

# Dickens and “Mariolatry”: Dickens’s Cult of the Virgin Mary

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“How far can an author tell a truth without seeing it himself?” (Chesterton 277)  
“The truth emerges in Dickens in a dialectical way by attraction and repulsion.”  
(Cribb, Review of *The Letters* 96)

## Introduction

Dickens’s doctrinal or ideological allegiances—his religious faith and intellectual belief—are difficult questions to deal with. In his centenary tributes to Dickens’s achievements in 1970, Angus Wilson observed: “Above all, he was a devout and practising Christian, however much sectarians of all denominations raised and still raise their eyebrows at his kind of Christianity” (7). Yet, reviewing Dennis Walder’s *Dickens and Religion* (1981), T. J. Cribb said:

Dickens went to church and said his prayers but did not believe in priests, Churches, or even the Bible, as theology; he did not believe in ritual, original sin, or salvation by conversion; he rejected missionaries, public prayer, distribution of tracts, and most religious instruction,

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there is no evidence that he believed in hell and he is elusive about resurrection. So in what sense is he a Christian, or even religious? (Cribb, Review of *Dickens* 403)

Certainly, one can find suggestions of Dickens's irreverence in a letter to L. W. Morey, where he writes:

because many forms of religion lead to what is practically Diabolical irreligion, I would not therefore abolish all forms of religion. Neither because the attraction of the two sexes, one towards another, occasions crime and degradation very often, am I prepared to enlist in a Crusade for the separation of the two sexes henceforth. (12 July, 1867; *Letters*, XI, 396)

The relationship of Dickens to religion is a topic that has now become commonplace in Dickens criticism. In this context, Dickens's opposition to Roman Catholicism is, according to Dennis Walder, "a familiar fact" (11), and he has been represented as a writer who preached against the Roman Catholic Church. In his letter to Miss Burdett Coutts, he calls "the Roman Catholic religion—that curse upon the world" (22 Aug. 1851; *Letters*, VI, 466). Alessandro Vescovi states emphatically: "Dickens despised the Roman Catholic machinery as much as he disliked Puseyism. He found Roman Catholics rather superstitious than pious and associated their religion with disorder and Papist schemes" (155-56). Therefore, many may be surprised to know that Dickens was a devotee of "Mariolatry." In this essay I challenge the commonsense assumption about Dickens's view of Catholicism. I am not trying to invent a Roman or Anglo Catholic Dickens, but it seems quite reasonable to credit Dickens with his own highly individual brand of Catholicism. At the very least, a reevaluation of his ideas on Catholicism is absolutely necessary, as the following case of retraction illustrates.

In 1977, Robert Newsom remarked in passing that Dickens's dream of Mary

Hogarth in Genoa reflects “horror and hatred” (123) of Catholicism. This has been a puzzling remark, since, as we shall see, it does not reflect the facts of the case. Predictably, in his new study *Charles Dickens Revisited* in 2000, Newsom, retracting his previous statement, observes that Dickens in fact became “kinder to what we might call the mystical side of religion” (95) and concludes:

There is a fascinating study yet to be done on Dickens’s profound ambivalence about Roman Catholicism. It is a theme that runs through his mourning for Mary Hogarth and *OCS*, BR of course, and *BH* (where Chancery carries much of the medieval baggage that popularly—i.e., in bigoted English Protestant opinion—attaches to Catholicism). (199)

Newsom’s change of mind is comparable to F. R. Leavis’s recantation of his views on Dickens, widely known among Dickens scholars. Dr. Leavis recanted his theses in *The Great Tradition* (1948) in favour of those in *Dickens the Novelist* (1970).

Dickens’s emotional stance towards Marian devotion is more complex than has been realized and calls for further exploration. Analysis of Dickens’s texts reveal further complexities, and even their plain meaning strikingly contradicts his well-documented aversion to Roman Catholicism. I argue that Dickens was a man who preached Protestantism while some of his imagination remained on the side of the Roman Catholic Church. To put it another way, Dickens was a Catholic writer at a subliminal level, yet he could not come to an understanding of his own faith.

## 1 . Dickens and His Anti-Catholic Age

In *A Christmas Carol* (1853) there is a curious passage. It takes place in the scene where the Ghost of Christmas Present takes Scrooge to a market, and shows

him the hustle and bustle of the town on Christmas morning:

There were ruddy, brown-faced, broad-girthed Spanish Onions, shining in the fatness of their growth like Spanish Friars; and winking from their shelves in wanton slyness at the girls as they went by, and glanced demurely at the hung-up mistletoe. (41; Stave III)

Here, Dickens uses his singular imagination to revivify the commonplace into the strange. Readers are forced to see the transformation of ordinary Spanish onions into prurient, lascivious and virile Spanish friars. Yet, there is something more we should note in the passage. Denis G. Paz argues:

When Dickens saw an onion, he did not just see an onion; he saw a swarthy Franciscan friar from the Mediterranean world, overweight from gluttony, lusting for sex with passing women. The difference between ordinary people and creative artists is that when we see an onion, we see an onion, but when they see an onion, they also see something far different and perhaps even new and wonderful. Yet although the power of their imaginations determines that they will transform the things of their world, it is the cultural context of the day that determines which images they use. The fear and loathing of Roman Catholicism was a major part of the nineteenth-century cultural context. (1)

The gist of Professor Paz's argument is that even Dickens's creative imagination was susceptible to the prejudice and stereotyping of the day, which both Dickens and his readers shared as both a deeply rooted and a deeply contested set of theological expectations in nineteenth-century culture.

The spirit of the age was anti-Catholic. Part of the reason lies in Britain's anti-Catholic history and national theology, as is evident in Dickens's patriotic narrative of English history, *A Child's History of England*, serialized in his weekly magazine *Household Words* (25 Jan. 1851–10 Dec. 1853) and covering the days

of the “Papal Aggression” Crisis of 1850–1851. Considering Dickens’s virulent anti-Roman Catholic bias, so apparent in his writings, it would be insupportable to suggest that he was pro-Catholic. However, the reality is not so straightforward as his anti-Catholic statements would suggest. In *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), Dickens’s fifth novel, he presents a historical narrative depicting mob-violence against the backdrop of the anti-Catholic rioting of 1780. This novel also reflects the militant anti-Catholicism of the mid-Victorian period. Yet, Dickens was capable of seeing Protestantism and Catholicism rather fairly. While he describes a growing anti-Catholic furor, with cries of “No Popery,” he regards the Gordon Riots—a Protestant religious uprising in London in 1780 aimed against the Papist Act of 1778—as a relevant example of rabid intolerance. The truth is, as G. K. Chesterton has put it, “anything like religious extravagance, whether Protestant or Catholic, moved him to an extravagance of satire” (163).

In Dickens one finds a perpetual conflict between opposing frames of reference: Protestantism and Catholicism. As is typical of Dickens, in the words of Timothy Cribb, “The truth emerges in Dickens in a dialectical way by attraction and repulsion” (Cribb, *Review of The Letters* 96). Here, we need to remember Dickens’s *locus classicus*: Dickens’s imagination was strongly driven by a process John Forster described as the “attraction of repulsion” (Forster II, 14). In Dickens’s fascination, contrary forces are simultaneously at work: attraction and repulsion. In other words, Dickens’s dialectical imagination is capable of oscillating between two ways of seeing things.

About Roman Catholicism Dickens felt a profound ambivalence. It is true that Dickens attacked the perniciousness of Roman Catholicism in *Picture from Italy* (1846), but he was attracted by some aspects of Roman Catholicism, i.e., Marian devotion, that is, the pious veneration of the Virgin Mary. However, one cannot find any systematic references to Marian devotion in Dickens’s *oeuvre*,

for he rarely approached a question philosophically, and his multifarious and unsystematic thought was not of the kind which fit neatly into self-conscious categories. One can say nevertheless that Marian devotion was the one of the most striking features Dickens found in Roman Catholicism. Dickens's fascination with Mary originated in his traumatic childhood when he was cut off from his family, then developed through his excessive admiration for Mary Hogarth, and expressed itself through ongoing communications with her. In short, Dickens's cult of the Virgin Mary was triggered by Dickens's idolatrous worship of Mary Hogarth, and profoundly influenced his depiction of female characters. What, then, is the substance of his cult of Mary?

## 2 . Dickens's Cult of Mary Hogarth

Dickens's "Mariolatry" started in good earnest with the sudden death of Mary Scott Hogarth (1820-37), his beloved sister-in-law [Fig. 1]. On 7 May 1837, at the early age of seventeen, in Dickens's own words, "she died in my arms, and the very last words she whispered were of me." Dickens confessed: "I solemnly believe that so perfect creature never breathed. I knew her inmost heart, and her real worth and value. She had no fault." (To Thomas Beard, 17 May 1837; *Letters*, I, 259). The event was of paramount importance in shaping his psyche. According to Gabriel Pearson, her death was "a religious crisis" (79). Mary represented something immaculate for Dickens. Through her premature death this immaculate figure became an object of worship. Dickens's religious impulse to venerate her goodness led him to create the apotheosis of her memory. In effect, her memory haunts his life and his works. She came to be enshrined in his texts, and one hears Dickens's extravagant mourning for her—his incantation of her memory—echoed throughout his writings.



**Fig. 1: Mary Scott Hogarth, 1820-1837: Dickens's Beloved Sister-in-Law**

Mary Hogarth was Dickens's source of inspiration, so naturally he idolized her. Dickens composed the following deeply pious inscription for her tombstone to immortalize her memory: "Mary Scott Hogarth | Died 7<sup>th</sup> May 1837 | Young Beautiful And Good | God In His Mercy | Numbered Her With His Angels | At The Early Age Of | Seventeen." (*Letters*, I, 259, fn1). Here, Dickens, intentionally or not, echoes distinctive beliefs in Catholicism: the Communion of Saints, the Immaculate Conception of Mary, and the Assumption of Mary. The Communion of Saints, according to Catholic doctrine, means that the Saints in heaven, amongst whom Mary is preeminent, are able to intercede for those on earth. Mary is considered queen of heaven and earth and queen of the angels. According to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, Mary was born without original sin because she was to be the mother of Jesus. According to Catholic belief in the Assumption of Mary, at the end of her earthly existence, Mary was taken body and soul into heaven.

Dickens's epitaph on Mary's tomb, "Young, beautiful, and good" are precisely those attributes he later applied to his idealized heroines. They are fair virgins from Rose Maylie down: Kate Nickleby, Madeline Bray, Little Nell, Emma Haredale, Ruth Pinch, Mary Graham, Florence Dombey, Agnes Wickfield, Esther Summerson, Ada Clare, Amy Dorrit, and Lucie Manette. These Dickensian maidens are all of spotless character and impeccable integrity, as if they were reincarnations of Mary Hogarth.

Mary Hogarth was not only the prototype for these angelic girls in Dickens's future novels, she was his guiding/guardian spirit as well. She was ever present in his consciousness and seemed even to constitute part of his own being. Six years after her death, Dickens pours himself out to Mrs. George Hogarth again:

she is so much in my thoughts at all times (especially when I am successful, and have greatly prospered in anything) that the recollection



of her is an essential part of my being, and is as inseparable from my existence as the beating of my heart is. (8 May 1843; *Letters*, III, 484)

Dickens’s words in parentheses “(especially when I am successful, and have greatly prospered in anything)” merit special attention. When he was in danger of growing overly elated by his rapturous reception in America in 1842, Dickens distinctly sensed her presence:

I feel, in the best aspects of this welcome, something of the presence and influence of that spirit which directs my life, and through a heavy sorrow has pointed upwards with unchanging finger for more than four years past. (8 May 1842; *Letters*, III, 35)

Dickens actually sensed that Mary’s spirit was constantly about him and felt her hallowing and monitory influence, with her annunciatory pointing upward.

What was behind Dickens’s “motive” for his Mary worship? Dickens’s devotion to Mary is due to his subconscious need for a guiding/guardian spirit who could appreciate his talents and ambitions. It was natural that Dickens should seek after a mother image—an idealized image of a woman who evokes the feelings usually reserved for a mother—in Mary Hogarth, who entered deeply into Dickens’s feelings, while the two “Mrs. Dickenses” were nothing to him. The first “Mrs. Dickens,” Elizabeth Dickens, his real mother, was a deficient “mother” who could not play the role of moral guide, and from whom he tasted a feeling of alienation. To the very end of his life he could never forget the feelings of abandonment by the one who should have cherished her gifted son. The other “Mrs. Dickens,” Catherine Dickens, his wife, was another deficient “mother” who was said to be stupid, clumsy and aggravating. In Dickens’s household to ask for Catherine’s guidance was totally out of the question.

The truth was that Dickens’s unfilled desire for a mother figure led him to its apotheosis in Mary Hogarth as an idealized women who is spiritually superior,

and uniquely fitted for both a sacrificial and domestic function. Mary Hogarth was deified by Dickens as a guiding/guardian “presence and influence” which directed his life and also embodied an eternal vision of “youth, beauty and goodness.” When he went to America in 1842, he visited Niagara Falls. Beholding the thundering waters, he felt himself to be in a sacred place, close to God. At that moment, Dickens thought Niagara Falls was a favorite haunt of Mary’s and that she had visited the scene many times in spirit since her death:

what would I give if the dear girl whose ashes lie in Kensal-green, had lived to come so far along with us—but she has been here many times, I doubt not, since her sweet face faded from my earthly sight.” (26 April 1842; *Letters*, III, 211)

Here, we find an echo of what Dickens wrote three years before in the final paragraph of *Oliver Twist*, which describes Agnes Fleming, Oliver’s mother. In the course of his life Dickens envied his sister Fanny Dickens, loved Maria Beadnell, married Catherine Hogarth, and had an affair with Ellen Ternan, but through it all he idealized Mary Hogarth in whom alone he found an all-loving mother figure.

### 3 . Dickens’s Dream of Mary Hogarth

Mary Hogarth often appeared to Dickens in his dreams. After her death he dreamt of her every night for months. In a letter to John Forster, Dickens’s intimate friend and semi-official biographer, written in Genoa in 1844 Dickens tells of a remarkable apparition of Mary Hogarth. She appeared to him in his sleep, not in her own person, but in “a blue drapery, as the Madonna might in a picture by Raphael.” Although he did not recognize the spirit as Mary until she spoke,

I think (but I am not sure) that I recognized the voice. Anyway, I knew it was poor Mary’s spirit. I was not at all afraid, but in a great delight,

so that I wept very much, and stretching out my arms to it [and] called it "Dear."

Dickens continues to recount his curious dream, admitting that he even cried to ask her to tell him:

"What is the True religion?" As it paused a moment without replying, I said—Good God, in such an agony of haste, lest it should go away!—"You think, as I do, that the Form of religion does not so greatly matter, if we try to do good?—or," I said, observing that it still hesitated, and was moved with the greatest compassion for me, "perhaps the Roman Catholic is the best? perhaps it makes one think of God oftener, and believe in him more steadily?" "For *you*," said the Spirit, full of such heavenly tenderness for me, that I felt as if my heart would break; "for *you*, it is the best!" Then I awoke, with the tears running down my face, and myself in exactly the condition of the dream. It was just dawn. (?30 Sep., 1844; *Letters*, IV, 196; italics original)

In the rest of the letter Dickens tells Forster that after waking he tried to rationalize this visitation from Mary Hogarth as conveying the workings of the human mind, as he did in a letter to Dr. Thomas Stone (2 Feb. 1851; *Letters*, VI, 277). Though Dickens, as an amateur psychotherapist, psychoanalyses his own dream, yet he is still uncertain about what he saw, as is evident from his words enclosed in parentheses: "(but I am not sure)," and he explains his altered state of consciousness: "I wonder whether I should regard it as a dream, or an actual Vision!" (?30 Sep., 1844; *Letters*, IV, 197) The apparition of Mary Hogarth seemed to him as startling as a revelation in a dream. Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) clearly stipulates the need to "distinguish between the influence of so-called daytime residues upon a following night's dreams and the true force—hence meaning—or the dream, which flows from the unconscious" (Welsh,

Review 81). What was repressed in Dickens's waking life was an anxiety about and longing for Roman Catholicism, and the dream of Mary Hogarth presented itself as an irruption, the release of the untamed forces for "Mariolatry" in his subconscious. In her *Knowing Dickens* (2007) Rosemary Bodenheimer aims to explore "the revealing and concealing intelligence that lurks somewhere . . . in Dickens's writing" (2), and she observes: "In his knowing but unknowing fashion, he had stumbled close upon the idea of dreams as wish fulfillments, by the way attesting to an attraction for the Mariolatry of the very Catholicism he took pains to protest in his waking life" (13). Yet there remains the question, how much of what Dickens reveals in his writings was he conscious and in control of? In 1911 Chesterton had already posed the question in this way: "There is an odd literary question which I wonder is not put more often in literature. How far can an author tell a truth without seeing it himself?" (277)

Dickens's dream of Mary Hogarth in Genoa was a reflection of his mental state: it unwittingly expresses his personal psychology; it is a narrative of his hidden wishes fulfilled; and it shows a depth of anxiety and longing which is at once revealing and concealing. It is revealing insofar as it projects Dickens's well-hidden restlessness and attraction to Marian devotion. Mary's apparition was not just influenced by the very natural association between the names: *Mary* Hogarth and the Virgin *Mary*. It also indicated his strong leaning toward the Marian element of Roman Catholicism which he strongly disapproved of in his waking life. At the same time, it is obfuscating insofar as Dickens equivocates on Mary's identity: "a dream or an actual Vision." Obviously, this dream was evidence of his troubled reflections on religion. Even if one cannot deduce that it implies his hidden desire to embrace Catholicism, it is certain that it reveals something of his unconscious desires. However, the chief significance and latent meaning of this incident lies not only in the content of the dream but in the fact that Dickens took

it as a divine revelation from Mary and decided to relate it to Forster since, by so doing, he showed how seriously he took Mary’s message, which reveals in turn the depth of his religious passions. Dickens’s cult of Mary Hogarth, a Raphael Madonna wrapped in blue drapery, leads to a cult of his own highly individual brand of “Mariolatry,” as it were. Dickens’s internal needs led him to embrace the veneration of Mary as a natural consequence of Mary Hogarth being for him the apotheosis of the sacred, a symbolic divine figure with whom he seeks union.

#### **4 . Under the Shadow of the Virgin Mary**

As space is limited I am not able to fully develop a case for Dickens’s Marian fascination across his *oeuvre*, to explore significant patterns and resemblances between novels. However, the case for Dickens’s attraction to the Virgin Mary holds true not only in each of Dickens’s novels but also over his whole body of work.

Dickens often sums up his moral and religious vision as his novels draw to a close. In some of his novels there are references, at the eleventh hour, to the Virgin Mary, who is a very different kind of presence, a presence external to the characters, as if the destiny of the heroes and heroines are determined by a metaphysical power, the power of divine Providence. The narrator’s references to the Virgin Mary merit close examination, and indicate how Dickens’s narrative is woven with the fabric of Christian humanism under the influence of a Marian imagination.

*Oliver Twist* (1837-39) is Dickens’s second novel with the subtitle *The Parish Boy’s Progress*: an allusion to Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* as well as Hogarth’s *A Rake’s Progress* and *A Harlot’s Progress*. Regarding the ending of the novel, Michael Slater argues: “Oliver, in fact, returns to Heaven after his

season in Hell. He dies just as surely as Little Nell does at the end of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, even though we see no corpse” (Slater, “On Reading” 81). In the penultimate paragraph of the novel the narrator says:

I have said that they were truly happy; and without strong affection and humanity of heart, and gratitude to that Being whose code is Mercy, and whose great attribute is Benevolence to all things that breathe, happiness can never be attained.

The expression “that Being” connotes the Mother of God, for the last paragraph of *Oliver Twist* emphasizes motherhood and it is a valedictory blessing for Agnes Fleming, Oliver’s unwed mother who dies giving birth to Oliver at the beginning of the novel:

if the spirits of the Dead ever come back to earth, to visit spots hallowed by the love—the love beyond the grave—of those whom they knew in life, I believe that the shade of Agnes sometimes hovers round that solemn nook.” (415; ch. 53)

In the novel’s valedictory words, Dickens not only reenacts his threnody for the loss of Mary Hogarth as he did at Niagara Falls in America, but also makes Agnes Fleming, a Virgin Mary incarnate, preside over *Oliver Twist*’s life from beginning to end.

Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-41), Dickens’s fourth novel, is usually seen as Dickens’s maudlin eulogy for Mary Hogarth. The novel is a Dickensian *Divina Commedia* (Dante’s epic and deeply Catholic poem), for it is an epic narrative about a little Victorian virgin, incarnated in the Mary Hogarth vein, who experiences her journey through Hell and Purgatory and finally to Paradise. Little Nell starts her odyssey by fleeing from London, the earthly city of men, and after her season in Hell, she continues her pilgrimage through Purgatorial industrial regions. Then, she finally gets her eternal rest at a

small village. Her death near the graveyard of a country church recalls Oliver’s retreat to a happy rural resting place, an intermediate resting place for awaiting the Assumption. Readers’ final image is afforded by the last illustration for the novel. *The Spirit’s Flight* [Fig. 2] shows the Assumption of Little Nell’s soul, carried by the angels. The artist George Cattermore (1800-68) composed the plate, borrowing the iconography and composition from *The Assumption of Mary*. George P. Landow argues: “Like the plate depicting the dead Little Nell at peace, this illustration continues Cattermole’s representation of the young girl as a holy figure by borrowing the iconography and composition of the Ascension [*sic*] of Mary” (Landow). The illustration is indeed demonstrably modelled on Juan Martín Cabezalero’s *Assumption of the Virgin* [Fig. 3]. Incidentally, it was K. J. Fielding who first pointed out that Dickens’s illustrator had pictured *The Virgin and Child* at the head of little Nell’s deathbed [Fig. 4] (Fielding 106).

*David Copperfield* (1849-50), Dickens’s eighth and highly autobiographical novel, concludes with David’s archaic apostrophe to his wife:

“Oh Agnes, oh my soul, so may thy face be by me when I close my life indeed; so may I, when realities are melting from me like the shadows which I now dismiss, still find thee near me, pointing upward!” (877; ch. 64)

The novel’s last words, “pointing upward,” precisely echo “point[ing] upwards with unchanging finger,” the words Dickens used to describe Mary Hogarth’s guiding presence in America. In this novel the gesture is an unmistakable signature for Agnes Wickfield. I will examine the question of her characterisation in the next section.

In the final chapter of *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), Dickens’s twelfth novel, when the tumbrel proceeds to the Guillotine carrying Sidney Carton and the little seamstress in the wagon, readers are surprised by the sudden reference to the

END OF "THE OLD CURIOSITY SHOP."

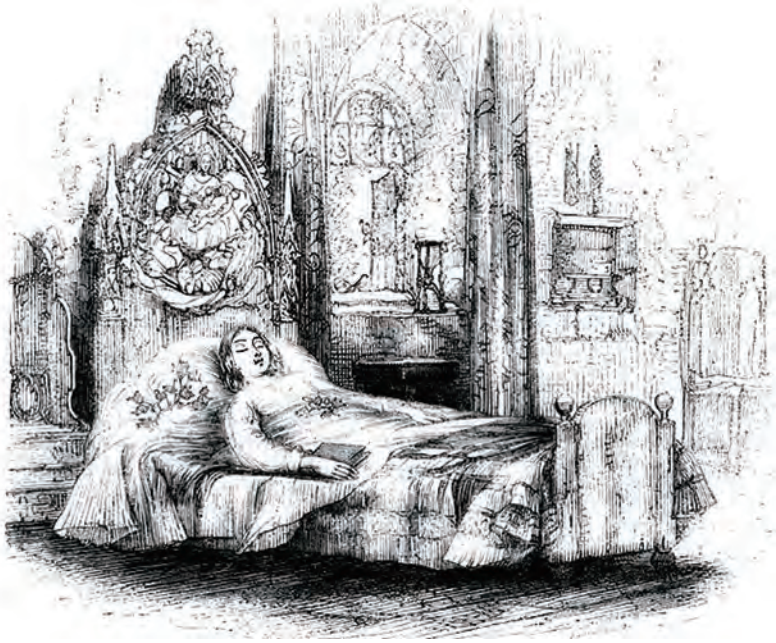


Fig. 2: *The Spirit's Flight (The soul of Little Nell ascending)*  
by George Cattermole Wood-engraving. *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Ch. 73.





**Fig. 3:** Juan Martín Cabezalero, *Assumption of the Virgin* 1665-70  
237 × 169 cm, Oil on canvas, Prado Museum, Madrid



**Fig. 4: *At Rest (Nell dead)* by George Cattermole  
Wood-engraving, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Ch. 71.**

Virgin Mary, “the Universal Mother”:

The two stand in the fast-thinning throng of victims, but they speak as if they were alone. Eye to eye, voice to voice, hand to hand, heart to heart, these two children of the Universal Mother, else so wide apart and differing, have come together on the dark highway, to repair home together, and to rest in her bosom. (Bk. III, 356; ch. 15)

Due to this allusion, we actually feel in *A Tale of Two Cities* something like “the saving ironic vision of Stendhal or the disenchanting practicality and secure Catholicism of Balzac” (Stange 10).

The eleventh-hour emergence of the Virgin Mary functions as Dickens’s version of a *deus ex machina*, an unexpected power that redeems a seemingly hopeless situation. The Virgin Mary’s presence reassembles a fragmented world and interconnects all the narrated events in the novel into a coherent whole. Without her, some of Dickens’s novels might fall into disconnected fragments, a series of episodic intensifications. Her last apparition unifies Dickens’s world and it allows his dream-like desire for “the Universal Mother” to emanate from the subconscious, in which his fascination for Catholicism is grounded.

Dickens’s last completed work is a strange tale called “George Silverman’s Explanation” (1868). Even when the story was completed, Dickens continued to regard it as an uncanny story:

Upon myself, it has made the strange impression of reality and originality!! And I feel as if I had read something (by somebody) which I should never get out of my head!! (To W. H. Willis, 28 June 1867; *Letters*, XI, 384).

As Dickens’s letter to his subeditor indicates, it is a story which emanated from Dickens’s *alter ego*, and it actually reveals Dickens’s unconscious wish for heaven. For the climax of the story Dickens has the protagonist, George Silverman, an

unassuming clergyman, rise up early and go down to the seashore in order to think and calm himself for the coming day when he plans to secretly perform a marriage ceremony for a young couple. Though he is in emotional turmoil and torn between conflicting feelings, Dickens's self-denying and suffering hero finds some solace and peace in the pre-dawn darkness. The boundless expanse of the ocean is almost always a symbol of death and eternity in Dickens, as when little Paul in *Dombey and Son* (1846-48) hears a mysterious call to freedom and death in "What the Waves were always saying" in Brighton. The scene is symbolically cosmic in scope and implications. Silverman seems to hear a voice from heaven—a voice of comfort and reassurance:

The tranquillity upon the deep, and on the firmament, the orderly withdrawal of the stars, the calm promise of coming day, the rosy suffusion of the sky and waters, the ineffable splendour that then burst forth, attuned my mind afresh after the discords of the night. Methought that all I looked on said to me, and that all I heard in the sea and in the air said to me, "Be comforted, mortal, that thy life is so short. Our preparation for what is to follow has endured, and shall endure, for unimaginable ages." (753; ch. 9)

Silverman finds the comfort and strength he needs by submitting to the sublime pageant of nature that fills the whole universe with heavenly glory. In light of the endings of the novels considered above, could the voice from heaven be that of the Virgin Mary?

## 5 . Apologia for Agnes Wickfield

In Dickens's portrayal of women, readers never fail to notice a certain type. They are the narrative and moral centers of their novels: they are all self-

sacrificing characters, invested with transcendent virtue, supernatural in powers as well as merit, and ensure a happy ending. They are Little Nell, Florence Dombey, Agnes Wickfield, and Little Dorrit: the “Fab Four” of Dickens’s women. They are the quintessential Dickensian girls. When it comes to the Dickensian women, most people spontaneously think of them as the chief representatives, apart from the eccentric and grotesque characters, such as Betsey Trotwood or Sarah Gamp. The quartet elicit from readers not just special attention but respect. They are the triumph of Dickens’s novels. They are not just little children, but “little mothers,” as Chesterton characterizes their common denominator: “whatever charm these children may have they are not the charm of childhood. They are not little children: they are ‘little mothers’” (108). Alexander Welsh entirely agrees with Chesterton. He identifies “Dickens’s most distinctive heroines” as “Nell, Florence, Agnes, and Dorrit—the little mothers” (Welsh, *The City* 195).

These “Little Women” shy away from their sexuality. Concerning Dickens’s virgin-mother ideal, Manheim writes: “In the ‘little’ heroines like Nell Trent and Amy Dorrit, Dickens has stretched the virgin-mother ideal to its most fantastic limits, for these girls are, implicitly and explicitly, *mothers* before they are *brides*” (Manheim 193; italics original). Regarding Dickens’s almost ritualistic iteration of the adjective “little,” Peter Conrad observes: “the adjective ‘little’ miniaturises, muffles and sheathes things and so makes them manageable and painless” (77). Dickens’s sentimental and symbolic vision hallows objects, tames and domesticates them. Maggy, a mentally retarded but insightful girl, hits the nail on the head when she utters an epithet: “Little mother . . . as a correction for [Amy Dorrit]” (Bk. I, 167; ch.14). Little Dorrit is a virgin-mother who is regarded as a source of nurture and support. Big Maggy is a holy fool. Their mother-and-child iconography, in a very grotesque manner, carries strong religious connotations.

Among the Dickensian “Fab Four,” it is Agnes Wickfield who is in a position

of pivotal importance in Dickens's *oeuvre* and we need to examine her as a special case, for in Dickens critical heritage she has suffered most among all of Dickens's portrayals of women. In 2010, 160 years after the publication of the novel, one critic still states: "Agnes's characterization has been a central problem for Dickens's critics" (McAleavey 210). She is an implausible character. From her first appearance, David, the first-person narrator of the novel, has insisted that Agnes is "the better angel of the lives of all who come within her calm, good, self-denying influence" (268; ch. 18). In 1940 George Orwell offered his scathing dismissal: "the most disagreeable of his heroines, the real legless angel of Victorian romance" (55). Since then she has long been criticized for lacking credible humanity. As J. Michael Léger has put it: "Agnes's non-humanity is too glaring to ignore and becomes clearer as the novel draws to a close" (319). Professor Slater concludes his influential study *Dickens and Women* (1983) with the following words on Agnes:

For better or worse, it is she who expresses most fully Dickens's conception of the feminine ideal—not everything he knew or felt or understood about women but everything he believed female nature, at its finest and purest, to be. (372)

David (and not Dickens) himself was uncertain of Agnes. In one of the most puzzling passages, David records his first encounter with Agnes and tells about a certain powerful impression which fixed itself indelibly in his mind:

I cannot call to mind where or when, in my childhood, I had seen a stained glass window in a church. Nor do I recollect its subject. But I know that when I saw her turn round, in the grave light of the old staircase, and wait for us, above, I thought of that window; and I associated something of its tranquil brightness with Agnes ever afterwards. (229; ch. 15)

David credits some unconscious source over which he had little understanding. From the beginning to the end David insists on his association of her with the “tranquil brightness,” soft light shining through a church’s stained-glass window. Four chapters from the end David pleads with her: “Ever pointing upward, Agnes; ever leading me to something better; ever directing me to higher things!” (843; ch. 60). Professor Carey jauntily writes that it is Agnes’s alluring gesture to sex: “David’s obtuseness is enough to make an any girl weep. For Agnes has perfectly normal instincts, in fact, and is pointing not upwards but towards the bedroom” (Carey 171). However, if “*David Copperfield* is a metaphysical rather than a social novel” (Wilson 212), we should read something more than physical in David’s words which conclude the 60th chapter, “Agnes”:

I had faithfully set the seal upon the Past, and, thinking of her, pointing upward, thought of her as pointing to that sky above me, where, in the mystery to come, I might yet love her with a love unknown on earth, and tell her what the strife had been within me when I loved her here. (844; ch. 60)

Professor Welsh also suggests that Agnes’s inescapable gesture, her “pointing upward,” should be interpreted as a gesture beckoning one to death, for she is an “angel of death” (Welsh, *The City* 180). However, if Agnes is Dickens’s highly individualised representation of the Virgin Mary, her gesture pointing upward signifies the reward of the righteous and confirmation of life after death. Endowed with mysterious power over life and death, the sacred Agnes, the impossibly sentimentalized and saintly ideal of the Virgin Mary, embodies the spirit of love and truth.

In the last three paragraphs of the novel Agnes becomes even less human, and more etherealized into a superior being, the latter-day Virgin Mary, who supersedes God: “[O]ne face, shining on me like a Heavenly light by which I

see all other objects, is above them and beyond them all. . . . the dear presence, without which I were nothing, bears me company.” (877; ch. 60). In the novel her role is that of the Mediator for David, in addition to radiating love to the benefit of those who happen to be around her, men and women alike. Agnes intercedes for David and commends him to God:

She commended me to God, who had taken my innocent darling [Dora] to His rest; and in her sisterly affection cherished me always, and was always at my side go where I would; proud of what I had done, but infinitely prouder yet of what I was reserved to do. (816: ch. 58)

David’s relation to Agnes is what a devout Catholic is to the Virgin Mary, without whom he or she would be nothing. After all, the concluding words of *David Copperfield*, “pointing upward!” embody the very apotheosis of Mary Hogarth, with the aura of the Virgin Mary.

## Conclusion

More than a century ago, in 1911, Chesterton, writer, Roman Catholic convert, and one of the best publicists Dickens ever had, discussed the function of criticism:

The function of criticism, if it has a legitimate function at all, can only be one function—that of dealing with the subconscious part of the author’s mind which only the critic can express, and not with the conscious part of the author’s mind, which the author himself can express. (272)

Dickens has been represented as an anti-Catholic writer. However, there is a fundamental discrepancy between his anti-Catholic professions and the actual content of his novels. While his biased judgment against Roman Catholics is



evident in his writings, Dickens was not fundamentally opposed to it. While he lampooned the avariciousness of the Roman Catholic Church, he also expressed something of his mysterious sympathy for Marian devotion.

Dickens loved paintings depicting the Virgin Mary. When he visited Venice in 1853, he was ecstatic in his admiration for Titian’s *The Assumption and Consecration of the Virgin* [Fig. 5]:

I have never yet seen any praise of Titian’s great picture of the Assumption of the Virgin at Venice, which soared half as high as the beautiful and amazing reality. It is perfection. (17 Nov. 1844; *Letters*, IV, 221)

This large oil painting commemorates the rising of Mary into heaven before the decay of her body. The subject of the painting, the Virgin Mary, is pointing upward. Another picture of the Virgin Mary that Dickens lauds is Tintoretto’s painting in the Doge’s Palace [Fig. 6]. Dickens regarded it as the culmination of beauty:

There are pictures by Tintoretto in Venice, more delightful and masterly than it is possible sufficiently to express. His *Assembly of the Blest* I do believe to be, take it all in all, the most wonderful and charming picture ever painted. (28 Nov. 1853; *Letters*, VII, 218)

This is usually known as the *Paradise*, and reputed to be the largest painting ever done upon canvas. It is filled with clouds and crowds of air-born figures in the traditional manner, and at the focal point in the upper middle, the dove of the Holy Spirit hovers in a disc of light, beneath which Jesus prepares to crown the Virgin Mary [Fig. 7].

Dickens’s disposition toward being attracted to a mother figure, together with his assumptions about the religious ideal, developed into a singular fictional creation of Dickens’s own brand of “Mariolatry”: Dickensian “little” Madonnas.



**Fig. 5: Titian, *The Assumption and Consecration of the Virgin*, 1516–1518  
690 cm × 360 cm, Oil on panel, Basilica of Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, Venice**



**Fig. 6: Jacopo Tintoretto, *Paradise*, after 1588  
74 ft × 30 ft, Oil on canvas, Doge’s Palace, Venice**



**Fig. 7: Detail from Tintoretto’s *Paradise***

The purported implausibility of Dickens's young female characters or their lack of complexity seems a much more interesting and complex matter if they are mutations or avatars of the Virgin Mary, a figure of Dickens's unconscious veneration, naturally generated by a man sympathetic to Catholicism yet living in deeply ingrained anti-Roman Catholic ethos. In the end, what is the significance of the recurrence of Dickens's allusions to the Virgin Mary? Are they Pickwickian expressions of Dickens's hidden "Mariolatry"? Mr. Dick, the lovable idiot savant in *David Copperfield*, is perpetually trying to write his own Memorial, but finds that Charles II's head is always creeping in. Is the Virgin Mary Dickens's "King Charles's head"? I think, to the contrary, that we should not reduce Dickens's Marian vision to a freak of his fancy. Rather, we should consider it part of Dickens's fundamental need for guidance and guardianship. In this essay I argue that Dickens drew his Marian vision from his own life experiences. It is my view that the time is ripe for a full-length study of a "Marian Dickens." After all, the place Dickens wished to be buried was not in Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey, but in the churchyard at Rochester Cathedral, the Protestant Cathedral of Christ and the Blessed Virgin Mary, his spiritual home.

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