

MATTHIAS BAUER AND ANGELIKA ZIRKER (TÜBINGEN)

## Subtle Medievalism: The Case of Charles Dickens

### 1. Introduction

Nineteenth century literature and the arts are obvious candidates to reflect on “Engaging with the Past,” but within that period, Charles Dickens is perhaps one of the least obvious cases to describe such an engagement. He is known especially for his sceptical view of venerating the Middle Ages as a source of artistic inspiration and a model of social and political order (see Brantlinger 2001, 64). In his 1844 Christmas Book, *The Chimes*, he has his protagonist, the ticket-porter Toby Veck, meet a group of city gentlemen, Alderman Cute, Mr. Filer and a red-faced, unnamed gentleman, who scold Toby for eating tripe as “the most wasteful article of consumption” (Dickens 1844; 2008, 100). The poor man’s diet becomes an occasion for his commenting on “such degenerate times as these” (*ibid.*, 101) and praising the “good old times, the grand old times, the great old times! *Those* were the times for a bold peasantry, and all that sort of thing. Those were the times for every sort of thing, in fact. There’s nothing now-a-days” (*ibid.*, 101). The inherent exaggeration of the gentleman’s praise of the past and his disparagement of the present point towards Dickens’s satire. In particular, Dickens in this passage holds up to ridicule the kind of nostalgia represented by the neo-medieval, feudalist dreams of the “Young England” movement. This intention can be inferred from what we know of the textual genesis of *The Chimes*: according to Dickens’s biographer John Forster, he at first had wanted the man who preferred the past to the present to be a “Young England gentleman” but then exchanged him for a “real good old city Tory” at Forster’s request, probably in order to avoid being charged with libel (see Davies 1983, 169). The Young England movement, under the leadership of Benjamin Disraeli, aimed at returning to the feudal system in which “Each knew his place: king, peasant, peer, or priest, / The greatest owned connexion with the least; / From rank to rank the generous feeling ran, / And linked society as man to man”<sup>1</sup>. (The three gentlemen’s unfeeling interaction with Toby shows that such a running of “generous feeling” “from rank to rank” is an outrageous lie: the praise of the feudal past and its allegedly ideal form of social cohesion is expressive of the inability to form a connexion with the human being next to oneself. The Middle Ages and their feudal system are being appropriated as a means to cover up the mindlessness and selfish wish for power of those who divert attention from their own failures and shortcomings. Thus the effect of Dickens’s removing the specific reference to the Young England movement from *The Chimes* is even to enhance the satire. As the narrator points out, the red-faced gentleman’s praise of the “good old times” is so unspecific that one never learns “what particular times he alluded to” (Dickens 1844; 2008, 102); it is nothing but a “set form of words” in which he goes “turning round and round” (*ibid.*,

---

1 Lord John Manners, *England’s Trust* 1841; see *The Chimes* 427-28n101; Manners had earlier contributed to Disraeli’s 1835 *The Vindication of the English Constitution*.

103). By having his narrator ridicule such verbal behaviour, Dickens appears to be quite distrustful of assigning much positive value to the past.

## 2. Dickens's Negative View(s)

Dickens tends to link his negative views of the past in general and the Middle Ages in particular to specific characters and their perception of the past. A case in point is the following conversation in *Dombey and Son* (1848), chapter 27: Mrs Skewton, the mother of Edith Granger (who is to marry Mr. Dombey), talks to Mr. Carker, the arch villain of the novel, over breakfast at Leamington Spa; the subject of their conversation is a planned visit to Warwick Castle:

‘I am quite rejoiced, Mr. Carker,’ said the lady-mother, at breakfast, after another approving survey of him through her glass, ‘that you have timed our visit so happily, as to go with us to-day. It is the most enchanting expedition!’

‘Any expedition would be enchanting in such society,’ returned Carker; ‘but I believe it is, in itself, full of interest.’

‘Oh!’ cried Mrs Skewton, with a faded little scream of rapture, ‘the Castle is charming! – associations of the Middle ages – and all that – which is so truly exquisite. Don’t you dote upon the Middle ages, Mr Carker?’

‘Very much indeed,’ said Mr Carker.

‘Such charming times!’ cried Cleopatra. ‘So full of Faith! So vigorous and forcible! So picturesque! So perfectly removed from commonplace! Oh dear! If they would only leave us a little more of the poetry of existence in these terrible days! [...] We are dreadfully real, Mr Carker,’ said Mrs Skewton; ‘are we not?’ (Dickens 1848; 2002, ch. 27, 421)

What we are presented with in this passage is an idealizing and clichéd perception of the Middle Ages. Mrs Skewton speaks in a vague and superficial manner (which fits her overall superficiality) about “the Middle ages and all that” and describes the castle as well as the historical period in general as “charming”.<sup>2</sup> The “charm” is then characterized in more detail, e.g. as “picturesque”. This word originated and became popular the eighteenth century: the *OED* records Steele’s use of it in 1705 as the first instance; it was then used in art theory, e.g. in 1768 by W. Gilpin in *An Essay upon Prints; Containing Remarks upon the Principles of Picturesque Beauty*. Mrs Skewton, accordingly, describes the Middle Ages not only enthusiastically but also in terms borrowed from the eighteenth century, a point we will develop further below.

Mrs Skewton’s praise ends in her comparison of the “poetry of existence” in the Middle Ages and the reality of her own time, an idea she may have got through reading novels thriving on popular medievalism.<sup>3</sup> This last point is commented on by the narrator: “Few people had less to complain of their reality than Cleopatra, who had as

2 *OED*, “charming, *adj.*”: “2.a. Fascinating; highly pleasing or delightful to the mind or senses. (At first distinctly *fig.* from 1. [Using charms; exercising magic power.], but now used without any thought of that, and as a milder word than *enchanting.*)”

3 In the 1839 edition of Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Pilgrims of the Rhine*, the last chapter, which takes place “amidst the desolate ruins of Heidelberg” (229), in sight of “the shattered casements and riven tower” of the castle (*ibid.*, 229), and near the Neckar river, stresses that the protagonist has lost “the poetry of existence” with the death of his beloved (*ibid.*, 234). In the first edition (1834), the narrator speaks of “the sunlight of life” instead (339-340).

much that was false about her as could well go to the composition of anybody with a real individual existence” (*ibid.*, 422). Her estimation of the past is hence unmasked as completely wrong because the present reality, to which she compares the past, is in her case purely artificial. The fact that Carker agrees with her does not bode well for the evaluation of his character either.

But things get even worse when the actual visit is described:

‘Those darling begone times, Mr Carker,’ said Cleopatra, ‘with their delicious fortresses, and their dear old dungeons, and their delightful places of torture, and their romantic vengeancees, and their picturesque assaults and sieges, and everything that makes life truly charming! How dreadfully we have degenerated!’

‘Yes, we have fallen off deplorably,’ said Mr Carker.

[...]

‘We have no Faith left, positively,’ said Mrs Skewton, advancing her shrivelled ear; for Mr Dombey was saying something to Edith. ‘We have no Faith in the dear old Barons, who were the most delightful creatures – or in the dear old Priests, who were the most warlike of men – or even in the days of that inestimable Queen Bess, upon the wall there, which were so extremely golden. Dear creature! She was all Heart! And that charming father of hers! I hope you dote on Harry the Eighth!’

‘I admire him very much,’ said Carker.

‘So bluff!’ cried Mrs Skewton, ‘wasn’t he? So burly. So truly English. Such a picture, too, he makes, with his dear little peepy eyes, and his benevolent chin!’ (*ibid.*, 424-425)

The whole passage is marked linguistically: Mrs Skewton uses a number of alliterations (darling – delicious – dear – delightful), as well as oxymoronic, self-contradictory adjective-noun combinations (delicious fortresses – dear dungeons – delightful places of torture – romantic vengeancees – picturesque assaults and sieges), and hyperbole (most delightful, most warlike, inestimable, extremely golden). She moves on from the Middle Ages to the Tudor period when she comes to a description of the portraits of Elizabeth I and Henry VIII, then exhibited at Warwick Castle.<sup>4</sup> She regards Henry as “charming,” and the period as “extremely golden” – which may come as a surprise given that the period of Henry in particular was one of unease, civil unrest and religious conflict. Mrs Skewton is, apparently, a bad physiognomist and historian. Dickens would take up her characterization of Henry VIII in his *A Child’s History of England*, composed six years later (1854). In chapter 23, he portrays “England under Henry the Eighth, Called Bluff King Hal and Burly King Harry”:

We now come to King Henry the Eighth, whom it has been too much the fashion to call “Bluff King Hal,” and “Burly King Harry,” and other fine names; but whom I shall take the liberty to

---

4 Cf. the note in the Penguin edition: “In Dickens’s time, portraits of Elizabeth I and Henry VIII were prominently displayed at Warwick Castle. The picture of Henry VIII remains, but that of Elizabeth (the so-called ‘Coronation’ portrait) is now in the National Portrait Gallery. Dickens seems here to be comparing the bride-seeking Dombey to the uxorious Henry, and the cool Edith to the professionally virginal Elizabeth” (Dickens 1848; 2002, 980n7). Landow (2009) cites the passage from *Dombey and Son* as an example of Dickens emphasizing “only the darker qualities of the middle ages” and points out that “the jarring catachresis [sic] of juxtaposing ‘delightful’ and ‘torture’ immediately distanc[es] her [i.e. Mrs Skewton] from the reader”. It will be seen that Landow’s judgment concerning Dickens’s attitude towards the Middle Ages is one-sided.

call, plainly, one of the most detestable villains that ever drew breath. (Dickens 1854; 1907, 223)

The plain truth is, that he was a most intolerable ruffian, a disgrace to human nature, and a blot of blood and grease upon the History of England. (*ibid.*, 255)

Mrs Skewton's words of characterization – bluff, burly – are repeated by Dickens to denigrate them as being merely the “fashion”<sup>5</sup>. This means that people use them without having any idea of what they are talking about. That Mrs Skewton uses them shows that she is uninformed, follows the fashion and has no substance – just like her idea of the past (the same goes, by the way, for Carker).

Dickens in *Dombey and Son* uses the trip to Warwick Castle, a representative building of the Middle Ages, as a tool for characterization and a comment on life: having a character called Cleopatra in the mid-nineteenth century speak about the medieval times in terms of the eighteenth century is meant to exemplify not only the anachronistic stance of people without a sense of history but also how the instrumentalization and appropriation of the past leads to a loss of an apt relation to the present and thus a failure to live in time.<sup>6</sup> Mrs Skewton *alias* Cleopatra is a character outside of her time: in her overall behaviour, she is a remnant of the Georgian period and its dandyism, a mode of life Dickens would ironically comment on when he described “some ladies and gentlemen of the newest fashion, who have set up a Dandyism” in his 1852-1853 novel *Bleak House*. Those fashionable people have no other expression of emotion than bewailing that the Vulgar have no “faith in things in general” (Dickens 1852-1853; 1999, 173). By this they mean, as the narrator puts it sarcastically, that they regrettably have no faith in what has “been tried and found wanting.” Their only way of establishing that desirable “faith in a bad shilling” is “mak[ing] the vulgar very picturesque and faithful by putting back the hands upon the clock of time and cancelling a few hundred years of history” (173).<sup>7</sup> The medievalism of this kind is based on “the

---

5 It comes rather as a surprise that the Oxford edition would refer to *A Child's History of England* in the note on Henry VIII but to a different passage, with no comment whatsoever on the word choice: “*Harry the Eighth*: according to Dickens's *Child's History*, Henry VIII (1491-1547) was ‘a disgrace to human nature, a blot of blood and grease upon the History of England’” (Dickens 1854; 1907, 958, note on 410). See also Chesterton's comment in his introduction to the Everyman edition of *A Child's History of England*: “sheer instinct and good moral tradition made him [Dickens] right, for instance, about Henry VIII. [...] Dickens's imagination could not re-picture an age where learning and liberty were dying rather than being born: but Henry VIII. lived in a time of expounding knowledge and unrest; a time therefore somewhat like the Victorian. And Dickens in his childish but robust way does perceive the main point about him: that he was a wicked man” (*ibid.*, xi).

6 This may be regarded as being symptomatic for quite a few characters in this novel. Mr. Dombey also tends to forget both the past and the present – he lives for the future alone, and his firm “Dombey and Son.” As Walker Heady points out, the forgetting of the past leads to illness, and only the understanding of the past can lead to an understanding of self (2009, 105-106). This understanding, however, presupposes a taking the past for what it was rather than idealizing and appropriating it. – A case in point for clinging to the past and, hence, failing to live in the present, is Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*. In *A Christmas Carol*, by contrast, Scrooge's forgetfulness about the past is the root of his present evil.

7 See Gill's note in the OUP edition of *Bleak House* (Dickens 1852-1853; 1999, 926): “Dickens conflates aspects of contemporary life he disliked and mistrusted – the Gothic revival, with its associated cult of the medieval, the Oxford/High Church movement, regarded by its opponent as

great retrogressive principle” (Dickens 1850; 1996, 246) that Dickens, in an article called “Old Lamps for New Ones”, diagnosed in Pre-Raphaelite Art.

### 3. The Uses of the Past

And yet, despite these negative evaluations of the past, we are presented with an ambivalent attitude towards the relationship of past and present: *Dombey and Son* is the novel where whole parts of London disappear for the sake of technological progress. When we read the portrayal of Staggs’s Gardens, now that the railway has arrived, we can see that Dickens does not welcome the new age unequivocally either:

There was no such place as Staggs’s Gardens. It had vanished from the earth. Where the old rotten summer-houses once had stood, palaces now reared their heads, and granite columns of gigantic girth opened a vista to the railway world beyond. The miserable waste ground, where the refuse-matter had been heaped of yore, was swallowed up and gone; and in its frowsy stead were tiers of warehouses, crammed with rich goods and costly merchandise. [...].

[...] Night and day the conquering engines rumbled at their distant work, or, advancing smoothly to their journey’s end, and gliding like tame dragons into the allotted corners grooved out to the inch for their reception, stood bubbling and trembling there, making the walls quake, as if they were dilating with the secret knowledge or great powers yet unsuspected in them, and strong purposes not yet achieved.

But Staggs’s Gardens had been cut up root and branch. Oh woe the day! when ‘not a rood of English ground’ – laid out in Staggs’s Garden – is secure! (Dickens, 1848; 2002, chapter 15)

The passage in *Dombey and Son* helps us see that the satirical treatment of things medieval (or better: of attitudes medieval) by Dickens is only one side of the coin. On the one hand, technological progress does away with “[t]he miserable waste ground” with its heaps of “refuse-matter” but, on the other hand, in fusing quotations from Wordsworth and Goldsmith, Dickens voices a deep regret: “Oh woe the day! When ‘not a rood of English ground’ – laid out in Staggs’s Garden – is secure!” This combines Wordsworth’s sonnet “On the Projected Kendal and Windermere Railway” (1844), which begins “Is not a nook of English ground secure”, with a line from Oliver Goldsmith’s poem *The Deserted Village* (1770), in which the expression “every rood of ground” is used. This is what Sanders’s annotations in the Penguin edition tell us; he treats the line as a jumbled “misquotation”. Such a negative evaluation, however, obscures the function of Dickens’s technique: for the Goldsmith quotation evokes a decidedly pre-modern context, which is no coincidence. In context, it reads: “A time there was, ere England’s griefs began, / When every rood of ground maintained its man;” (Goldsmith 1770; 1973, 57-58). If not a feudal dream, this is a dream of a past age in which “a bold peasantry” secured a perfect equilibrium of “what life required” – an age before “trade’s unfeeling train / Usurp[ed] the land” and provided it with “Unwieldy wealth” and “opulence”. Not just because of the retrospective ambiguity of “train” does Dickens’s description of Staggs’s Garden resonate with further echoes of Goldsmith’s nostalgia; the “tiers of warehouses, crammed with rich goods and costly merchandise” evoke Goldsmith’s description of the new wealth which has not improved society but

---

an attempt to turn the clock back to an ‘age of faith’, when the church and its rituals were all-powerful and when the lower orders knew their place”.

caused imbalance. But – and here we can see how balanced Dickens adoption of the regret for the bygone past is – the new age has not replaced a happy rural world but a miserable waste ground. The scene remains ambiguous: Staggs’s Gardens, as the name (evocative of hunting) implies, and as the expression “root and branch” suggests, is a piece of England’s natural environment supplanted by the tame dragons of the industrial age. At the same time, Staggs’s Gardens has not been a natural environment any more but a rubbish dump. Seen in this light, the Wordsworth-Goldsmith reference rings with irony. Yet again, if we take the tame dragons to be evocations of legend and medieval romance,<sup>8</sup> there is an element of “old” in the “new” which reinstalls an aspect of the very thing it is supposed to annihilate. In that respect, the Staggs’s Garden passage is the counterpart to Mrs Skewton’s “darling begone times”: If the wilful, anachronistic appropriation of the Middle Ages (or all things medieval) turns characters into objects of satire, the very reason for Dickens’s satirical attack can provide us with the key to what may be called Dickens’s subtle medievalism. What we mean by this paradox is that the very appropriation of the past is but a sign of its loss, whereas more appropriate and apt uses of the past must be sought elsewhere and may come in as an element of the future. Furthermore, the forgetfulness about the past may make it intrude itself in a doubtful fashion upon the present, as the “tame dragons” indicate.

In order to elaborate on the idea of Dickens’s subtle medievalism a little further, we would like to turn to *David Copperfield*, the next novel in Dickens’s career after *Dombey and Son*. In this fictional autobiography, the past is very much a matter of “Personal History” (the subtitle of the book). The appropriate uses of the past form an essential part of the protagonist’s making sense of his life story, and we shall see that the Middle Ages play a key role in this process. They come in through the pivotal location of David’s young adulthood: Canterbury, with its evocation of medieval architecture and its history as a place of pilgrimage.<sup>9</sup> This can be seen when David, towards

---

8 Honegger (2009) points out that there is probably only one tame dragon in medieval literature (34n21; even though he goes on to remind us of dragon-taming as a feature of saints’ legends). Dickens’s point is of course not that the “tame dragons” to which the conquering engines are compared are medieval in nature but that the engines are tamed like (medieval) dragons.

9 Canterbury furthermore evokes Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, whose impact on Dickens has been discussed e.g. by Tambling (2015); while he emphasizes Chaucer’s influence on Dickens’s art of characterization (e.g. 49) he also points out topographical links and reminds us that it is Mr Micawber in *David Copperfield* who expressly mentions “that religious edifice, immortalised by Chaucer, which was anciently the resort of Pilgrims from the remotest corners of – in short [...] in the immediate neighbourhood of the Cathedral” (51-52; *David Copperfield*, ch. 27, 396). Tambling regards Dickens’s representation of Canterbury in *David Copperfield* as “deliberately [...] mediaeval” (52). Another example of Dickens’s knowledge and awareness of Chaucer mentioned by Tambling is also relevant to *David Copperfield* even though Tambling does not make that link: in an 1866 letter to Sir James Emerson Tennent, explaining what the donor of the Poor Traveller’s Refuge at Rochester, another historical cathedral city, meant when in 1579 he excluded “Rogues or Proctors” from the charity, Dickens cites from Chaucer’s *General Prologue* (57) and identifies them with his humbug Pardoner. This Chaucer link is relevant to David Copperfield’s course of life: it casts some additional light on his decision to try and become a “proctor” (ch. 23, 335; David’s friend Steerforth calls him “a sort of monkish attorney”). In his decision to become a writer David discards this form of medievalism. – Flahiff (1991) relates the “fellow-travellers” of Dickens’s *Little Dorrit* to Chaucer’s Pilgrims. Besserman (2006) discusses the Chaucer references in *David Copperfield* and wonders if Uriah Heep’s comical

the end of the story (in ch. 52), returns to Canterbury shortly before the death of his wife Dora.

Early in the morning, I sauntered through the dear old tranquil streets, and again mingled with the shadows of the venerable gateways and churches. The rooks were sailing about the cathedral towers; and the towers themselves, overlooking many a long unaltered mile of the rich country and its pleasant streams, were cutting the bright morning air, as if there were no such thing as change on earth. Yet the bells, when they sounded, told me sorrowfully of change in everything; told me of their own age, and my pretty Dora's youth; and of the many, never old, who had lived and loved and died, while the reverberations of the bells had hummed through the rusty armour of the Black Prince hanging up within, and, motes upon the deep of Time, had lost themselves in air, as circles do in water. (Dickens 1849-1850; 1997, 723-724)

In some ways, this is the counterpart to the Staggs's Garden passage from *Dombey and Son*. Where there is disruption and loss in *Dombey and Son*, there is a sense of continuity between the (medieval) past and the present in *David Copperfield*. Instead of disruption and disappearance, there is a pastoral environment ("rich country and pleasant streams") which stretches out for "many a long unaltered mile"; the cathedral towers seem to defy the existence of change. This continuity is then contrasted with the reminder of time and the transient nature of everything. The bells, parts of the towers, make David aware of the impermanence of human life in comparison to their age. The medieval towers and their bells thus become a *memento mori* in the tradition famously marked by John Donne's meditation "For whom the bell tolls" (Donne 1975, 86). But even though the sound of the bells, like the human lives, are nothing more than "motes upon the deep of Time", little specks in the ocean of time, they keep on sending their message and provide the means by which the protagonist becomes aware of his own temporality. This is very different from the anachronistic negation of time that we have seen in Mrs Skewton. We can see here a function of the subtle medievalism in Dickens: the Middle Ages, i.e. the presence of the past in the form of the cathedral and its towers, enable human beings to "live in the Past, the Present, and the Future" (Dickens 1843; 2008, 77), as the reformed Scrooge vows to do at the end of *A Christmas Carol*. Having "lived and loved and died" (by contrast to Mrs Skewton who seems to do none of the three) lets human beings become "never old".

Thus the point of the medieval place is not, like Warwick castle, to deny time or fly back into a made-up past, but to become aware of it and live in it. In *David Copperfield*, this becomes most evident in the chapters which mark a second start in David's life; they are called "I make another Beginning" (Dickens 1849-1850; 1997, ch. 15) and "I am a New Boy in More Senses than One" (*ibid.*, ch. 16). They describe David's first arrival at Canterbury, where David becomes a lodger at Mr Wickfield's house and a pupil at Dr Strong's school. The two places combined represent classical antiquity and the Middle Ages; the classicism of Dr Strong's school is not only expressed in the Doctor's constant search for the "Greek roots" of words (which young David at first supposes to be "a botanical furor on the Doctor's part"; *ibid.*, 231) but also in the architecture, such as the stone urns on the wall around the school, which are "like sublimated skittles, for Time to play at" (*ibid.*, 220). The allegorical mode evoked here

---

self-comparison to Christ (in ch. 61) was inspired by Chaucer's comparison of Criseyde to Christ (102).

agrees with the medievalism of Mr Wickfield's house, which is "[a]s quiet as a monastery, and almost as roomy". In the description of the house, a strange fusion with the cathedral itself seems to take place, occasioned by Mr Wickfield's daughter Agnes, who will become David's spiritual guide and second wife. David's new life, his being "a New Boy in More Senses than One", is very much linked up with his meeting this girl, and we may be justified in regarding this constellation as an evocation of Dante's *Vita nuova*: Agnes becomes David's Beatrice, both saint and beloved. Agnes, from the first, evokes in David the memory of "a stained glass window in a church" (*ibid.*, 217):

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 Wickfield ever afterwards. (*ibid.*, 217)

Agnes thus transforms the monastery-like house into a church by becoming a special sort of light and image. The semi-transparent nature of the stained glass window becomes an expression of Agnes's function for David's life: she is both real and present and the guide to a higher and transcendent life – in the very act of evoking medieval religious art Dickens makes us see that David's journey is directed towards "goodness, peace, and truth" (*ibid.*, 226)<sup>10</sup>. Agnes is like the virtue of which Beatrice speaks in the *Paradiso*, that "shines through the body, as gladness does through a living pupil" (2.143-144; quoted from Akbari 2004, 140)<sup>11</sup>. This 'medieval' and partly allegorical character of Agnes has led to quite some misunderstanding among modern critics<sup>12</sup>.

Agnes is anything but weak or insipid. In her energy and usefulness, she is contrasted with David's "child-wife" Dora. In this respect also she can be aligned with the evocation of the Middle Ages through art and architecture. In "Old Lamps for New Ones", we remember, Dickens had lampooned artists of his own time who wanted to go back and undo the achievements of Raphael and other Renaissance artists. He comes up

---

10 The comparison of Agnes to a church window is integrated into a network of symbolic functions of windows in *David Copperfield*. A relevant parallel (as regards the past, the present, and the future) is the passage in which the narrator speaks of "the tremendous region whence I had so lately travelled [i.e. before birth]; and the light upon the window of our room shone out upon the earthly bourne of all such travellers, and the mound above the ashes and the dust that once was he, without whom I had never been" (Dickens 1849-1850; 1997, 12). On the popularity of stained glass in Medieval Revival literature (starting with the "dim religious light" of "storied windows richly dight" in Milton's "Il Penseroso"; Milton 1645; 1981, 146, ll. 159-160), see Alexander (2007, ch. 2, e.g. 54-55). Even though there is (apart from the saint's name) no direct link between Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes" (1819) and *David Copperfield*, the evocation of a transcendent light by means of medieval stained glass (that turns Medeline into a "splendid angel"; Keats 1819; 2007, 346, l. 223) combined with the rejection of feudalism in that poem (cf. Alexander 2007, 62) must have struck a sympathetic chord with Dickens, even though Porphyro's behaviour may not.

11 In the original "la virtù mista per lo corpo luce / come letizia per pupilla viva". For the relation of Agnes to Beatrice and of David's journey to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, see Bauer (1991, e.g. 206-207, 305). On Dickens (especially *Our Mutual Friend*) and Dante, see Tambling (2010). Tambling is interested in images of "Dickens as the writer of the urban" that link him to Dante, "rather than images which push us back towards the medieval and to nostalgia, where Dickens of course would not go" (115). As we try to show, the medieval is not necessarily identical with nostalgia in Dickens.

12 See Bauer (1991, 300-314, e.g. 308n28) and Zirker (2012, e.g. 169-170n4).



with a number of fictitious brotherhoods, such as “the Pre-Newtonian Brotherhood” (Dickens 1850; 1996, 247) who ignore the laws of gravitation, and a “P.G.A.P.C.B, or Pre-Gower and Pre-Chaucer-Brotherhood for the restoration of the ancient English style of spelling” in order to show the idiocy of any attempt at reinstalling the Middle Ages. Architecture is absent from these spoofs, even though Dickens invents a “Pre-Laurentius Brotherhood [...] for the abolition of all but manuscript books” (*ibid.*, 247), which engages Augustus Welby Pugin to produce them “in characters that nobody on earth shall be able to read” (*ibid.*, 247). Dickens thus mildly pokes fun at one of the foremost advocates of Gothic architecture in England, of whose fervent Catholicism he must have been sceptical.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, Pugin’s proposition of *The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture* (1841) promotes a functionalism which is by no means a mindless adoption of things past. He regarded Gothic architecture as fulfilling what he claimed to be the essential principle of architecture, *propriety*, by which he meant “that the external and internal appearance of an edifice should be illustrative of, and in accordance with, the purpose for which it is designed” (Pugin 1841; 2003, 42). This is quite different from the deceitful adoption of things medieval which Dickens decried, and goes very well with a representation that connects a character who acts as a guide in this world and beyond to medieval art and architecture. The way Agnes Wickfield appears is in keeping with her purpose and function.

There is one other aspect in David Copperfield’s reflection on Canterbury cathedral which fits into this picture of a subtle medievalism that focuses on the link between the past and the present, on “the many, never old, who had lived and loved and died, while the reverberations of the bells had hummed through the rusty armour of the Black

---

13 Critics have regarded Dickens’s attitude to Pugin and his style of Gothic architecture in different and sometimes even contradictory ways, which shows that it is not simply a matter of agreement or rejection. According to Landow, Dickens rejected Pugin, whose “architecture and design attempted to create authentic settings for his desired return to the past”; similarly Hill, referring to “Old Lamps for New Ones”, stresses that Dickens “took in Pugin in the course of an attack on Millais” (Landow 2009, 441). At the same time, Hill sees Pecksniff in *Martin Chuzzlewit* as an example of Dickens attacking the “steam-age architect” (Hill 2007, 287), i.e. a member of the camp opposing Pugin. Yet again, she suggests that Dickens’s choosing the location of Pecksniff’s house was a hint at Pugin, as “there is no reason for the purposes of the plot why Pecksniff’s house should be where Pugin’s own first house, the much mocked St Marie’s Grange, was, just outside Salisbury”. Furthermore, Pecksniff’s inept attempts at teaching the art of architecture may, as Hill thinks, have been inspired by the Great Russell Street drawing school of Pugin’s father Auguste (541n1). Stamp (2012), by contrast, believes that the “description in *Great Expectations* of Mr Wemmick’s fictional house in Walworth, a ‘little wooden cottage ... with the queerest gothic windows ... and a gothic door, almost too small to get in at’ complete with working drawbridge and a top ‘cut out and painted like a battery mounted with guns’, sounds not unlike Pugin’s quirky and impractical first house, St Marie’s Grange”. Wemmick’s castle, even though (or because) it may make readers smile, is definitely a very humane place. Alexander counts Dickens among those who shared Pugin’s “moral critique of architecture as expressing social ideals” (2007, 72). Spurr also sees Dickens take side with Pugin when he compares *The Old Curiosity Shop* to Pugin’s *Contrasts*, “a polemical work of architectural theory that juxtaposes images of medieval England with those of the Victorian industrial environment. [...] Although Dickens is no Catholic and is not the polemicist that Pugin is, his novel tends to confirm Pugin’s sense that the Industrial Revolution is the modern form of the demonic” (2002, 82).

Prince hanging up within [...]”. We may wonder why Dickens chose expressly to mention the Black Prince. In chapter 18 of *A Child’s History of England*, which focuses on the reign of Edward III, Dickens refers to a legend surrounding the origin of the motto of the Prince of Wales.

Among these [the dead of the battle of Crecy, 1346] was the King of Bohemia, an old blind man; who, having been told that his son was wounded in the battle, and that no force could stand against the Black Prince, called to him two knights, put himself on horse-back between them, fastened the three bridles together, and dashed in among the English, where he was presently slain. He bore as his crest three white ostrich feathers, with the motto *Ich dien*, signifying in English ‘I serve.’ This crest and motto were taken by the Prince of Wales in remembrance of that famous day, and have been borne by the Prince of Wales ever since. (Dickens 1854; 1907, 155)

Dickens never expressly alludes to this motto but we suggest that, since it was (and is) so well-known and so obviously connected to the Black Prince, the mentioning of his rusty armour that resonates with the message of the bells evokes the motto as well – as one way in which a specific heritage of the Middle Ages stays alive in the present. In a novel in which false humility (in the person of Uriah Heep) is contrasted with the true, confident humility of Agnes (who plays the role of her father’s “housekeeper”), and David is famously to learn to discipline his heart, the idea of service is inspired by this heritage.

#### 4. Conclusion

Dickens, in fiction and non-fiction alike, held fashionable attempts at longing for and appropriating the Middle Ages up to ridicule. As the satirical passages in *The Chimes* show, he viewed attempts at promoting the return to medieval social structures with suspicion, for these attempts were marked with a forgetfulness of the present and the future, and, in his view, frequently amounted to deceit, a veil covering personal interest. A similar suspicion was caused by attempts to undo the achievement of Renaissance art. The appropriation of the past as a means of hiding or excusing present failures seems to run like a pattern through Dickens’s oeuvre; and yet, at the same time, this does not mean that Dickens was a straightforward adherent of ‘enlightened’ views of the Middle Ages as they were promoted by historians such as Edward Gibbons in *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1789), who spoke of the “rubbish of the dark ages” (1776-1789; 1906, vol. 6, ch. 37, 162n23). Not only did Dickens include Gibbons in his satirical sallies, showing (for example in the dust heaps of *Our Mutual Friend*) that the “rubbish” of the present age was at least as obnoxious as that of the past; he also shows how the Middle Ages, living on in its architecture and what it expresses, become a means of learning to connect with the past, the present, and the future. This is not only the case in *David Copperfield* but also in the *The Chimes* itself. The very story which satirizes medievalism presents us with a medieval church that triggers and frames the process of isolation and re-socialization in the protagonist. In *The Chimes* this happens when the church comes alive and speaks through its bells to the protagonist, just as in the *David Copperfield* passage quoted above “the towers themselves, overlooking many a long unaltered mile of the rich country and its pleasant streams, were cutting the bright morning air, as if there were

no such thing as change on earth. Yet the bells, when they sounded, told me sorrowfully of change in everything". Mrs. Skewton abuses the past by denying its true nature and endowing it with an anachronistic "poetry of existence" (Dickens 1848; 2002, 421). To Dickens, falsehood and truth are never more closely juxtaposed than when it comes to the field of his own art. While Mrs. Skewton's "poetry of existence" is a lie, Dickens also shows us, in *The Chimes* and *David Copperfield* and elsewhere, processes of imaginatively transforming reality. It is the narrator-protagonist in *David Copperfield* who makes the cathedral towers act "as if there were no such thing as change on earth" and it is he who is able to hear what the bells are saying. Thus, to a considerable degree, the story of medievalism in Dickens is the story of the right and wrong uses of the imagination.

## References

### Primary Sources

- Bulwer-Lytton, Edward (1834): *The Pilgrims of the Rhine*. London: Saunders and Otley
- Bulwer-Lytton, Edward (1839): *The Pilgrims of the Rhine*. Exeter: J. & B. Williams
- Dante Alighieri (1988): *La Divina Commedia*. Ed. Giuseppe Vandelli. Milano: Ulrico Hoepli
- Dickens, Charles (1843; 2008): *A Christmas Carol*, in: Robert Douglas-Fairhurst (ed.): *A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Books*. Oxford: OUP, 4-83
- Dickens, Charles (1844; 2008): *The Chimes*, in: Robert Douglas-Fairhurst (ed.): *A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Books*. Oxford: OUP, 84-161
- Dickens, Charles (1848; 2002): *Dombey and Son*. Ed., intr. and notes Andrew Sanders. London: Penguin
- Dickens, Charles (1849-1850; 1997): *David Copperfield*. Ed. Nina Burgis; intr. and notes Andrew Sanders. Oxford: OUP
- Dickens, Charles (1850; 1996): "Old Lamps for New Ones," in: *Household Words* 12, 15 June 1850, 265-267. Repr. in: Michael Slater (ed.): *Dickens' Journalism*. Vol. 2: *The Amusements of the People and Other Papers: Reports, Essays and Reviews 1834-51*. London: Dent, 242-248
- Dickens, Charles (1852-1853; 1999): *Bleak House*. Ed., intr. and notes Stephen Gill. Oxford: OUP
- Dickens, Charles (1854; 1907): *A Child's History of England*. Intr. G. K. Chesterton. London: Dent
- Donne, John (1975): *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*. Ed. Anthony Raspa. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP
- Gibbons, Edward (1776-1789; 1906): *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. 12 vols; ed. J. B. Bury; intr. W. E. H. Lecky. New York: Fred de Fau and Co. <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/gibbon-the-history-of-the-decline-and-fall-of-the-roman-empire-12-vols>
- Goldsmith, Oliver (1770; 1973): "The Deserted Village", in: Martin Price (ed.): *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature: The Restoration and Eighteenth Century*. New York. OUP, 689-699
- Keats, John (1819; 2007): "The Eve of St. Agnes," in: Susan Wolfson (ed.): *John Keats*. New York: Pearson Longman, 338-353
- Milton, John (1645; 1981): "Il Penseroso," in: John Carey (ed.): *Complete Shorter Poems*. London: Longman, 139-146

- Pugin, Augustus Welby (1841; 2003): *The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture*, in: *The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture and An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture*. Intr. Roderick O'Donnell. Leominster: Gracewing
- Wordsworth, William (1844): "On the Projected Kendal and Windermere Railway". <http://www.bartleby.com/145/ww970.html>

## Secondary Sources

- Akbari, Suzanne Conklin (2004): *Seeing Through the Veil: Optical Theory and Medieval Allegory*. Toronto: U of Toronto P
- Alexander, Michael (2007): *Medievalism: The Middle Ages in Modern England*. New Haven: Yale UP
- Bauer, Matthias (1991): *Das Leben als Geschichte: Poetische Reflexion in Dickens' David Copperfield*. Köln/Wien: Böhlau
- Besserman, Laurence (2006): "Chaucer and Dickens Use Luke 23.24," *Chaucer Review*, 41.1, 99-104
- Brantlinger, Patrick (2001): "Did Charles Dickens Have a Philosophy of History? The Case of *Barnaby Rudge*", *Dickens Studies Annual*, 30, 59-74
- Davies, James A. (1983): *John Forster: A Literary Life*, Leicester: Leicester UP
- Flahiff, F. T. (1991-1992): "'Mysteriously come together': Dickens, Chaucer, and *Little Dorrit*," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 61.2, 250-268.
- Hill, Rosemary (2007): *God's Architect: Pugin and the Building of Romantic Britain*. London: Penguin
- Honegger, Thomas (2009): "A Good Dragon is Hard to Find, or From *draconitas* to *draco*," in: Chen, Fanfan; Honegger, Thomas (eds.): *Good Dragons are Rare: An Inquiry into Literary Dragons East and West*. Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 27-59
- Landow, George P. (2009): "Dickens Satirizes the Mediæval Revival." *The Victorian Web*, 30 August 2009. <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/dickens/antimedieval1.html>
- Spurr, David (2012): *Architecture and Modern Literature*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P
- Stamp, Gavin (2012): "Great Innovations: Dickens and Architecture." [bd.online.co.uk](http://www.bdonline.co.uk/great-innovations-dickens-and-architecture/5031622.article), 7 February 2012. <http://www.bdonline.co.uk/great-innovations-dickens-and-architecture/5031622.article>
- Tambling, Jeremy (2010): "Recalled to Life: Survival in Dickens and Dante," in: Jordan, John; Waters, Catherine; Hollington, Michael (eds.): *Imagining Italy: Victorian Writers and Travellers*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 115-137
- Tambling, Jeremy (2015): "Dickens and Chaucer," *English*, 64, 244, 42-64
- Walker Heady, Emily (2009): "A Steam-Whistle Modernist? Representations of King Alfred in Dickens's *A Child's History of England* and *The Battle of Life*," *Studies in Medievalism*, 17, 92-111
- Zirker, Angelika (2012): "Weak, sexless, one-dimensional, boring? Reading Amy Dorrit," in: Lenartz, Norbert; Orestano, Francesca (eds.): *Dickens's Signs, Readers' Designs: New Bearings in Dickens Criticism*. Rom: Aracne, 169-189