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1. Dickensian Prospects / 2. Artistic and Literary Commitments

1. Dickensian Prospects / Perspectives Dickensiennes

I/ Sight, Insight and Sightlessness in Dickens

"Looking on darkness which the blind do see": the Figure of the Blind Girl in Dickens and the Dickensian

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Résumés

English Français

The article focuses on the theme of blindness in Dickens's *American Notes* (1842) and in *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1845): sight impairment is treated as a vehicle to carry the reader from landscape to inscape, staging at once truth and deception, blindness and insight. Such dramatic irony is also the leitmotif of Wilkie Collins's *Poor Miss Finch* (1872) and is fully acknowledged in André Gide's *La Symphonie pastorale* (1919). Finally the cinema, notably Charlie Chaplin with *City Lights* (1932), exploits the visual drama of the blind girl whose inner vision is manipulated from the outside, yet retains the means to undo the visible deception, and grasp the essence of truth. The paradox offered by protagonists who are at once entombed in blindness and yet open books for those who see them, is present in the authors, and made more poignant and effective.

Cet article s'intéresse au thème de la cécité dans *American Notes* (1842) et *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1845), textes de Dickens dans lesquels, par le truchement du handicap visuel, le lecteur passe du paysage au paysage intérieur, ce qui instaure une mise en scène à la fois de la vérité et de la tromperie, de la cécité et de la clairvoyance. Cette ironie dramatique, leitmotif de *Poor Miss Finch* de Wilkie Collins (1872) également, André Gide l'identifie parfaitement dans *La Symphonie pastorale* (1919). On verra, en dernière analyse, comment c'est en particulier

Charlie Chaplin qui, dans *Les Lumières de la ville* (1932), exploite le drame visuel de la jeune aveugle dont la vision intérieure se fait manipuler de l'extérieur, sans que cela l'empêche de décrypter la tromperie visible et d'atteindre à l'essence de la vérité. On retrouve chez ces trois auteurs, de manière éminemment poignante et efficace, le paradoxe qu'incarnent des personnages à la fois prisonniers de leur cécité et fonctionnant comme des livres ouverts pour ceux qui les voient.

Entrées d'index

Mots-clés : cécité, clairvoyance, Dickens, Collins, Gide, cinéma

Keywords : blindness, insight, Dickens, Collins, Gide, cinema

Texte intégral

1 My title "Looking on darkness which the blind do see" quotes a line from Shakespeare's Sonnet 27, in order to develop the concept of the impairment of blindness as vehicle towards a landscape where the poet can freely travel, as the lines "But then begins a journey in my head" and "Intend a zealous pilgrimage to thee" (46) suggest. Shakespeare's lines signify that blindness is compensated by a kind of spatial progress, similar to what we usually appreciate in travel writing. But unlike real landscape,—reproduced within the paradigms of eyesight, where space and distance find structure as visual description, ordered and punctuated with carefully grouped objects [Eileen Gillooly and Deirdre David]—blindness opens up a wholly poetical inscape that bears no connection to the traditional landscape genre, where the distances were ordered and structured by geometry and mathematics, so that from vantage point to vanishing point the spectator could identify foreground, middle-ground and background. The landscape I am going to examine in this article does not obey these rules: it is more akin to the concept Dickens expounded in his "Book of Memoranda," namely that he wished to

represent[ing] London,—or Paris, or any other great place—in the light of being actually unknown to the people in the story, and only taking the colour of their fears and fancies and opinions—so getting a new aspect, and being unlike itself. An odd unlikeness to itself. (Forster 751)

2 Here landscape is moulded by emotions. The very words "unknown," "unlike" and "unlikeness" interfere with the traditional structure and prevent the viewer from appreciating the orderly sequence of the distances. This is indeed the remark of a writer who shows the secret tools in his workshop, fascinated, like so many poets and writers before him, by the rich compensation of insight, vision, epiphany and feeling which complement physical blindness. Fears and fancies and opinions amount to a psychological and philosophical universe moulded into representation without the aid of realism. Time, divested of chronology, and a consequent instability of forms appear to be its 'ordering' principles. As such, this universe coincides with the visionary space allotted to the prophet Tiresias, to Oedipus, to Shakespeare's *Lear*, and Gloucester's fate. Blindness can be seen as a leading literary motif opening a breach through the wall of realism, toward ulterior modes of perception—and this occurs from antiquity well into the nineteenth century.¹

3 Dickens deals in several instances with the question raised by the condition of sight impairment, and examines from different viewpoints the strange attitudes such condition may generate.² I shall dwell on his travelogue *American Notes* (1842) and on

The Cricket on the Hearth (1845) story, as specific instances of Dickens's assessment of the complexity inherent in the blindness / insight opposition, with a distinct gendered accent. After Dickens, Wilkie Collins has a blind protagonist in his novel *Poor Miss Finch* (1872), which revolves around the same theme; last but not least a French masterpiece, André Gide's *La symphonie pastorale* (1919), mentions Dickens's story as the necessary scaffolding to the events that have to unfold. When Charlie Chaplin exploits the condition of blindness to build the plot of *City Lights* (1931), a sentimental drama not deprived of comical touches, we realize how much the visual narration of the cinema thrives on the depiction of blindness. The full strength of the opposition blindness / insight rests on these stories, and is then told again by the cinema. The new art captures and thrives on the theme of blindness, on the emotional clash arising from interactions between the characters who see, and those who cannot see, but are seen. Chaplin, like Dickens, Collins and Gide, will dwell on the gendered potential of the blind girl figure. The innocent beauty of these protagonists, made more poignant by their unguarded display of emotions, involves the reader / spectator in a gesture of almost voyeuristic intensity.

1. American Notes, for General Circulation (1842)

- 4 The physical condition of sight impairment captures Dickens's attention as early as his first American journey, described in *American Notes* (1842). Dickens fills several pages of his travelogue with the description of the Perkins Institution and the New England Asylum for the Blind in Boston,³ and reports on the case of Laura Bridgman, a deaf and blind girl who was gradually taught to communicate by Dr Samuel Gridley Howe.⁴ While interested in the method adopted by Dr Howe, Dickens also dwells on elements that could easily flow into a literary text. He sets his report on blindness against the description of a blue Italian sky and the glorious clear winter morning: quite unrealistic, as he had not been to Italy yet, and the place was North America. Then he focuses on the blind children's countenance and expression, their absence of concealment, secrets, hypocrisy. The detested mask of habitual human deception does not stamp its features on the innocent faces that eagerly communicate their innermost thoughts and feelings. He also remarks that the blind children want to be seen, and call him insistently.

It is strange to watch the faces of the blind, and see how free they are from all concealment of what is passing in their thoughts; observing which, a man with eyes may blush to contemplate the mask he wears. Allowing for one shade of anxious expression which is never absent from their countenances, and the like of which we may readily detect in our own faces if we try to feel our way in the dark, every idea, as it rises within them, is expressed with the lightning's speed, and nature's truth. If the company at a rout, or drawing-room at court, could only for one time be as unconscious of the eyes upon them as blind men and women are, what secrets would come out, and what a worker of hypocrisy this sight, the loss of which we so much pity, would appear to be! (81)

- 5 Such condition, however, is like being "built up, as it were, in a marble cell, impervious to any ray of light, or particle of sound" (81)—a tomb indeed, one of those prison images which punctuate, as recurring realities as well as nightmares, *American Notes* and so much of his fiction. These concrete or inward prisons directly invite into the scene the spectral agents of one's imagination. But outwardly, from the observer's

point of view, they elicit the writer's attention which amounts to an act of reading, inasmuch as the feelings the blind express are readable without effort. In the *Asylum* Dickens is struck by a girl:

Her face was radiant with intelligence and pleasure. Her hair, braided by her own hands, was bound about a head, whose intellectual capacity and development were beautifully expressed in its graceful outline, and its broad open brow; her dress, arranged by herself, was a pattern of neatness and simplicity; the work she had knitted, lay beside her; her writing-book was on the desk she leaned upon.—From the mournful ruin of such bereavement, there had slowly risen up this *gentle, tender, guileless, grateful-hearted being*.

Like other inmates of that house, she had a green ribbon bound round her eyelids. *A doll she had dressed lay near upon the ground*. I took it up, and saw that she had made a green fillet such as she wore herself, and fastened it about its mimic eyes. [...] Her name is Laura Bridgman. (81–82; my emphasis)

- 6 The doll near the girl wears on her "mimic eyes" a green ribbon: made by Laura herself, just like the doll's dress. Not only proximity with the toy, but identification and attachment are evident here, as Dickens's insight catches the nature of the intimate relationship between the doll and her "owner": transitional or comfort objects, like many other beloved toys, dolls are to reappear in Jenny Wren's doll-dressmaking in *Our Mutual Friend* (1854–65), again to compensate physical impairment with their rich potential and vicarious role as simulacra. Fixing his keen eyes on Laura Bridgman (and on her doll, that he picks up from the ground) Dickens notes that Laura shows her feelings in a warm, physical, unaffected way; she is also keenly aware of whoever comes near to her.

Laura Bridgman (1829–1889)



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- 7 We are told that the Author relies on Dr Howe to relate the "fragments" of her history; he dwells on the fever that "raged several weeks" when the child was kept in a darkened room.⁵ As the result of the disease, "the darkness and silence of the tomb were around her" (83). This condition is very much akin to the silent system of the prison in Philadelphia, which is also finely observed in *American Notes*:

in reasoning from what I have seen written upon their faces, [...] I am only the more convinced that there is a depth of terrible endurance in it which none but the sufferers themselves can fathom, and which no man has a right to inflict upon his fellow-creature. I hold this slow and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain, to be immeasurably worse than any torture of the body:

and because its ghastly signs and tokens are not so palpable to the eye and sense of touch as scars upon the flesh; because its wounds are not upon the surface, and it extorts few cries that human ears can hear [...]. (146–47)

- 8 The ordeal of the prisoners is indeed different from the condition of blindness affecting Laura Bridgman. Notwithstanding this basic difference, Dickens realizes that “the mysteries of the brain,” albeit unfathomable, are written upon the faces of the prisoners, or on the delicate features of those who suffer sight impairment: to the penetrating eye of Boz, these countenances become open territories full of signs and tokens from the senses, like so many pages inviting him to read them—and to write about them. The paradox in which the body of a blind person is perceived simultaneously as a tomb and as an open book is noticed by Dickens, who gives full evidence to it. *American Notes* is, however, a travel book: the dramatic potential of this chiasmus is fully developed in the Christmas story where Bertha, the blind girl, is placed at the intersection of a narrative staging at once deception and revelation.

2. *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1845)

- 9 *The Cricket on the Hearth. A Fairy Tale of Home* is a sketchy and smug Victorian *Odyssey*. There is a Victorian Ulysses (Edward) coming back in disguise from South America to his old father (Laertes, Caleb Plummer) and his household; only faithful Eurycleia recognizes him (that is to say the serviceable Dot), and of course the dog Boxer (Argus);⁶ meanwhile his promised wife (his Penelope, May) is being insistently courted by the suitors, the Proci (old greedy Tackleton as the most impertinent, Antinous). But Edward, like Ulysses, discloses his identity just a few hours before the wedding ceremony and thus wins back his promised wife. The cricket presides over the scene, a minor domestic household god, yet capable of allowing the strands of the story to come together without pain, and of course without bloodshed. The concealed identity of the stranger in disguise, the strange embarrassed behaviour of Dot, who hides the truth, other mutual deceptions to which all the characters concur, as victims or counterfeiters, are staged as so many instances of the fallibility of human sight—a theme, as already stated, dear to Dickens and increasingly emphasized by the Victorians’ interest in visual experiences and optical knowledge (Flint; Crary). Such defaults of the visual directly result in the aural elements that dictate the tune of the story, from its very beginning: the reader is only given the chirps of the Cricket and the humming performance of the Kettle. The sounds they produce contain no lies. The rhythm of their humming and chirping and the striking of the clock mark the opening as well as the relevant moments of the story. Chapters are dubbed “chirps.”
- 10 Bertha, the blind girl, the doll-maker, sits at the physical and symbolic core of the collective deception, in her real blindness. At once utterly deceived and yet undeceived (the footsteps of the strange visitor, for instance, alert her fine sense of hearing), she incarnates the blindness / insight crux. The parcel collected by her father at the beginning of the story makes it clear with a sharp inversion: “It’s a box of dolls’ eyes for my daughter’s work. I wish it was her own sight in a box” (33–34).

Charles Dickens, *The Cricket on the Hearth*



London: Bradbury, 1846. 54

11 Similarities between Bertha and Laura Bridgman are easy to trace. First of all, the illustrations: those provided by Richard Doyle (“Chirp the Second”) and by John Leech (“Caleb at Work”)7 portray a girl whose slim body posture and hairstyle resemble Bridgman’s. Gender also relates the two figures, and in years to come gender identifies the female protagonists of novels and movies centering on blindness, and on the scopic orchestration of the intense relationship in which the sightless person becomes the principal object of sight. Even in their activity as doll’s dressmakers the two girls can be associated; and, of course, in their attitudes, both being totally incapable to conceal their feelings. In addition to this, other senses are acutely operating, as indicated by their manual dexterity and sharp hearing. Like Laura in *American Notes*, Bertha can be described as a “gentle, tender, guileless, grateful-hearted being.” But this blind girl is deceived by her father. Caleb Plummer is the victim of the miserly, devilish boss Tackleton, the toy merchant, whom he depicts as a humourist, a merry and light-hearted benefactor. This is what Bertha is made to believe:

The Blind Girl never knew that ceilings were discoloured, walls blotched and bare of plaster here and there, high crevices unstopped and widening every day, beams mouldering and tending downward. The Blind Girl never knew that iron was rusting, wood rotting, paper peeling off; the size, and shape, and true proportion of the dwelling, withering away. The Blind Girl never knew that ugly shapes of delf [sic] and earthenware were on the board; that sorrow and faintheartedness were in the house; that Caleb’s scanty hairs were turning greyer and more grey, before her sightless face. The Blind Girl never knew they had a master, cold, exacting, and uninterested—never knew that Tackleton was Tackleton in short; but lived in the belief of an eccentric humourist who loved to have his jest with them, and who, while he was the Guardian Angel of their lives, disdained to hear one word of thankfulness. (56–57)

12 The element of blindness is wrought into *The Cricket on the Hearth*, not only because of Bertha’s physical impairment, but owing to its symbolic corollary, the multiple deceptions practised and suffered by almost all the characters in the story: with the exception of Telemachus and Argus, that is to say Baby and Boxer. Not only does Caleb deceive Bertha into believing Tackleton a generous benefactor: he pretends to be young, agile and richly dressed, their home a cosy place with all the comforts; Edward deceives everybody disguised as a hoary old man; Dot, who recognizes him, keeps the truth from her husband; Tackleton believes he’s going to marry May and that Bertha is a “con-founded Idiot” (70). The sense of a giddy and strange universe is heightened by Dickens’s favourite device, the synecdoche which aligns the human

households of the story to a set of fabricated dolls' houses, with their stiff ominous inmates.

John Leech, "Caleb at Work"



The Cricket on the Hearth 1846. 61

- 13 Toys, animated, grotesque, with a mechanic will and motion of their own, heighten the general air of deception in Caleb's household. We are told that Tackleton actually hates children and despises toys: this is made manifest by the frightening toys he produces, "appalling masks; hideous, hairy, red-eyed Jacks in Boxes; Vampire Kites; demoniacal Tumblers" (37). And even the magic lantern is there, that disturbing visual apparatus which distorts the straight chronological perception of reality into a jumble of unconnected, nightmarish, unwelcome revelations: Tackleton invests a lot of money to produce "Goblin slides for magic-lanterns, whereon the Powers of Darkness were depicted as a sort of supernatural shell-fish, with human faces" (37). Quite a frightening show, to lead children into a vision of terrors. Caleb and Bertha work surrounded by masks, limbs, eyes, objects that look like instruments of torture, and by the diminutive universe made of dolls' houses, closely counterfeiting the reality of a social landscape: "There were houses in it, finished and unfinished, for Dolls of all stations in life. Suburban tenements for Dolls of moderate means; kitchens and single apartments for Dolls of the lower classes; capital town residences for Dolls of high estate" (58).
- 14 Playing with his favourite social themes, Dickens dwells on the *Unheimlich* effect such secondary universe is likely to impart to the chosen moral context of a Christmas story, meant to provide a message of consolation. Such message is entrusted to the cricket, whose magic heals not so much the problems of the wider social context, but the feelings warped by deception. The final revelation will make everybody dance around Bertha, happily playing the harp. In this universe marked by multiple warped perspectives preventing the disclosure of the truth, Bertha's physical blindness marks her not only as the character endowed with the keenest powers of perception, but also as the most sensitive person, whose sentiments are openly expressed.
- 15 The only deception she suffers is orchestrated by her father. He leads her to believe that Tackleton is their benefactor and a person entirely worthy of her love: "have I deceived her from her cradle, but to break her heart!" (106). Caleb's remorseful hint confirms Bertha's love for Tackleton. He notices her altered behaviour when she hears about Tackleton's wedding plans involving May. Both love and blighted hope are vividly enacted by Bertha: first, by devoutly kissing Tackleton's hands, then bursting into bitter

tears of sorrow. Dickens dwells on her revealing gestures, adding this meaningful trait to the portrait of blindness—the earnest, spontaneous and unguarded expression of inner feelings—a trait which will characterize, even more explicitly and intensely, the blind heroines of Collins’s and Gide’s narrations.

16 Alongside sight impairment, Dickens also dwells on the keen sense of hearing that endows Bertha with a kind of second sight. She is the only one to notice with surprise the step of the stranger: affected by its sound, she asks those around her to describe the visitor. The description of the aged man (Edward is wearing a wig of white hair) quenches her instinctive response to the sound of her brother’s footstep.

17 In *The Cricket on the Hearth*, beyond its faithful Homeric pattern, one may indeed descry a landscape made of fears and fancies and opinions. Fancies or desires are what each character wishes for, goals usually unachieved but nevertheless cogently pursued; fears are manifest or latent, and generate out of the screens provided by false visions, mistakes, misjudgements; opinions inevitably stick between the vantage point of the character’s mind and the vanishing point of his or her determination. Prejudice prevents curiosity. Aberration rather than perspective defines such landscape—not a landscape indeed, at least not in the accepted sense. It is a jumble of contrasting emotions which become readable owing to the Cricket, the governing spirit or *deus ex machina* who re-establishes the truth. Among the characters, the blind girl Bertha moves with a keener confidence across the invisible pitfalls provided by those who can claim to see.

18 The book sold “like Wildfire,” and was also a great success on the London stage, appearing simultaneously in seventeen theatres in London over the Christmas season of 1845 (Glancy xv).⁸ The spectacular vocation of the story in which a blind girl becomes the object of sight, is pictorially redrawn in John Everett Millais’s *The Blind Girl* (1856): in an open rural landscape, overflowing with bright colours that culminate in two overarching rainbows, two girls sit by the roadside. The older girl is blind. Itinerant beggars, they rest after a storm. The blind girl has a concertina on her lap, a tortoiseshell butterfly on her shawl and a card around her neck bearing the inscription “Pity the Blind.”

John Everett Millais, *The Blind Girl*



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19 Adding the emphasis of the written message to the visual feast of colours and the abundance of details, the painting partakes of the style and feeling of those chatty

sentimental parables the Pre-Raphaelite enjoyed to impart: nostalgically rural, even romantic, it nevertheless provides a series of well-developed visual oppositions between blindness and the other senses. The blind girl is fingering a blade of grass, and pleasant noises may be provided by the birds and cattle grazing on the fields. Like other blind girls—Bertha, Miss Finch—she can play an instrument, having an innate musical ear.

3. Poor Miss Finch (1872)

20 Like the girl musician in Millais's painting, and indeed Bertha's harp performance, the protagonist of Collins's *Poor Miss Finch. A Domestic Story* plays the piano extremely well. The book came out after Dickens's death, in 1872, and was not a success, at least until the twentieth century, because of its "blend of fairy-tale and factual detail," also described as a "magical entertainment, or pantomime" (xvi-xvii). These remarks set a useful critical lineage with Dickens's Christmas story and its theatre adaptations. Subtitles also provide a good match. Lucilla Finch and Bertha are both blind, but Collins weaves a much larger and more detailed tapestry of events around his heroine. Thus, in the Dedication:

More than one charming blind girl, in fiction and in the drama, has preceded 'Poor Miss Finch.' But, so far as I know, blindness in these cases has always been exhibited, more or less exclusively, from the ideal and the sentimental point of view. The attempt here made is to appeal to an interest of another kind, by exhibiting blindness as it really is. (ixl)

21 Together with a remarkably "professional" use of the existing information for his fictional project⁹—references are to philosophical and medical debates on the blind, as pointed out by Peters in her Introduction—Collins dwells on the character of the blind girl to put forward a larger issue, namely that "the conditions of human happiness are independent of bodily affliction, and that it is even possible for bodily affliction itself to take its place among the ingredients of happiness" (xl). This notion places Lucilla side by side with other girls who seem to accept their impairment with a smile and with a much keener reliance upon the other senses. Another trait that even more effectively establishes a relation between the behaviour of Lucilla and that of the real Laura Bridgman and the fictional Bertha Plummer, is the spontaneous, unguarded expression of their feelings, especially when they are in love. Lucilla, because of her blindness, is "set free from the prudishness and false modesty of the ordinary middle-class girl of her time" (xi). The narrator of the story, Madame Pratolungo, remarks that

modesty is essentially the growth of our own consciousness of the eyes of others judging us [...] blindness is never bashful, for the one simple reason that blindness does not see. [...] My poor Lucilla had always the bandage over her eyes. My poor Lucilla was never to meet her lover in the light. She had grown up with the passions of a woman—and yet, she had never advanced beyond the fearless and primitive innocence of a child. (59–60)

22 Peters remarks about the sexual implications inherent in such condition: these will become fully apparent once the cinema appropriates the blind girl figure, to make her the protagonist of stories in which female beauty and her innocent sexual attractiveness fill the screen, inviting simultaneously the gaze of other characters and of spectators to a gesture of almost voyeuristic intensity, only redeemed, in part, by the pathetic notion of the girl's impairment. In the case of Lucilla Finch (as in Gide's story) modern surgery removes—temporarily—the heroine's blindness. A German character, Dr Grosse,

performs the operation. In love with Oscar, when blind, the girl is going to be deceived by Oscar's treacherous and handsome twin brother, Nugent, who has also fallen in love with her.¹⁰ As a person endowed with sight, Lucilla falls into the snare orchestrated by Nugent. It takes her relapse into blindness (and series of sensational detours in the plot, with timely departures, arrivals, a comedy of errors) to regain her equilibrium and her happiness, with the certainty of recognizing the true object of her love. In her blindness, Lucilla finds freedom. The prison of sight impairment allows her to dwell in a landscape of her own creation, made of fears, fancies and opinions. In terms of visual landscape, instead, it is worth quoting these remarks, from Lucilla's journal, when she describes her difficulty with distances—a key element of traditional perspective:

To-day's experience has also informed me that I make slow progress in teaching myself to judge correctly of distances. In spite of this drawback, there is nothing I enjoy so much in using my sight as looking at a great wide prospect of any kind—provided I am not asked to judge how far or how near objects may be. It seems like escaping out of prison. [...] (333)

23 And yet she cannot figure out distances and correct proportions: the relative sizes of ships and boats puzzle her, and a horse and cart are mistaken by Lucilla as a dog pulling a wheelbarrow. Here we find that the conventional paradigms of visible landscape are totally upset, almost non-existent, even when sight impairment ceases to be. Lucilla still lives in her world made of fears (of whatever is black) and fancies (her love for Oscar) and opinions (dislike of Nugent), to the extent that Nugent, who deceives her by taking the place of her beloved Oscar, can easily manipulate her opinions. Nugent creates in Lucilla a disturbing feeling of unease: something is wrong, her body does not respond to his touch—as she did before.

4. André Gide's *La Symphonie Pastorale* (1919)

24 Dickens's Christmas story was translated into French by Amédée Pichot as *Le Grillon du foyer*, and included in his *Les Contes de Noël* in 1847. To this reception story we also owe the second life of *The Cricket*, which inhabits the plot of André Gide's *La Symphonie Pastorale* (1919). In this story, with full reference to Laura Bridgman and to Dickens, a blind orphan girl is adopted by a pastor, moved by Christian charity. We read in his journal the recollection of the day he took home a poor blind orphan, Gertrude. The landscape—the Jura region, in Switzerland—is all shrouded in deep snow, often in darkness: objective correlative to the condition of the girl, walled up ("emmurée") in her blindness, apparently idiot, inarticulate but for a few grunts. Feeling she was entrusted to his religious care, he took her home—despite the fact that his wife was not happy with the charitable mission. Amélie correctly perceives to which extent the pastor is falling desperately in love with Gertrude. Mistaking his love for a moral duty, he is quite self-deceived. Again we have a story in which physical blindness is paired, as in Dickens, by an equal amount of moral blindness.

25 One day a friend of the pastor, Dr Martin, tells him about the case of Laura Bridgeman (*sic*) and Dr Howe's method to educate the girl and wake her up into communication.¹¹ After Bridgman's case, Dickens's *Grillon du foyer* is evoked and given to the pastor: a striking story because of the load of pathos created by the art of Dickens. *The Cricket*, and Bertha's deception, are mentioned by Gide as an explicit reference to physical blindness, and with implicit irony aimed at the pastor's self-

deception. Gide inserts the Dickensian plot in his story to emphasize the behaviour of the pastor. Not only does he deceive Gertrude, with frequent quotes from the Bible about Christian love, he is also visibly blind to his own love for her.

Puis il me parla d'un conte de Dickens, qu'il croit avoir été directement inspiré par l'exemple de Laura Bridgeman et qu'il promet de m'envoyer aussitôt. Et quatre jours après je reçus en effet *Le Grillon du Foyer*, que je lus avec un vif plaisir. C'est l'histoire un peu longue, mais pathétique par instants, d'une jeune aveugle que son père, pauvre fabricant de jouets, entretient dans l'illusion du confort, de la richesse et du bonheur ; mensonge que l'art de Dickens s'évertue à faire passer pour pieux, mais dont, Dieu merci ! je n'aurai pas à user avec Gertrude. (38)

26 In Gide's story an emotional inscape is also built up *because* of blindness; and with the help of music, as the pastor takes Gertrude to Neuchâtel to listen to Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony. Gradually, thanks to Dr Howe's method, Gertrude blooms into curiosity, knowledge, beauty. She learns to play the organ in the small chapel, and the pastor spies on her and his son Jacques side by side: their hands touch and Jacques kisses her hand. Thus unconfessed love and jealousy coexist, but unheeded as far as unseen. As Jacques confesses his love for Gertrude to his father, the old man's jealousy finds subtle ways of discouraging the idyll and sending the son away from home.

27 In March, the pastor takes Gertrude for a walk, and as an answer to her question about the beauty of landscape, he quotes Matthew 6.28, "Consider the lilies in the field," and describes a glowing landscape, to which the blind girl adds: "not even Solomon in all his splendour" (Matt. 6.29)—wondering, through the verbal filter of the Bible, at a beauty which is part of an allegory, constructed within an immaterial space endowed with all the teleological splendours of religion. Gertrude fancies a landscape which only exists in the pages of the Gospel, with white lilies and silver streams, a promised land. But after the surgery Gertrude regains her sight and sees that she has been painfully deceived. Her new awareness brings her to suicide.

5. Visible blindness: the cinema

28 In his study about Dickens and the dream of cinema, Smith argues that Dickens was "manipulating the faintly negative aspects of the [magic lantern] device as a shadowy reflection of reality, by associating it with insobriety, deception, the fanciful play of the imagination at dusk" (108). The reference applies to the dark aspects described in *American Notes* and to the deceptions staged by *The Cricket*: the cinema appropriates such potential with its techniques and spreads into mass-visual culture the creative freedom and strong spectacular appeal offered by Dickens's dramatic plots.

29 David Wark Griffith directs *The Cricket on the Hearth* in 1909. Again, the story spawns a 1914 film directed by Marston and a 1923 silent, directed by Johnston. After a Russian *Cricket* (*Sverchock na Pechi*, 1915), in France *Le Grillon du foyer* is directed in 1922 by Manoussi (Glavin 2003 208). Sergei Eisenstein's famous comment (qtd. in Glancy xvi), that the art of Dickens and Griffith exploits the close-up technique as an expressive means of indicating the character's subjectivity, suggests that close-ups work most effectively in a context characterized by blindness and deception. The spectator, even more than the reader, is placed at an angle of vision which excludes most of the surrounding space, from where he could survey, and take part in, the dramatic irony of the story. This is indeed a landscape made of fears, fancies and opinions. There is a mystery inherent in these transitions from blindness into sight, heightened by montage

(Bordwell), whose dramatic quality and irony would not be lost on Charlie Chaplin. The movie *City Lights* (1931) places the famous comic marionette—the Tramp—in the urban jungle of the city, side by side with a blind girl, a timid flower seller, who is deceived into believing he is a millionaire.¹² Chaplin recalls in his autobiography:

In the Keystone days the tramp had been freer and less confined to plot. [...] The solution came when I thought of the tramp as a sort of Pierrot. With this conception, I was freer to express and embellish the comedy with touches of sentiment. But logically it was difficult to get a beautiful girl interested in a tramp. This has always been a problem in my films. [...] The girl in *City Lights* is blind. In this relationship he is romantic and wonderful to her until her sight is restored. (224)

- 30 Here we find again the Dickensian theme of a blind girl deceived by those who can see, rather than by her sight impairment.

City Lights (1931)



Image in the public domain

- 31 When the blind girl retrieves her eyesight she has to come to terms with the tramp, with his poverty and his generosity. A few scenes reveal that the final recognition, impossible in visual terms, is achieved owing to the sheer touch of a hand, and the memory of the first touch. Pathos melts into comedy and the happy ending. Another movie based on Gide's novella is *La Symphonie Pastorale*—a 1946 French film drama directed by Jean Delannoy and starring Michèle Morgan and Pierre Blanchar.¹³ This is the last—not least—example in a long lineage of young female protagonists, whose blindness, narrated as a vivid landscape of emotions, paves the way for the strong visual potential Dickens had already detected, both during his visit to the States and with his treatment of the theme in *The Cricket on the Heart*. As it happens, we can remark and agree with Glavin that Dickens's books came first, of course, but that these movies now shape Dickens's fiction by generating "whatever possibilities remain for reading the fiction" (5–6).

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Notes

1 See Mark Paterson, "'Looking on Darkness, Which the Blind Do See': Blindness, Empathy, and Feeling Seeing." *Mosaic. A Journal Devoted to the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 46. 3 (Sept 2013): 159-77. This issue of *Mosaic* is entirely devoted to the theme of blindness, and other articles have to be cited: Jan Eric Olsén's "Vicariates of the Eye: Blindness, Sense Substitution, and Writing Devices in the Nineteenth Century," 75-91; and David Bolt's "Aesthetic Blindness: Symbolism, Realism, and Reality," 93-108. Paul De Man's *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. New York: Routledge, 1983, examined the arena of criticism: one may infer that the double-blind peer review draws its authority from such text.

2 This article builds on the cultural and literary representations of disability in the nineteenth century highlighted by Martha Stoddard Holmes in her book *Fictions of Affliction: Physical Disability in Victorian Culture* (2004).

3 The report devoted to the institutions for the blind occupies pages 79–94 of the Penguin edition (1972), and it can be considered one of the largest patchwork pieces the author places in his travelogue—a text notoriously composed of his own impressions and material from other local sources (dialect, the black slaves and fugitive slave law).

4 Maud Howe and Florence Howe Hall in *Laura Bridgman, Dr Howe's Famous Pupil and What He Taught Her* (London: Little, 1904) mention Dickens (p. 107) and remark that in *American Notes* he quotes from Dr Howe's report.

5 Infectious illness conducive to blindness, albeit temporary, also appears in Dickens's *Bleak House*. In Ch. 35, in "Esther's narrative," a sublime landscape is engendered by blindness:

In falling ill, I seemed to have crossed a dark lake and to have left all my experiences, mingled together by the great distance, on the healthy shore... it seemed one long night, but I believe there were both nights and days in it—when I laboured up colossal staircases, ever striving to reach the top, and ever turned, as I have seen a worm in a garden path, by some obstruction, and labouring again [...]. Dare I hint at that worse time when, strung together somewhere in great black space, there was a flaming necklace, or ring, or starry circle of some kind, of which I was one of the beads! (555–56)

Again Dickens describes a space lacking proportion, perspective, order and coherence: akin to the colossal staircases in G. B. Piranesi's etchings of "Imaginary Prisons," while the scarlet beads may be associated to the scarlet stains produced by infection and plague in Edgar Allan Poe's story "The Mask of Red Death" (*Graham's Magazine* May 1842). Dickens and Poe met in 1842, and Poe had his review of Dickens's *Barnaby Rudge* in the February issue of *Graham's Magazine* (see Philip Collins, ed. *Charles Dickens, The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge, 2009, 105–11).

6 Dickens adds to the mystery of blindness and insight the strange behaviour of Boxer who "made certain delicate distinctions of his own, in his communication with Bertha, which persuade me fully that he knew her to be blind. He never sought to attract her attention by looking at her, as he often did with other people, but touched her invariably" (86). There's matter here to further the analysis into animals in fiction and the relationship they establish with humans.

7 Bertha also appears in the final illustration by John Leech, "The Dance," where she is now in the background but playing the harp and thus providing the music to the general merriment.

8 On January 1, 1846, Dickens writes to C. Felton, "The cricket is a most tremendous success. It has beaten my other carols out of the field, and is going still, like wildfire." (*Letters*, 4: 464). In her introduction to *Christmas Books* Ruth Glancy adds that the *Cricket* was frequently dramatized in several languages, including a Russian version which played to packed houses in Moscow in 1918. Lenin attended one performance, but walked out (xv).

9 On the subject see the recent study by Mariacconcetta Costantini, *Sensation and Professionalism in the Victorian Novel*. Bern: Lang, 2015.

10 Oscar is treated for epilepsy with nitrate of silver which disfigures him by making his skin permanently black. But blind Lucilla feels "a delicious tingle" (147) when he touches her. After the operation, Nugent although winningly handsome does not produce the same effect.

11 « Au reste, cette méthode, ajouta-t-il après me l'avoir minutieusement exposée, n'a rien de bien sorcier. Je ne l'invente point et d'autres l'ont appliquée déjà. Ne t'en souviens-tu pas ? Du temps que nous faisons ensemble notre philosophie, nos professeurs, à propos de Condillac et de sa statue animée, nous entretenaient déjà d'un cas analogue à celui-ci... À moins, fit-il en se reprenant, que je n'aie lu cela plus tard, dans une revue de psychologie... N'importe ; cela m'a frappé et je me souviens même du nom de cette pauvre enfant, encore plus déshéritée que Gertrude, car elle était aveugle et sourde-muette, qu'un docteur de je ne sais plus quel comté d'Angleterre recueillit, vers le milieu du siècle dernier. Elle avait nom Laura Bridgeman. Ce docteur avait tenu journal, comme tu devrais faire, des progrès de l'enfant, ou du moins, pour commencer, de ses efforts à lui pour l'instruire. Durant des jours et des semaines, il s'obstina à lui faire toucher et palper alternativement deux petits objets, une épingle, puis une plume, puis toucher sur une feuille imprimée à l'usage des aveugles le relief des deux mots anglais : pin et pen. Et durant des semaines, il n'obtint aucun résultat. Le corps semblait inhabité. Pourtant il ne perdait pas confiance. Je me faisais l'effet de quelqu'un, racontait-il, qui, penché sur la margelle d'un puits profond et noir, agiterait désespérément une corde dans l'espoir qu'enfin une main la saisisse. Car il ne douta pas un instant que quelqu'un ne fût là, au fond du gouffre, et que cette corde à la fin ne soit saisie. Et un jour, enfin, il vit cet impassible visage de Laura s'éclairer d'une sorte de sourire; je crois bien qu'à ce moment des larmes de reconnaissance et d'amour jaillirent de ses yeux et qu'il tomba à genoux pour remercier le Seigneur. Laura venait tout à coup de comprendre ce que le docteur voulait d'elle ; sauvée ! À partir de ce jour elle fit attention ; ses progrès furent rapides ; elle s'instruisit bientôt elle-même, et par la suite devint directrice d'un institut d'aveugles ... » (34–36).

12 Vescovi argues that the relationship between the Italian movie *La stazione* and "The

Signalman” can be paralleled “to that between Chaplin’s *City Lights* and Dickens’s Christmas story “The Cricket on the Hearth” (Glavin 54).

13 Adapted to the screen by Jean Aurenche. The film score was by Georges Auric. At the 1946 Cannes Film Festival, the movie won the *Grand Prix* (equivalent of the Palme d’Or) and the Best Actress award was for Michèle Morgan.

Table des illustrations

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	Crédits	London: Bradbury, 1846. 54
	URL	http://journals.openedition.org/erea/docannexe/image/4915/img-2.jpg
	Fichier	image/jpeg, 24k
	Titre	John Leech, “Caleb at Work”
	Légende	<i>The Cricket on the Hearth</i> 1846. 61
	URL	http://journals.openedition.org/erea/docannexe/image/4915/img-3.jpg
	Fichier	image/jpeg, 28k
	Titre	John Everett Millais, <i>The Blind Girl</i>
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	URL	http://journals.openedition.org/erea/docannexe/image/4915/img-4.jpg
	Fichier	image/jpeg, 32k
	Titre	<i>City Lights</i> (1931)
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