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Gothic Visions of Classical Architecture in Hablot Knight Browne's 'Dark' Illustrations for the Novels of Charles Dickens

Figs.

1. A. W. N. Pugin, detail, 'Contrasted Residences for the Poor', *Contrasts* (1836).
2. H. K. Browne, 'The Mausoleum at Chesney Wold', *Bleak House* (1853).
3. H. K. Browne, 'Little Dorrit's Party', *Little Dorrit* (1856).
4. H. K. Browne, 'Damocles', *Little Dorrit* (1857).
5. H. K. Browne, 'The Birds in the Cage', *Little Dorrit* (1855).
6. H. K. Brown, working sketch, 'The River', *David Copperfield*, Elkins Collection, Free Library of Philadelphia (1850).
7. H. K. Browne, 'The River', *David Copperfield* (1850).

Early Victorian London was expanding at a furious pace. Much of the new suburban housing consisted of cheap copies of Georgian neo-classicism. At the same time a large part of the city's centre, a substantial proportion of which had been rebuilt after the Great Fire of 1666, had fallen into decay. The alarming pace of change in the built environment was mirrored by that in the political realm. The threat of revolution, it was widely believed, could only be ended by a significant programme of reform but there was no consensus as to whether that should be essentially institutional, financial or moral. In these circumstances the past, and its material evidences, came to play a prominent role in the public imagination, as either a source of vital tradition or of dangerous vice and complacency. When Charles Dickens (1812-70) and his illustrators sought to picture London they returned repeatedly to architectural contrasts as a way of comparing the worlds of the rich and the poor. And due to Dickens' progressive social vision it was not only the slums that could be envisioned as teeming with dangers and excitements in the gothic literary mode, but also the monstrous homes of the powerful. Because much of the housing stock was more or less directly inspired by notions of Georgian proportion and design the resulting illustrations repeatedly represent gothic visions of classical architecture.

This article explores a series of illustrations produced by Hablot Knight Browne [*pseud.* Phiz] (1815–82) who was the most well-known of Charles Dickens' several artist

collaborators.¹ These images are sufficiently distinctive in style and method from Browne's normal productions that they have come to be known as the 'dark' plates. Their style acts to emphasise the gothic aspects of Dickens' presentation of Victorian Britain. Despite the fact that most of London was newly built in the nineteenth century it is a striking testament to the novelist's fascination with architectural and institutional decay that his built landscapes have come to be associated with age and rot in the contemporary popular imagination. From 1817-22, when he was aged of five to ten, Dickens lived in Chatham in Kent, where his father worked in a clerical capacity in the royal dockyards which were only finally to close in 1984. As part of the redevelopment of the docks an indoor 'literary themepark' called *Dickens World* was opened in 2007. Its aim is to entertain the visitor by presenting sites from Dickens' various novels which evoke either a nostalgic glow or gothic thrills. The attraction's website tells the prospective visitor that they may experience the 'haunted house' of Scrooge and 'walk through the damp corridors of the Marshalsea Prison... [but] beware the prisoners have been known to escape.'² This was where Dickens' father was imprisoned for debt in 1824 and from which he, at least, was only able to escape because of the death of his mother and his inheritance of part of her estate. The Dickens World interiors are both elaborately dilapidated and in full compliance with contemporary health and safety regulations. The plain, steel carapace of the building housing the attraction emphasises its conformity with

¹ Editions of the key Charles Dickens' novels used in this article are *Bleak House*, ed. Norman Page (London: Penguin, 1971) [hereafter *BH*] and *Little Dorrit*, ed. Harvey Peter Sucksmith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) [hereafter *LD*]. Good introductions to Browne and Dickens are Robert L. Patten, *Charles Dickens and 'Boz': The Birth of the Industrial-Age Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) and Robert L. Patten and Valerie Browne Lester, 'Browne, Hablot Knight (1815–1882)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, 2004): <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/3675>, accessed 3 January 2013.

² *Dickens World*, <http://www.dickensworld.co.uk/take-a-tour.php>, accessed January 2013. See Marty Gould and Rebecca N. Mitchell, 'Understanding the Literary Themepark: Dickens World as Adaptation', *Neo-Victorian Studies* 3:2 (2010), pp. 145-71: http://www.neovictorianstudies.com/past_issues/3-2%202010/NVS%203-2-7%20M-Gould-R-Mitchell.pdf, accessed 6 January 2013, and Kathryn Hughes, 'Dickens World and Dickens's World', *Journal of Victorian Culture* 15:3 (2010), pp. 388-93.

twenty-first-century architectural expectations and its effective containment of nineteenth-century horrors.

The twentieth-century image of Victorian London as ancient and decrepit was powerfully shaped by the fascination of Dickens and thus, of necessity, of his illustrators, with the ancient heart of the city.³ It is important to emphasise, however, that because of the thoroughness of the Great Fire of 1666 most of even the seemingly aged architecture of London was less than two-hundred years old. Medieval gothic churches and Tudor timber-framed houses were exceptional features in a landscape saturated by the legacy of Georgian classicism. In the illustrations to *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-1) a gothic literary sensibility repeatedly placed the vulnerable Little Nell in the looming shadows of medieval walls and arches.⁴ Yet later Dickens' novels, notably those of the 1850s which dealt not so much with old curiosities as with contemporary life, can also be placed in the same literary genre. Thus, for Allan Pritchard *Bleak House* (1852-3) is 'Dickens's supreme achievement in the Gothic mode' even though it has been previously less identified with the gothic perhaps because the sinister architecture that appears in its illustrations is post-medieval, or indeed, neo-classical.⁵ Hablot Knight Browne's dark plates appeared prominently in *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit* (1855-7). These books, and the (un-illustrated) novel that appeared between them, *Hard Times* (1854), are some of Dickens' most pessimistic, emotionally dark, explorations of the condition of Britain. Browne responded to this material by producing a series of images that employed a new method of engraving using a machine to score very close, fine lines that enabled the production of the effect of pen and wash work. In these compositions the play of light and dark provided dramatic impact in place of Browne's habitual reliance on figural

³ See the overview in Shearer West, 'London in Victorian Visual Culture', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of London*, ed. Lawrence Manley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 160-79.

⁴ Dominic Janes, 'The Gothic Arousal of Architecture in Dickens' *The Old Curiosity Shop* and its illustrations', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 35.3 (2013), pp. 1-17. See also Joan Stevens, "'Woodcuts Dropped into the Text": The Illustrations in *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge*', *Studies in Bibliography* 20 (1967), pp. 113-34.

⁵ Allan Pritchard, 'The Urban Gothic of *Bleak House*', *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 45:4 (1991), pp. 432-52, at p. 432.

depiction and caricature. It does not appear that Dickens initiated this change but rather that ‘Browne conceived it and suggested it to Dickens who responded enthusiastically’.⁶

These images have proved highly controversial. For some critics they evidence a decline in Browne’s abilities as an illustrator and in his relationship with Dickens. Thus Harvey has argued that ‘a reader who judges Dickens’s illustrations from a perusal of *Little Dorrit* will not expect much of Browne.’⁷ And Cohen finds this apparent attempt by Browne to achieve a heightened painterly seriousness to have been futile because ‘Dickens’s wasteland themes, symbols, and characters... were so thoroughly visualized by the pictorial prose that illustrations could do little more than embellish’ the power of his vision.⁸ Thus it was hardly a positive move when Browne, in her view, ‘started to subordinate the individuality of Dickens’s characters to his own creativity. The result was a number of plates – dubbed “the dark plates” – laden with melodrama and atmosphere, that had very little bearing on the text they were supposed to embellish.’⁹ Yet, as this last quotation indicates, even Browne’s critics had to admit that he had managed to produce some powerful images. Thus Cohen argues that ‘the suggestively sinister atmosphere of *Bleak House* is due as much to them [the dark plates] as to Dickens’ prose. Richard Stein has even called the dark illustrations for *Bleak House* Browne’s ‘subtlest collaboration with Dickens’ and for Michael Steig, this is some of Browne’s ‘finest and most complex work’.¹⁰ This article will look closely at the classical architecture that haunts many of these illustrations in order to explore the way in which Browne attempted to illustrate Dickens’ denunciation of contemporary institutions and his employment of the literary genre of the gothic. This can be seen as representing an important stage not only in the interrogation of moral qualities of style in

⁶ J. R. Harvey, *Victorian Novelists and their Illustrators* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1970), p. 153.

⁷ Harvey, *Victorian Novelists*, p. 105.

⁸ Jane R. Cohen, *Charles Dickens and his Original Illustrators* (Ohio University Press: Columbus, 1980), p. 206.

⁹ Jasper Schelstraete, “‘A Fresh Look for Old Puppets’: Marcus Stone, Charles Dickens, and Authorship’, *English* 61, no. 232 (2012), pp. 51–63, at p. 53.

¹⁰ Cohen, *Charles Dickens*, p. 108; Richard L. Stein, ‘Dickens and Illustration, in *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. John O. Jordan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 167-88, at pp. 172-3 and Michael Steig, *Dickens and Phiz* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), p. 131.

architecture but also of the dislocation of gothic literature from gothic architecture, an association that went back to Horace Walpole's pioneering novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764).

Whilst Walpole's novel displaced its medieval horrors to a fantasised southern Italy, its counterparts of the 1840s had frequently begun to take London as their setting. It was in his illustrations to one such work, *Auriol* (1844-5) by (William) Harrison Ainsworth (1805-82), that Browne pioneered his dark technique. This unfinished novel was a full-blown supernatural gothic fantasy published in serial form as 'Revelations of London'. Ainsworth, who had been a close associate of Dickens in the 1830s, was not Browne's only client to be supplied with similar engravings. A further notable series were, for instance, provided for Charles Lever's *Roland Cashel* (1848-50). Browne was participating in the construction of what Robert Mighall has termed 'Urban Gothic', Writing with reference to G. M. W. Reynolds' *The Mysteries of London* (1844-8), Robert Mighall states that 'the Urban Gothic of Reynolds is a Gothic of the here and now, it dispenses with the exotic distancing devices associated with the earlier mode, and its principal terrors are localized, being confined to specific parts of the capital. These low-life locales, and the inhabitants germane to them, are in themselves objects of horror'.¹¹

The sense that the contemporary British city was a site, and sight, of terror and gloom was a sentiment that was shared by social progressives such as Dickens and by many of their ostensive opponents among the ranks of the socially conservative including the pioneering proponent of gothic architecture and Roman Catholicism A. W. N. Pugin (1812-52). These two apparently unlikely fellow-travellers came together, for example, in their intense dislike of expressions of early Victorian utilitarianism such as the workhouses being built in the wake of the New Poor Law (1834). Pugin saw architectural reform, linked to an institutional revival of Roman Catholicism, as the solution to the problems of the nation. Over a fifteen year period, beginning with the publication of the first edition of *Contrasts* in 1836 he became famous as the champion of revived gothic over classical building styles.¹² He believed that, for example, a newly constructed monastery inspired by fourteenth-century

¹¹ Robert Mighall, *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction: Mapping History's Nightmares* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 38.

¹² A.W. N. Pugin, *Contrasts, or a Parallel between the Noble Edifices of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries and Similar Buildings of the Present Day; Shewing the Present Decay of Taste* (Salisbury: Pugin, 1836) (2nd ed. 1841).

models would provide the best means for distributing essential philanthropic aid to the poor. He directly *contrasted* such a vision with that of utilitarian planning the aim of which was to make poor houses as unpleasant as possible so that only those in extreme need would resort to them. Those passing inside the classical portico of such a place were, in his depiction, entering a brutal prison where they would be subject to chains and the whip and where their corpse would find due utility for use in the training of medical students. (Fig. 1) The desire of those instituting the system to strike a balance between fostering self-reliance and managing welfare expenditure was condemned as horrifically uncharitable and un-Christian.

Remarkably it was not only Roman Catholics who felt the lure of a monastic solution to the problem of poor relief, for this was an extraordinary moment when medieval revivalism was being taken seriously by thinkers of a wide range of positions in society as an alternative to free-market capitalism. For example, in the first section - the 'Proem' - to *Past and Present* (1843), Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) recounts both a visit to a workhouse in St. Ives, Cambridgeshire and to the attractive ruins of the nearby Abbey of St. Edmund in Suffolk. He wrote of the inmates of the former locale that:

In the eyes and brows of these men hung the gloomiest expression, not of anger, but of grief and shame and manifold inarticulate distress and weariness; they returned my glance with a glance that seemed to say, 'Do not look at us. We sit enchanted here...' There was something that reminded me of Dante's Hell in the look of all this.¹³

It is important to point out that Carlyle was interested in monasteries at this point because he envisioned them as places of masculine discipline and industry. Since work was a divine duty, ordained in the Bible, he was horrified to find that the poor house system appeared to render the poor into a state of apathy and hopelessness.¹⁴ This does not mean that he was an unprincipled defender of the factory system of production but rather wished to improve it

¹³ Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1843), p. 2. See also Richard Schoch, "'We do Nothing but Enact History": Thomas Carlyle Stages the Past', *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 54:1 (1999), pp. 27-52, at p. 36, and Patrick J. Welch, 'Thomas Carlyle on Utilitarianism', *History of Political Economy* 38:2 (2006), pp. 377-89, at p. 381.

¹⁴ Coline Cruise, 'Building men, Constructing Images', *Oxford Art Journal* 19:2 (1996), pp. 116-9.

through instilling a shared Christian work ethic as a result of which men would toil gladly and their employers not seek greedily to profit as a result.¹⁵

Therefore, in their different ways, and with more or less interest in architectural form, Pugin and Carlyle shared a strong distaste for the amoral operations of contemporary capitalism. Their respective Catholic and Protestant forms of moral didacticism were equally repugnant to the Dickens, but he was equally critical of what he saw as the utilitarian adulation of mechanical production and of statistical tabulation as the route to the greatest happiness for the greatest number. He made this very clear, for instance, in his account of the utilitarian wooing between Josiah Bounderby and Louisa Gradgrind in *Hard Times*:

Love was made on these occasions in the form of bracelets; and, on all occasions during the period of betrothal, took a manufacturing aspect. Dresses were made, jewellery was made, cakes and gloves were made, settlements were made... The hours did not go through any of those rosy performances, which foolish poets have ascribed to them at such times; neither did the clocks go any faster, or any slower than at other seasons. The deadly statistical recorder in the Gradgrind observatory knocked every second on the head as it was born, and buried it with accustomed regularity.¹⁶

Pugin was keen to distinguish what he presented as the moral probity of his designs in the gothic style which, he believed, were directly inspired by faith, from those of his competitors which were the result of calculations of financial return and personal self-esteem. It is notable, therefore, that in Browne's illustrations to *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-4) the framed drawings on the walls of the architect Mr. Pecksniff evoke precisely the lack of scruple and jobbing amorality that Pugin decried in *Contrasts*.¹⁷ Not only that, but it may be

¹⁵ Welch, 'Thomas Carlyle', p. 379.

¹⁶ Charles Dickens, 'Hard Times: Chapter 15', *Household Words* 9:14 (1854), p. 313.

¹⁷ Jeremy Tambling, 'Martin Chuzzlewit: Dickens and Architecture', *English* 48 (1999), pp. 147-68, at pp. 149 and 154; Rosemary Hill, *God's Architect: Pugin and the Building of Romantic Britain* (London: Allen Lane, 2007), p. 541, note 1 and Janes, 'The Gothic Arousal', pp. 325-41. Joseph H. Gardner, 'Pecksniff's Profession: Boz, Phiz and Pugin', *Dickensian* 72:2 (1976), pp. 75-86, at p. 78, points out that Browne was highly familiar with contemporary architectural illustration. He had been worked, for instance on *Winkles*

no co-incidence that Pecksniff's country house is placed outside Salisbury where Pugin lived at his St Mary's Grange and that when Pugin's recent publications were reviewed thoughts were apt to turn to Pecksniff, notably because the two built little and took abundant fees from students.¹⁸ Despite this, there is no evidence that Dickens showed enthusiasm for taking sides in the architectural 'battle of the styles' that Pugin had done so much to foment as a result of his incendiary critique of classicism.¹⁹ Nevertheless, Dickens' famous image of the harsh realities of the workhouse in *Oliver Twist* (1837-9) is of a piece with the horrible scenes that Pugin draw around his representation of a panoptical house for the poor.²⁰

So if Dickens failed to identify with Pugin's advocacy of the gothic style and the Roman Catholic Church as solutions to British social malaise he did share the architect's ability to project buildings built in the supposedly 'rational' classical style as locales of horror in the mode popularised in gothic novels. Thus we are meant to thrill with fear on imagining the neglected Florence all alone in her father's house in *Dombey and Son* (1846-8), a house so gloomy that it was a 'dark gap in the long monotonous street' where the walls looked down on her 'with a vacant stare, as if they had a gorgon-like mind to stare her youth and beauty into stone.'²¹ The image of the Gorgon is, quite literally, the epitome of classical nightmare. In a similar manner Carlyle's nightmare vision of a poor house was of a new institutional complex in the classical style. The St Ives Union workhouse was built in 1837-8. It was designed by William T. Nash of Royston on a courtyard plan with rows of round-arched windows.²² If the conjecture is correct that *Oliver Twist* (1837-9) was inspired by

Architectural and Picturesque Illustrations of the Cathedral Churches of England and Wales (1836-42).

¹⁸ W. H. Leeds, 'Architectural Revival and Puginism', *Westminster Review* 28 (1843), pp. 593-605, at p. 602.

¹⁹ See Bernard Porter, *The Battle of the Styles: Society, Culture and the Design of a New Foreign Office, 1855-61* (London: Continuum, 2011).

²⁰ See Janet Semple, *Bentham's Prison: A Study of the Panopticon Penitentiary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) and Peter M. Stokes, 'Bentham, Dickens and the Uses of the Workhouse', *SEL: Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 41:4 (2001), pp. 711-27.

²¹ Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son* (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1848), p. 226.

²² Kathryn Morrison, *The Workhouse: A Study of Poor Law Buildings in England* (Swindon: Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England, 1999), pp. 57-8. See also Workers' Educational Association Eastern District, *In and Out of the Workhouse: The*

Cleveland St. Workhouse in Camden in north London, then Dickens was also gothically inspired by similar architecture.²³ As Martin Tropp has argued in his book *Images of Fear* (1990) workhouses were ‘places that came close to recreating the Gothic castle that dominated the fictional landscape fifty years before.’²⁴ Architectural historians have, perhaps, been sufficiently distracted by the battles over the styles of building commissions that they have not paid enough attention to the popular reception of certain nineteenth-century buildings. After all, the serried rounded arched recesses of the windows of the St. Ives workhouse conjured up to Carlyle much the same sense of foreboding as the serried pointed arches of a gothic abbey might once have done in the eighteenth century.

The period from the 1840s to the 1850s saw, arguably, the height of the creative collaboration between Dickens and Browne. Those years also saw the publication of a series of novels which drew powerfully on images of darkness, evil and terror. In order to respond to this mood of seriousness Browne designed many of his illustrations as moody and (literally) dark compositions that emphasised the bleakness of haunted-looking spaces rather than intimacy associated with satirical depictions of characters from the novels. This style first came into prominence two-thirds of the way through the process of serial publication of *Bleak House*. Browne had previously used his dark style for one illustration (‘On the Dark Road’) in *Dombey and Son* (1846-8) and for another in *David Copperfield* (1849-50, ‘The River’, see below) but it was only with *Bleak House* that Browne was impelled – and Dickens would support him – to produce a series of nine plates in this style apart from the frontispiece.²⁵ The architectural focus of *Bleak House* is, of course, signalled by its title. It is deeply concerned with the disastrous effect of antiquated institutions, particularly the law, on a series of interlinked families. It features a series of bleak houses which echo, with various degrees of intensity, the horror that hangs about the original Bleak House. This had once been known as ‘The Peaks’ before it was renamed by Tom Jarndyce who was to blow his brains

Coming of the New Poor Law to Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire (Ely: EARO, 1978).

My thanks to Elizabeth McKellar for advice on Georgian architecture.

²³ See Ruth Richardson, *Dickens and the Workhouse: Oliver Twist and the London Poor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 300-1

²⁴ Martin Tropp, *Images of Fear: How Horror Stories Helped Shape Modern Culture, 1818-1918* (Jefferson: McFarland, 1990), p. 81.

²⁵ Valerie Browne Lester, *Phiz: The Man who Drew Dickens* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2004), p. 151

out in despair at the intractable nature of his legal difficulties. Yet the relative warmth of the Jarndyce family meant that the building remained to some degree one of the least bleak of the novel's bleak houses.²⁶ This helps to explain why the decidedly bleak frontispiece of *Bleak House* is actually of the aristocratic Dedlocks's mansion Chesney Wold, a house that externally hovers somewhere between Elizabethan and Jacobean in style. For Michael Steig the effect of this illustration is 'one of ambiguous unpleasantness, loneliness, sterility, the lack of human connection are all suggested'.²⁷

Key themes that this and later images in this style bring out are the alleged indifference of the rich to the poor; associations of the aristocracy with death and the lower classes with the struggles of life. It is striking that this dark style was used to depict the wealthy environment of Chesney Wold where a more conventional approach based on line-drawing might simply show a grand if lifeless dwelling. Dickens apparently signalled this visual mode in chapter two of the novel when he wrote that 'the view from my Lady Dedlock's own windows is alternately a lead-coloured view, and a view in Indian ink' (*BH* 56). Browne's engraving, 'Sunset in the Long Drawing Room at Chesney Wold', manages to evoke a gothic and sinister gloom in what might otherwise appear to be a luxurious interior in the classical style. It is thus in consonance with Dickens' text:

But the fire of the sun is dying. Even now the floor is dusky, and shadow slowly mounts the walls, bringing the [portraits of the] Dedlocks down like age and death. And now, upon my Lady's picture over the great chimney-piece, a weird shade falls from some old tree, that turns it pale, and flutters it, and looks as if a great arm held a veil or hood, watching an opportunity to draw it over her... the woods settle into great masses as if they were each one profound tree. And now the moon rises to separate them, and to glimmer here and there in horizontal lines behind their stems, and to make the avenue a pavement of light among high cathedral arches fantastically broken (*BH* 621).

Arboreal arches are depicted by Browne not as pointed but as rounded to illustrate the point at the end of the novel where Dickens describes Lady Dedlock's mausoleum as standing

²⁶ Alice van Buren Kelley, 'The Bleak Houses of *Bleak House*', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 25:3 (1970), pp. 253-68, at pp. 256 and 263.

²⁷ Steig, *Dickens and Phiz*, p. 157.

‘where the trees arch darkly overhead’ (*BH* 928). (Fig. 2) The style of this mausoleum is not described in the novel but Browne’s vision of it shows a baroque folly, illustrating the uncanny tendency of the classical style of mutate into what, to British taste, tended to appear to be decadent excess.²⁸ That this illustration was a self-conscious evocation of something horrific is implied by the sketch for this plate, now in the Free Library of Philadelphia, in the margins of which Browne has drawn three capering demons.²⁹ A number of the other dark plates of *Bleak House* focus upon the progress of Lady Dedlock to her death and show her overshadowed by rounded arches, some of which are presented as elements in classical architectural schemes (as in ‘Shadow’) and others which are simply artefacts of the decaying city (as in ‘The Morning’).

The cold and threatening presence of classical architecture in London itself is made explicit in the next Dickens novel that Browne illustrated, *Little Dorrit* (1855-7). This features eight dark plates. In ‘Little Dorrit’s Party’ we find her sheltering under the arched entrance to the Marshalsea Prison where she lives but from which she has been locked out. (Fig. 3) Eventually she is offered shelter by an official of the neighbouring church because she is on the charity list: ‘this was Little Dorrit’s party. The shame, desertion, wretchedness, and exposure, of the great capital; the wet, the cold, the slow hours, and the swift clouds of the dismal night’ (*LD* 171). Browne illustrates this scene by showing the form of a neo-classical church (depicted almost as dark as the prison) such as had been built after the Great Fire of London in 1666. The implication behind this scene is a denunciation of the Church of England for its scant charity and lack of human warmth. This was the sentiment that Dickens expressed when he criticised George Cruikshank’s *The Drunkard’s Children* (1848) for placing too much emphasis on personal weakness and not enough on institutional responsibility. Writing with reference to William Hogarth’s *Gin Lane*, a print of 1751 in which the distinctive neo-classical steeple of St. George’s, Bloomsbury, is visible in the distance, Dickens wrote that ‘the church is very prominent and handsome, but coldly surveys these things, in progress beneath the shadow of its tower... and is passive in the picture. We

²⁸ Jill Steward, ‘Performing Abroad: British Tourists in Italy and their Practices, 1840-1914’, in *Architecture and Tourism: Perception, Performance and Place*, eds D. Medina Lasansky and Brian McLaren (Oxford: Berg, 2004), pp. 53-73, at p. 58.

²⁹ Cohen, *Charles Dickens*, p. 113. See also John O. Jordan, *Supposing Bleak House* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), p. 152 and Michael Steig, *Dickens and Phiz*, p. 156.

take all this to have a meaning, and to the best of our knowledge it has not grown obsolete in a century.³⁰ In ‘Little Dorrit’s Party’ the three balls of a pawn-broker’s shop shown against the stone-work of the church in the form of an inverted cross imply the moral bankruptcy of the institution.³¹ The strange air of stultifying splendour and decay of the many city churches with their scanty congregations, as described by Dickens, is strikingly similar to the enervated atmosphere that he was at pains to evoke at Chesney Wold.³²

Mrs Clennam’s old house in the City of London is another example of a deathly classical structure as shown by Browne in ‘Damocles’. (Fig. 4) Dickens describes the house as being ‘an old brick house, so dingy as to be all but black, standing by itself within a gateway... It was a double house, with long, narrow, heavy-framed windows (*LD* 31-2). Its entrance door had ‘a projecting canopy in carved work, festooned jack towels and children’s heads with water on the brain, designed after a once popular monumental pattern’ (*LD* 32). These carved ornaments are likely to have been putti and swags of foliage such as were in fashion before the Building Acts of 1707 and 1709 attempted to clamp down on carved work as a danger for fire.³³ The villain Rigaud is shown sitting ‘upon the window-seat of the open window, in the old Marseilles-Jail attitude’ (*LD* 765) in which the reader had previously seen him depicted in prison in France at the beginning of the book (*LD* 2-3). (Fig. 5 and compare

³⁰ Charles Dickens, review, ‘Cruikshank, *The Drunkard’s Children*’, *Examiner*, 8 July 1848, p. 436. See the copy of the print in the Tate Gallery, London:

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hogarth-gin-lane-t01799>, together with Sambudha Sen, ‘*Bleak House, Vanity Fair, and the Making of an Urban Aesthetic*’, *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 54:4 (2000), pp. 480-502, at pp. 485-6.

³¹ Michael Steig, *Dickens and Phiz*, p. 165.

³² Many city churches were empty even on the Sabbath either because the poor were not going or, in some places, because they had been cleared out of the area by commercial redevelopment and in 1854 a proposal was even drawn up to demolish 29 churches in London; on all of which see *LD* 30, with Trey Philpotts, *The Companion to ‘Little Dorrit’* (Robertsbridge: Helm, 2003), p. 70, Mark A. Eslick, *Charles Dickens: Anti-Catholicism and Catholicism*, PhD dissertation (York: University of York, 2011), p. 131 and Nancy Aycock Metz, ‘*Little Dorrit’s* London: Babylon Revisited’, *Victorian Studies* 33.3 (1990), pp. 465-86, at p. 474.

³³ Philpotts, *The Companion to ‘Little Dorrit’*, p. 71.

Pugin's depiction of a cell, fig. 1, top right) The immediate Damoclean danger hanging over Rigaud's head is that of the imminent collapse of the building (*LD* 771-2).³⁴

Browne's cover design of the serial edition of the novel shows crumbling medieval architecture with Little Dorrit positioned at the centre under the entrance arch of the Marshalsea prison. But just as the Marshalsea in which Dickens' father was imprisoned was a new construction begun in 1811 in the course of a move away from the original medieval site, so the ancient institutions of England brought a stultifying darkness and decay to contemporary Britain even when they had been rehoused in classical architecture in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The framing role of the arch, be it rounded or pointed, as an expression of institutional control - of entrapment (shutting people in) or exclusion (shutting people out) - blurred the distinctions between architectural styles and emphasised by contrast, the importance of the moral vitality of the institutions that they housed. Dickens' novels of the 1850s were, therefore, not simply about institutions and architecture but also about who got to enter them or get out of them or see in and out. It is thus, perhaps, hardly surprising that Browne repeatedly employed arches as framing devices in his 'dark' illustrations to Dickens' works of this time.

However, it can be argued that the arch as containment device was of such importance that it did not simply play a role in the symbolic and visual expression of institutional power in these plates but it also informed their very form as artistic statements. This is clear from the very first use by Browne of the 'dark' technique to illustrate Dickens in 'The River' which presented the scene in *David Copperfield* (1849-50) where Martha is contemplating suicide:

As if she were a part of the refuse it had cast out, and left to corruption and decay, the girl we had followed strayed down to the river's brink, and stood in the midst of this *night-picture* [my emphasis], lonely and still, looking at the water.

There were some boats and barges astrand in the mud, and these enabled us to come within a few yards of her without being seen. I then signed to Mr. Peggotty to remain where he was, and emerged from their shade to speak to her. I did not approach her solitary figure without trembling; for this gloomy end to her determined

³⁴ Philpotts, *The Companion to 'Little Dorrit'*, p. 483. See also Mighall, *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction*, p. 115. And compare the falling buildings of Tom-All-Along's in *Bleak House*, on which see Pritchard, 'The Urban Gothic', p. 440.

walk, and the way in which she stood, almost within *the cavernous shadow of the iron bridge* [my emphasis], looking at the lights crookedly reflected in the strong tide, inspired a dread within me.³⁵

As with the pawn-broker's sign in 'Little Dorrit's Party' so the smeared-looking smoke-stacks on the horizon surrounding the dome of St. Paul's act as indictments of an institution that has failed to counteract the baleful aspects of contemporary life.³⁶

A working drawing of this scene is framed in a single line with an arched top, whereas the published version has no frame to the bottom or sides, but does retain a rough line forming an arch over the top. (Figs. 6 and 7) This indicates that Browne has taken pains to depict the 'cavernous shadow' but, in the final version to make the arch itself into the containing device of that darkness. By this means he avoided the criticism that Ruskin directed in a private letter towards Augustus Egg's handling of a very similar theme in his painting *Past and Present 3* (1858) which shows a homeless adulteress hiding under the arches of the neo-classical Adelphi by the Thames. Ruskin complained that in this painting the 'wretched vault of Waterloo bridge [sic] is impressive in the ghostly moonlight' as, for reasons of moral symbolism, he thought that it should not appear to be.³⁷ Browne managed to avoid the danger that an arched vault of a bridge might appear picturesque in such circumstances by eliding its material form but retaining its shape as a structure of visual constraint. In these various plates darkness and obscurity are repeatedly deployed in ways that refuse magnificence to classical designs in good repair or picturesque attractiveness to those crumbling into ruin.

Browne's dark plates, therefore, evoke an uncanny state of tension between the rigidity of ancient structures of visual and social control and their tendency to collapse and decay. One way to look at these images is to situate them not only in the context of a battle between the rival claims of classical and visual styles but also in relation to interactions between gothic and classical sensibilities. In a section of the catalogue that accompanied the exhibition *Gothic Nightmares: Fuseli, Blake and the Romantic Imagination*, held at the Tate

³⁵ Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, ed. Nina Burgis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 580. And see Steig, *Dickens and Phiz*, pp. 127-8.

³⁶ Michael Steig, *Dickens and Phiz*, p. 128.

³⁷ Quoted in John Lewis Bradley, 'An Unpublished Ruskin Letter', *Burlington Magazine* 100, no. 658 (1958), pp. 25-26, at p. 25.

Gallery in London in 2006, Martin Myrone presented what he termed ‘perverse classicism’. By this he referred to the way in which various artists depicted the twisting and bending of the heroic male body in states of confinement, repression and struggle in the context of the rising popularity of gothic horror narratives from the 1770s onward. One example he gives is the frontispiece to the first illustrated edition of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1831, original publication 1818). This was engraved by W. Chevalier after Theodor von Hulst (1810-44), an artist who lived in London and trained under Henry Fuseli before being admitted to the Royal academy schools and who exhibited widely. This plate, according to Myrone ‘plays to such Gothic trappings, setting the scene in a medieval chamber, strewn with skulls... The monster is, though, weirdly classical, even heroic in physique.’³⁸ The tracery of the window is also not straight-forwardly gothic in that it appears more like a thin screen such as might be seen in Islamic architecture and its arch is all but fully rounded. A distorting gothic sensibility, in the literary sense of that term, could, therefore, be applied in the middle decades of the nineteenth century to diverse styles of design and imagery.

Leona Toker has argued in her analysis of Dickens’ critique of utilitarianism that he feared any system that seemed to offer a single prescription for a perfect society, whether that was based on statistical analysis or blind faith. She also points out that it is hardly surprising that he was sceptical of the wilder claims of contemporary architects because, as she puts it, architecture is ‘the most Utopian of all arts’.³⁹ Thus he was directly opposed to the revivalist programme of giving new life to old buildings that had been put up in what he saw as the bad old days, either of the Middle Ages, or of Hanoverian corruption, and of putting up new ones in slavish imitation of them.⁴⁰ The long-standing nature of their collaboration strongly implies that these ideals were broadly in line with Browne’s feelings. Thus Browne’s dark plates do not denounce classical architecture on the grounds promoted by Pugin: namely that it was

³⁸ Martin Myrone, *Gothic Nightmares: Fuseli, Blake and the Romantic Imagination* (London: Tate, 2006), p. 71.

³⁹ Leona Toker, ‘*Hard Times* and a Critique of Utopia: A Typological Study’, *Narrative* 4:3 (1996), pp. 218-234, at p. 224.

⁴⁰ Rodney S. Edgecombe, ‘Anti-Clerical Gothic: The Tale of the Sisters in *Nicholas Nickleby*’, *Modern Language Review* 94:1 (1999), pp. 1-10, at p. 5 and Sue Zemka, ‘From the Punchmen to Pugin’s Gothics: The Broad Road to a Sentimental Death in *The Old Curiosity Shop*’, *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 48:3 (1993), pp. 291-309, at p. 302.

somehow inherently ‘pagan’ and foreign to British soil.⁴¹ Nor do these illustrations propose classical architecture as inherently deficient because of alleged insufficiencies as a functional style of design.⁴² What these dark illustrations show is a fear of institutional torpor which could be read from architectural forms that evoked heartless ugliness.⁴³ Moreover, to the extent that satirical elements are displaced in these illustrations it would seem that Dickens and his illustrator were deliberately attempting to resist the blunting of the moral message by evoking the novelist’s habitual attraction to things repulsive.⁴⁴ This helps us to understand why darkness repeatedly engulfs the buildings in Browne’s dark illustrations. Pugin and his fellow travellers may not have convinced the likes of Dickens that a gothic revival was a necessity for Britain, but they did contribute to a mood in mid-Victorian Britain that was willing to hold a supposedly cold and unfeeling classicism to moral account. In the process the gothic literary imagination continued to liberate itself from reliance on gothic visual settings and came uncannily to haunt modernity itself as perhaps is only appropriate in a new century that has seen the return of economic inequality on a scale that Browne and Dickens both parodied and feared.

⁴¹ Corinna M. Wagner, “‘Standing Proof of the Degeneracy of Modern Times’: Architecture, Society, and the Medievalism of AWN Pugin”, in *Beyond Arthurian Romances: The Reach of Victorian Medievalism*, eds Jennifer A. Palmgren and Lorretta M. Holloway (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 9-38, at p. 15. Note, however, that opponents of Pugin were busily abroad accusing Catholicism of being the institution that had brought the taint of idolatrous pagan worship into the Church, as I discuss in Dominic Janes, *Victorian Reformation: The Fight over Idolatry in the Church of England, 1840-1860* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 97-111.

⁴² Wagner, “‘Standing Proof’”, p. 22.

⁴³ James A. Schmiechen, ‘The Victorians, the Historians, and the Idea of Modernism’, *American Historical Review* 93:2 (1988), pp. 287-316, at p. 294.

⁴⁴ Unlike, for instance, in his responses to objects and buildings in Italy; see Dominic Janes ‘Dickens and the Catholic corpse’, in *Dickens and Italy: ‘Little Dorrit’ and ‘Pictures from Italy’*, eds Michael Hollington and Francesca Orestano (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2009), pp. 170-85 and Mark Eslick, ‘Architectural Anxieties: Dickens’s *Pictures from Italy*’, *English* 61 winter (2012), pp. 354-64.

