

CHARLES DICKENS, AND CERTAIN ASPECTS OF ROMANTICISM:

A thesis submitted to the

University of Leicester

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy,

1975,

by Pieter Dirk den Hartog

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## PREFACE

The greatness of the best nineteenth-century English novelists, one might well argue, has much to do with the way that their concern to establish a moral wisdom proceeds inseparably from an intense and highly exploratory pursuit of a psychological understanding of life, and their attempt to base the former on the latter. Such a statement must seem self-evident to anyone well-acquainted with George Eliot or Charlotte Brontë, but it is likely to raise hackles in the case of Dickens, as it smacks of just the kind of Procrustean formula that is liable to discount the peculiarly Dickensian kind of greatness. Nevertheless, the more I have considered Dickens's indebtedness to his English Romantic predecessors, the more it has struck me that while Dickens undeniably developed certain propositions he inherited from Wordsworth about the relationship of psychology and morality in quite a different manner and spirit than did George Eliot, his engagement with such propositions is at the heart not just of his relations with the Romantics, but of his works in general. Neither, I feel, is it at odds with, or even disjunct from, his distinctively individual nature: just as the mode of the novel enforced no incompatibility between the serious search for truth and the telling of a moving or gripping story or the staging of a zestful comic scene, so I hope that my approach will throw some light on Dickens's liveliness as well as his profundity. Hence the fact that my tracing of Dickens's development of several Romantic themes has led me to a lengthy discussion of his comedy.

I should like to thank a number of people who in various ways have enabled this thesis to be written: the sponsors and administrators of the Commonwealth Scholarship Scheme, who made study for the thesis possible; Professor S.L. Goldberg and Mr. T.B. Tomlinson of the University of Melbourne, who in their seminar on "Literature and Thought, 1870 - 1925"



threw out a number of suggestions that set me thinking along the lines that eventually led me to my particular subject; and my Leicester University supervisor, Professor P.A.W. Collins, who has patiently done his best to induct me into the procedures of research and scholarly presentation, besides commenting helpfully on work in progress and suggesting further reading. I am likewise indebted to Mr. Graham Burns of La Trobe University, who read some of the first draft at short notice and made valuable suggestions; and to my father, who made detailed criticisms of the ungainly prose of that draft, which I hope is now not quite so bad. Mrs. Susan Letts and Mrs. Rosemary Lovett were invaluable as typists, and made many sacrifices of their personal comfort in order to speed my submission. Finally, I am deeply grateful to my wife for her cheering support, despite the innumerable pressures upon her which the completion of my work has involved.

I have for the most part used and quoted from the Penguin English Library editions of Dickens's works and where I have not done so the relevant details are given in the initial footnote reference. Also, a list of works cited in other editions is given in the first section of my bibliography (p.431). John Forster's standard biography, The Life of Charles Dickens (1872-4) is cited in the 1938 edition, edited and annotated by J.W.T. Ley. Wordsworth's Prelude, which I frequently refer to, is cited in the 1850 version.

# CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
Acknowledgments and Preface	i-ii
List of Abbreviations	iv
1. Introduction	1
2. 'Continuity' inherited and modified: early Dickens and Wordsworth; Dickens, Lamb, and 'Fancy'	61
3. 'Continuity' extended: Dickens and Genial Comedy	108
4. Some Paradoxes of 'Continuity' and Morality (I): <u>Dombey and Son</u> <u>Notes</u> A. Dickens and Shakespeare: <u>Coriolanus</u> and the "Taboo on Tenderness" B. "The Taboo on Tenderness" and "Somebody's Luggage"	194 244 248
5. Some Paradoxes of 'Continuity' and Morality (II): <u>David Copperfield</u> <u>Note</u> A. Dickens and De Quincey	251 283
6. An "outcast" reclaimed? : <u>Bleak House</u>	298
7. 'Continuity', Protest, and the Ideal of Resignation: <u>Little Dorrit</u> Bibliography	356 431

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

The following are the abbreviated titles most commonly referred to,  
after full citation in initial reference:

Charles Dickens, Miscellaneous Papers, ed. B.W. Matz,  
London, 1914

MP

The Letters of Charles Dickens, ed. Walter Dexter,  
3 vols., The Nonesuch Dickens, Bloomsbury, 1938

Letters

The Letters of Charles Dickens, ed. M. House and  
G. Storey, The Pilgrim Edition: 3 vols. issued  
so far, Oxford, 1965 -

Letters (Pilgrim)

Philip Collins, ed., Dickens: The Critical Heritage,  
London, 1971

CH

John Forster, The Life of Charles Dickens,  
edited and annotated by J.W.T. Ley, London, 1928

Forster

## One

## INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the most interesting consequence of exploring Dickens's relations with his English Romantic predecessors, in the particular way I have chosen to do it, has been coming to realise that the tracing of connections involved has a certain bearing upon that abiding polemical issue of modern Dickens criticism, the question of whether the 'real' Dickens, as manifest in his imaginative works, should be seen as essentially a humane or a diabolical figure. It is my sense of Dickens that to choose exclusively between one or the other 'sides' is to do him a gross injustice: a Dickens definitively expressed by Quilp and Jasper seems to me as narrowly selective as one defined by Pickwick and Little Dorrit. Rather, it seems to me true, speaking generally, that the more Dickens's imagination is possessed by the vitality of evil, or the power of the egoistic will, the more vital is his preoccupation with a countervailing humanity. It is, as I will argue, for the most part the vitality of this preoccupation that is disclosed by study of his debt to certain Romantics along the lines followed in this thesis; though it is the necessary consequence of such vitality, meaning by that the harmony of truth-seeking energy with intelligence and imagination (and Dickens, needless to say, modifies as well as inherits), that the fruits of this preoccupation by no means



always minister to the kind of comfortable optimism that used to be regarded as typically Dickensian.

The first person to have put the case for a diabolical Dickens, as far as I know, is Edmund Wilson - by diabolical I mean something other than 'dark', which adjective has often been used by critics stressing the rather different matter of Dickens's pessimism. His attitude emerges most clearly in his comments on Jasper in Edwin Drood:

Mr. Jasper is, like Dickens, an artist: he is a musician, he has a beautiful voice. He smokes opium, and so, like Dickens, leads a life of the imagination apart from the life of men. Like Dickens, he is a skilful magician, whose power over his fellows may be dangerous. Like Dickens, he is an alien from another world; yet, like Dickens, he has made himself respected in the conventional English community. Is he a villain? From the point of view of the cathedral congregation of Cloisterham, who have admired his ability as an artist, he will have been playing a diabolic role. All that sentiment, all those edifying high spirits, which Dickens has been dispensing so long, which he is still making the effort to dispense - has all this now grown as false as those hymns to the glory of the Christian God which are performed by the worshipper of Kali? And yet in another land there is another point of view from which Jasper is a good and faithful servant. It is at the command of his imaginative alter ego and acting in the name of his goddess that Jasper has committed his crime.<sup>1</sup>

Wilson's view has been a seminal one, though subject, of course, to individual modification. Thus, where he is nothing if not evangelical in proclaiming this discovered satanism, a recent and highly-acclaimed critic who takes a somewhat similar line, John Carey, presents his 'underground' Dickens in a somewhat more debonair spirit: Wilson's covert existential hero, whose real image is a clerical hipster with a secret mission to transvalue all values, appears here as the reluctant

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1. Edmund Wilson, "Dickens: The Two Scrooges" in his The Wound and The Bow (1961; first published 1940), pp.1-93 (pp.91-2).

creator of endearingly lively humanoids. The gist of the argument is much the same, however:

Dickens, who saw himself as the great prophet of cosy, domestic virtue, purveyor of improving literature to the middle classes, never seems to have quite reconciled himself to the fact that violence and destruction were the most powerful stimulants to his imagination. To the end of his career he continues to insert the sickly scenes of family fun, and seriously asks us to accept them as the positives in his fiction. The savages and the cynics, the Quilps and the Scrooges, who have all the vitality, are, in the end, tritely punished or improbably converted.<sup>1</sup>

Of course there is much in Dickens, much that is vivid and memorable, that answers to the terms in which critics like Wilson and Carey offer their praise: his is a very different sensibility from, say, Wordsworth's, and the advantages are obviously not all on Wordsworth's side. Hugh of the Maypole on horseback in the Gordon riots is another instance that comes immediately to mind in support of the above-quoted formulation. And nobody would deny that there is a good deal in Dickens of which Carey's phrase "sickly scenes of family fun" is a fair appraisal. However, it is wrong to polarise the Dickens world into the insipidly goody-goody and the horribly-fascinating vicious, as it is the tendency of Wilson's, and more especially Carey's, line of argument to do. This is to simplify melodramatically in a way which Dickens himself seldom did. To start with, as Chesterton insisted,<sup>2</sup> between Quilp and Nell there is Dick Swiveller, a figure who is significantly not mentioned in Carey's book. He too is vital, the triumphant embodiment of exuberant happiness - a happiness far more convincing than the forced

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1. The Violent Effigy (1973), p.16.

2. G.K. Chesterton, Appreciations and Criticisms of Charles Dickens (1911), pp. 55-6.



cosiness of, say, The Cricket on the Hearth, and yet very close in spirit to the normally human. This should go without saying, but, as Denis Donoghue suggested in 1970,<sup>1</sup> the current state of Dickens criticism is such that there is a need for a fresh recognition of the 'traditional', 'popular' Dickens. Not, obviously, as the sole reality, or anything like it, but as a major element in the whole composition, as one important shade of the lighting, as it were. The genial Dickens, that is, is no less real, for all his tendency to wear thin in patches, no more a mere surface, than the macabre Dickens, or the tortured Dickens. Which is not at all to say that the traditional Dickensians were not wrong in emphasising that aspect to the exclusion of all others, and that some kind of iconoclasm of the kind Wilson inaugurated was not necessary.

More important, however, is the consideration that it may very well have been Dickens's clear awareness of the power of violence and destruction that led to his quite rightly never reconciling himself to their being the most significant reality of life, both life in general and the life of his own imagination. Such a path (and I think it is the one he can be seen to have taken) is surely not obtuse, but simply human responsibility. Quilp's vividness is, after all, little more than boyish fun - comical ferocities with prawns' heads and the like, which, while they undoubtedly exert a peculiar mesmeric charm upon the women of his world, never really strike the reader as threatening. For real viciousness we must go to Flintwich - or, in a subtler, less theatrically immediate sense, to Miss Wade. They too are 'vital', and more so than

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1. Denis Donoghue, "The English Dickens and Dombey and Son", in Ada Nisbet and Blake Nevius, eds., Dickens Centennial Essays (1971), pp. 1 - 21 (pp. 1 - 2).



any of the likeable or admirable characters in the novel, if 'vitality' is to be taken to mean nothing more than simple psychic intensity, impassioned force. Yet it is a vitality that is also acutely horrifying, and its magnetism is claustrophobic. To be unable to escape their presence - to completely succumb to that spell, is to suffer the annihilation undergone by Affery (Dickens's strikingly emphatic imagining of Mrs. Quilp from the inside) or the extinction of humanity Tattycoram temporarily yields to. As with Shakespeare in *Lear* the degree to which malignity is felt to be a dominating power in the world is an index of the absolute need to sustain faith in an alternative. Dickens's idea - and practice - of art is not that of passively offering up whatever imaginative intensities happen to be pressing upon him at the time. In this way he is not, in one of the negative senses of the word, a Romantic.

The outlook I am questioning here could not properly be said to be representative of contemporary Dickens criticism - it is hard to imagine, given the protean nature of the phenomenon, what could be. The 'diabolical' Dickens approach has already had a number of able detractors: F.R. and Q.D. Leavis, for instance, have directly challenged the reductive bias of Wilson's view<sup>1</sup>, as also has A.E. Dyson<sup>2</sup>; and a number of Philip Collins's articles have had the implicit critical bearing, I think, of judiciously re-emphasising the Dickens that the Victorians found so attractive a writer, if, in some notable cases, not altogether a great one.<sup>3</sup> (It is a strange irony that modern critics tend

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1. F.R. and Q.D. Leavis, Dickens the Novelist (1970), see esp. pp.xiii - xviii.

2. A.E. Dyson, The Inimitable Dickens (1970), pp. 290 - 30.

3. See, for instance, his "Dickens and Popular Amusements", Dickensian, LXI (1965), pp. 7 - 19; and his survey of modern Dickens criticism, "1940-1960: Enter the Professionals", Dickensian, LXVI (1970), pp. 143 - 61 (pp. 158 - 9).

sometimes to confer upon Dickens a lofty, almost marmoreal greatness that seems to entail less real appreciation than Victorians like Lord Acton, who disapproved of him as a writer to be taken seriously - "knows nothing of sin when it is not crime"<sup>1</sup> found in him as an entertainer.<sup>2</sup>) These qualifications once made, though, it still seems to me that Carey's attitude, say, is a characteristically contemporary one, representative of the general literary-cultural ethos if not of Dickens studies as such. A.E. Dyson has referred to "our present-day cult of toughness"<sup>3</sup>, and whilst I cannot quite agree with the terms of his defence of Esther Summerson in the context of which he makes this remark (and still less, I must admit, with Edgar Johnson's plea for Little Nell on similar grounds<sup>4</sup>), the phrase does have a salutary bearing today, when ironies about "cosy, domestic virtue" and the purveyance of "improving literature to the middle classes" come very easily. Which is not to suggest that we ought to throw off sophistication with a hollow groan, and rediscover Victorian sentimentality as a lost golden age: it is significant that Carey's tough-minded reading of Esther<sup>5</sup>, shorn of its fanciful excesses, does reveal things about her, in a way that enhances our sense of Dickens's intelligence, which Dyson's defence does not take into account. But it is worthwhile to compare what, as I want to argue in chapter five, is Dickens's tactful and humanely hesitant handling of certain unsettling insights about Esther's goodness, with the brash summary Carey offers of her case: that her

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1. Rev. in the Rambler, N.S. VI. (Jan. 1862), pp. 274 - 6; quoted from Philip Collins, ed., Dickens: The Critical Heritage (1971), p. 437.

2. Letter (1880), quoted from F.R. and Q.D. Leavis, Dickens the Novelist pp. 34 - 5.

3. Dyson, p.176.

4. Edgar Johnson, Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph, 2 vols. (1953), ii, 393.

5. Carey, pp. 172 - 3.



type is "a perversion"<sup>1</sup>. At his best Dickens can know things without being knowing.

I offer these general remarks at the outset as a preface to the theme of this thesis: Dickens's relation to Romanticism, or rather, certain aspects of that relation. Dickens's failure to reconcile himself to violence and destruction proceeds not just from worthy restraint or a simulated, lacklustre optimism, but, I suggest, from his deepest perception of essential human needs, on the fulfilment or not of which inner happiness or its opposite can be seen to depend. The key to such perception, I want to argue, is Dickens's indebtedness to the Romantics, for it is in what he makes of certain central insights and emphases they provide him, how he adapts them to his own experience, that his specifically humane wisdom is attained, a wisdom that at best not only provides understanding but releases emotional and imaginative power.

The principal aspect of this indebtedness that I want to treat of can be conveniently introduced by turning to an interesting analysis of Dombey and Son made some years ago by Julian Moynahan. Attempting to explain why Dombey behaves as he does towards Florence, he finds explanations such as Pride inadequate, and suggests that:

A third and more 'up-to-date' line of explanation is possible. Florence has an enormous capacity for tender feeling, while Dombey, for reasons never explained, is afraid of feeling. He has built a stone facade - of rigid views, rigid habits, rigid stance, and a rigid countenance - between his inner self and the people around him.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Ibid, p. 173.

2. Julian Moynahan, "Dealings with the firm of Dombey and Son : Firmness versus Wetness", in John Cross and Gabriel Pearson, eds., Dickens and the Twentieth Century (1962), pp. 121-32 (pp. 123-4).

He then continues to compare Dombey with the psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich's concept of "defence against feeling through the erection of a frozen façade 'character armour':<sup>1</sup>

/Reich/ found that his patients feared love more than loneliness. It was easier for them to feel nothing or to hate than to shed their armour and enter naked into what Dickens calls 'the community of feeling'.

In Dombey and Son Florence assumes the rôle of the therapist and suffers the hostility that neurotics of this sort are ready to vent on anyone willing to challenge their essential isolation.<sup>2</sup>

One of the main limitations of the 'diabolical Dickensians', I intend to argue, is their neglect of how deeply and consistently and intelligently Dickens is preoccupied with the springs of tenderness, with the sane and healthy vitality which they nourish, and the inner deadness and latent moral nullity consequent upon their denial. It is a concern which issues both in Dickens's most light-hearted (though not necessarily superficial) fiction - the "edifying high spirits" - together with his most delicate psychological probings. It is at least one ground of unity, that is, between minor works such as A Christmas Carol and "Somebody's Luggage", and the major novels. And whilst the particular insight Dickens is dramatising in Dombey's case does prompt us to look forward to a figure like Reich (I myself have found Ian Suttie's The Origins of Love and Hate<sup>3</sup> invaluable in thinking about Dickens), the general direction and nature of his concern here points back to certain of the English Romantics. The aim of this thesis is to examine the relationship between Dickens and a body of

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1. Ibid, p. 124.

2. Ibid, p. 124.

3. Ian D. Suttie, The Origins of Love and Hate, (1960; first published 1935).

work which, by and large, was intent not only upon the expression of feeling, but an intelligent exploration of the conditions of what they took to be healthy and vital feeling, an exploration that resulted in a legacy of imaginatively embodied and discursive psychological wisdom which was available to Dickens, and which, I want to suggest, he can be seen to have drawn on, and to have adapted, and modified, to his own purposes. I do not want in any way to claim that this account fully covers Dickens's interest in human nature: some of his most profound and imaginatively absorbed studies are, of course, of people for whom tenderness is never in question - Jagers and Tulkinghorn, for example. Dickens certainly did have a remarkable empathy for the amoral. Yet there is no reason to suppose that an impulsion towards the morbid entails that the concern with the healthy is necessarily superficial or hollow. One might reasonably suppose the opposite to be the case, with Dickens as with Dostoevsky.

A number of critics have already discussed Dickens in relation to the Romantics, and my debt to them will emerge as I go along. As could be predicted from the above remarks the figures I have in mind are not, for the most part, Byron, Shelley, or Keats, but the earlier generation, Wordsworth, Coleridge, De Quincey, and Lamb, whom Mario Praz has described as being essentially bourgeois in spirit, and as such the natural precursors of the Victorian novelists.<sup>1</sup> Through the mediation of such figures, Praz argues, Romanticism "turned bourgeois" in England in a way analogous to the evolution of Romanticism into the quiet bourgeois

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1. Mario Praz, The Hero in Eclipse in Victorian Fiction (1956).



Gemütlichkeit of the Biedermeier period in Germany:

For there can be observed, even in the great Romantics, a falling-back from extreme positions, a slowing-down into a quiet conformism, a dissemination of Romantic ideas in such a way as to make them accessible to the middle-classes. <sup>1</sup>

Wordsworth's preference for the humble subject, and his treatment of love as a domestic idyll (Ruth? Margaret?), or Lamb's studied homeliness, are cases in point. These ideals, Praz claims, are inherited and developed by Dickens.<sup>2</sup> Such an argument obviously simplifies and excludes, and leaves much room for refinement upon the broad comparison, but it points roughly in the right direction, I think. One might initially question, though, the implication of toning down Romantic ideas deliberately to please a middle-class public. This hardly seems right for the Wordsworth of The Prelude, say, who neither offends middle-class taste - though the poem didn't please it much on publication, being generally thought too heavy<sup>3</sup> - nor goes out of his way to suppress his natural self for its approval. Also questionable is Praz's assumption that the Wordsworth group are not "true Romantics", since they are neither "titanic rebels, or tumultuous Christians", contenting themselves as they do with being "resigned", and "murmuring timid prayers".<sup>4</sup> This seems a fairly narrow use of the term, though Praz is perhaps loth to think of the word Romantic divested of the ring of Promethean ardour, and begrudges the title to tamer fry - his viewpoint is perhaps a distinctively 'European' one, reminding us

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1. Ibid, p. 39.

2. Ibid, pp. 127-88.

3. See H. Lindenberg, "The Reception of The Prelude", Bulletin of the New York Public Library, LXIV (1960), pp. 196-208.

4. Praz, p. 67.

of Taine's celebrated attack on the dearth of passion in the English literature of his time. If Wordsworth and Coleridge do 'fall back' from the radical Romanticism of their revolutionary years, they can also be seen as continuous with, and developing from, the tendencies emerging throughout the eighteenth-century that can be loosely grouped under the word 'sentimentalism'.<sup>1</sup> The degree of continuity and difference, however, the precise grounds for retaining the term 'Romantic' to describe that which distinguishes the Wordsworth-Coleridge group, is something which I will have to allow to emerge in the run of my exposition.

"The Wordsworth-Coleridge group" - the four figures I have named were closely related by friendship, and would probably have influenced each other even if they had never read each other's works. Which of course they did, early access to The Prelude being one of the privileges of membership. Hazlitt and Hunt were two other close affiliates, both of whom, and especially the latter, I want to talk of later in relation to Dickens. Wordsworth and Coleridge were clearly the dominating forces in the group, the inaugurating influences, and their ideas appear in a diffused form in the writings of their friends. As Philip Collins has pointed out<sup>2</sup>, Dickens probably read more widely in the essayists than the poets, and thus received the Romantic legacy at a kind of second remove from its source, through the agency of the essayists as 'middle-men'. This is true, though it needs be said that the 'middle-men' were not just ciphers with a flair for

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1. See, for example, Lamb's praise of Rousseau's Confessions for their "frankness...openness of heart...disclosure of all the most hidden and delicate affections of the mind"; Letter to Coleridge, 8 November 1796; in Percy Fitzgerald, ed., The Life, Letters, and Writings of Charles Lamb, 6 vols. (1875), i, 339-40.

2. Philip Collins, Dickens and Education (1963), p. 213.



picking their friends' brains. They were all highly individualised personalities, assimilating what they took from Wordsworth and Coleridge to the bias of their own temperament and style. The result of this is not in every way a falling off: Hunt's recollections of his own past, for instance, are much lighter fare than Wordsworth's, but his genial humour gives them a certain attractiveness in their own right. And as I will suggest more fully later, this modification had perhaps a special relevance for Dickens's way of drawing on the Romantics, as to the attitude to his own past that Wordsworth made available to him it added a tone in which to recall it more suited to his own interests. Another way in which the essayists added something of their own in the act of mediation is in the extension of Wordsworthian or Coleridgean notions into new aspects of experience, the 'idea' drawn upon often openly declared by the pointed use of allusive idiom, or quotation assimilated into the run of the prose. Hazlitt, for example, in his essay on Hogarth, refers to the "lasting works of the great painters" as "the stay, the guide, and anchor of our purest thoughts".<sup>1</sup> Such new applications are important in Dickens's development of the Romantic legacy.

It can of course be objected at this point that Dickens didn't need such a series of shoulders to stand upon. Studies of influence are always open to such scepticism, and apart from understandable doubts about the point of the enterprise, there is the methodological query as to how, without evidence of a completeness that is rarely available, we can ever confidently proceed from a knowledge of resemblance to the

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1. "On the Works of Hogarth - On the Grand and Familiar Style of Painting", Lecture VII in Lectures on the English Comic Writers, in William Hazlitt, The Complete Works of William Hazlitt, ed. P.P. Howe, 21 vols. (1930-34), vi, 133-49 (149).

assertion of influence. We tend to do so and from the conviction that even with major figures, habits and possibilities of thought, feeling and expression are to a substantial extent selectively determined by the sanctions of the tradition, or confusion of traditions, they happen to inherit, and assume either as truth or the particular falsity which it is their task to deny. There is an especial value, for this reason, in adducing resemblances, general and specific, between figures who, taken together, can be said to constitute some kind of tradition, or branch of a tradition. In some cases, whilst it is hard to show specific instances where one writer has directly borrowed from another, it is evident that the underlying ways of thinking and feeling of the one writer have been formed either by the general influence of the other writers in question, or by immersion in a literary or actual social ethos in which the other writers are an influential presence. Here it is useful, I think, to define the relation as one of continuity. By this I mean something that is less tangible than a demonstrable borrowing, yet suggesting a connection in a way that a mere resemblance or parallel doesn't. In this thesis I will be dealing both with borrowings and continuities.

## II

Having briefly outlined with which Romantic figures I want to relate Dickens, and the kind of relation I want to show, I ought now to say that I do not intend a comprehensive treatment of that relation, but the exploration of a few of its interrelated features. My approach is along different lines, thus, to the distinguished and suggestive essays of

F.R. and Q.D. Leavis in Dickens the Novelist, the former of whom is specially concerned to define Dickens's place within a Romantic tradition. It is also somewhat different, or supplementary to, Peter Coveney's The Image of Childhood<sup>1</sup>, to which, however, I am indebted in a number of the lines I have pursued here. Coveney discusses Dickens as an important figure in the continuous exploration of childhood in nineteenth-century English literature, an exploration that derives from Blake, Wordsworth, and Coleridge. His chapter on Dickens concentrates on his direct portrayal of children. My starting-point, and leading theme, is a related issue, which Coveney raises elsewhere in his book, but not, surprisingly, with regard to Dickens: the relationship of the adult to his own childhood past. A special concern for this relationship was one of the important corollaries of the major Romantic assertions Dickens took up from his immediate predecessors. These have, I feel, been well summarised by Dr. Leavis as:

...the way in which the irrelevance of the Benthamite calculus is exposed; the insistence that life is spontaneous and creative, so that the appeal to self-interest as the essential motive is life-defeating; the vindication, in terms of childhood, of spontaneity, disinterestedness, love and wonder; and the significant place given to Art...<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Leavis has Blake specifically in mind, but the terms of his formulation don't exclude figures I have mentioned, whom we know Dickens read extensively, and with liking and admiration, and who we can feel fairly certain to have been much more influential presences in the ethos in which Dickens lived. A special concern for the relationship of

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1. Peter Coveney, The Image of Childhood (1967); revised edition of Poor Monkey (1957).

2. Dickens the Novelist, p.228. This passage is quoted here from Dr. Leavis's introduction to Coveney's The Image of Childhood, pp. 19-20.



childhood and adulthood was a psychological orientation that went naturally with the championing of these qualities, and especially with the moral pre-occupation with tenderness, which love, more for the Wordsworthians, perhaps, than for Blake, tended to mean, and the conditions determining the persistent capacity for tenderness in adult life. (It is false, however, to abstract particular qualities from the above list, as the Romantics for the most part treat them as inseparable, as different features of a single state of the soul.) Such an inter-relation is distinctive of the Romantics, and of Dickens as their inheritor, although, as I will show, Dickens's sense of life was such that the relation of adult and childhood selves was for him more ambiguous and problematic than theirs, so that the insights he takes over from them are often complicated in his treatment of them. For in Dickens childhood is very much a time in which, as he said in a slightly different context, "bad and good are inextricably linked in remembrance"<sup>1</sup>, and the cherishing acceptance of the personal past, which, following the 'Wordsworthian' Romantics, he holds to be the sine qua non of emotional health, is consequently a more difficult and tension-ridden affair. In fact one might almost say that without the restraining and guiding influence of the Romantic wisdom the world of Dickens's novels, merely conventional reticence set apart, might well have been a much harsher and less humane place than it actually is - might have been the world of John Carey's Dickens, in fact.

This is to rush ahead, however. First of all I want to establish more closely my sense of what the Romantic legacy to Dickens was.

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1. Letter to Forster, 21 November 1848; in Walter Dexter, ed., The Letters of Charles Dickens, 3 vols., The 'Nonesuch' Dickens (1938), ii, 129; hereafter referred to as Letters .

Doing this leads back into familiar territory, and I fear that I will seem to be rehearsing a tale oft' told. But it is, I think, necessary, in order to get proper bearings on Dickens. After this I will expand slightly on the comments immediately above, giving a brief summary of some of the ways in which Dickens developed the Romantic legacy, as an introduction to fuller elaboration in later chapters.

### III

My theme originates in the turmoil of the French Revolution, and, more particularly, in Wordsworth's shifting responses to it. For some people, 'progressive intellectuals', the Revolution meant, as one recent cultural historian has put it, "an attempt to create the conditions under which men would be free to express their good impulses".<sup>1</sup> That is to say, it was the historical opportunity for the realisation of the 'sentimentalist' conviction that if man could be given the right opportunities he would act virtuously by instinct. This conviction was radically at odds with traditional wisdom, theological and secular, which put its trust in the external restraints (internalised as a civilised ethical code, an idea of gentility, and so forth) which the 'sentimental' outlook wished to cast off, but which traditionalism deemed essential to curb man's natural tendency to evil. The actual outcome of the Revolution, of course, seemed to all intents and purposes to prove the conservative case. But the emotional reality of the sense of promise the onset of the Revolution released was undeniable. Hazlitt recorded

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1. R.F. Brissenden, Virtue in Distress: Studies in the Novel of Sentiment from Richardson to Sade (1973), p. 33. See also pp. 56-64.

that:

...that period (the time just after the French Revolution) was not a time when nothing was given for nothing. The mind opened, and a softness might be perceived coming over the heart of individuals, beneath 'the scales that fence' our self-interest.<sup>1</sup>

Such, too, was Wordsworth's mood in the early years after the Revolution: his paean to the dawn in which it was bliss to be alive is too well-known to need quoting. A youthful idealist, and travelling in France, he coupled a contempt for the corrupt ancien régime ("that voluptuous life/Unfeeling"<sup>2</sup>), with republican revolutionary optimism in:

...Man and his noble nature...  
His blind desires and steady faculties  
Capable of clear truth, the one to break  
Bondage, the other to build liberty  
On firm foundations, making social life,  
Through knowledge spreading and imperishable,  
As just in regulation, and as pure<sup>3</sup>  
As individual in the wise and good.

The optimism, significantly, was not simply a reasoned conclusion, but an instinctive response to the spectacle of "a people from the depth/Of shameful imbecility uprisen,/Fresh as the morning star." "Elate we looked/Upon their virtues"<sup>4</sup>, the next line, gives the sense of moral resurrection. However naive the enthusiasm, the sources from which it sprang were wholesome, he later contends, and his ardour was an extension of natural sympathies beyond the range of normal personal concern. His "erring"<sup>5</sup>, that is, was in a kind spirit, for he was still "a child of Nature, as at first,/Diffusing only those affections wider/That from the cradle had grown up with me".<sup>6</sup> The English

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1. "My First Acquaintance with Poets", Works, xvii, p.116.  
See also in "The Life of Holcroft", Works, xi, 92-3.

2. The Prelude (1850), IX, 345-6.

3. Ibid, IX, 355-63.

4. Ibid, IX, 383-6.

5. Ibid, XI, 157.

6. Ibid, XI, 168-70.



declaration of war upon France precipitated a turning point, nevertheless. Wordsworth recurs in both Books X and XI of The Prelude to the spiritual shock of the consequent denial of his natural patriotism, the effect of which he records as an inner dislocation, an estrangement of himself from hallowed affections: "...my likings and my loves/Ran in new channels, leaving old ones dry".<sup>1</sup> This alienation "soured and corrupted, upwards to the source,/ /his/ sentiments".<sup>2</sup> Or, as he puts it in Book X, with the self-knowing wit that is streaked throughout these books, the "light/ And pliant harebell" that had hitherto "Wantoned, fast-rooted on the ancient tower/Of my beloved country" was now "from that pleasant station torn/And tossed about in whirlwind."<sup>3</sup>

It was this inner souring that, together with the vanishing actuality of the revolutionary promise, predisposed him to move from a Rousseauian humanitarianism to an anti-emotional Godwinian rationalism:

This was the time, when, all things tending fast  
To depravation, speculative schemes-  
That promised to abstract the hopes of Man  
Out of his feelings, to be fixed thenceforth  
For ever in a purer element-  
Found ready welcome.<sup>4</sup>

With the feelings suppressed, and the reality that prompted them in abeyance, the revolutionary hope retreated into intellectual abstraction (Wordsworth here seems consciously to be speaking of himself both personally, and as a representative case in the unfolding of 'the spirit of the age'). The consequent immediate development - usurpation of the self by egotistic zeal, restless and fruitless

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1. The Prelude, XI, 184-5.

2. Ibid, XI, 177-8.

3. Ibid, X, 276-83.

4. Ibid, XI, 223-8.



intellectualising, the final cul-de-sac of cynicism - needs no retelling. With a "heart...turned aside/From Nature's way by outward accidents"<sup>1</sup> he became, in the full sense of the word, an ideologue, repeating in his own unrestrainedly "stern"<sup>2</sup> temperament, and his over-weening ability to detachedly "anatomise the frame of social life",<sup>3</sup> the "sternness of the just" during the Terror, who had "throned/The human Understanding paramount/And made of that their God".<sup>4</sup>

The story of Wordsworth's recovery is familiar. It is worth insisting, however, that the new phase was not simply a withdrawal into traditional conservatism. In Book II of The Prelude he explicitly dissociates himself from the mere reaction of "the good men/On every side" who:

...fall off, we know not how,  
To selfishness, disguised in gentle names  
Of peace and quiet and domestic love,  
Yet mingled not unwillingly with sneers  
On visionary minds;<sup>5</sup>

which sharply 'places' (note, for instance, the exactness of the double negative) the response of which he himself has often been accused. The faith he rediscovered was, he says some lines later, "A more than Roman confidence"<sup>6</sup> (underlining mine); by which, I take it, he is referring to a moral faith grounded in something more than the Augustan orthodoxy of self-disciplined adhesion to a social code, referring that is, to a morality of Grace, or inner illumination, rather than of Law. For all the influence of Burke in his anti-Jacobinism,

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1. Ibid, XI, 290-1.

2. Ibid, XI, 275.

3. Ibid, XI, 280.

4. Ibid, X, 339-43.

5. bid, II, 436-40.

6. bid, II, 443.

for all their shared distrust in 'naked Reason', Wordsworth was not content to deplore, as did Burke, that "All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off":<sup>1</sup>

Enough, 't is true - could such a plea excuse  
Those aberrations - had the clamorous friends  
Of ancient Institutions said and done  
To bring disgrace upon their very names;  
Disgrace, of which, custom and written law,  
And sundry moral sentiments as props  
Or emanations of those institutes,  
Too justly bore a part. A veil had been  
Uplifted; why deceive ourselves? in sooth,  
'T was even so; and sorrow for the man  
Who either had not eyes wherewith to see,  
Or, seeing, had forgotten! A strong shock  
Was given to old opinions; all men's minds  
Had felt its power, and mine was both let loose,  
Let loose and goaded. 2

"A veil had been/Uplifted" - Wordsworth seems to be deliberately answering Burke's appeal to "the wardrobe of the moral imagination".<sup>3</sup> Even writing in retrospect he does not for a moment suggest that the veil should have been put back, that the eye could have been averted from the nakedness of those "ancient Institutions" - he shows a poise and honesty which go beyond the conventional and the bourgeois. A certain parallel in this respect can be drawn with the dialectical rôle Carlyle assigns to Voltairean scepticism as a necessary preliminary to the birth of the "new Mythos".<sup>4</sup>

The path to recovery that Wordsworth did take was, in fact, highly unconventional. It was due to the very Romantic consciousness of his own individuality that he was able to recognise, as clearly as he did, that his inner crisis was due to the alienation wrought in him

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1. Edmund Burke, Reflections on the Revolution in France, (1968; first published 1790), p. 171.

2. The Prelude, XI, 259-73.

3. Burke, Reflections, p. 171.

4. Sartor Resartus, (. 1967; first published 1833-4), p. 146.,

by the "overpressure of the times"<sup>1</sup> from the emotional resources of his childhood, those "affections...that from the cradle had grown up with me",<sup>2</sup> from which his early idealism for the Revolution had been drawn. Spiritual restoration, therefore, lay in re-establishing the lost personal continuity. Thus the terms in which he describes his alienated state, "depressed, bewildered thus"<sup>3</sup>, recall the clairvoyant account in Book II of the contrasting state of a psychologically healthy infancy: "No outcast he, bewildered and depressed".<sup>4</sup>

It was, in a way, logically appropriate that it should be his sister who now "maintained for him a saving intercourse with his true self" - the self continuous with childhood - and thus led him:

...back though opening day  
To those sweet counsels between head and heart  
Whence grew that genuine knowledge, fraught with peace,  
Which, through the latter sinkings of this cause,  
Hath still upheld me,...<sup>5</sup>

At this point I think we can see Wordsworth's originality - and originality as a Romantic - which is considerable, for all his eighteenth-century affinities.<sup>6</sup> Christopher Salveson has interestingly shown in his The Landscape of Memory<sup>7</sup> that whereas writers of a

1. The Prelude, XII, 51.

2. Ibid, XI, 169-70.

3. Ibid, XI, 321.

4. Ibid, II, 241.

5. Ibid, XI, 353-6.

6. Cf. Mark Roberts, The Tradition of Romantic Morality (1973); Roberts surely simplifies in defining 'Romantic morality' as founded upon the "energy of the soul" (his phrase) as the direct antithesis of traditional stoic apatheia - a formula which leads him to argue that Wordsworth's morality is completely traditional.

7. Christopher Salveson, The Landscape of Memory: A Study of Wordsworth's Poetry (1965), ch.5.



'sentimentalist' persuasion were increasingly interested in Memory throughout the eighteenth century, interested, that is, in the continuity of adult and childhood selves - it is only with Wordsworth that Memory comes to be thought of as having an important moral function. To put it another way, Wordsworth's discovered conviction that the sources of spiritual strength lay in "the hiding places of man's power", entailed a novel drawing together of moral and psychological modes of thought. In this he was, of course, following in the steps of many who, like Shaftesbury and Hume, had challenged the traditional stoic antithesis of morality and feeling - of Reason and Passion - and of others who felt that childhood was more than a time of natural evil, or, at best, an innocent blankness. But in founding a continued belief in goodness as a spontaneous feeling (rather than the product of the exertions of the rational moral will), upon a psychological insight into the relationship of adulthood and childhood, in this he was asserting something quite new.

Wordsworth apart, the idea of the 'moral memory' appears in varying degrees in the writings of the other members of the circle; whether concurrently or derivatively is not my concern here, though it is probable that with the exception of Coleridge the latter was the case. Coleridge's poetry shows little direct trace of the notion, but it comes to light several times in his prose. In The Friend, for example, he offers this commentary upon Wordsworth's "My heart leaps up when I behold", the poem being a compact summary of Wordsworth's theme, and containing the to-be famous epigram "the child is father of the man":

...if men laugh at the falsehoods that were imposed on themselves during their childhood, it is because they are not good and wise enough to contemplate the Past in the

Present, and so produce by a virtuous and thoughtful sensibility that continuity in their self-consciousness, which Nature has made the law of their animal life. [Ingratitude, sensuality, and hardness of heart, all flow from this source. Men are ungrateful to others only when they have ceased to look back on their former selves with joy and tenderness. They exist in fragments. Annihilated as to the Past, they are dead to the Future, or seek for the proofs of it everywhere, only not (where alone they can be found) in themselves. A contemporary poet has exprest and illustrated this sentiment with equal fineness of thought and tenderness feeling.]<sup>1</sup>

As Peter Coveney has said, this is "an exact appreciation of Wordsworth's doctrine".<sup>2</sup> It is significant that Coleridge speaks of the "continuity in...self-consciousness" not just as a moral desideratum, but as a "law", a law of man's "animal life". The underlying conflation of moral and psychological thought in Wordsworth is here made explicit. One is made aware of the deliberateness of Wordsworth's phrase "natural piety":<sup>3</sup> "natural" is there not as a sign of general approval but to denote a specific, and unconventional, kind of piety. Coleridge again introduces the idea of continuity when he comes to make a distinction between genius and talent:

To carry on the feelings of childhood into the powers of manhood, to combine the child's sense of wonder and novelty with the appearances which every day for perhaps forty years has rendered familiar,  
 With sun and moon and stars throughout the year,  
 And man and woman -  
 this is the character and privilege of genius, and one of the marks which distinguish genius from talent.<sup>4</sup>

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1. The Friend, 10 August 1809, in Samuel Taylor Coleridge, The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ed. Barbara E. Rooke, vol. IV: The Friend, ii, 41; from "ingratitude" to end of quotation is note to main text.
  2. Coveney, p.84.
  3. My heart leaps up when I behold", 1,9.
  4. The Friend, quoted from Kathleen Coburn, ed. Inquiring Spirit (1951), pp.42-3.

As critics such as Coveney and William Walsh have commented,<sup>1</sup> Coleridge's regard for the powers of childhood is at the heart of his concern for the creative Imagination. Hence the fostering of the Imagination - which was, for him as for Wordsworth and the others of the circle, inseparably linked with the moral sense - involved the conservation of the child's wonder and spontaneity against the denaturing effect of orthodox education: Coleridge and Wordsworth share an anti-didactic bias that is markedly continuous with Dickens.

One prominent point in childhood at which Imagination has always come sharply into collision with hostile Rationality is over the question of fairy-tales and other childish fancies - the genial falsehoods, as distinct from the destructive kind Coleridge has in mind in the quotation above. Wordsworth puts in his plea for fairy-tales as an alternative to the over-precocious education of the "model" child in Book V of The Prelude,<sup>2</sup> and this is followed by an impassioned justification of the appropriateness of a "craving for the marvellous" in adolescence.<sup>3</sup> But by and large it is in Lamb mainly that we find a protective concern for these 'enchancements', both as nourishing fare in childhood, and as memories to be treated tenderly in later life. This latter emphasis involves the development of an important corollary of the continuity doctrine: the questioning of the rigid distinction between the tastes of the child and the adult. The insistence upon such a distinction was one of the axioms of pre-Romantic criticism, as

1. Coveney, pp. 84-90; William Walsh, The Use of Imagination (1959), pp. 11-14.

2. The Prelude, V, 291-346, 450-468.

3. *Ibid.*, V, 534-605.



can be seen from Francis Jeffrey's review of The Excursion in 1814:

An habitual and general knowledge of the few settled and permanent maxims, which form the canon of general taste in all large and polished societies - a certain tact, which informs us at once that many things, which we still love and are moved by in secret, must necessarily be despised as childish, or derided as absurd, in all such societies, - though it will not stand in the place of genius, seems necessary to the success of its exertions.<sup>1</sup>

An open cherishing of past enthusiasms that conventional standards declared "must necessarily be despised...or derided", a realisation that such things, too, can be "hiding-places of man's power" - this seems to me to be Lamb's individual (and problematic) contribution to the development of Wordsworth's initial insights. In this he stands, I think, as an influential mediating figure between Wordsworth and Dickens - a connection I will expand upon in my next chapter. Dickens's tone in Hard Times, for example, of making out a special plea for the vulnerable, of protecting delicate life-lines of the spirit which can so plausibly be disowned (Sleary himself is hardly delicate, but the wonder of his circus for others is), relates more specifically to Lamb than to any other figure, free though Dickens is of Lamb's tendency to studied winsomeness.

A marked interest in the desirably organic nature of the self also appears throughout the writings of the other Romantic essayists. Hazlitt takes up the theme on a number of occasions. His discussion of memory which comes first to mind, nevertheless, "Why Distant Objects Please",<sup>2</sup> does not follow Wordsworth in investing the memory with a

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1. Edinburgh Review (1814), quoted from John Wain, ed., Contemporary Reviews of Romantic Poetry (1953), p.74.

2. Table Talk (1821) in Works, viii, 255-63.



specifically moral agency, or even a pointedly beneficent psychological one, apart from simple pleasure; though elsewhere, in "On the Past and Future", he does so when he affirms that:

The objects that we have know in better days are the main props that sustain the weight of our affections, and give us strength to await our future lot.<sup>1</sup>

And in "Pope, Lord Byron and Mr. Bowles" he echoes Wordsworth when he says that with natural objects:

Familiarity in them does not breed contempt...their repeated impression on the mind...grows up into a sentiment... we refer them generally and collectively to ourselves, as links and mementos of our various being;...<sup>2</sup>

Hunt is less of a thinker than the other Romantics - less even than Lamb - and is not at his best when being overtly intellectual; it is characteristic of him that whereas others were breaking new ground in the understanding of the conditions of human happiness or lack of it, he could at times drop casually into the hoary explanation of 'melancholia' as produced by an excess of bile.<sup>3</sup> Still, the emphasis on personal continuity surfaces from time to time in his prose, as when, in The Town, he lightly suggests that trees and flowers:

...refresh the common places of life, shed a harmony through the busy discord, and appeal to those first sources of emotion, which are associated with all that is young and innocent.<sup>4</sup>

As 'thought' this is no more than a decorative flourish, yet as an attitude it is significant as a premise of Hunt's outlook and literary persona. The following short passage from his "Thoughts and Guesses

1. Ibid, viii 5.

2. Ibid, xix, 78.

3. "Fatal Mistake of Nervous Disorders for Insanity," The Indicator, 24 November 1819; quoted from Leigh Hunt, Leigh Hunt as Poet and Essayist, ed. Charles Kent (1891), pp. 116-20 (p.117). See also "On the Talking of Nonsense", The Indicator, 29 November 1820, in above anthology, pp. 25-9.

4. The Town: its Memorable Characters and Events (1859), p.22.

on Human Nature" is perhaps a better example:

When children are in good health and temper, they have a sense of existence which seems too exquisite to last. It is made up of clearness of blood, freshness of perception, and trustiness of heart. We remember the time when the green rails along a set of suburb gardens used to fill us with a series of holiday and rural sensations perfectly intoxicating. According to the state of our health, we have sunny glimpses of this feeling still;...<sup>1</sup>

Even without his characteristic humour we can see how the tone of this stands between Wordsworth and David Copperfield's idyllic recall of his early years:<sup>2</sup> the note of fragility and suppressed pathos here and in Copperfield is distinctly un-Wordsworthian.

Continuity within the self is an even more central pre-occupation in De Quincey, in whom the theme undergoes a significant modification. He is explicitly aware that judgements about human nature need to be founded upon an understanding of the laws of psychology, laws which still, he feels, remain to be discovered. As he wrote in an essay on Wordsworth in 1845: "In the sense of absolute and philosophic criticism, we have little or none...for before that can exist, we must have a good psychology, whereas, at present, we have none at all".<sup>3</sup> In an appendix to chapter five I will argue that not only was De Quincey a likely medium for the transmission to Dickens of the Wordsworthian insights I have discussed, but that his adaptation of those insights to the peculiarities of his own personality made them

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1. "Thoughts and Guesses on Human Nature", The Indicator, 13 September 1820, in Hunt, pp. 230-4 (p.231).

2. See, for instance, David Copperfield, pp. 64-5.

3. Thomas De Quincey, Collected Writings, ed. D. Masson, 14 vols. (1889-90), xi, 294.

especially relevant to Dickens's needs.

#### IV

Before moving on to an introductory summary of the various ways in which the continuity idea is taken up in Dickens, I want to go briefly into several questions arising from Wordsworth's new moral synthesis, which are relevant to what I want to look at in Dickens later. The first is the contribution Wordsworth's solution can be seen to have made at one of the points where Romanticism was most vulnerable - the instability of a moral sense founded upon the primacy of feeling. This weakness, of course, had been made glaringly obvious by the failure of the French Revolution to fulfil hopes for the regeneration of man. As we have seen, Wordsworth ascribed the degeneration of his early revolutionary ardour to a number of external causes. But as a proposition about humanity in general wasn't such an emotional state intrinsically unstable, inherently prone to change into its opposite? The accomplished satirists of the Anti-Jacobin, who managed to bring the legacy of Pope meaningfully to bear upon the new age, brought many home-thrusts against the 'new morality', as they called it, despite (or perhaps because of) their narrowness of outlook:

I love the bold, uncompromising mind,  
Whose principles are fix'd, whose views defined:  
Who scouts and scorns, in canting CANDOUR'S spite,  
All taste in morals, innate sense of right,  
And Nature's impulse, all uncheck'd by art,  
And feelings fine, that float about the heart:  
Content, for good men's guidance, bad men's awe,



On moral truth to rest, and gospel law.<sup>1</sup>

The consciously cherished Tory ruggedness is embarrassing, but the sixth line, if nothing else, leaves no doubt that the case put is not one to be easily placed as just stupidly reactionary. Shelley, who also embraced Godwinism, though in a different spirit from Wordsworth, is a good case in point: Mont Blanc, for example, is in one sense a bewildered revelation of the helpless inconstancy of a sensibility that fully trusts its own momentum:

The everlasting universe of things  
Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves,  
Now dark - now glittering - now reflecting gloom -  
Now lending splendour, where from secret springs  
The source of human thought its tribute brings  
Of waters ... 2

The poem is only tangentially political, but little reflection is needed to suggest that such a sensibility, vivid though it is (the feelings don't float, but rush in torrents), is not the stuff that viable citizens are made of, revolutionary or otherwise. Shelley himself recognises as much when he attributes to the mountain - itself in its massive solidity a symbol of all he himself is not - the "voice...to repeal large codes of fraud and woe".<sup>3</sup> Instability was the almost inevitable consequence of the premise of the primacy of feeling, especially in the excited atmosphere of the revolutionary years; though this had not, of course, been recognised by the 'sentimentalists' who had hailed the Revolution as a new dawn.

Dangerous volatility of feeling is not directly related to Wordsworth's concern in The Prelude, or the poems associated with it; here, rather, it is the deadening of normal feeling that is at question. In other poems, however, Wordsworth addresses himself to this other matter - in poems such as "Resolution and Independence", "Ode to Duty", and the interestingly almost Johnsonian "Elegiac Stanzas" on Peele Castle, all of which, in

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1. "The New Morality", II.223-30 (these lines by W. Canning); in L. Rice-Oxley, ed., Poetry of the Anti-Jacobin (1924), pp. 172-90 (p. 180).

2. "Mont Blanc" (1816), II. 1-6.

3. Ibid.. II. 80-1.

different ways, mark a further shift of stance, this time to a stoic austerity at once traditional and individually Wordsworthian. The 'solution' he records in The Prelude was free of this problem, however; one of its 'strong points', as it were, was a reconciliation of spontaneous feeling with stability, since the source from which that feeling was drawn was constant, or at least was felt as such. Thus, in "Tintern Abbey", Nature, inseparable for Wordsworth from childhood memory (as he had argued at length in Book XII of The Prelude), is presented as:

The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse  
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul  
Of all my moral being. <sup>1</sup>

Nothing more different from the restless turmoil of Shelley's Nature could be imagined; and the serenity that Wordsworth's poetry so often and surely gravitates towards witnesses the unity of the conscious idea and the poetic reality. Such a steadiness of inner feeling naturally is felt to sustain the self in the demands of normal social life:

...feelings too  
Of unremembered pleasure: such, perhaps,  
As have no slight or trivial influence  
On that best portion of a good man's life,  
His little, nameless, unremembered, acts  
Of kindness and of love. <sup>2</sup>

-an ideal of behaviour, in fact, quite other than the erratic impulsiveness that the word Romantic commonly suggests. The eighteenth-century code of temperate sociability and the round of social duties lives on in Wordsworth animated by a distinctly Romantic inwardness. It could be said that Wordsworth accommodated the emerging 'sentimental' tradition to the demands of normal life. In doing so he became, alongside Burke,<sup>3</sup> a major source of inspiration available for those later in the century who had conservative leanings, and who distrusted the Promethean legacy of

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1. II. 109-11 (underlining mine).

2. *Ibid.*, II. 30-5.

3. See Frederick L. Muhlhauser, "The Tradition of Burke", in Joseph E. Baker, ed., The Reinterpretation of Victorian Literature (1950).

the French Revolution and the version of Romanticism associated with it, yet who also shared fundamental Romantic convictions such as the primacy of feeling as a basis of the moral sense. George Eliot is an obvious example, and, as I will suggest later in this chapter, and argue at greater length in chapter       , in a more ambiguous way, is Dickens.

The other question arising from Wordsworth's synthesis is a problem that it almost unwittingly begot, concerning the possibility of Free Will. A recent article on Great Expectations by A.L. French raises the relevant point, albeit implicitly and in passing: "A good deal of Great Expectations", he argues, "is concerned with the ways in which a person is determined by his upbringing...the novel is defining, long before modern psychology, the ways in which the child is father of the man"<sup>1</sup>. The familiar tag is not intended to suggest a parallel between Wordsworth and modern deterministic psychology; yet how easily, in this aspect, the two go together! For doesn't the very extension of psychological understanding, to which Wordsworth seeks to anchor the moral sense, imply a discounting of the traditional high regard placed upon the rational moral will? Compare the opening of Book XIII of The Prelude with the closing passage of Johnson's The Vanity of Human Wishes:

From Nature doth emotion come, and moods  
Of calmness equally are Nature's gift;  
This is her glory; these two attributes  
Are sister horns that constitute her strength.  
Hence Genius, born to thrive by interchange  
Of peace and excitation, finds in her  
His best and purest friend; from her receives  
That energy by which he seeks the truth,  
From her that happy stillness of the mind  
Which fits him to receive it when unsought.<sup>2</sup>

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1. A.L. French, "Beating and Cringing", Essays in Criticism, XXIV (April 1974), pp. 147-68.
  2. The Prelude, XIII, 1-10.



Yet when the sense of sacred presence fires,  
 And strong devotion to the skies aspires,  
 Pour forth thy fervours for a healthful mind,  
 Obedient passions, and a will resign'd;  
 For love, which scarce collective man can fill;  
 For patience sov'reign o'er transmuted ill;  
 For faith, that panting for a happier seat,  
 Counts death kind Nature's signal of retreat;  
 These goods for man the laws of heaven ordain,  
 These goods he grants, who grants the pow'r to gain:  
 With these celestial wisdom calms the mind,  
 And makes the happiness she does not find. 1

Not being a pagan stoic Johnson is ultimately reliant upon Divine aid; but what he hopes to be granted by that is the virtue by which to achieve calmness of mind (one might add that the scrupulously self-checking habit of mind that manifests itself in the trace of irony in "fervours" and "aspires", is not unrelated to that calming "wisdom"). One's whole sense of Johnson, in fact, supports his idea that happiness is something that is made, wrested by the moral will from the refractory nature of experience. In this he is the highly individual representative of the stoic neo-classicism that was the conservative 'backbone', as it were, of Augustan culture. With Wordsworth, on the other hand, calmness itself is "Nature's gift", and man its passive recipient. Now, as Nature for Wordsworth is inseparable from childhood memory (Nature exists not so much in the present world as in the "hiding-places of ...power", as past experience) the above passage can be translated as the assertion that happiness is the gift of, that is, determined by, childhood. Even the specifically poetic life of the verse insinuates this: the unobtrusively evocative phrase "happy stillness of the mind" points back to such moments as when:

...the calm  
 And dead still water lay upon my mind  
 Even with a weight of pleasure, and the sky,  
 Never before so beautiful, sank down  
 Into my heart, and held me like a dream! 2

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1. "The Vanity of Human Wishes", II. 357-68 .
  2. The Prelude, II, 170-4 .

"Sank down into my heart" - the experience has become, that is, organically absorbed into the self; the later "happy stillness" is the product of its persistent residue, enabled by the continuity between adult and childhood selves. Wordsworth does not share the extreme position of De Quincey, whose claim that the unity of the self is ~~invariable~~ constitutes an outright denial of the capacity of the will to reject the personal past.<sup>1</sup> This variation of Wordsworth was perhaps in keeping with the particular nature of De Quincey's experience, and witnesses the way that the essential Romantic propositions become modified according to the individuality of the person who takes them up. Yet inspection of The Prelude shows Wordsworth, in the account of his return to stability, unconsciously in two minds whether his salvation involved a significant act of choice on his part, or whether, given his childhood experiences, it was a foregone conclusion anyway. (This particular point is discussed more fully in chapter seven.)

Wordsworth never seems to have felt this implicit passiveness of the ego to have been problematic - who, after all, would look such a beneficial dispensation in the face? On the contrary, his anxieties are prompted rather by the possibilities of freedom - of that very ground of indeterminacy in which Johnson, and the conservative-Augustan outlook in general, saw man's moral hope. "And I could wish my days to be/Bound each to each by natural piety"<sup>2</sup> - as with "natural piety", "bound" too carries a specific force, suggesting a desire for a state not unlike spiritual imprisonment: Blake's was not the only possible attitude to "mind-forged manacles". Still, Wordsworth's fetters are silken ones, and it is no wonder that he accepted so serenely the deterministic implications of his thought, when the prison into which it doomed him was as congenial as his own Past, and its immobility such a repose. It is also true, nonetheless, that the ease with which

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1. See ch. 5, Note A.

2. "My heart leaps up when I behold", II. 9-10.

Wordsworth accepted the absorption of the moral into the psychological was only made possible by the post-Rousseauian assumptions from which he began. A striking contrast from a non-'sentimentalist' point of view is offered by Steele's analysis of his own compassionate temperament in The Tatler, No. 181.<sup>1</sup> His own marked capacity for sympathy, he suggests, had possibly been caused by the powerful impression made upon him when young by his mother's grief at his father's death. Such an explanation follows the Wordsworthian mode (De Quincey's actual experience offers the closer comparison). But the conclusion Steele draws is strikingly anti-Romantic; if compassion is instinctive, he reasons, "good nature in me is no merit".<sup>2</sup> This kind of scruple did not occur to Wordsworth, who had no doubt about the ethical status of his feelings.

## V

Complacency apart, however, the wisdom of continuity was obviously much more problematic if considered in relation to lives lacking the happy affinity of childhood experience and adult normality so marked in Wordsworth's case. What if the power of those "hiding-places" was not unambivalently beneficial? What trust then could be placed in the inner self - the "true self" - as a fount of feeling by which to guide one's life? What if the emotion that came from Nature conflicted with normal moral claims, or the counsels of self-preserving good sense? What if the presence of "the Past in the Present" imposed a debilitating constriction upon the self - a real prison, in fact? Such deliberations did not occupy Wordsworth or Coleridge. On the other hand they did

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1. Tuesday 6 June 1710; quoted from collection of Tatler essays published as The Lucubrations of Isaac Bickerstaff, Esq., 4 vols. (1723), iii, 314-18.
  2. *Ibid.*, p. 316 .



loom large for De Quincey, and while he never formulated his dilemma with quite this baldness, it is at the heart of his work. The same is true, I believe, for Dickens, one of whose ways of developing the continuity theme is, like and beyond De Quincey, the attempt to reconcile his deep conviction of the truth of its tenets with a sense of life that makes this faith highly difficult. For him just as much as the earlier Romantics, fidelity to childhood is the path to personal salvation on earth, a requisite of spiritual and psychological well-being. Yet for him, especially, the path is a treacherous one.

This difficulty comes to a head for Dickens in his treatment of injustice, or rather, in those mature works in which the passionate recording of injustice has developed into the examination of its effects, the consequences for living it imposes upon the victims. Here, as the principal form of injustice in Dickens is that practiced by parents upon children, considerations of 'continuity' are inevitably prominent. The basic dilemma is this: how can a person accept continuity with a personal past that is dominated by the experience of injustice, (or, for that matter, any extreme suffering)? To do so is to lay oneself open to the malign legacy of that past, which in the cases Dickens deals with is typically to acknowledge as the core of the self the sense of personal insignificance early experience of injustice has imposed. Yet not to do so is to suffer the penalty of fragmentation, the implications of which Dickens, as a convinced inheritor of the Wordsworthian 'doctrine' of the organic self, is fully aware of - the simple defence against disturbing feelings that is the characteristic pre-Romantic strategy, is no longer available to him.

One way of coping in this situation is to seek to put oppression out of mind by accepting and identifying only with the reality that is congenial. Dickens explores this, as I shall show in chapters four and five, in Dombey and Son and David Copperfield, arriving at the further dilemma that in this case continuity must later come to be inseparable from regressiveness, that to be 'whole' in this way entails an inability to live by normal standards of maturity. Here he is exploring similar ground to De Quincey, and is, as I also want to suggest later, somewhat indebted to him, though seeing the problem in social rather than personal terms as in some sense a representative outcome of a particular society and the ideals of character it commends and enforces. But in other instances such a bisection of the world is impossible, and the adult is consequently the heir of a childhood past in which, at most, "bad and good are inextricably linked in remembrance".<sup>1</sup> Here the springs of love and tenderness are inseparable from such consequences of oppression as an innate sense of inferiority (Amy Dorrit) or burdening feelings of guilt and insecurity (Pip, whose case I have unfortunately not been able to discuss at length), so that a denial of the oppressive past must also involve a denial of the positive sources of feelings, or conversely, openness to the beneficent sources involve vulnerability, to the legacy of oppression. There is, however, a further kind of childhood with which Dickens is concerned to show an adult character coming to grips, the one which is unambivalently unfortunate, in which there is no significant "good" "inextricably linked" with the "bad". One of his most important psychological studies, that of Esther Summerson,

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1. Letter to Forster, 21 November 1848; Letters, ii, 129 .

is of this type. Here, too, however, I will want to argue that Dickens is working closely along the lines of Wordsworthian insights. For just as Wordsworth stresses that the vital emotional health of adult life is necessarily rooted in a happy childhood, so, as I will argue in chapter five, the key to Dickens's understanding in this portrait is his perception of the ways in which the absence of the conditions Wordsworth deems essential entails inner unhappiness in adulthood. His diagnosis complements Wordsworth's prescriptions, by demonstrating the consequences of their denial: Esther is, au fond, the exact opposite of the "Blest...infant babe" celebrated in Book Two of The Prelude, being, in fact, "an outcast...bewildered and depressed".<sup>1</sup> Consequently she is shown to achieve salvation through an adult relationship the inner meaning of which is a rebirth, the re-vitalisation of an inner emotional core which has been deadened early in life, and in which relationship the loved person is a surrogate parental figure. In her case the Wordsworthian salvation by recovery of a buried childhood core is unavailable, as she has no buried energy to recover; for her the "hiding-places of... power" must be created in adult life, the self must put down new roots. It is typical of the energy with which Dickens is pursuing his psychological explorations by the stage of Bleak House, that Esther's salvation is then seen to be a partial one, itself creating further problems, which the novel then proceeds to grapple with.

The otherwise very different figure of the elder Dombey is also very relevant here, as I hope to show in my chapter on the novel that bears his name, as also, of course, is Arthur Clennam in Little Dorrit, whom I have only refrained from bracketing with Esther here because in his case a perhaps even more obvious condition than Esther's of being an "outcast"

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1. The Prelude, II, 233-65.



is, fascinatingly, slightly relieved by residual intimations of an original happy childhood, which state of health the resolution of his story finally restores.<sup>1</sup>

Not surprisingly, the issues raised above in relation to Wordsworth also have a bearing upon Dickens's handling of the continuity theme. As several critics have pointed out, the possibility of free-will is one of the questions Dickens can be seen to be examining in his mature novels.<sup>2</sup> To this one might add that, given the conjunction of idea and experience I have just outlined, this question could not but have enforced itself upon him with some urgency; pre-Romantic writers like Pope and Johnson are, consciously at least, fairly confident about the importance of free-will, but for Dickens it is something to be asserted almost defiantly against a strong habit of perception in himself that tends to deny it. Thus we have Dickens's rather forced championing of Arthur Clennam's ability to emerge from his background free from crippling resentment,<sup>3</sup> or (to my mind one of the most moving things in Dickens) Dr. Manette's quietly heroic struggle (dramatically rendered, but not, I think, melodramatic) against the effects of his imprisonment. That Dickens is, in these cases, making something of a special effort to believe is suggested by the way that such acts of freedom are seen in heroic terms, and by the fact that they are greatly outnumbered by cases of those who are the prisoners of their past (as Arthur Clennam also is, in many ways, of course), and by those who by embracing the illusory freedom of denying the past or who, by a change of circumstances, unconsciously lose touch with it, also, in doing so, alienate themselves from their humanity: Redlaw in The Hounded Man, and, more importantly, Pip in Great Expectations are examples of this latter group - though Pip's case is obviously more

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1. In clarifying my sense of Dickens's attitude here I am indebted to K.J. Fielding, "Dickens and the Past: The Novelist of Memory", in Roy Harvey Pearce, ed., Experience in the Novel (1968), pp. 107-32.
  2. Q.D. Leavis in Dickens the Novelist, p. 280; also, on Great Expectations specifically, A.L. French, pp. 147-68.
  3. Little Dorrit, p. 206.

complicated than this suggests. One might sum up Dickens's position on this issue by saying that whereas he takes over ways of thinking that implicitly predispose him towards seeing life as a pattern determined by childhood, his sense of life is such that unlike Wordsworth he inevitably sees that such a truth entails serious problems. Quite different to the obvious ones I have just mentioned, yet perhaps even more interesting, are the developments in him of the Romantic conflation of the moral and the psychological, which in Wordsworth tends to make the moral will happily superfluous, but which in Dickens has more disconcerting implications. For in him the association of morality with feeling, and its laws and demands, leads to an inevitable perplexity in coming to clear-cut moral conclusions. On the one hand the overtones of the moral sanction of feeling persist in those situations where the feelings associated with 'continuity' are in conflict with normal moral demands - the consequence being an ambivalence of attitude towards maturity that no phrases such as "the mistaken impulse of an undisciplined heart" can resolve. Or, in other cases, the identification of moral value with feeling can lead to an undercurrent of scepticism about the emotional bases of what is to all appearances simply morally admirable behaviour, a suggestion that the behaviour is the function of psychological need or drive rather than disinterested humanity. Dickens's sustained and flexible attempt to come to terms with these paradoxes is, I feel, at the centre of the novels from Dombey and Son to Great Expectations, as well as in several of his minor works. On the other hand, however, it should also be said that Dickens's mature novels or, for that matter, any of the great nineteenth-century novels, would not have been possible but for a peculiar (perhaps unprecedented)

sensitivity to patterns of causality in time, which unavoidably challenged traditional confidence in the freedom of the will in writers not otherwise disposed to welcome a deterministic outlook. (Though he did at times exploit the beneficial aspects of determinism: the terms of his preference for Hogarth's "Gin Lane" over Cruickshank's "The Drunkard's Children" <sup>1</sup> reveal the alertness to the causes of behaviour that was an enabling assumption of the humanitarian reformism with which Dickens sympathised - though there is no need to infer that Dickens consciously shared the deterministic conviction of men like Bentham and Godwin, which was the philosophical basis of the reformers' creed. On the other hand it is hard not to feel that by the time of the later novels Dickens was not thinking of the free-will question as a consciously articulated problem.)

Similarly, on the other issue raised above, that of the reconciliation to stability, and normal life, Wordsworth's single-mindedness contrasts with an ambivalence of attitude in Dickens, in a way that corresponds to Dickens's mixture of dependence on and independence of Wordsworth in his treatment of the continuity idea. Although it was specifically the spiritual malaise of Godwinism that had prompted Wordsworth's re-discovery of the past, his recovery, "moderated" and "composed" <sup>2</sup>, entailed a renunciation of the Promethean aspirations of his Rousseauian 'sentimentalist' youth:

... 't was proved that not in vain  
 I had been taught to reverence a Power  
 That is the visible quality and shape  
 And image of right reason; that matures  
 Her processes by steadfast laws; gives birth  
 To no impatient or fallacious hopes,  
 No heat of passion or excessive zeal,  
 No vain conceits; provokes to no quick turns  
 Of self-applauding intellect; but trains

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1. "Cruickshank's 'The Drunkard's Children'", The Examiner, 8 July 1848; reprinted in and quoted from Charles Dickens, Miscellaneous Papers, ed. B.W. Matz (1914), pp. 105-8.

2. The Prelude, XIII, 48.



To meekness, and exalts by humble faith;  
 Holds up before the mind intoxicate  
 With present objects, and the busy dance  
 Of things that pass away, a temperate show  
 Of objects that endure; and by this course  
 Disposes her, when over-fondly set  
 On throwing off-incumbrances, to seek  
 In man, and in the frame of social life,  
 Whate'er there is desirable and good  
 Of kindred permanence,... 1

Earlier he had stirred to the challenge to man's social bondage, and against the traditional stoic wisdom advising resignation to the inevitability of suffering and injustice on earth. Hazlitt was to continue to do so, as were Byron and Shelley in the later generation of Romantics. Now Wordsworth set this aside, in the name of maturity. What was to be done about the undesirable and bad in the social frame is not clear - as is commonly recognised, the composure achieved by Wordsworth in this middle period tends to involve the insulation of the self from the suffering that could test it. In Little Dorrit, which is Dickens's most concentrated deliberation upon the value of this kind of composure, the ideal of resignation is tested in a world in which injustice is normal, and yet in which the possibility of its removal is seen as highly doubtful. Dickens's total response to this world is interestingly both like and unlike Wordsworth, as he is caught between his attraction to a serenity that flows from an uncomplaining acceptance of injustice, and oneself as a product of an unjust past - an acceptance which, in Amy Dorrit, brings with it the compensating benefits of continuity - and a sympathy for rebelliousness against injustice which echoes the stance of the Promethean tradition of the Romantics, a rebelliousness that is understandable and attractive, but which entails finally an alienation from the sources of love and trust in

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1. Ibid., II. 19-37.

oneself. Little Dorrit is Dickens's most comprehensive and ordered statement of his general ambivalence as to what could be called the moral status of discontent, both as an attitude governing one's expectation from life - and, more particularly, one's expectation from society - and as a temperament attuned to enforcing such expectations. For him as a Victorian, Romantic Prometheanism was both an experiment discredited by experience, and an inevitable part of his cultural heritage, and his complex and uneasy attitude remains close to a traditional Christian stoicism while in some respects looking forward to the this-worldly 'protest-mentality' of our own day, which, with mythic elevation faded into sociological jargon, is partially the descendant of the Romantic Promethean outlook. This tension informs his social criticism as a whole, as well as his judgements upon specific characters like Amy Dorrit and Tattycoram; as I hope to show, the idea of him as a 'sentimental radical', held by hostile critics from The Chimes onwards, tells only one half of the story. Amongst writers of his times he stands, to be brashly diagrammatic, between the moral conservatism of George Eliot, who strongly emphasises the conservative implications of the continuity idea (see, for instance, the opening of the third chapter of Daniel Deronda, and how happily Wordsworth and Burke consort as influences, pointedly alluded to); and the radicalism of the Charlotte Bronte of Jane Eyre, with its deliberate rejection of the stoic ethic of self-denial and patient endurance of suffering. This, I will elaborate upon in detail in my final chapter.

## VI

However, not all of the ways in which the idea of personal continuity is extended in Dickens take us so far from him as a writer of comedy. I have already briefly suggested above that Hunt's way of recalling the past provides an attractive supplementary style to Wordsworthian seriousness; by no means all recall, even of crucial and formative experience, can be conducted in Wordsworth's manner. Hunt's contribution to our theme - and it is also part of Lamb's - is the achievement of a way of being able to laugh at the past without disparaging it. For a number of their essays bring together a fond memory of childhood, a memory that embraces the past as part of themselves, with the kind of gentle and affectionate humour that cherishes the object it is laughing at, while at the same time retaining an adult perspective. In doing so they draw the Wordsworthian claims into a creative alliance with another theme which, while not Romantic in origin, achieved its consummate theoretic utterances in Romantic writers like Hunt and Hazlitt, and became an integral aspect of the Romantic temperament. This was the idea of a specifically genial sense of comedy, which had developed in the eighteenth century alongside the 'sentimental' tradition, explicitly opposed to the satiric and judgemental humour that was the natural counterpart to neo-classic rationalism. Whereas satire, as a humorous censure of human frailty as judged by good standards, had been an expression of the critical and antagonistic sense of human nature central to the neo-classic outlook, so genial humour, founded on sympathy for and enjoyment of the object of its laughter, and delight in human eccentricity, went hand in hand with the sentimentalist optimism about human nature, and trust in its individuality. Furthermore, a critically unorthodox belief in the especial compatibility of humour and pathos was a logical corollary of the idea of a sympathetic sense of humour, and this had affinities with the emerging regard for 'sensibility' - a dry



wit and a hard heart could easily be seen to go together. By and large the Romantic essayists canonised genial humour, both as a critical preference and, with notable exceptions, as a tone in their own writings. In this they set the climate for, and, I think, directly influenced Dickens, whose own humour, protean as it is, and often at its best when thoroughly ungenial, is markedly shot through with genial shades. Furthermore, in their association of the genial tone with the reminiscent mode they stand as transitional figures between what 'continuity' is in Wordsworth, and what it becomes, say, in David Copperfield. I will develop these points further in chapter two.<sup>1</sup>

The association of 'continuity' with genial humour involves us in a further issue: Dickens's treatment of popular culture, by which we are led into the broader question of his often alleged Philistinism. I said earlier that Dickens, perhaps through Hunt and Lamb, extended Wordsworth's 'doctrine' by treating childhood tastes as contributing to the "hiding-places of...power". With Dickens, and to some extent with Hunt, a fond adult indulgence of his own childhood tastes extends also into an especial affection for popular taste, the taste of adults who are child-like in their lack of sophistication, and to whom he is connected through his own sympathetic recollection of the time when he shared their enthusiasms. In Dickens in particular, personal memory broadens out into a general sympathy for popular culture, and a protective championing of its claims. The sympathy is not unironical; indeed, popular amusements provide him with a continual fund of humour. But this is mostly of the genial kind that both establishes a certain detachment and registers a warm appreciation. Significantly the qualities it relishes are those of a popular

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1. The growth of the idea of genial humour has been closely traced by Stuart Tave in The Amiable Humorist (1960). The orthodoxy of the genial mode in the Victorian era is discussed in Donald J. Gray, "The Uses of Victorian Laughter", Victorian Studies, X (December 1966), pp. 148-76.

romanticism - the unself-conscious gusto of a Dick Swiveller or a Flora Finching, or their equally robust, if vulgar, sentimentality. He is equally alert to the forces which threaten these qualities, whether they be the open antagonism of evangelical sabbatarianism, or the subtler pressures towards a brittle gentility that accompany the relative openness of mid-Victorian society. Consequently he is often in the position of endorsing a kind of Philistinism, his implicit rationale being (as it is developed most fully in Little Dorrit) that in the given social situation it is there that the Romantic values are located. Such, anyway, is one of the directions from which the question of Dickens's Philistine sympathies can be approached. Another is Philip Collins's suggestion that Dickens is "a significant figure in the covert alliance between Romantic anti-rationalism and Victorian Philistine anti-intellectualism"<sup>1</sup>. I want to take this up, as well as expanding upon the above, in chapters two and seven. In doing so I hope not to forget that Dickens was also the creator of Bounderby and Podsnap, as well as another character who is not usually recognised as being in some sense at least a study in Philistinism: Mr. Bucket, who is examined in this light during my discussion of Bleak House in chapter six.

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1. Dickens and Education (1963), p. 193.

## VII

These, then, are the 'aspects of Romanticism' which I will trace in Dickens, in relation to the figures I have mentioned. For the most part my discussion will concentrate on the major novels of the middle period - from Dombey and Son to Great Expectations, as these contain Dickens's most deeply pondered treatment of the issues at hand. I will be referring fairly often to the minor works, also, as well as the journalism, the letters, and the speeches, and will discuss at least two of the Christmas works, The Haunted Man, and Somebody's Luggage, in some detail. Before proceeding to particularities, though, I want to conclude this chapter by broaching several general questions about Dickens, my views on which inform the detailed readings of the novels I will offer: Dickens's capacity for 'thought' - a faculty as various as the meaning is vague - and his sense of himself in relation to his audience.

Estimates of Dickens's intellect differ notoriously, and once one has ruled out the transparently wrong cases made for and against, one is left with eminently respectable accounts almost totally at loggerheads. One reason why this should be so, I think, is the uneven and contradictory nature of his intelligence. What other great writer so perplexingly alternates between extraordinary perceptiveness - and by this I mean something much more than the sharpness, the superior Sam Weller kind of shrewdness, with which he has always been credited - and the various kinds of common-place crudenesses that, it must be admitted, are not unfairly described by the often-used epithet 'half-educated'? For this reason it is all too easy to quarry from Dickens a presentable impersonation in support of one's own critical bias. But granting this for the moment, one must then explain it. What is the logic of the inconsistency?



Perhaps Walter Bagehot comes close to finding the key in his discussion of Dickens in terms of the distinction between 'regular' and 'irregular' types of genius.<sup>1</sup> The regular type, of which he cites Plato as the paradigm, is "ordered, measured, and settled; it is the exact contrary of everything eccentric, immature, or undeveloped".<sup>2</sup> Even when in the wrong the operations of such a mind are marked by "a peculiar proportionateness, in each instance, of the mind to the tasks which it undertakes".<sup>3</sup> By contrast "men of irregular or unsymmetrical genius are eminent either for some one or some few peculiarities of mind, have possibly special defects on other sides of their intellectual nature, at any rate want what the scientific men of the present day would call the definite proportion of faculties and qualities suited to the exact work they have in hand."<sup>4</sup> Dickens, says Bagehot, is a genius of the irregular kind, and I think this formula an adequate explanation of his inconsistency. From this, though, Bagehot derives an inadequate idea of the depths of Dickens's insight. His own orientation is markedly neo-classic, and his idea of serious intelligence is implicitly inseparable from the virtue of the "regular genius". Dickens, he claims, lacks a "diffused sagacity",<sup>5</sup> a quality he defines, through Chaucer's possession of it, as the capacity to form "with ease a distinct view and just appreciation of all the mingled objects that the world presents",<sup>6</sup> a definition which thus makes it implicitly synonymous with "proportionateness". Lacking this Dickens possesses thus only a "minor species of perceptive sharpness",<sup>7</sup> acute observation without any sense of the whole by which it could be given its proper interpretation

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1. "Charles Dickens", National Review, VII (October 1858), pp. 458-86; I have quoted from the collected republication of his literary essays as Literary Studies, ed. Richard Holt Hutton, 3 vols., New Edition (1895), ii, 127-67. It is also reprinted, in part in CH, pp. 390-401.

2. Ibid., p. 129

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., p. 130

5. Ibid., p. 136

6. Ibid., p. 132

7. Ibid., p. 136

and evaluation. Bagehot's idea of wisdom, then, consists of acute observation - the ability to see what is - and the ability to know what to make of this. It does not recognise, in this essay at least, the existence of what one could call extraordinary observation, perception of a kind beyond normally intelligent keenness, of the order that one can call intuition. Dickens's intelligence, at its best, is of this kind, and goes unnoticed by Bagehot, and other critics of his cast of mind, because they tend not to recognise this kind of perceptiveness.

By way of illustration of the meaning of these terms, compare Dickens's insight into Dombey's aversion to Florence, cited earlier in this chapter, with Bagehot's criticism of Thackeray, in "Sterne and Thackeray"<sup>1</sup>, for being too harsh on snobbery. Bagehot's comments here strike me as an excellent example of what he means by "sagacity". Snobbery, he reasons, is the inevitable consequence of a society that permits social mobility between classes; and thus, seeing his contemporaries accept this system in preference to the alternative of either a levelling democracy, or a rigid separation of classes, is a vice which must be tolerated as the cost to be paid for the benefits the present system of removable inequality confers.<sup>2</sup> This is an arresting reflection, yet the intelligence resides not in anything original in the immediate perception, but in the bringing to bear upon a common-place a coolly and intelligently considered sense of life as a whole - in this case seeing the phenomenon of snobbery in the context of the prevailing class system - in such a way as to yield the most judicious interpretation of that common-place. The result is a liberation from a too simple feeling about snobbery (the kind of feeling about snobbery that too often grates in Dickens), and

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1. "Sterne and Thackeray", National Review (April 1864); in Literary Studies, ii, 282-325.

2. Ibid., pp. 319-23.

the substitution of one more tempered and urbane. With Dickens's sense of Dombey, on the other hand, intelligence consists in the initial perception being something striking and original: aversion due to fear of sympathy. Such a perception calls on no broad wisdom about Man and History (though such perceptions can, in time, via such men as Dickens, become diffused into the ordinary educated mind as second-hand 'ideas!') but a peculiar sensitivity to the inner states of others, or of oneself.

Such sensitivity was one of the "peculiarities of mind" Dickens possessed as an "irregular genius". Towards the end of his essay Bagehot, with that sense of surprising paradox not unlike his comment on Thackeray, concludes that it would perhaps have been a pity if Dickens had received the education that would have given him some of the qualities of the 'regular' mind. For that would have prevented the "aggravation of some special faculty" in which genius of his type consisted. Of course for Bagehot this faculty is little more than an extraordinary flair for doing certain rather superficial things. For this reason it is useful to compare his comment with T.S. Eliot's deployment of a similar argument to explain something much more profound in Blake:

It is important that the artist should be highly educated in his own art; but his education is one that is hindered rather than helped by the ordinary processes of society which constitute education for the ordinary man. For these processes consist largely in the acquisition of impersonal ideas which obscure what we really are and feel, what we really want, and what really excites our interest. ... Blake ...knew what interested him, and he therefore presents only the essential, only, in fact, what can be presented, and need not be explained. And because he was not distracted, or frightened, or occupied in anything but exact statements, he understood. He was naked, and saw man naked, and from the centre of his own crystal. 1

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1. "Blake", in The Sacred Wood, 4th edition (1934), pp. 151-8 (pp. 154-5).



Dickens doesn't have this kind of aloof self-possession, by any means - there is much of him that finds natural expression in 'impersonal ideas', and impersonal sentiments. However in certain areas of experience he is, or becomes more and more "naked" to certain truths, with an individuality comparable to Blake's, I think. As Steven Marcus has commented, implying this concentrated local nature of Dickens's intelligence: "His creative intelligence was, in its highest function, always connected with explicit recollections of his early life".<sup>1</sup> Childhood is not the only area in which his intelligence comes most alive - one might also suggest the psychology of power, for instance, as witnessed by the creation of Tulkinghorn and Jaggers. But it does seem right to think of 'intelligence' in Dickens in terms of the specific contexts in which it is at work, rather than as a general quality capable of manifesting itself whatever the subject it is engaged upon.

James, then, was precisely wrong, I think, when he said that Dickens "added nothing to our understanding of human character."<sup>2</sup> For, not to mention his other achievements, this is, I think, one of the most important things he did. Who before Dickens, for instance, had told anything of the psychology of insecurity? David Copperfield, Arthur Clennam, Merdle, and, pre-eminently, William Dorrit, are all, in a way, the precursors of Alfred Prufrock. This was partly a matter of Dickens's social situation: heroes had always felt fear, but no-one who mattered had felt anxiety about whether he was really the sort of person he represented himself to be - Pope is quite indifferent to how Sir Baalaam

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1. Steven Marcus, Dickens: From Pickwick to Dombey (1965), p. 124.
  2. Review of Our Mutual Friend in The Nation, NY (1865); quoted from Henry James, Selected Literary Criticism, ed. Morris Shapira (1968), pp. 31-5 (p. 34). (Underlining mine.)

inwardly feels, and so, for that matter, is Jane Austen with regard to Mrs. Elton. One might argue that it would naturally only be with a novelist who was himself a self-made man, writing in an age where that was at once not a thing that had to be covered up, and yet not a thing to be quite easy about, that such an extension of consciousness could emerge. Yet such an awareness was also a natural consequence of the peculiar pre-occupation with the relationship of childhood and adulthood: Arthur Clennam suddenly struck into irrational nervousness before Christopher Casby witnesses an awareness of the continuity of the self in time, and the unstable tie between consciousness and the present.<sup>1</sup> Dr. Manette is an especially powerful example of this (without the social dimension), as also is William Dorrit, whose overt breakdown spells out the insecurity previously hinted at in his speech and manners. Similarly, apart from Charlotte Bronte, who else before Dickens had traced at any length the workings of neurotic self-abnegation?

This, then, I suggest, is an explanation of the odd co-existence of the extraordinary and the banal in Dickens's intelligence. Further light is shed on this question by George Ford's comment that Dickens's prose "moves between ... the ... two poles of public and private, each with its own wave-length",<sup>2</sup> the public prose speaking with the dogmatic, forward-looking bluntness characteristic of certain representative accents of the age, and the private voice recording a more subtle and personal vision, looking inwards with a retrospective reverie. The public voice, the 'Whig tone', is easily recognisable:

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1. Little Dorrit, p. 188.

2. George Ford, "Dickens and the Voices of Time", in Nisbet and Nevius, eds., Dickens Centennial Essays, pp. 46-66 (pp. 50-1).

There are at Chesney Wold this January week, some ladies and gentlemen of the newest fashion, who have set up a Dandyism - in Religion, for instance. Who, in mere lackadaisical want of an emotion, have agreed upon a little dandy talk about the Vulgar wanting faith in things in general; meaning in the things that have been tried and found wanting, as though a low fellow should unaccountably lose faith in a bad shilling, after finding it out! 1

The metaphoric reduction of the larger issue to the verification of a coin perfectly catches the spirit of this voice - here and elsewhere: its impatient harshness, its aggressive forcing of things into simple antitheses. Its representativeness can be gauged by the closeness with which the following description of Macaulay written in 1877, can be taken to describe this side of Dickens as well:

Direct denunciation, direct panegyric, dogmatical hypotheses, and dominating conclusions: these are what he gives us. We do not suspect from him balanced doubts and elegant hesitancy. 2

Yet doubts and hesitancies make themselves felt, in the novels especially, qualifications which do not emanate necessarily from the private voice, the special centres of intensive consciousness, but from a mind which in general is, from the fifties onwards, growing, if with some awkwardness, from a native bluntness towards a recognition of complexity and difficulty. The doubts are not balanced, and the hesitancy is not by any means elegant: Dickens does not, outside his 'special areas', speak with the poise by which a response in one direction is harmoniously tempered by instantaneous recognition of other possibilities. Rather, an awareness of complexity tends to manifest itself as a pattern of fairly abrupt oscillations, by which the field is finally explored. The brash contempt of the passage quoted above, for instance, co-exists

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1. Bleak House, pp. 210-11.
  2. "Laus Philistiae", Cornhill Magazine, XXXVI (1877), pp. 24-35 (p. 29). The article, which appeared anonymously, was written by F.W. Cornish; see Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals, 1824-1900, 2 vols. so far (1966 - ), i, 364.



uneasily in Bleak House with a more considered respect for the values of Chesney Wold. Similarly we have the way in which Dickens in the middle and later novels keeps coming back from novel to novel to the same type of person, but to different representatives of the type that reveal its strengths and weaknesses in a new perspective: such as in the progression from Rouncewell to Bounderby to Meagles to Podsnap. Or his change of mind on the snobbery question from the decided hostility of Little Dorrit to something not unlike Bagehot's position in Great Expectations. Forster found him "very much a man of one idea, each having its turn of absolute predominance".<sup>1</sup> Yet he was quite capable of having a number of different and opposing ideas on the same subject - in succession. The overall impression thus given is of a restless combination of dogmatic energy and flexibility.

Finally, a note on Dickens and his public. I raise this here because on a number of occasions in later chapters I offer readings of Dickens's sense of a character which depend upon the acknowledgement of what I have mentioned above as a "tactful and humanely hesitant handling of certain unsettling insights". Inferences of this kind are risky, of course, and there is a difficulty in drawing a clear distinction between a tactful soft-peddling of an insight assuredly grasped, and a reluctance in Dickens himself to consciously arrive at certain conclusions that his intuition seems to be guiding him towards. There is, nonetheless, external evidence to suggest that a self-conscious tact is a consideration that our sense of Dickens cannot leave out of account. This, of course, has always been recognised, though the tendency has been to reduce it to opportunism.

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1. John Forster, The Life of Charles Dickens, ed. J.W.T. Ley (1928; first published 1872-4), p.637.

Such, for instance, is Edmund Wilson's view when he says of the changed ending of Great Expectations that "Dickens was still a public entertainer who felt that he couldn't too far disappoint his audience".<sup>1</sup> This is quite clearly part of the truth. But beyond this I think we do have to acknowledge in Dickens's relations with his public something beyond cynicism, slavish dependence upon their approval, or happy affinity of taste; something rather like an attitude of protective responsibility. For whatever he was when he began, he soon did grow into what Forster characterised as:

...the sense he entertained, whether right or wrong, of the importance of what he had to do, of the degree to which it concerned others that the power he held should be exercised successfully... 2

If he was in ways the daemonic embodiment of the popular heart, there is also another sense in which he at least came to feel himself to be, with no inordinate degree of self-deception, its guide and guardian.

It would perhaps be possible to trace the emergence of Dickens's consciousness of himself in this rôle from the time of the public reception of works such as The Old Curiosity Shop and A Christmas Carol, and the rather intimidatingly large tributes to his power as a moral influence bestowed upon him by ordinary people and literary elder-statesmen alike. However sceptical we are about such tributes (and there is surely no real need to be that sceptical), evidence suggests that consciousness of questions of tact and delicacy, of the need to be responsible towards the rôle into which such tributes cast him, did play a part in shaping what he put into print. This involved, amongst other things (such as, say, his sense of the absolute obligation to keep on writing the annual Christmas story) a certain restraint that, if it was in a sense conformity to convention, was for that not necessarily at all insincere, or a loss to his art.

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1. Wilson, p. 55.

2. Forster, p. 422.

To support this proposition one can look to the numerous discussions in his letters of what should or should not be written and published. Thus in 1845, in discussing with MacVey Napier a projected article on crime for the Edinburgh Review, he added to his unsentimental view that rape is "very difficult of proof" the assurance that he saw "a way of not compromising you on this head", and that Napier might rely on his being "gentle and discreet".<sup>1</sup> Somewhat differently in 1867 he commented on certain scenes of Reade's Griffith Gaunt, which were sexually explicit by contemporary standards, in a way which suggested that the writer's responsibility involved recognising that certain things suitable for sophisticated taste needed to be kept from some sections of the public, for their own good:

...I should say that what was pure to an artist might be impurely suggestive to inferior minds (of which there must necessarily be many among a large mass of readers), and that I should have called the writer's attention to the likelihood of those passages being perverted in such quarters. 2

Nothing could be more paternalistic, less like the demagogue Trollope imaged as Mr. Popular Sentiment.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, with his own magazines, his editorial tone aimed at what was felt to be a reasonable compromise between business acumen and integrity. Hence he claimed that Wilkie Collins tended to be "unnecessarily offensive to the middle classes"<sup>4</sup> - why should one automatically put a cynical interpretation on that "unnecessarily"? An absolutely clear-cut case of Dickens's protective attitude over-ruling all other considerations is, however, his rejection in 1855 of Harriet Parr's Gilbert Massinger for publication in Household Words. The story was about hereditary madness; it was, he wrote to Wills, "a work of extraordinary power". Nevertheless, it could not be accepted:

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1. Letter to Mac Vey Napier, 17 October 1847; Letters, i, 709.
  2. Letter to Wilkie Collins, 20 February 1867; Letters, iii, 510. The letter otherwise speaks highly of the novel, and Dickens's regard for it is elsewhere recorded in James T. Fields, Yesterdays with Authors (1879), p. 239.
  3. Anthony Trollope, The Warden (1961), pp. 191-4.
  4. Letter to W.H. Wills, 24 September 1858; Letters, iii, 58.

...so many people are, by no fault of their own, linked to a similar terrible possibility - or even probability - that I am afraid it might cause prodigious unhappiness, if we could address it to our large audience. I shrink from the responsibility of awakening so much slumbering fear and despair. Most unwillingly therefore, I come to the apprehension that there is no course but to return it to the authoress. I wish however that you would in the strongest language convey to her my opinion of its great merits, while you explain the difficulties I now set forth. 1

No mention is made of any adverse effect of possible publication on sales, or on Dickens's reputation, factors Dickens was not hesitant about broaching in his correspondence, as with his well-known request for Forster's opinion as to whether Walter Gay could be shown to decline "without making people angry".<sup>2</sup> One might well imagine that such a story could well have been a very good financial proposition, a possibility that Dickens, with his keen sense of the mesmeric fascination of the morbid, could not have been unaware of. The capacity for disinterested discretion shown here, and also arguably evident in the other examples quoted above, needs to be given its due weight alongside the more opportunistic trimming of the kind exemplified in the handling of Walter Gay.

In 1860, after years of restlessness, Dickens wrote to Miss Burdett-Coutts: "If I were soured, I should still try to sweeten the lives and fancies of others".<sup>3</sup> A vulnerable enough testimony for the critical eye on the look-out for self-praise, perhaps (and the letter as a whole is rather melodramatic), but it is certainly justified by Dickens's unflagging output in later years of comedy which, despite some evidence of the spade and pickaxe, is still for the most part genial and lively: the later novels are sombre about the human condition, but they are not soured. Still, one

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1. Letter to W.H. Wills, 22 July 1855; Letters, ii, 683.

2. Letter to Forster, 25 July 1846; Letters, i, 772.

3. Letter to Miss Burdett-Coutts, 8 April 1860; in Edgar Johnson, ed., Letters from Charles Dickens to Angela Burdett-Coutts, 1841-65 (1953), p. 370.



can't but have some doubts about Forster's claim that as to "presumption or self-conceit... Few men have had less of either".<sup>1</sup> Nor (thankfully) does Dickens's phrase "to sweeten the lives and fancies of others" give a full account of his art, unless "to sweeten" be interpreted in a very broad sense. And if one is to take Dickens's life into consideration, one can't ignore such Jasper-like excesses as his determination, against Forster's moral disapproval, to adapt Sikes's murder of Nancy as a reading:<sup>2</sup> the temptation for such a volatile and undeniably emotionally ambivalent man to use his seemingly magical powers recklessly must of course have been great, and such lapses are only to be expected. Yet unless one comes to the question with a priori assumptions that such incidents reveal truth of a special status, that the feelings inherent in them are more real by their nature than other feelings are, the weight of the evidence suggests that this kind of attitude to his audience was the exception and not the rule. It does suggest, for instance, that the power to cheer and console mattered more to him than to terrify, though that this was so was dependent, as I shall argue later, on his vivid awareness of just how strong that more demonic impulse, in himself and in life, actually was. Hence something like the following letter ought to be regarded, I think, as a more representative illustration of "that peculiar personal relation" between himself and his public - he is recounting a meeting at Leeds (probably a Soirée of the Mechanics

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1. Forster, p.422.

2. Ibid., bk.11, ch.1.

Institute, in December 1847, at which he had spoken <sup>1</sup>):

...the people cheered me very much. One gentleman on the platform, in particular, when they had all done and I was going out, cried very earnestly for "another cheer for the author of *Little Nell*". When I got home to the house I was staying at, I asked the lady of it if that gentleman had lost a child, ever. She said yes, a little daughter, lately, and that he had held to that story as a sort of <sup>2</sup> comfort, ever since.

If Dickens did perhaps have an excessive desire to be installed at the hearths of his readers as a household god, or insufficient diffidence about recording the signs of his almost overnight investiture, it still must be granted in his favour that he remained at his post, not just with a stiff upper-lip or even an Esther Summerson kind of determined cheerfulness, but with a gaiety that stays uncannily close to seeming spontaneous.

In the light of this I do not think, then, that it is reading too great a subtlety into Dickens to see in him that "humane hesitancy" I mentioned above, or to feel that he is not the kind of writer of whom it is appropriate to say, as Mrs. Leavis recently has, that "his touch is often lightest where most meaningful, and tactfully indirect" <sup>3</sup>.

For as K.J. Fielding has said of Dickens in general, by the time of Little Dorrit, at least, he was "infinitely more subtle, reserved and conscious of playing a part than biographers have usually allowed" <sup>4</sup>. These qualities of reserve and indirection come meaningfully into play, I want to suggest, on those occasions where Dickens's psychological exploration prompts him towards scepticism about several kinds of selflessness that seem on the surface to be completely admirable - I am thinking here primarily of Esther Summerson and Amy Dorrit. In both cases Dickens's reservations about them are extensively noted in implicit

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1. See K.J. Fielding, ed., The Speeches of Charles Dickens (1960), p. 80.

2. Letter to D.M. Moir, 17 June 1848; Letters, ii, 103.

3. Dickens the Novelist, p. 336.

4. K.J. Fielding, Charles Dickens: A Critical Introduction, 2nd edition, revised and enlarged (1965; first published 1958), p. 187.

detail, but never explicitly voiced. It does not seem to me factitious to infer that here Dickens is employing the kind of tact he accused Reade of lacking in Griffith Gaunt. Mrs. Leavis has suggested that the post-Copperfield Dickens often works on two levels, providing an explicit meaning for the relatively simple-minded bulk of his audience ( "How many readers do not think!" he wrote to Forster at the time of Chuzzlewit <sup>1</sup> ), alongside a deeper implicit significance for those able to appreciate it, and who therefore can be supposed capable of seeing it without it being spelt out for them. <sup>2</sup> The Meagles's among Dickens's readers, so her case goes, could hardly be expected to grasp the complexity of Tattycoram's problem, and would only recoil from it if it was overtly urged upon them. Thus the simplifying sermon at the end, which they can take at its face value if they want to. Similarly Dickens may well have felt that many in his audience, accustomed to think in simple black and white terms, were no more able to contemplate sceptical probings into conventional virtue in a properly poised spirit than they were able to read sexually suggestive passages in a pure one - and the recent history of the diffusion of such ideas as Freudian psychology and anthropological relativism into popular circulation surely supports him here.

In a more general sense, too, I think, Dickens's bond with his audience is relevant to my early points about his attitude to violence and destruction, and their fascination for him. For mightn't it also be argued that the positive side of the constriction it imposed upon him was a self-discipline, a steadying pressure that perhaps played some part

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1. Letter to Forster, 2 November 1843, in

2. Dickens the Novelist, pp. 118-23.

in keeping alive in his work that vital tension between the benign and the malign, between (not synonymous but related to the first pair) resentment and resignation, between, that is, continuity and discontinuity within the self, anchorage in and estrangement from the 'Wordsworthian' Romantic legacy that is arguably, I feel, an essential pattern in his response to life. Forster's rejoinder to Taine that Dickens was never too much of a philosopher and artist to forget that he was a respectable citizen<sup>1</sup> is stuffy enough, and inevitably smile-provoking. But whether one has the right to smile more than slightly, to turn on him, as it were, the broad beam of confidently superior enlightenment, is another matter.

I come to the end of this introductory chapter with some relief. My aim has been to provide a reasonably full introduction to the 'aspects of Romanticism' to which I relate Dickens, a compact summary of the themes in Dickens I intend to pursue, together with their inter-relations, and a clarification of several of my general assumptions about Dickens that will inform the detailed readings I will offer. I have deliberately kept my comments on Dickens, especially, at a fairly general level, leaving illustrative detail to later chapters. The result has been, I'm afraid, an 'overview' with a vengeance, with the rich and multitudinous immediacy of the novels receding into the pocket-handkerchief abstraction of 'problems' and 'solutions', as the tone has become more stratospheric and managerial. The following chapters will, I hope, bring my argument down to earth, and put some flesh on the rather skeletal propositions I have so far advanced.

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1. Forster, p.715.



## EARLY DICKENS AND WORDSWORTH; DICKENS, LAMB, AND 'FANCY'.

The pairing of Dickens and Wordsworth does not immediately strike one as being a likely literary relationship to conjure with, apart from the suggestion of some plausible illusion cunningly produced from out of the hat of critical ingenuity. Forster mentions in the Life that "Dickens had little love for Wordsworth",<sup>1</sup> and one's obvious sense of the vast difference of temper between the two men and their works makes the comment quite understandable. What Forster's enigmatic aside fails to do, however, is to make clear whether Dickens's attitude was one of relative indifference, or of antipathy of the kind that bespeaks an involved, if partially critical, interest. It is my contention in this thesis that the latter interpretation is nearer to the truth, and as I shall argue in later chapters, Dickens tends to feel the essential truth of certain Wordsworthian assertions, while maintaining an ambivalent attitude towards their import. Setting this aside for the moment, though, it is also fairly obvious that while it is natural that one's immediate reaction to the question of Dickens's formative sources is to think of the eighteenth-century novelists, an explanation of what Steven Marcus has called the "gentling"<sup>2</sup> of spirit that distinguishes Dickens from these forebears must inevitably refer us to the intervening Romantic ethos in which Wordsworth was such a potent presence. The mutual concern with childhood that is the most obvious landmark of the Romantic orientation they have in common, is also enough to prompt comparison.

Dickens certainly read Wordsworth, and, despite what Forster's remark would suggest, expressed admiration for him. Wordsworth's poems were in his library;<sup>3</sup> Household Words published an obituary article upon Wordsworth's death;<sup>4</sup> the Household Narrative reviewed of The Prelude upon its posthumous publication<sup>5</sup> (both articles are discussed briefly in chapter seven)

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1. Forster, p. 421.

2. Marcus, p. 29.

3. J.H. Stonehouse, Reprints of the Catalogues of the Libraries of Charles Dickens and W.M. Thackeray (1935), p. 119.

4. "William Wordsworth" (25 May 1850), pp. 210-213. Attributed to William

5. Weir - see Ann Lohrli, Household Words (1973), p. 455.

5. The Household Narrative (July 1850), p. 167.

and popular Wordsworthian tags appear from time to time in Dickens's writings.<sup>1</sup> Such evidence proves precious little, of course; more important, however, is the painter Wilkie's record, in a letter of 1839 to a Mrs. Ricketts, of Dickens's praise of Wordsworth in a personal conversation with himself. Dickens, Wilkie reported, had "a very great admiration for [Wordsworth's] genius, of which he thought the little poem of "We are Seven" was one of the most striking examples. What [he] seemed to like in this was divesting death of its horror, by treating it as a separation and not an extinction. He deprecated what in families occurred of never alluding to a near relation deceased; said he lately met with a severe loss, but took every pains to recall the person deceased to his family about him."<sup>2</sup> This is a significant piece of evidence, I think, as it shows Wordsworth touching Dickens's feelings deeply, the poetry becoming associated, as it were, with what was to remain one of Dickens's most potent "hiding-places of... power" - the "severe loss" Dickens alluded to was, of course, the death of Mary Hogarth in 1837. Interestingly, too, the terms of Dickens's appreciation touch on what was one of Wordsworth's major achievements: the poetic definition of an ideal of stoic composure in suffering and loss which did not involve a simple over-mastering of the potentially disabling feelings (a variation on the continuity idea). Dickens's regard for Wordsworth was further expressed when he recommended Wordsworth and Crabbe to Miss Miss Burdett-Coutts for inclusion in the library of Urania Cottage, her home for fallen women.<sup>3</sup>

Not surprisingly, then, the sentimental side of Dickens's early novels draws markedly on Wordsworth, though with a sweetening and banalising effect. Philip Collins has already commented on the sad resurrection of

"The Idiot Boy" into the character of Barnaby Rudge<sup>4</sup>: what is genuinely

1. For a list of such allusions see the comprehensive discussion of the evidence for Dickens's reading of Wordsworth, in Harry Stone, Dickens's Reading (Ph.D dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1955), pp. 416-19 (p. 418).

2. David Wilkie to Mrs. Ricketts, 14 October 1839; quoted from A. de Suzannet, "Dickens's Love for Wordsworth," Dickensian, XXIX (June, 1933), pp. 197-8.

3. To Burdett-Coutts, 15 November 1848; in Letters from Charles Dickens to Angela Burdett-Coutts, ed. Edgar Johnson, London, 1955, p. 133.

4. Collins, Dickens and Education, pp. 194-6.

extraordinary in Wordsworth (the poem seems to invite flippancy but a proper reading dispells it) becomes simply ludicrous in Dickens. Similarly, as Angus Wilson has noted<sup>1</sup>, "We are Seven" is the likely prototype of such things as Smike's grave tableau ending in Nickleby, or the scene in the Old Curiosity Shop where the child shows Nell his brother's grave; and again, of course, influence means dilution rather than creative stimulus, as the relative austerity of the Wordsworth poem becomes an unreal lushness in Dickens's hands:

She drew near and asked one of them whose grave it was. The child answered that that was not its name; it was a garden - his brother's. It was greener, he said, than all the other gardens, and the birds loved it better because he had been used to feed them.<sup>2</sup>

Wordsworth does not 'work up' his child's feelings, but presents them with a matter-of-factness that leaves them properly remote.

More specifically relevant to our particular theme, too, are the instances where the Wordsworthian theme of the moral force of memory appears reflected in these early works, albeit rather as an aside, a detachable 'sentiment', than as a seminal principle. In one of the interludes of Pickwick, for instance, a certain Gabriel Grub sees -

...those who had been delicately nurtured, and tenderly brought up, cheerful under privations, and superior to suffering that would have crushed many of a rougher grain, because they bore within their own bosoms the materials of happiness, contentment, and peace.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, the inset-tale "The Five Sisters of York" in Nickleby is a parable in demonstration of the claim that "memory, however sad, is the best and purest link between this world and a better."<sup>4</sup> At the beginning of the tale the sisters are seen working together upon embroidery. When challenged to justify this use of their time by a misanthropic Friar one of them answers that one reason they do so is that if:

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1. Angus Wilson, "Dickens on Children and Childhood", in Michael Slater, ed., Dickens 1970, pp. 195-227.

2. The Old Curiosity Shop, p. 490.

3. Pickwick Papers, p. 489.

4. Nicholas Nickleby, New Oxford Illustrated Dickens (1950), pp. 57-66 (p. 65).



"in later times, we went forth into the world, and mingled with its cares and trials - if, allured by its temptations and dazzled by its glitter, we ever forgot that love and duty which should bind, in holy ties, the children of one loved parent - a glance at the old work of our common girlhood would awaken good thoughts of by-gone days, and soften our hearts to affection and love." <sup>1</sup>

The friar scoffs at this, and denies the moral value of such childish fancies, enjoining upon the sisters a stoical resignation to the inevitability of suffering. But the sister's prediction is of course borne out, for the embroidery does in fact later awaken memories that give them strength and unity in suffering: temps perdu are recovered conveniently according to plan. Wordsworth's case against the stoical rejection of memory as a way of coping with loss (mentioned above, but dealt with more fully below ) reappears as a keepsake trifle.

Such examples hardly portend a substantial literary debt, but it is necessary to take note of them at the outset as they reveal that the ways in which Dickens from the beginning was thinking within Romantic assumptions extend from a general championing of the qualities the Romantics cherished in childhood, to the corollary affirmation of the relevance of those qualities in adult life. With A Christmas Carol (1843) an idea that had so far been only decoratively peripheral to the writing becomes a leading principle. For the tale adumbrates Wordsworthian tenets in a way analogous to George Eliot's Silas Marner-as Barbara Hardy has commented, it is memory that "restores Scrooge to the first springs of love in a way reminiscent of Wordsworth and George Eliot...the personal past is a tradition on which can keep alive the feeling child, father of the rational man." <sup>2</sup>

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1. Ibid., p. 60.

2. Barbara Hardy, The Moral Art of Dickens (1970), p.35.



In a sense, Scrooge represents Dickens's ingenious though highly simplifying adaptation of the spiritual psychology of the Wordsworthian outcast to the easily-recognisable figure of the curmudgeon of popular tradition.

In Oliver Twist, too, Dickens had drawn on a Wordsworthian notion of recall in describing Oliver's salvation by the Maylies:

The boy stirred, and smiled in his sleep, as though these marks of pity and compassion had awakened some pleasant dream of a love and affection he had never known; as a strain of gentle music, or the rippling of water in a silent place, or the odour of a flower, or even the mention of a familiar word, will sometimes call up sudden dim remembrances of scenes that never were, in this life; which vanish like a breath; and which some brief memory of a happier existence, long gone by, would seem to have awakened for no voluntary exertion of the mind can ever recall them.<sup>1</sup>

Oliver, of course, has no buried happy childhood to guide him: another passage several chapters later spells out almost explicitly how Dickens's consequent expedient in Oliver's situation of introducing the idea of a dream-past ("a pleasant dream of a love and affection he had never known"), looks consciously to a Wordsworthian conception of Nature, and the kind of pre-natal personal past Wordsworth celebrated in the "Intimations of Immortality":

Who can describe the pleasure and delight: the peace of mind and soft tranquillity: the sickly boy felt in the balmy air, and among the green hills and rich woods, of an inland village! Who can tell how scenes of peace and quietude sink into the minds of pain-worn dwellers in close and noisy places, and carry their own freshness, deep into their jaded hearts! Men who have lived in crowded, pent-up streets, through lives of toil: and never wished for change; men, to whom custom has indeed been second nature, and who have come almost to love each brick and stone that formed the narrow boundaries of their daily walks: even they, with the hand of death upon them, have been known to yearn at last for one short glimpse of Nature's face; and carried, far from the scenes of their old pains and pleasures, have seemed to pass at once into a new state of being; and crawling forth, from day to day, to some green sunny spot, have had such memories awakened up within them by the mere sight of sky, and hill, and plain and glistening water, that a foretaste of heaven itself has soothed their quick decline, and they have sunk into their tombs as peacefully as the sun: whose setting they watched from their lonely chamber-window but a few hours before: faded from their dim and feeble sight! The memories which peaceful country scenes call up, are not of this world, nor its thoughts and hopes. Their gentle influence may teach us how to weave fresh garlands for the

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1. Oliver Twist, p. 191.

graves of those we loved: may purify our thoughts, and bear down before it old enmity and hatred; but beneath all this, there lingers, in the least reflective mind, a vague and half-formed consciousness of having held such feelings long before, in some remote and distant time; which calls up solemn thoughts of distant times to come, and bends down pride and worldliness beneath it.<sup>1</sup>

Dickens's youthfully precocious inwardness with the last moments of the aged makes this writing rather ridiculous: Wordsworth may answer to an emotional need, but Dickens is obviously unable as yet to bring together Wordsworthian insights and sentiments with his imaginative observation of life. It is, of course, impregnably axiomatic that Dickens is ~~se~~ <sup>so</sup> much good at tackling Nature directly; the remark of his academic friend Cornelius Felton that the description of Niagara in American Notes was "a conception, that would be admired in the awful genius of Dante"<sup>2</sup>, properly represents a unique viewpoint in the history of Dickens criticism. By the time of A Christmas Carol, however, a convergence of Wordsworthian significance and Dickens's natural sphere of interest is more apparent: the "hiding-places of ... power" which Scrooge rediscovers in himself with the ghost's aid are memories of childish reading of fairy-tales and romance<sup>3</sup>, and of generous-hearted social jollity (Mr. Fezziwig's party)<sup>4</sup>.

Such an assimilation is characteristic of the mature novels. Thus, in Hard Times, the Wordsworthian continuity idea is present as a shaping assumption, but the spirit in which the idea is dramatised is thoroughly Dickensian. The following passage perhaps suggests most clearly Dickens's debt to Wordsworth in his understanding of his theme - Dickens is decrying the impossibility of Louisa Gradgrind drawing upon "any of the best influences of old home" to offset the sterility of her marriage, and protect her from the temptations insinuated upon her by Harthouse:

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1. *Ibid.*, p. 210

2. Rev. in the North American Review, LVI (January 1843), pp. 212-37; reprinted in part in CH., pp. 130-5 (p. 135).

3. The Christmas Books, 1, 72.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 75-8.

The dreams of childhood - its airy fables; its graceful, beautiful, humane, impossible adornments of the world beyond: so good to be believed in once, so good to be remembered when outgrown, for then the least among them rises to the stature of a great Charity in the heart, suffering little children to come into the midst of it, and to keep with their pure hands a garden in the stony ways of the world, wherein it were better for all the children of Adam that they should oftener sun themselves, simple, and trustful, and not worldly-wise - what had she to do with these? Remembrances of how she had journeyed to the little that she knew, by the enchanted roads of what she and millions of innocent creatures had hoped and imagined; of how, first coming upon Reason through the tender light of Fancy, she had seen it a beneficent god, deferring to gods as great as itself; not a grim idol, cruel and cold, with its victims bound hand to foot, and its big dumb shape set up with a sightless stare, never to be moved by anything but so many calculated tons of leverage - what had she to do with these? Her remembrances of home and childhood, were remembrances of the drying up of every spring and fountain in her young heart as it gushed out. The golden waters were not there.<sup>1</sup>

The major influence behind the Romanticism of Hard Times is Carlyle; we now know this more clearly than ever, as a result of recent studies.<sup>2</sup> Yet this passage makes it also clear that Wordsworth as well is an important contributory presence: "the dreams of childhood ....so good to be remembered when outgrown, for then the least among them rises to the stature of a great Charity in the heart" - this surely is Dickens's rough translation of Tintern Abbey:

...feelings too

Of unremembered pleasure: such, perhaps,  
As have no slight or trivial influence  
On that best portion of a good man's life,  
His little, nameless, unremembered, acts  
Of kindness and of love.

The continuous narrative of Teufeldröckh's life in Sartor Resartus treats of the protagonist's childhood and youth, and mentions certain elements of that childhood, such as habituation to obedience, that are

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1. Hard Times, p. 223 .

2. Primarily William Oddie, Carlyle and Dickens: The Question of Influence (1972).



said to be a good preparation for later life<sup>1</sup>. But there is no insistent connection between the childhood and the triumphantly resolved spirit of "The Everlasting Yea"; this spiritual discovery is in no way presented as a rediscovery of a personal past. Dickens's whole shaping of his themes into the histories of his characters in the novel follows the summary the above passage offers. Thus Louisa marries Bounderby through the lack of any assured centre of feeling in her that cries out against the deed, and is barely able to resist Harthouse for the same reason, his open cynicism being attractive to her, and striking a responsive chord just as Gowan is reported to have done with Miss Wade in Little Dorrit<sup>2</sup>. By contrast, Sissy Jupe's ministering kindness, while not created as dramatically convincing in the form in which it is offered, either in itself, or as someone of her background, is asserted as the logical consequence of the qualities her childhood has fostered: her care for Louisa is the "great Charity" that arises from her 'educationally backward' inability to disown in herself, amongst other things, those "dreams of childhood" that her circus upbringing has made so freely available to her. The assumed connection between Fancy and Charity may seem questionable, but it is at the heart of the Romantic position.

However, if Hard Times is akin to Wordsworth in its ideas, the spirit in which these ideas are dramatised is, as I said above, vastly different. "The dreams of childhood - its airy fables; its graceful, beautiful, humane, impossible adornments of the world beyond", "the tender light of Fancy", these phrases are far removed from the steady sobriety of Wordsworth's diction in stating his positives. They are closer in tone, I think, to the following:

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1. Sartor Resartus, bk. 2, ch. 2.

2. Hard Times, p. 229; Little Dorrit, pp. 732-3.



The artificial fountains of the metropolis are, in like manner, fast vanishing. Most of them are dried up or bricked over. Yet, where one is left, as in that little green nook behind the South Sea House, what a freshness it gives to the dreary pile! Four little winged marble boys used to play their virgin fancies, spouting out every fresh streams from their innocent wanton lips in the square of Lincoln's Inn, when I was no bigger than they were figured. They are gone, and the spring is choked up. The fashion, they tell me, is gone by, and these things are esteemed childish. Why not, then, gratify children, by letting them stand? Lawyers, I suppose, were children once. They are awakening images to them at least. Why must everything smack of man and mannish? Is the world all grown up? Is childhood dead? Or is there not in the bosoms of the wisest and the best some<sup>1</sup> of the child's heart left, to respond to its earliest enchantments.

This is Charles Lamb, fusing a description of a London scene with a celebratory recreation of one of the key Romantic images for the spontaneous nature of the healthy psyche, with its roots beyond control of the conscious ego: the fountain - one of Coleridge's favourite metaphors, and also one which appears frequently in Dickens, as in the above passage from Hard Times just quoted. There are, of course, plenty of distinctions to be drawn between Lamb and Dickens, but they both stand together in contrast to Wordsworth, I think, in their emphasis upon the child's, and thus, in a sense, the spiritually healthy adult's imagination as playful, vulnerable because in a sense absurd, and thus as fragile - as Fancy, that is, rather than Imagination as Wordsworth or Coleridge use the term.

This brings us to the stage, I think, at which it is appropriate to turn from examining the direct relation between Dickens and Wordsworth, to an appraisal of the mediation of the Romantic legacy to Dickens through one of the 'middle-men' of Romanticism, namely Lamb. Doing this, I hope, will throw more light on the process by which the fundamental Romantic insights came to be creatively assimilated into the work of a man who was in temper so different from the originating Romantic figures. I will be returning to Wordsworth in a later chapter, when I come to discuss the ways in which Dickens complicated or modified the Romantic insights themselves.

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1. Charles Lamb, "The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple" (1820), from The Essays of Elia, Writings, iii, 270-84 (273-74).

But at this stage I am concerned with Dickens insofar as he accepted these insights, albeit endowing them with his own emphasis and flavour in the way he exploited them. In this process of bringing together Wordsworthian idea and Dickensian 'tone', so to speak, and especially as by this 'tone' I mean Dickens as an essentially comic writer, Lamb ought, I think, be seen as a transitional figure of some significance. I will attempt to examine him as such, in relation to Dickens, in the following section of this chapter, beginning, of course, with the necessary preliminaries such as the evidence we have of Dickens's reading and knowledge of Lamb, before proceeding to the heart of the matter.

## II

Given the claims made in Chapter one for Dickens's intellectual respectability, the introduction of Lamb as an influential figure must seem a rather risky procedure. Ought Dickens to be cumbered with such a lead balloon, or rather, ballasted with such light-weight company as Lamb is nowadays generally held to be? For Lamb is not a currently respectable figure - he is, in fact, a positively shady one. There persist, of course, quiet back-streets of the intellectual metropolis where the rites of "preserving the quiet voice of Lamb in a noisy world"<sup>1</sup> are still lovingly adhered to. But the noisy world is oblivious of such practices, and in the literary intellectual world which is still aware of his existence, Lamb is for the most part thought of as a rather disreputable minor deity of a vanished age, of no more contemporary relevance than "the 'sculpture' of rhyme".

I think there is at least some cause for regret at this, the reasons for which I hope will become apparent in this chapter. My purpose here though, is not to attempt a direct critical evaluation of Lamb,

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1. Hugh Sykes Davies, "Charles Lamb and the Romantic Style", Charles Lamb Bulletin, New Series V, (January 1974), p. 89.



but to assess his relation to Dickens along the lines I have indicated above. A number of factors certainly exist which encourage one to pursue the comparison. First of all, Lamb is the figure amongst the Romantics who has been traditionally most closely associated with Dickens. Critics have often paired the two writers significantly. In 1864, for instance, Percy Fitzgerald noted the kinship between Lamb and Dickens in their treatment of childhood, an association which pleased Dickens.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Philip Collins's observation that "there are obvious affinities between Lamb and Dickens in their treatment of childhood, education, and much else", is fairly representative of a number of more recent pronouncements upon the topic, though there is no detailed modern account of the relationship that is so generally assumed.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, speculation wishing to go beyond the noting of affinities to the suggestion of actual influence has had available to it solid evidence of Dickens's reading and appreciating Lamb, which is fairly uncommon with him, whose recorded observations upon his literary predecessors are not profuse. Of Lamb's essay "Dream Children", for instance, Dickens commented that it was "The most delightful paper, the most charming essay, which the tender imagination of Charles Lamb conceived".<sup>3</sup> (Dickens's admittedly very minor Christmas piece "The Poor Relation's Story" seems to me to be directly modelled upon this wistful reverie of Lamb's).<sup>4</sup> Beyond this, numerous casual allusions in Dickens's letters reveal a consistent fond regard.<sup>5</sup> Some weight, also, must be given to the indirect but substantial and numerous ties of friendship and association that linked the two men. Leigh Hunt and Talfourd were good friends of them both. (Talfourd's The Letters and Life of Charles Lamb, published in 1837, was

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1. Afternoon Lectures in Literature and Art, 2nd Series (1864); Dickens to Fitzgerald, 2 February 1866, Letters, iii, 459
  2. "Dickens's Reading", Dickensian, CX (September 1964), pp. 136-51 (p. 140). Also see his Dickens and Education, p.213-14. Others to note the relation are E.V. Lucas, "The Evolution of Whimsicality", in his At the Shrine of St. Charles (1934), pp.56-7; Mario Fraz, Hero in Eclipse, pp. 120-1, 165; G. Tillotson, "The Historical Importance of Certain Essays of Elia", in James V. Logan, John E. Jordan and Northrop Frye, eds., Some British Romantics (1966), pp.89-116 (p.90); Denys Thompson, "Our Debt to Lamb" in F.R. Leavis, ed., Determinations (1934), pp. 199-217 (p.205).
  3. Speech to 9 February 1858; reprinted in The Speeches of Charles Dickens, ed. K.J. Fielding, (p.252).
  4. Christmas Stories, pp. 27-39.
  5. Letters (Pilgrim), see especially i, Charles Mackay (1838), p.485; ii, Andrew Bell, (7 April 1841), p.254, Washington Irving (28 September 1841), p.395, D.M. Moir (6December 1841), p.440.

owned by Dickens by at least 1840, and was in his possession when he died:<sup>1</sup> a letter to B.W. Procter of 1854 strongly suggests that he had read it.<sup>2</sup> Procter himself was another close mutual friend and Dickens had high praise for his biography of Lamb in a letter to him in 1866: "I do not think it possible to tell a pathetic story with a more unaffected and manly tenderness",<sup>3</sup> he wrote, with an eye, perhaps, to the opening for extravagant religiosity that Lamb's case offered to the sentimentalising biographer. At about the same time Percy Fitzgerald, who, as mentioned above, wrote a comparative essay on Dickens and Lamb, also brought out a biography of Lamb, and a complete edition of his works.<sup>4</sup> Lamb himself, shortly before his death, had become friendly with Forster, of which Talfourd's comment on one occasion of their meeting is that though Forster was a friend "of comparatively recent date...Lamb found himself as much at home as if he had known him for years."<sup>5</sup> Forster's Life does not overtly compare Lamb and Dickens, but as I will suggest in my next chapter,<sup>6</sup> Forster's appreciation of Dickens's humour is markedly consonant with an appreciation of Lamb. Lamb was also friendly at one stage with Macready, whom he had met through Charles Lloyd;<sup>7</sup> and Dickens in after years had dealings with Edward Moxon, the husband of Lamb's adopted daughter<sup>8</sup>, and Fanny Kelly, the actress Lamb had admired in her youth.<sup>9</sup> These details ought not to be seen as a sum total of separate connections, but as indication of a continuity, over the generations, of a milieu of generally liberal writers and men of letters, in which Lamb was a founding member, along with Coleridge, Wordsworth, Hazlitt, and others, and into the continuation of which Dickens moved in his formative years as a young

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1. To Edward Moxon, 27 October 1840; Letters (Pilgrim), ii, 139, 139n.4.

2. To B.W. Procter, 15 April 1854; Letters, ii, 551.

3. To B.W. Procter, 13 August 1866; Letters, iii, 481.

4. op. cit.

5. Thomas Noon Talfourd, The Letters of Charles Lamb, with a Sketch of his Life, 2 vols (1837), ii, 310.

6. See pp. 134-5.

7. E.V. Lucas, The Life of Charles Lamb, 5th edition (1910), p.411.

8. Dickens to Talfourd, 22 May 1840; Letters (Pilgrim), ii, 70-1.

9. Forster, pp. 381-2.



writer. Significantly, one of Dickens's colleagues on the Morning Chronicle was Hazlitt's son - Archibald Coolidge Jr. has pointed out the way in which the elder Hazlitt was a hero and model for radical-liberal journalists in Dickens's early days <sup>1</sup> - and it is worth bearing in mind that the "Morning Chronicle" was one of the newspapers singled out for attack in the Anti-Jacobin's poem "The New Morality", which proceeded to attack "ye five other wandering bards...Coleridge and Southey, Lloyd, and Lamb and Co." in the following stanza.<sup>2</sup> Dickens's contact with the English Romantic tradition was a social as well as an overtly literary one, though <sup>is</sup> this dimension/lost to our direct observation today.

Here, then, is our external evidence. Similarly, before proceeding with the particular point of contact at which I introduced the Lamb-Dickens comparison, it may help to reinforce our sense of the non-accidental nature of the specific similarity I pointed to, if we take <sup>aspects</sup> note of some of the other closely related/of their general affinity. Lamb strongly anticipates Dickens, for instance, in his insistence upon the crucial importance of the child's imagination:

Fantastic forms, whither are ye fled? Or, if the like of you exist, why exist they no more for me? Ye inexplicable, half-understood appearances, why comes in reason to tear away the preternatural mist, bright or gloomy, that enshrouded you? Why make ye so sorry a figure in my relation, who made up to me - to my childish eyes - the mythology of the Temple? In those days I saw Gods, as "old men covered with a mantle," walking upon the earth. Let the dreams of classic idolatry perish, - extinct be the fairies and fairy trumpery of legendary fabling, - in the heart of childhood, there will for ever spring up a well of innocent or wholesome superstition; the seeds of exaggeration will be busy there, and vital, from everyday forms educating the unknown and the uncommon. In that little Goshen there will be light when the grown world flounders about in the darkness of sense and materiality. While childhood, and while dreams, reducing childhood, shall be left, imagination shall not have spread her holy wings totally to fly the earth. <sup>3</sup>

1. Archibald C. Coolidge, Jr., "Dickens's Humor", Victorian Newsletter, XVIII (Autumn 1960), pp.8-15 (p.8).

2. II.328-33, Poetry of the Anti-Jacobin, p. 185.

3. "The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple", Essays of Elia, Writings, iii, 282-83.

This apostrophe is a kind of comic companion to "Dejection: an Ode" and the Ode upon "Intimations of Immortality", with Coleridge's "luminous cloud" and Wordsworth's "celestial light" echoed by Lamb's "preternatural mist". It could also be taken to some extent as a summary of Dickens's view of childhood and imagination. Its especial relevance is brought home by the context in which it appears, for the heightened representation Lamb has just created for us in his reminiscing prose reveals his imagination working in a manner very like Dickens's, "educing the unknown and the uncommon" in his vivid sketches of the Benchers, in much the same way as Dickens demonstrates "that in all familiar things...there is Romance enough".<sup>1</sup> In both writers, too, we find the same mixture of a recreation of the heightened vision of childhood, with the keen sense of the comicality of the exaggeration that belongs to the adult perspective: the liveliness of their prose depends upon the way the childish memory is mediated through the adult consciousness, as well as the ability of the adult mind to reach into the recesses of the past. Hence the comedy, for instance, of the opening chapters of Great Expectations. In this they are unlike Wordsworth in his most vivid moments of recall, in which the adult tone of reflection and the registration of experience as it occurred to the child are kept more distinct.

A further trait Lamb and Dickens have in common on this score, and a further point where Dickens may have learnt from Lamb, is the element of fantastic grotesquerie in the childhood imaginings they record. Lamb may half-facetiously acclaim Thomas Coventry, one of his Old Benchers, as a God, but he certainly was, to the child, a rather monstrous one:

... his person was a quadrate, [his] step massy and elephantine, his face square as a lion's, his gait peregratory and path-keeping, indivertible from his way as a moving column, the scarecrow of his inferiors, the browbeater of equals and superiors, who made

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1. Address in the First Number of Household Words: "A Preliminary Word" (30 March 1850); reprinted in MP, pp.167-9 (p.167).





Thus the apocryphal young man who has designs on Pip's insides represents the literary mode of sportive terror introduced into a context in which, as an element of the narrator's tone, it takes on special significance as suggesting the relationship between the narrator's present and past being. Similarly, the "dry Ogre chalking ghastly white figures"<sup>1</sup> in Hard Times is winningly fantastical for us, but hardly so for the young Gradgrinds, we infer. However Dickens would certainly have been in agreement with Lamb's contention in "Witches and Night Fears", that the child's superstitious imagination is an innate instinct, and that any attempts to suppress it, however well-meant, are futile and dangerous. Better the gloomy caves of Paul Dombey's imagination than the virtual desert of Louisa Gradgrind's.

Given this, it is not surprising that, although we can't look to Lamb for any kind of comprehensive social vision, we often come across indications, in embryonic form, of the Romantic opposition to utilitarianism that was to achieve its fullest formulation in Dickens. The attack on Gradgrindism is in line, of course, with a general opposition amongst the Romantics to utilitarianism and its derived educational practices. Coleridge's pronouncements upon education, for instance, resemble Dickens not just in general idea, but, at times, in rhetorical metaphor as well:

Touch a door a little ajar, or half-open, and it will yield to the push of your finger. Fire a cannon-ball at it, and the Door stirs not an inch: you make a hole thro it, the door is spoilt for ever, but not moved. Apply this to moral Education.<sup>2</sup>

This suggests Mr. Gradgrind: "he seemed a kind of cannon loaded to the muzzle with facts, and prepared to blow them clean out of the regions of childhood at one discharge".<sup>3</sup> And, elsewhere, Coleridge's lament at "young men the most anxiously and expensively be-schoolmastered, be-tutored, be-lectured, anything but educated",<sup>4</sup>

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1. Hard Times, p. 54.

2. MS, from Coburn, ed., Inquiring Spirit, p. 81.

3. Hard Times, p. 48.

4. The Friend, from Coburn, ed., Inquiring Spirit, p. 76.



almost exactly anticipates Dickens's case about M'Choakumchild and Bradley Headstone. Such similarities have been fully discussed by William Walsh in his The Use of Imagination.<sup>1</sup> It is unlikely, however, that Dickens would have read Coleridge here; the similarity is a perfect example of what I defined in my introduction as a 'continuity' which is less than influence but more than a parallel. It is more likely that Dickens knew Wordsworth's anti-utilitarian protest in "A Poet's Epitaph", or the related, though more broadly anti-didactic "Expostulation and Reply". This legacy of Romantic antagonism to education as merely knowledge, to the aggressive and reductive intellectualism that supported it, and to the precocious conceit it fostered, this most probably was directly transmitted to Dickens through Carlyle. Lamb, however, was perhaps a secondary, or reinforcing influence. In "The Old and the New Schoolmaster", for example, Lamb meets a type who strongly anticipates M'Choakumchild and Headstone:

The modern schoolmaster is expected to know a little of everything, because his pupil is required not to be entirely ignorant of anything. He must be superficially, if I may so say, omniscient. He is to know something of pneumatics; of chemistry; of whatever is curious or proper to excite the attention of the youthful mind; an insight into mechanics is desirable, with a touch of statistics; the quality of soils, etc.; botany; the constitution of his country, cum multis alijs.<sup>2</sup>

Like Dickens, and the other Romantics, Lamb recoils from the life-denying aggression of this pointlessly eclectic pedantry:

He must seize every occasion - the season of the year - the time of the day - a passing cloud - a rainbow - a wagon of hay - a regiment of soldiers going by - to inculcate some thing useful. He can receive no pleasure from a casual glimpse of Nature, but must catch at it as an object of instruction. He must interpret beauty into the picturesque. He cannot relish a beggar-man, or a gipsy, for thinking of the suitable improvement. Nothing comes

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1. (1959), pp.11-14.

2. Elia, Writings, iii, 209-20 (215).

to him not spoiled by the sophisticating medium of moral uses. The Universe - that Great Book, as it has been called - is to him, indeed, to all intents and purposes, a book out of which he is doomed to read tedious homilies to distasting schoolboys. <sup>1</sup>

When he wrote this Lamb possibly had in mind Expostulation and Reply, with its assertion of the claims of "wise passiveness" against "meddling intellect". Perhaps this has something to do with his odd, half-facetious apostrophe in the same essay to "those fine old Pedagogues" who "Passing from infancy to age ... dreamed away all their days as in a grammar-school. Revolving in a perpetual cycle of declensions, conjugations, syntaxes, and prosodies;..." Not uncharacteristically, Lamb's serious points appear side-by-side with sheer whimsy (his feeling for the past here has none of the serious point of, say, George Eliot's equally humorous apostrophe to "Old Leisure" at the beginning of Felix Holt).<sup>2</sup>

Elsewhere, though again in sporadic outbursts (his essays are written in marked contrast to the point-proving Addisonian model) Lamb hits out at the aggressive scepticism of all that is not Fact, in a way which strongly anticipates Dickensian polemic. "Witches, and Other Night Fears", which I mentioned earlier, contains an interesting and apposite digression on the vulnerability of childish fancy, which remarkably foreshadows the fate of the young Gradgrinds. The main argument of the essay is the futility of hoping to protect a child from fear by keeping his mind free from superstition. Such fear, he argues, is an innate instinct, needing no object to arouse it: his point is an implicit denial of the idea of the Lockean tabula rasa upon which is founded the enlightened reductivism of Gradgrind, who sees children's minds as empty vessels waiting to be filled.

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1. Ibid., p. 213.

2. (1965; first published 1866) pp. 13-20.



But before coming to this he gives the following brief sketch of the effect on him of reading a commentary on the Old Testament which raised, and then resolved, sceptical objections:

The habit of expecting objections to every passage set me upon starting more objections, for the glory of finding a solution of my own for them. I became staggered and perplexed, a sceptic in long-coats. The pretty Bible stories which I had read, or heard read in church, lost their purity and sincerity of impression, and were turned into so many historic or chronologic theses to be defended against whatever impugnors. I was not to disbelieve them, but - the next thing to that - I was to be quite sure that some one or other would or had disbelieved them. Next to making a child an infidel is the letting him know that there are infidels at all. Credulity is the man's weakness, but the child's strength.... I should have lost myself in these mazes, and have pined away, I think, with such unfit sustenance as these husks afforded, but for a fortunate piece of ill-fortune... 1

Lamb's lightly humorous reminiscence has a serious point, which is the essence of Dickens's case about the young Gradgrinds.

Given these points of affinity, it is not surprising that the emphasis upon the needful continuity between child and adult selves also features prominently in Lamb. Like Wordsworth, Lamb repeatedly affirms autobiography as a proper form of consciousness, and defends the sanctity of memory as containing "the hiding-places of man's power": of the Elia essays "The South-Sea House", "New Year's Eve", "Mackery End", "The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple", "My First Play", "Blakesmoor", "Newspapers Thirty-Five Years Ago", all strongly reflect this pre-occupation. The following passage from "New Year's Eve" perhaps suggests most clearly the way in which Lamb anticipates closely Dickens's mode of recalling the past:

I have almost ceased to hope; and am sanguine only in the prospects of other (former) years. I plunge into foregone visions and conclusions. I encounter pell-mell with past disappointments. I am armour-proof against old discouragements. I forgive, or overcome in fancy, old adversaries. I play over again for love, as the gamesters phrase it, games for which I once paid so dear. I would scarce now have any of those untoward accidents and events

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1. Writings, iii, 234.

of my life reversed. I would no more alter them than the incidents of some well-connived novel. . . .

In a degree beneath manhood, it is my infirmity to look back upon those early days. Do I advance a paradox, when I say that, skipping over the intervention of forty years, a man may have leave to love himself, without the imputation of self-love? <sup>1</sup>

If this advocacy of a softened recollection of the past points dangerously towards the blandness of "Tears, idle Tears" (and the page following the quotation is indeed an embarrassingly maudlin one), it is a way of relating to one's past that also anticipates David Copperfield. Lamb's formulation looks forward to the ironic but basically serene and accepting tone in which David as narrator recalls his own history, and also the accommodation with his own experience that the autobiographical element of the novel represents in Dickens himself. (Compare the last two sentences of the first paragraph in the above-quoted passage with his recorded claim in his autobiography to be satisfied to "know how all these things have worked together to make of me what I am." <sup>2</sup>) Apart from the explicit fable of The Hanted Man, both Little Dorrit and Great Expectations are concerned, amongst other things, with the necessity of accepting one's past as part of oneself.

Of more interest to our argument, however, is that the way in which this theme is taken up in Lamb is especially apposite to one of the ways it is handled in Dickens. This brings us back from the digression upon general similarities, to the point I made at the end of section one of this chapter, that Dickens and Lamb are alike in their tendency to express their reserve about Reason in a way which makes Fancy rather than Imagination (in the Coleridgean-Wordsworthian sense) the natural covering term.

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1. Elia, Writings, iii, 173-81 (174).

2. I refer to the autobiographical fragment Dickens gave Forster just prior to writing Copperfield; Forster, bk.1, ch.2.



Fancy, of course, is a word of many meanings. For both Lamb and Dickens it refers differently, and yet relatedly, to both the credulity of the child, and the conscious fancifulness of the adult mind; to the child's mostly unhumorous enchantment with the marvellous (Lamb gives an account of this quality of his own childhood imagination in "My First Play,"<sup>1</sup> and the self-aware heightening and exaggeration of the adult fancy. It goes without saying that Fancy in this adult sense is a principal and immediately visible quality of Dickens's mind, as he recognised himself when he wrote to Forster that he thought it was his "infirmity to fancy or perceive relations in things which are not apparent generally".<sup>2</sup> This is also true of Lamb, whose prose has a Gothic quality of self-delighting fancifulness that places it between Sterne and Dickens, in opposition to Augustan neo-classic prose. However, both Lamb and Dickens also have an especial amused fondness for the child's kind of fancy, and see in it a significance equivalent to that which Wordsworth sees in the imaginative revelations of childhood, both as an important experience in childhood itself, and as a persistent influence in later life. The championing, and personal recall, of such early fancies, is a characteristic feature of both writers. Such fancies are naturally humorous in adult recall, but their importance nevertheless requires that the humour be gentle and indulgent, accepting the feelings while smiling at their naivete. For in Lamb, and often in Dickens, the manner in which 'continuity' is defended derives from an awareness that the childhood legacy to be conserved is not such as can be affirmed as a revelation, with the seriousness that is for the most part appropriate to Wordsworth's memories, but something the importance of which is paradoxically at one with its seemingly light-weight nature, and its vulnerability to being disowned as absurd or trivial, as

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1. "My third play followed in quick succession. It was the Way of the World. I think I must have sat at it as grave as a judge; for I remember the hysteric affectations of good Lady Wishfort affected me like some solemn tragic passion," Elia, Writings, iii, 259-70 (263).

2. Forster, p. 721.

'merely childish'. Thus their advocacy is naturally pitched as a modest and defensive plea, in which a conscious charm is exercised, belying an appreciation that the position defended is extremely open to attack. This is the tone, for instance, of the passage quoted above from the end of section one from the "Old Benchers of the Inner Temple": "Why must everything smack of man, and mannish? Is the world all grown up?" It is also perfectly exemplified by the characteristically 'Elia' opening of "Old China":

I have an almost feminine partiality for old china. When I go to see any great house I inquire for the china closet, and next for the picture gallery. I cannot defend the order of preference but by saying that we have all some taste or other, of too ancient a date to admit to our remembering distinctly that it was an acquired one. I can call to mind the first play and the first exhibition that I was taken to; but I am not conscious of a time when china jars and saucers were introduced into my imagination.

I had no repugnance then (why should I now have?) to those little, lawless, azure-tinted grotesques, that under the notion of men and women float about, uncircumscribed by any element, in that world before perspective - a china tea-cup. 1

Lamb's tenderly witty fancy of a kind of comic original innocence ("that world before perspective") is a consciously charming defence of an eccentric taste, and that marked leaning of his imagination towards 'escapist' idyll ("uncircumscribed by any element" - compare the analogous championing in "On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century" of "the regions of pure comedy, where no cold moral reigns").<sup>2</sup> He founds his vindication of deviance upon an appeal to a version of the Wordsworthian 'continuity' doctrine; "I cannot defend the order of preference, but by saying, that we have all some taste or other, of too ancient a date to admit of our remembering that it was an acquired one". In doing so he offers a complete inversion of the Augustan orthodoxy of Francis Jeffrey's

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1. Elia, Writings, iv, 118-25 (118).

2. Ibid., iii, 361-71 (367).



deprecatory review of The Excursion in 1814 (already quoted in my introduction): "An habitual and settled knowledge of the few settled and permanent maxims, which form the canon of general taste in all large and polished societies - a certain tact, which informs us at once that many things, which we still love and are moved by in secret, must necessarily be despised as childish, nor derided as absurd, in all such societies - though it will not stand in the place of genius, "seems necessary to the success of its exertions...."<sup>1</sup> For Wordsworth the affections of early years are for the most part by no means absurd - see, for instance, his unequivocally exalted apostrophe to the writers of fairy-tales and romances in the fifth book of The Prelude.<sup>2</sup>

Lamb, on the other hand, admits the absurdity and childishness of his "hiding-places", but glories in them nevertheless - this is the mainspring of his sometimes very engaging and sometimes oppressive charm. He asserts the paradox with the modesty (or at least the show of it) that his acknowledgement of his eccentricity implies, and justifies it by the ideal of the integrity of the present with the past self.

We do not have to look far in Dickens to find parallels to Lamb on this score. Hard Times offers perhaps the most important example, where we have Sissy Jupe's instinctive resistance to the Gradgrindian pressures to disown as absurd the sense of fancy and wonder that are shown to have been fostered in her by her circus upbringing, with its genial fondness for fairy-tales and the right kind of knowledge about horses.<sup>3</sup>

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1. From Wain, Contemporary Reviews of Romantic Poetry, p. 74.

2. II. 491-533.

3. Hard Times, pp. 95-9.

Gradgrind announces to her, upon her entry into Stone Lodge, that "From this time you begin your history. You are, at present, ignorant, I know".<sup>1</sup> It is in the nature of his reductivist mentality to feel that the mind may be restored to its original tabula rasa, in order to begin afresh. But in Sissy's case Nature spontaneously thwarts the denaturing idea, as Sissy later says, with Dickens fusing realism and symbolic import in a way in which he sometimes does not with Paul Dombey, for instance, that "mistakes" "~~seem to come~~ natural" to her.<sup>2</sup> Hence the integrity with the vital sources of her own past is preserved.

Sissy's sense of the circus, though, is still straightforwardly child-like. The circus, as it is presented to us, with all Dickens's relish for its jumble of hand-me-down theatrical pretension and typically circus-like sleaziness, is closer to Lamb in that it is likeable and absurd at once, and requires protection in a special tone. Thus Lamb's charm on behalf of old china, or the Inner Temple fountain, finds a certain equivalence in Sleary's 'philosophy':

Don't be croth with uth poor vagabondth. People mutht be amuthed. They can't be alwayth a learning, nor yet they can't be alwayth a working, they an't made for it. You mutht have uth, Thquire. Do the withe thing and the kind thing too, and make the betht of uth; not the wurtht.<sup>3</sup>

Sleary's words are convincing as of his own expression, yet they also work as a summary of Dickens's case, and offer us a way, a tone of poised indulgence, in which

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1. Ibid., p. 88.

2. Ibid., p. 96.

3. Ibid., p. 308, Also pp. 52-3.



we, as unchild-like adults, yet not fettered with Gradgrindian single-vision, can be asked to take the circus.

Hard Times is not directly autobiographical. Yet we know that Dickens to some extent modelled Sleary's troupe on Astley's circus, which was one of his potent early memories and which he refreshed by lengthy observation of the circus and its backstage life whilst writing the novel.<sup>1</sup> So the circus scenes, which certainly are in Dickens's most lively and affectionate vein of comic observation, are in a way the projection into the impersonal genre of the novel of the kind of recall, and attitude towards the personal past, that we find in the essay which is perhaps his closest approximation to (and likely literary progeny of) such Lamb essays such as "the Old Benchers": "Where we Stopped Growing".<sup>2</sup> Here Dickens fondly catalogues certain of his own early enchantments which he is glad never to have outgrown - childhood reading, London scenes and figures, and early theatre visits predictably make up most of the list. The overlap with Lamb's "hiding-places" is considerable. Like Lamb in "New Years Eve", Dickens makes use of the occasion of the year's turning to put the case for the conservation - in an appropriate spirit - of early enthusiasms:

...thankful we are to have stopped in our growth at so many points...and particularly with the Old Year going out and the New Year coming in. Let none of us be ashamed to feel this gratitude. If we can only preserve ourselves from growing up, we shall never grow old, and the young may love us to the last. Not to be too wise, not to be too stately, not to be too rough with innocent fancies, or too treat them with too much lightness - which is as bad - are points to be remembered that may do us all good in our years to come. And the good they do us, may even stretch forth into the vast expanse beyond those years; for, this is the spirit inculcated by One on whose knees children sat confidently, and from whom all our years dated.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Fields, p. 233.

2. MP, pp. 358-64.

3. Ibid., pp. 363-4.

The strong moral emphasis, while not alien to Lamb, more suggests Wordsworth - the closing sentence is a good illustration of the conjunction Philip Collins has noted in Dickens of Romantic affinities and an allegiance to New Testament Christianity.<sup>1</sup> But the emphasis on "innocent fancies" - it is too much lightness that Dickens is objecting to - is purely in the spirit of Lamb.

Nevertheless, whilst it is in many ways close to Lamb, "Where We Stopped Growing" is also indicative of one of the ways in which Dickens is finally very unlike him. As is proper to the nature of what they are both intent on conserving, Dickens's tone in the above has something of Lamb's poised modesty of assertion: his "not to be too rough with innocent fancies" is in accord with Lamb's "Why must everything smack of man, and mannish? Is the world all grown up?" in the "Old Benchers" essay (my underlining). Yet where Lamb's modesty is really a kind of slyness, manoeuvring us round to what is, too often, a fundamental regressiveness and evasiveness of temper in him, the same balance in Dickens is generally in the service of a much firmer awareness of the claims of the adult, disenchantedly real world. Where Lamb claims tenderness for childhood fancies out of a reluctance to enter wholeheartedly into the world beyond them, Dickens does so, I would claim, out of a direct and personal awareness of how strong the pressures are that seem inevitably to cut one off completely from the springs of tenderness, wonder and joy that early childhood fancies foster, and which fond memory of them keeps alive. One feels in Dickens, that is, an awareness of what, to adapt his own words from a slightly different context, is the "need to do violence to feelings

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1. Collins, Dickens and Education, p. 197.



in order to fight in life's struggle".<sup>1</sup> The opening of the essay, for instance, hedges about the reverie into the past with adamant reservations:

Few people who have been much in the society of children, are likely to be ignorant of the sorrowful feeling sometimes awakened in the mind by the idea of a favourite child's 'growing up'. This is intelligible enough. Childhood is usually so beautiful and engaging, that, setting aside the many subjects of profound interest which it offers to an ordinarily thoughtful observer; and even setting aside too, the natural caprices of strong affection and prepossession; there is a mournful shadow of the common lot, in the notion of its changing and fading into something else. The sentiment is unreasoning and vague, and does not shape itself into a wish. To consider what the dependent little creature would do without us...is not within the range of so fleeting a thought...The regret is transitory, natural to a short-lived creature in a world of change, has no hold in the judgement, and so comes and passes away. 2

Dickens clearly feels it necessary to distinguish between the need for the adult self to keep in touch with the sources of vital feeling invested in early experience, and the merely sentimental nostalgia for childhood in which, as Peter Coveney<sup>3</sup> has fully demonstrated, Romanticism was prone to lapse into (the generalised uncritical nostalgia typified by, say, Tennyson's brilliantly articulated but insidious "Tears, Idle Tears" is an extension of this). The younger Dickens of ten years previously had himself been carried away into such a vein of feeling with Little Nell, whose story is significantly a fictional analogue to the sentiment of "Deaths of Little Children" (1820),<sup>4</sup> an essay of Leigh Hunt (who closely related to Lamb, and who will be introduced into the discussion in the next chapter).

Lamb is never as artlessly sentimental as the Dickens of Little Nell - he was after all writing as a sophisticated and fully educated figure

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1. Forster, p. 540.

2. MP, pp. 358-9.

3. The Image of Childhood, ch. 7.

4. The Indicator, 5 April 1820; reprinted in Hunt, Hunt as Poet and Essayist, pp. 180-4.

in a literary ethos in which the norms of Augustan rationality and emotional self-discipline still exerted a strong, if no longer dominating influence; and his manner bears the stamp of the need to assert his individuality with a certain caniness. Even the sentiment of Hunt's "Deaths of Little Children" is leavened by a manner of sprightly paradox. The Dickens of Little Nell, on the other hand, is still a naif. Lamb's regressiveness is insidious rather than overt, making itself felt in the lack of anything like the forward-thrusting vigour - the Victorian critical term 'manly' seems exactly the right word - of the Dickens paragraph quoted above, where the syllogistic march of the closing cadences is even faintly Johnsonian. Thus he disarmingly acknowledges that his taste for old china (not in itself regressive, of course, but so by how fully representative it is of Lamb's interests), is "a feminine partiality", or that his "infirmity" is "in a degree beneath manhood ... to look back upon those early days." But such admissions, while distinguishing him from naive sentimentalism of the Little Nell kind, and the self-enclosed flatulence of some of the late Victorian examples cited by Mr. Peter Coveney, indicate little pressure in Lamb towards a more out-going and bracing engagement with life. It does indicate, on the other hand, a self-knowledge, and corresponds to a gentle humour that balances (without disturbing) Lamb's pathos; and Lamb's tone in general represents, perhaps, an interesting example of Romantic individualism, sociably compromised and mellowed into a case for a liberal pluralism that pays a certain homage to norms while at the same time diverging

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from them. Yet there is nothing in Lamb that suggests that such self-knowledge is anything but complacent; his uninterruptedly social performance of his individual eccentricity ensures that the unruffled flow of his lingering cadences is never jolted by any sharp recognition of the penalties of regressiveness - see, for instance, the final paragraph of "Mrs. Battle's Opinions on Whist", and the calmly wistful tone of the closing note: "Bridget and I should be ever playing".<sup>1</sup> In which case, the shared sociability that such a liberal pluralism proffers is in danger of becoming little more than an agreeable surface masking what are finally completely insulated individualities, with any vital tension between the individual and the norm being smoothed away. By contrast a phrase like 'vital tension' seems absolutely appropriate to Dickens, for his work is heavily scored with contradictory impulses towards the tender and the tough, the sentimental and the **vigorously**, even harshly, masculine, between, that is, that which makes him both like and unlike Lamb (and also in a different way, as I suggested in my introductory chapter, different from Wordsworth). His attitude in "Where We Stopped Growing" represents one of his ways of striking a balance between the conflicting claims of an adult normality and the attractions of early memory.

A similar doubleness of attitude is also struck in Dickens's critical pronouncements about Fancy, as an essential quality of all literature, and inseparably, of life. Dickens's now well-known letter to Henry Cole in support of Hard Times claimed only "a little standing-room for Queen Mab's Chariot among the Steam Engines"<sup>2</sup> (my underlining), and avowed that he had actually a good deal of time for political economy, in its place. This may not have been an accurate reflection

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1. Ella, Writings, iii, 181-90 (190).

2. To Henry Cole, 17 June 1854; the letter is from MS held in the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York; quoted here from K.J. Fielding, "Charles Dickens and the Department of Practical Art", Modern Language Review, XLVIII (July 1953), pp. 270-7 (p. 274).

of Hard Times, which is more one-sided than Dickens's letter, but it is a just account of the balance of emphasis in his work as a whole; the admiration he shows for Rouncewell in Bleak House is the obvious immediate evidence of the fact that he not only accepted the world of Steam Engines, but that there was a side of him that answered excitedly to the aggressive energy they embodied and symbolised. Correspondingly, on a more general frame of reference, one can take Dickens's address in the opening number of Household Words, pledging that "No mere utilitarian spirit, no iron binding of the mind to grim realities" would give "a harsh tone" to the magazine, for "we would tenderly cherish that light of Fancy which is inherent in the human breast"<sup>1</sup>. Dickens's metaphor for Fancy is seemingly so commonplace that we hardly notice it, but it gives a good account of the relations of his imagination with the world about him. For it at once indicates the expressive role of Fancy as an activity of mind associated with qualities such as spontaneity and vital spirits, - one thinks of Dickens's clinching sentence for Mrs. General's inner deadness: "A cool, waxy, blown-out woman, who had never lighted well".<sup>2</sup> Yet it also suggests the power of Fancy to illuminate the ordinary world, to show, as Dickens went on to put it, "that in all familiar things, there is Romance enough, if we will find it out".<sup>3</sup> Whether such Romance, in Dickens, is always elicited in this manner, or whether it is added on, or squeezed out, is a most critical point it would be irrelevant to go into here; suffice it to say that one would want to give a different answer according to the particular example one was looking at. Yet it would seem obviously true that Dickens's commitment to Fancy enables him to inhabit the everyday world, with all its harshnesses and

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1. MP, p. 167.

2. Little Dorrit, p. 503.

3. MP, p. 167.



and bleaknesses, with a range and ease utterly beyond Lamb (or Hunt), for whom Fancy represents a licence to retire from the world of lawyers, as it were, into the little green nooks of the mind where artificial fountains play. Dickens would be justly appalled by the unimaginative flatness of the average present-day television documentary with its atmospheric obviousities, lacking, as they do, the superior mobility of the verbal imagination in all but specially contrived circumstances. Yet the range of his interests includes all the seemingly prosaic social issues that they treat of - see, for example, the lively but also sensibly analytic account of Titbull's Almshouses.<sup>1</sup> It is symbolic that on one occasion, in the essay "A Plated Article"<sup>2</sup>, where Dickens takes up Lamb's joke about "a world before perspective" in the decoration of old china, he is talking of, and praising, the contemporary production of plates in a factory he is visiting.

The most interesting evidence we have on this score, though, is the way in which Dickens's firmer and easier purchase on the actual world of adult vision makes itself felt in the very texture of his writing. The prose of the circus scenes in Hard Times, for instance, is much more robust than anything in Lamb, despite the parallels between them I have suggested:

Before Mr. Bounderby could reply, a young man appeared at the door, and introducing himself with the words, "By your leaves, gentlemen!" walked in with his hands in his pockets. His face, close-shaven, thin, and sallow, was shaded by a great quantity of dark hair brushed into a roll all round his head, and parted up the centre....He was dressed in a Newmarket coat and tight-fitting trousers; wore a shawl round his neck; smelt of lamp-oil, straw, orange peel, horses' provender, and sawdust; and looked a most remarkable

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1. Uncommercial Traveller, pp. 289-300.
  2. Reprinted Pieces, pp. 550-9 (p. 557).

sort of Centaur, compounded of the stable and the play-house. Where the one began, and the other ended, nobody could have told with any precision. This gentleman was mentioned in the bills of the day as Mr. E.W.B. Childers, so justly celebrated for his daring vaulting act as the Wild Huntsman of the North American Prairies; in which popular performance, a diminutive boy with an old face, who now accompanied him, assisted as his infant son; being carried upside down over his father's shoulder, by one foot, and held by the crown of his head, heels upward, in the palm of his father's hand, according to the violent paternal manner in which wild huntsmen may be observed to fondle their offspring. Made up with curls, wreaths, wings, white bismuth, and carmine, this hopeful young person soared into so pleasing a Cupid as to constitute the chief delight of the maternal part of the spectators; but, in private, where his characteristics were a precocious cutaway coat and an extremely gruff voice, he became of the Turf, turf. 1

He had reached the neutral ground upon the outskirts of the town, which was neither town nor country, and yet was either spoiled, when his ears were invaded by the sound of music. The clashing and banging band attached to the horse-riding establishment which had there set up its rest in a wooden pavilion, was in full bray. A flag, floating from the summit of the temple, proclaimed to mankind that it was 'Sleary's Horse-Riding' which claimed their suffrages. Sleary himself, a stout modern statue with a money-box at its elbow, in an ecclesiastical niche of early Gothic architecture, took the money. Miss Josephine Sleary, as some very long and very narrow strips of printed bill announced, was then inaugurating the entertainments with her graceful equestrian Tyrolean flower-act. Among the other pleasing but always strictly moral wonders which must be seen to be believed, Signor Jupe was that afternoon to 'elucidate the diverting accomplishments of his highly trained performing dog Merrylegs'. He was also to exhibit 'his astounding feat of throwing seventy-five hundredweight in rapid succession backhanded over his head thus forming a fountain of solid iron in mid-air, a feat never before attempted in this or any other country and which having elicited such rapturous plaudits from enthusiastic throngs it cannot be withdrawn'. The same Signor Jupe was to 'enliven the varied performances at frequent intervals with his chaste Shakespearian quips and retorts'. Lastly, he was to wind up by appearing in his favourite character of Mr. Button, of Tooley Street, in 'the highly novel and laughable hippo-comediotta of The Tailor's Journey to Brentford'. 2

There is much to praise in this - the economical comic suggestiveness (the "clashing and banging band", which fuses the comic

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1. Hard Times, pp. 71-2.

2. Ibid., pp. 55-6.



tone of genial resignation with the momentary ludicrous suggestion that such indeed is the band's purpose); the fluency with which the comic wordiness of ironically observed cliché is assimilated to the run of the writing; the typical Dickensian prose habit of counterpointing such wordiness with his own pithily comic idiom: "the clashing and banging band...was in full bray". The relevant point for our argument, however, is Dickens's amazing eye for, and obvious relish of, those details of the actual in which the theatrical pretensions of the troupe are embedded, and which place those pretensions in - well - such an amazing light. The prose draws its vitality from the harvest of a disenchanted eye, rather than from any residue of youthful wonder. One might compare this with the following from Lamb's "My First Play":

The curtain drew up, (I was now past six years old,) and the play was Artaxerxes!

I had dabbled a little in the Universal History - the ancient part of it - and here was the court of Persia. It was being admitted to a sight of the past. I took no proper interest in the action going on, for I understood not its import; but I heard the word Darius, and I was in the midst of Daniel. All feeling was absorbed in vision. Gorgeous vests, gardens, palaces, princesses, passed before me. I knew not players. I was in Persepolis for the time, and the burning idol of their devotion almost converted me into a worshipper. I was awestruck, and believed those significations to be something more than elemental fires. It was all enchantment and a dream.

Lamb is writing of childhood experience in a way that would most likely have been incomprehensible to an educated person of the preceding generation, to whom the childish enthusiasm would have seemed laughable and vulgar, and not worth recording - compare, say,

the visit in Tom Jones made by Partridge, whose bewitched reactions reflect "the simple dictates of nature, unimproved indeed,<sup>2</sup> but likewise unadulterated by art", and are hence unequivocally ridiculous.

1. Elia, Writings, iii, 262.

2. Henry Fielding, The History of Tom Jones (1955; first published 1749), bk. 16, ch. 2.

Lamb's surrender to revived feelings is a poised one, of course, in which adult taste functions as humour balancing the glow of childhood recollection. The tawdriness of the affairs on stage is implied, and explicitly admitted at the end of the essay. But, unlike Dickens above, the humour treads softly and does not violate the subjective reality of the experience, which is, after all, "the glory and the dream", and still a "hiding-place of power" for the adult self.

This comparison brings us up against a problem in Hard Times, and the mature Dickens in general, of whom the spirit of the above-quoted passage is fairly representative (Wopsle's Hamlet, or the somewhat different account of theatrical melodrama and pantomime in "Two Views of a Cheap Theatre" in The Uncommercial Traveller, are only two of a number of similar examples one could cite, with reference to the theatre alone<sup>1</sup>). How, one might ask, does one square this kind of seemingly ungentle comedy, a comedy that has a very un-Lamb-like triumphant gusto in the absurdity of the circus's fantastic aspirations, and which cherishes with an exact eye the incongruities which deflate them, with the indulgence we are being asked to extend to it? Or rather, how congruous is the kind of indulgence Hard Times asks of us for things like the circus, with that solicited by an essay such as "Where We Stopped Growing"? For whilst the presentation of the circus in the novel is compatible with a kind of paternalistic sponsoring of it as nourishing fare for children,

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1. Uncommercial Traveller, pp. 29-39.



and the child-like unsophisticated "people" who "mutht be amuthed", it is rather at odds with Dickens's only faintly facetious claim in the essay to have "stopped in our growth"<sup>1</sup> at such points, since the life of the presentation derives so obviously from the fact that Dickens has grown up in this respect.

One might of course argue that the circus's continued vividness for him, even as grotesque to the disenchanted eye, is still in a sense a persistence, in a modified form, of the earlier wondrous apprehension. For all its absurdity the troupe is by no means rendered through the dulled gaze of anything like Coleridgean dejection. Yet beyond this there is another way in which 'disenchantment' is not finally quite the right word for Dickens's 'grown-up' sense of the circus, however ludicrous it is. For while in no way needing to cling on to any childish illusions about the circus, his thoroughly realistic sense of it is still much more genial than, say, Conrad's comparable picture of Zangiacomo's orchestra in Victory. Zangiacomo's group, with brilliant acidity, is shown "not making music" but "simply murdering silence with a vulgar ferocious energy."<sup>2</sup> In contrast to this Sleary's "clashing and banging band" can be seen, in Dickens's presentation of it, to have a kind of vulgar jollity that we are invited to enjoy, not just as an amusing oddity, an object of amiable, observant perplexity, like Forster watching the chaos of a Hindu religious ceremony in A Passage to India, but as a likeable bouyancy of spirit - the rhythmic inflection of Dickens's phrasing at this point enjoins this sympathetic participation upon us. Similarly

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1. MP, p. 363.

2. (1948; first published 1915), p. 68.



Dickens is heartened rather than oppressed by the irrepressible confidence of the troupe amidst circumstances that would quell the more sophisticated - an optimism perfectly caught by that flag, nonchalantly floating from the summit of the temple (what a sure touch in the choice of that word, as with E.W.B. Childers soaring into a Cupid in the other passage just quoted), or in the blithe self-assurance of Sleary himself (Dickens's Hogarthian eye for suggesting the inner state by the detail of expression or posture picks this up with the description of him as "a stout modern statue with a money-box at its elbow" - the elbow is a natural place for the money-box to be, but also implicitly reinforces the sense of Sleary's assurance). He, of course, is happily unconscious of the ridiculous sense of contrast suggested by the "ecclesiastical niche of early Gothic", and is thus able, to convert it to his own terms as an effusive expression of his troupe's esprit de corps. All this could well, one imagines, with one or two minor alterations, be pressed into the service of a sardonic vision more like Conrad's; yet it is the peculiarly Dickensian effect that it isn't.

This resilient geniality, thriving amidst circumstances that one might imagine would discourage it, gives a satisfying answer to the problem raised above. For this kind of geniality, which is a generous responsiveness to the kind of absurd but buoyant life the circus has ("all the fathers could dance upon rolling casks, stand upon bottles, catch knives and balls, twirl hand-basins, ride upon anything, jump over everything, and stick at nothing")<sup>1</sup> - this, one might well say,

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1. Hard Times, p. 77.

represents an acceptably adult continuation of those child-like qualities of "freshness, and gentleness, and capacity of being pleased"<sup>1</sup> (to quote from Copperfield) that Dickens feared a too harsh disowning of childhood enthusiasms could impair. Dickens can afford to be, in his way, "rough" with innocent fancies, for the roughness, that is, his realistic and broad comic treatment of them, is an expression of the spirit, in a modified form, that they themselves were valued as fostering.

This, anyway, is one way in which Dickens's early enthusiasms and loves frequently reappear in his mature work. But there are other ways. Thus the essay "Dullborough Town" for instance, is a kind of reversal of the earlier essay "Where We Stopped Growing", in that a homecoming pilgrimage to the town of his boyhood enforces upon him the realisation that he has lost touch with his youth - the external disappearance of old landmarks is paralleled by an inner, personal disenchantment:

Ah! Who was I that I should quarrel with the town for being changed to me, when I myself had come back, so changed, to it! All my early readings and early imaginations dated from this place, and I took them away so full of innocent construction and guileless belief, and I brought them back so worn and torn, so much the wiser and so much the worse!<sup>2</sup>

Yet despite this conclusion the body of the essay can't but convince one that the fall has been in a way a happy one, for the life of it lies not in the re-evocation of those "early imaginations", but in Dickens's lovingly accurate charting of the signs of present dilapidation - his prose-painter's relish in capturing the right detail; we are less interested in his fairly distanced account of his childhood

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1. David Copperfield, p. 61.

2. Uncommercial Traveller, pp. 116-26 (p. 126).

experience of the theatre, than in what his sharply realistic eye picks up about the theatre's present state of decay, such as the fact that the theatrical money is now taken "in a kind of meat-safe in the passage". Similarly, in the earlier reminiscence, "Our English Watering Place",<sup>1</sup> what strikes us most is not the feeling of nostalgic evocation, but such clinching details of the present state as that when a travelling entertainer visits the town he issues bills "with the name of his last town lined out, and the name of ours ignominiously written in".<sup>2</sup> In these cases one feels that Dickens has taken over a mode developed by Lamb and others (I will be coming to one of the others, Leigh Hunt, shortly), and adapted it to a mood of his own, which is more firmly rooted in the present—one notes the way that "Dullborough Town", for instance, digresses lengthily into the popular amusements issue through chancing upon the Mechanics Institute, a new building that has no association with his personal past.

Nevertheless, there is a side of Dickens that is unequivocally closer to the Romantic essayists' tone in treating the personal past than I have been suggesting in the above instances. The youthful Sketches By Boz contain many of the immediate examples that come to mind, in which childhood enthusiasms are revived with an acquiescent, if humorous, enthusiasm. But these I want to leave until the discussion of the Romantic treatment of London, in my next chapter. In a different way, too, Lamb's tone towards his past is very close to the spirit of David Copperfield, the Dickens novel in which the wistful but serene retrospection that is Lamb's distinctive note finds its fullest expression in Dickens — the 'special flavour' that sets

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1. Reprinted Pieces, pp. 391-9.

2. Ibid., p. 392.



Copperfield apart in the Dickens canon has a lot to do with this. As again, I don't want to embark on a discussion of Copperfield now, as I offer a reading of it in chapter five. However, it is directly pertinent to our train of thought here to single out, in comparison to the passage quoted above from Lamb's "My First Play", the following from David's visit to the theatre:

...the mingled reality and mystery of the whole show, the influence upon me of the poetry, the lights, the music, the company, the smooth stupendous changes of glittering and brilliant scenery, were so dazzling, and opened up such illimitable regions of delight, that when I came out into the rainy street, at twelve o'clock at night, I felt as if I had come from the clouds, where I had been leading a romantic life for ages,... 1

As Mrs. Leavis has recently argued, Dickens sees David as, in part, a test-case in the viability of the Romantic doctrine of innocence. The play, we learn from Steerforth, whose cool sense of it is not unrelated to his own spiritual malaise, but who on this occasion we trust, has been as bad as the one Lamb was first enchanted by: David's naive beguilement by it is one sign that he is one of those in whom, to quote Lamb's "Old Benchers" essay, "there... /is/...some of the child's heart left, to respond to.../childhood's/...<sup>2</sup> earliest enchantments". Whether he is also one of "the wisest and the best", to add the beginning of Lamb's sentence, is, of course, the moot point of the novel. There are obviously many ways in which the novel shows us that he is not - his naivete about the play is a harmless manifestation of that dangerously imprudent naivete that he shows in his relations with Bora and Steerforth. Nevertheless one misses the richly ambivalent spirit of the novel if one takes prudence,

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1. David Copperfield, p. 344.

2. Elia, Writings, iif, 274.

however important its implications, as being the only criterion it is bringing to bear even in those episodes - Dickens, for better or worse, is not Maria Edgeworth, or the Jane Austen of Sense and Sensibility.

For however firmly 'placed' it is in the novel itself, the pervasive feeling of the novel is a lingering humorous tenderness for those absurd people who can be cherished only by the backward-looking gaze: Clara Copperfield and Dora, and, in a way, the Micawbers and the aimiable and harmless Mr. Dick, are the obvious main figures of references here. All, in a sense, are creatures of fancy, and the indulgence they bespeak is a feeling closely continuous with Lamb - one might compare, for instance, the end of Lamb's "Mrs. Battle's Opinions on Whist" - "Bridget and I should be ever playing"<sup>1</sup> with David's early memory of his mother and himself "playing in the winter twilight, dancing about the parlour!"<sup>2</sup> The situations are very different, but the similarity of tone and of attitude to experience is so close as to suggest that Dickens may well have had Lamb particularly in mind whilst writing the novel. Dickens is unlike Lamb in demonstrating the drastic costs David has to pay for his own rather regressive way of preserving an emotional continuity with his personal past - his love for the people that associate with his "hiding-places" is not an "innocent fancy" because it is productive of unhappiness for others. Yet no kind of abrasive recoil from the drift of David's feelings is felt in the novel, which is why its especial charm can strike one, at times, as does Lamb's appeal more blatantly, as being to some extent ambivalent and suspect. If the

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1. *Ibid.*, p. 190.

2. David Copperfield, p. 65.



robust and not especially tender geniality of the Hard Times passages discussed above typifies the mature, reasonably tough but not hardened Dickens who recognised "the need to do violence to feelings in order to fight in life's struggle"<sup>1</sup>, the Dickens who naturally speaks of the suppression of feeling as "violence", for to him it is felt as such, finds its fullest expression in Copperfield. Edmund Wilson exaggerates somewhat when he says that in Copperfield Dickens struck "an enchanting vein which he had never quite found before and "which he was never to find again":<sup>2</sup> minor pieces such as "At the Holly Tree Inn", "A Holiday Romance", and parts of the essays "Birthday Celebrations" and "New Year's Day" show Dickens celebrating childhood and youthful romance in a Copperfieldian vein that is still genuinely alive in him,<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless his view is largely correct; Copperfield stands distinct from earlier works in that the Lamb-like poise of its tender comedy marks an advance on the raw sentimentality of the Little Nell sections of the Old Curiosity Shop or the mushier parts of Dombey and Son (though the Dick Swiveller-Marchioness episode complicates the scheme, while being in a different mode again from Copperfield). And with the exception of the above-quoted minor pieces, and perhaps some of the later Christmas stories, Dickens was not again to permit that kind of indulgent tenderness such open expression - no later novel has the air or serenity and release with which Copperfield is so redolent; oddly so, given the painful nature of the experience it records - but undeniably.

This is strikingly symbolised by the following novel, Bleak House, in which the governing tone shifts somewhat abruptly into the tougher

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1. Forster, p. 540.

2. Wilson, p. 39.

3. Christmas Stories, pp. 95-129 (esp. pp. 116-26); UC/RP, pp. 691-725; Uncommercial Traveller, pp. 199-208; MP, pp. 651-62.



accents of Victorian manliness, and in which the attitude to life that chooses, "in a degree beneath manhood", evasion of adult responsibilities, or clings excessively "with a feminine partiality" to childish fancies, is critically placed and rejected in the portrait of Skimpole. (For one might suggest, the portrait is not so much a personal one of Hunt as an impersonal evaluation of some aspects of the view of life which he and Lamb as Romantic essayists tended to share - including the tendency to insulate the self into that eccentric fanciful privacy "where no cold moral reigns", so wonderfully yet finally insidiously symbolised by Lamb in "Old China" as the tea-cup world of "those little, lawless, azure-tinted grotesques, that, under the notion of men and women, float about, uncircumscribed by any element, in that world before perspective".<sup>1</sup> Unlike anything before it in the Dickens canon Bleak House is a very Victorian novel - in the sense of the word that suggests Carlyle and Thomas Arnold - in which life is an affair inevitably bound by law and circumscription, and in which to "float about" is to sink to the bottom. Lamb may be bourgeois in his un-Promethean 'timidity' as Mario Praz has claimed,<sup>2</sup> yet that timidity is at one with the way in which he is also deficient in the positive bourgeois qualities summed up in that very mid-Victorian word (and key term in Bleak House): earnestness. Yet it is also true of Bleak House, and indicative of its un-Carlylean freedom for the most part from the bullying and Philistine edge of Victorian manly earnestness, that the rendering of Skimpole, whilst admirably firm in judgement, also gives full and generous play to his truly engaging charm. As I will suggest in a later chapter, there are ways of seeing through Skimpole which are themselves judged adversely in the novel.

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1. Elia, Writings, iv, 118.

2. Praz, p. 67.

Once all this has been said, however, it should also be remembered that Lamb, too, was not without his manly side. A.R. Orage, the contemporary of Pound and Eliot, noticed this when he argued, under the heading of "The Danger of the Whimsical", that Lamb's "strong side" had been forgotten, though this was his own fault. Lamb did have "a sincere and severe taste in art and literature", but he had himself thwarted and obscured its proper prominence because:

...he could seldom avoid playing monkey tricks in his expression of it. The whimsical overcame his natural good judgement, and he succumbed as easily to a facetious triviality in the midst of a serious essay, as to a pun in the midst of a serious conversation.<sup>1</sup>

"On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century" offers a defence against one of the less fortunate implications of the encroaching earnestness of the new age, from the standpoint of his version of Romanticism.

(Macaulay's criticism of it in 1841 is a good touchstone of the changing temper of the times, to put alongside Carlyle's more general dismissal).<sup>2</sup>

Alongside this, however, we have also the following ebullition from the essay "Characters of Dramatic Writers Contemporary with Shakespeare", which attacks the same object, but from the quite different perspective of an eighteenth-century trenchancy:

The insipid levelling morality to which the modern stage is tied down, would not admit of such admirable passions as these scenes are filled with. A puritanical obtuseness of sentiment, a stupid infantile goodness, is creeping amongst

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1. A. Orage, Selected Essays and Critical Writings, edited by Herbert Read and Dennis Saurat (1936), p. 60.
  2. "Lamb had no practical sense in him, and in conversation was accustomed to turn into quips and jests whatever turned up - an ill example to younger men, who had to live their lives in a world which was altogether serious, and where it behoved them to consider their position in a spirit other than jocose..."  
(quoted from R.A. Wilson, Carlyle at his Zenith (1927), p. 126.)



us, instead of the vigorous passions, and virtues clad in flesh and blood, with which the old dramatists present us. Those noble and liberal casuists could discern in the differences, the quarrels, the animosities of men, a beauty and truth of moral feeling, no less than in the everlastingly inculcated duties of forgiveness and atonement. With us, all is hypocritical meekness. A reconciliation scene, be the occasion never so absurd, never fails of applause. Our audiences come to the theatre to be complimented on their goodness. They compare notes with the amiable characters in the play, and find a wonderful sympathy of disposition between them.<sup>1</sup>

One can hardly imagine the impassioned and penetrating sarcasm of this could come from the same man that produced the slyly wistful defensiveness of the "Artificial Comedy" essay; in one case the immoral is defended as too vitally real to be ignored; in the other as too unreal to be earnestly bothered about, merely a brilliant butterfly to be spared the heavy-handed gracelessness of moral wheels. On another occasion, too, he was to declaim, on the rejection of one of his poems by a fashionable Annual, against "this cursed, canting, unmasculine age".<sup>2</sup> The same typically eighteenth-century pointedness (Lamb was born in 1775, the same year as Jane Austen) is present in the calm, almost 'sociological' early essay "Recollections of Christ's Hospital". Also, of the "Popular Fallacies" in the Elia Essays, Number I and XVI reveal an astringent sharpness of perception quite alien to the idea of the saintly, unworldly Charles, and the first part of XII, "That Home is Home Though Never So Homely" is equal in insight, in its brief way, to Dickens's more extensive treatment of the same theme in Bleak House. "Modern Gallantry" is also intelligent and serious. Lamb's criticism can often lapse into foolish antiquarian chat about Burnet's "good old prattle" (and such like; but he also wrote the consistently intelligent "On the Genius of Hogarth", and the equally good "Barrenness of the

1. Writings, iv, 221-2.

2. Letter to B.W. Procter, 29 January 1829; Writings, ii, 383.

3. "Mackery End, in Hertfordshire", Elia, Writings, iii, 252-8 (253).



Imaginative Faculty in the Production of Modern Art",<sup>1</sup> both of which combine penetrating generalisation with a sensitive particularity of comment. And if a certain misplaced sentimentality does intrude into the Hogarth essay, or prompt a plainly untenable and misleading defence of Hamlet, its converse is that properly founded generosity which alerts Lamb to the dangers of a reductive interpretation of Don Quixote.<sup>2</sup> The sensibleness of Lamb's particular criticisms of contemporary poetry, in his letters, is generally recognised. But it is hard to relate the Lamb of these examples with the author of "Old China".

### III

My pursuit of Dickens's relation to Lamb has inevitably drawn me into analyses of particular novels, encroaching on the substance of later chapters, whilst involving me in summary formulations that only detailed readings can support. At this stage it is necessary to beg a suspension of disbelief of these generalisations about the novels, until I come to elaborate upon them in later chapters. I now want to turn aside to further examine the nature of Dickens's comedy, and in particular the description of it I have given in this chapter as genial and tender. The prominence of these tones in the passages I have been referring to ought not just to be seen as a spontaneous inflection of the tone of the comedy in keeping with Dickens's theme - such as the welcoming attitude to the objects of early reverence, however absurd. For the fact that such a theme could be pursued so naturally

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1. Last Essays of Elia, Writings, iv, 87-102.

2. Letter to Southey, 19 August 1825; Writings, ii, 64.

in a comic mode depended upon Dickens being able to associate comedy with geniality and tenderness, which ability was available to him neither as a universal human habit nor a manifestation of original genius, but, I want to argue, a further specific legacy taken up by Dickens from his chosen literary ancestors, among whom the Romantics were in this case too important guiding figures. Stuart Tave, in his The Amiable Humorist (1960), has authoritatively demonstrated the emergence and growth throughout the eighteenth-century of an idea of comedy opposed to the corrective and satiric concept that was the natural expression at this point of Augustan neo-classic orthodoxy, an idea of comedy as benevolent, enjoying foibles rather than ridiculing faults, viewing laughter as an expression of good spirits rather than of contempt and the triumphant sense of superiority, and cherishing humorous figures as likeable eccentrics rather than delinquent deviants to be persuaded by the lash of satire back into normal behaviour. This sense of comedy was obviously closely related to 'sentimentalism', and one of the points of continuity between sentimentalism and the English Romantics, in whom, in critical theory and to a certain extent in practice, the emerging tradition reached its consummation, persisting, as Donald J. Gray<sup>1</sup> has recently shown, into oppressive orthodoxy in the Victorian period. As Tave says, concluding his book with the arrival of Pickwick, Dickens's early readers were well-prepared to appreciate his early humour, and contemporary reviews abounded in critical formulae closely attuned to its spirit and tone, a concordance that had been lacking in early critical appraisals of Fielding's Parson Adams

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1. Donald J. Gray, "The Uses of Victorian Laughter", Victorian Studies, X (December 1966), pp. 145-176.

in Joseph Andrews, at a time when the new idea of comedy was still very much a minority view.<sup>1</sup> I want to build upon Tave's introductory remarks connecting Dickens with this tradition and chart its affinity with the temperament of the Romantics, who invested it with especially strong sanctions. One consequence of this will be to illuminate the connection already hinted at between the genial and tender view of comedy, and the theme of continuity, showing how two quite separate 'ideas' come to function in a kind of elective unity within the Romantic framework.

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1. Tave, p. 240. On critical reception of Parson Adams, p. 142.



## Three

## DICKENS AND GENIAL COMEDY

Perhaps one good way to begin discussion along the lines indicated at the end of the previous chapter is to look at Lamb's essay on an eighteenth-century satirist with whom Dickens was from the beginning compared: Hogarth. Sydney Smith declared upon reading the Sketches by Boz that "the soul of Hogarth" had "migrated into the body of Mr. Dickens",<sup>1</sup> and from then on, as Philip Collins has remarked, the Dickens-Hogarth comparison became "routine".<sup>2</sup> In 1844 R.H. Horne, in his A New Spirit of the Age, varied the note slightly when he suggested that:

Anyone who would rightly...estimate the genius of Mr. Dickens, should first read his works fairly through, and then read the Essays by Charles Lamb and by Hazlitt, on the genius of Hogarth. 3

Horne's protracted comparison of Dickens and Hogarth is not a very happy one; Thackeray slashed shrewdly at the heavy weather it made out of obviousities,<sup>4</sup> and Dickens himself wrote in a letter that his portrait in Horne's book looked "a little like the Iron Mask, without the Man in it".<sup>5</sup> However, his introduction of the Romantic essayists suggests a further line of enquiry than the one he had in mind. For just as Lamb's essay<sup>6</sup> (to leave Hazlitt aside for the moment) eloquently and convincingly locates many qualities in Hogarth which ought to figure in any account of Dickens, so it also imposes on Hogarth certain qualities which he lacks, but which he and Dickens share. It is thus an interesting possible avenue of approach to one aspect of Dickens's relation to the Romantics: his sense of comedy.

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1. Quoted in F.R. and Q.D. Leavis, Dickens the Novelist, p. 335n.

2. CH, p. 5.

3. R.H. Horne, A New Spirit of the Age, 2 vols. (1844; reprint edition 1971). Chapter on Dickens: pp.1-76, above quote: p. 20.

4. Rev. in the Morning Chronicle, 2 April 1844; reprinted in W.M. Thackeray, Contributions to the "Morning Chronicle", ed. Gordon N. Ray (1966), pp.13-22.

5. Dickens to Talfourd, 19 March 1844; Letters, i, 583

6. "On the Genius of Hogarth", Writings, iv, 287-313

There is no need to give a summary of Lamb's essay here. It is undeniably a landmark in the appreciation of Hogarth, which for the most part in the eighteenth century had been dominated by a condescension somewhat akin to that with which Dickens was later to be viewed.<sup>1</sup> Lamb is cogently persuasive about the misleading generic criteria on which the traditional estimate had been founded, and his detailed account of the serious reach of the art, its superiority to caricature, deserves to be regarded as a touchstone of 'literary' art criticism. His 'readings' of the last two plates of the "Rake's Progress", for instance, deserve consideration in any contemporary evaluation of either Hogarth, or of Lamb himself. About half-way into the essay, however, there emerges a strain of feeling which seems less to illuminate Hogarth, than to reveal Lamb:

Another line of eternal separation between Hogarth and the common painters of droll or burlesque subjects, with whom he is often confounded, is the sense of beauty, which in the most unpromising subjects seems never wholly to have deserted him. "Hogarth himself," says Mr. Coleridge, from whom I have borrowed this observation, speaking of a scene which took place at Ratzeburg, "never drew a more ludicrous distortion, both of attitude and physiognomy, than this effect occasioned: nor was there wanting beside it one of those beautiful female faces which the same Hogarth, in whom the satirist never extinguished that love of beauty which belonged to him as a poet, so often and so gladly introduces as the central figure in a crowd of humorous deformities, which figure (such is the power of true genius) neither acts nor is meant to act as a contrast, but diffuses through all and over each of the group, a spirit of reconciliation and human kindness; and even when the attention is no longer consciously directed to the cause of this feeling, still blends its tenderness with our laughter: and thus prevents the instructive merriment at the whims of nature, or the foibles or humours of our fellow-men, from degenerating into the heart-poison of contempt or hatred." To the beautiful females in Hogarth, which Mr. C. has pointed out, might be added the frequent introduction of children (which Hogarth seems to have taken a particular delight in) into his pieces. They have a singular effect in giving tranquillity and a portion of their own innocence to the subject. The baby riding in its mother's lap in the March to Finchley, (its careless

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1. See Frederick Antal, Hogarth and his Place in European Art (1962), Ch. 10.



innocent face placed directly behind the intriguing time-furrowed countenance of the treason-plotting French priest), perfectly sobers the whole of that tumultuous scene. The boy-mourner winding up his top with so much unpretending insensibility in the plate of the Harlot's Funeral, (the only thing in that assembly that is not a hypocrite,) quiets and soothes the mind that has been disturbed at the sight of so much depraved man and woman kind.<sup>1</sup>

Isn't Lamb finding feelings in Hogarth that for the most part just aren't there?<sup>2</sup> Beauty in Hogarth there is, but isn't it rather sensuous good-looks, the "natural beauty" Hazlitt recognised in "the girl picking the Rake's pocket in the Bagnio scene ... the Poet's wife, handsomer than falls to the lot of most poets,..."<sup>3</sup> Hazlitt can recognise this, for in him an impassioned romantic idealism about women, to which he finds nothing in Hogarth to answer, in contrast to Raphael and Leonardo da Vinci, coexists without strain with a robust feeling for the unrefinedly sexual-witness his exuberant if inelegant praise of the "plump, ripe, florid, luscious look of the Servant-wench embraced by a greasy rascal of an Othello", in the noon scene of "The Four Times of the Day."<sup>4</sup>

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1. Writings, iv, 300-1. The Coleridge quotation is from The Friend, xvi (7 December 1809); reprinted in Coleridge, Collected Works, iv, The Friend, ii, 213. Compare Coleridge on the letters of Junius: L. xiv. "Continual sneer, continual irony, all excellent, if it were not for the 'all';- but a countenance, with a malignant smile in statuary fixture on it, becomes at length an object of aversion, however beautiful the smile. We are relieved, in some measure, from this by frequent just and well expressed moral aphorisms; but then the preceding and following irony gives them the appearance of proceeding from the head, not from the heart." S.T. Coleridge, Coleridge's Literary Remains, ed. Henry Nelson Coleridge (1836-9), i, 254.
  2. Both the engraving and the painting of The Distressed Poet are reproduced in Ronald Paulson, Hogarth: His Life, Art, and Times, 2 vols. (1971), pls. 154-6. The painting is in Birmingham Art Gallery.
  3. "On the works of Hogarth. - On the Grand and Familiar Style of Painting", Lectures on the English Comic Writers, Works, vi, 133-49 (144).
  4. *Ibid.*, p. 137. See Paulson, pls. 148a - b. The Rake's Progress is in Sir John Soane's Museum, London, and Paulson, pls. 120-7.



Lamb, by contrast, misleadingly moralises Hogarth's women; despite his occasional trenchancy about contemporary drama he is for the most part prematurely Victorian in his aversion from the sexual, which is the probable explanation for his comment that Hogarth's "Strolling Players" was "the only one of his performances at which we have a right to feel disgusted".<sup>1</sup> In contrast to Hazlitt, whose comment is quoted above, his sense of the wife in "The Distressed Poet" provides further evidence of a sentimentalising drift:

...is there nothing sweetly conciliatory in the mild patient face and gesture with which the wife seems to allay and ventilate the feverish irritated feelings of her poor, poverty-distracted mate...? <sup>2</sup>

This, significantly, would do for Hablot Browne's picture of Ada comforting Richard Carstone<sup>3</sup> (though as I have suggested below, Dickens's feelings about that situation contain an element of reserve, if not explicit irony, that is not suggested by the illustration). It has nothing to do with Hogarth's scene, in which the wife is quite isolated from her husband, with an innocence and beauty which seem mainly bewildered at finding themselves in such circumstances, which verge on moral blankness, and which, far from being a source of comfort, are a final helpless reproach to the distressed man. (To enforce this reading Hogarth has added the detail of the cat and kittens that lie at her feet.)

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1. Writings, iv, 299n. See Paulson, pl. 146.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 306.

3. Flask House, p. 753.

Similarly, with the "kneeling ministering female" <sup>1</sup> in the Bedlam scene of the "Rake's Progress", or the "passionate heart-bleeding entreaties for forgiveness which the adulterous wife is pouring forth to her assassinated and dying lord" <sup>2</sup> in "Marriage à la Mode", one would surely only be asserting common opinion in saying that these are not "things to touch the heart, and dispose the mind to a meditative tenderness" <sup>3</sup>, which is what Lamb takes them to be. Whatever Hogarth's intention may have been, the virtue offered here is no more convincing than the man of Ross. We observe that here are women crying and imploring, but that is all; the emotions are not pictorially dramatised in a way that moves us. Hogarth may well have been trying to compel us to acknowledge the reality of admirable emotions in ordinary people, but the emotions exist only as spectral abstractions in bodies of clay.

Much the same, too, must be said about Lamb's comments upon Hogarth's children, where again his view is strongly Romantic. One is thankful to Lamb for singling out the baby on its mother's back in the "March to Finchley" - here his description seems quite justified. Yet doesn't he exaggerate when he says that the figure "perfectly sobers the whole of the tumultuous scene." <sup>4</sup> It is a spark of hope, indeed, but only a spark, whereas Lamb would have it a beacon. Seen in context Hogarth most probably intends us to compare it with the family groups on the left and right hand corners of the picture, which prompts a sardonic reflection as to the impending fate of this innocence which is not at all sobering in the sense Lamb claims. Dickens himself makes what is, I think, Hogarth's point, in his essay "Wapping Warehouse" in The Uncommercial Traveller:

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1. Writings, iv, 306.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., p. 301. The paintings of Marriage à la Mode are in the National Gallery, London, and reproduced in Paulson, pls. 162-7.

4. Ibid., p. 301. Painting is in Foundling Hospital, London; reproduced in Antal, pl. 990.

There were many babies here, and more than one handsome young mother. There were ugly young mothers also, and sullen young mothers, and callous young mothers. But, the babies had not appropriated to themselves any bad expression yet, and might have been, for anything that appeared to the contrary in their soft faces, Princes Imperial, and Princesses Royal.<sup>1</sup>

What, too, is there to "quiet and soothe the mind" in the boy-mourner in the "Harlot's Funeral"?<sup>2</sup> For his freedom from hypocrisy is itself no moral virtue, as it is only a function of the understandable blankness of a child of that age to such an event - he is a tabula-rasa child of eighteenth-century convention, not an innately good one of the post-romantic nineteenth.

Lamb's comments on this score are not all wrong. His 'reading' of the mother of the Idle Apprentice seems to me to be exactly right.<sup>3</sup> Yet one must conclude, I think, that what Lamb ignores, inspired perhaps by his intense and true feeling for the latter portraits of the Rake, in which something like tragic compassion is a real element, is Hogarth's relative alienness to the Romantic sensibility that Lamb's essay partially exemplifies. Thackeray's amusing reflections in The English Humourists are mostly lightweight in comparison to Lamb, superficial in their mixture of nostalgia and complacent patronage of Hogarth as good old salt of the art world; yet they do emphasise one important truth that Lamb neglects:

The moralists of that age had no compunction, you see, they had not begun to be sceptical about the theory of punishment, and thought that the hanging of a thief was a spectacle for edification. . . . Except in one instance, where, in the madhouse scene in the "Rake's Progress", the girl whom he has ruined is represented as still tending and weeping over him in his insanity, a glimpse of pity for his rogues never seems to enter honest Hogarth's mind. There's not the slightest doubt in the breast of the jolly Draco...

There's more pity and kindness and a better chance for poor Tom's successors now than at that simpler period when Fielding hanged him and Hogarth drew him.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Uncommercial Traveller, p. 23.

2. Paulson, pl. 99.

3. Writings, iv, 306. Engraving reproduced in Paulson, pl. 212.

4. W.M. Thackeray, The English Humourists, published with The Four Georges, Everyman (1912), pp. 184, 184-5, 189.



The main thing I want to stress in Lamb's essay, however, corollary to the obvious Romantic idealisation of woman and childhood, and the general humanitarianism, is the noticeable unease it repeatedly shows about the traditional role and stance of satire. This goes beyond the relegation of satire to a secondary level of importance, as in Arnold's notorious judgement that Pope and Dryden are "classics of our prose".<sup>1</sup> Rather it is a fear that the powers of satire corrode the satirist himself, and his appreciative reader. When Coleridge writes that in Hogarth "the satirist never extinguished that love of beauty which belonged to him as a poet" he is not just saying that satire can usurp the higher faculty, but that it can actively vitiate it, spreading, that is, "the heart-poison of contempt or hatred." Not surprisingly, his idea of a healthy state of satiric sensibility is one that Pope, say, would probably have regarded as debased: "the instructive merriment at the whims of Nature, or the foibles or humours of our fellow-men" sounds effeminate and trifling when compared to Pope's avowal of "the strong Antipathy of Good to Bad".<sup>2</sup> Lamb, of course, is fully in agreement with Coleridge. A retreat is needed from "the too great heat and asperity of the general satire";<sup>3</sup> and later, in praising the genial and non-satiric side of Hogarth, he adds that "all laughter is not of a dangerous or soul-hardening tendency"<sup>4</sup>, which implies that the satiric generally is. Pope, however, justifies satiric anger by the moral ends it serves, the elevated and ennobled aggression which, he claims, "heals with Morals what it hurts with Wit."<sup>5</sup> Much the same could also be said of the milder Addison. His idea of satire is sedate compared to Pope's;

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1. "The Study of Poetry" (1880) in Matthew Arnold, The Complete Prose Works of Mathew Arnold, ed. R.H. Super (1973), ix, pp.161-88 (p.181).
  2. "Epilogue to the Satires: Dialogue II", I. 198.
  3. "Writings, iv, 305.
  4. Ibid., p. 312.
  5. "The First Epistle of the Second Book of Horace Imitated", I. 262.

yet it is significant that the restraint he urges, in such an essay as his Spectator No. 179, for instance<sup>1</sup>, concerns only discretion towards the object of satire; there is no suggestion that the spiritual health of the satirist is problematic.

By contrast, what Coleridge and Lamb commend is a release from anger as such:

...diffuses through all, and over each of the group, a spirit of reconciliation and human kindness; and even when the attention is no longer consciously directed to the cause of the feeling, still blends its tenderness with our laughter:...(Coleridge)

The boy-mourner...quiets and soothes the mind that has been disturbed...

...yet enough to give relaxation to the frowning brow of satire...(Lamb)

Such sentiments are continuous with that undercurrent in the eighteenth century of distrust with satiric ridicule, that Tave has graphed; yet circumspect regulation of ridicule, rather than the more or less complete hostility to it shown by the Romantics, seems to have been the typically Augustan and moderate form that distrust took. Note, for instance, the following example cited by Tave, from a certain John Brown, discussing its propriety:

...though under the severe Restriction of Reason, it may be made a proper Instrument on many Occasions, for disgracing known Folly; yet the Turn of Levity it gives the Mind, the Distaste it raises to all candid and rational Information, the Spirit of Animosity it is apt to excite, the Errors in which it confirms us when its Suggestions are false, the Extremes to which it is apt to drive us, even when its Suggestions are true; all these conspire to tell us, it is rather to be wished than hoped, that its Influence upon the whole can be considerable in the Service of Wisdom and Virtue. 2

One might argue that Emma is, in a sense, an exploration towards the definition of a feasible notion of proper ridicule, in the light of such

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1. 25 September 1711; in The Spectator, ed. Donald F. Bond, 5 vols. (1965), ii, 204-8.
  2. "On Ridicule, Considered as a Test of Truth", Essays on the Characteristics (1751), pp. 104-6; cited in Tave, p. 35.



recognitions. Coleridge and Lamb, however, are writing after the French Revolution and a case could, I think, be made out (though there is no time for it here) that it was one of the consequences of that event to strongly associate satire with the destructive and, it seemed to many in the post-Romantic generation, spiritually rootless satiric intellect of enlightened scepticism. The Romantic distrust of satire looks forward to the Victorians, who, as Walter Houghton has amply demonstrated, tended in their optimism to identify the satiric spirit with the Mephistophelean Voltaire;<sup>1</sup> the Anti-Jacobin group's conviction that the demons of subversion could be fought off by a harkening back to "Pope's satiric rage"<sup>2</sup>, was not transmitted to later generations of conservatism, as is evidenced by the widespread reservations about Thackeray's satirical acidity, which went with a complementary preference for Dickens on this score at least, even by those who felt Thackeray to be the weightier novelist.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike most of the other Romantics of his group, Wordsworth's references to satire are few and insignificant. However the emphasis upon quietening and soothing the mind in the above-quoted passages of Lamb and Coleridge suggests that the eschewal of satire was closely continuous with that shift of sensibility - that deepening stress upon a vital serenity as a desired emotional centre of gravity - that Wordsworth, while not of course initiating, can be said chiefly to have poetically consummated, and which was at the centre of his influence upon the others in his circle. The Wordsworthian ideal proposed in The Excursion was that of a man who,

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1. Houghton, pp. 297-301.

2. "The New Morality", 1.21.

3. De Quincey, for instance, deplored Dickens's extravagance and want of fidelity to nature, his antipathy to the upper classes and glorification at their expense of an idealised picture of the working man; yet, to quote the Rev. F. Jacox: "Dickens he unhesitatingly preferred, because of his genial humanity, to Thackeray, whom I in vain tried to vindicate from a prevailing 'spirit of caustic cynicism'." Thomas De Quincey, Thomas De Quincey, Life and Writings, ed. A.H. Jaffé ("H.A. Jaffé") (1890), pp. 265, 301.



sustaining in himself "the joy of that pure principle of love" by concentrating his attention on "such objects as excite/No morbid passions, no disquietude,/No vengeance, and no hatred" comes to perceive "His feelings of aversion softened down;.../Until abhorrence and contempt are things/He only knows by name".<sup>1</sup> This ideal (a self-indulgent one in its way) is hardly compatible with the wielding of the satiric lash. It is, however, compatible with a more genial humour, in which laughter and affection are mingled - in fact, one might say that the eighteenth-century 'sentimentalist' legacy receives an especial sanction from Romantics such as Lamb almost by reason of their Wordsworthian sympathies.

Consequently, to return to Lamb's essay on Hogarth, the converse of his sentimentalising imposition is his happy illumination of an element in Hogarth that an orthodox pre-Romantic appraisal - typified, say, by Horace Walpole's view that "he observes the true end of comedy, re-formation; there is always a moral to his pictures"<sup>2</sup> - was likely to miss: Hogarth's subordinate but still important vein of non-satiric comedy. Lamb's comments upon the "Election Entertainment" show the bias of his temper to the best advantage:

... when he [the spectator] shall have sufficiently admired this wealth of genius, let him fairly say what is the result left on his mind. Is it an impression of the vileness and worthlessness of his species? or is not the general feeling which remains, after the individual faces have ceased to act sensibly on his mind, a kindly one in favour of his species? Was not the general air of the scene wholesome? Did it do the heart hurt to be among it? Something of a riotous spirit to be sure is there, some worldly-mindedness in some of the faces, a Doddingtonian smoothness which does not promise any superfluous degree of sincerity in the fine gentleman who has been the occasion of calling so much good company together: but is not the general

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1. The Excursion, iv, 1213, 1210-12, 1219, 1225-6.

2. Horace Walpole, Anecdotes of Painting in England (1786), p.146.

cast of expression in the faces of the good sort? Do they not seem cut out of the good old rock, substantial English honesty? Would one fear treachery among characters of their expression? or shall we call their honest mirth and seldom-returning relaxation by the hard names of vice and profligacy?

"Honest mirth" suggests a faint tendency to an idealising sentimentality à la Goldsmith, but the account is substantially just. If Lamb isn't really able to digest the "strong meat" <sup>2</sup> of satire on its own terms, there is an admirable robustness of appetite in his recognition of this kind of likeable geniality for what it is, in his gratified perception that the spirit of the painting is not strictly satiric.

This taste is shared by other Romantics. Something like it is in evidence in Hazlitt's discussion of Shakespeare's comedy in his Lectures on the English Comic Writers.<sup>3</sup> Hazlitt's argument is a curious one, rather uneasily equivocal in a way that suggests that though he is undoubtedly a Romantic, it is not in a sense that excludes a complex and inclusive taste; he is alive to the contradictory diversity of the currents of his age, and his essays often reveal a mind in which opposites are only precariously held in balance. The discussion of Shakespearian comedy is an example of this. The comedies, he asserts, are not the best that have been written. His reasoning, however, is paradoxical:

I would not be understood to say that there are not scenes or whole characters in Shakespeare equal in wit and drollery to anything upon record. Falstaff alone is an instance which, if I would, I could not get over. 'He is the leviathan of all the creatures of the author's comic genius, and tumbles about his unwieldy bulk in an ocean of wit and humour.' But in general it will be found (if I am not mistaken) that even in the very best of these, the spirit of humanity and the fancy of the poet greatly prevail over the mere wit and satire, and that we sympathise with his characters oftener than we laugh at them. His ridicule wants the sting of ill-nature. He had hardly such a thing as spleen in his composition.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Writings, iv, 310-11.

2. Ibid., p. 305.

3. Works, vi, 30-8.

4. Ibid., p. 32.



This is meant; it is the paradox urged in "On the Pleasure of Hating."<sup>1</sup> The kind of emotional withdrawal discussed above was not possible for someone of his sanguine intransigence. Yet he embraces the inevitability of ill-nature and spleen somewhat in the spirit of romantic irony, and his placing criticism of Shakespeare in the comedies is suffused with a longing for those qualities for which he is to be relegated, in a way that is almost deliberately allowed to undermine the overt argument. Thus when he says of Pistol, Bardolph, and company that in spite of our disgust we like them, an orthodox eighteenth-century critic would have taken the negative critical bearing of the remark. But with Hazlitt the overall feeling is much more ambivalent, much less firmly resolved:

But genius, like charity, 'covers a multitude of sins;' we pity as much as we despise them; in spite of our disgust we like them, because they like themselves, and because we are made to sympathise with them; and the ligament, fine as it is, which links them to humanity, is never broken. Who would quarrel with Wart or Feeble, or Rouldy or Bull-Calf, or even with Pistol, Nym, or Bardolph? None but a hypocrite. The severe censurers of the morals of imaginary characters can generally find a hole for their own vices to creep out at; and yet do not perceive how it is that the imperfect and even deformed characters in Shakespeare's plays, as done to the life, by forming a part of our personal consciousness, claim our personal forgiveness, and suspend or evade our moral judgement, by bribing our self-love to side with them. Not to do so, is not morality, but affectation, stupidity, or ill-nature. I have more sympathy with one of Shakespeare's pick-purses, Gadshill or Peto, than I can possibly have with any member of the Society for the Suppression of Vice, and would by no means assist to deliver the one into the hands of the other.<sup>2</sup>

The allusion to the Society for the Suppression of Vice is significant, as it reminds us of the need to understand the Romantic anti-didactic bias in the context of the hardening of the Augustan moral temper into the

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1. The Plain Speaker, Works, xii, 127-36.

2. Works, vi, 33. cf. Hazlitt on Measure for Measure: "Shakespeare was in one sense the least moral of all writers: for morality (commonly so called) is made up of antipathies; and his talent consisted in sympathy with human nature, in all its shapes, degrees, depressions, and elevations. The object of the pedantic moralist is to find out the bad in everything; his was to show that 'there is some soul of goodness in things evil'." Characters of Shakespeare's Plays, Works, iv, 346-7.



merely hidebound: the line through Addison and Johnson terminates, as it were, in the arid primness of Hannah More, to which the Romantics constitute the necessary (and necessarily imperfectly balanced) reaction. Whereas Johnson had kept his obvious relish for Falstaff's amorality under firm restraint, commending Shakespeare's portrayal by falsely assimilating it to his own terms ("The moral to be drawn from this representation is...")<sup>1</sup>, Hazlitt's negative judgement here consorts with a refusal to check his spontaneous delight in an attitude of mind which he feels must finally be admitted to be inferior. His well-known account of Falstaff elsewhere<sup>2</sup> marks the apogee of Falstaff's steady rise in favour throughout the eighteenth century, from the nadir of Dennis's severely neo-classic preference of him in The Merry Wives of Windsor, where he is exposed in true Jonsonian fashion, through essays such as Maurice Morgann's, which look forward to Hazlitt's celebration of his vitality, which triumphantly refuses to be compassed by moral terms.<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly, Hazlitt's regret that Shakespeare's comedy must be judged inferior prompts him to speculate upon the relation of different modes of comedy to their social context, in a manner which has a strong flavour of Romantic-Rousseauian nostalgia.<sup>4</sup> Satire he argues is necessarily our most valuable kind of comedy, because the development of civilisation has led to the social inducement of vice and affectation in a way unknown to Shakespeare's age, where vice was a natural growth. Shakespeare could afford to be lenient, because he did not have artificially created evil to contend with. His comedies are therefore to be judged

1. Notes on Shakespeare's Plays (2 Henry IV), in The Works of Samuel Johnson, Yale Edition (1958-), vii, 523.

2. Characters of Shakespeare's Plays, Works, iv, 277-84.

3. See Tave, pp. 122-32.

4. This part of his argument also owes something to Sir William Temple's Of Poetry (1690), - the relevant passage of the essay is quoted in Irene Simon, ed., Neo-Classical Criticism 1600-1800 (1971), pp.153-4.

inferior to Molière's because of criteria enforced upon us by our fallen state. Shakespeare's "comic Muse" is "too good-natured and magnanimous",<sup>1</sup> which is a fault, given the present state of things.

Thus Hazlitt's discussion, despite its final valuation, at least contains a pronounced and articulate sympathy for comedy that is genial and non-satiric. So pronounced a sympathy, in fact, that Leigh Hunt later approvingly noted Hazlitt's position to be that Shakespeare's genius was "too large and magnanimous" to "delight in satire."<sup>2</sup> And for Hunt the "geniality of Shakespeare's jesting"<sup>3</sup> represented "wit and humour in perfection":<sup>4</sup> the view is a simplification of Hazlitt, but is essentially continuous with him.

Taken together, then, Coleridge, Lamb, Hazlitt, and Hunt can be seen, with some qualification, as expounding a common Romantic taste in comedy. I have already suggested the way in which Coleridge's and Lamb's attitudes to comedy and satire can be seen to be shaped by their Romanticism in general. With Hazlitt and Hunt the taste is a more simple outcome of their Romantic optimism. It follows naturally, for instance, from Hunt's confidence that life, if we can bring ourselves to look at it freshly and truly (Hunt's sense of what this involves is not profound), is not essentially a vale of tears, but a thing of enjoyment and delight. This emphasis is - in its comparatively superficial way - as radically Romantic, as discontinuous with the prevailing eighteenth-century background of modified stoicism, as Blake. Hazlitt's sense of life is sterner - charged with a deep awareness of Experience as well as Innocence - yet his Romantic idealism is intransigent, and it is this we feel generously present in his recognition of Shakespeare's magnanimity.

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1. *Works*, vi, 35.

2. "Wit and Humour" (1846), in Hunt, pp.491-502 (p.495).

3. *Ibid.*, p. 496.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 495.



What most unites the above writers as Romantics in their reflections on comedy, though, is their primary emphasis upon the quality of the feeling expressed in comedy, as against the objective function of the comic perception in relation to its object. There is, in fact, a strong implicit analogy between their idea of the proper comic spirit, and of the spirit of lyrical celebration; 'mirth' - a word they use repeatedly - is the comic counterpart, or manifestation, of 'joy' in the Coleridgean sense. Where satire is tied to the diagnosis of social ills, comedy is successful according to the pure flowering of its own spirit. Thus, as Hazlitt says of Shakespeare's Aguecheek: "the gratification of the fancy, 'and furnishing matter for innocent mirth', are therefore the chief object..., rather than reforming the moral sense, or indulging our personal spleen."<sup>1</sup> It is to Hunt, however, that we must look to the full development of this attitude. A late essay, "Wit and Humour" (1846) puts his position succinctly. In it he completely rejects Hobbes's explanation of laughter:

"The passion of laughter," he says, is nothing else but sudden glory arising from a sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves by comparison with the infirmity of others... His limitation of the cause of laughter looks like a saturnine self-sufficiency. There are numerous occasions, undoubtedly, when we laugh out of a contemptuous sense of superiority, or at least when we think we do so. But on occasions of pure mirth and fancy, we only feel superior to the pleasant defiance which is given to our wit and comprehension; we triumph, not insolently but congenially; not to any one's disadvantage, but simply to our own joy and reassurance."<sup>2</sup>

Hobbes's definition implicitly takes satire as the normal mode of laughter, and offers a sceptically reductive account of its pretensions: contempt is a potentially noble and impersonal emotion to the satirist, but to Hobbes it is merely egotism. Hunt is in implicit agreement with Hobbes

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1. *Works*, vi, 36.

2. Hunt, p. 492.



about contempt, and offers an alternative idea of laughter based on the congenial and the joyful: this is "pure mirth". (Lamb seems to be making much the same claim when he distinguishes between "the petrifying sneer of a demon which excludes and kills Love, and the cordial laughter of a man which implies and cherishes it.")<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere he sees mirth as an effusion of vivacity, a flow of spirits; the high-spirited play of wit is "the perfection of what is agreeable in humanity - the harmony of mind and body - intellect and animal spirits".<sup>2</sup> Shakespeare is the master of this kind of comedy. Whereas Johnson had complained that Shakespeare was too easily diverted by quibbles, Hunt praises his "delight in pursuing a joke"<sup>3</sup> for the vivacity it occasions. The scenes given over to this kind of comedy are "instances of his animal spirits, of his sociality, of his giving and receiving pleasure, of his passion for enjoyment of something wiser than wisdom."<sup>4</sup> Hunt may well have had in mind Johnson's dictum that Shakespeare mattered largely because it was possible to collect from his works "a system of civil and oeconomical prudence."<sup>5</sup> His essay is hopelessly one-sided, yet it is valuable in its intent defence of that vital spark of life which a too exclusive valuation of 'point' easily ignores. Unlike Lamb on Hogarth (though more like Lamb in practice - at his best), he makes no mention of 'tenderness', or even kindness, but the spirit of 'mirth' is innocent nonetheless, self-delighting in its vivacity, and free from venom. As with Hazlitt on Shakespearian comedy,

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1. "Hogarth", Writings, iv, 312.

2. "On the Talking of Nonsense", The Indicator (29 November 1820); in Hunt, pp. 255-9. (p. 256).

3. *Ibid.*, p. 257.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Preface to Shakespeare, Works, vii, 62.

Hunt's statements here culminate a line of anti-Hobbesian thought on the nature of laughter that had developed throughout the previous century, fighting its way against a strongly entrenched view that open laughter was a sign of ill-breeding; though it is Tave's opinion that the anti-Hobbesian view did not gain widespread acceptance until late in the century.<sup>1</sup> A delight in laughter as a flow of good spirits obviously received strong reinforcement from the main Romantic assumptions, just as the distrust of laughter was a natural correlative of the neo-classic attitude. With laughter more or less accepted as something good in itself, the way was of course open for the acceptance of an idea of comedy as simply facetiousness.

The Romantic nature of Hunt's idea of comedy is made even more apparent by its association - the step seems natural and logical - with the Romantic idea of childhood. A want of mirth, Hunt claims, represents a "falling off from the pure and uncontradicted blithesomeness of childhood".<sup>2</sup> Similarly Shakespearian mirth appeals to those "whose faculties are fresh about them";<sup>3</sup> on both the giving and receiving side the spirit of comedy lives only amidst the quickness of youthful enthusiasm, which can delight in its expansive zest. Such reflections, Hunt says, have come:

...partly from having spent some most agreeable hours the other evening with a company, the members of which had all the right to be grave and disagreeable that rank and talent are supposed to confer, and yet, from the very best sense or forgetfulness of both, were as lively and entertaining to each other as boys.<sup>4</sup>

Youthful high-spirits are here acknowledged as the essence of mirth.

The assertion of the paradox that such naive gaiety can be, in a sense, "wiser than wisdom" clearly shows the adaptation, into the consideration of

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1. Tave, pp. 68-87.

2. "Talking of Nonsense", Hunt, p. 256.

3. Ibid., p. 257.

4. Ibid., p. 258.

comedy, of one of the basic premises of the Romantic attitude: 'mirth' is adopted, as it were, as another aspect of Romantic 'joy'. As Tave has shown, the laughter of children was an important point of reference in the eighteenth century for those wishing to maintain that laughter was necessarily at one with ridicule and contempt; but such childish laughter was at the same time viewed with condescension, as with Thomson's picture in The Seasons of "Rustic mirth.../The simple joke that takes the peasant's heart,/Easily pleased; the long loud laugh sincere."<sup>1</sup> In comparison one remembers Dickens's declared hope in "Where We Stopped Growing" not to have "outgrown the capacity of being easily pleased with what is meant to please us".<sup>2</sup> As Tave puts it:

By the beginning of the nineteenth century an increasing confidence in the goodness of the free play of natural emotion and spirits made frank laughter a sign of an open and universal humanity....<sup>3</sup>

In saying all this I am not forgetting that the eighteenth century, too, had its rich vein of genial comedy. In fact the eighteenth century novel strongly informs the taste in comedy of all the above writers. The point, however, is that their taste is a highly selective one; in their remarkably similar preferences not just for the same novelists but for the same characters they implicitly adopt a canon which at once expresses and reinforces their own temperamental bias. Fielding's Parson Adams, for instance, is a collective touchstone of the genially comic. "What heart was ever made the worse", says Lamb, in the Hogarth essay, "by joining in a hearty laugh at the simplicities of Sir Hugh Evans or Parson Adams, where a sense of the ridiculous mutually kindles and is kindled by a perception of the amiable?"<sup>4</sup> Hazlitt felt that Adams was perhaps Fielding's "finest character", adding significantly that "our

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1. (1730), "Winter", 11. 622-4.

2. MF, p. 363.

3. Tave, p. 43.

4. "Hogarth", Writings, iv, 312.



laughing at him does not once lessen <sup>1</sup>our respect for him." <sup>1</sup> One can sense the underlying influence of the Romantic moral temper here. At other times it is quite explicit. Thus Coleridge turns to Parson Adams to illustrate what he means by "a good heart".<sup>2</sup> By contrast early critical comment on Adams was perplexed by him, or saw him as an object of comic contempt in his unworldliness; it was not until the beginning of the nineteenth century that he became a classic example of the lovable, laughable type.<sup>3</sup> The feeling for Sterne's Uncle Toby was even more enthusiastic. Hazlitt declared the portrait to be "one of the finest compliments ever paid to human nature."<sup>4</sup> For Coleridge it constituted a refutation of Jacobin scepticism: "Note Sterne's assertion of, and faith in, a moral good in the characters of Trim, Toby, etc. as contrasted with the cold scepticism of motives which is the stamp of the Jacobin spirit."<sup>5</sup> And with Hunt appreciation turned panegyric:

Why, this I will say, made bold by the example, and caring nothing for what anybody may think of it who does not in some measure partake of thy nature, that he who created thee was the wisest man since the days of Shakespeare; and that Shakespeare himself, mighty reflector of things as they were, but no anticipator, never arrived at a character like thine. ...As long as the character of Toby Shandy finds an echo in the heart of man, the heart of man is noble. It awaits the impress of all good things, and may prepare for as many surprises in the moral world, as science has brought about in the physical.<sup>6</sup>

Here again, as with Coleridge, Romantic moral optimism was felt to entail political significance.

Sterne would surely have been bemused by Hunt's seizing on Uncle Toby as a portent of the coming man; Hunt represents the extreme form of a general tendency in the above-quoted examples to detach one impulse in the eighteenth-century novel from the context in which it is one term in an overall equilibrium.

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1. "On the English Novelists", Lectures on the English Comic Writers, Works, vi, 106-132 (115).

2. Literary Remains, i, 380.

3. Tave, p. 144.

4. Works, vi, 121.

5. Literary Remains, i, 147.

6. "Wit and Humour"; not reprinted in the Charles Kent anthology, but is so in Leigh Hunt, Essays and Sketches, ed. R. Brimley Johnson, The World's Classics (1906), p. 131.

For, as a recent commentator on Dickens's relation to the eighteenth-century sentimental tradition has pointed out, "Sterne implies that Toby's boyish naivete can be a defect as well as a comical and endearing foible".<sup>1</sup> Similarly, as another critic has insisted, Fielding often "notes the natural malignity of man",<sup>2</sup> and has a severer aristocratic side which can sound like Chesterfield. Thus, he says at one point:

...barbarous mockery of people's weaknesses...[is]...an excrescence of an uncontroul'd licentiousness mistaken for liberty, and never shews itself in men who are polish'd and refin'd, in such manner as human nature requires, to produce that perfection of which it is susceptible, and to purge away that malevolence of disposition, of which, at our birth, we partake in common with the savage creation.<sup>3</sup>

The more strictly eighteenth-century Fielding is excluded from the Romantics' consideration. Hazlitt recognised in Sterne both "a vein of dry, sarcastic humour, and of extreme tenderness of feeling",<sup>4</sup> but the former is very much underplayed in the Romantic account of him. It was only in the enthusiastic atmosphere of the Romantic mind, that the genial idea of comedy could, as it were, come close to realising itself, for better or worse, as an autonomous spirit free from the restraint of alternative points of view.

## II

I have barely mentioned Dickens so far in this discussion; I have been hoping that the bearing on him of my comments upon others has been apparent. For Dickens's comedy, I want to suggest, can most properly be understood in the light of the Romantic idea of comedy that I have been outlining.

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1. Roselee Robison, "Dickens and the Sentimental Tradition: Mr. Pickwick and My Uncle Toby", University of Toronto Quarterly, XXXIX (April 1970), pp. 258 - 73 (p.272).
  2. C.J. Rawson, Henry Fielding and the Augustan Ideal under Stress (1972), p. 21.
  3. Henry Fielding, The Journal of a Voyage to Lisbon (1755), collected in The Complete Works of Henry Fielding, 16 vols. (reprint. edn. 1967), xvi, 201.
  4. "English Novelists", Works, vi, 121.

By this I mean that he represents the full flowering in creative literature of the taste which the earlier Romantics were expressing and circulating.<sup>1</sup> This relationship ought to be seen not so much as one of direct influence (Dickens probably read Hazlitt on Shakespearian comedy with sympathy, but was hardly likely to have been much affected by him, in the sense of being made other than what he already was),<sup>2</sup> but of a close continuity of sensibility, a community of certain ways of thinking and feeling, of the kind that makes one want to think of Dickens as being, in this aspect as in others, in an emerging 'Romantic tradition'.

Demonstration of this claim can best begin by going back to Hogarth. Dickens's debt here is undeniable; there is some truth at least in Sydney Smith's fancied migration. The biographical reminiscences of James T. Fields recall Dickens's "unbounded" admiration for Hogarth, and add that he had made a study of the painter's thought as displayed in his work, and that his talk about Hogarth was delightful.<sup>3</sup> Dickens, of course, had "the attentive gaze/ That saw the manners in the face", to quote Johnson's epitaph on Hogarth (which, Fields reports, Dickens often repeated). His genius for the disclosure of significant inner life through external observation, a method which works through the surface, but is not, as George Eliot and others claimed,<sup>4</sup> superficial - this special power perhaps explains why Hogarth seems to have meant as much to him as any writer. Dickens declared at the beginning of "Hunted Down", a late story, that there "is nothing truer than physiognomy, taken in connexion with manner"<sup>5</sup> - the story is constructed upon a demonstration of the truth of this claim.

1. "Earlier" must be qualified, as Hunt went on writing throughout much of Dickens's career: "Wit and Humour" was not written until 1846. There is no real development in Hunt's attitude, however, and his reading of Dickens would only have reinforced his existing notions.

2. At least until Black House (I take up Hazlitt's essay again at the end of this chapter, in the light of Dickens's generally more severe tone from this novel onwards). For Dickens's reading of Hazlitt, see Stonehouse, pp. 55-6.

3. Fields, p. 209. <sup>Stone, p. 537, and Dickens to Wilkie Collins, 24 February 1854; Letters, ii, 543.</sup>

4. Eg., her article, "The Natural History of German Life: Riehl", Westminster Review (1856); collected in George Eliot, Impressions of Theophrastus Such; Essays; Leaves from a Note-Book (n.d.), pp. 356-96 (pp. 361-2).

5. Reprinted Pieces, p. 667.



This, and other similar remarks,<sup>1</sup> are further indications, I think, of Dickens's consciousness of what can be demonstrated from the writing: that his art has strong affinities with Hogarth's (see, for instance, my comment above on the introductory image of Sleary and of Dombey).<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, even at the beginning of his career Dickens was echoing Hogarth in a qualifying spirit, which was, in fact, rather akin to that of Lamb's essay on him:

They were an elderly woman, of decent appearance, though evidently poor, and a boy of about fourteen or fifteen. The woman was crying bitterly; she carried a small bundle in her hand, and the boy followed at a short distance behind her. Their little history was obvious. The boy was her son, to whose early comfort she had perhaps sacrificed her own - for whose sake she had borne misery without repining, and poverty without a murmur - looking steadily forward to the time when he who had so long witnessed her struggles for himself might be enabled to make some exertions for their joint support. He had formed dissolute connexions; idleness had led to crime; and he had been committed to take his trial for some petty theft. He had been long in prison, and, after receiving some trifling additional punishment, had been ordered to be discharged that morning. It was his first offence, and his poor old mother, still hoping to reclaim him, had been waiting at the gate to implore him to return home.

We cannot forget the boy; he descended the steps with a dogged look, shaking his head with an air of bravado and obstinate determination. They walked a few paces, and paused. The woman put her hand upon his shoulders in an agony of entreaty, and the boy sullenly raised his head as if in refusal. It was a brilliant morning, and every object looked fresh and happy in the broad, gay sunlight; he gazed round him for a few moments, bewildered with the brightness of the scene, for it was long since he had beheld anything save the gloomy walls of a prison. Perhaps the wretchedness of his mother made some impression on the boy's heart; perhaps some undefined recollection of the time when he was a happy child, and she his only friend and best companion, crowded on him - he burst into tears; and covering his face with one hand, and hurriedly placing the other in his mother's, walked away with her.<sup>3</sup>

The relevant plate of the Idle Apprentice and his mother is strongly present in the background here, but it is strongly coloured with contemporary

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1. Eg. "The Demeanour of Murderers": "In passing we will express an opinion that Nature never writes a bad hand. Her writing, or it may be read in the human countenance, is invariably legible, if we come at all trained to the reading of it"; *MP*, pp. 594-8, (p.594).

2. See ch. 2, pp. 92-3, and ch. 4, pp. 211-12.

3. "Criminal Courts", *Sketches by Boz*, - pp. (pp. 197-8).

Romantic sentiment. The morally significant "brilliant morning" recalls Hunt's essays. And the change of heart, with the by this time conventionalised romantic allusion to childhood as a spring of moral feeling, bears the stamp of the sentimentality of the contemporary theatre. Lamb himself had mocked this ("a reconciliation scene, be the occasion never so absurd, never fails of applause" )<sup>1</sup> as Dickens was to even in the early stages of his career (e.g. Nickleby) - and even here he handles the scene with a certain untheatrical sparseness. Yet it also seems true that Dickens's treatment here answers to the kind of expectations Lamb and Coleridge thought they saw gratified by Hogarth: the "spirit of reconciliation and human kindness" that "diffuses through all."<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, several of Dickens's early critics were alert to this ground of distinction between him and Hogarth, as well as recognising the similarity between them. Mary Russell Mitford wrote that Dickens resembled Hogarth "greatly", except that he took "a far more cheerful view, a Shakespearian view, of humanity"<sup>3</sup> (the allusion to Shakespeare is significant in the light of the Romantic view of Shakespearian comedy discussed above). Likewise, Lister, in the Edinburgh Review, wrote that "Mr. Dickens is exempt from two of Mr. Hogarth's least agreeable qualities - his cynicism and his coarseness. There is no misanthropy in his satire, and no coarseness in his descriptions";<sup>4</sup> one can see that where post-Romantic taste did not misinterpret Hogarth on these points it was likely to recoil from him (the modulation of the Hogarthian tradition in art into painters like Morland and Wilkie was inevitable<sup>5</sup>). At the end of the century Gissing was to make the distinction with less squeamishness and more poise when he said that

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1. "Characters of Dramatic Writers Contemporary with Shakespeare", Writings, iv, 222.

2. "Hogarth", Writings, iv, 301.

3. Letter to Miss Jephson, 30 June 1837; reprinted in CH, p.36.

4. LXVIII (October 1838), pp. 75-97; reprinted in CH, pp. 71-77 (p.72).

5. Antal, pp. 182, 188.



"there prevails in[Hogarth] an uncompromising spirit of which Dickens had nothing whatever."<sup>1</sup>

Such sentimentality is at one with Dickens's reforming optimism (a conjunction one finds at times even in the much more urbane writing of George Eliot's Middlemarch<sup>2</sup>). It is the characteristically post-Romantic nineteenth century trust in the possibilities of goodness, that underlies the faith in social engineering among the non-Benthamite wing of the reformers (the mixture of the high-souled and the practical in Dorothea Brooke's interest in tenants' cottages is perhaps representative). It is the faith behind that "interfering for prevention or for cure", the lack of which Dickens mistakenly, I think, took to be the satiric point of "Gin Lane":<sup>3</sup> one might also be fairly sure how different the fate of Little Emily would have been in a treatment by Hogarth. In the same spirit Dickens cited Hogarth's scene of the death of the Idle Apprentice as a satire on executions, in the context of an argument for the abolition of capital punishment.<sup>4</sup> Hogarth is satirising the crowd, all right, as well as edifyingly pointing the end of the recreant; but there seems little to suggest that the satire is against execution, in the sense of advocating change, any more than, say, Johnson's rehearsal of the fate of Charles XII in "The Vanity of Human Wishes" is a specific protest against the system of monarchy, rather than an illustration of a general and unalterable

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1. George Gissing, Charles Dickens: A Critical Study (1902), p.31.

2. As in her declared hope that if Lydgate had "perhaps...been strong enough to persist in his determination to be the more because she was the less", he might have been able to inspire Rosamond to act less selfishly and obstinately - ch.75.

3. "Cruikshank's 'The Drunkard's Children' ", rev. in The Examiner (July 1848), in MP, pp. 139-43.

4. "Capital Punishment", letters to The Daily News, 9, 13, 16 March 1846; reprinted in MP, pp. 21-41 (p.30).



human condition. Dickens's later conclusion that "there are people who have no good in them - none ... who have no human heart, and who must be crushed like savage beasts and cleared out of the way" (the landlady's speech, alluding to Rigaud-Blandois, in Little Dorrit, p. 169<sup>1</sup>), comes with the intensity of disillusion).

My claim, then, is that Lamb's misinterpreted Hogarth is really a pretty good partial picture of Dickens. Of course there are certain things in Dickens which are Hogarthian in the way Lamb found disturbing: the "Strolling Actresses", which Lamb felt to be "disgusting", are direct forebears of Sleary's troupe, with its women none of whom "were at all particular in respect of showing their legs"<sup>2</sup> - Dickens's jokes about the "money-box ... in an ecclesiastical niche of early Gothic", and the gold-starred theatrical Pegasus, directly echo Hogarth's details in this work. Though even in this instance Dickens's rather hopeful comment that "there was a remarkable gentleness and childishness about these people, a special inaptitude for any kind of sharp practice,"<sup>4</sup> clearly shows his distance in temper from the previous century.

Generally one could not think of a writer other than Dickens in whom the spirit that "blends its tenderness with our laughter" is more typical (though not exhaustively so), or in whom it is more perfectly realised.

1. p. 169.

2. Hard Times, p.77.

3. The relation of the "Strolling Players" to Dickens's theatre-people has been pointed out by V. de S. Pinto, The Pelican Guide to English Literature, iv, 286.

4. Hard Times, p.77. Though beneath this a robust geniality is common to both Hogarth and Dickens here.

I have already discussed Dickens's command of this range of feeling in relation to his way, compared to Lamb's, of recalling the past. Such command, however, is not at all confined to this particular vein. There are failures, of course, such as Ruth and Tom Pinch, where the tenderness is an attitude of conscious piety, and grates like a bullying sermon. But to set against this we have the romance of Dick Swiveller and the Marchioness in The Old Curiosity Shop; and by Dombey and Son the poignantly comic makes itself present beyond the confines of stylised comedy, as a tone naturally available to realistically open-ended delineation of character:

Son with his little fists curled up and clenched, seemed, in his feeble way, to be squaring at existence for having come upon him so unexpectedly.<sup>1</sup>

As Mrs. Leavis has remarked, characters who in previous Dickens novels would have been caricatures, are now presented with a comedy enriched with "a delicate and tender sympathy".<sup>2</sup> Miss Tox is an obvious case in point:

The lady thus specially presented, was a long, lean figure, wearing such a faded air that she seemed not to have been made in what linen-draper's call 'fast colours' originally, and to have, by little and little, washed out. But for this she might have been described as the very pink of propitiation and politeness. From a long habit of listening admiringly to everything that was said in her presence, and looking at the speakers as if were mentally engaged in taking off impressions of their images upon her soul, never to part with the same but with life, her head had quite settled on one side. Her hands had contracted a spasmodic habit of raising themselves of their own accord as in involuntary admiration. Her eyes were liable to a similar affection. She had the softest voice that ever was heard; and her nose, stupendously aquiline, had a little knob in the very centre or key-stone of the bridge, whence it tended downwards towards her face, as in an invincible determination never to turn up at anything.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Dombey and Son, p.1.

2. Dickens the Novelist, p. 349.

3. Dombey and Son, pp. 55-6.

By the time the description comes to her voice, "the softest that was ever heard", which is not itself a satiric detail, the current of sympathy that has been murmuring beneath our amusement at the vivid comedy grows to a distinct protective chivalry. Miss Tox is a victim of the Dombey world, as well as one of its minor upholders; and we are certainly meant to pity, as well as be amused by, her gauchely uncertain femininity (nicely symbolised by the "odd, weedy little flowers in her bonnets and caps"), which survives precariously despite her lack of confidence in it, and her corresponding self-degrading exaltation of the ideal of Dombeyan sternness. There is very little in Hogarth, or Pope, for that matter, that corresponds to this.<sup>1</sup>

David Copperfield has traditionally been recognised as a triumph of the tenderly and poignantly comic. This is so obvious that there is no need to add here to what I have said in the previous chapter, and which I will expand in my later chapter on the novel itself. It is sufficient to point to Forster's appreciation of the novel, which is continuous in spirit with the Romantic idea of comedy developed earlier:

...in the use of humour to bring out prominently the ludicrous in any object of incident without excluding or weakening its most enchanting sentiment, it stands decidedly first. It is the perfection of English mirth. We are apt to resent the exhibition of too much goodness, but it is here so qualified by oddity as to become not merely palatable but attractive; and even pathos is heightened by what in other hands would only make it comical. ... and he has nowhere given happier embodiment to that purity of homely goodness, which, by the kindly and all-reconciling influences of humour, may exalt into comeliness and even grandeur the clumsiest forms of humanity.<sup>2</sup>

One notices how Forster's idiom "mirth", "kindly and all reconciling influences", echoes the language of the earlier Romantic writers. Similarly his readiness here to locate and value the blend of humour and pathos in the novel associates him with the tradition of amiable humour Tave has

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1. For a further discussion of Miss Tox, see ch. 4, pp. 226-30.

2. Forster, p. 555.

(underlining mine).



outlined: taste for such a mingling of modes, in defiance of neo-classic insistence upon their separation, was one of the logical corollaries of the idea of genial and tender humour, emerging with some hesitancy in the eighteenth century and being fully canonised in both theory and practice early in the nineteenth.<sup>1</sup> Leigh Hunt, for instance, was the first critic to invent the term "the humorous pathetic", and Hazlitt also deployed the concept widely.<sup>2</sup> One aspect of the interest Forster's Life has for us is that it suggests how the taste in humour of the earlier Romantics must have been brought to bear in at least one way on Dickens (there must have been other ways) through its formative influence on the critical outlook of his closest associate. (Elsewhere in the Life Forster echoes the earlier advocates of genial humour even more formulaically, as, for instance, in his comment upon Dr. Marigold's Prescriptions : "laughter close to pathos, but never touching it with ridicule".<sup>3</sup> )

Dickens's explicit comments on other writers and artists also support the general case. 'Tenderness', for instance, is as central a critical term for him as for Lamb or Coleridge. Smollett's novels, he thought, were "extraordinarily good in their way", but it was "a way without tenderness"<sup>4</sup> Again, prominent among his reasons for disliking Defoe was the "utter want of tenderness and sentiment", shown in the death of Friday, which was "as heartless as Gil Blas, in a very different and far more serious way".<sup>5</sup> And some years later Dickens congratulated Wilkie Collins upon The Woman in White, which, he said, was "a very great advance on all of Collins's former writing, and most especially in respect of tenderness."<sup>6</sup>

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1. Tave, chs. 9-11.

2. Ibid., pp. 230-32.

3. Forster, p. 745.

4. Letter to Frank Stone, 30 May 1854; Letters, ii, 560. The softening of the eighteenth-century comic tradition of Smollett and Fielding is commented upon in Marcus, pp. 23-8. Dickens's debt to Smollett is examined exhaustively though rather mechanically, in F.D. Wierstra, Smollett and Dickens (1928).

5. Letter to Forster, April 1856; Letters, ii, 768.

6. Letter to Wilkie Collins, 7 January, 1860; Letters, iii, 145. The above three letters, together with other examples of Dickens's literary judgement, are discussed in M. Engel, "Dickens on Art", Modern Philology, LIII, (August 1955), pp. 25-38.

Such a critical tack could signify an almost effeminate squeamishness of critical appetite, as when Hunt rejected Sheridan for "lack of tenderness".<sup>1</sup> Dickens's remarks on this score, however, are not extremist in this way.

Dickens similarly echoed his Romantic predecessors when he hailed the artist and illustrator John Leech, who, he said, had brought an improving refinement into English illustration. Dickens, says Forster,

...was of the opinion that ... Mr. Leech was the very first Englishman who had made Beauty a part of his art; and he held, that, by striking out this course, and setting the successful example of introducing always into his most whimsical pieces some beautiful faces or agreeable forms, he had done more than any other man of his generation to refine a branch of art to which the facilities of steam-printing and wood engraving were giving almost unrivalled diffusion and popularity. His opinion of Leech in a word was that he turned caricature into character.<sup>2</sup>

Dickens, we know, knew and respected Lamb's Hogarth essay, as can be deduced from his comment that he had always thought the purpose of "Gin Lane" "to be not adequately stated even by Charles Lamb."<sup>3</sup>

The inadequacy to Dickens's developing art of Cruikshank's illustrations, limited to the grotesque and lacking in any positive feeling for tenderness and beauty as they were/<sup>has</sup> I feel, been persuasively argued by Mrs. Leavis.<sup>4</sup> Her case is supported by Henry James's on Cruikshank's illustrations in his Autobiographies: "the scenes and figures that he intended to comfort and cheer, present themselves under his hand as but more subtly sinister, or more suggestively queer, than the frank badnesses and horrors. The nice people and the happy moments, in the plates, frightened me almost as much as the low and the awkward..."<sup>5</sup>

1. Tave, p. 240.

2. Forster, p. 492. Forster is reporting a paper of Dickens's, "Leech's 'The Rising Generation'", The Examiner (30 December 1848); reprinted in MP, pp. 136-39.

3. Ibid., p. 491.

4. Dickens the Novelist, ch. 7.

5. A Small Boy and Others (1913), in Autobiographies (1956); quoted from selection reprinted in CH, pp. 612-5 (p. 614).

Thus tenderness. As for geniality, that this is an essential quality of Dickens's humour needs no spelling out here. It is worth noticing, however, how easily the picture Hazlitt draws of Shakespearian geniality could be applied to Dickens:

...we pity as much as we despise them; in spite of our disgust we like them, because they like themselves, and because we are made to sympathise with them; and the ligament, fine as it is, which links them to humanity, is never broken. Who would quarrel with Wart or Feeble, or Mouldy or Bull-Calf, or even with Pistol, Nym and Bardolph? None but a hypocrite.

Jingle, Mantalini, Crumple, Dick Swiveller, Micawber, all could be added to Hazlitt's list here; with all "we like them because they like themselves", because they have what Paul Elmer More has happily called "the insolence of irrepressible life".<sup>2</sup> Jingle is not so much a villain, as a paragon of omnipresent sociability, with a lively and amazing anecdote for all occasions. Even Pecksniff is a kind of moral Bobadil (one of the few Jonson characters, by the way, that Hazlitt really liked, objecting - again in line with the 'amiable humorists', who reversed the neo-classic elevation of Jonson over Shakespeare -<sup>3</sup> for the most part to the "caustic unsparing severity" which he felt to be Jonson's normal tone.<sup>4</sup> Dickens's relish for Bobadil is recorded in Forster's Life).<sup>5</sup> We also know that he knew and valued Maurice Morgann's essay on Falstaff, which was an important document in the emerging 'amiable humour' tradition.<sup>6</sup> Hazlitt's view of Shakespeare's relationship to his characters is likewise suggestive of Dickens.

Our later comic writers represent a state of manners, in which to be a man of wit and pleasure about town was become the fashion, and which the swarms of egregious pretenders in both kinds openly kept one another in

1. Works, vi, 33.

2. Paul Elmer More, "The Praise of Dickens", in his Shelburne Essays, 5th Series (1967; first published 1908), v, 22-44 (37).

3. Tave, pp. 135-39.

4. Works, vi, 44.

5. Forster, p. 383.

6. Letter to T.J. Serle, 29 January 1844; Letters, i, 565. Letter to Lord Campbell, 27 January 1859; Letters, iii, 90; here Dickens refers to the essay as "a delicate combination of fancy, whim, good heart, good sense, and good taste".



countenance, and were become a public nuisance. Shakespeare, living in a state of greater rudeness and simplicity, chiefly gave certain characters which were a kind of grotesques, or solitary excrescences growing up out of their native soil without affectation, and which he undertook kindly to pamper for the public entertainment. ...The gratification of the fancy, 'and furnishing matter for innocent mirth', are, therefore, the chief object of this and other characters like it, rather than reforming the moral sense, or indulging our personal spleen.<sup>1</sup>

Dickens's mature works tend towards Hazlitt's idea of the later writers: the Dorrit - Mrs. General - Gowan grouping typify that system of mutually supporting identities that Hazlitt has in mind. The pre-Dombey novels, however, are for the most part collections of grotesques grouped and indulged in Hazlitt's Shakespearian manner, which fact has traditionally been the ground of that mixture of critical dissatisfaction and peculiar delight with which they have been received. Even such a highly organised and interrelated novel as Little Dorrit bears residual traces of the earlier mode, as with Mrs. F's aunt, who is defiantly irreducible to any pattern of significance; whereas with someone like Flora Finching Dickens has created a character who could easily exist in one of the earlier novels, yet who is now conceived with both a richer intrinsic complexity, and a definite function in an organically perceived social order. But the freely indulged authorial delight in the 'humours' of character, and the essential irrelevance of satiric intention, are especially characteristic of early Dickens. Such 'delight', in fact, often extends to a kind of collaborative participation in the triumph of the 'humour' in the character, or rather, the triumphant vitality of the character by virtue of the humour;

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1. Works, vi, 35-6.

the eccentric deviance from normality itself represents a 'life-force', as it were, that checks and confutes the reforming attitude; the lash drops from our hands, and we recognise our satiric selves as straitjacketing Houghnons, rejoicing in the expansive powers of our indulgence, and in the richer and more variegated life it acknowledges and celebrates. Or, to quote Chesterton: "What [Thackeray and George Eliot] could never have given, and exactly what Dickens does give, is the bounce of Trabb's boy. It is the real unconquerable ruck and energy in a character which was the supreme and quite indescribable greatness of Dickens."<sup>1</sup>

Even with such a repellent character as Squeers, satiric scorn gives way to a kind of imaginative enchantment with the comically monstrous:

"My son, sir, little Wackford. What do you think of him, sir, for a specimen of the Dotheboys Hall feeding? Ain't he fit to burst out of his clothes, and start the seams, and make the very buttons fly off with his fatness? Here's flesh!" cried Squeers, turning the boy about, and indenting the plumpest parts of his figure with divers pokes and punches, to the great discomposure of his son and heir. "Here's firmness, here's solidness! Why you can hardly get up enough of him between your finger and thumb to pinch him anywheres." <sup>2</sup>

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1. Appreciations and Criticisms, pp. 202-3.

2. Nicholas Nickleby, p. 434.

In Dickens the "insolence of irrepressible life" can run to the perverse and degraded. Squeers, like Quilp, is intensely alive, with a baying, even zestful ferocity, the effect being a mixture of comedy and shock. With Dickens's more healthy eccentrics, however, there is a natural process by which indulgent comedy for its own sake grows into the significant social analysis of the later novels. With his especial feeling for "irrepressible life" Dickens was in a unique position, as he matured, to see and feel the manifold ways in which the spirit of the developing Victorian civilisation threatened the vitality that his earlier comedy had been nourished by. Micawber, and Flora Finching, for example, are characters whom we both delight in for their own sake, and in doing so recognise them as assertions of a crucial Dickensian social theme: that virtue ought not to exclude "cakes and ale",<sup>1</sup> or, apropos of Micawber, that "to banish plump Jack" is to "banish all the world". Thus with Dickens, as to a certain extent with Shakespeare, genial comedy takes on a seriousness of implication beyond "the gratification of the fancy", or rather, shows the seriousness of this; and thus assumes a social responsibility of an importance comparable to satire proper. Hazlitt was not properly in a position to appreciate this: the Society for the Suppression of Vice, influential though it was in his time, did not yet speak with the voice of general consensus that was to oppress the coming age, of which such an unlikely figure as Harriet Martineau was to say, writing of Lamb, that he had "the spirit of geniality in which, above everything, our time is deficient".<sup>2</sup> What Hawthorne, in The Scarlet Letter (which Dickens disliked, but which

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1. cf. Leigh Hunt's view that Shakespeare "reminds the 'unco righteous' for ever, that virtue, false or true, is not incompatible with the recreations of 'cakes and ale'"; "Wit and Humour", Hunt, p. 496.

2. Quoted from Mariel Jaeger, Before Victoria (1956), p.160.



has certain points of interest in common with Little Dorrit) was to call "the disease of sadness"<sup>1</sup> - or, as we might add, Arthur Glennam's disease, had not yet become one of the age's noticeable and not unrepresentative characteristics.

Lastly, it needs to be said that with Dickens, genial does not necessarily mean gentle; geniality in him, in fact, is happily compatible with an almost anarchic boldness of comedy. The exhilaration of his best humour has much to do with the suggestion it carries that it has sprung into being free from considerations of restraint and decorum, free from a conscious measuring of tone. Thus it is that some of the characters for whom Dickens elicits our most spontaneous sympathy are those at whom we have laughed most devastatingly and uproariously: Dickens's genial jokes pull no punches in order to be polite, but warmly embrace their butts with a mirthful grin that they would find, if they wished to stand upon their dignity, utterly offensive. Obvious examples that come to mind are Pickwick, Toots and Flora Finching, and there is even something of this feeling in our wry, sad, yet not unenjoyable amusement at some of David Copperfield's discomfitures.

Such an attitude has its drawbacks, and its advantages. One of the latter is surely a sense of release consequent upon our brazenly unrestrained recognition of the ludicrousness of people, whom we normally would not laugh at, because of our liking or compassion for them, a recognition that is oddly free of contempt or recoil. Much of Dickens's humour, its sense of violent incongruity, its seemingly extravagantly askew vision of the world, derives from that child-like

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1. Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter (1850) in The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, 11 vols. (1962- ), i, 184.

closeness and accuracy, to quote him from Copperfield, with which he observed that characteristic awkwardness and deformity of humanity which the conventional adult vision, in its inattentiveness and its politeness, tends to screen out. To say this is only to repeat Santayana's justly famous comment: "When people say Dickens exaggerates, it seems to me that they can have no eyes and no ears. They probably have only notions of what things and people are; they accept them conventionally, at their diplomatic value".<sup>1</sup> Yet where Santayana lays his stress on the savage and merciless effect of Dickens's comic realism - and it is obviously the right emphasis for much of Dickens - there is also another way in which Dickens's specifically genial vein is equally as rude and unblinking, yet with an innocence and generosity of spirit that atones for its incursions by its utter lack of disdain or distaste for the truth it uncovers. Chesterfield found awkwardness repulsive, for instance, a mark of ill-breeding; Dickens, who loathed Chesterfield, and felt him to be the epitome of all that was tight and ungenerous (a simplification, but not, surely, that far off in a broad sense) reveals in his writing a fascination with it; Toots's gaping and fumbling ineptitude for instance, is immensely funny to him. But it is not funny as to the heartless and unthinking sense of humour of a child, but as, so to speak, a 'philosophic', humorous-pathetic emblem of the radically imperfect human condition. The effect is one of complete candour, redeemed from cruelty by the humanity that informs it. Thus to object, as John Lucas does,<sup>2</sup> to Esther Summerson's amusement at her maid Charley's awkward handwriting ("every pen appeared to become

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1. "Dickens", The Dial, LXXI (1921), pp. 537-49; reprinted in and quoted from George H. Ford and Lauriet Lane, Jr., eds., The Dickens Critics (1961), pp. 135-51 (p. 143).

2. John Lucas, The Melancholy Men (1970), pp. 220-1.

perversely animated") is to fall into a kind of egalitarian prudery, the logically implicit ideal of which is the abstract world of "idealised proletaires" so alien, as Chesterton pointed out, to the "grotesque democracy" of Dickens.<sup>1</sup> Esther is not gloating over her class superiority in seeing that Charley's efforts are also amusingly odd, any more than Dickens is pre-eminently disdainful, as John Carey has recently claimed him to be, in creating the world as a grotesque place: they are both recording what they find life to be, with both generosity and candour.

As with awkwardness, so with actual deformity. Those who are repelled or made uneasy by Dickens's humour are likely to feel their distaste justified by the following description, for instance:

The little man is dressed something like a gunsmith, in a green-baize apron and cap; and his face and hands are dirty with gunpowder, and begrimed with the loading of guns. As he lies in the light, before a glaring white target, the black upon him shines again. Not far off, is the strong, rough, primitive table, with a vice upon it, at which he has been working. He is a little man with a face all crushed together, who appears, from a certain blue and speckled appearance that one of his cheeks presents, to have been blown up, in the way of business, at some odd time or times.

...it appears that he is lame, though able to move very quickly. On the speckled side of his face he has no eyebrow, and on the other side he has a bushy black one, which want of uniformity gives him a very singular and rather sinister appearance. Everything seems to have happened to his hands that could possibly take place, consistently with the retention of all the fingers; for they are notched, and seamed, and crumpled all over. He appears to be very strong, and lifts heavy benches about as if he had no idea what weight was. He has a curious way of limping round the gallery with his shoulder against the wall, and tacking

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1. G.K. Chesterton, Charles Dickens (1906), pp. 81-7 (p.86).



off at objects he wants to lay hold of, instead of going straight to them, which has left a smear all round the four walls, conventionally called 'Phil's mark.'<sup>1</sup>

I have quoted this at some length, since in this way one can see Dickens in a characteristic 'staple' mode of not trying to force comedy from every pore of the prose, but keeping it subordinate to his fundamental aim, which is to give a proper account of the object under view. The peculiarly Dickensian note of the comic-fantastic is momentarily struck, of course - "who appears...to have been blown up, in the way of business, at some odd time or times" - yet this has no over-insistent place in the composition. The sketch is grotesque, but in the comparatively realistic manner of Hogarth, rather than the purely stylised mode of Rowlandson. Thus there is no suggestion that the prose is merely marking time when it modulates into quite ordinary un-comic information, such as that Phil is very strong, or works at a rough primitive table. The effect of this must be, I think, to convince us of Dickens's disinterestedness here: that he is candidly, though not at all clinically, observing what Phil is actually like, rather than obsessively pursuing his deformities. This is reinforced by the way, that seems to me surely to be the case here, in which the perception of the grotesque is at one with a feeling of sympathetic geniality. Carey is quite wrong, I feel, in claiming that sympathy and humour in Dickens are quite separate, that "the sympathy has to be pronounced by the sad, lofty voice which occasionally breaks in on the facetious...one".<sup>2</sup>

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1. Bleak House, p. 357.

2. Carey, p.76.

The whole flavour of Dickens's joke here about Phil's having been blown up "in the way of business" lies in its madcap imagining of a kind of impossible resilience in him (as if he could somehow, after such a catastrophe, patch together all the pieces ~~and~~ soldier shufflingly on), a resilience which is one of Dickens's main points about him in the rest of the passage - genial sympathy in Dickens is characteristically not enervating pity, but a remarkable openness in him to that which deserves respect. Similarly the joke about "Phil's mark" at once plays on his deformity and registers a sign of affection and acceptance: the tone towards Phil here has more in common with the robustness of popular feeling (the feeling of the Gallery clientèle who are not too nice to coin Phil's limp into folklore), than with the conscientious refinement of a civilised attitude. Dickens can at times afford to dispense with tact, because he has more vital sources of humanity to call upon.

This kind of geniality seems to me to be peculiarly Dickens's own (though one might compare the Hogarthian geniality Lamb noted - see above). Yet there is nothing contradictory in this in also suggesting that there is a way in which this very individual quality was continuous with certain implications of the tradition of 'amiable humour' we have been relating Dickens too, and was also perhaps to some extent enabled and fostered by it. Dickens's general fascination with the grotesque is in line with that cherishing of the odd and eccentric that was the logical consequence of the decline of the satiric attitude - deformity and awkwardness are, so to speak, oddity

pushed to extremes. Beyond this, however, the especial warmth Dickens has for some of his grotesques in their grotesqueries—that oddly emblematic status he implicitly accords them as representatives of humanity rather than fools and deviants—this is also closely continuous with a certain line of Romantic developments of the ideas of aimiable humour. Forster, for instance, was critically well-equipped to appreciate Dickens's anti-Chesterfieldian attitude to awkwardness; I cite his comments on *Copperfield*, previously quoted, but they have a much wider application:

...the kindly and all-reconciling influences of humour may exalt into comeliness and even grandeur the clumsiest forms of humanity. <sup>1</sup> (*Copperfield*, 5, 16)

'Comeliness' and 'grandeur' press the paradox a bit far, but toned down, however, Forster's case about, presumably, the Peggottys, is essentially the same as I have been arguing about Toots and Phil Squod. The paradox that humour dislocates the accepted hierarchy of high and low represents an inversion of neo-classic insistence upon hierarchy, the manifestation of which in the critical theory of comedy is the idea of the mock-heroic. The seminal formulation of the paradox was arrived at by the German Romantic writer Jean Paul Richter. Whereas satiric mock-heroic, he argued, <sup>2</sup> annihilated the individual by contrast to a standard, 'humour', in his sense of it, annihilated the finite itself by contrast with infinity. It lowered the great in order to set it beside the little, and raised the little to set it beside the great; in doing so, it annihilated both in reference to the infinite. Thus unlike satire, humour took individual folly into its

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1. Forster, p. 555.

2. Tave, pp. 174-77.



protection, as it was not a falling from the standards of humanity but a representative symbol of humanity itself. The humorous pathetic was obviously a tone closely associated with this conception. Richter had a strong influence upon the English Romantics, both as critic and humorous writer - he was known as "the German Sterne", both Carlyle and De Quincey wrote essays about him, and Coleridge also acknowledged his indebtedness.<sup>1</sup> One's sense of Dickens's close continuity with this Romantic outlook could not be more demonstrably confirmed, I think, than by the fact that when Forster comes to expand upon the particular comments of the kind quoted above in his full-dress discussion of Dickens's humour, he offers what is almost a paraphrase of Richter, as interpreted by Carlyle:

To perceive relations in things which are not apparent generally, is one of those exquisite properties of humour by which are discovered the affinities between the high and the low, the attractive and the repulsive, the rarest things and things of every day, which brings us all upon the level of a common humanity. It is this which gives humour an immortal touch that does not belong of necessity to pictures, even the most exquisite, of mere character or manners; the property which in its highest aspects Carlyle so subtly described as a sort of inverse sublimity, exalting into our affections what is below us as the other draws down into our affections what is above us.<sup>2</sup>

This by no means accounts exhaustively for Dickens's humour, which has its sardonic and satiric modes as well; even within the macabre Dickens ranges from sardonic to genial (how cloying it would be if it didn't!) And how irresponsibly indulgent a fictional world it would be if the idea of <sup>the</sup> conflation of things to a common humanity

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1. Ibid., pp. 237-40.

2. Forster, p.721.

was the absolute single premise from which all else followed. But Forster is closely attuned enough to the genial mode of it I have been emphasising to suggest that there is a further way, beyond that which I have already suggested in my discussion of Hazlitt and Hunt, in which Dickens's comedy is rooted in an already existing Romantic taste.

It would be interesting to extend this discussion by examining the relation of Dickens's comedy to the actual 'creative' work of the Romantic essayists, especially with regard to their treatment of place and character. A substantial kinship can be expected here, as Dickens had begun as a writer of sketches somewhat in the manner of Lamb or more especially of Leigh Hunt, whose essays he seems to have especially admired as a young man<sup>1</sup>. And in a way analogous to the connections suggested so far what Dickens can be seen to have inherited from them in their conception of place and character is a marked break with the satiric, didactic traditions of the main stream of Augustan writing, as typified in the periodical essays deriving from the Tatler and the Spectator: the Dickens 'character', atomistically conceived and existing by right of his or her own oddity or picturesqueness, is the full flowering of a heterodox eighteenth-century interest in eccentricity that the Romantic essayists had established as a new norm. Considerations of space prohibit a proper exploration of this point, but it is worth citing at least one instance where a Dickens character, a reasonably complex one, developed rather than simply deployed, and yet still a 'character' in the style of the early novels, seems very closely to echo a 'character' in a

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1. See Dickens to Leigh Hunt, ? 13 July 1838; Letters (Pilgrim), 1, 414.



sketch by one of the earlier Romantic essayists, both in general mode and particular detail. I refer to Dickens's Betsey Trotwood and Lamb's Sarah Battle:

One or two rubbers might co-extend in duration with an evening. They gave time to form rooted friendships, to cultivate steady enmities. She despised the chance-started, capricious, and ever-fluctuating alliances of the other. The skirmishes of Quadrille, she would say, reminded her of the petty ephemeral embroilments of the little Italian states, depicted by Machiavel: perpetually changing postures and connexions; bitter foes today, sugared darlings tomorrow; kissing and scratching in a breath; but the ware of whist were comparable to the long, steady, deep-rooted, rational, antipathies of the great French and English nations. <sup>1</sup>

To this hour I don't know whether my aunt had any lawful right of way over that patch of green; but she had settled it in her own mind that she had, and it was all the same to her. The one great outrage of her life, demanding to be constantly avenged, was the passage of a donkey over that immaculate spot. In whatever occupation she was engaged, however interesting to her the conversation in which she was taking part, a donkey turned the current of her ideas in a moment, and she was upon him straight. Jugs of water, and watering pots, were kept in secret places ready to be discharged on the offending boys; sticks were laid in ambush behind the door; and sallies were made at all hours; incessant war prevailed. <sup>2</sup>

In both cases the genial effect derives from a whimsicality of sympathy that finds such obsessions oddly charming, ludicrous rather than ridiculous.

A close similarity also exists between Lamb and Dickens in their relish for the expansively sociable but insolvent character. Captain Jackson's ability to sustain, and communicate, the illusion of plenty amidst poverty, is akin to Micawber's self-intoxicating rhetorical virtuosity: both Lamb and Dickens revel in the triumph of high spirits over prudential realism with a lack of reserve quite at odds with the demands of Sense:

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1. "Mrs. Battle's Opinions of Whist", *Elia*, *Writings*, iii, 181-90 (183-84)

2. *David Copperfield*, p. 251.



Her daughters were rational and discreet young women; in the main, perhaps, not insensible to their true circumstances. I have seen them assume a thoughtful air at times. But such was the preponderating opulence of his fancy, that I am persuaded, not for any half-hour together did they ever look their own prospects fairly in the face. There was no resisting the vortex of his temperament. His riotous imagination conjured up handsome settlements before their eyes, which kept them up in the eyes of the world too, and seem at last to have realised themselves; for they both have married since, I am told, more than respectably.<sup>1</sup>

Romantic genial comedy ("we like them, because they like themselves") entails a rediscovered willingness to lay aside the claims of Good Sense, albeit in a spirit of paradoxical effrontery, in the interests of a larger and more flexible idea of what makes for 'life'. Such claims, or at least the consequence of completely ignoring them, can only really be laid aside in the world of the comic imagination. In real life, the boundaries of which the eighteenth-century orthodoxy very determinedly accepted, even a Falstaff can be brought low, as Shakespeare realised, and in doing so moved from genial comedy to tragedy. Like the poetry of the marvellous genial comedy often demands a "willing suspension of disbelief", a tactful decorum of taking characters at their (persuasive) face value. Once begin to wonder whether Mrs. Micawber might not have had her moments of irresolute fidelity in the watches of the night, and her charm vanishes. Like romance proper, it expresses an ideal longing, not for the fabulous and unreal, but for a selective reality, a weeding out of awkward consequences and implications, in which a certain type of human spirit can come to fruition. As Gissing has said of the carousing in

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1. "Captain Jackson", Last Elia, Writings, iv, 29-34 (33). An even closer parallel exists between Captain Jackson and Colonel Sellers, in Mark Twain's and Charles Dudley Warner's The Gilded Age (1873), Twain's share of which has been republished as The Adventures of Colonel Sellers, ed. Charles Neider (1966).

Pickwick: "he would indeed have been a sorry Pickwickian who owned to a morning's headache".<sup>1</sup>

Lamb's comic imagination aspires self-consciously to the condition of freedom, a world like that of the "Artificial Comedy of the Last Century", a region of "pure comedy, where no cold moral signs".<sup>2</sup> Wistful regret at the necessary ideality of such a world is one of his most frequent notes, consorting easily with the rather ingratiating pathos of an essay like "Dream Children". Romantic longing expresses itself in him as a sedately tasteful velleity - see, for instance, the ending of "Mrs. Battle's Opinion on Whist": "Bridget and I should be ever playing".<sup>3</sup> Dickens implicitly gives an explanation of this impulse in his own fiction in a Household Words essay, "Lying Awake".<sup>4</sup> Attempting to give a reason for the appeal of balloon ascents to the ordinary public he suggests that "This particular public have inherently a great pleasure in the contemplation of physical difficulties overcome;" mainly, as he takes it, "because the lives of a large majority of them are exceedingly monotonous and real". He then draws an analogy with the Christmas Pantomime: "Surely nobody supposes that the young mother in the pit who falls into fits of laughter when the baby is boiled or sat upon, would be at all diverted by such an occurrence off the stage"; rather, the secret of the enjoyment "lies in the temporary superiority to the common hazards and mischances of life; in seeing casualties... happen...without the least harm being done to any one - the pretence of distress in a pantomime being so broadly humorous as to be no pretence at all". Dickens's description here of a world of comic freedom, which

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1. Gissing, p.10.

2. Elia, Writings, iii, 361-71 (367).

3. Ibid., p. 190.

4. Reprinted Pieces, pp.431-7; following quotations are from p. 435(twice), pp. 435-6, p. 436.

is cherished for its unlikeness to actuality, seems to me to give a good account of the genially comic world over which Micawber presides. Similarly, our delight in those other Dickens 'characters' such as Swiveller who are heroes of genial comedy rather than, as with Toots, objects of it, is a response to their ability by their own élan and theatrical finesse, to create a convincing illusion recreating their circumstances to match their own spirit: Captain Cuttle kissing his hood in a gesture of gallantry <sup>1</sup> triumphantly overturns the mock-heroic suggestion that the conjunction of aspiration and reality enjoins. The peculiarly exhilarating effect of this mode of comedy stems from the impression it gives of freedom magically conjured from the imprisonment of harsh circumstance: the exploitation of the pathos potential in every such act of heroism depends upon the manipulation of the contrary suggestion of further, final truth.

If freedom then, is the triumphant virtue of the hero of genial comedy, irresponsibility is his besetting sin. In his proper realm, of course, this is all part of his charm. But as with our humanity that supports him, so it is in the nature of such a hero to aspire beyond his condition. It is a distinctive note of a number of Dickens's potentially humorous-pathetic figures, for instance, to persuade us, against our better reason, that they are far more humorous than pathetic; pathos evaporates before Dick Swiveller's presence like morning mist before the rising sun, and even Flora Finching has far too much bounce, to use Chesterton's word again, to let us see more than a glimpse of the

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1. Dombey and Son, p. 195.



sadness of her situation, though that glimpse is a telling one, and consonant with the finally more sober tone of the novel in which she exists. This is a matter of Dickens's gusto, which for the most part distinguishes him from Lamb, who, especially in his essayistic self-projections, is all too ready to thrust pathos upon us, softly sighing at the balloon of the comic dream to bring it to the ground at the very moment of its release. Similarly, but more disconcertingly, a character like Micawber sometimes embarrasses us by stepping out of his proper genre. No one gives a damn about Swiveller's debts, but, as with some of Falstaff's doings, the implications of Micawber's debts make him at times too simply real for us to be quite at ease with him. They prompt us to ask the question, irrelevant to genial comedy as such but pertinent to the properly mimetic novel - and David Copperfield teasingly hangs between both- whether there is not a deeper Micawber working on our Copperfieldian trust and generosity by consciously playing at being himself, for ulterior ends.

However it is also true that comedy of this kind often works by being enigmatic about just how self-knowing it is, by asserting its paradoxes poker-faced. In this light it is interesting to compare Lamb's Ralph Bigod ("The Two Races of Men") with Harold Skimpole - Micawber's "dark underside" as Chesterton has called him.<sup>1</sup> They are markedly similar, making their claims upon others by paradoxes that are disarming but specious. Dickens differs from Lamb, however, in showing Skimpole's knowing exploitation of his licence from others as a character of genial comedy: he acts out a persona and manipulates

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1. Charles Dickens, p. 154.

others' susceptibility to its charm. (Skimpole is, in fact, a splendid demonstration of how shifty genial humour can be, especially if used of oneself; and one can also well imagine him writing an essay like "On the Artificial Comedy of the last Century").

In showing the indulgence extended to Skimpole to be disastrously sentimental, if highly understandable, Dickens moves beyond the Romanticism of his earlier novels into a more austere and difficult key that reminds us more of Johnson than of Lamb or Hunt. Forster's comments on the Micawber-Skimpole comparison, "genuine humour against personal satire",<sup>1</sup> and his complaint against the novel in general, "we hardly escape...into the old freedom and freshness of the author's imaginative worlds",<sup>2</sup> express an accurate perception of the novel from the limited viewpoint of the tradition of genial criticism (note how Forster here echoes Lamb's "On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century"), disconcerted by the descent of shades of the prison-house upon the glory and the dream of the comic world. In fact Johnson's dictum upon Falstaff is surprisingly pertinent to Skimpole: "no man is more dangerous than he that with a will to corrupt, hath the power to please; and neither wit nor honesty ought to consider themselves safe with such a companion...."<sup>3</sup> And as with Johnson's sense of Falstaff, too, the final austerity is anything but priggishness: only a great humorist such as Dickens could have endowed Skimpole with the charm he undoubtedly has (see, for example, his discourse on "the overweening assumptions of Bees", or on the Dedlock portraits).<sup>4</sup> Hannah More would have seen through Skimpole in a flash: neatly impaled him in a paragraph (a critic in the Eclectic Review wanted to see his real-life equivalents flogged).<sup>5</sup> Dickens's tough

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1. Forster, p. 552.

2. Ibid., p. 561.

3. "Notes on Shakespeare's Plays (2 Henry IV)", Works, vii, 523.

4. Bleak House, pp. 143, 588.

5. "We have often wished that someone would take a whip and flay them into the development of a more manly nature"; "Bleak House", Eclectic Review, VI (1853), pp. 675-6; quoted here from Donald H. Erickson, "Harold Skimpole: Dickens and the Early 'Art for Art's Sake' Movement", Journal of English and Germanic Philology, LXXII (January 1973), pp. 48-59 (p. 48n).



reasonableness is of a more hard-earned kind, as it is won against the grain of a temperament which is keenly and generously susceptible to the kind of vivacity Skimpole possesses. With Skimpole, and in Bleak House generally, Dickens gives us a vision that is neither genial comedy nor didactic satire, but encompasses something of the virtues of both. And if none of the following novels, either, recaptured the "old freedom" in the sense Forster used the term, this was not because Dickens was getting tired, but because this freedom was itself a kind of imprisonment. For the mature Dickens life was too rich and serious a business to be still viewed through the narrowing, if purifying glass of any particular genre.

Dickens's remarks on humour in "Lying Awake" are of especial interest, in that they are, as far as I know, the closest he comes to contributing to the theoretical debate on the nature of laughter, as outlined above. His view is distinctly on the side of the Romantics, as it is a reworking of the Hobbesian idea of rising contemptuously above the object of laughter into the spirit of geniality. The comments on the pantomime also yield us what I think is some insight into the spirit of Dickens's own more macabre comedy. In the later novels, especially, we do find the macabre in a genuinely chilling sense, though the major instances that come to mind express not a gleeful indulgence in the horrific for its own sake (though there is an element of this, perhaps, in some of the more purely 'atmospheric' grotesquerie of Bleak House), but an imaginatively engaged but objective sardonic rendering of certain things in the world which he finds too disconcerting to merely play with: Wemmick's conversation with Pip about the casts of



the heads of former clients is a perfect case in point.<sup>1</sup> However, much more prevalent in Dickens is a kind of macabre comedy which isn't at all chilling, (but which) is, light-hearted and playful, though not, I would claim, in a perverse or neurotic spirit.

Much of this, I think, far from being a form of covert aggression, as critics who subscribe to neo-Hobbesist Bergsonian or Freudian ideas of laughter would have us believe,<sup>2</sup> does indeed evoke the spectre of violence only to instantaneously convert it to something different, something more like an essentially harmless and inconsequential animation. Thus Matthew Pocket's entreaty, anguished, but in a typically Dickensian comic mode, as to whether "infants [are] to be nutcrackered into their tombs, and is nobody to save them?"<sup>3</sup> is not an expression of latent murderousness against his family circle - being a gentleman he has accepted in his soul the necessary costs of civilisation, which Dickens wryly but unambiguously accepts as the preferable alternative to the brutishness of Orlick, or Drummle, or the subtler viciousness of Jaggers. Rather, one feels, his joke assuages his exasperation by momentarily evoking a world of comic freedom in which anything can happen to infants, or anything, without serious consequences: the comic imaging of death, deformation, or other violent or unpredictable transformation is here, and in most cases in Dickens (and, of course, in much other comedy), not a cathartic expression of violence, but an extravagant declaration of freedom from circumstance, which offers momentary relief to our awareness of the harshly determined nature of things as they are.

In this way, Mr. Pocket's mind-balancing fancifulness is a paradigm

1. Great Expectations, pp. 223-4.

2. See, for instance, James R. Kincaid, Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter (1971), pp. 1-19; although his particular comments on the novels reveal a more various feeling for the nature of Dickens's comedy than his overtly declared theoretical presuppositions would seem to permit.

3. Great Expectations, p. 217.

of the relation of Pip, the narrator recreating his past experience, to the original nature of the experience itself. For in the comic mutation of that experience in recollection he manages to suggest, above all, a heartening sense of freedom and detachment from a childhood that is indicated to have been painful but is not in fact felt as such in the narrative re-telling, from a determining set of circumstances that but for the assurance the tone of the recollection inspires could not but have left a depressed and embittered human being. That he is partly this Dickens doesn't deny. But that he is more derives from our taking the narrative tone, as I think we must, as Pip's voice, an emanation of his achieved selfhood, and not just as a ventriloquial projection on Dickens's part - taking it as, so to speak the mature flowering of that self-assertive gaiety that bursts out so wonderfully yet vulnerably in Pip's "lie" about what he did at Miss Havisham's, and which, in its mixture of keenness and fragility, his own name so nicely symbolises. The narrator's voice, of course, has much in common with Dickens's own, and so, in a sense is ventriloquial. Yet it is bestowed on Pip so as to be continuous with him as a character, and not imposed as an obscuring mask - just as Flora Finching's flights of fancy are no less her own for being recognisably Dickensian. Whether Dickens is being too optimistic in feeling that such a voice could belong to someone of Pip's experience is a moot critical point; Pip's wounds, after all, are shown to be deeper than David Copperfield's (or Dickens's). Certainly the novel takes pains to give its optimism some basis, carefully and subtly enmeshing good and bad together as Pip's formative influences: it is the



presence of Joe's hopelessly self-baffling but still latent strength and assertiveness that justifies a Pip quite unlike Arthur Clennam or George Silverman, so that we accept his intermittent flashes of power (as with his cleanly aggressive tone towards Pumblechook, for instance),<sup>1</sup> as quite compatible with the timidity and masochism he reveals at other times. Given this, that Dickens chose to give Pip the benefit of what must be, to all but the dogmatic, at least a doubt, is a characteristic of his hopeful but not unrealistic outlook on life, of which his genial comic spirit is such a natural expression.

### III

One of the most engaging achievements of the writers under discussion, where again we can see Dickens deriving from, and building upon his Romantic predecessors, is their treatment of London. This topic deserves to be treated as a section in itself, and doing so will enable a recapitulation of the themes I have been pursuing in the last two chapters, in a way which will reinforce our sense of their interrelation.

It is a surprising paradox of cultural history that Augustanism, which was generally urban in temper, produced a mainly hostile literary response to London life (London being the paradigm city of the present), whereas the Romantics, who have been traditionally seen as anti-urban, produced among them a considerable body of work in which the city is responded to in a way that is fresh, curious, and welcoming, naive in all the ambiguity of positive and negative senses which, thanks to the Romantics, the word now has for us.

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1. The unconscious poetry of the assault on Pumblechook ("his mouth full of flowering annuals to prevent his crying out" (p.475) - 'laughing Ceres'?) seems actually to have more to do with one side of Pip's nature than with the merely brutal Orlick's; p. 71.



The explanation can be found, perhaps, by recalling Hogarth's Progresses, and their essentially eighteenth-century temper. "The Rake's Progress", for instance, is very close in spirit to the following passage from Pope's "Moral Essay: Epistle III":

Riches, like insects, when concealed they lie,  
Wait but for wings, and in their season fly,  
Who sees pale Mammon pine amidst his store,  
Sees but a backward steward for the Poor;  
This year a Reservoir, to keep and spare;  
The next, a Fountain, spouting through his Heir,  
In lavish streams to quench a Country's thirst  
And men and dogs shall drink him 'till they burst. 1

This is adduced, unconvincingly, to support Pope's blandly rationalising paradox that "Extremes in Nature equal Good produce". The imaginative intensity, however, lies in the perception of the fate of the heir; Pope's satiric hauteur ("men and dogs") counterpoises a peculiarly naked vision of grotesque predatory ferocity, and the almost innocent helplessness of its victim. This is even closer to Hogarth, I think, than the later narrative of Sir Baalaam is to the "Marriage à la Mode", a resemblance Mrs. Leavis has noted. For Pope such malignity is not systematically associated with an anti-urban attitude. Yet while his roots are in 'The World' (the Epistles to Miss Blount, "...after the Coronation", and "...With the works of Voiture" are characteristic early poems), the later satire, based in the Twickenham retreat, foreshadows what in the second half of the century becomes an almost habitual identification of city life as such with the Hogarthian snares and predators. For whatever Johnson might say in conversation about the man who disliked London not liking life, he felt impelled to write of London poetically in

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1. (1732), ll. 171-78.

these terms:

For who would leave, unbrib'd, Hibernia's land,  
Or change the rocks of Scotland for the Strand?  
There none are swept by sudden fate away,  
But all whom hunger spares, with age decay:  
Here malice, rapine, accident, conspire,  
And now a rabble rages, now a fire;  
Their ambush here relentless ruffians lay  
And here the fell attorney prowls for prey;  
Here falling houses thunder on your head,  
And here a female atheist talks you dead.

While THALES waits the wherry that contains  
of dissipated wealth the small remains.<sup>1</sup>

Goldsmith echoes with a sentimentalised "Harlot's Progress":

Ah, turn thine eyes  
Where the poor houseless shivering female lies,  
She once, perhaps in village plenty blest,  
Has wept at tales of innocence distress'd;  
Her modest looks the cottage might adorn,  
Sweet as the primrose peeps beneath the thorn;  
Now lost to all; her friends, her virtue fled,  
Near her betrayer's door she lays her head,  
And pinched with cold, and shrinking from the shower,  
With heavy heart deplores the luckless hour,  
When idly first, ambitious of the town,  
She left her wheel and robes of country brown.<sup>2</sup>

- though the sentiment has not yet developed into the positive issue of active humanitarianism: Miss Burdett-Coutts's door is not yet an available alternative, nor are the (ostensibly pure) redeeming feet of Mr. Peggotty echoing through the streets. Cowper's denunciation is perhaps the most intense of all. Yet G. Robert Stange is quite wrong, I think, when he suggests in *The Victorian City*<sup>3</sup> that Cowper anticipates the Romantics in this matter, for his picture of London is quite continuous with the Hogarthian mode:

Ambition, avarice, penury incurred  
By endless riot, vanity, the lust  
Of pleasure and variety, dispatch,  
As duly as the swallows disappear,  
The world of wandering knights and squires to town.

1. "London; A Poem in Imitation of the Third Satire of Jurenal." 11.9-20.

2. "The Deserted Village", 11, 325-336.

3. G. Robert Stange, "The Frightened Poets", in H.J. Dyos and Michael Wolff, eds., *The Victorian City*, 2 vol. (1974), ii, 475-94 (476-7). Stange identifies Augustanism with a pro-urban disposition.



London engulfs them all. The shark is there  
 And the shark's prey; the spendthrift and the leech  
 That sucks him; there the sycophant and he  
 That with bare-headed and obsequious bows  
 Begs a warm office, doomed to a cold jail  
 And groat per diem if his patron frown.  
 The levee ~~swarms~~, as if in golden pomp  
 Were charactered on every statesman's door,  
 "Battered and bankrupt fortunes mended here."  
 These are the charms that sully and eclipse  
 The charms of nature. <sup>1</sup>

And the rearguard-Augustanism of the Anti-Jacobin group's "The  
 New Morality" smoothly accommodates new vices to the old pattern:

Guard we but our own hearts: with constant view  
 To ancient morals, ancient manners true,  
 True to the manlier virtues, such as nerved  
 Our father's breasts, and this proud Isle preserved  
 For many a rugged age:- and scorn the while, -  
 Each philosophic atheist's specious guile. -  
 The soft seductions, the refinements nice,  
 Of gay morality, and easy vice:-  
 So shall we brave the storm; our 'stablished power  
 Thy refuge, Europe, in some happier hour, -  
 - But French in heart - tho' victory crown our brow,  
 Low at our feet though prostrate nations bow,  
 Wealth gild our cities, commerce crowd our shore, -  
 London may shine, but England is no more. <sup>2</sup>

What Johnson (in "London") praised, not without self-humour,  
 as "surly virtue", with its dislike of "the supple Gaul" "studious  
 to please, and ready to submit", was as much a part of the Augustan  
 self-image of the English as Chesterfield's cosmopolite urbanity.  
 The French Revolution merely confirmed traditional suspicions.

London then, far from representing to the Augustans their ideal  
 of civility, was the object of almost inflexible and stereotyped distrust.  
 The attitude reflects the more heavily moral tone of the later Augustan  
 generations, for whom Johnson and Cowper rather than Pope and Addison  
 were the representative spokesmen, and the underlying shift of social

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1. "The Task", III, 811-826.

2. ll. 453-65 (these lines by W.F.M. Canning); in Rice-Oxley, ed.,  
 "Poetry of the Anti-Jacobin", p. 191.

3. ll. 145, 124, 123.



gravity in the Augustan synthesis towards the middle-class. If the Pastoral poetry of the middle and later Augustans reminded Eliot of retired country clergymen and schoolmasters, the social poetry suggests Dr. Primrose and Mr. Knightley; which is to say that the anti-urban attitude derives not from a predilection to Romantic solitariness but from a feeling that the country is a suitably temperate zone in which a proper sociability can flourish. It is possible to see in the hostility, perhaps, the special situation of the eighteenth-century middle-class and lower gentry: largely integrated with the higher orders, and yet subordinately dependent upon them, Hogarth's Progresses must have had a particular relevance to the vulnerabilities of their social situation. The interrelation of marriage and seduction with social ambition must have represented a peculiar peril for people with enough social position to feel this kind of elevation to be a real possibility, and yet still inferior enough to be more than likely enough the exploited party in any such arrangement. Similarly the embitterment with the patronage system so pervasive in the above passages also reflects the inevitable tensions of a cultural situation where the diffusion of aristocratic culture into the middle-classes created a superfluity of ambitious and well-educated middle-class men of letters desperately dependent on support from the patrician elite.

Different social conditions supported Lamb and Hunt, and later Dickens. For their expanded and broader-based audience London could no longer in the old way mean the lure of 'The World'; where the

story of Dr. Primrose, his daughter, and Squire Thornhill in The Vicar of Wakefield must have represented a common problem for Goldsmith's readers, Kate Nickleby's plight is something of a social fantasy: Dickens's tale of "the Misplaced Attachment of Mr. John Dounce" in the Sketches by Boz<sup>1</sup> would probably have been closer to the real experience of many of his new reading public. Similarly the increased possibility of making a living by professional journalism can be seen to have palliated another source of urban disillusion - from Goldsmith to Gissing the theme of the "Distrest Poet" is conspicuous by its absence.<sup>2</sup>

Wordsworth's rejection of London is in markedly different terms from that of the earlier writers:

Rise up, thou monstrous ant-hill on the plain  
Of a too busy world! Before me flow,  
Thou endless stream of men and moving things!  
Thy everyday appearance, as it strikes -  
With wonder heightened, or sublimed by awe -  
On strangers, of all ages; the quick dance,  
Of colours, lights, and forms; the deafening din;  
The comers and the goers face to face,  
Face after face; the string of dazzling wares,  
Shop after shop, with symbols, blazoned names,  
And all the tradesman's honours overhead:<sup>3</sup>

What repels Wordsworth is not the Hogarthian snare, but the benumbing oppression of atomised vanity. His London anticipates the idea of 'mass society' that was to develop into an orthodoxy later in the century:

Oh, blank confusion! true epitome  
Of what the mighty city is herself  
To thousands upon thousands of her sons,  
Living amidst the same perpetual whirl

1. pp. 244-9.

2. Though Dickens's letters do show him very much aware of the still far from secure position of the writer: to Miss Coutts, 2 June 1843, Letters (Pilgrim) iii, 499-500; to Thomas Beard, 4 September 1845, Letters, i, 700. Dickens's activities on behalf of the Guild of Art and Literature expressed a similar concern.

3. The Prelude, VII, 149-59.

Of trivial objects, melted and reduced  
 To one identity, by differences  
 That have no law, no meaning, and no end - 1

The deep inner attention, the steady rhythms, of the organic consciousness, cannot flourish here.

By contrast, Wordsworth's London-based associates, while sharing his sense of the metropolis as an "endless stream", were attracted to it for that very reason. Hazlitt, in "On Londoners and Country People",<sup>2</sup> accepts Wordsworth's claim that city life destroys local sympathies, and draws an unflattering portrait of the typical Londoner as "native shallowness mounted with pertness and conceit",<sup>3</sup> someone, in fact, rather like Guppy. But he concludes with a celebration of the compensating benefits of living amidst the city's rich variety:

But man in London becomes, as Mr. Burke has it, a sort of "public creature". He lives in the eye of the world, and the world in his. If he witnesses less of the details of private life, he has better opportunities for observing its larger masses and varied movements. He sees the stream of human life pouring along the streets - its comforts and embellishments piled up in the shops - the houses are proofs of the industry, the public buildings of the art and magnificence of man; while the public amusements and places of resort are a centre and support for social feeling. A playhouse alone is a school of humanity, where all eyes are fixed on the same gay or solemn scene, where smiles or tears are spread from face to face, and where a thousand hearts beat in unison! 4

Hazlitt was specifically answering the preface to The Excursion. A letter of Lamb's to Wordsworth, declining his invitation to the Lake District, has none of Hazlitt's reservations in its clear preference for city life:

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1. Ibid., VII, 722-8.

2. Plain Speaker, Works, xii, 66-77.

3. Ibid., p. 74.

4. Ibid., p. 77.



I have passed all my days in London, until I have formed as many and intense local attachments as any of you mountaineers can have done with dead Nature. The lighted shops of the Strand and Fleet Street; the innumerable trades, tradesmen, and customers, coaches, waggons, playhouses; all the bustle and wickedness round about Convent Garden; the very women of the Town; the watchmen, drunken scenes, rattles; life awake, if you awake, at all hours of the night; the impossibility of being dull in Fleet Street; the crowds, the very dirt and mud...the pantomimes - London itself a pantomime and a masquerade - all these things work themselves into my mind, and feed me, without a power of satiating me. The wonder of these sights impels me into night-walks about her crowded streets, and I often shed tears in the motley Strand from fulness of joy at so much life.

...Have I not enough, without your mountains?<sup>1</sup>

A similar apostrophe in his essay "The Londoner" discloses more clearly how an acknowledged appreciation of city life is enabled by freedom from the neo-classic mould:

The very deformities of London, which give distaste to others, from habit do not displease me. The endless succession of shops where Fancy, miscalled Folly is supplied with perpetual gauds and toys, excite in me no puritanical aversion. I gladly behold every appetite supplied with its proper food. The obliging customer, and the obliged tradesman - things which live by bowing, and things which exist but for homage - do not affect me with disgust; from habit I perceive nothing but urbanity, where other men, more refined, discover meanness: I love the very smoke of London, because it has been the medium most familiar to my vision.<sup>2</sup>

This is in Lamb's habitual tone of unsistent iconoclasm, - of dissent from an accepted norm which disarms by offering itself as eccentricity. It is at least partly a statement of emancipation from the neo-classical distrust of appetite from which much of its hostility to urban life derives. Where urban commerce seems to the neo-classic eye to be merely the accomplice of moral corruption in its promotion of "soft seductions and refinements nice", Lamb offers,

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1. Letter to Wordsworth, 30 January 1801; in Writings, ii, 69-71.

2. Pseudonymous letter first published in "The Reflector"; Writings, iv, 322-4). (323-4).

speaking not as public moralist but as private tourist, a whimsical yet not unserious alternative of an innocent consumerism. Taken with strict seriousness such a view would be irresponsibly naive, but, in the spirit in which it is offered, it has the positive effect of freeing a whole area of life from a too simply reductive interpretation.

As Philip Collins has pointed out, the above quoted letter of Lamb's might well be a manifesto for Dickens.<sup>1</sup> For Dickens's rendering of London, though it is richer and more various than that of his immediate predecessors, inherits and grows from their appreciation of its discontinuous, particular life, free of the old moral framework. As examples of this attitude one can cite Lamb's "South Sea House", "My First Play", "The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple", "In Praise of Chimney Sweepers", "Complaint of the Decay of Beggars in the Metropolis", to give a not exhaustive list; one's list for Hunt would include "On the Sight of Shops", "Walks Home by Night", "A Visit to the Zoological Gardens", "The Inside of an Omnibus", and some of the sketches that enliven series such as The Town, and The Old Court Suburb. Sketches by Boz obviously shows Dickens at his closest to these essays, but modifications of the sketch manner, integrated with an increasing tightness into the work as a whole, yet bearing the recognisable marks of set-pieces, persist into the later novels.

Each writer, here, as with the writings discussed earlier, adopts the general mode to his own temperament. Hunt writes with a flavour of light humour, but his key-note is a straightforwardly aesthetic

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1. "Dickens and London", in Dyos and Wolff, eds., The Victorian City, ii., 537-57.



pleasure in the incidental graces and beauties of the urban scene.

Compare his thoughts on trees in The Town<sup>1</sup>, for example, with

Dickens's wry comedy of the countrified sparrows of Staple Inn in

Bleak House<sup>2</sup>. Or look what Hunt has to say on the subject of fogs:

But the mind can often help itself with agreeable images against disagreeable ones: or pitch itself round to the best sides and aspects of them. The solid and fiery ball of the sun, stuck, as it were, in the thick, foggy atmosphere; the moon just winning her way through it into beams; nay, the very candles and gas lights in the shop-windows of a misty evening - all have, in our eyes, their agreeable varieties of contrast to the surrounding haze.<sup>3</sup>

Quotation of the relevant passage of Dickens isn't necessary. Lamb, on the other hand, has a mannered half-facetious religiosity about his quiet nooks and crannies that is thankfully all his own; so that when Dickens echoes the "South Sea House" in his account of Tom Pinch's 'office' in the Temple the prose is plainer, and draws its (not exceptional) animation from a typically Dickensian noting of the grotesqueness of decay.

One trait, however, that Lamb, Hunt and Dickens in his first-person sketches, all share in their descriptions of London, is the frequent reference to childhood. Many of the scenes are childhood memories, and their detailed rendering is a way of keeping in touch with child-like wonder - 'continuity' again. From a strictly adult point of view many of the scenes are not worthy of such attention; they would seem to be, in fact, prime examples of what Jeffrey classed as "things which we still love and are moved by in secret", but "must necessarily be despised as childish, or derided as absurd."<sup>4</sup> One

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1. The Town; Its Memorable Characters and Events (1859), pp. 21-2.

2. Bleak House, p. 181.

3. The Indicator, 31 November 1819; Hunt, pp. 120-2 (p.120).

4. Wain, Contemporary Reviews of Romantic Poetry, p. 74.



cannot imagine Addison devoting several pages to an account of a military parade in St. James's Park, or a whole essay to Greenwich Fair. In the Romantics, though, we find a knowing indulgence of the objects of childish enthusiasm, in which a controlled absorption in childish wonder blends with a tolerant adult amusement at it.

Thus Hunt on the military parade:

We say, therefore, may war turn out to be as mortal, and speedily so, as railroads and growing good sense can make it; though in the meantime, and the more for that hope, we may be allowed to indulge ourselves as we did when children, in admiring the pretty figures which it cuts in this place - the harmlessness of its glitter and the transports of its beholders. Will anybody who has beheld it as a boy ever forget how his heart leaped within him, when, having heard the music before he saw the musicians, he issued hastily from Whitehall on to the parade, and beheld the serene and stately regiment assembled before the colonel, the band playing some noble march, and the officers stepping forwards to the measure with their saluting swords? Will he ever forget the mystical dignity of the band-major, who made signs with his staff;...

"Beheld", "leaped" - the echo of Wordsworth's "Rainbow" is not accidental (compare Hunt's essay on "Colour": "The little child, like the real philosopher, knows more, for his 'heart leaps up', and he acknowledges a glad mystery."<sup>2</sup>) Hunt had his own light-hearted form of "natural piety", and adapted Romantic ways of feeling to the urban scene. Similarly, in "Of the Sight of Shops", Hunt at times strikes a humorously fond reminiscent note that looks forward to Dickens's tone in Copperfield - the humour does not cut across the evoked continuity:

We still feel ourselves little boys, while standing in this shop; and, for that matter, so we do on other occasions.<sup>3</sup>

and the essay continues on its sociably amused but retrospectively

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1. The Town, p. 438.

2. "Colour", Leigh Hunt's London Journal (29 August 1835); in Hunt, pp. 383-4 (p.384).

3. "On the Sight of Shops - Second Paper", The Indicator (7 June 1820); in Hunt, pp. 207-13 (p.207).

wondering catalogue of childhood memories of shops and their contents. Lamb's "My First Play" aims at the same poised surrender, in which the adult taste functions as humour balancing the glow of childhood recollection:

All feeling was absorbed in vision. Gorgeous vests, gardens, palaces, princesses, passed before me. I knew not players. I was in Persepolis for the time, and the burning idol of their devotion almost converted me into a worshipper. I was awe-struck, and believed those significations to be something more than elemental fires. It was all enchantment and a dream. No such pleasure has since visited me but in dreams.<sup>1</sup>

Lamb recognises the 'absurdity' of the reaction; the tawdriness of the affairs on stage is implied, and explicitly admitted at the end of the essay. But the humour treads softly, and does not violate the subjective reality of the experience, which is, after all, "the glory and the dream", and still a "hiding-place of power" for the adult self. It is very noticeable, however, that here, as with Hunt's essays, a decorum of sociable lightness exists by which it is insisted that the nostalgia is a necessary holiday - one never feels that the recalled past is likely to overwhelm and disable the present self. Dickens's habitual tone in Copperfield and Great Expectations, of filtering memories of a painful past through a present tone of comfortable good-humour, is perhaps related. We can see, in fact, that the affectionate and humorous-pathetic tones of Romantic 'amiable comedy' are a striking appropriate style in which to recall the personal past - the nature of the experience, and the manner of presenting it, are very well suited. These essays evince a process of 'elective affinity' by which quite independent elements of the Romantic outlook, its

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1. Elia, Writings, iii, 262.

idea of comedy, and its doctrine of 'continuity', are synthesised.

Dickens's London is presented similarly in the above respect, though with him wonder coexists with a broader and more insistent comedy, and Hunt's tendency to overly fay charm, and Lamb's preciousness, are not taken over:

The company are now promenading outside in all the dignity of wigs, spangles, red-ochre, and whitening. See with what a ferocious air the gentleman who personates the Mexican chief, paces up and down, and with what an eye of calm dignity the principal tragedian gazes on the crowd below, or converses confidentially with the harlequin! <sup>1</sup>

The comically assumed perspective is at once that of the author when young, and that of the present audience, in which "clerks and 'prentices" form the staple. Indulgence of his own childhood tastes extends also into an especial affection for popular taste - the taste of adults who are child-like in their lack of sophistication. One recalls the wish Dickens expressed in "Where We Stopped Growing": "We hope we have not outgrown the capacity of being easily pleased with what is meant to please us".<sup>2</sup> *MP*, p. 363.

Dickens is not quite alone here; such a sympathy is incidentally implicit in Hunt's St. James's Park sketch, and is present again, with the covering sanction of an allusion to Wordsworth, at the beginning of his essay on pantomimes:

He that says he does not like a pantomime, either says what he does not think, or is not so wise as he fancies himself. He should grow young again, and get wiser. "The child," as the poet says, "is father to the man;" and in this instance he has a very degenerate offspring.<sup>3</sup>

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1. "Greenwich Fair", *Sketches by Boz*, pp. 111-18 (p.115).

2. *MP*, p. 363.

3. "Pantomimes", *The Companion* (9 January 1828), in Hunt, pp. 313-6 (p.313).



After which follows a narrative of a pantomime in a manner similar to that Dickens was to use in some of the Boz Sketches, though the positive side of Hunt's more aesthetic bias is an un-Dickensian ability to evoke pantomime as a form of art that requires no condescension whatever, however affectionate, for its appreciation. It is hard not to believe that an essay such as this helped to form Dickens's creative response to London. It is surely Hunt the Romantic as exemplified in the above passage that Dickens had in mind in the enthusiastically admiring letter he wrote him in 1838; in submitting his extant works for Hunt's approval:

You are an old stager in works, but a young one - in faith, faith in all beautiful and excellent things. If you can only find it in that green heart of yours to tell me one of these days that you have met, in wading through the accompanying trifles, with anything that felt like a vibration of the old chord you have touched so often and sounded so well, you will confer the truest gratification on, - my Dear Sir, - your faithful friend... 1

Still, it is only in Dickens that we find the fond retention of the enthusiasms of the writer's own childhood broadening out into an analogous sympathy with popular culture in general, and a readiness to champion its claims protectively on the level of a 'social issue'. Richard Altick has shown<sup>2</sup> how unorthodox was Dickens's almost single-handed fight in the literary intellectual world against the unrelenting cheerlessness of the culture prescribed for the lower orders by middle-class reformers of all persuasions. His confidence that the ordinary men and women could be trusted to enjoy themselves without becoming vicious (the early series "Sunday under Three Heads"<sup>3</sup> is a key reference here), obviously stemmed from his almost unique feeling for what was

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1. Letter to Leigh Hunt, ? 13 July 1838; in Letters (Pilgrim), i, 414.

2. Richard D. Altick, The English Common Reader (1957), ch. 6.

3. (1836), in Reprinted Pieces, pp. 637-663.

positive in popular culture, at least on its non-religious side.<sup>1</sup>

A brief comparison of Dickens's sketch of "Astley's" with a passage from The Vicar of Wakefield, will perhaps bring out more clearly the relation of this sympathy, individual to Dickens though it is, with the Romantic assumptions operative in his predecessors' way of seeing London:

The play began, and the interest of the little boys knew no bounds. Pa was clearly interested, too, although he very unsuccessfully endeavoured to look as if he wasn't. As for ma, she was perfectly overcome by the drollery of the principal comedian, and laughed till every one of the immense bows on her ample cap trembled, at which the governess peeped out from behind the pillar again, and whenever she could catch ma's eye, put her handkerchief to her mouth, and appeared, as in duty bound, to be in convulsions of laughter also. Then when the man in the splendid armour vowed to rescue the lady or perish in the attempt, the little boys applauded vehemently, especially one little fellow who was apparently on a visit to the family, and had been carrying on a child's flirtation, the whole evening, with a small coquette of twelve years old, who looked like a model of her mama on a reduced scale; and who, in common with the other little girls (who, generally speaking, have even more coquettishness about them than much older ones), looked very properly shocked, when the knight's squire kissed the princess's confidential chambermaid.

When the scenes in the circle commenced, the children were more delighted than ever; and the wish to see what was going forward completely conquering pa's dignity, he stood up in the box and applauded as loudly as any of them.<sup>2</sup>

Being apprized of our approach, the whole neighbourhood came out to meet their minister, dressed in their finest clothes, and preceded by a pipe and tabor; a feast was also provided for our reception, at which we sat cheerfully down; and what the conversation wanted in wit was made up in laughter.<sup>3</sup>

The comedy of Dr. Primrose often turns on the unwittingly betrayed contradiction between the eighteenth-century gentleman who knows and

1. On Dickens's failure to acknowledge the genuinely valuable side of organised religion as an element of popular culture, see F.R. Leavis, The Great Tradition (1962), p.271, and also the Victorian novelist and literary journalist, Mrs. Oliphant in her "Charles Dickens", Blackwoods Magazine, LXXVII (April 1855), pp. 451-66, reprinted in CH, pp. 327-36 (pp. 333-4). For a comprehensive discussion of Dickens's interest in popular culture see Philip Collins, "Dickens and Popular Amusements", Dickensian, LXXI (January 1965), pp. 7-19.

2. Sketches by Boz, pp. 104-10 (p.106).

3. The Vicar of Wakefield (1766) in Oliver Goldsmith, The Collected works of Oliver Goldsmith, 5 vols, ed. Arthur Friedman (1966), iv, p.32.

values his distinctions ("what the conversation wanted in wit was made up in laughter" - he would have seen the point of Chesterfield's remark that "true wit, or sense, never made anybody laugh"<sup>1</sup>), and the side of him which yields impulsively to levelling 'vulgar' enjoyment. Goldsmith's irony is complex, though, and respects the Doctor's Johnsonian grave judiciousness as well as being amused by it. Dickens's attitude where a dignified restraint from simple enjoyment is concerned is generally more single: he is much more likely to find it innocent and cheering than stupid or malign, and deem restraint to be life-denying stiffness - again we can see Romantic optimism to be an informing influence. Hazlitt's notion of the "innocent mirth" occasioned by Shakespearian comedy, or Hunt's claim that a want of mirth represents a "falling off from the pure and uncontradicted blithesomeness of childhood" (both treated of earlier in this chapter) are obvious antecedents to Dickens here. In the above instance, then, while he admits (echoing Lamb's "My First Play") that his taste for the circus itself is gone, he finds a nourishing replacement for his own inevitably lost childishness in a warm sympathy for the childlike enthusiasm of the audience. He endorses "Pa's" surrender of his "dignity", and there is the analogous implication that we, too, should surrender out dignity, and let their enthusiasm flow over us, calling out a responsive enthusiasm in ourselves (Dickens's later description of Astley's in The Old Curiosity Shop employs dramatic parataxis - similar to Lamb's "My First Play" - in order to heighten immediacy). We smile, of course, in doing so, at the naivete that we are knowingly indulging; yet it is not the smile of superiority that

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1. Lord Chesterfield to his Son, 9 March 1748; in Lord Chesterfield's Letters to his Son, and Others, Everyman's Library (1929), p. 49.



would separate us from the bond of common feeling. Dignity, insofar as it tends to separate, is as much a vice for Dickens as it was a virtue for the Augustan mind. As Dickens was later to realise more insistently, English Pa's, especially of the lower-middle class, were all too likely to cling to their dignity in such circumstances with a neurotically self-conscious tenacity, as although they were virtually dependent upon popular culture they were very prone to be made ~~as~~hamed of it by their aspiring Papa-like sense of themselves. This, Dickens recognised, was a distinctively national trait, an effect of the English class-system - see the Household Words essay "Insularities".<sup>1</sup> His most important study of this disease is, of course, Mrs. General, and her influence in the world of the Dorrits. He is the leading exponent and celebrant in English literature of a Romantic style of sociability. And at least one notable contemporary critic R.E. Hutton, felt that "His picture of the domestic affections" was "very defective in simplicity and reserve", "not really English", and tending "to modify English family feeling in the direction of theatric tenderness and an impulsiveness wholly wanting in self-control".<sup>2</sup>

One can easily see that this kind of temperament entails its own distinctive weaknesses, as well as its strengths. Such is the case on this score, as obviously on others. For the very openness to the lively and enthusiastic in popular culture tends to become a narrow convention; especially in the early novels Dickens lacks Twain's ability, say, to respond variously and flexibly to this kind of life, to register

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1. MP, pp. 566-72. By contrast see his delighted record of the utterly un-English Moccoletti 'ceremony' during the Roman Carnival: "there seems to prevail, during its progress, a feeling of general, almost childish, simplicity and confidence" (Pictures from Italy, p. 176).

2. The Spectator, XLII (17 April 1869) pp. 474-5; in CH, pp. 489-91 (p. 490).

both the enjoyable and the harsh and repellent in quick succession.<sup>1</sup> Dickens's presentation typically moves within a set range of feeling (the very opposite of Hogarth here), and he can sometimes seem to be 'doing a tone' on a scene, forcing the note with a too studied good cheer.

Still, whatever qualifications one makes, Dickens's renderings of circuses, popular theatres, boating excursions, tea-gardens and the like, have a zest and animation almost unique in English literature; and this is largely because of the keen readiness of sympathy and imagination with which he enters into this life, free of the dignified reserve which checks spontaneity by its ever-present consciousness of distinctions and discriminations. As Philip Collins has pointed out, "vigour and animation, the delight in life and specifically in the simple pleasures of 'everyday people' ...are as important a part of Dickens's report on London of his times" as the studies in squalor and suffering.<sup>2</sup>

Not surprisingly, what engages him most in popular culture is its buoyant romanticism, its often pathetically comical yet optimistic and un-self-doubting fancy, its affinity, that is, with the world of genial comedy. It is a spirit very much like that invoked in Richard Hoggart's account of working-class life in his well-known The Uses of Literacy:

This is an attitude which requires of the things done for fun - of its decorative arts, of its songs, of its 'free' acts - a sprawling, highly ornamental, rococo extravagance. It loves what might be called (without necessarily implying an historical link) the 'baroque'....It loves the cornucopia, all that is generous and sprawling, that suggests splendour and

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1. Eg. Huckleberry Finn, the description of the streets of the country town, and the dogfight (ch. 21), and the circus (ch. 22).

2. "Dickens and London", Victorian City, p. 549.

wealth by sheer abundance and lavishness of colour. It loves the East because the East is exotic and elaborate.

Like these /the lush Italian/ operas, the songs have a limited and bold emotional equipment, without subtleties, but the springs of the heart are working. It is not enough simply to dismiss them as, to quote Cecil Sharp, 'noxious weeds' - the debased street music of the vulgar". They are vulgar, it is true, but not usually tinselly. They deal only with large emotional situations; they tend to be open-hearted and big-bosomed. The moral attitudes behind them are not mean or calculating or 'wide'; they still just touch hands with an older and more handsome culture. They are not cynical or neurotic; they often indulge their emotions, but are not ashamed of showing emotion, and do not seek to be sophisticatedly smart.

Dickens's position is analogous to Hoggart's, of course, not to the things Hoggart is describing. Like Hoggart he is not espousing Philistine taste, though the reaction against being "sophisticatedly smart" entails the danger of over-reaction into the Philistine; - but defining- imaginatively living out - the properly humane relationship towards ordinary values and feelings that popular taste cherishes, as well as other less valuable things. This relationship is there in the brief but effective description of Trooper George's visit to Astley's, in Bleak House:

Being there, is much delighted with the horses and the feats of strength; looks at the weapons with a critical eye; disapproves of the combats, as giving evidence of unskilful swordsmanship; but is touched home by the sentiments. In the last scene, when the Emperor of Tartary gets up into a cart and condescends to bless the united lovers by hovering over them with the Union Jack, his eyelashes are moistened with emotion. <sup>2</sup>

The bizarre muddle of the Emperor of Tartary and the Union Jack, and the even odder hint of fussy solicitude suggested by "hovering", typify Dickens's fond sense of the absurd but likeable in popular taste; likeable because the feelings it expresses and nourishes are good ones: there is nothing of Podsnap in George's patriotism.

1. Richard Hoggart, The Uses of Literacy (1957), pp. 118-19, 134-5.

2. Bleak House, p. 356.



Dickens is not committing the Philistine mawkishness of holding these feelings up as models for us; his point is, rather, that for us to sneer at them in George would be callously snobbish, that there is a way in which our humanity can be nourished by a sympathy for feelings in others which we ourselves cannot straightforwardly share. George's sentimentality, here, for example, corresponds to his unwavering loyalty to Sir Leicester Dedlock, which is seen to be utterly admirable in him, though it would be rather ridiculous in someone of any more sophistication. Such an attitude is itself vulgar only from the viewpoint of the eighteenth-century exclusive pre-occupation with the Polite, which also found it necessary to make excuses for Shakespeare.

Of course Dickens's sympathy is made easier for him by the fact that High-Victorian middle-class taste valued exuberance over elegant restraint in a way that itself had Philistine leanings, vastly preferable though that was to the taste that condemns it from a sense of Bauhaus functionalism as the pitch of refinement.<sup>1</sup> It is also worth noting here that Dickens has a more straightforward respect for George's professional eye for horses, feats of strength, and combats, as the circus people being entertainers does not rule out their being vital horsemen. As Dickens makes clear in Hard Times, what is an entertainment for others is for them also a craft, a discipline of character. James Fields reports that Dickens spent many hours behind the scenes at Astley's during the writing of Hard Times.<sup>2</sup> And Mrs. Fields quotes comments of

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1. As does John Holloway, in "Hard Times: A History and a Criticism", in Gross and Pearson, eds., Dickens and the Twentieth Century, pp. 159-74.

2. Fields, p. 233.

his on a young rope dancer who tried over and over again to accomplish a certain somersault, which shows that this deeper significance of the circus life, which is evident in the writing, was certainly something Dickens intended:

That's the law of the circus...they are never allowed to give up, and it's a capital rule for anything in life. Doubtless this idea has been handed down from the Greeks or Romans and these people know nothing about where it came from. But it is well for all of us. 1

Bleeding Heart Yard, in Little Dorrit, presents a similar case. Dickens has a sufficiently inward sense of London to know that the impression of an atomised society is partially deceptive. Despite the typically urban historical discontinuity the Yard is in itself an urban community, salvaging echoes of the past into its own significant history which, in a modest but real way, is part of the living tissue of its culture:

It was inhabited by poor people, who set up their rest among its faded glories, as Arabs of the desert pitch their tents among the fallen stones of the Pyramids; but there was a family sentimental feeling prevalent in the Yard, that it had a character...

...The opinion of the Yard was divided respecting the derivation of its name. The more practical of its inmates abided by the tradition of a murder; the gentler and more imaginative inhabitants, including the whole of the tender sex, were loyal to the legend of a young lady of former times closely imprisoned in her chamber by a cruel father for remaining true to her own true love, and refusing to marry the suitor he chose for her. The legend related how that the young lady used to be seen up at her window behind the bars, murmuring a love-lorn song of which the burden was, 'Bleeding Heart, Bleeding Heart, Bleeding away,' until she died. It was objected by the murderous party that this Refrain was notoriously the invention of a tambour worker, a spinster and romantic, still lodging in the Yard. But, forasmuch as all favourite legends must be associated with the affections, and as many more people fall in love than commit murder - which it may be hoped, howsoever bad we are, will continue until the end of the world to be the dispensation under which we shall live - the

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1. Quoted in M.A. de Wolfe Howe, Memories of a Hostess (1922), p. 178,

Bleeding Heart, Bleeding Heart, bleeding away story, carried the day by a great majority. Neither party would listen to the antiquaries who delivered learned lectures in the neighbourhood, showing the Bleeding Heart to have been the heraldic cognisance of the old family to whom the property had once belonged. And, considering that the hour-glass they turned from year to year was filled with the earthiest and coarsest sand, the Bleeding Heart Yarders had reason enough for objecting to be despoiled of the one little golden grain of poetry that sparkled in it.

Dickens does more than record picturesque surfaces - he reveals the inner workings of the culture which those surfaces express, and is sensitive to the vital function that the seemingly trivial piece of sentiment may have in maintaining the difference between a humane, if rough, community, and a degraded one. The taste for popular melodrama that supports the belief is amusement, but the function of amusement is, Dickens shows, a serious one in a way that the Bleeding Heart Yarders themselves would not, of course, be sufficiently self-conscious to acknowledge.

However pernicious the escapist tendencies of Victorian-Romantic poetry may have been for the educated classes, the idea of 'the poetical' is certainly vindicated in such a social context, though Dickens's sense of popular culture was not, of course, limited to that. To try to refine popular taste away from this simple level would be to become a de facto ally of the Gradgrind party.

I have been speaking of Dickens's indulgent treatment of popular culture as an implication of his Romantic attitude to his own past experience. The popular culture of London life had been amongst his most vivid early experience, and this, un-disowned by any too rigid idea of the suitable object of adult attention, continued to be among

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1. Little Dorrit, pp. 176-77.



the "hiding-places" of his power, a creative source in his writing and an instinctive guide of his social sympathies. It is also worth noting that Dickens's defence of popular culture was simultaneously based upon a related Romantic assertion: the championing of the imaginative quality of literature against those who either deprecated the claims of literature because it was essentially imaginative - the propagandists of 'useful knowledge' - or those who wanted to harness literature (or art) to sheerly unimaginative didactic purposes. This is too broad to bear recounting here, and too well-known for this to be really necessary. For present purposes it suffices only to point out that the defence of popular literature - especially popular children's literature such as the Fairy-Tale - figures prominently in the Romantic case: such literature, of course, was especially vulnerable to enlightened reformers such as Richard Edgeworth, who believed that

"The history of realities, written in an entertaining manner, appears not only better suited to the purposes of education, but also more agreeable to young people than improbable fictions." 1

Such an attitude as Edgeworth's was a logical if extreme development of Augustan critical principles, and it was thus only natural that the justification of popular loves from which no "system of civil and economical prudence" could be gleaned (to quote Johnson on Shakespeare, perhaps unfairly) fell to the Romantics, from whose viewpoint the "improbable fictions" that they themselves had enjoyed as children could be seen, even from adulthood, to have their proper value. Thus we have Wordsworth's heartfelt remembrance in

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1. Comment of hers in Richard and Maria Edgeworth, Practical Education (1801), quoted from Vineta Colby, Yesterday's Woman (1974), p. 141.

The Prelude of "the tales that charm away the wakeful night/In Araby, romances; legends penned/For solace by dim light of monkish lamps", and his plea that the modern education of useful knowledge, with its encouragement of an unnatural Bitzer-like intellectual precocity, could give way to the old reign of "the wishing-cap/Of Fortunatus and the invisible coat/Of Jack the Giant-Killer, Robin Hood,/And Sabra in the forest with Saint George,"<sup>1</sup> Similarly we have Lamb's well known outburst to Coleridge execrating Mrs. Barbauld and other writers, "those Blights and Blasts of all that is Human in man and child," who were working to 'improve' children's literature along Edgeworth's lines: "Think what you would have been now if, instead of being fed with tales and old wives fables in childhood, you had been crammed with geography and Natural History."<sup>2</sup> Dickens's oft-repeated concurrence with such assertions is, again, something too commonly-known to need further re-telling; one might adduce, for instance, the pointed allusion to Signor Jupe's reading habits in Hard Times (fairy-tales and popular novels of fancy were of course, for Dickens, an integral element of the wider popular culture of circus, theatre, and pantomime), or to the contrasting reading-habits of the Smallweeds in Bleak House, or the related satire against utilitarian education in the Miss Monflathers Academy episode of The Old Curiosity Shop. Similarly we have the indictment of Thomas Day's didactic children's story, Sandford and Merton, a classic of the genre Lamb objected to, in Dickens's humorous reminiscence of his own childhood sufferings under Mr. Barlow, "the instructive monomaniac" depicted in Day's story as a model educationist (Mr. Barlow)<sup>3</sup>; or his attack on Cruikshank's attempt

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1. The Prelude, V, 496-8, 341-4.

2. Letter to Coleridge, 23 October 1802; Writings, I, 420-1.

3. Uncommercial Traveller, pp. 338-44.



to use fairy-tales as a vehicle for the temperance movement, delivered through a satiric burlesque on the story of Cinderella, "Frauds on the Fairies".<sup>1</sup> Dickens was of course instinctively on the side of tradition in this respect, against the incursions of someone such as Harriet Martineau, whom he referred to as being "grimly bent upon the enlightenment of mankind".<sup>2</sup> However it is arguable that he may well have derived a certain confidence in that instinct by having the authority of the earlier Romantics behind him.

One can infer this, I think, from the way that "Frauds on the Fairies", for instance, begins with a strongly Wordsworthian rationale:

We may assume that we are not singular in entertaining a very great tenderness for the fairy literature of our childhood. What enchanted us then, and is captivating a million of young fancies now, has, at the same blessed time of life, enchanted vast hosts of men and women who have done their long day's work, and laid their grey heads down to rest. It would be hard to estimate the amount of gentleness and mercy that has made its way among us through these slight channels. Forbearance, courtesy, consideration for the poor and aged, kind treatment of animals, abhorrence of tyranny and brute force - many such things have been first nourished in the child's heart by this powerful aid. It has greatly helped to keep us, in some sense, ever young, by preserving through our worldly ways one slender track not overgrown with weeds, where we may walk with children, sharing their delights.<sup>3</sup>

This is, I suggest, a gloss on the idea of continuity as formulated in Tintern Abbey ("I have owed to them...feelings too/Of unremembered pleasure: such, perhaps,/As have no slight or trivial influence/On that best portion of a good man's life,/His little, nameless, unremembered, acts/Of kindness and of love.").<sup>4</sup> The essay is not simply appealing

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1. Household Words (1 October 1853); in MP, pp.406-12.

2. Letter to W.H. Wills, 14 October 1854; Letters, ii, 597.

3. MP, p. 406.

4. II. 26-35.



to Wordsworth as a rhetorical ploy, dragging in the endorsement of the late laureate for its own purposes. On the contrary one might well say that whereas if Wordsworth has not existed Dickens would still have felt in sympathy with fairy-tales, he would probably not have been able to understand so clearly the significance of that sympathy, and would thus probably not have been sufficiently assured of its respectability as to have vented it with such firmness.

Nevertheless, Dickens's defence of popular literature is eclectic in its indebtedness. Just before the end of "Frauds on the Fairies" there occurs another Wordsworthian borrowing, slightly amended "The world is too much with us, early and late."<sup>1</sup> Earlier on he had argued that "In an utilitarian age, of all other times, it is a matter of grave importance that Fairy tales should be respected" - in the years since Wordsworth's poetic prime that age had become even more deeply entrenched as an every-day reality for the mass of people, and it is arguable that the world was more with more people in an even more destructive way than had been the case when Wordsworth had written. It was perhaps this increased desperateness of the situation, and Dickens's tough-minded and unromantic resolution that it was a situation that had to be actively accepted (see chapter two) that explains why Dickens at times tends to justify the literature of fancy in terms that recall Keats rather than Wordsworth. The last words of "Frauds on the Fairies" are that fairy-tales are a "precious old escape" from the present (especially harsh) world. Such a way of

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1. MP, p.412.

putting it is still congruent with the Wordsworthian gloss with which the essay opened, but it also points towards the rather different justification offered in Hard Times, when Sissy speaks of her home life to Louisa Gradgrind:

"...I used to read to him to cheer his courage, and he was very fond of that. They were wrong books - I am never to speak of them here - but we didn't know there was any harm in them."

"And he liked them?" said Louisa, with her searching gaze on Sissy all this time.

"O very much! They kept him, many times, from what did him real harm. And often of a night, he used to forget all his troubles in wondering whether the Sultan would let the lady go on with the story, or would have her head cut off before it was finished."

"And your father was always kind? To the last?" asked Louisa; contravening the great principle and wondering very much.

"Always, always, returned Sissy, clasping her hands."<sup>1</sup>

If we, as well as Louisa, are prompted to wonder here, pondering how it might be that feasting the imagination on the exotic violence of the East may be said to be productive of paternal mildness, the answer is that the nature of the (consciously paradoxical?) claim being made is prophylactic rather than inspirational. Fading away and quite forgetting through literature is at least, as Sissy points out, preferable to some other means of oblivion, and while Dickens the artist may have had higher grounds to offer which, not formulable obviously moral terms, would have been anything but strategic in the context at hand, Dickens the public man is at least being characteristically humane and pragmatic.

However, Dickens's sense of popular culture and the Cockney variety especially was not. For its sentimentality, he saw, was inseparable from the decorative and festive, the "ornamental rococo

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1. Hard Times, p.99.

extravagance". Dickens's sense of life is very close to the credo of Hunt's essay on "colour":

...we are not fond enough of colours.

...The Puritans, who did us a great deal of good, helped to do this harm for us. They degraded material beauty and gladness, as if essentially hostile to what was spiritually estimable; whereas the desirable thing is to show the compatibility of both, and vindicate the hues of the creation. Thus the finest colours in men's dresses have at last come almost exclusively to livery footmen and soldiers. A soldier's wife, or a market-woman, is the only female that ventures to wear a scarlet cloak; and we have a favourite epithet of vituperation, gaudy, which we bestow upon all colours that do not suit our melancholy. It is sheer want of heart and animal spirits. We were not always so. Puritanism, and wars, and debts, and the Dutch succession, and false ideas of utility, have also conspired to take gladness out of our eyesight, as well as jollity out of our pockets.<sup>1</sup>

This, in many ways, could also be a Dickens manifesto. His agreement with Hunt's ideas about Puritanism and utility does not need repeating here - not surprisingly he is equally concordant with Hunt about colour. In the Dickens world, in fact, colour is a crucial sign of vitality, and is consciously used as such. Thus, in a letter to Miss Coutts, he questioned her wisdom in commending some essays of her girls which censured finery in dress. He had, he said:

...a very great misgiving that they were written against nature, under the impression that they would have a moral aspect.

- and in justification he added what could almost stand as a summary of Hunt's essay:

I have to add an observation which I believe to be a true one. I constantly notice a love of colour and brightness, to be a portion of a generous and fine nature. I feel sure that it is often an innocent part of a capacity for enjoyment and appreciation, and general adornment of everything, which makes a bouyant, hopeful, genial character. I say most gravely that I do NOT know what I may take away from the good influences of a poor man's home, if I strike this natural common thing out of the girl's heart who is going to be his wife.<sup>2</sup>

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1. "Colour", Leigh Hunt's London Journal, 29 August 1835; from "The Puritans ...Thus" deleted from the Charles Kent anthology reprinting (pp. 363-4), but included in version offered in Leigh Hunt, Essays and Sketches, ed. R. Brimley Johnson, pp. 303-6.
  2. Letter to Miss Coutts, 9 April 1857; Letters, ii, 842. See also letter to Miss Coutts, 5 March 1857; Letters, ii, 839.



(One recalls the story, apocryphal but not unlikely, of Dickens turning up to sit for the painter Frith in a sky-blue overcoat with red cuffs.<sup>1</sup> . . . . . Some months previously he had similarly recommended to Miss Coutts the choice of brighter coloured material for the dresses of the Urania Cottage girls, than the dull fabric she had suggested to him: "Color these people always want, and color (as altered to fancy), I would always give them. In these cast-iron and mechanical days, I think even such a garnish to the dish of their monotonous and hard lives, of unspeakable importance. One color, and that of the earth earthy, is too much with them early and late."<sup>2</sup> (The Wordsworth allusion is light-hearted but not insignificant.)<sup>2</sup> One again recalls Miss Tox, who has "such a faded air that she seemed . . . to have been made in what linen-draperies call 'fast-colours' originally".<sup>3</sup> Or, Sissy Jupe, who is "so dark-eyed and dark-haired," that she seems "to receive a deeper and more lustrous colour from the sun when it shone upon her", whereas Bitzer is "so light-eyed and light-haired that the self same rays appeared to draw out of him what little colour he ever possessed".<sup>4</sup>

From this point on, however, Hunt and Dickens differ. Hunt's more limitedly aesthetic imagination confines itself to the unadulteratedly colourful and picturesque: he is really more at home in gardens and in his cockney week-ender's idea of the countryside, than in the streets. Like Hunt, Dickens complains of the drabness of London, and the dress of Londoners, in comparison with continental neighbours.<sup>5</sup>

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1. Ellen Moers, *The Dandy* (1960), p. 226.

2. Letter to Miss Coutts, 15 November 1856; *Letters*, ii, 812.

3. *Dombey and Son*, p. 6.

4. *Hard Times*, pp. 49-50.

5. "The Boiled Beef of New England", *Uncommercial Traveller*, pp. 250-9 (p. 250).

Yet he accepts London for what it is. He is, after all, the poet, before T.S. Eliot, of urban decay, but he cherishes what colourfulness he can still find there, and charts it with love as well as irony.

Compare, for instance, the different ground covered in Hunt's "Mayday",

"The First of May":<sup>1</sup> Hunt gives us a brief historical resumé, whilst Dickens records a still extant May-Day event.

What Dickens most rejoices in, however, is Cockney flashness, that mixture of the tatty and the hopefully glamorous that, like the tinsel glory of Astley's, symbolises for him his genially comic sense of human ambivalence, its authentic longings and undeniable realities, that is the essence of his vision of life:

[Dick Swiveller's] attire was not, as he had himself hinted, remarkable for the nicest arrangement, but was in a state of disorder which strongly induced the idea that he had gone to bed in it. It consisted of a brown body-coat with a great many brass buttons up the front and only one behind, a bright check neckerchief, a plaid waistcoat, soiled white trousers, and a very limp hat, worn with the wrong side foremost, to hide a hole in the brim. The breast of his coat was ornamented with an outside pocket from which there peeped forth the cleanest end of a very large and very ill-favoured handkerchief; his dirty wristbands were pulled down as far as possible and ostentatiously folded back over his cuffs; he displayed no gloves, and carried a yellow cane having at the top a bone hand with the semblance of a ring on its little finger and a black ball in its grasp.<sup>2</sup>

Ellen Moers has pointed out how unlike Dickens's treatment of the Swiveller type of lower-middle class 'gent' is to the mere disdain shown by other novelists such as Thackeray and Samuel Warren, whose outlook is ungenially satiric.<sup>3</sup> For Swiveller is more than a joke: he is, in his way, a cheering force for life in

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1. The Indicator, 26 April 1820, in Hunt, Poet and Essayist, pp. 190-3; Sketches by Boz, pp. 169-76.
  2. Old Curiosity Shop, p. 61.
  3. Moers, pp. 214-7.

his bouyant esprit, as is given here in the way in which he somehow manages to carry off his decrepit finery (he is surely an antecedent of 'Burlington Bertie!') His confidence in his desperate sartorial expedients is infectious. His speech, too, has its own kind of "rococo extravagance" (to use Hoggart's phrase):

"But what", said Mr. Swiveller, with a sigh, "what is the odds so long as the fire of soul is kindled at the taper of conviviality, and the ring of friendship never moults a feather. What is the odds so long as the spirit is expanded by means of rosy wine, and the present moment is the least happiest of our existence." <sup>1</sup>

Faded rhetoric clashes with homely slang - a favourite Dickensian joke - but the humour lies not in the unveiling of pretentiousness, but in our appreciation of the expansive gusto that seems to reach out for elevated speech as in some sense proper to it. The flowers of rhetoric are for Swiveller (as later for Micawber, and, in his way, Pecksniff) what the Emperor of Tartary is for Trooper George. Chesterton puts it well: "Great draughts of words are to him like great draughts of wine". <sup>2</sup> In this he is a presiding spirit of Dickens's London. For the voices that 'carry' there most vividly are those of expansive sociability:

That little round-faced man, with the small brown surtout, white stockings and shoes, is in the comic line; the mixed air of self-denial, and mental consciousness of his own powers, with which he acknowledges the call of the chair, is particularly gratifying. "Gen'l'men," says the little pompous man, accompanying the word with a knock of his president's hammer on the table - "Gen'l'men, allow me to claim your attention - our friend, Mr. Smuggins, will oblige." - "Bravo!" shout the company; and Smuggins, after a considerable quantity of coughing by way of symphony, and a facetious sniff or two, which afford general delight, sings a comic song, with a fal-de-ral - tol-de-ral chorus at the end of every verse, much longer than the verse itself. It is received with unbounded applause, and after some aspiring

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1. Old Curiosity Shop, p.60.

2. Charles Dickens, p.96.



genius has volunteered a recitation, and failed dismally therein, the little pompous man gives another knock, and says, "Gen'l'men, we will attempt a glee, if you please". This announcement calls forth tumultuous applause, and the more energetic spirits express the unqualified approbation it affords them, by knocking one or two stout glasses off their legs - a humorous device; but one which frequently occasions some slight altercation when the form of paying the damage is proposed to be gone through by the waiter.

We smile at the pompous little man, yet in doing so also recognise that the pomp, both his and that of the formalities he presides over, is in its way a genuine one. Even in this simple piece Dickens catches a fulsome extroversion that demands a ceremonial elevation even though it looks comic in it. The humour is not deflationary: it delights in the intransigent aspiration of ordinary humanity towards the theatrical, the flamboyant, the ceremonial, in the teeth of the doomed absurdity of the enterprise. Thus Dickens's sympathy with the would-be dandyish apprentices: "were there ever such harmless efforts at the grand and magnificent as the young fellows display?... We may smile at such people, but they can never excite our anger."<sup>2</sup> This is the essence of the genially comic attitude, and the antithesis of satire (even gentle satire, such as informs the episode of the Primrose family portrait, in The Vicar of Wakefield; if we smile indulgently there it is because we have trust in the Vicar's other good qualities - there is nothing attractive to us in his folly itself.)

This should be obvious. It is at one with that cheerful, positive, enjoying spirit that so palpably animates Dickens's sense of London, and yet which, as Philip Collins has wryly noted<sup>3</sup>, is apt to be forgotten in the academic zeal for high seriousness, or

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1. "The Streets-Night", Sketches by Boz, pp. 53-8 (pp. 57-8).

2. "Thoughts about People", Sketches by Boz, pp. 215-19 (pp. 213-19)

3. "Dickens and Popular Amusements", p.8.

rather the pseudo-seriousness of attitudinal solemnity. It is interesting that one recent study that seems to me to do just this, does so largely through its inability to distinguish between the genial and the satiric. J. Hillis Miller rightly perceives that Dickens's London reveals itself largely through theatrical gestures of one kind or another; yet by interpreting this satirically and reductively he arrives at a sense of London for all the world like the satiric mock heroic vision of Eliot's "Waste Land":

Unconsciously theatrical gestures or speech are the signs not of a plenitude but of an absence. They have the hollowness of a mask... . The theme of disillusionment runs through all the Sketches,...an uncovering of the sordid reality behind a beguiling surface is the essential movement of the Sketches... . Boz is the man who knows that behind the stage set is the cobwebby disorder backstage. Behind each mask he sees the shabby performer.<sup>1</sup>

This is presentably glum (not to mention mean-minded), for the taste of modern angst but it has nothing to do with Dickens's feeling for the relation between the theatrical and the 'real'. Predictably, Miller's prose works characteristically in the idiom of contemporary radical social criticism:

The reader of the Sketches receives a powerful sense not only of the comic vitality of Dickens's earliest creations, but of their enclosure, the narrowness of their lives, their spiritual poverty. They are pathetically without awareness that their cheapness is pathetic, hopelessly imprisoned within the cells of a fraudulent culture.<sup>2</sup>

If these figures are "hopelessly imprisoned", how, one might well ask, do they manage at the same time to embody "comic vitality", since, as I have argued, the paradoxical air of freedom they possess is a crucial aspect of their comic being?

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1. J. Hillis Miller, "Sketches by Boz, Oliver Twist, and Cruikshank's Illustrations", in J. Hillis Miller and David Borowitz, eds., Charles Dickens and George Cruikshank (1971), pp. (pp. 25-6).

2. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

One might perhaps wonder whether it isn't Miller himself who is imprisoned, within the jaundiced categories of his rhetoric? For surely another strength of Dickens's vision of London is that even when his view of it becomes more depressed, it never sank into the alienated totalising abstraction implied by Miller's account; even in Bleak House the fog and the mud does not quite smother out Astley's, Phil Squod, Snagsby and his "countrified" sparrows, or the perky, if not exactly humane liveliness and sociability of Cook's Court and the Sol's Arms, or the "Slap-Bang" restaurant. Dickens's increasingly coherent and interrelated sense of society and its evils does not harden into an idea of The System, telescopically perceived, in which trees have receded into a bare outline of the woods. Being freed, by virtue of his Romantic background, from the rigid moralising framework of the post-Hogarthian view of London, he retains the nominalism of the truly novelistic intelligence, the alert eye for the particularities that qualify the general case, the tenacious vitality that sustains itself, like the Bleeding Heart Yarders, amidst the general squalor.

Having come down upon this triumphal note, it is, however, still necessary to add a qualifying postscript. For, despite the fact that I have been able to draw material for my argument from both Bleak House and Little Dorrit, there is a way in which Guppy, say, does signify a change of atmosphere in Dickens's London, a change analogous to the ones I have already indicated in Bleak House. Given the contemporary state of Dickens criticism it is perhaps his continuity with Swiveller that



needs to be emphasised: genuinely odious though he is, he still has too much Dickensian bounce in him to be taken for an Eliotic "young man carbuncular". For Dickens at once to make him seriously offensive, and yet still, in a way, enjoyable company, is a mark of the novel's distinction. Yet his presence, symbolised by the "large hot-house flower in his button hole", and the "thick gold ring on his little finger",<sup>1</sup> has a down-to-earth insistence in its unpleasantness that defeats the deodorising power of a genre-bound comic perspective. Vulgarity, Dickens seems to be saying, is vulgarity. It is complementary to this, perhaps, that whereas in Sketches By Boz Dickens found the apprentices' efforts at the dandyish to be "harmless and endearing", the later essay "The Boiled Beef of New England", castigates the prevailing descent of fashion from class to class as itself a cause of shabbiness insofar as it exacerbates the habit of wearing second-hand clothes.<sup>2</sup> The gain this evinces in analytical 'sociological' intelligence goes with a marked disenchantment of mood: a certain aura of 'celestial light' has fled from the tatty finery. Likewise, in several later essays which treat of popular theatres in London one senses a certain uneasy strain between Dickens's protective commendation of the performances, defending popular taste against the implied high-brow censure, and his actual descriptions of them, which lack even the ironically qualified enthusiasm of earlier sketches such as in "Astley's" or "Greenwich Fair" - the rendering is pointedly in a style of detached reportage, rather than his earlier (semi) mock-dramatic mode. In the later essays, in fact, the plays are merely grist for a comic mill, and

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1. Bleak House, p. 173 ( my underlining).

2. Uncommercial Traveller, pp. 250-1.

if we did not have the surrounding commentary we would be justified in taking Dickens's attitude as simply critical, in the manner, say, of Goldsmith in his Citizen of the World essays.<sup>1</sup> At one point he even refers to them openly as "trash".<sup>2</sup> These "hiding-places of power", at least, have receded beyond him, and with the bridge gone between his own adult taste, and popular taste, that such 'continuity' constituted, his socially conscious attitude and literary response become quite disjunct. Percy Fitzgerald's reminiscences include a revealing account of a visit by Dickens, in middle-age, to the theatre, to see for the first time since his boyhood a play that had become one of his most treasured childhood memories. Intense anticipation was followed, upon contact with the actual performance, with disgust: Dickens went home at the end of the second act.

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1. See, for instance, Letter XXI; in Oliver Goldsmith, Collected Works, ii, 89-94.
  2. Household Words, 30 March 1850, pp. 57-60; in MF, pp. 171-77(p.173).
  3. Percy Fitzgerald, Memories of Charles Dickens (1913), pp. 41-5.

## Four

'CONTINUITY' AND MORALITY (I): DOMBEY AND SON

"I have avoided unnecessary dialogue so far, to avoid overwriting; and all I have written is point".  
Dickens to Forster, 6 December 1846; Letters, ii, 820.

Recent criticism<sup>1</sup> of Dombey and Son has justly taken Dicken's letters on his progress with the novel to confirm its sense that the novel marks a distinct break with his earlier work, a shift from the self-delighting diffusiveness that culminated in Chuzzlewit<sup>2</sup> towards a more concentrated significance, and from the cornucopian presentation of an atomised 'gallery of characters' towards the more careful depiction of a coherent social world in which individuals, while still eccentric, are more recognisably the products of the society in which they move. This is undeniable, and ought to be axiomatic in any consideration of the mature Dickens. Perhaps because this can be taken for granted it is worth entering a caveat, before proceeding with a discussion of the novel which will be largely concerned with significance and interpretation, that such shifts, while marked, do

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1. See, for instance, Kathleen Tillotson, Novels of the Eighteen-Forties (1954), pp. 157-20; F.R. Leavis in Dickens the Novelist, ch. 1.

2. See Dickens's claim in a letter to Forster, 2 November 1843, whilst writing Chuzzlewit: "I feel my power now, more than I ever did" (Letters (Pilgrim), iii, 590; also cited in Forster, p. 305).



not entail a loss of the qualities that had so animated the earlier work. For while Dombey may be in a sense "subdued", as Steven Marcus has said,<sup>1</sup> it is by no means sober:

"I know what's to be the end of it, as far as I am concerned," replies Mrs. Pipchin, "and that's enough for me. I'm going to take myself off in a jiffy!"  
 "In a which, Mrs. Pipchin?" says Mrs. Chick.  
 "In a jiffy," retorts Mrs. Pipchin sharply.  
 "Ah, well, really I can't blame you, Mrs. Pipchin," says Mrs. Chick with frankness.<sup>2</sup>

Mrs. Chick's momentary mistake irresistibly suggests the old shrew's departure in some sort of cross between a buggy and a broomstick: the leap of wit is a marvellous stroke of humoristic madcap, drawing on, and triumphantly recreating, our already developed sense of Mrs. Pipchin's amazingness — even Mrs. Chick might have glanced towards the chimney at this point. It is richly funny too, for the simple joke about Mrs. Pipchin being a witch is compounded by the idea of her being one in her bustlingly aggressive toast and chops-minded old womanish way. And, like much of the humour in the novel, it is wonderfully economical, for that rather

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1. Marcus, p. 293. Marcus also remarks upon a "tendency to epigram", which I note below.

2. Dombey and Son, ed. Alan Horsman (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 793.

ponderous unravelling and spelling out manner with which Dickens can sometimes cumber his best comic suggestions is quite absent. It is also totally without any bearing on any thematic significance whatsoever. Kathleen Tillotson has caught the mode of the novel well in her comment that in this (for Dickens) "new technique of comedy", subordination to the main design "yet gives ample elbow-room for Dickens's 'preposterous sense of the ridiculous'".<sup>1</sup> For, one might add, with Dickens elbow-room is room enough for his comic sense still, so to speak, 'to ride upon anything, jump over anything, and stick at nothing'.

Yet, some of the best comic moments are also full of point, epigrammatic. We have, for instance, Miss Tox's sounding out of Mr. Toodles:

"Y ou were going to have the goodness to inform me, when we arrived at the door, that you were by trade, a - "  
 "Stoker," said the man.  
 "A choker!" said Miss Tox, quite aghast.  
 "Stoker", said the man. "Steam injin".<sup>2</sup>

A whole case about 'the two nations' is given in one swift, light, fantastical, stroke. Equally memorable - epigrammatic - is the way in which Miss Tox's abject position in the Dombey household is given in her pathetic comic playing with Paul, especially her being driven "in single harness".<sup>3</sup> Or the aggressively contemptuous report that Bagstock "took his lobster-eyes and his apoplexy to the club, and choked there all day".<sup>4</sup> Flawed though the novel is, for the most part it is to do it a disservice to concentrate on its 'meaning' at any expense to the easy vividness with which that

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1. Tillotson, p. 192.

2. *Dombey and Son*, p.16.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 549.

meaning is rendered.

To realise this must inevitably sound a warning to any critic bent upon 'interpretation'. For isn't there the obvious danger that his commentary will merely translate the novel back into common-places, edged here and there with decorative flourishes of approving rhetoric? This would be the case if the novel in question were, say, Chuzzlewit, which for all the fantastic flummery of its 'doing', is informed by perceptions that are pretty pedestrian indeed - even the American episode, which is intelligently observant, and civilised in its judgement, adds nothing in the way of insight to Mrs. Trollope's Domestic Manners of the Americans, which Dickens had read before writing the novel.<sup>1</sup>

The vision of Dombey and Son is an extraordinary one, however, and while it has been much commented upon, and along lines broadly similar to the ones I want to follow, there still remains something further to be said. This is especially so as the novel's burden, while a very individual one, is, I feel, deeply related to some of the Romantic insights and assertions in terms of which I have already been discussing Dickens.

It is obvious that the novel is working within broadly Romantic assumptions. Think, for example, how fully the essential pattern of the novel's thought is summed up in Dickens's comment on Blimber's Academy: "Nature was of no consequence at all. No matter what a young gentleman was intended to bear, Doctor Blimber made him bear to pattern, somehow or other."<sup>2</sup> Innocent Nature versus corrupting Society, these are the principal terms of the novel, and they are, of course, the principal terms of the Romantic outlook. Not quite so obvious, though, is the way in which the coherence of the novel's vision derives from Dickens's exploration of the relevance of these terms to his social experience:

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1. See Dickens to Mrs. Trollope, 16 December 1842; Letters (Pilgrim), iii, 395.

2. Dombey and Son, p. 142.



Was Mr. Dombey's master-vice, that ruled him so inexorably, an unnatural characteristic? It might be worthwhile, sometimes, to inquire what Nature is, and how men work to change her, and whether, in the enforced distortions so produced, it is not natural to be unnatural. Coop any son or daughter of our mighty mother within narrow range, and bind the prisoner to one idea, and foster it by servile worship of it on the part of the few timid or designing people standing round, and what is Nature to the willing captive who has never risen up upon the wings of a free mind - drooping and useless soon - to see her in her comprehensive truth.

Alas! are there so few things in the world, about us, most unnatural, and yet most natural in being so? Hear the magistrate or judge admonish the unnatural outcasts of society; unnatural in brutal habits, unnatural in want of decency, unnatural in losing and confounding all distinctions between good and evil; unnatural in ignorance, in vice, in recklessness, in contumacy, in mind, in looks, in everything. But follow the good clergyman or doctor, who, with his life imperilled at every breath he draws, goes down into their dens, lying within the echoes of our carriage wheels and daily tread upon the pavement stones ... Vainly attempt to think of any simple plant, or flower, or whole-some weed, that, set in this foetid bed, could have its natural growth, or put its little leaves forth to the sun as GOD designed it....

Those who study the physical sciences, and bring them to bear upon the health of Man tell us that if the noxious particles that rise from vitiated air, were palpable to the sight, we should see them showering in a dense black cloud above such haunts, and rolling slowly on to corrupt the better portions of the town. But if the moral pestilence that rises with them, and, in the eternal laws of outraged Nature, is inseparable from them, could be made discernible too, how terrible the revelation! 1

Raymond Williams is right to have called attention to this authorial digression<sup>2</sup>. Unfashionable in its explicit exhortation as it is, it is one of the characteristic manners which Dickens felt quite compatible in their variety, and also contains in broad outline the structure into which the maturing Dickens was beginning to organise his perception. However, Williams is wrong, I think, to suggest that such passages indicate "a way of learning to see general social causes behind and beyond individual failures and weaknesses" that is distinctively of the nineteenth century,

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1. Ibid., p. 619-20.

2. Introduction to Penguin edition of *Dombey and Son* (1970), pp. 18-21.

a transition from an earlier tradition of conceiving of character as an emanation from an individual soul. For surely it is also highly characteristic of 'the eighteenth-century mind', insofar as we can provisionally conceive of such an entity, to combine a trust in individual accountability with a very strong awareness of the individual as the product of his society - such is the whole point of 'the Polite'. Isn't the change signalled by the above passage rather that, following in the emerging tradition of Rousseau, it lays the emphasis on society as a negatively deforming rather than a positively shaping force? Of course it doesn't deny that society can be good (neither did Rousseau), just as Jane Austen, say, equally admits that there are societies that can deform as well as civilise. The difference is rather that whereas the pre-Romantic outlook was based upon an assured sense of a contemporary civilisation that, in its ideals and decorums if not in its actual practice, served to enhance and elevate life, the Romantic response to society as it existed, as distinct from an idealised past or a Utopian future, was that it systematically blighted the possibilities of healthy humanity. And if the Romantic view seems to imply a diminished sense of individual accountability, this is because the individual in this scheme is likely to be seen as the victim of conditioning forces in a way which precludes the development of personal responsibility, though it is also true of Dickens that when he treats of particular persons in his novels he shows little sympathy with people who cannot be seen as more than simply victims; his persistently traditional moral temper clings intransigently to the Charleys and the Betty Higdens in a way which separates him from the welfare-state socialists who are the modern inheritors of this aspect of the Romantic outlook.

Dickens's mature writing is strongly influenced by this outlook, though not exclusively so - his mind thankfully worked more by eclectic absorption than by deductions from a priori premises. And as is suggested

by the analogy he draws between the physical sciences and the possible mode of vision by which the evidence of the "moral pestilence" can be discerned, such an outlook provided for a quite different response than that of the withdrawal from society with which the term Romantic is usually associated. For another possibility for the artist and thinker sharing this perspective was a role analogous to the humanitarian physical scientist, the rôle of charting the workings of the "moral pestilence", analysing the laws by which it worked, understanding the nature of the enemy as a guide to fighting it. Such, after all, had been Rousseau's achievement. In the particular passage under discussion Dickens's vehemence soon leads him away from the *Dombey* world as such, to the more overt kind of social issue he was to grapple with (and already had grappled with) more fully elsewhere. Yet the *Dombey* ethos is shown to be a breeder of its own kind of moral pestilence, and if its depiction releases Dickens's comic delight as well as his militant analytic zeal, it is also true that he renders it as "a system" in a way which shows the novel assimilating together the functions of both traditional religious satire and prophecy, and of social science (the metaphor of disease, of course, beautifully accommodates these divergent levels). To associate *Dombey and Son* with a book such as Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Society* seems ludicrous and improper, and utterly insensitive to particularity. Yet there is a sense in which they both belong to the same broad tradition of social criticism, despite their immense differences.

Within the general Romantic orientation, however, *Dombey* is deeply and centrally in touch with the Romantic conception of childhood, and, the theme I have been emphasising in this thesis, the Romantic assertion of the necessary continuity between the adult self and its roots in childhood experience. As Peter Coveney has put it, *Dombey* "embodies the society which Blake and Coleridge saw in theoretical gestation".<sup>1</sup>

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1. Coveney, p. 140.



Not surprisingly, therefore, Dickens in Dombey and Son draws heavily on the insights of his Romantic Predecessors; though in doing so he surprisingly extends for us our sense of their implication and relevance. The Prelude was still unavailable to him at this stage, of course, but the less ample and detailed statements of the continuity idea were, in poems such as Tintern Abbey and Intimations of Immortality, as well as in the modulations of the theme in Lamb, Hunt, and, significantly (as I will later suggest) in De Quincey. One can't read Dombey, for instance, without hearing the murmuring echo of these lines:

But for those first affections,  
 Those shadowy recollections,  
 Which, be they what they may,  
 Are yet the fountain light of all our day,  
 Are yet a master light of all our seeing;  
 Uphold us, cherish, and have power to make  
 Our noisy years seem moments in the being  
 Of the eternal Silence: truths that wake,  
 To perish never;  
 Which neither listlessness, nor mad endeavour,  
 Nor man nor Boy,  
 Nor all that is at enmity with joy,  
 Can utterly abolish or destroy!  
 Hence in a season of calm weather  
 Though inland far we be,  
 Our souls have sight of that immortal sea  
 Which brought us hither,  
 Can in a moment travel thither,  
 And see the Children sport upon the shore,  
 And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.

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1. William Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood", ll. 149 - 68.

This inevitably suggests the mythic symbolism of land and sea in Dombey (as also, in a quite different direction, it brings Moby Dick to mind); for although the symbolic pattern is worked out in a mode of sentimental fancy - suggesting the kind of modification of Wordsworth through Lamb discussed above - it is essential to the novel's meaning. Thus we have that rather implausibly seaman-like Captain Cuttle, a sailor of strictly symbolic seas, who is justly summed up in the approving Romantic formula that "no child could have surpassed [him] in experience of everything but wind and weather; in simplicity, credulity, and generous trustfulness".<sup>1</sup>

Captain Cuttle is not central to the novel, however, though he points towards the centre. He is one of those characters who disport themselves in the novel's "elbow-room", cornucopian expressions of the novel's spirit, filling out its Romantically permissive openness of form, strictly aligned to the novel's insights yet not in any way carrying the weight of its intelligence. It is rather to Dombey himself that we should look if we are to measure the balance of inheritance and new growth the novel embodies. For he represents Dickens's study - from the Romantic perspective - of the breakdown of continuity. This breakdown is seen as socially enforced; a crisis analogous to Wordsworth's is now seen as the representative outcome of the social order of which Dombey is at once product and mainstay, enforcing discontinuity upon others just as it has been enforced upon him. Dombey, that is to say, is a study of a land-locked psyche, and ironically, as Dickens sees, one of the consequences of the new Railway age is to inhibit the kind of easy inner communication Wordsworth cherished ("our souls have sight of that immortal sea ... Can in a moment travel hither"), and destroy the amphibious life which, for the Romantic outlook, is the well-spring of human vitality.

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1. Dombey and Son, p. 652.

This may seem broadly true, put in such summary form, though detailed adumbration is obviously needed, to bring out the cogency of Dickens's case. Before proceeding with this, however, it is necessary to touch on the question of the kind of social representation Dickens is attempting with *Dombey* and his world. *Dombey* himself obviously invites us to seek out the corresponding type in social and historical reality, upon which he is founded. At first glance this seems easy enough. Yet when one wants to go beyond general formulae such as saying, for example, that *Dombey* "embodies the hardening features of an increasingly influential commercial class",<sup>1</sup> when one tries to locate more particular prototypes, then one discovers that nothing quite fits. John Lucas, for example, has noted<sup>2</sup> that *Dombey* shares "that mixture of hard-headed business acumen and cold charity" that distinguished the Clapham set of upper-middle class Evangelicals, who had strong connections with the banking world. This is quite true, but there is much about the Clapham group that *Dombey* doesn't partake of, namely the cultivated urbanity and persistent capacity for relaxed liveliness that made them so much more congenial and admirable figures than the comparison with *Dombey* suggests.<sup>3</sup> The point is, I think, that *Dombey* as a character has that kind of typicality for which it is superfluous to search for an exact historical analogue. He is an 'ideal type' in the non-evaluative sociological sense of the word, embodying in pure form characteristics that in any historical example will be found to be mingled with others, since that example will almost certainly be affected by other determinants of character than those of the type under consideration. Thus the Claphamites were not only Puritans, and businessmen, but were gentry by cultivation and manner, if not by vocation.

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1. Robin Gilmour, "Dickens and the Self-Help Idea", in J. Butt and I.F. Clarke, eds., *The Victorians and Social Protest* (1973), pp. 71-101 (p.84).

2. Lucas, pp. 154-5.

3. See account of the circle in E.M. Forster, *Marianne Forster* (1956), and, especially in comparison with later generations of Evangelicals: Ford K. Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians* (1961).



This kind of typology differs from the abstraction of traditional allegorical personifications of a religious or folklore kind, however, such as the figure of Pride, or 'the miser', in that it is not a projection of a moral idea or image, but the abstraction of a constellation of interrelated traits from an actual context of which this constellation forms part, or the foundation, of character, but not the totality. Dombey, that is, represents Dickens's attempt to dramatise his understanding of the essential make-up of the contemporary Puritan-derived businessman, rather than a portrait of any possible actuality in its completeness. That he could suggest to his illustrator a person who seemed to personify this idea does not contradict this point.<sup>1</sup>

In this light and bearing in mind still the question of the Romantic legacy, it is worth comparing Dickens's conception of Dombey, his family, and 'world', with a highly similar character-type that has been outlined by the British psychotherapist Ian Suttie in his work, The Origins of Love and Hate. This book was published just after the author's early death in 1935, and as it is not popularly known or generally regarded it may seem odd to adduce it here. However John Bowlby, who is widely regarded, at least in England, as an authority in the psychology of early child-parent relationships, has recently suggested that the comparative neglect of Suttie's work has been due to his explicit hostility to Freud, which created an antagonism which prevented it from making the valuable contribution to psycho-analytic theory it might otherwise have made.<sup>2</sup> Certainly Suttie's orientation has much in common with the school of English analysts with which Bowlby is associated, and which in recent years has come increasingly into prominence in psycho-analytic circles -

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1. See Dickens to Forster, 18 July 1846; Letters, i, 768.

2. John Bowlby, Attachment, Attachment and Loss Volume I (1971; first published 1969), pp.440-41.

Suttie was an early member, for instance, of the Tavistock Clinic, with which both Bowlby and R.D. Laing have been connected. That Dickens's diagnosis of *Dombey* corresponds almost exactly, as I intend to show, with Suttie's analysis of the same type of character, reinforces one's sense that Dickens is a remarkable intuitive psychologist in etiology as well as symptomatology (to disagree with at least one judgement upon his psychological acumen that fits with the still persistent scepticism of his capacity for thought)<sup>1</sup>. It also suggests, as I will argue, that his exploitation of Romantic insights was in the service not just of sentimentality, but of the development of that "good psychology" that De Quincey felt to be the pre-condition of any "philosophic criticism", and which the early Romantic concern for childhood itself laid the foundations for.

The character-type of Suttie's I have been alluding to, then, is that which he sees as the 'typical' product of what he calls "the taboo on tenderness". This, he claims, operates in significantly varying degrees in different cultures, but is especially prevalent in our own, with its patriarchal family-structure, puritan temper, and aggressive and competitive character ideals, related to its economic foundations - Suttie was born in 1889, grew up in Scotland, and wrote his book in the 1930's (so that the world he describes is of course considerably closer to the Dombeyan 'Bleak Age' than our own, of which it is a sociological common-place that it is marked, for better or worse, by the decline of that "Protestant Ethic" that both Suttie and Dickens are referring to). By the "taboo on tenderness" Suttie means a marked culturally-enforced antipathy to, or suspicion of, the 'soft' emotions,

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1. Sir Russell Brain, "Dickensian Diagnoses", British Medical Journal (December 24, 1955), pp.1553-56; reprinted in Some Reflections on Genius and Other Essays (1960). Nevertheless an extremely helpful essay.

the openness and demonstrative affectionateness, that are of primary importance in early childhood. In certain cultures, he argues, such feelings are rigorously excluded from what is felt to be acceptable in adult behaviour, and a rigid barrier is drawn between the adult and the child-like. Here the transition from childhood is not a gradual one, in which the progressive surrender of childish privileges is compensated for by the acquirement of such substitute adult traits as sociability and cultural interests, which, one might argue, in their qualities of playfulness, self-forgetfulness, and warm companionship, preserve the emotional core of childhood in a transmuted, acceptably adult form. Rather it is sharp and precipitate, and children are forced to "'grow up' too quickly to allow them time to outgrow their childishness".<sup>1</sup> This abrupt weaning creates an abnormal degree of anxiety, and a premature feeling that approval must be earned, that makes the child eagerly compliant with adult demands that he become tough, aggressive, and competitive and thus a suitable combatant and functionary in the industrial and expansionist economic system. Similarly, the sudden loss of tenderness is liable to be managed by a "self-weaning from affection", "a self-insulation from love-hunger by the 'cultivation' of a 'love-shyness'....a refusal to participate in emotion".<sup>2</sup> The alternative to this, given the suddenness of the loss, is a regressive withdrawal that itself leads nowhere. The child, that is, learns to live with the "tenderness taboo" by adopting it himself. This entails a Puritanic indifference - numbness - to art and genial sociability. Furthermore, as the child grows up he himself becomes an active agent enforcing the tenderness taboo upon others. He is not only

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1. Suttie, p.94.

2. Ibid., p.93.



inaccessible to appeals for sympathy from others - the taboo involves, Suttie argues, "a psychic blindness to pathos of any kind"<sup>1</sup> - but positively resentful, in that anything that tends to re-arouse the longing that has been suppressed but not extinguished is felt as threatening; he reacts to pathos and sentiment, says Suttie, just as the prude reacts to an erotic suggestion, and for the same reason. For the same reason he likewise dreads to appeal to the sympathy of others, as it involves an admission of dependence which is felt to be dangerous. As a parent, consequently, he tends to inflict his own neurosis upon his children, robbing them of their childhood, just as he was robbed of his. In marriage an anaesthetised insensitivity to the softer emotions leads him to deprecate and condescend to the feminine, and he tends to regard his wife as a protégé or toy, with the result that if, as is almost by definition likely, he remains the pre-eminently authoritative figure in the family, held in awe if not loved, his wife, even if she is sympathetic to children, will not feel confident in herself or be respected by them.

Such, summarily put, is Suttie's case about the Puritan character, as moulded in a patriarchal family. It obviously is too sheerly typological to give anything like a rounded account of the social reality it describes, yet, 'grossly and sharply told' as it is, it does seem to me to offer an illuminating interpretation of one side of the truth about Victorian England, whilst as a 'typological' account of Puritan family life it is at least strongly in agreement with other studies such as Levin L. Schücking's Die Britanische Familie (1929)<sup>2</sup>, and Gordon Rattray Taylor's The Angel-Makers (1958). Most striking, however, is the uncanny and detailed correspondence

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1. Suttie, p. 93.

2. Translated from the German by Brian Battershaw, and published as The Puritan Family (1969).

of Suttie's analysis with what Dickens has to say in Dombey and Son.

At which point we can turn opportunely back to the novel itself, to illustrate this claim.

One can best begin with a few of the early glimpses we get of the male Dombey's, Father and Son:

Dombey sat in the corner of the darkened room in the great armchair by the bedside, and son lay tucked up in a little basket bedstead. . . .

Dombey, exulting in the long-looked-for event, jingled and jingled the heavy gold watch chain that depended from below his trim blue coat, whereof the buttons sparkled phosphorescently in the feeble rays of the distant fire. Son, with his little fists curled up and clenched, seemed, in his feeble way, to be squaring at existence for having come upon him so unexpectedly.

"He will be christened Paul, my - Mrs. Dombey - of course." She feebly echoed, "Of course," or rather expressed it by the motion of her lips, and closed her eyes again.

"His father's name, Mrs. Dombey, and his grandfather's! I wish his grandfather were alive this day!" 1

From the glimpses [Polly] caught of Mr. Dombey at these times, sitting in the dark distance, looking out towards the infant from among the dark heavy furniture - the house had been inhabited for years by his father, and in many of its appointments was old-fashioned and grim - she began to entertain ideas of him in his solitary state, as if he were a lone prisoner in a cell, or a strange apparition that was not to be accosted or understood. 2

He had risen, as his father had before him, in the course of life and death, from Son to Dombey ... 3

The first thing that strikes one here is the way that Dickens's adaptation of the Hogarthian mode is a parent in some of these passages; here, as elsewhere in the novel, he successfully prosecutes his deep-reaching analysis of Dombey's being through the economical, vivid and simple art of the pictured scene. Look how much he manages to convey in the first extract, for instance: the analogy between the "feeble rays" of the distant fire and Paul's own "feeble way" of "squaring at existence"

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1. Dombey and Son, pp. 1-2.

2. Ibid., p.25.

3. Ibid., p.2.

(a typically Hogarthian way of conveying significance through analogy of detail) is further enriched by the odd inversion constituted by the fact that it is the buttons, the objects from which the rays reflect, that seem, as it were to have drained the light from its natural source, imprisoning it into the unnatural intensity suggested by phosphorescence. The essential condition of the Dombey world is conveyed in this simple and realistic imagery. There is a hint, too, of that generosity of the novel which can show us Dombey without irrational animus: that residual streak of humanity in him which we are seldom allowed to lose sight of is indicated here by that (for him) almost unguardedly boyish way in which, inspired by the occasion, he jingles his watch.

The significant point about these passages for the point of my argument, however, is the way in which Dickens seems to insist to us that Dombey Senior is as much victim as incipient oppressor in this situation. His salient characteristics, his name, and the physical setting, which is so integrally a part of our sense of him, these are shown more as the impersonal properties of family tradition than as marks of his individuality; that chair, one feels, is a kind of throne, to which he has acceded after following (such is the implication) a course not unlike that which he now expects his own son to go through.

Consequently, as one ponders the young Paul's life, one comes to be aware of the curious undercurrent of suggestion that what we are openly seeing him undergoing is an odd repetition of what, we are invited to infer, has also been his father's early history, although, as what we later learn of Dombey makes plain, it is of the essence of his nature that his own childhood should remain barely visible to us. Dickens clearly intimates to us that Paul comes at least partially to resemble his father as he grows into childhood - Dr. Leavis has pointed this out as evidence of Dickens's clear-sighted and unsentimental grasp



at this stage of the novel. Thus we are shown father and son sitting together by the fire: "Mr. Dombey stiff with starch and arrogance; the little image by inheritance, and in unconscious imitation".<sup>1</sup> The same point is made elsewhere, apropos of Paul's magisterial refusal to go to bed: "No, I won't" replied Paul, composing himself in his arm-chair again, like the master of the house".<sup>2</sup> This is at once endearing and disconcerting, and it is a sign of the delicate complexity of the novel's tone at this stage that both these responses are evoked together. The disconcerting implication, of course, is that if Paul did grow up - survive that is, not just as a fixated adolescent, but as an adult capable of embodying authority - it would be at the cost of becoming authoritarian like his father. Doesn't this also suggest the converse, which is that Dombey himself is a Paul who has grown up in this way?

The same inference, it seems to me, also is offered to us in the scene where Paul first meets Dr. Blimber:

"Ha !" said Dr. Blimber. "Shall we make a man of him?"  
 "Do you hear, Paul?" added Mr. Dombey; Paul being silent.  
 "Shall we make a man of him?" repeated the Doctor.  
 "I had rather be a child," replied Paul.  
 "Indeed!" said the Doctor. "Why?"  
 The child sat on the table looking at him, with a curious expression of suppressed emotion in his face, and beating one hand proudly on his knee as if he had the rising tears beneath it, and crushed them. But his other hand strayed a little way on the neck of Florence. "This is why", it seemed to say, and then the steady look was broken up and gone; the working lip was loosened; and the tears came streaming forth.  
 "Mrs. Pipchin", said his father, in a querulous manner, "I am really very sorry to see this".<sup>3</sup>

This moment would not be as moving as it is if Paul did not have enough of his father in him not to break down without a struggle. Yet we can't but feel relieved that he does, for it is Nature asserting itself against that

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1. Ibid., p.93.

2. Ibid., p.96.

3. Ibid., p.145.

which, though we feel it as bravery in this instance, is also the beginnings of what is distinctly a "taboo on tenderness" that his world seeks to enjoin upon him - the chip off the old block becoming the wooden man complete. Dickens phrases the act of self-control so as to bring out the underlying destructiveness of what, on the surface, seems an admirable gesture: "beating one hand proudly on his knee as if he had the rising tears beneath, and crushed them." Aren't we meant to reflect that such ambiguously valuable self-discipline must have been an essential element of the father's own upbringing, and that the difference between himself and his son is that he has embraced the "taboo on tenderness" that is the natural reaction to the abrupt weaning and impatience with childhood that are the hallmarks of the family system of nurture; whereas the young Paul takes the alternative option and rejects it, retreating into what in this situation can only become the regressive cul-de-sac that his early death fitly symbolises? Curiously enough, too, Dombey's own behaviour in this scene hints at that resentment of pathos as threatening that is claimed in Suttie's analysis: the "querulous" manner of his complaint to Mrs. Pipchin strikes an odd note for someone of his usual marmoreal composure, suggesting an intensity of feeling beneath the surface that throws him oddly off balance, even given the fact that he disapproves of Paul's behaviour. The treatment of the Dombey-Florence relationship in the novel explores the meaning of this fissure, as I will argue later in the chapter.

At this stage of the novel, however, such an interpretation of Dombey's character can only be a matter of speculation; though, as I have suggested, it is speculation prompted by clues the novel lays for us. We are presented with a man whom, as Dickens puts it later in the novel, wears "armour" that is "proof against conciliation, love, and confidence; against all gentle sympathy from without, all trust, all tenderness, all soft emotion".<sup>1</sup>

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1. Ibid., 538.

But we are not offered anything approaching an explicit explanation. To quote Julian Moynahan, Dombey is presented from a "deliberately obscured point of vantage"<sup>1</sup>; Dickens teases us with enigmatic communications such as that Florence "held the clue to something secret in his breast"<sup>2</sup>, or, later, that she is "charged with something that would release him from extraordinary suffering".<sup>3</sup> But apart from occasional signs that something is wrong somewhere within, we are not allowed to see beyond the stiff upper lip. This is perfectly appropriate, both as dramatic device and also in its truth to character, since if Dombey's malady is a suppression of his childhood vulnerability, the kind of personal recall of his past that would explicitly connect it with his son's present state is of course impossible to him, for that would constitute a step taken towards a cure.

Something very like this, of course, occurs at the end of the novel. Before moving on to this, though, it is worth looking briefly at some of the other aspects in which Dombey resembles Suttie's 'type'. He is, for instance, markedly lacking in those qualities Suttie argues to be the natural substitutes for the tenderness of early relationships: sociability and 'cultural interests' (the person of numbed tenderness, says Suttie as if with Dombey in mind, "gives all his friends the 'frozen mitt'").<sup>4</sup> He is a Philistine, not through lack of education but, it is shown, through a deeper numbness to the colourful and the lively as such - even the obvious splendour of Edith's jewellery leaves

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1. Moynahan, p.122.

2. Dombey and Son, p.31.

3. Ibid., p. 487.

4. Suttie, p.96.



him sensuously unmoved, and his attraction to Edith herself is more a matter of enjoying power over what others find desirable than finding her desirable in herself. He is too sure-willed to be ill at ease in society, yet he moves in it with an Olympian remoteness, enjoying it not for its own sake but for the testimonials to his power it offers him: that Major Bagstock is an insufferable bore is no matter, since as he seems to make a hit with Carker Dombey can therefore have the pleasure of looking on "like a stately showman who was glad to see his bear dancing well".<sup>1</sup> That conviviality has something to offer beyond dancing bears is not a discrimination he is in the habit of making. Thus Dombey is at once an alien in society and yet crucially dependent upon it, as his will needs objects on which to impose itself; if, as Carker says, he has previously "held it at arms length",<sup>2</sup> he certainly enjoys getting a firm grip on it, though there is no surrender of detachment. Dickens nicely catches the degree of condescending participation he is prepared to bestow upon it in the clockwork gallantries, perfectly formed yet frigid, with which he 'courts' Edith:

"It gives me great pleasure", said Mr. Dombey with cumbrous gallantry, "that a gentleman so nearly connected with myself as Carker is, should have had the honour and happiness of rendering the least assistance to Mrs. Granger". Mrs. Dombey bowed to her. "But it gives me some pain, and it occasions me to be really envious of Carker;" he unconsciously laid stress on these words, as sensible that they must appear to involve a very surprising proposition; "envious of Carker, that I had not that honour and that happiness myself." Mr. Dombey bowed again. 2

I think this point raises some doubt (to digress from my main argument for a moment) as to the view several recent critics have canvassed that Dombey is, in a sense, the tragic hero of the novel.

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1. *Dombey and Son*, p.367.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 354.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 372.

Julian Moynahan, for instance, has claimed that his "career" matches Stavrogin and Coriolanus in its "superb desolation of pride and obstinacy",<sup>1</sup> whilst T.B. Tomlinson has similarly contended that Dickens's "most interesting writing" is "backing" Dombey's "powerful egocentricity" as "very impressive indeed".<sup>2</sup> The weakness in such cases, I feel, is that Dombey's power turns out not to have the self-sufficiency we would expect of a man of the stature these critics attribute to him. We learn, for example, that at the post-wedding party he gives, the one social occasion where he is "little regarded" by the company, he appears "ill at ease" and "linger[s]" about near the door" in surprisingly uncharacteristic fashion.<sup>3</sup> Thus, when the House collapses, which is to say, amongst other things, when his socially sanctioned 'impersonal' identity ceases to be confirmed and the very moment when one might expect the truly dogged Lear-like grit to show through, he collapses without too much of a struggle. Dickens does indeed make some attempt to show him proud in his ruin, but does not insist upon it, so that we don't, I think, find his final submission to Florence, to be an anti-climax, "a dismal conclusion", as Moynahan puts it.<sup>4</sup>

It might be argued, nevertheless, that Dickens is contriving things against the truth of his deepest feelings, roping the imaginative Frankenstein back into his moral scheme. Against this, though, I would want to suggest that the peculiar way in which Dombey's undoubted, if strange, 'impressiveness' in the novel is rendered, casts from the beginning an air of ambiguity over this quality that leaves us uncertain as to what our final assessment of it ought to be. For so much of the dramatic effect of his authoritative manner depends, surely, on the

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1. Moynahan, p. 125.

2. T.B. Tomlinson, "Dickens and Individualism; *Dombey and Son*, *Beak House*", *The Critical Review*, XV (1972), pp. 64-81 (p.65).

3. *Dombey and Son*, p. 494.

4. Moynahan, p. 125.

Olympian economy of its manifestation—the last thing to be expected of the really god-like personage is prolixity. Isn't there thus a way in which Dombey, given his social position, is in the peculiarly fortunate position of being able to put forward his deficiencies as telling strengths? He has no conversation, no liveliness, is ignorant of all tastes and all games; but would one want that from such a lofty personage? Wouldn't it be almost indecent for such majesty to descend to a game of picquet?<sup>1</sup> Hence, whilst his monumentality hardly adorns the drawing-room, it still remains convincingly monumental, and thus, in its ghastly but undeniable way, impressive. For the most part, after all, Carker, who is Chesterfieldian in the Victorian and Dickensian stereotype, in cultivated versatility as well as in cunning, can be relied upon to do the talking. However, when he is otherwise engaged (it is, I think, one of Carker's main functions in the novel to bring out this point), Dombey can look simply foolish, as he does at his party, alone "behind the decanters, in a state of dignity", or stranded in desolate silence with the equally tongue-tied East India director.<sup>2</sup> There is, I think, something of a huge joke about Dombey's 'impressiveness', that is not unrelated to the joke about Bunsby in the comic sub-plot. As can be illustrated elsewhere (in the more obvious case of Christopher Casby for instance) Dickens is relentlessly sceptical of the charisma of strong silence, at least when it makes large claims for itself: his is the most un-Ibsen-like of fictional worlds. This may be a limitation of his vision, must be admitted to be so, in fact. But it is true, nevertheless. It is also true that however much we, like Moynaham, may be interested in Dombey not as a soul, but as a businessman in an age of railroad building, this is not Dickens's interest in him. In fact, despite what the novel's partial celebration of the railway leads us to expect, the Dickens of Dombey is surprisingly, and to a somewhat limiting degree perhaps, uninterested in the actual world of finance, as distinct from the qualities of soul it nourishes and denies.

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1. Dombey and Son, p. 367-8.

2. Ibid., p. 493. See also pp. 489-90.



If one follows the directions of the novel, then, one ought not to feel a nagging sense of lost grandeur when Dombey, at the end, finds it in himself to clink glasses with Captain Cuttle<sup>1</sup>. For apart from being a neat tying of ends in the comic pattern, this also has the serious function, as much as anything, of witnessing his recovered psychic health. To recur to the Household Words essay, "Where we Stopped Growing", that I discussed in my last chapter, it marks his new ability to be "easily pleased with what is meant to please us", and to indulge "the simple folly of being gay upon occasion without the least regard to being grand" - even, we might add, bearing Captain Cuttle's presence in mind, of not being "too rough with innocent fancies"<sup>2</sup>. For Dickens as for Suttie, this kind of sociability is a cardinal feature of the condition of vitality that is the opposite to that induced by the "taboo on tenderness"; this condition, of course, is the one which I have up till now been talking of with regard to Dickens and the Romantics, as one of "continuity in...self-consciousness", to advert again to Coleridge's formal but exact phrase. Suttie's point of view, it seems to me, is strikingly in line with that of the Romantic tradition in this matter.

Thus Dombey and people in general. Dombey's idea of marriage, of course, corresponds closely to the characteristics outlined above in my exposition of Suttie's profile; so closely, in fact, that there is no need to spell out the parallel. We don't really need to be told by Dickens that "towards his first wife, Mr. Dombey... had borne himself like the removed Being he almost conceived himself to be", and that he "had asserted his greatness during their whole married life, and she had meekly recognised it"<sup>3</sup>. This is all conveyed to us in the first page or so of the novel. The suppression of femininity is a leading principle of the Dombey world, an adjunct of the tenderness taboo. But I shall

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1. Ibid, p. B29.

2. M.P., p.363.

3. Dombey and Son, p. 538.

leave discussion of this until I come to Miss Tox, in his treatment of whom Dickens pursues insights that the plot enables him only to briefly indicate through Dombey's first marriage. Predictably, Dombey's interest in Edith is that of a bored autocrat who seeks more spectacular conquests of power, and our interest in her, insofar as it survives the melodramatic rendering, is in the test she offers to his assertiveness: Dombey's motivation in this relationship is not unlike that of the seemingly very different Grandcourt in Daniel Deronda. In Dombey, one feels, there is almost the making of a Don Juan of the power-hungry, coldly non-sensual kind that Taine felt to be typical of the English libertine.<sup>1</sup>

The crux of Dombey's case lies in his relations with Florence. On this Julian Moynahan has recently advanced what is, I think, a very illuminating argument (and certainly a seminal one in the reading of the novel I am offering here). Dombey's growing aversion from Florence, which is seen to replace his previous mere indifference, is, Moynahan argues, a consequence of his fear of love, a fear arising from his apprehension that any yielding to such a sentiment must involve dissolution, a 'drowning' of his strong ego. Moynahan bases this view on the following passage from the third chapter of the novel, which comes just before we are told of the new development in Dombey's attitude:

The last time he had seen his slighted child, there had been that in the sad embrace between her and her dying mother, which was at once a revelation and a reproach to him. Let him be absorbed as he would in the Son on whom he built such high hopes, he could not forget that closing scene. He could not forget that he had had no part in it. That, at the bottom

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1. Thus his comments on Lovelace, in Clarissa: "What a character! How English! How different from the Don Juan of Mozart or of Molière! Before everything he wishes to have the cruel one in his power: then come the desire to bend others, a combative spirit, a craving for triumph; only after all these come the senses.", H.A. Taine, History of English Literature, trans. H. Van Laun (1874), iii, 280.

of its clear depths of tenderness and truth, lay those two figures clasped in each other's arms, while he stood on the bank above them, looking down a mere spectator - not a sharer with them - quite shut out.

It is one of the rare direct glimpses we are given of Dombey's innermost feelings, but it certainly bears the weight put upon it by Moynahan's analysis, as it is perfectly in keeping with Dombey's psychology, and the larger symbolic patterns of the novel. But the passage prompts one further question, which Moynahan's commentary doesn't take up. Why, one asks, does Dombey care that he had no part in this scene, given his apparent indifference to the participants? Why does the memory haunt him, and why does Florence's appeal to him disturb him so deeply? Why can't he simply ignore it? If the "secret in his breast" to which (as we are told on the next page), Florence has the clue, is simply that he fears love, why should that fear be so disconcerting to him? The answer to this, I think, lies in the fact that the image that haunts him is not just one of love, but of love between mother and child. Thus it should not surprise us too much that the final words of the passage have a tone that we associate not with Dombey but with David Copperfield, for Dickens's implication is, I think, that the memory troubles Dombey because it reminds him that there once was a time in which even he was a Copperfield, a time in which even he felt the abruptly-weaning childhood-denying Puritanism of the family system as acutely painful, and not as the proper climate for the fulfilment of Dombeyan destinies. The appeal of such a cue to hidden memory, that is, threatens to erode the "tenderness taboo", and the whole character that has been founded upon it. It is Florence's painful fate to be for her father the embodiment of such an appeal.

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1. Dombey and Son, p.31.



What I am doing, of course, is modifying Moynahan's argument by introducing Suttie's terms (Moynahan himself acknowledges a debt to Wilhelm Reich)<sup>1</sup>. In this light, it seems to me that there is another ground on which one cannot fully accept Moynahan's objections to the development of Dombey's story. Given that surrender to Florence is shown to involve a lapse into a passive un-manning invalidism, he argues, isn't Dombey's previous proud and lonely state actually preferable? I have already suggested the way in which I do not share Moynahan's sense of the unreconstructed Dombey; yet even given this, his point strikes me as very understandable, especially as Dickens's massive orchestration of Florence's pathos does, as Moynahan points out, give Dombey's fears in a way a real basis. Yet Dickens is at least quite right, I feel, in insisting that Dombey's salvation can only come on such extreme terms. His first words to Florence upon her return are "Oh my God, forgive me, for I need it very much".<sup>2</sup> What this quite striking admission of need suggests is that Dombey's passive and invalided state is a kind of emotional equivalent to a state of child-like dependence (In Great Expectations, Pip likewise temporarily undergoes a similar regression during his illness<sup>3</sup>). Dickens's intuitive logic is arguing, I think, that as Dombey's disease is, as I think we can infer, the consequence of childhood deprivation, cure can only come by living through the emotional state of childhood anew, this time securely and gratifyingly. With the emancipation from the tenderness taboo (signified by the admission of dependence and, the admission of vulnerability implied by open crying<sup>4</sup>), the 'false self', or, as Carker puts it, the "triumphal car" to which he has been "yoked"<sup>5</sup>,

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1. Moynahan, p. 124.

2. Dombey and Son, p. 802.

3. Great Expectations, pp. 472-81.

4. Dombey and Son, pp. 817-19.

5. Ibid., p. 601.

that has been founded upon the taboo, is now irrelevant and has indeed already dissolved with the collapse of the House. Hence Dombey must begin life emotionally anew, as a child: what seems at first to be morbid sentimentality is really a triumph of psychological realism on Dicken's part.

Such a regression into a state of "docile submission"<sup>1</sup> may be embarrassing to us, if not to Dickens. But it is, so the novel I think is saying, both creative and necessary, an extraordinary solution to match an extraordinary problem. It is, after all, closely akin in feeling to the reconciliation of Lear and Cordelia, except that Shakespeare also takes pains to point out the possessive nature of the regenerated feelings (he distinguishes clearly, as Dickens perhaps doesn't, between psychological and spiritual rebirth): there is nothing in the bland resolution of Dombey's case to match the undertones of the "let's away to prison" speech. However, Dickens's thinking here represents a noteworthy extension of the Romantic assertion of the necessity of 'continuity', as well as anticipating the insights of certain modern psycho-analytic thinkers whose general orientation is roughly similar to that of Suttie.<sup>2</sup>

## II

I want now to turn from Dombey himself, and touch briefly on some of the minor figures of his world. Not much remains to be said about his colleagues in oppression, Mrs. Pipchin and the Blimbers, or about Major Bagstock, that other exponent of "toughness": their bearing on the theme I have been tracing is obvious, and anything I could say about them would only be repeating what has already been said by previous

commentators on the novel - Steven Marcus's discussion of Bagstock, for

1. Ibid., p. 803.

2. Eg. D.W. Winnicott (also, like Suttie, Bowlby, and Laing, associated with Tavistock Clinic), who has concluded that the temporary regression of adults to an infantile dependence can be "a healing mechanism", though "one that remains potential unless there be provided a new and reliable environmental adaptation which can be used by the patient in correction of the original adaptive failure"; D.W. Winnicott, "Metapsychological and Clinical Aspects of Regression, within the Psycho-Analytical Set-Up" [1954] in his Collected Papers (1958), republished as Through Paediatrics to Psychoanalysis, (1975), pp. 278-294 (p.293). See also his paper entitled "Withdrawal and Aggression", in the same volume, pp.255-61; and the Introduction to the volume by M. Masud R. Khan, pp.xi-xxxviii (p.xxii-xxv). With Florence and her father Dickens, I suggest, is arriving at the same insight as Winnicott, though through literary means and with a literary impulsion and obligation to embody such insight in the guise of a sentimental tale.

instance, is very apposite to what I have been saying.<sup>1</sup> One point worth insisting upon, perhaps, is that the thematic relevance of these characters is not just a way of achieving unity in the novel, as is the case, say, with Dickens's not very convincing attempt to cover the disparate and sprawling life of Chuzzlewit with the umbrella of the idea of selfishness; but an attempt to see society as a unity, as a system of functionally related elements.

Something still remains to be said, however, about the oppressed figures in the Dombey world. Mr. Chick, for instance, is generally recognised as a felicitous presence in the novel, an amiable domestic rebel sporadically assaulting the chill of the Dombey world with his cheering if ineffectual outbursts of liveliness. Yet while a peripheral figure, he is still a bit more than a brilliant variation of a stock joke:

"Don't you over-exert yourself, loo" said Mr. Chick, "or you'll be laid up with spasms, I see. Right ol loor rul! Bless, my soul, I forgot! We're here one day and gone the next!"<sup>2</sup>

There is just a hint of something really peculiar in the blitheness of his last words; without ~~the~~ sacrificing the comedy by intruding a 'serious point' the writing manages to glance at a real psychic dislocation, an inner world of private gaiety that, in its defensiveness, has become quite estranged from the normally human. Within the Dombey ethos alien qualities are inevitably twisted out of shape by their suppression: Dickens discloses the laws of this world through a tracing of oddities rather than regularities.

Not the least aspect of the novel's achievement is its tracing

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1. Marcus, pp. 344-46.

2. Dombey and Son, p.11.



of the painfully odd form femininity is twisted into by patriarchal pressures. Mrs. Dombey, of course, has been virtually erased from life altogether by the opening of the novel. Her death is a moment of real pathos, yet that does not preclude Dickens from hinting at the grotesque absurdity of what she has been reduced to:

Thus, clinging fast to that slight spar within her arms,  
the mother drifted out upon the dark and unknown sea  
that rolls round all the world.<sup>1</sup>

That detail about the "slight spar" is as moving as it is because it grimly indicates the extremely reduced sense of selfhood in Mrs. Dombey, and thus an especial kind of bewilderment in her as she approaches death: her case somewhat anticipates Dickens's clairvoyantly perceptive caricature of the almost complete disintegration of the sense of self in Mrs. Gradgrind ("I think there's a pain somewhere in the room...but I couldn't positively say that I have got it"<sup>2</sup>).

Mrs. Dombey's brief appearances at the beginning of the novel are significant, and announce a line of enquiry that demands to be followed, as the insight her fate witnesses is too important to be allowed to lapse. That Dickens recognised this is shown, I think, by the important secondary role he has given to Miss Tox, whose "faded air"<sup>3</sup> explicitly associates her from the beginning with Mrs. Dombey. Her self-abasing infatuation with the "pecuniary Duke of York"<sup>4</sup> is thus thoroughly in accordance with the sexual code of the Dombey ethos, epitomised by Dombey's first marriage, in which he "had asserted his

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1. Ibid.

2. Hard Times, p. 224.

3. Dombey and Son, p.6.

4. Ibid., p.9.

greatness...and she had meekly recognised it"<sup>1</sup>. Dickens's position is not a feminist one in the accepted sense of the word, and in fact his jokes connecting Cornelia Blimber's sexlessness with her education in the classics typify an attitude that is highly vulnerable to the current charge of 'male chauvinism'. His case is rather that in the Dombey scheme of things - as in the family system outlined by Suttie - femininity as such can have no dignity or self-confidence. His introduction to Miss Tox puts this with a nice balance of comedy and point:

The lady thus specially presented, was a long lean figure, wearing such a faded air that she seemed not to have been made in what linen-draperies call "fast colours" originally, and to have, by little and little, washed out. But for this she might have been described as the very pink of general propitiation and politeness. From a long habit of listening admiringly to everything that was said in her presence, and looking at the speakers as if she were mentally engaged in taking off impressions of their images upon her soul, never to part with the same but with life, her head had quite settled on one side. Her hands had contracted a spasmodic habit of raising themselves of their own accord as in involuntary admiration. Her eyes were liable to a similar affectation. She had the softest voice that ever was heard; and her nose, stupendously aquiline, had a little knob in the very centre or key-stone of the bridge, whence it tended downwards towards her face, as in an invincible determination not to turn up at anything.

Miss Tox's dress, though perfectly genteel and good, had a certain character of angularity and scantiness. She was accustomed to wear odd weedy little flowers in her bonnets and caps. Strange grasses were sometimes perceived in her hair; and it was observed by the curious, of all her collars, frills, tuckers, wristbands, and other gossamer articles - indeed of everything she wore which had two ends to it intended to unite - that the two ends were never on good terms, and wouldn't quite meet without a struggle. She had furry articles for winter wear, as tippetts, boas and muffs, which stood up on end in a rampant manner, and were not at all sleek. She was much given to the carrying about of small bags with snaps to them, that went off like little pistols when they were shut up...<sup>2</sup>

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1. Ibid., p. 538.

2. Ibid., pp. 6-7.

Miss Tox's referential timidity is presented partly as a point about her marginally 'safe' social position. Yet it is also and perhaps relatedly, undeniably connected with her attraction, as a woman, to Dombey's version of masculine power:

"But his deportment, my dear Louise!" said Miss Tox. "His presence! His dignity! No portrait that I have seen of anyone has been half so replete with those qualities. Something so stately, you know: so uncompromising: so very wide across the chest: so upright! A pecuniary Duke of York, my love, and nothing short of it!" said Miss Tox. "That's what I should designate him."<sup>1</sup>

Yet Dickens is alert to the paradox that this sort of appreciation of that kind of 'strength' goes with a lack of confidence in the contrasting femininity in herself that the Dombeyan self-enclosed hardness denies. Her feminine feeling for Dombey leads her to adopt his own standards in self-judgement; and thus we have that rather pathetically comic image of a gauchely hesitant sexual identity conjured up by those "odd weedy little flowers", and those shyly exotic "strange grasses", an impression that is soon after confirmed by her painfully apologetic presentation of her gift of fancywork:

"It is only a pincushion for the toilette table...one of those trifles which are insignificant to your sex in general, as it's very natural they should be - we have no business to expect they should be otherwise - but to which we attach some interest."<sup>2</sup>

- an unobtrusive detail, but significant, as can be more clearly realised if we remember Dickens's comment upon the Bounderby's conjugal home: "There was no mutesign of a woman in the room. No graceful little adornment, no fanciful little device, however trivial, expressed her influence."<sup>3</sup>

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1. Ibid., p.9.

2. Ibid., p. 7, and pp. 7-8n: from "table...interest" was in Dickens's first Ms, but later deleted from published text of 1848. It is reprinted in the Clarendon edition as a footnote, and in the Penguin edition is incorporated into the text (p.57).

3. Hard Times, p. 161.



All this might seem to be making rather heavy weather with Miss Tox, but I don't think so. For it is typical of the novel that this kind of penetrating analysis can proceed in a mode of caricature, caricature that is, so to speak, of essences rather than surfaces. Yet it is also true that the interest Miss Tox comes to hold for Dickens leads him to round out his idea of her beyond the confines of caricature, while still retaining the boldly eccentric outlines of the initial image. Even in the introductory passage there are details that, as well as being comic, elicit a kind of protective chivalry towards her on our part: "She had", we are told, "the softest voice that was ever heard." Consequently, as the novel progresses, the brusque satire against her genteel snobbishness gradually gives way to a humorous defence of her as the embodiment of Dickensian-Romantic values; wry amusement at her unmellowed girlish romanticism blends into compassion for promise unfulfilled:

"And the child, you see," said Mrs. Chick, in deep confidence, "has poor dear Fanny's nature. She'll never make an effort in after-life, I'll venture to say. Never! She'll never wind and twine herself about her Papa's heart like -"  
 "Like the ivy?" suggested Miss Tox.  
 "Like the ivy," Mrs. Chick assented. "Never!, She'll never glide and nestle into the bosom of her Papa's affections like - the -"  
 "Startled fawn?" suggested Miss Tox.  
 "Like the startled fawn", said Mrs. Chick. "Never! Poor Fanny! Yet, how I love her!"  
 "You must not distress yourself, my dear", said Miss Tox, in a soothing voice. "Now really! You have too much feeling."<sup>1</sup>

The sad joke of it is, of course, that Miss Tox herself is at heart something of a "startled fawn", or, as Dickens elsewhere puts it, "a blushing virgin"<sup>2</sup> She even at times sounds not unlike Flora Finching:

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1. *Dombey and Son*, pp. 50-1.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 129n (first MS, but not 1848 text).

"Between the Major and me there is now a yawning chasm, and I will not feign to give encouragement, Louisa, where I cannot give my heart."<sup>1</sup> This side of her, however, has remained suppressed, if not extinguished, and consequently remains fixatedly juvenile, half-buried beneath the Dombeyan self she has assumed. Thus the end of the above-quoted exchange with Mrs. Chick shows her eagerly stepping into the only role in the Dombey world in which a woman is granted prestige, that of the protégé, to use Suttie's term,<sup>2</sup> a lieutenant and subordinate replica of the male, marked by that "air of commanding superiority" and "Strength and vigour of mind"<sup>3</sup>, which, as Mrs. Chick says, a man such as Dombey requires. Mrs. Chick seems to falter in her rôle as the standard-bearer of firmness and Miss Tox dutifully takes her place, at the expense of those natural instincts of which the Dombey ethos has made her ashamed and almost unconscious.

This examination of the novel's concern with femininity does not take us outside the terms of our argument to date. Suttie, for instance, as is clear from my paraphrase of his argument, sees a hostility to feminine qualities as a natural aspect of the "taboo on tenderness" - the feminine is akin to the childish in being 'soft'. Similarly, it is not surprising that one expression of the novel's growing sympathy for Miss Tox is a glance at her own childhood in nostalgic recall:

Miss Tox sat upon the window-seat, and thought of her good Papa deceased - Mr. Tox, of the Customs Department

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1. Ibid.

2. Suttie, p.98.

3. Dombey and Son, p.90.

of the public service; and of her childhood, passed at a seaport, among a considerable quantity of cold tar, and some rusticity. She fell into a softened remembrance of meadows, in old time, gleaming like buttercups, like so many inverted firmaments of golden stars; and how she had made chains of dandelion-stalks for youthful vowers of eternal constancy, dressed chiefly in nankeen; and how those fetters had withered and broken.<sup>1</sup>

She too has her hiding-places of what, even in her, is a kind of "power", childhood sources of positive feeling; these are "summer recollections", touched off by the breath of "Nature and her wholesome air" that in the page just before this passage has been described as having drifted into Princess's Place. Miss Tox is something of a pathetic-comic Sleeping Beauty. Her youthful "chains of dandelions" clearly recall the fanciful little devices, such as her presentation pincushion, or those "divers ornaments, cut out of coloured card-boards and paper"<sup>2</sup>, which burgeon in her apartment after her joining the Dombey ménage; these latter productions disclose that however much she has succumbed to the values of the domestic sky-god (whose imperious gaze could hardly be expected to notice such trifles), Princess's Place has not yet become Stone Lodge, there are still some places where she has "stopped growing", and consequently there are still some points at which she remembers "not to be too rough with innocent fancies"<sup>3</sup>. It is this persistence of a kind of submerged "continuity in ... self-consciousness" in her that prepares the way for her conversion to the anti-Dombey party late in the novel, which is convincing on the level of comic symbolism, even if we can't realistically think of her as so wonderfully at ease with the Toodles, or vice versa.

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1. Ibid., p. 395.

2. Ibid., p. 88.

3. M.P. p. 363.



The characters I have been discussing are all, likeable though they may be in ways, "enforced distortions" created by the Dombey 'system', natural consequences of unnatural conditions. The strangest fruit of Dombeyism however, is Paul himself:

"Ha!" said Dr. Blimber. "Shall we make a man of him?"  
 "Do you hear, Paul?" added Mr. Dombey; Paul being silent.  
 "Shall we make a man of him?" repeated the Doctor.  
 "I had rather be a child," replied Paul.  
 "Indeed!" said the Doctor. "Why?"<sup>1</sup>

Our sympathy here is with Paul of course, as victim of the Doctor's amiable but insensitive aggressiveness (his concluding "Why?" strongly recalls Wordsworth's "Anecdote for Fathers"). Yet as Dickens elsewhere is always unsentimental enough to make clear, Paul's opting to remain a child (strange but not, I think, too unrealistic in its self-conscious determination) is a sign of a disease, a disease enforced upon him by the world into which he has been born. For it is an essential consequence of that world to make impossible any relation between childhood and adulthood but that of strict antithesis: to be "made a man" at Blimber's, the spirit of which institution is, Dickens insists, fully in accord with Dombeyan principles, is not to grow from one state to the other, preserving an organic continuity between the two, but to be untimely ripped from childhood and thrust into a falsely precocious adult role. Paul's fate is one of the deviant paths taken by lives shaped by this denial of continuity. Dombey himself, as I have argued, is sealed in a self from which the childhood springs of feelings are excluded - the paradigm Romantic idea of alienation; Miss Tox, on the other hand, is a divided being, in whom the child-like and the adult co-exist

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1. Dombey and Son, p. 145.

in rigid separation. Paul's destiny, ironically, is the very converse of his father's: his refusal to enter his father's world, and his subsequent dying, which he is shown to experience as a gradual reunion with his mother; this, psychologically speaking, is a (literally) pathological regression. Interestingly enough it is one of the major responses to the "taboo on tenderness" listed by Suttie as alternatives to the adoption of it.<sup>1</sup>

On the face of it, nevertheless, the narrative of Paul's decline does not really suggest that anything like an objectively diagnostic study is central to Dickens's intention. But the peculiar power of Dickens's rendering of Paul derives from his ability to insinuate a sure perception of the psychological reality of Paul's case into what, with the presence of this element, we can then feel as a moving semi-religious rhetoric of pathos on his behalf. Take, for example, the conclusion of his well-known enquiry about money:

"Why didn't money save me my Mama?" returned the child.  
 "It isn't cruel, is it?"  
 "Cruel!" said Mr. Dombey, settling his neckcloth, and seeming to resent the idea. "No. A good thing can't be cruel."  
 "If it's a good thing, and can do anything," said the little fellow, thoughtfully, as he looked back at the fire, "I wonder why it didn't save me my Mama." <sup>2</sup>

We duly acknowledge the home-thrust at Dombey's values here, but we are also being asked to note that Paul himself is more than the idealised wise child, the spokesman for uncorrupted innocence. This comes out in the phrasing of Paul's question, which is very deliberate, I think, in emphasising that Paul's feeling for his mother is a reflex of intense personal need: "Why didn't it save me my Mama?" he asks.

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1. Suttie, p.93.

2. *Dombey and Son*, p.94.

The acuteness with which Paul is beset by this need, the consequence, of course, of the privation engendered by his upbringing, this associates, as Dr. Leavis has pointed out, with Paul's disconcerting strangeness. Leavis's judgement that Dickens's genius here "is an intense concern for the real"<sup>1</sup> seems to me to be undeniable. Thus it is, I think, that even at some of the points where Dickens seems blatantly to be indulging in the religious, passages which Leavis's analysis does not mention, our awareness of the need these feelings minister to in Paul justifies their presentation in a manner quite other than the diagnostic term 'regressive' would indicate:

...he went down to the margin of the ocean every day; and there he would sit or lie in his carriage for hours together; never so distressed as by the company of children - Florence alone excepted, always.

"Go away, if you please," he would say, to any child who came to bear him company. "Thank you, but I don't want you".

Some small voice, near his ear, would ask him how he was, perhaps.

"I am very well, I thank you," he would answer. "But you had better go and play, if you please."

Then he would turn his head, and watch the child away, and say to Florence, "We don't want any others, do we? Kiss me, Floy." <sup>2</sup>

This is followed by Paul's questions as to the whereabouts of India, and his statement that he would die "of being so sorry and so lonely" if Florence were there, upon which the chapter concludes with the following, so understandably embarrassing to modern taste:

Another time, in the same place, he fell asleep, and slept quietly for a long time. Awaking suddenly, he listened, started up, and sat listening.

Florence asked him what he thought he heard.

"I want to know what it says," he answered, looking steadily in her face. "The sea, Floy, what is it that it keeps on saying?"

She told him that it was only the noise of the

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1. Dickens the Novelist, p.14.

2. Dombey and Son, p.110.



rolling waves.

"Yes, yes," he said, "But I know that they are always saying something. Always the same thing. What place is over there?" He rose up, looking eagerly at the horizon.

She told him that there was another country opposite, but he said he didn't mean that; he meant farther away - farther away!

Very often afterwards, in the midst of their talk, he would break off, to try to understand what it was that the waves were always saying; and would rise up in his couch to look towards that invisible region, far away.<sup>1</sup>

The mode of this last passage somewhat recalls Little Nell. Yet where the drawn-out celebration of death-yearning in the early novel was uncontrollably morbid, the context in which it occurs here is such that it has a positive significance, to which the approving tone of the poetic rhetoric is appropriate. For Dickens is not just indulging in a decorative interlude of hand-me-down mysticism, but drawing on mystic symbolism in order to insist upon a psychological insight: that to Paul regression is a way of insisting upon psychic integrity.

This oddly paradoxical notion, is, I think, at the heart of Dickens's understanding of Paul. I have already suggested the ways in which the novel demonstrates the importance of a properly childlike childhood as the essential core of the healthy adult self: the denial of this truth is the cardinal sin of the Dombey world. In Paul's case Dickens wonderfully extends this insight to recognise that, given the circumstances, his regressiveness is an instinctive attempt in defiance of pressure to 'grow-up' in a way that will alienate him from it. This is arguably why Dickens chooses to show his lapsing into "weariness" not just as a wilting passivity, but, in its way, as an oddly active and searching state:

Yet, in spite of his early promise, all this vigilance and care could not make little Paul a thriving boy.

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1. Ibid., p.111.

Naturally delicate, perhaps, he pined and wasted after the dismissal of his nurse, and, for a long time, seemed but to wait his opportunity of gliding through their hands, and seeking his lost mother.<sup>1</sup>

Dickens is not being facetious , for the almost conscious elusiveness noted in Paul here is one of his characteristic expressions, the look "half of melancholy, half of slyness"<sup>2</sup> or, elsewhere, the "sly and quaint yet touching look"<sup>3</sup> which accompanies his answers to the optimistic questions put to him by his father. Paul's way of seeking his mother lies through withdrawal. Hence his preoccupation with "what the waves are saying", is, I think, Dickens's stylised rendering of Paul's imagination working in a compensatory fashion to foster what Wordsworth in Book Two of The Prelude ascribed to the "infant Babe": "the gravitation and the filial bond/Of nature that connect him with the world"<sup>4</sup>. Dickens shares Wordsworth's leading intuition that a child's secure and happy early relationship with its mother is a precondition of its feeling 'at home' or 'at one' with the world. Paul, however, is already "an outcast....bewildered and depressed"<sup>5</sup>, a condition consequent upon his having been born into the Dombey world. The only way by which he can remain faithful to this precariously established inner core of being is thus by a retreat from that world into the inner world of imagination in which this being can live, a retreat of which death is the inevitable consummation - his filial bond can only be with the sea. Thus the peculiar rightness of Dickens's image of him at the fireside with his "old, old face, peering into the red perspective with the rapt attention of a sage"<sup>6</sup>;

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1. Ibid., p.91.

2. Ibid., p. 95.

3. Ibid., p. 144.

4. The Prelude, II, 243-4.

5. Ibid., II, 241.

6. Dombey and Son, p.93.

for in his inner absorption, his concentrated attentiveness upon the underlying currents of consciousness, Paul inhabits that common ground shared by some schizophrenics (the state which his disease roughly approximates), and one kind of creative artist. One might even suggest that Paul's increasing benignity as he approaches death does not represent the imposition of the logic of sentimentality upon the previous realistic recognition of his disturbingly thin-skinned distaste for company other than Florence, but the equally realistic intuition that the advance of his disease entails an increased inner security, a consequence of a more firmly established inner self by which the presence of others becomes less threatening.

In Paul, then, we can see exemplified most clearly the way that in Dombey and Son the theme of 'continuity' which we have been tracing undergoes a considerable modification. As I have shown, the idea originated in Wordsworth as a deepening and renovation of traditional morality, or rather eighteenth-century stoicism. It represented one way of accommodating the subjective and emotional vitality of sentimentalism, with the stability provided by the reliance on a fixed and objective social code. In Dombey and Son, however, a situation is outlined in which the claims of 'continuity' and the claims of morality, in the sense of a practical guide to everyday living, are irreconcilably at odds. The world of the novel is one in which all the stoical, or non-sentimental elements of traditional morality, the qualities such as self-discipline, firmness of will, a positive-minded attitude towards the future, and a refusal to linger in the past, all these have become localised in a particular and obnoxious social order.



Subservient to it to the point at which they have no independent validity, they can be exhaustively accounted for as the masked instruments of the prevailing 'system'. Strength of will and purpose here survives only as the "effort" beloved of Mrs. Chick; and stoicism in adversity as Mrs. Pipchin's triumph over the loss of her husband in the Peruvian mines. The novel draws on the Romantic qualifying critique of these values as such, to present a picture in which their operation as a social code is judged as the tyranny of a destructive ideology. Correspondingly, with Paul it draws on the Romantic valuing of "continuity" to suggest a way in which what looks from a normal point of view to be weakness (however understandable) is also seen - in comparison to the alternative patterns to which other characters in his world have shaped their lives - to be a kind of strength, to suggest, that is, a way in which the distinction between health and sickness (or maturity and immaturity, is not all that simple or clear-cut. Only this, it seems to me, can explain the apparently discordant mixture of firmly diagnostic, if sympathetic judgement, and wondering respect that informs the novel's conception of him.

If Paul represents the strong side of the novel, Florence is almost inevitably associated with its weak side. This division seems for the most part quite proper: the balance of feeling and intelligence that marks the handling of Paul is markedly absent with Florence, his sister, who for the most part is less an objectively discerned character than a vessel of pious feeling, interesting to us only in her rôle of catalyst in her father's conversion. Yet there are points at which, alongside the sentimentality, the novel shows something of the same kind of perceptiveness about her as it does about the other members of her family. Take, for example, her initial reaction to her father's remoteness:

But her own mother, she would think again, when she recalled this, had loved her well. Then, sometimes, when her thoughts reverted swiftly to the void between herself and her father, Florence would tremble, and the tears would start upon her face, as she pictured to herself her mother living on, and coming also to dislike her, because of her wanting the unknown grace that should conciliate that father naturally, and had never done so from her cradle. She knew that this imagination did wrong to her mother's memory, and had no truth in it, or base to rest upon; and yet she tried so hard to justify him, and to find the whole blame in herself, that she could not resist its passing, like a wild cloud, through the distance of her mind.<sup>1</sup>

Here emotional lushness by no means drowns out a quite remarkable and objective apprehension of the neurotic emotional logic of the child starved of affection. At moments such as this we can sense a continuity between Florence and Dickens's mature explorations in similar psychological territory with such characters as Esther Summerson and Pip. Elsewhere, too, scenes which come across with the predominant effect of undiluted pathos seem to touch on a reality about Florence that Dickens blurs with his sentimentality, but nevertheless never quite seems to bury out of sight:

"Oh, Walter," exclaimed Florence, through her sobs and tears. "Dear brother! Show me some way through the world - some humble path that I may take alone, and labour in, and sometimes think of you as one who will protect and care for me as for a sister! Oh, help me Walter, for I need help so much!"<sup>2</sup>

For Dickens to have shown us how much help Florence really did need would have involved him in a quite different novel than the one he wrote; as it is, the facilely comfortable comedy in which Florence's fate is worked out excludes the disturbing actuality consequent upon her privation that her plea for "help" seems actually to indicate.

In her outcast state she is, as Dickens puts it, "a wounded solitary heart".<sup>3</sup>

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1. Ibid., p. 335.

2. Ibid., p. 664.

3. Ibid., p. 241.

Nevertheless we are never allowed to see her in any but the fixed postures of demure gentility calculated to offer no resistance to our flow of sympathy. In reality, one might surmise, the chivalrous and naive Walter Gay would have been in for a more difficult marriage than the fairy-tale plot acknowledges.

Something of this ambiguity attends even their marriage, however. It is, undeniably, a paradigm of the sexless ideal of Victorian convention, the especial piquancy of which lies in the fact that it is really a relationship of elder brother and younger sister:

Blessed Sunday Bells, ringing so tranquilly in their entranced and happy ears! Blessed Sunday peace and quiet, harmonising with the calmness in their souls, and making holy air around them! Blessed twilight stealing on, and shading her so soothingly and gravely, as she falls asleep, like a hushed child, upon the bosom she has clung to! <sup>1</sup>

Our embarrassment at this kind of piety ought not to prevent us seeing that there is, perhaps, a certain rightness in the image of Florence as a "hushed child", a rightness that has less to do with early-Victorian conventions (though Dickens is, of course, drawing on them) than with the individual pattern of Florence's psychology. For just as with Dombey himself a regression to the emotional equivalent of a new compensatory childhood is a necessary precondition for his renewal, so the logic of Florence's history implies, one might suggest, the analogous insight that she too needs to live through a natural childhood - again in surrogate form - before she can properly become a woman. The terms in which her relationship with Walter is offered, that is to say, bespeak a realistic fidelity to the "enforced distortion" of her being, rather than the imposition of a stereotype unconscious

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1. Ibid., p. 679.



of its happy appropriateness to Florence's unusual case; yet on the other hand the acute feeling of relief that marks the union of Florence and Walter, the strong suggestion that Walter represents a refuge offering her what her father has wrongfully withheld ("now, no more repulsed, no more forlorn, she wept indeed, upon the breast of her dear lover"<sup>1</sup>), this suggests that the nature of the relationship is conceived very much with the particular emotional pressures generated by Florence's history in mind.<sup>2</sup> Where Dickens goes wrong, one might suggest, is not in what he presents, but in his attitude towards it, in the misplaced unreserved piety that, as with Dombey's own regeneration, takes the therapeutic half-way house to recovery for the fulfilment itself. The valuable concern for continuity with childhood becomes here a dangerous unconcern for continuation beyond it.

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1. Ibid.

2. Note the following statement by a patient of the psycho-analyst R.D. Laing, quoted by him in his The Divided Self:

If you had actually screwed me it would have wrecked everything. It would have convinced me that you were only interested in pleasure with my animal body and that you didn't really care about the part that was a person. It would have meant that you were using me like a woman when I really wasn't one and needed a lot of help to grow into one. It would have meant you could only see my body and couldn't see the real me which was still a little girl. The real me would have been up on the ceiling watching you do things with my body. You would have seemed content to let the real me die. When you feed a girl, you make her feel that both her body and her self are wanted. This helps her get joined together. When you screw her she can feel that her body is separate and dead. People can screw dead bodies, but they never feed them.

The Divided Self (1965; first published 1959), p.166.

The ugly hard-boiled sexual idiom of this obviously suggests a world remote from Florence's, but the core of the emotional situation is, I feel, analogous.

Walter Gay is scarcely one of the more interesting figures in the novel, and critical commentary might properly be expected to let him tactfully alone. He is a paragon of the specifically Romantic virtues; a "cheerful looking, merry boy, fresh with running home in the rain; fair-faced, bright-eyed, and curly haired".<sup>1</sup> He is distinctly akin in type to the "race of real children"<sup>2</sup> celebrated in *The Prelude* at the expense of the model child beloved of Mr. Barlow and his kind.<sup>3</sup> Yet he is, obviously, such a paragon as to be a gross unreality himself. However, the novel displays some intelligence in its initial conception of Walter - as an idea if not a realised presence - and the resolution of his fate takes us directly to the novel's weakness as a critique of early-Victorian society. So it is perhaps worth devoting the concluding portion of this chapter to him.

Dickens's stated initial intention to "disappoint all the expectations" Walter's introduction "seems to raise"<sup>4</sup> was perfectly in keeping with what he actually wrote. For beneath the play of high spirits his doom is contrived in his first appearance with an almost clockwork precision. His upbringing at the Wooden Midshipman is, it goes without saying, a pointed contrast to that which Paul undergoes. The connection between his affectionate bonds with his uncle and Captain Cuttle and his own freshness and cheerfulness is clearly implied. Less obvious, perhaps, is the contrast between education as perpetrated at Blimber's, and the education, informal but real, which Walter is shown to have undergone at the hands of his uncle. For Walter's enthrallment with the marvellous and adventurous<sup>5</sup> life of the sea is clearly in line

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1. *Dombey and Son*, p.38.

2. *The Prelude*, V, 411.

3. *Ibid.*, V, 294 - 425.

4. Dickens to Forster, 25 July 1846; *Letters*, I, p. 771.

5. *Dombey and Son*, p.43.

(modestly and comically prettified, but, in its stylised way, not without point) with the positive idea of education the earlier Romantics had counterposed against the prevailing pedantry. It is in line with Coleridge's insistence that the education of the young should awaken "by the noblest models the fond and unmixed love and admiration which is the natural and graceful temper of early youth"<sup>1</sup>; and with Wordsworth's celebratory recollection of his own youthful enthusiasm for Romance, in the fifth book of The Prelude. Even more specifically it is in line with J.S. Mill's own Romantically-orientated objection to some forms of utilitarian education, which he voiced in 1838:

Not what a boy or girl can repeat by rote, but what they have learnt to love and admire, is what forms their character. The chivalrous spirit has almost disappeared from books of education, the popular novels of the day teach nothing but (what is already too soon learnt from actual life) lessons of worldliness, with at the most the huckstering virtues which conduce to getting on in the world; and for the first time perhaps in history, the youth of both sexes of the educated classes are universally growing up unromantic.<sup>2</sup>

We are surely meant to see that Walter's informal education has had a hand in the formation of his character. His trouble is, of course, that while he has all the chivalrousness in the world, he is perhaps too deficient in those huckstering qualities. Dickens hints at this, light-heartedly for the moment, in one of Walter's earliest exchanges with his uncle:

"Come along then, Uncle!" cried the boy. "Hurrah for the admiral!"  
 "Confound the admiral!" returned Solomon Gills. "You mean the Lord Mayor."<sup>3</sup>

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1. "Essay On His Own Times"; quoted from Coburn, ed., Inquiring Spirit, p. 82.
  2. "A Prophecy", Westminster Review, VI and XXVIII (1838); quoted from K.J. Fielding, "Mill and Gradgrind", Nineteenth-Century Fiction, XI (June 1956), pp. 148-51 (p. 150).
  3. Dombey and Son, pp. 38-9.



Having himself infected his nephew with his own romanticism, Gills is now worriedly trying to bring him around to present realities, which demand the quite opposed qualities suggested by his chilling advice to him on his new job at Dombey's: "Be diligent, try to like it, my dear boy, work for a steady independence, and be happy!"<sup>1</sup> The old world has passed away, and the Sea is now a matter of fiction only.<sup>2</sup> Such prudence goes against the grain, however, and before long Gills and Cuttle are themselves revelling with their nephew in a riot of nostalgic reminiscence, and inciting him with wild and irresponsible fantasies to become a second Dick Whittington. We accept this genially enough, but Dickens has clearly intimated the danger inherent in an idea of education, however good in itself, which is too far out of step with economical and vocational realities. Walter as we see him here is clearly designed to be a misfit; likeable, but with little more chance of success or even acceptable survival in life as presented in the novel than the Wooden Midshipman itself. Later in the century England's surplus of Walter Gays were to find an outlet for their Romanticism in the Empire - Walter's nautical imaginings anticipate Kingsley and Public School muscular Christian Romanticism, with its heavily anti-trade bias (an ethos which was to contribute to the relative decline of English industrial power remarkably prognosticated by Dickens in the Doyce-Barnacle sections of Little Dorrit). However, this new lease of life for anti-bourgeois ideals is not foreseen, understandably enough, in the scheme of history envisaged in

Dombey and Son: Walter, it is strongly hinted, is a youth destined to grow up into a world in which he has no place. Yet it so turns out that it is his destiny to rise rapidly in the commercial world, and

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1. Ibid., p.42.

2. Ibid.

finally, we are assured, to be the head of another House of Dombey and Son. This is manifestly unbelievable. We accept it in a way, however, as yet another fanciful improbability in the consciously fairy-tale atmosphere of the end of the novel - it has its appropriateness within the terms of a genre designed to indulge human hopefulness rather than to reflect life truthfully. Nevertheless, in resorting to these terms the novel smooths over awkward contradictions raised by the quite serious attempt to come to grips earlier on with large questions of human values and social progress. It is not just that Dickens is reluctant to show us Walter going to the dogs, as originally intended, though this is one reason for his falsification. It also relates to the fact that Dickens, for all the dislike he shows here for the forces of the new railway age, is also firmly committed to living through the framework of its "stern realities".<sup>1</sup> It would be otiose to illustrate here that Dickens is no Luddite, as it is common knowledge. Even in Dombey and Son, while he may show little interest in the world of finance as such, he certainly welcomes the progress the railways exemplify. As his wholehearted approval of the new developments in Staggs Gardens makes quite clear, he is no simple-minded conservationist, and while the passing of the material world of the Wooden Midshipman is to be regretted, only the sort of person denoted by Mrs. Skewton could fail to agree, Dickens feels, that this is not finally all for the better. This as Steven Marcus has said, leaves the novel deeply divided in its sympathies, "On the one hand...affirming the changing world symbolised by the railroad, and on the other condemning the society that produced it".<sup>2</sup> It is in

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1. The Chimes, in The Christmas Books, i, 245. The phrase, or its near equivalent, recurs often in Dickens, generally in an approving tone of rather ebullient stoicism.

2. Marcus, p. 355.

consequence of this, I think, that Dickens is reluctant to persist with his initial idea of Walter as a failure, and thus he insists both that the economic order typified by the Dombey House must remain, and thus, inevitably, that someone such as Walter is capable of participating successfully in it. Here, wishing to save both Walter and the House, he conjures away the contradiction between what they stand for that is at the heart of his serious social analysis. Someone is needed to run things in the world of Experience, and rather than fall into the hypocrisy of relying on someone we can't admire, Dickens will have us believe that Innocence can assume the controls, divagating into comedy because he can't really believe this himself.

Did he have any other alternative? Other, that is, than writing Walter's history as a tragedy, or envisaging the transformation of capitalism into a new order to which Walter's character would somehow seem appropriate, both of which solutions were too extremist for the essentially practical and positive-minded Dickens, whose outlook at this stage was still (to use the word non-perjoratively) bourgeois at heart. One alternative was the compromise represented by the person who lived in both worlds, who endeavoured to hold together in himself the Dombeyan toughness and bourgeois self-discipline requisite for successful survival, while at the same time preserving in himself a humanising core of anti-Dombeyan tenderness and fancy. A person who managed, in the special Romantic sense of the words, to be at once adult and child (Walter Gay, of course, is not this, being permanently boyish). Dickens himself, in his mixture of Romantic



creative artist and hard-headed businessman and self-made success, was something of this sort of person, as one might infer, other sources of evidence apart, from the peculiar and reciprocal combination of, as it were, tough and tender-mindedness, that I have been emphasising so far in this thesis. Significantly, it is David Copperfield, the male 'hero' in the novel following Dombey, who constitutes Dickens's first fictional attempt at such a character. That David partially represents Dickens himself ought not to be taken as evidence that he is not a socially representative figure; rather it is the case, one might suggest, that Dickens drew here freely on his own experience because he could see in his own history qualities that were relevant to a portrayal of the sort of young man who, in contemporary circumstances, could reasonably be expected to achieve success and happiness, qualities which Dickens, in his bourgeois way, still placed a value upon.

Obviously, however, to offer approvingly a character in whom this compromise is embodied, was necessarily to involve a quite different image of society from the tightly systematic model-world of Dombey and Son, the logic of which permits no maturity that is not a form of radical alienation. Which is perhaps why critics have been tempted to conclude that Copperfield is hardly a work of social criticism at all. But this leads us on to another chapter.

NOTE A. DICKENS AND SHAKESPEARE: CORIOLANUS, AND THE "TABOO  
ON TENDERNESS"

If Dombey and Son is a creative development of Romantic insights, it is also indebted to Shakespeare in the way it is so. No reader can fail to be struck by the frequent Shakespearian allusions in the novel, though these of course are only significant insofar as they alert us to the possibility of a deeper relationship. What this might be has been briefly touched on by Kathleen Tillotson: "Not seldom, towards the close of the novel", she has written, "we think of another unbending but vulnerable man of affairs who wished to stand 'as if a man were author of himself'; or of another proud father and banished daughter, Lear and Cordelia".<sup>1</sup> Fairly obvious parallels present themselves between Dombey and both these Shakespearian protagonists. Above all it seems to me not unlikely that Dickens's coherent vision of the Dombey world as systematically organised upon and functioning by the principle of the "taboo on tenderness", may well owe something to Shakespeare's diagnosis of the workings of the Roman world in Coriolanus, the interest of which play lies equally in the history of its hero and the 'sociology' of the society that produced him. Certainly, the similarities of perception are considerable; it goes without saying that Shakespeare's feeling for the Romans is more developed than that which can be gathered from Dickens's vague Philistine asides, but he is scarcely more enamoured of their peculiar virtues. Take, for instance, Volumnia's gloating testimonial to her son's upbringing in the forcing-house methods of the Roman brand of Blimberism and Pipchinery:

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1. Tillotson, p.170.

I pray you, daughter, sing, or express yourself in a more comfortable sort: if my son were my husband, I should freelier rejoice in that absence wherein he won honour than in the embracements of his bed where he would show most love. When he was but tender-bodied, and the only son of my womb; when youth with comeliness plucked all gaze his way; when, for a day of king's entreaties, a mother should not sell him an hour from her beholding; I, considering how honour would become such a person; that it was no better than picture-like to hang by the wall if renown made it not stir, - was pleased to let him seek danger where he was like to find fame. To a cruel war I sent him; from whence he returned, his brows bound with oak. I tell thee, daughter, I sprang not more in joy at first hearing he was a man-child than now in first seeing he had proved himself a man. (Act I, Scene III)

The world of heroic effort is founded upon the violation of childhood just as is the Dombeyan world of bourgeois effort: Volumnia's will is not so much less terrible than Lady Macbeth's, although ostensibly directed towards impersonal and patriotic ends. Likewise, I can think of no literary antecedent to Dombey other than Coriolanus in which 'proving' oneself a 'man' entails that distinctively Dombeyan mixture of masculine strength (intense, if narrow) and radical neurosis, though the paradox is akin in spirit to the Romantics - Coriolanus, one might say, offered Dickens an example of the Romantic 'continuity' theme developed as a key to a vision of society, in a way which had special relevance to his purposes in Dombey and Son. Dickens's eighteenth-century sources surely offered him no hint of such an outlook: Tom Jones's acceptable transition from Romantic boyishness to a more prudent maturity is possible in a way which Walter Gay's cannot be.

The view I am assuming of Coriolanus is a debatable one, but not, I think, eccentric. Even in Volumnia's speech above there is a hint that her not un-Pipchin-like contempt for "not being pressed too hard



at first"<sup>1</sup> has left him "yoked to his own triumphal car"<sup>2</sup> (to quote the educated Carker, who explicitly introduces the Roman analogy) in a way strongly analogous to Dombey. Similarly, his brow being "bound with oak" suggests the self-imprisonment and stiffness that is the tragic defect of Coriolanus's strength. This parallel, of course, becomes more obvious later on in the protagonists' careers, where both struggle against a hidden vulnerability in themselves to what Coriolanus terms "a woman's tenderness" - recognition that Dombey and Coriolanus are very different ought not to distract attention from what they have in common. A further parallel is the significance both Shakespeare and Dickens place upon certain of the features of a patriarchal order. The Dombeyan echo to Volumnia's "I sprang not more in joy at first hearing he was a man-child" needs no spelling out. There is no daughter in Shakespeare's play, however, though if there was we can be sure that her position in the household would have been no superior to Florence's, and that Shakespeare's attitude would have been at least sympathetic, if not gushy in Dickens's vein. Coriolanus has a wife, if not a sister or daughter, and her situation, bullied by Volumnia and her friends, whose scorn for feminine 'weakness' is a conventionally sanctioned supportive attitude in the Roman 'system', can't but remind one of the fate of femininity in the Dombey world:

Gent. Madam, the Lady Valeria is come to visit you.  
Virgilia [wife to Coriolanus]: Beseech you, give me  
 leave to retire myself.  
Volumnia Indeed you shall not. Methinks I hear hither  
 your husband's drum,

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1. *Dombey and Son*, p.140.

2. *Ibid.*, p.601.

See him pluck Aufidius down by the hair;  
 As children from a bear, the Volscies shunning him:  
 Methinks I see him stamp thus, and call thus:  
 "Come on, you cowards! You were got in fear,  
 Though you were born in Rome." His bloody brow  
 With his mail'd hand then wiping, forth he goes,  
 Like to a harvest-man that's task'd to mow  
 Or all, or lose his hire.  
Virgilia His bloody brow! O Jupiter, no blood!  
Volumnia Away, you fool! It more becomes a man  
 Than gilt his trophy: the breasts of Hecuba,  
 When she did suckle Hector, look'd not lovelier  
 Than Hector's forehead when it spit forth blood  
 At Grecian swords contending. - Tell Valeria  
 We are fit to bid her welcome.  
Virgilia Heavens bless my lord from fell Aufidius!

(Act One, Scene Three)

No less than Dickens with, say, Jaggers, Shakespeare is fascinated and somewhat awed by the power of perverted energy displayed here; yet Volumnia, while 'heroic', is nevertheless felt to be ghoulish, and we are invited to extend something of the same sympathy to Virgilia in her understandable timidity that we do to Mrs. Dombey or Miss Tox. Clara Copperfield and Miss Murdstone is another Dickensian analogue that comes to mind here though Dickens tends to encapsulate his female ogres into undisturbing comedy. Bullied wives and neglected daughters are not uncommon in literature, but what distinguishes Shakespeare and Dickens here is that they have chosen to portray these phenomena as socially sanctioned and as representative of socially functional phenomena of the worlds in which they occur.

## NOTE B: THE 'TABOO ON TENDERNESS' AND "SOMEBODY'S LUGGAGE"

In a broad sense, an attack on the "taboo on tenderness" is at the root of much of Dickens's social criticism; it is a natural complement to his characteristic positive values. It is certainly relevant, for instance, to his progressively deepening critique of the psychological effects of the harsher strain of Nonconformity - David Copperfield, Esther Summerson, Arthur Clennam and Pip are all, in their varying ways and degrees shaped, or rather mis-shaped ("enforced distortions") by a religiously inspired or sanctioned antipathy to what, from the Romantic viewpoint, is a natural childishness. Even Dombey himself is a distinctively Protestant type, though of a secularised form. It is worth noting, however, that on at least one other occasion Dickens took up the idea of the "taboo on tenderness" as operating on a diffused, not specifically religious level, making itself felt, that is, as a general feeling about what is and is not 'manly'. This was in the All the Year Round Christmas story for 1862: "Somebody's Luggage".<sup>1</sup>

The story concerns an Englishman, an officer and gentleman, who is on holiday in a French town in which a number of French soldiers are billeted. The soldiers are helping to pay for their lodgings by making themselves useful domestically, a state of affairs the Englishman finds ludicrously unbecoming to military dignity. He is especially offended by the daily sight of a soldier playing with a young child. He is, in fact, emotionally of a Dombeyan mould, with, as Dickens puts it, "very little gentleness, confounding the quality with weakness"<sup>2</sup>. Visiting a nearby cemetery, he condemns as "frippery" the tributes left at the grave of a recently deceased soldier by his friends. They are, he feels, "offensively sentimental",<sup>3</sup> and very un-English. When circumstances enforce upon him the duty of taking charge of the child whom he has previously seen playing with the soldier (the now deceased one) his reaction is predictably one of intense embarrassment; and he is shown

1. Reprinted in various forms; I have used it as it appears in Charles Dickens, Christmas Stories, New Oxford Illustrated, pp.315-55.

2. Ibid., p.337.

3. Ibid., pp. 340-1.



"creeping forth like a harmless assassin with Bebelles [the child] on his breast instead of a dagger".<sup>1</sup>

Up to this point the story turns on the portrayal of the inhibition of tenderness as the characteristic of a social type, an emotional malady peculiar to the English gentleman. Dickens was acutely aware of the fact that compared to their continental neighbours (which for Dickens meant mainly the French and the Italians), the English middle-classes were a relatively stuffy lot, lacking, as a class, the spontaneity and vivacity Dickens delightedly recorded as common both to the plebeian Cavalletto in Little Dorrit, and the "rare old Italian Cavaliere" sketched in the Household Words essay "New Year's Day",<sup>2</sup> who, epitome of Dickensian-Romantic social virtues ("Brown is [his] face, but green his young enthusiastic heart"), keeps at his bedside "the mechanical appliances of the whole circle of the Arts...ready against inspiration in the night."<sup>3</sup> One also thinks of the Mocolletti festival described in Pictures from Italy,<sup>4</sup> the Uncommercial Traveller essay "In the French-Flemish Country",<sup>5</sup> or Dickens's angry attack on the falsity of many of the grounds of superiority on which the English were accustomed to plume themselves, in the Household Words essay "Insularities", which deserves more recognition than it generally receives.<sup>6</sup> Dickens's outlook is essentially English in many ways (one thinks of his reference in a letter to Forster to "what we often said of the canker at the root of all that Paris life").<sup>7</sup> Yet Orwell's comment that it is free of "vulgar nationalism"<sup>8</sup> seems to me to be quite right -

1. Ibid., p. 346.

2. M P, p. 569.

3. Ibid., p. 658.

4. Charles Dickens, Pictures from Italy (1973; first published 1846), pp. 168-76.

5. Uncommercial Traveller, pp. 269-79.

6. M P, pp. 566 - 72.

7. Dickens to Forster, 5 September 1847; Letters, III, 52.

8. George Orwell, "Charles Dickens", in The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, 4 vols (1968), I, pp. 413 - 60 (p. 43).

"Insularities" even goes so far as to sacrilegiously contend that the Frenchman is a "more domestic man than the Englishman".<sup>1</sup> One recalls again R.H. Hutton's pronouncement, quoted in the last chapter, that Dickens's "picture of the domestic affections" was "not really English", tending "to modify English family feeling in the direction of theatric tenderness and an impulsiveness wholly wanting in self-control".<sup>2</sup>

This theme, nevertheless, is touched on, rather than explored, and the story is of interest to us here more as evidence of Dickens's preoccupation and attitude, than of creative achievement. It is a likeable story though, and there is no cause for critical rue in the fact that the unfolding plot slides away from the idea put forward at the outset, confusing the issue by making the protagonists' emotional defensiveness the product of a particular family quarrel, the upshot of which is unrelated to him in his representatively national aspects. Interestingly, however, Dickens uses the account of his reconciliation with his estranged daughter and her family, and his recovered power of tenderness, as an illustration of the abiding and spiritually restorative power of Memory; though it is not, in this case, his suppressed memory of his own childhood that is in question, but his memory of his daughter when young:

...the windows of the house of Memory, and the windows of the house of Mercy, are not so easily closed as the windows of glass and wood. They fly open unexpectedly; they rattle in the night; they must be nailed up. Mr. the Englishman had tried nailing them, but had not driven the nails quite home. 3

though one can't help feeling that Dickens's generalisation is glancing at other kinds of Memory, especially the kind we have been discussing.

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1. *M P*, p. 569.

2. R.H. Hutton, "Mr. Dickens's Moral Services to Literature", *Spectator*, XIII (17 April 1869) i, pp. 474 - 5; in *C H*, pp. 489 - 91 (p.490).

3. *Christmas Stories*, p.337.



## Five

'CONTINUITY' AND MORALITY (II): DAVID COPPERFIELD

The consensus of modern criticism has by and large come to accept that David Copperfield has a unifying theme, and that this is the analysis and education of David's undisciplined heart. It is a grudging and reserved acceptance, however, as there is also pretty general agreement that the imaginative life of the novel is resistant to the kind of straightforward didactic pattern implied by, say, Gwendolyn Needham's account of the novel in her article, "The Undisciplined Heart of David Copperfield".<sup>1</sup> Few today would not find impossibly windy Chesterton's claim that Dora represents "the infinite and divine irrationality of the human heart"<sup>2</sup>, but the tone of recent criticism of the novel is nevertheless in sympathy to a degree, at least, with the spirit of his cognate dictum that "the whole meaning of Dickens" is "that we should keep the absurd people for our friends",<sup>3</sup> and his opinion that the rather didactically-loaded resolution of David's story, at the expense of these people is a denial of Dickens's real sympathies, which lie with the drop-outs and failures, while the David who commendably forges his way to an honoured place in the Victorian meritocracy is a bit of a prig and a bore in consequence.<sup>4</sup> As Barbara Hardy has put it, "the undisciplined heart" is a unifying theme in the novel, but it is not a source of the novel's strength.<sup>5</sup> Or, to quote Monroe Engel:

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1. "Nineteenth Century Fiction", IX (September 1954), pp. 81-107.

2. Charles Dickens, p. 199.

3. Appreciations and Criticisms, p. 135.

4. Ibid., ch. 13.

5. Barbara Hardy, The Moral Art of Dickens (1970), p. 129.



On the surface, David Copperfield asserts the need for prudence and the beauty of success. But the power of the novel comes from its vital rendering of the beauty of incaution and the poignancy of limitation and defeat. In its plot, David Copperfield is conventionally Victorian. But essentially and imaginatively, it subverts its own contentions. 1

Such judgements are not just the product of modern sentimentally indiscriminate hostility to bourgeois ideals - the response that Engel's Scott Fitzgeraldish phrases about "the beauty of incaution and the poignancy of defeat" alerts us to. They derive, I am sure, from an accurate assessment of the novel. The Dickens who would have us believe that David and Agnes represent a true suitability "of mind and purpose" is working broadly within the same terms as Jane Austen and Maria Edgeworth, for whom the marriage of well-regulated minds is a touchstone of personal and social happiness. The trouble is that whereas their genius thrives under such a system, Dickens's simply wilts: his attempt to form his mind according to such a model seems to be as misguided as David's attempt to form Dora's. Dickens's option for an ideal of self-discipline is an understandable reaction to the perceived consequences of the emotional laissez-faire of David's youth. Yet if such an option is, as Engel says, "conventionally Victorian", the novel also makes us aware that the legacy of the Romanticism that has intervened between Dickens and the earlier didactic novelists is not to be set aside by high-minded intentions; and we are left with a perhaps not uncharacteristically Victorian discrepancy between the disciplined type-figures we are urged to admire, and the delinquent individualities for whom the novel can't help soliciting our affection. "Better to be naturally Dora than anything else in the

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1. Monroe Engel, The Maturity of Dickens (1967), pp. 152-3.

world"<sup>1</sup>, says David in one of his, and the novel's, wisest moments; one which, moreover, defines its spirit. That "naturally" focusses our sense of the novel's Romantic allegiance, and the productive affinity of that legacy with the novel's liberal and tolerant (some would say too tolerant) disposition.

This doubleness of feeling is only markedly damaging to the novel when Dickens chooses to ignore its existence, as he does, of course, in the objectionable conclusion of David's history. Elsewhere, however, it issues in a tone which, while open to certain critical reserves, embodies a richly responsive and engagingly poised appraisal of David's experience. One might attempt to define this tone by indicating a peculiar unity formed by Dickens' insightfulness, which is lucid and unsentimental in what it sees, and a generally good-humoured serenity with which this wisdom is, as it were, 'held', a serenity that springs from sources too deep within the novel to be accounted for by any idea of "maintaining a sufficient appearance", which notion Mrs. Leavis posits to explain the relatively unruffled air of David's account of his marriage difficulties, which she, mistakenly I think, takes to be "hopeless".<sup>2</sup> Even when David is explicitly aware of his dissatisfaction with Dora, it is recorded with a mellowness that reconciles and sets at ease, rather than generating any sharply felt need for an alternative of the kind Agnes stands for:

The old unhappy feeling pervaded by life. It was deepened, if it were changed at all; but it was as undefined as ever, and addressed me like a strain of sorrowful music faintly heard in the night. I loved my wife dearly, and I was happy; but the happiness I had vaguely anticipated, once, was not the happiness I enjoyed, and there was always something wanting. <sup>3</sup>

That seemingly very ordinary metaphor of the music is perfect - its

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1. David Copperfield, p. 765 (underlining mine).
  2. Dickens the Novelist, p. 69.
  3. David Copperfield, p. 765 .

suggestion of calm wistfulness assuages critical discontent and embellishes David's feeling of not too unhappy resignation, of reconciled good temper with the immaturity in Dora he is becoming aware of. A similar spirit pervades David's recollection of his past. Take, for instance, his memory of his child-love for Emily, an incident common enough to childhood, but particularly of-a-piece with the "undisciplined heart" which inevitably led him to his first wife:

What happiness (I thought) if we were married, and were going away anywhere to live among the trees and in the fields, never growing older, never growing wiser, children ever, rambling hand in hand through sunshine and among flowery meadows, laying down our heads on moss at night, in a sweet sleep of purity and peace, and buried by the birds when we were dead!<sup>1</sup>

The overtly ironic reflection here, fancifully and gracefully light, is quite in keeping with the rest of the passage: the lyricism is chaste and fresh, fragile yet hauntingly real, and the irony is appropriately of anything but a jolting kind, bringing us with quiet efficiency back to our senses

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1. Ibid., p. 202: We do know by this stage that Emily is not what David takes her to be:

"You would like to be a lady?" I said.

Emily looked at me, and laughed and nodded 'yes'.

Far from being lost in a timeless present, she already has a rather calculating eye on the future. Something of this aspect of the difference between her and David is caught in Phiz's drawing of the wedding-party leaving the Peggotty home, p. 200, in its marked contrast between David, open-faced, and head turned back in spontaneous surrender to the moment, and Emily, hands crossed and head down-turned, suggesting a slightly withdrawn knowingness and self-possession.



while permitting us to enjoy the afterglow of the childish illusion in wry retrospect. The novel clings fondly to those very things which, from the viewpoint of its didactic, reforming intent, it is most necessary to put aside (the episode is a virtual rehearsal of the spirit into which David enters his first marriage). This ambiguous spirit itself is perhaps perfectly symbolised in the brief but poetically contemplative image we are shown of Mr. Dick and his kite:

It was quite an affecting sight, I used to think, to see him with the kite when it was up a great height in the air. ...He never looked so serene as he did then. I used to fancy, as I sat by him of an evening, on a green slope, and saw him watch the kite high in the quiet air, that it lifted his mind out of its confusion, and bore it (such was my boyish thought) into the skies. As he wound the string in and it came lower and lower down out of the beautiful light, until it fluttered to the ground, and lay there like a dead thing, he seemed to wake gradually out of a dream; and I remember to have seen him take it up, and look about him in a lost way, as if they had both come down together, so that I pitied him with all my heart.<sup>1</sup>

David might well place this compassionate and imaginative interpretation upon this spectacle, for in a way it stands as an epigraph both to his own career, and to the way in which it is traced in the novel, which accurately charts down-to-earth reality, but prefers to linger feelingly in the atmosphere of dreams.

There is, nevertheless, a case to be made that this kind of ambiguity of feeling is not so much rich as somewhat dishonest. For a serious "study" of a morally central theme such as "the undisciplined heart", the novel is oddly free of real feelings of waste and pain consequent upon the imprudence of its characters. This is partially due to the fact that, as I suggested in chapter two, the novel moves rather uncertainly between the different genres of genial comedy and the mimetic novel proper. No-one with any sense of critical reasonableness would want to object, for instance, to the way the Micawbers are repeatedly let off the hook. With David himself, however,

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1. David Copperfield, pp. 272-3.

whose story is seriously offered as a study in sentimental education, it is less surprising that critics have found what I have called the serenity of his tone to be irritatingly bland. If one comes to Copperfield with Adolphe, say, or, the Lydgate story of Middlemarch in mind, one can't but be tempted to agree with Angus Wilson's comment that "David Copperfield is technically a very fine novel of the sentimental education genre, but the need of mellow, wise reflection is surely too easily held"<sup>1</sup> A.O.J. Cockshut's similar judgement that "the self-criticism has no sting"<sup>2</sup> refers to his misleading assumption that David is Dickens's self-portrait; but as applied to David's portrait of his own past it is arguably a just criticism. Similarly it is perhaps with something of the same feeling that Barbara Hardy has contended that David's disciplining himself to live in marriage with Dora is not really explored, that we are given a summary rather than a dramatic realisation, and that the final effect is one of evasion.<sup>3</sup> A real coming to grips with the situation, it is implied, would have involved a much more disturbing and painful account than the spirit of the novel encompasses.

Understandable though these charges are, however, I do not think they are finally justified. For what looks like sentimentality in the treatment of the David-Dora marriage (the test of the mature David's understanding of his /past), is not so, for David's tone about it is not just a gratuitous indulgence of feeling, but is unmistakeably supported, I think, by a perceived rationale, an 'irrational rationality', one might say, founded on considerations beyond those of Sense, yet flowing from a profound psychological insight into the

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1. "The Heroes and Heroines of Dickens", Review of English Literature, II (July 1961), pp. 9-18; reprinted in Gross and Pearson, eds., Dickens and the Twentieth Century (, pp. 3-11.
  2. A.O.J. Cockshut, The Imagination of Charles Dickens (1961), p. 118 .
  3. Hardy, pp. 130-2 .

nature of human need. Dickens's imagination, as I said at the outset, is essentially hostile to the kind of moral-didactic schema that reforms wayward individuality to a socially sanctioned or otherwise extrinsically derived pattern - the way, for instance, implied by Maria Edgeworth in her notes for Ormond (1817), when she stated that her "prime object" was "to shew how a person may re-educate themselves - and cure the faults of natural temper and counteract bad education and unfortunate circumstances."<sup>1</sup> This recalcitrance is more than a matter of temper or instinct on Dickens's part; though it is rested in that. It derives a sanction, I want to contend, from what shows itself in the novel as a distinctively intellectual persuasion that there is a more fundamental pattern that needs to be observed; the integrity of the individual self in time, or rather, what I have hitherto referred to in this thesis as the Romantic idea of the "continuity in...self-consciousness". That Dickens can see that it is better for Dora to be "naturally herself than anyone else in the world", rather than be re-educated from "the faults of natural temper", springs from the perception that the self has an organic unity which ought not be violated in the name of impersonal norms or ideals, whatever their superior maturity. By this logic David's marriage to Dora, while still a bad mistake by common-sense terms, the import of which is not evaded, is also seen to have a certain fitness, a fitness that justifies David's oddly unafflicted attitude towards his dilemma. Until the last stage of the novel, at which point it becomes purely didactic and reformatory in spirit, Dickens seems to be at least tentatively entertaining the proposition

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1. Quoted from Colby, Yesterday's Woman, p. 135n.



that it is finally better, against all Reason, for David to be "naturally" himself than anyone else in the world, whatever the cost.

The key to this rationale, the essential pattern of David's being, is seen to turn on his early relations with his mother, and the way in which in later life he unconsciously reduplicates them with others. A number of critics have taken stock of this fact: A.E. Dyson, for instance, has referred to David's quest for "lost childhood", and "the tenacity with which David seeks his lost mother throughout the world";<sup>1</sup> and Mrs. Leavis has persuasively outlined the way in which David is led to marry Dora by his "conditioned helplessness" in the face of her resemblance to his idealised memory of his mother, which is at the core of his emotional being.<sup>2</sup> These readings seem to me unquestionably true, and in Mrs. Leavis's case especially established with impregnable completeness. It does seem to me, however, that her account over-estimates Dickens's clinical-diagnostic detachment in tracing this 'continuity' in David, seeing it as she does as being offered by Dickens simply as an explanation of David's foolishness. Dickens's understanding of the organic pattern of David's nature is of-a-piece with his use of the concept of continuity in order to explore and explain abnormal psychology, the pre-occupation noted in my discussion of Dombey and Son and which I will revert to in later chapters. Yet his sense of David could not be said to be definitively accounted for by a term such as neurotic: David's peculiar temperament has certain highly unfortunate

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1. Dyson, pp. 134, 139 .

2. Dickens the Novelist, p. 54 .

vulnerabilities, he realises, but his estimation of it, I feel, is much less exclusively judgemental than Mrs. Leavis's reading would have us believe. It is quite true that Dickens's point-of-view is not identical with that of even the adult reminiscing David. The novel implies, for instance, a less indulgent idea of Clara Copperfield than even the relatively enlightened adult David explicitly admits in his narrative: at the beginning of the novel David recalls quite unironically her "innocent and girlish beauty"<sup>1</sup> almost immediately before showing her acting with an irresponsibility that makes a word like "innocence" very dubiously applicable indeed. Here Dickens is, in fact, showing us David as narrator, unwittingly lapsing into that idealised sense of his mother that, upon her death, as he later admits, "cancelled all the rest"<sup>2</sup> - so much so that nothing of the doubt which she must have inevitably given rise to in her child is directly acknowledged in his later narrative. David as narrator is repeatedly shown not just calmly recording the past, but writing under the emotional possession of the return of powerful memories: frequent exclamations such as "Can I say she ever changed, when my remembrance brings her back to life, thus only; and ...still holds fast what it cherished them?",<sup>3</sup> signal to us not to expect from David a strictly dispassionate and objectified narration. Given this, however, it still seems to me the case that the novel is enjoining upon us that David's feelings for women, whilst sentimental and immature, are nevertheless of value; and that similarly the continuity he unwittingly enacts between his childhood and his later life is not just a deterministic trap, as Mrs. Leavis's

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1. David Copperfield, p. 20.

2. Ibid., p. 187.

3. Ibid., p. 74.

interpretation implies, I think, but a peculiar consonance of the adult emotional life with the "hiding-places of . . . power" rooted in formative years, of the kind celebrated by the "Wordsworthian" Romantics.

Hiding places of weakness, one might well retort. This is obviously at least half of the truth. Yet how completely are we to dismiss such comments on this reflection of David's upon his days of courtship:

There is no doubt whatever that I was a lackadaisical young spooney; but there was a purity of heart in all this, that prevents my having quite a contemptuous recollection of it, let me laugh as I may.<sup>1</sup>

These words recall the discussion of Dickens's genial comedy in chapter three, and are in fact very apposite to the created tone of the whole Dora episode, which is a masterpiece of the mixed mode of the 'humorous pathetic'. David's "purity of heart" is vulnerable to ironic rejoinder -  
<sup>2</sup>  
 Estey Trotwood calls it David's "earnestness of affection", which implies an affectionate regard for it on her part, but which also reminds her of David's mother, and her helpless vulnerability. Nevertheless, it is a pity if David's claim is too knowingly slighted, in our preoccupation with his emotional deficiencies. It does stand for something real in him which is not just absurd:

I was going on at a great rate, with a clenched hand, and a most enthusiastic countenance; but it was quite unnecessary to proceed. I had said enough. I had done it again. Oh, she was so frightened! Oh, where was Julia Mills? Oh, take her to Julia Mills, and go away, please! So that, in short, I was quite distracted, and raved about the drawing room.

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1. Ibid., p. 454. Cf. the discussion of the pre and post-Romantic attitudes to the 'absurdities' of childhood, in chapter two.

2. Ibid., p. 565.



I thought I had killed her, this time. I sprinkled water on her face. I went down on my knees. I plucked at my hair. I denounced myself as a remorseless brute and a ruthless beast. I implored her forgiveness. I besought her to look up. I ravaged Miss Mills's work-box for a smelling bottle, and in my agony of mind applied an ivory needle-case instead, and dropped all the needles over Dora. I shook my fists at Jip, who was as frantic as myself.<sup>1</sup>

I don't think one has at all caught the particular flavour of the novel if one doesn't acknowledge that the presentation of David's ridiculousness here is shot through with a comical affection (the phrase used to describe David's feeling for Peggotty) for the naive but intensely idealistic chivalrousness that so incapacitates him. A mature person would have acted more coolly in such a situation, and probably to more point, but it is of the essence of the double argument of the genially comic mode, of which this scene is a splendid instance, to suggest a saving truth in David's foolishness.

Each new situation leads us to freshly reassess David's spontaneous emotional generosity, which, while it so often leads him into trouble, can't but engage our sympathy, whatever qualifications we might want to urge. Thus, when he says of his reunion with Peggotty:

I was troubled with no misgiving that it was young in me to respond to her emotions. I had never laughed and cried in all my life, I dare say not even to her more freely than I did that morning.<sup>2</sup>

One sees that the positive side of his undisciplined heart is a complete freedom from the "taboo on tenderness", as discussed in the previous chapter. That in this novel is exemplified in the Murdstone 'firmness' which embodies many of the more obvious traits of the Suttie pattern:

My mother dropped her work, and arose hurriedly, but timidly I thought.

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1. Ibid., pp. 605-6.

2. Ibid., p. 365.

"Now, Clara my dear," said Mr. Murdstone. "Recollect! control yourself, always control yourself! Davy boy, how do you do?" <sup>1</sup>

(It should be noted, however, that Murdstone is also a very different man from Dombey. In the former a passionate masculine virility is shown to co-exist uneasily with Puritan austerity, the combination issuing in his very un-Dombeyan sadism - Dombey would never have enforced his authority by saying "if I have an obstinate horse or dog to deal with, what do you think I do?"<sup>2</sup>, and the incident in which he actually strikes Florence is dramatic and shocking because uncharacteristic, a sign of a fracturing of the customary personality.<sup>3</sup> Murdstone, one notes, even handles a cane with a certain sporty relish.<sup>4</sup> In this instance as elsewhere, Dickens never repeats himself in the use of 'representative' figures, but seeks out the interesting variations within the type.)

The real value of David's feelings is proven in the resolution of marriage: it is exactly David's quixotic hypersensitivity to becoming, as he puts it, "a Monster who had got into a Fairy's bower"<sup>5</sup>, that restrains him from actually becoming one in a situation in which that is surely one highly possible outcome, and thus falling into the gross irony of repeating Murdstone's behaviour with a similar wife. His quickness to sense the way in which his attempts at conjugal education are turning him into someone "always playing spider to Dora's fly"<sup>6</sup> stems from the same sensitivity to the way he is depressing her - moral intelligence, it is implied here, is as much a matter of feeling as of intellect proper. Such a discovery is a point in David's favour, especially as we are told that forming the mind of one's wife is a conventionally sanctioned activity.

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1. Ibid., p. 93 .

2. Ibid., p. 95 .

3. Dombey and Son, p. 637 .

4. David Copperfield, pp. 106-7 .

5. Ibid., p. 607 .

6. Ibid., pp. 762-6 (p. 763) .

For David to come to realise the positive harm done by such laudable activities as reading Shakespeare to one's wife is a sign of somewhat individual perceptiveness, as the Dickens world is, and, arguably, the Victorian reality actually was, all too full of confident educators oblivious to the fact that their effect was not always elevating.

David's chivalry is tapped most deeply by Dora as it is she who, so closely resembling his mother, touches the deep core of his being, the hidden emotion stored in memories of his early idyllic life. Mrs. Leavis's essay amply demonstrates this, and there is no need to rehearse the details of her case here. The complementary point that needs to be emphasised, however, as I hope the above remarks suggest, is that these memories of his mother, for all their incapacitating influence, are also, in a real if amusing sense, "the soul" of David's moral being, the reason why he is, for all his limitations, a fundamentally good person, with a goodness fairly uncommon amongst characters in fiction, in that it is at once convincing, and, I feel, partially attractive. This, I feel, is the significance of Dickens' showing us that it is his "fanciful picture of my mother"<sup>1</sup> that sustains David on his arduous journey to Dover; she is an odd figure, given her fragility, to preside over such a trial, but psychologically appropriate nevertheless, just as it is another stroke of truth when David records that when that picture finally deserted him he is left "helpless and dispirited".<sup>2</sup>

The trouble is, of course, that the very positive qualities David inherits from his early years are inseparable from his negative ones. We can see this early on in David's reflections upon his childhood love for Emily, the first object of his displaced feeling for his mother:

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1. Ibid., p. 244 .

2. Ibid .



I am sure I loved that baby quite as truly, quite as tenderly, with greater purity and more disinterestedness, than can enter into the best love of a later time of life, high and ennobling as it is. I am sure my fancy raised up something round that blue-eyed mite of a child, which etherealised, and made a very angel of her.<sup>1</sup>

His elevation of this feeling above "the best love of later time" is a strange sentiment to come from the ostensibly perfectly gratified husband of the matronly Agnes, yet it rings quite true to one's sense of the 'real' David, in whom love and idealism is shown to have become intensely associated with the pre-adult love of boy and girl, the sublimated form of the feeling of the boy David for his girlish mother. David's idea of a timeless idyll with Emily, "never growing older... children ever", obviously relates to the initial paradise from which he was ejected by Mr. Murdstone, and looks forward to the affair of Dora, which, as both Betsey Trotwood and Dora (in her un-Clara-like self-protective shrewdness) realise, is "a boy and girl attachment".<sup>2</sup> The roots of, what, with qualifications, we must call David's positive moral being, are in an immature emotional development.

One way of describing what Dickens is doing here, I think, is to see him as taking up the 'Wordsworthian' Romantic grounding of the moral self in the psychological principle of continuity with early memories, and examining some of the implications of such a conjunction in a problematic case such as David's. David's reverent fidelity to his memories, in fact, has an almost literary self-consciousness that invites us to see him as a figure through whom this established Romantic theme is being pursued: "I don't know why one slight set of impressions should be more particularly associated with a place than another, though I believe this obtains with most people, in reference especially to the associations

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1. Ibid., p. 87 .

2. Ibid., p. 565 .

of their childhood".<sup>1</sup> This muses David in recalling Yarmouth, as if he had just been reading The Prelude (which Dickens would not have had a chance to read by the time of writing this chapter of the novel). And later, on returning to Blunderstone to revisit "the old familiar scenes of his childhood", he declares that his "occupation in his solitary pilgrimages was to recall every yard of the old road as I went along it, and to haunt the old spots, of which I never tired. I haunted them, as my memory had often done...."<sup>2</sup> "Continuity" of "self-consciousness" manifests itself in him not just in his instinctive choices, but also in the very way his mind works, in that fond mulling over his past that constitutes its essential rhythm. Yet in him, Dickens shows, unlike Wordsworth and Coleridge, such an integrity of self entails both positive and negative consequences, inextricably woven together. What exactly we are to conclude from this remains undefined. Is the idea of 'continuity' to be judged inadequate, from the standpoint of practical morality, and common-sense standards of maturity - the standpoint of Betsey Trotwood or does it itself provide a standpoint from which morality and maturity seem to be somewhat limited criteria of value?

The answer to this depends on how we react to David as narrator. For his tone, that wryly tender comic attitude, continually insinuates to us, as I have already suggested, that a fidelity to the personal sources of emotional power is of primary importance. To respond to the charm of the narrator's recall, which is the key to liking and being moved by the novel, beyond finding it interesting, is to feel the force of this implicit claim.

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1. Ibid., p.91.

2. Ibid., pp. 377-78.

For as much as the novel implies that David is inadequate, he himself, as narrator, beguiles us into the feeling that such inadequacies do not finally matter, that there is a larger perspective in the light of which they are of secondary importance (which is not to say that they are not important, but that there are other things that are more so).

Consequently, while there are plenty of things that make David's marriage to Dora seem an impossible situation, there are more fundamental grounds on which they are, literally, as we ironically but not too grimly conclude, 'made for each other', with a logic as inexorable as any romantic fancy of pre-destination. (David at least partially fulfils Dora's immature needs as well as vice versa, as we can see whenever David reveals to her his embryonically un-boyish nature, when he becomes Trotwood to her rather than Doady). Dora's death, I feel, is more a way of clearing the path for Agnes than of letting David out of an unbearable impasse.

Thus, while the novel indicates ways in which David's feelings are immature, there is no other strong voice in the novel to enforce upon us, against his appeals, that such immaturity needs to be resisted at all costs. Betsey Trotwood's rationality is itself fairly placed as limited in its own way: she represents, I think, she herself having set her will firmly against her own past (her faithless husband), Dickens's sympathetic yet respectful criticism of the traditional stoic ideal of resistance to suffering. Likewise David's overt admonitions to himself about the need for a disciplined heart hardly carry much weight, as they are so out of touch with the drift of his narrative tone. The spirit of the novel, one must conclude, is essentially subversive, despite its unconvincing attempt to turn respectable at the end. Whether the subversion represents emancipation or decadence is a matter of philosophic assumptions. A more demonstrable assertion, however, is that it



is not just blind, but is clear-sightedly aware of the costs and consequences of the feelings it endorses, and endorses them in the implicit conviction that there is a deeper principle involved than practical morality. There is ground for agreement here between those who might feel that Dickens hereby has achieved a creative extension of the Romantic 'continuity' principle, and those who feel that the novel, to its detriment, bears witness to the perilous implications that principle entails. It might well be urged, for instance, that Coleridge's counsel not to cease to "look back upon ~~his~~ former ~~self~~ with joy and tenderness" can be seen in one way to give a licence to self-complacency.

Given this, it is needless to say that I do not agree with Mrs. Leavis that David is "colourless and intentionally uninteresting in himself - only a type"<sup>1</sup>. David is the pervasive if by no means the omniscient consciousness of the novel. He is not a self-projection of Dickens: the narrator's voice is identifiably close to Dickens's but is not a mere ventriloquial mask. Rather it is Dickens's voice transmuted to the terms of David's character, as Chesterton, I think, realised when he said that the characters in the novel were "real characters lit up by the colours of youth and passion".<sup>2</sup> These colours are partially those of David's mind. Of course Dickens does manage to have the narration imply truths that lie in the obscure shadows of David's brightly-lit consciousness - the truth about Clara's betrayal of her son, for instance, or the gathering portents of Steerforth's elopement, things that are lost on the young David and

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1. Dickens the Novelist, p. 46.

2. Charles Dickens, p. 148.

things that are lost even on the adult narrator. Yet the most deeply felt impressions in the novel are where people and experiences are given to us irradiated by David's youthful intensity. This is obviously the case with the passages I have been discussing, but it is also a general quality of David's vision. Take, for instance, his awed rendering of his discovery of Steerforth's death:

The old remembrance that had been recalled to me, was in his look. I asked him, terror-stricken, leaning on the arm he held out to support me;

"Has a body come ashore?"

He said, "Yes"

"Do I know it?" I asked then.

He answered nothing.

But, he led me to the shore. And on that part of it where she and I had looked for shells, two children - on that part of it where some lighter fragments of the old boat, blown downlast night, had been scattered by the wind - among the ruins of the home he had wronged - I saw him lying with his head upon his arm, as I had often seen him lie at school.<sup>1</sup>

The details of this scene are stagily contrived, composed in the manner of a story-telling Victorian painting. Yet it is a moving moment, and is so largely because David's past feeling for Steerforth dramatically returns upon him, resurrecting the boyish image of the hero - in the pose so suggestive to David in the old days of his effortless power - in a way that gives a certain air of tragic grandeur to the death. The power of the scene, that is, is a matter of David's imagination, his persistent capacity, one might say, for wonder, which is seen to draw its life from the deep tap-root it maintains in the intense impressions of early years. His "first affections" and "shadowy recollections", to quote the Intimations of Immortality, are "the fountain-light" of all [his] day", all the crucial areas of his life, not just where women are concerned.

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1. Ibid., p.866 .

As this scene reminds us, David is as much an innocent with Steerforth as he is with Dora. Yet it should also suggest to us that while one crucial meaning of 'innocence' as applied to David is, as Mrs. Leavis has put it, "moral simplicity and ignorance of what people are really like",<sup>1</sup> it also applies to him in the sense of wonder. David embodies not just the weaknesses of the Romantic celebration of innocence, but some of the strengths as well; and if his youthfulness puts him at many ways at a disadvantage in the world, it has for him the compensation that the earth is still somewhat enveloped for him in Coleridge's "fair luminous cloud". This while it at times disastrously obscures common-sense reality for him, at times richly enhances it.

The novel clearly provides us with a summary of its sense of this ambiguity in the scene where David goes to the Covent Garden theatre, and afterwards renews friendship with Steerforth.<sup>2</sup> The two incidents are connected, of course, and David's unquestioning acceptance of the implied high-toned romantic simplification of the play prepares us for his reaction on meeting his old protector. David's liking of the play has very little to do with intelligence, but is rather a wholehearted boyish wonder at the romance of an imagined world. One's immediate response to this is surely one of patronising humour at his naivete. Yet we are checked in this attitude when we see David and Steerforth comparing notes on the play. We don't doubt that Steerforth's outright dismissal is the more correct report, even if tinged with ennui. Yet put against this, David's reaction does seem to have something to be said for it, which Steerforth gives its due in the affectionate yet covertly critical rejoinder: "you are a very Daisy. The daisy of the field, at sunrise, is not fresher than you are."<sup>3</sup>

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1. Dickens the Novelist, p. 72.

2. David Copperfield, pp. 344-5.

3. Ibid., p. 346.



At one level this refers to David's gullibility, the young unknowingness David himself feels himself painfully afflicted by when he admits that Littimer makes him feel "the greenest and most inexperienced of mortals!"<sup>1</sup> Yet at the same time Steerforth is acknowledging in David that other-related but enviable "greenness" of the kind Dickens had had in mind when as a young man, in complimenting Leigh Hunt on being "an old stager in works, but a young one in faith - faith in all beautiful and excellent things", he had referred to "that green heart of yours".<sup>2</sup>

David's naive response to the play is, I think it is implied, similar to that Lamb nostalgically recorded in "My First Play" (see chapter two), except that unlike Lamb David is still in thrall to "the glory and the dream" - in this his naivete is at once a positive, Romantic innocence, and what from one perspective is his failure to grow up is in Romantic terms, a sign of a triumphant preservation of the heritage of childhood.

Up till now I have been speaking mainly of David as the actor within, the object of, the novel's narrative. To David the narrator I have referred chiefly in order to settle the question of the novel's tone towards David the child and young man. 'The novel', as I have already stressed, is not just David's voice in name alone. It is, of course, Dickens that speaks unmistakeably in the narrative prose, yet it is a Dickens whose accents have been modified into those of a fictional narrator who in important ways sounds like the person he should be, given the experience he is endowed with in the novel, and his peculiar and complex relation to it which the novel explores. (The actual blend of the autobiography and impersonal invention that the novel contains is of course relevant here). For the workings of memory are not just something treated

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1. Ibid., p. 358.

2. Letter to Leigh Hunt, 13 July 1838; Letters (Pilgrim), i, 414.

in the narrative, in the way that I have hitherto been describing, but as has been fully shown in a recent highly-illuminating article by Robin Gilmour, the narrative itself is largely a dramatic enactment of the workings of memory, a portrait not just of the young David but also of the middle-aged David of the narrative present as revealed through his recall of the past, a study not just of memories but of the mind remembering.<sup>1</sup>

That this is the mode in which the novel is working is apparent from the second chapter, at which point David shifts from a resumé of the circumstances surrounding his birth to a direct searching of his memory "into the blank of ...infancy" :

Now I am in the garden at the back... a very preserve of butterflies, as I remember it, with a high fence, and a gate and padlock; where the fruit clusters on the trees, riper and richer than fruit has ever since, in any other garden, and where my mother gathers some in a basket, while I stand by, bolting furtive gooseberries, and trying to look unmoved. A great wind rises, and the summer is gone in a moment. We are playing in the winter twilight, dancing about the parlour. When my mother is out of breath and rests herself in an elbow-chair, I watch her winding her bright curls round her fingers, and straitening her waist, and nobody knows better than I do that she likes to look so well, and is proud of being so pretty. 2

To summarise Gilmour's argument, with which I generally agree, the interest of such a passage is not only that it recreates David's idyllic childhood, but that it presents us, as is the case so often in the novel, with an adult narrator who, for all his claims to have outgrown his childhood, is still very much in its thrall, entranced by memories that have persisted radiantly through time. A narrator, that is, whose "hiding-places of...power" (or weakness) are still very much intact, and who, despite having largely become, as his aunt had wished, that "fine firm fellow... with strength of character that is not to be influenced, except on good reason, by anybody or by anything,"<sup>3</sup> still very much inwardly feels, albeit with some saving irony, the influence of a past that makes for a quite different sort of

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1. Robin Gilmour, "Memory in David Copperfield", Dickensian, LXXI (January 1975), pp. 30-42.

2. David Copperfield, p. 65.

3. Ibid., p. 332.

person. There are, one might say, two separate voices held in equilibrium in David the narrator: the middle-aged man who clearly recognises his past foolishness, and the still latent youth who lives on in the intensity with which the Past, through unquelled memory, is still alive in the Present. David's narrative is very much the delineation of one form of what it means for one's "days to be /Bound each to each by natural piety" (see my earlier comments about the almost literary self-consciousness of this fact in the narrative), and while this may be disturbingly at odds with the narrator's declared commitment to a maturity conceived as a growing away from memory, it is also true that, as Gilmour puts it, "it is only in the act of memory" that David can "recover that sense of life's possibilities and complexity which makes him an artist"<sup>1</sup> - although one would also want to stress that the co-presence of the adult perspective, the detached sense of the past as comic and foolish, is also a vital ingredient of the artist's being. Earlier on I adduced the peculiar charm of the narrative as evidence of how Dickens intended us to arbitrate between the conflicting claims of 'continuity' and common-sense morality. Mightn't one invert this procedure to claim that the charm of the writing is directly (though not exclusively) dependent upon the fact that it is committed to continuity? Early in the second chapter David observes (in another moment of Romantic self-consciousness) that most grown men who are remarkable in their "power of observation" (artists, one assumes, are in this category) rather retain that faculty from childhood than acquire it later. Similarly, he goes on to add, do "such men ... retain a certain freshness, and gentleness, and capacity of being pleased, which are also an inheritance they have preserved from their childhood."<sup>2</sup>

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1. Gilmour, p. 41.

2. David Copperfield, p. 61.



"Freshness, gentleness, and capacity of being pleased" - are it these the very words that most come to mind if we try to formulate to ourselves in what that peculiar charm consists?:

I go to the door, wondering who it is; there, I meet a pair of bright eyes, and a blushing face; they are Dora's eyes and face, and Miss Lavinia has dressed her in tomorrow's dress, bonnet and all, for me to see. I take my little wife to my heart; and Miss Lavinia gives a little scream because I tumble the bonnet, and Dora laughs and cries at once, because I am so pleased; and I believe it less than ever.

"Do you think it pretty, Doady?" says Dora.

Pretty! I should rather think I did.

"And are you sure you like me very much?" says Dora.

The topic is fraught with such danger to the bonnet, that Miss Lavinia gives another little scream, and begs me to understand that Dora is only to be looked at, and on no account to be touched. So Dora stands in a delightful state of confusion for a minute or two, to be admired; and then takes off her bonnet - looking so natural without it! - and runs away with it in her hand; and comes dancing down again in her own familiar dress, and asks Jip if I have got a beautiful little wife, and whether he'll forgive her for being married, and kneels down to make him stand upon the Cookery Book, for the last time in her single life. 1

Like much of Copperfield this is relatively simple prose for Dickens, at the opposite end of a spectrum, as it were, from the baroque virtuosity of Chuzzlewit. Yet I know of few other instances (family life in The Rainbow, Kitty and Levin in Anna Karenina ?) of writing so luminously joyful, in which humour is less a product of conscious wit than of spontaneous mirth. It is pre-eminently, one might say, the reminiscent voice of someone who has not, to quote Coleridge, "ceased to look back upon [his] former [self] with joy and tenderness", and who has thus, to quote Coleridge again in another context, preserved his heritage of "Joy ... the spirit and the power, /Which wedding Nature gives to us in dower".<sup>2</sup> At times, even, David as narrator seems to be straining against the fact of living in the present as if against bondage, as when he concludes a paean to the happiness of his days of his engagement to Dora with the declaration that "of all the times of mine that Time has in his grip, there is none that in one retrospect

1. Ibid., p. 696.

2. "Dejection: An Ode", 11, 67-8.

I can smile at half so much, and think of half so tenderly"<sup>1</sup> - the sense of himself as the victim of mutability is unmistakeable. Edmund Wilson has said that in Copperfield Dickens had found "an enchanting" vein "which he was "never to find again".<sup>2</sup> Enchanting, one could add, because, in his ironic way, still enchanted. Whether Agnes would have found such a situation enchanting as well is another matter, however.

## II

In contrast to his treatment of David's private life, Dickens offers no exonerating rationale for his immaturity as it effects him in his relations with a wider society. David may scrape along with Dora as a Doady, but in the wider world Doadyism is seen to be quite unequivocally a public menace. This is obviously so with his unwitting complicity in Emily's seduction. Beyond this, however, we have Dickens's persistent interest in the figure David cuts on the stage of society in general, in his comportment as a gentleman, as an example-setting social officer in the class society that this novel firmly subscribes to. In the social world projected by Dombey and Son the strict antithesis of 'firmness' and 'wetness' ensures (as I have argued in the previous chapter) that permanent boyishness is the only alternative to a Dombeyan maturity: no such thing as a humane maturity is conceivable within the terms in which the novel works. The world of Copperfield, on the other

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1. David Copperfield, p. 551.

2. Wilson, p. 39.

hand, is much more diverse, more an empirical reflection of the possibilities of Victorian society, one might say, than a stylised abstraction of it to illustrate a thesis in the boldest terms possible. Thus, while the Murdstone 'firmness' is obviously meant to indicate a hateful and important reality in contemporary life, Dickens is at pains to point out that there is a proper kind of firmness that young men such as David and Traddles must acquire if they are to be worth their salt: the firmness of "a fine, firm fellow", which Betsey Trotwood is disturbed to feel that the young David lacks. If the Murdstones represent the sadistic extreme of authoritarianism, David and Traddles are finally endorsed as having achieved in themselves an authoritativeness that Dickens regards as befitting their station in life. That the young David should be called 'Sir' and 'Master' by the Peggottys is only natural, Dickens feels; what is important is that he should grow up into the sort of person who will command that form of address respectfully from his social subordinates. Thus his apotheosis is not just to be a successful novelist, but a social pillar of the literary domain, a patriarch of the pen: "As the endurance of my childish days had done its part to make me what I was, so greater calamities would nerve me on...and so as they taught me, would I teach others".<sup>1</sup> Authorship for David is a sphere of social leadership and responsibility just as it was (as I have argued in my introductory chapter) for Dickens himself, for by becoming a professional the author did not cease to be a gentleman, but rather undertook the duties of that role in a different way. Likewise the novel's final seal of approval upon Traddles is its picture of him, for all his unbuttoned saturation in girlish femininity, sitting "at the foot of the large table like a Patriarch".<sup>2</sup>

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1. David Copperfield, p. 888.

2. Ibid., p. 950.



That a man like Traddles can both romp and rule as the situation requires is a pretty paradox, and as he never becomes more than a decorative motif in the novel, illustrating perceptions argued more fully elsewhere, one is not drawn into inquiry as to its credibility. On the other hand, how a character such as David can manage to reconcile his peculiar self with the demands of the social role, is a question that has obviously exercised Dickens deeply. His final answer is dreary enough: the self-consciously reformed David shines like lead against the lively hues of his former friends, and even against the peculiar charm of his young self, or his narrative self in more relaxed moods. More successful, however, are a number of scenes which, while striking one at first as incidental comedy, actually constitute a coherent examination of the difficulties someone of David's psychological history has in exercising his gentlemanly function in a way that it is proper for him to do. Perhaps the most striking illustration to draw upon here is the incident in which David is displaced from the cherished Box-seat on the coach by the man who has bred Suffolk Punches:

"That ain't a sort of man to see sitting behind a coach-box, is it though," said William in my ear, as he handled the reins.

I construed this remark into an indication of a wish that he should have my place, so I blushinglly offered to resign it.

"Well, if you don't mind, sir," said William, "I think it would be more correct."

I have always considered this as the first fall I had in life.... I was got up in a special great-coat and shawl, expressly to do honour to that distinguished eminence; had glorified myself upon it a good deal; and had felt that I was a credit to the coach. And here, in the very first stage, I was supplanted by a shabby man with a squint, who had no other merit than smelling like a livery-stables, and being able to walk across me, more like a fly than a human being, while the horses were at a canter!

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A distrust of myself, which has often beset me in life on small occasions, when it would have been better away, was assuredly not stopped in its growth by this little incident outside the Canterbury coach. It was in vain to take refuge in gruffness of speech. I spoke from the pit of my stomach for the rest of the journey, but I felt completely extinguished, and dreadfully young. <sup>1</sup>

Beneath the surface comedy of this scene there is a suggestion, I think, that David's "fall" is something of a breach of Nature: due perhaps to the autobiographical material that went into it, Copperfield is a novel keenly aware of the plebeian threat to gentility. David is in fact distinguished by his inability to command the deference from social 'subordinates' that is appropriate to his rank: the incident on the coach is later followed by his ignominious fear of Mrs. Crupp, his intimidation by Littimer, and the difficulties he has with servants in the chaotic fairyland he establishes with Dora. Dickens perceptively sees that it is the boyishness that is at the core of his emotional being, and which endears him to Dora, that here makes itself felt as a lack of authority which the others instinctively play upon, and which is felt by him as self-distrust, in a situation in which he is committed to appearing assured, a gentleman in command. The novel offers no grounds of justification for this kind of failure.

This brittleness is further compounded by another aspect of his history which pointedly shows itself immediately after his displacement from the box-seat:

"It was curious and interesting, nevertheless, to be sitting up there behind four horses: well-educated, well-dressed, and with plenty of money in my pocket; and to look out for the places where I had slept on my weary journey. I had abundant occupation for my thoughts, in every conspicuous landmark on the road. When I looked down at the trampers whom we passed, and saw that well-remembered style of face turned up, I felt as if the tinker's blackened hand were in the bosom of my shirt again. <sup>2</sup>

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1. Ibid., p. 342-3.

2. Ibid., p. 343.

The physical circumstances here are a perfect image of the changed social circumstances of David's life: he can now, he feels, look down upon his past with a detached and comfortable sense of having escaped from it. But not quite. His eviction from the box has disconcerted him, and this feeling suddenly makes itself felt as a momentary vertiginous collapse of this social and psychological distance from his past: "I felt as if the tinker's hand were in the bosom of my shirt again" . The detail of the shirt is especially arresting here as the detail of the beggar's hand reaching into the bosom of his ragged shirt is a perfect correlative image for a feeling of violated privacy and a rudely exposed hidden inner self. We have here the first example of an experience Dickens was to trace in similar forms in such different characters as Merdle, Arthur Clennam, William Dorrit, and (in a different sense) Dr. Manette, his witness that the continuity of childhood and adulthood involves the persistence of the terrors and insecurities as well as the joys of early-life. Dickens here achieves, I suggest, another creative extension of his Romantic theme, as well as, with David here, and, savagely with William Dorrit later, making use of his insight to capture what one imagines to have been a not uncommon psychological state in an age in which perhaps a larger proportion of gentlemen than usual in a class society had pasts at odds with their current social rank. K.J. Fielding has argued that Copperfield "is distinguished from the later novels by its self-assurance that by self-mastery a man may live down what might have harmed him".<sup>1</sup> This certainly is the optimistic interpretation of David's past urged by Agnes when she writes to him that "as the endurance of my childish days had done its part to make me what I was, so greater calamities

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1. Fielding, "Dickens and the Past", Experience in the Novel, p. 110 .



would nerve me on, to be yet better than I was",<sup>1</sup> and we are left in no doubt that the power of such positive thinking has everything to do with David's final success. Yet one is left wondering at the end where, in the triumphal picture, one is to fit that "self-distrust" which is the negative aspect of what his childish days have made him. Are we to assume that with Agnes's support it no longer undermines his authoritativeness as celebrated literary didact and paterfamilias, or has Dickens forgotten about it? Whatever answer one gives, one's memory of it can't but introduce a questioning undertone to the veritable coronation march of the novel's closure.

At the end then, one might suggest, Dickens resolves the conflict between David's psychological make-up, and the social role he is to play successfully if he is to win our respect, by pushing the disturbing peculiarities of David's character into the background, or loftily and vaguely assuming that they are made inoperative by a reformation of character. A desperate expedient, given that the finished product, as imaged by the adult narrator, is such a colourless abstraction. Yet David's early performances as a social leader certainly provide grounds for desperation. It is not surprising that the youth who is so easily ejected from the Box-Seat becomes the young man who is forced to this conclusion about the first household of which he is the head:

"The fact is, my dear," I began, "there is contagion in us. We infect everyone about us".

"It is not merely, my pet," said I, "that we lose money and comfort, and even temper sometimes, by not learning to be more careful; but that we incur the serious responsibility of spoiling everyone who

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1. David Copperfield, p. 888.

comes into our service, or has any dealings with us. I begin to be afraid that the fault is not entirely on one side, but that these people all turn out ill because we don't turn out very well ourselves." <sup>1</sup>

Hard as it may be for us to realise from the perspective of our changed social circumstances, David's household, containing servants and hence an arena for the meeting of the governing and the governed, is as much a stage of public life as the classroom, the church, or the place of work. Hence David's earnest conviction that they are guilty of a failure of social leadership. There is considerable truth in Orwell's comment that "at the back of Dickens's mind there is usually a half-belief that the whole apparatus of government is unnecessary". <sup>2</sup> Yet in this novel at least, in striking contrast to Dombey and Son, Dickens does stress what are in a broad sense the governing responsibilities of men like David and Traddles, responsibilities in the sense in which they pertain to someone like Mr. Knightley in Emma, not locally rooted and semi-squirearchical as his are, but the equivalent for their Victorian, more urbanised society. And while Dora is the more spectacularly incompetent of the pair in these scenes, Dickens also insists that David's lack of the qualities of command are also to blame for the chaos that swells around them. They both feel helplessly intimidated by their first maid, a fact which Dickens presses upon us by having David admit to us that she had struck him as Mrs. Crupp's daughter in disguise. Thus it is only under extreme provocation that David is "nerved" to get rid of her. Similarly they are both the prey of cheating shopkeepers: "Our appearance in a shop was a signal for the damaged goods to be brought out immediately" <sup>3</sup> - one is immediately reminded of David's earlier history of being exploited by those who pretend to serve him, from the compassionate waiter onwards. And if the housekeeping is formally Dora's responsibility -

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1. Ibid., p. 761 .

2. "Charles Dickens", Collected Essays, etc., i, 429-30.

3. David Copperfield, p. 707 .

a strong husband would have taken over its command himself - the page is David's.

Again, of course, there is a genial note in the comedy of these passages that sometimes works to partially endear David in his ineptitude. He is foolishly generous in allowing the page's tears to inhibit him from dismissing him, but he is, after all, generous.<sup>1</sup> His bewildered lack of authoritativeness at his own dinner-table likewise has its engaging side: "There was another thing I could have wished, namely, that Jip had never been encouraged to walk about the table-cloth during dinner. I began to think there was something disorderly in his being there at all, even if he had not been in the habit of putting his foot in the salt or the melted butter" - <sup>2</sup> the hesitant mildness of David's irritation has its own especial appeal. Yet associated with David in his public capacity we as readers are perhaps without grounds for not finding such charm insidious, for whereas with Dora David in his boyishness can reach a modus vivendi, in social life this not only makes him a victim, but in its minor but still significant way simply undermines the social order - the civilisation - to which he belongs and to which the novel in essence subscribes; invites, that is, a day in which every tinker's blackened hand would be in every gentleman's shirt and the spirit of Uriah Heep in control in all the professions. Part of the interest David Copperfield has for us today, I think, lies in the fact that in its way, and from its distinctly bourgeois-genteel viewpoint, it dimly foreshadows that more modern cultural crisis of, as Yeats has put it, "the best" lacking "all conviction, while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity"<sup>3</sup> - in Jip's paw triumphantly in the melted butter there is the faintest premonition, perhaps, of Yeats's

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1. Ibid., pp. 759 - 60.

2. Ibid., p. 709 . (My underlining)

3. "The Second Coming", ll. 7-8.



"rough beast", which,"its hour come round at last,/Slouches towards  
Bethlehem to be born".<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, it might be argued, an  
appreciative tolerance of Copperfieldian charm is a test of our own  
liberality: no more than Falstaffian jollity ought it to be banished  
from humane society. Finally, perhaps, our valuation of the novel  
will depend to some extent on our underlying feeling of how liberal,  
in general, we can afford to be.

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1. Ibid., ll. 21-2.

## NOTE: DICKENS AND DE QUINCEY

In my discussions both of Dombey and Son and Copperfield I have been emphasising the importance of Dickens's perception that the claims of 'continuity' and of practical moral maturity can just as easily be opposed as complementary, and that such a situation poses an especial dilemma for someone like him who, working in terms of his inherited Romantic premises, is necessarily loath to subordinate the former to the latter. In this he is generally unlike Wordsworth, for whom the experiences of childhood are unproblematically "the soul...of all [his] moral being": the happy predominance in childhood of beneficent Nature experienced intimately, mainly as a nurtural presence, enables him to re-affirm traditional moral discipline without sacrificing the emotional inwardness of commitment, the spontaneity, that characteristically made moral commitment for other Romantics such a difficult affair. (I am thinking here of the Wordsworth of "Tintern Abbey" or The Prelude rather than of the "Ode to Duty".) Thus I have spoken of Dickens as having modified the idea of the crucial importance of personal continuity as it came to him from Wordsworth and his friends (the idea itself can be seen as a form of radical 'sincerity', an idea of the integrity of the self to its childhood beginnings that constitutes one answer to the abiding literary and cultural problem of what sincerity is).<sup>1</sup>

This, however, is not quite true, even if we think only of Wordsworth amongst Dickens's Romantic predecessors. For on several important occasions Wordsworth's distinctively Romantic respect for the integrity of the life of the feelings did lead him to urge what involved a major qualification of

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<sup>1</sup>See: Lionel Trilling, Sincerity and Authenticity (1972).

the traditional stoic code of emotional self-discipline. A comparison of Wordsworth's appraisal of self-destructive fidelity to the past in his tale of Margaret, with Johnson's orthodox stoic reflections on the same issue in his essays, shows just how much broader Wordsworth's sense of the morally desirable was than Good Sense, or even practically beneficial 'good feeling':

Yet still

She loved this wretched spot, nor would for worlds  
Have parted hence; and still that length of road,  
And this rude bench, one torturing hope endeared,  
Fast-rooted at her heart; and here, my Friend, -  
In sickness she remained; and here she died;  
Last human tenant of the ruined walls!"

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It seems determined, by the general suffrage of mankind, that sorrow is to a certain point laudable, as the offspring of love, or at least pardonable as the effect of weakness; but that it ought not to be suffered to increase by indulgence, but must give way, after a stated time, to social duties, and the common avocations of life. 2

The business of life is to go forwards.....It would add much to human happiness, if an art could be taught of forgetting all of which the remembrance is at once useless and afflictive; if that pain which can never end in pleasure could be driven totally away, that the mind might perform its functions without incumbrance, and the past might no longer encroach upon the present. 3

Similarly, part of the point of "Ruth" seems to me to lie in the unorthodox passiveness in the face of sorrow that the deserted heroine displays, with Wordsworth's implied approval. Differently, as I have argued in chapter two, Dickens had in Charles Lamb the encouraging advocate of a certain broadening of the desirable standards of maturity to involve a certain appreciative toleration of the child-like. Neither in Wordsworth nor Lamb, however, would Dickens have found any precedent

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1. The Excursion, I, 910-16.
  2. The Rambler, No. 47, 28 August 1750; in Works, iii, 252-8 (255).
  3. The Idler, No. 72, I September 1759; in Works, ii, 224-7 (225-6).



for the way in which in both Dombey and Copperfield the claims of continuity with a personal past directly conflict with, and are endorsed against, not just a narrow definition of adult normality, but adult normality as such.

He did, however, have a precursor in this respect in another of the secondary figures of English Romanticism (also a member of the Wordsworth circle): Thomas de Quincey. And as De Quincey was undoubtedly a writer Dickens knew and liked, some consideration of their relationship is indispensable to a study such as the present one, both because De Quincey was a Romantic (Philip Collins has pointed out that Dickens probably read more widely in the Romantic essayists than in the Romantic poets)<sup>1</sup> and more particularly because he was one, as I have just suggested, in a way highly pertinent to the particular thematic connections and permutations I have been tracing.<sup>2</sup>

First of all it is necessary to set straight what we know about the dates and manner of Dickens's reading of De Quincey. In his memoir of Dickens, written in 1870, James T. Fields, a close American friend, cites De Quincey as one of Dickens's favourite authors, alongside Cobbett, Carlyle, and Sydney Smith.<sup>3</sup> We also know that the thirteen volume Collected Edition of De Quincey was in the Gad's Hill library.<sup>4</sup> This collected edition did not begin to appear until 1853,<sup>5</sup> several years after the two novels, Dombey and Son and David Copperfield, in relation to which De Quincey, for my present purposes, can most profitably be discussed. This edition, which appeared over a period of seven years, brought together a vast miscellany from the periodicals of the previous three decades. How many of these articles Dickens may have read in their original form is an unanswerable

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1. Dickens and Education, p. 213.

2. The Dickens-De Quincey relationship has recently been discussed by Christopher Herbert in his article "De Quincey and Dickens", Victorian Studies, XVII (March 1974), pp. 247-63. For the most part his discussion pursues a different path to mine below, but where there is a convergence I indicate it. See also brief note by M.R. Woodhead, "De Quincey and 'Little Dorrit'", Notes and Queries, CCXVII (November 1972), p. 409.

3. Fields, p. 238.

4. Stonehouse, p. 27.

5. Selections Grave and Gay from the Writings Published and Unpublished by Thomas de Quincey, ed. Hogg, 14 vols. (Edinburgh 1853-60).

question, considering the sparseness of Dickens's recorded comments upon his reading. We have no reason to presume a comprehensive acquaintance. However, we can be fairly sure about The Confessions of an English Opium-Eater, which was very well-known indeed<sup>1</sup>, and it seems reasonable to speculate that by the time he came to write Dombey he would probably have read the series of essays entitled Suspiria de Profundis which appeared in Blackwood's through 1845, considering that it was announced as a sequel to the Confessions, and included what must have been of especial interest to Dickens at the time, a chapter of autobiographical analysis entitled "The Affliction of Childhood"<sup>2</sup>. That Dickens was fairly familiar with Blackwood's is something we can be fairly sure of, as a number of his letters either allude to things he had read in that magazine, or commend aspiring writers to submit their works to it.<sup>3</sup> John Wilson, author of Noctes Ambrosianae, and another of Dickens's favourite essayists<sup>4</sup>, had been an editor until 1837.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Dickens had mixed widely in the Edinburgh literary world during his visit in 1841.<sup>6</sup>

As I have just intimated, the work of De Quincey that would probably have been the most help to Dickens in his thinking along the lines we are examining is De Quincey's account of his own childhood, "The Affliction of Childhood". De Quincey's mother was, it seems, a rather cold woman, albeit an admirable one, and his father, frequently called away on business, was not an active presence. Consequently the death of a favourite sister when he was six was experienced as a catastrophe, and gave his character

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1. See, for instance, the obvious echoes of it in Edwin Drood.
  2. Reprinted in Thomas de Quincey, Collected Writings, ed. D. Masson, 14 vols., xiii, pp. 331-69. See editorial note on revisions, *ibid.*, pp. 331-3.
  3. Reprinted as part of the autobiographic sketches, Writings, i, 28-54.
  4. See, for instance, letters to James White, 23, Sept. 1849; and to W.H. Wills 5 Sept. 1855, in Letters, ii, 173, iii, 687. Dickens first read George Eliot's Scenes of Clerical Life in Blackwood's in 1843 (Forster, p. 292).
  5. See Stone, p. 537.
  6. See Forster, bk. 2, ch. 10.

a direction from which it never recovered:

About the close of my sixth year, suddenly the first chapter of my life came to a violent termination; that chapter which, ever within the gates of recovered Paradise, might merit a remembrance. "Life is Finished!" was the secret misgiving of my heart; for the heart of infancy is as apprehensive as that of maturest wisdom in relation to any capital wound inflicted on the happiness. "Life is Finished! Finished it is!" was the hidden meaning that, half unconsciously to myself, lurked within my sighs; and, as bells from a distance on a summer evening seemed charged at times with an articulate form of words, some monitory message, that rolls round unceasingly, even so for me some noiseless and subterraneous voice seemed to chant continually a secret word, made audible only to my heart - that "now is the blossoming of life withered for ever"....Yet in what sense could that be true? For an infant not more than six years old, was it possible that the promises of this life had been really blighted?... Raptures there might be in arrear; but raptures are modes of troubled pleasure. The peace, the rest, the central security which belong to love that is past all understanding - these could return no more. Such a love, so unfathomable - such a peace, so unvexed by storms, or the fear of storms - had brooded over those four latter years of my infancy, which brought me into special relations to my eldest sister. <sup>1</sup>

Leaving Dickens aside for the moment, what is immediately striking about a passage such as this is that whilst the manner of it is very much De Quincey's own (the consciously lofty plangency to which the elaborately arranged sentence structure contributes), the thought of the passage draws heavily on Wordsworth's poetic study of his own childhood in The Prelude. The poem was not to be published until some years after De Quincey's essay, but we have De Quincey's avowal that he had already read the poem in manuscript <sup>2</sup>, and it seems to me that he has in fact here creatively adapted the influence of his friend to achieve a very clear understanding of his own case. One can see his intelligent grasp of the "great philosophic

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1. Writings, i, 28-9.

2. "Literary and Lake Reminiscences", Writings, xii, pp. 268, 281, 292.



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 poem", as he called it, in the way that he emphasises the crucial  
 importance of that "central security" that Wordsworth saw as the  
 foundation of real health (see the "Blest the infant Babe" passage  
 from the second book of The Prelude; I quote and discuss this passage  
 fully in chapters six and seven) . Note also the intelligently  
 accurate way De Quincey has transposed the phrase "troubled pleasure"  
 from the boat-stealing passage in Book One of The Prelude ("it was an  
 act of stealth/And troubled pleasure") : the new context (the excitements  
 of seeing Rome, reading Milton, etc.) seems only fancifully related  
 at first reading, yet further pondering shows, I think, how well the  
 borrowing focusses a sense of unease beneath the surface enjoyment.  
 By looking to Wordsworth, one might say, De Quincey is able to transform  
 an eloquent expression of intense feeling into an understanding of the  
 meaning of that feeling, and its bearing on the possible growth of the  
 self. For isn't it the case that Wordsworth has enabled him to see  
 that his early childhood loss placed him in the condition Wordsworth had  
 diagnosed as the antithesis of that of the "Blest... infant Babe", that  
 of the "outcast...bewildered and depressed."? Without the sensitive  
 and highly original delineations in The Prelude of the difference between  
 inner wholeness and inner alienation (the famous account of the theft of  
 a boat for instance, records the temporary violation and loss of the  
 condition celebrated in the "infant Babe" passage), would De Quincey have  
 compared his state on leaving the room in which his dead sister was lying  
 with that of the archetypal outcast, the wandering Jew?:

O, Ahasuerus, everlasting Jew! fable or not a fable, thou, when first  
 starting on thy endless pilgrimage of woe - thou, when first flying  
 through the gates of Jerusalem, and vainly yearning to leave the  
 pursuing curse behind thee - couldst not more certainly in the words  
 of Christ have read thy doom of endless sorrow, than I when passing  
 for ever from my sister's room.

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1. "On Wordsworth's Poetry", Tait's Magazine (September 1845); in Writings,  
 xi, 294-325 (294).
2. The Prelude, II, 233-54.
3. *Ibid.*, I, 361-2.
4. Writings, i, 43.

Without Wordsworth, one might suggest, the rationale of the intensity of his grief would not have been so clearly comprehensible.

De Quincey's sister died when he was six, yet the first-quoted passage dealing with the episode stands at the head of his personal history. This is quite appropriate, as the experience was undoubtedly a trauma in the full sense of the word, and in breaking the straightforward chronological sequence to introduce it De Quincey was emphasising the importance of the episode as a main-spring of his character: what unity the written autobiography has turns on his psychological history as shaped by the bereavement. What, then, of the effects of the trauma on later life? The most important point that emerges here is that due to his assimilation of Wordsworthian ideas De Quincey's retrospective judgement of how he could have coped with his grief and lived on proves to be a bafflingly contradictory one. The common-sense pre-Romantic attitude in such a situation was that the best way of meeting such a loss was to try to look resolutely forward, praying for the relief of forgetfulness (to revert to Johnson, "the business of life is to go forward"). From the Wordsworthian point of view, however, such common-sense reasonableness necessarily entailed an alienation of the self from the sources within it from which all real health could grow. Thus the allegiance to 'continuity', to somehow winning release from the outcast state and regaining some kind of access to that "central security", meant for De Quincey an endorsement of what was at

the same time a self-destructive morbidity:

Now began to unfold themselves the consolations of solitude, those consolations which only I was destined to taste; now, therefore, began to open upon me those fascinations of solitude which, when acting as a co-agency with unresisted grief, end in the paradoxical result of making out of grief itself a luxury, such a luxury as finally becomes a snare, overhanging life itself, and the energies of life, with growing menaces....At this time, and under this impulse of rapacious grief, that grasped at what it could not obtain, the faculty of shaping images in the distance out of slight elements, and grouping them after the yearnings of the heart, grew upon me in morbid excess. And I recall at the present moment one instance of that sort, which may show how merely shadows, or a gleam of brightness, or nothing at all, could furnish a sufficient basis for this creative faculty... 1

To come back to Dickens, doesn't this strongly bring to mind

Paul Dombey, central to whose character, as I suggested in chapter two, is a regressiveness which, as in De Quincey's case above, is paradoxically a strategy to preserve the integrity of the self? In fact Paul's yearning for his lost mother, or for what his lost mother represents, would seem to parallel De Quincey's reaction to his sister's death at every point. Like Paul, De Quincey was marked from an early age by a strong tendency to "thoughtfulness and abstraction", and in both cases this combines with a peculiarly concentrated power of the imagination to sustain a highly private inner world in which the primary emotional bonds are preserved at the cost of destructively isolating the child from the normal flow of life. Neither writer explicitly acknowledges that such a morbid imbalance of feeling does have an undeniable positive logic, which is that without such 'creative regression', as it were, the springs of life would be in danger of drying up; but such is the strongly implicit burden of what both are saying. Paul's intimations about "what the waves are saying" are crude and opaque besides the sonorous and elaborate fantasies De Quincey adduces to illustrate his own childish "faculty of shaping images in the distance out of slight elements, and grouping them after the yearnings of

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1. Ibid., i, 46.



the heart".<sup>1</sup> Yet in both cases the psychological function is the same, and the judgement we are invited to make upon it is ambivalent, for exactly the same reasons. Despite the obvious differences between the childhood world of Dombey and Son and the more congenial one that emerges in De Quincey's narrative, it seems to me quite likely that in thinking about the relevance of the 'continuity' idea to the case of Paul Dombey, Dickens may well have been guided by De Quincey's understanding of his own peculiar psychology. In any case, the adaptations of the 'doctrine' in De Quincey's autobiographical sketch and in Dombey and Son are remarkably similar.

Unlike Paul Dombey, however, De Quincey survived the affliction of the childhood, and struggled on into an unsettled adult life, in which forward and backward-looking impulses were never to be satisfactorily reconciled. In this his case anticipated that of David Copperfield, the protagonist of Dickens's next novel, who is shown to survive and yet be forever conditioned by a loss similar to De Quincey's. "Having always,

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1. Thus he recalls the vision he had repeatedly experienced in Church at that time, in which, through the uncoloured glass window, from the hint of a cloud:

...under the flash of my sorrow-haunted eye, it grew and shaped itself into visions of beds with white lawny curtains; and in the beds lay sick children, dying children, that were tossing in anguish, and weeping clamorously for death. God, for some mysterious reason, could not suddenly release them from their pain; but he suffered the beds, as it seemed, to rise slowly through the clouds; slowly the beds ascended into the chambers of the air; slowly also his arms descended from the heavens, that he, and his young children... might yet meet the sooner.

(Writings, i, 47)

up to the completion of my sixth year, been a privileged pet, and almost, I might say, ranking among the sanctities of the household, with all the female sections",<sup>1</sup> and from thence to be "shut out for ever",<sup>2</sup> to feel that "Life is finished"<sup>3</sup> - these are De Quincey's words, but they might very well have been David's, about his banishment from the paradisaal existence of his early years, though there are no Murdstones in De Quincey's narrative, which is not in any sense a work of social criticism. Furthermore, while in articulating David's history according to the logic of his psychologically formative early experiences, Dickens did have available to him a number of statements of the continuity idea. The Prelude, the major statement by any of Dickens's predecessors of the idea as argued in terms of the detailed and continuous narrative of a single life, was not published until a good deal of Copperfield had been written.<sup>4</sup> Consequently the main possible literary inspiration for Dickens's fairly original rendering of David's life in terms of its organic pattern would have been De Quincey. And while in the neurotically morbid nature of his introversion the author of Confessions of an Opium-Eater was more like Paul Dombey than David, the way by which De Quincey oscillated between normality and abnormality, sustaining, as it were, two distinct selves which never united, closely parallels the rhythm of David's being. At the beginning of the second chapter of his story, "Introduction to the World of

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1. This quotation, however, is from an article first appearing as "A Sketch from Childhood" in Hogg's Instructor (1851-2; see Writings, i, 55n), being reprinted in immediate sequence with "The Affliction of Childhood" in the later collected editions: see Writings, i, 80.
  2. *Ibid.*, i, 43.
  3. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
  4. The Prelude appeared in July 1850, during which month Dickens wrote No. XVI (chaps. 47-50) (Butt and Tillotson, p. 163)

Strife", De Quincey relates how the "harsh awaking" into the necessary disciplines of the normal world "broke the strength of [his] sickly reveries" and saved him from "an early grave", and a few pages later he refers to "the superior manliness, generosity, and self-control" of those who benefit by the disciplines of public-school life.<sup>2</sup> Yet later on he describes the separation from his elder brother, who had been responsible for his salutary adjustment to normal boyhood, as a "deliverance",<sup>3</sup> and elsewhere, in another autobiographical aside, a consequent recurrence of the "agitations of ...childhood" under the influence of his first experiments with opium is reported as returning with "the grandeur of recovered life".<sup>4</sup> This doubleness is matched in David's case, in which the movement towards the self of the 'disciplined heart', is repeatedly checked by the persistently resurgent influence of his past - the way, as discussed in chapter five, that David's memories of his mother are shown to unconsciously control his later life. Both Dickens and De Quincey maintain an ambivalent attitude towards this contradictoriness of pattern, at once applauding the disciplined movement towards maturity, yet acquiescing in the lapses away from it insofar as it enables the self to keep in touch with the true personal sources of emotional energy. And needless to say, just as the spontaneous vitality

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1. Writings, i, 56.

2. *Ibid.*, i, 59.

3. *Ibid.*, i, 120. See also i, 115.

4. *Ibid.*, xiii, 340.



of David's narrative lies pre-eminently in those passages in which his undisciplined heart is indulged, albeit with gentle irony, so the imaginative life of De Quincey's prose, its gloomy yet at times beautiful highly-wrought splendours, is the direct expression of that mood of peculiarly gratifying melancholy which it was at least his artistic if not his personal triumph not fully to suppress.

One aspect of De Quincey, however, that is nowhere reflected in Dickens, is his element of conscious psychological theorising, something, of course, which he shared with both Wordsworth and Coleridge (thus his lament, in his essay on Wordsworth, quoted in my introduction,) that "In the sense of absolute and philosophic criticism, we have little or none...but before that can exist, we must have a good psychology, whereas at present we have none at all."<sup>1</sup> Variations on some of the key formulae of English Romanticism do appear pertinently in Dickens at times; witness, for instance, his reflection at the outset of Copperfield, that grown men remarkable in their powers of observation "may with greater propriety be said not have lost the faculty, than to have acquired it; the rather, as...such men ...retain a certain freshness, and gentleness, and capacity of being pleased, which are also an inheritance they have preserved from their childhood."<sup>2</sup> Yet it is also useful to note, I think, that Dickens was not just paralleled by a work such as De Quincey's Autobiographic Sketches, which exemplified the unifying logic he was to use in tracing

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1. Ibid., xi, 244.

2. David Copperfield, p. 61.

David's history, but also had available to him in De Quincey, before writing Copperfield, a conscious and theoretical exposition of the way the organically continuous nature of the self was revealed in the processes of Memory. Dickens's sense of the importance of the continuity idea may well have been articulated, confirmed, or reinforced by his reading of a series of speculations and short fantasies grouped under the portentous title of Suspiria de Profundis. These, as I have said, were advertised as a sequel to the well-known Confessions, which had appeared some twenty-five years previously. As the title suggests, the tone of the pieces tends towards a religious loftiness quite alien to Dickens. Yet the following passage represents the positive contribution that the Suspiria, pace the manner, could have made:

Yes, reader, countless are the mysterious handwritings of grief and joy which have inscribed themselves successively upon the palimpsest of your brain; and, like the annual leaves of aboriginal forests, or the undissolving snows on the Himalaya, or light falling upon light, the endless strata have covered up each other in forgetfulness. But by the hour of death, but by fever, but by the searchings of opium, all these can revive in strength. They are not dead, but sleeping....In some potent convulsion of the system, all wheels back into the earliest elementary stage. 1

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1. Writings, 1, 121-33.

2. Ibid., xiii, 348-9.

This comes from a sketch called "Palimpsest of the Human Brain", in which De Quincey elaborately unfolds an idea that the self is like a palimpsest, in that earliest experiences persist ineradicably even when covered over and virtually forgotten in later life, still retaining the power to influence the present from afar, or to dramatically resurface without conscious effort.<sup>1</sup>

Actually, what should be emphasised about the above is that it represents a distinctly individual variation by De Quincey upon the original Romantic idea. For whereas Wordsworth, Coleridge, and, in his way, Lamb conceived of fidelity to early memory as morally and psychologically desirable, in the De Quincey of the Suspiria (and elsewhere) the idea appears as a deterministic law of nature, bearing moral authority because it is a law and beyond human check, even though its workings be partially destructive. The mind, De Quincey said, contained "organising principles ... which ... will not permit the grandeur of human unity to be violated".<sup>2</sup> The peculiar closeness of this to David is obvious, caught as he is in a state of "conditioned helplessness"<sup>3</sup> by his own past. Indeed, at the emotional climax of the essay its theme is recapitulated in terms more suggestive of David's case than De Quincey's own:

The bewildering romance, light tarnished with darkness, the semi-fabulous legend, truth celestial mixed with human falsehoods, these fade even of themselves as life advances. The romance has perished that the young man adored; the legend has gone that deluded the boy; but the deep, deep tragedies of infancy, as when the child's hands were unlinked for ever from his mother's neck, or his lips for ever from his mother's kisses, these remain lurking below all, and these lurk to the last.

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1. See also Confessions of an English Opium-Eater, Ibid., iii, 236-7, and "Recollections of the Lake Poets", Ibid., ii, 204-5. On this point see Herbert, "De Quincey and Dickens", pp. 247-50.
2. Writings, xiii, 347.
3. Dickens the Novelist, p. 54.
4. Writings, xiii, 359.



The accents of this are unmistakeably De Quincey's: by the time of Copperfield, at least, Dickens did not permit such emotions to swell so fulsomely in his prose. But it is surely very tempting to think that writing such as this might have had a considerable catalytic effect upon the man who <sup>a</sup> few years after reading it (which he probably did) was to produce Copperfield, an effect either of waking dormant memories and suggesting perceptions about their influence on present life, or of providing reassurance about the validity of perceptions that may have already occurred to Dickens - the value of literary influence, one can safely assume, lies not only in an author's reading suggesting to him things he has not previously thought of, but also in clarifying to him his half-formed intimations and persuading him of their truth. Even if this was not the case in the above instance, it still seems to me that the particular collocation is worth pointing to, insofar as it fills out more closely what in my introduction I referred to as the continuity of the English Romantic tradition.

Six

AN "OUTCAST" RECLAIMED?: BLEAK HOUSE

I have argued that the spirit of David Copperfield is substantially one of expansiveness, of a trust in the amenity and flexibility of the human situation permissive of a relatively relaxed and ambiguous attitude towards the standards of maturity. In this climate characters such as Dora, the Micawbers, and in some respects, David, can live out their individuality with a charmed freedom safe from tragedy; even Littimer and Heep partake somewhat of the festive dispensation as we see them poised for escape through the anomalies of the prison system. In Bleak House, by contrast, the consequences of 'the undisciplined heart' are disastrous. In this world the shades of the prison-house close in with an inexorable vengeance, and romantic innocence is inevitably a victim:

The door stood open, and we both followed them with our eyes, as they passed down the adjoining room on which the sun was shining, and out at its farther end. Richard with his head bent, and her hand drawn through his arm, was talking to her very earnestly; and she looked up in his face, listening, and seemed to see nothing else. So young, so beautiful, so full of hope and promise, they went on lightly through the sunlight as their own happy thoughts might then be traversing the years to come and making them all years of brightness. So they passed away into the shadow, and were gone. It was only a burst of light that had been so radiant. The room darkened as they went out, and the sun was clouded over. <sup>1</sup>

Esther, in what the novel sees as her necessarily optimistic sentimental way, embarks on this touching poetic reflection, but is forced to abandon

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1. Bleak House, p. 233 .

it when the facts thwart her: "It was only a burst of sunlight". The more inclusive symbolism of sun and shadow passes her by, of course, and the rhythm of the last few lines catches the lapse of her thoughts into emotional neutrality. However, the full symbolic suggestion of sun and shadow do stay with us, giving dramatic point to an uneasiness about Richard that has been felt in the rest of the chapter, and Esther's own selective response here is itself the object of a sympathetic irony, being one of the examples of the determined cheerfulness upon which she so relies. As the novel proceeds, this incident becomes in retrospect a representative image of the novel, as we see that this is indeed a world where innocent happiness is only possible as an interlude within the ordinary, bleaker, more shadowy world. One may not agree with the critical values implicit in Forster's pronouncement that in this novel, in contrast to Copperfield, we no more "escape... into the old freedom and freshness of the author's imaginative worlds", and that many of its characters "are much too real to be pleasant".<sup>1</sup> But one can't miss what he's getting at.

Esther herself, of course, has traditionally been taken as a major sign of this change of atmosphere. She was prominent among Forster's grounds of unease about the novel, and in her "too conscious unconsciousness"<sup>2</sup> of her good qualities, he found nothing particularly real nor at all pleasant. Dickens's sequel to David Copperfield in the first-person narrative form was, he felt, definitely not a success. Other contemporary

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1. Forster, p. 561.

2. Ibid.



reviewers seem to have been no more taken than Forster with Esther's precocious spinsterliness, being no more sympathetic than the most hard-boiled of moderns with the impression she gives of coy yet ostentatious virtue.<sup>1</sup> For the most part modern commentators have been annoyed and baffled by her in much the same way, and few have managed to furnish more than limp apologies for the girl who until recently must have been one of the greatest wallflowers of all fictional 'heroines'. Those who have made the effort have usually found her greatest justification to lie in her supposedly limpid narration; being a plain girl she can be relied upon to give us the facts straight, in her no-nonsense domestic manner, thus allowing Dickens to save his own voice for the purple patches. "She does, however, have the advantage that the journeyman work of plain narration can be left to her", is the final resort of Sylvere Monod, in a recent article, after having run up a variety of cul-de-sacs in an unsuccessful attempt to argue his way out of an inherent irritation.<sup>2</sup> Differently, Murray Krieger has suggested that Esther's history is a sentimental story to compensate for the gloom and terror of Rick's tragic involvement.<sup>3</sup> The assumption commonly persists that Esther is meant to be perfect, and that Dickens has bungled things, perhaps because he is trapped by the exigencies of having a narrator who must perforce reveal her own moral perfection.

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1. See the selection of reviews reprinted in A.E. Dyson, ed., Dickens: Bleak House, Casebook Series (1969); pp. 57 (Spectator), 70-1 (Westminster Review), 79 (Putnam's Magazine) and 87 (Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine). A gallant note of dissent, however, was registered by the reviewer in Bentley's Monthly Review (Dyson, ed., p.67), who had complete faith in Esther's disingenuousness.
  2. "Esther Summerson, Charles Dickens and the Reader in Bleak House", Dickens Studies, V (May 1969), pp. 5-25.
  3. Murray Krieger, The Tragic Vision (1966; first published 1960), p. 140n.

This attitude is not hard to understand: Esther's narrative is not immediately attractive at those places where it seems most obviously stamped with her own personality, and one's natural tendency is to quickly stereotype her as 'conventional heroine overdone', and read hurriedly on with glazed and incurious eye. However, I think that the traditional reaction has failed to appreciate what a careful inspection of the text can't but show to be the complexity of Dickens's purpose with Esther. Hence there is cause for satisfaction in the emergence in recent years of a small band of commentators on the novel who are at least prepared to find her 'interesting', if not, for the most part, someone, as Q.D. Leavis has tactfully yet not over-generously put it, in whose society we necessarily "rejoice".<sup>1</sup>

These critics have argued that Dickens's concern in this portrait is primarily diagnostic and analytic rather than celebratory, and that the outcome is a subtle study of the way in which a basically neurotic personality is formed by the early circumstances of her life.<sup>2</sup>

I am quite in agreement with the general burden of such claims; Esther does represent, I think, one of Dickens's most deeply insightful characterisations. Consequently I do not feel abashed at being about to devote a substantial opening section of this chapter to her - which I do not because my general sense of her is radically dissimilar to that of her recent defenders, but because I feel that Dickens's thought about her marks a further interesting development of the Romantic ideas about 'continuity', the relation of which to the novels has been the

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1. Dickens the Novelist, p. 140.

2. W. Axton, "The Trouble with Esther", Modern Language Quarterly, XXVI (December 1965), pp. 545-57, and "Esther's Nicknames: A Study in Relevance", Dickensian, LXII (September 1966), pp. 158-63; Taylor Stoehr, Dickens: The Dreamers Stance (1965), pp. 137-51; Q.D. Leavis in Dickens the Novelist, pp. 154-60; Alex Zwerdling, "Esther Summerson Rehabilitated", PMLA, LXXXCIII (May 1973), pp. 429-39; Carey, pp. 172-3. An interesting but, I think, unconvincing defence of Esther as a sheerly celebratory portrait is contained in Dyson, ch. 7, also printed as "Bleak House: Esther Better not Born" in Dyson, ed., pp. 244-73.

underlying theme of my thesis so far.

As with David, Esther is a study of the continuity of the self from childhood to adulthood, of the immanence of time past in time present. One quickly noticeable difference between them, however, is that whereas David is self-consciously nostalgic (see previous chapter), glorying like a Romantic poet in the refluxes of memory, Esther clings determinedly to the Johnsonian-stoic idea that "the business of life is to go forward" :

My fancy, made a little wild by the wind perhaps, would not consent to be all unselfish, either, though I would have persuaded it to be so if I could. It wandered back to my godmother's house, and came along the intervening track, raising up shadowy speculations which had sometimes trembled there in the dark, as to what knowledge Mr. Jarndyce had of my earliest history—even as to the possibility of his being my father, though that idle dream was quite gone now.

It was all gone now, I remembered, getting up from the fire. It was not for me to muse over by-gones, but to act with a cheerful spirit and a grateful heart. So I said to myself, "Esther, Esther, Esther! Duty, my dear!" and gave my little basket of housekeeping keys such a shake that they sounded like little bells, and rang me hopefully to bed.

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We repeatedly see Esther setting her face against her past – at one point towards the end of the novel she even refers to her life before the loss of her looks as being "gone like my infancy or my childhood"<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, the outlawed memory is shown to exert a powerful influence of which she is quite unconscious: the more she seeks to set the past

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1. Bleak House, p. 131.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 887.



aside, the more Dickens reveals to us of the way in which it pervasively conditions her present behaviour. In the above-quoted passage, for instance, Esther's resolute cheerfulness is largely bound up with a characteristic self-deprecation ("it was not for me to muse over bygones") that is the direct consequence of the early influence of her godmother, indicating that the very reaction by which she defends herself against an overpowering return of the memory of early experience is itself the product of that experience. In fact, a puritanical inhibition against indulgence in morbid emotion is about the one positive legacy Esther has derived from her formative years, since, as the novel charts in detail, it is mainly morbid memories that these years have bequeathed her. Through her case, I think, Dickens can be seen to have taken up the Romantic preoccupation with the continuity of the self, and to have pursued the complementary enquiry as to what the consequences are if those early psychological conditions were absent in which a vital core of self is created and with which the adult self must needs keep in touch. Consequently, whereas the early Romantics had concerned themselves with the various-faceted inheritance of well-being to be derived from childhood experience subsisting as memory at the buried core of the self, and whereas in Dombey and Son and David Copperfield Dickens himself had depicted modified forms of this inheritance which, for various reasons, could not be integrated with adult selfhood, so with Esther Dickens is exploring the converse case of a felt inner lack of well-being, similarly seen as a childhood legacy.

By the time he began to write Bleak House in November 1851 Dickens may well have had some familiarity with Wordsworth's Prelude (it was in his library at his death, along with the rest of Wordsworth's published work<sup>1</sup>). Consequently, it is not unlikely that, absorbed as he was becoming in the mysteries of growth and continuity in the psyche, his eye would have been caught by the following passage in the second book;

Blest the infant Babe,  
(For with my best conjecture I would trace  
Our Being's earthly progress,) blest the Babe,  
Nursed in his Mother's arms, who sinks to sleep/  
Rocked on his Mother's breast, who with his soul  
Drinks in the feelings of his Mother's eye!  
For him, in one dear Presence, there exists  
A virtue which irradiates and exalts  
Objects through widest intercourse of sense;  
No outcast he, bewildered and depressed:  
Along his infant veins are interfused  
The gravitation and the filial bond  
Of nature that connect him with the world.  
Is there a flower, to which he points with hand  
Too weak to gather it, already love  
Drawn from love's purest earthly fount for him  
Hath beautified that flower; already shades  
Of pity cast from inward tenderness  
Do fall around him upon aught that bears  
Unsightly marks of violence or harm.  
Emphatically such a Being lives,  
Frail creature as he is, helpless as frail,  
An inmate of this active universe..... 2

Apart from the opening chapters of Emile, direct and detailed application of Romantic ideas about childhood to nurture specifically, and its consequence for later life, is rare; though, of course, the Romantic pre-occupation with the organic nature of the self obviously implies such a view: intense interest in the "seed-time"<sup>3</sup> of the soul<sup>3</sup>

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1. See Stonehouse, p. 119.

2. The Prelude, II, 233-52; the poem was briefly but favourably reviewed in Household Narrative (the supplement to Household Words), July 1850, p. 167 and also in The Examiner, which was under Forster's editorship (see H. Lindenberger, "The Reception of The Prelude", Bulletin of the New York Public Library, LXIV (1960), pp. 196-208. Professor Philip Collins has advised me that as yet unpublished evidence has recently come to light showing that Dickens bought a copy of The Prelude upon its publication.

3. *Ibid.*, I, 301.

could not but point the way to a consideration of the early relations between parents and children in different terms than earlier thought on the subject characteristically had. And while Wordsworth in The Prelude is avowedly dealing with the growth of a poet's mind, his stated belief in the poet as "a man speaking to men...nothing differing in kind from other men, but only in degree"<sup>1</sup> can be adduced to justify one's impression in reading The Prelude that the ideals it endorses are offered as normative.<sup>2</sup>

In Wordsworth the idea of Nature as partly an idealised maternal presence is extended to the claim that a happy and affectionate relationship with one's actual mother is a necessary pre-condition of the later underlying sense of belonging in Nature, in life itself, living "emphatically" as "an inmate of this active universe". Dickens may or may not have had The Prelude in mind when he conceived Esther's early history; at the least the wisdom informing these lines seems to me strikingly continuous with the insights controlling the glimpse of Esther's early years which we are given as the implicit key to her being - Dickens is surely occupying the same intellectual vantage-ground as Wordsworth, applying the converse of his insight in suggesting how in her the lack of a proper nurtural bond has produced someone who is, at heart (no longer just, as Oliver Twist was, in physical circumstance) an "outcast...bewildered and depressed":

1. "Preface to the Second Edition of the Lyrical Ballads", in The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, ed. E. de Selincourt, ii, 384-404 (393-7).

2. There is an interesting measure of agreement between Wordsworth here and modern psycho-analytic writers such as Eric Erikson, with his concept of "basic trust" ((see his Childhood and Society, (Penguin 1965; first published 1950), pp.239-43)), and R.D. Laing, with his similar idea of "ontological security" (The Divided Self, ch. 3); though Wordsworth and his nineteenth-century literary followers use a language which is capable of lucid psychological analysis, while still retaining a traditional religious resonance.



I was brought up, from my earliest remembrance - like some of the princesses in the fairy stories, only I was not charming - by my godmother. At least I only knew her as such. She was a good, good woman! She went to church three times every Sunday, and to morning prayers on Wednesdays and Fridays, and to lectures whenever there were lectures; and never missed. She was handsome; and if she had ever smiled, would have been (I used to think) like an angel - but she never smiled. She was always grave, and strict. She was so very good herself, I thought, that the badness of other people made her frown all her life. I felt so different from her, even making every allowance for the difference between a child and a woman; I felt so poor, so trifling, and so far off; that I never could be unrestrained with her - no, could never even love her as I wished. It made me very sorry to consider how good she was, and how unworthy of her I was; and I used ardently to hope that I might have a better heart; and I talked it over very often with the dear old doll; but I never loved my godmother as I ought to have loved her, and as I felt I must have loved her if I had been a better girl. <sup>1</sup>

In this state, of course, she is perfectly vulnerable to her godmother's charge that she has been born "set apart"<sup>2</sup>, with the shadow of especial sinfulness on her: Dickens acutely perceives the relationship between the nurtural psychology that seems to have been not that untypical of the more extreme kind of Victorian Puritanism, and its theological image of man's state (of which the peculiar circumstances of Esther's birth make her, in her godmother's eyes, a paradigm example). Just as The Prelude records a self alternately nourished by and cut off from vitalising childhood experience, "hiding-places of power", so Esther's story is one of being haunted by an inner sense of worthlessness, that is for the most part kept in check by an emotional self-discipline (itself partially the product of the inner lack of self-esteem), but which is potentially debilitating and at times nearly overwhelms her normal self, - as when she discovers that Lady Dedlock is her mother, or when she falls in delirium during her fever, during which she experiences a loss of the "separation between the various stages of [her] life".<sup>3</sup>

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1. Bleak House, p. 63.

2. Ibid., p. 65.

3. Ibid., p. 543.

So much for the facts at the root of Esther's situation.

Given the basic affinity with Romantic insights, Dickens's unfolding of the logic of her psychological growth is distinctively his own<sup>1</sup> (though perhaps somewhat indebted to Jane Eyre). - Nevertheless, his filling out of the portrait is very much in the spirit of the Wordsworthian position. One can see this, for instance, in Esther's unquestioning disclosure of her initial reaction to her situation:

I went up to my room, and crept to bed, and laid my doll's cheek against mine wet with tears; and holding that solitary friend upon my bosom, cried myself to sleep. Imperfect as my understanding of my sorrow was, I knew that I had brought no joy, at any time, to anybody's heart, and that I was to no one upon earth what Dolly was to me.

Dear, dear, to think how much time we passed alone together afterwards, and how often I repeated to the doll the story of my birthday, and confided to her that I would try, as hard as ever I could, to repair the fault I had been born with (of which I confessedly felt guilty and yet innocent), and would strive as I grew up to be industrious, contented, and kind-hearted, to do some good to someone, and win some love to myself if I could. 2

This, of course, follows straight upon Mrs. Barbary's pronouncement to her that she is "set apart" in especial inherited sinfulness, and that<sup>3</sup> "submission, self-denial, diligent work" are consequently to be her fit lot in life, thus giving explicit theological sanction to the implicit bearing of the way she has previously treated Esther, and clarifying Esther's feelings about herself into a distinct sense of identity and role. As some recent commentators have noted, Dickens

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1. I have regretted not having time or space enough to properly trace this connection, which is, I think, vital to Dickens's understanding of the psychology of neurotic self-denial; Jane Eyre, one might say, has in herself the embryo both of Esther and Tattycoram in Little Dorrit. The possibility of such an influence is briefly noted by Lionel Stevenson in "Dickens's Dark Novels, 1851-1857", Sewanee Review L1 (Summer 1943) pp. 398-409 (p.404); but as far as I know his suggestion has never been taken up and developed, though several other critics have commented on the Brontë-Dickens relationship with reference to other matters.

2. Bleak House, p. 65.

3. Ibid.

is here quite clearly suggesting that Esther's extreme dutifulness in later life is not simply a matter of disinterested idealism, but a direct response to early training (how Dickens comes to terms with the paradox of an honest and mostly likeable selflessness substantially motivated by a neurotic intensity is a question I will come to later). The impressionableness of the young mind, and its vulnerability to distorting adults, is perhaps nowhere more pathetically recorded in Dickens. Yet if Esther is shown to be radically crippled by the first guardian of her soul, she is not presented entirely in terms of a passive tabula-rasa. For, as Alex Zwerdling has pointed out<sup>1</sup>, Esther feels innocent of her godmother's charge, as well as guilty, and in the way she shoulders the burden of atonement there occurs a modification of its terms: her resolve adds "kind-heartedness" to her godmother's list of duties, and whereas her godmother is shown to value selflessness as a self-centred demonstration of piety, Esther spontaneously thinks of it in relation to helping others and winning affection for herself. What Dickens is affirming by this is that there is an instinctive human hunger to found the self on a basis of love, a hunger that asserts itself without prompting from outside. Such is the need of the human self to contain "hiding-places of power" at its core, that it seeks to create such centres of feeling even in the face of hostile circumstances, even to the point of investing

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1. p.430.



intense affection in a surrogate inanimate object, as is the case with Esther and her doll. Wordsworth had made something of the same point when he wrote of the "infant babe...who with his soul/  
Drinks in the feelings of his mother's eye!"<sup>1</sup>

Thus we arrive at a significant corollary, added by Dickens to the initial Romantic insights, which is that given the crucial importance of implanting certain centres of feeling in the young child, a failure to do this in the initial relationships with parents will lead to later relationships being construed along the lines of child and parent, as if the self needed to repair its unsatisfactory beginnings by re-enacting them in a changed successful version. I have previously discussed several of the relationships in Dombey and Son along such lines. Esther, however, represents a much more mature examination of the effect upon a child of being starved of love in early life - the gain in penetration and objectivity is substantial. For where with Florence Dombey, for instance, Dickens was content to dramatise, with the maximum sentimental expressiveness, the aching need arising from her neglect, with Esther he takes pains to show how the way that compensatory need expresses itself is itself conditioned by the upbringing which the self needs compensation against. Esther does not merely implore affection from others - as Florence does - but sets out to actively

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1. The Prelude, II, 236-7.

win it by self-denial, thus seeking escape from the identity imposed upon her by her godmother through an intense reliance upon one of the salient features of that identity. This paradoxical state of being at once freed from and still imprisoned by her <sup>is</sup> beginnings/at the heart of Esther's life with the Jarndyce circle at Bleak House.

Steven Marcus has referred to Dickens's habit of counterposing his vision of urban squalor with unconvincing portraits of a "new communion of de-institutionalised saints", who "escape from society" into an idealised, non-existent 'little society'<sup>1</sup>. This criticism (it is a pretty common one) obviously holds for the people we are officially asked to revere in Oliver Twist and to some extent in Dombey and Son, and one might be forgiven for thinking that much the same is true of the group of exiles from Chancery who find refuge at Bleak House. Certainly it is at Bleak House that many of Esther's seemingly most off-putting mannerisms come into full bloom:

Every part of the house was in such order, and every one was so attentive to me, that I had no trouble with my two bunches of keys: though what with trying to remember the contents of each little store-room drawer, and cupboard; and what with making notes on a slate about jams, and pickles, and preserves, and bottles, and glass, and china, and a great many other things; and what with being generally a methodical, old-maidish sort of foolish little person; I was so busy that I could not believe it was breakfast-time when I heard the bell ring. Away I ran; however, and made tea, as I had already been installed into the responsibility of the tea-pot; and then, as they were all rather late, and nobody was down yet, I thought I would take a peep at the garden and get some knowledge of that too. I found it quite a

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1. Marcus, pp. 90-1.

delightful place; in front, the pretty avenue and drive by which we had approached (and where, by the by, we had cut up the gravel so terribly with our wheels that I asked the gardener to roll it); at the back, the flower-garden, with my darling at her window up there, throwing it open to smile out at me, as if she would have kissed me from that distance. Beyond the flower-garden was a kitchen-garden, and then a paddock and then a snug little rick-yard, and then a dear little farm-yard. As to the House itself, with its three peaks in the roof; its various-shaped windows, some so large, some so small, and all so pretty; its trellis-work, against the south front for roses and honey-suckle, and its homely, comfortable, welcoming look: it was, as Ada said when she came out to meet me with her arm through that of its master, worthy of her cousin John - a bold thing to say, though he only pinched her dear cheek for it.

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Such insistent snugness - Esther's general air of presiding at a doll's-house tea-party - surely makes pretty claustrophobic reading at first, and it is close enough to earlier Dickensian celebrations of feminine domesticity (Ruth Pinch for instance) for it to be plausibly inferred that it has Dickens's unquestioning endorsement here as well. However here, I think, Dickens is stepping back somewhat from a vein of sentiment he had previously merely indulged, by seeing it as a functional part of Esther's psychology: her eager industry is her way of winning, or rather, one might say, coercing affection. Similarly her embarrassingly intense delight in the cosy is surely Dickens's psychologically accurate perception of one way of instinctively compensating for the loneliness of her early childhood: deprived as she has been of the normal child's protective and affectionate world of people and imaginative figures, she needs to create them for

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1. Bleak House, pp. 142-3.



herself in ostensibly adult terms. Having as a child self-denyingly given up her solitary friend, her doll (the act is recorded without comment, but the meaning is implicitly clear, given the context), she naturally now relishes the prospect of life in a life-size doll's-house. The same rationale also underlies, I think, her much-reviled way of at once almost obsessively recording in her narrative the complimentary tributes her diligence elicits, while at the same time modestly disclaiming them, the habit Forster complained of as her "too conscious unconsciousness"<sup>1</sup> of her own good qualities. As Q.D. Leavis and Alex Zwerdling have observed, this is neither coyness nor smugness, but a rather pathetic psychological compulsion.<sup>2</sup> The compliments she notes down are, as Mrs. Leavis puts it, "necessary proofs that she has won the right to be alive" - her noting them down is surely a sign of their vital importance to her. That she at the same time disclaims them is surely due to her equally compulsive self-deprecation - her ambivalence here parallels her treatment of her doll. If, as we are surely meant to, we bear Esther's past in mind as we read her later chronicle, we can't but read her cosiness and her troubled hungry feeding on other's praise as rather desperate assertions against the latent inner sense of her worthlessness and alienation that hovers constantly on the edge of her consciousness. Esther is something of an old maid before her time, as her friends unthinkingly acknowledge in the nick-names they give her, and as she herself oddly welcomes. Yet in her undisguised eagerness for approval she is also a child, bringing a child's intensity of need for

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1. Forster, p. 561 .

2. Dickens the Novelist, p. 156 ; Zwerdling, p. 430 .

emotional confirmation into an adult setting, in which the seed of a healthy self denied germination in the stony ground of her first home can take proper root. (Miss Donny's is an obvious anticipation of Bleak House.) If we acknowledge what is really taking place in Esther's narrative, its effect is surely one of an intelligently justified pathos which is not at all cloying, as we are not being asked to view it with unqualified admiration.

Dickens's case about Esther, then, is both penetrating and well thought-out. His achievement, with her, though, also consists of his success in dramatising her character, so that she is both interesting in her own right, and an informative and engaging chronicler of the world outside her - a successful character in a novel, that is, rather than just an intellectually conceived case. Her rather over-intense need to find an answering warmth and consideration in people, for instance, does not only issue in the dithyrambs over Bleak House of the kind quoted above. It also manifests itself in more muted and personable ways, as in the following from her account of her journey with Bucket:

Although I remember this conversation now [they have been talking of Jo], my head was in confusion at the time, and my power of attention hardly did more than enable me to understand that he entered into these particulars to divert me. With the same kind intention, manifestly, he often spoke to me of indifferent things, while his face was busy with the one object that he had in view. He still pursued this subject, as we turned in at the garden gate.

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1. Bleak House, p. 831.

One might well urge Bucket's generally relentless sociability to be just as responsible for his behaviour here as the paternal and chivalrous motives Esther ascribes to him, and in doing so reflect that her optimistic interpretation is not entirely disinterested and impersonal: she imputes conscious delicacy with a more than rational generosity because she has an especial need to discover such qualities in people. Yet while here as elsewhere in the novel her susceptibility is not in fact offered to us for unequivocal approval, one ought not register the incident in a merely clinical spirit. It is, in its small way, quite a touching incident, and gives warmth to our feeling for Esther as a person as well as evidence for our understanding of her as a psyche.

The complex appraisal of Esther's susceptibility is developed fully in the novel: it is one of the main lines of investigation Dickens pursues with regard to her. It arises, for instance, in Esther's relations with Caddy Jellyby:

"Let me see, Caddy," said I "...I am at your service and the darling child's, my dear, whenever you like."

Caddy was quite transported by this reply of mine; being, I believe, as susceptible to the least kindness or encouragement as any tender heart that ever beat in this world;...

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It is in keeping with Esther's character here that she doesn't also reflect that such openness might need to be balanced by a more sceptical reserve. We perhaps do, however, and several pages further on in the novel there occurs a scene which strongly suggests that Dickens feels that we ought to:

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1. Ibid., p. 380.



"My son!" said Mr. Turveydrop. "My children! I cannot resist your prayer. Be happy!"

His benignity as he raised his future daughter-in-law and stretched out his hand to his son (who kissed it with affectionate respect and gratitude), was the most confusing sight I ever saw. 1

Turveydrop's fakery is transparent, and it reflects limitingly on Esther that she is "confused" by it - a similar stifling of her instinctive critical judgement has already caused her to take a quite unhelpfully conservative line with Caddy about her mother. However it is indicative of the novel's general subtlety of judgement where Esther is concerned that her confusion here is soon seen to issue in a quite correctly discreet decision not to disillusion Caddy about the old man - reacting to the circumstances of her birth in a way opposite to that taken by Miss Wade in Little Dorrit, she consequently treats people in an antithetical manner, with the converse advantages and limitations.

The emerging assessment of Esther's susceptibility to kindness is fully chrystallised in the treatment of her relationship with Jarndyce. He, of course, compensates directly for Mrs. Barbary, since having felt "so poor, so trifling, and so far off; that I could never be unrestrained" 2 with her godmother, it is only natural that she especially appreciates (and is rather overcome by) Jarndyce's openness and willingness to share confidences, and joys in the lieutenant's role he assigns her with the eagerness of a child entrusted with adult responsibility.<sup>3</sup> The connection between early and later relationships is neatly summarised in Esther's reflections just prior to opening the letter containing Jarndyce's proposal, where her thoughts range from her "overshadowed childhood" to her altered state of happiness due to the "light from one central figure , represented before me by the letter on the table".<sup>4</sup>

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1. Ibid., p. 382.

2. Ibid., p. 63 .

3. Ibid., pp. 145-9.

4. Ibid., p. 666 .

The novel's handling of the Esther-Jarndyce relationship is a masterly exercise of intuitive logic. Yet it is often seen as little more than a ghastly pas de deux of claustrophobically cosy compliments. One reason for this misunderstanding is surely the superficial resemblance the relationship bears to the conventional Victorian habit of conceiving the relations of man and woman along familial rather than sexual lines, one variant of which being the husband wife relation which is covertly that of father and daughter.<sup>1</sup> Up to the time of Bleak House Dickens can work in this convention as sentimentally and uncritically as anyone, and at first sight Esther and Jarndyce appear to be just another edition of the Stronges in Copperfield and the Peerybingles in The Cricket on the Hearth. In both these cases Dickens vents vague doubts as to the appropriateness of such a relationship, whilst finally reassuring himself of its normality and warmly indulging the blandly affectionate piety it enshrined. With Esther and Jarndyce, however, Dickens is able to at once perceive a very distinct logic in the relationship, the warmth of which is seen to be quite adequately motivated and is thus not sentimental, while at the same time quite assuredly diagnosing its inadequacies as a possible marriage. He manages to see, that is, both that the relationship therapeutically gratifies a need in Esther for a covertly parental warmth and kindness, and that this involves its own fairly severe distortions. It is this unusual co-presence of meanings in Esther's relationship with Jarndyce (and Richard and Ada,

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1. Some recent studies of this pattern are contained in Eric Trudgill, "Madonnas and Magdalens" (Ph.D dissertation, University of Leicester, 1972), pp. 80-92, 251-281; and, with especial reference to Dickens, Alexander Welsh, The City of Dickens (1971), pp. 150-60.

for that matter) which produces that mixture of good spirits, whimsy, and rather strained notes that makes her narrative at times off-putting at first reading.

A focal point here is the matter of Esther's nicknames. William F. Axton has based his study of Esther upon the following passage:

"You are clever enough to be the good little woman of our lives here, my dear," he returned playfully; "the little old woman of the Child's (I don't mean Skimpole's) Rhyme.  
 'Little old woman, and whither so high?'  
 'To sweep the cobwebs out of the sky.'  
 ... This was the beginning of my being called Old Woman, and Little Old Woman, and Cobweb, and Mrs. Shipton, and Mother Hubbard, and Dame Durden, and so many names of that sort, that my own name became quite lost among them. 1

With friends like these ...? Well, not exactly: Esther, haunted by the fear that she has no valid identity, eagerly embraces a role which assigns her (and rewards her for) an undeniable usefulness, even though it does "deprive her of a measure of identity" (to use Axton's phrase) - "my own name", as she says, "became quite lost among them!" The names symbolise the laud heaped on Esther at Bleak House for her partially neurotically motivated 'goodness' and are themselves playfully cosy and unnatural in suggestion. "Dame Durden", for instance, as Axton has shown, was a person in a contemporary popular tune who was the only one alone whilst all around her were finding lovers.<sup>2</sup> Dickens was to make the same point about the function of nicknames with Tattycoram in Little Dorrit. In this ambiguity, I feel, is encapsulated the pervasive double attitude of the novel towards the Esther-Jarndyce relationship. This can be defined by pointing out that while Jarndyce's warmth and approval gratifies an essential need in Esther, the fact that

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1. Bleak House, pp. 147-8.

2. Axton, p. 160.

he does so in response to the self-abnegating model identity her past has shaped her to adopt, which he takes to be unequivocally 'good,' means that he becomes unwittingly complicit in confirming her in her neurosis, while at the same time helping to release her from it. His goodness is partially misplaced, that is, as it is bestowed upon an excessively self-denying personality in such a way as to sanction it at the expense of the growth of a more normally confident ego. Hence the liberation he offers Esther turns out to be really only a milder version of the same kind of imprisonment; ironically Jarndyce and Mrs. Barbary are in the end allies, his understandably naive love a menace to her achievement of a normal selfhood, as well as her vindictiveness. Esther is of course 'happy' at Bleak House, as she so often tells us. Yet it is an oddly-grounded happiness, in which the emotional benefits of a surrogate childhood are elicited by wholeheartedly acting out a precocious spinsterhood; the new beginning in her emotional development Jarndyce enables her to make takes place on terms which cut off the possibility of a natural transition to a mature womanliness. And whereas in previous works Dickens had presented such relationships unquestioningly, here he takes pains to indicate quite clearly his sense that the relationship of Esther and Jarndyce does not represent a proper human fulfillment, or, indeed, the most that Esther can or ought to hope for from life. We can see this most explicitly, I think, in Dickens's treatment of the episode of their engagement, to which I will therefore now turn.

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One might start with Jarndyce's proposal. Esther accepts, of course, but with a certain suppressed uneasiness, and gratitude looms larger in her reasons for doing so than one might have expected: "I felt that I had but one thing to do. To devote my life to his happiness was to thank him poorly, and what had I wished for the other night but some new means of thanking him? ... Still, I cried very much"<sup>1</sup>. Esther's tears are inexplicable to her; we know that they are for Alan Woodcourt, but she herself dare not acknowledge that fact, both because her inordinate modesty will not allow her to consider herself a fit candidate for romance with Woodcourt, and also because to do so would grate intolerably against her feeling for Jarndyce, whom she prepares to marry not just from affection but also, as the phrasing of the above quotation makes quite plain, from self-deprecating duty. "I had but one thing to do .. To devote my life to his happiness" is not the language of spontaneous and loving choice. Paradoxically, the predicament in which the proposal places her is made even more acute by the fact that Jarndyce, unlike Dr. Strong in Copperfield, is not simply obtuse in his paternalism, and in fact endeavours, in his letter of proposal, to free Esther from the bonds of gratitude: "It addressed me", she reflects, "as if our places were reversed, as if all the good deeds had been mine, and all the feelings they had awakened, his .... I was always to remember that I owed him nothing, and that he was my debtor, and for very much,"<sup>2</sup>

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1. Bleak House, pp. 667-8.

2. Ibid., pp. 666-7.

Unfortunately what he doesn't realise is that this delicacy is inevitably quite transparent to Esther, who is acutely sensitive to such qualities in others . Consequently, by ennobling him even more in her eyes, it simply sharpens the compulsion to accept, (as well, one might add, as adding to the poignancy of the whole situation for the reader, who is thus deterred from any simple resentment against Jarndyce).

Dickens's task in rendering the feelings in play here is, in fact, quite a difficult one. In accepting Jarndyce Esther seems to set the seal on her rejection of an essential element of her nature - her need to be loved as her natural self, rather than the industrious secondary personality that early experience has taught her to be the only self that will be acceptable to others, and which thus is the only one she herself accepts, a valuation which, as I have said, the Bleak House friends unwittingly reinforce. As she herself has accepted this judgement, however, it is only logical that this need cannot be shown to express itself in her as a conscious wish. Yet Dickens is, I feel, definitely concerned to assert its existence and importance, and he does so by having her unconsciously or uncomprehendingly betray it. He makes a beginning here with the use he makes of Esther's doll, early in her story:

My dear old doll! I was such a shy little thing that I seldom dared to open my lips, and never dared to open my heart, to anybody else. It almost makes me cry to think what a relief it used to be to me, when I came home from school of a day, to run upstairs to my room, and say, "O you dear faithful Dolly, I knew you would be expecting me!" and then to sit down on the floor, leaning on the elbow of her great chair, and tell her all I had noticed since we parted.

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1. Ibid., p. 62 .

The doll is a kind of surrogate mother for Esther, who imagines receiving from it the trust and intimacy denied her by her godmother - Dickens is akin to Wordsworth here in his sensitivity to the way in which the child's primary emotional needs find gratification in imaginative play. Given this one can make sense of Esther's burial of the doll shortly after her godmother's death. She records the event without any kind of explanatory comment, which is true to a child's highly limited awareness of its own motives. Yet given the context, and our knowledge that she is already in the grip of the psychological logic of self-abnegation, we can confidently interpret the act, I think, as self-denying symbolic rejection of her right to the kind of relationship her feelings for her doll had created, a symbolic acquiescence in her fate only to be able to win acceptance for others by supreme diligence. Yet that the capacity for such feelings is buried rather than destroyed is later revealed by the striking reversion to the doll and its significance which is touched off by the marriage proposal of the unprepossessing Mr. Guppy:

I sat there for another hour or more, finishing my books and payments, and getting through plenty of business. Then, I arranged my desk, and put everything away, and was so composed and cheerful that I thought I had quite dismissed this unexpected incident. But, when I went upstairs to my own room, I surprised myself by beginning to laugh about it, and then surprised my self still more by beginning to cry about it. In short, I was in a flutter for a little while; and felt as if an old chord had been more coarsely touched than it ever had been since the days of the dear old doll, long buried in the garden.

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1. Ibid., p. 178 .

It is a sign of the agility with which Dickens's mind is working in his handling of Esther's story, that it can so swiftly move from the uproarious comedy of the proposal to this delicate psychological observation. Upon reflection the implication of the rather unlikely connection between Guppy and the doll is surely that the "old chord" is Esther's suppressed need for an unconditional love (or love of a less severely conditional kind than she consciously accepts as possible for herself), the adult form of which is romantic love, love of the kind Ada and Richard have for each other, but from which she assumes she is excluded. Guppy's crass advances, by raising, if even in ludicrous form, the possibility that she might be the object of such love, disturbingly re-arouse these buried expectations. The doll is a node of one of her "hiding-places of power", and her experience of it an instance of what De Quincey had called an "involute of human sensibility"<sup>1</sup> It is thus seminal to her capacity for experiences of the same emotional quality in later life. Registering the undercurrents of subversive feeling through a dutifully water-tight consciousness such as Esther's poses a demanding task for the novelist, and requires an alertness to mere murmurs of suggestiveness on the part of the reader.

It is of course Alan Woodcourt's task to touch that "old chord" in the proper spirit, to release Esther's 'sleeping beauty', the beauty of spirit, one might say, that constitutes the inner feeling of being innately worthy of love, from the spell of Mrs. Barbary's curse. Esther's growing but unadmitted pre-occupation with him

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1. Collected Writings, i, 128.



is at first only faintly disclosed through her perplexed embarrassment with his attentions. One hardly has to be someone on whom nothing is lost to guess what is in the offing; though, as Alex Zwerdling has recently demonstrated, her obliquity stems not from coyness or even consciously controlled reticence, but from the confusion she is thrown into by any consideration of a romantic involvement, since it contradicts so obviously with her ingrained assumptions about herself.<sup>1</sup> This confusion, as Zwerdling has pointed out, manifests itself in the "grammatical disarray" of her ordinarily lucid narrative at such moments when Woodcourt is in question.<sup>2</sup> It is also revealed in a certain evasiveness on Esther's part, on at least one occasion, about the motive for her own feelings:

...he had no fortune or private means, and so he was going away. He had been to see us several times altogether. We thought it a pity he should go away! Because he was distinguished in his art among those who knew it best, and some of the greatest men belonging to it had a high opinion of him.

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The awkward full-stop between feeling and proffered explanation betrays her own hesitancy about her rationalisation.

Given, then, the tentativeness of these disclosures, her response to Miss Flite's report of Alan's heroism is nothing short of startling:

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1. p. 434 .

2. The examples Zwerdling quotes are on p. 233 and pp. 291-2 .

3. Bleak House, pp. 291-2 .

And I did read all the noble history; though very slowly and imperfectly then, for my eyes were so dimmed that I could not see the words, and I cried so much that I was many times obliged to lay down the long account she had cut out of the newspaper. I felt so triumphant ever to have known the man who had done such generous and gallant deeds; I felt such glowing exultation in his renown; I so admired and loved what he had done; that I envied the storm-worn people who had fallen at his feet and blessed him as their preserver. I could myself have kneeled down then, so far away, and blessed him, in my rapture that he should be so truly good and brave. I felt that no one - mother, sister, wife - could honour him more than I. I did, indeed!

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"I felt so triumphant ... such glowing exultation ... could myself have kneeled down ... in my rapture" - the accents of this surprising outburst are those of passion, passion of a quite personal and interested kind, for which, we must feel, the heroism is the precipitating device rather than sole cause. Such feelings seem to belong more to a Jane Eyre than an Esther. Firstly there is the passionate selfhood that is released in the triumph - Esther is not just humbly prostrate before the idea of male glory, but is so in a way that involves vicarious participation in it. And secondly there is the related strong suggestion of an uncharacteristic naked pitting of the personal will against all competitors for Alan's attention: "I felt no one - mother, sister, wife - could honour him more than I. I did, indeed!" How unlike the Esther whose staple tone of happiness is a rather tense litany of willed contentment, or who so uncomplainingly accepts the role of duenna and little old woman. Yet it is, in fact, the re-emergence of an

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1. Ibid., p. 556 .

Esther whom, as I have argued, Dickens has from the beginning prepared us to accept. It is no wonder that it is at this point that Esther feels compelled to own up to "the little secret" that she had sometimes thought that Woodcourt loved her, and would have proposed to her if his financial situation had been suitable. Her outburst has made further evasion impossible.

Yet if her feelings and hopes can no longer be evaded, they are, as Zwerdling has commented, too boldly at odds with her Dame Durdenish nature to be allowed to survive in their true form.<sup>1</sup> Her disfigurement of course provides a tangible reason for her to be glad that Woodcourt has not already declared himself, and for her to accept that the possibility of a match between them is something that must now be put aside. Yet in the curious lack of rebelliousness in her resolve to sublimate her passion into a wish for union after death, one surely feels that the momentary eruption of selfhood has collapsed, and that the characteristic drive to self-abnegation has re-assumed control:

O, it was so much better as it was! With a great pang mercifully spared me, I could take back to my heart my childish prayer to be all he had so brightly shown himself; and there was nothing to be undone: no chain for me to break, or for him to drag; and I could go, please God, my lowly way along the path of duty, and he could go his nobler way upon its broader road; and though we were apart upon the journey, I might aspire to meet him, unselfishly, innocently, better far than he had thought me when I found some favour in his eyes, at the journey's end.

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1. p. 435.

2. Bleak House, p. 557

Her wording reveals that she can only think of earthly fulfilment for herself as something selfish and guilty, and the conflict this has involved her in is indicated by the fact that it is only after dismissing any lingering hopes of marriage that she feels that she can "take back" her "childish prayer", resume, that is, her normal identity which is based on winning love through ceaseless effort.

Nevertheless, terrestrial wedding bells ring out for her in the end. Whether this is a credible outcome of the almost insoluble division of feeling the novel has established in her is a moot point: I am rather inclined to agree with Zwerdling that it is not.<sup>1</sup> Whatever the truth of this might be, it is significant that Woodcourt's declaration of love, even though presented as an avowedly disinterested congratulation to her on her unselfishness, releases in her a quite different feeling to anything that Jarndyce's praise has engendered:

Although I closed this unforeseen page in my life tonight, I could be worthier of it all through my life. And it was a comfort to me, and an impulse to me, and I felt a dignity rise up within me that was derived from him when I thought so.

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A feeling of "dignity" is not something that any of the regular inhabitants of Bleak House have ever inspired in her, as it implies a freedom from that curse of self-distrust that they have continued to subtly confirm even in their kindness. Whether, though, a transition from the conviction that one must ceaselessly strive to be unselfish in order to win love, to the conviction that one is deservedly loved because one is remarkably unselfish, whether this really signifies the attainment of a healthy and balanced maturity, is another matter.

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1. Zwerdling, p. 438.

2. Bleak House, p. 889 (underlining mine).



## II

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 I/wandered far from my point of departure, which was the way in which Dickens's thinking about Esther derives from the Romantic insights into the necessarily organic or continuous nature of the self. Yet in doing so I have been tracing what I feel is the path taken by Dickens's intuitive psychological reasoning as it explores the implications of Romantic insights when applied to the understanding of an unusual (but not, one feels, socially anomalous) case such as Esther. What is the psychology of someone who is "an outcast... bewildered and depressed"? What possibilities of salvation (or, as we might say, 'therapeutic cure') are open to such a person? What are the difficulties involved in such an apparent answer as the 'new beginning' of a second surrogate childhood sponsored by a covertly parental figure? What way is there out of these difficulties? These are the questions which, I have been arguing, Dickens was probing in his conception of Esther Summerson, questions to which he supplied his own answers, but which he would not have been able to ask in the way he did if it had not been for certain of his Romantic predecessors.

further  
 A / aspect of the novel's study of Esther is the way in which its understanding of her individual psychology leads it into at least questioning certain widely-held Victorian ideals and mores. I have already touched on the Victorian penchant for the father-daughter marriage. More interesting even, is the complex position Dickens finds himself in with regard to that cardinal Victorian virtue of Self-denial. The especial hold of this ideal over the temper of the times is indisputable, and needs no illustration here. What does need to be insisted upon, however, is the way in which the more adventurous-minded of the period's writers combined earnest loyalty to the ideal with a probing scepticism of many of its concrete manifestations.

Thus, where an unqualified indulgence in moral uplift about self-renunciation is characteristic of a Charlotte Yonge, with George Eliot such emotional pressures are largely held in check, albeit uneasily, by a rigorously objective intelligence: in neither *Maggie Tulliver* nor, for the most part, *Dorothea Brooke*, for instance, is the urge to selflessness viewed without irony. The complexity of response is typified in her well-known judgement on *Jane Eyre*: "All self-sacrifice is good -but one would like it to be in a somewhat nobler cause than a diabolical law which chains a man body and soul to a putrefying carcase." <sup>1</sup> *Jane Eyre* itself contains the impulse both to applaud fervent self-denial, and to diagnose it in some of its forms as neurotic and life-denying.

In *Bleak House* Dickens too, I think, is considering the received idea of the age in a similarly complex manner. Thus whilst remarks such as Esther's to Skimpole, that "everybody is obliged to be <sup>2</sup> "responsible!" do indeed carry a lot of weight, they are not exhaustively typical of the novel's position, and do not justify our simply equating the Dickens of this novel with Carlyle as an exponent of Work and Duty, or to conclude, as one recent critic of the novel has done, that Esther epitomises Carlyle's ideals ("It is all in *Past and Present* "is that critic's final comment on the novel).<sup>3</sup> For with Esther Dickens's post-Romantic habit of considering the

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1. Letter to Charles Bray, 11 June 1848; in George Eliot, *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 7 vols. (1954-6) i, 268.

2. *Bleak House*, p. 586.

3. Blair G. Kenney, "Carlyle and *Bleak House*", *Dickensian*, LXVI (January 1970) pp. 36-41 (p. 41).

adult moral character as something related to and substantially shaped by childhood experience can be seen to have led him into the paradoxical perception that behaviour which seems admirable - Esther's dutifulness - is the product of neurotic drives: the sanguine social moralist in him is checked by the intellectually free-ranging intuitive psychologist, who, setting the social ideal in the context of the whole individual personality, arrives at more ambiguous judgements about it.

And yet to introduce a word like 'judgement' at this stage is to suggest precisely the wrong thing about Esther's story. For, as one gradually comes to realise in pondering the novel, Dickens's rendering of Esther is for him unusual, in that at no point does she actually receive his direct authorial endorsement. At no point, that is, are we explicitly told by Dickens himself what to think of Esther, as we are, for example, in the cases of Florence Dombey and Amy Dorrit. One might retort, of course, that the air about her is too thick with the accolade of others for Dickens himself to get a laudatory word in edgeways - or need to, for that matter. When all around are crying Esther's praises, what need have we of additional authorial confirmation? Yet, as I have argued, the implication of Esther's psychological history, taken as a whole, is that this praise is to some extent misguided, if not in a subtle way harmful.

Given this, might it not be possible that the lack of overt authorial arbitration is due not just to its redundance, or the fact that Dickens, in choosing to convey Esther's history through her own first-person narrative, has prevented himself from making the kind of intervention he might otherwise have made (and has thus transfused his approval into the proxy hosannas of Jarndyce and crew)? Couldn't one also suggest that one of the purposes served by the choice of the first-person narrative is the concealment of a certain scepticism about Esther on Dickens's part that he may not have wanted to make noticeable, a concealment that works by the readiness we have in assuming that any such reserve, or lack of explicitness, must be the product of sheerly formal reasons.

Dickens is, I suggest, playing a rather canny game with the reader here, and if one reflects on the situation he has thought himself into over Esther one can well see why he may have chosen to do so. For having arrived at the conclusion that Esther's ostensibly ideal selflessness is, in fact, largely motivated by the neurotic legacy of early experience, wasn't he bound to draw the deduction that the moral status of the selflessness was of a fairly ambiguous kind? Yet this he has not done, explicitly, or at least not in the aggressively reductive way that John Carey attributes to him when he says that in Esther Dickens is showing us the type of the sexless heroine as "a perversion".<sup>1</sup>

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1. Carey, p. 173.



Rather, he has maintained a kind of poker-faced neutrality, indicating grounds for scepticism clearly enough for those prepared to notice them, yet at no time marshalling these grounds into any kind of militantly overt formulation. The distance between Dickens here and Carey's interpretation of him is worth dwelling upon. Whatever we might think of Esther's goodness it is ingenuous, is not cant, and does not serve a gross conceit in her - she is no Mrs. Pardiggle. Thus, one might conclude, Dickens's hesitance is a more appropriate tone to take towards it than Carey's in which the bravura of its insistent but nevertheless rather conventional iconoclasm leads to a crudification of Dickens's insight. Several years later Dickens went on to conceive a character - Miss Wade - whose reaction to early emotional deprivation is exactly the opposite to Esther's: rather than feeling that she needs to strive especially hard to win love from others she feels fundamentally resentful of others for having cheated her of it. The character that emerges from these beginnings is essentially and necessarily vicious. Surely it is not too far-fetched to speculate that the author of Bleak House, with probably some sort of apprehension of what Esther might have become if she had reacted differently to her early circumstances, naturally felt that the humane and sagacious thing to do was to signal his scepticism in a fairly reticent manner. For, the world being an imperfect place, and Dickens being by this time, I think, a man sufficiently cognizant of the inevitability of this fact, could one, he may well have argued to

himself, afford to treat the kind of virtue Esther displays without a certain tenderness. Furthermore, the reductive explanation of moral behaviour as the gratification of personal psychological needs is a habit of mind which modern intellectuals find much more congenial than one can expect the Victorian, or rather pre-modern Dickens to have done, and to regard Dickens's hesitance about his psychological intuitions on this score as simply pusillanimous would be quite unjustifiably complacent.

Finally, another factor that one might suggest to have been influential here is Dickens's awareness, as I have already argued in my introductory chapter, that diplomatic considerations were involved in the situation of writing for an audience the bulk of whom were much less sophisticated or capable of intellectual subtlety than himself. Even if Dickens had felt the need to commit himself more overtly to his scepticism about Esther, could he have hoped that the numerous Meagles's and Chillips among his readers would have been able to contemplate such a declaration without being quite unproductively confused or upset, without that is, concluding that Dickens was trying to explain away Esther's goodness as simply a product of something else, rather than seeing that the correlation posited between her behaviour and its conditioning background is a correlation only, and not a decisively asserted causal chain by which the former is seen as the mere reflection of the latter. Similarly, while Esther's case does entail for Dickens a certain scepticism about some of the manifestations of the Victorian ideals of Duty and Work, he may well have reflected whether that many of his readers would have been able to take this scepticism without thinking of it as a debunking of the

ideals themselves, as providing, that is, a licence for the Skimpoles - and curiously enough, but undeniably, it is in the very novel that contains the seeds of his most devastating critique of Puritan psychology that Dickens writes more emphatically than ever before in support of the social ideals that were not seldom fostered by just such a psychology. Whether Dickens could have foreseen the demoralising effect that a crudely deterministic psychological explanation of morality would have in the coming age (I am thinking of the popularisation of Freudianism and anthropological relativism), is a matter of pure conjecture. However I think we can argue from the idea of himself in relation to his public that emerged through consideration of various secondary sources in chapter one, that a further reason for handling his subversive intuitions with a certain gingerliness was a genuine fear of disturbing people for whom being disturbed in their essential assumptions about life could serve no possible helpful purpose. In doing so, one might suggest, he was not sacrificing his artistic instinct for truth to bourgeois timidity, but simply reinforcing his humane respect for the 'otherness' of other people, a quality with which diagnostic psychological perceptiveness is, one might claim, ideally conjoint.

### III

So far I have been talking of Esther as if the novel consisted of her case alone. How then, does her history fit into the novel as a whole, and to what extent does the connection with Romantic themes and insights manifest itself in the rest of it?

The pursuit of such an enquiry does reveal a fundamentally Romantic pattern of ideas to be shaping the novel, though as it does not bear immediately on the particular strands of the Romantic inheritance I have so far been unravelling I will limit myself to a very summary outline. Esther's story, then, relates to the rest of the novel in that it is one branch, it seems to me, of an overall examination of the relevance to life of the idea of Original Sin. To what extent, Dickens is asking, in the context of numerous specific situations, is the idea a true description of human nature, and to what extent does it itself produce unnecessary suffering and a blighting of the human spirit? In general Dickens's answer here tends to be that the latter is the case, and in this he is writing from the viewpoint of the Romantic insistence upon Original Innocence. Chancery, the novel's comprehensive symbol of 'fallen' humanity, is, he argues throughout, essentially a contingent human creation: the corruption of innocence is a product of artificial society rather than human nature as such. Or, as Shelley had put it, melodramatically, in *Queen Mab*:

Nature! - no!

Kings, priests, and statesmen, blast the human flower  
Even in its tender bud; their influence darts  
Like subtle poison through the bloodless veins  
Of desolate society.

.....

Let priest-led slaves cease to proclaim that man  
Inherits vice and misery, when Force  
And Falsehood hang even o'er the cradled babe,  
Stifling with rudest grasp all natural good. 1

The "Force and Falsehood" here are roughly the equivalent to the forces of Chancery as they shadow Ada and Richard, Esther's vision of whom, "so young, so beautiful, so full of hope and promise", epitomises Dickens's version of that "natural good", which, he feels, is nevertheless doomed to "come into the inheritance of a protracted misery". As Jarndyce at one stage says despairingly of Richard Carstone's growing cynicism:

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1. *Queen Mab*, pt. iv, ll. 103-20.



"Jarndyce and Jarndyce was the curtain of Rick's cradle".<sup>1</sup> Of course, as critics have pointed out, Chancery itself sometimes figures in the novel as an image of a metaphysical rather than a social condition: "it taints everybody. You know it taints everybody",<sup>2</sup> says Richard of it at one time, as if it were Original Sin incarnate. We also have Miss Flite's punning confusions of the legal and the Divine in her ramblings about "the Day of Judgement".<sup>3</sup> However such views are pointedly those of the victims of Chancery, who have succumbed to the grandiose mystique, and as Mark Spilka has justly claimed, Dickens's concern is to challenge the human tendency to inflate concrete social evils into metaphysical permanencies.<sup>4</sup> Thus Esther replies to Richard's charge that Chancery "taints everybody" by hotly asserting that Jarndyce has kept himself free from it: "he has resolutely kept himself outside the circle",<sup>5</sup> she claims, meaning that in true Rousseauan-Romantic style he has kept himself free of Original Sin by keeping himself free of Society.

To the question, then, of whether man must inevitably live in Chancery, the novel's answer is that if this is so it is by man's own doing, and that an alternative is at least theoretically possible. Esther's story represents the question asked in the context of religion and its influence on the psychology of the individual. Parallel to this is the novel's attack, in its depiction of Chancery and its denizens, on the powerful contemporary ethic of economic individualism. This, in its assumption of self-interest as the sole explanation of human conduct, is another version of Original Sin: the purely utilitarian Smallweeds, in their utter discounting of "ideality, reverence" and "wonder"<sup>6</sup> as human attributes, are at the final stage of happy acquiescence in the fallen state of man. Not surprisingly, as such they are shown as violators of such Romantic positives as Imagination and Childhood:

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1. Bleak House, p. 548.

2. Ibid., p. 581.

3. Ibid., p. 81.

4. Dickens and Kafka (1963), pp. 220-32.

5. Bleak House, p. 581.

6. Ibid., p. 341.

...the house of Smallweed, always early to go out and late to marry, has strengthened itself in its practical character, has discarded all amusements, discountenanced all story-books, fairy-tales, fictions and fables, and banished all levities whatsoever. Hence the gratifying fact, that it has had no child born to it, and that the complete little men and women whom it has produced, have been observed to bear a likeness to old monkeys with something depressing on their minds. 1

An antiquated court of law such as Chancery may seem an odd symbol to designate such an ethic, yet as it is specifically concerned with disputes within families over inheritance, with members of a family acting against each other as self-interested individuals, it does provide a perfect image for a situation in which the members of the larger family of humanity are unnaturally turned against each other in purely selfish competition; for, that is, the world of Benthamite Economic Man.

Yet on the other hand it would be wrong to conclude that the idea of Chancery can be simply equated with economic individualism as an ideology: by no means all of the characters linked with it, however selfish and predatory, are so in a way that connects them with the ideological self-consciousness of the Smallweeds or the 'fallen' Richard Carstone. It does not, finally, point to anything like a unified explanation of the various forces it represents, but works more as a rhetorical device, like the Reign of Dullness in The Dunciad, enabling the novel to present many different kinds of selfishness together with a certain unity of effect. Rather than the systematic social etiology we have come to expect from a nineteenth-century novel, we are given something more closely resembling the illustrative catalogue of traditional satire: the ethos of Cockneyism and legal sharpness that has produced Guppy is not shown to be in any way related to the social facts that have enabled

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1. Ibid., p. 342.

a Chadband or a Pardiggle to flourish. Bleak House is quite unlike Dombey and Son, Hard Times and Little Dorrit in this.

Such then, in very broad outline, is the novel's vision of "Force and Falsehood". Complementary to this, of course, is the inquiry into the possibility of an 'alternative society' of innocence and harmony, the hope espoused early in the novel by Richard Carstone when he declares to his fellow-wards that "Chancery will work none of its bad influences on us ... it can't divide us now!"<sup>1</sup> The blend of Romantic utopian communalism and conventional domesticity that characterises life at Bleak House is nothing new in Dickens. What is new, however, is that unlike Dombey, with the jollities of the Captain Cuttle world, here such 'typically Dickensian' sentiments are rendered as the traits of objectively dramatised characters who are seen with both warmth and detached critical understanding. Rick's case, of course, is an obvious illustration that innocence is not enough: it is his lack of anything more than Walter Gay's boyish good nature that leads him to drift into Chancery's clutches. Jarndyce too, however, is an essentially critical study, in which is demonstrated the limitations of the Romantic-sentimentalist ideal of the good-natured man, the exponents of which stretch back through Pickwick to Sterne's Uncle Toby. Preeminent amongst these is the moral culpability of being naive, as with his susceptibility to Skimpole's use of a Romantic ideology of childhood innocence and candour. Related, and just as important, there is, too, the inadequacy of kindness unbalanced by firmness, this being the case with his "goodness", which is disablingly "tortured by condemning, or mistrusting, or secretly accusing anyone"<sup>2</sup> so that he can't help feeling immensely relieved whenever he rationalises away the disconcerting doubts about Skimpole that he has from time to time, a dangerous act which Esther and company inevitably find simply endearing.<sup>3</sup> The merely passive nature of Ada's loyalty to Richard similarly raises doubts about her; and with Esther, apart from these points I have already discussed there are also intimations of a certain element of intense possessiveness in her feelings for her fellow wards.<sup>4</sup> Dickens has much sympathy for the Bleak House circle, but he certainly no longer believes that it embodies a fully satisfactory answer to Chancery's values.

1. Ibid., p. 108.

2. Ibid., p. 130.

3. Ibid., pp. 129-30.

4. For example, see pp. 229-34.

The Jarndyce group are not the only alternative to Chancery explored in the novel. There are also the Dedlocks, and in particular Sir Leicester, the novel's chief representative of the past, who seems more to contrast with the world of Guppy, Smallweed and Vholes than belong to it. As such he deserves full scrutiny in the context of the present discussion, though consideration here must inevitably begin with acknowledgement of how contradictory and uncertain Dickens's attitude to them is, as comparison of the following two passages reveals - the first is a description of the Dedlock town-house:

It is a dull street under the best conditions; where the two long rows of houses stare at each other with that severity, that half-a-dozen of its greatest mansions seem to have been slowly stared into stone, rather than originally built in that material. It is a street of such dismal grandeur, so determined not to condescend to liveliness, that the doors and windows hold a gloomy state of their own in black paint and dust, and the echoing mews behind have a dry and massive appearance, as if they were reserved to stable the stone chargers of noble statues. Complicated garnish of iron-work entwines itself over the flight of steps in this awful street; and from these petrified bowers, extinguishers for obsolete flambeaux grasp at the upstart gas. Here and there a weak little iron hoop, through which bold boys aspire to throw their friends' caps (its only present use), retains its place amongst the rusty foliage, sacred to the memory of departed oil.

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Compare this to the following; Rouncewell has just called upon

Sir Leicester:

"In these busy times, when so many great undertakings are in progress, people like myself have so many workmen in so many places, that we are always on the flight."

Sir Leicester is content that the ironmaster should feel that there is no hurry there; there, in that ancient house, rooted in that quiet park, where the ivy and the moss have

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1. Ibid., p. 709.



had time to mature and the gnarled and warted elms, and the umbrageous oaks, stand deep in the fern and leaves of a hundred years; and where the sun-dial on the terrace has dumbly recorded for centuries that Time, which was as much the property of every Dedlock - while he lasted - as the house and lands. Sir Leicester sits down in an easy-chair, opposing his repose and that of Chesney Wold to the restless flights of ironmasters. 1

The first passage is fairly predictable, a lively effusion of fancy in the service of a confident liberal-radical view of the aristocracy as imposingly obsolete. Our sympathies are enlisted clearly on the side of the 'upstart gas'. Ingeniously exploiting his sense of architecture as metaphoric Dickens comes upon a detail that has a quite literal significance, for gas street-lighting was a striking example of what could be accomplished by that progressive spirit that aristocratic inertness threatened to stifle, a tangible practical correlative of the 'enlightened' spirit, and one practical way of ameliorating the misery of slum life in places such as 'Tom-all-Alone's'. The buildings are pictured in a typically Dickensian manner, in the familiar dichotomy of ugly massiveness and homely cottage (the implied ideal) that reflects what is often Dickens's underlying sense of things in general - one of Taine's complaints about Dickens was that he never rendered the majesty and calmness of buildings. 2

The second passage, however, quite reverses our expectations.<sup>3</sup> Dickens's normal endorsement of earnestness, professionalism, energy, is momentarily qualified, and the very qualities which are usually the butt of his progressivist jokes appear to be revered. In a way

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1. Ibid., p. 450

2. Taine, The History of English Literature, iv, 129.

3. There is an interesting discussion of such covert contradictions and complexities of attitude in the novel in G.H. Ford, "Self-help and the Helpless in Bleak House", in R.C. Rathburn and M. Steinmann, eds., From Jane Austen to Joseph Conrad (1958), pp. 92-105.

that confutes many of his convictions, he recognises that the dignity and peace he sees in Chesney Wold are inseparable from its detachment from the energetic striving of the age. There is only a very slight irony involved in Sir Leicester "opposing his repose and that of Chesney Wold" to Rouncewell's "restless flights". Despite his political hostility, he can't help noticing, and not ineloquently recording, that the antiquated ethos of the aristocratic country house has a nobility of spirit strikingly in contrast to the cynicism and selfishness that rule in the Chancery world - while on the one hand condemning the past from the standpoint of a progressive present, Dickens is also being driven back by a disgust for so much of what the present actually consists of into a conservative nostalgia.

For with all its ridiculousness, Sir Leicester's world is seen to live by a code sharply in contrast to Chancery selfishness. As 'the world of fashion' it may well be, as Dickens says, "not unlike the Court of Chancery"<sup>1</sup>. ( ) But established at Chesney Wold it still retains something of its traditional feudal character. This is apparent, for instance, both in Sir Leicester's ceremonious yet real chivalry towards his wife, and also in the very pointedly sketched pattern of relations between Sir Leicester and his dependents, as represented by Mrs. and George Rouncewell, which is almost a text-book illustration of the traditional ideal:

The present representative of the Dedlocks is an excellent master. He supposes all his dependents to be utterly bereft of individual characters, intentions, or opinions, and is persuaded that he was born to supersede the necessity of their having any... But he is an excellent master still, holding it a part of his state to be so. He has a great liking for Mrs. Rouncewell; he says she is a

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1. Bleak House, p. 55.

most respectable, creditable woman. He always shakes hands with her, when he comes down to Chesney Wold, and when he goes away; and if he were very ill, or if he were knocked down by accident, or run over, or placed in any other situation expressive of a Dedlock at a disadvantage, he would say if he could speak, "Leave me, and send Mrs. Rouncewell here!" feeling his dignity, at such a pass, safer with her than with anyone else. 1

Again the authorial attitude is uneasily ambivalent, the heavy sarcasm of Dickens's own liberalism fading into recognition that the obtuse conviction of superiority itself sustains humane relationships, insofar as the very irritating sense of personal dignity (that so invites us to picture it "at a disadvantage") is seen to require an impressive performance of the responsibilities of the role on which that dignity is founded. This is still a world in which honour is a powerful motive as well as enlightened self-interest, in which "ideality, reverence, wonder" - the qualities the Smallweed mentality has discarded, are still nourished, albeit in forms which the novel can't but see critically. Dickens's amused respect for Sir Leicester's rather marmoreal gallantry or George's feudal faithfulness - human relations untainted by the Chancery nexus - is quite alien in spirit to the earnest nostalgic pieties of Disraeli and Young England. yet he is by no means free from a lingering sense of loss even while on the other hand seeming to confidently endorse the advent of the Rouncewell civilisation - whether one can have Rouncewell without the Smallweeds is, one might say, the important question which the novel neglects to answer.

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1. Ibid., p. 134.

A further important function of the Dedlocks consists in the comparisons the novel make between the different attitude to them taken by different classes of people. The ironmaster's unabashed defiance of Sir Leicester is in a good cause, is necessary for that cause's fulfilment. But with someone like Guppy, however, there is a natural unity between his self-seeking sharpness - his Chancery nature - and a vulgar barrenness of spirit, a paucity, as with the Smallweeds, of "ideality, reverence, wonder", that pointedly manifests itself as a chirpy blankness to anything upon which the code of deference to superior gentility might be founded. Thus, after having forced himself as a casual visitor into Chesney Wold on the wrong day, Guppy's chummy tone, untouched by the dignity of its surroundings, is almost sacrilegious:

"Much obliged to you, ma'am! says Mr. Guppy, divesting himself of his wet dreadnought in the hall. "Us London lawyers don't often get an out; and when we do, we like to make the most of it, you know."

The old housekeeper, with a gracious severity of deportment, waves her hand towards the great staircase. Mr. Guppy and his friend follow Rosa, Mrs. Rouncewell and her grandson follow them, a young gardener goes before to open the shutters.

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As is usually the case with people who go over houses, Mr. Guppy and his friend are dead beat before they have well begun. They straggle about in wrong places, look at wrong things, don't care for the right things, gape when more rooms are opened, exhibit profound depression of spirits, and are clearly knocked up.... Thus they pass on from room to room, raising the pictured Dedlocks for a few brief minutes as the young gardener admits the light, and recommitting them to their graves as he shuts it out again. It appears to the afflicted Mr. Guppy and his inconsolable friend, that there is no end to the Dedlocks, whose family greatness seems to consist in their never having done anything to distinguish themselves, for seven hundred years. 1

Dickens is aiming at an irony that cuts both ways, though unfortunately, instead of a consistent poise, he tends rather to slide incongruously from one attitude to the other, so that by the end of the passage Guppy is our understandably perplexed proxy as 'the common man' and the Dedlocks have shrunk to easy comic butts, as if out of Ruddigore. This is one of Dickens's tones towards the aristocracy, a simple-mindedness to which he at times reverts throughout the novel. At the beginning, however, the great house and its inmates are quite unironically accorded a dignity against which Guppy's familiar manner registers as offensive, untempered as it is by any quietening respect for the surroundings. The writer who began as the champion of Cockney perkiness has now come to see that personality in the same terms as Hazlitt had in "On Londoners and Country People", as "native shallowness mounted with pertness and conceit". This maturing has been achieved without loss of the ability to render that personality freshly and accurately, and still invest it with a certain seedy charm. There is, also, a rightness in it being Guppy who should be shown to invade Chesney Wold, in that the Cockney character, in deriving from a social situation relatively unbound by the deferential feelings

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1. Ibid., p. 137-8 .

of a social order based on rank, was an advance specimen of the new society of separate and self-sufficient classes that the transfer of power from the Dedlocks to the Ironmasters was bringing into being. The only Londoner of whom the novel fully approves, Phil Squod, significantly treats his master, George, with semi-feudal respect, and he also finishes his days at Chesney Wold.<sup>1</sup>

Guppy's first incursion upon Chesney Wold stands at the beginning of that long development of plot by which he and various other fellow-denizens of Chancery are brought into dramatic confrontation with the Dedlocks. The major and commonly accepted thematic significance here is of course the hidden connection between the high and mighty, and the fallen outcast, that their researches reveal. A secondary yet important meaning, however, is the way in which the self-interested ruthlessness with which they track down their aristocratic prey, their insensitivity to the tragic nature of the Dedlock's downfall, suggests itself as an index of their general poverty of spirit. The novel itself, of course, lingers on Sir Leicester's dignified suffering amidst the ruin of his life: as with Burke on the death of Louis XVI Dickens feels that to be unaffected by such an event, as are the Chancery characters, is a sign of deficient humanity.

By contrast, the almost sacred awe which George Rouncewell and his mother feel for the Dedlocks witnesses their nobility of character. Their relations with their master and mistress formally embody that quality of "willingly or heartily" admitting "superiority in others" which

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1. Cf. Hazlitt in "On Londoners and Country People", Plain Speaker's Works, xii, 66-77 (67): "Your true Cockney is your only true leveller".

the traditional theory held to be the moral benefit of deference to rank, and it is largely for this reason that Dickens goes so far as claim that George is in a way a better man than his industrialist brother:

The brothers are very like each other, sitting face to face; but a certain massive simplicity, and absence of usage in the ways of the world, is all on the trooper's side.

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George is a Romantic holy innocent, in whom child-like wonder has been extraordinarily preserved. As such he is a rather sentimental and theoretic ideal for someone like Dickens, and, as with that other holy innocent David Copperfield, Dickens's attitude is one of ironic amusement as well as approbation. Dickens himself was too much a mental inhabitant of the mental world of the other Rouncewell, a world of practicality and independence rather than semi-mystical reverence and unquestioning loyalty, not to stress, through the Bagnets and the affair of George's arrest, that righteous innocence by itself is not enough. He also stresses a comical element in George's deferential loyalty: thus his sentimental enthusiasm for the patriotic romance he sees at Astley's is harmless comic instance of the way in which (as with David Copperfield) innocence preserves itself by being also gullibility.<sup>2</sup> Dickens's recoil from the money-making present has led him to reach back to traditional ideals - a pretty common Victorian reaction - but in doing so he has not tried to crush the feelings in him which question his nostalgia, feelings to which his satiric genius is so closely tied.

One way, then, in which Bleak House urges its concern for the Romantic positives of "ideality", "reverence" and "wonder", is by a diagnosis of a levelling plebeianism

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1. Ibid., p. 906 .

2. Ibid., p. 356 .

as one of the traits of the Chancery character.<sup>1</sup> That Dickens should see this an important issue is not really surprising, as his liberal dislike of aristocratic hegemony had already been checked and complicated by the impressions of his American travels, and the American episodes of Martin Chuzzlewit insistently record that the abolition of traditional deference can result merely in the sanctioning of egotism. A more unexpected feature of this theme, however, is the treatment of the Philistine nature of plebianism. This may seem an odd point to raise, as Dickens himself has traditionally been held to have been something of a Philistine, and still is; Fraser's obituary comment is still echoed by eminently respectable critics: "His tastes... were strongly, though not blindly, middle-class British, and he was no wise ashamed of them. He made no pretence of caring for old pictures, or classic music, or poetry as a special thing. He enjoyed a brisk dance-tune, a simple song, and admired cheerful pictures like those of Frith, Stanfield, and Maclise. In literature he liked what most people liked, in scientific matters he knew what most people know."<sup>2</sup> This comment does have some truth, but it is misleadingly simplistic, as can be shown, for instance, by reference to Dickens's comments on Art in Forster's Life, which reveal a lively and at times intelligent interest in "old pictures", if not a maturely formed appreciation, and contain on one occasion a withering denunciation of the kind of narrowly bourgeois taste the Fraser's obituary attributed

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1. For a similar, and similarly equivocal, appreciation of the aristocratic social theory, also by a radical and Romantic writer, see Hazlitt's "Character of Mr. Burke, 1807", Political Essays, Works, vii, 301-13. Dickens's library contained a copy of the Political Essays, along with the rest of Hazlitt's works (see Stonehouse, p. 56).

2. Unsigned notice, "Charles Dickens", Fraser's Magazine, July 1870, n.s. ii, 130-4; quoted from reprinted selection in CH, pp. 526-8 (p. 528).



to him. Yet, whatever the extent might be to which Dickens was or was not himself a Philistine, his mature novels undoubtedly record Philistinism as a representative and threatening social phenomena of the age. Bounderby in Hard Times comes immediately to mind, of course, with, amongst other things, his gloating indifference to the marks of cultivation left by the previous owner on the house he has taken over.<sup>1</sup> Differently there is Podsnap, or, the object of a more even-handed judgement, Meagles. The issue raises itself more obscurely in Bleak House, but nevertheless in a way which makes it an essential element of the novel's social vision.

The examination focusses upon two characters: Inspector Bucket, and Harold Skimpole. It is, of course, Bucket to whom it is left to deliver the novel's first explicit condemnation of the irresponsible aesthete, which is perhaps a wise tactic on Dickens's part, as it enables us to enjoy as bracingly pithy what might have been sententious in other mouths:

"Whenever a person says to you that they are as innocent as can be in all concerning money, look well after your own money, for they are dead certain to collar it, if they can. Whenever a person proclaims to you 'In worldly matters I'm a child,' you consider that that person is only a-crying off from being held accountable, and that you have got that person's number, and it's Number One. Now, I am not a poetical man myself, except in a vocal way when it goes round a company, but I'm a practical one, and that's my experience.

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Why isn't such confident trenchancy available to Esther and her friends? Skimpole's appeal to pseudo-romantic sanctions has something to do

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1. Hard Times, pp. 196-7 .

2. Bleak House, p. 832 .

with it, as mentioned above, as also is the way Esther's insecurity issues in her general reluctance to judge people adversely, the way in which, as Alex Zwerdling has neatly put it, "her observant satirical eye is regularly reproved by her conformist conscience": "the difference between Dickens and Esther as narrators lies"<sup>1</sup>, Zwerdling claims, rightly, I think, "not in their perceptiveness but in their self-confidence about their perceptiveness". Thus, when Esther does manage to voice her unease about Skimpole face to face, saying that "everybody is obliged to be responsible, it is done "timidly enough, he being so much older and more clever than I,"<sup>2</sup> Yet an equally important factor is surely the that Skimpole carries off/stance of irresponsibility with an undeniable charm:

Mr. Skimpole was as agreeable at breakfast, as he had been overnight. There was honey at the table, and it led him into a discourse about Bees. He had no objection to honey, he said (and I should think he had not, for he seemed to like it), but he protested against the coverweening assumptions of Bees. He didn't at all see why the busy Bee should be proposed as a model to him; he supposed the Bee liked to make honey, or he wouldn't do it - nobody asked him. It was not necessary for the Bee to make such a merit of his tastes. If every confectioner went buzzing about the world, banging against everything that came in his way, and egotistically calling upon everybody to take notice that he was going to his work and must not be interrupted, the world would be quite an unsupportable place. 3

The impromptu occasional effusion, the paradoxical jeu d'esprit is brilliantly suggestive of Leigh Hunt as his most lively (or Lamb: compare Skimpole's joke elsewhere about his wish to "develop generosity in a new soil, and in a new form of flower"<sup>4</sup> with Lamb's "The Two Races of Men")<sup>5</sup>. Such a passage shows that the placing judgement Dickens intends

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1. Zwerdling, p. 432 .

2. Bleak House, p. 586 .

3. Ibid., p. 143 .

4. Ibid., p. 125 .

5. Elia, Writings, .iii, 165-72.

of such pre-Victorian lack of earnestness is not a narrow one. Skimpole in fact is one of the chief sources of liveliness in the novel, and the frequency of his ever-voluble appearances betokens not just his 'thematic relevance', but Dickens's obvious enjoyment in rendering his speech, in imaginatively donning the mask of his personality. Dickens as Skimpole can even at times make his own voice sound rather flat, as is apparent if we compare the relatively lumbering sarcasm directed at the Dedlocks in the early chapters of the novel ("there is a general smell and taste as of the ancient Dedlocks in their graves" -

sarcasm is of course only one element of Dickens's tone at such moments), with the fancifulness Skimpole's flippant gaiety conjures from the gloom of the Dedlock portrait gallery:

He had been over the Hall in the course of the morning and whimsically described the family pictures as we walked. There were such portentous shepherdesses among the Ladies Dedlock dead and gone, he told us, that peaceful crooks became weapons of assault in their hands. They tended their flocks severely in buckram and powder, and put their sticking-plaster patches on to terrify commoners, as the chiefs of some other tribes put on their war-paint. There was a Sir Somebody Dedlock, with a battle, a sprung-mine, volumes of smoke, flashes of lightning, a town on fire, and a stormed fort, all in full action between his horse's two hind legs: showing, he supposed, how little a Dedlock made of such trifles. The whole race he represented, as having evidently been, in life, what he called 'stuffed people,' - a large collection, glassy-eyed, set up in the most approved manner on their various twigs and perches, very correct, perfectly free from animation, and always in glass cases. 1

And even when he comes close to being directly offensive to Esther, as when, with dilittantish condescension, he praises her sense of responsibility with covert mockery, he does so with an audacious and sprightly wit that almost manages to carry off the vulgarity<sup>2</sup> (the vulgarity being of the kind

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1. Bleak House, p. 56.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 587-8.

to which James was later to be so concerned to show brilliance of personality to be especially prone):

"Now when you mention responsibility," he resumed, "I am disposed to say, that I never had the happiness of knowing anyone whom I should consider so refreshingly responsible as yourself. You appear to me to be the very touchstone of responsibility. When I see you, my dear Miss Summerson, intent upon the perfect working of the whole little orderly system of which you are the centre, I feel inclined to say to myself - in fact I do say to myself, very often - that's responsibility!" 1

Skimpole, one might say, thoroughly earns his keep at Bleak House, the life of which (and of course the novel's record of that life) would be a good deal bleaker without him.

From all this it may appear that there is in the novel an unresolved tension between an overt moralism and an unacknowledged but freely indulged preference for an amoral charm and personal cultivation, a discrepancy between Dickens the self-conscious sage of a mass Victorian public, and a more private self that was prepared to be more tolerant of dubious moral integrity if combined with a talent for being excellent company. To accept this interpretation, however, is, I think, to under-estimate Dickens's conscious awareness of the implications of the situation he is exploring, for there is evidence that in a way not unlike Mathew Arnold he is aware that neither morality nor cultivation by themselves constitute an adequate basis for civilisation. In support of this one can cite the fact that Esther herself is fully appreciative of Skimpole's company. Her presence is certainly made more agreeable to us by her being such a willing reporter of Skimpole's sallies. That such asides as her comment on Skimpole's

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1. Ibid., p. 586-'7.



actual appetite for honey in the first-quoted passage never become more than an undercurrent in her narrative, stems, in fact, from an ability to enjoy Skimpole, against which Bucket's simple dismissal of him strikes one as mean and narrow, however morally correct. Esther's very first description of Skimpole assures us that he is being observed by someone of sufficient urbanity of feeling to do him justice:

He was a little bright creature, with a rather large head; but a delicate face, and a sweet voice, and there was a perfect charm in him. All he said was so free from effort and spontaneous and was said with such a captivating gaiety, that it was fascinating to hear him talk....There was an easy negligence in his manner, and even in his dress (his hair carelessly disposed, and his neckerchief loose and flowing, as I have seen artists paint their own portraits),....<sup>1</sup>

Esther knows what a cultivated personality is, and freely recognises and acclaims it in Skimpole. In part at least her protracted toleration of him comes from an understandable civilised reluctance: Bucket 'sees through' him so much more easily because he is simply blind to that "perfect charm" in him which almost to the end of the novel continues<sup>2</sup> to allay her critical unease. In this he is a Philistine, and his irony about being "not a poetical man...but ....a practical one", turns somewhat against him.

Bucket as a Philistine in this respect may not strike one as being a very interesting consideration. His main function here, it seems to me, is to throw into relief by contrast the positive aspect of Esther's complex attitude to Skimpole, which indicates an attempt by Dickens to distinguish the moral spirit of his novel from the narrowly Philistine moralism Arnold was finding so oppressively typical of the age, and of which, one might add,

1. Ibid., pp. 118-19 .

2. E.g., pp. 652-3 .

Skimpole's own sortie against the bees is quite a neat caricature. Nevertheless, Bucket's Philistinism is a significant aspect of his oddly complex character. Traditionally, critics have seen Bucket as simply a projection into the novel of the admiration for the new professional police force Dickens displayed in his journalism.<sup>1</sup> Recently, however, several readings of the novel have indicated a number of points at which his genial surface fades off into enigma and menace.<sup>2</sup> One significant way in which I feel this to be the case is a certain suggestion in the novel that whereas in an immediate sense he is the protector of Sir Leicester Dedlock against Guppy and his allies, he is also, in a more subtle way, a matter of implicit tone rather than declared antagonism, something of an invader himself. Socially he is a curious by-product of the technomeritocratic social order that was just beginning to emerge in the Victorian era with the marked growth in number and in importance of the professions. For whereas in Woodcourt, the other representative in the novel of the newly important groups modern professionalism combines with traditional gentlemanliness, albeit modified in accordance with his new rôle of ministering to the poor,<sup>3</sup> in Bucket expertise and its attendant power are seen to belong to a character who is culturally barely above the level of a Guppy, the main difference being that whereas Guppy is simply chummy in the Cockney manner Bucket knows how to exploit the same manner in the service of public relations.

For the most part, of course, his Guppyan Philistinism is harmlessly comic. His remark to Bagnet that his friend

1. E.g., John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson, Dickens at Work (1957), pp. 196-8; Philip Collins, Dickens and Crime (1962), pp. 206-13
2. E.g., Dyson, pp. 167-9; Q.D. Leavis in Dickens the Novelist, pp.
3. See, for instance, p. 684: Woodcourt's "habit...of speaking to the poor, and of avoiding patronage or condescension, or childishness", is a form of gentlemanly delicacy, and contrasts with Bucket's button-holing familiarity.

is "a regular dab" at the "violinceller... he saws away at Mo-zart and Handel, and the rest of the big-wigs, like a thorough workman",<sup>1</sup> (this also conveys one of Dickens's points, the virtue of artistic professionalism, and is thus an oblique authorial thrust at Skimpole); or his exclamation that Lady Dedlocks boudoir, containing what Dickens refers to as the "many delicate objects so curiously at variance with himself", is "spicy"<sup>2</sup> - these things hardly make him any more threatening than Sam Weller. Yet Bucket's fascination for Dickens is largely due, I think, to the fact that he represents what could happen to a shrewd and amiable cockney like Weller in the relatively more socially fluid conditions of Victorian England - Sam Weller, of course, exists in a novelistic world in which social rank is assumed to be eternally immutable. Bucket's case, that is, is somewhat analogous to Rouncewell the Ironmaster's. Dickens partially relishes a situation where someone like Bucket has the social initiative over people like Volumnia and the debilitated cousin, for his deportment of himself at Chesney Wold witnesses the social revolution that has taken place since the time when, as Miss Petowker had put it in Nicholas Nickleby, aristocrats could be described as people who "break-off doorknockers, and...beat up policemen".<sup>3</sup> Yet the novel also intimates a way in which, despite his superficial "adaptability to all grades",<sup>4</sup> he can't help being disagreeably offensive to someone like Sir Leicester in our eyes as well as the Baronet's, even when intent on smoothing his way with pleasing deference. Thus the following example of those "little specimens of his tact"<sup>5</sup> with which he seeks to

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1. Bleak House, p. 733 .

2. Ibid., p. 821 .

3. Nicholas Nickleby, p. 186 .

4. Bleak House, p. 777 .

5. Ibid., p. 772 .

manage the highly delicate situation he is in at Chesney Wold as ambiguously social interloper and representative of an authority to which even the Dedlock's are subject:

"Now, Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet," Mr. Bucket begins, standing over him with one hand spread out on the library-table, and the forefinger of the other in impressive use, "it's my duty to prepare you for a train of circumstances that may, and I go so far as to say that will, give you a shock. But Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, you are a gentleman; and I know what a gentleman is, and what a gentleman is capable of. A gentleman can bear a shock, when it must come, boldly and steadily. A gentleman can make up his mind to stand up against almost any blow. Why, take yourself, Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet. If there's a blow to be inflicted on you, you naturally think of your family. You ask yourself, how would all them ancestors of yours, away to Julius Caesar - not to go beyond him at present - have borne that blow; you remember scores of them that would have borne it well; and you bear it well on their accounts, and to maintain the family credit. That's the way you argue, and that's the way you act, Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet."

Sir Leicester, leaning back in his chair, and grasping the elbows, sits looking at him with a stony face. 1

Sir Leicester may well look "stonily", not just in preparation for the portended shock, but because for all Bucket's mollifying tribute there is in his tone a distinct proprietorial knowingness about him - it corresponds to their relative physical positions at that moment - which is all the worse for the undertone, half of ignorance, half of flippant vagueness, that registers in the allusion to "them ancestors...away to Julius Caesar". Bucket has, so to speak, 'taken possession' of the baronet in a way that makes his avowed respect seem merely perfunctory. The scene is one of social comedy, yet comedy informed by the serious perception that Bucket, while likeable in a way someone like Guppy obviously isn't, also embodies a vulgarity of spirit, which, when precipitated by social change into a position of power and influence, is inimical to any hope for a civilisation of which "ideality, wonder,

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1. Ibid., pp. 781-2.



and reverence" are informing values. (Bucket's strengths of character, needless to say, are quite compatible with the absence of such values.) Such a threat as he poses is more insidious than that of a Smallweed or a Guppy, not just because unlike them he is potentially a member of the newly powerful social elite shown to be emerging in the novel (or rather, of one of the plurality of disparate elites unconnected by a common class culture), but also because his plausibility as a character makes it difficult for him to be perceived in any way as a threat.

## Seven

'CONTINUITY', PROTEST AND RESIGNATION: LITTLE DORRIT

Victorians who answered Carlyle's clarion-call to spiritual regeneration by closing their Byron were arguably just as likely to open their Wordsworth as their Goethe. There is no lack of evidence as to Wordsworth's status among the guides and guardians of the Victorian heart, and as to his influence being to some extent dependent upon the way in which his poetry was felt to be a commitment to the disciplines of ordinary morality animated by a serene inward conviction.<sup>1</sup> As I have argued in my introductory chapter, this spontaneous conservatism<sup>2</sup> ((a more than Roman confidence"(underlining mine)) was often for Wordsworth inseparable from his conviction of the importance of the memory of childhood, which, being the period of life in which Nature had most significantly revealed itself to him, was consequently in a very real psychological sense "The anchor of /his/ purest thoughts.../...and soul/Of all /his/ moral being". "Continuity in...self-consciousness", or as I have been abbreviating it 'the continuity idea', is not a directly informing theme of the relatively impersonal Excursion, but a fidelity to the self of childhood is an enabling pre-requisite of the adult moral self in more

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1. For a convenient summary on this point, see Houghton, pp. 267-8.

2. The Prelude, II, 443.

autobiographic statements such as "Tintern Abbey" and Intimations of Immortality, and also of the "moderated" and "composed" resignation affirmed as a mature alternative to dangerous revolutionary impatience with life in The Prelude. So far my examination of what Dickens made of the relationship between the demands of continuity and of morality has emphasised the ways in which he shows them to be at once inter-connected yet at odds. In Little Dorrit, however, while 'continuity' is a shaping pre-occupation in a number of ways, the chief one, I want to argue, is an exploratory testing of its relationship with the ideal of resignation, the terms of which relationship are markedly Wordsworthian, whilst the context in which the ideal is posited - a fictional world reflecting a Dickensian and therefore very un-Wordsworthian sense of life, is such as to enforce a somewhat different appraisal of the ideal.

Dickens, however, was not the only Victorian novelist for whom <sup>was</sup> Wordsworth/the poet not just of an ethical idealism founded on Nature, but of radically new insight into the psychological conditions conducive to the healthy moral self - the poet of The Prelude, one might say, rather than The Excursion. There was also George Eliot, and it will perhaps be helpful to look briefly at her before taking up Little Dorrit, since whereas Dickens's engagement with Wordsworthian notions in that novel is as much a matter of dialogue as agreement, her's, while by no means less profound or intelligent, reveals the influence in a more direct and unqualified way.

That Wordsworth made a great impact on George Eliot, and influenced her in pondering experience and articulating it in moral terms, we know from external sources.<sup>1</sup> It is thus with no surprise that in The Mill on the Floss we come across passages such as these:

Life did change for Tom and Maggie; and yet they were not wrong in believing that the thoughts and loves of these first years would always make part of their lives. We could never have loved the earth so well if we had had no childhood in it - if it were not the earth where the same flowers come up again every spring that we used to gather with our tiny fingers as we sat lisping to ourselves on the grass - the same hips and haws on the autumn hedgerows - the same red-breasts that we used to call "God's birds", because they did no harm to the precious crops. What novelty is worth that sweet monotony where everything is known, and loved because it is known?

The wood I walk in on this mild May day, with the young yellow-brown foliage of the oaks between me and the blue sky, the white star-flowers and the blue-eyed speedwell and the ground ivy at my feet - what grove of tropic palms, what strange ferns or splendid broad-petalled blossoms could ever thrill such deep and delicate fibres within me as this home scene? These familiar flowers, these well-remembered bird-notes, this sky with its fitful brightness, these furrowed and grassy fields, each with a sort of personality given to it by the capricious hedgerows - such things as these are the mother tongue of our imagination, the language that is laden with all the subtle inextricable associations the fleeting hours of our childhood left behind them. Our delight in the sunshine on the deep-bladed grass today might be no more than the faint perception of wearied souls, if it were not for the sunshine and the grass in the far-off years, which still live in us, and transform our perception into love.<sup>2</sup>

There is no sense of ease like the ease we felt in those scenes where we were born, where objects became dear to us before we had known the labour of choice, and where the outer world seemed only an extension of our own personality: we accepted and loved it as we accepted our own sense of existence and our own limbs. Very common place, even ugly, that furniture of our early home might look if it were put up to auction; an improved taste in upholstery scorns it; and is not the striving after something better and better in our surroundings, the grand characteristic that distinguishes man from the brute - or, to satisfy a scrupulous accuracy of definition, that

1. See Gordon S. Haight, George Eliot: A Biography (1968), pp. 29, 258, 527, 531.

See also Thomas Pinney, "George Eliot's Reading of Wordsworth; The Record", Victorian Newsletter, No. 24, pp. 20-2.

2. George Eliot, The Mill on the Floss (1951: first published 1860), pp. 44-5.



distinguishes the British man from the foreign brute? But heaven knows where that striving might lead us, if our affections had not a trick of twining round those old inferior things - if the loves and sanctities of our life had no deep immovable roots in memory. One's delight in an elderberry bush overhanging the confused leafage of a hedgerow bank, as a more gladdening sight than the finest cistus or fuchsia spreading itself on the softest undulating turf, is an entirely justifiable preference to a landscape gardener, or to any of those severely regulated minds who are free from the weakness of any attachment that does not rest on a demonstrable superiority of qualities. And there is no better reason for preferring this elderberry bush than that it stirs an early memory - that it is no novelty in my life, speaking to me merely through my present sensibilities to form and colour, but the long companion of my existence, that wove itself into my joys when joys were vivid.

Childhood memories here are conceived as "hiding-places of...power" in a way obviously derived from Wordsworth, as is the immediate corollary that the feeling for place and object rightfully depends upon the memory invested in or associated with it. Note how closely, for instance, George Eliot's attitude to the appeal of novelty, or the objective appraisal of beauty according to "present sensibilities to form and colour", echoes Wordsworth's account in the twelfth book of The Prelude of how he had estranged himself from his deeper feelings by for a period looking at Nature in such a manner:

Bent overmuch on superficial things,  
 Pampering myself with meagre novelties  
 Of colour and proportion; to the moods  
 Of time and season, to the moral power,  
 The affections and the spirit of the place,  
 Insensible,.... 2

becoming what Lamb termed Wordsworth's opposite, "that gentlemanly

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1. Ibid., p. 152.

2. The Prelude, XII, 116-21.

spy upon nature, the picturesque traveller",<sup>1</sup> which had been, of course, the role prescribed by the previous century's ideal of cultivation. (Note especially the close verbal echoes here, Wordsworth's "novelties/of colour and proportion" against Eliot's "it is no novelty...sensibilities to form and colour".) However, comparison with a representative passage of Wordsworth also suggests that George Eliot has modified as well as inherited:

Was it for this

That one, the fairest of all rivers, loved  
 To blend his murmurs with my nurse's song,  
 And, from his alder shades and rocky falls,  
 And from his fords and shallows, sent a voice  
 That flowed along my dreams? For this, didst thou,  
 O Derwent! winding among grassy holms  
 Where I was looking on, a babe in arms,  
 Make ceaseless music that composed my thoughts  
 To more than human softness, giving me  
 Amid the fretful dwellings of mankind  
 A foretaste, a dim earnest, of the calm  
 That Nature breathes among the hills and groves.<sup>2</sup>

The life of the river for Wordsworth derives from its association with the nurse's presence, yet it is not simply a neutral medium in which the human memory is invested. The river has its own life and voice, into which the nurse's presence seems to have been dissolved and consequently idealised. In a manner typical to Wordsworth the imaginative resonance of the memory is rooted in the immediacies of person and place, yet opens out, through these, towards recognition of the immanent pantheistic Spirit - a delicate continuity is preserved here, for instance, between the actual mothering figure, and Nature conceived as a pervasive maternal presence. In the passages from The Mill on the Floss, on the other hand, the items of place are of

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1. "Review of Wordsworth's Excursion", Writings, vi, 228-239.(237).

2. The Prelude, I, 269-81.

significance simply by virtue of the human associations with which they have been hallowed; there is no reciprocal idealising process at work. George Eliot has taken over Wordsworth's psychological insight into the nature of memory and the self, and his sense of its profound moral consequence, but there has also been a certain secularising of the Wordsworthian inspiration.

If this involves a certain loss, it also entails some sort of compensating gain. For it enables Eliot to see the relevance of the organic integrity of the self to cases where the experience stored in memory has been of a perfectly commonplace order. The "old inferior things" that appeal to us do so simply because of the affections that twine around them, and the value of them in memory lies only in their capacity of conserving and evoking those affections - there is no way, as there is in Wordsworth, in which the affections themselves are ennobled by the objects or places with which they have become associated. Eliot follows Wordsworth in stressing memory as a kind of psychological anchor against man's restless and overweeningly expansive impulses ("Heaven knows where that striving might lead us" ), as a primary motive of self-contentment. Thus, just as Wordsworth's Godwinian intellectual hubris alienated him from the true springs of his being, so Maggie Tulliver's elopement with Stephen Guest is depicted not so much as a sin against an external social code, but as a denial of her own childhood. Both writers thus share the understanding that the idea of self-continuity provides a telling rationale for the ideal of resignation, and the

conservative social philosophy associated with it: by remaining true to what we have been we achieve contentment/<sup>with</sup>its product, which is what we are, rather than yearning to be what we are not. However, where in Wordsworth the renunciation of "impatient or fallacious hopes" and the desire of "throwing off incumbrances" and consequent commitment to living within "the frame of social life" <sup>1</sup>is sustained by memories charged with revelation, in Eliot sheer ordinariness and banality redeemed by human affection are looked to to contain man's expansive impulses. Consequently her conservatism, while pious, lacks Wordsworth's peculiarly exalted tone, having, indeed, an underlying dourness, since the "old inferior things", in her vision, really are inferior, as well as hallowed. Wordsworth's imagination is rooted in a love of temperate and subdued beauty, but "commonplace...even ugly furniture" is not a directly obtruding presence in his world. Eliot, one might say, has adapted the potentially conservative application of the idea of continuity to support a quietist social code in such a way as to bring it more realistically within the range of common life.

Thus, for the moment, George Eliot. An adaptation of Wordsworth similar to that which I have just been pointing to also takes place, I want to argue, in Little Dorrit, which had appeared some years previously. To understand why Dickens was drawn to this combination of ideas, and what he made of them, it is necessary to pay attention to the context into which they were introduced to, that is, the novel as a whole. And perhaps the best approach to the kind of interest Dickens was bringing to

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1. Ibid., XIII, 24, 34, 35.



bear upon an ideal by which the dangerous tendencies inherent in "the striving after something better and better in our surroundings" might be checked, is to begin with that side of the novel which itself is most animated by a form of such striving: its social criticism. This will involve a rather circuitous approach to direct discussion of the function of the idea of continuity in the novel, but I hope it will be apparent in the following intervening pages that by such an approach a proper perspective upon the idea is being established.

The most striking thing about the social criticism of Little Dorrit is its comprehensiveness and penetration. The manifold abuses and injustices, the socially sustained fatuities and the general thwarting of vitality are conceived quite convincingly as interrelated phenomena, the distinct issue of a combination of factors grasped as the peculiar operative principles of the particular society under consideration. Amongst other things, the novel is a work of analytic thought, in which the question 'what is England essentially like, and why is this so?' is pursued more thoroughly and systematically than in any previous Dickens novel; we here have pre-eminently a case of it being the inner workings of the social heart that are traced. One indication of this is the fact that with no negative reflection upon the diversity and concreteness of the novel's perception we can recognise the following contemporaneous letter from Dickens to Forster as a summary of its social vision:

... I really am serious in thinking... that representative government is become altogether a failure with us, that the English gentilities and subserviencies render the people unfit for it, ...<sup>1</sup>

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1. Letter to Forster, 30 September 1855; Letters, ii, 693.

The contrast between the power structure on paper, and his pressing sense of what it was in actuality, had led Dickens in fact to the same conclusion as Walter Bagehot was later to arrive at about the secret of what he took to be the beneficial stability of mid-Victorian society (a stability, of course, which Dickens interpreted as an imprisoning terror). Both Dickens and Bagehot, that is, were in agreement that England as they knew it was essentially a deferential nation, and that this truth offered a key to the understanding of English politics and manners.<sup>1</sup> That this pivotal insight shapes the rendering of society in Little Dorrit is obvious, and needs no detailed illustration, given the present state of criticism of the novel. Thus when Plornish speaks glowingly of William Dorrit's gentility he shows "a perverse admiration of what he ought to have pitied or despised", which<sup>2</sup> is echoed or referred to time and again throughout the novel by character after character, most significantly, of course, by the centrally important Mr. Meagles.

Yet if the "English gentilities" mean the reign of the Barnacles and Gowans and their kind, why, Dickens asks, haven't people cast them aside? Here, interestingly, Dickens comes up with much the same answer as did Bagehot later, who while not sharing Dickens's feelings about the English governing class, felt that the mass of Englishmen were not sufficiently enlightened as to be capable of deferring to intelligence alone, but instead deferred "to what we may call the theatrical show of society...a certain charmed spectacle which imposes

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1. The crucial statement of this view in Bagehot is in his The English Constitution (1867), esp. ch. 7.

2. Little Dorrit, p. 180.

on the many, and guides their fancies as it will".<sup>1</sup> The depiction of the social order maintaining itself by the various forms of theatrical show - the persuasive suggestion of authority and capacity by manner rather than concrete achievement, is likewise a consistent pre-occupation of Dickens in Little Dorrit:

But Mr. Tite Barnacle was a buttoned-up man, and consequently a weighty one. All buttoned-up men are weighty. All buttoned-up men are believed in. Whether or no the reserved and never-exercised power of unbuttoning, fascinates mankind; whether or no wisdom is supposed to condense and augment when buttoned-up, and to evaporate when un-buttoned; it is certain that the man to whom importance is accorded is the buttoned-up man. Mr. Tite Barnacle never would have passed for half his current value, unless his coat had been always buttoned-up to his white cravat.<sup>2</sup>

Dickens is not just indulging in rhetorical exaggeration: as he similarly points out in the parallel instance of Christopher Casby, the efficacy of the social illusion can turn upon the finesse with which the theatrical details are managed. Not sharing Bagehot's belief in the competence of those behind the scenes, however, and writing largely as spokesman of the emergent but suppressed middle-class meritocracy, represented in the novel by eminently untheatrical persons such as Doyce, Cleverham, and Pancks, he has, needless to say, none of Bagehot's urbane tolerance for the Machiavellian style of government, beyond the opportunity it offers him to expose it. And as is suggested by such things as the rendering of Gowan's manner, or the "Great Patriotic Conference", with its alertness to the individuality of each character, its economical but not crude sketching of the relatively subtle social style of Bar (we enjoy the way he and Ferdinand manipulate 'the heavies'

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1. The English Constitution, Fontana Library (1963; first published 1867), p. 248.

2. Little Dorrit, p. 621.

at the Merdle dinner)<sup>1</sup> and its admission that a man such as Physician, significantly a friend of the intelligent if cynical Bar and not the simply foolish Bishop, does exist in such a world, the exposure proceeds with a delicacy of touch beyond the range of the famous rhetorical broadside on 'How Not To Do It, which has been sometimes adduced as proof that Dickensian satire against the upper classes is limited to an outsider's crude abuse.

The theatrical show of society, then, appears in the novel as a world of empty forms, the related facets of which range from such obviously empty vessels as Tite Barnacle and Casby, to Mrs. General's surface, to more subtly insinuating performances such as Gowan's hollow but undeniably skilful and 'impressive' charm. That Dickens was conscious that in such a notion he had arrived at a leading principle that would genuinely show in a coherent and interrelated way the consequences for English life of the triumph of deference, is shown in another letter to Forster written some little while before he began work on the novel:

Don't think it a part of my dependency about public affairs, and my fear that our national glory is on the decline, when I say that mere form and conventionality usurp, in English art, as in English government and social relations, the place of living force and truth.<sup>2</sup>

Little Dorrit develops at length this central proposition, one of its achievements being the mutually supporting connections it demonstrates between the different ways "form and conventionality" manifest

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1. "Unless I butt one of them into an appointed corner, and you butt the other," said Ferdinand, "it will not come off after all": Ibid., p. 624.

2. Forster, p. 618.



themselves in different aspects of life; when Dickens in his letter had referred in rapid succession to art, politics, and social relations he was not being loosely synthetic. For instance, the various portraits satirised in the novel, from Gowan's of William Dorrit to the apotheosis of Mr. Finching that Flora so pungently disposes of ("as to a pillar with a marble pavement and balustrades and a mountain, I never saw him near it, nor like in the wine trade, excellent man but not at all in that way"),<sup>1</sup> are all social and political rather than artistic events, theatrical costumery ministering to the mystique of the gentility system - Tite Barnacle, we are told, "seemed to have been sitting for his portrait to Sir Thomas Lawrence all the days of his life". Likewise 'taste', as enforced by Mrs. General, is merely an extension of the social code into what passes as aesthetic judgement. In no other novel, in fact, does Dickens display such a confident sense of society as an intricate organism, the laws of functioning of which are thoroughly known to him.

It is well-known that at the time of writing Little Dorrit Dickens was actively involved in a political pressure group, the Administrative Reform Association, the goal of which was precisely to dislodge what they took to be Barnacle-ism from its influence in Government. This is not surprising, as implicit in the novel's diagnosis is what on the surface seems to be a straightforward recipe for a cure. If Plornish has "a perverse admiration for what he ought to have pitied or despised", can't the desirable change of attitude be brought about by enlightenment, enlightenment of the very kind that the novel itself is

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1. Little Dorrit, p. 329.

offering? Or if not Plornish, who Dickens sees as hopelessly middle-headed - Dickens's attitude to the Second Reform Bill some ten years later was <sup>1</sup>optimistic but ambivalent - can't the Meagles's of the world be looked to to throw off the mind-forged manacles of their snobbery and assert themselves against the complacency of the Palmerstonian ethos in what Dickens referred to in a letter as "the vigorous national manner?"<sup>2</sup>. The novel itself contains an exhilarating paradigm of such an act of liberation in Pancks's dénouement with Casby: once having gained the courage of his ebullient shrewdness Pancks discovers that demolition of the Patriarchal mystique is a ridiculously simple process - the frustrating thing about England, Dickens seems to be saying, is that the manacles are 'all in the mind'. Certainly the characteristic tone of much of the satire in the novel, angry and urgent, is one that seems to demand action and change; it is close in spirit to Pancks's own tensed snorting and hissing energy, which is why the wonderful rhetoric of his eruption ("You're a driver in disguise, a screwer by deputy, a wringer, and squeezer, and shaver by substitute")<sup>3</sup> is convincingly his and yet so unmistakeably an emanation of Dickens. The rhythms of the Tite Barnacle passage cited above, likewise, virtually evoke an image of Dickens physically laying hands on that luminary, seizing at his shirt-buttons in savage glee.

Indeed it was, of course, this confidently expectant anger that so distressed many of Dickens's critics, so struck them as evidence of his vulgarity and <sup>the</sup> lack of that proper education with which his genius had unfortunately not been tempered. Significantly, the

1. See Dickens to G.W. Rusden, 24 August 1868, Rusden Collection, Trinity College, Melbourne; cited in F.B. Smith, The Making of the Second Reform Bill, Cambridge, 1966, p.237.

2. Letter to A.H. Layard (leading figure in campaign for Administrative Reform) 10 April 1855; Letters, ii, 652.

3. Little Dorrit, p. 869.

objections of such critics were not just that the Dickens of the later novels was unduly jaundiced about the English governing classes, but rather that he was so because he was unduly impatient with life itself, had not philosophically reconciled himself to the vanity of human wishes in the manner that was to be expected of a properly educated gentleman. This, for instance, was the burden of Walter Bagehot's charge against what he called Dickens's "sentimental Radicalism":

It is painful to pass from these happy instances of well-used power to the glaring abuses of the same faculty in Mr. Dickens's later books. He began by describing really removable evils in a style which would induce all persons, however insensible, to remove them if they could; he ended by describing the natural evils and inevitable pains of the present state of being in such a manner as must tend to excite discontent and repining. The result is aggravated, because Mr. Dickens never ceases to hint that these evils are removable, though he dare not say by what means. Nothing is easier than to show the evils of anything. Mr. Dickens has not unfrequently spoken, and what is worse, he has taught a great number of parrot-like imitators to speak, in what really is, if they knew it, a tone of objection to the necessary constitution of human society.... Nothing can be easier than to make a case, as we may say, against any particular system, by pointing out with emphatic caricature its inevitable miscarriages and by pointing out nothing else. Those who so address us may assume a tone of philanthropy, and for ever exult that they are not so unfeeling as other men are; but the real tendency of their exhortations is to make men dissatisfied with their inevitable condition, and what is worse, to make them fancy that its irremediable evils can be remedied, and indulge in a succession of vague strivings and restless changes. Such, however, - though in a style of expression somewhat different, - is very much the tone which Mr. Dickens and his followers have in later years made us familiar.<sup>1</sup>

"Natural evils", "Inevitable pains"; Bagehot can appeal to phrases like this in a spirit of uncontentious generalisation, for they are

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1. Bagehot, "Charles Dickens", Literary Studies, ii, 160-1.

for him the commonplaces of traditional wisdom, or rather, of the conservative philosophy of Christian stoicism, from which the traditional social order had derived its intellectual sanction. And if his poise perhaps strikes one as too smooth and inert, a little too untroubled by any pressure of feeling against which it has had to contend, it certainly is a telling statement of a view of life which can never be ruled out of consideration, and which is a relevant ground of objection to certain things in Dickens.

What Bagehot failed to see about the Dickens of Little Dorrit, however, was that for all its unrefined reformist anger and protest the novel is also deeply permeated with a countervailing sense of the inevitable intractability of the human condition, of "natural evils" and "inevitable pains". It is in fact a novel of restless contradiction, which at the same time as violently venting its passion for change and liberation is also deeply involved in exploring the underlying question as to the validity of such human hopes. Recurrently through the novel Dickens is prompted by the scene at hand to generalise that we are all "restless travellers through the pilgrimage of life".<sup>1</sup> One reason why these asides don't strike one as being pretentious is that they seem genuinely pertinent to the way Dickens's intelligence and sympathy are at work in the novel, stringently declining to rest in comfortable and known stances.

Thus, for all the intense desire charging the novel that Meagles will see the light, Dickens stands true to his disconcerting perception that the Meagles's of the world are obtuse to the end of their days:

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1. Little Dorrit, p. 67.



"You remind me of the days," said Mr. Meagles, suddenly drooping - "but she's very fond of him, and hides his faults, and thinks that no one sees them - and he certainly is well connected and of a very good family!"

It was the only comfort he had in the loss of his daughter, and if he made the most of it, who could blame him? <sup>1</sup>

Dickens's valedictory indulgence to Meagles here may seem odd when one reflects on the far-reaching consequences the novel has already shown to hang on his snobbery. Yet that the novel does suddenly soften to him strikes me as a sign of its humanity, its willingness to set aside political trenchancy in response to immediate human need. The novel's straightforward case for change is even more directly checked by the considerations it admits in the case of that minor but essential character, John Chivery; I quote from the scene in which he has come to pay his respects to William Dorrit after that gentleman's rise in the world:

"What else did you come for, sir?"

"Nothing else in the world, sir. Oh dear me! Only to say, sir, that I hoped you was well, and only to ask if Miss Amy was well?"

"That's that to you, sir?" retorted Mr. Dorrit.

"It's nothing to me, sir, by rights. I never thought of lessening the distance betwixt us, I am sure. I know it's a liberty, sir, but I never thought you'd have taken it ill. Upon my word and honour, sir," said young John, with emotion, "in my poor way, I am too proud to have come, I assure you, if I had thought so." <sup>2</sup>

A petty-bourgeois dupe? The habits of mind Chivery displays here definitely contribute to the Barnacle hegemony, and we have here surely another perfect example of that "perverse admiration" for what ought to be "pitied or despised". Yet the whole import of his presence

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1. Ibid., p. 883.

2. Ibid, pp. 692-3.

in the novel, one which it insists upon by the frequent appearances accorded him, is surely that such qualities of modesty and politeness, however misguided, are valuable in themselves. Certainly the gullibility of his attitude towards Dorrit is inseparable from his admirable devotion to *Any*. Dickens by this stage no more than Bagehot trusted the ordinary man to be able to bestow his admiration discriminatingly. Subsequently, the implication is, any reformist enlightenment which dispenses with what Chivery stands for will be paying for social progress with a sacrifice of individual virtue, the endemic paradox, of course, of all revolutionary movements.

Thus, as well as the suspicion that progress may well be impossible, we have in the novel the further complicating perception that its achievement will probably entail losses to humanity concomitant upon the gains. A further challenge to the novel's radicalism is presented by Cavalletto. During his travels in Italy Dickens had noted the odd conjunction there of wretched poverty and absence of social progress, with a prevalent innate cheerfulness and pleasantness of manner.<sup>1</sup> Given Dickens's constant assumption that the ends of political activity are not circumscribed by the material enhancement of life, it is not surprising that this observation eventually found its way into Little Dorrit, though to see the pertinence of this point to the enquiry conducted in a novel some few years later was intelligent on Dickens's part. For here was a country infested by super-Barnacles of the most vicious kind, and yet this had not involved the destruction of the essential spirit of the people. Hence we have Cavalletto, who

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1. See Forster, p. 377.

implicitly questions radical convictions about the need for vigorous assertion by the manner in which, in him, an instinctive submissiveness consorts naturally with an easy-going nature - is, indeed, an essential ingredient of his vital happiness. This peculiar synthesis of qualities is demonstrated in his relations with Rigaud:

"I'll not fill it. What! I am born to be served. Come then, you Cavalletto, and fill!"

The little man looked at Clennam, whose eyes were occupied with Rigaud, and, seeing no prohibition, got up from the ground, and poured out from the bottle into the glass. The blending, as he did so, of his old submission with a sense of something humorous; the striving of that with a certain smouldering ferocity, which might have flashed fire in an instant (as the born gentleman seemed to think, for he had a wary eye upon him); and the easy yielding of all to a good-natured, careless, predominant propensity to sit down on the ground again: formed a very remarkable combination of character.<sup>1</sup>

What use would enlightenment be in such a case?

The intelligence of the novel, then, restless and flexible, is repeatedly bringing to light telling counter-instances to its major propositions. There is even a trace of this, I think, in Dickens's study of Arthur Clennam, though here, if anywhere, the novel's sympathies at first seem to be quite clear-cut. Arthur is introduced with brilliant volleys of boldly anti-Nonconformist satire in the best Dickens manner. Yet as the novel proceeds he changes for us from a man who has good qualities despite his upbringing, to a man whose good qualities are paradoxically inseparable from, though not, of course, identical with it. We are told, for example, that Amy finds in his earnestness "something that reminded her of his mother,

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1. Little Dorrit, p. 815.

with the great difference that she was earnest in asperity and he in gentleness."<sup>1</sup> Great care is taken in the novel that the existence of such different kinds of earnestness is not simply a sentimental fiat: the whole issue of Arthur's 'lost mother' partially accounts for this, as I shall argue later in this chapter. Interestingly, however, it is not just gentleness that is shown to drive Clennam on in the dogged heroism of conscience with which he pursues his suspicion of his family's guilt, but an almost obsessive sternness that suggests itself as the quite direct consequence of his mother's code:

It was in vain that he tried to control his attention by directing it to any business occupation or train of thought; it rode at anchor by the haunting topic, and would hold to no other idea. As though a criminal should be chained on a stationary boat on a deep clear river, condemned, whatever countless leagues of water flowed past him, always to see the body of the fellow creature he had drowned lying at the bottom, immovable, and unchangeable, except as the eddies made it broad or long, now expanding, now contracting its terrible lineaments; so Arthur, below the shifting current of transparent thoughts and fancies which were gone and succeeded by others as soon as come, saw, steady and dark, and not to be stirred from its place, the one subject that he endeavoured with all his might to rid himself of, and that he could not fly from.<sup>2</sup>

"Criminal", "condemned": the sensibility here directly recalls that which in the opening chapters was merely the object of satire; Dickens shows a range of sympathies not usually accorded to him,<sup>3</sup> exploring beyond his habitual assumptions in his firm location of something undeniably impressive here, a dour toughness that has value in a quite 'un-Dickensian' way, but which suggests the natural basis of friendship

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1. Ibid., p. 208.

2. Ibid., p. 742.

3. See, for instance, Trevor Blount, "The Chadbands and Dickens's View of Dissenters", Modern Language Quarterly, XXV (September 1964), pp. 295-307.



between Clennam and Doyce. Besides this the antithesis of Old and New Testament Dickens mounts at the end of the novel during the confrontation of Mrs. Clennam and Amy Dorrit, seems a bit simplistic. Unlike present-day celebrants of 'the decline of the Protestant ethic' Dickens is unable to place his trust in any simple kind of liberation from its repressive disciplines; for Arthur to have won complete freedom from his background, the novel sees, would have meant him becoming much the lesser man.<sup>1</sup>

Given, then, the novel's sense of the difficulty of "throwing off incumbrances",<sup>2</sup> that it should be interested in examining the relevance of an ideal of resignation should not seem paradoxical, although given the unaccommodated contradiction I have been indicating between the passion for action and change and scepticism as to its feasibility, it would seem surprising if such an examination was not itself conducted in a spirit fraught with tension. Our

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1. Dr. Leavis has argued (Dickens the Novelist, pp. 261-3) that Clennam, in the considerateness and tact of his behaviour, is, amongst other things, Dickens's positing of an ideal of gentility alternative to that exemplified by Gowan or William Dorrit: correctness and propriety, in Clennam's case, express and make effectual inner moral conviction. In this light it is interesting to note that Clennam is not unlike a rather muted example of the desideratum for a contemporary gentleman expressed by the evangelical reformer Shaftesbury when outlining why he would prefer to send his son to Rugby rather than Eton:

"I fear Eton...it makes admirable gentlemen and finished scholars - fits a man, beyond all competition, for the drawing-room, the Club, St. James's Street, and all the mysteries of social elegance; but it does not make the man required of the coming generation. We must have nobler, deeper, and sterner stuff; less of refinement and more of truth; more of the inward, and not so much of the outward, gentlemen; a rigid sense of duty, not a 'delicate sense of honour;' a just estimate of rank and property, not as matters of personal enjoyment and display, but as gifts from God, bringing with them serious responsibilities, and involving a fearful account;..." (extract from personal Diary, 21 November 1844; reprinted in Edwin Hodder, The Life and Work of the Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, KG, 3 vols (1886), II, 77.

Dickens knew Shaftesbury, and has great respect for him, despite his violent disagreement with Shaftesbury's position on the Sabbatarian question (see Forster, pp. 194, 540, and article "The Sunday Screw", in MP, p. 241 - 8 (p.241)).

2. The Prelude, XIII, 34.

perspective on this, however, can be further enhanced if we at first take stock of the almost complementary mixture of attraction and repulsion felt by the novel for its opposite: the stance of general militance.

Like most radical liberals Dickens was uneasily aware that the social change by which the Barnacles would be ousted might well not content itself with replacing them with Meagles's and Doyces, and that in such an episode it would not just be Casby's hair that would be in danger. At one point in his correspondence with Layard during the writing of the novel he remarked that he sensed at that moment in England the same "smouldering resentment" <sup>1</sup> apparent in France just before the outbreak of the Revolution. <sup>1</sup> Hence it is not insignificant that Little Dorrit begins in Marseilles, the revolutionary associations of which town are soon brought to our attention by Meagles's outburst about the townsfolk's "allonging and marshonging". <sup>2</sup> Such amiable grumpiness is meant to endear Meagles to us, yet as William Myers has argued, <sup>3</sup> the adventurousness of the novel's radicalism is typified by the way this attitude to the discontents of others is almost immediately shown to be complacent, when Tattycoram confronts Meagles with a form of "allonging and marshonging" within his own family circle. Quickly, too, the novel spells out the revolutionary political overtones of Tattycoram's resentment, in such things as her association with Miss Wade, who at the beginning of the novel is given some of the marks of a revolutionary intellectual (I shall come to this later), and Meagles's comment later in the novel on the

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1. 10 April 1855; Letters, ii, 651-2.      2. Little Dorrit, p. 53.  
 3. William Myers, "The Radicalism of Little Dorrit", in John Lucas, ed. Literature and Politics in the Nineteenth Century (1971), pp. 77-104.

inevitability of Tattycoram's flight:

"You don't know that girl's passionate and proud character. A team of horses couldn't draw her back now; the bolts and bars of the old Bastille couldn't keep her."<sup>1</sup>

What Tattycoram's revolt challenges is the hypocrisy of compromise - the compromise of that middle-class liberalism that fits so comfortably on Meagles, and which Dickens, as Myers has argued, at once ascribes to in the novel and sees beyond. It is the liberalism that resents haughty and obfuscating patronage of the middle-classes by the Barnacles, but is prepared itself to patronise people like Tatty. And if it is right to actively resent the heartless patronage of a Gowan, why not the well-meaning but obtuse and nevertheless hurtful patronage of a Meagles?

Thankfully Dickens has no pat answers to these questions, no nicely graded conclusive distinctions between necessary and unnecessary evil, justifiable and unjustifiable discontent. Certainly he not only feels that the Meagleses have treated her with a certain self-indulgence and lack of intelligence - even Meagles in the end acknowledges that the "jingling name" had been a mistake.<sup>2</sup> Beyond this, as well, the novel is very much in sympathy for that in Tatty which drives her to assert her equality: "lustrous dark hair and eyes"<sup>3</sup> evince vitality in her just as they rather notionally stand for it in Sissy Jupe, and her "full red lips"<sup>4</sup> are markedly noticeable when she is being defiant. Besides her Pet strikes one as insipid, and while at first Dickens gallantly smooths this over by calling her "air of timidity and dependence" "the best weakness in the world",<sup>5</sup> he very soon

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1. *Little Dorrit*, p. 369.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 878.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 240.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 54-5.



afterwards rounds on her, saying she shrinks "childishly, in her  
<sup>1</sup> from Miss Wade.  
 spoilt way". This enhances Tattycoram in our eyes by comparison.

Yet her rebellion fails: in rejecting the Meagleses she rejects the self that loved and trusted them, and thus numbs herself to love and trust as such, with the result that, under Miss Wade's guidance, but utterly amenable to it, she is reduced to being "miserable, suspicious, and tormenting".<sup>2</sup> I don't think Dickens can be accused of putting his finger in the scales here in the interest of morality, for the psychological logic of Tatty's career seems to me to be faultless. Neither does her return strike me as a sentimental volte-face, for the same reason; and while leaving the suggestion of comfortable resolution there for the reader incapable of profiting by greater subtlety, it is at least left open to us to suspect that she is doomed to a life of irresolvable oscillation. Dickens, one concludes here, is quite powerfully drawn towards the extremism that would raze all prison walls at one blow - that boldness of tone I discussed above often seems to implicate him in such a way. Yet he is at the same time quite clear-sightedly and intelligently fearful of where such sympathies can lead him. Here and in general Dickens's greatness consists not just in an imagination especially responsive to violence and anarchy, which is the gist of John Carey's claim, but also <sup>in</sup> his differently but equally imaginative and usually un-platitudinous understanding of the consequences of violence, emotional as well as physical, especially insofar as it alienates the agent from those springs in his being of more positive feelings.

Nevertheless, the complexity of response is not managed flawlessly.

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1. Ibid., p. 64.

2. Ibid., p. 880.



Comparison of the following two brief passages surely shows a too easy piety winning out in the second; the first describes Meagles's house:

...there was a hale, elderly portion, to represent Mr. and Mrs. Meagles, and a young picturesque, very pretty portion to represent Pet. There was even the later addition of a conservatory sheltering itself against it, uncertain of hue in its deep-stained glass, and in its more transparent portions flashing to the sun's rays, now like fire and now like harmless water-drops; which might have stood for Tattycoram. <sup>1</sup>

Soon afterwards Arthur sees this reflection of her in the mirror:

...he saw, by the reflection of the mirror, Tattycoram stop in passing outside the door, listen to what was going on, and pass away with an angry and contemptuous frown upon her face, that changed its beauty into ugliness. <sup>2</sup>

Do these passages quite fit together? Doesn't the imagery in the first point to something like a beauty in anger, that the rather simplifying moral dichotomy of the second passage ("beauty into ugliness"), then denies?

There is little comfort in the irresolvable oscillation that we suspect to be Tattycoram's fate, a condition that strongly strikes one as Dickens's own, as it shows itself in the novel. Yet what happens to her rebelliousness when it becomes completely self-enclosed, isolated from all contrary impulses, is surely worse, being the terminal state, in fact, of Miss Wade. One way of describing Miss Wade's attitude to life, or rather defensive posture against it, is to say that it represents the total rejection of all compromise. For her there is no point in distinguishing between the degree of imprisoning inequality enforced by a Meagles and that enforced by a Barnacle, or a William Dorrit -

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1. Ibid., p. 235.

2. Ibid., p. 238.

all are equally loathsome. Thus the strange mixture of truth and insanity in her 'liberating' diagnosis of Tatty's former situation:

...in ~~the~~ character I was interested and pleased to see much of the rising against swollen patronage and selfishness, <sup>calling</sup> themselves kindness, protection, benevolence, and other fine names, which I have described as inherent in my nature. I often heard it said, too, that she had 'an unhappy temper'. Well understanding what was meant by the convenient phrase, and wanting a companion with a knowledge of what I knew, I thought I would try to release the girl from her bondage and sense of injustice.<sup>1</sup>

This way, indeed, madness does lie, but it is typical of Dickens's own restless shunning of easy certainties that we are forced to concede that we are here dealing with a powerful and incisive mind, however wrong it may be; witness her telling thrust about "the convenient phrase" by which people of the Meagles type rationalise their reluctance or inability to consider disconcerting intimations too curiously.

There are, in fact, a number of details at the beginning of the novel that cast her somewhat in the rôle of a revolutionary intellectual - Dickens is not writing a 'novel of ideas' in the sense that The Magic Mountain is, but of ideas as they are imperceptibly present in the flow of everyday experience. One senses a hint of such a connection when, after the initial association has been made between the original French Revolution, the traveller's immediate state of being 'imprisoned' in quarantine, and imprisonment in general, Miss Wade breaks her silence to angrily contest Meagles's casual but focal remark that "a prisoner begins to relent towards his prison, after he is let out:"<sup>2</sup>

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1. Ibid., p. 734.

2. Ibid., p. 60.

"Do you mean that a prisoner forgives his prison?" said she, slowly and with emphasis.

"That was my speculation, Miss Wade. I don't pretend to know positively how a prisoner might feel. I never was one before."

"Mademoiselle doubts," said the French gentleman in his own language, "it's being so easy to forgive?"

"I do."

Pet had to translate this passage to Mr. Meagles, who never by any accident acquired any knowledge whatever of the language of any country into which he travelled. "Oh!" said he. "Dear me! But that's a pity, isn't it?"

"That I am not credulous?" said Miss Wade.

"Not exactly that. Put it another way. That you can't believe it easy to forgive."

"My experience," she quietly returned, "has been correcting my belief in many respects, for some years. It is our natural progress, I have heard."

"Well, Well! But it's not natural to bear malice, I hope?" said Mr. Meagles, cheerily.

"If I had been shut up in any place to pine and suffer, I should always hate that place and wish to burn it down, or raze it to the ground. I know no more."

"Strong, sir?" said Mr. Meagles to the Frenchman:...

As Meagles's last remark instances, Dickens's finest comic strokes are often at one with his moments of most concentrated significance (consider, for instance, the Shakespearian way in which the word "natural" is deployed here). Miss Wade's final outburst almost explicitly marks her, I think, as a child of the Revolution, as does, perhaps, what may be an intended pun in the phrase "natural progress" (the common progress from innocence to experience with age - Meagles is, in a way not totally unredeemed by the double edge that the Romantics had put on the word, being childish here - and the inevitable progress of human civilisation from the darkness to enlightenment). This impression is reinforced by Miss Wade's parting

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1. Ibid., p. 61.

invective several pages further on, which assails Meagles with a threat of doom which very closely touches on a rhetorical figure beloved of both Carlyle and Dickens in their attacks against social complacency:

"Your pretty daughter," she said, "starts to think of such things. Yet, "looking full upon her," you may be sure that there are men and women already on their road, who have their business to do with you, and who will do it. Of a certainty they will do it. They may be coming hundreds, thousands, of miles over the sea there; they may be close at hand now; they may be coming, for anything you know or anything you can do to prevent it, from the vilest sweepings of this very town." <sup>1</sup>

This seems to be only a slightly veiled form of the same notion Dickens himself uses later when he exclaims "look to the rats young and old, all ye Barnacles, for before God they are eating away our foundations, and will bring the roofs on our heads!"<sup>2</sup>, the difference being that whereas Dickens's outcry is prophylactic (it is "our foundations" that are being eaten away), Miss Wade has a gloating joy in involving those "vilest sweepings", and derives an added frisson of pleasure from the idea of historical determinism ("Of a certainty they will do it") - this last touch being a very telling aperçu, I think, into the psychology of the 'Jacobinical' mind.

What I am arguing is not that Miss Wade is shown as a literal exponent of any cause or intellectual programme, but that Dickens is depicting in her something more like the psychological type of what he takes pains to identify for us as one kind of revolutionary

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1. Ibid., p. 64.

2. Ibid., p. 208.



intellectual. Such a suggestion seems to play about the whole of Miss Wade's presentation in that discussion about forgiving the prison. There is also, for instance, Miss Wade's obvious pride in her de-bunking scepticism, in not being "credulous", or, as she puts it the beginning of her written self-justification, her power of "habitually discerning the truth", instead of being "habitually imposed upon", by virtue of which she has been condemned not to live "as smoothly as most fools do".<sup>1</sup> This, of course, is a mainstay of her self-conceit, just as there has been a strong element of an *egoism à deux* in the attraction of her and Gowan to one another in their self-congratulatory "anatomis[ing]" of "the wretched people around [them]"<sup>2</sup> - the rebellious nihilist of the Left, as it were, tellingly in alliance with the acquiescent nihilist of the Right. Yet Miss Wade is, of course, anything but a fool: her justification, in its swift, relentless and brilliant though deluded logic, is testimony enough to that. Her downfall, however, implicit in the early discussion and fully apparent in her written document, is largely that it is the very powerfulness of her analytic mind, with the illusion of clairvoyance it gives her, that blinds her to the real nature of her own motives. For in bringing her powerful scepticism to bear on the commonplace wisdom of a Meagles ("it's not natural to bear malice, I hope") she is not simply submitting it to the impartial test of intellectual analysis, as it is implicit she thinks she is doing; rather, the procedures of analysis are at once the rationalisation for

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1. Ibid., p. 725.

2. Ibid., p. 733.

and the servile vehicle of her own severely neurotic emotions. Like Wordsworth in his portrait of the Solitary in The Excursion, or of Oswald in his play The Borderers, Dickens has here made a telling study of the hidden roots of one kind of revolutionary mentality.

Miss Wade, then, is mad, making simply impossible demands upon life, since the air-tight logic of her thought systematically discounts any experience that might in any way gratify her expectations: urgently in need of love as a child, her unfailing distrust of all possibilities of it, as being merely a masked form of self-regarding condescension, has drawn her to the conclusion that life itself is a vain sham. Interestingly her stance of the embittered idealistic rebel, proudly aloof from the compromises of lesser mortals, has an air of Byronic Prometheanism: she certainly thinks of her own form of Lara's "vital scorn of all"<sup>1</sup> in much the same self-dramatising and self-rationalising way that some of the Byronic heroes invite the rebellious spirit to assume. On the other hand, nevertheless, Dickens surely wants us to feel that Meagles's comfortable optimism about the ease with which the prison can be forgiven, with which, that is, one can accept the inevitable injustice that life inflicts upon one, is equally unhelpful as a guide to living. Never having been a prisoner before, either in the literal or metaphoric sense, his advice is largely a projection of his own pretty complacent ease with life, endearing enough to those not seeing him through jaundiced eyes, but hardly more helpful to those who have had a tougher time of things than himself than is his hearty encouragement to Arthur Clennam to "light...up" his lost will,

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1. Lara, I. 313.

purpose and hope.<sup>1</sup> Miss Wade's vision of life may be narrow and highly partisan, but it does answer much in life as the novel discloses it that Meagles is simply oblivious of - hence its seductive plausibility to Tatty as an explanation of her own experience, a plausibility that the novel stringently enjoins on us not to discount too hastily as specious. It is not just for the purpose of preserving Miss Wade's aura of mystery for us, I think, that Dickens withholds her full history until quite late in the story.

These considerations, I suggest, lead us to the underlying question Dickens is pursuing throughout Little Dorrit: what is the best kind of response to the injustice of social inequality? What possible alternatives are there, beyond an easy acceptance of it and an unrelenting resistance? Of these the one is only possible to people such as Meagles, and the other is finally fruitless; or also, as in Tatty's case, de-humanising, because involving a yielding of the heart over to pure antagonism, a rejection of the positive in life along with the negative, these two being inextricably mixed together in her situation vis a vis the Meagleses in a manner emblematic of a radically imperfect human condition. One answer here, of course, is that represented by Little Dorrit herself, and it is to her that I want at this point to turn, having by now established some idea of the pressures which Dickens is bringing to bear in his treatment of her.

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1. Little Dorrit, p. 59.

## II

With several notable exceptions Amy Dorrit has received little more recognition than the nodding condescension accorded her by Fanny. Virtuous tepidity wins few laurels from modern criticism, and this has been the conventional formulation. William Myers, for example, whose view on the novel's radicalism I cited above, has this to say about her:

...it is difficult to place her exactly, to see her as anything but gratuitous self-indulgence on Dickens's part, to relate her intelligently to the Circumlocution Office and the Merdle Empire. She seems, in fact, out of place, miraculously unconditioned by her environment, a detached, invented evasion of the novel's problems...

She is at the centre, in other words, of a literary rather than a political appreciation of intransigent political and human problems; through her they are felt and judged; but she is not an instrument of change, a solution to the novel's problems.<sup>1</sup>

The assumptions of criticism of this kind are really too narrow to deal adequately with a work such as Little Dorrit. For what is being blindly denied here is the very likely possibility that Dickens, who was after all writing within what was still largely a religious culture, would not have found the question of whether someone was or was not a viable "instrument of change" an exhaustive test of his or her human value or relevance. On the contrary, it seems to me that the novel's deep sense of the difficulty of change, which I have been outlining, strongly enforces the relevance of someone who does manage to forgive the very real prison of her life and yet live productively, in a quietism that is the very opposite of the mere apathy commended by Dr. Haggage<sup>2</sup>,

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1. Myers, pp. 101-2.

2. Little Dorrit, p. 103.



to which Clennam is tempted.<sup>1</sup> In her "active resignation",<sup>2</sup> to quote Meagles's testimonial, is the extraordinary proving of the virtue that Meagles, in his innocence of life's pervasively imprisoning nature, can so glibly refer to in his discussion with Miss Wade as a common human capacity. To object to her for her resignation per se rather than for anything unsatisfactory in her embodiment of that ideal; or, as another recent critic has done, to object to the novel for seeming to endorse that ideal, rather than to a lack of force or intelligence or honesty shaping such an endorsement, seems to me to be an improper way of bringing value judgements to bear.<sup>3</sup>

Extraordinary is an apt word for Amy, yet the first thing that needs to be insisted upon about Dickens's conception of her is that it is in no way a mere wheeling in of an unreal ready-made stereotype. There are obvious points of resemblance between her and the numerous patient Griseldas of minor Victorian fiction, in whom, to quote Vineta Colby, "sainthood, self-sacrifice, and martyrdom are...translated into homely virtues, displayed in the lives of ordinary people".<sup>4</sup> Undoubtedly, too, the readiness with which Dickens seriously considered someone like Amy as the saving answer to the impasse of discontent has much to do with his being of, if not circumscribed by, the same culture that popularly gave such credence to this stereotype. However the connection is only superficial, for Dickens has demonstrably pondered the question of whether, and how, Amy's extraordinariness is a convincing outcome of

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1. Ibid., p. 244.

2. Ibid., p. 881.

3. Marie Peel, "Little Dorrit - Prison or Cage", Books and Bookmen, XVII (September 1972), pp. 38-42.

4. Colby, p. 182.

real circumstances. Far from being "miraculously unconditioned by her environment"<sup>1</sup> she is shown to emerge, as has been argued by both Barbara Hardy and Dr. Leavis, whom I quote, "out of the situation and the routine of daily life that produced her".<sup>2</sup> The way in which Dickens has done this has particular relevance for the argument of my thesis, since in thinking through Amy's character, he is heavily indebted, I want to argue, to Wordsworthian-Romantic ideas about the moral significance of self-continuity. He has, one might say, given us a character whose psychology is strikingly similar to the Wordsworthian pattern, whilst radically altering the situation in which that psychology has to operate. Such alteration, not surprisingly, can be seen to have involved a modification of the pattern - most obviously in a manner similar to that effected by George Eliot which I outlined at the beginning of this chapter. Still, however, individual to Dickens, and perhaps related to the power of those impulses of discontent in the novel which the inspiration of Amy is looked to to allay, it is also true that the authenticity which this realistic motivation lends to her behaviour also raises disturbing queries about the sense in which it can be properly said to be moral.

One can make a beginning with the Wordsworthian echoes in Amy by considering the charge her family make against her when, ostensibly released from the Marshalsea, they accuse her of being a "complete prison-child"<sup>3</sup> for her inability to join in their pretensions. They are in a manner right, though the immediately apparent irony is that in the reader's eyes they are really indicating grounds for praise rather

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1. Myers, p. 101.

2. *Dickens the Novelist*, p. 226; Hardy, p. 16.

3. *Little Dorrit*, p. 419.

than blame. Here Dickens seems to be closely in accord with Wordsworth in a number of ways. Amy's spontaneous, unwilling contentment with the restrictions of her life is very much in line with the 'philosophy' of the Wordsworth who, "moderated and composed", regained health and sanity at Grasmere:

Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room;  
And hermits are contented with their cells;  
And students with their pensive citadels;  
Maids at the wheel, the weaver at his loom,  
Sit blithe and happy; bees that soar for bloom,  
High as the highest Peak of Furness-fells,  
Will murmur by the hour in fox-glove bells:  
In truth the prison, into which we doom  
Ourselves, no prison is ... 1

(underlining mine)

Vacuous enough, indeed (and note the very idiosyncratic progression from "nuns" and "hermits" to "we"). Yet it is representative enough of the pervasive conception in the mature Wordsworth of the moral life as being free from strain and effort, of goodness as the spontaneous flow of quietly joyful feeling springing from an almost impervious calm, rather than the product of the moral will - see the contrast of Wordsworth and Johnson on this point in my introduction. Wordsworth's paradox about the prison is only one example of his continual recurrence to scenes of contained space, felt not as a constriction but a refuge, a favourite image of the mind in withdrawn and self-possessed repose: "a fixed centre of a troubled world", "Central peace, subsisting at the heart/Of endless agitation".<sup>2</sup> Correlatively, Wordsworth's feminine ideal is of someone naturally attuned to tranquillity, embodying the spiritual calm that men yearn for and guide themselves by:

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1. "N uns fret not at their convent's narrow room;" (Composed? - Published 1807); in Miscellaneous Sonnets.

2. The Excursion, V, 16; IV, 1146-7.

"Him might we liken to the setting sun  
 As seen not seldom on some gusty day,  
 Struggling and bold, and shining from the west  
 With an inconstant and unmellowed light;  
 She was a soft attendant cloud, that hung  
 As if with wish to veil the restless orb.<sup>1</sup>

She welcomed what was given, and craved no more;  
 Whate'er the scene presented to her view  
 That was the best, to that she was attuned  
 By her benign simplicity of life,

.....  
                                     ...God delights  
 In such a being; for, her common thoughts  
 Are piety, her life is gratitude.<sup>2</sup>

Little Dorrit might be said to represent Dickens's inquiry into the validity of such an ideal, under the complicating pressures of life as typified by the Marshalsea rather than Grasmere: for her "the prison... which...no prison is" is a prison indeed, although she bears it as if it is not, without sign of friction or struggle. How apt, for instance, is the idea of "central peace, subsisting at the heart/Of endless agitation" to the image of Little Dorrit and Clennam at the end of the novel: "They went quietly down into the roaring streets, inseparable and blessed...".<sup>3</sup>

Such parallels suggest a certain sharing of a framework of reference, but nothing that could not have been derived from a common allegiance to post-Romantic assumptions in general about the nature of goodness. The novel's specifically Wordsworthian indebtedness becomes more distinct, however, when one considers Amy's peculiarly affectionate relation to the Marshalsea prison itself, which is prominent among those aspects of her character that strike us as both extraordinary and yet

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1. *The Excursion*, VII, 230-5.

2. *The Prelude*, XII, 158-61. 171-3.

3. *Little Dorrit*, p. 895.



justly observed:

To speak of home, and to go and look at it, it being so near, was a natural sequence. They went to the closed gate, and peeped through into the court-yard. "I hope he is sound asleep," said Little Dorrit, kissing one of the bars, "and does not miss me."

The gate was so familiar, and so like a companion, that they put down Maggy's basket in a corner to serve for a seat,...<sup>1</sup>

With a pitiful and plaintive look for her wayward sister; for her idle brother; for the high blank walls; for the faded crowd they shut in; for the games of the prison-children as they whooped and ran, and played at hide-and-seek, and made the iron bars of the inner gateway "Home".<sup>2</sup>

Amy's "still surviving attachment to the one miserable yard and block of houses as her birthplace and home" is very arguably Dickens's variant upon Wordsworth's insistence that the healthy self is closely rooted in a particular place or places, hallowed by memory - which inevitably followed from the asserted desirability of fidelity to the personal past. The variation noticeably consists of the same kind of toning down and 'secularising' of Wordsworth that is evident in the passages from The Mill on the Floss (published some years later) discussed at the outset of this chapter, although in Dickens's case the paradox of the "sweet monotony where everything is known, and loved because it is known" is enforced more severely. Perhaps because so much of Dickens cries out against the idea of stoical resignation, resignation here is a grimmer business than in the Eliot of the later novel. That Amy's paradoxical attachment to the unpleasant is being here explained and justified in post-Wordsworthian terms is further

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1. Ibid., p. 216.

2. Ibid., p. 109.

supported if we compare it with Lamb's comment in "The Londoner":

"I love the very smoke of London, because it has been the medium most familiar to my vision",<sup>1</sup> which is in keeping with the way I argued in chapter two that Lamb had assimilated Wordsworth.

The key to Amy's spontaneous goodness, her 'monistic' moral self, is thus the Wordsworthian one of her unresisting fidelity to her childhood affections, either as invested in place, or directly in people. People and place are, of course, inseparable - that is the point of Wordsworth's insight - so that when Amy makes the symbolic and self-definitive gesture of kissing the bars, and feels the gate to be a companion, she is inevitably thinking of her father. The oddly paradoxical truth about her upbringing in the unwholesome Dorrit family is, in fact, its security, and the availability of a kind of affection. Unlike Clennam, whose loveless childhood has left him very much, in Wordsworth's phrase, "an outcast...bewildered and depressed", the primary bonds of feeling have been freely implanted in her innermost being, and her relations with the immediate world which is interfused with these bonds is consequently one of affectionate belonging, by which for her the sordid and dreary nature of that world is redeemed, "irradiated" if not "exalted".<sup>2</sup> In one sense she has even been the favourite of the family, "by far the best loved of the three"<sup>3</sup> as her father puts it during one of his reviews of the history of his paternity. Dickens pointedly takes pains to avoid being simple-minded about the play of feeling within the family, and doesn't just re-write Cinderella for us: Fanny's

1. Writings, iv, 322-24.

See also Lamb's letter to Wordsworth attesting that his "attachments are all local, purely local.... The rooms where I was born, the furniture which has been before my eyes all my life... these are my mistresses" (Writings, ii, 69-71(70) previously cited in ch. 3, p. 11). This letter was included in Talfourd's edition of Lamb's letters (i, 212-15), which Dickens owned and knew (for details, see ch. 2, pp. 71-2).

2. Cf. The Prelude, II, 238-40: "For him, in one dear Presence, there exists/ A virtue which irradiates and exalts/ Objects through widest intercourse of sense".

3. Little Dorrit, p. 275.

embrace, for instance, we are told at one point, is "a really fond one".<sup>1</sup>

The crucial deviation of her case from the Wordsworthian norm, however, is that with 'love' she has drunk in massive doses of manipulative condescension. Wryly enough her father's very lethargic conceit had contributed to her emotional stability, for as he has never rejected her ministering attention she has consequently never felt unwanted. Such devotion, we conclude from his present behaviour, he has always repaid with a self-centred patronage that passes for love. Her situation is like a grotesque exaggeration of Tattycoram's, but developing in the opposite way: whereas Tatty asserts her independence and consequently rejects love as a basis of the self, Amy remains faithful to her capacity to give and receive love by accepting the inferiority with which it has been inextricably interwoven. Whereas Tatty the adopted illegitimate revolts against the rôle of trusted servant, Amy the natural daughter willingly embraces it.

Amy's spontaneous self-denial, then, is the product of an upbringing which has granted love and security at the cost of any kind of independent self-assertive will. When Dickens has her referred to as a "child", which he repeatedly does, he is using that word half in a sentimental Victorian sense and half with a stringently diagnostic intent, alluding to the curious fact that she has none of the egoistic will by which children pull away from childhood dependencies into the relative independence of adulthood: thus the delicately judged mildly disconcerting

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1. Little Dorrit, p. 666.

effect the idea of her physical child-likeness has upon us (which I don't think Dickens attributes to her just to make her highly adult sense of responsibility look quaint). One striking aspect of this childlike nature is the tenacity with which she clings onto a belief in her father's basic goodness, despite what would seem to an outsider as massive evidence to the contrary:

Little Dorrit was not ashamed of her poor shoes. He knew her story, and it was not that. Little Dorrit had a misgiving that he might blame her father, if he saw them; that he might think, "why did he dine today, and leave this little creature to the mercy of the cold stones". She had no belief that it would have been just reflection; she simply knew, by experience, that such delusions did sometimes present themselves to people. It was part of her father's misfortunes that they did.<sup>1</sup>

This is representative; the revaluation of one's parents in the light of greater objectivity, which is part of the development of an independent will, is completely inhibited in her.

In consequence of this, one can't help feeling that there is a certain ambivalence at work in the presentation of her during the account of the Dorrits' travels in Europe, where she most fully assumes the mantle of the Romantic 'continuity theme'. On the face of it her home-sickness is a witness to the realness in her by which is to be judged the hollowness of the cosmopolitan ethos into which the rest of her family, hollow themselves, have plunged. Her absorption in remembering her version of those "old inferior things" around which her "affections" had "had....a....trick of twining" (I quote from George Eliot, not Wordsworth) seems an exemplary instance of the moral power to be derived from the

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1. Ibid., p. 209.



"continuity in...self-consciousness", a triumph of the specifically Romantic definition of integrity. However, when one comes to look more closely at her reactions at this stage, one can't but begin to doubt whether seeing her just as a moral touchstone isn't rather blurring the actual portrait of her that the novel presents, even though such is the attitude to her Dickens at times tells us overtly to take.<sup>1</sup> Amy's vulnerability in her new situation, her bewilderment, and the unfailing care she heaps on her thoroughly undeserving family, all these things obviously do invest her with genuine pathos. Yet while it reflects on us rather than Dickens if we are embarrassed by all of his outbursts on her behalf - which are at times good instances of that generous anger Orwell pointed to,<sup>2</sup> it is finally necessary to make a clear distinction between being, justly, highly sympathetic, and seeing her simply as a moral heroine. And Dickens does, I am sure, see with more clarity and penetration into the workings of Amy's heart than does the immensely chivalrous Clennam, even though his own heart and head being perhaps thankfully sometimes at odds, he is liable at times to let his sense of outrage cloud his vision (one thinks here of the cool-minded Bagehot's criticism of his 'irregularity', discussed in my introduction.)

Thus, at various key points during her travels with the family, one can't resist the impression that we are being given an analysis, sympathetic but essentially dispassionate, of someone whose exemplary fidelity arises not from moral virtue per se but from a deeply felt need:

In this crowning unreality, where all the streets were paved with water, and where the death-like stillness of the days and

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1. See, for instance, Little Dorrit, p. 526.

2. "Charles Dickens", Works, i, 460.

nights was broken by no sound but the softened ringing of church-bells, the rippling of the current, and the cry of the gondoliers turning the corners of the flowing streets, Little Dorrit, quite lost by her task being done, sat down to muse. The family began a gay life, went here and there, and turned night into day; but she was timid of joining in their gaieties, and only asked to be left alone.<sup>1</sup>

The atmospheric details are splendid here because they catch poetically the significance of the beautiful but unsettling charm that Venice has for her. Bereft of the familiar things of her life it is as if the very solidity of her identity seems to be in danger of dissolution, an obscure but significant inner state that the strangeness of Venice ("streets...paved with water", "death-like stillness", "softened ringing of the bells") at once sensitively expresses (Dickens's 'irregularity' of genius at work here) and precipitates. Amy's response is patently not Philistine indifference, but hyper-sensitivity: Venice stirs the deep roots of personal feeling in a way that prohibits any easily manageable aesthetic 'appreciation' - one kind of temperamental inability of certain musically cultivated people to listen sympathetically to the slow movements of some late-Romantic music strikes me as an apt parallel to draw. As Mrs. General reports her as saying, her reaction is one of "wondering exceedingly".<sup>2</sup> As her sense of her own reality has been built on the servitude of her family life, so, the implication clearly goes, freedom for her is too fearful to be borne. Her work is not something she does in a spirit of self-denying asceticism, but because it is only through that that she derives any tangible sense of self at all. Similarly, when Arthur first

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1. Little Dorrit, p. 519.

2. Ibid., p. 527.

tells her of the family's change of fortune, her realisation that soon "all the familiar experiences would have vanished away" significantly makes her look not sad but "frightened"<sup>1</sup>. Nor has her fear got anything to do with a premonition of the impending family vanitas. Hence, although her attitude to the life she is expected to lead now is accompanied by insight that has a moral significance, I don't see how her reaction in general can be properly called moral.

I think we are touching here on the previously-discussed difficulty involved in the Wordsworthian-Romantic pre-occupation with explaining and justifying the moral sense in terms of its roots in the psychologically significant experiences of childhood: that if moral behaviour is explained as being simply determined by such experiences, or, as is the case here, gratifying a need arising out of them, doesn't it lose its moral status? This worry only exists, of course, if one assumes that moral behaviour is not just a matter of beneficent effect or an inner feeling of beneficence, but necessarily also involves an element of will and choice; and that, furthermore, while perhaps not necessarily involving any checking of impulse, it does not gratify an appetite stronger than any that it denies, unless such gratification is not perceptibly the motive behind the behaviour. Now if one accepts these premisses, as I do, Any's behaviour would not seem to be moral in any strict sense, or at least not moral in a sense that could be offered as representatively applicable to other people, in the way, for instance, that Meagles offers it as a model to the

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1. Ibid., p. 467.

(temporarily?) repentant Tattycoram. For, as is evident I think from the above discussion of her response to Venice, the most accurate interpretation of her unwavering loyalty to her old tasks is that it is an instinctive hankering after security. Furthermore, there are in her no opposing pressures to act otherwise than she does, as her capacity to act selfishly has been drained out of her, as I have discussed above, by her peculiar upbringing. In consequence of her unshakeable faith in her father, as mentioned above, she never really has to learn to accept injustice, because she never faces the fact that she has been treated unjustly. Or to put it another way, she can hardly be said to forgive the prison, as she never becomes aware that she has anything to forgive. What Dickens records of her on this score is acutely consistent with the psychology of her character, but rather disqualifies her, I think, from the moral status he at times wants to award such fidelity:

If the thought ever entered Little Dorrit's head that night, that he could give her up lightly now in his prosperity, and when he had it in his mind to replace her with a second wife [Mrs. General], she drove it away. Faithful to him still, as in the worst times through which she had borne him, single-handed, she drove the thought away.<sup>1</sup>

This, significantly, is Dickens at his most confused. On the one hand, with her blind impregnability to doubt in mind, he is hesitant about the possibility that she could entertain such a thought; while on the other, in keeping with the tone of heroic celebration, he gestures quite irrelevantly to a Tattycoram-like intensity of struggle: "she drove the

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1. Ibid., p. 670.



thought away". In contrast to Tattycoran, however, she never even has to count one. In this she is akin to one form of Wordsworth's feminine ideal, although not exactly to the Wordsworth whose personal spiritual history is recorded in The Prelude, who is presented as at times all too easily disloyal to the true "hiding-places of [his] power"; although we are left with the strong suspicion that the resolution of his moral crises has nevertheless been strictly pre-determined<sup>1</sup> by his childhood.

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1. Take, for instance, his recovery from the "tyranny" of a sheerly visual pleasure in Nature:

... I had known  
Too forcibly, too early in my life,  
Visitings of imaginative power  
For this to last: I shook the habit off  
Entirely and for ever, ...  
(The Prelude, XII, 201-5.)

Given the first lines of this, he could just as appropriately have said that the habit 'fell away'.

All these suggestions are equally in evidence when we are shown the actual workings of Amy's memory, rather than just the emotional state its influence produces. The rendering of consciousness by a summarised miming of a character's meditation is not usually Dickens's forte, but when Amy sits down "to muse" in Venice it is surely handled as sensitively as one could wish for:

Such people were not realities to the little figure of the English girl; such people were all unknown to her. She would watch the sunset, in its long low lines of purple and red, and its burning flush high up in the sky: so glowing on the buildings, and so lightening their structure, that it made them look as if their strong walls were transparent, and they shone from within. She would watch those glories expire; and then, after looking at the black gondolas underneath, taking guests to music and dancing, would raise her eyes to the shining stars. Was there no party of her own, in other times, on which the stars had shone? To think of that old gate now!

She would think of that old gate, and of herself sitting at it in the dead of <sup>the</sup> night, pillowing Maggy's head; and of other places and of other scenes associated with those different times. And then she would lean upon her balcony, and look over at the water, as though they all lay underneath it. When she got to that, she would musingly watch its running, as if, in the general vision, it might run dry, and show her the prison again, and herself, and the old room, and the old inmates, and the old visitors: all laating realities that had never changed.<sup>1</sup>

Her integrity with her past asserts itself instinctively in the play of her thought and imagination, faintly contrived to signal pathos in the comparison between parties, but convincing nevertheless. "Continuity in ...self-consciousness" could not be more perfectly exemplified. So instinctive is it, in fact, that the Past is not just the unchanging core of her present being, but an inflexible prison of it; her case (and her father's, for that matter) approximates more closely to De Quincey's emphasis on the inviolable unity of the self than the assumption often present in Wordsworth or Coleridge that the self is free to reject its own roots, although at an inevitable cost. (Note how apt to William Dorrit's collapse, for instance, is De Quincey's claim in "The Palimpsest of the Human Brain" that "all memories are not dead, but sleeping...in some

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1. Little Dorrit, p. 520.

potent convulsion of the system, all wheels back into its earliest elementary stage".)<sup>1</sup> However it is not quite true to say that Amy is beset by no impulses opposed to those "lasting realities". She is, of course, quite untouched by the social world of Venice. Yet her Turner-esque vision of the de-realising radiance of the city, which so suggestively conveys her isolation from social life, also hints at another and more valuable kind of expansive liberation; although this, in its impossibly remote and impalpable beauty, stirs in her (as we can tell from the cadences of the passage) none of the excitement of desire - no urgent Shelleyan longing - but only a sad resignation. This casts an even more severe ironic shadow over Amy's integrity and 'realness' than when its only alternative is the negatively unreal world of the cosmopolitans - the dream of Italy, and of Venice especially, is a positive unreality, inaccessible to Amy, but not even dreamt of by the Gowan-General Dorrit world. Similarly, the suggestions elsewhere in the novel of the cost of her integrity are here enforced very sharply. She reacts to the memories with a distinct sense of relief, as by them she regains her natural centre of gravity, regains herself. She needs them. Yet inseparably with this is interfused an uncompromising sense of the comparative bleakness of that self; we feel the harsh force of that "run dry", placed as it is against the dreamy vagueness of the townscape, and the suggestion of those repeated "old[s]" brings together both reassuring familiarity and monotony - in contrast to the Eliot discussed above the balance of the poise here does not admit of that monotony being called "sweet".<sup>2</sup>

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1. Collected Writings, xiii, 349.

2. The Mill on the Floss, p. 44.

Indeed the over-riding authorial feeling for Amy in this passage seems to me to be something like pity. And since this is not simply for her as the virtuous victim of others, but for that, implanted in her by others, by which she is virtuous, this would seem to imply that her virtue is rather to be lamented as a fate than commended as an ideal. The very firmness with which the idea of continuity is seen to guarantee goodness as a psychological necessity, something deriving from "lasting realities", and "deep immovable roots (Eliot, see p.362) becomes in Dickens's hands, in this case, a pressure to interpret that goodness as something else, or at least something less unambiguously desirable than one might think. Whether peace at such a price is worth it still remains a disturbingly open question. It is not, certainly, for a Tattycoram, on the complete lack of whose high-spirited vitality Amy's goodness depends, and it is significantly Meagles who brandishes Little Dorrit before her as a panacea, since there is a strong suggestion that the simplistic sermon on duty is being ironically sabotaged by being put in the mouth of such a preacher. While Dickens obviously wants to find in Amy an inspiring answer to how one can live within the inevitably painful constrictions of life, and at times speaks as if he has done so, the true burden of his vision is that no such answers exist.

### III

So far in this chapter my emphasis has been not so much on how Dickens may have been influenced by Wordsworth, as on what can best be called his dialogue with him, by which Wordsworthian insights and emphases can be seen to be tested and modified according to Dickens's own sense of life. As hardly needs saying at this stage, the Dickens I have in mind



in pursuing this comparison has an imagination antithetical to Wordsworth's in its volatility and its restless aliveness to diverse and extraordinary modes of feeling; calmness, the sense of being deeply and securely anchored amidst a troubled world, are obviously not states to which he is most vitally responsive, any more than they are for Shakespeare (Arnold's well-known lines "We ask and ask: Thou smiles and art still,/Out-topping knowledge",<sup>1</sup> seem more like an idealised picture of Wordsworth). It is not surprising that the Household Words obituary of Wordsworth in 1850, while acknowledging him to have been a "truly good and great man", also made the criticism that "he did not understand, and therefore could not appreciate, the ennobling tendencies of the social and scientific career on which this age has entered".<sup>2</sup> These words remind us not just that Dickens was editor of a magazine that sponsored Harriet Martineau upon such topics as the "Wonders of Nails and Screws"<sup>3</sup>, but that he was also too deeply infected with the Promethean radical spirit of the age to have felt Pattycoram's passion for equality to be innately absurd. Wordsworth, the obituary had gone on to say, had "looked out upon the world from his egotistic isolation rather as a critical spectator, than as a sympathiser".<sup>4</sup> Similarly one might adduce the intense personal restlessness in Dickens at the period of writing Little Dorrit as peculiarly un-Wordsworthian, as was his claim to Forster that such "wayward and unsettled feeling ...is part (I suppose) of the tenure on which one holds an imaginative life"<sup>5</sup>; though at this point, of course, one realises what must have been the fascination of the Wordsworthian ideals in their remoteness, as in a novel dominated by a sense of "all we restless travellers

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1. "Shakespeare", II, 2-3.

2. "William Wordsworth", Household Words, I ( May 1850), p. 213.

3. See, though, K.J. Fielding, "Hard Times and the Factory Controversy: Dickens vs Harriet Martineau", in Nisbet and Nevius, eds., pp. 24-45.

4. Household Words, I, 213.

5. Forster, p. 640.

the pilgrimage of through/life",<sup>1</sup> Amy, in her quietism, stands out uniquely as a non-traveller, and hence as a challenge to be explored.

However there are a number of ways, some important and some not, in which Little Dorrit works more single-mindedly with the Wordsworthian grain, and to these I now want to turn. There are, to start with, a number of minor Wordsworthian traces in the novel, which nevertheless are worth noting as they alert us to the likelihood of deeper assimilation. The Meagles's sentimental but poignant faith in Pet's dead sister<sup>2</sup> seems to derive from "We are Seven", the poem Dickens singled out when he praised Wordsworth to the painter Wilkie (his comments are quoted fully in chapter two, p.62). It is also possible, I think, that the friendship of Amy and Maggy derives from "The Idiot Boy". Dickens's point is basically the same as Wordsworth's here: how the unprepossessing can be hallowed and made lovable by familiarity and affection; though it must be said that Dickens cheats somewhat by trying to endear Maggy to us, whereas Wordsworth's emphasis is on the inaccessibility of the boy to the romanticising or sentimentalising mind.

These are small points. We can feel the presence of Wordsworth in a significant way, I think, in the treatment of Arthur Clennam. If the two figures did not agree about social ideals, they were more in accord as to the conditions of psychic health in childhood:

"And now, Mr Clennam, perhaps I may ask you whether you have yet come to a decision where to go next?"

"Indeed, no. I am such a waif and stray everywhere, that I am liable to be drifted where any current may set."

"It's extraordinary to me - if you'll excuse my freedom in saying so - that you don't go straight to London," said Mr. Meagles, in the tone of a confidential adviser.

"Perhaps I shall."

"Ay! But I mean with a will."

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1. Little Dorrit, p. 67.

2. Ibid., p. 58.



"I have no will. That is to say," - he coloured a little, - "next to none that I can put in action now. Trained by main force; broken, not bent; heavily ironed with an object on which I was never consulted and which was never mine; shipped away to the other end of the world before I was of age, and exiled there until my father's death there, a year ago; always grinding in a mill I always hated; what is to be expected from me in middle life? Will, purpose, hope? All those lights were extinguished before I could sound the words."

"Light 'em up again!" said Mr. Meagles.

"Ah! Easily said. I am the son, Mr. Meagles, of a hard father and mother. I am the only child of parents who weighed, measured, and priced everything; for whom what could not be weighed, measured, and priced, had no existence. Strict people as the phrase is, professors of a stern religion, their very religion was a gloomy sacrifice of tastes and sympathies that were never their own, offered up as part of a bargain for the security of their possessions. Austere faces, inexorable discipline, penance in this world and terror in the next - nothing graceful or gentle anywhere, and the void in my cowed heart everywhere - this was my childhood, if I may so misuse the word as to apply it to such a beginning of life."<sup>1</sup>

We have here another example, of course, of Dickens's Romantic premises about childhood and the life of the affections yielding him a telling vantage-point from which to diagnose the 'tenderness taboo' at the heart of the severer manifestations of Nonconformity and its business and work ethic, the ethos that was one of the major contributing streams of Victorianism. The positives against which Nonconformist sternness is judged - the individuality of the child and the indulgence of the 'soft emotions', universally important but especially to childhood - these are all recognisably Romantic emphases, and central/<sup>to</sup>similar Dickensian critiques in previous novels, though put here with an incisive epigrammatic

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1. Ibid., pp. 58-9.

tautness ("their very religion was a gloomy sacrifice of tastes and sympathies that were never their own, offered up as part of a bargain for the security of their possessions"), that dispells any suspicion of flagging repetition.

Here in particular, however, Dickens's discernment of the consequence of such a childhood is especially close to Wordsworth - I refer again to that key passage in The Prelude on the "infant babe":

Blest the infant Babe,  
(For with my best conjecture I would trace  
Our Being's earthly progress,) blest the Babe,  
Nursed in his Mother's arms; who sinks to sleep  
Rocked on his mother's breast; who with his soul  
Drinks in the feelings of his Mother's eye!  
For him, in one dear Presence, there exists  
A virtue which irradiates and exalts  
Objects through widest intercourse of sense;  
No outcast he, bewildered and depressed:  
Along his infant veins are interfused  
The gravitation and the filial bond  
Of nature that connect him with the world.  
Is there a flower, to which he points with hand  
Too weak to gather it, already love  
Drawn from love's purest earthly fount for him  
Hath beautified that flower; already shades  
Of pity cast from inward tenderness  
Do fall around him upon aught that bears  
Unsightly marks of violence of harm.  
Emphatically such a Being lives,  
Frail creature as he is, helpless as frail,  
An inmate of this active universe.<sup>1</sup>

Clelland's childhood has been the complete negation of this ideal: he is, par excellence, an "outcast...bewildered and depressed". The absence of affectionate bonds between himself and his parents, and their stern discouragement in him of anything corresponding to the sense of beauty and the instinctive compassion that Wordsworth sees as derived from such bonds, is shown to have resulted, as Wordsworth would have expected, in a feeling of alienation from life as such,

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1. The Prelude, II, 233-54; on the question of Dickens's possible knowledge of The Prelude, see ch. 6, p. 306. Augustan-oriented objections to Nonconformity, by contrast, generally take the form of a defence of Reason and moderation (typically Anglican and latitudinarian, against dissenting 'enthusiasm'; as in Crabbe's The Convert:

The Faith that reason finds, confirms, avows,  
The hopes, the views, the comforts she allows -  
These were not his, who by his feelings found,  
And by them only, that his faith was sound;  
Feelings of terror these, for evil past,  
Feelings of hope, to be received at last;  
Now weak, now lively, changing with the day,  
These were his feelings, and he felt his way.

(ll. 85-92; Tales, 1812).



of not being at home in the world: "I am such a waif and stray everywhere", as he puts it. This point is sharpened by our knowledge that he is anything but a drifter through moral lassitude, as are the "civilised gipsies"<sup>1</sup> of the Gowan and Barnacle sets. An earnest and conscientious man, his alienation springs from a depth beyond the control of the moral will: the "void" in his heart leaves him without the instinctive "filial bond" to life in which a vital moral feeling, in the Wordsworthian sense, must necessarily be rooted. Consequently, though a good man, dutifully grinding in deference to the "respect" for his mother that has been in her upbringing the alternative to love, he is without "will, purpose, hope", the emphatic life of the Wordsworthian norm. In seeing the connection between Arthur's upbringing and its issue, Dickens need not necessarily have been applying the converse of Wordsworth's ideal along the lines Wordsworth had indicated, but there is a strong continuity of insight, nevertheless.

Yet Clennam's case is not hopeless. We soon see, in fact, that the account of himself that he has given to Meagles is too finalised; his heart is not a complete void:

He leaned upon the sill of the long low window, and looking out upon the blackened forest of chimneys again, began to dream; for it had been the uniform tendency of this man's life - so much was wanting in it to think about, so much that might have been better directed and happier to speculate upon - to make him a dreamer, after all.<sup>2</sup>

Why he should have become a dreamer is left a little vague - the gesture at explanation here, "so much was wanting...to think about", isn't convincing. Even though Dickens makes it clear that dreaming of this

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1. Little Dorrit, p. 359.

2. Ibid., p. 80.

kind is a pis aller (though it does associate with Amy Dorrit's forlornly resigned "dream" of Italy, discussed above), one suspects a sentimentality at work here in what seems an optimism that the human soul cannot be completely crushed by environment, as one does with the treatment of Jo in Bleak House. Dickens's development of this idea can't but deepen our reservations:

He was a dreamer in such wise, because he was a man who had, deep-rooted in his nature, a belief in all the gentle and good things his life had been without. Bred in meanness and hard dealing, this had rescued him to be a man of honorable mind and open hand. Bred in coldness and severity, this had rescued him to have a warm and sympathetic heart. Bred in a creed too darkly audacious to pursue, through its process of reserving the making of man in the image of his Creator to the making of his Creator in the image of an erring man, this had rescued him to judge not, and in humility to be merciful, and have hope and charity.

And this saved him still from the whimpering weakness and cruel selfishness of holding that because such a happiness or such a virtue had not come into his little path, or worked well for him, therefore it was not in the great scheme, but was reducible, when found in appearance, to the basest elements. A disappointed mind he had, but a mind too firm and healthy for such unwholesome air. Leaving himself in the dark,<sup>1</sup> it could rise into the light, seeing it shine on others and hailing it.

What, one asks, has happened to his early reaction to "the resentful Sunday" when he has "sat down glowering and glooming through the tardy length of the day, with a sullen sense of injury in his heart"?<sup>2</sup>

Can we believe that "dreaming" would have allayed that so completely as is asserted here? This is the sort of question that the prose at this point does not encourage us to ask, as it bears us off on its wave-like pattern of repeated antitheses, freeing us from the close scrutiny of the determination of character into a high-toned sermon in which Clennam becomes simply an idealised prop. Especially in the last paragraph quoted here, with the high-handed moralising gusto of phrases

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1. Ibid., p. 206-7.

2. Ibid., p. 69.

such as "whimpering weakness" and "little path", we can see how seductively handy the Carlylean moral steamroller<sup>1</sup> can be when Dickens's commitment to psychological determinism runs into conflict with his moral passions - one also thinks here of the crudely populist "no nonsense" dismissal of "philosophic philanthropy" through the landlady of the 'Break of Day'<sup>2</sup>, or, more intelligently on Dickens's part, Fanny's self-rationalising appeal to determinism:

"Other girls, differently reared and differently circumstanced altogether, might wonder at what I say or may do. Let them. They are driven by their lives and characters; I am driven by-mine".<sup>3</sup>

Dickens here is certainly alongside Wordsworth in asserting the primary importance of the Imagination in the growth of a moral sense. But the loss of touch with the subtle psychological realism characteristic of both writers at their best parallels Wordsworth's lapse in the Intimations of Immortality.

The resolution of Clennam's<sup>fate</sup>, however, marks an interesting and at least partially successful recovery. Arthur's natural mother, we learn, is not Mrs. Clennam, but a young woman significantly associated with the "tastes and sympathies" abhorred by Mrs. Clennam's religion as "those accursed snares which are called the Arts"<sup>4</sup>. And the separation, the novel insists, has not taken place too early for some residue of the more gentle nurture to have been impressed:

"I have seen him [Mrs. Clennam confesses], with his mother's face, looking up at me in awe from his little books, and trying to soften me with his mother's ways that hardened me."<sup>5</sup>

1. The Carlyle of, say, "The Everlasting Yea" in Sartor Resartus.

2. Little Dorrit, pp. 168-9.

3. Little Dorrit, p. 649.

4. Ibid., p. 848.

5. Ibid., p. 859.

I think the implication may be, as Lionel Trilling has suggested,<sup>1</sup> that it has been the fugitive memory of his first mother that has kept him from embitterment; she, as it were, being the "one dear Presence" who has irradiated and exalted his dreams, and which, his dreams keeping 'alive', has been the psychological source of his persistent goodness. Dickens after all, had done something not too unlike this with the way that Paul Dombey's dreaming had been a kind of symbolic compensation for the loss of his actual mother. One can't do more than speculate here, as the demands of the mystery plot and surprise dénouement obviously prohibit Dickens from being anything but teasingly vague (and either confused or deliberately misleading) as to what that dreaming may have arisen from: one might conclude that Dickens possibly intends such a Wordsworthian rationale. Whether such an emphatic moral being - co-existing with such unemphatic "will, purpose and hope - can without sentimentality be seen to be sustained by such a relatively fragile foundation, however, seems to me highly doubtful. The discovered truth about the first mother hardly justifies the earlier claim that a belief in "all...gentle and good things" is "deep-rooted in his nature"<sup>2</sup> (underlining mine).

The most interesting aspect of the situation here, however, is the suggestion that Little Dorrit's nursing constitutes in Clennam a restoration of a long-lost continuity with positive childhood, <sup>experiences.</sup> For just as he is, /as her husband, perfectly in keeping with the integrity of her experience, being a father she can devotedly succour, and thus enforcing no more discontinuity

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1. Introduction to the New Oxford Illustrated edition of Little Dorrit (1953), pp. v-xvi (p.xii); reprinted in his The Opposing Self (1955), pp.50-65.

2. Little Dorrit, p. 206.



with her past upon her than the fact that he is an appreciative and non-exploitative one, so she revives and concentrates in him all those fugitive memories that have hitherto comprised a kind of half-created soul of his moral being:

Yet Clennam, listening to the voice as it read to him, heard in it all that great Nature was doing, heard in it all the soothing songs she sings to man. At no Mother's <sup>knee</sup> but hers had he ever dwelt in his youth on hopeful promises, on playful fancies, on the harvests of tenderness and humility that lie hidden in the early-fostered seeds of the imagination; on the oaks of retreat from blighting winds, that have the germs of their strong roots in nursery acorns. But, in the tones of the voice that read to him, there were memories of an old feeling of such things, and echoes of every merciful and loving whisper that had ever stolen to him in his life. <sup>1</sup>

Nature here is unmistakably Wordsworth's, the sanctifying medium of the self's wholeness. Central to the passage is the Wordsworthian assertion of the relatedness of nurture, the imagination, and the adult moral self. At one point, in fact, it directly echoes Wordsworth not just in idea but in idiom: the phrase "the early-fostered seeds of the imagination" would seem to be a direct borrowing of Wordsworth's "Fair seed-time had my soul, and I grew up/Fostered alike by beauty and by fear", in the first book of The Prelude.<sup>2</sup> The passage as a whole, perhaps, might well be seen as Dickens's development of the metaphor suggested by the borrowing, in order to give his own version of a number of Wordsworth's points. Tintern Abbey seems indirectly present: "the harvest of humility and tenderness" suggests itself as shorthand for:

... -feelings too  
Of unremembered pleasure: such, perhaps,  
As have no slight or trivial influence  
On that best portion of a good man's life,  
His little, nameless, unremembered, acts  
Of kindness and of love.<sup>3</sup>

1. Ibid., pp. 883-4.

2. The Prelude, I, 301-2.

3. Tintern Abbey, ll. 30-5.

- and "the oaks of retreat from blighting winds, that have the germs of their strong roots in nursery acorns" has perhaps the same relationship to the claim later in the poem that Nature:

...can so inform

The mind that is within us, so impress  
 With quietness and beauty, and so feed  
 With lofty thoughts, that neither evil tongues,  
 Rash judgements, nor the sneers of selfish men,  
 Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all  
 The dreary intercourse of daily life,  
 Shall e'er prevail against us, or disturb  
 Our cheerful faith, that all which we behold  
 Is full of blessings.<sup>1</sup>

- except that where Dickens uses the natural metaphor in a paradoxical sense, "roots...in nursery acorns", he expresses Wordsworth's own epigrammatic summary of his case, "the child is father of the man", in "My heart leaps up when I behold". Amy does not engender and sustain a shedding of the adult self, and a return to childhood to re-establish withered roots - the state Dickens at least gestures towards in the reconciliation of Florence and her father. Rather she is shown as the agent of a Nature with which Clennam has always had a hesitant and surreptitious relationship, consolidating, anchoring steadily within him, as it were, all those intimations of that "gravitation" and "filial bond" that have survived the Calvinist ethos but which previously have been too diffused, forming no confident or confidently acknowledged centre of self in the "void" of his "cowed" heart, providing no centre of gravity to allay his inner restlessness. Amy is this centre, and whatever reserve the novel's psychological clear-sightedness may prompt elsewhere about the nature of this quiet, it is here shown to us, through Clennam's eyes, as Wordsworth's saving Mystery, the voice not of the Marshalsea but

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1. Ibid., II. 125-34.

of that "healthy autumn day",<sup>1</sup> with which she is pointedly associated. And if Amy's speeches do not make the Wordsworthian formulations real for us, this poetic evocation, (the best description in this particular mode Dickens ever wrote) largely does, as its subtle fusion of autumnal dignity and quiet with spring-like freshness and animation is sensitively suggestive - as is the bouquets of flowers she brings Arthur in prison - of the particular kind of renewal she signifies. Dickens may, when one examines the novel as a whole, be seen to be doubtful about what Little Dorrit actually is, but he certainly is at one with Clennam here in the whole-heartedness of his yearning for what she signifies, the serene and restoring tenderness that promises release from his turbulent restlessness of anger as well as from Arthur's drifting restlessness of apathy. To a man who, as Forster said of him at the time, had "no 'city of the mind' against outward ills, for inner consolation and shelter"<sup>2</sup>, the appeal of such a demure embodiment of "oaks of retreat from blighting winds" could not but have been deep, especially given Dickens's own preoccupation with those "nursery acorns", to which he, in his relations with his own past, had such an intense, if shifting and unsteady, relationship; although it is perhaps correspondingly due to that "sympathy for, and with, the real in its most intense form", that intentness upon finding "the freedom and satisfactions of an ideal" from "the actual", to which Forster attributed that lack, that Dickens could not help infusing the novel with a scepticism that constitutes an at least partial resistance to such an appeal. Dickens was finally not capable of letting his sympathies "repose upon the breast of Faith"<sup>3</sup>,

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1. Little Dorrit, p. 883.

2. Forster, p. 641.

3. The Excursion, I, 954-5.

and was thus, as it were, not prepared to relax completely upon Little Dorrit's.

#### IV

Consideration of the theme of personal continuity in *Amy* leads inevitably into the novel's examination of the cosmopolitanism to which she is contrasted. John Carey, in his comments on what he argues to be Dickens's rather casual and unsatisfactory use of the prison symbol, especially objects to the following of Amy's impressions of tourists in Italy:<sup>1</sup>

It appeared on the whole, to Little Dorrit herself, that this same society in which they lived, greatly resembled a superior sort of Marshalsea. Numbers of people seemed to come abroad, pretty much as people had come into the prison; through debt, through idleness, relationship, curiosity, and general unfitness for getting on at home. ... They prowled about the churches and picture-galleries, much in the old, dreary, prison-yard manner.<sup>2</sup>

And so on. The condemnation certainly seems rather sweeping. Yet it is not simply emotive, being presented in terms of persuasively detailed observation. Nor ought the spirit behind it, while somewhat inflexible, be interpreted as merely Philistine, as does Carey, taking Amy in Italy as the mouthpiece of Dickens's own aggressive lack of culture. For the attitude has more respectable connections, so to speak, in a distrust of the cosmopolitan ideal that flowed naturally from the basic Wordsworthian-Romantic premises about the self and its past. And if such premises could at times be used to mask a simply Philistine spirit - the lack of anybody in Little Dorrit who positively represents the

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1. Carey, p. 115.

2. Little Dorrit, p. 565.



cosmopolitan ideal, even in its limitations, is a fact that at least raises suspicions in favour of Carey's charge - they do provide pertinent criticism of a too simple idea of the relation between culture and the self.

The key texts of Romantic anti-cosmopolitanism are, of course, in Wordsworth. One immediately thinks, for example, of the episode in The Prelude I mentioned earlier, in which Wordsworth disavows the "meagre novelties of colour and proportion" that engaged him during his continental touring, meagre because he had necessarily been "to the moral power/The affections and the spirit of the place/Insensible". The cosmopolitan, turning Nature into a vast picture-gallery ("even in pleasure pleased/Unworthily, disliking here, and there/Liking; by rules of mimic art transferred/To things above all art",<sup>1</sup> must necessarily be condemned to superficiality, so the argument goes, as his relationship with Nature is the antithesis of that slow interfusing of self and place, begun in childhood and maintained by memory, that is Wordsworth's ideal. The explicit attack on picturesque travel in The Prelude is only a spelling out of the obvious implication of Wordsworth's attitude to Nature elsewhere, in Tintern Abbey, say, or the repeated celebration in The Excursion of retirement into the reassuring bounds of locality:

... thus I breathed  
A parting tribute to a spot that seemed  
Like the fixed centre of a troubled world.  
.....  
How vain, thought I, is it by change of place  
To seek that comfort which the mind denies;<sup>2</sup>

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1. The Prelude, XII, 109-12.

2. The Excursion, V, 15-17, 21-2.

Amy Dorrit's attachment to her home, as I have argued, can be seen as Dickens's extreme and somewhat ironic development of this idea. It is only by the converse application of this that Dickens asserts a connection between the dissipating pointlessness pervading the expatriate ethos, and their lack of the kind of involvement in the world about them of the kind that could sustain real purpose and responsibility. Better Amy's grim bondage to a real home, than the essential homelessness of the cosmopolitans' life:

...Mrs. General was accessible to the valet. That envoy found her on a little square of carpet, so extremely diminutive in reference to the size of her stone and marble floor that she looked as if she might have had it spread for the trying on of a pair of shoes; or as if she had come into possession of the enchanted piece of carpet, bought for forty purses by one of the three princes in the Arabian Nights, and had that moment been transported on it, at a wish, into a palatial saloon with which it had no connection.<sup>1</sup>

The observation is perhaps rather diagrammatic, yet it does sufficiently explain the Marshalsea comparison as to clear it of mere John Bullish moralism. Furthermore, it correlates tellingly with such things as Mrs. General's idea of culture and Henry Gowan's dilettantism. The same motif is used elsewhere: it is a pointed and adroit way of suggesting the relatedness of such disparate characters as Mrs. General, Miss Wade, and the Gowans. On entering Miss Wade's apartment, for instance, Clennam notices how she:

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1. Little Dorrit, pp. 524-5.

...appeared to have taken up her quarters there as she might have established herself in an Eastern caravanserai. A small square of carpet in the middle of the room, a few articles of furniture that evidently did not belong to the room, and a disorder of trunks and travelling articles, formed the whole of her surroundings.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, we have the Hampton Court ethos:

The venerable inhabitants of that venerable pile seemed, in those times, to be encamped there like a sort of civilised gipsies. There was a temporary air about their establishments, as if they were going away the moment they could get anything better;<sup>2</sup>...

The outer décor, perhaps rather obviously, manifests the inner rootlessness - as the last passage reminds us, these "travellers" are no more at home in England than abroad. Dickens's point is the same that George Eliot was to adduce in providing the explanatory background for the morally insecure Gwendolen Harleth in Daniel Deronda, whose early years have been spent "roving from one foreign watering-place or Parisian apartment to another, always feeling new antipathies to new suites of hired furniture".<sup>3</sup> Eliot's whole treatment of Gwendolen, in fact, in what it obviously makes of Wordsworth, enforces upon one how natural a derivation from Wordsworth the anti-cosmopolitanism of Little Dorrit is:

Pity that Offendene was not the home of Miss Harleth's childhood, or endeared to her by family memories! A human life, I think, should be well rooted in some spot of a native land, where it may get the love of tender kinship for the face of earth, for the labours men go forth to, for the sounds and accents that haunt it, for whatever will give that early home a familiar unmistakeable difference amidst the future widening of knowledge: a spot where the definiteness of early memories may be inwrought with affection, and kindly acquaintance with all neighbours, even to the dogs and donkeys, may spread not by sentimental

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1. Ibid., pp. 375-6.

2. Ibid., p. 359.

3. Daniel Deronda (1967; first published 1876), p. 52.

effort and reflection, but as a sweet habit of the blood. At five years old, mortals are not prepared to be citizens of the world, to be stimulated by abstract nouns, to soar above preference into impartiality; and that prejudice in favour of milk with which we blindly begin, is a type of the way body and soul must get nourished at least for a time. The best introduction to astronomy is to think of the nightly heavens as a little lot of stars belonging to one's own homestead.<sup>1</sup>

That "widening of knowlege", of course, points to a side in Eliot which Dickens doesn't at all share, that intellectual cosmopolitanism that when not restrained in the way indicated here, is in herself all too easily "stimulated by abstract nouns" into such things as the absurd Zionist fantasies that bedevil Daniel Deronda. Her case about Gwendolen, however, is essentially the same about her kind of cosmopolitanism as Dickens's in its way, about the corresponding characters in Little Dorrit.

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1. Ibid., pp. 50-51. Compare a well-known pre-Romantic denunciation of going to seed on the Grand Tour: Pope's portrait of the Duke of Kingston in The Dunciad (bk. 4, ll. 282-336). This is no more tolerant than Dickens or Eliot of the cosmopolite ethos, yet the main thrust of the attack turns not on a betrayal of Englishness, or of a self rooted in local attachment, but of the universal values of the classical past. Thus the sad irony ("All classic learning lost on classic ground") that the very scenes which one might have expected to ennoble, now merely corrupt.



With major characters such as Gowan and Miss Wade the lack of "connection" to any place associates effectively with the subtle rendering of their characters in other respects. The development of the idea can, however, be simply melodramatic, and this is significantly so where the question of cosmopolitanism and local attachment becomes one of nationality and patriotism:

"You are English, sir?"

"Faith, madam, no; I am neither born nor bred in England. In effect, I am of no such country," said Mr. Blandois, stretching out his leg and smiting it: "I descend from half-a-dozen countries."

"You have been much about the world?"

"It is true. By Heaven, madam, I have been here and there and everywhere!"

"You have no ties, probably. Are not married?"

"Madam," said Mr. Blandois, with an ugly fall of his eyebrows, "I adore your sex, but I am not married - never was." <sup>1</sup>

Taken in himself Blandois can be quite an amusing grotesque, not just melodramatic, but partially, as a recent commentator has suggested, a cameo of an insanely self-dramatising personality.<sup>2</sup> To some extent he is a simplified anticipation of Conrad's Ricardo, in Victory. He also performs the useful fictional task of showing the hidden inter-relation of different things in the novel. Thus, emerging into the novel at Marseilles, a town of revolutionary fame and yet, pointedly, a racial miscellany,<sup>3</sup> his theatrical self-assertion has links both with the overtones of Byronic rebellion in Miss Wade ("the wrongs society has heaped upon me are treasured in this breast",<sup>4</sup> he says, as if posing as Byron's Corsair), and also, in his arrogated gentility, doing crudely what Gowan does with finesse, with the 'theatrical show' of society. In this way he reinforces Dickens's intimation, registered through the Wade-Gowan liason, of the underlying affinity between the nihilism outside Society and that within.

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1. Little Dorrit, p. 404.

2. Harvey Peter Sucksmith, "The Melodramatic Villain in Little Dorrit", Dickensian, LXXI (May 1975), pp. 76-83.

3. Little Dorrit, p. 39.

4. Ibid., p. 174.

Granting all this, however, the impression still remains that Blandois is designed to embody Evil with a melodramatic blatancy sufficient to shock the Meagles's of Dickens's audience out of any lingering equivocation they might have about it in its more charming forms. Certainly those inexorably mobile eyebrows of his are not a comic sign of his own theatrical crudeness, but an authorial clapperboard bluntly telling the reader to shout 'boo'.

This kind of presentation points towards the coarsening of Romantic themes into Philistinism that one finds in a minor novel like Bulwer Lytton's Lucretia (1846), where the case against the "intellectual All in All"<sup>1</sup>, aided by a tendency in Wordsworth to identify this malady with France,<sup>2</sup> issues in a ridiculous tale of a murderess, educated in France by a hard-hearted Philosophe who has ruined her by "plunging her mind amidst that profound corruption which belongs only to intellect cultivated in scorn of good, and in suppression of heart"<sup>3</sup>. Here we have the perfect fruit of that "covert alliance between Romantic anti-rationalism and Victorian Philistine anti-intellectualism", that Philip Collins has indicated:<sup>4</sup> we are here already a good distance along that line that leads downwards from Wordsworth and Coleridge (and Burke) to Thomas Hughes, and, worse still, to Marie Corelli.<sup>5</sup> Blandois is obviously not the only point in Dickens where the original impulses of Romanticism can be seen to be devolving in this direction: Cornelia Blimber in Dombey and Son, with her short hair and spectacles pointedly associated with her being "sandy and dry with working in the graves of deceased languages",<sup>6</sup> is a parallel instance, though Dickens's 'male chauvinism' has at least the saving grace of being genial rather than bullying, and Cornelia is indulgently married off at the end of the novel.

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1. "A Poet's Epitaph", 1.32.

2. See, for instance, the Wanderer's attack on Voltaire, "the laughing sage of France", a nation of "most frivolous people" in The Excursion, IV, 996, 1005.

3. Lucretia (1853, first published 1846), p. 60.

4. Collins, Dickens and Education, p. 193.

5. For an account of this, see Coveney, pp. 184-93.

6. Dombey and Son, p. 207.

Thankfully, Dickens's portrait of the specifically English alternative to cosmopolitanism, Mr. and Mrs. Meagles, compasses a fond yet measured appreciation of their Philistinism without in any way itself being of it (the approach to the Philistine issue here is quite different to that developed in Bleak House). Their warm domesticity is of the kind that perhaps especially in the nineteenth century came to be prized as characteristically English, as did Wordsworth when he celebrated his return from exile to an "English fire".<sup>1</sup> However, this conjunction is not given the mindless, grossly opportunistic endorsement it is in someone like Bulwer ("there... hisses the welcoming tea urn...and, best of all, there is the glad face of the sweet English wife")<sup>2</sup>, but is handled with a deft poise:

...Mrs. Meagles was, like Mr. Meagles, comely and healthy, with a pleasant English face which had been looking at homely things for five-and-fifty years or more, and shone with a bright reflection of them.<sup>3</sup>

One notes the way "English" is used synonymously with "homely" and "pleasant". At first reading one only sees praise here, but as our sense of the Meagleses develops the irony dawns that it is due to the very lack of paying proper attention to un-homely things that they are so obtuse. Sneaking kindness for a lord apart, their virtues and limitations spring from the same source: an intensity with which they are themselves that blinds them to the differentness of others. Hence to them, or rather to Mr. Meagles, his wife having a barely notional fictional independence, prisoners are basically amiable, and orphans capable of resisting their sense of injustice.

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1. "I travelled among unknown men", 1. 12.

2. Lucretia, p. 204. For a more respectable statement of feminine sweetness as a peculiarly English characteristic, see Hazlitt's "On a Portrait of an English Lady, by Vandyke", Plain Speaker, Works, XII, 280-94.

3. Little Dorrit, p. 54.



It is this fact that makes Meagles on tour such splendid material for comedy. The joke, of course, is that for all his gadding about he does not move an inch, in spirit, from England. His dislike of foreign languages is only one sign of the way in which the rest of the world, while it can perplex him, does not in any way sink in:

...we go trotting about the world. This is how you found us staring at the Nile, and the Pyramids, and the Sphinxes, and the Desert, and all the rest of it;<sup>1</sup>

- in "staring" and "all the rest of it" lies the sad truth, honestly acknowledged, of essential incomprehension. Yet is it so sad? For while the novel's sketch of Meagle's cultural follies firmly and humorously places him as a Philistine, the comedy is in that genial rather than satiric spirit (using these terms in the sense I have defined them in chapter three), which appreciates as well as censures. In doing this, interestingly, it draws upon that Romantic critique of <sup>an</sup> objective and universal model of culture that I have been discussing in its critical application. To illustrate this it is worth citing at length from Clennam's viewing of Meagles's collection:

Of articles collected on his various expeditions, there was such a vast miscellany that it was like the dwelling of an amiable Corsair. There were antiquities from Central Italy, made by the best modern houses in that department of industry; bits of mummy from Egypt (and perhaps Birmingham); model gondolas from Venice; model villages from Switzerland; morsels of tessellated pavement from Herculaneum and Pompeii, like petrified minced veal; ashes out of tombs, and lava out of Vesuvius; Spanish fans, Spezzian straw hats, Moorish slippers, Tuscan hairpins, Carrara sculpture, Trastaverini scarves, Genoese velvets and filigree, Neapolitan coral, Roman cameos, Geneva jewellery, Arab lanterns, rosaries blest all round by the Pope himself, and an infinite variety of lumber. There were views, like and unlike, of a multitude of places; and there was one little picture-room devoted to a few of the regular sticky old Saints, with sinews like whipcord, hair like Neptune's, wrinkles like tatting, and such coats of varnish

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1. Ibid., p. 58.



that every holy personage served for a fly-trap, and became what is now called in the vulgar tongue a Catch-em-alive O. Of these pictorial acquisitions Mr. Meagles spoke in the usual manner. He was no judge, he said, except of what pleased himself; he had picked them up, dirt-cheap, and people had considered them rather fine. One man, who at any rate ought to know something of the subject, had declared that "Sage, Reading" (a specially oily old gentleman in a blanket, with a swan's-down tippet for a beard, and a web of cracks all over him like rich pie-crust), to be a fine Guercino. As for Sebastian del Piombo there, you would judge for yourself; if it were not his late manner, the question was, Who was it? Titian, that might or might not be - perhaps he had only touched it. Daniel Doyce said perhaps he hadn't touched it, but Mr. Meagles rather declined to overhear the remark.

When he had shown all his spoils, Mr. Meagles took them into his own snug room...

... ..  
 Clennam's eyes had strayed to a natural picture on the wall, of two pretty little girls with their arms entwined. "Yes, Clennam," said Mr. Meagles, in a lower voice. "There they both are. It was taken some seventeen years ago. As I often say to Mother, they were babies then."<sup>1</sup>

Partially the point here is the quite conventional one of the nouveau-riche gulled by the specious impersonation of received taste; though someone, however, who is not too self-conscious to suppress a magpie yen for souvenirs.<sup>2</sup> Dickens's taste in art, while not thoroughly rounded and mellowed, was a good deal more developed than Meagles's, and there is enough external evidence for us to feel confident that the appeal to Titian as a standard against which to judge the works at hand is not an empty gesture.<sup>3</sup> We have Forster's record of his friend's enthusiasm for Titian, especially his "Assumption of the Virgin",<sup>3</sup> and also Dickens's comments in "Pictures from Italy".<sup>4</sup> However the deeper purpose at work in this passage, I think, is to suggest the cultural discontinuity inherent in Meagles and the cultural system of which he is the embarrassing mainstay.

1. Ibid., pp. 236-8.

2. On the actual weakness of the Meagles-type Victorian collector for fake Italian 'Old Masters', see John Steegman, Consort of Taste (1950), pp. 243-5.

3. Forster, pp. 359-60.

4. Pictures from Italy, pp. 195-6.

For art as absorbed into his "miscellany" has been uprooted from the life which produced it and which it expressed, yet has not in any way been transplanted into the compensating soil of any genuine deep receptiveness, the lack of even the beginnings of which is conveyed by the centreless eclecticism manifest in the collection. It is lumber not through what it is in itself but through what it has become in the atomised impersonality of Meagles's keeping. Devoid in this way of any vital prompting, a collector must either hoard mindlessly, or deliver himself over to Mrs. General and her Mr. Eustace, with their "extensive miscellany of objects"<sup>1</sup>.

What, then, do we make of the "natural picture" which we are shown in contrast? Not, I suggest, that compared with the bourgeois taste in homely genre scenes all foreign art, Titian included, is unnatural. For close to the time of writing this Dickens had condemned the current products of this kind of painting as marred by "a horrid respectability...a little, finite, systematic routine".<sup>2</sup> This comment, however, had been in a private letter, a medium in which he could vent his bouts of impatience with bourgeois insipidity without constraint. (Significantly, the terms of Dickens's contrasting enthusiasm here for the best contemporary French painting - "fearlessness...bold...dashing...passion and action"<sup>3</sup> - parallel Dickens's ambivalent sympathies with regard to Pet and Tattycoram.) In the novel a certain air of ambiguity clings about the phrase "natural picture" in itself, but in context the real implication, I think, is that the naturalness inheres not so much in the picture, in contrast to other pictures,

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1. *Little Dorrit*, p. 501.

2. *Forster*, p. 617.

3. *Ibid.* The particular Paris exhibition that prompted Dickens's outburst included a large number of works by Ingres and Delacroix.

but in Meagles's relationship with it, which is a living one in the way that his relationship with his collection is not. In the portrait of Pet and her dead sister - as would also be the case, one suspects, with other paintings not so personally relevant but in a similar sentimental mode ("their arms entwined") there is exemplified the kind of art which does 'connect' with the true springs of Meagles's being, somewhat raw though they are.<sup>1</sup> Here, as elsewhere in Dickens in general and Little Dorrit in particular - the 'myth' of Bleeding Heart Yard (discussed in a previous chapter<sup>2</sup>), the Flornish taste in interior decoration, or Flora Finching's romantic imagination, with its obvious roots in the lyrics of Thomas Moore - we find that wise appreciation of the humaner side of popular Philistine taste that is not itself to be identified with it. Such a response was of course Dickens's peculiarly individual forte. Yet, as I have argued already (chapter three), approaching from a somewhat different angle, it would not have emerged with such confidence but for the enabling background of established Romantic assumptions. One of the most relevant of these, as I have stressed here, was an understanding that culture was vital by virtue of an organic connection between the person experiencing and the 'object' experienced; which was true not just of the appreciation of Nature, but, as I think Dickens is concerned to show in Little Dorrit, of Art as well.

## V

The genuinely warm liking for Meagles that flows through the novel, despite his limitations, is itself evidence that Dickens's recognition that

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1. The important but Meagles-like Victorian art-patron, John Sheepshanks, objected to Richard Redgrave's painting, "The Governess", on the ground that its subject looked lonely sitting by herself in the room. On Sheepshanks's suggestion the painter then added several children in the background. (Jeremy Maas, Victorian Painters (1969), p. 114.

2. See ch. 3, pp. 181-2.

he could not write with complete candour for an audience of whom Meagles was a typical member, was not simply opportunism, but also an ordinary good-natured tact, simple in motive if complex in execution. The fact that Dickens's contemporary revulsion from the kind of English art typified by Meagles' "natural picture" does not get into the novel, is perhaps a small example of such reticence in operation. A larger one, as Mrs. Leavis has argued,<sup>1</sup> is the rather poker-faced ambiguity with which Meagles's sermon to Tattycoram is presented: <sup>for</sup> the Meagleses and those of the audience who think similarly there is a comprehensible moral, while for the more discerning there is something more complex, based on the premise to which the first class of reader must necessarily be somewhat blank, that anything Meagles says in the novel must be seen with some irony as expressing him and not the author. This may seem to involve a depressing acceptance of Meagles's opaqueness to enlightenment, but to this Dickens could well retort that to accost a Meagles with any but black and white moral terms would be simply to speak to him in a foreign language - such a rejoinder is implicit in the novel's whole sense of him. Mrs. Leavis's argument, indicating an ingenious but not impossibly subtle resolution of the conflicting claims of truth and policy, does seem to me a more satisfactory explanation than the attribution of an inconsistency much greater even than that which we do at times find in Dickens. A similar explanation, perhaps, might even be offered of that ambiguity I have argued to exist in the presentation of Little Dorrit herself, although whether the hesitancy of

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1. Dickens the Novelist, pp. 119-23.



Dickens's scepticism here is due to diplomacy or just personal indecision is a moot point - certainly Dickens declares himself explicitly 'for' Amy as moral heroine in a way in which with Esther Summerson, as I have argued, he surprisingly doesn't.

Nevertheless, whatever the exact truth of the above may be, Dickens's treatment of Meagles certainly epitomises his openness to Mario Praz's charge (discussed in my introduction, p. 911) that he is one of those figures in whom Romanticism can be seen to have "turned bourgeois".<sup>1</sup> In Little Dorrit the leading exponent of one of those extreme positions that Praz takes to express the true Romantic impulse, Miss Wade, is diagnosed finally as insane in a way quite divested of Byronic splendour: the account we are given of her is a prosaic rendering of the same psychological pattern that is heroically rationalised in Lara, as that "...vigilance of grief that would compel /The soul to hate for having loved too well."<sup>2</sup> While the novel does show in its treatment of bourgeois ideals a restlessness and a flexibility beyond the simple terms of Praz's formulation, there is no doubt that its author is finally prepared to be a fellow-traveller alongside Meagles, to conclude with him on the terms of an amiable and not unrespectful modus vivendi, in which his vices are tolerated for the sake of his virtues, or what it is Dickens's peculiar dramatic genius to make us feel as virtues. Whether this is cause for satisfaction or regret is too much a matter of one's fundamental assumptions about life to be properly within the range of literary-critical discourse. Yet if one speculates upon why it was that the "smouldering ferocity" that Dickens sensed in England at one time during the writing of the novel, and which he compared to France on the eve of the Revolution,<sup>3</sup> never did absolutely break out, the typicality to the tone of Victorian literature

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1. Praz, p. 39.

2. Lara, II, 311-12.

3. Letter to Austin Henry Layard, 10 April 1855; Letters, II, 651-2.

of the generous and unembittered view of ordinary humanity that Meagles, as created, represents, is perhaps one of those historical intangibles that one can adduce.

But with a novel like Little Dorrit it is inappropriate to end on a comfortable note, for it is the confirmed habit of this work to be continually upsetting, qualifying, and generally whittling away at our idea of it - its restlessness just won't let our formulations alone. Hence, just when one settling down into a duly sober but still basically cheering sense of Meagles as being, for all his sins, the last descendant in that Pickwickian line of constitutionally happy men, one's attention is caught by the following conversation that takes place amidst the stasis of Meagles's Twickenham retreat:

"Here we are, you see," said Mr. Meagles, "boxed up, Mr. Clennam, within our home-limits, as if we were never going to expand - that is, travel - again. Not like Marseilles, eh? No allonging and marshonging here!

"A different kind of beauty, indeed!" said Clennam, looking about him.

..."Ah!" returned Mr. Meagles. "Something like a look out, that was, wasn't it? I don't want a military government, but I shouldn't mind a little allonging and marshonging - just a dash of it - in this neighbourhood sometimes. It's Develish still."<sup>1</sup>

The note of wistfulness is delicately sounded, not insisted upon more than Meagles's nature permits of. He is actually too closely bound up in his radiant social persona, too impervious to alternative suggestions of what he might be (hence his invulnerability to foreign languages and

customs), to be other than what he already is, and thus

restlessness in him can only register as an enigmatic undertone. Incapable of a deeper subjectivity he remains a basically happy man, yet also, for the same reason, unable to satisfy what restlessness he does feel.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>. Little Dorrit, pp. 235-6.

<sup>2</sup>. On Dickens's attitude to Meagles, see Myers, pp. 79-93.

This, too, has implications beyond itself, as it brings into focus a certain unease one feels about the simple opposition we are being offered, on the question of acquiring gentility, between the good-natured and unself-conscious vulgarity of a Meagles or a Flora Finching, and the brittleness that pervades the ethos where so much of the gentility must necessarily look for salvation to Mrs. General's "surface", the dignity that is the middle-class surrogate for aristocratic distinction. Doubtlessly, this antithesis is cogently 'argued' <sup>and</sup> Dickens's qualified endorsement of his robust Philistines gains extra edge by their being a pis aller preference to Mrs. General's victims. Conversely, his original application, in the study of William Dorrit, of insights into the self's continuity to the traditional satiric treatment of social mobility, yields a new psychological logic to the conservative view beyond the traditional more external perspective. Thus, where the traditional view in, say, Pope's portrait of Sir Baalaam or Jane Austen's Mrs. Elton had seen foolishness and vulgarity in the affectation of the nouveau-riche, Dickens's more inward and compassionate rendering registers vertiginous insecurity; William Dorrit's desperate strivings may be shown rather too often, but this has something to do with the originality of the treatment:

Nothing could exceed Mr. Dorrit's indignation, as he turned at the foot of the staircase on hearing these apologies. He felt that the family dignity was struck at by an assassin's hand. He had a sense of his dignity, which was of the most exquisite nature. He could detect a design upon it when nobody else had any perception of the fact. His life was made an agony by the number of fine scalpels that he felt to be incessantly engaged in dissecting his dignity.<sup>1</sup>

The seemingly clumsy change of metaphor evinces the determination to give a thorough account of the inner life - Dickens was surely breaking

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1. Little Dorrit, p. 511.

quite new ground for the English novel here in his psychological exploration of nervous obsession as related to social life.

And yet finally, one does feel the unsatisfactoriness of the antithesis we are offered, the want of someone to show that the 'self-made' gentleman is not a doomed impossibility. Interestingly, if we are to accept Mrs. Leavis's persuasive argument that Great Expectations is not a 'snob's progress' but a tough-minded vindication of Pip's attempt to make himself a gentleman, despite all the costs and pains on the way,<sup>1</sup> Dickens himself may perhaps be credited with having felt something of the same unease, and be seen as having taken up again in the later novel an important problem that the earlier one had left imperfectly resolved. Pip certainly wins our sympathy for brazening out Estella's torturing diffidence, which is the version of the chief butler's gaze, the upper class contempt that sees through 'pretension', that he has to undergo. Most significantly, perhaps, his chastened survival as a gentleman at the end of the novel follows a sequence of events which ends with a return to childhood during illness - that characteristic Dickensian strategy for recovering lost continuity - which then is followed by a renewed growing away from it, which is implicitly endorsed by the novel as inevitable and proper. Whereas the novels I have been dealing with in this thesis have been engrossed with the idea of personal continuity, at times joying in it and at others twisting and turning in its relentless and tentacular embrace, Great Expectations is fascinating and unique in the Dickens canon in that the grappling with the idea it enacts issues ultimately in release from it.

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1. Dickens the Novelist, ch. 6.



## A. PRIMARY SOURCES

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published in the one volume	{	<u>The Uncommercial Traveller,</u>
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"Charles Dickens, and certain aspects of Romanticism": a thesis submitted for the degree of PhD. at the University of Leicester by Pieter Dirk den Hartog, in September 1975 - A Synopsis.

The thesis examines certain aspects of Dickens's relationship to a number of his English Romantic predecessors, namely Wordsworth, Coleridge, Hazlitt, Hunt, De Quincey and Lamb. The central line of enquiry concerns the pre-occupation of these writers with the relationship between the adult self and its formative childhood origins, with the ways that "the child is father of the man", and the possible light that can be thrown upon certain of Dickens's novels by tracing the ways in which he inherits and modifies the fruits of this pre-occupation. Chapter one introduces this theme as an element of the Romantic outlook, and gives a summarised account of those manifestations of it in Dickens that are to be discussed at length later in the thesis. Chapter two begins with an account of the residual traces of the theme in the early novels, and then proceeds to a discussion of how the Wordsworthian-Coleridgean advocacy of a continuity between child and adult selves is developed in Charles Lamb in a manner at times more pertinent to Dickens's nature than it is in the major figures themselves. The dissimilarity between Dickens and Lamb on this score is also emphasised. Chapter three is a study of the inter-relation between the Romantic endorsement of continuity, and the 'sentimentalist'- derived idea of comedy as an essentially genial activity, followed by a study of Dickens's comedy in the light of these ideas. Chapters four and five offer readings of Dombey and Son and David Copperfield, stressing how Dickens, in marked contrast to Wordsworth but not unlike De Quincey, is in these novels sensitive to the tension between the claims of morality and the claims of continuity, the desirable integrity of the adult self to its childhood roots. Chapter six is a reading of Bleak House, being mainly an elucidation of Dickens's study in that novel of the consequences in later life of the absence of those conditions in childhood that the Romantics assumed to be the pre-conditions of healthy later life. Finally, chapter seven examines Little Dorrit along somewhat similar lines, but pays special attention to the novel's complex sense of the interdependence of 'continuity and what it feels to be the somewhat ambivalent ability to resignedly accept life's limitations as inevitable: Dickens's attitude to this interdependence is compared to and contrasted with Wordsworth's.