Hence Joyce's frequent trick of the 
verbal double take, a type of antimetabole in which a sentence is 
followed by, more or less, itself reversed -- as though the narrator or 
the reader has fallen into a Stephen-like temporary paralysis. The 
effect of this tends to be pleasant, as at the start of 'Aeolus', where 
it contributes to a satisfying picture of Dublin as a place where ancient 
operations repeat themselves with infallible regularity: 'Grossbooted 
draymen rolled barrels dullthudding out of Prince's stores and bumped 
them up on the brewery float. On the brewery float bumped dullthudding 
barrels rolled by grossbooted draymen out of Prince's stores' (7:21-- 
24). This seems hugely different from Stephen's fixation on, for 
example, the pot of bile by his mother's deathbed, but, as we have seen, 
Stephen's remorse is infringed upon by his aesthetic sense, and it is 
possible to understand that Stephen may derive a strange contentment from 
the supposedly horrible image -- which is at least colourful -- just as 
Joyce conveys contentment in his frozen images, or tiny visual epipha-
\[\text{(11:81--83).}\]

Passages like these do not merely contribute to unfolding the plot 
or setting the scene, but seem to study the act of perception. And they 
are intimately related to Joyce's sense of language. For it is as though 
the most ordinary statements sound strange to Joyce, and he has a knack 
of making them sound correspondingly strange to his readers, thereby 
producing another kind of double-take, temporary paralysis, or epiphany. 
This is the case even in Dubliners. Consider, for example, the innocent

phrase 'Till to-morrow, mates' in its context in 'An Encounter':

When we were making the last arrangements on the eve we were all vaguely excited. We shook hands, laughing, and Mahony said:

— Till to-morrow, mates.
That night I slept badly.

(p. 21)

The phrase acquires a prominence which it would be unlikely to enjoy in anybody else's writing: the banality is exposed but the scene is still engrossing. It is as if the child is using these words for the first time, and as if we were reading them for the first time too. There is a fleeting stupidity here which casts the sophistication of our assumed familiarity with the world into an abyss.

To disorient the reader or hold him up in this way can be seen as a 'modernist' feature of Joyce's writing, but although Joyce does it with an economy and a surreal freedom from the stock response that is absolutely his own, the effect achieved is not so different from the perceptual tricks that are often executed by Dickens. David Copperfield arrested by the sight of Micawber eating walnuts, for example, a moment registered in all its oddness and then passed by: this has a certain plot-developing function in so far as it informs us that David is recognizing Micawber's recuperative abilities, but it is more important as a paradigmatic moment in the child's development -- again, an epiphany -- in terms of the way that he looks at the world around him, making connections and spotting incongruities. At times like these, Dickens's imagination leans towards the liberated subjectivism that allows Joyce to interrupt his narrative, hold it still, or even go backwards. Surely Dickens, at such times, is as much to be numbered among the 'highest' practitioners and innovators of 'literary art' as Joyce himself.

The sense of the process of perception taking place, in the works of Joyce and Dickens, tends to complicate our reading of what the characters of those novels are said to have perceived. Thus, we cannot be sure of what Esther Summerson -- another mirror-gazer -- actually sees when she examines her face, because in the course of Bleak House a type of narrative has developed which is made up of different points of view, inextricably entangled, and in which the idea that individuals can radically deceive themselves and others has been very much to the fore. It is similar to the situation that I have described as obtaining in
Blake’s *Island in the Moon*, but on a much grander scale.

In *Ulysses*, the unreliability of perception is reflected in Joyce’s attitude to Stephen, which is now more conspicuously ironical. The new Stephen, like a Nickleby or a Richard Carstone, is less remarkable for his aesthetic theories than his rather flat jokes. The ‘cracked lookingglass of a servant’ (1:146; pillaged from Wilde) and the ‘disappointed bridge’ (2:39) fall far short of real humour, not least through being, in the context of Stephen’s personal circumstances, egregiously cracked and disappointed. And this is their merit. Stephen’s humour is invariably self-referential: the looking-glass answers his sorry sense of internal injury, while the bridge is Stephen the would-be exile who has nothing more to show for his continental peregrinations than a quartier latin hat. And is not ‘The Parable of the Plums’ in ‘Aeolus’ rather laboured and ponderous and anticlimactic -- as distinct from Joyce’s vastly clever interruptions and manipulations of it, which are not Stephen’s? Overall, Stephen’s wit is just a tributary of Joyce’s, in *Ulysses* -- a very different situation from the *Portrait*, where it was quite possible to confuse the two.

But that is not to say that the depiction of Stephen is now unsympathetic. His self-absorption is very far from being self-congratulatory, and the vividness of his suffering, when he briefly focuses on what seem to have been the real circumstances of his mother’s death, is not at all corrupted by the neurotic fantasies which surround it: ‘Her door was open: she wanted to hear my music. Silent with awe and pity I went to her bedside. She was crying in her wretched bed’ (1:250--52). ‘Ghostly light on the tortured face. Her hoarse loud breath rattling in horror, while all prayed on their knees. Her eyes on me to strike me down’ (1:274--76). Contrary to the impression received by many of the novel’s early readers -- that it was an anarchic maelstrom of styles, making all it described seem absurd and artificial, valueless -- here Joyce seems to have judged the circumstances grave enough to impel simplicity. This is one of the ‘soft centres’ of *Ulysses*, as Richard Brown has it.16

Joyce is in the liberated but frightening modernist predicament of having lost Dickens’s automatic reverence for the deathbed, and while this means that he can seem shockingly wayward and inconsequential in his descriptions of death, it also means that his descriptions tend to be far more true than Dickens’s to the ambiguity of real mental processes. It would be wrong to view Stephen’s confused and self-tormenting mental state as particularly strange, aberrant, or literary, even though it is heightened so by his unusually aestheticized sense of the world. Those few sentences on the mother’s final throes are enough to assure the reader that there is indeed something in Stephen’s heart that passes show, even if 'his mourning [seems], like Hamlet’s, a role rather conspicuously protracted'.

Dickens, in his earlier works, usually gives us an unsatisfactory account of death and mourning because he censors any ideas that would compromise the pious awe dictated by the religious and social conventions of his time, but, once again, this is a weakness that Dickens himself came to recognize and rectify. When David Copperfield guiltily frets, at one point, over the irrational envy engendered in him by Dora’s sorrow for her father, lately deceased, Dickens is already anticipating the courage and breadth of humanity that Joyce will need in order to accommodate all the pathological or distasteful aspects of a Stephen Dedalus while still leaving that character engrossing and likeable.

Having said that, Joyce was clearly a person who liked to dwell on his own misfortunes. And Stephen, in *Ulysses*, is still meeting with unhappy accidents -- accidents which, rather more than the pandy-batting in the *Portrait*, can seem to be blown up out of proportion. The most notable of these occurrences is to be found in the brothel scene of ‘Circe’, where Stephen is knocked down by an English soldier, Private Carr. This, like most things in *Ulysses*, functions on many levels. First there is a humorous parallel with Leopold Bloom, who had nearly been knocked down earlier in the day -- not by a Private Carr, but a public bus. Then we know that Carr was the name of the English diplomat who sued Joyce in Trieste for the price of the pair of trousers which he

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had found it necessary to buy for his part in Joyce's production of The
Importance of Being Earnest -- an incident which is similar, in terms of
its literary prominence and its initial triviality, to Blake's scuffle
in the garden at Felpham. This parallel is far from incidental, for, as
Morton Paley originally pointed out, the clash in the brothel in Ulysses
contains distinct echoes of the Felpham confrontation. And yet Joyce
is not one to follow Blake's lead in making a monster of the persecutor
figure. On the contrary, had Joyce been in Blake's shoes we can be
confident that he would have found it much more difficult than Blake and
most of his critics seem to do to be dismissive and contemptuous of
Private Scholfield.

For Joyce, in Ulysses, is much more critical than he was before
about his self-consolatory impulses, and about feelings of pity in
general. Consider a strangely neglected character in the novel -- the
blind stripling. This haunting, almost silent figure, who spends the day
perambulating Dublin with no immediately obvious purpose, appears first
in 'Lestrygonians', at a street corner, beside Mr Bloom:

A blind stripling stood tapping the curbstone with his slender
cane. No tram in sight. Wants to cross.
-- Do you want to cross? Mr Bloom asked.
The blind stripling did not answer. His wallface frowned
weakly. He moved his head uncertainly.

After some reassurance from Bloom, the stripling admits that yes, he does
wish to cross the road, whereupon:

-- Come, Mr Bloom said.
He touched the thin elbow gently; then took the limp seeing
hand to guide it forward.
Say something to him. Better not do the condescending.
They mistrust what you tell them. Pass a common remark.
-- The rain kept off.
No answer.
Stains on his coat. Slobbers his food, I suppose. Tastes
all different for him. Have to be spoonfed first. Like a child's
hand. Like Milly's was. Sensitive. Sizing me up I daresay from
my hand. Wonder if he has a name.

There is a very complicated system of sympathies and antipathies at work
here. Bloom is sorry for the stripling and tries to be helpful, but
feels some awkwardness and distaste, and cannot help looking on the

stripling as a bit of a curiosity, and not quite a real person: ‘Wonder
if he has a name.’ When the stripling has gone Bloom speculates about
him for some time: about what his work might be, about how he might
experience sex, about his sensory life in general. In the course of
these thoughts Bloom seems to realize that it is easy to misunderstand
and patronize such a person -- ‘we are surprised they have any brains’
(8:1116) -- but the pity and the interest, finally, cannot be sustained:
‘Dear, dear, dear. Pity, of course: but somehow you can’t cotton on to
them someway’ (8:1148--50).

As a figure of pathos, the stripling, with his ‘bloodless pious
face like a fellow going in to be a priest’ (8:1112--13), recalls the
early, priestly, self-pitying Stephen. And again, this is a parallel
that Joyce seems to have intended. For when, in the third chapter of the
novel, Stephen ruminates fruitlessly upon his mother’s death, and
experiences the ‘ineluctable modality of the visible,’ and when we
remember about his broken spectacles -- the real optical disorder which
makes the metaphorical one seem like a fanciful pose -- and when, above
all, he peers out to sea and starts to think of Gloucester on the
beetling cliff, Stephen becomes a veritable blind man *mangé*. ‘I am
getting on nicely in the dark,’ he says. ‘My ash sword hangs at my side.
Tap with it: they do’ -- and ‘they’ are clearly the blind, with their
sticks. Much later, Stephen uses his ‘ash sword’ to smash a brothel
lampshade, exclaiming as he does so ‘Nothung,’ making a mock-heroic
identification with Siegfried. Siegfried with his sword, Nothung,
translates, in *Ulysses*, to Stephen with his nothing: nothing much of
reassuring substance to say, and nothing much to do -- in a state of
suspension between the condition of the mythical hero, and that of the
poor, blind, aimless stripling. Stephen, throughout his career, is
clearly Joyce’s representative, and never more so than here, where we
inevitably make the connection with Joyce’s own horrible eye-troubles,
and with what seems, by many accounts, to have been his ostentatiously
feeble and enervated manner. And hence the stripling too, on one level,
simply has to be read as a version of Joyce himself.

This suggests that Joyce is still begging for our pity. The
stripling, as we have seen him so far, is not someone whom we would wish
to dislike any more than a Blakean innocent, or a less haughty Oliver Twist. In Joyce’s rather sopp’y Blake essay, as previously noted, Blake’s chimney-sweeper is discussed in conventionally pitying terms. But the chimney-sweeper who puts in a very brief appearance in Ulysses is completely different: he nearly pokes another character’s eye out with his brush (12:1--11). And, before that, the blind stripling himself has turned nasty, in a passage that works as a startling revenge of the Blakean and Dickensian innocents. This happens in the ‘Wandering Rocks’ chapter, in which the stripling, in a further parallel with Stephen Dedalus, is the victim of a physical buffeting -- administered in this case by a human juggernaut and Scholfield-like multiple being called Cashel Boyle O’Connor Fitzmaurice Tisdall Farrell:

As he strode past Mr Bloom’s dental windows the sway of his dustcoat brushed rudely from its angle a slender tapping cane and swept onwards, having buffeted a thewless body. The blind stripling turned his sickly face after the striding form.
-- God’s curse on you, he said sourly, whoever you are! You’re blinder nor I am, you bitch’s bastard!

(10:1115--20)

The episode ends immediately, upon this sour note. It is a fair response on the stripling’s part, but it does contrast with his previous demeanour. This is hardly the childlike innocence which Bloom seems to have assumed. For the reader, the experience (which is faintly upsetting, but not unfunny) is a bit like turning to Stanislaus’s 1904 diary, with an image of a sensitive, poetical, Chamber Music-writing, young James Joyce in mind, and reading this: ‘Jim says he has an instinct for women. He scarcely ever talks decently of them, even of those he likes. . . . "That one’d give you a great push." "She’s very warm between the thighs, I fancy." "She has great action, I’m sure."’

The blind stripling’s last, typically passive, participation in the action of Ulysses occurs in the ‘Sirens’ episode, which is haunted throughout by his disembodied tapping, and where we finally learn what his purpose is in Dublin: for, as Bloom had hinted (8:1116 and 1139), he is an itinerant piano-tuner. ‘I never heard such an exquisite player,’ asserts Miss Douce, who may or may not be a discerning judge (11:278); but, whatever the stripling’s musical and auditory accomplishments, his

19 Dublin Diary, p. 15.
sad lack of other sensory experience, vis-à-vis Bloom, is now poignantly reasserted. Bloom ogles 'a poster, a swaying mermaid smoking mid nice waves. Smoke mermaids, coolest whiff of all. Hair streaming: lovelorn' (11:299--301), but the stripling is not so lucky: 'Tap. Tap. A stripling, blind, with a tapping cane came taptaptapping by Daly’s window where a mermaid hair all streaming (but he couldn’t see) blew whiffs of a mermaid (blind couldn’t), mermaid, coolest whiff of all' (11:1234--36). However, for all its lingering pathos, this is merely a burlesque and kitschy anticipation of the stripling’s greater misfortune, which is his inability to view the pleasant spectacle of the sirens themselves, who are the Ormond Hotel barmaids. When Bloom leaves the bar he sees the stripling loitering indecisively in the doorway. The brief reflection that follows floats somewhere in an ambiguous zone between Bloom’s own mind and the novel’s Protean narratorial voice: ‘An unseeing stripling stood in the door. He saw not bronze. He saw not gold. Nor Ben nor Bob nor Tom nor Si nor George nor tanks nor Richie nor Pat. Hee hee hee hee. He did not see’ (11:1281--83). What is this ‘hee hee hee hee’ -- rhyming so cruelly with ‘see’? Is Bloom, or Joyce, laughing at the stripling’s deprivation? Thus ends the stripling’s career, on a disturbing note of Schadenfreude.20

In fact, the stripling is mentioned once more. But he has now become an abstraction. This is in the penultimate chapter, ‘Ithaca,’ where the narrator instructs himself to ‘reduce Bloom by cross multiplication of reverses of fortune, from which these supports [his financial precautions] protected him, and by elimination of all positive values to a negative irrational unreal quantity,’ with these results:

Successively, in descending helotic order: Poverty . . . . Mendicancy: that of the fraudulent bankrupt with negligible assets paying 1/4d in the , sandwichman, distributor of throwaways, nocturnal vagrant, insinuating sycophant, maimed sailor, blind stripling, supernannted bailiff’s man, marfeast, lickplate, spoilport, pickthank, eccentric public laughingstock seated on bench of park under discarded perforated umbrella. Destitution . . . . Nadir of misery: the aged impotent disfranchised rate-supported moribund lunatic pauper.

20 Cf. Karen Lawrence, who notes that ‘the deliberately oblique treatment of the action’ in this episode ‘functions as a strategy for capturing the pain being repressed’ (The Odyssey of Style in ‘Ulysses’ [Princeton, 1981], p. 100). The pain that Lawrence is thinking of, however, is mainly Bloom’s: once again, the less articulate and engaging sufferer is overlooked.
This is a characteristically eccentric, free-associating list, but its generally unsavoury character is obvious, and the presence of the stripling in this company seems calculated to shock. It is as though his blindness were a function of monetary carelessness: a joke and a disgrace. There is absolutely nothing in the piano tuner's actions, as we are shown them, to justify these insinuations to the upright and liberal-minded reader. And think back to his meeting with Bloom: 'Wonder if he has a name.' The most disturbing thing, especially after this list in 'Ithaca' -- which is narratorial or authorial, not lodged clearly in the mind of any character -- is that after all it is Joyce himself who has declined to give the stripling / tuner the distinction of a name. And yet the omission here is ultimately self-chastising: for it is not just 'Sirens' but really the whole novel that is spectrally pervaded by 'the soundless sounding,' as Bernard Benstock calls it, 'of the blind stripling's tuning fork, abandoned unintentionally on the Ormond bar piano'.

The portentousness of the character is more completely apprehended by Michael Seidel: 'In the Dublin of "Sirens", the "real classical" [11:280] force, the blind piano-tuner, is gone. He has left his tuning fork in the bar for a land deprived of an epic ear.' But, on the other hand, Joyce has done much to undermine our sympathies for the stripling; or, at least, to warn us against responding towards him.

It is probably significant that the only other 'striplings' in Joyce's published literary works are the unpleasant Weathers in 'Counterparts' (Dubliners, p. 96), and the unsettled and eerie 'all shapes of striplings in sleepless tights,' near the end of Book Three of Finnegans Wake (3rd edn. [London, 1964], p. 589).

There is nothing unusual about speaking of the 'indifference' or 'detachment' of the narratorial stance in Ulysses: see, for example, David Sidorsky, 'Modernism and the Emancipation of Literature from Morality: Teleology and Vocation in Joyce, Ford, and Proust', New Literary History, 15 (1983--84), 137--53 (141). My point is to stress the degree to which Joyce encourages his readers to be uncomfortable with this indifference. See also Clive Hart, 'Gaps and Cracks in Ulysses', James Joyce Quarterly, 30 (1992--93), 427--37. Hart writes interestingly of the things that are missing from Ulysses, the ways in which, despite its density and vastness, it is really a very incomplete account of a Dublin day, but neglects the uneasiness which arises when the entity being presented in this fragmentary form is a vulnerable human being.


in a spontaneously charitable way. So if the tuning fork -- rather than, for example, Miss Douce's harmonic garter (11:413) -- is to be taken as sounding some sort of keynote to the novel, and if the stripling is to be taken as an alter-ego for Joyce, an image of the artist, then it is hard to say whether that should (or would be meant to) reflect well on Joyce's enterprise, or whether it should be a kind of self-dismissive mockery. Nevertheless, Joyce's handling of the stripling is just one of many ethical cruxes which ensure that the author himself is liable to a form of inspection appropriate to what Thomas Staley has described as 'the great moral theme of Ulysses: Man's lack of a sense of responsibility to himself and to his fellow man'. But the reader might well conclude that Joyce, like Blake and Dickens before him, is paradoxically being very responsible in thus adverting to his own possible irresponsibility.

Arguably the most significant of the alterations made by Hans Walter Gabler and his team for the 1984 Ulysses concerns a question that is on Stephen's mind throughout the book. In the brothel scene, shortly before the fight with Carr, Stephen has another ghastly vision of his dead mother. He asks her, 'Tell me the word, mother, if you know now. The word known to all men' (15:4192--93). What this word might be is a question which has exercised Joyce scholars for many years, but now there seems to be a quasi-official answer, for Gabler has restored a lost passage to the 'Scylla and Charybdis' chapter which reads, 'Do you know what you are talking about? Love, yes. Word known to all men' (9:429--30). This is followed by a Latin quotation from Aquinas which distinguishes, according to Richard Ellmann, between 'love which ... genuinely wishes another's good', and ... a selfish desire to secure our own pleasure "on account of which we desire these things", meaning lovelessly and for our own good, not another's'. This is interesting, because it seems to encapsulate and yet not resolve the central

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ambiguities of feeling in the novel, as to whether Stephen is really
grieving for his mother or simply playing Hamlet, as to whether Stephen
really feels for Bloom, or Molly for Bloom, or Bloom for the stripling,
and so on. It suggests a dichotomy distinctly reminiscent of Blake, and
more particularly of 'The Clod & the Pebble', from Songs of Experience:

Love seeketh not Itself to please,
Nor for itself hath any care;
But for another gives its ease,
And builds a Heaven in Hells despair.

So sang a little Clod of Clay,
Trodden with the cattles feet:
But a Pebble of the brook,
Warbled out these metres meet.

Love seeketh only Self to please,
To bind another to Its delight:
Joys in anothers loss of ease,
And builds a Hell in Heavens despite.

(E19)

And the same hard-to-untangle conflict between true and false feeling,
charity and self-interest is central to Dickens: it would not be
difficult to imagine downtrodden Little Dorrit as the Clod of Clay, or
stony Estella as the Pebble. Hence Dickens's rigorous self-examination,
and his commendable ruthlessness with autobiographically inspired heroes
such as David and Pip.28

Joyce, who would resume his persecution of David Copperfield in
Finnegans Wake ('Doveyed Covetfilles'; 434:28) would probably begrudge
Dickens these comparisons; but then, the career of the blind stripling
might be taken as implying that the world's justice is not to be relied
upon, and, more specifically, that we should not burden Joyce himself
with great expectations of fairness. 'The second aspect' of the fourfold
vision of Ulysses, as Ellmann sees it, 'is ethical, involving certain
discriminations between desirable and undesirable life.'29 But this
sentence seems to come from a more civilized world than the world of

28 For a recent attack on the idea that 'the word known to all men'
is 'love' see Cheryl Fox, 'Absolutely: Redefining the Word Known to All
Men', James Joyce Quarterly, 29 (1991--92), 799--804. Fox claims that
the word is 'yes', and in so doing returns to the familiar view that
Ulysses is ultimately affirmative, whole-heartedly positive about life.
To me, the inescapable pros and cons of 'love' seem truer to the mixed
fortunes, and mixed feelings, in this novel. See also John Gordon, 'Love
in Bloom, by Stephen Dedalus', James Joyce Quarterly, 27 (1989--90), 241-
55.

29 Richard Ellmann, Ulysses on the Liffey, corrected reissue
Ulysses. For this is a novel in which a real historical catastrophe can be introduced, sharply visualized, and then simply lost in free-association, word-play, and the protagonists' self-concern:

Terrible affair that General Slocum explosion. Terrible, terrible! A thousand casualties. And heartrending scenes. Men trampling down women and children. Most brutal thing. What do they say was the cause? Spontaneous combustion. Most scandalous revelation. Not a single lifeboat would float and the firehose all burst. What I can't understand is how the inspectors ever allowed a boat like that .... Now, you're talking straight, Mr Crimmins. You know why? Palm oil. Is that a fact? Without a doubt. Well now, look at that. And America they say is the land of the free. I thought we were bad here.

I smiled at him. America, I said quietly, just like that. What is it? The sweepings of every country including our own. Isn't that true? That's a fact.

This, you might say, does nothing more than reflect Joyce's idea of the flighty, irresponsible thinking of a few individual Dubliners. And yet, what is happening when Joyce has Bloom reflect upon 'the generic conditions imposed by natural, as distinct from human law' (17:995--96), including 'inevitable accidents at sea' (17:1000--01)? From a figure who is so often taken to be an affirmation of human nature -- simple, ungainly, but essentially good -- this laissez-faire is worrying. Perhaps Bloom is so docile, so good-natured, that he will reconcile himself to anything. And Ulysses, as an amoeba-like textual organism, seems itself to be able to ingest all the unpleasantness of life and, in doing so, to neutralize it. 'Look at the sea' asks Stephen. 'What does it care about offences?' (1:231--32). What, the reader might ask, does this novel care about suffering? This perhaps approaches what T. S. Eliot had in mind when he observed of Ulysses, 'it has given me all the surprise, delight, and terror that I can require, and I will leave it at that'.

Conclusion

William Blake lures his readers into sympathy for the weak, the hampered, the outcast, and then shocks us by switching to a mode of retributive savagery. Or he campaigns against secrecy and militarism and then suddenly appears to be the very personification of harboured malice and egotistical disharmony. Charles Dickens puts forward young individuals, often implicitly based upon himself, as the heroes of his novels, but then mocks and undermines them, moving to ever more rigorous analyses of social compulsion and psychological bondage, so that the notion of a self-determining, benevolent subject is made more and more problematical. And James Joyce, for all that Ulysses may end with a 'Yes', does not, any more than Blake or Dickens, attach an unequivocally optimistic or consoling ending to the system of moral confusion, pity, and hostility which he has evoked. Stephen may have found Bloom, as the novel comes to a close, and vice-versa -- or not, as the case may be -- and Bloom may or may not be back on good terms with Molly, but a sense has emerged of a world full of crises and disasters, far beyond the empathetic resources of the most benevolently disposed individual, and quite possibly immune to the ministrations of art. And, somewhere in Dublin, Joyce’s blighted and rejected alter ego, Dedalus’s dead alias, the poor blind stripling, is still tapping dismally, foul-temperedly, along. In each of these cases the reader is drawn into areas of pressing ethical concern by the author, but at the same time confronted with intimations of that same author’s possible irresponsibility, indifference, or positive malevolence.

I believe that the originality of this thesis, aside from its new readings of many individual texts, lies mainly in its propagation of a sense of the ethical significance of literature which opposes some forms of post-structuralist scepticism but which, unlike more conventional humanistic approaches, is not reductive or platitudinous. To a certain extent, nevertheless, my approach participates in recent trends in Blake studies, Dickens studies, Joyce studies, and critical practice in general, and throughout the thesis, I have drawn attention to points at which my argument overlaps with or has been partially anticipated by other critics who are sensitive to ethical problems raised by the works
of my three chosen authors. This is especially the case with Blake, who has very frequently, in recent years, been discussed as a systematic philosophical thinker whose work can teach the reader valuable lessons about life. Often Blake is described as achieving this significance through a kind of undermining or problematizing of his authorial status. According to Andrew M. Cooper, for example,

Increasingly, Blake’s mythological universe comprises the author’s internalized mental representations of the world, their shaping influence on his actions, and in turn the world’s responses to those actions as perceived by him through the filter of his representations. So far from appearing in propria persona as the bard who present, past, and future sees, Blake comes to look more like a Foucauldian ‘author function,’ a locus of contestatory social-historical forces of which his ‘proper person’ is only one constituent among many.

... Only by recognizing the ways in which subjectivity has become implicated in the systems of knowledge, power, and ideology that supply its consciousness and reinforce its ‘subject’ status can Blake develop an ethics of resistance -- namely, ‘self-annihilation’ both as an article of religious belief and a means of aesthetic production -- and so approach an at least provisionally authentic self.¹

What I have to add to this rarefied account of the exemplary crisis of selfhood, authorship, and authority in Blake is a reaffirmation of the ethically provocative concreteness of the depictions of human joy and suffering in his works, coupled with Blake’s implication of versions of himself, within these texts, in actions and attitudes which he otherwise abhors. In other words, I wish to emphasize the ways in which Blake consistently links sophisticated ontological doubts to a sense of moral crisis in the outside world, thus prompting readers to re-evaluate their attitudes to the inequities and sufferings around them with real urgency. Thus, I must question the meaningfulness of Cooper’s ‘ provisionally authentic’, and would argue that this picture of Blake approaching a provisional state calls for a less upbeat conclusion than that with which Cooper rounds off his essay.

Stephen Cox, another critic who has recently commented on Blake’s achievement of philosophical usefulness through a kind of self-abnega-tion, concludes his major study thus:

Although Los’s city of art is an image of the ‘eternal,’ we know that it is formed in ‘immense labours & sorrows’ and that it is ‘ever building, ever falling’ [Milton, 6.1--2; E99]. This is one

of Blake’s many advertisements of the difficulties that led him constantly to revise his speculations and the logic that organizes them. The final effect is not, however, a denial of the power of vision; and it is not an affirmation of the value of mystery or indeterminacy. It is not a hint that all attempts at explanation might as well be abandoned. It is, rather, a sign that Blakean visions are not emptily self-reflexive but are imperfect and unapologetically inelegant aids to the contemplation of a truth beyond themselves.”

Again there is some overlap here with my suggestion that Blake achieves ethical significance by casting doubt on his own moral worth, but Cox does not seem, any more than Cooper, to realize the full seriousness of the imperfections that Blake points to in himself, their closeness to the things outside himself that he most heavily denounces. And because he does not go this far Cox is a little platitudinous. Far from really achieving an exemplary annihilation of the selfhood, Blake, like Dickens and Joyce, is most impressive and instructive when he confronts the reader with a sense of the author as one who is subject to the same ethical principles and liable to the same moral failings as anybody else, who is not necessarily innocent of any of the forms of corruption or oppression that his work describes. Without this linkage, the writings of Blake, Dickens, and Joyce would be dishonest: they would encourage the reader to think that he or she, like the author, inhabited a privileged realm of discourse above the wrongs of objective society, and hence to underestimate the difficulty of achieving moral progress. This is what I mean by the ‘necessary evils’ of my title: without the ethical doubt which Blake, Dickens, and Joyce cast upon their own enterprises we could not, in the end, take them seriously.

At the end of The Ethics of Romanticism Laurence Lockridge writes: ‘The Romantics have served as a large-scale demonstration that the ethical dimension of literature expresses a writer’s denial, internal to the literary text, of the strictly hypothetical status of imaginative literature. Far from being necessarily inhibitions or repressions, a writer’s moral persuasions fuel imagination to demonstrate, judge, exhort, and tell us what we might become.’ I think that this is right,

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but I have been doing something a bit different and, I believe, more radical. Blake, Dickens, and Joyce, I have suggested, do not merely encourage us to think about the better individuals we might become, but also force us to think about the imperfect individuals we, like themselves, might already be. To some readers, this may seem an obvious point to make, but all too many recent analyses of Blake, Dickens, and Joyce effect, in their theoretical abstraction, a painless repression of the features of these writers that are most beneficially distressing.

I would characterize my overall critical approach in this thesis as a type of radical humanism which tries to encourage an acceptance of the universality of human weakness without being despondent about it, and which seeks to restore a paradoxical dignity to literature. Blake, Dickens, and Joyce are not at all reduced by their ethical self-questioning. In a time and place where the elected representatives of society alternate continually between denouncing the alleged moral failings of others and perpetrating crass misdeeds of their own this seems to be a point of more than literary significance and one that is especially worth making.
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