

What the Alligator Didn't Know: Natural Selection and Love in *Our Mutual Friend*

Nicola Bown

In chapter seven of *Our Mutual Friend*, Silas Wegg takes a walk through Clerkenwell on his way to read *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire* to the Boffins. On the way he stops at a 'little dark greasy shop', with a 'muddle of objects vaguely resembling pieces of leather and dry stick, but among which nothing is resolvable into anything distinct [...] and two preserved frogs fighting a small-sword duel.'¹ The shop, of course, belongs to Mr Venus, the 'articulator of bones' and taxidermist, and Wegg is in search of a bony replacement for his wooden leg. The shop's interior, like its window, is a muddle of miscellaneous objects:

'My working bench. My young man's bench. A Wice. Tools. Bones, wariou. Skulls, wariou. Preserved Indian baby. African ditto. Bottled preparations, wariou. Everything within reach of your hand, in good preservation. The mouldy ones a-top. What's in those hampers over them again, I don't quite remember. Say, human wariou. Cats. Articulated English baby. Dogs. Ducks. Glass eyes, wariou. Mummied bird. Dried cuticle, wariou. Oh, dear me! That's the general panoramic view.' (88)

In one sense this is yet another in the parade of Dickens's great comic lists, an enumeration of assorted and incongruous grotesque objects for the pleasure of the effect. As Michael Cotsell has pointed out, Wegg's visit to Mr Venus's shop was a last-minute addition to the second number of the novel, a make-weight chapter to allow the chapter introducing the Lammles, 'A Marriage Contract', to be postponed to the third number.² Yet what seems at first sight to be mere happenstance, a new situation invented at the last minute to fill a gap and exploited for its comic potential, turns out to be unexpectedly profound. By the end of the novel, Venus has a significant role to play in the Boffin-Harmon plot, helping to foil Wegg's plot and discovering the 'grindstone prepared for Mr Boffin's nose'.

But I think there is more to Venus's shop than this. As a taxidermist his trade is concerned with both death and life: his 'art' is to re-present corpses in the guise of creature when alive, to make dead bodies appear life-like. As Venus says, showing off a canary he has prepared to the boy who has come to collect it, 'there's animation! On a twig, making up his mind to hop! Take care of him, he's a lovely specimen.' (86). Life and death are, of course, central to this novel's concerns, with its intricate thematic patterning of death, birth and resurrection. Things that are dead (or seem so) and come

back to life abound in *Our Mutual Friend*, and the presence of a taxidermist provides a comic elaboration of the theme. I shall argue, however, that Venus's shop appears in several different guises throughout the novel, and that its modulations into different forms provide a commentary on what I shall argue is one of the central concerns of the novel. Howard Fulweiler has recently read *Our Mutual Friend* as a Darwinian novel, showing how its themes and plotting echo those of Darwin's *Origin of Species*.³ He sees *Our Mutual Friend* as profoundly influenced by the theory of evolution by natural selection and argues that the novel's criticisms of capitalist rapacity and waste are expressed through a distinctively Darwinian language: metaphors of predation and the language of chance, and the theme of the struggle for existence. Fulweiler comments, though, that 'it is clear that the picture of the world presented in *Our Mutual Friend*, despite its many affinities with *The Origin*, and despite the fact that it occupies considerable common ground, diverges from it sharply.'⁴ In this essay I shall develop Fulweiler's insight that this is a profoundly Darwinian book that, nevertheless, abjures Darwin's conclusions: *Our Mutual Friend* is Dickens's reply to *On the Origin of Species* in which he counterposes the world as conceived by natural selection with the redeeming power of love. As we shall see, the role played by Mr Venus, who we should remember is also Mr Love, turns out to be a central one.

I am not concerned here with tracing the references to *On the Origin of Species* in this novel, nor with identifying Darwinian topoi and metaphors in the text. Rather than seeing this as a novel written by a reader of Darwin and formed out of that reading, in this account of *Our Mutual Friend* Darwin's work stands at some distance.⁵ Instead, I focus on the imaginative implications of the idea of evolution by natural selection, and especially the emotional impact of Darwin's vision of the natural world. Although, as many have been at pains to point out, for Darwin the natural world is beautiful and wondrous it is also pitiless, driven by random chance and contingency, purposeless, full of unredeemed deaths.⁶ A skit by E.S. Dixon published in the *Cornhill Magazine* in 1862 gives a sense of the reception of these aspects of Darwin's work in his wider culture. In 'A Vision of Animal Existences' the narrator meets two disreputable characters, Natural Selection, a formidable woman in a bright blue Phrygian cap with a gold life-preserver, and her son, Struggle for Life: 'his eyes were luminous like a cat's in the dark; his canine teeth were short, strong tusks; his fingernails were retractable talons; his tunic was the colour of

arterial blood.⁷ Natural Selection then, wears the blue Phrygian cap of the bloodthirsty *Sans-Culottes*, while her son is a ghastly and bestial monster. There follows a nightmare vision in which the pair are let loose in the Zoological Gardens, with chaotic and bloody results. The point of the skit is not an attack on Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection as such: rather it is an appalled reaction to the ruthlessness of the natural world it describes. Similarly, the review of *On the Origin of Species* by Richard Owen, which appeared in July 1860 in *All the Year Round* also noticed these violent implications: 'It is Malthus's doctrine applied to the whole animal and vegetable kingdoms, with increased force [...] a grain in the balance will determine which individual shall live and which shall die'.⁸

It is significant that Richard Owen contributed the review of *On the Origin of Species* to Dickens's periodical, for Fulweiler suggests that Mr Venus may be a reference to Owen.⁹ Richard Owen, the first head of the Natural History Museum was one of the predominant scientific figures of the day. Nicknamed 'the Great Dissector' or more respectfully, 'the British Cuvier', Owen's particular area of expertise was animal morphology and palaeontology. Famous for the identification of species from small pieces of fossilized bone, Owen's researches into animal morphology and his skill at reassembling the skeletons of extinct animals from fossil remains made him pre-eminent in this field.

Owen was a friend and correspondent of Dickens's and published from time to time in Dickens's journals. In addition to his review of *On the Origin of Species*, Owen's research on the gorilla's brain was discussed in 'Our Nearest Relation' and in 1862 the journal carried a puff for Owen's proposed new Department of Natural History at the British Museum, which later came to fruition as the Natural History Museum.¹⁰ As Gowan Dawson has shown, the two men corresponded over a long period, and Owen greatly admired Dickens's work.¹¹ Owen's notorious prickliness (Darwin wrote of him to Huxley, 'Upon my life I am so sorry for Owen; he will be so d----d savage'¹²) and his social and professional insecurity are parodied in Venus's peevishness (he is a 'haggard melancholy man, speaking in a voice of querulous complaint' (85)) and his somewhat bathetic pride in his own skill. As he says to Wegg:

'Mr Wegg, not to name myself as a workman without an equal, I've gone on improving myself in my knowledge of Anatomy, till both by sight and by name I'm perfect. Mr Wegg, if you was brought here loose in a bag to be

Nicola Bown, *What the Alligator Didn't Know: Natural Selection and Love in Our Mutual Friend*

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.' (89)

At the time of writing of *Our Mutual Friend*, Owen had been curator of the Hunterian Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons for some years. This was a collection of pathology and anatomy specimens of both humans and animals which had been collected by members of the Royal College of Surgeons, and to which Owen had added his own extensive anatomical and palaeontological collections. A contemporary engraving of the museum shows a crowded room, with specimens in glass cases lining the walls, cabinets for bones, slides and prepared specimens, and articulated skeletons displayed around the walls, over the cabinets and suspended from the ceiling. It is not a great leap of the imagination to see Mr Venus's shop, with its 'human wariou. Cats. Articulated English baby. Dogs. Ducks. Glass eyes, wariou. Mummied bird. Dried cuticle, wariou' as an affectionate, parodic version of the Hunterian Museum, presided over by Dickens's friend. It is clear that it is affectionate, for Dickens put into the window the pair of duelling frogs he kept on his own writing desk.

This is no more than to elaborate on Fulweiler's suggestion that Mr Venus may be a reference to Richard Owen, but I think the identification may be more meaningful than a playful portrait of a friend. By looking at Owen's role in debates around evolution in the 1850s and 1860s, it is possible to see that his views and interests intersect with some of the key topoi of the novel, and invest them with extra layers of meaning. Owen is normally, and rightly, portrayed as the opponent of Darwin in the battles over natural selection that followed *On the Origin of Species*.¹³ He was the professional rival of Darwin's protégé and supporter, T.H. Huxley, fighting a bitter battle with the latter for the directorship of the Natural History Museum. He published several hostile reviews of *On the Origin of Species*, apart from the one in *All the Year Round*, and the hostility between Darwin, Huxley and their associates and Owen lasted for the rest of his life. Yet the picture is more complex than a simple equation of Darwin with evolutionary thinking and scientific progress and Owen with reactionary natural theological thinking about species would suggest. Evelleen Richards has shown that, as in the 1840s, Owen had already accepted the evolution of new species.¹⁴ Owen clearly did believe that the transmutation of forms could take place, yet, Richards argues, he was unable to articulate this clearly because of the conservative context in which he was trying to make his career. As a man

Nicola Bown, *What the Alligator Didn't Know: Natural Selection and Love in Our Mutual Friend*

without family money or social position, Owen was dependent on the patronage of the scientific establishment for his living, and this circumscribed the views he was able to publish.

In the early 1840s Owen came under the influence of German scientists, particularly those connected with *Naturphilosophie*, who understood the natural world as shaped by an underlying ideal structure successively realised in a progression of homological forms. Unlike Paley's *Natural Theology* (1802), which saw the book of nature as an analogue to divine Scripture, *Naturphilosophie* saw the world as a dynamic and changing entity, driven by transcendent forces, often in terms of polar forces in eternal conflict with one another. As Germany was the centre of physiological research in the mid-nineteenth century, it is not surprising that Owen was in touch with German scientists. In his own field, he was particularly influenced by the leading *Naturphilosoph* Lorenz Oken, who had developed a systematic theory of animal morphology, first published in 1810 as *Lehrbuch der Naturphilosophie*. For Oken, transcendent principles underlay the forms and development of animals, with each part of the animal's anatomy forming a homology to its body as a whole. Oken's 'transcendental morphology' was formative in Owen's thinking about the relations between species in this decade.

Transcendental morphology was the idea that related species were modifications of an original archetype and that, though each species differed from its original, earlier species, the idea of the archetype would be visible in the skeletal and muscular forms of each separate species in the shape of homologies between the forms. Similarities in joints or skull-shapes, for instance, pointed to the existence of a transcendent, divinely originated archetype that had been modified as the species changed and progressed; these modifications were inherent in the original, archetypal form as its transcendent idea. Owen ended his lecture, *On the Nature of Limbs* (1849), which dealt with the homologies between legs and fins, with a ringing endorsement of the metaphysical and idealist implications of his work:

Now, however, the recognition of an ideal Exemplar for the Vertebrated animals proves the knowledge of such a being as Man must have existed before Man appeared. For the Divine mind which planned the Archetype also foreknew all its modifications. The Archetypal idea was manifested in the flesh, under divers such modifications, upon this planet, long prior to the existence of those animal species that actually exemplify it.¹⁵

Nicola Bown, *What the Alligator Didn't Know: Natural Selection and Love in Our Mutual Friend*

This is very different from conventional Natural Theological thinking, which was steadfastly opposed at this stage to evolution, even in this divinely planned, progressivist form. When Owen prevailed upon the Ray Society to publish a translation of Oken's *Lehrbuch der Naturphilosophie* in 1847 a scandal ensued and Owen was quickly forced publically to distance himself from Oken's dangerous ideas.¹⁶

Nevertheless, his influence did live on in another controversy in which Owen was involved. Oken was the originator of the term 'primordial slime' (*Urschleim*) to describe the condition of the emergence of the very first life forms, and the origins of life were a matter of intense scientific debate in the 1850s and 1860s.¹⁷ As James Strick has shown in *Sparks of Life* the extensive debate over the possibility of the spontaneous generation of life *ab nihilo* was hotly debated in these decades, and that the question of spontaneous generation was a highly political one in London scientific circles of these decades. Opponents of evolution, especially those who cleaved to the tenets of Natural Theology, opposed the possibility of spontaneous generation, because the creation of life was a single, divine event. Those in favour of various versions of what was prior to 1859 called the development hypothesis had, perforce, and even if they could not accept that there was experimental proof for it, to side with the possibility that spontaneous generation of life might theoretically happen. Over the course of the 1850s Owen aligned himself with those who conceded the possibility that life forms might generate where none had before existed.¹⁸ Though the opponent of natural selection and the professional rival of Darwin's circle, Owen was certainly not anti-evolution as such. Rather, he saw evolution as a planned upward progression, pregnant with divine intention.

Owen's interest in physiology also meant that he followed one of the other key developments of the mid-century: the debate over Schwann's cell theory. Nineteenth-century physiologists were preoccupied with what Thomas Hall has called the 'life-matter problem': that is, what the relationship is between living and inert matter, and what is the difference between them.¹⁹ In a long series of intellectual struggles those seeking to understand the basic units of life (including Huxley with his hypothesis that protoplasm was the fundamental substance of all life forms), in which the aim was to arrive a good theory of how units of life, be they protoplasm, gemmules or cells, were endowed with life without offering a hostage either to the reviled doctrine of vitalism or to the equally problematic mechanistic view of life. Was there a spark of life, or was it a principle? If

Nicola Bown, *What the Alligator Didn't Know: Natural Selection and Love in Our Mutual Friend*

one could not speak of a vital force, then perhaps it was safer to speak of vital processes. If life was not a touch of the divine, neither was it merely the workings of the animal machine.

And these questions were not merely theoretical or limited to a specialised professional audience. They had, for example, considerable bearing on the panic over live burial that gripped Europe in the 1850s onwards. Because it was so difficult to certify that death has categorically taken place, the debate over live burial involved questions about what actually constitutes life, and this led directly to the formulation of the concept of ‘brain death’ as a final arbiter of the mortal process.²⁰

There was a considerable backwash from these debates into both elite and popular periodicals. In addition to articles by journalists such as G.H. Lewes who were science specialists in periodicals such as the *Westminster Review* and other quarterlies, Dickens’s own, much more popular journals also covered all of these debates. There were articles on spontaneous generation (1855), vital heat (1858), cell theory and the unity of form and structure (1857), resuscitating mummified animals (1860), the breath of life (1860), bone-making (1862) and live burial (1862).²¹ Given his constant involvement in his own periodicals, it would be staggering if Dickens were not familiar with at least the broad outlines of these debates – and indeed, they can clearly be seen as part of the wider cloth from which *Our Mutual Friend* was cut. In the second chapter, we learn that John Harmon the elder ‘direct[ed] himself to be buried with certain eccentric ceremonies and precautions against his coming to life’ (26), an obvious reference to the panic over live burial. And on the opening page the bed of the River Thames is described as covered with ‘slime and ooze’, recalling the ‘primordial slime’ from which life first emerged.

In this novel, of course, dead bodies are dragged from the slime, and while some, like those of Rogue Riderhood and Bradley Headstone, have died in the ‘ooze and scum’ (781) at the bottom of the river, others – Eugene Wrayburn and John Harmon/Rokesmith – come back to a new life. This is a novel which is full of speculation about what constitutes death and life, and in which the boundary between the two is repeatedly crossed. The episode in which Riderhood is hauled out of the river for the first time represents the moment between life and death with a powerful intensity:

If you are not gone for good, Mr. Riderhood, it would be something to know where you are hiding at present. This flabby lump of mortality that we work so hard at with such patient perseverance, yields no sign of you. If you are gone

Nicola Bown, *What the Alligator Didn’t Know: Natural Selection and Love in *Our Mutual Friend**

for good, Rogue, it is very solemn, and if you are coming back, it is hardly less so. [...] See! A token of life! An indubitable token of life! The spark may smoulder and go out, or it may glow and expand, but see! The four rough fellows, seeing, shed tears. Neither Riderhood in this world, nor Riderhood in the other, could draw tears from them; but a striving human soul between the two can do it easily. (439-40)

This episode draws much of its power from its vitalist language: the ‘spark of life’ which will ignite the ‘flabby lump of mortality’, and the soul ‘striving’ between life and death. An article on ‘The Breath of Life’ published in *All the Year Round* in 1860 mirrors both the language and intensity of this passage, describing ‘the breath of life [as] an unpenetrated mystery’: ‘we cannot, by any search, lay bare the sources of life in the fresh seed; we cannot tell how life was breathed into the infant, or account for the decay by which a season of maturity is followed.’²² And a Francis Jacox introduced ‘What is Death?’, part of a series called *Thanatos Athanatos: A Medley*, which ran for several years in the late 1850s, with the statement: ‘Great is the problem of Life. But the problem of Death is greater, and makes more intricate, more insoluble, that of Life.’²³ The discussion of questions of life and death in popular periodicals was saturated with vitalist and transcendental language, even when reporting on the work of scientists who would themselves have rejected these terms and who struggled against them. So, for example, an article called ‘Resuscitating Animals’ from *All the Year Round* reporting on French experiments relating to spontaneous generation, referred to the experimenters not as scientists but as ‘resurrectionists’, hooking a discussion of the relationship between desiccation and mortality to a vitalist, religious language.²⁴ The language of life and death, in this novel as in periodical discussions, constantly reaches for the transcendent in the form of vitalist concepts and religious language (often through biblical reference) in order to convey the emotional intensity of the passage between life and death.²⁵

From his first appearance in his shop, Mr Venus is woven into the dense web of references in the novel to life and mortality, birth, death and resurrection. His shop may be full of dry sticks and disarticulated bones, glass eyes and dried cuticle, but it is also, paradoxically, full of life. ‘There’s animation!’ (86), Mr Venus exclaims as he hands over a canary to the boy who has come to collect it, and in the candles flickering flame the contents of the shop ‘show for a minute as if paralytically animated’ (91). Later, when Mr Boffin visits Mr Venus and they hatch their plan to foil Wegg, the shop comes alive again: ‘the whole stock seemed to be winking and blinking with both eyes, as Mr Venus did.’

Nicola Bown, *What the Alligator Didn’t Know: Natural Selection and Love in Our Mutual Friend*

(563) By the time Mr Boffin visits Mr Venus, his shop has acquired an alligator, which has been transformed from a metaphor for the foot-soldiers of finance capitalism, the ‘jobbers who job all the jobberies jobbed... the Alligators of the Dismal Swamp, [who] are always lying by to drag the Golden Dustman under’ (210), to a real reptile, preserved by the taxidermist’s art. Mr Boffin hides behind the skeleton of the French gentleman (who has a ‘grin on [his] ghastly countenance’ (570)) listening to Wegg’s vicious plan to embezzle Harmon’s inheritance, and the contents of the shop seem to come to life to bear witness to the world’s venality and corruption: ‘The yard or two of smile on the part of the alligator might have been invested with the meaning, “All about this was quite familiar knowledge down in the depths of the slime, ages ago.”’ (570) Mr Venus’s shop, then, is full of dead things that come back to life, just like the dehydrated and mummified creatures resuscitated by the ‘resurrectionists’: it contains, metaphorically at least, the entire spectrum of life forms from Man through to primordial slime.

And, of course, although all these life forms are found higgledy-piggledy, out of order with each other and themselves, in the shop, they are nevertheless part of a chain that stretches upwards from the lowest and oldest forms to the latest and highest: Man, represented by the French gentleman. *Our Mutual Friend* is shot through with metaphors of rising and falling – into the Thames, up onto the rooftops – and the episodes in Mr Venus’s shop are no exception. When Wegg first walks into the shop, Mr Venus rises from behind his counter, and he continues to rise and fall for the rest of the chapter. He dives down behind the counter and complains ‘Don’t hit *me* because you see I’m down. I’m low enough without that.’ (86) ‘Drooping despondently’ he makes tea for Mr Wegg, appearing over the smoke of the fire ‘as if he were modernizing the old original rise in his family’ (88), and talks of ‘elevating myself by my own independent exertions’ (88). But, as his name suggests, though ‘a man climbs to the top of the tree’ (90) of his trade (or as Venus characteristically calls it, ‘my art’), ‘it’s the heart that lowers me, it is the heart!’ (89). Clearly Mr Venus’s name suggested the joke about the ‘old original rise in his family’, but repeated literal and metaphorical rising and falling movements that litter this chapter are significantly linked to the wider patterns of rising and sinking that shape the novel as a whole. When Venus complains that it is the heart that lowers him, he is a comic foreshadowing of the plight of Jenny Wren, ‘how often so dragged down by hands that should have raised her up’ (243). Both are lowered by the heart: she by the drunken father

who loves the bottle more than he does her, and he by Pleasant Riderhood's refusal to marry him.

In fact, rising and sinking is everywhere in *Our Mutual Friend*. On the one hand, these metaphors plainly tessellate with ideas about evolution, from the Alligators of the Dismal Swamp waiting to pull the dustman under to the rising and falling in what Dickens calls in a revealing slip of the pen, 'Mr Venus's museum' (760). On the other hand, they are also joined to the ideas about life and death that pervade the novel, from Eugene Wrayburn, in his delirium like a 'drowning man [rising] from the deep, to sink again ... he in his desperate struggle went down again' (721), to Jenny Wren's discomfiting cry to Fledgeby, "'But *you* are not dead, you know [...] Get down to life!'" (279), and Lizzie Hexam lifting the dying Betty Higden 'as high as heaven' (506). But rather than seeing these as two separate strands of connotation flowing from these metaphors of rising and sinking, I think we should see them as closely connected. Through the image of the alligator, Dickens connects the rapacity of financial speculation and the Malthusian roots of natural selection: it really is a reptile eat reptile world. It's no surprise that in the wake of the publication of *On the Origin of Species*, 'Malthus's doctrine applied to the whole animal and vegetable kingdoms' as Owen called it, Dickens should recur in his portrayal of Betty Higden to his savage attacks on the poor laws with their basis in post-Malthusian political economy.

But Darwin's theory of natural selection was not the only model of evolution available for imaginative use by Dickens. Equally influential, especially for Dickens as the friend of Richard Owen, were ideas of evolution as a designed and beneficently ordered upward progression, in which the chain of species moves upwards towards perfection.²⁶ And the transcendental language of rising and falling, charged with transcendent significance, connects questions about the origins of life with questions about the meaning of life; of the forms of the body with the fate of the body; and of the nature of death with the hope of an afterlife. Whether Dickens himself heard the resonances in his writing between debates over evolution, the source of life, and the problem of death is less important than the fact that, because these debates were swirling around in the common literary and periodical culture of the time, his words pick up their echoes willy-nilly. At an intuitive level Dickens used the materials he found around him to shape his fictional meditation of life, death and love; what the novel has to say about these scientific

Nicola Bown, *What the Alligator Didn't Know: Natural Selection and Love in *Our Mutual Friend**

questions is less important than that they deepen and complicate the novel's language and thematic patterning.

As many critics have said, *Our Mutual Friend* pictures and condemns the reptilian world of mid nineteenth-century capitalism, fuelled by speculation and waste, greed and ruthlessness.²⁷ For critics of Darwin, the theory of natural selection was little different, a vision of a natural world driven by hunger and competition, full of cruelty, chance and death. These are, of course, both present in the image of the alligator in the slime. But how might such a vision be redeemed? What was it the alligator *didn't* know? In the final part of this paper, I will argue that Dickens draws upon this transcendent language of evolution to show that life and death are intensely meaningful: that the secret of life and death, both vital spark and hope of redemption, is love. And, of course, key to my reading of *Our Mutual Friend* as a novel about the redeeming power of love, is Mr Venus – or as he might also be known, 'Mr Love'. Venus is 'lowered' by the heart, and cast down by Pleasant's rejection of him; but he is redeemed by love too. He gives up the plot with Wegg and discovers it to Mr Boffin in order to be worthy of her, and is of course rewarded by being united with her at the end of the book, though their union remains one of the novel's imagined futures rather than a part of a conspectus of happy homes in the final chapter. This leads to my second point, that although Dickens works hard to make love redeem his fictional society, in this, his last completed novel, love is not entirely adequate to the task. In a post-Darwinian world, Dickens cannot gather in all the deserving characters and give them happy endings. The power of love, like everything else in the post-Darwinian world, is chancy and contingent. Yet Dickens valiantly attempts to make love sufficient in a world of competition and waste, to show that love makes sense of the cruel chances of the world in a state of nature. And he does so through the transmuted image of the Hunterian museum, which showed all life, and displayed the divine plan.

Our Mutual Friend is full of versions of Owen's museum aside from its main representation as Mr Venus's shop. A hint is given to the theme in the first description of Boffin's bower, where, alongside the 'region of sand and sawdust' beside the fire, is 'a flowery land [which] displayed such hollow ornamentation as stuffed birds and waxen fruits under glass shades' (63). This comes a little before the previously unplanned insertion of Mr Venus into the novel's plot and thematic structure, yet it foreshadows significance that will come to be attached to preserved specimens and simulacra of life. A

**Nicola Bown, What the Alligator Didn't Know: Natural Selection and Love
in *Our Mutual Friend***

second, seemingly distant cousin of Venus's shop is Pleasant Riderhood's establishment, a pawnbrokers and seaman's boarding house. Here, instead of disarticulated skeletons, there are pieces of disembodied clothing: 'The background, composed of handkerchiefs, coats, shirts, hats, and other old articles "On Leaving," had a general dim resemblance to human listeners' (352), and these disembodied listeners listen in on a conversation between Riderhood and the disguised Rokesmith about a dead man's coat. I see the pawnshop as a nightmare version of Venus's museum in which the effects of the dead are dispersed and re-sold, a place where money has the only true value and love and its ceremonies a meaningless sham: 'Show Pleasant Riderhood a Wedding in the street, and she only saw two people taking out a regular license to quarrel and fight [...] show her a Funeral, and she saw an unremunerative ceremony in the nature of a black masquerade' (345-346). Whereas Mr Venus's wares flicker with animation and listen attentively, almost on the verge of life, to the conversations in his shop, Pleasant's wretched goods hang around like ghosts of the departed waiting to eavesdrop on the living.

In complete contrast, the third transmutation in this novel of the Hunterian museum presents it in the light of an idyll, an ideal version in which its most fantastic promises have come true. At the climax of his masquerade as a miser, Mr Boffin taunts Rokesmith in front of Bella about his aspirations to win her love:

'Win her affections,' retorted Mr Boffin, with ineffable contempt, 'and possess her heart! Mew, says the cat, Quack-quack says the duck, Bow-wow-wow says the dog! Win her affections and possess her heart! Mew, Quack, quack, Bow-wow!' (583)

As Fulweiler says, Boffin here plays *laissez-faire* Darwinist, representing 'life as simply animal competition'.²⁸ But it is significant that it is love that Boffin is traducing as merely the meaningless competition and mating of animals, for really it is love that is at the centre of the Boffins' redemptive plan for Bella. She is really to learn to love John Rokesmith, and to love him without concern for money or society; and, of course, she does. Her reward is a triumphant return to the refurbished and renewed Harmony Jail/Boffin's Bower that is to be her home, a bower of true harmony and love. As she ascends the stairs towards where Mr and Mrs Boffin are waiting to embrace her, she and John come to 'a charming aviary, in which a number of tropical birds, more gorgeous in colour than the flowers, were flying about; and among those birds were gold and silver fish, and mosses, and water-lilies, and a fountain, and all manner of wonders' (748). Here is Venus's shop

Nicola Bown, *What the Alligator Didn't Know: Natural Selection and Love in Our Mutual Friend*

truly come to life, a living museum in which under the auspices of true love the dead have been resurrected. This is an idyllic vision, and not surprisingly, for Bella and John's marriage calls out from Dickens his most rhapsodic mode, and is the moment in the novel where his faith in the redeeming power of love is most secure. The chapter describing their wedding concludes: 'And O there are days in this life, worth life and worth death. And O what a bright old song it is, that O 'tis love, 'tis love, 'tis love, that makes the world go round!' (656) Love gives meaning to life, and takes the sting from death; it makes the world go round and redeems the chanciness, waste and contingency of nature.

But this is only one half of the novel's bifurcated story. The Boffin/Rokesmith plot is underpinned by the notion of design: set in motion by the frustration of one kind of design, Harmon's will, and complicated by another, the 'friendly move' of Wegg and Venus, it is brought to fruition by Boffin's own design to nurture the redemptive love of John and Bella. The Wrayburn/Headstone plot, on the other hand, is the novel's dark half, in which contingency and chance have a much greater part to play. Eugene first sees Lizzie sitting by the fire by chance, and it is a series of chance meetings between Eugene, Lizzie and Headstone that drive this plot to its murderous climax. In a sense, Eugene is the novel's true Darwinian, for it is he who (rather disingenuously) says: 'My dear fellow, I don't design anything. I have no design whatever. I am incapable of designs. If I conceived a design, I should speedily abandon it, exhausted by the operation.' (292) And whereas the Boffin plot is peppered with images of animation and re-animation in Venus's shop and its transmutations, the other half of the story has the Thames, not so much a Jordan in which one is baptised to new life, as another Styx, a river from which one is lucky to emerge alive at all:

And as the great black river with its dreary shores was soon lost to her view in the gloom, so she stood on the river's brink unable to see into the vast blank misery of a life suspected, and fallen away from by good and bad, but knowing that it lay there dim before her, stretching away to the great ocean, Death. (77)

In Lizzie's vision of the river Thames here, it becomes an almost unbearable symbol of an unredeemed, and unredeemable life: a life of misery and lovelessness that has nothing at its end but death.

That vision is the keynote of the stories of Lizzie, Eugene and Headstone, each of whom at different points faces 'unutterable misery' (696); and which have as their crisis (between Eugene and Headstone and between Headstone and Riderhood) a struggle, by

Nicola Bown, *What the Alligator Didn't Know: Natural Selection and Love in Our Mutual Friend*

the river, to the death. Eugene is saved by Lizzie, who pulls him from the river, praying ‘help my humble hands, Lord God, to raise it from death and restore it to some one to whom it must be dear!’ (683). It seems as if Dickens is about to pull out his redemptive rabbit once more: Lizzie will save Eugene, and Eugene will love her. Yet it doesn’t quite work. At the climax of this plot, as Eugene lies in delirium between life and death like a drowning man, surfacing and then going under again, Jenny Wren, the dolls’ dressmaker, discovers a word, and the word saves him. The word, though, is not love, but wife. Dickens fudges: he substitutes a tinny rhyme, life and wife, for the pairing that would mirror the patterning of the novel’s other plot, life and love. Eugene saves his life by acting rightly by Lizzie, by making an honest woman of her; but he cannot redeem his life by loving her. Lightwood’s formal and ambivalent blessing represents the failure of Dickens’s redemption by love here. In contrast to the natural idiom of Mrs Boffin’s ‘My deary, deary, deary, wife of John and mother of his little child! My loving loving, bright bright, Pretty Pretty!’ (748), Mortimer’s words to Eugene and Lizzie are stilted, borrowing a formal diction quite out of character and sounding most unnatural:

‘A final word before I go. This is the right course of a true man, Eugene. And I solemnly believe, with all my soul, that it Providence should mercifully restore you to us, you will be blessed with a noble wife in the preserver of your life, whom you will dearly love.’ (723)

It is notable that Eugene’s love for Lizzie is projected into the future, as something that will come because she is a noble wife, not as the centre of their life together (although his love for her may grow out of her love for him). And it is equally significant that the novel imagines no domestic space for them, for Dickens can’t get them into one of his ideal homes. (Indeed, it is easy to see why. Lizzie would always be going to bed early, and Eugene always staying up late with Mortimer, who’s always visiting, in the library.) In this half of the novel, in which patterning and design do not work, the redemptive power of love cannot hold. There is no imaginative space for versions of Mr Venus’s shop in Lizzie and Eugene’s marital home.

In the penultimate chapter, Jenny Wren receives a visit from Sloppy, mangle-turner turned cabinet-maker. Sloppy offers to make the dolls’ dressmaker a cabinet for her scraps of material, and she tells him ‘I accept your offer. – I suppose He won’t mind... Him who is coming to court and marry me.’ (788-89), and Sloppy leaves, saying ‘and here’s both *my* hands, Miss, and I’ll soon come back again.’ (789) It is just the merest,

Nicola Bown, *What the Alligator Didn’t Know: Natural Selection and Love in Our Mutual Friend*

slightest hint, the last and faintest of the novel's imagined futures: the home of Sloppy and Jenny Wren. And it is the last, most poignantly comic, of the novel's versions of Owen's museum: a room lined with cabinets full of bright scraps of cloth, with the dolls arranged on top in all their finery, and Sloppy as the dolls' dressmaker's fairytale prince, come to save and love her. But that isn't quite the end of the story. In its final pages, the novel returns to the 'dismal swamp' of society, where it is left to the Twemlow to defend Eugene and Lizzie's marriage, before going off to his lodgings over a livery stables accompanied by Mortimer Lightwood, returning the reader once more to the ambivalence about redemption and love that is at the heart of the Wrayburn/Headstone parts of the novel. If it is true that the alligator didn't know about the saving power of love, it is also true that in the dismal swamp love cannot redeem everyone. For all Dickens's best efforts, the world that is shaped by natural selection is one in which life is sometimes wasted and love is not enough.

¹ Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) ed. and introd. Adrian Poole, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997), p.83. Further references will be given in parentheses in the text.

² Michael Cotsell, 'Mr Venus Rises from the Counter: Dickens's Taxidermist and his Contribution to *Our Mutual Friend*', *Dickensian*, vol. 80 (1984), 105-13.

³ Howard Fulweiler, "'A Dismal Swamp': Darwin, Design and Evolution in *Our Mutual Friend*", *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, vol. 49 (1994), 50-74.

⁴ Fulweiler, 'A Dismal Swamp', p. 73.

⁵ In addition to Fulweiler's essay, Darwin's influence in Dickens is also considered by George Levine in *Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), and more recently by Ernest Fontana, 'Darwinian Sexual Selection and Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*', *Dickens Quarterly*, vol. 22 (2005): 153-71; Natalie McNight, 'Dickens and Darwin: a Rhetoric of Pets', *Dickensian*, vol. 102 (2006): 131-43; Adeline Buckland, "'The Poetry of Science": Charles Dickens, Geology and Visual and Material Culture in Victorian London', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 35 (2007): 679-94. Fontana and Fulweiler are particularly concerned to trace patterns of coincidence between Darwin's work and *Our Mutual Friend*; though it is doubtful that Dickens had read Darwin's work in any

detail, he certainly would have been aware the shape of the theory of natural selection from the extensive reviews in the periodical press, including his own.

⁶ For a recent argument to this effect, see George Levine, *Darwin Loves You: Natural Selection and the Re-Enchantment of the World* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006).

⁷ [E.S. Dixon], 'A Vision of Animal Existences', *Cornhill Magazine*, vol. 5 (1862): 311-18 (p. 313).

⁸ [Richard Owen], 'Natural Selection', *All the Year Round*, vol. 3 (1860), 293-99 (p. 297).

⁹ Fulweiler, 'A Dismal Swamp', p. 56.

¹⁰ 'Our Nearest Relation', *All the Year Round*, vol. 1 (1859), 112-15; 'Owen's Museum', *All the Year Round*, vol. 8 (1862), 62-67.

¹¹ In the keynote address to the 'Dickens and Science' conference from which this issue of **19** emerged.

¹² Letter dated 28 December 1859, cited in Evelleen Richards, 'A Question of Property Rights; Richard Owen's Evolutionism Reassessed', *BJHS*, vol. 20 (1987), 129-71 (p. 129).

¹³ See Nicolaas Rupke, *Richard Owen: Biology without Darwin, a revised edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), especially pp. 161-65.

¹⁴ See Richards, especially pp. 167-71.

¹⁵ Richard Owen, *On the Nature of Limbs* (1849), ed. Ron Amundson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp. 85-86.

¹⁶ Lorenz Oken, *Elements of Physiophilosophy* translated from the German by Alfred Tulk (London: The Ray Society, 1847).

¹⁷ Thomas S. Hall, *Ideas of Life and Matter: Studies in the History of General Physiology 600BC-1900AD*, vol. 2 *From the Enlightenment to the End of the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), p.174.

¹⁸ See James Strick, *Sparks of Life: Darwinism and the Victorian Debates Over Spontaneous Generation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 35-61.

¹⁹ Hall, *Ideas of Life and Matter*, p. vii.

²⁰ See Martin S. Pernick, 'Back from the Grave: Recurring Controversies over Defining and Diagnosing Death in History', in *Death: Beyond Whole-Brain Criteria*, ed. Richard M. Zaner (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988), pp. 17-74.

²¹ 'A Scientific Figment', *Household Words*, vol. 10 (1855), 453-56; 'Vital Heat', *Household Words*, vol. 18 (1858), 13-18; 'Nature's Greatness in Small Things', *Household Words*, vol. 16 (1857), 511-13; 'Resuscitating Animals', *All the Year Round*, vol. 2 (1860), 387-92; 'The Breath of Life', *All the Year Round*, vol. 2 (1860), 484-88; 'Bone-making', *All the Year Round*, vol. 8 (1862), 209-11; 'Buried Alive', *All the Year Round*, vol. 8 (1862), 107-11.

²² 'The Breath of Life', *All the Year Round*, vol. 2 (1860), 484-88 (p. 484).

²³ Francis Jacox, 'What is Death?', part two of 'Thanatos Athanatos: A Medley', *Bentley's Miscellany*, vol. 40 (1856), 579-85. The series commenced in November 1856 and ran intermittently until May 1859, comprising subjects as various as the childish incomprehension of death, death as rest, death called upon in times of woe, death and sleep, cemeteries and charnel houses, the fear of death and so on.

**Nicola Bown, What the Alligator Didn't Know: Natural Selection and Love
in Our Mutual Friend**

²⁴ Resuscitating Animals', *All the Year Round*, vol. 2 (1860), 387-92 (p. 389).

²⁵ My interpretation of this novel owes a great deal to Michael Wheeler's sacramental reading of *Our Mutual Friend* in *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). While the redeeming love which is central to my reading is not quite Christian, my sense of the importance of patterns of love, death and redemption in this novel are hugely influenced by Wheeler's work.

²⁶ Various teleological models of evolution had been mooted since the end of the eighteenth-century, principally by Lamarck, the most controversial of which was Robert Chambers, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844). See James Secord, *Victorian Sensation: The Extraordinary Publication, Reception, and Secret Authorship of Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), for an account of the influence and readership of this *succès de scandale*.

²⁷ Perhaps most influentially, Nancy Metz, 'The Artistic Reclamation of Waste', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, vol. 34 (1979), 59-72; Catherine Gallagher, 'The Bio-Economics of *Our Mutual Friend*', in *The Body Economic: Life, Death and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Mary Poovey, 'Reading History in Literature: Speculation and Virtue in *Our Mutual Friend*', in *Historical Criticism and the Challenge of Theory* ed. Janet Levarie Smarr (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

²⁸ Fulweiler, 'A Dismal Swamp', p. 66.