

ANDREW SANDERS

Charles Dickens *Resurrectionist*



CHARLES DICKENS RESURRECTIONIST

Andrew Sanders



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For Edwina

Das ist Karfreitagszauber . . .

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Introduction

In his *Charles Dickens: the Story of his Life*, published soon after the novelist's death in 1870, J. C. Hotten records an early example of Dickens's fondness for practical joking:

When Charles Dickens first became acquainted with Mr. Vincent Dowling, editor of *Bell's Life* . . . he would generally stop at old Tom Goodwin's oyster and refreshment rooms, opposite the office, in the Strand. On one occasion, Mr. Dowling, not knowing who had called, desired that the gentleman would leave his name, to be sent over to the office, whereupon young Dickens wrote:

CHARLES DICKENS, RESURRECTIONIST, <i>In search of a subject.</i>
--

Some recent cases of body-snatching had then made the matter a general topic for public discussion, and Goodwin pasted up the strange address-card for the amusement of the medical students who patronised his oysters. It was still upon his wall when 'Pickwick' had made Dickens famous. (pp. 36-7)

Dickens's playful description of himself as a body-snatcher was conceived in 1835, a year before the sudden death of his sister-in-law, Mary Hogarth, cast its long shadow over his life, and some twenty-four years before the appearance of Jerry Cruncher. It was, nevertheless, an unwitting prophecy of the search for subjects for Dickens's subsequent fiction, subjects which suggest the extent to which the novelist was concerned with the impact of death on the living and with the power of life to master the tyranny of death. Although *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841) was to some degree an imaginative attempt to bring Mary Hogarth back to life again, the

novels which succeed it show death not as a defeat or as a disruption, but as a crucial element in the experience of living, albeit a living mirrored in fiction. It is the intention of this study to suggest the extent to which Dickens drew on his experience and on his faith in his treatment of death and resurrection in his work.

The importance of the Christian, as opposed to the body-snatcher's, idea of resurrection in Dickens's novels has been hinted at often enough before. John Gross, for example, writing in the preface to the pioneering collection of essays, *Dickens and the Twentieth Century*, of 1962, noted forcefully, if somewhat disparagingly:

His Christianity is more relevant than one tends to think nowadays. There was undeniably a gulf between his morality, which was Christian in colouring, and his literal beliefs, which were nebulous: hence the embarrassing Biblical language of his operatic climaxes and death-bed scenes. But a formal belief is rarely quite as formal as it appears; one has to allow for childhood memories, emotional overtones, unresolved doubts. Dickens may have thought of Christianity primarily in terms of a diffuse loving-kindness, for instance, but he was also profoundly attracted by ideas of redemption and resurrection. John Jasper betrays more in Cloisterham than respectability. (p. xii)

Despite the last throw-away suggestion, one which does not stay for a question let alone an answer, Gross's spirited observation demonstrates something of the growing seriousness with which Dickens's ideas and beliefs were beginning to be taken. A further major step forward was taken by Alexander Welsh in his *The City of Dickens* of 1971. However much the novelist's private life might provide capital for twentieth-century moral dust-heap rakers, his professions of faith are both constant and, it would seem, heartfelt. Although those beliefs might indeed have seemed 'nebulous' to a Victorian fundamentalist, just as they do to a modern sceptic, Dickens's religion was both vital and pervasive. In his will, printed as an appendix to Forster's *Life*, he committed his soul 'to the mercy of God' in conventional enough terms, but he then went on to exhort his children 'humbly to guide themselves by the teaching of the New Testament in its broad spirit, and to put no faith in any man's narrow construction of its letter here or there'. It was a reiteration of fundamental principles, principles which had in-

formed Dickens's life and his fiction from the first. At no point does he seem to have doubted basic Christian teachings, or to have been troubled by the phenomenon which modern writers have styled 'the Victorian crisis of faith'. Doctrinal dispute, niceties of scriptural interpretation, the dissidence of dissent, the Catholic revival, Tractarianism, Evangelicalism and agnosticism seem equally to have enraged him rather than to have engaged his mind, ever intolerant of party spirit and narrowness. After a brief flirtation with Unitarianism in the 1840s, doubtless as a consequence of the internecine struggles within the Church of England during the period, Dickens would seem to have happily settled back into a broad Anglican Christian orthodoxy which drew its moral and spiritual principles from the New Testament rather than the Old, from a commitment to an active life in this world rather than from a contemplation of the next. Speculation irritated him, although, as his brushes with spiritualism suggest, he was generally prepared to keep an open mind. The last letter that Dickens wrote on the morning before his death, to a correspondent who had complained of a supposedly flippant reference to Scripture in *Edwin Drood*, clearly suggests the depth of his reverence. He was shocked, he told his critic, to find that any reader could mistake his tone; he had always striven in his writings 'to express veneration for the life and lessons of Our Saviour' simply because he *felt* that veneration. He had never, however, 'made proclamation of this from the house tops' (8 June 1870). It is a similar statement to that made nearly thirty years earlier in a letter to a Calvinistic antagonist. 'That every man who seeks heaven must be born again, in good thoughts of his Maker', he sincerely believed, but that it was 'expedient for every hound to say so in a certain snuffling form of words' he did not believe (10 May 1843).

It is perhaps this very combination of a sincere but simple enough faith with a general refusal to proclaim it from the house tops which seems to have rendered Dickens's insistent Christianity so irrelevant to most modern critical discussion of his work. Nevertheless, his attitudes to dying, death and bereavement derive from his reading and understanding of the Gospels; he expresses not a conventional piety as a sop to his readers, but a comfort derived from a scheme of beliefs to which he genuinely adhered. If Mary Hogarth's sudden death in 1836 seems to have shocked Dickens into a doubt which shows through his professions of faith in her angelic transformation, it proved to be a spiritual wound which, I suggest in Chapter 2, was

healed by further painful experience. As I have attempted to argue in my third chapter, there is a certain vagueness about the relationship between this world and the next in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, a novel so pervaded by death. The dead Nell's goodness is left to her heirs in the here and now, while her continued existence in another realm is implied rather than affirmed. In *Dombey and Son*, however, a novel which followed five years later, the dead Mrs Dombey and the son who joins her beyond the wild waves, function as active inspirers of life in this world, drawing the virtuous to them, like the transfigured Arthur Hallam in *In Memoriam*, by the power of continuing love. The memory of Paul, and the certainty of Paul's place in a heavenly scheme, keeps Florence sure of her emotional bearings in spite of the storms which beset her, just as it contrasts in a reader's experience with the emptiness of Mrs Skewton's end and the violence of Carker's. In *Bleak House*, which I discuss in my fifth chapter, Dickens's emphasis shifts to a pattern in which the central character, Esther, succeeds not only in finding a vital place in an otherwise deathly world but also in undergoing a kind of recall to life by reversing the belief, instilled in her in childhood, that it would have been better for her never to have been born. A similar pattern, I suggest in Chapter 6, can be found in the last novels. Heavenly rebirth, such as is promised to the dying, is seen merely as an extension of the resurrections experienced by the living. For Dickens the only certain knowledge of heaven is based on what is learnt on earth.

In my first two chapters I have endeavoured to place the ideas of death and resurrection in Dickens's fiction in the context of his time, the tradition in which he worked, and of his recorded experience. The prevalence of death in his fiction reflected a familiar enough reality to his readers; he neither killed characters for the market (*pace* Ruskin's remark about Little Nell), nor for fictional convenience (*pace* Borges's distortion of Ruskin's remark as 'when in doubt, kill a baby'). Dickens wrote of dying children because so many nineteenth-century families, including his own, lost children in infancy; he described pious adult death-beds because he had attended them; he expressed grief at the loss of fictional characters because he so sorely felt the loss of friends and relatives. I hope that my discussion of individual novels in the subsequent chapters can be seen to derive directly from these prefatory surveys. The five novels I have selected for critical analysis span his career as a writer and seem to me to be central to any modern reader's experience of his

work, an experience which is not always immediately sympathetic. I am well aware that I have sometimes retrodden familiar ground. I only hope that I have adequately acknowledged my debts to the labours and insights of my predecessors. I also hope that my occasional dissent from conventional interpretation will be seen to form part of an overall argument derived from a close and affectionate reading of the evidence.

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I They Dies Everywheres . . .

The death-rate in *Bleak House*, John Ruskin argued, functions merely as 'a representative average of the statistics of civilian mortality in the centre of London'; it might therefore be further adduced that the substantial number of fatalities suffered during the span of Dickens's novels from *Pickwick* to *Edwin Drood* reflects that in the real urban world of the nineteenth century.¹ No major character dies in *Pickwick Papers*, though dark mortal shadows are cast over the story by deaths and hauntings in the interpolated tales and especially by the account of the death of the 'Chancery prisoner' in Chapter 44. From *Oliver Twist* onwards, however, characters, major and minor, are variously struck down in the course of narratives and their death-beds, or at least death-scenes, come to take on a considerable local or thematic importance in the development of a story. *Oliver Twist*'s unmarried mother dies in childbed in the first chapter of the novel, to be followed by the news of little Dick's impending demise and by the violent deaths of Nancy, Sikes, and Fagin. Smike's death-bed, if we except those of the 'widow's son' in *Sketches by Boz* and the 'Chancery prisoner', effectively Dickens's first, haunts the closing chapters of *Nicholas Nickleby* and forms a striking contrast to the despairing last hours of Ralph Nickleby. Little Nell's death is virtually the goal of the progress traced in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, though her chief persecutor, Daniel Quilp, is to drown on 'a good, black, devil's night' and to be washed up, a glaring corpse, on a deserted mud-bank. *Barnaby Rudge* is pervaded by violence, and the unsolved murder at the Warren seems almost to presage the murderous actions of the mob during the Gordon Riots. If *Martin Chuzzlewit*, which displeased so many of its first readers, accounts for the death of no major character, it at least contains the murder of Tigg, the suicide of Jonas Chuzzlewit, and Mrs Gamp's superlative expatiations on the loveliness of corpses. *Dombey and Son* opens, like *Oliver Twist*, with the death of a mother and it goes on to describe the decline of its first protagonist, the death-beds of the newly-converted Alice Marwood and the desolate Mrs Skewton,

and the violent end of Carker. Mrs Copperfield dies of the effects of bearing David's brother in Chapter 9 of *David Copperfield*, to be followed in due course by the roughly parallel death of Dora, by Barkis going out with the tide, and by the dramatic drownings of Ham and Steerforth. In *Bleak House*, Jo dies of the apparent effects of fever and neglect, Richard Carstone wastes away, his life-blood sucked by a vampire law-suit, Lady Dedlock is found dead at the gates of the squalid grave-yard where her former lover lies buried, Tulkinghorn is found shot, and Krook is the supposed victim of spontaneous combustion. Stephen Blackpool is mortally injured by falling down a disused mine-shaft in *Hard Times*, and Josiah Bounderby is to die after the novel's close of a fit in a Coketown street. Mr Dorrit declines into distraction and death and Merdle opens his jugular vein in his bath in *Little Dorrit*, while Blandois is killed in the collapse of the Clennam house, a collapse which also occasions Mrs Clennam's terminal stroke. *A Tale of Two Cities* opens with Dr Manette's recall to life and ends with Sydney Carton's anticipation of his resurrection from the steps of the scaffold, having meanwhile accounted for the identifiable deaths of the villainous Marquis St Evrémonde, and Mme Defarge and the numerous unnamed but innocent victims of the September massacres and the guillotine. *Great Expectations* opens in a grave-yard, moves to a London dominated by Newgate, and describes the diverse ends of Mrs Joe, Miss Havisham, Compeyson and Magwitch. *Our Mutual Friend* begins as a mangled corpse is dredged from the Thames and witnesses the peaceful deaths of little Johnny and Betty Higden, the violent ones of Gaffer Hexam, Rogue Riderhood and Bradley Headstone, and the attempted murders of John Harmon and Eugene Wrayburn. The unfinished *Edwin Drood* is centred on yet another murder, but the mystery of the novel will remain forever unsolved as a result of the intervening death of the only man ever able to solve it correctly.

Calculating the exact number who die in the course of Dickens's novels is as vain an exercise as estimating Lady Macbeth's fertility-rate, but it is none the less clear that the novelist was a man much preoccupied with mortality. As a recorder of his times he was also transcribing, and eventually transforming, the evidence of the urban civilisation around him, data which was as much relative to the facts of death as to those of life. Given the vast increase in the population of Victorian Britain, and its steady annual growth, Death posed questions which disturbed more than simply religious

hope. The grave-yards groaned with a surplus worse than that of the slums, and Death as the ultimate *omnium gatherum* steadily undid more people than ever streamed optimistically through the crystal aisles of the Great Exhibition. The Victorians delighted in statistics, and if Dickens did not exactly share the delight in Benthamite cataloguing demonstrated by many of his contemporaries, he must at least have shared their shock at the published evidence of Parliamentary Commissions, conscientious journalists, Registrars General, and corresponding members of the Statistical Society of London. The thirst for knowledge, and for a scientific basis for reform, paralleled an increase in social ill, and a lack of social hygiene appalled men and women aware for the first time of the benefits of sanitary improvement. Although the bubonic plague had declined a century or more before as a basic condition of urban life, it was effectively replaced by epidemic waves of cholera, typhus, typhoid, dysentery and smallpox. If Samuel Pepys's fellow-citizens blindly shut their windows at night, burnt bonfires at street-corners and incense in their houses, the Victorians publicly fretted over the fact that their science seemed to explain the causes of infection without providing them with an effective means of combatting it. The catalogues of ill, from the opening of Tennyson's *Maud* to the reports which stimulated the Public Health Acts of 1866, 1871 and 1875, pointed to the fact that peace was proving a worse killer than war. As Edwin Chadwick soberly and unpoetically noted in his *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population* of 1842, 'the annual loss of life from filth and bad ventilation are greater than the loss from death or wounds in any wars in which this country has been engaged in modern times'. Yet more disturbingly, the evidence assembled by Chadwick's commissioners suggested that 'the ravages of epidemics and other diseases do not diminish but tend to increase the pressure of population'.²

Chadwick's report reminded early Victorians, as much as *Bleak House* reiterated the fact to mid-Victorians, that diseases bred in the slums took their revenge on society as a whole. A huge new urban population, in London and in the industrial cities of the Midlands and the North, transferred rural poverty into the cities and concentrated problems into smaller, but densely populated, areas. In a city of London's scale the classless effects of disease and death were accentuated by proximity. Castes separated from each other by hedges and park walls in the country shared the same water supply and drainage in the town; however much they endeavoured

not to, they jostled each other in the central streets, and the mansion merely hid the tenement to its rear. If the juxtaposition of rich and poor, and of two distinct nations unknown to each other, has been exaggerated for propagandist reasons, in London at least, each class, and the infinite and often subtle gradations which blurred real class distinctions, shared a common geographical if not social setting. There was, nevertheless, as Dickens himself noted in 1863, a noticeable class distinction in the capital's mortality-rates. 'The most prosperous and best cared for among men and women', he told an audience at a banquet in aid of the Royal Free Hospital, 'know full well that whosoever is hit in this great and continuing battle of life . . . we must close up the ranks, and march on, and fight out the fight. But', he went on, extending his analogy, 'it happens that the rank and file are many in number, and the chances against them are many and hard, and they necessarily die by thousands, when the captains and standard-bearers only die by ones and twos.'³ In 1830, for example, the average age at death for a gentleman or professional man and his family was forty-four; for a tradesman or clerk and his family it sunk dramatically to twenty-five, while for a labourer and his family it was only twenty-two.⁴ Edwin Chadwick himself noted that in the socially mixed parish of St George, Hanover Square, in 1839, the average age at death was thirty-one, though that average was pulled down by the statistics for infant mortality amongst the poorer parishioners.⁵ Such figures are deceptive in one important regard, for they are biased by the very fact of the inclusion of infant mortality-rates, and, as a result of better hygiene, nourishment and medical treatment, a child born into a middle-class family stood a marginally better chance of survival than one born lower down the social scale. If the figures are adjusted by placing infant deaths in a special category, a slightly brighter picture of average life-expectancy emerges. Between 1838 and 1854, statistics for England and Wales suggest that the average age at death for both men and women was 39.9 years; having survived the first fifteen of those years, however, life-expectancy could be extended to 58.2 years. After the age of twenty-five, it extended again to 61.1. For the period 1950 to 1952, by contrast, these averages read 66.4 years, 69.4 and 70 respectively.⁶

As the nineteenth century advanced into the twentieth, life-expectancy gradually extended, largely as a result of a more general application of precisely those benefits which once exclusively strengthened the middle-class infant. This improvement was no-

ticeable to the Victorians themselves, and became a matter of some self-congratulatory relief and compensation for the frightening conclusions drawn by Chadwick and his fellow-statisticians in the early 1840s. There had been a general national decline in the death-rate in the period 1780–1810, but it had begun to rise again with the development of the large industrial towns, a factor which greatly disturbed the Census Commissioners in 1831.⁷ The rate varied between regions, however, with London generally better off than the new northern cities.

By 1880, one can sense the relief of Thomas A. Welton who reported to the Statistical Society of London that over a twenty-five-year period the overall mortality-rate had declined by about 25 per cent.⁸ The zymotic diseases (scarlatina, typhus, typhoid, and typhina) and diseases of the lungs remained the biggest killers, but, Welton noted, the general risk of falling victim to one or the other was slowly diminishing, the rate in London (1.98 per cent) remaining appreciably less than that in Manchester (3.14 per cent) or Liverpool (3.10 per cent). Some fifteen years earlier the *Journal of the Statistical Society* had commented extensively on the findings of the twenty-fifth annual report of the Registrar General. So pervasive was the high rate of infant mortality in the period 1850–60 that the *Journal* did not bother to adduce reasons or to diagnose likely causes. In the age-group 5–10 years, however, it was noted that more than half the deaths of the children concerned were attributable to the zymotic diseases, while the remainder were supposed to be the various results of scrofula, tabes, phthisis, hydrocephalus and a category generally labelled ‘diseases of the brain and lungs’. Amongst children aged between 10 and 15, the death-rate remained one in every two hundred, though consumption is now increasingly cited as the main cause of death, only marginally overtaking the fevers and diphtheria. In the age-group 15–25 it is noted that smallpox emerges as the biggest single killer, though half of the deaths of young women are attributed to consumption, and a significant proportion to the effects of childbirth. Two out of every hundred men aged between 25 and 35 and three out of every hundred women were left widowed. Only after reaching the age of 45 does it seem that the risk of dying from organic disease other than those of the lungs outbalances the dire effects of the zymotic diseases, diarrhoea, dysentery, phthisis and cholera.⁹ It scarcely comes as a surprise to learn that in 1839, with a population approaching two million, there were 45,277 funerals in

London, 21,471 of them being of children aged under ten years.¹⁰ For infants the mortality-rate remained 150 in every 1000 births until the end of the century, only dropping to 138 in every 1000 births between 1901 and 1905.¹¹ Edwin Chadwick even estimated that of the £24 million deposited in savings banks in 1843, some £6–8 million was saved in order to meet the expenses of funerals, that is, extraordinarily enough, between a quarter and a third of saved capital.¹²

It is with these figures in mind that we can begin to grasp not only the alarming mortality-rate at Mrs Mann's baby-farm in *Oliver Twist*, and the death of the brickmaker's child in *Bleak House*, but also the sudden departure of little Johnny in *Our Mutual Friend*, and the slow declines of older children like Nell Trent and Paul Dombey. The deaths in childhood of the mothers of *Oliver Twist* and Philip Pirrip, of Mrs Dombey, and of the two Mrs Copperfields, equally have a perspective, as does the extensive use of the imagery of fever in *Bleak House*. Thrombosis, which kills, amongst others, Mrs Skewton, Mr Bounderby and Mrs Clennam, is a disease associated exclusively with old, or at least middle age. It was to kill Dickens himself at the age of 58. The vague, though once, it seems, definable 'brain fever', accounts, as one recent commentator has shown, for a substantial number of near fatalities in Victorian fiction, amongst them Pip's.¹³ Tuberculosis, a familiar enough remover of the less robust characters of other contemporary novelists, seems comparatively rare in Dickens's novels, though it kills 'the widow's son' in one of the earlier *Sketches by Boz*; nevertheless, as several medically qualified Dickensians have noted, he is otherwise an excellent observer and recorder of symptoms.¹⁴

Bleak House remains, however, the most significant investigation amongst Dickens's works of the various effects of disease on urban life in the nineteenth century. An unspecified contagious disease, most probably, given the nature of Esther's subsequent scars, smallpox, becomes not only a uniting image for the story, but also a sign of the real destructiveness caused by the rottenness of society. It is, of course, useful that Dickens remains unspecific, for he is thereby able to exploit a more general Victorian concern with fever. The contemporary concern was well founded, for fevers, even those loosely diagnosed as 'brain fever' and likely to be the result of mental as much as physical disease, regularly reached epidemic proportions in the middle years of the century. It was not idly that George Eliot gave Lydgate an interest in 'special questions of