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## BIRDS OF PREY: A STUDY OF OUR MUTUAL FRIEND

The secret of gold Midas, which he with his long ears never could discover, was, That he had offended the Supreme Powers;—that he had parted company with the eternal inner Facts of this Universe, and followed the transient outer Appearances thereof; and so was arrived *here*. Properly it is the secret of all unhappy men and unhappy nations. Had they known Nature's right truth, Nature's right truth would have made them free. They have become enchanted; stagger spell-bound, reeling on the brink of huge peril, because they were not wise enough. They have forgotten the right Inner True, and taken up with the Outer Sham true.

(Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present*)

*Our Mutual Friend* is Dickens' last completed novel. As a vision of society it reflects the sombre opinions that he had formed concerning the condition of England. As a work of art it reveals the skill in organic structure that distinguishes his late novels. Inspired by the government's confusion and red-tape during the Crimean campaign and by its resistance to the Administrative Reform Movement, Dickens' symbols of England in *Little Dorrit* were the labyrinth and the upside-down universe. Since that time he had witnessed no encouraging change in the social order. Particularly distressing to him was the conviction that any connection between government and people was purely imaginary: "The People is altogether an abstraction to them; a Great Baby."<sup>1</sup> In several articles for *Household Words* he elaborates this view. In "Where Are They?" (*HW*, 1/4/54) he reflects on the amazing array of people who make up society but whom one never detects about one, for "how are we to tell any one man from another . . . by his dress alone?". In "That Other Public" (*HW*, 3/2/55) he enlarges the idea, exploring the public's belief that possessing all the right principles of action itself it is nevertheless hindered by the inertia and muddle of "the public", that is, an imaginary public that foolishly permits all the corruption in government and big business. In "The Great Baby" (*HW*, 4/8/55) he dwells ironically on the government's inability to come to grips with the public it supposedly represents. And "as to the popular spirit", he writes

to Forster, "it has come to be so entirely separated from the Parliament and Government, and so perfectly apathetic about them both, that I seriously think it a most portentous sign."<sup>2</sup> To Macready he writes, "I do reluctantly believe that the English people are habitually consenting parties to the miserable imbecility into which we have fallen, and never will help themselves out of it."<sup>3</sup> In 1857 he believes "representative Government . . . a miserable failure among us"<sup>4</sup>; and, when asked to stand for an uncontested seat in the House of Commons, he replies, "No consideration would induce me to become a Member of that amazing institution."<sup>5</sup>

In the years until his death, he observed, and in *All The Year Round* exposed to continuous satire, another source of despair, the chicanery of big business, especially of joint-stock banks and companies and of construction swindles. "Going Into Business" (*AYR*, May 13, 20, 27, 1865) is a characteristic series about a Greek capitalist who with three hundred pounds establishes a joint-stock company with three branches in London, Smyrna, and Odessa. The branches draw upon each other to the extent of forty thousand pounds at a time, and use the fictitious money to buy shares in other companies until eventually the whole enterprise collapses.

*Our Mutual Friend* is the artistic outcome of Dickens' view of his society in these years. The two main themes apparent in the criticisms just referred to are, first, that social and political relationships are fantastically unreal, and second, that absence of regulation has allowed commercial rapacity on a huge scale. The book's symbolism gives a forceful and concrete form to these ideas. Sinister unreality is evident in a host of disguises adopted by the various characters, and rapacity, chiefly in the form of scavenging, is the novel's central motif. The expert manipulation of these motifs makes of *Our Mutual Friend*, in spite of the deficiencies in humour that critics find in it, a good example of Dickens' late style.

The atmosphere of *Our Mutual Friend* is adapted to the predators that infest it. When Mr. Pickwick set out for the farm at Dingley Dell, it was on "the wet of afternoon that might induce a couple of elderly gentlemen, in a lonely field, to take off their great-coats and play at leap-frog in pure lightness of heart and gaiety" (380).<sup>6</sup> But the characters of *Our Mutual Friend* live in a different world. They prowl a dank and gloomy labyrinth over-shadowed by refuse heaps, where humanity at times seems "like so much moral sewage, and to be pausing until its own weight forced it over the bank and sunk it in the river" (20-1). London, as the final chapter heading in Book The First indicates, is "A Dismal Swamp" full of "all manner of crawling, creeping, fluttering, and buzzing creatures" (29). Character after character is a bird, a beast, or a fish of prey in this swamp.

Many seek the "gold dust of the Golden Dustman," Boffin, but beyond Boffin's sphere other predators ravage the financial, political, and social worlds in all directions. Beginning the book, Dickens had written to Forster: "I see my opening perfectly, with the one main line on which the story is to turn."<sup>7</sup> The opening for this main line is the initial scene of Gaffer Hexam, with his resemblance to "a roused bird of prey" (3), hungrily searching the Thames' murky waters for corpses. His rival in this old, established profession (See Mayhew's conversation with a river-finder<sup>8</sup>) is Rogue Riderhood, himself a "vermin . . . water rat" (170), who compliments Hexam on his vulture-like success (4). The main line that develops from this scene is one in which scavengers, parasites, and vermin appear at every turn. The drowned man is mistaken for the heir to the Harmon inheritance, the fortune of "a tremendous old rascal who made his money by Dust" (13), that is, by collecting, sorting out, and selling the garbage of London.<sup>9</sup> The dust heap, a central symbol, is literally filthy lucre, and beasts of prey are poised all around it.

Chief among the predators lying by to drag its custodian, Mr. Boffin, under is Wegg, "a ligneous sharper" (53). He hovers about Boffin's Bower "like some extinct bird" (213). Unable to read himself, but feeling that his new status calls for more education, Boffin hires Wegg, a seller of street ballads and therefore literary, as tutor: "A literary man—with a wooden leg—and all Print is open to him!" (49). Boffin having stated his preference, "some fine bold reading, some splendid book . . . as'll reach right down your pint of view, and take time to go by you," and Wegg having grandly observed, "You couldn't show me the piece of English print, that I wouldn't be equal to collaring and throwing" (50), they settle down to a work appropriately challenging—Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. In the Memo Book from which he culled ideas for *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens had written: "Gibbon's Decline and Fall. The two characters. One reporting to the other as he reads. Both getting confused as to whether it is not all going on now."<sup>10</sup> Boffin feels a touch of this confusion: "Wegg takes it easy, but upon-my-soul to a old bird like myself these are scarers. And even now that Commodious is strangled, I don't see a way to our bettering ourselves" (60). The point of the allusions to Gibbon, of course, is that England, the dismal swamp full of sharks and alligators and vultures, is poised for the fall itself.

Consider the financial world in which the Veneerings, the Lammies, and Podsnap live like parasites on the profits of shares:

As is well known to the wise in their generation, traffic in Shares is the one thing to have to do with in this world. Have no antecedents, no established character, no con-

vation, no ideas, no manners; have Shares. Have Shares enough to be on Boards of Direction in capital letters, oscillate on mysterious business between London and Paris, and be great. Where does he come from? Shares. Where is he going to? Shares. What are his tastes? Shares. Has he any principles? Shares. What squeezes him into Parliament? Shares. Perhaps he never of himself achieved success in anything, never originated anything, never produced anything! Sufficient answer to all; Shares. O mighty Shares! To set those blaring images so high, and to cause us smaller vermin, as under the influence of henbane or opium, to cry out night and day. 'Relieve us of our money, scatter it for us, buy us and sell us, ruin us, only we beseech ye take rank among the powers of the earth, and fatten on us' (114).

Here is the image of the scavenger generalized and applied to society as a whole. Seek a sharper focus, and we find the Lammles, husband and wife, each marrying the other under false pretenses to acquire a fortune, each deceived and agreeing to work with the other to prey on the rest of society: "We have both been biting, and we have both been bitten. In a nut-shell, there's the state of the case" (125). Their first prey is Georgiana Podsnap, whom they undertake to marry to Fascination Fledgeby if he pays them a thousand pounds. Fascination Fledgeby, "the meanest cur existing, with a single pair of legs" (268), is another predator, a usurer who employs a kindly and amiable Jew to belabour his clients. While playing upon their anti-semitic prejudices and publicly reviling the Jew for carrying out his own commands, he pretends to plead on the clients' behalf. And "every bargain, by representing somebody's ruin or somebody's loss, acquired a peculiar charm for him" (271). But he and the Lammles are not the only parasites on the marriage market. Bella Wilfer openly declares her intention to marry for money: "I can't beg it, borrow it, or steal it," she says, "and so I have resolved that I must marry it" (320). Her greed causes Boffin too to behave like a miser with the intent of making avarice disgust her. He studies the lives of famous misers, and speaks, of servants for example, like Fledgeby himself: "You must either scrunch them, or let them scrunch you" (464).<sup>11</sup>

Overwhelmed by this ravaging crew, one might tend to forget the humorist in Dickens, and indeed the humour itself is rather grim. But it too is intrinsic to the theme. In the character of Mr. Venus we have a sombrelly comic parody of the scavenging theme, for Mr. Venus, lovesick Mr. Venus, is an articulator of human bones. Besides dead birds, frogs, alligators and so on, he collects what he calls "human wariou", bits of human anatomy from the hospitals, and builds them into skeletons for students. His friendship with Wegg is struck up when Wegg, having become Boffin's literary gentleman, comes to inquire about his own amputated leg:

I shouldn't like—I tell you openly I should not like—under such circumstances, to be what I may call dispersed, a part of me here, and a part of me there, but should wish to collect myself like a genteel person. (82)

Wegg's rising in the world leaves Venus unimpressed, for as he says, "I'm not only first in the trade, but I'm *the* trade." And he continues pleasantly,

Mr. Wegg, if you was brought here loose in a bag to be articulated, I'd name your smallest bones blindfold equally with your largest, as fast as I could pick 'em out, and I'd sort 'em all, and sort your vertebrae, in a manner that would equally surprise and charm you. (83)

Unfortunately, Mr. Venus has troubles in love. "She objects to the business . . . She knows the profits of it, but she don't appreciate the art of it, and she objects to it" (84). Perhaps this is why Venus repents and discloses Wegg's schemes in the end. For Venus too has seen worldly wealth as dust:

A man climbs to the top of the tree, Mr. Wegg, only to see that there's no look-out when he's up there! I sit here of a night surrounded by the lovely trophies of my art, and what have they done for me? Ruined me. Brought me to the pass of being informed that "she does not wish to regard herself, nor yet to be regarded, in that bony light!" (84).

On all levels, and whether the tone is comic or grim, the central image of the scavenger dominates *Our Mutual Friend*. All the details are attuned to it in a structure which, if it lacks linear clarity and sparseness, is nevertheless an organic unity.

We saw, however, that Dickens was concerned with the bewilderingly illusory nature of society as well as its rapacity. This concern manifests itself in the novel in a subordinate device, a series of disguises. Few people are just what they seem; one character's function is simply to reveal puzzlement, and another cannot see what he is doing or why. The germ of this theme of the impostor is found in a letter to Forster in 1861:

I think a man, young and perhaps eccentric, feigning to be dead, and *being* dead to all intents and purposes external to himself, and for years retaining the singular view of life and character so imparted, would be a good leading incident for a story . . . A poor impostor of a man marrying a woman for her money; she marrying *him* for *his* money; after marriage both finding out their mistake, and entering into a league and covenant against folks in general: with whom I propose to connect some Perfectly New people. Everything new about them. If they presented a father and mother, it seemed as if THEY must be bran new, like the furniture and carriages—shining with varnish, and just home from the manufacturers.<sup>12</sup>

John Harmon, the Lammies, and the Veneerings are the characters who arise from

this speculation, and their common quality is pretence. Another reason for the grouping here is that these characters represent three levels of thematic development. Harmon is at the book's centre; he maintains his disguise not merely to spy out the legal and financial arrangements touching his fortune but rather to become acquainted with and consult the feelings of the woman who is to marry him without having known him; and to become acquainted with the Boffins, who are entrusted with the fortune. In Harmon, in other words, Dickens develops the effects of money on an individual character. The disguise is adopted charitably, and its purpose involves a sharpened critical awareness, both in Harmon and the reader, of everyone concerned with the fortune. At the other extreme of development are the Veneerings, not full individuals with complex motives that we can explore, but rather, as their name suggests, a veneer, a thin, adopted surface which Dickens uses to represent social attitudes: it is at the Veneerings' that "The Voice of Society" is canvassed in the second and last chapters of the book. Whereas Harmon occupies the foreground as an individual, the Veneerings occupy the background and help to figure forth a panorama of society at large. Between these two levels are the Lammles, adopting their disguise like the Veneerings for the purpose of personal gain, moving between the vague world of their social gatherings of "the Member, the Engineer, the Payer-off of the National Debt, the Poem on Shakespeare, the Grievance, and the Public Office" (7), and the fully developed world of the Boffins in the foreground.

Veneering's role as an impostor typical of his times is made clear in the chapter describing his election to Parliament, "A Piece of Work". Charlatanism and bribery combine to enable Veneering to play at being a member:

Britannia, sitting meditating one fine day (perhaps in the attitude in which she is represented on the copper coinage), discovers all of a sudden that she wants Veneering in Parliament. It occurs to her that Veneering is a 'representative man'—which cannot in these times be doubted—and that Her Majesty's faithful Commons are incomplete without him. So Britannia mentions to a legal gentleman of her acquaintance that if Veneering will 'put down' five thousand pounds, he may write a couple of initial letters after his name at the extremely cheap rate of two thousand five hundred per letter. It is clearly understood between Britannia and the legal gentleman that nobody is to take up the five thousand pounds, but that being put down they will disappear by magical conjuration and enchantment (244).

Veneering's opinions are identical with those of whomever he happens to talk to, but it matters little, since to be elected "nothing is understood to be so effectual as scouring nowhere in a violent hurry — in short, as taking cabs and going about",

though, of course, as Lady Tippins observes, Veneering "can only consent to be brought in by the spontaneous thingummies of the incorruptible whatdoyoucallums" (250). Boots and Brewer do the scouring in a way that gives comic life to the play-acting:

In these inspiring moments, Brewer strikes out an idea which is the great hit of the day. He consults his watch, and says (like Guy Fawkes), he'll now go down to the House of Commons and see how things look.

'I'll keep about the lobby for an hour or so,' says Brewer with a deeply mysterious countenance, 'and if things look well, I won't come back, but will order my cab for nine in the morning.'

'You couldn't do better,' says Podsnap.

Veneering expresses his inability to acknowledge this last service. Tears stand in Mrs. Veneering's affectionate eyes. Boots shows envy, loses ground, and is regarded as possessing a second-rate mind . . . and Mr. Podsnap says, 'Mark my words, sir. That's a man of resource; that's a man to make his way in life.' (251)

Veneering's career is an illustration of sham in the business world as well as in government. His rise to power in the drug business is signalled by a flush of veneer: plate glass window, French-polished mahogany, and a gleaming, enormous door-plate (33). Ultimately he 'over-jobs his jobberies' and is forced to retire to France to live on Mrs. Veneering's diamonds. Throughout the book Twemlow's function is to reflect bewilderment at Veneering's layers of veneer: "Mr. Twemlow had said to himself in his lodgings, with his hand to his forehead: 'I must not think of this. This is enough to soften any man's brain,'—and yet was always thinking of it, and could never form a conclusion" (7).

Veneering is a 'representative man', so we ought to expect the shams and mysteries that exist everywhere. John Harmon has two aliases, Julius Handford and John Rokesmith. The Lammles "have both been deceiving and . . . both been deceived" (125). Wegg is both literary man and sharper, who would like "a cut of invisibility in which to walk off safely with the precious stones and watch-cases" of Clerkenwell (77). Fascination Fledgeby masks his vicious greed by making Riah its agent. Eugene and Mortimer are lawyers but have so few cases that Young Blight, their clerk, invents imaginary clients: "Mr. Aggs, Mr. Baggs, Mr. Caggs, Mr. Daggs, Mr. Faggs, Mr. Gaggs": for "his mind would have been shattered to pieces without this fiction of an occupation" (86-7). Circumlocution is necessarily an important activity in this world. Miss Podsnap's birthday may be celebrated but, because of its biological connotations, not mentioned. And when Eugene and Jenny, the doll's dressmaker, talk of his plans to educate Lizzie Hexam, he makes light of his actual intentions, or refuses to face them, by talking of dolls:

'I think of setting up a doll, Miss Jenny,' he said.  
 'You had better not,' replied the dressmaker.  
 'Why not?'  
 'You are sure to break it. All children do.' (238)

Everywhere one looks one meets dissimulation.

Confusion about character exists not only between the various agents, however, but within the individual consciousness contemplating itself. Eugene is unquestionably the most absorbing character in the book. It is he rather than Our Mutual Friend, John Harmon, who engaged Dickens' interest. If we except the unfinished portrait of John Jasper, Eugene is the last of a series of characters reflecting Dickens' own temper. From the bumptious confidence of Nicholas Nickleby, to the vague distress, the sense of an "old unhappy loss or want of something" that afflicts David Copperfield, to the paralysed will of Arthur Clennam, there is a steady progression in the novels toward Eugene Wrayburn. Eugene and Mortimer remind K. J. Fielding of Wilde; he sees them as "a pallid, mid-Victorian Algy and Jack. Eugene actually goes Bunburying and is reproached by his friend for not being earnest."<sup>13</sup> But this is to mistake the tone and Dickens' intention. In his Memo Book we find the following hint of Eugene's role:

As to the question whether I, Eugene, lying ill and sick even unto death, may be considered by the representation that coming through this illness, I shall begin a new life, and have energy and purpose and all I have yet wanted: *I hope* I should, but *I know* I shouldn't. Let me die, my dear.<sup>14</sup>

The novel obviously begins with this conception in view. Eugene is gloomy, indolent, listless, a man who is bored with life and with himself:

You know that when I became enough of a man to find myself an embodied conundrum, I bored myself to the last degree by trying to find out what I meant. You know that at length I gave it up, and declined to guess anymore. Then how can I possibly give you the answer that I have not discovered? (286).

He drifts even towards seduction without any definite intention. Eugene's literary kinship is as much with Chekov's Ivanov as with Algy. "My will seems to be paralyzed by a kind of stupor," says Ivanov. "I can't understand myself or anyone else." In his vague passivity, to Eugene as to Ivanov, action is pointless: "I am a ridiculous fellow. Everything is ridiculous" (166). Though he is a more important figure, his function in the novel is somewhat similar to Twemlow's, drawing our attention to the confusion of this world. For as Twemlow registers continual amazement at the bewildering illusions of a world of dissimulation, Eugene em-



bodies the consequences of life in such an environment. Intelligent enough to perceive its absurdity, he becomes so cynically detached that his life is as futile as that which it denies. Moreover, in his gloomy lassitude and indifference, he drifts toward becoming a predator himself, so that Mortimer finds his intentions towards Lizzie a matter of serious concern. Disillusioned, despairing of the world about him and of a certain desolation within himself, Eugene bears the same relation to the novel's world as Dickens does to his own.

*Our Mutual Friend* is a study of the havoc wrought on character in an acquisitive society. The emphasis on character is important. Admitting that the chief recurrent symbol, the dust heaps, keeps before us "the dust and ashes of all misdirected human effort in a society in which true values have been distorted by an all-pervading greed for money", K. J. Fielding argues nevertheless that

We are not allowed to forget that the golden-haired Boffin also helped to build them up, that he inherits them, and that they are passed on to Bella Wilfer and the miser's son with the evident approval of the author. If any deduction is to be drawn from this ending it is that there is no objection to inheriting wealth without working for it, and that it is only wrong for a man like old Harmon to build it up by providing an honest service to the community. This is obviously absurd.<sup>15</sup>

Absurd it is, but essentially because Fielding's *reductio ad absurdum* of the pattern of suggestion is itself perverse. The important question is not whether or not the miser's son worked for the money, but what his attitude to it is. Old Harmon provided an honest service, but he was still "a tremendous old rascal" (13) who used his money as a weapon. Quite correctly, Orwell suggests that Dickens' target "is not so much society as 'human nature'".<sup>16</sup> Like Carlyle and Arnold and Ruskin, Dickens is aware that the only reform capable of curing the ills he is concerned with is a moral regeneration within the individual character. Rather than furnish a plan for reorganizing society, Dickens is content to show what society, in its individual members, is like. To this end he does two things: he presents a host of characters wrought in the imagery of scavenging; secondly, he presents a host of impostors—even beneficent action calls for disguise. The skill with which he weaves his recurrent images and suggestions into an organic unit makes *Our Mutual Friend* an excellent example of his final technique.

#### NOTES

1. Dickens, "The Great Baby", *Household Words*, 4/8/55.
2. Dickens, *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Walter Dexter (London, 1938), II, 622, Forster, 3/2/55.

3. *Ibid.*, II, 695, Macready, 4/10/55.
4. *Ibid.*, II, 838, Paxton, 1/3/57.
5. *Ibid.*, II, 840, Prynne, 14/3/57.
6. Page references are to the New Oxford Illustrated Dickens edition (London, 1953).
7. Dickens, *Letters*, III, 364, Forster, —/10/63.
8. Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor* (London, 1861-62), II, 147-50. Dickens might have derived Hexam's hatred of learning from Mayhew's description of the defiant ignorance of dredgers.
9. An account of the business may be found in Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, II, 166-79, and two more in *Household Words*: "Dust", 13/7/50 and "A Suburban Connemara", 8/3/51.
10. Dickens, *Letters*, III, 187.
11. Dickens had one of Boffin's principal texts, Merryweather's *Lives and Anecdotes of Misers*, in his own library. See J. H. Stonehouse, *Catalogue of the Libraries of Charles Dickens and William Makepeace Thackeray* (London, 1935).
12. Dickens, *Letters*, III, 271, Forster, —/—/61.
13. K. J. Fielding, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Introduction* (London, 1958), 186.
14. Dickens, *Letters*, III, 787.
15. K. J. Fielding, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Introduction*, 189.
16. George Orwell, *Inside the Whale and Other Essays* (London, 1940), 13.