

## Millais, Dickens and the ‘idea’ of a picture

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*One of the earliest works Millais painted under the new Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood banner was later known as Christ in the House of His Parents (1848-9), first exhibited in the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition of 1850. It created a critical furore, one of the most virulent attacks coming from Dickens in Old Lamps for New Ones. Dickens is clearly enjoying himself, a rollicking piece of knockabout journalism. Is it worth taking seriously? I want to argue in this article that it is, partly for the light it sheds on Dickens’s attitude to Christianity but equally importantly for what it tells us about Dickens’s views on visual aesthetics. When Whistler sued Ruskin for the latter’s hostile review of his Nocturne in Black and Gold, in November 1878, it ended up in the law courts with financial ruin, near mental breakdown and a resignation from an Oxford professorship. Dickens and Millais went the other way, moving on from this unpromising start to develop a real professional relationship, and, to some extent, personal friendship, sealed in death.*

Two artefacts can spark off each other, and so can two artists. When Millais and Dickens first met, sparks flew, sparks of heat rather than light.

*Old Lamps for New Ones* appeared in his own periodical, the two-penny weekly *Household Words*, on 15 June 1850.<sup>1</sup> For Dickens, the realism of the portrayal of the Holy Family in *Christ in the House of His Parents* (Fig.1) verged on the blasphemous. Who were these young Turks who dared to overturn four centuries of artistic orthodoxy and, in the process, produce something so ugly? Raphael gave us beauty where this new-fangled PRB has given us only ‘the lowest depths of what is mean, odious, repulsive and revolting.’ The child Jesus, Dickens went on, is ‘a hideous, wry-necked, blubbering red-headed boy in a bed-gown’; Mary is ‘so horrible in her ugliness, that (supposing it were possible for any human creature to exist for a moment with that dislocated throat) she would stand out from the rest of the company as a Monster, in the vilest cabaret in France, or the lowest gin-shop in England.’

Dickens was not alone in attacking this painting. *The Times* labelled it ‘revolting’, the *Illustrated London News* concentrated on the sinister ‘Brotherhood’ implications of the so-called ‘PRB’ (4 May 1850), and Frank Stone launched a major onslaught in the *Athenaeum* (1<sup>st</sup> June).<sup>2</sup> *The Builder* wrote of ‘the studious vulgarity of portraying the youthful Saviour as a red-haired Jew boy, and the sublime personage of the virgin a sore-

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<sup>1</sup> C. Dickens, and M. Slater, *‘Gone Astray’ and Other Papers from ‘Household Words’, 1851-59* (London: Dent, 1998), pp. 242-8.

<sup>2</sup> Graham Storey, Kathleen Tillotson and Nina Burgis, *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, Vol. 6, 1850-1852 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 106, fn. 5, and p. 107, fns. 1&2. Hereafter, the letters are referred to in the Pilgrim Edition (12 volumes, 1965-2002) as P6 etc. W.E. Fredeman’s *Pre-Raphaelitism. A Bibliocritical Study* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965) gives further review references.

heeled, ugly, every-day sempstress.<sup>3</sup> The irony of censuring the painter for depicting Jesus as a 'Jew boy' is exquisite, and was probably lost on the reviewer.



Figure 1: John Everett Millais (1829-1896), *Christ in the House of His Parents* ('*The Carpenter's Shop*') (1849-50), oil on canvas, 86.4 × 139.7 cm (Tate, London; image © Tate, CC-BY-NC-ND 3.0 (Unported), <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/millais-christ-in-the-house-of-his-parents-the-carpenters-shop-n03584>)

Dickens's attack is three-fold: the near-blasphemous depiction of the Holy Family, the focus on the cult of the ugly, and the audacity of the artist and his group in taking revisionism to the point of insolence. Each bears examination. Dickens as Defender of the Faith at first sight seems hard to swallow. He was no enthusiast of organised religion. Virulently anti-Catholic, he had a marked dislike of High Church Anglicans and Low Church Chapel. Dissenting preachers, for Dickens, were a rich source of satirical mockery the line of hypocrites from Stiggins 'The Shepherd' in *Pickwick Papers* to Chadband in *Bleak House* and Little Bethel in *Old Curiosity Shop*. Anglo-Catholics, the High Church wing of the Oxford Movement, usually called by him 'Puseyites', he accused of preferring internal squabbles about liturgy and vestments to addressing the scandal of the urban poor.

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<sup>3</sup> *The Builder*, 1 June 1850, pp. 255-6.

In March 1843 he wrote:

I find that I am getting horribly bitter about Puseyism. Good God to talk in these times of most untimely ignorance among the people, about what Priests shall wear, and whether they shall turn when they say their prayers.<sup>4</sup>

In a letter to Daniel Maclise of 30 May 1850, he encloses a copy of *Old Lamps for New Ones*, a week prior to publication, for his friend's attention:

I feel perfectly sure that you will see nothing in it but what is fair public satire on a point that opens very serious social considerations. If such things were allowed to sweep on, without some vigorous protest, three fourths of this Nation would be under the feet of Priests in ten years.<sup>5</sup>

It is Millais's supposed Anglo-Catholic sympathies that riled Dickens, the Tractarian symbolism in the painting as he sees it, Crucifixion, Trinity, Infant Baptism, all smacking of Puseyite sympathies.

Dickens's own religious views are not easy to characterise. 'Liberal Christian' might serve him best, a deep conviction in the ethical and social teachings of Christ but less drawn to the supernatural or theological aspects of faith, and distinctly undrawn to religion in the form of the established churches. Clergymen, for the most part for Dickens, were in a circle of hell all of their own.

Valentine Cunningham, in a shrewd analysis of the distinction between Dickens's views on Christianity and on Christ, draws attention to the little-known *The Life of Our Lord* that Dickens wrote for his children in the years 1846-9, not published until 1934, sixty-four years after his death. Dickens explains his motive for writing: 'Everybody ought to know about Him. No one ever lived who was so good, so kind, so gentle, and so sorry for all people who did wrong, or were in any way ill or miserable.'<sup>6</sup> This is the 'Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild' of Charles Wesley's hymn. Jesus was sent to us as an exemplar of goodness. If we imitate him, the world will be an infinitely better place. Cunningham labels this 'New Testament Lite, a theology that is ethically generous but also rather vague at crucial places.'<sup>7</sup> The Gospel According to St Charles is long on social goodness and compassion, short on any theology of conversion or atonement. We must be good, and we attain goodness by imitating Jesus. But what about those who don't want to be good or who have 'no power of themselves to help themselves'?<sup>8</sup> If human nature is intrinsically fallen, how is the fall

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<sup>4</sup> Letter to Fonblanque, 13 March 1843, in *Letters*, P3, pp.462-3.

<sup>5</sup> *Letters*, P6, pp.106-7. The Pilgrim Editors of this volume (Storey, Tillotson and Burgis) suggest in a footnote that Maclise would have been 'fundamentally opposed' to the tenor of Dickens's article, Maclise himself a champion of the PRB without being a member.

<sup>6</sup> C. Dickens, *The Life of Our Lord: written expressly for his children*, (London: Associated Newspapers, 1934), p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Valentine Cunningham, 'Dickens and Christianity', in *A Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. by David Paroissien, (Chichester: Blackwell-Wiley, 2011), p. 258.

<sup>8</sup> Collect for the Second Sunday in Lent in the *Book of Common Prayer* (1549), a source Dickens knew well, and quotations from which abound in his writing.

of man to be reversed? ‘There is no original sin in Dickens’s theology... He has no theological rationale of evil.’<sup>9</sup> If human nature is not fallen, why is there so much evil and suffering?

The pictorial embodiment of Dickens’s Jesus is Holman Hunt’s *The Light of the World*.<sup>10</sup> Begun at the same time as Millais’s *Christ in the House of His Parents*, it was not exhibited until the RA Exhibition of 1854.<sup>11</sup> This is the archetypal Aryan Hero, auburn, nicely shampooed tresses hanging elegantly on his broad shoulders. It plays to our English Christological fantasies, the idealised Anglo-Saxon Jesus, a million miles from Millais’s wounded boy or the presumably Palestinian original.

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Barrie Bullen’s *The Expressive Eye*<sup>12</sup> analyses in depth Hardy’s interest in painting and how he brings that visual awareness to the novels themselves. The same story could be told about Dickens, but with many significant differences. Both men were classic autodidacts, in painting as in everything else, but Hardy approached his art education with typically methodical thoroughness where Dickens was more haphazard and cavalier. Partly drawn to London by the International Exhibition of 1862, Hardy visited the National Gallery every lunchtime from his architectural offices for twenty minutes, disciplining himself to a single painter ‘and forbidding his eyes to stray to any other’.<sup>13</sup> As Bullen demonstrates, the novels are consequently infused with references to painters and paintings, and the novels themselves are studies in how we perceive scenes, events and people. *Under the Greenwood Tree* is subtitled ‘A Rural Painting of the Dutch School’, and *Far from the Madding Crowd* is an extraordinary series of verbal paintings and perceptions, a study in how we *see* anything and everything.

Dickens’s autodidacticism was ferocious but much less planned. He was a more gregarious man than Hardy and numbered many painters among his close friends: Daniel Maclise, Frank and Marcus Stone, William Powell Frith, Augustus Egg and Clarkson Stanfield.<sup>14</sup> He made two visits to Italy, firstly with his family from July 1844 to July 1845, and then again eight years later, October to December 1853. This nine-week jaunt with Egg and Wilkie Collins was a boys’ trip away, an unapologetic treat following the

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<sup>9</sup> Cunningham, p. 267.

<sup>10</sup> Used as an illustration in *The Life of Our Lord*, p. 122.

<sup>11</sup> The original is in Keble College Chapel, Oxford; a later version (1851-6) is in Manchester City Art Gallery. A third version (1900-4) is in St Paul’s Cathedral.

<sup>12</sup> J. B. Bullen, *The Expressive Eye: Fiction and Perception in the Works of Thomas Hardy*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

<sup>13</sup> Florence Emily Hardy, *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy 1840-1891: Compiled Largely from Contemporary Notes, Letters, Diaries, and Biographical Memoranda, as Well as from Oral Information in Conversations Extending over Many Years* (London: Macmillan, 1928) p. 69, quoted at Bullen, p. 20.

<sup>14</sup> See, among others, John Turpin, ‘Daniel Maclise and Charles Dickens: A Study of their Friendship’, *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, Vol 73 No. 289; Spring 1984; pp. 47-66.

completion of *Bleak House* in August of that year. The first visit produced *Pictures from Italy* (1846), the very title sitting neatly in Bullen's thesis about Hardy that I would like to extend to Dickens.

In Italy, he dived into galleries and churches, and reacted energetically to the paintings he saw there, very much in the rumbustious style of his piece on *Christ in the House of His Parents*. Tintoretto's *Assembly of the Blest* is 'the most wonderful and charming picture ever painted.'<sup>15</sup> Titian's *Assumption of the Virgin* possessed 'amazing beauty' and Raphael's *Transfiguration* was a 'masterpiece.'<sup>16</sup> In Bologna, it was the canvases of Guido, Domenichino and Caracci that caught his eye<sup>17</sup> but the Palazzo Te in Mantua was a dreadful disappointment, Giulio Romano's frescos 'so inconceivably ugly and grotesque [...] monsters with swollen faces and cracked cheeks, and every kind of distortion of look and limb [...] immensely large and exaggerated to the utmost pitch of uncouthness.'<sup>18</sup> Canova's statues exhibited 'exquisite grace and beauty', where Bernini's were 'the most detestable class of production in the wide world [...] whose attitudes put all other extravagance to shame.'<sup>19</sup>

He claimed no expertise in art criticism – 'I am not mechanically acquainted with the art of painting and have no other means of judging of a picture than as I see it resembling and refining upon nature.'<sup>20</sup> He praised Leonardo's *Last Supper* for its 'beautiful composition and arrangement' but censured Michelangelo's *Last Judgement* for its lack of 'any general idea, or one pervading thought [...] a confusion of naked knotty-bodied figures, sprawling up or tumbling down' the end wall of the Sistine Chapel.<sup>21</sup> Correggio's frescos in the cupola of Parma Cathedral show the Assumption, Mary surrounded by apostles and saints, but Dickens saw only 'a labyrinth of arms and legs [...] heaps of foreshortened limbs, entangled and involved and jumbled together.'<sup>22</sup>

Dickens shared a general mid-Victorian belief in the unity of the arts: the novelist and the dramatist, literature and painting were 'sister arts.'<sup>23</sup> In his farewell speech on leaving America, after his second visit there, 2 November 1867, he saluted 'My brother artists, not only in literature but in the sister arts, especially painting, among whose professors living, and unhappily dead, are many of my oldest and best friends.'<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Letter to Forster, 28 November 1853, P7, p. 218.

<sup>16</sup> *Pictures from Italy*, 'Rome'. Because Dickens's creative work exists in so many different editions, conventionally page numbers are not given.

<sup>17</sup> *Pictures from Italy*, 'Through Bologna and Ferrara'.

<sup>18</sup> *Pictures from Italy*, 'By Verona, Mantua and Milan, Across the Pass of the Simplon into Switzerland'.

<sup>19</sup> *Pictures from Italy*, 'Rome'.

<sup>20</sup> *Pictures from Italy*, 'By Verona, Mantua and Milan, Across the Pass of the Simplon into Switzerland'.

<sup>21</sup> *Pictures from Italy*, 'Rome'.

<sup>22</sup> *Pictures from Italy*, 'To Parma, Modena, and Bologna'.

<sup>23</sup> Speech to the Royal General Theatrical Fund, 29<sup>th</sup> March 1858; K. J. Fielding, *The Speeches of Charles Dickens* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), p. 265.

<sup>24</sup> Fielding, p. 371.

That friendship extended to his illustrators, for whom Dickens was a notoriously hard taskmaster. Of his fifteen novels, only two appeared originally without illustrations – *Hard Times* (1854) and *Great Expectations* (1860-1). The first, *Pickwick Papers* (1836-7) ironically started life as Dickens providing text to Seymour’s pictures; but after Seymour’s suicide, and Buss’s disappointing attempt to fill his shoes, Hablot Knight Browne was chosen. This was the start of a profound working relationship over ten novels, Browne choosing the pen name ‘Phiz’ to complement Dickens’s ‘Boz’. For *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5) he turned to Marcus Stone, and for *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* to Luke Fildes and Charles Collins. For the five Christmas Books (1843-8) he cast his net wider, to Landseer, Maclise, Leech, Tenniel, Stanfield and others. Q. D. Leavis argues persuasively that the illustrations become less important as the novels mature, Dickens increasingly becoming his own (verbal) illustrator.<sup>25</sup> This thesis resonates with Bullen’s argument about Hardy, that he was his own illustrator, in words, from the outset.

Dickens was always demanding of his illustrators, and this would sometimes boil over into irritation and anger. On 18 July 1846, he wrote to Forster about completing the first monthly instalment of *Dombey and Son*, Chapters I-IV: ‘I think the general idea of Dombey is interesting and new and has great material in it [...] The points for illustration, and the enormous care required, make me excessively anxious.’<sup>26</sup>

The key word for Dickens is ‘idea’, sometimes ‘notion’, analogous to ‘impression’ in Hardy, the foundational link between the visual and the verbal. Michelangelo’s *Last Judgement* lacked ‘any general idea, or one pervading thought.’ Visiting the 1855 Universal Exhibition in Paris, he felt strongly that English art did not stand up well against the French: ‘Small, shrunken, insignificant, niggling. The general absence of ideas was horribly apparent.’<sup>27</sup> Throughout the letters, we read of ‘the great turning idea of the Bleak House Story’<sup>28</sup>; ‘a notion of another little story’ [*Nobody’s Story*];<sup>29</sup> ‘I am in the first stages of a new book, [*Little Dorrit*] which consists in going round and round the idea’;<sup>30</sup> ‘a very fine, new and grotesque idea [...] has opened upon me’ [*Great Expectations*.]<sup>31</sup> ‘Idea’: the masterplan of the work, the overall conception or aim of the work.

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<sup>25</sup> Q. D. Leavis, ‘The Dickens Illustrations: Their Function’, in F. R. Leavis and Q. D. Leavis, *Dickens the Novelist* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970), pp. 332-371.

<sup>26</sup> Letters, P7, p.586.

<sup>27</sup> Letter to Forster, 11 November 1855, P7, pp. 742-3.

<sup>28</sup> Letters, P6, p. 805.

<sup>29</sup> Letters P7, p. 200.

<sup>30</sup> Letters, P7, p. 571.

<sup>31</sup> Letters. P9, p. vii.

Major authorial anxieties centred on Mr Dombey. Dickens asked Browne to send him a sheet of about thirty sketches of Dombey's head and deportment, so he could choose the one that came closest to his own idea of the character.<sup>32</sup> Forster, in an unrivalled position to know, tells us that Dickens was 'rarely anything but disappointed' in the illustrations to his novels, but this perfectionism seemed to draw his collaborators closer to him rather than alienating them. His reaction to Browne's 'Paul and Mrs Pipchin' was not untypical, as expressed to Forster:

I am really distressed by the illustration of Mrs Pipchin and Paul. It is so frightfully and wildly wide of the mark. Good Heaven! In the commonest and most literal construction of the text, it is all wrong [...] I can't say what pain and vexation it is to be so utterly misrepresented. I would cheerfully have given a hundred pounds to have kept this illustration out of the book. He never could have got that idea of Mrs Pipchin if he had attended to the text. Indeed, I think he does it better without the text; for then the notion is made easy to him in short description and he can't help taking it in.<sup>33</sup>

The *idea* of Mrs Pipchin, the *notion*. The 'idea' is embodied in the novel's title and frontispiece, and Dickens laboured long over both. For the title of *Hard Times*, for example, he sent no fewer than fourteen suggestions to Forster, for him to select his preferred three, Dickens having done the same. Dickens chose *Hard Times*, *A Mere Question of Figures* and *The Gradgrind Philosophy*. Forster's choices were *Prove It*, *Hard Times* and *Simple Arithmetic*. So, *Hard Times* it was. Similar agonizing went into David Copperfield's name. To have the title or name *was* to have the novel or character firmly in his mind. Once those were secure, the writing out of the story or character was relatively straightforward. The physical evidence for this lies in his Working Notes, the three or four sheets of pale blue paper, 7" × 9", folded vertically in half, on the left hand a series of tags and phrase. Often these are questions which Dickens subsequently answered himself. On the right side is the Number Plan, 1 to 19/20 for a monthly serial (the last two instalments appearing together), with the titles of each chapter and the main content. The different coloured inks used and variations in handwriting show that he was compiling these Working Notes over some period of time.<sup>34</sup>

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'He wrote a very harsh and hasty criticism,' his daughter, Kate Perugini, herself an artist, wrote thirty years after her father's death, referring to his original 1850 *Household Words* article; 'a criticism that I have reason

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<sup>32</sup> The sheet is reproduced in J. Forster and J. W. T. Ley, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, (London, 1928), pp. 474-5. The original is in the Forster Collection in the V&A.

<sup>33</sup> Letters, P4, p. 671.

<sup>34</sup> C. Dickens and H. Stone, *Dickens' Working Notes for His Novels* (London: University of Chicago Press), 1987.

to believe he regretted publishing in later years.<sup>35</sup> But a letter Dickens wrote to Millais five years after the original article, suggests otherwise. Wilkie Collins, a close friend of both men, brought them together for a reconciliation dinner, which, according to Hunt writing fifty years later, ended in ‘removing all estrangement, and in making Dickens understand and express his sense of the power of Millais’s genius and character.’<sup>36</sup> But Dickens was sticking to his guns:

Objecting very strongly to what I believe to be an unworthy use of your great powers, I once expressed the objection in this same journal. My opinion on that point is not in the least changed, but it has never dashed my admiration of your progress in what I suppose are higher and better things.<sup>37</sup>

So, who was right, Millais or Dickens? Accusations of Puseyite sympathies seem arcane mid-Victorian squabbles and are probably best left there. For the Master of the Grotesque to object to Millais’s use of the same seems so bizarre it need detain us little longer. He accused Millais’s Virgin Mary of being more at home in the ‘vilest cabaret in France, or the lowest gin-shop in England’, but cabarets and gin-shops abound in Dickens and he adores both. But what of his pivotal word ‘idea’? What is the ‘idea’ of this painting?

When it was first exhibited, its only heading was Zechariah 13:6: *And one shall say unto him, What are those wounds in thine hands? Then he shall answer, Those with which I was wounded in the house of my friends.*<sup>38</sup> The extent to which Zechariah can be read as Christian prophecy has been disputed as far back as the Reformation.<sup>39</sup> Such readings in the mid-Victorian period were held to be particularly Anglo-Catholic and the painting is full, arguably too full, of such typology. The nails, pincers and wood anticipate the Cross; the child’s wounded hand and drop of blood on his foot prefigure the Five Wounds of Christ, the Stigmata; the carpenter’s triangle next to the ladder is possibly Trinitarian; the white dove on the ladder is more certainly the Holy Spirit; the sheep in the background are the Christian flock; Jesus’s cousin John the Baptist holds a bowl of water. The two window openings separate the inner carpenter’s shop from the world outside, a possible echo of Tractarian ‘reserve’, the need to separate the holy from the profane. Mary’s comforting of the injured child is the Mater Dolorosa at the foot of the Cross or the Pietà.

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<sup>35</sup> K. Perugini and Marion Spielmann, ‘Charles Dickens as a Lover of Art and Artists’, *The Magazine of Art* (January 1903), pp. 125-30 and 164-9.

<sup>36</sup> William Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (London: Macmillan, 1905), vol. 2, p. 185.

<sup>37</sup> Letters, P7, p. 517.

<sup>38</sup> The *Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges* (1882) has a footnote on this verse: ‘The reference which Dr Pusey and others have seen in this verse to our Lord and to the prints of the nails in His hands is in a high degree forced and arbitrary. It cannot possibly be reconciled with the preceding context, with which the verse intimately coheres. ‘Quidam hoc traxerunt ad Christum,’ writes Calvin, ‘quia dicit Zacharias manibus inflicta esse vulnera; sed illud est nimis frivolum, quia satis constat sermonem prosequi de falsis doctoribus, qui abusi fuerant Dei nomine ad tempus.’ Dickens in league with the Reformation’s Calvin? Interdisciplinary studies throws up some fascinating bedfellows.

<sup>39</sup> *The Moody Handbook of Messianic Prophecy: Studies and Expositions of the Messiah in the Old Testament* (2019) has seven chapters devoted to Zechariah, including one on the verses immediately following Millais’s, 13:7-9, by J Randall Price, with an analysis of how these verses are used in the New Testament.

So, what is this painting trying to say? What is its *idea*? We may reject the whole Dickensian concept of ‘idea’, but to understand it is possibly to appreciate why he reacted against this painting so strongly.

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Charles Collins, Wilkie’s brother, married Dickens’s daughter Kate in 1860, five years after the reconciliation dinner.<sup>40</sup> Dickens wanted him as the illustrator for *Edwin Drood*, but Millais, by now a good friend, successfully suggested Fildes would be a better choice. When Dickens died on 9 June 1870, at Gad’s Hill, Kate asked Millais to go down and make a drawing of her father in death (Fig.2), as Millais had drawn her in life – *The Black Brunswicker* (1860). Sixteen years later, Kitton asked Millais’s permission to include this sketch in his *Charles Dickens by Pen and Pencil*. Millais responded: ‘You are quite welcome to publish the sketch I made after death if you have Mrs Perugini’s permission. She is a very old friend of mine.’<sup>41</sup>



Figure 2: John Everett Millais (1829-1896), *Dickens After Death* (1870), pencil on paper, 21.35 × 34.6 cm (Charles Dickens Museum, London; reproduced by permission)

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<sup>40</sup> Charles Collins was a recent poster boy for the Ashmolean, his *Convent Thoughts* (1850-1) used for the museum’s advertising. Kate married her second husband, Charles Edward Perugini, also a painter, in 1874, the year after Collins’s death.

<sup>41</sup> Letter of 22 June 1886, published in H. Stone, *The Night Side of Dickens: cannibalism, passion, necessity* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1994), p. 633. The letter was in Stone’s personal collection.

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