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Goodness and Goods: Victorian Literature and Values for the Middle Class Reader

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'We are a commercial people', said Matthew Arnold in one of his late essays, 'The Incompatibles'.[1] And readers of Arnold are familiar with his devoted problematising of Victorian materialism. In a typical passage of *Culture and Anarchy*, where once again he was attacking the spirit of 'our free-trading Liberal friends', he declared that his target was the mechanical worship of the 'fetish of the production of wealth and of the increase of manufactures and population'.[2] On this view, materialism – the pursuit of ever-expanding money prosperity, conspicuous consumption, the uninhibited growth of commerce – was false religion, a sort of paganism more appropriate to darkest Africa than Christian England, and thus bad morals. What Arnold was trying to do was to drive a wedge into the common equation – an equation built into the English language – between the good and (material) goods: what Mrs. Bulstrode in *Middlemarch* (Ch. 61) called 'perishable good'.

'Perishable good': the echo in the phrase of Christ's words about not laying up treasure on earth where moth and rust corrupt and thieves break through and steal, was clear. And Arnold's answer to those who thought that 'Business is Civilization' was also to resort to Biblical words

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[1] Matthew Arnold, 'The Incompatibles', *Irish Essays and Others* (1882; Popular Edition, Smith, Elder, and Co., 1891), 1–58.

[2] Matthew Arnold, 'Our Liberal Practitioners', *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), ed. J. Dover Wilson (Cambridge University Press, 1963), 195.

and Christianised moral imperatives. He used the words of Christ in reply to the temptation of Satan: 'It is written: *Man doeth not live by bread alone*'. This was, again, in 'The Incompatibles' essay. Equally striking about this essay is that it also calls in aid a novelist and a novel, Charles Dickens and *David Copperfield*. Dickens gets invoked because, Arnold declares, he knew the middle class 'intimately' ('he was bone of its bone and flesh of its flesh. Intimately he knew its bringing up'). Salem House, the ghastly school to which little David is sent in *David Copperfield*, is taken as representative of middle-class schooling. The awful Murdstones, who take over David's early life, hard, calculating, grasping, puritanical people, are read by Arnold as characteristic of a wide middle-class faith in the morality, the virtue, of commercial activity. And Arnold's use of Dickens was not at all casual. He was carefully drawing support for his polemic from a chief representative of what was a huge contemporary writing army of men and women who offered repeated literary critiques of crude economic advantage and of a shoddy ethical confusion between moral goodness and the possession of material things.

Nor was it distortive of Dickens and the whole anti-materialist school of literary thought to frame that body of writing in Biblical quotation and reference, for Dickens and the rest were steeped in the New Testament's habit of siding with the poor.

Victorian writing is full of Good Samaritans – Cheerybles, a Brownlow, a Dorothea Brooke, a Jane Eyre – personal benefactors who share their material goods with the less well-off. 'The Good Samaritan was a Bad Economist': that, we're told in *Hard Times* (Ch. 12), is what Mr. Gradgrind, northern manufacturer, Liberal MP and devotee of *laissez faire* economic principles, is seeking to prove in his writings. Biblically inspired sympathy for the poor ran directly counter to the self-advantaging doctrines of Political Economy – what *Hard Times* labels as 'the fictions of Coketown', the untruths promoted by Gradgrind's friend and ally Josiah Bounderby. This Biblicised body of fictional writings is the one that has given the English Language the name Scrooge as the title of all selfish, miserly persons, the opposites of Good Samaritans. 'You all know the parable of the Good Samaritan', Charles Kingsley told his Liverpool audience in June 1870, when he preached his famous 'Human Soot' sermon on behalf of the Kirkdale Ragged School.[3] And acting the true Good Samaritan, declared Kingsley, would involve far more than simply contributing to the funds of a Ragged School. There were great armies of destitute children on the streets of northern cities who were crying out for quite radical assistance.

[3] *Charles Kingsley, His Letters and Memories of His Life*, ed. By His Wife (Henry S. King and Co, 1877), II, 322–6.

Kingsley particularly appeals to women, the wives and daughters of the commercial men of Liverpool. And women writers, people like George Eliot, Mrs. Gaskell, Charlotte Brontë, were particularly moved to express this sort of Christian sympathy in their texts. George Eliot, her atheism totally moulded by Christian ethics, proposed sympathy for ordinary people, which should be provoked by realistic portraits in realistic fictions, as the very essence of art: 'a picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment. . . . Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot. All the more sacred is the task of the artist when he undertakes to paint the life of the People.'[4]

But the Biblically based, Christian appeal on behalf of the poor was not limited to females. 'The Good Samaritan', Kingsley declared in the Human Soot sermon, 'would have known what his duty was; and I trust that you will know, in like case, what your duty is'; and he meant to include men too. Men and women had the same Lord, and so the same responsibilities. 'For is not this . . . your relation to these children in your streets? ragged, dirty, profligate, untaught, perishing – of whom our Lord has said, "It is not the will of your Father in Heaven that one of these little ones should perish".' And it's in agreement with this Biblical approach that Dickens has the dying crossing-sweeper of *Bleak House*, the London waif Joe, coached in the Lord's Prayer by the good Doctor Woodcourt before the Dickensian text rounds angrily on Christian England: 'Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day' (Ch. 49). When this kind of fiction thinks of the homeless, it's prayerfully – like Copperfield, once he's safely rescued from his spell of tramping: 'and how I prayed that I never might be homeless any more, and never forget the houseless' (Ch. 13).

Admittedly, respectable Victorian fiction is happiest with the virtuous and educable poor, the honest labourer, the picturesquely Rembrandtesque worker – Stephen Blackpool, Joe Gargery, Adam and Seth Bede, Caleb Garth, Jude the quiet and obscure, Mr. Toodles – many of whom get named ostentatiously for Bible characters and

[4] George Eliot, 'The Natural History of German Life', *Westminster Review* (July 1856); *Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*, ed. A.S. Byatt and Nicholas Warren (Penguin, 1990), 110.

well-known Christian saints, and who will prove worthy candidates for the role of Christ in the Carpenter's Shop. Admittedly, too, this fiction is commonly discomfited by more marginal labourers, such as the river-men and dust-men of *Our Mutual Friend*, the brick-workers of *Bleak House*, the likes of Matthew Arnold's Zephaniah Diggs – 'my poor old poaching friend . . . who, between his hare-snaring and his gin-drinking, has got his powers of sympathy quite dulled and his powers of action in any great movement of his class hopelessly impaired'.[5] But however disturbed by what Arnold called the 'festering masses' of East London – 'children eaten up with disease, half-sized, half-fed, half-clothed, neglected by their parents, without health, without home, without hope'[6] – these Christian and Christianised writers could not help recalling that these were just the people for whom Christ had become poor, homeless, marginal, a consorter with outcasts and rejects, the demented, lepers, Samaritans, a woman with an issue of blood. These were the very ones Christ had died for outside the City Wall in the Jerusalem garbage tip.

Theological considerations of this kind animate Charles Kingsley's extraordinary Liverpool indictment of the manufacturing systems of Britain as being designed explicitly and consciously to produce a calculated quantity of Human Soot, wasted trash people, a filthy discarded human by-product that is as much a built-in and accepted part of the economics of manufactures as the certain by-product of smoke, soot, ashes. This particular economic analysis, buttressing a theological allegation and solution, is, of course, what provided the imaginative drive and stimulus for Kingsley's novel about the Human Soot of Britain, *The Water Babies* (1863). A not dissimilar theology of Christ's wasted people likewise spurred Robert Browning. His poem 'Fra Lippo Lippi' (1855), for example, is the story of a street arab compelled to live at the social margin on waste matters, the chucked-away trash of the city: 'On fig-skins, melon-parings, rinds and shucks/Refuse and rubbish'. This lad 'learns the look of things' by keeping an eye out for which person is likely to let him keep a bit of discarded 'half-stripped grape-bunch', which dog is likely to yield up 'His bone from the heap of offal in the street', which gentleman in church will 'let him lift a plate and catch/The droppings of wax to sell again'. (George Eliot quoted extensively from just these passages of 'Fra Lippo Lippi' in her approving review of Browning's *Men and Women* volume in *The Westminster Review* of

[5] *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. cit., p. 100.
[6] *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. cit., p. 194.

January 1856.)[7] Mrs. Gaskell's presentation of the grisly existence of the cellar-dwellers of Manchester in *Mary Barton* (1848) comes out of precisely the same sort of theological calculations. So, again, does the picture of Jane Eyre's destitution after she has fled from a bigamous marriage to Rochester, when the starving girl eagerly eats up 'a mess of cold porridge' intended for pigs (*Jane Eyre*, 1847, Ch. 28). Biblically minded readers would know they were to compassionate with this unwillingly prodigal-like, wandering daughter who would 'fain have filled her belly with the husks that the swine did eat.' The economic arrangements of Britain were being condemned because of their obviously inhuman tactics, their evil management of the circulation of wealth and resources, in these presented acts of desperate recycling – the wax droppings, the pig food – and the cruel fate of these wasted human beings, the Human Soot, compelled to live like trash upon trash. And the empowering of this criticism of a malevolent economy was Biblical theology.

Conversely, but still Biblically, the love of money is repeatedly demonstrated in Victorian literature to be the root of all evil. Again and again the plots of Victorian novels are arranged to demonstrate that the craving for money, the desire to get far on the upgrade of prosperity, simply corrupts. Eliot's Silas Marner, *Middlemarch*'s Bulstrode, *Bleak House*'s Richard Jarndyce, *Great Expectations*' Pip are all examples of the corrupting power of greed. Great financial expectations rot the self. In a telling passage of *The Mill on the Floss* (Bk. 4, Ch. 3) George Eliot contrasts 'good society', that is wealthy people, adversely with the 'unfashionable lives' that she would persuade her readers are morally superior both as people and as subjects for fiction. This moralised aesthetic seeks to invert snobbish assumptions about the value of 'good society'. This fiction will be on the side of the huge underclass, however over-earnest and emphatic (Eliot's wry adjectives) that it might be about gin or religious enthusiasm, because of its economic wastedness. This despised class *spends* itself to keep the fashionable, the subjects of fashionable fiction, in their leisure. George Eliot arranges *Silas Marner* precisely as a miniature allegory of the alienating power of cash. Cash cuts you off from human company. Silas is saved when he loses his gold and finds the golden-haired little child Eppie who leads him, in sound Biblical fashion, back into the society of his fellow-villagers (a little child leading the erstwhile miser back into a secular version of the Kingdom of Heaven). According to Kingsley (in his pamphlet about the sweating trades, *Cheap Clothes and Nasty*, 1850), capitalism is cannibalistic; it eats up its own wage-slaves. Again and again Dickens demonstrates that the cash-nexus is

[7] George Eliot, *Westminster Review* (January 1856); *Selected Essays*, ed. cit., 349–57.

destructive of fellow-feeling, humanity, family, loving relationships. This is what divides Pip from Joe Gargery, Mr. Dombey from his family and his employees, indeed from the whole world of the non-rich. Ch. 20 of *Dombey and Son*, the famous railway station encounter between Mr. Dombey and Mr. Toodles, stoker of the train, has rightly been seized on by critics as central to Dickens's vision of the relative moral weight of the rich and the artisan class. Toodles is filthy, covered in the dust and ashes of his profession, a piece of Human Soot no less. Mr. Dombey looks at him 'as if a man like that would make his eyesight dirty'. Dombey would shrug off Toodles's personal interest in his grief – Toodles's wife was wet-nurse to Paul Dombey who has recently died. Dombey wants no personal engagement with such people: when Polly Toodles worked for him she was renamed Richards as part of a casually cruel but carefully contrived depersonalising process. It's particularly gruelling to Dombey, then, to perceive that the piece of new black crepe in Toodles's stoker's cap is a mark of mourning for Paul Dombey. What's more, Toodles will not take charity: handing out cash haughtily is Dombey's usual way, and Toodles, a 'professional' man now, in railway employ, will have none of it. His claim is on a fellow-feeling that gold has nothing to do with, and the rich man is upset as well as morally condemned by his resistance to that:

> To think of this presumptuous raker among coals and ashes going on before there, with his sign of mourning! To think that he dared to enter, even by a common show like that, into the trial and disappointment of a proud gentleman's secret heart! To think that this lost child, who was to have divided with him his riches, and his projects, and his power, and allied with whom he was to have shut out all the world as with a double door of gold, should have let in such a herd to insult him with their knowledge of his defeated hopes, and their boasts of claiming community of feeling with himself . . . .

The cash-connection, which is the only one that the rich man – even the proudly charitable one like Dombey – will allow, has to be physically annihilated, as in the extraordinary ritual burning of the two one-pound notes that Pip at first supposes to be the only connection between himself and the returned convict Magwitch (Ch. 39):

> He watched me as I laid my purse upon the table and opened it, and he watched me as I separated two one-pound notes from its contents. They were clean and new, and I spread them out and handed them over to him. Still watching me, he laid them one upon the other, folded them long-wise, gave them a twist, set fire to them at the lamp, and dropped the ashes into the tray.

There's more in human relations and obligations than can be dissolved by the simple paying back of an old bit of charity – the two greasy pound notes

that Magwitch contrived to have sent to Pip as reward for the stolen pie and metal file and the small human contact out on the marshes years before. What's more, there are further lessons for Magwitch to learn. His mistake is to believe that all the cash he's lavished from the distance of Australia on making Pip into a gentleman will buy him the affection of the now well-off youth. It takes some time before true affection grows between the orphan and his surrogate father.

What both parties in the Pip-Magwitch relationship have to learn is that money dehumanises. Money relationships turn the parties to them into things, absorb flesh and blood into the fetishised object world where people are simply one more possessable item in a scene of mere possessions. Pip had a glimpse of this quite early in his career, when (Ch. 19), ready cash in hand, he went along to Trabb the tailor and found himself to have become an object in a world of things and numbers. Trabb calls for rolls of cloth by their numbers; he touches Pip possessively; he measures him 'as if I were an estate'. Money is the immediate cause of Pip's being metamorphosed into the mere stuff of the materialist world of the Victorian capitalist imagination. It's the world of Mr. Podsnap who (*Our Mutual Friend*, Ch. 11) plumes himself 'in the midst of his possessions', which include his daughter and the guests at his dinner-table , who are all put away at night like so many items of the Podsnap plate:

> Certain big, heavy vehicles, built on the model of the Podsnap plate, took away the heavy articles of guests weighing ever so much; and the less valuable articles got away after their various manners; and the Podsnap plate was put to bed.

People as mere articles to be disposed of by rich possessors: it's a constant theme of Henry James's sharp reflections on parents and lovers and husbands. Pansy Osmond in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), is so treated by her father and by the suitor, Rosier. Rosier's appreciation of Pansy is all one with his appreciation of Madame Merle's 'jolly good things'. Gilbert Osmond greatly resents it when another suitor, Warburton, rejects his daughter as one might turn down a 'suite of apartments' after having got a month's lodging there for nothing. And it's not the idea that a daughter on the marriage market should be treated like an apartment up for sale or rent that's offensive to this father, only the eventual spurning of a prospective deal. 'I want a great woman', declares Christopher Newman of James's *The American* (1877, Ch. 3):

> What else have I toiled and struggled for all these years? I have succeeded, and now what am I to do with my success? To make it perfect, as I see it, there must be a beautiful woman perched on the pile, like a statue on a monument. . . . She shall have everything a woman can desire; I shall not

> even object to her being too good for me; she may be cleverer and wiser than I can understand, and I shall only be the better pleased. I want to possess, in a word, the best article in the market.

Newman is only putting bluntly and crudely the attitude that prompts Mr. Dombey, or Rochester in *Jane Eyre* or, *mutatis mutandis*, Casaubon in *Middlemarch*. Women are particularly focused on in Victorian writing in their role as tradeable articles in the bourgeois marriage market. But the depersonalising, materialising, fetishising effect that enslaves them to the ownership of their husbands is only a particular example of an inclusive materialising effect that the literature of the time is widely anxious to satirise.

Victorian plots are obsessively hostile to what Tennyson in his long poem *Maud* (1855) called, in yet another Biblically inspired accusation, 'Mammonism'. Mammonites are the greedy, like Bella Wilfer in *Our Mutual Friend*, hardened by her desire 'to be r-r-rich'. They're the crudely, ostentatiously well-off, like Maud's Sultan-like brother, or Mr. Dombey, or the Veneerings of *Our Mutual Friend*, or the elegantly got-up Brocklehurst women and Rochester's house-guests in *Jane Eyre*. They're the easy-money people – the women who marry or are married off for money (the likes of Edith Dombey); the relatives who jostle greedily for inheritances (such as the Featherstone family and friends in *Middlemarch*); the chisellers, cheats and swindlers who populate Victorian novels in such numbers, like Uriah Heep (*David Copperfield*), Carker (*Dombey*), the Chadbands (*Bleak House*), Bulstrode (*Middlemarch*), the Bumbles (*Oliver Twist*); gamblers like Gwendolen Harleth in *Daniel Deronda* and Lydgate and Fred Vincy in *Middlemarch*; investors, especially those involved in stock-market scams, like the Lammles in *Our Mutual Friend* or Merdle in *Little Dorrit*.

And the filthy rich are – well – filthy. Acquiring money is connected again and again in Victorian fiction with some sort of moral blackness, and that evil's physical emblems and analogues – with crime, darkness, filth, trash, with the lower places of the city, the world and the self, with madness and with particular kinds of exile and alienation (as in *Oliver Twist* where the slums are the haunts of the fearful Irish and Jews as well as of criminals). Becoming rich is linked with the fears and anxieties provoked by a terrifying sense of otherness. Mad, jilted Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* is the emblem of such awful estrangement. The narrator of *Maud*, a Victorian update of Hamlet, is driven insane by his encounters with the Mammonism, both public and private, of Victorian England – a dementing congeries of money-making wickedness that Tennyson approaches in a whole clutch of references to other literacy accusers of the age, including Kingsley's *Alton Locke* and Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Magwitch, the outcast from the prison hulks who makes

money down-under in criminalised Australia, is just one representative of this sense of the darkly alienating filthiness of lucre. So is Mr. Boffin, the Golden Dustman of *Our Mutual Friend*, his wealth accumulated from his trade in the waste of London, the accumulated trash-heaps of the city: 'Coal-dust, vegetable-dust, bone-dust, crockery dust, rough dust and sifted dust, – all manner of Dust' (Ch. 2).

And this filth is hard to wash off or clean up. There are ritually arranged baptisms or cleansing operations in the fiction, but redemption for this particular kind of corruption is difficult to come by. The two clean one-pound notes that Pip offers in exchange for the filthy pair he originally received from Magwitch aren't accepted by Magwitch, or by the text, as in any way a recuperation into purity. In the same novel the lawyer Jaggers may be able to get the dirt of Newgate out of his fingernails, by dint of his obsessive hand-washings and persistent use of his pen-knife as a nail-file, but he can't get the dirt of Newgate – a criminal association which enriches both him and his portable-property accumulating assistant Wemmick – out of his life. Ritual washings are simply not regenerative enough. The very water of washing or pseudo-baptism that Gaffer Hexam employs in the opening pages of *Our Mutual Friend* is after all the slimy ooze of the Thames, and the cash he's seeking to sanctify remains spoil taken from dead bodies:

> It was not until now that the upper half of the man came back into the boat. His arms were wet and dirty, and he washed them over the side. In his right hand he held something, and he washed that in the river too. It was money. He chinked it once, and he blew upon it once, and spat upon it once, – 'for luck', he hoarsely said – before he put it in his pocket.

'There's some things that I never found among the dust', said Boffin: not everything in the world 'wears to rags'. Love, for instance, isn't such trashy stuff. But everything is trash in what *Household Words* called 'The City of Unlimited Paper', the world of stock-jobbing fortunes, paper affluence, greedy stock-market bubbles, the new financial Babylonia, a moral and spiritual wasteland presided over by such financial houses as Strawboy and Rag of Fustian Lane, or Chaos, Rotbill and Clay of Bankside.[8] And the financial smashes, scams and bankruptcies that result from doings in that surrealistic materialist nightmare zone are essentially of moral significance:

> Next day it was noised abroad that Dombey and Son had stopped, and next night there was a List of Bankrupts published, headed by that name.
>
> The world was very busy now, in sooth, and had a deal to say. It was an innocently credulous and a much ill used world. It was a world in which there was no other sort of bankruptcy whatever. There were no

[8] 'The City of Unlimited Paper', *Household Words* (19 December 1857), 1–4.

> conspicuous people in it trading far and wide on rotten banks of religion, patriotism, virtue, honour. There was no amount worth mentioning of mere paper in circulation, on which anybody lived pretty handsomely, promising to pay great sums of goodness with no effects. There were no short-comings anywhere, in anything but money. The world was very angry indeed; and the people especially, who, in a worse world, might have been supposed to be bankrupt traders themselves in shows and pretences, were observed to be mightily indignant.

The overt oppositions in play here – virtuous poor versus immoral rich; honest, though ill-paid worker versus dishonest but richly rewarded financier; sympathetic human trash versus unsympathetic filthy lucre – are in some senses clear and in almost every sense morally impressive. The oppositions are not, though, absolutely clear-cut, and Victorian literature finds it difficult to think about them straightforwardly much of the time. The trouble begins, I think, in that symbiosis within money-generating capitalist enterprise that Kingsley dwelt on so powerfully: the complete fit he observes between the filthy wealth-creating mechanisms of Victorian commerce and industry and the Human Soot that both produced the wealth and was wasted by it. For Kingsley supports both sides of the commercial operation, both parties to the opposition. He believes that the country's economy needs its foul industries and also needs to rescue the humans who are trashed by those industries. And it's clearly hard to be welcoming to both, hard to have your heavy industrial cake and also deplore its human effects. And this is characteristic of Victorian literature.

For a start, the moralised language of darkness, depravity, filthiness carries on sticking to the poor. However much the poor are sympathised with, and the causes and causers of the filthy conditions are satirised, the blackness remains as offensive as ever. The dark places of the earth remain dismayingly dark. Slums remain noxious places to the outsider's nostrils and imagination. Cellars go on being fearful places in a fearful underground. And how could this not be, since the immediate motor of the analysis is a Christian discourse in which sin is after all sin, and utter darkness utter darkness? Which must be part of the reason why Victorian fiction seems largely incapable of effecting much of an imaginative compromise between, on the one hand, a dementing living death – as in *Maud* where the narrating victim of financiers and speculators is buried alive in a private nightmare – or actual death (Stephen Blackpool of *Hard Times*, Joe the crossing-sweeper, Jude, Magwitch), as the final fate of victims of the world of English wealth, fashion, ownership, and on the other hand, fixing upon some kind of far-off, far-fetched, utopian escape as the solution for the poor to England's economic problems. It's better, one supposes, to be shipped out to the Colonies, as in *Mary Barton* or *David Copperfield*, than to be

put sacrificially to death, an exemplary martyr upon the altar of a novel's critique of mammonism. Better still to be ratcheted onto a fantasy plot of personal wealth-making, the so-called 'plot of fortune' that is Victorian literature's commonest final solution to the economic and moral ills of the modern world that it keeps making its prime concern. But these individual utopias are no real answer at all; they certainly do nothing for the great mass of Human Trash so sympathetically, but problematically, defined as such by the troupes of writing Samaritans.

For all of literature's Good Samaritan intentions – in fact, it might be said, because of them – the living slum-dweller, the one who didn't get away, the one not 'picked out from the rubbish' (as Jaggers puts it) by courtesy of benefactor or plot as the likes of Oliver Twist and Great Expectations' Estella are, the one who has to carry on living in Coketown or the East End, remains troublingly Other, still sunken, diseased, infectious, dark, and fearfully stigmatised as mob, trades-unionist, artisan, Jewish, Irish, criminal.

> It was a foul, chilly, foggy Saturday night. From the butchers' and green-grocers' shops the gas lights flared and flickered, wild and ghastly, over haggard groups of slip-shod dirty women, bargaining for scraps of stale meat and frost-bitten vegetables, wrangling about short weight and bad quality. Fish-stalls and fruit-stalls lined the edge of the greasy pavement, sending up odours as foul as the language of sellers and buyers. Blood and sewer-water crawled from under doors and out of spouts, and reeked down the gutters among offal, animal and vegetable, in every stage of putrefaction. Foul vapours rose from cowsheds and slaughter houses, and the doorways of undrained alleys, where the inhabitants carried the filth out on their shoes from the back-yard into the court, and from the court up into the main street; while above, hanging like cliffs over the streets – those narrow, brawling torrents of filth, and poverty, and sin, – the houses with their teeming load of life were piled up into the dingy, choking night. A ghastly, deafening, sickening sight it was. Go, scented Belgravian! and see what London is!

That's from Kingsley's *Alton Locke* (Ch. 8), a fiction intensely sympathetic to the plight of the poor, especially the inhabitants of the awful and notorious London parish of St. Giles. But the mixed feelings even of the reformist evangelist for clean streets, clean air and efficient sewer systems, are obvious. These people are horrifying unclean. So are the denizens of the London slums in the reform-minded novel of yet one more of Victorian fiction's major reformer-satirists, *Oliver Twist*. Playing the part of an awed Dante to the Artful Dodger's Virgil, little Oliver is initiated into the terrors of London's Field Lane, yet another notorious slum region of the time:

> A dirtier or more wretched place he had never seen. The street was very narrow and muddy, and the air was impregnated with filthy odours. There were a good many small shops; but the only stock in trade appeared to be heaps of children, who, even at that time of night, were crawling in and out at the doors, or screaming from the inside. The sole places that seemed to prosper amid the general blight of the place, were the public-houses; and in them, the lowest orders of Irish were wrangling with might and main. Covered ways and yards, which here and there diverged from the main street, disclosed little houses, where drunken men and women were positively wallowing in filth; and from several of the door-ways, great ill-looking fellows were cautiously emerging, bound, to all appearance, on no very well-disposed or harmless errands (Ch. 8).

The lowest orders of the Irish, these drunken wallowers in filth, comprise a human stage-set for the even greater horrors of the even darker population they frame – the Jew Fagin (known, to the vexation of Jewish readers, most usually throughout the first versions of the novel simply as 'the Jew'), and his household of thieves and thugs and whores. What's being approached thus nightmarishly – and it must be stressed again that these are texts that in principle side with the wretches they're presenting – is a kind of internal alien body, uncannily dark and sooty, an internal infection in the land, as fearfully troubling as the dark people of the colonial edge, the colonial sources of British wealth, that keep intruding as the worrying, guilty frame of so many Victorian fictions and texts produced within the prosperous classes for the enjoyment of prosperous readers. The Jews, Irish and criminals of *Oliver Twist*, stoker Toodles of *Dombey and Son*, are the native equivalents of Bertha Mason, the mad Creole woman in the attic of *Jane Eyre*, or Joey Bagstock's Native manservant who is somewhere on the fringes of the Dombey–Toodles encounter on the railway platform, or the Africans of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The Belgian Congo of Conrad's 1899 nouvelle is far away, like the India of *David Copperfield*, the Canada of *Mary Barton*, the Australia of *Great Expectations*. But the dark inhabitants, and dark truths, of those margins have a way of invading the centre. Magwitch turns up in London; what Bertha Mason represents can't stay locked up in the attic. Britons, of course, infect the colonial place with their British values (Matthew Arnold thinks inevitably, in his meditations on British Puritanism in his 'Incompatibles' essay, of the Tranvaalers, the 'commercial gentlemen' and their wives, who carry 'a kind of odour of Salem House all round the globe'), but the darkness of colonial places returns with more subtly infectious powers. The imperialist adventure in the Crimean frames Tennyson's *Maud* and conditions all of Kingsley's, and Gerard Manley Hopkins's, thoughts about the poor of England's great cities. But, still, the Crimean, like the Congo, is out there, a long way off. How troubling,

then, the sense that 'this too', as Conrad's narrator has it in *Heart of Darkness*, i.e. London, might be 'one of the dark places of the earth' – a darkness to be found witnessed to on the slightest excursion into St. Giles or Field Lane.

And if the darkness remains uncanny – *unheimlich*, literally out of place at home – and so unthinkable even to the sympathetic Victorian novelist, there is some case for suggesting that this might not be unconnected, *inter alia* no doubt, with the fact that all Victorian writers are steeped in, infected, compromised by the necessary commercialism of their own writing trade. What novelists do in their fictions with swindlers, for instance, is clearly conditioned by their own daily experience of swindling publishers. Victorian novelists had themselves to become sharp financial operators or go under. Theirs was often a case of choosing between being financially masterful or being financially mastered. Writing and publication in Victorian England were obviously a kind of gambling. Losing novelists were often as hooked on loss-making writing ventures as losing gamblers are. Great fortunes were to be got, of course, by writing. Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* earned £10,000; so did George Eliot's *Romola*. The tough negotiations of George Eliot and George Henry Lewes over *Middlemarch* reminded its publishers of the ways of the two swindling lawyers in *Copperfield* who acquired Pip's services for nothing. George Eliot's faith should have been called *Countism* rather than *Comteism*: that was the bitter jest of those who ran up against her manoeuvrings for the large and steady buck.[9] And all of this kind of entrepreneurial financial wizardry was conducted on behalf of texts, such as *Our Mutual Friend*, *Middlemarch*, *Great Expectations*, that are greatly agitated by the morally distorting power of pelf. It's not the least irony of this situation that, for example, *Great Expectations* should have been hurriedly put into the pages of Dickens's periodical *All The Year Round* to boost its flagging circulation. The allegory of money's filth would itself be a best-selling source of major revenue. The novel that satirised the notion that acquisitions of cash somehow expanded the physique of the owner – which is the satirical reason, perhaps, why Mr. Trabb has to take Pip's measurements again now he has a large sum of ready money – is the means of substantially fattening Dickens's bank account.

It's very noticeable indeed that some of the strongest dramas of money and property in Victorian literature are centred on the anxieties of the loss of cash, material thinning, the denuding of property – for

[9] I am indebted to J.A. Sutherland's wonderfully informative *Victorian Novelists and Publishers* (The Athlone Press, 1979) for these informations.

example, the confiscation of Magwitch's money that land Pip in the hands of the debt-collectors, the Marshalsea episodes of *Little Dorrit*, the terrible stripping bare of the Tullivers' home in *The Mill on the Floss*. Dickens's whole approach to life and writing was, of course, famously affected by his own father's financial problems which landed the father in debtor's prison and the son in the Blacking Factory. Financial deprivation was intimately linked in Dickens's imagination and nightmares with the plunge he thus made into the black zones of the urban poor. His texts fear for, and with, all those who must lose their property. The stripping and wasting of the Dombey house after the crash (Ch. 59) becomes a litany of terrifying material loss populated by a filthy-handed vampire crew of Jews (and Christians), the grasping agents of commerce and trade at their most predatorily fearful and dark:

> The house stands, large and weather-proof, in the long dull street; but it is a ruin, and the rats fly from it.
>
> The men in the carpet caps go on tumbling the furniture about; and the gentlemen with the pens and ink make out inventories of it, and sit upon pieces of furniture never made to be sat upon, and eat bread and cheese from the public-house on other pieces of furniture never made to be eaten on, and seem to have a delight in appropriating precious articles to strange uses. Chaotic combinations of furniture also take place. Mattresses and bedding appear in the dining-room; the glass and china get into the conservatory; the great dinner service is set out in heaps on the long divan in the large drawing-room; and the stair-wires, made into fasces, decorate the marble chimney-pieces. Finally, a rug, with a printed bill upon it, is hung from the balcony; and a similar appendage graces either side of the hall door.
>
> Then, all day long, there is a retinue of mouldy gigs and chaise-carts in the street; and herds of shabby vampires, Jew and Christian, over-run the house, sounding the plate-glass mirrors with their knuckles, striking discordant octaves on the Grand Piano, drawing wet forefingers over the pictures, breathing on the blades of the best dinner-knives, punching the squabs of chairs and sofas with their dirty fists, touzling the feather beds, opening and shutting all the drawers, balancing the silver spoons and forks, looking into the very threads of the drapery and linen, and disparaging everything. There is not a secret place in the whole house. Fluffy and snuffy strangers stare into the kitchen-range as curiously as into the attic clothes-press. Stout men with napless hats on, look out of the bedroom windows, and cut jokes with friends in the street. Quiet, calculating spirits withdraw into the dressing-rooms with catalogues, and make marginal notes thereon, with stumps of pencils. Two brokers invade the very fire-escape, and take a panoramic survey of the neighbourhood from the top of the house. The swarm and buzz, and going up and down, endure for days. The Capital Modern Household Furniture, &c., is on view.
>
> Then there is a palisade of tables made in the best drawing-room; and

> on the capital, french-polished, extending, telescopic range of Spanish mahogany dining-tables with turned legs, the pulpit of the Auctioneer is erected; and the herds of shabby vampires, Jew and Christian, the strangers fluffy and snuffy, and the stout men with the napless hats, congregate about it and sit upon everything within reach, mantel-pieces included, and begin to bid. Hot, humming, and dusty are the rooms all day; and – high above the heat, hum, and dust – the head and shoulders, voice and hammer, of the Auctioneer, are ever at work. The men in the carpet-caps get flustered and vicious with tumbling the Lots about, and still the Lots are going, going, gone; still coming on. Sometimes there is joking and a general roar. This lasts all day and three days following. The Capital Modern Household Furniture, &c., is on sale.
>
> Then the mouldy gigs and chaise-carts re-appear; and with them come spring-vans and waggons, and an army of porters with knots. All day long, the men with carpet-caps are screwing at screw-drivers and bed-winches, or staggering by the dozen together on the staircase under heavy burdens, or upheaving perfect rocks of Spanish mahogany, best rosewood, or plate-glass, into the gigs and chaise-carts, vans and waggons. All sorts of vehicles of burden are in attendance, from a tilted waggon to a wheel-barrow. Poor Paul's little bedstead is carried off in a donkey-tandem. For nearly a whole week, the Capital Modern Household Furniture, &c., is in course of removal.
>
> At last it is all gone. Nothing is left about the house but scattered leaves of catalogues, littered scraps of straw and hay, and a battery of pewter pots behind the hall-door. The men with the carpet-caps gather up their screw-drivers and bed-winches into bags, shoulder them, and walk off. One of the pen and ink gentlemen goes over the house as a last attention; sticking up bills in the windows respecting the lease of this desirable family mansion, and shutting the shutters. At length he follows the men with the carpet-caps. None of the invaders remain. The house is a ruin, and the rats fly from it.

To be sure, moral lessons are drawn and satirical questions are asked of these rituals of negated materialism. In the bare sparseness of the family mill, sans linen, sans crockery, sans carpets, sans nearly everything material, George Eliot's Maggie Tulliver learns life-altering lessons of resignation, assisted by the little copy of Thomas à Kempis that Bob Jakin lovingly provides her with. The material downfall of the House of Dombey is a lesson in the hubris of materialism. Henry James's *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897) offers a richly satirical comedy of upper-class greed as its Mrs. Gereth carts her rare and beautiful *objets* back and forth across the south of England in pantechnicons hired in the Tottenham Court Road: hers is Jamesian moral self-disgrace by furniture removal. But for all their carefully orchestrated moralised responses, it's easy to perceive that these writings are themselves steeped in the Tullivers' dismay at the loss of their things, and the Dombey horror at having the outward and visible manifestations of wealth unsentimentally stripped away. These texts seem

all at once to find Mrs. Gereth's incomprehension morally deplorable and to share it: 'She could at a stretch imagine people's not having, but she couldn't imagine their not wanting and not missing'. For '"Things" were of course the sum of the world' (Ch. 3).

What is present in large measure, then, in Victorian writing about money and possessions is the great bourgeois problematic of the English novel: that flawed equation which has so sustained English fiction, the link that began in Puritanism and was amply kept up in our novels, the felt connection between salvation (moral being, moral health) and (commercial) prospering, between selfhood and ownership, between being right with God and being blessed by God with houses, lands, goods. The problematic famously began with Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. The English novel has been, in these regards, one long *Robinsonade* (as the German language has it) ever since. The writers and their audience – heirs to the Puritans all – were heirs to this dire equation, the connected twin concerns of Arnold's Philistine as exemplified by the tragic case, alluded to in the 'Porro Unum Est Necessarium' chapter of *Culture and Anarchy*, of Mr. Smith, an insurance company secretary who had committed suicide because he 'laboured under the apprehension that he would come to poverty, and that he was eternally lost'. Protestant writers – and most Victorian fictionists are Protestant – are stuck with the fact that the bourgeois Protestantism that has shaped the age's dominant form of writing, the novel, and that has inspired their Good Samaritanism and their moral deploring of the deleterious effects of filthy lucre, is the very same bourgeois Protestantism that is quite visibly infected with the very commercialism they deplore. In other words, 'our serious middle class', as Arnold called it, produces both George Eliot, the critic of commercial fiddling and financial grasping, and also her character Bulstrode, *Middlemarch*'s London Dissenter and banker whose theological suppleness about where the so-called divine leadings are taking him, whose expert inventing of good ends for bad commercial practices, are the ground of his terrible and rightly deplored corruption. Dickens and Chadband, the crooked loud-mouthed preacher of righteousness, and the Murdstones, and Mrs. Clennam, the ruthless mother in *Little Dorrit* who sits graspingly behind her iron-bound copy of the Scriptures, and, for that matter, both Matthew Arnold and his invented horror of a Philistine, the northern Liberal dissenting manufacturer Mr. Bottles Esquire of *Friendship's Garland*, all come out of the same Protestant matrix. Representatively, Arnold deplores, in *St. Paul and Protestantism*, the 'bargain' theology of Calvinism. But some kind of bargain-mindedness informs all the activities of writers like him.

It's an impasse, and a guilty one. Some sense of it is perhaps one reason why Dickens labels the doctrines of Political Economy, as lampooned in

Hard Times, the 'fictions of Coketown'. The commercially aggressive and corrupted factory apologists and the novelists who satirise them are all fictionists together, just as, like Mrs. Gaskell and the factory owner W.R. Greg who publicly deplored her *Mary Barton*, they are all Protestants together.

Dickens is particularly troubled by the convergence between literacy and criminality, between forgery, swindling, illegitimate acquisitions of wealth, and what he himself is about as a writer. This convergence appears nowhere more succinctly than in that article that appeared in Dickens's paper *Household Words* in December 1857, entitled 'The City of Unlimited Paper'. A very Dickensian piece indeed, it was actually by John Hollingshead. It was written to satirise City scams and commercial fraudulence that put honest investors' moneys at great risk through the kind of bankruptcies that had occurred in great numbers in the City crisis of 1857. The piece caused, apparently, a great sensation. Thackerary, for one, greatly admired it and he tried to get Hollingshead to write for his journal *The Cornhill*. The central bankruptcy concerns of the article looked back to the Bundelcund Banking Co. swindle in Thackeray's *The Newcomes* (1853–5) and forward to the ruin of Philip Firmin in *The Adventures of Philip* (1861–2). And there are plenty of ironies hereabouts apart from the Dickensian ones. Hollingshead, for example, received the regular *Household Words* contributor's fee of £3.13s.6d for his article, whereas Thackeray was in receipt of £600 a month for his editorship of *The Cornhill*.[10] But the Dickensian ironies are even more arresting.

The article sets up many hintful associations with Dickens's fictional money dealings as Hollingshead jeeringly refers to the corrupt dealings of City institutions and companies. There are Messrs. Ignes, Fatui and Company who trade fraudulently with Australia via the Australian mail. In Bullion Alley there is the dubious house of Fossil, Ingot and Bagstock. During the South Sea Bubble collapse Mr. Fossil staved off a run on his bank by standing at his door and shovelling gold sovereigns 'into baskets out of a dust-cart'. The Australian mail, Mr. Bagstock, dust-carts: these names and features all throw out lines of communication to Dickens's own sharpest fictional attacks on the corruptions of money and commerce. Pip's cash comes via the Australian mail; Bagstock is the name of Dombey's awful ex-colonial sidekick; Mr. Boffin the Golden Dustman's fortune came out of his dust-carts. Even closer to home, though, are the misleading pictures

[10] G.N. Ray, ed., *The Letters And Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray*, 4 Vols (Oxford University Press, London, 1945–46), IV, *1857–63*, p. 157; 'John Hollingshead', *Household Words: A Weekly Journal 1850–1859 Conducted by Charlts Dickens: Table of Contents, List of Contributors and Their Contributions*, compiled by Ann Lohrli (Univ. of Toronto Press, 1973), 305–8.

of non-existent factories and mills engraved as letter-heads and on invoices – such as the portrait of the Scottish Mills complex allegedly owned by Lacker, Crane and Company of Packingcase Yard, Lower Thames Street. For such lying engravings are 'works of the imagination':

> The premises in Packingcase Yard are modest enough, and would not seem to indicate a business of very extensive character; but, in this instance the art of the engraver is called in, and we are presented upon invoices and bill-stamps with a flattering and highly suggestive view of the important and busy Dunmist Mills, of which the small office in London is only one of the numerous agencies. There are water-power and steam-power; high chimneys sending forth volumes of smoke; long ranges of out-buildings with groups of busy work-people, and large, solid bales of merchandise; bridges and tramways, and waggons loaded with raw material, drawn by struggling horses of the Flemish breed, towards the crowded gates of this industrial settlement. The whole is a work of the imagination of the highest order alike creditable to the designer and the engraver. When, in the usual course of things, the house of Lacker, Crane and Company is compelled to call its creditors together, and an inspection of the magnificent factory, outworks, and plant, takes place by the order of the assignees, the dissolving view of the industrial hive, with its active work-people and its din and clatter of machinery, gradually recedes, and in its place stands the pastoral simplicity of a couple of barns, and a kilted shepherd tending his flocks.

In *Great Expectations* lower-class forgers, such as rough coiners and swindlers, end up in Newgate. The satiric point of the *Household Words* article is that the smart London swindlers get off scot-free. Dickens's novel is less tolerant than the world is. Pip is presented to us in the wake of Joe's London visit (Ch. 28), as a demoralised self-swindler, a man passing off nutshells upon himself for bank notes, and when in the same chapter Pip travels down to see Joe and Biddy we're not too surprised that in the same coach there should be a pair of convicts discussing Magwitch and that one of them should be the man who brought Magwitch's two one-pound notes to Pip, nor that these two villains should eat nuts and spit the shells about. Convicts are, like the poor, always with Pip, and so is Newgate prison. The presence of the prison is kept up by the novel as an accusation of the respectable. The prison haunts Pip's respectable life as a trainee lawyer; it's the source of Jaggers's income; it's where Jaggers's strong-wristed servant Molly, Estella's mother, comes from; it's the gold-mine of Wemmick's stash of portable property; it's the contaminated centre of the lives of Miss Havisham and her jilting lover Compeyson, the secret at the heart of Estella's glamorous life and Pip's expectations; it's where Jaggers has his potentially lucrative brushes with dubious Jews and other criminal types like Abraham Lazarus and his brother (Ch. 20). And the accusatory criminal connections of Newgate, so significantly bound up with the financial and

social expectations of Pip and the respectability of the rest, are also crucially allied with the world of the Blacking Factory. In Ch. 27, Joe Gargery and Wopsle, up from the country, went off straightaway to have a look at a 'Blacking Ware'us.' '"But we didn't find that it come up to its likeness in the red bills at the shop doors; which I meantersay", added Joe, in an explanatory manner, "as it is there drawd too architectooralooral"'.

Dickens's worry about writing matters and what matters in his own writing could scarcely be clearer. Sticking the labels on the blacking bottles was Dickens's own traumatic childhood occupation. Blacking became for him the lifelong emblem of the hellish, criminal, darkened depths of London poverty and a lowering existence in the lower commercial depths of the city that had once threatened to engulf him for life. A measure of his distaste, and his relief at having escaped, is the fact that he gave the name Fagin to the attractive-repulsive father of slum criminality in *Oliver Twist* – the name of the one boy who befriended him in the Blacking Factory and so the one, ironically, likeliest to make life there passable and endurable. And Joe's comment on the misleading architectooraloorality of blacking manufacturers' publicity materials ('the red bills at the shop doors') links them accusingly with the lying paperwork put about in the City of Unlimited Paper. They're all 'works of the imagination'. And so Dickens's own trade, the textual and imaginative means of the Good Samaritan, the fictional instrument of moral protest, the very vehicle of high moral values and moral goods, is being felt to be uncomfortably close to the works of commercial darkness that had threatened to seal the boy Charles Dickens as a scared and victimised piece of Human Soot. Respectable writing was, on this reckoning, only as sullied as what it was seeking to clean up. It's a consideration that understandably belonged rather to the nightmare un- or sub-consciousness of Dickens' writing than to its daylight consciousness. But, it might be thought, in these anxious self-reflections, the unconscious life of Dickens's texts was thus confronting the moral problematic of the fictional medium in bourgeois Victorian England with greater honesty than most fully conscious discussions ever managed.