

***The Scriptures of Charles Dickens: Novels of Ideology, Novels of the Self*, by Vincent Newey. Nineteenth-Century Series. Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2004. 328. ISBN 1859284345. US\$84.95 (hardback).**

When Dickens began his public readings of *A Christmas Carol* in the 1850s, he could hardly have anticipated that this best-loved Christmas Book would remain a feature of annual seasonal celebrations into the twenty-first century. But he would not have been disappointed with the accompanying popular view that what Louis Cazamian called the “Philosophy of Christmas” defines his outlook. Some contemporary commentators criticised Dickens’s secularisation of the season, Ruskin, for example, remarking that Dickens’s Christmas “meant mistletoe and pudding – neither resurrection from dead, nor rising of new stars, nor teaching of wise men, nor shepherds” (qtd Collins 444). Vincent Newey identifies the *Carol* as an exemplary text in this regard, illustrating the elements of “Dickensian epiphany: not a leaping of spirit in the presence of the Divine or, as characteristically for the Romantics, of Nature, but a becoming of healthy emotional and moral instincts in anthropocentric contexts” (3). His book is a close and careful study of this process of “becoming” as it is represented in the *Carol* and four novels from different stages of Dickens’s career: *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations* and *Our Mutual Friend*. “[W]itnessing to literature as the provider of a new canon, a substitute bible” (3), Newey traces Dickens’s response to the failing metaphysical assumptions of his tumultuous age, arguing that in his use of “character-as-example” and “experiential reader engagement” (3) we find a distinctive recall to fellow-feeling and outgoing vision that constitutes a Dickensian “secular scripture.” Critical recognition of the broad liberal humanism, unevenly mixed with strains of conservatism and radicalism, evident in Dickens’s fiction is hardly new. But Newey’s meticulous attention to the complexities of Dickens’s characterisation, and to the particular ways in which ideological ambivalence is manifested in his “self-subverting” (286) narratives, results in readings that, although broadly familiar, are also extended in fresh and discriminating ways. His critical approach might perhaps be described as a “new humanist” analysis of character – examining the thematic seriousness with which Dickens’s characters function “as models of how to conduct oneself and one’s interaction with others, and how not to” (2) – but one that is also deftly informed by recent theoretical developments.

As Newey notes, the language of the Bible pervaded Victorian culture and together with the popularity of Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, this omnipresence highlights the importance of understanding Dickens’s philosophy and values in relation to Puritan conversion narrative and spiritual autobiography. The point is demonstrated in a superb analysis of the “notation of unsettlement and re-formation” evident in the conversion of Scrooge – an analysis that complicates the narrative of his transformation with a recognition of its “tragic interest” (33), glimpsed in the “untold stories, suppressed, like those of childhood trauma and secret or absent love,

in favour of the narrative of enculturation" (51). Such embedded narratives constitute the "characteristic double vision of the Dickensian novel – ideology and experiential wisdom, the latter outreaching and detaching us from the former, making it the subject of debate" (50). The double vision reappears in the depiction of the underworld in *Oliver Twist* – in "the political imperative to reject and the imaginative urge to embrace" that permeates its representation (90). While the ideological ambivalence of Dickens's fiction has been shown before, the interest here lies in the particular manifestations Newey detects and anatomises. He astutely notes the way in which Nancy's doubling of Rose Maylie emerges when she talks to Sikes "as if she were Rose, in the same semi-religious terminology of salvation" (94): "Survival is made available to Nancy in the end only in terms of a language of conversion" and this internalisation of doctrine "threatens to crush out of Nancy all the humanity Dickens has put in and to reduce her to an *exemplum* in a parable of sin and repentance" (94).

Indeed, Newey gives fresh emphasis to the significance of Dickens's female characters in contesting conventional conceptions of womanhood and the ideology of domesticity upon which they were based, going beyond discussion of overtly transgressive women to find complexity in apparent dolls, like Dora, or angels, like Agnes, in *David Copperfield*. He notes the way in which David's text reveals "aspects of Dora's character that are never directly acknowledged" – the important part she has played in "stabilizing their relationship" (146) and the mixture of "deference, self-defence, and courage" that emerges despite David's pathetic picture of her holding his pens. Similarly, he identifies "traces of erotic feeling" in Agnes that give texture to the intimacy she comes to share with David in a marriage that provides a model balance of body and spirit.

The ideological complexities of class are also sharply observed in the analysis of villains who double the hero, like Uriah Heep and Orlick. The tendency of Dickens's fiction to put into question the very ideological formations it also underwrites is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the characterisation of Uriah, whose conception "casts a deconstructive light back upon David and the values he represents" (136). As Newey argues, "nowhere does David impugn the system that produced Heep father and son, nor contemplate grounds either for reforming it or for exculpating Uriah" (132). An inditement of the ethos of self-improvement endorsed elsewhere in the efforts of the narrator himself, the representation of Uriah "discloses limitations in David's viewpoint and personality which are never resolved in the novel and which Dickens never deprecates" (132). Again, in *Great Expectations*, the "positivist narrative" of Pip's development is destabilised by his exchanges with Orlick, who shifts from being "an aspect of Pip's psychological life" to become "an outside interrogator lifting the lid on the hero-biographer's self-interest and egocentricity" (198). Developing his argument about the hidden psychology of Dickens's women, Newey brings out the bad conscience evident in

Pip's account of his sister, illustrating the novel's critique of the constraints of gender upon women's needs and place in society.

The final chapter on *Our Mutual Friend* continues to illuminate Dickens's reappraisal of female stereotypes and his development of earlier concerns with social stability and progress. In a sensitive account of Bradley Headstone's tortuous position in between classes, Newey rightly remarks the way in which "Dickens treats Headstone seriously and with respect": "In giving him this stature and in giving him his say, Dickens repays a debt to the maligned Heep and demonized Orlick – though without yielding an inch on the question of the social climber's demands for recognized status and positive valuation" (255). He details the lineaments of Eugene Wrayburn's "two-sided, enigmatic character" (267), remarking its advance on precursors like Steerforth and Harthouse. In these readings, as throughout, a fine critical intelligence is at work. There are moments when the evidence is stretched – I am one of those readers who, as Newey anticipates, will disagree with his (only half-joking) suggestion that Pip the younger is really the son of Bidley and Pip (228). But these do not detract from the overall pleasure of reading a deeply sensitive account of the rich and complex humanism of Dickens's secular scriptures.

Works Cited

Collins, Philip. Ed. *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge, 1971.

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***Dark Vanishings: Discourse on the Extinction of Primitive Races, 1800-1930*, by Patrick Brantlinger. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003. x + 248. ISBN 0-8014-8876-1. \$49.95 (cloth); \$19.95 (paper).**

Patrick Brantlinger's *Rule of Darkness* (Cornell UP, 1990) was one of a handful of texts that remained steadily on top of my desk for easy and frequent reference while I was in graduate school. It was, especially for a young graduate student, a wonderful compendium of information about imperialism and literature throughout the nineteenth century. I remember using it as I selected the individual texts I wanted to read for my oral exams. I was not alone; *Rule of Darkness* is a book that influenced a range of young scholars and spawned many in depth studies of literature and imperialism.

Victorian studies generally and the study of imperialism in particular have grown and changed since 1990. And, no doubt, my view of *Dark Vanishings*, Brantlinger's latest book, is also influenced by my changed position: I am no longer an eager, young graduate student. As ever, Brantlinger is, in *Dark Vanishings*,