

## Finale

In reflecting on diverse forms of uncertainty that dwelt persistently in the mind of Charles Dickens and may be discerned in his writings, we have failed to consider a hesitation of his to resolve yet another concern that seems to have weighed on his mind, or may even have troubled him, throughout his writing career. There is no reason to doubt that Dickens was a deeply religious man. There are after all numerous instances in his writings and in his correspondence where he expressly avows a belief in the Christian faith. A man who took it upon himself to write a life of Jesus Christ<sup>1</sup> for his children can hardly be thought to have seriously questioned his own religious convictions. And yet this is a very personal book, offering a simplified, in some ways even idiosyncratic outline of the gospels, which possibly for this reason never saw print during the author's lifetime. In later life he always urged his grown-up children to rely on the message of the New Testament for spiritual and moral guidance; although he does not seem to have wholly accepted the doctrines of the Christian creed. In any case he quite openly expressed his aversion to the "obtrusive professions of, and tradings in, religion".<sup>2</sup> It may not be too speculative an approach to assume that this very subjective attitude to the Christian tenets finds its parallel in the so varied treatment of religious issues in the novels.

Charity, as practiced by such exemplary figures as the Cheeryble brothers (NN), Joe Gargery (GE), Samuel Pickwick (PP) or John Jarndyce (BH), seems to derive from an innate goodness or an ethical outlook rather than from Christian teachings. It may also turn out to have been misled. Is it at all imaginable that Samuel Pickwick, a retired businessman of some standing, should prove so gullible to the deceits of imposters? Is it mere shortsightedness or plain complacency that makes John Jarndyce shut his eyes to the insidious egotism of the self-indulgent Harold Skimpole? Pickwick may appear as an "angel in

tights and gaiters" (PP, ch. 45, p. 642) to his friends and protégés, but never professes Christian principles. Somewhat paradoxically, the good men, in all these novels, are never found among the official advocates of Christianity. Conversely, those who do preach the faith, like the dissenting minister Stiggins (PP) or the unctuous Chadband (BH) are exposed as hypocrites and frauds. The overbearing Mrs Pardiggle and the equally dominating Mrs Jellyby (BH) are so devoted to their missionary endeavours that they appear forgetful of the old paradigm that "charity begins at home" – admittedly not a Christian principle. It is left to Allan Woodcourt, a young doctor who tends to the poor, to administer a layman's last rites to the young streetsweeper Jo, whom the Christian community has spurned (BH, ch. 47). No priest is called to comfort the fatally injured Stephen Blackpool, who dies gazing at a star that "had shown him where to find the God of the poor" (HT, ch. 34).

It is noticeable that the representatives of the faith who are so drastically shown up as imposters or deceivers usually belong to a dissenting creed or to the evangelical school. With a few exceptions, like the canting prison chaplain in *Barnaby Rudge* (ch. 77), the Anglican clergy mostly appear as mere agents of the prescribed ritual in the novels. They may administer a wedding or a funeral, but hardly become visible, let alone individualised. Whereas the schoolmaster who befriends Little Nell and her grandfather towards the end of their journey develops into a fully drawn character, the incumbent of the village church is only briefly noted as an old man of a retiring, mournful disposition (OCS, ch. 51, p. 485). We hear as little about the clergyman during whose sermon little David Copperfield falls asleep as about the priest who officiates at his so premature wedding. The official who affectionately tends to the wedding of Little Dorrit and Arthur Clennam is not the clergyman but the verger. Yet the ceremony is graced by the image of Our Saviour shining forth from a stained glass window of the church.

Whereas the servants of the Established Church may be marginalised, Charles Dickens's severest censure mainly affects the more dogmatic creeds. In *Little Dorrit*, Mrs Clennam's stern Calvinism leads her into self-righteous wrongdoing, of which she only belatedly repents. Esther Summerson's aunt never ceases to impress her niece with the threat that she will suffer for her mother's depravity (BH). While the narrator, deliberately it would seem, omits any reference to the Catholic clergy in dwelling on the excesses of the Protestant mob during the Gordon Riots

(BR), no sympathy is ever expressed for the Roman Catholic Church; (the same attitude becomes noticeable in a *Tale of Two Cities*, where the massacres among the French clergy are only indirectly noted). The Catholic Geoffrey Haredale, like the genial locksmith Gabriel Varden, is cast as a man of courage and fortitude. On the other hand, the faith which inspires him is shown up as dark and oppressive. It is quite in character that he should go abroad after his duel with Sir John Chester to seek expiation in a convent noted for its excessive severity, shutting himself away “from nature and his kind” (BR, Chapter the Last). Comment to this extent, or the conspicuous absence of it in the novel, might not suffice to indicate Dickens’s views on the Roman Catholic Church, if his aversion to its institutions was not so amply asserted in other places, as in the travelogue *Pictures from Italy* (1846).

Compared with the censures which are here driven home, the Church of England is never treated with equal disapproval. But then its dignitaries are hardly ever noticed. In the love plot of *Oliver Twist*, Harry Maylie forgoes all aspirations of a public career to spare his bride from gossip and calumny. After his ordination, which is regarded as a matter of course rather than a vocation, the young couple settle in a rural vicarage, secluded from the wide world and apparently largely exempt from pastoral obligations. It is only in Dickens’s last but one novel *Our Mutual Friend* that a roundly and realistically drawn clergyman puts in an appearance. It might seem as if Dickens had for the first time seriously interested himself in the at times precarious condition of the Anglican clergy. The Reverend Frank Milvey is in fact described as a hard-worked man whose care for his parishioners never wavers, while he has a family to support on a pittance. It is probably just as well that he should be aided by a more practically minded companion, even though dear Mrs Milvey, at heart a kind woman, may occasionally embarrass him through some down-to-earth prejudices (OMF, I, ch. 9; II, ch. 10; III, ch. 9; IV, ch. 11). But then Milvey is a very humane, forbearing and humble man, who is well aware of his own shortcomings and the limitations of his office.

The first impressions conveyed of the cathedral precinct at Cloisterham in *Edwin Drood* might suggest that Dickens had reverted again to an unfavourable attitude towards the Established Church. There is little faith and much arrogance among the body of clergy, whom the narrator disdainfully compares to a flock of rooks as they depart from their ill-attended services. Yet there is one shining exception among them,

who is even to function as one of the main figures in the novel. Like the Rev. Frank Milvey, the Minor Canon Septimus Crisparkle has been “expensively educated” (OMF, I, ch. 9), though he may not be as poorly paid as his literary predecessor. Like him he is a good, humble and open-minded man, who lives the Christian precepts in all his doings. On the other hand, he may be more strictly committed to the church ritual as a member of a chapter. Much has been made of the evocation of an early summer morning in Cloisterham, which the author wrote shortly before his death. It must not be overlooked, however, that the text does not come quite clear on the motif of the “Resurrection and the Life” (ED, ch. 22, p. 215), which is here so emphatically asserted. Does the sunlight streaming into the cathedral confirm the liturgical message, or, conversely, prove its emptiness?

There is certainly no indication on part of the narrator that the Minor Canon held a liberal attitude to the ceremonial which Dickens himself regarded with scorn; or that he might ever fail in obedience to his ecclesiastical superiors. Unless the author had forecast a situation in which Crisparkle’s religion of the heart would come into conflict with the discipline of his office. He is after all quite deliberately set up against the self-righteous bigot Luke Honeythunder, in an extensive argument presumably intended to bring home the Christian message as Dickens seems to have conceived it at the time (ED, ch. 17).

It may be just as well that this Christian gentleman, who literally goes out of his way to assist those in need of spiritual care, should not be a married man who has a family to support. He is in fact well looked after by his mother, a dear old lady whose occasional narrow-mindedness need not have any bearing on his pastoral dedication. Free from day-to-day chores and personal worries, he can entirely devote himself to his calling.

Septimus Crisparkle is indeed an admirable man, and highly admired by those who have benefited from his selfless spiritual commitment. Helena Landless in particular emphatically asserts her high opinion of the Minor Canon, which is noticeably reciprocated by him. John Forster’s view that the author intended these two figures to embark upon marriage at the end of the novel is indeed supported by several instances of their mutual admiration in the text (ED, ch. 10, p. 130; chs. 17, 21). Many readers of the novel have followed this reading since it was first propounded, and we would not argue that Dickens might not have considered this outcome for a while. But such reasoning cannot disprove the possibility of

his changing his mind as the narration progressed. Can we really imagine the proud young beauty sharing the good Minor Canon's household with his strong-minded mother, to whom he is so boyishly devoted? Or could we expect this spirited young lady to dwindle into an ever so practical, if rather illiberal, parson's wife as exemplified by dear Mrs Milvey? Should we foresee a situation where Septimus Crisparkle, having relinquished his distinguished office, was struggling to make ends meet as an ordinary, less gentlemanly, but altogether more independent parish priest?

There is no end to speculation of this kind and it will undoubtedly never lead to an unassailable conclusion. As we have tried to show throughout this book, Charles Dickens's imagination, or what we have defined as his secondary mode of composing, is unlimited in its fecundity and quite capable of rescinding what it has called forth if a new creative impulse was to assert itself. As the countless number of solutions to the mysteries of *Edwin Drood* which have been propounded over the years prove, the extant text of the novel holds ever so many moments or issues that would allow the narrative to proceed in different directions. On the strength of this proposition there is also some good reason to assume that every one of the other novels would have been as closely scrutinised by its critics had Dickens left it unfinished. Would not a comparable fragment have provoked a similar range of deliberations? It does not require much reflection to conceive of queries concerning analogous issues that might have suggested themselves had one or the other novel remained a torso of incomplete narrative strands.

Did the author, once a certain stage in the narration of *Oliver Twist* had been reached, really intend Fagin to meet his deserved fate at the hands of the hangman or would he have let him escape the law to suffer an even more appalling punishment? As we know from later examples, Dickens was held by the scenario of a condemned man pondering his desperate situation in a prison cell, which also seems to have gripped his readers. But this is not the way how Jonas Chuzzlewit or the malignant dwarf Quilp come to an end. Should Arthur Clennam eventually marry Little Dorrit, in whom he does evince considerable interest, or was he to be united with Pet Meagles after all, to whom he had become closely attached? Their incompatibility in age, which deters him in this case, must surely hold good for the other lady as well. Or is the world of a "Nobody", which Arthur Clennam has constructed for himself, so firmly conceived that he cannot summon the determination ever to try its boundaries?

And, if this be so, why should the loveable Pet, daughter to a generous and altogether very likeable father, be made to languish in a union with another, younger man whose utter worthlessness has been brought home so relentlessly? Was the writer considering a happier future for the much harassed Stephen Blackpool, the true hero of *Hard Times*, or must the highly idealised pauper die to expose and in fact atone for the wrongs of his betters? And was Louisa Gradgrind, apparently destined to become a Mrs Bounderby, ever to be rewarded for her self-sacrificing obedience, as a more traditional view of her plight might have foreseen, or would she, in terms of a modern attitude to a woman's condition in society, have to suffer for her lack of resolution ?

Our study of several of Charles Dickens's novels has indeed yielded a wide range of variants that the author might have preferred and may in all probability have considered. Nevertheless, we would not wish to convey the impression that our findings have in any way exhausted the potential of these so very complex works. Besides, only some of the novels have been examined in depth, leaving a wide field open for further research. In addition, recent process-oriented approaches to textual study have only intermittently been resorted to, and should be more systematically employed in future studies. Thus the concept of narrative frames as constituent elements in the evolution of texts could be used for a closer investigation of the thematic structure of the novels. An application of the theory of possible worlds would enable the critic to fully ascertain the potential of the individual character as a nucleus in the configuration of plot elements. While intertextual studies have disclosed a variety of models to which the author's works relate, little has so far been done to define the thematic patterns which readers could bring to bear on the narratives in the course of the textual process. Several of Dickens's novels are to date available as hypertexts, which might prove instrumental to an exploration of the literary and cultural information linked to the specific main text. Further computer-based research could undertake lexical, syntagmatic and tropological analyses of the novels for an improved assessment of their genesis and their gestation involving their reception by the reading public. Yet while the scope of further research work on Charles Dickens's creative achievement can hardly be measured, this writer feels sure to predict that whatever approach may be pursued it will still add to our admiration of his inexhaustible genius.