

Dickens and Character: ‘The Economy of Apprehension’

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Declaration of Authorship

I, Tamsin Evernden, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed:

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Abstract

In November 1867 a young Henry James encountered Charles Dickens at the height of his fame. James was only briefly in Dickens's presence but noted 'a kind of economy of apprehension': a look in the older writer's eye that he equated to power withheld; limiting local interaction, but also representative of the way Dickens now meted out his implicitly finite gifts, holding something in reserve. Two years previous, in 1865, James had submitted a damning review of Dickens's last completed novel, *Our Mutual Friend*, in which he revisited arguments that had dogged Dickens from the beginning of his career, as to how he 'created nothing but figure' and 'added nothing to our understanding of human character'.

Although critical opinion has developed over the ensuing century and a half, the penumbra of superficiality remains, with a focus on Dickens's overt stylisation: melodrama, grotesquerie; pattern and repetition forming the locus of scholarship reassessing Dickens's prose techniques. I use James's phrase to initiate a two-way premise; one speculative: that even in Dickens's apparently simple characterisation there was supreme elective skill winnowing out generative components, so what is outwardly manifest belies the complexity of the founding structure. The more extensive premise, underpinning the body of my thesis, focuses on a few characters conceived as serious, so commonly held to lack the 'power' of Dickens's comic creations. I posit that his characterisation herein was both founded on a more intellectual kind of mental processing than Dickens has been given credit for (whether purposed or sub-conscious); and that these characters provide route maps to thinking around a wide arena of issues, thereby delivering far more than has been appreciated. My thesis comprises a close study of three novels representing Dickens's early, middle and late period: *Oliver Twist*, *Dombey and Son*, and *Our Mutual Friend*.

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Introduction

If ‘character’ has long been ostracised from literary scholarship – to quote Peter Lamarque: ‘Character has been an unpopular and discredited conception for a generation of literary critics’ – Dickens, and analogously Dickens Studies, were bound to suffer an attenuated bilateral effect.¹ The association between Dickens and his characters is unparalleled within the history of modern authorship: the result of a triplicate of distinctive factors: Dickens’s own proclaimed relationship with his creations, for whom he expressed an emotional bond; his public readings in the latter part of his career, which generated almost electric responses from audiences already – as the artist David Wilkie commented three decades earlier – ‘talk[ing] about the characters as if they were next-door neighbours’; and the novels’ dissemination within popular culture through media such as film and theatre, which has situated the characters within the wider public domain.²

The situation is further complicated by the dual perspective posited on Dickens’s characters by a loving public, and a critical tradition that has – and this is a great irony – long been suspicious of his craft in this respect, and the results (characters themselves). From George Henry Lewes in 1872, who remarked, ‘his characters have nothing fluctuating or incalculable about them, even when they embody true observation’, to Barbara Hardy a century later, who writes: ‘his individual characters are pretty plainly illustrations, created by needs and roles, seen as agents and victims, within a critical analysis of contemporary England’, the critical heritage is circumscribed by doubt.³ Hardy’s comment reveals, in fact, the benefit that has been seen to outweigh a defect: that Dickens’s overriding concern (different, of course, to his authorial pleasure) was the critique of society within the paradigm of the novel. Iris Murdoch, who rated Dickens highly and whose regard rather gives the lie to critical nit-picking, did not see the need to compartmentalise: ‘Dickens manages to do everything, to be a great imaginative writer and explicit social critic [...] his most effective criticism of

¹ See Peter Lamarque, ‘How to Create a Fictional Character’, in *The Creation of Art: New Essays in Philosophical Aesthetics*, ed. by Berys Gaut and Paisley Livingstone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 33-52 (p. 34).

² Dickens gave his first public reading in 1853, and increasingly bravado performances over the ensuing decade. See Graham Storey, ‘Preface’, *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Madeline House, Graham Storey and Angus Easson, 12 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965-2002), x (1862-4), vii-xiii, ix. Dickens’s paternalistic attitude towards his characters is expressed in both private letters and published prefaces; he famously dubbed *David Copperfield* his ‘favourite child’. See ‘Preface to the Charles Dickens edition’ (1867), reproduced in Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, ed. by Nina Burgis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), Appendix B, p. 870; David Wilkie’s comment, recorded at a dinner in 1839, is quoted in Leonée Ormond, ‘Dickens and Painting: Contemporary Art’, *Dickensian*, 80 (1984), 3-25 (p. 4). On Dickens and popular culture see Juliet John, *Dickens and Mass Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

³ G. H. Lewes, from a review of Vol. I of Forster’s *Life*, *Fortnightly Review*, February 1872, reproduced in *Charles Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Philip Collins, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 572-76 (p. 574); Barbara Hardy, *The Moral Art of Charles Dickens* (London: The Athlone Press, 1970), p. 4.

society are made through live and touching characters [...] Dickens is a great writer because of his ability to create character'.⁴

Murdoch fuses a potentially reductionist judgment into a generative one. Dickens's characters may be 'created by needs and roles', but they are transmitters of a critique that works auxiliary effects: 'live and touching characters' involve us in empathetic engagement, imprinting the reader's consciousness not only as personifications of sociopolitical ideas, but as expansive amalgams of affect. This steers us to another tension point within the critical heritage pertaining to character studies: that between affect and form. A professional scholar might understandably resist being absorbed into a character's story (something that Victorian critics did not see as an indignity, with Thackeray conveying his praise for Dickens's technique through an emotional response: 'There's no writing against such powers as this – one has no chance!').⁵ There is a residing assumption within the academy that to be 'drawn in' means treating the text as a glass through which we see a parallel reality, an unforgivable naivety under the aegis of theoretical approaches beholden to form. Here, for example, is Terry Eagleton, in his 'Preface' to Steven Connor's structuralist study of Dickens:

Criticism of Dickens can be roughly divided into two major camps. On the one hand there are those readings which fasten upon plot, character and relationship, discovering in the novels all the prodigal richness of 'life' itself [...] The fictionality of the novels is accordingly repressed: they become instead windows onto the Victorian world, in which plot and character are seen less as complex effects of language than as living entities to be directly correlated with what we supposedly agree to be 'human life'. The second major form of criticism, in reaction to such reductionism, approaches the novels as structures of symbolic meaning, rescuing them from the shame of mere entertainment or documentation for a certain ideology of Literature.⁶

Though it belongs to a very specific epoch in the history of critical practice, the passage is suggestive of schisms still extant. It posits the assumption that we are in the business of ratios; that an appreciation of fiction through the locus of personal experience or observation ('life') will derogate that text's status as art; that attention to language and metaphor puts into abeyance our susceptibility to affect.

My thesis presents a way of looking at Dickens's construction of character which attempts to give due regard to both the formal structuring and the affective 'power'. The unscholarly word passes muster here, due to its prominence in the critical heritage: it pinpoints something that has never been quite resolved, and there is a

⁴ See 'Literature and Philosophy: A Conversation with Brian Magee' (1978), in *Iris Murdoch, Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. by Peter Conradi (London: Penguin, 1999), pp. 3-30 (p. 17).

⁵ William Makepeace Thackeray, responding to the death of Paul Dombey in a letter of 1847, cited in Alan Shelston, *Charles Dickens: Dombey and Son and Little Dorrit*, ed. by Alan Shelston (London: Macmillan, 1985), p. 34.

⁶ Terry Eagleton, 'Preface', Steven Connor, *Charles Dickens* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), iv-v (iv).

shyness commensurate with trying to compress a semi-mystical effect into technical analyses.⁷ Dickens's technical facility, in terms of slotting every element of his panoramic stories, with their myriad characters and situational constructs, into the vehicle of a novel, resembles, in its combination of intricacy of input and functional output, something almost equivalent to a mathematical formulae. We can push the dynamics of the image further to conceive of tight input, generative output; much as Sir Charles Bell envisaged the human hand: '[it] presents the last and best proof in the order of creation, of that principle of adaption which evinces design'.⁸ The paradox of art emerging from design founds the creative endeavour itself; it parallels that between effort and effortlessness in execution. A recent documentary on the creative brain featured the ballet dancer Edward Watson, who spoke of the moment that the ordinances of technical precision – work, in effect – released the fluidity of movement that presents to the audience, and to a degree to himself, as free.⁹ A like correlation underpins form and process in nature, particularly wherein a fixity of aspect determines great function, for example in symmetry: 'for a symmetry to hold several things have to be true [...] Thus symmetry can be a powerful idea, rich in consequences [...] an idea that Nature is very fond of'.¹⁰

Such speculations can self-propagate. I reference them here because they found my belief that in every way, when examining Dickens's characterisation, there is a similar dynamic in place in relation to both his practice and to what we can derive from the reading experience. Hence my rather counterintuitive sub-title. I appropriate it from a suggestive, albeit barbed, account by the young Henry James of his meeting with Dickens in 1867 when the latter was at the height of his fame. James sums up their brief encounter: 'I [...] recognised, and which met my dumb homage with a straight inscrutability, a merciless military eye, I might have pronounced it, an automatic hardness, in fine, which at once indicated to me, and in the most interesting way in the world, a kind of economy of apprehension'.¹¹ James interprets this 'economy of apprehension' as a measure of power purposively withheld to thwart local interaction; and more vitally, Dickens's own salvaging device, allowing him to mete out his implicitly ebbing, time-critical, gifts with due

⁷ 'Surely it is the task of criticism to exhibit the sources of that power?', G. H. Lewes (1872) quoted in Collins, pp. 572-6 (p. 573); 'What is the secret of his power?' Arnold Kettle (1962) quoted in *Charles Dickens's Oliver Twist: A Sourcebook*, ed. by Juliet John (London, New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 45; 'Dickens's continuing power', Brian Rosenberg, *Little Dorrit's Shadows: Character and Contradiction in Dickens* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996), p. 20.

⁸ Sir Charles Bell, *The Hand: Its Mechanism and Vital Endowments, as Evincing Design* (London: John Murray, 1852), p. 41.

⁹ See Edward Watson in conversation with Meg Rosoff, *Artsnight*, 5 August 2016, clip available from BBC iPlayer: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07n2w8t>>.

¹⁰ See Frank Wilczek, *The Lightness of Being: Big Questions, Real Answers* (London: Penguin, 2008), p. 61.

¹¹ Henry James, 'Notes on a Son and Brother', in *Henry James: Autobiography*, ed. by Frederick W. Dupee (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 237-544 (p. 389).

proportionality.¹² The deduction is ‘merciless’ but, by switching its implicit agency, the phrase provides a paradigm for the propitious quantifying that unites the techniques of characterisation I discuss: the flooding of meaning through a tiny phrase; the impact of a ‘stacked’ character through a text; the propagation of something commensurate to lay philosophy in some passages of dialogue. These are aesthetic formulae that differentiate from established critical appropriation of the term ‘economy’ in Dickens studies, for explication of fiscal or urban interchange.¹³

To unlock these surmises, and go through them one by one. The first, the flooding of meaning through a tiny phrase, is the means to minute indices that give us sudden access, should we choose, to either affective or cognitive meaning pertaining to character in Dickens’s texts. To appreciate it we need to be alert to the tiniest shifts of idiom and to the implications of word order. In his warning against our over-investment in Shakespeare’s characters, L.C. Knights proposed that ‘*Macbeth* [...] is a statement [...] of ordered emotion’.¹⁴ ‘Ordered emotion’: it is a percipient way of glossing the percolation of meaning through the staggered operation of narrative. Within Dickens’s writings the smallest sentences can carry a huge emotional freight. When, in *Oliver Twist* (1846), the titular orphan is exhausted from being on foot all day and sits down to rest, Dickens writes: ‘He had no heart to beg. And there he sat’.¹⁵ There is a passivity to the second sentence, in its stubborn bulwark form, that mimics not only Oliver’s outward immobility but his inner hopelessness – because *connoting of that deadness*. Plastic and phonetic quantities add in. Even the figurative stretch of its precursor (‘He had no heart to beg’), is forsaken in the intermediary shift.

Language that is both apposite *and* generative can carry us forward into a greater understanding of a character though the auspices of one word. This can reside in cognitive as opposed to (or as well as) affective dispensation, and often releases several interpretative throughways. In *Dombey and Son* (1846-8) little Paul, closeted in Dr Blimber’s Academy and yearning to be free, is spied by Dickens, but *not* by his father:

¹² Dickens was on a reading tour at the time: ‘monstrous “readings” [...] the awful nightly [...] exhibition’. See James, p. 389.

¹³ See ‘Dickens II’, ‘Circulation and Interchange’, in David Trotter, *Circulation: Defoe, Dickens, and the Economies of the Novel* (London: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 101-3; Katherine Byrne, ‘Consuming the Family Economy: Tuberculosis and Capitalism in Charles Dickens’s *Dombey and Son*’, *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 29 (2007), 1-16.

¹⁴ L.C. Knights, ‘How Many Children had Lady Macbeth?’, *Explorations: essays in criticism, mainly on the literature of the seventeenth century* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1946), pp. 1-39 (pp. 4, 29).

¹⁵ Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, ed. by Kathleen Tillotson, 2nd edn, with Introduction and updated notes by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 56.

Oh! could he but have seen, or seen as others did, the slight spare boy above, watching the waves and clouds at twilight, with his earnest eyes, and breasting the window of his solitary cage when birds flew by, as if he would have emulated them, and soared away!¹⁶

‘Breasting’ comes to evoke not exactly the literal abutting of the window pane with the child’s breast, but the aching ken of his longing: a spiritual thrust of force comparable to a physical act. It evokes an action which is doubly understood through the comprehension of anatomical form: the bird’s curved breast, and association; the bird in the cage, an archetypal image of entrapment.

My analysis here shows how one word can spring separate from its context, adhering more valuable meaning than its cohorts. Often moments of ‘give’ in Dickens’s prose, where time spent considering them will literally elicit more sense, are marked by oddness: imagistic, grammatical, or syntactical idiosyncrasy; sometimes an unnecessary shift of tense. When *Oliver Twist* accompanies Mr Sowerberry to retrieve a corpse, the distraught widower gives his account of events: ‘I begged for her in the streets; and they sent me to prison. When I came back, she was dying; and all the blood in my heart has dried up, for they starved her to death’.¹⁷ The complexity here is reliant upon a jostling of tenses and shuttling of cause and effect. The crux of the sentence: ‘and all the blood in my heart has dried up’, provides a visceral figure of despair. It represents that as a process which took effect over time – the heart’s blood ‘dry[ing] up’ is progressive compared to, say, the clichéd breaking of a heart. The passage’s curious quality derives from this image (adjacent to descriptions of actual bodily suffering) and its genus. The reason the man gives for his despair falls in the second clause of that sentence: ‘for they starved her to death’. His heart now does service, so to speak, for a process of perceived maltreatment that occurred when he was locked away. The locus of the man’s despair is his perception that this was preventable, and from this he has not recovered. So whilst the content of his sentences communicate the sense of being at a terminus, which is consistent with despair, their form – streaming forth as if part of an interior monologue – tell a different story of continued pain. Such a ‘telling’ note, which requires the reader to think backwards and around, breaking narrative cognition but as a means of bringing more understanding to the further reading of it, is different to the ‘false note’ that Adam Phillips has described writers scanning their drafts for; conscious that it might precipitate a looking back or sideways.¹⁸ The ‘telling’ note harnesses a larger truth of poetic association that can give us a broader

¹⁶ Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ed. by Alan Horsman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 181.

¹⁷ *Oliver Twist*, p. 39.

¹⁸ I take this reference from the verbal discussion ‘Style as Perception’, Adam Phillips in conversation with Robert Douglas-Fairhurst; organised by the Open University’s Contemporary Cultures of Writing Research Group in collaboration with the Institute of English Studies, Senate House, University of London, Wednesday 25 March 2015.

understanding of the character at hand, the story as a whole, and sometimes more besides: the philosophical dimension or interface. It fans into meaning that counts. In this sense the window onto the character is preserved, as an operational figure for the reader's engagement, even though that reader is in effect shifted sideways by renewed attentiveness to a formal property.

In close analysis of word choice, we pay tribute to the deductions of Russian formalism and structural linguistics, which explored ways that a word carries within it the legacy of common, or previous, use.¹⁹ Much of what registers as 'facetious' in Dickens relies on his adoption of grandiose *parole* for unlikely material.²⁰ Hence we encounter: 'a robber of fifty years, whose nose had been almost beaten in, in some old scuffle, and whose face bore a frightful scar, which might probably be traced to the same occasion'.²¹ The actual language matter that facilitates an alien edge is small – the connective phrase 'most probably be traced' – but enough, in its (socially aspirational) diffidence, to give the entire sentence a patina of irony. (Much shape-shifting of this kind occurs in the formal transport of Dickens's narrative, in the changing of wheels to the vehicle of meaning, and contributes a truly metamorphic quality in its upper reaches).

My second premise, the 'stacked' character in Dickens, is an introductory counter to still extant ideas as to his apparently simplest characters being equable to caricatures, as per David Paroissien: '[His] fondness for caricature and for presenting figures possessing only a single defining trait number, among Dickens's limitations, a cause of unevenness some have disparaged'.²² To consider this properly, it is worth examining the preconceptions pertaining to both generality and specificity. They are both loaded critical concepts in relation to Dickens. At his weakest he is seen to engage with generic form, particularly in the rendition of virtue in character. Dickens's 'angelic children: Oliver, Nell, Barnaby, Paul, and Florence' have been judged monotypes with little variance across the critical canon.²³ Some leverage is accorded to the strangeness of Paul Dombey, when still alive enough to evince it.²⁴ Commensurate to this is the idea that good itself

¹⁹ See Mikhail Bakhtin, "Heteroglossia in the novel", 'Discourse in the novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. by Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 259-360.

²⁰ 'The style, metaphoric, redundant, facetious, is easily recognisable'. See 'Introduction', Anny Sadrin, *Parentage and inheritance in the novels of Charles Dickens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 1-6 (p. 2). 'Parole' is the Saussure's term for language that has been adapted by its user as opposed to pre-existent 'langue'. See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. by Wade Baskin, ed. by Perry Meisel and Haun Saussy (New York; Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2011).

²¹ *Oliver Twist*, p. 404.

²² David Paroissien, 'Characterisation', in *The Oxford Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. by Paul Schilke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 76-81 (p. 80).

²³ Hardy, p. 4.

²⁴ 'There is a deep sense of infant lunacy about the child'. Peter Coveney, *The Image of Childhood* (London: Penguin, 1967), p. 143.

eradicates conceptual body in fictional character, so making Juliet John's argument on Dickens's persuasive villains equally persuasive.²⁵ It gives suggestive interest to Freud's quip on Dickens's 'flawless girls [...] so good they are quite colourless'.²⁶ (So producing the irony of critics welding their own sticking points via personal irritation; in effect giving body back to these 'colourless' ideals).²⁷ This has wider repercussions for the conceptual frames in which these characters ordinarily move; whereby Dickens is implicitly guilty of replicating his own techniques from book to book, and employing idiom that exists *outside* his authorship: both general and generic. Barbara Hardy comes down quite hard on him for this. She says, in reference to Little Nell and *Oliver Twist*: 'These two virtuous children are given the enforcement of Christian pastoral [...] [though Dickens] cannot actually be said to be very sensitive to either Nature or God. His language is at its weakest, flattest, and cheapest when dealing with aesthetic and religious feeling'.²⁸ By 'cheapest' Hardy implies derivative: the idiom of an age rather than the artist (and of *Keepsake* quality); at little cost to Dickens's creative self, but of especial cost when applied to subject matter of the 'high' art type.²⁹ The '[flat]' tempo can certainly take hold in passages of Dickensian pastoral, for example in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841) when Nell is resident in the country.³⁰ Sometimes it takes a hold in *Dombey and Son*: those passages when Florence is alone in the townhouse, remembering her brother, longing for her father.³¹ However it is possible to read the density of Dickens's prose, and the enervated tempo, as a direct transcription of the rhythms of Florence's thought. The sense that we are wading through water, a fugitive yet weighty medium, may evoke the dual workings of absorbent memory and effort to keep interacting with the living world. Furthermore it is possible to re-quality the integration of 'aesthetic and religious feeling' by identifying biblical references, both linguistic and thematic. In *Dombey* these create a supernumerary structure which informs Dickens's characterisation with a cerebral dimension, that whilst inevitably spiritual in allusion, is far from 'colourless'.

²⁵ See Juliet John, *Dickens's Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

²⁶ Sigmund Freud, letter to Martha Bernays, quoted in Lawrence Frank, *Charles Dickens and the Romantic Self* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), p. 14.

²⁷ See Martha's Nussbaum's pitching of the flawed yet charming Steerforth against the virtuous and obdurate Agnes, in 'Steerforth's Arm: Love and the Moral Point of View', *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 335-63.

²⁸ Hardy, p. 7.

²⁹ *The Keepsake*, published annually from 1827-57, was characterised by its sentimental prose pieces and illustrated frontispieces.

³⁰ Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, ed. by Norman Page (London: Penguin Books, 2000), chapters LIV, LV. All future references to this edition in text.

³¹ Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ed. by Alan Horsman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), chapter XXIII.

As my *Dombey* example posits, alternative interpretations of ‘weak[ness]’ can emerge out of readings that attend to the particulars of the language itself and the atmosphere accordingly propagated over a stretch of text.³² I would suggest that we are overly conscious of our own time spent reading – and taking in – those prose passages that document Florence in mourning. This is antithetical to the reading experience of Carker’s flight: there is an aerated energy to the prose therein which heightens the reader’s own alertness.³³ This augments my point, above. This gives traction for reappraising a good character as one with which we can engage (virtue requires engagement, as villainy fascination, in fiction); *and* as a Dickensian construction. My thesis deliberately focuses, in part, on characters that have been criticised for their weakness and/or lack of interest: Oliver Twist, Florence Dombey, Paul Dombey, Lizzie Hexam. I wade into that welter of supposed generality and locate character specificity, even character *parole*: idiom, voice, as opposed to *langue*.³⁴

To return to the aegis of specificity and what I term the ‘stacked’ character. At his most performative, Dickens creates specificity so animated it incurs the (benign) caricature tag, as the infamous speech and gestural tics thwart naturalness.³⁵ A Dickens text has the delightful quality of assigning even the most incidental character a high degree of specificity; and these ‘micro’ instances have a bearing on what we might consider ‘macro’ evolutions. The wooden-legged gentleman with the ‘blue bag’ who ‘stumps’ his way out of the church on Florence Dombey’s wedding day is a highly specific incidental character. Despite being confined to a few sentences, his noisy retraction lingers on, across our reading of the ceremony itself: ‘there is the man with the wooden leg stumping away’ (852).³⁶ The phenomenon of the motor action that reaches across a text is unique to Dickens and is a measure itself of ‘stacked-ness’: of something apparently small having long and progressive repercussion. We know that Mrs Sparsit has stopped plunging through the wet undergrowth, but in the reader’s mind she keeps on going; in tandem with her own figure of Louisa Bounderby descending her way down stairs into ignominy.³⁷ Once Mr Brownlow and Mr Grimwig have set ‘the watch between them’, in the ‘dark parlour’ wherein they await Oliver’s return, it keeps time across the

³² Hardy, p. 7.

³³ *Dombey and Son*, chapter LV.

³⁴ Cf. Saussure. See footnote 20, above.

³⁵ Obvious examples: Mrs Micawber’s pledges to ‘never desert’ her husband; Blandois’s ‘ugly play of nose and moustache’. See Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, ed. by Nina Burgis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 166; *Little Dorrit*, ed. by Harvey Peter Sucksmith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 359. All future references to these editions in text.

³⁶ ‘A man with a wooden leg, chewing a faint apple and carrying a blue bag in his hand, looks in to see what is going on; but finding it nothing entertaining, stumps off again, and pegs his way among the echoes out of doors’. *Dombey*, p. 852.

³⁷ See Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*, ed. by David Craig (London: Penguin, 1985), chapters X and XI. All future references to this edition in text.

novel, until the boy is repatriated to the good without danger of relapse (118). Uriah Heep's attendance to Mr Wickfield's accounts: Dr Manette's shoe-cobbling: these are more obvious variants of activities that nurture either a goal-orientated activity, or one so unproductive its continuance serves as a sign of madness.³⁸ But the effect on the reader is analogous: we feel the pressure of it even when not present on the page.

I would suggest that Dickens's mode of specificity is the same whether he tackles a major or minor character: the emphasis is upon choice and reiterated detail. The latter is a given within Dickens scholarship; the subsidiary action of choice less addressed. Select detail, which might also be edited (drawn from an array of choices), results in potent specificity. This has natural autonomy, even when affiliated to a single action, as per my examples above. To quote Peter Lamarque: '[if] creativity is linked to specificity, then specificity must be linked to narrativity, for it is only through narrative detail that characterisation can develop'.³⁹ When we transfer this idea of *creative* specificity to Dickens's major characters, we see how it is the *peculiarity* of each select detail that facilitates an operation of largest traction in the reader's memory (or longest, if calibrate by real-time reading experience).

Uriah Heep, in *David Copperfield* (1850), has a huge impact due to the stacking of peculiar specifics in his make up. These run the gamut from his background (his ancillary mother); his physical appearance (red hair); his touch (clammy hands), and of course his speech habits: particularly his "umble" protestations, that so rankle with David (228). Uriah is one of Dickens's most sophisticated creations. The selection of specifics – telling, impactful details – is prescient. We only have to think of Norman Bates and his mother, to feel the enduring power that a close relationship between an adult son and his mother can have within western culture – and we have the corpus from classical tragedy to psychoanalysis to help us puzzle out why.⁴⁰

A caricature or mere 'figure' also comprises a few telling details: usually a combination of physical features and behavioural traits. How can we differentiate between this and Uriah's power, that is so much more resonant? The measure of their relentless stacking insist upon our notice, within a book's frame; the subtlety of the components ensure a sophisticated legacy, that may allow for metamorphosis and change beyond the book (whilst never compromising the resilient prototype). Uriah fascinates both David and the reader. The

³⁸ See Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, ed. by Andrew Saunders (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

³⁹ Lamarque, pp. 33-52 (p. 37).

⁴⁰ Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* (429 BC); Alfred Hitchcock, *Psycho* (1960).

things that David holds against him are illogical, even unjust. The physical specifics – red hair and clammy hands – are not offensive individually, but their co-operation works on us over successive encounters, so that we feel an accordant and slightly guilty distaste. One more physical oddity would have tipped the balance. Just as a real encounter solders at the face and hands at greeting – so with Dickens’s portrayal. In terms of performative character, from an objective standpoint Uriah is a hard worker who suffers from an excess of class obsession. Had he remained on the side of the law, he might have retained his unappealing traits, but turned into a self-made man: a would-be hero in ways. In Anthony Powell’s nine book series, *A Dance to the Music of Time* (1951-75), one of the most impactful characters is Kenneth Widmerpool. An object of scorn from school onwards, he is both a social misfit and physically unprepossessing. As an adult, he continues to reside with his mother whom he regards with veneration. He ends up doing well in business, surprising those who disparaged him. I wonder if Kenneth Widmerpool could have existed without Uriah Heep. Powell takes that pregnant mix of unsavoury characteristics and potential worth and twists them in a different way (they also share a clunky name). Analogously, Charles Stringham, the debonaire and charming schoolboy whose mother is a capricious beauty of social standing, ends up falling into ruin. At the end of their schooldays the narrator visits Stringham at home and meets his still devoted nanny, Tuffy, with whom he enjoys a slightly sadistic mutual bond.⁴¹ Here we have James Steerforth, repackaged; Rosa Dartle, resurgent.

My thoughts on Powell are speculative, but I wanted to pursue the hypothesis in order to ‘stress test’ the potency of the mixes Dickens provides.⁴² Uriah’s combination of ego and obsequiousness, the love-hate relationship between Rosa and Steerforth: these are complex units built of honed insight. Dickens has selected, out of the vista of possibilities, ‘singular’ ingredients that conjoin in a way which furnishes maximum ‘affordances’ to the imagination.⁴³ They are inflected at the outset, by being a considerable remove from the generic; which does not mean Dickens didn’t broach the generic; parse through it to something more distinctive. I borrow the term ‘affordances’ from the cognitive scientist Margaret Boden; who in turn credits ecological psychology:

One class of values merits special mention here, namely, what ecological psychologists call ‘affordances’ (Gibson 1966, 1979). These are naturally evolved tendencies to behave towards a perceived feature in a particular way. Some are positive: affordances suggesting opportunities for

⁴¹ Anthony Powell, *A Question of Upbringing* (1951), in *A Dance to the Music of Time*, 12 vols (London: Arrow Books, 2005), 1.

⁴² As applicable in economics, when external pressures are simulated in order to test the robustness of an operational system. See Wayne B. Nelson, *Accelerated Testing - Statistical Models, Test Plans, and Data Analysis* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2004).

⁴³ Cf. Paul Dombey: ‘But it is to be lamented of this gentleman that he is singular’. *Dombey*, p. 197.

locomotion, for feeding, for stroking, for courting [...] and so on. Others are negative, such as affordances eliciting fear or disgust.⁴⁴

An affordance is a compulsion determined by the ‘perceived feature’ broached. Although she does not spell it out, Boden implicitly brings this to bear on her conception of exceptional creativity:

In general, the richer the associations, and the deeper the relevance, the greater the aesthetic value of the novel combinations. Combinational creativity in general depends on intellectual interest and emotional resonance, as opposed to the appreciation of structural artistic styles.⁴⁵

‘Intellectual interest’; ‘emotional resonance’: the latter is, again, a given in the wider appreciation of Dickens within culture and society. This provides the broadest template for resonance: a generative economy over time, across generations and demographics; a parallel dynamic to that I have been arguing occurs within the individual reader’s consciousness. But what about ‘intellectual interest’? The concept of intellect is a foreign one to Dickens studies; a makeshift mythography built up around what might replace the learning we might easily identify in the novels of George Eliot, for example. Rosemarie Bodenheimer’s book, *Knowing Dickens*, is built upon the double premise that he is both unknowable, and his inspiration largely elusive.⁴⁶ John Gross’s perceptive albeit slightly declamatory conclusion that Dickens ‘may be mawkish, hysterical, often not very intelligent, but in the end he knows more’, sums up the paradox.⁴⁷

I will be providing a counter-argument. In another variant of the ‘economy of apprehension’, I see Dickens as building a character from within and without in conjunction; an operation that, at best, is so evenly weighted as to escape notice: in effect, a background aesthetic to the contingent phenomena of the stacked character, of resonance, that is marked by equivocation rather than bias. To build from without, Dickens utilises resources that we posit as ‘intellectual’ in popular culture: the Bible, as already cited, classical literature, aesthetic debate both historical and contemporary. When putting together the character of Oliver Twist at the beginning of his career, or Eugene Wrayburn at the end, Dickens utilises the respective literary legacies of sensibility and melancholy, and Aestheticism in both its abstract and material ramifications,

⁴⁴ Margaret Boden, *Creativity and Art: Three Roads to Surprise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 72.

⁴⁵ Boden, p. 88.

⁴⁶ Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *Knowing Dickens* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007).

⁴⁷ See John Gross, ‘Introduction: Some Recent Approaches’, in *Dickens in the Twentieth Century*, ed. by John Gross and Gabriel Pearson, (London: Routledge, Kegan & Paul, 1962), ix-xvi (xvi).

respectively.⁴⁸ These abut and shape the concurrent development of each character's psychology through interior evolution, and are often both lightly and tactfully integrated into the prose.

The problem of conceiving of the intellectual dimension to Dickens's writing is exacerbated by his own purported belief, at least through his early to mid-career, in art as entertainment as opposed to didactic instrument.⁴⁹ But many of the schisms in Dickens's own nature seem to derive from his instinctive compulsion to one polarity and vaunted loyalty to another through theoretical or principled means. His attitude to high church religion is symptomatic. His visit to Italy in the summer of 1844 augmented a native suspicion of the Catholic faith, but a dream related in September that same year reveals the contrariness of Dickens's own feelings.⁵⁰ The paradox at the heart of any claim for Dickens's intellectual engagement is his proclaimed contempt for intellectual pontificating, and wariness of the 'dead letters' that Doctor Blimber and his daughter Cornelia revere in *Dombey*. However, I think Dickens played games with his own hungry and ever-moving intellect; utilising things he had read and remembered by filtering them into his texts, in the full knowledge that they would not be discerned by every reader. Dante, for example, seems a presence of multiform application to *Dombey*.⁵¹ There is the obvious theme of Dombey's pride. Dombey's domain resembles a concentric province arbitrated between two moral extremes: the suite of rooms on the ground floor being Dombey's 'cell', where he remains immolated by festering pride; the upper regions, including Paul's (and then Florence's) room, a place of release and promise of absolution, where Dombey can finally loose his tears.⁵² Florence is a would-be Beatrice, beneficent and earth-bound at the same time. John Lucas, who does explore Dickens's experience of her city namesake in relation to the novel, identifies the 'nameless Florentine lady, preserved from oblivion by a Painter's hand, [who] yet lives on, in enduring grace and youth', as a possible precedent for Dombey's daughter.⁵³ I think it more likely that Dickens takes Beatrice herself as inspiration for Florence, much of whose make-up as a character, I will be arguing, indicates a transcendent power, by rote of both language reference and symbolic theses.

⁴⁸ In *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5).

⁴⁹ "'People mutht be amuthed'" (*Hard Times*) is the memorable mantra not only of the lispng circus-master, Mr Sleary, but of Dickens himself'. See Juliet John, 'The Novels and Popular Culture', in *A Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. by David Paroissien (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011), pp. 142-56 (p. 142).

⁵⁰ In which Mary Hogarth proclaimed that Roman Catholicism was best for Dickens; discussed in chapter one. See Dennis Walder, *Dickens and Religion* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 11.

⁵¹ Stephen Bertman's essay on Dante in relation to *A Christmas Carol* (1843) is persuasive, but no proof has been found of Dickens's reading of Dante. See 'Dante's Role in the Genesis of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*', *Dickens Quarterly*, 24 (2004), pp. 167-75.

⁵² *Dombey*, p. 885.

⁵³ Dickens, *Pictures from Italy* (1846), quoted by John Lucas, in 'Dombey and Son: Living in a World of Time', *Charles Dickens: The Major Novels* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), pp. 22-45 (p. 27).

Is there a correlation between Dickens's 'felicitous' stacking of propitious specifics for the make up of his characters and his method of working?⁵⁴ He rarely commented publicly on the creative process, but in a magazine article of 1862 confided: 'I never commit thoughts to paper [...] until I am obliged to write, being better able to keep them in regular order, on different shelves of my brain, ready ticketed and labelled to be brought out when I want them'.⁵⁵ 'Different shelves of my brain': the conceit suggests a creative consciousness that can hold a great deal of material and yet keep it segregated: again, paralleling that balance between founding order and rich dispensation that I have reiterated throughout this introduction. Where Dickens was prolific with note-making, for example in the refining of names, his notebooks reveal the degree to which he toyed with slight differentiations. Variants are divvied out in columns: catacombs of nomenclature from which the right choice will manifest.⁵⁶ Perhaps still more revealingly, Dickens was famously distraught when deprived of busy city streets to walk in. Writing to Forster from Genoa, where he composed much of *Dombey*, he iterated: 'I want them beyond description. I don't seem to be able to get rid of my spectres unless I can lose them in crowds'.⁵⁷ It seems to me that Dickens was not talking about personal demons here – though perhaps there is that too – but his characters in waiting ('my spectres'). The energetic operation of his physical self through busy city streets, when available, not only provided relief from the stasis of the writing desk, but perhaps, in the number and variety of real 'spectres', human populace, he would then encounter, he found some relief in similitude of form: another version of neurological filing; of positing those 'spectres' on 'different shelves of [the] brain'. If my surmise is correct, then there is a similitude between the way Dickens's texts comprise a tensed discourse of elements winnowed into salience by both conscious choice and subconscious agency; and his creative mind, an effective autostrada of many potentialities keeping pace with the main conduit.⁵⁸

These are abstract and ambitious arguments, but they found my exploration of Dickens's characterisation. Some critics have come close to saying similar things. Alice Meynell, writing in 1899, credited Dickens with a 'style' (at the time, in question): 'self-proved [...] authorship from the beginning; and the immediate,

⁵⁴ Alice Meynell refers to Dickens's 'just felicities'. See Alice Meynell, 'Charles Dickens as a Writer' (1899), in *The Wares of Autolycus: Selected Literary Essays*, chosen and introduced by P.M. Fraser (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 92-100 (p. 97).

⁵⁵ Quoted in Kathleen Butt and John Tillotson, *Dickens at Work* (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 28.

⁵⁶ See Fred Kaplan, transcribed and annotated, *Charles Dickens' Book of Memoranda: A Photographic and Typographic Facsimile of the Notebook Begun in January 1855* (New York: The New York Public Library, 1981).

⁵⁷ Quoted by Claire Tomalin, *Charles Dickens: A Life* (London: Viking, 2011), p. 183.

⁵⁸ 'Narrative [...] implies "any story-telling," that is, tensed discourse where events are related'. See Lamarque, pp. 33-52 (p. 50).

enterprising, brilliant choice of the word and the thought in one'.⁵⁹ Her discernment of conjunction – the 'brilliant choice of the word and the thought in one' – touches upon my meaning, though bypasses the complex processes that I believe elicit such a result, through the multiple agency of Dickens's consciousness. My thesis examines three novels, from Dickens's early, middle, and late period respectively: *Oliver Twist* (1837-8), *Dombey and Son* (1846-8), and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5).⁶⁰ They are united by having been identified as serious in subject matter; fundamentally dark in tone.⁶¹ Each of the three provides ample opportunity for debating established critical judgements on character; furthermore each offers a distinctive aesthetic calibre, and richness in regards to cultural referencing, so allowing for a broad explication of my thesis.

⁵⁹ See Meynell, pp. 92-100 (p. 93).

⁶⁰ 'Critics have long divided Dickens's works into "early" (*Sketches to Chuzzlewit*), "middle" (*Dombey and Copperfield*) and "late" (*Bleak House to Edwin Drood*)'. See Joanne Eysell, *A Medical Companion to Dickens's Fiction* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2005), p. 36.

⁶¹ See, for example, Steven Marcus on the prevailing 'darkness' of *Oliver Twist*; Dennis Walder's characterisation of *Dombey and Son* as 'sober'; C.P. Snow's designation of *Our Mutual Friend* as 'sombre'. See Marcus, p. 65; Walder, p. 124; C.P. Snow, 'Dickens', in *The Realists* (London: Macmillan, 1978), p. 62-83 (p. 72).

Chapter One

Oliver Twist: ‘How do you solve a problem like Oliver?’

‘you were a thinking feeling Philosopher habitually’⁶²

To attempt an analysis of *Oliver Twist* (1837-9), Dickens’s second published novel, primarily through study of Oliver Twist, his titular character, is itself an act of critical departure.⁶³ Whilst *Oliver Twist* is one of the most universally recognised of Dickens’s titles, and in relation to certain plot instances, stories; Oliver Twist has been almost unilaterally dismissed within the scholarly heritage; both on his own terms, and as representative of the generic worst that Dickens’s characterisation has to offer.⁶⁴ For Dennis Walder Oliver is ‘more of an emblem [...] than a convincing human being’; for David Paroissien he numbers one of the ‘failures’ amongst the novelist’s ‘central male characters’.⁶⁵ He is assumed to lack agency; ‘physical individuality’; and is implicitly a disappointment in regards to the ‘power’ that, as discussed in my introduction, implants a character within individual or mass consciousness, as affective or stimulating idea.⁶⁶ ‘The weakness of the novel lies in its characterisation of goodness’, writes Peter Coveney, and as Dickens announced, in his 1841 ‘Author’s Preface’, that Oliver stands for ‘the principle of Good’, this is ostensibly a damning critique.⁶⁷

My reading mounts a defence of Dickens’s characterisation of Oliver on several of these premises. The pervasiveness of critical dismissal is surprising, given that the novel is also acknowledged as seminal in its foregrounding of the child’s consciousness.⁶⁸ If we were to segregate the text dedicated to Oliver, we would

⁶² Letter from Samuel Taylor Coleridge to William Wordsworth, 23 July 1803; quoted by Stephen Gill, ‘The Philosophic Poet’, in *The Cambridge Companion to William Wordsworth*, ed. by Stephen Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 142-60, (p. 156).

⁶³ *Oliver Twist* was originally serialised in *Bentley’s Miscellany*, Feb 1837-April 1839; (three instalments omitted); issued as a triple-decker in November 1838 and reprinted in 1839, 1840 and 1841. The 1841 edition included ‘The Author’s Preface to the Third Edition’. Dickens revised the text for reissue in 1846; and this forms the basis for the authoritative Clarendon edition and Oxford University Press edition. See Stephen Gill, ‘Note on the Text’, in Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, ed. by Kathleen Tillotson, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), xxvi. All future references to this edition in text.

⁶⁴ Its fame due in part to the dissemination of the story through dramatic media adaptations. See Juliet John, ‘The Making of a Cultural Myth: *Oliver Twist* on Screen’, in *Dickens and Mass Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 207-39.

⁶⁵ Dennis Walder, *Dickens and Religion*, 2nd edn (Abingdon, Oxon.: Routledge, 2007), p. 57; and David Paroissien, ‘Characterisation’ in *The Oxford Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. by Paul Schlicke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 77-81 (p. 77).

⁶⁶ ‘He remains remarkably passive throughout the whole book’; ‘It is logical that he has no character, because he has no physical individuality’. Humphrey House quoted by Juliet John, *Charles Dickens’s Oliver Twist: A Sourcebook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 81; John Bayley, ‘Things as they Really Are’, in *Dickens in the Twentieth Century*, ed. by John Gross and Gabriel Pearson (London: Routledge, Kegan & Paul, 1962), pp. 49-66 (p. 61).

⁶⁷ See Peter Coveney, *The Image of Childhood – The Individual and Society: a Study of the Theme in English Literature*, 2nd edn (London: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 137. See ‘The Author’s Preface to the Third Edition’, *Oliver Twist*, liii-lvii (liii).

⁶⁸ ‘*Oliver Twist* is the first novel in the language with its true centre of focus on a child’, see Coveney, p. 127.

detach a substantial body, encompassing many variances in Dickens's approach. Psychological exploration of the child's mindset is one aspect of Dickens's portrayal. It is inflected however, as being distinctly Oliver's, as well as generically recognisable as that of a child. Coveney praises Dickens's catching of 'that grotesque other dimension of reality that children have', but I would argue that Oliver works against this for much of the novel, as a matter of keeping clear-headed and rational, which is part of his character praxis.⁶⁹

Nevertheless, subsisting alongside this drive towards the normative, I see Oliver as equipped with faculties that mark him out as an exceptional child. Dickens's novel is recognised as a 'realist fairy-tale', but critics have not sought to explore the implications, and permutations, of this paradox through its title character.⁷⁰ Perhaps as a measure of schisms within his own art at this time, I believe Dickens deliberately wrought a fusion of antitheses in Oliver: between the blessed and ordinary (in story terms), and symbolic and realist construct (in formal, narrative terms). We can establish that he has individual qualities and attributes that manifest and recur; a realist method of building character.⁷¹ Some of these fulfil the requirements of his symbolic function however, and Dickens shows Oliver as either transcendent over the demonstrative illogic (in physical strength, for example), or having to contend with the responsibilities incurred (through his powers of insight, for example), i.e. remaining within the blind bind of the realist paradigm. My reading of Oliver's development across the text is formed through study of his emotional and cognitive – or reasoning – faculties, as explicated by Dickens. I segregate these, perhaps reductively, as 'feeling Oliver' and 'thinking Oliver', to draw attention to their separate manifestation, which contributes still further to internal tensions. Oliver's accentuated facility in regards of both feeling and thinking, the former contrived mostly through performative conceits and cultural paradigms, the latter more reliant upon unique, proximate, prose narrative, place particular psychological strain upon the self as focalised through realism. To my understanding Dickens pays attention to that, marshalling an interaction between author, character and plot. In my reading he precipitates his child hero into near nervous collapse towards the novel's end, before pulling him back from the brink via plot circumstance. This contributes to a substrata teleology, a latent 'character arc'.⁷²

⁶⁹ Coveney, p. 132.

⁷⁰ John, *Dickens and Mass Culture*, pp. 207-39 (p. 208).

⁷¹ Analogous to what Ralf Scheider calls 'bottom-up' characterisation: 'the successive accumulation of textual information in working memory, where it is kept accessible until it can be connected with prior knowledge or turned into a category or schema itself'. See Jens Eder, Fotis Jannidis and Ralf Schneider, 'Characters in Fictional Worlds: An Introduction' in *Characters in Fictional Worlds: Understanding Imaginary Beings in Literature, Film, and Other Media*, ed. by Jens Eder, Fotis Jannidi and Ralf Schneider (Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), pp. 5-64 (p. 35).

⁷² A term used in screenwriting, interchangeably with 'transformation arc or growth line', for a character's development 'gradually over the arc' of a story. See Ray Frensham, *Screenwriting*, 2nd edn (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2003), p. 90.

For me there is another reason why Oliver seems to quiver at certain junctures, and express especial distress: he recognises and can apprehend the possibility of a loss of moral probity. Few scholars have countenanced this; most judging Oliver either finitely representative of innocence, or incapable of wrongdoing (the symbolic and realist perspectives refracted at as critical approaches).⁷³ The concept of a character at an anchor point between circumstantial outcomes, figured literally when the newborn Oliver is ‘rather unequally poised between this world and the next’; and when Rose’s life is ‘trembling in the balance’, is key to Dickens’s writing, and is replicated in moral quandaries (1; 261). The drama of it in *Oliver Twist* is, as always, augmented via a constant interchange of parts and frames of reference between virtue and vice; a tight vocabulary of shared conceits (‘my boy’, for example, is both the kindly magistrate’s and then Sikes’s opportune appellation for Oliver) and echoing paradigms of behaviour.⁷⁴ ‘What the devil do you come in between me and my dog for?’, rails Sikes, reminding us that there is a version of intimacy in his world, arbitrated through the continual levying of abuse as opposed to affection (111). There is an aesthetic predilection to ‘flip’ throughout the novel; to see a possibility through its antithesis, as per John Bayley’s comment that ‘Fagin’s world’ and Mr Brownlow’s ‘are twin sides of the same coin of fantasy’.⁷⁵

A parallel tension exists between the novel’s status as ‘a pioneering text of social realism’ and a reading experience which is often judged dreamlike.⁷⁶ There is a quality of equivocation to the narrative voice contingent to its habitual regaining of balance; the revolutions of satire, tragedy, tender and dismissive idiom in the first chapter alone set the pattern, and contribute an unlikely aesthetics of mediation. Due to the ambition and diversity of approaches that Dickens utilises in constructing Oliver, and their occasional unevenness (the rural interval gives us a different character to the urban sections), he is sometimes in danger of upsetting the balance. The criminal cast, by contrast, do subsist in a concordant equilibrium of a kind; and I would argue that this is in part what lends the novel a dreamlike quality; wherein darkness, though always present, is also strangely *sfumato*.⁷⁷ It suffers from a reticence of realisation through its most overt devices

⁷³ ‘For he is ideal and incorruptible innocence’; ‘[Oliver] would have made the world’s most incompetent pickpocket’. See Steven Marcus, *Dickens: From Pickwick to Dombey* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), p. 80.

⁷⁴ ‘My boy!’ said the old gentleman, ‘you look pale and alarmed. What is the matter?’; ‘Yes, he’s my boy,’ replied Sikes, looking hard at Oliver’; *Oliver Twist*, pp. 22, 165.

⁷⁵ John Bayley, ‘Things as they Really Are’, in *Dickens in the Twentieth Century*, pp. 49-66 (p. 51).

⁷⁶ See John Bowen, ‘Charles Dickens (1812-1870): Englishman and European’, in *The Cambridge Companion to European Novelists*, ed. by Michael Bell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 209-26 (p. 211); ‘[The novel’s] refuges [...] strike many readers as too good to be true, too convenient to be real – as if the whole action were a dream’; see Philip Horne, ‘Introduction’, Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, ed. by Philip Horne (London: Penguin Books, 2009), xiii-xliv (xi).

⁷⁷ Cf. John Bayley’s perceptive noting of ‘Dickens’s capacity to see the same thing with an extreme hardness and an extreme softness too’. See John Bayley, ‘Dickens and His Critics’, in *The Uses of Division: Unity and Disharmony in Literature* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1976), pp. 90-103 (p. 92).

and conceits, which provides for both an internal contradiction and an internal life support system for Fagin's gang. The proliferation of violence never delivers a palpable result until the murder of Nancy. Oliver is beaten by Noah and Charlotte, Mr Sowerberry, and Mr Bumble, within the hour presumably; and still manages to kick against the door of his lock-up.⁷⁸ Fagin launches the contents of a (hot?) 'pewter pot' at Charley Bates and we never learn where it falls (93). Bull's-eye, Sikes's long-suffering cur, is symbolic of the nature of violence as narrated through the novel's substantial part; which creates an aesthetic patina of incident and concern, but fails to sabotage the mechanics of story. '[S]cratched and torn in twenty different places', his blinking visage, both damaged and hostile, parallels the refractory chutzpah of Fagin's recruits, who must always be adjusting and adapting (95). Similarly, words of narratorial judgement and condemnation: 'dreadful', 'hideous', 'vile', register as both hyperbolic and neutral, as they designate something reprobate but also strangely non-relatable, especially to a modern readership unlikely to share the stringency of Victorian moral precepts that would demand 'penitence' from Nancy.⁷⁹ These non-imagistic adjectives form a supernumerary register that make little real impact, like Sikes's imprecations. I doubt this was Dickens's conscious purpose; but perhaps it keys into his unconscious one. The gang's vitality, as both formal and narrative organisation, bypasses the diegetic violence *and* the mimetic narrative judgement; in part because they need to push forward, in order to survive. Illicit perpetuity is in their blood; it is this edict that fuels the Newgate Calendar. So something of what I discussed in my introduction – modes of being associated with potent characters perpetuating post-text – is pertinent to the gang as a whole. Their routines are sustained and companionable: shared meals, games that despite their sinister end are jocular in practice. There is an ecosystem in place, as they migrate from one warren-like homing ground to another, whether sideway or boarded-up house. They are the strong economy, the buoyant black market; making it particularly difficult for Oliver to break through as both realist character and 'principle of Good'.

⁷⁸ *Oliver Twist*, p. 50.

⁷⁹ *Oliver Twist*, pp. 323, 147, 358, 325.

Oliver and godhead – one: breaking bonds

The child god is usually an abandoned foundling. Often it is threatened by extraordinary dangers: it may be devoured, like Zeus, or torn to pieces, like Dionysus. (Carl Kerényi)⁸⁰

No matter where it was or was not – enough that there was a town and in the southern quarter of the town a tumble-down house inhabited by an orphan child, left all on its own after the death of its father and mother (*Ipolyi Arnold Népmesgyűjteménye*, no. 14)⁸¹

The two quotes above derive from ‘The Primordial Child in Primordial Times’, an essay by classical philologist Carl Kerényi, from the volume he co-wrote with psychiatrist Carl Jung, *The Myth of the Divine Child*, which interrogates the myth across cultures and epochs. Kerényi’s premise reveals the ancient archetype behind Dickens’s historically specific story of an orphan left at the mercy of a flawed welfare system. The ‘extraordinary dangers’ Kerényi cites correlate with those Oliver faces. ‘[T]he child shan’t be torn down by the dog, unless you kill me first’, cries Nancy to Sikes (125). Threats of grievous bodily harm proliferate and critics have noted cannibalistic imagery throughout.⁸²

The narrative itself provides Oliver’s sole companionable hold for the novel’s first quarter. Dickens figures the loss of even this abstract patrimony at times. The cue is the use of Oliver’s full name, a formal device which signals a hostile perspective encroaching or the complete divesture of *any* familiar claim, as if his author has pooled him for alternative minting. So we learn of Noah Claypole’s hypocrisy: ‘from the violent and sanguinary onset of *Oliver Twist*, he had sustained severe internal injury and damage’; and of our hero being offered up for the taking via a bill notice: ‘the public were once more informed that *Oliver Twist* was again To Let’ (49; 25). The device recurs when Oliver is at his most physically vulnerable. Following Fang’s interrogation, ‘Little *Oliver Twist* lay on his back on the pavement, with his shirt unbuttoned, and his temples bathed with water; his face a deadly white’ (82). When the servants prise open the front door after the botched robbery, they ‘beheld no more formidable object than poor little *Oliver Twist*, speechless and exhausted’ (225). These are turnstile moments, when Oliver’s fate is in the balance; he is rescued by the Brownlow and Maylie households respectively. His story has no agency without his being found.

⁸⁰ Carl Kerényi, ‘The Primordial Child in Primordial Times’, in C.G. Jung and C. Kerényi, *Science of Mythology: Essays on the Myth of the Divine Child and the Mysteries of Eleusis*, trans. by R.F.C. Hull, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1985; repr. 2002), pp. 29-82 (p. 32).

⁸¹ Quoted by Kerényi, pp. 29-82 (p. 34).

⁸² ‘There is a repeated undercurrent or fear of cannibalism in the story’. John Bowen, *Other Dickens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 90.

The second quote, the opening lines of a Hungarian legend, is characteristic of such tales, which often end: ‘And if they are not dead they are still alive today’.⁸³ Dickens’s library contained volumes of Indo-European folk and travel lore, dating from the 1830s onwards, and scholars have noted his creative debt.⁸⁴ Whether or not he encountered this literary trope, the airy ambience of this opening (‘No matter where it was or was not’) facilitates an alternative reading of Dickens’s to *Oliver Twist*. It comprises a series of deflections and generalities:

Among other public buildings in a certain town, which for many reasons it will be prudent to refrain from mentioning, and to which I will assign no fictitious name, there is one anciently common to most towns [...] a workhouse; and in this workhouse was born: on a day and date which I need not trouble myself to repeat, inasmuch as it can be of no possible consequence to the reader [...] the item of mortality whose name is prefaced at the head of this chapter. (1)

When we finally land on our subject, ‘the item of mortality’, we are directed backwards in a further elision to ‘the head of this chapter’ (though of course this delivers a more promising irony). The passage could be read as a satire on Utilitarianism, with its dehumanising ethos and penchant for statistics. But the paragraph’s successive erosions also free up a space where there are no expectations or ordinary precepts in play, and that is oddly freeing. Just as the opening of the Hungarian tale beams in on the ‘orphan child’, and the reader knows instinctively that the story starts right there, in that inauspicious but prescient kernel of humanity, we know, by the time we learn that ‘Oliver cried lustily’, that we have found our hero: the story’s artery (3). In fact, within the short but remarkable stretch of Dickens’s first chapter, the generalities are rebuffed by specifics: moments of physical and tactile precision that identify the presence of life. Oliver ‘sneeze[s]’ a page before he cries (2). Idiosyncrasy energises the anonymous paradigm. His ‘little flock mattress’ elicits a sense of tenderness; for the first moment we can visualise the scene with individual details in place (1). (Oliver’s mother raises her head from the equivalent: ‘the patchwork coverlet which was carelessly flung over the iron bedstead, rustled’; a single, poignant, instance of agency; 2). So just as lack of provenance bequeathes the ‘orphan child’ of Hungarian legend a prominence he would have lacked, framed by family, history, status; Oliver subsumes the reader’s apprehension by the end of chapter one.

⁸³ Kerényi, ‘The Primordial Child’, in Jung and Kerényi, *The Myth of the Divine Child*, pp. 29-82, p. 34. Károly (Carl) Kerényi was Hungarian by birth so would have been familiar with his cultural heritage. This quote is not footnoted in his text. A possible source is Arnold Ipolyi’s *Ungarische Mythologie* (1854): the bishop historian’s compilation of myths and legends from his birth country.

⁸⁴ For example Freytag (G.), ‘Pictures of German Life’, Froissart (Sir J.) ‘Chronicles’ (1839), and Hering (G.), ‘Sketches of the Danube, in Hungary and Transylvania’ (1838). See ‘Catalogue of the Library of Charles Dickens’ in *Reprints of the Catalogue of the Libraries of Charles Dickens and W.M. Thackeray Etc.*, ed. by J.H. Stonehouse (London: Piccadilly Fountain Press, 1935), pp. 5-120 (pp. 49, 57). [Dickens envisaged] ‘audiences familiar with fairy tales, German romances and other forms of “low” art’. See Walder, p.4. Dinah Birch notes that ‘Translated story collections from other cultures [...] reinforced the popularity of fairy stories’ during the 19th Century. See ‘Fairy Tales’, in *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, ed. by Dinah Birch (Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 358.

As he builds Oliver from infant to child proper, Dickens has to avoid the predilection towards allegory that the child as symbol can so readily inhere and that Dickens employed successfully elsewhere. In *A Christmas Carol* (1843) the Ghost of the Christmas Present reveals two children to Scrooge as signs of epidemic poverty: ‘This boy is Ignorance. This boy is Want’.⁸⁵ They shrink before our hypothetical eyes; a tiny twosome gazing out of the dark; a measure of the disempowerment that allegorical augmentation brings, as well as the ravages of hunger. Even when the embodiment of (theoretically empowering) virtue, as Little Nell is frequently conceptualised, the scope for individuality is diminished because allegory is essentially static. When Dickens chose to embody ‘the principle of Good’ in Oliver, he needed to create a hybrid: good as active agent, with the propensity to adapt and influence in order to ‘survi[ve] through every adverse circumstance’.⁸⁶

In his essay on ‘The Psychology of the Child Archetype’, Carl Jung comes close to figuring a hybrid archetype when he writes of how the ‘still living Christ-child [...] in the legend of Saint Christopher [...] has the typical feature of being smaller than small and bigger than big’.⁸⁷ Oliver needs to migrate between these two polarities; ‘smaller than small’ to elicit our most urgent compassion (a key concept within the text; and a sentiment that Dickens accorded a kind of idiomatic hagiography in his account of the omissions of his childhood); ‘bigger than big’, capable of disproportionate heroism.⁸⁸ We are repeatedly reminded of Oliver’s littleness; ‘little Oliver’ precedes ‘Little Dorrit’ by twenty odd years in this respect (33). Dickens uses the phrase eleven times; and it isn’t merely a term of endearment, Mrs Sowerberry remarks on Oliver’s size (‘Dear me! [...] he’s very small!’) and Fagin recommends him to Sikes on that premise (‘Well, he is just the size I want’) (30: 153). Scale was ideological to Dickens, personally as well as professionally. Robert Douglas-Fairhurst comments on how the title vignette of the child author in the Household Edition of Forster’s *Life* ‘seems pathetically young and frail, and this reflects Dickens’s tendency to exaggerate how small he was at the time’.⁸⁹ Scale is also the most suggestive conceptual synonym for the child’s feeling of

⁸⁵ Charles Dickens, ‘A Christmas Carol’, in *A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Writings*, ed. by Michael Slater (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 94.. ‘At its simplest, allegory is a way of saying one thing and meaning another’; see ‘Introduction’, Jeremy Tambling, *Allegory* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 1-18 (p. 6).

⁸⁶ The quote in full reads: ‘I wished to shew, in little Oliver, the principle of Good surviving through every adverse circumstance, and triumphing at last’. See ‘Author’s Preface’, *Oliver Twist*, liii-lvii (liii).

⁸⁷ Carl Jung, ‘The Psychology of the Child Archetype’, in Jung and Kerényi, *The Myth of the Divine Child*, pp. 71-78 (p. 77).

⁸⁸ ‘It is wonderful to me, that, even after my descent into the poor little drudge I had been since we came to London, no one had compassion enough on me – a child of singular abilities, quick, eager, delicate, and soon hurt, bodily or mentally – to suggest that something might have been spared [...] to place me at any common school’. Quoted by Marcus, p. 82.

⁸⁹ See Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, *Becoming Dickens: The Invention of a Novelist* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 29.

confederacy with other children; its obviousness not diluting its effectiveness. In *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), Eliot has the young Maggie Tulliver, growing fearful of the gipsy camp to which she has escaped, envisage sending her father ‘a letter by a small gipsy’.⁹⁰ Little Dick’s painful confession is couched in that logic, wherein ‘like[ness]’ is a matter of seeing eye to eye both literally and spiritually: ‘perhaps, if I had lived to be a man, and had grown old, my little sister, who is in Heaven, might forget me, or be unlike me’ (133). Smallness encompasses both futurity (‘Children are hopes’ in the natural course of things) and fragility.⁹¹

Scale also helps us figure the ambiguities inherent in Dickens’s perspective on childhood. Left in Mr Sowerberry’s ‘gloomy workshop’ Oliver ‘[gives] way to the feelings which the day’s treatment may be supposed likely to have awakened in a mere child’ (52). Here the child is purposively rendered powerless; as per Dickens’s plangent claim in a letter of 1838 that he had ‘been abroad in the world from a mere child’.⁹² The prose is more ironised in the Oliver reference, disguising the peak of affront (how can this happen to a child) as the sentence’s vanishing point. Analogously the child recedes; viewed through the long lens of maturity, by which he is diminished by an ostensible lack of knowledge and experience. ‘You think like a child, poor boy’, comments Mrs Maylie to Oliver, implying a commensurate naiveté, when he refutes ‘Heaven[’s]’ permitting Rose to die (258). (Oliver has to work extra hard in advocating hope, religious or otherwise, against a pathology in the novel that disenfranchises youth through lack of *morbid* experience).⁹³ When the noun ‘child’ mutates into an adjective it is likewise pejorative, suggesting mental insufficiency. The magistrate, ‘half blind and half childish’, who is struck by Oliver’s ‘pale and terrified face’, signals a trustingness that, paradoxically, facilitates radical acts of personal integrity, but implicitly unmans the possessor amongst his corrupt peers (21). Conversely, Nancy can use the sacrosanct idea of the child as a figure, without irony, to the convalescent Sikes: ‘such a number of nights as I’ve been patient with you, nursing and caring for you, as if you had been a child’ (308). We can guess that she herself never enjoyed this

⁹⁰ George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. by A. S. Byatt (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 112.

⁹¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1963), quoted by Helen Small, *The Long Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 197. The full quote reads: ‘Children are hopes, young girls are wishes and requests’, which has a bearing on how sexuality already has an impact in Little Nell, less so in Oliver.

⁹² Letter from Charles Dickens to J.H. Kuenzel, [?] July 1838, in *The Pilgrim Edition of the Letters of Charles Dickens*, 10 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), ed. by Madeline House and Graham Storey, I, pp. 423-24 (p. 424).

⁹³ An example of what I identify as its counterintuitive ‘flip’ aesthetic in my chapter introduction. ‘I am old, and [...] know that it is not always the youngest and best who are spared’, says Mrs Maylie; ‘[...] you have a young heart, and knowing I have suffered great pain and sorrow, you will be more careful, perhaps, not to wound me again’, lectures Mr Brownlow. *Oliver Twist*, pp. 258, 104.

ideal (if her rough age calculus is right, she barely experienced a childhood) whereby the child has a right to expect summary care, but both she and Sikes understand the symbolic theft.⁹⁴

One way of disengaging Oliver from the narrative freight that accompanies these two polarities associated with childhood, sanctimony and powerlessness, is through physical transformation. At Fagin's safe house after the kidnap, Oliver overhears Sikes's surmise that Mr Brownlow's household will deem him the thief: 'he jumped suddenly to his feet, and tore wildly from the room: uttering shrieks for help, which made the bare old house echo to the roof' (125). It is quite a turnaround, hinting at untapped physical resources – albeit building on a realist premise of a child's energies in reserve (there is no textual precedent, though Oliver has just been through a period of relative well-being that might have galvanised that robustness). It is not danger or suffering but the implication that others will think badly of him that triggers Oliver's breakout. This is part of an overall pattern in which abuses of belief figure as the peak of his endurance, triggering a loss of control. A prescient instance occurs when Oliver literally becomes 'bigger than big', defending his mother's memory against Noah's taunts. We witness (Cartesian) spirit and bodily humours coalescing, transforming Oliver into a martial hero who would befit the pen of Sir Walter Scott; an improbable victor over the 'big charity boy' (33):

Crimson with fury, Oliver started up; overthrew the chair and table; seized Noah by the throat; shook him, in the violence of his rage, till his teeth chattered in his head; and collecting his whole force into one heavy blow, felled him to the ground.

[...] his spirit was roused at last; the cruel insult to his dead mother had set his blood on fire. His breast heaved; his attitude was erect; his eye bright and vivid; his whole person changed, as he stood glaring over the cowardly tormentor who now lay crouching at his feet: and defied him with an energy he had never known before. (44)

A complex transition has taken place, soldering Oliver's diverse dimensions. A little previous, Noel has abrasively asked what his mother died of, and Oliver, still oblivious to his malice, answers in a detached manner: "Of a broken heart, some of the old nurses told me," [...] more as if he were talking to himself, than answering Noah. "I think I know what it must be to die of that!" (43). Oliver retreats inwards to access a form of aspirational memory, wrought by empathy and insight, 'as he were talking to himself'. But then Noah's goading worsens; Oliver's mother was a 'nice 'un'; then a 'bad 'un': a criminal, no less. The subtext, from the older boy, is sexual; a 'nice 'un' implies a willingness to accept the male gaze, and more; a 'bad'

⁹⁴ "I thieved for you when I was a child not half as old this!" pointing to Oliver. "I have been in the same trade, and in the same service, for twelve years since"; *Oliver Twist*, p. 127. Nancy can be, at most, twenty, which suggests she has been in 'the same service' since the age of eight. In many ways it is the most terrifying indictment of the book.

‘un’ shows up the consequences of that (Nancy and Bet prefigured). So Oliver, vivifying before our eyes, defends his mother’s honour within an appropriately adult dimension (bigger than big); certainly, a shift away from realism. But it has another purpose as a rare moment of future-orientated characterisation, presaging the possibility of Oliver eventually embodying a conventional Victorian ideal of manhood: healthy, honourable, ‘erect’ of attitude, quick to defend his kind (44). This grows out of the more retrospective, plangent, figure of Oliver as highly intuitive, keying into his mother’s unhappiness.

Feeling Oliver

When Oliver is affected by his mother’s (as yet unidentified) portrait he is likewise most troubled by being unable to tease a felt connection into clear communication; like a blocked mesmerist. ‘It makes my heart beat,’ added Oliver in a low voice, ‘as if it was alive, and wanted to speak to me, but couldn’t’ (89). (Always a ‘low voice’ for these intimations; putting down subliminal markers towards the story’s conclusion, but also showing Oliver trying to make sense of them to himself). The scene reveals how Dickens’s construction of Oliver’s intuitive self is reliant upon a feminine ‘ethics and aesthetics of presence’, to use John Bowen’s suggestive phrase, and the language of sensibility.⁹⁵ Recovering from his illness at Mr Brownlow’s, Oliver spots the picture on the wall and is immediately struck by it. I quote pertinent parts of his conversation with Mrs Bedwin, which represents a new stage in Oliver’s maturation as realist character, and symbolic entity:

[...] What would his mother feel if she had sat by him as I have, and could see him now!’

‘Perhaps she does see me’, whispered Oliver, folding his hands together; ‘perhaps she has sat by me. I almost feel as if she had [...]

She can’t know anything about me though [...] If she had seen me hurt, it would have made her sorrowful, and her face has always looked sweet and happy, when I have dreamed of her.’

‘Are you fond of pictures, dear?’ inquired the old lady, seeing that Oliver had fixed his eyes, most intently, on a portrait which hung against the wall: just opposite his chair.

‘I don’t quite know, ma’am,’ said Oliver, without taking his eyes from the canvas; ‘I have seen so few that I hardly know. What a beautiful, mild face that lady’s is! [...] Is – is that a likeness, ma’am?’

‘Why, sure you’re not afraid of it?’ [...] ‘Oh no, no’, returned Oliver quickly; ‘but the eyes look so sorrowful; and where I sit, they seem fixed upon me. It makes my heart beat [...] as if it was alive, and wanted to speak to me, but couldn’t’. (84-9)

Kerényi writes of the mother of the child god, so often, as established, ‘an orphan’ or ‘abandoned foundling’:

‘The mother has a peculiar part to play: she is and is *not* at the same time’.⁹⁶ The portrait device aptly fulfils

⁹⁵ See John Bowen, *Other Dickens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 92.

⁹⁶ Kerényi, ‘The Primordial Child’, in *The Myth of the Divine Child*, pp. 29-82 (p. 32).

this paradox for Dickens's purposes. Agnes is no more, yet present; her influence, in the form of her untold story, will continue to mould the unfurling narrative. Oliver feels drawn to the picture because he intuitively recognises a bond; the picture in turn becomes a possible conduit to a greater presence, Agnes's spirit, or at least the values her virtue embodies (Bowen's 'ethics and aesthetics'). The symbolic nexus must encompass both Oliver's assumption that his mother would feel for his 'hurt', just as he voiced his understanding of her 'broken heart'; bilateral empathy across the breach of death. Dickens ensures that the mother figures as 'always sweet and happy' in her child's dreams, the portrait's 'beautiful, mild face' augments that promise of a propitious end. That end is arbitrated through Agnes's faith in her son embodying 'the principle of Good', and the Christian edict of a good and just Lord; the teleology both Oliver's ('triumphing at last') and commensurate to the orthodox Christian belief system of Good trumping Evil, whatever 'hurt' is endured.⁹⁷

The language showcased here, with the continual recourse to expressions of equivocation, 'perhaps', 'almost', 'as if'; and repetitions exacerbating the emotional hyperbole – (' "You're very, very kind to me, ma'am", said Oliver') – shifts back to employ an defunct literary idiom. The sentimental novel, or novel of sensibility, had enjoyed fashionable status in the mid-to-late eighteenth century, epitomised by such works as Oliver Goldsmith's *Vicar of Wakefield* (1766), Lawrence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (1768), and Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* (1771).⁹⁸ The 'asterisks, dashes, meandering narrative and fragmentation' that Janet Todd defines as emblematic of the genre, were meant to convey 'emotion beyond words' and are replicated in Oliver's occasionally fractured phraseology.⁹⁹ 'I never, never will, sir', he assures Mr Brownlow (104); 'I — I — would rather go' he tells the Artful Dodger (141). These instances can be read individually as expressing fervour and tentative self-assertion; but the cadences of querulousness have long been in place: 'I am a very little boy, sir; and it is so — so — [...] So lonely, sir!', Oliver tells Mr Bumble (30). In the sentimental novel the device was self-conscious and became easy to parody. Dickens adopts it just enough in his characterisation of Oliver to suggest the seepage of feeling bearing its pressure upon the fast frame of words, but I would argue that the primary effect of the borrowing, at this level and to this degree, is to input something of the feminine sensibility into Dickens's feeling child.

⁹⁷ Cf. 'I wished to shew, in little Oliver, the principle of Good surviving through every adverse circumstance, and triumphing at last'. See 'Author's Preface', *Oliver Twist*, liii-lvii (liii).

⁹⁸ 'A form of fiction, popular in the 18th century, illustrating and promoting 'sensibility', a combination of virtue, ready sympathy and charitable impulse'; see 'Sentiment, novel of' in *Oxford History of English Literature*, ed. by Dinah Birch. On the genre and its origins, see Jerome J. McGann, *The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); and Timothy O'Hagan, 'Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778): The novel of sensibility', in *The Cambridge Companion to European Novelists*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 89-106.

⁹⁹ See Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London & New York: Methuen, 1986), p. 6.

‘Sensibility’, that ‘faculty of feeling, the capacity for extremely refined emotion and a quickness to display compassion for suffering’, was differentiated from sentiment by being displayed through the body.¹⁰⁰ The reactive body was inevitably connected to the feminine, as Janet Todd explains: ‘Women were thought to express emotions with their bodies more sincerely and spontaneously than men; hence their propensity to crying, blushing and fainting’.¹⁰¹ Crying, fainting, and turning pale (the inverse of blushing) are consistently characteristic of Oliver. This affiliates him more closely with the feminine, and the maternal legacy of feeling. It also raises the interesting premise that Oliver, in this tale in which the child was, for the first time, the ‘centre’, tantamount to the heroine.¹⁰² There is no leading romance in *Oliver Twist*; Harry and Rose peripheral (Sikes and Nancy offer the ‘flip’ version; with their joint badgering and jealousies; but also, at times, something unexpectedly moving, as when Nancy ‘kisse[s] the robber’s lips’ before she leaves for her meeting with Rose’; 319). So we are missing a heroine; and that dimension of future sexuality exploited, which creates such a frisson in *The Old Curiosity Shop* as Quilp lusts over Nell, is ostensibly absent too. Yet Oliver facilitates its antidote, an adulation of anaesthetised beauty, which often registers as vapid in Dickens. He attracts unilateral attention in this respect: Mr Grimwig is ‘strongly disposed to admit that Oliver’s appearance and manner were unusually prepossessing’; Toby Crackitt comments that ‘[h]is mug is a fortin’ to him’ (107; 160). We get a clue as to why when Dickens depicts the boy convalescent: ‘His wounded arm, bound and splintered up, was crossed upon his breast; his head reclined upon the other arm, which was half hidden by his long hair, as it streamed over the pillow’, evoking not only Gothicised images of female victimhood by artists such as Henry Fuseli and Benjamin West, but Romantic iconography of the doomed poet (230).

These discourses impact our reader response, so that we too, like Mrs Bedwin: ‘can’t bear, somehow, to let him go out of [our] sight’ (109). Oliver also summons up associationist memories in others, awaking somewhat mawkish sentiments. Mr Sowerberry’s funeral processions include ‘little Oliver headed, in a hat-band reaching down to his knees: to the indescribable admiration and emotion of all the mothers in the town’ (42). On the road, ‘[an] old lady, who had a shipwrecked grandson wandering barefooted in some distant part of the earth, took pity upon the poor orphan’ (56). Perhaps there is a more prurient dimension

¹⁰⁰ See Todd, *Sensibility*, p. 7. ‘In terms of the crucial mind/body dyad that shaped the original philosophical discussions, sensibility emphasises the mind in the body, sentimentality the body in the mind’; see McGann, *The Poetics of Sensibility*, p. 7.

¹⁰¹ Todd, *Sensibility*, p. 19.

¹⁰² ‘Dickens made the child the central as opposed to minor character’. See U.C. Knoepfelmacher, ‘Mutations of the Wordsworthian Child of Nature’, in *Nature and the Victorian Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California, 1977), ed. by U. C. Knoepfelmacher and G.B. Tennyson, pp. 391-425 (p. 422).

there too. John Bayley compares the compulsion the reader feels to both see the hero saved, and watch salaciously from the sidelines as more trials are undergone, to ‘the kind of novel in which the heroine, say, is immured in a brothel [...] we, like her, both shrink from her fate and desire it’.¹⁰³ Oliver’s early experience comprises a series of immurements, of being locked away; goaded into agency by being kept in the dark.

What kind of text might have influenced Dickens’s version of sensibility? *David Copperfield* (1850) famously pays tribute to the lauded storytellers of Dickens’s youth: Cervantes, Defoe, and Fielding.¹⁰⁴ Scholars emphasise the novelist’s debt to the picaresque form and eighteenth-century modes of humour and satire; as John Bowen notes, an ‘overwhelmingly masculine and comic tradition’.¹⁰⁵ Little attention is paid to the sentimental heritage, yet Dickens’s library included volumes by Maria Edgeworth and moral philosopher Adam Smith.¹⁰⁶ It also included a quintessential text of the sentimental genre that may even give us a source for the founding precepts of *Oliver Twist*, a novel by Sarah Fielding (Henry’s sister): *Adventures of David Simple, containing an Account of his Travels through London and Westminster in Search of a Real Friend* (1744).¹⁰⁷ There are many striking analogies between this text and *Oliver Twist*. The chief female characters are two sisters called ‘Nanny Johnson and Betty Trusty’, a small remove – in name if not in type – from Nancy and Bet. The title character is as innocent and well-meaning as his name suggests. David’s stated resolution is ‘to seek out one capable of being a real Friend, and to assist all those, who had been thrown into Misfortunes by the ill Usage of Others’.¹⁰⁸ This seems to pre-empt not only Oliver’s trials and inadvertent agency of aid (without Oliver, Rose Maylie’s birthright would never have been exposed), but a life-long obsession of Dickens’s. Soon after meeting Ellen Ternan, he confided to John Forster that: ‘a sense comes always crashing on me now, when I fall into low spirits, as of one happiness I have missed in life, and one friend and companion I have never made’.¹⁰⁹ David Simple’s median role, somewhere between human and

¹⁰³ John Bayley, ‘Things as they Really Are’, in *Dickens in the Twentieth Century*, pp. 49-66 (p. 50).

¹⁰⁴ When David turns to reading ‘for company’; citing ‘Tom Jones’, ‘Don Quixote’ and ‘Robinson Crusoe’ amongst others. See Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, ed. by Nina Burgis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) p. 53.

¹⁰⁵ Bowen, ‘Englishman and European’, in *European Novelists*, p. 211.

¹⁰⁶ See *Catalogue of the Library of Charles Dickens from Gadshill*.

¹⁰⁷ It is listed as: ‘Fielding, Miss, sister of Novelist, *Adventures of David Simple, containing an Account of his Travels through London and Westminster in Search of a Real Friend*, by a Lady 1772 8vo’. The binding is recorded as ‘broken’, which suggests use. See *Reprints of the Catalogues of the Libraries of Charles Dickens*, p. 52.

¹⁰⁸ The quotation in full reads: ‘“What is it that you are seeking?” David answered, “It was a Person who could be trusted, one who was capable of being a real Friend; whose every Action proceeded either from Obedience to the Divine Will, or from the Delight he took in doing good; who/ could not see another’s Sufferings without Pain, nor his Pleasures without sharing them”’. See Sarah Fielding, *The Adventures of David Simple*, ed. by Linda Bree (London: Penguin Books, 2002), p. 68.

¹⁰⁹ Quoted by Edmund Wilson in *The Wound and the Bow: Seven Studies in Literature* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1997), p. 55.

blessed being, is acknowledged by others: one character deems him an ‘Angel’; another claims that his ‘Goodness [has] worked a Miracle’.¹¹⁰ This presages Mr Losberne’s warning that ‘it would be little short of a miracle, if she [Rose Maylie] recovered’; and foregrounds Oliver’s presence as agency (261). David’s own progress is bedevilled by his brother Daniel, who dupes him out of his rightful inheritance of their mutual father’s fortune; so foreshadowing Monks’s wiles. When David is betrayed by Nanny, with whom he is in love, we are told that: ‘Poor David’s Heart was ready to burst’.¹¹¹ We find, throughout *Oliver Twist*, not only a consistent reference to Oliver’s ‘heart’ both physical and symbolic, but many references to Oliver’s being at breaking point, a true *coeur sensible* (bleeding heart).

In fact, the references to Oliver being ‘insensible’ are endemic; a term Dickens’s uses widely in his fiction, but of inaugural pertinence to the loss of consciousness in this personification of accentuated consciousness.¹¹² The word now reads as antiquated, a baroque hybrid, yet shows up a curious analogy between an idiomatic quirk particular to the sentimental novel and a phenomenon within *Oliver Twist*. Erik Erämetsä’s study of the language and lexicon of the genre discusses how commonly employed pejorative adjectives, ‘unkind’, ‘ungenerous’, ‘unfeeling’, emphasise the goodness they negate.¹¹³ Dickens uses this device throughout *Oliver Twist*; and in a telling albeit apparently peripheral description of London preparing for business, describes opening trade as ‘unclosed’.¹¹⁴ This strategy of housing one concept within another so it beams through, so ably emblematised through word use, reflects the novel’s dynamic as a whole: the ‘flip’ potentiality that I have already highlighted. Dickens’s entire method in *Oliver Twist* is fraught with the tension of the adjacent other: good rubs shoulders with evil on a continuum. The reader gets a perpetual reminiscence of upset through the vagaries of contentment in the Mrs Maylie’s rural retreat; equally the scenes of criminal fraternity are charged with the bonhomie of true camaraderie. A more discursive thematic patterning enchains alternatives from opposite ends of the moral spectrum within story. Oliver is advertised for service at five guineas, then five pounds; Mr Brownlow (if it is indeed he) offers ‘fifty pounds’ for Sikes

¹¹⁰ Quoted by Linda Bree, ‘Introduction: Fiction in the 1840s’, *David Simple*, xxi.

¹¹¹ Sarah Fielding, *David Simple*, p. 40.

¹¹² For example: ‘But, for many days, Oliver remained insensible to all the goodness of his new friends’; ‘Still Oliver lay motionless and insensible on the spot where Sikes had left him’. *Oliver Twist*, pp. 83, 219.

¹¹³ See Erik Erämetsä, *A Study of the Word ‘Sentimental’ and of other Characteristics of Eighteenth Century Sentimentalism in England* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Tiedeakatamian, 1951), pp. 103, 116. I owe the prompt to this source to Janet Todd, p. 4.

¹¹⁴ ‘By degrees, other shops began to be unclosed; and a few scattered people were met with’. *Oliver Twist*, p. 163.

brought in alive (411).¹¹⁵ Oliver begs permission to ‘run away and die in the fields’; Sikes leaves him in a ditch, and Fagin taunts Nancy with the hypothesis that Oliver is ‘Left in a ditch, Nance, only think!’ (172; 201). The novel’s lexicon and story provide a limited number of musical chairs: occupants must leave their mark in order that their seat be not confused or taken for another. (The ‘mark’ is an important concept; with Nancy repatriating the ‘mark’ of the branded prostitute as the legacy of her effect).¹¹⁶ The morally viable alternative at least dictates the evil [sub]version; it retains the supreme determinant function within the text, which is spoken against, but simultaneously given credence. Sikes uses religion to explicate his meaning; casually but crucially, effectively, knowing that it will immediately be clear: ‘He’s as willing as a Christian, strike me blind if he isn’t!’; ‘They’re soft-hearted psalm-singers, or they wouldn’t have taken him in at all’ (119; 125).

The most challenging outcome of this is the temptation to countenance moral slippage through the locus of Oliver’s moral resilience. John Lucas has deduced that Oliver’s sighting of Fagin and Monks, through the penumbra of a waking dream, ‘is the nearest he comes to corruption [...] it offers a hint that even in the country the boy’s mind may be infected by Fagin’s world’.¹¹⁷ A more credible fork in the road comes when Oliver reads the Newgate Calendar and finds his imagination engaged, albeit repelled, by the tales of evil doing. The Calendar is tantamount to the criminal bible. Charlie Bates is horrified to think that the Artful might not merit inclusion: ‘How will he stand in the Newgate Calendar?’ (351). It is a testament to confederacy, enforced narrative confederacy through an inventory of unrelated episodes perhaps, but nevertheless a means of yoking a disparate group together.¹¹⁸ Oliver has reached his limit of endurance; this is his Garden of Gethsemane moment: ‘In a paroxysm of fear, the boy closed the book, and thrust it from him. Then, falling upon his knees, he prayed Heaven to spare him from such deeds; and rather to will that he should die at once, than be reserved for such crimes, so careful and appalling’ (157). Both the ardour of Oliver’s self-admonition, which suggests a fear that the other is more proximate than he would like, and Dickens’s language, are telling. What does Oliver most fear? ‘[B]e reserved for such crimes’ could mean

¹¹⁵ I had not identified this spectator as Brownlow until I read John Lucas who, I think rightly, discerns a sinister aspect to the representation of benign old gentleman turned predator. See John Lucas, *The Melancholy Man*, 2nd edn (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980), p. 48.

¹¹⁶ ‘Let him be—let him be—or I shall put that mark on some of you, that will bring me to the gallows before my time’. *Oliver Twist*, p. 126. The ‘mark’ is apposite to both punitive branding and the witches’ mark or distinguishing blemish.

¹¹⁷ Lucas, p 31.

¹¹⁸ The idea of annals proves suggestive in relation to the book’s criminal underclass. Fagin’s core ethos, ‘tak[ing] care of number one’, proposes confederacy by analogy as opposed to through connective bonds: ‘you can’t consider yourself as number one, without considering me too as the same [...] it’s your object to take care of number one – meaning yourself’. *Oliver Twist*, pp. 348-9.

either as victim or as perpetrator. The degree of Oliver's imaginative investment is revealed when he arrives with Sikes near the site of the intended burglary. '“The water!” thought Oliver, turning sick with fear. “He has brought me to this lonely place to murder me!”' (168). The Newgate Calendar is replete with tales of 'secret murders that had been committed by the lonely wayside: and bodies hidden from the eye of man in deep pits and wells' (157).

Of course 'infect[ion]' of mind is not simply a matter of imaginative pull, it is also dispensed through cognitive influence; the assumption of tactics and ironies (sadly lacking in the Maylie world). Oliver reveals how he has learnt flexibility of mind, essential to metamorphic criminal practice wherein the contingent is always relevant, when he tells a single, rare, joke. The Dodger and Charlie are advocating the opportunity for self-advancement within Fagin's purportedly confederate business. 'Why, where's your spirit?' jeers the Dodger; 'Would you go and be dependent on your friends?' (141). After a bit of mutual hedging, Oliver introduces a new tangent: '“You can leave your friends, though,” said Oliver with a half smile; “and let them be punished for what you did”' (142). The 'half smile' hints at the 'priggish' edge that critics have discerned; but in the high-minded admonition there is also a recognition of strategy, and the concession of humour helps ameliorate wrong.¹¹⁹

Thinking Oliver

Dickens employs a technique with Oliver that is almost unique in his characterisation of the early period, and which has been consistently overlooked by critics. He goes within: he documents Oliver's thought processes, and he legitimises this strategy by devising a linguistic game around the concept of 'mind', and (as so often) a dangerous equivalence in the counter-phenomenon of criminal vigilance.

My argument on Oliver's thinking is dependent on three separate premises. Firstly, that Dickens represents Oliver as having a distinctly pragmatic turn of mind which augers well for his resilience in the real 'world'.¹²⁰ Secondly, that Oliver's register of circumstance segregates into two types of cognitive activity that in some respects work against each other. He thinks constructively, sometimes with a degree of cunning, but he also has extraordinary (perhaps mystical) powers of retention. Encased within Oliver, this creates a psychological duality equivalent to that well-known binary between energy and passivity in Dickens's work,

¹¹⁹ '[A] priggish condescension that has more to do with class than crime'. See Dominic Rainsford, *Authorship, Ethics and the Reader: Blake, Dickens, Joyce* (London: Macmillan Press, 1997), p. 110.

¹²⁰ Cf. 'He belonged to the world again', *Oliver Twist*, p. 86.

well paralleled in the contrast between the ever-changing dynamic of the city and the memory-bound stasis of the countryside. Thirdly, that we must understand Oliver's emotional psyche as different – and occasionally oppositional – to what we might term his thinking psyche. This emotional psyche is privileged by an *a priori* intimation of human experience. This construction, on Dickens's part, is given credence by tropes of sensibility already addressed. It also raises questions about Dickens's engagement with Enlightenment theorists such as Locke and Rousseau, as well as with the Romantic poets.¹²¹

We first find Oliver responding with tactical intelligence when Mr Bumble threatens to remove him from Mrs Mann's (spurious) care: 'Young as he was [...] he had sense enough to make a feint of feeling great regret at going away' (8). When confronted by the 'live board', Oliver 'was not quite certain whether he ought to laugh or cry' (9). Again, he is judiciously aware of the fact that either reaction might be helpful in this situation, no doubt schooled by workhouse dynamics: you can flatter a bully by feigning laughter; or appease them by displaying tearful abjection. When Oliver requests an extra portion of gruel, having drawn the short straw amongst his peers, he approaches 'the master, basin and spoon in hand, [and] said: somewhat alarmed at his own temerity: "Please, sir, I want some more" ' (12). The elegant turn of phrase may be duly ironic – Oliver can hardly afford to indulge in mannered self-regard – but this still allows a space for self-assessment: an interval between thought and action (it is also ironic in being the moment, perhaps, when Oliver is least speaking from individual impulse).

Such a privileging of Oliver's inner mindset (at its most compromised), helps body out the character when all around him regard his self as non-existent. This is explicitly satirised, and foreshadows the crux moment in the story when the doctor, Mr Losberne, summarises the likely attitude of the Bow Street Runners to Oliver: 'What is he, after all, they would say?' (238). *What*, not *who*: a veritable 'item of mortality' (1). Hence, when Oliver is advertised to willing trade, coinage takes priority over person: 'five pounds and Oliver Twist were offered to any man or woman who wanted an apprentice' (15). There is a more insidious idiom which further satirises this ludicrous inversion of rightful order and values in society at large. When Dickens envisages the likely outcome of the board's treatment of Oliver, he reasons that the boy might pre-empt the process: 'by tying one end of his pocket-handkerchief to a hook in the wall, and attaching himself to the other' (15). The strange syntax lets us down to Oliver, as subsidiary factor, and flips the concept of suicide by figuring

¹²¹ John Locke (1632-1704), author of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) and *Some Thoughts on Education* (1693); Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), author of *Émile Or Treatise on Education* (1762).

desperation as judgement. Ditto: when Oliver is ‘ordered to put himself into a clean shirt’ the human self becomes a passive appendage; the shirt the superior guise (19). This is shadowed by the broader idiom of inversion that applies across the novel, when Dickens comments that Oliver’s mother weathered ‘difficulties and pain that would have killed any *well-disposed* woman weeks before’; or when the ‘conversation’ between busybody carers is ‘*interrupted* by a moan from the sick woman’ (51; 186: italics mine). Dickens is pressing the point home: the fortunate have construed that others’ pain is a bother inflicted upon society by the respective sufferers; the idiom suggests will is involved, as opposed to ungovernable circumstance.

Oliver’s pragmatism aids him as he sets off on his own in the world, having escaped Mr Sowerberry’s business of death. We learn that ‘he sat down to rest [...] began to think, for the first time, where he had better go to try to live’ (54). ‘[G]o to try to live’: the phrase is as operable as any in Dickens for gently teasing out the ambiguities of language. For Oliver, ‘liv[ing]’ is a matter of supporting himself; making a living, as it would be for a mature adult.¹²² But it is also facilitating an opening in the text for Oliver to become more himself, to grow as a person. It hangs fire in the way that Dickens’s best phrases do. Later, we find Oliver asked directly by Mr Brownlow about how he intends ‘to live’, in effect:

‘How should you like to grow up a clever man, and write books, eh?’
‘I think I would rather read them, sir,’ replied Oliver.
‘What! Wouldn’t you like to be a book-writer?’ said the old gentleman.
Oliver considered a little while; and at last said, he should think it would be a much better thing to be a bookseller; upon which the old gentleman laughed heartily, and declared he had said a very good thing. When Oliver felt glad to have done, though he by no means knew what it was.
(103)

The exchange is a good indication of Oliver’s innate pragmatism (‘he by no means knew what it was’) and, crucially, differentiates him from his benefactor. Dominic Rainsford has criticised the household dynamic: ‘The future, for all these characters, seems to hold nothing more than placid retrospection’.¹²³ Mr Brownlow looks back to the girl he loved (Edward Leaford’s sister); to lost acquaintances from a distant past (‘a vast amphitheatre of faces over which a dusky curtain had hung’; 77). This character type prefigures the schoolmaster in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), with ‘a lonely air about him and his house’: both scholars, revealing Dickens’s own rather fraught relationship with the inward excavation process essential to

¹²² And is prospectively for Pip’s siblings, ‘who gave up trying to get a living, exceedingly early in that universal struggle’. See Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. by Charlotte Mitchel (London: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 3.

¹²³ See Rainsford, p. 112.

creativity, that he countered by physical exercise and a constant harangue to press forward.¹²⁴ Revealingly, when Dickens started a diary in January 1838 he was all tough self-regulation: ‘henceforth I make a steadfast resolution not to neglect or *paint* [this diary]’ but quickly capitulated: ‘[t]here ends this brief attempt at a diary. I grow sad over this checking off of days, and I can’t do it’.¹²⁵ The act of ‘checking off the days’ was presumably recessionary in an unproductive way, sabotaging his forward momentum, and this must be understood as a different creative dynamic to that Dickens indulges in his more elegiac or sentimental fiction.¹²⁶ Oliver’s refutation of the ‘Man of Letters’ role, immortalised by Carlyle in his 1837-40 lecture series and accepted by David Copperfield as his rightful vocation, is significant.¹²⁷ Oliver has seen the bookseller ply his trade, he instinctively understands that for man or society to move forward there must be some form of circulation in place, whether that of economic capital or viable daily activity. The bookseller also appears to offer a lending service, perhaps inspired by Dickens’s contemporary Charles Edward Mudie, ratifying that circulation model.¹²⁸ We get a sense of this surprising strain in Oliver later in the story when he appeals to Rose to make practical use of his presence: ‘if I could but work for you’ (248). Action is the antidote to Oliver’s retentive, affective, psychology; and as he matures it is possible that he has an inkling of this.

Oliver is also good at reading people and using the resulting insights. When Mrs Bedwin turns him away from Agnes’s portrait he does not let on that he retains the image mentally: ‘he thought it better not to worry the kind old lady’ (89). Oliver’s objective self acts as an ancillary to his subjective self and often pushes him to act for his own best interests. Alone with Nancy on the eve of the attempted burglary, we learn that:

Oliver could see that he had some power over the girl’s better feelings; and, for an instant, thought of appealing to her compassion for his helpless state. But, then, the thought darted across his mind that it was barely eleven o’clock; and that many people were still in the streets: of whom surely some might be found to give credence to his tale (159)

¹²⁴ John Forster on his friend’s walking addiction: ‘His notion of finding rest from mental exertion in as much bodily exertion of equal severity, continued with him to the last’. Quoted by Bodenheimer, *Knowing Dickens*, p. 178. ‘In his plain old suit of black, he looked pale and meagre. They fancied, too, a lonely air about him and his house’; *The Old Curiosity Shop*, p. 188.

¹²⁵ See ‘A Dickens’s Diary’ (1838-41), reproduced in *The Pilgrim Edition of The Letters of Charles Dickens*, 10 vols, I, ‘Appendix A’, pp. 629-43 (p. 631). It gradually becomes a more factual record without subjective elaboration.

¹²⁶ Perhaps a combination of small-scale calibration, ‘days’, and the lack of a prospective audience, hampered Dickens’s stretch.

¹²⁷ In his lecture series ‘Heroes and Hero Worship’ (1837-40) Carlyle, a friend of Dickens’s, considered the ‘Hero’ as Divinity, Prophet, Poet, Priest, and Man of Letters. See Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes and Hero Worship, and the Heroic in History* (London: James Fraser, 1841).

¹²⁸ ‘There are some books to be taken back, too’. *Oliver Twist*, p. 108. Mudie launched his lending library in 1840 and in 1842 a subsidiary subscription service ‘lending out one exchangeable volume to subscribers at the rate of a guinea per annum’, from his Bloomsbury site. See Henry Curwen, *A History of Booksellers: The Old and the New* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1873), p. 425.

Dickens provides an incremental tracking of Oliver's thought process, as he weighs up two possible means of escape. When it comes to it, however, Oliver utilises neither potential advantage: appealing to her tenderness, or alerting (another kind of) street walker. His own compassion comes to the fore: 'the girl's voice was in his ear: beseeching him in such tones of agony to remember her [...] he had not the heart to utter [a cry]' (160). Oliver's affective personality (feeling Oliver) acts to thwart a more selfish instinct, which nevertheless could have facilitated his rescue at an earlier stage in the story. It is curious to note that, when Nancy first enters his room, Oliver has just laid aside the Newgate Calendar. Given the emotion he has displayed only moments before, it reads as odd that he has the presence of mind to '[stir] the fire'.¹²⁹ It is a small gesture but shows up Oliver's mastery of the situation, attested by his level-headed questions and the objectivity that allows him to recognise and conceptualise the 'power' he has 'over the girl's better feelings'. In fact, as he matures, Dickens bequeathes 'thinking Oliver' with something comparable to the literary cognitive critic's premise of 'mental set': an ability to critique subjective reactions, and judge how to utilise them to most advantageous end, a development of that earlier propensity, as already discussed.¹³⁰

When Oliver is completely passive and drained of ingenuity, he is at his most vulnerable. As discussed in my thesis introduction, there is a wonderful little anchor point in the novel when he first encounters the Dodger. Oliver has been shut out of every shelter and is running out of ideas. So he sits on a door-step and we are told: 'He had no heart to beg. And there he sat' (56). Dickens's prose stalls in sympathy. At that very moment the Artful (never so deserving of his name) clocks his prey. Had Oliver been less psychologically depleted at this juncture, or deprived of forward momentum, he may have been more wary of this charming 'strange young gentleman' (57). Oliver himself has been judged as 'strange' by consecutive inn landladies, who fear that he is a thief; a particular irony given the person he is about to meet.¹³¹ So he discloses himself immediately, with a drowsy sense of epic potentiality that only fuels the Dodger's purpose: 'I am very hungry and tired [...] I have walked a long way. I have been walking these seven days' (57). There may be

¹²⁹ 'Oliver stirred the fire.' *Oliver Twist*, p. 158.

¹³⁰ 'Mental set is the readiness to respond in a certain way. It is, obviously, an adaption device of great survival value'. See Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006), p. 18. Zunshine connects this to our enjoyment of fiction, 'predicated – at least in part – upon our awareness of our 'trying on' mental states', p. 17.

¹³¹ '[H]e would stand about the inn-yards, and look mournfully at every one who passed; a proceeding which generally terminated in the landlady's ordering one of the postboys [...] to drive that strange boy out of the place, for she was sure he was going to steal something'. *Oliver Twist*, p. 56.

deliberate echo of the Seven Days of Creation; just as Oliver's waiting outside successive hostile inns echoes the Christmas story.¹³²

'Thinking over all he had seen and heard'

What I term Oliver's retentive mind-set is both a blessing and a burden, epitomising the split between his sacred, tutelary, function and his own local need to survive within the context of the novel's realist paradigm and the plot itself. Early on in the novel we get a sense of how seriously Oliver takes experience, and how he not only absorbs but meditates upon it. Having witnessed the ignominy of those associated with Mr Sowerberry's business, from avaricious kin to inattentive clergymen, we are privy to Oliver's response:

Oliver wondered, in his own mind, whether it had taken a very long time to get Mr Sowerberry used to it [this way of life]. But he thought it better not to ask the question; and walked back to the shop: thinking over all he had seen and heard (41)

It is an important passage, again highlighting the concept of 'mind' and giving notational space to its workings. Oliver instinctively recognises that it would be useless to voice his concerns, which in their effrontery would show up multiple hypocrisies. So we are given the first indication of Oliver having to internalise this reflective, critical, faculty (and its dark surmises). The passage also signals that this capacity may be part of his hypothesised divinity, or blessed dimension, especially – as implied here – if that thinking equates to disinterested evaluation of human behaviour. The chapter's closing phrase echoes the First Epistle to the Corinthians: 'But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him' (1 Corinthians 2.9). This critique of the human being's ordinarily dull comprehension is then ameliorated by a reference to the special kind of insight mediated by the Holy Spirit: 'But God hath revealed *them* unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God' (1 Corinthians 2.10).

The novel could certainly sustain a reading advancing the idea that Oliver has a priestly function incarnate: 'vessel' as much as vassal, literally informed by the 'principle of Good' as if blessed by the deity.¹³³ Were we to advance this symbolic reading, we could cast Dick as an embodiment of the Holy Spirit, bequeathing an inaugural blessing that is little understood but efficacious. Dick represents a degree of unreality that provides

¹³² 'And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made'. Genesis 2. 2. All Bible references are to The King James Version.

¹³³ As Steven Marcus puts it elegantly: 'Oliver is the vessel of Grace, but a grace that has been secularised and transformed into a principle of character'. See Marcus, p. 80.

a contrast to Oliver, showcasing the latter's amphibious constitution as part-symbol, part-realist construct. Whereas Little Nell is given a narrative frame of Christian sentiment but sometimes seems to recoil from its edicts, Dick is completely accepting of Christian dictum. It houses his illogic; all the more gratefully as so clearly dependent upon punitive life experience. He announces to an astonished Mr Bumble that he is 'glad to die when [...] very young' so as to be on equal footing with his 'little sister [...] in Heaven' (133). It is possible that Dickens's characterisation of this troublingly blithe rhetorical and theoretical confidence was inspired by Wordsworth's 'We are Seven' from the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), the one work by the Romantic poet he is on record as praising.¹³⁴ In it, a spectrally lovely child – whose 'beauty' makes the narrator 'glad'; a Wordsworthian adjective, brimming with glittering indebtedness, echoing by Dick/Dickens – conceives of her deceased siblings as analogous to those living, so compounding her argument and the poem's title.¹³⁵

Dickens's own version of Christianity is well-documented; his hatred of dogma, obtuse texts; his humanist rationale that man's relation to God is defined by his earthly doings.¹³⁶ Yet equally he could invest wholeheartedly in illogic and superstition, especially when it seemed to mark him out; to fulfil a need. In September 1844 he recounted a 'curious dream' in which Mary Hogarth had appeared before him, and advocated the Roman Catholic religion: 'for *you*, it is the best!'.¹³⁷ Something of this perversity informs the characterisation of Dick, both summarily affective for the moment he is in play; then dispensed coldly by story as reality regains a grip: 'Dick was immediately taken away, and locked up in the coal-cellar' (134).¹³⁸

Yet Dickens is careful to establish Dick as a quasi-Biblical figure whose symbolic cachet transcends any concerns his temporal naiveté engenders. In one of the novel's most eerie vignettes, Oliver spots Dick at first light, before anyone else has risen: 'A child was weeding one of the little beds; and as he stopped, he raised

¹³⁴ See Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth and the Victorians* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 115. 'We are Seven', in *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads, 1798 and 1802*, ed. by Fiona Stafford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 49-51.

¹³⁵ 'Her eyes were fair, and very fair|—Her beauty made me glad [...] "How many? seven in all," she said,|And wondering looked at me [...] Two of us in the church-yard lie,|My sister and my brother,|And in the church-yard cottage, I|Dwell near them with my mother.'" 'We are Seven', *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 49.

¹³⁶ See Walder; and Valentine Cunningham, 'Dickens and Christianity' in *Oxford Companion to Charles Dickens*, pp. 255-76.

¹³⁷ Charles Dickens to John Forster, Letters, IV, pp. 195-97, p. 196; see also Walder, pp. 10-11. On his visit to Italy that same year, 1844, Dickens had generally taken against the ostentation of Roman Catholicism. See Charles Dickens, *Pictures from Italy*, ed. by Kate Flint (London: Penguin, 1998).

¹³⁸ As Robert Douglas-Fairhurst notes: 'The mixture of sentimental regret and ruthless efficiency is typical of what later children could expect from Dickens's pen'. See Douglas-Fairhurst, p. 36.

his pale face, and disclosed the features of one of his former companions' (53).¹³⁹ Dick shows unlikely autonomy; for a moment in control of his locale. The scene has a Blakean tenor: erudite, poetic and strange.¹⁴⁰ It evokes the Book of Genesis: 'And the LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed' (Genesis 2. 8) The subsequent action seems estranged from the story proper:

'Kiss me,' said the child, climbing the low gate, and flinging his little arms around Oliver's neck. 'Good-b'ye, dear! God bless you!'
The blessing was from a young child's lips, but it was the first that Oliver had ever heard invoked upon his head; and through all the struggles and sufferings, and troubles and changes, of his after life, he never once forgot it (54)

Rainsford discerns an 'erotic element' here, but it seems moreover an ardent testament to the trust and completeness that absolute faith manifests, however sceptical the beholder.¹⁴¹ And what is key, of course, is the fact that we again have reference to Oliver's retentive mind, not comprehending all that Dick's blessing implies in theistic terms, perhaps, but still acknowledging the gesture as one of overreaching love with comparable reach: 'he never once forgot it' (54). Oliver's memory of this moment, both inevitable and implicitly purposed, consciously held, provides a talismanic aide through life. In a sense the encounter resembles one of Wordsworth's 'spots of time': a moment which is imprinted upon the consciousness.¹⁴²

Dick's spiritual legacy is confirmed by Oliver's own eventual role as ad hoc 'gardener' to Rose and Mrs Maylie: 'There was always something to do in the garden, or about the plants, to which Oliver: who had studied the science also, under the same master, who was a gardener by trade: applied himself with hearty goodwill' (255). Dickens is careful to emphasise the seriousness of Oliver's interest, and Mr Losberne good-humouredly alludes to him as a would-be botanist: 'Oliver [...] ought to be ranging the meadows after botanical phenomena of all kinds' (282). Oliver's unerring navigation of the rural landscape when taking news of Rose's illness to the doctor is surely predicated by such outdoor study: 'Swiftly he ran across the

¹³⁹ Dick's 'pale face' is the first of many such, disjoined from the gloaming, foretelling death, most pertinently Nancy's: 'looking up in her face as they passed a gas-lamp, [Oliver] saw that it had turned a deadly white'. *Oliver Twist*, p. 120.

¹⁴⁰ F. R. Leavis mused: 'I have again and again thought how like Blake he is in his strongest work'; quoted by Coveney, p. 18. Critics have explored thematic analogies but agree that 'it is probable that Dickens never heard of his neglected predecessor'. See Rainsford, p. 108.

¹⁴¹ Rainsford, p. 108.

¹⁴² Wordsworth's epic poem *The Prelude*, though composed and revised over the period 1798-1850, was published posthumously (1850); so Dickens cannot have read it when he wrote *Oliver Twist*. Nevertheless the countryside section uses words and phrases which evoke Wordsworth's characteristic idiom; such as 'It was a lovely spot to which they repaired', 'peace and quietude', 'gentle influence'; *Oliver Twist*, p. 253. We can only assume it is in an 'affinity', to use Stephen Gill's word, and an example of the availability of such a Romantic lexicon. See Gill, p. 8.

fields, and down the little lanes that sometimes divided them' (259). Again, Oliver provides provides a secularised, adaptive, version of what Dick established within a monolithic archetype. Dick is the pre-Fall figure, ill-equipped for reality or semi-realist genre, and accordingly must suffer eviction as the narrative re-orientates towards the future (114). Oliver must function in the (Enlightened) world, in which science challenges superstition and husbandry accedes to knowledgable specialism; the latter, of course, informing the medical practice that enables Mr Losberne to save Rose's life.

Oliver and godhead – two

Oliver has no true collaborator in the novel: no one who shares his early traumatic experience and no one of his own age after his separation from Dick. His loneliness is both apposite to his role as a quasi-divine child, and something he suffers the very human consequences of. Oliver's enforced attempts to arbitrate between the auspices of specialness and mortal weakness make him a Christ figure in miniature, rather than simply a 'Christian child'.¹⁴³ Dickens identifies – and draws out – the paradox relating to Jesus Christ's own experience as narrated in the New Testament. Embodying both divinity and realised humanity, Christ's story shows up the schisms of this pairing; the Agony in the Garden embodying loneliness more summarily than any other account within the philosophical, religious, or literary canon. It is of course wrong to make the grandiose claim that Dickens saw Christ in Oliver, but in his own interpretation of the Gospel story we see certain elements loom large that help make sense of loneliness as a central idea within his fiction and his own life.

Oliver takes both Mr Bumble and the reader by surprise when he reveals his loneliness with great passion; and in more words than he used until this point:

[...] 'no, no, sir; I will be good indeed; indeed; indeed; indeed I will, sir! I am a very little boy, sir; and it is so—so—'
'So what?' inquired Mr Bumble in amazement.
'So lonely, sir! So very lonely!' cried the child. 'Everybody hates me. Oh! sir, don't, don't pray be cross to me!' The child beat his hand across his heart; and looked at his companion's face, with tears of real agony. (30)

Dickens shows the abused child anticipating persecution with psychological veracity; fear having morphed into erroneous feelings of culpability, and the expectation that upset will incite anger. But his foregrounding of loneliness challenges this realist paradigm. It would be more natural for a child to express their pain

¹⁴³ 'Oliver is the *lusus naturae*, a Christian child'. See Marcus, p. 82.

through temporal and visceral states: cold, hunger, exhaustion; or fear, misery, unhappiness – catch-all terms which convey the sensation of reality becoming unbearable for one untutored in idiomatic or theoretical niceties. But loneliness, which Oliver articulates in a rush of recognition, is an evolved state: an interpretation of all those things together, through the specific bias of endurance of them without company. It could be read as the first juncture in which the tension between Oliver as realist character and symbolic agent manifests, intimated – and thereby choreographed – by Oliver to some degree. The divine figure is necessarily solitary; loneliness is the human consequence of solitariness. Carl Kerényi writes of how the ‘nursing of the child by divinities or wild beasts in the myth of Zeus [...] show us two things: the *solitariness* of the child god, and the fact that he is nevertheless *at home* in the primeval world – an equivocal situation, at once that of the orphan child and a cherished son of the gods’.¹⁴⁴

The figure of Jesus Christ offers a synonym for this ‘equivocal situation’ in the Christian tradition. During the years 1846 to ‘49 Dickens wrote ‘simple prayers and a plain version of *The Life of Our Lord*’ for his children; so contemporary to his revision of *Oliver Twist* for the authoritative 1846 edition.¹⁴⁵ *The Life of Our Lord* provides a fascinating, albeit little-read, insight into Dickens’s mindset at that time. The task that Dickens set himself was essentially one of editing: he cannot include all the gospel stories so he selects a mixture, mostly from the Gospels According to St Matthew and St Luke. His is a subjective election that applies as much to minutiae as to substantive content. Dickens is careful, for example, to state that Jesus was ‘twelve years old’ when Joseph and Mary take him to ‘a Religious Feast [...] in the Temple of Jerusalem’; lose then relocate him, ‘sitting in the Temple, talking about the goodness of God [...] with some learned men’.¹⁴⁶ It is a decisive moment in which the child Jesus reveals his godhead to his parents; divides himself from them for the first time. Jesus’s alleged age is only cited in St Luke’s Gospel: ‘And when he was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem after the custom of the feast’ (Luke 2. 42). Why did Dickens choose to make this detail prominent? At twelve he was sent to Warren’s Blacking Factory. The age was thereby significant not only because this experience was traumatic, but because it marked a time when he first challenged himself to fulfil an alternative destiny; and used his powers of observation to gather material for

¹⁴⁴ Kerényi, ‘The Primordial Child in Primordial Times’; in Jung and Kerényi, p. 33.

¹⁴⁵ See Walder, p. 13.

¹⁴⁶ Charles Dickens, *The Life of Our Lord* (London: Associated Newspapers, 1934; repr. London: Collins & Co., 1970), p. 23.

future art ('I have been abroad in the world from a mere child').¹⁴⁷ We cannot preclude the idea that Dickens found the alignment between his age and that of Jesus's self-disclosure appealing.

Dickens's retelling of the Gospel stories show him putting especial emphasis upon the blessedness inherent to the child. He relays almost verbatim a passage from St Matthew's Gospel. Here is the original in full:

At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?/ And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them,/ And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven./ Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven./ And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me./ But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea. (Matthew 18. 1-6).

Dickens's version is as follows:

The Disciples asked him, 'Master, who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?' Jesus called a little child to him, and took him in his arms, and stood among them, and answered, 'a child like this. I say unto you that none but those who are as humble as little children shall enter into Heaven. Whosoever shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me. But whosoever hurts one of them, it were better for him that he had a millstone tied around his neck, and were drowned in the depths of the sea. The angels are all children.' Our Saviour loved the child, and loved all children.¹⁴⁸

We can accept that the emphasis upon the child's sanctity was there partly to make his own children feel connected to the Bible story, but the twists that Dickens administers are significant for his writing too.¹⁴⁹

Dickens makes a break from his source (and breezily amends doctrine) when he states: 'The angels are all children'. This sentiment perhaps underpins the narrator's gnostic acknowledgement of value in *The Old Curiosity Shop*: 'I love these little people; and it is not a slight thing when they, who are so fresh from God, love us'.¹⁵⁰ The repeated use of the suffix 'little' in both Bible text and Dickens's version concurs with his use of that appellative, or similar ('Tiny Tim'), throughout his work; in reference to characters within story and without. The 'millstone' image takes us straight to *Oliver Twist*. Mr Bumble identifies Oliver as 'a

¹⁴⁷ '[Dickens] remembered, no doubt, how the seeds of his intuitive genius were already present in the imagination of the boy of twelve'. See Angus Wilson, 'Dickens on Children and Childhood', in *Dickens 1970: Centenary Essays* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1970), pp. 195-227, p. 207. See also Dickens's letter to J.H. Kuenzel, [?] July 1838: 'As to my means of observation, they have been pretty extensive. I have been abroad in the world from a mere child', *Letters*, I, pp. 423-24 (p. 424).

¹⁴⁸ *Life of Our Lord*, pp. 55-6.

¹⁴⁹ As per Dickens's title: 'Entitled by Dickens *The Children's New Testament*, it was never intended for publication, but was at last published in 1934'. See Jennifer Gribble, 'The Bible in Great Expectations', *Dickens Quarterly* 25, (2008) 232-40 (p. 239). fn. 3.

¹⁵⁰ *The Old Curiosity Shop*, p. 12.

deadweight, a millstone [...] round the parochial throat' (27). The source has been acknowledged, though the full irony is only evident upon reading the Matthew verse in full (Mr Bumble receives retribution of a kind).

Dickens gives empathetic heft to Jesus Christ's story by emphasising his loneliness. After Judas's betrayal, Dickens relays the response of the other disciples:

No one offered to protect Him, except Peter, who, having a sword, drew it, and cut off the right ear of the High Priest's Servant [...] But Jesus made him sheath his sword, and gave himself up. Then, all the disciples forsook Him, and fled; and there remained not one – not one – to bear Him company.¹⁵¹

'Not one – not one – to bear Him company'. The querulous strain again suggests Dickens indulging a personal affinity. Throughout his career he was vexed by the dual pressure of public exposure and an absence of true intimacy. When Jesus is mocked on the cross, the narrative adopts a similarly plaintive tone: 'None were there, to take pity on Him, but one disciple and four women. God blessed those women for their true and tender hearts!'¹⁵²

The trope of loneliness, or lack of friendship, gathers autonomous traction in *Oliver Twist* after Oliver's confession to Mr Bumble. Oliver is labelled as the proverbial 'cabin-boy without any friends' who might make a ready recruit for any ship, however dubious the crew (25). We learn that Agnes had prayed 'And oh, kind Heaven! [...] whether it be boy or girl, raise up some friends for it in this troubled world; and take pity upon a lonely desolate child' (190).¹⁵³ True companionship is put at the heart of the novel's conception of what is good: beneficent, health-giving, morally propitious. Yet Oliver's own conception of friendship is compromised by a neurosis about his value to others, explicable from a psychoanalytic perspective by his early experience of being both unloved and cast as troublemaker. Incarcerated in Mr Sowerberry's 'gloomy workshop' we are told that '[t]he boy had not friends to care for, or to care for him [...] the absence of no loved and well-remembered face sunk heavily into his heart. But his heart *was* heavy, notwithstanding' (32).

The interest here is two-fold: both in Dickens's prioritising the activity of 'car[ing] for' over that of receiving care, and the fact that Oliver's heart is 'heavy' despite his having 'no loved [...] face' in past recall. I have already established that Oliver needs to be active; action is essential to his survival and counters the

¹⁵¹ *Life of Our Lord*, p. 100.

¹⁵² *Life of Our Lord*, p. 111.

¹⁵³ An echo of David Simple's mission to seek out 'one capable of being a real Friend'. See Fielding, *David Simple*, p. 68.

potentially disabling effects of rumination without purpose (‘after a good deal of thinking to no particular purpose, he [...] trudged on’; 55). To ‘care for’ another is the active corollary of human interchange; without the stimulus to anxiety that passive indebtedness to others incurs (‘if I could but work for you’; 248). More puzzling is the suggestion that Oliver manifests the feelings of one who had been loved, and loved another: ‘But his heart *was* heavy, notwithstanding’ (32). This could be understood as simply longing, make reference back to Agnes’s brief but urgent maternal care; or even Dickens’s satire upon the prejudice evinced by Mr Bumble and his cohorts, that the poor do not warrant the imputation of feeling. But there is more to be said. The conceit recurs when a convalescent Oliver witnesses Rose Maylie’s tears on his behalf: ‘marks of pity and compassion [...] awakened some pleasant dream of a love and affection he had never known’ (230). The idea emergent is that of the raw human spirit instinctively versed in the language of affection; the sentiments of love and kinship part of our psychological infrastructure, conditioned as opposed to initiated by use.

This puts Dickens at an intersection between Enlightenment theories of childhood. Scholarship upon the philosophical perspectives the Victorian era inherits, from Locke to Rousseau, emphasises the shift between Locke’s assessment of the child as a ‘blank’, drawn – in effect – by life experience, by nurture; and Rousseau’s radical reappraisal of the child as an individual, born innocent, who merits consideration as a human being on his own terms.¹⁵⁴ (‘Oliver White, eh?’ mistakes Mr Brownlow when he first apprehends his charge; perhaps Dickens’s in-joke upon the ‘blank’ slate of Locke’s conception; 90). Rousseau advised that the best way to sustain native freshness was to ‘stimulate his senses and cultivate his body’ for the duration of childhood proper.¹⁵⁵ ‘The mind, his reasoning faculty, should be kept dormant’, until at least the mid-teens.¹⁵⁶ In Oliver Dickens creates an amalgam, in which the child is moulded by experience (sometimes beyond repair, as Fagin intuits) but is also possessed of an emotional reciprocity, as well as an already active reasoning faculty (‘Thinking Oliver’).¹⁵⁷ Although he could not have read the *The Prelude* of 1805, it is as if Dickens appropriates Wordsworth’s conception of memory as a key to the unconscious, and removes the

¹⁵⁴ See Coveney, pp. 40-7; Todd, pp. 25-9; and for a more recent appraisal, Galia Benziman, *Narratives of Child Neglect in Romantic and Victorian Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 22-43. ‘They are always looking for the man in the child, without thinking of what it was before he became a man’. See ‘Author’s Preface’, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile Or Treatise on Education*, trans. by William Payne (New York: Appleton, 1896; repr. New York: Amthurst, Prometheus Books, 2003), xii-xlv (xiii).

¹⁵⁵ Quoted by Coveney, p. 45.

¹⁵⁶ Quoted by Coveney, p. 45.

¹⁵⁷ Rousseau uses the term ‘sensible’ but in without affectation or parody: ‘We are born sensible, and from our birth we are affected in different ways by the objects around us’. He preempts modern psychoanalytic adoption of the term ‘objects’ to mean people and situation as well as things, for example Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object* (1987). Rousseau, p. 4.

subjective application.¹⁵⁸ Oliver has ‘intimations’ of the most profound emotional experience; as if detecting strains not his own.¹⁵⁹ In fact, Oliver in the countryside is situated between three different models: the Wordsworthian child; the Rousseau prototype who revels in the natural world (‘you can fill up a sheet by telling me what walks you take’, quips Harry Maylie; 283); and the model Victorian pupil, who pores over his Bible on a daily basis.¹⁶⁰ (When Fagin and Monks appear outside the study and we witness Oliver ‘leaping from the window into the garden’ and calling ‘loudly for help’, he seems to ‘vivify’ again: showing where his, and the narrative’s, true energy resides; 272).

Oliver’s loneliness is exacerbated by many trials in which he is shut up in a solitary room: six times during the novel’s first third. Dickens shows Oliver deliberately aligning himself with sanity at these junctures: fending off the possible slide into madness that enforced solitariness can bring. Carl Jung compares a child’s combating his fear of the dark to the heroic endeavour, realist/symbolic symbiosis at its most potent: ‘The hero’s main feat is to overcome the monster of darkness [...] Day and light are synonyms for consciousness, night and dark for the unconscious [...] the “child” distinguishes itself by deeds which point to the conquest of the dark’.¹⁶¹ ‘A close prisoner in the dark and solitary room to which he had been consigned by the wisdom and mercy of the board’, Oliver:

[...] spread his little hands before his eyes to shut out the darkness, and crouching in the corner, tried to sleep: ever and anon waking with a start and tremble, and drawing himself closer and closer to the wall, as if to feel even its/ cold hard surface were a protection in the gloom and loneliness which surrounded him. (15-16)

This markedly visceral explication details how Oliver, with scant resources available, uses physical tactics to preclude ‘the gloom and loneliness’ which is as much mental penumbra as bodily affliction (16).¹⁶²

¹⁵⁸ Dickens commissioned a ‘generally favourable’ review of *The Prelude* of 1850 for his editorial *Household Narrative*. See Carl Dawson, *Victorian Noon: English Literature in 1850* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1979), p. 131.

¹⁵⁹ Wordsworth’s ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality’ (1807) was included in the *Poetical Works* (1836). Dickens owned a copy; see ‘The Library of Charles Dickens’, *Libraries of Dickens and Thackeray*, pp. 5-120 (p. 119).

¹⁶⁰ Rousseau’s ‘anti-intellectual’ ethos forbids the child books, though he is permitted *Robinson Crusoe* in his early teens. See Coveney, p. 45. ‘[...] at night, Oliver read a chapter or two from the Bible: which had been study all the week’. *Oliver Twist*, p. 255.

¹⁶¹ C. G. Jung, ‘The Psychology of the Child Archetype’, in Jung and Kerényi, pp. 83-118 (p. 86).

¹⁶² Dickens has often been accused of not giving Oliver physical legitimacy. John Bayley notes ‘his eyes glisten at the sight of the scraps of meat in Mrs Sowerberry’s kitchen - one of the few really physical intimations of him we have’. See Bayley, ‘Things as they Really Are’, *Dickens in the Twentieth Century*, pp. 49-66 (p. 62). The above passage is a better example of Dickens facilitating a sense of Oliver’s physical reality, I think, being less generic; more apposite to Oliver as an individual.

Later, convalescing at Mr Brownlow's, Oliver has difficulty sleeping. He may now be relatively safe, tucked into a bed within a civilised household, but 'the gloom and loneliness' still harbour horribly pertinent terrors:

And thus the night crept slowly on. Oliver lay awake for some time, counting the little circles of light which the reflection of the rushlight-shade threw upon the ceiling; or tracing with his languid eyes the intricate pattern of the paper on the wall. The darkness and deep stillness of the room were very solemn; and as they brought into the boy's mind the thought that death had been hovering there, for many days and nights, and might yet fill it with the gloom and dread of his awful presence, he turned his face upon the pillow, and fervently prayed to Heaven. (85)

Again, Dickens emphasises Oliver's proactively physical gestures; by 'tracing [...] the intricate pattern of the paper on the wall' he creates order out of the potentially amorphous and overwhelming. He 'turn[s] his face upon the pillow' better to focus upon his own mental cohesion. The passage is interesting for embodying that split between 'death' and 'Heaven' so expressive of human vulnerability (and mortality). Oliver intuits that he has been dangerously ill; his own demise is the 'hovering' threat, but equally he appeals to the concept of 'Heaven', that central tenet of Christian faith, characterised as the ideality of the good dead received by their maker. Neither Oliver, nor Little Nell, can make that leap whereby death ceases to be frightening because of the promise of being with God: the gulf between the dark paradigm and the theological edict is huge.¹⁶³

Oliver's ultimate test, comparable to solitary confinement, comes when he spends the several days in Fagin's safe-house following his kidnap by Nancy and Sikes. It is (paradoxically) tantamount to repatriation within the criminal community. We are told that '[here] Oliver remained all day, and for the greater part of many subsequent days; seeing nobody, between early morning and midnight; and left, during the long hours, to commune with his own thoughts' (139). Fagin, astute on psychological matters, probably knows that 'commun[ing] with his own thoughts' might trigger a crisis for an acknowledged sensitive child who has already suffered multiple trauma. It is a strategy near-guaranteed to 'break' him psychologically and render him malleable to influence.¹⁶⁴ So part of Oliver's task is to manage his own mental processes, which he does by being active, and again by regulating what has no shape or contour, unmapped time:

[...] there was neither sight nor sound of any living thing; and often, when it grew dark, and he was tired of wandering from room to room, he would crouch in the corner of the passage by the street-door, to be as near living people as he could; and would remain there, listening and counting the hours, until the Jew or the boys returned. (139)

¹⁶³ Dickens depicts Little Nell as coming under strain as her symbolic function fails to protect her from natural childish fears, especially those pertaining to death, both real and conceptualised, like Oliver. Her reaction to the crypt is emblematic: '“A black and dreadful place!” exclaimed the child'. See Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 418.

¹⁶⁴ 'I was really worried about what happened to Oliver. Just instinctively, as a child, I knew [...] Oliver was really in danger. There was something very dark going on there'. Donna Tartt, who admits to being inspired by *Oliver Twist* for her novel *The Goldfinch* (2013). See 'The art of darkness', *The Sunday Times*, 'Culture' supplement, 13 October 2013, pp. 4-6 (p. 5).

For Oliver, ‘the Jew [and] the boys’ are his only compatriots now: they have the value therefore of being other human beings with whom he can at least have ‘living’ interaction. Dickens chooses to highlight that prefix, the adjective ‘living’, twice in the above passage. The horror of death which Oliver previously intuited as directly contingent to his illness, is now more hostile, apart; perhaps more the scion of irrational (and godless) fear. Oliver knows this, and as well as ‘wandering from room to room’ – a microcosmic version of Dickens’s taking to the streets, enabling exercise, variety, a circuit – he ‘crouch[es] in the corner of the passage by the street-door, to be as near living people as he could’ (139).¹⁶⁵ He wants to perpetuate that tenuous connection by making himself as proximate as possible. We find Oliver again self-medicating to some degree therefore, acting in his own best interests, and the psychological and practical here coalesce.

As with so many aspects of the novel, the bad shadows the good in ghastly parallel. The concept of friendship circulates the criminal community, through both Dickens’s narrative voice and the characters’ interaction. This shows us how bastardised a principled ideal might become, but also how necessary even phoney confederacy is for human survival. When Sikes takes Oliver through Smithfield Market, ‘[h]e nodded, twice or thrice, to a passing friend; and, resist[ed] as many invitations to take a morning dram’ (164). The specific word use (registering as slightly tangential in context), allows Dickens to draw his web of interrelating symbolism between virtue and vice tighter. Even Fagin, approaching his homeland of Field Lane, is said to be ‘well known to the sallow denizens of the lane’, who ‘on the lookout to buy or sell, nodded, familiarly, as he passed along’ (197). Later, when Fagin enlists Noah’s help in tracking Nancy: ‘She has found out some new friends, my dear [...] I must know who they are’, ‘friend’ becomes a paltry euphemism for lover (given Nancy’s trade); its apparent benignity lending this subversion of word and meaning a prescient horror (365).

Essentially however, the criminal community functions as a galactic system: each individual self-sufficient but enchained by their dependence on others’ complicity. Fagin’s signature riddle says it all: ‘we have a general number one; that is, you can’t consider yourself as number one, without considering me too as the same [...] it’s your object to take care of number one – meaning yourself’ (348-9). The echo of Oliver’s having ‘[no] friends to care for, or to care for him’ is surely deliberate. We are meant to contrast the boy’s yearning for a compassionate bond with Fagin’s ‘care’, equating to ruthless vigilance. ‘I have never forgot you, Bill; never once’, he wheedles to Sikes, echoing Oliver’s receipt of Dick’s blessing (312). Fagin holds

¹⁶⁵ On Dickens and walking (sometimes as much as thirty miles a day or night) see Bodenheimer, pp. 178-182.

his 'friends' in a cognitive bind of watchfulness and distrust. It is not unusual to witness the criminal community lost in thought – '[e]very member of the respectable coterie appeared plunged in his own reflections' (96). We can assume their reflections are similarly insidious and self-interested. So Dickens subverts the value of thought itself, so key to Oliver's virtuous character; a formal irony that he exploits when Fagin warns Oliver before the burglary escapade: 'Whatever falls out, say nothing; and do what he bids you. Mind!' Placing a strong emphasis on the last word, he suffered his features to resolve themselves into a ghastly grin; and nodding his head, left the room' (157).

Oliver on the wane

'Mind' – we also can credibly place a strong emphasis upon the word, as we develop our understanding of how important thought, and mental computation, is to Dickens's novel and his titular character. As Oliver begins to accrue experience, two more troubling behavioural traits manifest which tie into his retentive mind set. He becomes melancholic, through thinking too much, and debilitated by nerves, from feeling too much. The two, thinking and feeling, which I have previously segregated, inform each other through the trope of melancholia. However Dickens's description of Oliver's nervous apotheosis resorts to the limited idiom of sensibility. What we are meant to understand from this, I conclude, is that Oliver's emotional fragility can ill sustain the demands of his retentive mindset (an intellectual and spiritual faculty). The schism between symbolic and realist construct are again played out in plot. It is time to explore this in detail.

The prognosis comes early, in the form of Mrs Sowerberry's malicious quip: 'There's an expression of melancholy on his face, my dear [...] which is very interesting' (35). Then, as Oliver makes his itinerant way through nameless villages in flight from his native town, we read how:

he would stand about the inn-yards, and look mournfully at every one who passed: a proceeding which generally terminated in the landlady's ordering one of the postboys who were lounging about, to drive that strange boy out of the place, for she was sure he had come to steal something. (56)

As ever Oliver's striking appearance attract notice, but in this instance to his detriment. 'Look[ing] mournfully': we can imagine how Oliver is trying to conceive of how 'to live' – his stated mission of a few pages previous – and feels daunted by a sense of alienation from others (54).

As plot gathers pace, melancholy ceases to operate as mere aesthetic conceit and becomes an affliction, inhering all the pejorative meanings the word was capable of connoting. Following Rose Maylie's recovery

from illness, we are told that: '[t]he melancholy which had seemed to the sad eyes of the anxious boy to hang, for days past, over every object: beautiful as all were: dispelled as if by magic' (270). Oliver's subjective torment, in relation to his friend, has affected his world view. However natural his affliction, it is still a distortion of objective reality. Malthus discriminated between the various causes of this altered perspective in his Preface to *Population: The First Essay*: 'The view which he has given of human life has a melancholy hue, but he feels conscious, that he has drawn these dark tints, from a conviction that they are really in the picture, and not from a jaundiced eye or an inherent spleen of disposition'.¹⁶⁶ The danger is that an accumulation of bad experience will augment the 'jaundiced eye' as a permanent as opposed to temporary hindrance. Oliver's symbolic agency as the 'principle of Good' would then be fatally compromised, for a failure to retain a clear perspective and forward momentum implies a lack of faith in the greater good: God Himself. So when Dickens salvages Rose at death's door (correcting in fiction that he could not in life), he also protects Oliver from the consummate test of exceptional mental resilience.¹⁶⁷

Who is the melancholy man?¹⁶⁸ Why might Dickens have chosen to use this particular paradigm to elucidate the character of Oliver? The melancholy man is intelligent, a thinker, suffering from the adverse repercussions of his mental make-up; he is solitary, destined to be detached from others. Dickens's library boasted a copy of Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (an 1837 two volume edition, the same year that he began *Oliver Twist* in earnest).¹⁶⁹ Burton's critique of melancholy did much to establish it as a psychological bind, as opposed to an upset of the bodily humours (as per medieval characterisation, and Malthus's reference to 'spleen'). Himself a scholar and self-confessed melancholic, Burton's text also conferred a certain noble mystique that perpetuated thenceforward. Nevertheless his diagnosis is damning in many respects: the melancholic allows accumulative negative experience to cloud his present judgement, so that 'every small occasion of sorrow, need, sickness, trouble, fear, grief, passion, or perturbation of the mind,

¹⁶⁶ T. R. Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, (1798), quoted by Marcus, p. 65n.

¹⁶⁷ The death of Mary Hogarth, in May 1837, affected Dickens greatly, and critics have linked this to his remedial portrayal of Rose recovering from what seemed like terminal decline: 'Dickens backed away from Rose's premature death, twisting the narrative back into positive territory'. See Jerome Meekier 'Twists in *Oliver Twist*', *Dickens Quarterly*, XXIX, 2 (2012), pp. 116-124 (p. 121).

¹⁶⁸ John Lucas called his book on Dickens 'The Melancholy Man', and defended the title in his introductory note to the 2nd edition, but his gloss is tangential to the classic understanding of melancholia. He explains that he took the phrase from Kant: 'The man of melancholy disposition is little concerned with the judgement of others [...] he relies purely on his own insight'; see Lucas, lx.

¹⁶⁹ The Christie's catalogue entry reads: 'BURTON (R.), ANATOMY OF MELANCHOLY; with a satyricall [sic] Preface, a Translation of the Classical Quotations; and Account of the Author'. See *Catalogue of the Library of Charles Dickens from Gadshill*, p. 17.

every manner of care, discontent, or thought [...] causeth anguish, dullness, heaviness, and vexation of spirit'.¹⁷⁰

The Victorian public would have understood the melancholic disposition primarily through Hamlet. Phenomenally popular on stage, Shakespeare's 'delicate and tender prince' became a cipher for interiority.¹⁷¹ His monologues presuppose the audience's empathetic understanding; as William Hazlitt wrote in his *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* (also on Dickens's bookshelf): 'Hamlet is a name; his speeches and sayings are but the idle coinage of the poet's brain. What then, are they not real? They are as real as our own thoughts. Their reality is in the reader's mind. It is we who are Hamlet'.¹⁷² More precisely, some will find this stage persona ratifies inner experience: 'he who has felt his mind sink within him, and sadness cling to his heart like a malady'.¹⁷³ Dickens identifies Oliver with Hamlet through the figure of the 'mind's eye' that he uses to good effect when Oliver is bodily turned away from the portrait of his mother, but still sees it in his 'mind's eye'.¹⁷⁴ As Dickens would have known, the phrase is used by Hamlet when discussing his dead father with Horatio:

HAMLET: My father! — methinks I see my father —

HORATIO: Where, my lord?

HAMLET: In my mind's eye, Horatio.¹⁷⁵

The conceit is perfect as a literary borrowing, of course, because what Oliver retains in his mind's eye is in fact an image of his dead mother: the sufferer of a wrong like Hamlet's father, who requires her child to avenge her name.

¹⁷⁰ 'Melancholy: What It is', in Robert Burton, *The Essential Anatomy of Melancholy* (New York: Dover Publications, 2002), p. 15.

¹⁷¹ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. by Roma Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), IV, 4, 48. Dickens calls Oliver 'delicate and handsome' when smartened up by Mrs Bedwin (102).

¹⁷² See William Hazlitt, 'Hamlet', in *The Round Table and Characters of Shakespeare's [sic] Plays* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1936), pp. 232-37 (p. 232). Dickens had an 1838 reprint of the 1817 first edition. See *Catalogue of the Library of Charles Dickens from Gadshill*, p. 56.

¹⁷³ Hazlitt, pp. 232-7 (p. 232).

¹⁷⁴ 'Oliver *did* see it in his mind's eye as distinctly as if he had not altered his position', *Oliver Twist*, p. 89.

¹⁷⁵ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I, 2. 183.

Dickens was impatient with the affectation of interiority and questioned the sacred place afforded Hamlet in the popular imagination.¹⁷⁶ As the chronicler of Oliver's innerness, however, Dickens can disclose his character's melancholic predisposition whilst making it clear that Oliver never plays upon this or even reveals it to others. We find repeatedly that experience is said, by Dickens, to 'sink' or to have 'sunk' into Oliver's soul (Cf. Hazlitt, above). At the story's outset we find:

[...] Oliver was then led away by Mr Bumble from the wretched home where one kind word or look had never lighted the gloom of his infant years. And yet he burst into an agony of childish grief, as the cottage gate closed after him. Wretched as were the little companions in misery he was leaving behind, they were the only friends he had ever known; and a sense of his loneliness in the great wide world, sank into the child's heart for the first time. (8)¹⁷⁷

Thenceforward, Dickens establishes a figurative idiom of Oliver's soul being endlessly absorbent. On the run, he is aided by a 'benevolent old lady', and we learn how her 'kind and gentle words' and 'tears of sympathy and compassion [...] sank deeper into Oliver's soul, than all the sufferings he had ever undergone' (56). Kidnapped by Fagin's cohorts, we are told that 'Oliver's heart sank within him, when he thought of his good kind friends [the Brownlow household]' (137). A hierarchy of impact is established: the more profound or traumatic the experience, the greater traction within Oliver's inner self. This idiom inevitably recalls Wordsworth, who invoked the elements – most significantly water – as imagistic carriers of meaning as well as physical presences. Or, more metaphysical still, Kerényi's surmise that 'Like the womb of the mother, boundless water is an organic part of the image of the Primordial Child'.¹⁷⁸

It is also apposite to Dickens's method is apposite to *Oliver Twist* as a whole, and the sense of things being on the wane: people weak, damaged or hurt; virtue debilitated by entropy.¹⁷⁹ Dickens summarises Oliver's feelings, following his convalescence in the care of 'Mrs Maylie, Rose, and the kind-hearted Mr Losberne':

¹⁷⁶ See Jonathan Arac, 'Hamlet, Little Dorrit, and the History of Character' (1988), in *Critical Conditions: Regarding the Historical Moment* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), pp. 34-46.

¹⁷⁷ Those antithetical quantities, friendship and loneliness, make their first appearance here; in fact, we can see the formal correspondence between the workhouse inmates (of any age) and the criminal class. A group of disparate individuals, they are, in the eyes of society, made one: the passive negative of Fagin's ostensibly binary model of self and society, the 'general number one' (*Oliver Twist*, p. 348). Their marginalised status makes them interchangeable: identikit representatives of an experience as opposed to individual possessors of consciousness.

¹⁷⁸ See Kerényi, 'The Primordial Child in Primordial Times', in *Essays on A Science of Mythology*, pp. 25-66 (p. 49).

¹⁷⁹ Especially when associated with the elderly: 'Brownlow and Grimwig anticipate Jarndyce and Boythorn [...] the first stoical but disappointed in the world, the second cynical, excellent at heart, but, on the surface, somewhat deranged. The ménage is completed by a housekeeper, Mrs Bedwin, who is equally ancient and multiply bereaved'. See Rainsford, *Blake, Dickens, Joyce*, p. 112.

If fervent prayers, gushing from hearts overcharged with gratitude, be heard in heaven – and if they are not, what prayers are! – the blessings which the orphan child called down upon them, sunk into their souls, diffusing peace and happiness. (247)

Dickens extends that idea of strong feeling equating to impact by figuring gratitude as metaphysical velocity, speeding up Oliver's communication with the deity (though the caveat could reveal an edge of nihilism as opposed to confidence on his author's part). It is unclear whether we should read 'peace and happiness' as Oliver's prayers reproduced verbatim, or 'blessings' as a generic term for prayers undisclosed. Whatever the case, the idiom is familiar: good wishes like (holy?) water permeating mortal matter. A few pages later, in Dickens's most strikingly Wordsworthian passage, the narrator meditates more generally on the benefits of rural retreat: '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!' (253).¹⁸⁰ Throughout this rural section the new ease of empathetic communication between person to person, the living and the dead, the present and the past (and Dickens implies all these) gives the very narrative a certain insubstantiality, as if the mechanics of plot itself have been distilled, and it comes as no surprise when we are told that 'three months glided away' (255). 'Glid[ing]' – what Oliver effects at the novel's close ('Oliver opened it [the door], glided away') – represents the aesthetic antidote to the animalistic locomotion of the first half, in which Oliver 'trot[s]' behind Mr Bumble and later Sikes (8; 164).

This transition into insubstantiality parallels the elision from real to unreal that has its dangers. Hysteria, madness: when experience exerts pressure on the inner self, initiating a momentum of response that – at its apotheosis – can mean reality dissolving into unreality, the solid giving way to fragments of estranged sensibility. The first signs that Oliver may be prone to such psychological dangers occur after the botched street theft. Recovering at Mr Brownlow's, he is given his first taste of human kindness. I have already pointed out that it is the apparent betrayal of others's trust that troubles Oliver most after his kidnap. The limits of Oliver's endurance are figured then, albeit conventionally: 'it was well for him that he could not know what they had heard, or it [his heart] might have broken outright' (137). What Dickens skilfully builds into Oliver, and the narrative, is a sense of indebtedness to those who have been good to him, which keeps pace with those fears born of a more primitive instinct for self-preservation. When he realises that his escapade with Sikes translates to 'housebreaking and robbery' he becomes 'well nigh mad with grief and terror' (172). The 'grief' is more pertinent than the 'terror', as what Oliver intimates is the irreversible going

¹⁸⁰ 'Dickens goes out of his way in this section of the book to insist on the educative and healing powers of nature'. See Lucas, p. 33.

to the bad that this action represents. His gestures of protest are emblematically Christian: hands held as if in prayer, supplicatory kneeling: ‘He clasped his hands together, and involuntarily uttered a subdued exclamation of horror. A mist came before his eyes; the cold sweat stood upon his ashy face; his limbs failed him; and he sunk upon his knees’ (172).

Oliver’s physical decline at that moment is provoked by moral revulsion rather than brute terror. His plea connects intuitively to the dangers presented by the plan hatched by Fagin and Monks, of which he of course has no actual knowledge: ‘pray have mercy on me, and do not make me steal’ (172). This is a pre-emptory crisis of conscience, a realisation of that we might infer Oliver predicated in fancy when he became briefly engaged by the Newgate Calendar. Oliver does not want to be put in the position wherein his actions represent the bad, even while his mind moors with the good. For Oliver this is tantamount to a moral fall, and who knows the consequences thereafter. Religious and secular literature is strewn with instances of one bad act engendering such self-hatred that complete moral subsidence follows.¹⁸¹ Donald Winnicott compounds the phenomenon in his psychoanalytic deductions of the child persuaded to steal: ‘Especially in the early stages it is often quite clear that stealing is an unwelcome thing turning up in the life of the child and bewildering him [...] Soon, as the child does not understand why he must steal, there comes about a hardening and a whole host of secondary motives’.¹⁸² Fagin intuitively grasps that there is a corollary to this in others’ conception, when he says of Nancy: ‘as the boy begins to harden, she’ll care no more for him, than for a block of wood’ (206).

Oliver does understand that he is at a fork in the projective road, and has to utilise all his integral strength and his stored artillery. By calling upon ‘the bright Angels that rest in Heaven’, he reconnects to Dick and his inaugural blessing; which, as noted earlier, he ‘never once forgot’ (172; 54). Rival moral forces – retained experience pitched against visceral threat – represent the novel’s abstracted concerns in microcosm. Oliver himself seems to be galvanised by incentives beyond his immediate comprehension; he fights for the durability of his symbolic integrity, as well as for the survival of his realist self.

¹⁸¹ Criseyde in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* is a good example of this phenomenon; after Criseyde has been unfaithful to Troilus she loses all self-respect and wrong builds upon wrong in self-seeding trajectory.

¹⁸² Donald Winnicott, letter to R. S. Hazelhurst, 1 September 1949, reprinted in *The Spontaneous Gesture: Selected Letters of D. W. Winnicott*, ed. by F. Robert Rodman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 17.

Rescued again at the point he loses consciousness, Oliver recovers in the Maylie household. He is again surprised by human kindness, as on the previous occasion when taken in by Mr Brownlow and Mrs Bedwin. This time the stakes are higher. He has experienced circumstances wrenching him away from apparent safety and security. He is more aware of life's eddying unpredictability and, as a result, his attempts to thank Rose and Mrs Maylie take on a desperate urgency as if he can thereby stall fate:

But, at length, he began, by slow degrees, to get better, and to be able to say sometimes, in a few tearful words, how deeply he felt the goodness of the two sweet ladies, and how ardently he hoped that, when he grew strong and well again, he could do something to shew his gratitude; only something which would let them see the love and duty with which his breast was full; something, however slight, which would prove to them that their gentle kindness had not been cast away; but that the poor boy whom their charity had rescued from misery, or death, was eager to serve them with his whole heart and soul. (248)

I quote the passage in full to give a faithful imprint of the narrative's literal impression: it is pregnant with longing, with a straining wish to bear recompense for good done (unto self). The antiquated idiom informs it with the familiar cadences of the poetics of sensibility. Again, we can also look forward, to psychological findings of the twentieth century to see how percipient Dickens's portrayal is in sentiment (even whilst it is retrospectively sentimental in idiom). In 'The Innate Morality of the Baby', Winnicott approves of the mother encouraging her child's 'innate tendencies towards morality', and explains that:

[...] what I am describing here is in fact the gradual build-up in the child of a capacity to feel a sense of responsibility, which at base is a sense of guilt [...] The infant gradually becomes able to tolerate feeling anxious (guilty) about the destructive elements in instinctual experiences, because he knows that there will be opportunity for repairing and rebuilding.¹⁸³

Oliver has an inflated sense of responsibility by this stage, and an analogously over-weaned sense of guilt. He does not know if there is any 'opportunity for repairing and rebuilding': such a comfort has been repeatedly denied him. When bad things start to happen, Oliver's internal support structure begins to crumble. 'Pray make haste! I feel I should die; it makes me tremble so', he cries to Mr Losberne as their carriage approaches the deserted Brownlow residence (251). Oliver – who has survived near-starvation and appalling physical abuse – is nearly undone by the mental exertions occasioned by psychological stress. Dickens's prose again parallels, with its mounting cadences, this internal pressure:

The hope of eventually clearing himself with them, too, and explaining how he had been forced away, had buoyed him up, and sustained him, under many of his recent trials; and now, the idea that they should have gone so far, and carried with them the belief that he was an imposter and a robber: a belief which might remain uncontradicted to his dying day: was almost more than he could bear. (252)

¹⁸³ See D.W. Winnicott, 'The Innate Morality of the Baby', in *The Child, the Family and the Outside World* (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 96-7.

It is clear that Oliver's anxieties, though natural, are now underpinned by a form of neurosis. The hyperbole Dickens introduces: 'a belief which might remain uncontradicted to his dying day', discloses this, in addition to the integral prose rhythms. But Oliver's greater test has still to come. When Rose Maylie falls ill Oliver experiences the grave worries commensurate with such a situation:

The suspense: the fearful, acute suspense: of standing idly by when the life of one we dearly love, is trembling in the balance; the racking thoughts that crowd upon the mind, and make the heart beat violently, and the breath come thick, by the force of the images they conjure up before it; the desperate anxiety *to be doing something* to relieve the pain, or lessen the danger, which we have no power to alleviate; the sinking of soul and spirit, which the sad remembrance all our helplessness produces; what tortures can equal these. (261)¹⁸⁴

The italics (Dickens's own, and he generally disapproved of their use) reveal the emphasis here: 'our helplessness' is the summary torture.¹⁸⁵ For Oliver that sense defines his experience of successive brief acquaintance: Dick, Mr Brownlow, Mrs Bedwin, even his mother. They are removed from him, he is removed from them; he can do nothing and the strain is almost unbearable.

The subtlety of Oliver's confusion here goes far to demonstrate the sophistication of his creator's thinking on this matter. Dickens's achievement culminates however in the surprise he issues once Rose has been saved. We might expect Oliver to be ardent relief epitomised. This is how a poor psychologist would have it, but Dickens knows his character by now and wishes us to comprehend him likewise: 'It was almost too much happiness to bear. Oliver felt stunned and stupefied by the unexpected intelligence; he could not weep, or speak, or rest. He had scarcely the power of understanding anything that had passed' (263). Fittingly, Oliver finds 'a burst of tears' relieve 'the almost insupportable load of anguish which had been taken from his breast' (263-4). Holy water again – the resurgence of true feeling as figured so memorably by poet and Anglican priest George Herbert in his poem *The Flower*: 'Grief melts away/ Like snow in May/ As if there were no such cold thing'.¹⁸⁶ Dickens lets Oliver off the hook therefore, but it is close to call, and to some degree Oliver's erratic response to the journey back into his native town with Rose, speaking through tears, a finely-tuned fusion of happiness and sadness, is testament to the impact of this psychological trauma or near-breakdown.

¹⁸⁴ We can guess that Dickens was drawing upon his own experience at the death of Mary Hogarth here, though she deteriorated so quickly he did not even have the indulgence of protracted worry: '[Mary] went upstairs to bed at about one o'clock in perfect health, [...] was taken ill before she undressed; and died in my arms next afternoon.' To Richard Johns, 31 May 1837, *Letters*, I, p. 263.

¹⁸⁵ On Dickens's 'dislike of italics in printed text', see Bodenheimer, p. 11.

¹⁸⁶ George Herbert, 'The Flower', in *George Herbert: A Selection of his Finest Poems*, ed. by Louis L. Martz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 5.

How do you solve a problem like Oliver? I titled this chapter semi-jokingly as a tribute to the popular culture that has engulfed *Oliver Twist* in modern times.¹⁸⁷ Countless musical and film productions, however entertaining and profitable, are for me analogous to the tableaux that Janet Todd identifies as the dominant narrative device for signalling emotion within the eighteenth century work of sentiment:

All present these contrasts and the exemplary emotion in tableaux [...] when they occur, the story or argument is arrested so that the author can conventionally intensify the emotion and the reader or spectator may have time physically to respond.¹⁸⁸

Yet in this case such ‘tableaux’ are superannuated by ‘the reader or spectator’ by virtue of displaced media. Of course we will remember the scene in which Oliver asks for more, if it forms the emotional crux of a David Lean film.¹⁸⁹ What happens though, as with any great work of literature that has been much interpreted in visual media, is that we forget to look in the text itself: and I mean *look* as opposed to read, locate the words and phrases that are so easy to miss; and can seem supplementary to plot touchstones. This is why I chose Oliver to explore as my first character study. He is, despite his titular status, so easily lost in the dramas that comprise his story.

Dickens himself understood the visceral, and potentially commercial, power of the Sikes and Nancy murder scene. It was his favourite to read aloud to audiences who remarked upon his own strenuous emotional investment. It becomes, tellingly, a mutual act, between murderer and victim, which is illustrative in itself of the way that Nancy’s assertions of conscience begin to dog Sikes, in transposed and fanciful form, when on the run. But in a subtle way the Sikes and Nancy story also holds a seed of sex and love, buried in a mire of death and dirt, and that is also part of its transcendent fascination. Certainly there aren’t many female companions in Dickens’s fiction, who could put their feet up on the fender as Nancy does when sitting with Sikes: ‘She took her feet off the fender, pushed back her chair, and bade Fagin draw up his, without saying more about it: for it was a cold night, and no mistake’ (148). It is only through the intimacies of Dickens’s text that we pick up on such parallel intimacies of character.

¹⁸⁷ ‘Maria’, sometimes known as ‘How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?’ is a show tune from the 1959 Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, *The Sound of Music*. Andrew Lloyd Webber adopted the phrase for his 2006 reality TV show in which he cast an unknown in the lead role with the aid of public votes. On *Oliver Twist* as a ‘culture-text’ see John, *Mass Culture*, pp. 207-39.

¹⁸⁸ See Todd, p. 4.

¹⁸⁹ Despite its age (1948), probably still the most memorable of the titular films.

Chapter Two

Dombey and Son: 'Vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle'

'What's the matter with the child?' asked Susan.

'He's cold, I think,' said Polly, walking with him to and fro, and hushing him.

It was a bleak autumnal afternoon indeed; and as she walked, and hushed, and, glancing through the dreary windows, pressed the little fellow closer to her breast, the withered leaves came showering down.¹⁹⁰

In *Dombey and Son* (1846-8) Dickens spends more words on the analysis of his characters' interiority than ever before; operating as much through diegesis as via the mimesis with which he has long been associated.¹⁹¹ It is one reason that the text does demonstrate a gear change in his fiction writing, and warrants its standing as 'the first major novel'.¹⁹² Dickens draws attention to the reader's ideally being prised to more than what is most outwardly demonstrative in his 1858 'Preface to the Cheap Edition'. He writes, in relation to his titular character: 'Mr Dombey undergoes no violent internal change, either in this book, or in life. A sense of his injustice is within him all along [...] It is ten years since I dismissed Mr Dombey. I have not been impatient to offer this critical remark upon him, and I offer it with some confidence'.¹⁹³ The 'remark' is wonderfully suggestive of bipartite maturation. Dickens indicates that he himself has got to better know – perhaps become more confident of – the potentialities stored in the textual phalanx that is Mr Dombey; and what he asserts (deduces) is that this comprises a complex, layered, psychology. 'A sense of his injustice is within him all along' subtly countenances knowledge that hovers on the edge of consciousness; in this instance housing a double-bind of distorted perspective retained, and the need for reappraisal. Dickens's statement gives the lie to critical judgements that Dombey is merely the embodiment of a principle: pride or 'money-pride'.¹⁹⁴ As with Oliver, whose (realist) anxiety escalates as his (symbolic) agency becomes all the more vital to plot, Dombey's duality incentivises the inevitability of breakdown: 'The more he represses it, the more unjust he necessarily is'.¹⁹⁵ In Dombey's case that duality is all of a piece with predominantly realist treatment.

¹⁹⁰ Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ed. by Alan Horsman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 48-67 (p. 67). This concluding exchange sums up chapter V, Book I, 'Paul's Progress and Christening'. The Oxford University Press edition is based on the first one-volume edition, published in 1848, as per the Clarendon edition of 1974. All future references to this edition in the text.

¹⁹¹ 'Dickens's presentation of character is often dramatic: that is, he relies upon dialogue and gesture than upon narration and description'. See Louise Yelin, 'Strategies for Survival: Florence and Edith in "Dombey and Son"', *Victorian Studies*, 22 (1979), 297-319 (p. 299).

¹⁹² See for example, F. R. and Q.D. Leavis, 'The First Major Novel: "Dombey and Son"', in *Dickens, The Novelist* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970), pp. 1-33.

¹⁹³ 'Preface to the Cheap Edition (1858)', reproduced as 'Appendix A', *Dombey*, p. 927.

¹⁹⁴ 'Money-pride and money-faith, egotism, the closed heart, class as "exclusion" – these in *Dombey and Son* are aspects of the same theme'. See F. R. and Q.D. Leavis, pp. 1-33 (p. 7).

¹⁹⁵ 'Preface to the Cheap Edition', *Dombey*, p. 927.

Dombey and Son is in fact couched in an aesthetics of recalcitrant waiting; the subversion of healthy maturation. It is a book all about not attending to the dangers that lie within. Like the rats in Dombey's townhouse, these are only too ready to erupt into active and anarchic presence. There is an imaginative congruence with the concluding lines of W. B. Yeats's poem *The Second Coming* (1920); and its corollary image of civilised convention figured as the rocking of a cradle (moral laziness segueing into hypocrisy):

The darkness drops again but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?¹⁹⁶

Yeats's allusive figure of a 'rough beast' which '[s]louches' towards its desired end tallies with crude images of enforced abnegation in Dickens's text. Often these are gender-orientated or ripe with sexual innuendo. The biblical image of mastery exerted by the crushing under heel is appropriated.¹⁹⁷ So Carker envisages Edith humiliated, submissive: 'down among his horses feet, fallen and in the dust'; 'crouching in some corner' of the Dijon apartment (682; 808). Similarly, in one of several pictorial figures for a purely psychological bate, Florence pictures Dombey's wrecking her 'fond idea' of him: 'She saw his cruelty, neglect, and hatred, dominant above it, and stamping it down' (780). '[D]ominant above it [...] stamping it down': the power here is implicitly bestial, with a hint of sexual sadism that broaches taboo.¹⁹⁸ What unites such image schema is the insidious metamorphosis of power into something that makes a mockery of civilised standards and humane prerogatives. This is what gives the bestial its dimension of *unrealised* danger. Whether seen from the perspective of aggressor or victim, the 'it', which famously calibrates little Paul's double-take on his father's presence at his sickbed, is rife within the text: an unnameable cover for moral shame and the evil that springs tangentially from wrongdoing, charged with autonomous purpose.¹⁹⁹ Alice Marwood is a personification of pestilence: damaged property that now wreaks destructive effects (her name itself evokes nature gone to the bad). Her own realisation that revenge may override its bounds qualifies her retraction from the punishment of James, and return to the heartland of Harriet Carker.

¹⁹⁶ William Butler Yeats, 'The Second Coming' (1920), in *Selected Poems*, ed. by Richard Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 50-1.

¹⁹⁷ 'And the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly'. Romans 16. 20.

¹⁹⁸ Bestial imagery for male dominance is countered by the usage of the word 'wild' to suggest (a more honest) animal rawness of instinct in female characters: 'Florence wildly exclaimed that he was badly hurt; that he was killed!'; 'Edith drew it suddenly away, and, for a moment, looked at her with the same strange dread (there was a sort of wild avoidance in it)', *Dombey*, pp. 637, 645.

¹⁹⁹ See chapter XVI, Book I, 'What the Waves were Always Saying': 'Floy!' he said. 'What is that?'/ 'Where, dearest?'/ 'There! at the bottom of the bed.?'/ 'There's nothing there, except Papa!', *Dombey*, pp. 236-41 (p. 238).

There is also an ostensibly contrary strain of imagery relating to battles, swordsmanship, and the proving or assaying of weaponry for conscious behaviour; which in turn highlights the adroit cruelty of much domestic action (Edith and Dombey retreated into their respective corners: antagonists in a marital duel). Yet it also harnesses our fear of latent dungeon brutality. Many of Dickens's references are allusively medieval, from Mrs Pipchin's makeshift 'Castle' to the actual Warwick Castle, site of Dombey's ill-starred courtship.²⁰⁰ Dickens had visited Warwick Castle in October 1838. His aesthetic response was dismissive; but he would no doubt have logged its violent past: a history which has some correlation with the themes of *Dombey*.²⁰¹

In the fifteenth century Warwick Castle was used to imprison the English monarch, King Edward IV, under the auspices of its owner, Richard Neville, 16th Earl of Warwick (nicknamed 'The Kingmaker'). Neville had swapped allegiance from the Yorkist to Lancastrian cause upon Edward IV's marriage to Elizabeth Woodville, which he disputed. He was an insurgent from within, like Carker: a court renegade from the very epicentre of Dombey's 'world'.²⁰² Edward's two young sons, Edward Plantagenet, heir to the throne, and his brother Richard, Duke of York, were left in the care of their uncle, Richard, Duke of Gloucester, following Edward's death. They met their fate as the Princes in the Tower: murdered, probably on their uncle's orders, before he succeeded to the throne as Richard III. I wonder if Dickens had this dynastic tragedy in view when he chose Warwick Castle as the setting for Dombey's awkward courtship; in tandem with the first (minor but prescient) machinations of 'Mr Carker the Manager', newly arrived on the scene (384). The analogy gives me a strange way into my discussion of little Paul Dombey, strangest of Dickensian children.

'Psychology in art'? Paul Dombey and Paul Delaroche

In his autobiography, *A Small Boy and Others* (1913), Henry James records his feelings upon seeing Paul Delaroche's painting, *The Princes in the Tower* (1831), then, as now, in the Louvre, Paris:

Les Enfants d'Edouard thrilled me to a different tune, and I couldn't doubt that the long-drawn old face of the elder prince, sad and sure and sick, with his wide crimped side-locks of fair hair and his violet legs marked by the Garter and dangling from the bed, was a reconstitution of a far-off history of the subtlest and most 'last word' modern or psychological kind. I had never heard of

²⁰⁰ 'The Castle of this ogress and child-queller was in a steep by-street at Brighton', *Dombey*, p. 106. The chapters which recount the plan for and visit to Warwick Castle are presciently called 'Shadows of the Past and Future', and 'Deeper shadows' (XXVI; XXVII).

²⁰¹ Dickens visited Kenilworth then Warwick, just like the Dombey party. He wrote of the castle: 'an ancient building newly restored and possessing no very great attraction beyond a fine view and some beautiful pictures'. Letter to Mrs Charles Dickens, 1 November 1838, *Letters*, I, p. 447. See also *Dombey*, p. 394.

²⁰² An image developed by Dickens and taken up by critics. See chapter LV, 'Mr Dombey and his World', *Dombey*, pp. 753-63.

psychology in art or anywhere else [...] scarcely suppose then had; but I truly felt the nameless force at play.²⁰³

The adolescent James's perceptive response was in direct contrast to the accepted critical view of this work by the renowned French history painter.²⁰⁴ A reduced version hangs in the Wallace Collection, London.²⁰⁵

The 1910 catalogue of the collection sums it, and its creator, (reductively) up: 'Delaroche exercised a great and disastrous influence upon modern art. It was he who inaugurated the artificial, stage-dramatic style of representation in painting which obtained great acceptance for many years all over Europe'.²⁰⁶

For me, the opposing reactions to Delaroche's painting and interpretation of his means of rendering subjects help us unpack some of the issues at stake in criticism pertaining to Dickens's characterisation. By a strange allegiance of effect, certain visual determinants offer suggestive parallels to literary aspects in the textual entity that is Paul Dombey; in particular those that register as sinister and touching in tandem. There is some possibility, too, that Dickens knew Delaroche's conception, at least through reproduction. Perhaps it was a lodged presence in his creative subconscious.

What James identified as 'psychological' within the painting is all of a piece with its oddness and attenuated, 'stage-dramatic' quality. The two princes, attired in angular medieval garb, perch upon a four-poster bed carved with heraldic insignia – so high, they have only been able to access it via some free-standing steps. Delaroche has articulated through their forms not only a sense of who they are in that captured moment – vulnerable children – but who they are destined to be.²⁰⁷ The burden of their heritage, in terms of both office and in relation to the teleological narrative of which, unbeknown to them, they are part, is etched on their overly mature faces: elongated features, skin both sallow and eerily phosphorescent as if emitting inner light. They carry two different trajectories of expectation as, in Anny Sadrin's analysis, the first five numbers of

²⁰³ Henry James, 'A Small Boy and Others' (1913), quoted in Norman D. Ziff, *Paul Delaroche: A Study in Nineteenth Century French History Painting* (New York: Garland, 1977), p. 104. The painting's original Salon title was *Edouard V, roi mineur d'Angleterre, et Richard, duc de York, son free puine*. See Martin Meisel, *Realisations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 232, footnote 4.

²⁰⁴ Paul Delaroche, *Les Enfants d'Edouard,Louvre homepage* [online]. Department of Paintings: French Painting [cited 23 January 2017]. Available from: <<http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/children-edward>>

²⁰⁵ Paul Delaroche, *Edward V and the Duke of York in the Tower* (16 1/2 in. x 20 in.) *Wallace Collection homepage* [online]. 'What's On: "Treasure of the Month – March 2010"' [cited 23 January 2017]. Available from: <<http://wallacecollection.org/whatson/treasure/92>>

²⁰⁶ *Catalogue of the Oil Paintings and Water Colours in the Wallace Collection, with short notices of the painters*, 11th edn (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1910), p.75.

²⁰⁷ Martin Meisel says of the painting; 'the occasion of effect, is [...] a tension between two times, one to succeed another, and two locales, soon to become one'. He means that the murderer's presence is signalled by the light beneath the door, but his comment has wider purport. See Meisel, p. 82.

Dombey and Son ‘[read] as if two novelists were writing it simultaneously though at cross-purposes [...] Paul Dombey the Elder [...] [and] Charles Dickens’; the former envisaging a successful heir, the latter a necessary sacrifice.²⁰⁸

The amalgam of visual aspects in Delaroche’s portrayal of the tragic princes is analogous to the textual conglomerate comprising Dickens’s characterisation of ‘Little Paul’ (25). The narrative components are equally ‘stage-dramatic’ but also reconstitute a history of ‘the subtlest and most “last word” modern or psychological kind’; in that all the details which are so pressing are also uncomfortable, i.e. break from conventions of form or genre (melodrama, much discussed in relation to Dickens, is the opposite).²⁰⁹ Hands grasping both arms of his chair as he sits by his father’s side, Paul’s seat has the semblance of a throne.²¹⁰ Expectations of his destiny engulf him in every interior environment (home, church, successive schools): he has to escape outside, to that verge between the known and unknown, the sea’s edge, to disjoin himself from these.²¹¹ Furthermore, there is an element of anachronism to Delaroche’s depiction of the ill-fated princes which tallies with Dickens’s construct. Ironically, this anachronistic element is prescient as opposed to retrospective and gestures towards the fin de siècle (new fashioned old-fashioned). Delaroche’s princes appear enervated, fey: rendered limpid by the traverse of ages as opposed to mere childish fatigue. Their ill appearance anticipates the exhaustion of decadence: a phenomenon synonymous with the century’s latter decades. Decadence marks the warped state of things too long in place; when change is overdue, and pestilence as well as overt aestheticism characterises the peak of refinement. Decadent characters drawn by Joris-Karl Huysmans and Oscar Wilde evince too much knowledge, boredom, and thereby an inability to be surprised and – in effect – innocent.²¹²

²⁰⁸ See Anny Sadrin, *Parentage and inheritance in the novels of Charles Dickens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 46.

²⁰⁹ Melodrama offered an established dramatic form with widely understood rules. See Juliet John, ‘Introduction’ to *Dickens’s Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 1-20. There is an irony in the fact that James virulently criticised ‘[...] the troop of hunchbacks, imbeciles, and precocious children who have carried on the sentimental business in all Mr Dickens’s novels; the little Nells, the Smikes, the Paul Dombey’s’. He could see how oddity might equate to psychological percipience in visual, but not in narrative, terms. Quoted by Claudia Nelson, *Precocious Children & Childish Adults* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2012), p. 14.

²¹⁰ ‘[...] laying his hands on the elbows of his little chair’, *Dombey*, p. 98.

²¹¹ ‘But all goes on, as it was wont, upon the margin of the unknown sea’, *Dombey*, p. 621.

²¹² Joris-Karl Huysmans, *À rebours* (Against Nature) (1884); Oscar Wilde, *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* (1891).

Critics have identified a lineage of male characters in Dickens's fiction that anticipate decadent period typology.²¹³ Prominent among them are James Steerforth and James Harthouse, but perhaps these have their prototype in the original James, Carker, with his 'voluptuous' pictures and refined ways (499). However the child Paul is also decadent in the sense that he never embodies the carefree fearlessness of pure innocence. His innocence, though a literal fact, is shadowed by the knowingness that has him imply his own demise, and occasionally revel in the split between his knowledge and others's. This almost suggests the furtive delight of connoisseurship, a solipsistic relish which Dickens evokes through Paul's gesture of hand rubbing (and more subtly, the grating of his hands on chair arms).²¹⁴ The connoisseur is jealous of their knowledge. This may read as perverse, as Paul is essentially a victim character for whom we feel compassion. However he does combine realism and a form of surrealism or, in Peter Coveney's astute approximation, an unprecedented 'imaginative intensity'.²¹⁵ This is perhaps best glossed as a version of realism that houses surrealism. So we need not conclude that Paul knows of his death, but we can posit that he carries the promise of it within him, just as his creator did from the outset ('Boy born, to die'); and the intimation of this affords a kind of smugness, the origin of which is perhaps mysterious to the child himself.²¹⁶

Paul certainly pre-empts a later generation of children characters: the solitary explorers of Frances Hodgson Burnett and J.M. Barrie.²¹⁷ These Edwardian creations are isolated in a way that dogs few Victorian precedents: wilfully drawn to the fantastical and wayward. There is a corrective emphasis upon community in Victorian culture (the exception, Kingsley's over-curious chimney sweep, has to die in order to explore the fantasy dimension).²¹⁸ Both Oliver and Paul experience the tension of this; Oliver longs for a secure normality that bypasses the pain and pleasure of specialness; Paul exhibits an initial apartness which

²¹³ 'The thin, calculated sensuality that runs from the Byronic Steerforth to the Yellow Book Wrayburn'. See Angus Wilson, 'The Heroes and Heroines of Dickens', in *Dickens and the Twentieth Century*, pp. 3-11 (p. 11). 'Turning his attention from sartorial to spiritual dandyism, he creates a gentleman of a new dandy tradition: polished, poised and essentially amoral'. See Beth F. Herst, *The Dickens Hero: Selfhood and Alienation in the Dickens World* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1990), p. 140.

²¹⁴ "It can't make me strong and quite well, either, Papa, can it?" asked Paul, after a short silence, rubbing his tiny hands'; 'But Paul got his hand free as soon as he could; and rubbing it gently to and fro on the elbow of his hair, as if his wit were in the palm, and he were sharpening it', *Dombey*, pp. 100; 99.

²¹⁵ Coveney, p. 140.

²¹⁶ In Dickens's plan for the novel, outlined in a letter to John Forster, quoted by Sadrin, p. 46.

²¹⁷ Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Little Princess* (1905), *The Secret Garden* (1911); J. M. Barrie, *Peter's Pan's First Adventures to Neverland* (1904). Hodgson Burnett initially published *The Little Princess* as a magazine serial called *Sara Crewe, or: What happened at Miss Minchin's Boarding School* (1888), paying tribute to *Dombey* as 'Miss Pipchin' morphs into 'Miss Minchin'.

²¹⁸ See Charles Kingsley, *The Water-Babies: A Fairy Tale for a Land Baby*, ed. Robert Douglas-Fairhurst (Oxford: Oxford University Press [1863], 2014). Tom's master is a chimney sweep called 'Grimes'; a sadistic version of Paul's Glubb.

gradually segues into a need to be loved, in tandem – we are given to understand – with a bodily weakening and intimation of mortality.

The ‘modern or psychological’ ambit of Paul’s old-fashioned[ness] comes full circle when he becomes the referential core of Frederic Adye’s paean to ‘Old-Fashioned Children’, published in *Macmillan’s* in August 1893, on the cusp of the fin de siècle. ‘The old-fashioned child is in fact a development of modern writers, and to Dickens for his delineation of this [...] the palm must be given. It is he indeed who has supplied us with the phrase’, he writes.²¹⁹ The renewed currency of a long-established conceptual paradox may have been conditioned by the contemporary interest in abnormal psychology, embodied by texts such as Vernon Lee’s *Hauntings* (1890), in which intuition is synonymous with aesthetic dissoluteness and is frequently the precursor to death. Was Adye also looking through a pictorial lens? Children’s book illustrators such as Kate Greenaway habitually portrayed children in nostalgic dress, a mixture of medieval and Directoire period style, and gave them ‘solemn, absorbed faces’.²²⁰ Fred Barnard’s illustration of Florence and Paul for the Household Edition of *Dombey and Son* (1877), is both overtly Greenaway-esque and pays apparent tribute to Delaroche’s work in composition.²²¹ Though such observations create an evidently anachronistic web of visual data, they shed a back light on viable aspects of little Paul Dombey: his prodigal fitness for a decadent aesthetic, whether interpreted through specifics that presage a later time; or atmosphere.

Did Dickens know of *Les Enfants d’Edouard*? He certainly admired Paul Delaroche and enthused about him during the *Dombey* years. In 1847, when in Paris, he advised Harrison Ainsworth to ‘[...] seize the concierge by the throat and demand to see a fresco by Paul de la Roche [sic] which I believe to be the greatest work of art in the world’.²²² Dickens was referring to the panoramic *L’Hémicycle du Palais des Beaux-arts* (1837-41), on display at the École des Beaux-Arts.²²³ *Les Enfants* was, of course, in the Louvre, which Dickens and

²¹⁹ Quoted by Malcolm Andrews, *Dickens and the Grown Up Child* (London: Macmillan, 1994), p. 127. See Frederic Adye, ‘Old-Fashioned Children’, *Macmillan’s Magazine*, 68 (1893), 286-92.

²²⁰ Her illustrations for ‘The Pied Piper of Hamelin’ (1888) are representative. See *Kate Greenaway* (London: Academy Editions, 1977), p. 2.

²²¹ See *The Works of Charles Dickens: Household Edition: Dombey and Son*, illustrated by F. Barnard (London: Chapman and Hall, 1911), p. 77. Paul is perched on an occasional table and Florence stands next to him, her arm woven around her brother’s neck. The composition is strikingly like Delaroche’s in *Les Enfants*: the elevation of the more delicate sibling; the closeness of the heads and the mingling of hands. The drawing was converted into a stained glass window design by John Winbolt, now on display at Dickens’s House; and reproduced as the cover of my working edition (maker uncredited).

²²² Letter to Harrison Ainsworth, 18 March 1847; quoted by Leonée Ormond, in ‘Dickens and Painting: Contemporary Art’, *Dickensian*, 80 (1984), 3-25 (p.19).

²²³ Dickens may have heard about *L’Hémicycle* from the artist Daniel Maclise, who had written to their mutual friend Forster in 1844: ‘It is impossible for me even to convey to you my admiration for that splendid work’. Quoted by Ormond, 3-25 (p. 19).

Forster took in on a fortnight of site-seeing in January 1847, immediately after Dickens had ‘slaughter[ed] a young and innocent victim’ at the close of *Dombey*[’s] fifth number.²²⁴ Given his appetite for French art, it is possible that Dickens first visited France’s national gallery on his inaugural Paris trip in July 1844.²²⁵ Even if he had not seen Delaroche’s work at first hand, he might well have encountered it in reproduction. It had proved immediately popular with the public upon its exhibition at the 1831 Salon and even inspired a play, Casimir Delavigne’s *Les Enfants d’Edouard*, dedicated to ‘A mon ami Paul Delaroche’, which opened to acclaim in 1833.²²⁶ Thackeray published a laudatory review in his Paris theatre report for *The National Standard*, calling it ‘one of the best acted tragedies I had ever the good fortune to see’.²²⁷ Dickens’s interest in the theatre was at its height in 1833, as his professional ambitions retracted.²²⁸ It is unlikely that his rival reporter’s praise for a Parisian hit would have gone unnoticed. In a later piece, ‘On the French School of Painting’ (1836), Thackeray acknowledged Delaroche’s *Les Enfants*, which he noted had appeared ‘a hundred different ways in print’ (including alongside the play of its name; Prud’homme’s engraving is printed in the 1836 edition of Delavigne’s collected works and some later ones).²²⁹

Paul and St Paul

It is common knowledge that Dickens took great care with his characters’ names, but the naming in *Dombey and Son* remains unexplored.²³⁰ Why ‘Paul’? The narrative reason is fast announced: ‘He will be christened Paul, my – Mrs Dombey – of course’, offers Paul the elder, initiating one of the two rival teleologies already noted (1).²³¹ The name was relatively unusual; there are no characters in Eliot or Thackeray called Paul;

²²⁴ ‘I am slaughtering a young and innocent victim-’. Letter to John Forster, quoted by Tomalin, *Dickens: A Life*, p. 190.

²²⁵ Quoted by Claire Tomalin, in *Charles Dickens: A Life* (London: Viking, 2011), 190. Although Dickens’s distaste for English painting, particularly the contemporary Pre-Raphaelites, is renowned, he was won over by the French: ‘There are no end of bad pictures among the French, but, Lord! the goodness also! – the fearlessness of them; the bold drawing; the dashing conception; the passion and action...!’, See Ormond, 3-25 (p.19). On Dickens’s 1844 trip see Tomalin, p. 154.

²²⁶ ‘Delaroche’s Children of Edward was enormously successful with the crowds’. See Norman Ziff, *Paul Delaroche: A Study in Nineteenth Century French History Painting* (New York, Garland, 1977), p. 104. See Martin Meisel, *Realisations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 237.

²²⁷ See ‘Foreign Correspondence’, *The National Standard* (6 July 1833), published in *Stray Papers* (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1901) pp. 36-39 (p. 37). Cited by Meisel, p. 237.

²²⁸ ‘By April 1833, he had given up the idea of becoming a professional actor. Yet, as if to affirm the theatre’s enduring importance to him, he plunged into organising, producing, directing, and acting in an evening of private theatricals at the Dickens home’. See Fred Kaplan, *Dickens: A Biography* (London: Sceptre, 1989), p. 56.

²²⁹ See W. M. Thackeray, ‘On the French School of Painting’, *The Paris sketch book of Mr. M.A. Titmarsh: and the memoirs of Mr. Charles J. Yellowplush* (London: Smith, Elder, 1869), p. 46; *Oeuvres completes de Casimir Delavigne* (Paris, 1836), p. 375 (illus). . Cited by Meisel, p. 238 (fn. 25), 236 (fn. 19).

²³⁰ See for example, John R. Reed, ‘Dickens and Naming’, *Dickens Studies Annual*, 36 (2005), 183-97.

²³¹ ‘[T]he book actually reads as if two novelists were writing it simultaneously though at cross-purposes [...] Paul Dombey the Elder [...] Charles Dickens’. See Sadrin, p. 46.

Charlotte Brontë's Monsieur Paul, the Belgian professor in *Villette* (1853), highlights its association with Europe (as per Paul Delaroche).

But, of course, there is a huge precedent, one so large it has perhaps been an elephant in the critical room: 'Upon the arrival of the procession at the place of interment, and after the melancholy duties had been paid to Paul (without robbing Peter), the following Requiem was chanted'.²³² This passage, extracted from an 1847 satire written in response to the public outcry at little Paul's death, is the only incidence I have found of the elephant being brought to light. In my reading of Dickens's text St Paul, Paul the Apostle, a towering figure in Christian theology, provides the source of a web of associated meaning: one which informs our understanding of both character and the text's most dense symbolisms.

Almost as looming as the absence of critical discussion on Paul's name, is the prevalent view that Dickens was hostile to pedantry in the interpretation of biblical texts, or anything approaching bibliolatry.²³³ This needs contextualising. Dickens did advise against the propounding of Old Testament texts – he instinctively understood the potential for figurative language to wreak debilitating effect if taken literally, and furthermore the abuse of power this might occasion amongst the clerical establishment. But his advice is audience-specific. To Angela Burdett-Coutts, co-founder of Urania Cottage, a refuge for fallen women, he wrote in November 1847: 'I trust that those enlightenments to which you refer, are to be found in the New Testament? I am confident that harm is done to this class of minds by the injudicious use of the Old'.²³⁴ Likewise he reviled against phrases such as 'The Lamb of God' in the religious education of children, 'recollecting the immense absurdities that were suggested to my childhood by like injudicious catechising'.²³⁵ However he was clear that the young might mature into an understanding of such symbolic schema: 'I have always been anxious not to weary my children with such things before they are old enough to form opinions respecting them'.²³⁶ In both cases Dickens is warning against the unmediated effect on vulnerable minds.

²³² From an unsigned article, 'Inquest on the late Master Paul Dombey', *The Man in the Moon*, March 1847, i, 155-60, quoted in Collins, ed., *The Critical Heritage*, p. 223.

²³³ See 'Introduction', Walder, pp. 1-16.

²³⁴ Letter from Charles Dickens to Angela Burdett-Coutts, 3 November 1847. See Edgar Johnson, *The Heart of Charles Dickens: As Revealed in his Letters to Angela Burdett-Coutts*, selected and edited from the Collection in the Pierpont Morgan Library (Westport; Connecticut: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1952), p. 101.

²³⁵ The passage in full: 'I heard a lady visitor [...] propounding questions in reference to "the Lamb of God" which I most unquestionably would not suffer any one to put to my children: recollecting the immense absurdities that are suggested in my childhood by such injudicious catechising'. Charles Dickens to S. R. Starey, 24 September 1843, *Letters*, III, pp. 573-74 (p. 573).

²³⁶ Letter to Edward Dickens, 26 September 1868, *Letters*, XII, pp. 187-88 (p. 188).

Yet for Dickens himself, biblical imagery and language afforded a rich resource; his engagement with it perhaps still under-appreciated. In an example of what I discussed in my introduction, Dickens's use of biblical sources often amounts to inflections of idiom; so tactful a swabbing, it is as if it comprises authorial game play, rather than a projected dialogue with this readership. (In 'Two Views of Cheap Theatre', a piece of 1860, Dickens recognises the Bible's allusive potentiality but sees the preacher as a mediator).²³⁷ To give an example of delicate borrowing, Jesus's plea at Calvary: 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do' (Luke 23. 34), seems to undercut a number of passages in Dickens where the format of 'not know[ing] what they do' is echoed.²³⁸ Adjectival echoes seem more purposed for public receipt. Carker is 'so subtle and vigilant of eye'; in the private comforts of his home, he 'issues forth some subtle portion of himself', and is eventually demoted as a 'false and subtle' man who 'despise[s] the object upon which he fawns' (678; 500; 812). The source of course is Genesis, which forewarns of the serpent's deviousness: 'Now the serpent was more subtil [sic] than any beast in the field which the LORD God had made' (Genesis 3. 1). The Bible always provides a wider framework of imagistic conceits, utilised both emphatically and at times with a light touch. Dombey breaks a rib falling from his horse, a witty reference to Adam's rib, of which Eve derives, in prescient warning of his marriage's demise.²³⁹

Of course, St Paul is present in *Dombey and Son*, and at a rather key point. As a new pupil at Doctor Blimber's Academy, little Paul Dombey witnesses the following instruction from the Doctor: 'Johnson will repeat to me to-morrow morning before breakfast, without book, and from the Greek Testament, the first chapter of the epistle of Saint Paul to the Ephesians' (169). The Book of the Ephesians is one of the Pauline epistles: numbering five out of the thirteen as they are ordered in the New Testament.²⁴⁰ For all their gnomic complexity, there is no record of their having merited Dickens's especial antagonism.²⁴¹ The Ephesians were

²³⁷ 'As to the models [biblical texts], imitate them. Sunday preachers – else why are they there, consider?' 'Two Views of a Cheap Theatre' (*All the Year Round*, 25 February 1860), in *The Dent Uniform Edition of Dickens' Journalism: The Uncommercial Traveller And Other Papers 1859-70*, 4 vols (London: J.M. Dent, 2000), ed. by Michael Slater and John Drew, IV, pp. 52-62 (p. 62).

²³⁸ For example: 'He stood, for a moment, with the blood so tingling through all his veins from terror [...] then, confused and frightened, he took to his heels; and, not knowing what he did, made off as fast as he could lay his feet to the ground', *Oliver Twist*, p. 74; 'Florence, not knowing what she did, put on a shawl and bonnet, in a dream of running through the streets', *Dombey*, p. 703.

²³⁹ '[...] the patient, though severely cut and bruised, had broken no bones but a lesser rib or so'; *Dombey*, p. 636; 'And the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man'; Genesis, 1.22.

²⁴⁰ Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860), as founder of the 'Tübingen School' of New Testament criticism, brought a new, Hegelian critical perspective to the Pauline epistles. Only seven of the epistles are now believed to be fully attributable, including Romans and 1 Corinthians. The Ephesians has been subject to some doubt. Of course these arguments post-date Dickens; and remain the subject of unresolved debate today.

²⁴¹ They did receive rather negative characterisation in *Little Dorrit* (1857) when Arthur Clenham reflects on 'the hiccupping references to 2 Ep., Thess, c. III. v. 6 & 7'. Quoted by William Kent, *Dickens and Religion* (London: Watts & Co., 1930), p. 53.

a people unversed in Christianity. In *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*, Harold Hoehner claims that the ‘teaching of the Ephesians is considered the crown or quintessence of Paulinism because in large measure it summarises the leading themes of the Pauline letters’.²⁴² He puts this in context:

The Ephesians were instructed that they formerly had no relationship with God (Eph. 2. 1-3, 11-12) but that changed when they placed their faith in the work accomplished by Christ’s death on the cross [...] with the result that they have access to God the Father [...] Salvation is not only for the present time but will be consummated in the future [...] In that future day the body of believers will be presented to Christ ‘without blemish or wrinkle or any such thing’.²⁴³

Paulinism is born out of Christology and focuses upon the agency of grace in the attainment of salvation. It orientates toward a better future and figures faith in imagistic terms as the physical perfection of youth.

The parallels between the leading themes of Paulinism and the symbolic framework of *Dombey and Son* are rich and manifold. The most puzzling aspect of Dickens’s text is the designation of little Paul as ‘old’, which spawns the differentiation of ‘old-fashioned’.²⁴⁴ (It is important to note that he is initially likened to an old man, and only latterly and ever more repeatedly caught within the aegis of the ‘old-fash[ion]’).²⁴⁵ In Ephesians 4. 20-24, the Apostle Paul sets out his edict for this benighted people:

But ye have not so learned Christ;
If so be that ye have heard him, and have been taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus:
That ye put off concerning the former conversation with the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts;
and be renewed in the spirit of your mind;
And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.

The theologian Alfred Wikenhauser identifies the argument as paralleled across the Pauline Epistles; and explicates it as follows: ‘Paul calls upon his readers to put off the old man with his (bad) works and to put on the new man, the image of his Creator’.²⁴⁶ He goes on to elucidate:

A similar meaning [to ‘new man’] attaches to the ‘inward man’ [...] of II Corinthians 4. 16: ‘For which cause we faint not: but though our outward man is corrupted, yet the inward man is renewed

²⁴² Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids; Michigan: Baker House Company, 2003), p. 106.

²⁴³ Hoehner, p. 110. The King James Version reads: ‘[...] not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish’; Ephesians 5. 27.

²⁴⁴ See chapter viii, ‘Paul’s Further Progress, Growth, and Character’, *Dombey*, pp. 95-117.

²⁴⁵ Even Paul starts to pick up on these references and quizzes Florence: ‘“Do *you* think I have grown old-fashioned?” His sister laughed, and fondled him, and told him, “No”’. See *Dombey*, p. 210. Florence is the only one to cheerfully dispute the designation.

²⁴⁶ Specifically in Colossians 3. 9, Romans 13. 14 and Galatians 3. 27. See Alfred Wikenhauser, *Pauline Mysticism: Christ in the Mystical Teaching of St Paul*, trans. by Joseph Cunningham (Herder: Freiburg, 1960), p. 45.

day by day'. This 'inward man' is identical with 'Christ in us', our new life [...] The 'inward man' corresponds to the 'new man' of Colossians 3. 9 and Ephesians 4. 23: 'Put on the new man'.²⁴⁷

I conceive of Dickens erecting a bold trinity in *Dombey and Son*, in which Dombey is the 'outward man' who must lose his 'old' self in order to be reborn 'not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing' (Ephesians 5. 27). As Jesus died, in Christian theology, in order to bring salvation to humanity and absolution from sin, little Paul must die in order to release the 'new man' in Dombey. He represents sin, because he is growing into the destiny which bore Dombey into effective inhumanity; if he does not perish he will replicate that pattern and it will carry on into perpetuity.²⁴⁸ Although critics have identified the doomed parity between Dombey and son, most focus upon their incompatibility within socio-economic paradigms.²⁴⁹ If my argument has credence, the Pauline source furnishes a tightly-fused symbolic schema which allows for the story's self-enfolding evolutions/revolutions. Paul the old-looking baby becomes an 'old' child who gradually sickens into an 'old-fashioned' parody of itself as death looms. His father reverts to a state of childish dependence upon the daughter: a man reborn into humility at its most 'base' – in the sense of lowly, as opposed to 'base' as material constitute (once his only scale of reference, by which he memorably evaluates Florence).²⁵⁰ Definitions evolve within a circumscribed family triad; the 'still point of the turning world'.²⁵¹

We can extend the reading to Florence, though her symbolic freight is split between her effective agency as the embodiment of grace; and her role as a cohering force, more analogous to the Bride of Christ, the church personified. This more expansive and celebratory teleology looks forward to her own eventual role as the mother of a happy family and presumably, corrective genealogy, into perpetuity. Julian Moynahan remarks that Florence draws all towards her, except for (initially) Dombey.²⁵² She is a cohering force. Her message

²⁴⁷ Wikenhauser, p. 46.

²⁴⁸ 'Paul Dombey will become his father. The times will change but time will stand still'. See John Lucas, *The Major Novels* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 35.

²⁴⁹ See, for example, 'The Forcing Apparatus: *Dombey and Son*', in Sally Shuttleworth, 'The Forcing Apparatus: *Dombey and Son*', in *The Mind of the Child: Child Development in Literature, Science, and Medicine, 1840-1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 107-30; and Katherine Byrne, 'Consuming the Family Economy: Tuberculosis and Capitalism in Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son*', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 29 (March 2007), 1-16.

²⁵⁰ 'Paul is associated from his first introduction – red, bald, and deeply creased – with the qualities of age'. See Shuttleworth, p. 111. '[...] such a child was merely a piece of base coin that couldn't be invested'. *Dombey*, p. 3.

²⁵¹ T.S. Eliot, 'Burnt Norton', *Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), pp. 1-8 (p. 4).

²⁵² Moynahan notes her 'enormous power over nearly every important character in the book except Dombey and Carker, and in the end over Dombey'. See Moynahan, 'Firmness versus Wetness', in *Dickens in the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Gross and Pearson, pp. 121-31 (p. 121). Actually Florence attracts Carker's lascivious attention as a maturing girl, but Dickens shifts his attention to Edith.

and medium is pervasive love. It tallies with Ephesians 5. 2: ‘And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling savour’. Little Paul envisages his ideal destiny as growing up to live with his sister in rustic harmony: ‘to [...] go away into the country with my darling Florence, have a beautiful garden, fields, and woods, and live there with her all my life!’ (202). His arcadian premise makes more sense if we think of their congruence as the cohesion of Christ and church: or sacrificial Son and Bride of Christ. Dickens’s reiterates the pervasion of love in Florence’s thoughts, even at the most challenging junctures, ‘Nothing wandered in her thoughts but love’ (270).²⁵³

Florence’s more complex gift, that of grace, is hardest to pin down in Dickens’s text, as it such a perverse concept within Pauline theology. As Linda Freedman explains: ‘The Protestant doctrine of grace was developed out of a specifically Pauline notion of the word [...] (charis), which is usually translated as “favour”’.²⁵⁴ In my tentative iconography, little Paul must die in order to break the pattern of accumulative inhumanity which perpetuates if each Dombey begets a son and trains him up within a pride-bound, materialist, ethos of business primogeniture. Though an innocent himself, he bears away that potential sin. Grace is the agency of a sinner’s conversion: put in place at baptism, fulfilled at the moment of death. It is a gift of God: the closest personification in the Bible is of course the Holy Spirit, often symbolised as a dove.²⁵⁵ Grace is both something that wreaks great and transformational effect, and is impossible to command through will, work, or – crucially here – earthly currency such as wealth or status.²⁵⁶

Grace, in the Pauline epistles, is specifically engineered through the rite of Baptism, and is a blessing that is bestowed by God as opposed to earned by the recipient’s works. The baptism of little Paul has troubled critics, including Forster, who had it that Dickens himself held little store by the rite.²⁵⁷ But within Pauline theology it is the vital point of conjunction between man and God, sinner and salvation. St Paul’s mysticism is thereby made pragmatic: ‘the real union of life and being [...] is established by a sacramental act, namely

²⁵³ The full reference is as follows: ‘Nothing wandered in her thoughts but love—a wandering love, indeed, and castaway—but turning always to her father’. *Dombey*, p. 270.

²⁵⁴ Linda Freedman, ‘Reflection and the Aesthetics of Grace in *Villette*’, *Literature and Theology*, 22 (2008), 406-18 (p. 406).

²⁵⁵ At the Baptism of Christ, for example: ‘And Jesus, when he was baptised, went up straightway out of the water: and lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him’: Matthew 3. 16.

²⁵⁶ Freedman cites Romans 11. 6 as the ‘closest thing to a Pauline definition of grace’: ‘[...]and if by grace, then it is no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then it is no more grace: otherwise work is no more work’. See Freedman, 406-418 (p. 406).

²⁵⁷ [Forster] reports that for Dickens in February 1841 the “realities” of the sacrament of baptism no longer amounted to more than “enabling him to form a relationship with friends he most loved.” See Walder, p. 14.

by Baptism. He says clearly that mystical union with Christ is brought about by this act'.²⁵⁸ Baptism is equated with death because it is at that juncture that it comes into effect; as per I Romans 6. 3: 'Know you not that all we who are baptised in Christ Jesus are baptised in death?'. This explains Dickens's famously cold portrayal of little Paul's baptism, which Peter Coveney remarks is more like a funeral.²⁵⁹

Baptism is immersion in water. Paul, in fact, is twice baptised: once officially, a second time when he is woken from his swoon by some 'sprinkled water' on his forehead – the faint signalling the mortal illness that now takes hold.²⁶⁰ The sea is the dominant symbol within *Dombey and Son*, usually placed at a counterpoint to the railway: the latter representative of the materialist and strictly teleological, business-led, world.²⁶¹ Back to Wikenhauser: 'The Greek verb "to baptise" always had the connotation of being plunged into the element'.²⁶² Little Paul and Florence are associated with the sea in turn: Paul by his musings as to what the waves are always saying, that come crashing into clarity upon his death; Florence by more thematic association, most fully explored by Julian Moynahan, with the cyclical organism of the sea.²⁶³ Acts tell of how St Paul commandeers a ship in a storm, putting his faith in God and urging the crew to do likewise: 'And now I exhort you to be of good cheer: for there shall be no loss of *any man's* life among you, but of the ship. For there stood by me this night the angel of God, whose I am, and whom I serve' (Acts 27. 22).²⁶⁴ The reader thinks of Walter embarking on his perilous voyage: 'Was he saved!' exclaims Florence – and he is, restoring the angelic girl's palpable gift, a purse, a pledge of faith, to her on his return (729).

Grace, as St Paul makes clear, is the only feasible salvation for the proud man, who in effect stalls God: 'Do nothing out of vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourself' (Philippians 2. 3). Right at the beginning of 'the first chapter of the epistle of Saint Paul to the Ephesians' (which Johnson is tasked to 'repeat [...] without book'), a rival taxonomy to earthly riches, and specifically material inheritance, is set in

²⁵⁸ See Wikenhauser, p. 110.

²⁵⁹ See Coveney, p. 142.

²⁶⁰ 'And when he raised his head, quite scared, and looked about him, he found that the Doctor Blimber had come into the room; and that the window was open, and his forehead was wet with sprinkled water'; *Dombey*, p. 201.

²⁶¹ See 'Waves and Railway', Steven Connor, *Charles Dickens* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), p. 33.

²⁶² Wikenhauser, p. 111.

²⁶³ As per the title for Book I, chapter XVI, 'What the Waves were always saying', *Dombey*, 236-40; Moynahan, pp. 121-31.

²⁶⁴ Linda Freedman's article on Grace in relation to *Villette* drew my attention to this passage. See Freedman, pp. 406-18.

place (169).²⁶⁵ St Paul speaks of Jesus Christ, 'In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace' (Ephesians 1. 7); and later: 'In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will' (Ephesians 1. 11). So several pertinent symbolic inversions are in place: the Son who acts to facilitate his Father's bequest 'after the counsel of his own will'; the 'inheritance' being one of faith and good purpose, 'unsearchable riches' rather than monetary wealth.²⁶⁶ Likewise Little Paul debars Dombey's materialistic intent; similarly taking effect on his father's bequest and family legacy.

Dombey is fertile ground for the blanket coming of grace ('Grace be to you').²⁶⁷ Once disadvantaged, he neither attempts to access, nor answers to, help. Dickens makes this clear at two respective moments of extreme dejection: 'if a kind hand could have been stretched out [...] [he] would have risen up, and turned away'; and of course in specific relation to the agent of grace, Florence, whom Dombey now realises he has wronged: 'if he could have heard her voice in an adjoining room, he would not have gone to her' (885; 883). He will not work upon repatriating himself to the possibility of loving change.

How does Dickens illustrate the action of grace at the critical moment? It seems remarkable that Florence asks Dombey for his forgiveness, when it should be the other way round, but by doing all – appropriating the necessary psychological act of asking forgiveness, and extending the mercy which is the prerogative of the wronged, she effects the complete revolution necessary to turn this most stubborn of men. She is, in effect, enacting one of the most transcendent elucidations within the Pauline epistles: 'my Grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness'.²⁶⁸ For all his internalised regret, Dombey's conversion is a *happening*, not a process. Florence's plea is a form of white lie, but a strategic one of such lightening strike vigour that it warrants the semantic form reserved for the Holy Spirit: 'The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee'.²⁶⁹ Only by being 'come upon' can Dombey be

²⁶⁵ 'Johnson will repeat to me tomorrow morning before breakfast, without book, and from the Greek Testament, the first chapter of the epistle of Saint Paul to the Ephesians'; *Dombey*, p. 169.

²⁶⁶ Cf. Saint Paul on the wealth of Christ: 'Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ'. Ephesians 3. 8.

²⁶⁷ Ephesians 1. 2.

²⁶⁸ 'For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me'. II Corinthians 12. 8-9.

²⁶⁹ Luke 1. 26-38. The idiom echoes II Corinthians 12. 9, as above; 'that the power of Christ may rest upon me'. Dickens uses this idiom for Carker's pending fate: 'Death was on him'. He uses the lightening image to presage the clear-sightedness that Dombey eventually attains in relation to his daughter: 'a dawning knowledge [...] struck him in the end like lightening'. *Dombey*, pp. 823, 29.

accessed, and this in part explains the odd suddenness of Florence's arrival at the most fortuitous juncture. The phrase carries within it, and so contextualises, that which critics have interpreted as a psychosexual dimension to Florence's love for her father.²⁷⁰ In his letter to John Forster outlining his plan for the novel, Dickens referred to Florence as '[Dombey's] unknown Good Genius always'; and he several times figures her as a dove.²⁷¹ Her combination of extreme humility – ready to nestle modestly within others's lives (as she does Captain Cuttle's) – and blanket empowerment (as per the above) is neatly fused in the dove conceit.

Perhaps St Paul's most famous edict is from the First Epistle to the Corinthians: 'for now I see as through a glass darkly; but then face to face; now in part; but then I shall know even as also I am known'.²⁷² It has multiple resonances for *Dombey and Son*. Dombey is forever reluctant to look at Florence's face, peering at her from beneath his handkerchief upon discovering her transformation into a beautiful adolescent.²⁷³ When she saves him at the novel's end he kisses her on the mouth, looks upward, and pleads God's forgiveness.²⁷⁴ Perhaps he has forever forfeited the freedom to gaze freely. An interplay of light and dark pervades Dickens's text. Of most pertinence, of course, is the golden light that filters through the shutters of Paul's death chamber, with a tremulousness that suggests reflection on water.²⁷⁵ In Andrew Lincoln's exegesis of Ephesians for *The Cambridge Companion to St Paul*, he glosses lines Ephesians 5. 3-14 as: 'believers have a new identity as children of light with its connotations of holiness [...] this light that has Christ as its source is able to expose and transform the darkness of the surrounding society and its values'.²⁷⁶ Dombey's house is always in darkness, with a symbolism both biblical and prescient of mid-Victorian architectural aesthetics which warned against houses always in shadow.²⁷⁷ There is a more closely interpolated use however in the

²⁷⁰ See Moynahan, 121-31.

²⁷¹ Letter from Charles Dickens to John Forster, 18 October 1844, quoted in John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson, *Dickens at Work* (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 95.

²⁷² I Corinthians 13. 12.

²⁷³ On this moment and other instances of 'vision' in the novel see Stacey Kikendall, 'The Power of Vision in Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son*', *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 44 (2011), 65-81 (p. 75).

²⁷⁴ 'As she clung closer to him, in another burst of tears, he kissed her on the lips, and, lifting up his eyes, said, "Oh my God, forgive me, for I need it very much!"'. See *Dombey*, p. 890. His invocation recalls Christ's on the cross, in rhythm and tone: 'Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.' (Luke 23:34). As per fn. 238, above.

²⁷⁵ 'When the sunbeams struck into his room through the rustling blinds, and quivered on the opposite wall like golden water', *Dombey*, p. 236.

²⁷⁶ Andrew T. Lincoln, 'Ephesians', in *The Cambridge Companion to Saint Paul*, ed. by James D.G. Dunn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 133-40 (p. 139). The most pertinent phrase is: 'For ye were sometimes darkness, but now *are ye* light in the Lord: walk as children of light'; Ephesians 3. 8.

²⁷⁷ See 'Aspect and Prospect', Robert Kerr, *The Gentleman's House; Or, How to Plan English Residences, from the Parsonage to the Palace* (London: John Murray, 1864), p. 88.

frequent descriptions of shadows lowering themselves back over Dombey's, and sometimes Edith's, respective faces; when they have intimated an uncomfortable apprehension about themselves, and then disregarded it. This is a blanking out of enlightenment (and God, in effect); frequently a building up of resentment (within one human being; the most parallel sentiment to the bestial pestilence mentioned in my chapter introduction). After Edith intercedes on Dombey's furtive observation of his daughter, and claims Florence as her nocturnal companion on her first night in the marital home, Dickens's narrative puts a watch on the doubly rejected man: 'The room grew darker, as the candles waned and went out; but a darkness gathered on his face, exceeding any that the night could cast, and rested there' (533). (There is an echo and subversion here of II Corinthians 12. 9; 'that the power of Christ may rest upon me'; again demonstrating Dickens's delicate appropriation of biblical text). Later, he has opportunity to watch Edith, his equal in vengeful pride, as she reacts to his rejection of her plea for a new mutual understanding: 'To see the face change to its old expression, deepened in intensity! [...] To see scorn, anger, indignation, and abhorrence starting into sight, and the pale blank earnestness vanish like a mist!' (601). Alice Marwood figures Harriet Carker's resemblance to her malign older brother along similar lines: 'I see the shadow of him in her face!' (520).

Dombey's second marriage is in contravention of St Paul's advice in the Ephesians, perhaps the most pragmatic in relation to the domestic sphere within the Epistles, and at least partially analogous to Victorian domestic mores: 'Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, even as unto the Lord'; 'Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ is the head of the Church'.²⁷⁸ After the ceremony, the reader witnesses Carker reciting the traditional Christian marriage vows as his horse 'picks his dainty way' into town (479). (Masculine daintiness implies time and leisure for callowness or cruelty in Dickens: *Oliver Twist* is rife with nasty individuals manhandling toothpicks). Carker is doubt salaciously running through his mind what Louisa Bounderby conveys through metaphor: 'Yet when the night comes, Fire bursts out, father!'.²⁷⁹ Preceding Carker's journey, Dickens tells us that 'Night, like a giant, fills the church, from pavement to roof, and holds dominion through the silent hours' (478). Critics have often assumed that the Dombey marriage is unconsummated, but this figure of night as an tumescent force seems a powerfully suggestive

²⁷⁸ Ephesians 5. 22-25.

²⁷⁹ See Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*, ed. by David Craig (London: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 135.

counterargument.²⁸⁰ In itself it casts an ominous shadow over the narrative to come, and shows us how far Dombey and Edith are from the conjugal harmony advocated by St Paul and in Victorian culture.

Grace Abounding?

I wonder if there isn't another literary precedent to Dickens's exploration of grace, as well as the Pauline epistles. John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* is the author's autobiographical account of the operation of grace upon his resistant self. Walder explains how Bunyan's text was a precedent for spiritual biography of the kind emulated by Dickens's friend Carlyle in *Sartor Resartus*.²⁸¹ Most famously, of course, Bunyan was the author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, a text much discussed in relation to Victorian novels of transformation, and a direct model for *Oliver Twist*, or *The Parish Boy's Progress*.²⁸² Dickens again references it in his pointed titles for chapters five and eight of *Dombey and Son*: 'Paul's Progress and Christening' and 'Paul's further Progress, Growth, and Character'. The allegorical nature of Bunyan's seminal 1678 text provides a suggestive framework for the novel's moral semantics. Dickens owned the 1830 edition of *The Pilgrim's Progress* with a 'Life of Bunyan' by Robert Southey; which uses *Grace Abounding* to create a biographical account, quoting and paraphrasing liberally.²⁸³

In many ways, the child Bunyan is a model for little Paul Dombey. He is afflicted by bad dreams: 'Often [...] after I had spent this and the other day in sin, I have in my bed been greatly afflicted, while asleep, with the apprehensions of Devils, and wicked Spirits, who still, as I thought, laboured to draw me away with them'.²⁸⁴ 'At night I dream about such cu-ri-ous things!', Paul tells his father, accentuating that pregnant word, with all its associations of the strange and unwarranted.²⁸⁵ Bunyan of course recounts a childhood in which moral questions are delineated in patent religious imagery: early on he realises that his struggle is between faith and

²⁸⁰ Steven Marcus implies impotence; Helene Moglen believes that Edith refuses Dombey. See Marcus, p. 343; and Helene Moglen, 'Theorizing Fiction/ Fictionalising Theory: The Case of *Dombey and Son*', *Victorian Studies*, 35 (1992), 159-84 (166-9).

²⁸¹ 'Spiritual autobiography about the regeneration of the individual soul was a recognisable genre'. See Walder, p. 114

²⁸² Even those that do not announce the debt upfront. Linda Freedman notes how *Jane Eyre* is 'girded by *The Pilgrim's Progress*'. See Freedman, 'Aesthetics of Grace', 406-18 (p. 407).

²⁸³ Dickens's copy was listed as: 'Bunyan – "Pilgrim's Progress", with Life by Robert Southey, with engravings by John Martin, 1830 (8vo)'; see 'Library of Charles Dickens', in *Catalogues of the libraries of Charles Dickens and W. M. Thackeray*, p. 16.

²⁸⁴ See Robert Southey, 'A Life of John Bunyan', *The Pilgrim's Progress; To Which is Prefixed a Life of the Artist* (London: John Murray, 1830), vii.

²⁸⁵ Perhaps this is the precursor to 'Curiouser and curiouser' – the watchword of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), and made famous by that text. It appears at the beginning of chapter two, as Alice begins to grow at an alarming rate: '“Curiouser and curiouser!” cried Alice (she was so much surprised, that for the moment she quite forgot how to speak good English); “now I'm opening out like the largest telescope that ever was!”'. See Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland; and Through the looking glass and what Alice found there*, ed. by Peter Hunt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 16.

the free-spiritedness that might encompass spiritual laxity. The adult Bunyan performs his own exegesis on his childhood troubles. As Southey reports: ‘His waking reflections were not less terrible than those fearful visions of the night; and these, he says “when I was but a child, but nine or ten years old, did so distress my soul, that then in the midst of my many sports and childish vanities, amidst my vain companions, I was often much cast down and afflicted in my mind therewith; yet I could not let go of my sins”’.²⁸⁶ Paul, as we know, is equally afflicted from an early age: ‘He was childish and sportive enough at times, and not of a sullen disposition; but he had a strange, old-fashioned, thoughtful way, at other times, of sitting brooding in his miniature arm-chair’ (98). Dickens’s echoes Bunyan’s coupling of childishness and sportive-ness (it reads as slightly antiquated in his account of Paul; so perhaps hinting at a borrowing, but equally this plays into Paul’s identity).

For young Bunyan, spiritual relief comes in the form of a revelation, but little Paul can only grasp at intimations, instinctively compelled by the print on Doctor Blimber’s stairs.²⁸⁷ Bunyan has his moment of incipient conversion as a young man, ‘in the midst of a game of cat’: ‘as he was about to strike the cat from the hole, it seemed to him as if a voice from Heaven suddenly darted into his should and said, Wilt thou leave thy sins and go to Heaven? Or have thy sins, and go to Hell?’²⁸⁸ It probably presses an argument too far to think of little Paul seated next to Mrs Pipchin and her cat, a witch-like pair to whom he comprises an uncanny third.²⁸⁹ But certainly Bunyan’s spiritual education is facilitated by the generic poor, and women in especial, and this does tally with Paul’s inclination to both old Glubb and his sister Florence.²⁹⁰ To quote Southey: ‘he fell in company with a poor man who talked to him concerning religion and the scriptures in a manner which took his attention, and sent him to his Bible’; later:

The poor women whose company Bunyan sought after he had listened to their talk were members of Gifford’s little flock. The first effect of his conversation with them was that he began to look into the Bible with new eyes [...] He now took delight in Saint Paul’s epistles, which before he “could not away with;” and the first strong impression that they made upon him was that he wanted the gifts

²⁸⁶ Southey, ‘Life of the Artist’, Bunyan, vii.

²⁸⁷ ‘He had much to think of, in association with a print that thing up in another place, where, in the centre of a wondering group, one figure he knew [...] stood pointing upward’. *Dombey*, p. 206. Leonée Ormond has identified this ‘as one of Rembrandt’s most famous etchings, “Christ healing the Sick”’. See Ormond, 3-25, (p. 21). William Kent takes issue with Paul’s responsiveness: ‘I beg leave to doubt whether, in the absence of any persistent and impressive religious teaching [...] little Paul would have thought any such thing’, but it concurs with Dickens’s gradual allotting of knowledge and Christian iconography to the dying child. See Kent, p. 42.

²⁸⁸ Southey, ‘Life of the Artist’, Bunyan, xi.

²⁸⁹ *Dombey*, p.113.

²⁹⁰ ‘Paul continues to define himself in relation to the women whose nurturance he craves, not in opposition to them. He grants their subjectivity whilst wishing to claim his own’. See Moglen, 159-84 (p. 162).

of wisdom and knowledge of which the Apostle speaks.²⁹¹

So the young Bunyan finds St Paul newly accessible, but is still striving to achieve the serenity of the blessed: ‘Gold! could it have been gotten for gold, what could I have given for it!’, he cries, foreshadowing Dombey’s unenlightened belief that ‘Money [...] can do anything’ (99). The adult Bunyan must reach a point of absolute dejection, parallel to Dombey’s suicidal low, before he realises that it is not his effort that counts. He yearns for salvation whereas Dombey does not, of course, even reason the need. But in both cases mental unrest begets distorting fancies: ‘his imagination was wrought in a state of excitement in which its own shaping became vivid as realities’.²⁹² We think of Dombey and his obsession with the interior footprints, from potential purchasers of his worldly goods, and fear that if he died his blood would get spread by the same parasitic feet (a perfect synonym for a ruined bloodline; inheritance become pestilent).²⁹³ Southey recounts how ‘it was at a meeting with [Bunyan’s] fellow believers, when his fears again were prevailing, that the words for which he longed, according to his own expression “broke in” upon him, “My Grace is sufficient for thee, my Grace is sufficient for thee, my Grace is sufficient for thee” – three times together’.²⁹⁴

How to explore character in *Dombey and Son*?

One of the founding premises of this thesis is that Dickens’s characters give us more performative variety in action, and variegated psychology as conveyed through narrative, than criticism has usually allowed. In part this is because of the tidal pull of overarching theme in Dickens’s novels. *Dombey and Son* tells of cataclysmic overhaul, from Dombey’s to that Staggs’s Gardens undergoes; it is hard to track the tiny shifts backwards in the narrative trajectory that give us space to consider parts of character that do not necessarily subscribe to overall plot. But they are there; and presage the sophistication of later novels that encompass more of such intricate internal contradiction: *Great Expectations* (1861) and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5).

My focus in this chapter is upon Paul and Florence Dombey. The suggestive idiosyncrasies of Dickens’s characterisation of Paul Dombey have been acknowledged but relatively unexplored through close reading of text. Read through narrative, his character gives us huge traction in terms of the kind of moral philosophy I mention in my introduction, a lay discipline perhaps (but thereby nicely fulfilling Dickens’s goal of

²⁹¹ Southey, ‘Life of the Artist’, Bunyan, xiii; xviii.

²⁹² Southey, ‘Life of the Artist’, Bunyan, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, xxv.

²⁹³ See *Dombey*, pp. 884-6.

²⁹⁴ Southey, ‘Life of the Artist’, Bunyan, xxxv.

accessibility). Florence has been seen as an example of the overly passive and amenable female character; as Dennis Walder sums up: ‘Florence’s passivity and infinite loyalty under duress have led to much critical impatience’.²⁹⁵ But she also discloses variance and interest when approached through close reading.

Firstly I want to consider two instances of divergence in action and narrative in two main but subsidiary characters who have been associated with melodrama and judged of monolithic purport. ‘Neither Edith Dombey nor Mr Carker is a character of real life’, wrote A.M. Ward in 1882; and later critics have not disputed the buoyant put-down.²⁹⁶ Yet their respective action and speech give clues to possible variances of personality (giving leverage to the larger scope explored by Robert Douglas-Fairhurst and Andrew Miller in their respective scholarship on alternative destinies contingent to different roads taken).²⁹⁷ Carker saves Dombey’s life when the latter is thrown from his horse: the native agility we always read as pejorative suddenly charged with purpose: ‘Mr Carker, quick of eye, steady of hand, and a good horseman, was afoot, and had the struggling animal to his legs and by the bridle, in a moment. Otherwise that morning’s confidence would have been Mr Dombey’s last’ (635). It’s a big moment, downplayed by Dickens’s narrative irony; had it been written at a slower tempo the tension of the circumstance itself would have been repatriated (though of course then the risk to Dombey himself would have seemed concerning; and Dickens needs the episode to read as slightly ridiculous). At this stage Dombey’s ‘Manager’ might have benefited from not acting so fast; his claims to succeed his erstwhile master in both personal and professional terms could have been facilitated without the trouble later incurred. Though probably an instance of instinct; it is worth weighing into the accepted reading of Carker as wholly malign, and lends added irony to his being driven to his own death by a possibly fantastical idea of Dombey’s proximity (losing physical and mental control at the behest of the transport that will overtake the horse).

Although acknowledged as ‘complex’, Edith Dombey has also been read as a product of melodrama, and furthermore as prone to hysteria: a character who refracts internal drama by gesture, as opposed to conveying more measured qualities through her own agency.²⁹⁸ Yet Edith’s humane and civilised protest to Dombey, in

²⁹⁵ See Dennis Walder, ‘Introduction’, *Dombey*, vii-xxiv (xxi).

²⁹⁶ A. W. Ward, *Charles Dickens*, ‘English Men of Letters’ series, quoted in *Charles Dickens: Dombey and Son and Little Dorrit: a casebook*, ed. by Alan Shelston (London: Macmillan, 1985), pp. 43-5 (p. 45).

²⁹⁷ Robert Douglas-Fairhurst examines this in relation to Dickens himself and his awareness that his life could have taken a very different course; Miller in relation to fictional character. See Douglas-Fairhurst, *Becoming Dickens*; Andrew H. Miller, “‘A Case of Metaphysics’: Counterfactuals, Realism, *Great Expectations*”, *ELH*, 79 (2012), 773-85.

²⁹⁸ ‘Dickens’s first attempt to create a complex woman character’; ‘Edith’s melodramatic posturing can also be regarded as an expression, however crude, of hysteria, as Freud explained it’; see Yelin, pp. 310, 315.

what Lawrence Frank rightly calls ‘one of the more brilliant confrontations in all of Dickens’s novels’, shows a nature far more pragmatic and capacious than the melodramatic model gives credence for.²⁹⁹ Her speech is worth quoting in full as it is rarely considered:

‘There is no wealth [...] that could buy these words of me, and the meaning that belongs to them. Once cast away as idle breath, no wealth or power can bring them back. I mean them; I have weighed; and I will be true to what I undertake. If you will promise to forbear on your part, I will promise to forbear on mine. We are a most unhappy pair [...] but in the course of time, some friendship, or some fitness for each other, may arise between us. I will try to hope so, if you will make the endeavour too; and I will look forward to a better and happier use of age than I have made of youth or prime.’ (601)

It is an extraordinary passage, poetic yet stern, and couched in canonical references that further ground its profundity. The idea of words ‘weighed’ evokes Portia’s arguments in *The Merchant of Venice* and that play’s critique of material value in every sense.³⁰⁰ Edith offers grounds for mutual understanding; her cadences weave a dialectic between hers and Dombey’s interest, the rhythmic patterning one of equivocation that reflects the content. (The quality of concession, like mercy, ‘is not strained’).³⁰¹ She admits the pettiness of marital acrimony (‘forbear [...] forbear’). The threat of her words being ‘cast away as idle breath’ if Dombey does not receive them recalls the Sermon on the Mount: ‘Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you’.³⁰² Edith articulates a complex revolution of thought through this conceit. Rather than warning of Dombey’s scorning her effort; she allows his disdain to actively define the result: ‘[o]nce cast away as idle breath’. She makes his reaction determinate of the value of what she says. Rejected, the value cedes to that dynamic of mutual destruction (and deflation: ‘idle breath’) once again. Dombey does not hear, indeed scorns her effort, and from that point Edith’s mindset imbibes a degree of neurosis whereby her husband becomes a cipher for all ills: ‘Whatever shapes of outrage and affront, and black foreshadowings of things that might happen, flickered, indistinct and giant-like, before her, one resented figure marshalled them against her. And that figure was her husband’ (639).

²⁹⁹ Lawrence Frank, *Charles Dickens and the Romantic Self* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), p. 44.

³⁰⁰ As Portia tasks her suitors to choose a casket, Morocco speculates: ‘And weigh thy value with an even hand:|If thou be’st rated by thy estimation’, presaging the instance when Shylock is commanded to take a pound of flesh, ‘nor [...] less nor more’. William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. by John Drakakis (London: A & C Black Publishers, 2010), II, vii. 24; IV, i, 321.

³⁰¹ Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, IV, i, 180.

³⁰² Matthew 7. 6.

Edith's speech reveals self-knowledge; her reactive behaviour from thence on a deliberate sabotaging of the gains of that. Her own pride demands that fate execute – and so prove – her premonitions of doom (presaging Louisa Gradgrind's tragic compliance to an unhappy marriage in *Hard Times*). The perversity of Edith's reverse manoeuvre is characteristic of *Dombey*. Much of the text pertains not only to the difficulty of understanding and making ones way in the world, but within the realm of personal consciousness. Dickens dedicates a lot of text to travails within this psychological realm; often these are for the reader's eyes only; sometimes they are brokered by another character's surmises. When Dombey tells Richards to summon Florence to play with Paul, she maps his incipient urge to retract: 'he turned, hurriedly; as if to gainsay what he had said, or she had said, or both' (31).³⁰³ The text is replete with the fantasies that one person fosters around another, triggering alternative narratives within individual consciousnesses: Carker's sensual dreams of Edith, Miss Tox's love for Dombey: a sincere emotion that causes her pain, and is figured by her ministering to his every wish unnoticed. Walter and his uncle are honest with themselves in relation to their mutual fantasy that Walter will one day win Florence. Old Sol 'pampered and cherished it in his memory [...] until it became quite the spoiled child of his fancy' (118). This is 'fancy' in the Coleridge sense of a dream untethered to reality. It prevails as such, until real-life factors threaten even that; as they do Walter's once Dombey learns of his uncle's penury: 'all his old wild fancies had been scattered to the winds in the fall' (144).

Most suggestive are those exposés of Dombey's own consciousness, that encompass much figurative space because there is such estrangement between his admitted understanding and reality. Dombey has but one fantasy, and it will not permit obstacles. '[F]eeling as if the boy had a charmed life, and must become the man with whom he held such constant communication in his thoughts', he disregards Paul's susceptibility to infant malady (97). Here we have a figure for the internal relationship between the self and a projective schema, represented as dialogue. Dombey is slow to pick up on those private intimations with which his public self has no truck. This is made clear when the gravity of Fanny's condition becomes apparent: 'He certainly had a sense within him, that if his wife should sicken and decay, he would be very sorry' (5). That 'sense' is a tiny kernel that is soon displaced by the need to furnish his overriding fantasy, so a complex amalgam results: 'since the death of his wife [...] [s]omething lay at the bottom of his heart [...] but it was more a *sense* of the child's loss than his own, awakening within him an almost angry sorrow' (17; italics mine). 'Sense' becomes an important word for mapping the weak spots of Dombey's hardened consciousness

³⁰³ 'Richards' being Dombey's designated name for Polly Toodles, 'an ordinary name, and convenient'. See *Dombey*, p. 18.

(as per Dickens's 'Preface' and the 'sense of his injustice [...] within him all along').³⁰⁴ The reader recalls Hamlet's father's ghost, appearing – in Horatio's description – with 'a countenance more in sorrow than in anger'.³⁰⁵ Dombey has attained no such transcendent heights of hypothetical wisdom. His anger is paramount as he resists circumstance that thwarts his vision.

In the most telling passage of all, musing upon his growing wariness of Florence, Dombey envisages the girl and her mother immobilised within that deathbed topos: 'at the bottom 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' (31). As with Florence's conceit of Dombey's 'cruelty and neglect' 'stamping [...] down' her idea of him, Dickens represents the distance between Dombey and any verdant tenderness through a performative tableau lodged in the mind itself (780).³⁰⁶ Although the two are frozen within a moment of retrospective time, Dombey is the static one: the immured watcher. Florence and her mother participate in something illicit but beautiful and secret. It is tempting to consider that Dickens took his image from Dante's *The Inferno*, wherein Paolo and Francesca, are forever clasped in each others's arms as they are wheeled around the second circle of hell.³⁰⁷ Although the image is ostensibly a pejorative and punitive one of sin, it also holds such romance and power. Dickens frequently plays with the borderline between kindred and sexual intimacy within this text, across gender, allowing the shimmering overlay to represent yearning and depth of love as opposed to carnal desire.

Dombey struggles to withstand the feelings that sidle in: 'Unable to exclude these things from his remembrance, or to keep his his mind free from such imperfect shapes of the meaning with which they were fraught, as were able to make themselves visible to him though the mist of his pride' (31). Here is the mind as uncertain landscape: a place of awakened, intermittent, or residual life. Within Dombey's mind things are not born however, they are simply unrealised, keying back into the Corinthians image: 'For now we see as though a glass, darkly'.³⁰⁸ However incognisant of his more emotionally charged apprehensions, Dombey is

³⁰⁴ 'Preface to the Cheap Edition (1858)', *Dombey*, 'Appendix A', p. 927.

³⁰⁵ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. by G. R. Hibbard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), I. II. 229.

³⁰⁶ By housing these figures in his characters' minds Dickens likewise internalises the standard trope of sentimental literature, that 'presents these contrasts [of mood or fortune] and the exemplary emotion in tableaux, usually drawing on the notion of the family unit or the reclusive individual'. See Todd, p. 4.

³⁰⁷ See 'The Inferno', *Dante Alighieri, The Divine Comedy, The John Ciardi Translation* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1970), v, 1-140. I wonder whether Dickens had seen Ary Scheffer's painting *Paolo and Francesca* (1835), the primary version of which is in the Wallace Collection; the smaller in the Louvre. Dickens knew and admired Scheffer, who painted his portrait in 1855. See 'Art and Artists' in *Oxford Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. by Schlicke, pp. 25-7 (p. 26). The painting's power lies in its composition: the two figures clasped together in an airborne embrace.

³⁰⁸ 1 Corinthians 13. 12.

not stupid: he will frequently recognise another's meaning but refuse to countenance it as fit for (his) purpose. This is a repeated device in his interaction with the child Florence. So when Polly Toodles explains that 'Miss Florence was afraid of interrupting, Sir, if she came in to say goodnight', Dombey deliberately reconfigures her point in his reply: 'You can let her come and go without regarding me' (35). Florence's longing for her father is annulled rather than rebuffed; a misconception that incurs no responsibility. Sometimes Dombey will resurrect his true realisation of another's meaning. Polly ventures that: 'I believe nothing is so good for making children lively and cheerful [...] as seeing other children playing about 'em' (30). Dombey's reply deliberately mistakes her: 'I think I mentioned [...] that I wished you to see as little of your family as possible' (30). It is only a day, and page, later that Dombey finally utilises his understanding of Polly's real meaning and elects to have Florence present as her brother's playmate. Of course this perspicuity is not always extant: it tends to be operable when Paul and Florence are both very young; it does not assist Mr Dombey in his relations with the older Florence, Edith, or Carker.

Paul Dombey

How are we to read Paul Dombey? Critics have seen him as a precursor of David Copperfield; I see him as a successor to Oliver Twist in his combining of the realistic and the symbolic child with elements of specialness.³⁰⁹ Both dimensions exert more power in this portrayal, meaning the tension between them is the greater. How does Dickens solve this? He seems, from the outset, to have decided that this 'Boy born, to die' is to comprise a pressure cooker of intriguing qualities, many of which have wider purport than simply adducing character.³¹⁰ Overall, Dickens creates an amalgam of three conversant Pauline parts. One part occasionally tugs at or even eclipses the other; they play a relay race of interlacing selves. There is the vulnerable self whose reactions perhaps closest predicate those of the generic child experiencing a motherless infancy, the eviction of his nurse, a taxing schooling, thereby fulfilling Dickens's socio-political critique of the 'forcing house' principle at home or school, as well as providing material for empathy.³¹¹ Then there is the capricious and wilful self: perhaps Dickens's way of suggesting the person Paul might have become had he succeeded into his father's narrative rather than his author's; though it may also be due to the

³⁰⁹ 'Paul Dombey [...] is the immediate forerunner of little David'. See Tomalin, *Dickens: A Life*, p. 185.

³¹⁰ From Dickens's own number plans for *Dombey and Son*, quoted in Sadrin, p. 46. In the 'important letter' that Butt and Tillotson call the 'master plan' for the novel, Dickens expatiates: 'When the boy is about ten years old (in the fourth number) he will be taken ill, and die'. Letter to John Forster, 24-25 July 1846, quoted in Butt and Tillotson, p. 95. Paul actually dies at around six years of age, at the end of the fifth number.

³¹¹ 'Forcing house': a Victorian term for a hothouse where plant growth is artificially hastened, as per: 'Doctor Blimber's establishment was a great hothouse, in which there was a forcing apparatus incessantly at work'. See *Dombey*, p. 150; also Shuttleworth, 'The Forcing Apparatus: Dombey and Son', in *The Mind of the Child*, pp. 107-30.

boy's erratic understanding that he embodies powers beyond the ordinary. Again, this connects to my argument on Oliver, but I see Paul's powers as more incarnate; related to his perspicacious probing consciousness. This belongs to the third self: who combines an objectivity reminiscent of Platonic philosophy with a child's tenacious radii for adult fallacy. Dickens tasks little Paul to locate the deepest 'forms' of reality. The process taxes the vulnerable self: his conversation with his father about money is a case in point; he is only too pleased to slip back into conventionally childish mode and sing with his sister.³¹² The transition can be as unnerving for the reader as for the novel's cast. When Mrs Wickham, with relish, relates her warning story of a child gone to the bad: 'Betsey Jane [...] was put upon as that child has been put upon, and changed as that child has changed', the phrase 'put upon' is doubly suggestive of possession – afflicted by extracorporeal influence – and burden: facilitating the image of a tiny Atlas, with all the world's cares on his shoulders (114).

The 'old, old, fashion'

Before exploring this tripartite amalgam, I want to return to Dickens's characterisation of Paul as 'old' and/or 'old-fashioned', which informs all three selves outlined above. I have discussed this in relation to the Pauline epistles; in which the designation of 'old' registers the corrosive efficacy of sin as accrued through a life ('Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with *him*, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin').³¹³ In this allegorical reading, Paul must die in order to stem the sin perpetuated by a Dombey scion replicating his father's pride in self and materialist values; thereby paying for 'the iniquity of the fathers'.³¹⁴ Baptism is the point of initial conjunction between man and divinity in life; the baptised are 'in Christ' according to the Christology of the apostle Paul: death is the point of realised conjunction with God the Father.³¹⁵ This affords some neat play of word and idea in relation to Dombey, who envisages his son being railroaded into a grand destiny; which is nevertheless a reversion, tantamount to his son being 'in him'.³¹⁶ He tells Paul: 'When you are old enough [...] you will share my money, and we shall use it together' (142). Paul's maturation, which Dombey allusively terms 'getting on', is equivalent to his

³¹² See *Dombey*, pp. 95-117; especially pp. 98-101.

³¹³ Romans 6. 6.

³¹⁴ 'Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God *am* a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth *generation* of them that hate me'. Exodus 20. 5.

³¹⁵ 'It is significant that Paul so often wrote 'in Christ' in places where we would have expected to read 'by Christ'. See Wikenhauser, p. 25.

³¹⁶ As per the Second Commandment: 'Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness *of any thing* that *is* in heaven above, or that *is* in the earth beneath [...]] Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them'. Exodus 20. 4-5.

metamorphosis into a version of himself: a mirror party who can strengthen the solipsistic ring of fiscal power binding man and boy.³¹⁷ Dickens has set up the link between father and son, via the deceitful premise of age, in the novel's second paragraph, when 'the countenance of Son' is described as 'crossed and recrossed with a thousand little creases'; on Dombey's face lines accrue like notches on the trunks of trees destined for felling: a neat reference to the timber trade; of nature being appropriated for business ends (1).³¹⁸

There is, of course, a rich cultural history of secular purport to the concept of 'old', which provides material for close reading and more realist approximations. 'Old' has connotations of both wear and wisdom; as the body grows frailer, the mind acquires greater experience. Dickens plays with both aspects in his portrayal of little Paul. Physique-wise, just as the natural elements of the cityscape are 'withering' and 'withered' (the word, in various idiom, occurs twenty-seven times), he implies that Paul looks worn down as opposed to fresh and child-like.³¹⁹ He is unusually small, his limbs are weak; his head iconographically and perhaps literally too large for his body (Delaroche's *L'Enfants* combine the same ratio).³²⁰ At some point this becomes part and parcel of his decline, but illness only accentuates what was already in place (illness makes Paul, in a sense, most fully himself). But Dickens also exploits the sense that Paul is aged in mind: a bold illogical move that presages his first introduction of the 'old' conceit:

Thus Paul grew to be nearly five years old [...] He was childish and sportive at times [...] but he had a strange, old-fashioned, thoughtful way, at other times, of listing brooding in his miniature arm-chair when he looked (and talked) like one of those terrible little Beings in the Fairy Tales, who, at a hundred and fifty or two hundred years of age, fantastically represent the children for whom they have been substituted. (97-8)

The 'terrible little [Being]' is 'terrible' not because he embodies evil, necessarily, but because he harbours knowledge that others cannot access. As an imposter he can utilise the lack of suspicion accorded to any ostensibly innocent child. To mirror this idea of knowledge beyond reach, Dickens uses the gradient of age calculated in centuries: beyond the human measure. Helen Small has noted that our cultural assessment of

³¹⁷ 'My son is getting on, Mrs Pipchin. Really, he is getting on.' *Dombey*, p. 147.

³¹⁸ 'On the brow of Dombey, Time and his brother Care had set some marks, as on a tree that was to come down in good time'. *Dombey*, p. 1.

³¹⁹ Helen Small prefaces her discussion of ageing by examining Cicero's *De Senectute*. Cicero contrasts withering with ripeness: 'There had to be a time of withering, of readiness to fall, like the ripeness which comes to the fruits of the trees and of the earth' (215); quoted by Small, *The Long Life*, p. 8. *Dombey* is full of dead leaves: 'It was a bleak autumnal afternoon [...] and as she [...] pressed the little fellow closer to her breast, the withered leaves came showering down'. *Dombey*, p. 67. Did Dickens know *De Senectute*? Perhaps: 'he did possess a respectable familiarity with the classical tradition'. See Iain Crawford, 'Dickens, Classical Myth, and the Representation of Social Order in *Barnaby Rudge*', *The Dickensian*, vol. 93 (1997), 185-8 (p. 188).

³²⁰ Mrs Chick makes naughty reference to Paul's large head, metaphorically speaking: 'The fact is, that his mind is too much for him. His soul is a great deal too large for his frame.' *Dombey*, p. 102.

old age ‘is semantically overweighted towards “old old age” ’; even within the human life span, we tend to consider the furthest exemplars of age as carrying most interest, and holding the key to age’s mystery, perhaps.³²¹ Dickens often doubles ‘old’ as an adjective, prompting primeval and sacerdotal associations:

[Father and son] [...] were the strangest pair at such a time that ever firelight shone upon. Mr Dombey so erect and solemn [...] his little image, with an old, old face, peering into the red perspective with the fixed and rapt attention of a sage (98)

[...] in those old, old moods of his, she seemed to have a grotesque attraction for him (109)

Once more the old, old look passed rapidly across his features like a strange light (158)

The conceit could also relate to the vistas of time disclosed by Charles Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* (1830-3), that recast planet earth itself in an ‘old, old’ light: in many ways a ‘terrible’ revelation as humanity’s stature diminished accordingly.³²² There is a slackening of cerebral tension reflected by the substitution of the gnomonic ‘old’ for ‘old-fashioned’. ‘Old-fashioned’ becomes the quarry of gossip – Paul’s ‘character report’ at school, the whispering chorus at Doctor Blimber’s Academy and at the end-of-term party.³²³ Though its meaning does not have to be superficial, ‘old-fashioned’ encompasses quick-fire pejorative judgements relating to dress and manners. But ‘old’ is something else: so perverse in context, it holds the greater poetic potency. In fact the word, minimal yet so culturally suggestive and phonetically resonant, parallels Dickens’s best prose regarding Paul: when a single phrase will divulge different meanings according to context, and language holds a great deal within its limited bounds.

How do Paul’s three selves interlink and play out? Our compassion is aroused by the vulnerable child, who most closely tallies with a realistic one: perhaps the more sophisticated outcome of the increased plangency in the final number chronicling his life. Peter Coveney implies that we should read Paul’s illness as psychosomatic; a dying of the soul rather than the body and a further catechisation to Dombey: ‘The boy’s illness is nowhere specified [...] His death is inward, a thing of the boy’s heart’.³²⁴ But Dickens is clear that

³²¹ See Small, *The Long Life*, p. 3.

³²² Dickens was aware of Lyell’s findings, that reoriented human presence on earth on previously unimagined geological time frame. See Gillian Beer, ‘Introduction’, *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, rev. edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 1-21 (p. 10).

³²³ ‘But it is to be lamented of this young gentleman that he is singular (what is usually termed “old-fashioned”) in his character and conduct.’ See *Dombey*, p. 197.

³²⁴ See Coveney, *The Image of Childhood*, p. 143.

Paul suffers a debilitating disease.³²⁵ At the age of nearly five Mrs Chick suggests that he ‘occasionally seems about to lose, for the moment, the use of his—’, and blanching at an unpleasant truth, is aided by the more trusting Miss Tox: ‘I think the medical gentleman mentioned legs this morning, my dear Louisa, did he not?’ (103). The politesse of the two women is doubly euphemistic, for neither is fond of the other; but here the hedging reveals an anxiety about confronting the facts and presenting them to Dombey.

Little Paul Dombey diminishes as a character once his illness is judged terminal. His own anxiety seems to transmit through the text, both plot and language. This pattern mirrors that discussed in *Oliver Twist*; though the reasons are antithetical. Oliver is reacting to the shock of things of value coming to his lived life; he experiences the real fear of losing these, so anxiety is an implicitly temporary attendant upon joy. Paul becomes ever more isolated and prone to native whimsy, truly a voice ever more aligned with ‘What the Waves were always saying’ (236). ‘The solitary child lived on, surrounded by this arabesque work of his musing fancy, and no one understood him’ (179). Dickens’s diagnostic statement is heartbreaking in its finality, and sets up a breach between character and cast, perhaps reader too. The aesthetic figure of the arabesque caters for the involutions of the child’s thoughts, that become more and more disjoined from the orbits of active life and practical well-being, especially once illness gains a grip.³²⁶

When Paul first realises something is wrong, his response is both objective and subjective, in conjunction with his preternaturally wise and childish selves. He instructs Mrs Pipchin not to ‘tell Florence’ ‘[a]bout me’; and insists that his father not learn of his enquiring whether Dombey wept.³²⁷ As far as possible, he forestalls the impact of a dark prognosis. Providing for his sister in another sense, he is keen that she log the encomiums garnered at Doctor Blimber’s party. ‘Did she hear them? Would she ever forget it? Was she glad to know it?’ –: conceptualising and bulwarking a legacy of love to be disseminated and upheld by others (218). But at the same time he becomes uncharacteristically dependent and more supplicant in conversation. Cordelia’s revelation that ‘we can’t like you [...] as well as we could wish’ is said to ‘touch the child upon a tender point. He had secretly become more and more solicitous from day to day, as the time of his departure

³²⁵ Scholars have debated as to what this is, with suggestions including leukaemia and tuberculosis. See Joanne Eysell, *A Medical Companion to Dickens’s Fiction* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2005), pp. 132-34; and Katherine Byrne, ‘Consuming the Family Economy: Tuberculosis and Capitalism in Charles Dickens’s *Dombey and Son*’, *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 29 (March 2007), 1-16.

³²⁶ The figure plays into a baroque aesthetic identified by Adorno in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. ‘The novel’s inventory is baroque and allegorical’. See T. W. Adorno, ‘On Dickens’s “The Old Curiosity Shop”: A Lecture’ in, *Notes to Literature*, trans. by Shierry Weber, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, 2nd edn, 2 vols (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), II, pp. 171-77 (p. 172).

³²⁷ ‘“Don’t tell Florence what, my little Paul?” said Mrs Pipchin [...] “About me,” said Paul.’; ‘I’m very glad he didn’t cry [...] I thought he did. Don’t tell them that I asked.’ *Dombey*, pp. 202, 219.

drew more near, that all the house should like him' (197). There is a double resonance to nearly every key word in Dickens's sentence: 'departure' standing for death, 'all the house' for the wider community of men. Dickens recreates what I termed a Garden of Gethsemane moment in my discussion of Oliver. Paul, weakening bodily, is afraid. His stronger self – both objective and philosophical – is no longer paramount; evinced only in moments of insight, rather than rigorously employed. He yearns for others' approval, as if seeking the psychological equivalent of the Egyptian pharaoh's model entourage, built to accompany his transition into the afterlife. He needs to feel supported, having never had that sensation apart from through his sister, upon whom he rests both mentally and physically. We know that his legs are the first things to reveal Paul's malady; implicitly buckling beneath him.³²⁸ The absence of support becomes more and more thematically pertinent. Left alone in Doctor Blimber's study after his introduction to the Academy, Florence having withdrawn her supporting arm, little Paul sits unmoving 'upon his pedestal':

He sat, with folded hands, upon his pedestal, silently listening. But he might have answered 'weary, weary! very lonely, very sad!' And there, with an aching void in his young heart, and all outside so cold, and bare, and strange, Paul sat as if he had taken life unfurnished, and the upholsterer was never coming. (159)

The careful notation accentuates our sense of Paul being isolated and powerless. The prose can take its time about him, so to speak, because he has no reactive capability. Every aspect of Paul's vulnerability is highlighted: his smallness, mannered disposition ('with folded hands'), his reliance upon support, his acuity. In the narrative surmise as to how Paul might '[answer]', there is perhaps an echo of Tennyson's *Mariana* (1830): 'She said, "I am aweary, aweary, / I would that I were dead!"'³²⁹ Such a lyrical borrowing conveys something of the slightly grandiose affectation that is part of Paul's 'old-fashioned' persona. This is offset by the punch of 'an aching void in his young heart'; the most direct statement, though figurative in itself, of the pain the child feels, lacking the interior strength that might have been augmented by a loving home.³³⁰

³²⁸ Mrs Chick suggests that he 'occasionally seems about to lose, for the moment, the use of his—', and blanching (perhaps partially revelling) at an unpleasant truth, is aided by the more trusting Miss Tox: 'I think the medical gentleman mentioned legs this morning, my dear Louisa, did he not?' *Dombey*, p. 103.

³²⁹ Alfred Tennyson, 'Mariana' (1830), from *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830), in *Alfred Lord Tennyson: Selected Poems*, ed. by Aidan Day (London: Penguin, 1991), 11.

³³⁰ Much of Dickens's writing on children presages modern psychoanalysis, such as the 'attachment theory' developed by John Bowlby (1907-1990), which holds that a child must feel supported through his early years by one strong emotional bond to acquire resilience for later life. Although Florence loves her brother from the outset, her company is discouraged until Polly Toodles intervenes. Polly herself, summoned by Paul as the 'kind good face' when he is on his deathbed, epitomises warmth but has her own children to think of, and is expressly forbidden from creating bonds by Dombey: 'It is not at all in this bargain that you need become attached to my child, or that my child need become attached to you [...] Quite the reverse'. See *Dombey*, pp. 18; 240.

Paul's capricious self does not get much of an airing, though it is active in some prescient passages. When Dombey gives Walter the money as a loan to his uncle, he explains the gesture to his son:

‘And you see, Paul [...] how powerful money is, and how anxious people are to get it. Young Gay comes all this way to beg for money, and you, who are so grand and great, having got it, are going to let him have it, as a great favour and obligation’.

Paul turned up the old face for a moment, in which there was a sharp understanding of the reference conveyed in these words: but it was a young and childish face immediately afterwards, when he slipped down from his father's knee, and ran to tell Florence not to cry any more, for he was going to let young Gay have the money. (142)

Paul's ‘understanding’ of his father's character and motives is often critical, or at the least sceptical, but here there is an element of something else. The ‘sharp understanding’ suggests a flash of insight passing from one to the other. Perhaps it is Dombey's uncharacteristically capacious and expressive idiom: he portrays Paul as one blessed with more than monetary wealth: ‘you, who are so grand and great, having got it, are going to let him have it, as a great favour and obligation’. The implicit dynamic is between king and commoner. It may be this that catches Paul's imagination, facilitated by the emotional quickening Dombey betrays. It is a taste of power in action, no less, rather than a theoretical treatise about money. He has registered Walter's plea, his gratitude: most importantly Florence's investment in the situation. The scene reveals the incipient self that may have developed were Dombey and Son to have traded together, evincing palpable returns, and witnessing their joint aggrandisement in the eyes of the City.

Dickens's decision to explore Paul's germane morality at this age is not precocious. Jerome Kagan writes:

By the fourth year, children have an unconscious appreciation of some of their psychological qualities, and an identification begins with the belief that some of the distinctive qualities of another person belong to the self. A boy realises that he and his father have the same family name and the [...] hair [colour] [...]. In time, the boy comes to believe that he is similar to the parent in distinctive ways. The child goes beyond those facts and assumes that the self must have other psychological qualities that belong to the parent, even though he has no objective evidence for that inference.³³¹

Dickens himself makes a striking analogy between the older Paul and the younger Paul in his discussion of their treatment of Florence. He wrote to Forster: ‘[the child's] love and confidence are all bestowed upon his sister, whom Mr Dombey has used – and so has the boy himself too, for that matter – as a mere convenience and handle to him’.³³² It is an intriguing insight into Dickens's plan as to the psychological underpinning of

³³¹ See Jerome Kagan, *The Nature of the Child* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), p. 139.

³³² To John Forster, 25-26 July 1846, *Letters*, IV, pp. 589-99 (p. 588).

his text. Paul is happy in Florence's presence, but his most fervent declarations of sibling love are made after she studies on his behalf; removing the literal burden of his schoolwork. There is just the tiniest note of complacency at the tail end of their exchange:

'Oh Floy!...How I love you! How I love you, Floy!'
'And I you, dear!'
'Oh! I am sure of that, Floy' (178)

His vision of their living together in a bucolic idyll segregate Florence from the feasible reality of her becoming a mother and host to a new familial narrative.³³³ It is perhaps wrong to read too much into this however. Paul is too young to understand the hypothetical consequences for his sister, who lavishes him with affection that might feasibly suggest a shared vision; in fact it could be argued that she uses her brother, though for equally understandable reasons: he provides love within a barren home. However Paul's response to other children appearing on the beach when he and his sister are out watching the sea is chilling, in its dual passiveness and control. Florence is often read as voiceless, a judgement I mean to question, but this is one instance when Paul voices sentiments for the two of them:

'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.' (116)

This is subtly done. Paul's extreme politeness is used to build an insistent barrier between himself and others. With a clever twist of idiom, 'he would [...] watch the child away', Dickens turns a passive action into an aggressive one: the interloper is willed out of the picture frame, eyes implicitly boring into his or her head. There is something else here too. 'Some small voice, ear his ear, would ask him how he was, perhaps'. The wonderful disingenuousness is characteristic of Dickens at his best. It directly recalls 1 Kings 19. 12-13:

And after the earthquake a fire; *but* the LORD *was* not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice.

And it was *so*, when Elijah heard *it*, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave. And, behold, *there came* a voice unto him, and said, What doest thou here, Elijah?

³³³ 'I mean [...] to [...] go away into the country with my darling Florence, have a beautiful garden, fields, and woods, and live there with her all my life!', *Dombey*, p. 202. Paul's reference to a rural landscape suggests again some encounters with this material perhaps through books or pictures.

This is the voice of God, directing Elijah back to Damascus to decree a rightful ruler and restore order to a turbulent kingdom. It probes Elijah's probity: 'What doest thou here, Elijah?', gently redirecting his steps. For Paul there is the same: this is a time of reckoning, when his lapse into selfishness and – moreover – a mode of righteous decree, presages ill.

But there is the other Paul, the wise third man, whose presence vindicates the 'sage' analogies Dickens makes early on.³³⁴ As explained earlier, I think of Paul's variant selves as intermittently in the ascendant, as opposed to coexisting together. Put crudely, this is part and parcel of being a fictive character whose role is to both command affect, and channel and focus thinking of a complex, philosophical, order. They are not compatible bedfellows. But, as with Oliver, Dickens feeds that incongruity into the text: ensuring that Paul seeks relief, in capricious wiles or cathartic emotion, after an instance of hard thinking – or conveyance of thought-provoking matter. For Paul is not always the cognisant thinker – this is an important point – but he provides the reader with material so organised as to trigger profound debate. If we see Paul as Dickens's conduit for epistemology, we can understand this as a form of meta-textual inheritance, conferred upon but not always understood by its facilitator. Paul's truth-seeking often takes the form of articulating words and concepts presumably extant within the *Dombey* household: 'money', 'die', around which he wends his own 'mental expedition' – perhaps also accruing ideas from books (the conversation with Toots about dying on a moonlit night suggests some familiarity with romance lore and fairy tales).³³⁵ So it isn't that Paul always arrives at the truth; more that his questions raise truths for the reader.

To occupy such a role, Paul must be selfless, not selfish. Accordingly the child sometimes reveals a great objectivity and selflessness. He puts himself out of the picture, which is essential for all truth seekers, and judges others according to their integral identity rather than by their relation or use to himself. Having horrified Mrs Pipchin by his puzzlement at Berry's affection for her cranky relative, she comes back:

'How can you ask such things, Sir! why are you fond of your sister Florence?'
'Because she's very good,' said Paul. 'There's nobody like Florence'.
'Well!' retorted Mrs Pipchin, shortly, 'and there's nobody like me, I suppose'.
'Ain't there really though?' asked Paul, leaning forward in his chair, and looking at her very hard.
'No,' said the old lady.
'I am glad of that,' observed Paul, rubbing his hands thoughtfully. (146)

³³⁴ 'his little image, with an old, old face, peering into the red perspective with the fixed and rapt attention of a sage'. *Dombey*, p. 98

³³⁵ 'But the Apothecary happening to meet his little patient's eyes, as the latter set off on that mental expedition', *Dombey*, p. 204. 'Don't you think you would rather die on a moonlight night when the sky is quite clear, and the wind blowing, as it did last night [...] There was a boat over there, in the full light of the moon, a boat with a sail', *Dombey*, p. 180. Paul's vision, which he elucidates: 'The sail like an arm, all silver', evokes the passing of King Arthur in Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, and Tennyson's poetic retelling.

‘Because she’s very good [...] There’s nobody like Florence’ – there is no ego here; no reference to the sibling bond, or to the kindness which in both senses defines relations with Paul. He implicitly rebuffs the Utilitarian idea of good as something judged on dividends; defending it as something of value in itself.³³⁶ The amusing addendum also has a wider, non-personal, import; Paul seems to be scanning human kind for defective parts.

Paul’s unfazed compliance to any detrimental judgment – ‘ “You are a very small chap” said Mr Toots./ “Yes, Sir, I’m small” returned Paul’ – evinces a similar lack of egoism: a wish to see things as they really are (163). Likewise, when Mrs Blimber infers ‘old Glubb’ to be a nightmarish individual Paul defends his friend:

‘What a dreadfully low name!’ said Mrs Blimber. ‘Unclassical to a degree! Who is the monster, child?’
‘What monster?’ inquired Paul.
‘Glubb,’ said Mrs Blimber, with great disrelish.
‘He’s no more a monster than you are,’ returned Paul.
‘What!’ cried the Doctor, in a terrible voice. ‘Aye, aye, aye? Aha! What’s that?’
Paul was dreadfully frightened; but still he made a stand for the absent Glubb, though he did it trembling.
‘He’s a very nice old man, Ma’am,’ he said. ‘He used to draw my couch. He knows all about the deep sea.’ (160)

Doctor Blimber hears Paul’s retort as impertinent; gesturing at his monstrosity as opposed to asserting the equivalence between every human being.³³⁷ Paul’s description of old Glubb, ‘a very nice old man’, re-calibrates the reader’s own wariness of that strange figure, helping to obviate Dickens’s admittedly lumpen name. Paul gives a lead on justice and tolerance that shows up the ready prejudices of society; fostered by aesthetics, often propagated gleefully by his author for entertainment’s gain.

The conversation that has repercussions across the novel occurs in chapter eight, entitled ‘Paul’s further Progress, Growth, and Character’, in further allusion to Bunyan. Once at Doctor Blimber’s Academy Dickens notes that Paul ‘kept his character to himself’: there is no opportunity for engaged interaction (179). But his father provides fodder, being – we assume – always keen to oblige his son, when Paul questions him about money. The word ‘money’ has no doubt registered as an important concept to the child, without his fully understanding the ‘label’; as per Daniel Dennett’s observation on children privy to adult conversation:

³³⁶ Iris Murdoch’s *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970) and its Platonic conception of good as something that has real presence in and of itself; and can take action inside a person without necessarily converting to demonstrative practice, has suggestive pertinence.

³³⁷ In Paul’s ‘trembling’ there may be a reference to Philippians 2. 12: ‘work out your own salvation with fear and trembling’; with its cohesive message of solidarity: ‘Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others’ (Philippians 2. 4).

‘a word can become familiar, even without being understood’.³³⁸ I quote the conversation in full, as many elements are relevant:

[...] little Paul broke silence thus:

‘Papa! what’s money?’

The abrupt question had such immediate reference to the subject of Mr Dombey’s thoughts, that Mr Dombey was quite disconcerted.

‘What is money, Paul?’ he answered. ‘Money?’

‘Yes,’ said the child, laying his hands upon the elbows of his little chair, and turning the old face up towards Mr Dombey’s; ‘what is money?’

Mr Dombey was in a difficulty. He would have liked to give him some explanation involving the terms circulating-medium, currency, depreciation of currency, paper, bullion, rates of exchange, value of precious metals in the market, and so forth; but looking down at the little chair, and seeing what a long way down it was, he answered: ‘Gold, and silver, and copper. Guineas, shillings, half-pence. You know what they are?’

‘Oh yes, I know what they are,’ said Paul. ‘I don’t mean that, Papa. I mean what’s money after all?’

Heaven and Earth, how old his face was as he turned it up again towards his father’s!

‘What is money after all!’ said Mr Dombey, backing his chair a little, that he might the better gaze in sheer amazement at the presumptuous atom that propounded such an inquiry.

‘I mean, Papa, what can it do?’ returned Paul, folding his arms (they were hardly long enough to fold), and looking at the fire, and up at him, and at the fire, and up at him again.

Mr Dombey drew his chair back to its former place, and patted him on the head. ‘You’ll know better by-and-by, my man,’ he said. ‘Money, Paul, can do anything.’ He took hold of the little hand, and beat it softly against one of his own, as he said so.

But Paul got his hand free as soon as he could; and rubbing it gently to and fro on the elbow of his chair, as if his wit were in the palm, and he were sharpening it—and looking at the fire again, as though the fire had been his adviser and prompter—repeated, after a short pause:

‘Anything, Papa?’

‘Yes. Anything—almost,’ said Mr Dombey.

‘Anything means everything, don’t it, Papa?’ asked his son: not observing, or possibly not understanding, the qualification.

‘It includes it: yes,’ said Mr Dombey.

‘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.’

He didn’t ask the question of his father this time. Perhaps he had seen, with a child’s quickness, that it had already made his father uncomfortable. But he repeated the thought aloud, as if it were quite an old one to him, and had troubled him very much; and sat with his chin resting on his hand, still cogitating and looking for an explanation in the fire. (98-100)

For once Paul is rendered smaller rather than (by aspiration) larger in his father’s conception: ‘the presumptuous atom’ has dared to tread on the sacred turf reserved for his true idol, mammon.³³⁹ Father and son’s gestures are microcosmically expressive of their shifting relation: Dombey backing his chair in order to get a fuller view of his interrogator, the conciliatory pat on Paul’s head; most tellingly, the ‘settling’ of the

³³⁸ ‘The child, prompted initially by some insistent auditory associations provoked by its parents’ admonitions, acquires the habit of adding a sound track to its activities – ‘commenting’ on them. The actual utterances would consist at the outset of large measures of ‘scribble’ – nonsense talk composed of wordless sounds – mixed with real words mouthed with real feeling but little or no appreciation of their meaning, and a few understood words [...] the habit of adding ‘labels’ would thus be driven into place before the labels themselves were understood [...] A word can become familiar, even without being understood’. See Daniel Dennett, *Kinds of Minds: Towards an Understanding of Consciousness* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1996), p. 149.

³³⁹ ‘Ye cannot serve God and mammon’. Matthew 6. 24.

‘neckcloth’ conveying a nervousness and unease.³⁴⁰ When Paul asks ‘What’s money?’ he is not even sure whether money is a noun or an adjectival property, hence the grammatical elision, that makes money out to be something potentially intangible: effect rather than property, and in fact he carries this through, quite viably, when he asks what money can ‘do’. He may well have heard money discussed in this way. But, as a linguistic touch, ‘What’s money?’ also conveys a hint of disparagement, or at least disqualifies veneration, that would have been better conveyed by a dignified: ‘What is money’ (as Dombey re-phrases it). Dombey is excited by the premise of discussing what he knows most intimately with his young son: a cyclical system of currency and exchange that raises his blood as does no living thing. But he recognises Paul as too young to understand abstract economics and reverts to the palpable coinage the child has no doubt seen (money’s progeny in a way – the true ‘base coin’ buttressing abstract equity).³⁴¹ Paul brushes this aside, and asks: ‘what’s money after all?’. This is a moment of philosophical purport. Miss Tox’s phrase: ‘To think [...] that Dombey and Son should be a Daughter after all!’ is representative of the novel, to both critics and lay readers, and has been absorbed into wider culture.³⁴² But here we have the first, and as vital, ‘after all’. The phrase could mean two things: after all is said and done (which is how Miss Tox uses it). Or: when we get down to core truth, and bypass intermediary fallacies. In this context the phrase has the latter meaning. Paul is trying to whittle down to the real import of this thing, which he intimates has both comprehensive relevance and deified status. When he asks what money can ‘do’, he is thinking about its effect on humanity, person-to-person relations, because his life has mostly consisted of observing person-to-person relations, at this pre-school age. Ironically, Paul’s question might justifiably have elicited the answer Dombey deferred: construing money as the means by which to acquire more money, through wheeling and dealing. He would never have meant it that way though. Like Rosa Dartle’s constant refrain in *David Copperfield*: ‘is it really though?’ – Paul’s question nudges at the conscience of his interlocutor, chafing at life’s facade; just as he rubs his hands on his chair arms as if to sharpen his ‘wit’ (here registering the Shakespearian sense of keen intelligence).³⁴³

³⁴⁰ The adjusting of the neckcloth, often synonymous with the clearing of the throat, is an instantly recognisable sign of unease, and relates to iconography of the ‘stiff neck’ as a feature of ‘The Proud’ in Dante, derived in turn from the Bible. Ciardi’s gloss: ‘“*stiff neck*: A recurring Biblical figure for pride and obstinacy. Cf. Acts 7. 51: “Ye stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears.”’ See *The Divine Comedy, John Ciardi Translation*, XI, 55; p. 247 n.53.

³⁴¹ Cf. Dombey’s declamatory attitude to Florence: ‘such a child was merely a piece of base coin that couldn’t be invested – a bad Boy – nothing more’; *Dombey*, p. 3.

³⁴² For example Melvin Konner, *Women After All: Sex, Evolution, and the End of Male Supremacy* (New York: Norton and Company, 2015) borrows the reference for its title.

³⁴³ An ingenuous David recounts the way Rosa’s voice (and portrait) haunts him: ‘[A]s I feel asleep, I could not forget that she was there looking, “Is it really, though? I want to know;” and when I awoke in the night, I found I was uneasily asking all sort of people in my dreams whether it really was or not’. See *David Copperfield*, p. 290. ‘But Paul got his hand free as soon as he could; and rubbing it gently to and fro on the elbow of the chair, as if his wit were in the palm, and he were sharpening it’. See *Dombey*, p. 99.

When Dombey answers that money can do ‘anything’, and Paul asks him to qualify: ‘anything means everything, doesn’t it, Papa?’, another key dichotomy is set up. Dombey is so in awe of money, it triggers a trajectory of incandescent valediction. ‘Anything’ looks upwards to the realms of impossibility. Paul reigns him in. ‘[E]verything’ encompasses what we know as doable; it is still a term of praise, but is literally circumspect: it does not presume on the unknown. The word comes back to haunt the child when Dombey tells Doctor Blimber that he wishes his son to learn ‘Everything, if you please, Doctor’ (155). Dombey’s vanity requires that his son has a mind gorged with data, a trophy brain, despite the fact that a business professional requires an edited skill set.³⁴⁴

In a most poignant moment, Paul then wonders ‘why money did not save me my Mama’. This reveals that he has thought about his mother, and wondered about her; possibly built an identity in his mind. Although he will not remember Fanny, he will no doubt have heard Florence’s recollections and become familiar with the swathed portrait that hangs in the Dombey townhouse.³⁴⁵ Like many a child, he reads arbitrary fate through a subjective lens, and bequeathes the inanimate animistic power. He is simply puzzled by this omission on behalf of something so omniscient in his father’s account. Dickens cleverly takes Paul back into realist mode at this juncture, releasing him from the strictures of truth-seeking, letting him sink back into dream, the subject of which is, we are told, ‘quite an old one to him’ (99). The idiosyncratic grammar – ‘save me my Mama’ – is perfect for illustrating this; touching because of the reiterated possessive, bringing to mind the figure of a mother enclosed within her child’s circumference, like a hard-won prize, rather than vice versa.

Florence

Critics have been suspicious of Florence, deeming her outwardly passive and impermeable to change, and at the same time possessed of a power both furtive and insidious. Her campaign to secure her father’s love is so long-standing, hinting at a masochism deeply troubling to modern and specifically feminist perspectives. A quartet of seminal articles found Florence unattractive as a character; in the realist sense of judging her actions within story.³⁴⁶ Interpretations can seem front-loaded towards the obsessional axis which is certainly

³⁴⁴ Possibly Dombey wants Paul to have a chance of trying for Oxford or Cambridge and fraternising with an aristocratic set: society he himself tries to infiltrate by marrying Edith Grainger, née Skewton. It is telling that a contemporary review spoke of Dombey in patronising terms because his wealth is mercantile: ‘we prefer St James’s to St Olave’s; and a cornetcy in the Blues, to a corner stool in the counting-house’. See ‘Sharp’s London Magazine’ (1848), quoted in Shelston, p. 27.

³⁴⁵ ‘The dead and buried lady was awful in a picture-frame of ghastly bandages’. *Dombey*, p. 24. The starkly black humour marks a shift from *Oliver Twist*, with its hagiographic portrayal of both Agnes’s character and portrait; but this does not diminish its potential importance for Fanny’s children, within story.

³⁴⁶ Nina Auerbach, ‘A Daughter After All’, *Dickens Studies Annual*, 5 (1976), 95-105; Yelin, pp. 297-319; Catherine Waters, ‘Ambiguous Intimacies’, *Dickensian*, 84 (1988), 161-67; Moglen, pp. 159-84.

an aspect of Florence's character: noting that Florence 'stole' into her father's room when Dombey is absent, Louise Yelin sees this as highly motivated: 'she attempts to "take by stealth" what she has never had – his love'.³⁴⁷ But there is a humility to the word too, a simple shyness: Florence is also said to have 'stolen' into her mother's room at the novel's start: 'There had been a girl some six years before, and the child, who had stolen into the chamber unobserved, was now crouching timidly, in the corner where she could see her mother's face'(3). This is hardly an act of unwarranted subterfuge, more one carried out with a child's knowledge that she risks adult displeasure. Florence has arrived in the room before we arrive at her; a neat linguistic mirroring of her status as present but unacknowledged in Dombey's conception of the family.

I believe Florence to be a more complex entity than critics have allowed; as a character construction, moored by references from Dante to Shakespeare that lend gravitas to her operation and status within the novel's cast. In terms of performative character, Florence's apparent lack of interactive power can be countered through close readings which show her directing others through her speech. At times there is an element of manipulation to this, but there are few virtuous characters within Dickens who do not sometimes fall prey to this fault. It facilitates survival, often works to good end; and helps us appreciate the subsets of thinking behind what appears on the page; a supervisory consciousness as per cognitive literary critic Peter Carruthers: '*awareness of one's own mental state* makes possible the enjoyment derived from the manipulation of this state'.³⁴⁸ Also, it suggest pragmatism, often an underestimated quality in Dickens's good characters, and vital to their survival through difficulty (as per Oliver). Hilary Schor gives Florence some leverage in this respect: 'she is far from an unworldly or extra-worldly creature'.³⁴⁹ However Schor does not follow through the potentialities of her chapter title: '*Dombey and Son: the daughter's nothing*', with its implicit reference to *King Lear*; or indeed the scholarly potentiality of her theme, 'the writing daughter'.³⁵⁰

Being a girl, Florence is famously dismissed as 'a piece of base coin that couldn't be invested', but the etymology of her name shows up gold: fiorino d'oro, the gold florin, a coin which enabled the Republic of

³⁴⁷ 'Florence stole into those rooms at twilight', *Dombey*, p. 340. See Yelin, 297-319 (p. 304).

³⁴⁸ Peter Carruthers, quoted by Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006), p. 17.

³⁴⁹ See Hilary Schor, *Dickens and the Daughter of the House* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 55.

³⁵⁰ '[I]t was in this novel that Dickens began to isolate those characteristics of the daughter, in particular the writing daughter, which were the hallmark of his later career.' Schor, p. 49.

Florence to grow as a trading operative; so of high transactional as well as symbolic value (3).³⁵¹ Florence is, right from the beginning, a precious currency; her name, most like, chosen by her mother, Fanny.³⁵² In another novel, we might assume that Dombey had taken Fanny to Italy on honeymoon. But, by hearsay and Dickens's hints, the marriage never had any romance to it: 'Of those years he had been married, ten – married, as some said, to a lady with no heart to give him, whose happiness was in the past' (2). Florence is about six years old at the novel's start, so conceived around four years into the marriage.³⁵³ Perhaps her name houses Fanny's lost memory of a 'happiness [...] in the past'; it is quite likely, in his immediate disappointment at his first-born being a girl, Dombey left the naming to his wife. So a further reason for the odds to be stacked against Florence; already disadvantaged by being minted off her mother's sex, and implicitly her nature. Dickens gives Fanny short shrift; and were we to read her through the derisive comments of Mrs Chick, we'd assume her to be the precursor to Mrs Gradgrind, Tom and Louisa's fatally insipid mother in *Hard Times* (1854).³⁵⁴ But Dickens gets in first; lampooning Mrs Chick as 'a common piece of folly [...] compared with whom her sister-in-law had been a very angel of womanly intelligence and gentleness' (52-3). More convincing still is Dickens's delicate tribute to Fanny's maternal feeling, as she registers '[t]he little voice, so familiar and dearly loved' (10). It is the first instance of Florence's voice transcending, so to speak, an unsympathetic environment; getting through: '[it] awakened some show of consciousness, even at that ebb' (10).

John Lucas is the only critic to cite Dickens's debt to the city of that name as significant in his naming of Florence.³⁵⁵ Dickens visited Florence in 1845 and recounted his impressions in *Pictures from Italy* (1846). It is a far from 'perfunctory account'; and gives us some insight into the rationale behind specific components of Florence's character.³⁵⁶ Dickens apotheosises 'these rugged Palaces of Florence!' – and, for a man often said to be impatient with the esoteric nature of Renaissance art – is clear where its glories lie:

³⁵¹ '[T]he fiorino d'oro of Florence [...] dating from 1252 and weighing 3.5g', with a 'value of [...] £1 in the local currency. The design [...] of the florin was the standing figure of the Baptist and a fleur de lis'. See Philip Grierson, *The Coins of Medieval Europe* (London: Seaby, 1991), p. 110.

³⁵² The mother of Florence Nightingale (1820-1910) was also called Fanny, a derivative of Frances.

³⁵³ 'There had been a girl some six years before'. *Dombey*, chapter I, Book III.

³⁵⁴ 'She had never been well, within her daughter's knowledge; but, she had declined within the last few days [...] and was now as nearly dead'. See Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 222.

³⁵⁵ 'Dickens seems to have chosen the then unusual name of his heroine with great care. It had for him a significance which can be best understood if we look at the closing chapter of his *Pictures from Italy*'. Lucas, 'Dombey and Son', pp. 22-45 (p. 17).

³⁵⁶ 'There is a perfunctory account of Florence'; see Tomalin, *Dickens*, p. 168.

Here, open to all comers, in their beautiful and calm retreats, the ancient Sculptors are immortal, side by side with Michael Angelo, Canova, Titian, Rembrandt, Raphael, Poets, Historians, Philosophers – those illustrious men of history, against whom its crowned heads and harnessed warriors show so poor and small, and are so soon forgotten. Here, the imperishable part of the noble mind survives, placid and equal, when strongholds of assault and defence are overthrown; when the tyranny of the many, or the few, or both, is but a tale; when Pride and Power are so much cloistered dust.³⁵⁷

The passage makes the arts truly immemorial; its practitioners are the ‘men of history’; the determinants of rank and martial prowess diminished alongside.³⁵⁸ ‘Pride and Power are so much cloistered dust’: Dombey’s vice and his object are immaterial; of no matter. Yet Dickens grounds his pantheon with a surprisingly obverse preliminary: ‘how solemn and how grand the streets again, with their great, dark, mournful palaces, and many legends: not of siege, and war, and might, and Iron Hand alone, but of the triumphant growth of peaceful Arts and Sciences’.³⁵⁹ Here the ‘triumphant growth of peaceful Arts and Sciences’ coexist as tributaries alongside the myths of conquest. Counterintuitively, the palaces are ‘great, dark, mournful’: though they nurture the lights of learning and philosophy, there is no material brightness or show. We could be talking about Dombey’s dark townhouse, which becomes a surprising place of solace to his daughter: a vault of memories which help shape her character and, it could be argued, compassion and thoughtfulness.³⁶⁰

The girl Florence is associated with learning in more literal ways too. Her quick mastery of Paul’s schoolwork enables her to show him ‘all that was so rough, made smooth, and all that was so dark, made clear and plain’; reversing the figure from St Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians: ‘And now we see as through a glass, darkly’ (177).³⁶¹ Dickens explains her doing:

Florence sat down at night to track Paul’s footsteps through the thorny ways of learning; and being possessed of a naturally quick and sound capacity, and taught by the most wonderful of masters, love, it was not long before she gained upon Paul’s heels, and caught and passed him. (177)

³⁵⁷ Charles Dickens, ‘A Rapid Diorama’, *Pictures from Italy*, ed. by Kate Flint (London: Penguin, 1998), pp. 162-87 (p. 186).

³⁵⁸ Dickens was wary of Renaissance art’s high church aesthetic; his attitude being more adduceable to Ruskin’s: ‘[He] did not desire the religion. He desired the delight’. Quoted by Leonée Ormond, ‘Dickens and Painting: The Old Masters’, *Dickensian*, 79 (1983), 130– 51; and for a more recent overview, Mark Bills, and others, *Dickens and the Artists* (London: Yale University Press, 2012).

³⁵⁹ Dickens, *Pictures from Italy*, p. 186.

³⁶⁰ See *Dombey*, pp. 253-73; pp. 419-32.

³⁶¹ ‘For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.’ 1 Corinthians 13.12.

The imagery is patently religious, evoking Bunyan's allegory of his protagonist Christian's perilous journey towards salvation in *The Pilgrim's Progress*; as well as the forty days Christ spends in the desert wilderness.³⁶²

The 'quick and sound capacity' stands Florence in good stead throughout the novel. Following the death of her brother, we are told that '[h]er books, her music, and her daily teachers, were her only real companions' in the 'dreary magnificence' of that neglected townhouse (338-9). We forget about this unacknowledged populace: the 'daily teachers' and the disciplines they further. Florence must be an able and responsive scholar for Susan to gain tangential benefit, who, 'in her attendance on the studies of her young mistress, began to grow quite learned herself' (339). (The poetic vigour of Susan's speech to Dombey, extolling Florence, may be the tangential result).³⁶³ At important points within the novel, Florence has been reading or is attempting to read. On the night of Edith's flight, she is perturbed and must forgo her habit: 'Florence could not read, or rest a moment' (702). Just before Dombey gets married, she is interrupted from her reverie by Edith's visit: 'Florence was, one day, sitting reading in her room, and thinking of the lady and her promised visit soon – for her book turned on a kindred subject – when, raising her eyes, she saw her standing in the doorway' (447). For any girl of Florence's social status reading was a normal leisure activity. But Dickens tells us explicitly in this instance how she relates her reading to her life: did she seek out the book on a 'kindred subject'? In what way is it 'kindred'? It is a fascinating premise – this is early on in Florence and Edith's relationship, and the book's identity would reveal the girl's take on her future stepmother (a role, of course, often vilified in fiction).

Dickens also uses the book as a contrived figure for the learning that Florence attempts in order to rectify her estrangement from her father in the chapter xxiv, 'The Study of a Loving Heart'.³⁶⁴ Florence's 'study' is both the activity of her observation of other children; and the unfamiliar space that affords this opportunity: the Skettles residence, a suitably anodyne 'pretty villa in Fulham' (361). Hilary Schor interprets Florence as 'a budding sociologist [...] cross-section[ing] her society, running the knife of daughterly affection and

³⁶² Christian encounters the Slough of Despond amongst other psychological obstacles. See John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress: from this world, to that which is to come*, ed. by Roger Pooley (London: Penguin, 2008), pp. 189-90. See Matthew 4. 1-11.

³⁶³ For pure linguistic ebullience it anticipates Molly Bloom's monologue in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). Susan runs her sentences together in one breathless trajectory: 'I have seen her in her grief and I have seen her in her joy (there's not been much of it) and I have seen her with her brother and I have seen her in her loneliness and some have never seen her [...]'. *Dombey*, p. 649.

³⁶⁴ *Dombey*, pp. 361-74.

curiosity through a sample'.³⁶⁵ Yet she is committed rather than clinical; and the paucity of revelation, in terms of aiding her understanding of easy family relations, is figured as a 'hard book'; difficult, ungriving:

Many a day did Florence thoughtfully observe these children [...] Florence would feel more lonely than [...] finding how unlike them all she was. But attentive to her study, though it touched her to the quick at every little leaf she turned in the hard book, Florence remained among them, and tried, with patient hope, to gain the knowledge that she wearied for. (363-4)

The extended conceit also introduces Florence's flawed belief that reciprocated love is a matter of effort: as revealed by her quirk of idiom in discussing how she might 'learn [...] how to gain her father's love' from Edith.³⁶⁶ It is interesting to cast back to that key conversation between Florence and Polly Toodles, when the as yet unfamiliar nurse tells a reparative parable: the story of another little girl who loses her dear mother:

'So, when this lady died [...] she went to GOD! and prayed to Him, this lady did [...] to teach her little daughter to be sure that in her heart: to know that she was happy and loved her still: and to hope and try – oh all her life – to meet her there one day, never, never, never to part any more.' (26)

'Teach', 'try': these are the fundamentals of Florence's psychology. Perhaps there is a pathological element revealed therein too, since she is always seeking a method to tackle the unassailable; it is an irony that Dickens's embodiment of grace is so very obdurate to the idea of an un-petitioned blessing herself.

Florence's studiousness suggests normative intelligence, but it is not the most important in her story. Newly deprived of her mother, Florence is said to be 'possessed of so much affection that no one seemed to care to have, and so much sorrowful intelligence that no one seemed to mind or think about the wounding of' (29). 'Intelligence' is used repeatedly in the novel as a noun, often of slightly satirical bent: cf. 'Secret Intelligence' and 'More Intelligence': the chapters which give Dombey a start on fleeing Carker.³⁶⁷ But here Dickens splices the noun together with its potentially adjectival sense. Florence's quickness, in every sense, is emphasised in the opening chapters: Polly picks up on it when relaying her tale of the motherless daughter; Dombey does too: 'As if she had an innate knowledge of one jarring and discordant string within him, and her very breath could sound it' (31). (Dombey is scared of such perspicaciousness; it will needle the 'sense of his injustice', but Dickens's figure also evokes the iconography of Hope with her broken lyre; neatly foretelling what Florence's 'knowledge' – and grace – will eventually do for her father).

³⁶⁵ Schor, p. 56.

³⁶⁶ 'And now Florence began to hope that she would learn, from her new and beautiful Mama, how to gain her father's love'; *Dombey*, p. 431.

³⁶⁷ Chapters LII and LIII respectively, *Dombey*, p. 763; p. 796.

Florence's intelligence, as a young child, is that of one both thinking and feeling: a double quantity I discussed in relation to Oliver. The bipartite operation is made clear when she overhears Polly and Susan discussing Dombey's being 'a deal too wrapped up in somebody else': 'The child looked quickly from one nurse to the other, as if she understood and felt what was said' (28). This intelligence, an aggregate of rational thought and feeling sensitivity, what we might now call 'emotional intelligence', is central to my reading of Florence and defence of her as a character construct. Florence certainly becomes harder to broach – critically – as she gets older. She is wrapped up in Dickens's prose, most verbose and cushioning in 'The Study of a Loving Heart', and accordingly loses substance – becomes, as many critics have suggested – 'colourless'; 'specular' even.³⁶⁸ But as a child she proves herself spirited and courageous; valiantly navigating overwhelming circumstances in real time, and the child carries into the woman. When we first encounter Florence she, alone amongst the bedside watchers, comprehends the severity of her mother's plight. Dombey directs her attention to Paul, but Florence's eyes 'returned to her mother's face immediately, and she neither moved nor answered' (3). When Fanny briefly opens her own eyes, Florence reacts in contravention of the procedural formality evinced by Dombey's instruction, rushing forward and flinging her arms around her. Remaining there until Fanny dies, '[she] never raised her head, or moved her soft cheek from her mother's face, or looked on those who stood around, or spoke, or moved, or shed a tear': an action that proves an exercise of will and exercise of love (9). As an animal freezes in the presence of a predator, by instinct knowing that movement may trigger the kill, Florence binds herself around Fanny as if she can stem the transition from life to death; preserve her mother from the inevitable 'watch' of fate. The action is peculiarly segregated within the scene, between mother and daughter only; reflected by Florence's face being closed to Fanny's own. That 'intensity' – Dickens himself uses the word – of feminine engagement, has poignant consequences:

The two medical attendants exchanged a look across the bed; and the Physician, stooping down, whispered in the child's ear. Not having understood the purport of his whisper; the little creature turned her perfectly colourless face, and deep dark eyes towards him; but without loosening her hold in the least. (10)³⁶⁹

Here we have 'colourless' in Dickens's text, not taking on the meaning that Freud assigned it – lacking in vigour – but representing a summation of feeling. Even when addressed by the Court Physician, Florence will not release her hold, her pledge to save, until it really is too late.

³⁶⁸ See *Dombey*, pp. 361-74. 'In the case of Dickens, those flawless girls [...] so good they are quite colourless'; Sigmund Freud to Martha Bernays, quoted by Frank, p. 14; Schor, p.51.

³⁶⁹ 'The child clung close about her, with the same intensity as before.' *Dombey*, p. 9.

The next time we see Florence we realise that no-one has spoken to her of her loss or explained exactly what has occurred. It is possible that even the meaning of death is foggy to her. So she is still equipped with that same intensity, implicitly carried forward from the deathbed. ‘What have you done with my Mama?’, she addresses Polly and Susan both, in a poignant transcription of her inner puzzlement (25). Undeterred: ‘What have they done with my Mama?’ is her adjusted follow-up, when she gets no immediate result (25). Determined to elicit information regarding the one who is most important to her, she reiterates: ‘I am not afraid of you [...] But I want to know what they have done with my Mama’ (25). Truth is perhaps suspected but not fully admitted, and Polly’s reference to Florence’s mourning dress proves a touchstone: ‘“I can remember my Mama”, returned the child, with tears springing to her eyes, “in any frock” ’ (25). Psychologist Kendall Johnson writes of post-traumatic stress in children manifesting in ‘three common phenomena’: ‘denial and numbing, re-experiencing, and depressive and phobic symptoms’.³⁷⁰ Certainly Florence seems to be enacting some form of denial, or pretence that change is still possible, and that she can empower it through by force of love and will. When Polly confirms that black is worn in memory of those who are ‘gone’, Florence is more succinct and cooperative in her petitioning: ‘Where gone?’ (26). As with Paul’s ‘Why didn’t money save me my Mama?’, the grammatical error makes the question more poignant, here echoing a collapse of Florence’s alternative narrative, that had commandeered all her resilience.³⁷¹ She lays ‘aside the bonnet she had held in her hand until now, and [sits] down on a stool at the nurse’s feet’ (26). The bonnet detail nicely tallies with the way Florence exposes herself to new insights as she takes her seat by Polly. Her response to Polly’s tale is quick and visceral: ‘The cold ground’ she shudders, and not as a question, but as statement of fact (26). Her surmise echoes Claudio’s image of burial in *Measure for Measure*: ‘Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;/ To lie in cold obstruction and to rot’; whereas Polly turns the image, appropriating Claudio’s phrase for life, ‘this sensible warm motion’, by reasserting earth’s essential fertility: ‘The warm ground! [...] where the ugly little seeds turn into beautiful flowers, and into grass, and corn’ (26).³⁷² (Polly’s imagery also links earth to Demeter, mother of Prosperine, Queen of Hades, herself goddess of grain and fertility, to whom Prosperine returns in the cycle of seasonal change).

It is perhaps underestimated how much Fanny’s death impacts on Florence. Critics universally address the impact of Paul’s fragility and death upon his sister. But both her need for his love and her reaction to his

³⁷⁰ Kendall Johnson, *Trauma in the Lives of Children* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 39.

³⁷¹ *Dombey*, p. 99.

³⁷² William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, ed. by N. W. Bawcutt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) III, I, 129.

death should be read in relation to ‘that first and greater loss’ (260). When she begs Polly to let her ‘lie by my brother’ it is in a self-serving plea: ‘Oh! I think he loves me’, she says; similar in fact to that Edith later enacts to/on her, binding herself to the less-knowing person as a breach between self and the other who is causing pain (53).³⁷³ That pathological element was presumably absent in her relationship with her mother. The only point at which Florence questions Dombey’s standing in her own regard follows on from a protracted period when she cannot but admit his mental cruelty to both Edith and herself, and wonders: ‘Could it be, she asked herself with starting tears, that her own dear mother had been made unhappy by such treatment, and pined away and died?’ (639). She can only acknowledge ‘such treatment’ by displacing it into her mother’s story, rather than confronting the pain it has caused herself. Daniel Dennett writes of ‘a phenomenon of disassociation in the presence of great pain’ in children: ‘They somehow declare to themselves that it is not they who are suffering the pain’.³⁷⁴ One psychological ruse the child employs is to ‘split at least momentarily into something like multiple personalities (“I am not undergoing pain, ‘she’ is”)’.³⁷⁵ This is a variant of Florence’s focalising of her own pain through the memory of her mother.³⁷⁶

Yet this loaded suspicion equates to the ‘shadow on her heart’ that is present on Edith and Dombey’s wedding night; when Florence is afflicted by waking dreams of the dead: ‘her dead brother and dead mother shine [...] like angels’ (478). It preempts the literal stroke across her body that Dombey inflicts after Edith has fled; when rage against the female sex is dispensed solely upon his daughter. ‘[H]e told her what Edith was, and bade her follow her, since they had always been in league’: the un-gendered broadside of ‘what’ reveals the full vulgarity of the implicit accusation (704).³⁷⁷ He strikes her ‘crosswise, with that heaviness, that she tottered on the marble floor’ (478). In heraldry bastardy is represented by the ‘bend sinister’: a renegade diagonal running from upper right to lower left; so the strike could lend ballast to Hilary Schor’s musing that Florence’s ‘base coin’ is a figure for bastardy.³⁷⁸ But it is more likely a symbolic cipher for the

³⁷³ ‘She pressed her lips to the gentle hand that lay outside the bed [...] Its touch was like the prophet’s rod of old upon the rock. Her tears sprung forth beneath it [...] Thus Edith Grainger passed the night before her bridal.’ *Dombey*, p. 461. Ignorance (or innocence) is relative in both cases: Florence and Edith endure a tension within their respective relationships with Dombey that Paul and Florence (in her turn) do not.

³⁷⁴ Dennett, p. 163.

³⁷⁵ Dennett, p. 163.

³⁷⁶ Dennett’s analysis also helps make sense of Florence’s displacement of herself when anticipating the advent of Edith: ‘she thought of her late self as if it were some other poor deserted girl who was to be pitied for her sorrow.’ *Dombey*, p. 456.

³⁷⁷ No doubt Dombey uses a word appropriate for a slattern, but there is a hint here that his language is out of the bounds of even colloquialism.

³⁷⁸ ‘Dianne Sadoff has pointed out, “the metaphor of ‘base coin’ signifies not only valueless currency but also illegitimate genealogical origin; the coin is forged, adulterated, ‘bastard’ issue”’. See Schor, p. 51.

‘shadow on her heart’, the doubt Florence has always repressed as to Dombey’s ill-treatment of Fanny; as well as of herself. It is transgressive at outset, comprising as it does a recognition of Dombey’s unowned guilt, the ‘one jarring and discordant string within’ his soldered facade (31).³⁷⁹

Florence has been criticised by scholars for not having a sense of self; Louise Yelin calls her a ‘relative creature’; Helene Moglen notes that her ‘voice of entreaty, keyed to the tone of others’.³⁸⁰ Florence acts with good sense and purpose at several key junctures, suggesting a coherent sense of self and where necessary, a tactical facility. Furthermore, there are times when Florence’s voice directs action, sometimes to the extent of benign manipulation. Having escaped Mrs Brown’s clutches, the child Florence must find her way home. We are told she ‘called to her aid all the firmness and self-reliance of a character that her sad experience had prematurely formed and tried; and keeping the end in view, steadily before her, steadily pursued it’ (80). When she identifies the ‘blithe-looking boy’, Walter, she is quick to act on her presentiment:

‘I am lost, if you please!’ said Florence.

‘Lost!’ cried the boy.

‘Yes, I was lost this morning [...] and my name is Florence Dombey, my little brother’s only sister – and oh dear, dear, take care of me, if you please!’ (81-2)

Even given the lapse into tearfulness, the polite insistence on notice and delivery of vital information is impressive; and in fact, the plangency (‘dear, dear’ merges upset and prescient affection) affords a further steer to get the result she needs. Critics have taken umbrage at Florence’s qualification of herself as ‘my little brother’s only sister’; as if there were her sole identity. But, the context should be taken into account. Florence knows that she will be most missed by Paul, and possibly intimates that her absence could have a detrimental effect on his health. Therein lies the value of her presence within the family unit. Whether her cry is one of genuine upset, a direct appeal to Walter, or a combination of the two, it is honest, and urgently tactical as opposed to self-effacing. From that point on, the pair’s debates over next steps stand as a template for open and pragmatic discussion, and auger well for the marital dynamic: ‘“Suppose I take you to my uncle’s, [...] and go to your house in a coach to tell them you are safe, and bring you back some clothes. Won’t that be best?” “I think so,” answered Florence. “Don’t you? What do you think?”’ (83). Perhaps

³⁷⁹ ‘She dared not look into the glass; for the sight of the darkening mark upon her bosom made her afraid of herself, as if she bore about her something wicked.’ *Dombey*, chapter xlv, 725. In relation to bastardy, the force of Dombey’s own belief in his vision is accentuated when Dickens has him imagine one of Polly’s brood substituted for Paul, and how he would find it hard to weed out that impostor: ‘Whether a man so situated, would be able to pluck away the result of so many years of usage, confidence, and belief, and endow a stranger with it?’, *Dombey*, chapter ii, 20. For Dombey the calibre of his intended *nurture* almost trounces the claims of nature; a surprising premise, but then the Dombey wealth is third generation: *self-made*, mercantile stock.

³⁸⁰ See Yelin, pp. 297-319 (p. 305); Moglen, pp. 159-84 (p. 178).

Florence's most bold verbal act is her marriage proposal to Walter.³⁸¹ In the space of a chapter she boldly claims, and thereby authorises, his hints of a switch in his feelings from the brotherly to the sexual.

A slight hint of manipulation is present when Edith, still a newcomer in Florence's life, visits her during the house alterations. Florence immediately requests that she transfer to her brother's old room, rather than have her own improved: ' "If I might change them, Mama", returned Florence, "there is one up-stairs I should like much better." ' (447). Again, she knows her advantage and utilises it, not impolitely, or even inappropriately, but certainly boldly, as Edith's jesting response: 'Is this not high enough, dear girl?' acknowledges. In her dealings with Toots, Florence remodels potentially embarrassing circumstance, by deflecting his obvious motives and redirecting his voice. As he attempts to proclaim his love, she intercedes:

'I am so grateful to you, I have such a reason to like you for being a kind friend to me, and I do like you so much;' and here the ingenuous face smiles upon him with the pleasanter look of honesty in the world; 'that I am sure you are only going to say good bye!'(615)

And of course Florence later engages him to accompany the dismissed Susan, so initiating that substitute courtship: 'Quick as thought, Florence glided out and hastened down-stairs', locates Toots and secures his services: 'you are so friendly to me, and so honest, that I am sure I may ask a favour of you' (657). There are not many occasions when Florence can be seen to manipulate others through speech in a way that is other than well-intended, albeit obstructive to riposte. Yet her reply to Edith, when the latter asks after Dombey in their final encounter, is 'taint[ed]' by self-deception.³⁸² She discloses their new-found intimacy: 'I only wish to do my duty to Papa. I am very dear to him, and he is very dear to me' (915). This (needlessly) shuts Edith out, in a protectionist manner that neither pays due regard to Edith's natural estrangement (she is no longer a competitor for Dombey's affection) and wrongly suggests that the present situation is a long-standing one ('I am [...] he is'). It does a disservice to their mutual sufferance under Dombey's unenlightened rule.

Dickens also gives Florence a voice, within narrative, that is informed with omniscient truths. This often has a semi-mystical cadence, congruent with a slightly archaic or poetic idiom. The device resembles that Dickens employed with Oliver and Paul; at moments when they relay a percipient insight. The desperation of Florence's love for her father carries the urgency of warning by its very nature. This Dickens converts into Florence's unheard voice; implicitly that of her spirit as opposed to her physical being, and uses it to corral

³⁸¹ Hilary Schor is one of few critics to note the radicalism of this: '[Florence] walks directly into a marriage plot'. See Schor, p. 59.

³⁸² I make reference to Louise Yelin's noting of Amy Dorrit's single 'taint', when she refuses to acknowledge that her father should pay off his creditors once released from prison. In both examples love bends morality. See Yelin, 297-319 (p. 309).

forebodings of the future. Following one of her father's many dismissals, Dickens puts forward an alternative narrative: 'he might have read in her keen glance the impulses and fears that made her waver; the passionate desire to run clinging to him, crying, as she hid her face in his embrace, "Oh father, try to love me! there's no one else!"' (32) It becomes evident that 'there's no one else', through the plot's unfolding. Similarly, when Dombey is ill and supine, and Florence sits by his bed, the narrative intercedes with this call, harnessing a mounting tempo of insidious ills: 'Awake, unkind father! Awake now, sullen man! The time is flitting by; the hour is coming with an angry tread.' (643-4). Florence's longing and Dickens's warning coalesce.

Dombey does not hear Florence's spiritual voice; events force through changes and her return, as discussed, is comparable to the coming of the Holy Spirit: the agency of grace. The Holy Spirit acts as the facilitator of communication on the Day of Pentecost:

And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place.
And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting.
And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them.
And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.³⁸³

Dickens makes specific reference to this in his depiction of Florence alone in the gloomy townhouse, subsequent to Paul's death. Her ability to rebuff psychological phantasmagoria is emphasised by Dickens's descriptions of her spending time in the rooms in which her brother spent his final days. Dickens identifies that even a mourner can fear the spectre of the dead beloved; whilst, in a sense, a discredit to both the deceased and the Christian faith, it takes transcendent courage to obviate that very human response. Florence masters any such fantasies. She is active rather than static, and able to engage with plastic reminders of Paul, such as the piano on which she plays his favourite songs; guiding herself through the grief process in a state of accommodation as opposed to resistance. Her ability to rise above the indignities of grief: the fear, immolation and resentment, is Florence's most Christian aspect. Dickens describes how this comes about by reference to the day of Pentecost, and the Holy Spirit: 'it is not in the nature of pure love to burn so fiercely and unkindly long. The flame that in its grosser composition has the taint of earth, may prey upon the breast that gives it shelter; but the sacred fire from Heaven, is as gentle in the heart, as when it rested on the heads of the assembled twelve, and showed each man his brother' (260). Transcendent voice is an apposite figure for reaching across boundaries without fear; as well as introducing the analogous theme of divine grace.

³⁸³ Acts 2. 1-4.

Indeed, Florence's very name becomes the watchword for Paul, Edith, and, presumably, the ship-bound Walter.³⁸⁴ In contrast, Dickens has Carker speak several tongues literally: 'The letters were in various languages, but Mr Carker the manager read them all' (316). But Carker, until his death monologue (a virtuoso rattle), never says anything in earnest, except perhaps the cruel barbs he levies at his brother and Captain Cuttle. Carker uses language to further his duplicities, rather than communicate; those he has wronged, such as Alice Marwood, never utter his name (which hovers tellingly close to 'canker').

On two occasions, Florence will not speak, and they can be read in relation to Cordelia's famous refusal to entertain her father's demands for an overt demonstration of filial love in *King Lear*. We know that Dickens was preoccupied with the play at this time.³⁸⁵ A number of critics have touched upon Shakespeare's tragedy in relation to *Dombey*, but without evincing much conclusion. Anny Sadrin is roundly dismissive: 'It has been suggested that Dombey was a new King Lear' (her footnote credits Tillotson and Thurley), 'But this comparison is totally unfounded: Lear craves the attention of his daughter [...] and their tragedy is based on a misunderstanding [...] Dombey [...] ignores and hates Florence until his last minute change of heart'.³⁸⁶ Yet the debt is more subtly disclosed through language. The key dialogue between the King and his youngest daughter concludes with Cordelia reiterating her refusal to speak; to match her sisters' effusions of flattery:

KING LEAR
[...] Speak.

CORDELIA
Nothing, my lord.

KING LEAR
Nothing!

CORDELIA
Nothing.

KING LEAR
Nothing will come of nothing: speak again.

CORDELIA
Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave
My heart into my mouth: I love your majesty
According to my bond; nor more nor less.³⁸⁷

³⁸⁴ Cf. Edith: 'they had not seen her, just before, in her own room with no one by; and they had not heard her utterance of the three words, "Oh Florence, Florence!"' *Dombey*, p. 558.

³⁸⁵ 'Dickens eagerly re-read during the early 1840s'. See Lucas, 'Dombey and Son', p. 41.

³⁸⁶ See Sadrin, p. 49.

³⁸⁷ William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. by Kiernan Ryan (London: Penguin, 2015), I, I, 68.

When Florence is a child, Dombey grudgingly brings her and her brother together under Polly's auspices. Seeing his daughter perturbed, unused to such notice, he reacts irritably: 'come in: what is the child afraid of?' (32). He then asks portentously: 'Do you know who I am?'. She replies 'Yes, Papa' – giving him the credit of informality, rather than stating, as well she might, 'Yes, you are my father' (or as Paul might: 'Dombey and Son').³⁸⁸ He follows: 'Have you nothing to say to me?', straining for a more salubrious response; a mediation of the tension that stems from suddenly facing the truth (32). Dombey, like Lear, is frightened by his daughter's unadulterated simplicity. She indeed says 'nothing', but everything, by refracting – in the combination of her native loving trust ('Yes, Papa') and her schooled trepidation – an image of himself that is as disconcerting as it is true. She rankles Dombey in fact, just as Cordelia does Lear, for her full implication of right action in minimal speech.

The second debt to *King Lear* is an especially suggestive moment in regards to Florence's relation to language and its placement and misplacement ('I cannot heave/ My heart into my mouth'). Florence, staying at the house of Sir Barnet Skettles, is visited by Carker, ostensibly as an agent of Dombey's. He suggests, with slippery elegance, that the girl entrust him with a message to her father: '[...] if Miss Dombey can intrust me with any commission, need I say how *very* happy I shall be?' (374). We know that there are countless times when Florence would have run to her father and expressed her feelings freely. But she senses the danger of entrusting sincerity to insincerity and replies: 'Nothing [...] but my — but my dear love — if you please' (374). She will not enlarge on a sentiment which she rightly fears will be distorted or worse, utilised, by the novel's Iago. So she keeps to conventional niceties; only her staggered delivery, the dashes recalling the language of sensibility and feeling informing text discussed in *Oliver*, betraying the cost.³⁸⁹

Critics have repeatedly read Florence's love for her father as a jealous force that destabilises emotional equilibrium. Dickens makes it clear that as a child Florence has an excess of facility and sensibility that only seeks an object: 'possessed of so much affection that no one seemed to care to have, and so much sorrowful intelligence that no one seemed to mind or think about the wounding of' (29). Any integral force to her feeling should be read as ancillary as opposed to ill-intended. I wonder if this heightened responsiveness alienates Dombey as much as his daughter's moral radii, from the moment he witnesses 'the sad embrace between her and her dying mother, which was at once a revelation and a reproach to him' (31). Florence is

³⁸⁸ See *Dombey*, p. 163.

³⁸⁹ 'A work such as Richardson's *Clarissa* is full of lacunae, asterisks, dashes [...] indicating emotion beyond words'. See Todd, *Sensibility*, p. 4.

careless of appearances when loving (Captain Cuttle is conscious of the physical trust she places in him).³⁹⁰ Louise Yelin thinks that it is her ability to conjure up responsive love that Dombey envies; but perhaps it is her ability to love, her appetite for love, her vigour for it and courage about it.³⁹¹

Florence's love of Dombey derives from a phalanx of influences, including this native dispensation to love. Intriguingly, in Dickens's makeshift plan he wrote: 'At the same time I shall change her feeling towards him for one of a greater desire to love him, and to be loved by him; engendered in her compassion for his loss, and her love for the dead boy whom, in his way, he loved so well too'.³⁹² 'At the same time', of course, as Dombey's own reciprocal feelings morph into 'positive hatred' (by dint of her showing a negative reflection of himself).³⁹³ '[A] greater desire to love him, and be loved by him': the emphasis is unexpected, especially from the retrospective standpoint of the novel's critical heritage. Dickens may be using the active form: 'to love him', to indicate permitted love on show; that which Florence play-acts when she brings 'little tokens of duty and service' to Dombey's rooms during his absence (339). Or perhaps Dickens means that Florence's love is always an attempt, however violently vaunted, until she has a child herself. This, after all, is her own interpretation, which seems perverse at first reading: 'When it was born, and when I knew how much I loved it, I knew what I had done in leaving you' (889). We know that Florence's 'love for the dead boy' is, however strong, in attendance to that 'greater loss' of her mother.³⁹⁴ But perhaps Florence's love for her living boy releases her from the pain of accumulative loss.

The scenes leading up to Paul's death are contributive to Florence's growing sense of yearning towards her father too. Father and daughter spend much time in close proximity by the sick bed. Florence would have seen Dombey bowed with grief, humbled by pain. In fact, when Paul sees the shape of Dombey: '“Floy! he said. “What is that?”' the ambiguous pronoun need not be as damning as critics have feared (238).³⁹⁵ Of course there is the implication that Dombey is alien to his son. But he might be alien in the sense that he is

³⁹⁰ '[H]e would not have held her in his arms, while she was unconscious, for a thousand pounds.' *Dombey*, p. 707.

³⁹¹ 'It is her ability to make others love her that evokes in her father the “spirit of jealous opposition”'; see Yelin, 297-319 (p. 301).

³⁹² To John Forster, 25-26 July 1846, *Letters*, IV, pp. 589-99 (p. 588).

³⁹³ 'From that time, I purpose changing his feeling to indifference and uneasiness towards his daughter into a positive hatred'. To John Forster, 25-26 July 1846, *Letters*, IV, pp. 589-99 (p. 588).

³⁹⁴ 'At the same time I shall change her feeling towards him for one of a greater desire to love him, and to be loved by him; engendered in her compassion for his loss, and her love for the dead boy whom, in his way, he loved so well too'. *Ibid.*, 95.

³⁹⁵ The declension to the impersonal pronoun is the last - terrible - commentary on their relationship.' See Coveney, *Image of Childhood*, p. 148.

crumpled by emotion, so materially different to the Dombey who sat next to his heir by the fireside. When Dombey himself confronts 'it' in the mirror at the novel's end: a self he does not recognise, and is fascinated by: 'He glanced at it occasionally, very curious to watch its motions', he is suffering the same radical self-division as the traumatised child in Dennett's analysis, who 'leaves' his own psyche and monitors the self as another (886).³⁹⁶ (Perhaps Dombey is just an outgrown traumatised child, which gives all the more brutal sense to little Paul's early end). 'It' connotes monstrosity, in line with the novel's underbelly of prescient Yeatsian imagery: beasts bred from within social malaise. Yeats's 'rough beast' is Dickens's 'Destroying Angel' who amasses his retinue: 'dark shapes issue from amidst their homes' (685).³⁹⁷ The 'good spirit who would take the house-tops off' sweeps in from above with clean diagnostic action (685).

Florence refers to her child as 'it'.³⁹⁸ She rehouses the non-gendered pronoun; and refuses to countenance the advance of 'the Destroying Angel': 'Bright and blest the morning that should rise on such a night' (685). Martha Nussbaum has analysed Dante's Beatrice as a fusion of the earthly and heavenly; and equally as one able to access the 'particular' of human-sized intimations with the omniscient view of the blessed.³⁹⁹ When Florence chooses to marry Walter, it is as if the wise self who spoke out of the frightened girl at key moments in the text forges the two in unity. A marriage of selves. She may be frightened as she approaches the church, with no relief from Dickens's portentous portrayal, but she continues despite bad symbolic prognoses: 'No gracious ray of light is seen to fall on Florence, kneeling at the altar with her timid head bowed down' (852). She outwits the thrust of Dickens's narrative; as her brother Paul deflected, and chastised, his creator's will to scorn (for entertainment's sake) in his defence of Glubb.

There is another, final addendum we should consider in the portrayal of Florence and the critical assessment of her character. Critics have unanimously followed Moynahan in their reading of the wooden Midshipman crew as the Dwarfs to her Snow White: a fairy tale brotherhood, lacking in real power. As Moynahan sees it, this community's 'values are simple good nature and simple-mindedness. It leaves out of account intelligence, forceful masculine energy [...] as well as sensuality'.⁴⁰⁰ Captain Cuttle's sense that he should

³⁹⁶ 'They "leave"'. They somehow declare to themselves that it is not they who are suffering the pain'. See Dennett, p. 163.

³⁹⁷ 'And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,/ Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?'. Yeats, *The Second Coming*, 21.

³⁹⁸ As above, *Dombey*, p. 889.

³⁹⁹ 'Her particularity transcends all barriers. In that full particularity he loves her'. See 'The Christian Ascent: Dante' in Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 557-90 (p. 573).

⁴⁰⁰ See Moynahan, 121-31 (p.128).

not abuse Florence's trust is founded on a native sensuality.⁴⁰¹ Sol Gills gets back home through the aid of fellow seafarers: 'I found many captains and others, in that part of the world, who had known me for years, and who assisted me with a passage here and there, and for whom I was able, now and then, to do a little in return, in my own craft' (843). Here reciprocity comes good; Uncle Sol navigates himself through the unknown via the agency of friendship and old bonds. One of the most striking double meanings in *Dombey and Son* occurs when Captain Cuttle speculates that his debt originates in 'a matter of security for Wally's father – an old bond' (131). We know that to Dombey 'bond' would mean something traded on the financial markets; that a fiscal debt unrecovered would warrant a severity of action approaching Shylock's.⁴⁰² But through action, confederacy, and courage, these values are turned by the novel's end.⁴⁰³

⁴⁰¹ When Florence seeks refuge after fleeing her father: 'Captain Cuttle was so respectful of her, and had such a reverence for her, in this new character, that he would not have held her in his arms, while she was unconscious, for a thousand pounds'. *Dombey*, p. 707.

⁴⁰² Shylock: '[L]et him look to his bond: he was wont to call me usurer; let him look to his bond: he was wont to lend money for a Christian courtesy; let him look to his bond.' William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. by John Drakakis (London: A & C Black, 2010), III, I, 43.

⁴⁰³ In fact, repatriating Cordelia's quietly transcendent application of the word above Shylock's assertively materialist one: 'I love your majesty | According to my bond; nor more nor less'. Shakespeare, *Lear*, I, I, 68 (Cf. p. 107, above).

Chapter Three

***Our Mutual Friend*: ‘To go about, wander, doubt’**

I rashly said, ‘Aha! The Evil Spirit. To be sure. He is very soon disposed of.’ ‘Pardon, Monsieur,’ said the Sacristan, with a polite motion of his hand towards the little door, as if introducing somebody—‘The Angel Gabriel!’⁴⁰⁴

Our Mutual Friend (1864-5), Dickens’s last completed novel, reveals an interplay between established ‘Dickensian’ narrative techniques and modes of characterisation, in themselves wrought to an unprecedented level of sophistication, and those in process. I deliberately use the phrase ‘in process’ to suggest two features of newer Dickensian modes, as I see them: they include fundamental changes in the way that he actually writes, and thereby play out on the page (though being anatomical and subtle, are sometimes hidden in plain sight); and they are hard to determine in a finite way, brokering ambiguity as to their intended end or purpose.

William Empson defined ambiguity as, primarily: ‘any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language’.⁴⁰⁵ This sense is always pertinent to Dickens, especially the notion of semantic stretch within a small linguistic unit. In *Our Mutual Friend* he occasionally exploits his facility in this regard to almost baroque levels. Take this description of the schoolmistress: ‘[...] Miss Peecher at the table stitched at the neat little body she was making up by brown paper pattern for her own wearing’.⁴⁰⁶ As well as the implied doubling of two ‘neat little bod[ies]’, the sentence plays with the conception of a façade being created (‘made up’); and the double sense of ‘wearing’ as both attiring and tiring, wearing out. ‘[S]titched at’ presages the vernacular expression ‘stitch-up’, a deliberate feint.

Miss Peecher, however, is the butt of a joke: there is no doubt as to the tenor of our presumed response (following the narrator, we are meant to feel scorn; and register that she will never migrate into a character we should take seriously). In this sense the vignette represents exactly the kind of ambiguity that I will *not* be focusing on in this chapter; though it is a well-worn premise in Dickens. This is ambiguity which turns upon a diverse throwing out of references, often relying upon the integral ‘ambiguity’ of language in an Empsonian sense as promoting ‘alternative reactions’; but the important consequence – how the character appears to us – is actually rather closely circumscribed. If we were to create a visual model for the mental

⁴⁰⁴ ‘Lyons, the Rhone, and the Goblin of Avignon’, Dickens, *Pictures from Italy*, pp. 16-24 (p. 17).

⁴⁰⁵ William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 3rd edn (London: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 19.

⁴⁰⁶ Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* (New York: Random House, 2002), p. 226. This edition is based on the 1867 edition, itself a revision of the 1865 first edition, as per the Clarendon edition. All future references to this edition in text.

processing that a reader follows in considering (or parsing) the Miss Peecher sentence, it would resemble several circles on a continuum, where a divergence only heralded a return. In truth, Dickens has Miss Peecher nailed throughout the novel as an object of derision; and as a character arbitrated almost solely through heavily stylised prose patterns, her own action merely shadows her author's: 'Miss Peecher repressed a sigh as she gathered her work together for bed, and transfixed that part of her dress where her heart would have been if she had had the dress on, with a sharp, sharp needle' (226).

In relation to *Our Mutual Friend* I am proposing a more unsettling topos that engages the word's etymology: from the Latin *ambiguus* 'moving from side to side, of doubtful nature', and *ambigere* 'to go about, wander, doubt'.⁴⁰⁷ This is pertinent to both the writing and the experience of characters. It also has a supernumerary application in that this is the Dickens novel in which it is hardest to judge what we are meant to think. The writing which encloses Miss Peecher and the Veneering circle, where the very idiom is analogous to a directive from author to reader, sits proud upon a far more discursive, fluid, prose; at times accordant to our ideas of sophisticated realism as per Eliot, Hardy, James (for example, in some passages of dialogue). Yet, it is also internally striated with ironies that see Dickens carrying through familiar techniques of linguistic patterning and symbolic ballast on a more microcosmic and integrated scale. The reading experience is sometimes analogous to seasickness: there is no firm ground; ostensibly 'good' characters behave dubiously, 'bad' ones suffer injustice. Furthermore, in the locale of Dickens's character construction, the cultural references are so eclectic, it becomes a problem trying to bind them into one phalanx of meaning, that nevertheless equates to an ethically cogent whole. Jenny Wren, for example, resembles both a fairy tale princess from the pen of Dickens's contemporary George MacDonald, and a puckish creature from the Jacobean stage.⁴⁰⁸ The niggling worry about what exactly Dickens *means*, feeds over the same as to what he *thinks*, as he sometimes plays mercurial games in his attitudinal stance within the text; again, giving the reader an uneasy sense of dislodged moorings. Certainly what Anita Brookner felt was a given in Dickens's fiction, 'the sense of right and wrong', seems at times in jeopardy.⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary*.

⁴⁰⁸ George MacDonald's *The Light Princess* (1864) has particular thematic correlations with Jenny's story. Her world-weary musing, 'Oh this world, this world!' echoes the title of Thomas Middleton's 1608 revenge tragedy: *A Mad World, My Masters*. See Thomas Middleton, *A Mad World, My Masters*, ed. by Standish Henning (London: Edward Arnold, 1965). Eugene keys into the Middleton association when he dubs himself 'Sir Eugene Bountiful'; the play's male lead is Sir Bounteous Progress, an old rich country knight.

⁴⁰⁹ 'I think young people love Dickens. The funny names [...] and the sense of right and wrong.' See Mick Brown, interview with Anita Brookner, *The Telegraph Magazine*, 2009.

Of course, I am not suggesting that Dickens has lost his sense of right and wrong, but he permits a limbo area to open up in *Our Mutual Friend*: a space in which he tests us and perhaps himself. Probity becomes a factor in the tripartite interplay between Dickens, text, and reader. We are forced to confront and evaluate our own moral radii as we catch ourselves reacting in, at times, ignominious ways that seem actively encouraged by Dickens; so perpetuating the underlying theme of ‘proving’: the concept of a prolonged trial as to ethical staunchness, most palpably manifest in the Bella/John plot line.⁴¹⁰ What I am identifying in particular, is a predilection towards feelings of safe distance (at best) or superiority (at worse) in our relation to characters which identify as virtuous but weak (as opposed to say, empathy or sentimental objectification). In my reading, Mr Dolls forms an end point of this scale: Dickens sets the drunkard up as an object of scorn, and his characterisation introduces important new dimensions of abasement and abjection; sordid equivalences to the more graciously conceived criteria of victimhood in Dickens’s earlier to mid-period novels.

To start at the minor end of my scale: characters who are virtuous but not empowered. Twemlow, who forms the novel’s moral centre in some critical accounts, is introduced in a way which makes direct reference to his attempt to comply with sartorial penumbra that qualify identity so that the person within does not have to:

Reflects Twemlow: grey, dry, polite, susceptible to the east wind, First-Gentleman-in-Europe collar and cravat, cheeks drawn in as if he had made a great effort to retire into himself some years ago, and had got so far and had never got any further (11)⁴¹¹

Twemlow has committed, in a minor way, a quintessential sin for Dickens in this novel; presenting a halfway measure between complicity and rebellion. He is exonerated of course, but it takes his assertion of courage into that very hotbed of superficiality, ‘Society’, in his verbal defence of Lizzie at the book’s end. This forms an almost palpable countermovement which releases him from vestiges of pitiable comedy.⁴¹² Riah is another example; Dickens’s presentation is strangely mediated between a romantic and almost disingenuous narratorial stance, set adjacent to evidence, in passages of action and dialogue, of great moral rectitude in this patient figure. However it is as if Dickens cannot forgive Riah his outward passivity, and cannot celebrate that rectitude in a vital way. He draws attention, instead, to the subservient gestures that he attributes in part

⁴¹⁰ As John Harmon conceives it: ‘[...] the thought entered my head of turning the danger I had passed through, to the account of begging for some time supposed to have disappeared mysteriously, and of proving Bella’. *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 360. The word choice may also incorporate the sense of ‘proving’ in the kitchen, i.e. bread rising, Dickens’s in-joke as to Bella’s domestic concerns.

⁴¹¹ Dickens gives Twemlow’s position a lot of implicit approval, and even wants to give Twemlow the last word spoken aloud’. See Dominic Rainsford, ‘Victorian Moral Philosophy and *Our Mutual Friend*’, *Dickens Quarterly*, 27 (2010), 273-290 (p. 281).

⁴¹² *Our Mutual Friend*, pp. 798-9.

to the Judaic faith.⁴¹³ This is done with some respect; but equally, the positing of cultural opacity enhances the sense that Dickens is also frustrated, regarding ostensible meekness as itself a redundant mode of engagement. This is most clearly inferred in the image closing ‘The Whole Case so Far’ (bk II, ch. XV), which leaves a trace upon the mind’s eye like something unseen in real time: ‘[...] Riah, who had been sitting on some dark steps in a corner over against the house, arose and went his patient way; stealing through the streets in his ancient dress, like the ghost of a departed Time’ (396).

To give a more substantive example of this internal testing: Jenny Wren is a character with whom we should evidently sympathise; burdened by both physical disability and a dependent father. She is clever enough to foresee the spectrum of likely response from others, ranging from clumsy tact, shock, and, perhaps revulsion. The latter of course is taboo: the most extreme version of an unacceptable reaction to disability or difference per se. But Dickens’s genius is to have Jenny cater to this, making it *her* call; recognising that even though other characters, her narrator, and the reader, might *not* feel it, she is almost overly aware of the possibility. She pre-empts unpremeditated reactions from others; most overtly when showing Sloppy the way that she moves with her crutch: ‘ “But you had better see me use it”, she said, sharply. “This is the way. Hoppetty, Kicketty, Peg-peg-peg. Not pretty; is it?” ’ (790). This plays into that dangerous margin whereby a planted thought furnishes a ghost presence: by pre-empting possible disgust, Jenny makes it part of the equation. She does not want to witness a transition that substantively changes her in others’ conception at a remove. Such a process belittles her, and that deeply denigrates the qualities she has in abundance: intelligence, perception, social acumen. It is surprising how much even Jenny’s friends underestimate her supervisory intelligence, talking over her when sensitive subjects are raised.⁴¹⁴ Of course tact is a social necessity, but it is also reductive, trapping Jenny into behavioural mores that are immaterial to her ‘outlier’ status, discounting the alternative power of her own resources; treating as precious those fictions that are resilient precisely because they *are* complicit, so palpably transparent.⁴¹⁵ Jenny creates an intermediate spectrum of fictional conceits

⁴¹³ Examples include: ‘For whom, perhaps with some old instinct of his race, the gentle Jew had spread a carpet’; ‘It was characteristic of his habitual submission, that he sat down on the raw dark staircase, as many of his ancestors had probably sat down in dungeons, taking what befell him as it might befall’. *Our Mutual Friend*, pp. 272; 411.

⁴¹⁴ See, for example, Lizzie whispering ‘Her father’ to Eugene, in explanation of Jenny’s reference to her ‘troublesome bad child’ (which creates complicity between the two ‘adults’ in effect); and Riah’s disclosure to Miss Abbey: ‘ “[Lizzie] has been for some time living with my young companion, and has been a helpful and a comfortable friend to her. Much needed, madam,” he added, in a lower voice. “Believe me; if you knew all, much needed” ’. *Our Mutual Friend*, pp. 233; 427.

⁴¹⁵ David Kaplan interprets Jenny as a ‘schemer’ who is nevertheless beholden to her ‘utterly transparent’ lies; see David Kaplan, ‘Transparent Lies and the Re-articulation of Agency in *Our Mutual Friend*’, *Papers on Language and Literature*, 51 (2015), 244-268, (p. 246). My reading inverts his, as I see her as choreographing her lies as a way of facilitating survival. The ‘outlier’ is a modern term for an age-old paradigm; see Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success* (London: Penguin, 2009).

that allow her and others to deal with a terrifying amalgam of physiological and physical pain. She knows this; others know it.

Jenny and Dickens collaborate in this mutual exposé; this trumping of any furtive mockery at source by ‘outing’ ugliness. Jenny describes herself ‘scudding’ and ‘bobbing’ inelegantly across the city, seeking ladies of leisure. A form of pimping, in effect: a typical instance of Dickens grounding an idea that has a temptingly allusive tangent; but equally, forcing the reader to ask whether it is they who are sordid-minded (425).⁴¹⁶ Dickens, a few paragraphs later, describes Jenny ‘plodd[ing]’ along with Riah (426). He takes her queerness, a self-manufactured defence in part, at face value; there is none of the tenderness that softens his characterisation of Mr Dick in *David Copperfield* (1850) or Maggy in *Little Dorrit* (1857). There is an absence of comedy; and a preponderance of satire. It’s bladed; like Jenny’s eyes, her hands, her manner (‘“Right!” exclaimed Miss Wren with another chop’).⁴¹⁷ Because of this, Dickens permits the reader to also objectify her oddness; visualise her features, form, and motion. He builds her up in aggregate, to be fully on display, as no other character’s corporeal self. Exposure is vulnerability; and however active Jenny keeps within plot, Dickens incorporates a cool neutrality into our reading of her; at odds with the didactic subjectivity informing his characterisation of victim children in the past. Even Paul Dombey, another ‘little crooked antic of a child’ and Jenny’s only viable progenitor, occupied a space of sentiment intermittently, as discussed in my previous chapter.⁴¹⁸ For Jenny, that space is not available; it is replaced by something far more ambiguous and dark.

⁴¹⁶ Precious McKenzie Stearns suggests that Jenny herself might have had ‘[...] possible past experience with a darker side of city life and men’; but this is surely impossible given her physical condition. See Precious McKenzie Stearns, ‘“Sex and the City”: Charles Dickens’s Working Women in *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *Our Mutual Friend*’, *English*, 61 (2012), 137-50 (p. 147).

⁴¹⁷ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 424; also ‘[...] the eye down there under lighter shadows sparkled more brightly and appeared more watchful’, p. 339. Dickens may have taken inspiration from the appropriately eerie ‘fixed glass eyes’ that dolls possessed from the early 1800s. See *The Dolls’ Hospital Diaries* (Dublin: The History Press, Ireland, 2012), p. 32.

⁴¹⁸ ‘You lodge yourself of your own accord in a house with [...] a little crooked antic of a child, or old person, or whatever it is’. *Our Mutual Friend*, 222. Charlie Hexam’s damning analysis capitalises upon Dickens’s own use of the neutral pronoun across his *oeuvre*, but especially in this novel, to suggest a median state between gender, life and death; normative categories. The description recalls the ‘old’ child Paul Dombey; ‘antic’ correlating the etymological associations of the antique and grotesque. See *Dombey*, p. 98.

‘The horror!’ ‘The horror!’⁴¹⁹

An incident from Dickens’s past has prescient potency here. It is little critiqued in anything but a pantomimic sense, following, in truth, Dickens’s own tone.⁴²⁰ But for me the vignette of the ‘curious’ mechanistic clock that Dickens saw in Lyons Cathedral, two decades previous, presents a very real worry about the interpretation of good and evil in the world, as well as a straightforward satire on devotional fervour.⁴²¹ Dickens was shown the clock by the Sacristan, with its mobile automata: the Virgin Mary, and the Angel Gabriel issuing in and out of a trapdoor to, essentially, effect the Annunciation. Yet the latter is ‘a very ill-looking puppet’, and Dickens confidently deems it ‘The Evil Spirit. To be sure’.⁴²² When the Sacristan corrects him, in predictably sober tones, the question remains as to how such a glaring mismatch between form and meaning could pass muster. Was it Dickens’s lack:— not being able to identify symbolism that apportioned goodness? Or, at least, to house obtrusive humility, wherein ugliness accords to virtue, within his interpretation?⁴²³ Or was the institution of the Catholic Church, no less the Sacristan, authorising a semantic disconnect that made a jest of faith itself, by allowing a conceit to play out that so clearly invited laughter from a lay perspective? Dickens gives no further analysis on the page, but in a contemporaneous letter recounts the ‘mistake he made in Lyon’; and how the town left a bad mental aftertaste: ‘a great Nightmare – a bad conscience – a fit of indigestion – the recollection of having done a murder’.⁴²⁴ The imagery concurs strikingly with the contagion of untethered guilt in *Our Mutual Friend*.⁴²⁵ Furthermore, the episode’s element of vaudeville disconnect gets tangibly resurrected in the portraits of victims that occasionally invite contempt; in Dickens’s distaste for obtrusive humility, in the dizzying revolutions of so-called heroes and

⁴¹⁹ [H]e seemed to stare at me out of the glassy panel [...] condemning, loathing all the universe. I seemed to hear the whispered cry, “The horror! The horror!”’. The ultimate expression of black scepticism in Joseph Conrad, *The Heart of Darkness* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), p. 92.

⁴²⁰ See for example, Malcolm Andrews, *Dickensian Laughter: Essays on Dickens and Humour* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 156-57.

⁴²¹ ‘Lyons, the Rhone, and the Goblin of Avignon’, Dickens, *Pictures from Italy*, pp. 16-24, p. 17. Dickens travelled to through France and Italy in the summer of 1844 with his family, and published his travelogue in 1846.

⁴²² ‘There was a centre puppet of the Virgin Mary; and close to her, a small pigeon-hole, out of which another and a very ill-looking puppet made one of the most sudden plunges I ever saw accomplished: instantly flopping back again at sight of her, and banging his little door violently after him. Taking this to be emblematic of the victory over Sin and Death, and not at all unwilling to show that I perfectly understood the subject, in anticipation of the showman, I rashly said, “Aha! The Evil Spirit. To be sure. He is very soon disposed of.” “Pardon, Monsieur,” said the Sacristan, with a polite motion of his hand towards the little door, as if introducing somebody—“The Angel Gabriel!”’. Dickens, *Pictures from Italy*, p. 17.

⁴²³ Dickens’s vitriolic critique of Pre-Raphaelite painting made this difficulty clear; he famously saw the figure of the Virgin Mary in Millais’s ‘Christ in House of His Parents’ as ‘horrible in her ugliness’. See Charles Dickens, ‘Old Lamps for New Ones’ (*Household Words*, 25 June 1850), in *Selected Journalism 1850-1870*, ed. by David Pascoe (London: Penguin Books, 1997), pp. 521-26 (p. 522).

⁴²⁴ Charles Dickens to Alfred d’Orsay, 7 August 1844, *Letters*, IV, pp. 166-171 (p. 170). Dickens’s colourful account to his friend elaborates a little on the published version, though in detail rather than in substance. He does however cite his misidentification as to ‘The Devil’ as opposed to the ameliorated ‘Sin and Death’.

⁴²⁵ Many characters ‘catch’ this; Eugene: ‘If the real man feels as guilty as I do, [...] he is remarkably uncomfortable’; and, more surprisingly, Lizzie: ‘a sense of being involved in a murky shade of Murder dropped down upon her’; *Our Mutual Friend*, pp. 159, 68.

heroines, the conflicted relationship Dickens retains towards external ugliness. Herein, truly, we have realised *ambigere*, ‘moving from side to side, of doubtful nature’; the two puppets alternating in perpetual performance, Dickens’s confusion as to the moral agency of the ‘ill-looking’ one.

There is a ‘very ill-looking puppet’, wholesale, in *Our Mutual Friend*: the unfortunate Mr Dolls. For me Mr Dolls represents something new in the Dickens canon, and pertinent to my argument as to the novel’s muddled ambiguities. He embodies the force of the abject: a phenomenon, in both ordinary and philosophical terms, pertaining to twentieth rather than nineteenth century culture. Its chief theorist, Julia Kristeva, defined the abject as that which lies ‘beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable’.⁴²⁶ Mr Dolls causes others to unilaterally reverse: Eugene hurries away when Lizzie signals his arrival, she herself rises to leave the room.⁴²⁷ They are horrified by what he embodies; emits. What is this, exactly? Mr Dolls is ineffectual, yet crucially, sorry. He ‘mumble[s] some maudlin apology’ to Eugene; ‘make[s] overtures of peace and reconciliation’ to his daughter, once his fleeced, inebriate, state becomes clear (234).⁴²⁸ Dickens actually uses the term ‘abject’, in conjunction with the deflationary ‘it’: ‘Abject tears stood in its eyes, and stained the blotched red of its cheeks’ (234).⁴²⁹ Wilkins Macawber, Harold Skimpole; these (professional) failures were armoured by their verbose fallacies; egoism protecting others from the burden of their collapsed selfhood.⁴³⁰ The layer of unreality that stops critics from associating Dickens with the rawness of pain encountered in, say Thomas Hardy, has much to do with the insulating strength of those verbose fallacies.⁴³¹ Mr Dolls’s knowledge of his state, conversely, makes him all the more keen to press it home, and use it to motor further self-abasement. He grovels to Jenny when she threatens transportation: ‘Shouldn’t like it. Poor shattered invalid. Trouble nobody long’ (235). Pathos is defined by subservience to fate, a lack of

⁴²⁶ See Julia Kristeva, ‘Neither Subject nor Object’, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, transl. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 1.

⁴²⁷ ‘A man stumbled against him as he turned away, who mumbled some maudlin apology. Looking after this man, Eugene saw him go in at the door to which he himself had just come out. On the man’s stumbling into the room, Lizzie rose to leave it.’ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 234.

⁴²⁸ For Kristeva the externalised abject is something we are both repelled and tempted by. As well as representing the abject for others; Mr Dolls embodies the conflict of the abject within the self, a scourge of conflicted urges to amend and sin again; ‘the impossible constitut[ing] its very being’, Kristeva, ‘The Abjection of Self’, *An Essay on Abjection*, p. 5.

⁴²⁹ Dickens’s use of the neutral pronoun across his *oeuvre*, but especially in *Our Mutual Friend*, suggests a median state, between gender, life and death; normative categories. He uses it of Mr Dolls’s corpse (‘It’s her drunken father’), and Eugene’s body, so near to being the same (‘its two useless arms in splints at its sides’). See *Our Mutual Friend*, pp. 713; 718.

⁴³⁰ In *David Copperfield* (1850) and *Bleak House* (1853) respectively.

⁴³¹ David Gervais quotes the novelist John Cowper Powys, who identified a ‘shocking and profane vitality’ in Dickens that ‘enables us to face “tragedy” without shrinking from it’, a pertinent insight here. See David Gervais, ‘Dostoevsky and the English Novel: Dickens, John Cowper Powys and D.H. Lawrence’, *The Cambridge Quarterly* (35:1, 2006) 49-71 (p. 60).

fight; as D.H. Lawrence identified of Hardy's characters, quintessentially 'pathetic' in his view: 'the question of their unfortunate end is begged in the beginning'.⁴³²

Mr Dolls is immured in a paradoxical crux of self-awareness and forfeiture of responsibility that is hard to assign to the domain of the Dickensian as we know it. None of Dickens's adult personae who have fallen on hard times (Nemo in *Bleak House*; Alice in *Dombey and Son*) are construed as pathetic. Tragic aspects orientate them in melodrama: thoughts of vengeance salvage vitality. Mr Dolls preempts an important cipher within the modernist canon, raised by Conrad, Joyce, Nabokov, Woolf (in bitterer terms than Hardy's): the *disappointing* man; target of black humour, as opposed to carrier of benign comedy. His author affords him no plangency, even when he suffers through external causes. In fact, I would argue that Dickens unleashes a keenness of rage in this character's direction, ostensibly targeting ineffectuality (the deliberate refusal of personal power: profanity to Dickens); but, subliminally, the very punishment of the weak that he also willingly partakes in. Mr Dolls becomes a touchstone for this deeper angst: a portal to compassion curdled by bitterness. (Compare his ludicrous demise to Cavalletto's injury scene in *Little Dorrit*).⁴³³ As the character attempts to cross the road and is repeatedly thwarted, he makes an ever greater exhibition of himself: 'A more ridiculous and feeble spectacle than this tottering wretch making unsteady sallies into the roadway, and as often staggering back again [...] the streets could not have shown' (520). It is as if Dickens wants to ram a point home about the endemic fallout of powerlessness. Brian Cheadle reads Mr Dolls's volitions benevolently, a sign of chiding conscience as to his betraying Lizzie.⁴³⁴ I see them as representative of a broken man confronting agency in its most crudely articulate form: noisy and purposive transport, when he has none. His action seems to echo the defeated Angel Gabriel, 'who dived out with surpassing suddenness, [and] at the sight of the Virgin instantly dived in again', returning inelegantly to his hole.⁴³⁵

Dickens's characterisation of Mr Dolls is important to note at this juncture because it forms, to my mind, the hub of a new blackness of sceptical thought on Dickens's part; and in the purposed characterisation threads

⁴³² Gervais, 49-71 (p. 62).

⁴³³ 'A humble machine, familiar to the conspirators and called by the expressive name of Stretcher, being unavoidably sent for, he was rendered a harmless bundle of torn rags by being strapped won upon it'; *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 712. '[Clenham] soon saw that it was a litter, hastily made of a shutter or some such thing, and a recumbent figure upon it, and the scraps of conversation in the crowd, and a muddy bundle carried by one man, and a muddy hat carried by another, informed him that an accident had occurred'. Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 167.

⁴³⁴ 'Mr Dolls is seemingly not beyond the moral spectrum'. See Brian Cheadle, 'Improvising Character in *Our Mutual Friend*', *Essays in Criticism*, 59 (2009), 211-233 (p. 222).

⁴³⁵ To Count D'Orsay, 7 August 1844, *Letters*, IV, pp. 166-171 (p. 170).

emerge – abasement, abjection, eroticism and perversion – that qualify *Our Mutual Friend* in plot-determined areas of parallel darkness. These undercurrents ghost the dynamics of rivalry, most markedly that between Eugene and Bradley (as they do Pip’s masculine rivalries in *Great Expectations*, from the young Herbert Pocket to the adult Bentley Drummle); and even Jenny Wren’s version of rivalry in her perception of able-bodied, privileged, women who experience life on a wholly different scale to her own.⁴³⁶

When Mr Dolls empties his pockets, he presents his daughter with palpable disappointment, public evidence of failure:

‘Is this all?’ demanded the person of the house, when a confused heap of pence and shillings lay on the table.

‘Got no more,’ was the rueful answer, with an accordant shake of the head.

‘Let me make sure. You know what you’ve got to do. Turn all your pockets inside out, and leave ‘em so!’ cried the person of the house.

He obeyed. And if anything could have made him look more abject or more dismally ridiculous than before, it would have been his so displaying himself. (235)

The subtext here is surely the inane and purposeless display of the flasher; simultaneously shedding the limelight on himself and advertising his loneliness, his willingness to upend civic and social equilibrium. Moreover the flaccid pockets that sit against the trouser leg suggest impotence, the ultimate symbol of ineffectuality. I will argue throughout this chapter that a form of explicitly sexual humiliation grounds much of Eugene’s berating of Bradley; and indeed the generic palpability – the flashed, exposed, nature – of desire. In this novel of engines turned inside out; workings made visible, the corrosive unmanageable nature of desire for another subject (or object), its erasing of the possessor’s dignity, its unruly quality, determines many characters’ relationship to personal dignity within the text, from the addicted drunkard Mr Dolls, to the greedy schemer Mr Lammle, to the love plights of Miss Peecher, Bradley, and even Eugene himself. Its energy divests itself inwards, but with no less force, in the semblance of miserliness, from John Harmon Senior to Mr Boffin’s too involved subterfuge. Turning sexual desire into a cognitive process worthy of the name of love is a process afforded to the few: Lizzie Hexam, eventually the broken Eugene, to some extent Bella Wilfer, who have the strength of will and moral rectitude to do so.

⁴³⁶ Cf. ‘Pip and Drummle [...] squaring up in stringing immobility for the direct warmth of the fire, like a pair of sumo hearth-dogs’. See Brian Cheadle, ‘The late novels: *Great Expectations* and *Our Mutual Friend*’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. by John O. Jordan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 78-91 (p. 81).

‘The doll in the doll’s house’⁴³⁷

Bella is an interesting character to consider in relation to the dynamics of dignity. She grows into maturity and morphs into a different kind of character construct in the process. However there is a dimension to her aspirational identity that affords mockery within the hinterland of textual ambiguity, and in relation to Dickens and the reader’s shifting/shifted stance. Its locale – the domestic – is such an established province of Dickensian investment, Dickensian charm, that we can perhaps see its compromised status as another example of abjection played out in narrative: an authorial turning away as a relationship of trust sours.

Bella begins as a slightly more likeable version of Fanny Dorrit: bored with family, self-confessedly mercenary, undeniably pretty. Dickens’s summary of her blooming in the comfortable environs of the Boffin residence triggers an intriguing Empsonian switch:

That young lady was, no doubt, an acquisition to the Boffins. She was far too pretty to be unattractive anywhere, and far too quick of perception to be below the tone of her new career. Whether it improved her heart might be a matter of taste that was open to question: but as touching another matter of taste, its improvement of her appearance and manner, there could be no question whatever. (299)

He briefly identifies ‘taste’ as a moral gauge, a cerebral Kantian facility discerning the ‘moral good which carries with it the highest interest’; and then lets it slide to something accordant to ideas of material beauty (already contingent to the domestic; to the decoration of the external ‘interior’ of the home).⁴³⁸

Bella transcends material concerns through the agency of love. Love allows her to leave behind the narrow behavioural constrict that only permits a volition between selfishness and hysteria born of guilt. Fanny Dorrit never exits this shuttling process; hence the almost material pressure her presence exerts on the text of *Little Dorrit*. Both girls are caught within a further narrative bate: Dickens likes prettiness and will pet it endlessly (even figuring his habit in ‘Pet’ Meagles).⁴³⁹ Bella receives a great deal of prototypical prose conditioning that is apparently valedictory of her beauty; but equally damaging of her dignity and germane maturity. Of particular note is the first encounter between John Harmon and Bella, which parodies sexual dynamics to female detriment: ‘A gentleman coming in, Miss Bella, with a short and sharp exclamation, scrambled off the

⁴³⁷ ‘I want to be something so much worthier than the doll in the doll’s house’. *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 662.

⁴³⁸ Dickens’s binary evaluation resembles Kant’s between ‘the agreeable and the good’; the first rendering enjoyment, satisfaction; the second having a teleological ambit either as something of use, or on a higher plane, something of moral value. See Immanuel Kant, ‘Analytic of the Beautiful’, *Critique of Judgement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press [1793] 2007), iv, pp. 39-40.

⁴³⁹ ‘She was round and fresh and dimpled and spoilt’. See Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, p. 30.

hearth-rug and massed the bitten curls together in their right place on her neck' (37). The 'gentleman' is sharply monolithic, self-determined; the feminine response a veritable articulation of flirtatious dissembling. (Dickens drops a clue to Bella's healthy sexual appetite: 'bitten curls' – at the present point, as critics have noted, diverted into alternations of flirtation and frustration in her relationship with R.W.).⁴⁴⁰

We witness Bella evolve in and through her own verbal and cognitive processing. In the first part of her story this manifests in two important dialogues: with John Rokesmith at the riverside, and Lizzie Hexam at the fireside, relayed in the same chapter: 'Somebody Becomes the Subject of a Prediction'.⁴⁴¹ Bella builds love and friendship with courage; pushing intimacies into place through cool rationality and honest warmth respectively. These conversations represent an ascendancy to a new level of cognitive and performative function: dancing on the high wire of often troubling assertions of truth, maintaining a fragile equilibrium with her intermediary. 'I feel rather serious', as she confides to her husband-to-be (516). But Bella is not on her own yet. We can almost sense the relapse when Dickens, and accordingly Bella, falls back into base mode after a key exchange with Rokesmith about Mrs Boffin suffering at the hands of her husband:

'Of course, you see that she really suffers, when Mr Boffin show how he is changing?'
'I see it every day, as you see it, and am grieved to give her pain'.
'To give her pain?' said Bella, repeating the phrase quickly, with her eyebrows raised.
'I am generally the unfortunate cause of it'.
'Perhaps she says to you, as she often says to me, that he is best of men in spite of all'.
'I often overhear her, in her honest and beautiful devotion to him, saying so to you,'
returned the Secretary with the same steady look, 'but I cannot assert that she ever says so to me'.

Bella met the steady look for a moment with a wistful, musing little look of her own, and then, nodding her pretty head several times, like a dimpled philosopher (of the very best school) who was moralising on Life, heaved a little sigh, and gave up things in general for a bad job, as she had previously been inclined to give up herself. (509)

The conversation shows us Bella's ability to grasp unpleasant circumstance (this is not a discussion Dora Copperfield could have had); a related ability to take on a supposedly radical assertion without summary rejection ('To give her pain?'). Most importantly, the way that Bella unites her and Rokesmith's perspectives, 'you see that', 'Perhaps she says to you', not only ratifies their bond, but is tactful, empathetic; taking on board the situation in the round (Rokesmith's discredited status in the household). But then, Bella is tidied up

⁴⁴⁰ A series of drawings by Frederick Sandys, entitled 'Proud Maisie' (1867-8), are a good illustration of this: a petulant, implicitly sexual voracious young woman biting her curls. See Betty Elzea, *Frederick Sandys: A Catalogue Raisonnee* (Woodbridge: Antique Collectors Club, 1999). '[W]e [...] may soon become embarrassed by the zest with which he dwells on the physical manifestations of Bella's love for her father'. See Michael Slater, *Dickens and Women* (London, J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1983), p. 283.

⁴⁴¹ For the latter, see *Our Mutual Friend*, pp. 510-16.

into coy, miniaturised, conceits as Dickens takes her up again; signalling a parallel infantilisation and disenfranchisement.

Once married Bella displays little of the maturity of perspective that she evinces here. The Battersea domestic idyll is ‘nothing but figure’.⁴⁴² Bella herself becomes progressively more insubstantial. The prose gradient carries us forward to the clunky apotheosis of the coming baby news.⁴⁴³ It is only when she comes to be truly tested, as part of the ‘Patient Griselda’ plot line, that Bella must cater for ambiguity in a way that revives her native potential: accommodating the mystery of her husband’s behaviour, committing her own ‘pious frauds’ under its dark auspices.⁴⁴⁴ She is forced to deliver a double lie to echo John’s ‘two faces’: ‘It becoming necessary, upon this, to send him to bed again and hold him in waiting to be lanced, Bella did it’ (728; 730). Although you could read this as Dickens’s idiomatic expression of the rather laborious second roll-out (to the Milveys, subsequent to Mortimer Lightwood), I wonder if he is implying that Bella has to literally visualise John so indisposed in order to push through with the requisite disingenuous conviction. In a strange meta-textual way Bella’s participation in pious fictions ensures that she demonstrates contemporary theories of the cognitive processes involved in reading; her negotiation of ‘*mental sets*’ reflects the same at story level.⁴⁴⁵ In order to utilise her consciousness for the requisite sport she needs first empathy and imagination, then be ready to revolve these to manipulative end. Concerns as to the abuse of the Pauline principle, ‘do not do evil that good may come’, dog *Our Mutual Friend*.⁴⁴⁶

Bella’s revived mental strength and pliancy girds her for the weight of surprise that her husband’s eventual revelation delivers. At this point a Dickens heroine of the older ilk might have fainted; physically bailed out. But Bella keeps asking questions; she is honest about her puzzlement, exploring how she can get to the

⁴⁴² ‘[T]o repeat what we have already intimated, he has created nothing but figure’. Henry James, review in *The Nation* (New York), 21 December 1865, reprinted in Philip Collins, ed., *Charles Dickens, The Critical Heritage* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995) pp. 469-73 (p. 472).

⁴⁴³ See ‘Concerning the Mendicant’s Bride’, *Our Mutual Friend*, pp. 655-71.

⁴⁴⁴ On Boffin’s ‘pious fraud’, see Edwin M. Eigner, ‘Shakespeare, Milton, Dickens and The Morality of the Pious Fraud’, *Dickens Studies Annual*, 21 (1992) 1-25. The ‘Patient Griselda’ template, derived from ‘The Clerk’s Tale’ in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, is a relatively unexplored but acknowledged part of the novel’s critical history; see Northrop Frye on the ‘creaky Griselda plot’, in ‘Dickens and the Comedy of Humours’, in Roy Harvey Pearce, ed. *Experience and the Novel* (London: Columbia University Press, 1968), 49-81 (p. 50). Jeremy Tambling doesn’t touch upon it in his recent article, ‘Dickens and Chaucer’, *English*, 64 (2015), 42-64.

⁴⁴⁵ For example, Peter Carruthers ‘suggests that we may find pleasing the *awareness* of our attitude of pretending’: “*awareness of one’s own mental state* [that] makes possible the enjoyment derived from the manipulation of this state”. As quoted by Lisa Zunshine, *Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2006), 18, 17; ‘Of [...] great survival value is the adaption device called *shift of mental sets*. This may be defined as the shift of one’s readiness to respond in a certain way. It is required for handling changing situations in extralinguistic reality.’ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴⁴⁶ Dominic Rainsford raises this in relation to John Harmon. See Dominic Rainsford, ‘Victorian Moral Philosophy and Our Mutual Friend’, *Dickens Quarterly*, 27 (2010), 273-291 (p. 288).

cognitive end required.⁴⁴⁷ She comes into her own. But whilst Bella's two-dimensional carapace, that was most operational when she was fully her author's, to be petted and fondled over, now falls away, her husband has gained the perverse urgency and agency of one of Dickens's 'stacked' characters, in which one motive seems to percolate all action. John Harmon becomes less and less sympathetic as he involves his wife in a veneration of money that threatens to dismantle the lessons of the past, though he is more disproportionately gleeful than craven and miserly about its possession. Goaded Bella with visions of beautiful dresses and her own carriage, he systematically undermines the pragmatic values engendered by their more humble lifestyle ('I love those pretty feet so dearly that I could not bear the dirt to soil the sole of your shoe'; 663). Really, the dying child Johnny's 'kiss for the boofer lady' was a bequest to the older John, to maintain an engagement with grittier, dirtier realities, as the seedbed for true compassion and engagement with the world (322).

The home-scape that John eventually reveals is an explosion of fantasy: 'As they ascended [the staircase], it was seen to be tastefully ornamented with the most beautiful flowers [...] Going on a little higher, they came to a charming aviary, in which a number of tropical birds [...] were flying about; and among those birds were gold and silver fish, and mosses, and water-lilies, and a fountain, and all manner of wonders' (749). Such conceits derive from a colonial vision of life enjoyed through the appropriation of exotica. Perhaps most significantly, Bella reaches her bedroom to find 'an ivory casket' on her 'exquisite toilette table'; 'and in the casket were jewels the like of which she never dreamed of, and aloft on an upper floor was a nursery garnished as with rainbows' (759). The prose tumbles gifts of widely varying form and scale together, as if the 'Inexhaustible' has upset her toys, but the casket strikes a warning note.⁴⁴⁸ It evokes the casket of jewels in Gounod's *Faust*, the opera that Dickens was so moved by upon seeing it in Paris, in January 1863.⁴⁴⁹ The central story, loosely based on Goethe's original, tells of the innocent Marguerite's seduction by Faust, aided by Mephistopheles. The present of a casket of alluring jewels forms a turning point. In the stage instructions to Barbier and Carré's libretto, '[Marguerite] puts down the casket and then kneels to adorn herself with the jewels'. Vanity and avarice compromise her goodness, as she sees a fantasy of empowerment emerge:

Ah! You see how I seem to glitter in the glass [...]
Is it you, Marguerite,
Is it you? Tell me true. [...]
See a princess appear,

⁴⁴⁷ It takes Bella several pages to resolve the mystery to her satisfaction. See *Our Mutual Friend*, pp. 750-9.

⁴⁴⁸ The nickname for Bella and John's daughter.

⁴⁴⁹ On Dickens reaction to Gounod's *Faust* and Gluck's *Orphee*, that he saw at around the same time, see Robert Bledsoe, 'Dickens and Opera', *Dickens Studies Annual*, 18 (1989), 93-118.

See a princess appear,
That is not you,
That is not you. [...]
No, see a princess appear,
Ev'ry man bows before her. ⁴⁵⁰

Later Marguerite confides to her neighbour, Marthe: 'I don't know where they came from. I found a casket and the jewels were so beautiful, I couldn't resist. I shouldn't have touched them'.⁴⁵¹ Whether or not *Faust* was a direct inspiration, the casket of jewels strikes a perversely antiquated note in Dickens's story; evoking the sinister fairy tales of Brothers Grimm and the myth of Pandora's Box. It is as if Dickens is noting new potential danger, allowing a wrinkle of doubt to dislodge the semantics of this apparently celebratory scene.

It is typical of the novel's shifting semantics that it is Bella who is exposed by this; as if Dickens derides her guilelessness in relation to her husband, even whilst he pays due respect to her love. It is a milder continuum of what I identified at its most extreme in his characterisation of Mr Dolls: an impatience with those who have the potential to be exploited, even if that quality is commensurate to innocence and trust. This manifests both in Dickens's depiction of Bella in Battersea: a domestic marionette, dependent upon manuals and demeaning herself in her attempts to impress her spouse, returning home from the China house; and a play-within-a-play involving Jenny Wren.⁴⁵² In the chapter entitled 'A Respected Friend in a New Aspect' (ostensibly Riderhood; but it wouldn't be atypical of Dickens to double-up), Jenny spies 'a dazzling semi-circle of dolls in all the colours of the rainbow' in 'a brilliantly-lighted toy-shop window' (a menagerie: not unlike the refurbished 'Harmony Jail') (424).⁴⁵³ She identifies these to Riah as all '[her] work' and explains her method of gleaning inspiration from 'great ladies' (424-5). She then singles out one lady/doll:

There was Lady Belinda Whitrose. I made her do double duty in one night. I said when she came out of the carriage. 'You'll do, my dear!' and I ran straight home and cut her out and basted her. Back I came again, and waited behind the men that called the carriages. Very bad night too. At last 'Lady Belinda Whitrose's carriage! Lady Belinda/ Whitrose coming down!' And I made her try on – oh! and take pains about it too – before she got seated. That's Lady Belinda hanging up by the waist, much too near the gaslight for a wax one, with her toes turned in'. (425-6).

⁴⁵⁰ Jules Barbier and Michel Carré, *Faust, An Opera in Five Acts, music by Charles Gounod, original libretto by Jules Barbier and Michel Carré*, trans. by Edmund Tracey (London: Josef Weinberger, 2000), pp. 37-8.

⁴⁵¹ *Faust*, p. 39.

⁴⁵² Bella's chosen tome, 'The Complete British Family Housewife', resembles *Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management* (1861). See *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 664.

⁴⁵³ See *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 53; and pp. 749-59, as discussed.

The initials, B.W., correlate with Bella's (the only true ones, as 'Rokesmith' manifests to be a false name).⁴⁵⁴ The 'double duty' prefigures Bella's own double bind, compelled to both trust her husband and cover for his undisclosed secrets. Here we have 'trial' reconfigured as a constant switching of garments and identities, before some equilibrium is found.⁴⁵⁵ But Jenny's narrative is essentially one of scorn. Her artisan's revenge, upon those who are privileged by circumstance, is to revel in the physical indignity of the doll's vulnerable stance: 'too near the gaslight for a wax one, with her toes turned in'. Such unguardedness may presage a conflagration. 'Lady Belinda Whitrose' is both 'the doll in the doll's house', an artefact within the quintessential artificial display, and a hypothetical '[Mrs] Dolls'; wilting under a scrutiny that elects some keynote of her being (662).⁴⁵⁶ The emphasis is on the callowness of innocence; whilst the vignette lambasts any complacency that might arise from supposed security.

The Dickensian Negative

Writing about these undertows, moving to destabilise the very foundations upon which we base our sense of Dickens's characters and their relationship to their author, necessitates a move still further back; or iconographically down: to the book's genesis, Dickens's own mental state; and what might stand as baseline prose: the text's genetic anatomy, before pursuing more focused explorations of character itself.

Ambiguity in my reading of *Our Mutual Friend* covers a whole welter of uncertainties: from underlying or niggling doubt, mixed messages, and suspended judgments; but this in no way equates to a weakening of Dickens's power as a writer. On the contrary, this is something over which he has unilateral artistic control. It is a new province of thinking and writing that may well derive from the mental stress he was under in his domestic set-up (he had been involved with Ellen Ternan since 1862, and was estranged from his wife Catherine) and the trauma of the Staplehurst Rail Crash.⁴⁵⁷ In the first instance, Dickens behaved badly, presenting a blind side to any form of engagement; in the second, he had to endure that most debilitating of

⁴⁵⁴ Dominic Rainsford points out that 'an assumed name' potentially renders the marriage illegal. See Rainsford, 'Victorian Moral Philosophy', 273-91 (p. 288).

⁴⁵⁵ 'Try me through some reverse, John – try me through some trial'. *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 662.

⁴⁵⁶ Of course the most famous utilisation of Bella's phrase is Henrik Ibsen's *The Doll's House* (1879).

⁴⁵⁷ For a summary of Dickens's troubled mind at the time, see Adrian Poole, 'Introduction', *Our Mutual Friend* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), ix-xxv, ix-xi. For an account of his affair with Ellen ('Nelly') Ternan, see Tomalin, pp. 284-328. On 9th June 1865 Dickens, Nelly, and her mother were on board the London to Folkestone train when it derailed over a viaduct near Staplehurst, Kent, resulting in numerous casualties and ten deaths. In four consecutive letters to different correspondents, Dickens recorded that he was 'too shaken' to write in earnest, not by his own experience, 'but by the terrible work afterwards in getting out the dying and the dead'. See letters to Mrs Sartoris; Mrs Winter; Miss Jewsbury; Augustus Tracey; 14-15 June 1865, *Letters*, II, pp. 58-58.

experiences: being powerless to secure others' relief; without substantive agency.⁴⁵⁸ All through his professional life Dickens had written with imperative ends in mind. Agency is his creative watchword, it determines both his sense that art can and should be a force for social change; and aesthetically, his enthrallment to ends as opposed to means: speech acts of illocutionary force ('Describe the message – *be* the message').⁴⁵⁹ This, in conjunction with the famed character typology that I have figured as 'stacked' in construction, but is, in effect, "instant".⁴⁶⁰ The irony is that the forfeiting of real-life agency, and perhaps a loss of faith in personal power, precipitates an evolved kind of writing which is able to negotiate, and spend time exploring, states of doubt and uncertainty. As a way of conceptualising this I am proposing a Dickensian 'negative' – not Hillis Miller's canonical reading of the inanimate encroaching on our readerly consciousnesses – but something more aligned to Keats's famous gloss of Shakespeare's gift: '*Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts'; and to some extent, Theodor Adorno's 'negative dialectics'.⁴⁶¹

Perhaps what is most marked about the space that Dickens's writing occasionally now occupies, this broad negative, is that it is no longer informed with a sense of the imperative. It is as if Dickens has let slip – or relinquished certain hold upon – the idea that writing has agency, that there is always an end in view; but perversely this permits him new aesthetic freedoms. Of course Dickens has not lost his social concern; as scholars have remarked, satire of 'Society' registers as his sharpest (albeit so self-reflexive, as per the mirror motif, it is almost too nonsensical to function as normative critique).⁴⁶² However, both in relation to plot

⁴⁵⁸ Dickens wrote of his defunct marriage: 'a page of my life which once had writing on it, has become absolutely blank'. To Miss Burdett Coutts, 12 February 1864, *Letters*, x, pp. 355-7 (p. 356). Dickens famously retrieved some of the manuscript for *Our Mutual Friend* from the wreckage of the rail disaster, and refers to the incident in his postscript. See Claire Wood, *Dickens and the Business of Death* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 134-6.

⁴⁵⁹ See John Searle, *Philosophy of Language: Force, Meaning and Mind*, ed. by Savas L. Tsohatzidis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Dickens's conception of an electric message derives from his notebook of 1862: 'Open a story by bringing two strongly contrasted places and/ strongly contrasted sets of people, into the connexion/ necessary for the story, by means of an electric message/ Describe the message – *be* the message – flashing/ along through space - over the earth, and under/ the sea.' See Fred Kaplan, transcribed and annotated, *Charles Dickens' Book of Memoranda: A Photographic and Typographic Facsimile of the Notebook Begun in January 1855* (New York: The New York Public Library, 1981). p. 19.

⁴⁶⁰ As per Susan Sontag: '“instant character” [...] is understood as a state of continual incandescence – a person being one, very intense thing'. See Susan Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"', in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), pp. 275-92 (p. 286).

⁴⁶¹ 'Suddenly, there is a crack in the facade, and what is behind breaks through in a kind of eruption: sheer, gross, heavy, impenetrable matter [...] altogether resisting man's attempts to assimilate it into his world', see J. Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of his Novels* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 309. To George and Tom Keats, 21, 27 (?) December 1817, *John Keats: Selected Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), ed. by Jon Mee, pp. 40-2, pp. 41-2. 'Adorno claims that art and thought realise themselves most fully not in what they can assert as positive and systematic but in what is discovered through the negation and decomposition of what can be positively thought or systematically expressed'. See Richard T. Gaughan, 'Introduction', *Our Mutual Friend*, xiii-xxx (xiv); and Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (1966).

⁴⁶² 'A second level of style also involves the use of comedy, although this time the tone is more insistently serious'. See Stephen Gill, 'Introduction', *Our Mutual Friend* (London: Penguin, 1971), pp. 11-32 (p. 13).

events and to society with a small ‘s’, there is a sense that Dickens now operates as an observer, at a remove. This ironically, gives him time: time to weld different forms of apprehension about circumstance; as opposed to a call to arms, best embodied by his invocation on Jo the Crossing Sweeper’s death.⁴⁶³ Social disenfranchisement seems to redound upon the author in Dickens’s description of vagrant children in Covent Garden. There is a sense as to which both subject and object are ghosts, airily at a loss:

There is a swarm of young savages always flitting about this same place, creeping off with fragments of orange-chests and mouldy litter – Heaven knows into what holes they can convey them, having no home! – whose bare feet fall with a blunt dull softness on the pavement as the policeman hunts them, and who are (perhaps for that reason) little heard by the Powers that be, whereas in top boots they would make a deafening clatter. These, delighting in the trembles and the horrors of Mr Dolls, as in a gratuitous drama, flocked about him in his doorway, butted at him, leaped at him, and pelted him. (712)

The familiar satire and imaginative figuring is couched in an unprecedented breadth of calibrated observation; the exclamation mark conveys an existential despair, a ‘throwing away’ of accountability as opposed to a marshalling of the reader’s sympathy.⁴⁶⁴ Furthermore there is a newly dark, realist perspective in place; the children are not only victims but thoughtlessly cruel, demonstrating what Thackeray was always willing to confront: ‘the dismal precocity of poverty’.⁴⁶⁵ This narrative backdraft, so to speak, provides for similarly notational backdrops, in which the writing adjusts incrementally to parse a local irony or document a natural detail; in the description of schools encroaching from city to suburb, and the account of the Lammles’ fateful walk along Shanklin sands.⁴⁶⁶ This has bearings upon the way that Dickens constructs and writes major characters in the novel; they are enmeshed in a fabric which is already more subtly striated.

Dickens also takes his time to write out strategically redundant characters. Fragments of language give us pause for thought; create a sense of touching a raw nerve as to a character’s hidden life experience. For example, explicating Patience Riderhood, beleaguered daughter of (the) Rogue: ‘Show her a live father, and she saw but a duplicate of her own father, who from her infancy had been taken with fits and starts of

⁴⁶³ ‘Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lord and gentlemen [...] And dying thus around us, every day’. Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (London: Penguin Books [1853], 2003), p. 734.

⁴⁶⁴ As per Dickens’s comment on the writing of *Our Mutual Friend*: ‘It is a combination of drollery with romance which requires a deal of pains and a perfect throwing away of points that might be amplified’. To Wilkie Collins, 25th January 1864, *Letters*, X, pp. 346-49 (p. 346).

⁴⁶⁵ ‘Rebecca Sharp looked like a child. But she had the dismal precocity of poverty’. William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 17.

⁴⁶⁶ The breadth of perspective afforded in the Isle of Wight scene, unusual for Dickens for the keenly observed descriptions of encroaching wildlife and landscape, from the seagull to the coastal land mass itself; recalls William Dyce’s painting, *Pegwell Bay, Kent – a Recollection of October 5th 1858-60, c.1858-60*, oil on canvas, 63.5 x 88.9 cm, Tate Britain, London. This conveys much the same powerlessness in the face of contemporaneous geological findings; see Beer, ‘Introduction’, pp. 1-21.

discharging his duty to her, which duty was always incorporated in the form of a fist or a leaden strap, and being discharged hurt her' (342). The gradient of the sentence is uncompromising. Building upon familiar stylistic patterning, it veers off at the end, with as ungiving a slap of cold truth as Riderhood's punishment. Dickens offers no palliative, but equally he affords Patience that little bit of dignity, as bold an acknowledgement of pain as a 'minor character' might accrue. Likewise, with young Blight, who creates an inventory of make-believe clients as Mortimer Lightwood's (in all but monetary terms redundant) clerk:

'Strict system here; eh, my lad?' said Mr Boffin, as he was booked.
'Yes, sir', returned by boy. 'I couldn't get on without it'.
By which he probably meant that his mind would have been shattered to pieces without this fiction of an occupation. (84)

Again, we are brought up short by this sudden projection of psychological realism, arbitrated through a minor character, grounded on compassion but coming closer to scepticism in manifestation. There is no promise of resolution; and the pain is masked by such a fragile feint; it is analogous to other necessary turnings-away from the dark, evoked summarily by George Eliot's phrase: 'that roar which lies the other side of silence'.⁴⁶⁷

'How does the time go?'

In *Our Mutual Friend*, process is open to divided ends. There is no fast hold. Stephen Gill notes of Eugene: 'More important – he loves'.⁴⁶⁸ A validation of emotional response from Dickens's hero, I recalibrate his comment to call to light the openness of the emotion, conceived as process. When Eugene first spots Lizzie she leaves the room under pressure of his gaze.⁴⁶⁹ Some critics read this as sexual desire, (im)pure and simple.⁴⁷⁰ I would allow for something far more complex, that gives intimation of all that their relationship will eventually involve, but is not at this stage prescriptive. In his perpetual holding back from firm definitions (ends), Eugene becomes a means for Dickens to explore a psychology that takes great liberty with rumination, advancing a dubious patriarchal right over it; but paradoxically, also releasing new conceptual freedoms by his refusal to be subject to normative ends. A prescient moment occurs when the bed-bound Eugene is waiting with Lizzie for Mortimer to bring Frank Milvey back to officiate their marriage. Figuring

⁴⁶⁷ 'If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity'. George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (London: Penguin, [1871] 2003), ed. by Rosemary Ashton, p. 194.

⁴⁶⁸ Gill, 'Introduction', *Our Mutual Friend*, pp. 11-32 (p. 29).

⁴⁶⁹ 'One of the gentlemen, the one who didn't speak while I was there, looked hard at me. And I was afraid he might know what my face meant'. *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 26.

⁴⁷⁰ For example, Brian Cheadle who refers to Eugene's 'incipient will to possess'. See Cheadle, pp. 211-33 (p. 227).

the Reverend and his wife's swift transport towards Greenwich, Dickens employs one of his most exciting images of prescriptive ends: 'the train [...] roared across the river, a great rocket: spurning the watery turnings and doublings with ineffable contempt, and going straight to his end, as Father Time goes to his' (733). The river's contortions are analogous to the process of thought itself, 'turnin[g] and doublin[g]'; playing out the illusion of choice and personal time.

But Eugene rebuts this edict. River-changed, he asks Lizzie a few paragraphs later: 'How does the time go? Has our Mortimer come back?' (734). He posits in two sentences an alternative creed. His conceptualisation of time is relaxed; and throughout the novel 'ease' might be identified as the euphemism by which Eugene carries, and deals with, life's stresses.⁴⁷¹ It may be a fabrication, but it is a generative one when turned outwards; by far the most important pious fraud in the book, or transparent lie.⁴⁷² To create a semblance of ease is to create a semblance of control, and choice. It allows in turn the sentiment expressed in the next sentence, when his friend becomes their mutual friend ('*our* Mortimer'; italics mine). Eugene implies that in being one with Lizzie nothing is unilateral; what might earlier have registered as an arrogant idiom, the plural pronoun, proves itself not a mode of repatriation, of self-aggrandisement; but of tenderness, of humanity claiming ordinance. At this point Eugene provides for his soon-to-be-wife, albeit from his sickbed, by devising a purely idiomatic platform of ease that permits generative love, gainsaying the restrictions their situation ostensibly offers.

Dickens, like Eugene, exposed himself to the unknowables of process when he was at his least public, and most usefully vulnerable; in his nighttime walks, that time of almost unconscious creative collation that I discussed in my introduction. Steven Marcus notes suggestively of Dickens's habit: 'He neither strolled nor "took" a walk nor "went" for one. *He walked*. Fifteen or twenty miles at a brisk steady pace satisfied his usual requirements' (italics mine).⁴⁷³ Dickens was alive to the facilitation of process; to dividends manifesting in uncertainty. But it took a whole career, and the foundational tremors of personal doubt, for this to be couched into his characterisation.

⁴⁷¹ ' "May I ask why so, Mr Aaron?" said Eugene, quite undisturbed in his ease.' *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 395.

⁴⁷² Cf. Kaplin, 'Transparent Lies', 244-68.

⁴⁷³ Marcus, p. 278.

‘**“I am lost!” replied the man, in a hurried an eager manner**’

An early exchange between Gaffer Hexam and a disguised John Harmon foretells the novel’s themes of dislocation and relocation, but also the propitiousness of the *lost* state:

‘A body missing?’ asked Gaffer Hexam, stopping short, ‘or a body found? Which?’
‘I am lost!’ replied the man, in a hurried and eager manner. (23)

‘Two belated wanderers in the maze of the law’, quips Eugene Wrayburn a few chapters later, as he watches Bradley Headstone and Charlie Hexam advance uncertainly through the Temple.⁴⁷⁴ All the main characters must find their way towards identities and destinies that evolve from alternatives contingent upon circumstance, genetics, and luck.⁴⁷⁵

We are party to this process. Dickens allows individual consciousnesses to unfurl upon the page through directly articulated interior monologue or free indirect speech. Often his characters are trying to work out what they think or feel, and we are privy to the tidal movements of thought. Self-delusion and self-critique succeed each other. Intriguingly, the most revelatory moments emerge in dialogue: Eugene’s statement of love to Mortimer; Jenny’s articulation of despair to Lizzie (‘O me, O me, O me!’); Bradley’s disclosure that he has no friends (340).⁴⁷⁶ These register with idiomatic and semantic clarity, and also subvert what the reader expects in each case: *viz* Eugene’s bald statement, Jenny’s dispensing of argument, Bradley’s honesty.

The arbitration of inner lostness is a more discursive, pained, affair; sometimes amounting to casuistry; more often helpless or programmatic self-deception.⁴⁷⁷ For characters as well as their author, the negative is a populated place of liberated imagination and cognition. When Jenny invites Lizzie to envisage the life of Eugene’s ‘lady’, she provides a negative dreamscape: neither she nor Lizzie see this as a real possibility.⁴⁷⁸ The promise, and premise, of love, in particular, authorises an extreme form of self-belittlement which derives from a tradition of amatory expression, but also, I think, says something particular about Dickens’s

⁴⁷⁴ It can’t have been an accident that Dickens chose the Inn of Court with a biblically allusive name.

⁴⁷⁵ On Darwin’s debt to Dickens’s techniques of narrative organisation, see Gillian Beer, *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth Century Fiction* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983); and Natalie McKnight, ‘Dickens and Darwin: A Rhetoric of Pets’, *The Dickensian*, 102 (2006), 131-43.

⁴⁷⁶ ‘I have no resources beyond myself. I have absolutely no friends’; ‘I love you, Mortimer’; *Our Mutual Friend*, pp. 780; 724.

⁴⁷⁷ Andrew Miller discusses casuistry in relation to *Middlemarch*. He writes: ‘[...] casuistry had a thriving life [...] in nineteenth century novels. Casuistry served there as an occasion for generic self-examination and definition.’ See Andrew H. Miller, ‘Reading Thoughts: Victorian Perfectionism and the Display of Thinking’, *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 35 (2002), 79-96.

⁴⁷⁸ See *Our Mutual Friend*, pp. 339-40.

novel and the discursive scope form of abjection this provides.⁴⁷⁹ Lizzie, especially, occupies a paradoxical crux; where she both refuses Eugene's advances, and states to Bella that her love for him affords her an almost spiritual resource.⁴⁸⁰ Her argument about her insufficiency never changes; from a lack of merit pre-marriage, to her statement that she hopes her husband may never be ashamed of her after it.⁴⁸¹ This seems too primal a point to make about the class divide; the life-and-death drama of their now joint story has swept conventions away. Lizzie voices a primitive concern about self-worth that perpetuates throughout the novel.

As these introductory analyses suggest, the most concerted and naturalistic representations of consciousness coalesce around Eugene Wrayburn and Lizzie Hexam: unlikely hero and heroine.⁴⁸² Dickens allows their misapprehensions to play out on the page, within the texture of the prose: witness Lizzie's cogitations as she worries about her father's involvement in the river crime; or Eugene's speculations over personal motivation.⁴⁸³ This helps effect a textual demonstration of the multi-dimensional nature of character. The Lizzie Miss Abbey is frustrated by, the sister Charlie thinks he knows; the Eugene at the Veneering dinner table, the love-rival Bradley apprehends: these personae are outed as superficial swabs that inevitably conjoin with stereotype. It is axiomatic to psychology, perhaps, that others only see part of our selves; but rarely has Dickens indicated the prismatic complexity of character that contains many different filaments *on the page*, as a factor of textual discursiveness; usually, as discussed in my introduction, we become aware of a character's internal contradictions through mimetic performative oddness, that manifests as pressure upon the text. In *Our Mutual Friend* the ambit of diegetic telling falls to both Dickens and the character in question. For example, Dickens builds an incantatory idiom suggesting strength and rootedness up around Lizzie, that takes in both his and her words, to form a unique linguistic carriage (comparable to a Bakhtinian

⁴⁷⁹ The tradition belongs mainly to poetry. Intriguingly, the novel's first paragraph situates Gaffer and Lizzie's boat somewhere 'between Southwark Bridge which is of iron, and London Bridge which is of stone'; *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 2. Did Dickens have Richard Lovelace's love ode, *To Althea, from Prison* (1642) in mind, with its famous premise: 'Stone Walls do not a Prison make, / Nor Iron bars a Cage'. It was quoted in Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (1853).

⁴⁸⁰ See *Our Mutual Friend*, pp. 514-15.

⁴⁸¹ ' "Don't be ashamed of me," she replied, "and you will have more than paid all." ' *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 735.

⁴⁸² Famously John Harmon, alias Rokesmith, relays the events that took him to that locus of misplaced identity in 'A Solo and a Duett', but as Stephen Gill has noted, this manifests as a laboured device for anchoring the plot. See Gill, pp. 11-32 (p. 22).

⁴⁸³ See *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 68. Stephen James does justice to Lizzie's complex interior monologues when he examines her triadic use of 'sure', protesting Gaffer's innocence to herself too much. See Stephen James, 'Repetition, Rumination, Superstition: The Rituals of *Our Mutual Friend*', *English*, 61 (2012), 214-33, (p. 217). In general critics have generally been quick to dismiss Lizzie; Michael Slater representative in deeming her 'fatally lacking in any sort of emotional or intellectual complexity'. See Slater, p. 286. Eugene's thought processes have been more widely recognised; Cf.: 'Dickens's description of his thoughts and feelings is a remarkable representation of the conscious and unconscious workings of the mind'. Deirdre David, *Fictions of Resolution in Three Victorian Novels* (London: Macmillan, 1981), p. 76.

speech genre, in its more individualist mode).⁴⁸⁴ My transport image has a perhaps leading pertinence. Philip Horne has written perceptively of how Dickens's most sophisticated character construction extends into almost physiological territory: 'The style of a character is not necessarily just language but also demeanour, a style of behaviour (which D evokes *in* language)'.⁴⁸⁵ The vehicle of each 'character-space': the parts of the text when they either act or speak, becomes uniquely individuated in *Our Mutual Friend*, with aesthetic tone, a sense of rhythm or abstract contingents, as well as the more prototypical idiom, all playing a part.⁴⁸⁶

'Are you a judge of china?': Aestheticism and disorientating spaces

There is an intermediary dimension that I wish to highlight before examining these individual characters – in many ways a negative presence in itself, ghosting specific references; underpinning the character construction of Eugene Wrayburn in particular, but little addressed by critics. Aestheticism offers a perfect example of how Dickens was able to both 'sprinkl[e]' his novel with trackable referents and inform it with something far harder to pin down, a sensibility particular to the cultural moment; yet presaging further shifts through to Decadence and even Modernism; all marked, in their way, by self-consciousness regarding art and style, in direct counterpoint to Victorian earnestness.⁴⁸⁷ Dickens was rarely straight-forwardly earnest; and to some extent my thesis has tried to reclaim the version of earnestness for him that I do believe to be extant, a *seriousness of motive* even if its intended effects are otherwise, that Dickens himself felt to be compromised in Thackeray: 'he feigned a want of earnestness, and [...] made a pretence of undervaluing his art'.⁴⁸⁸ As a phenomenon explored through theme, Aestheticism is of particular interest in *Our Mutual Friend* precisely because it sits prone upon a body of such discursive, highly felt and thought prose; it is in contrast in many ways, with its fetishistic foregrounding of style over content, form over material.⁴⁸⁹ Dickens's life span only broaches the edge of Aestheticism as a English literary phenomenon: Swinburne published his *Poems and*

⁴⁸⁴ As opposed to an idiom affiliated to a social class that Bakhtin associates with Dickens in his analysis of *Little Dorrit*. I have in mind something akin to his analysis of Turgenev: 'the character speech almost always influences authorial speech [...], sprinkling it with another's words, [...] and in this way introducing stratification'. See Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Heteroglossia in the novel', in 'Discourse in the novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. by Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 259-360 (p. 315).

⁴⁸⁵ Philip Horne, 'Style and the making of character in Dickens', in *Dickens's Style*, ed. by Daniel Tyler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 155-76 (p. 160).

⁴⁸⁶ I borrow Alec Woloch's term. See Alec Woloch, *The One and the Many* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 13.

⁴⁸⁷ I borrow 'sprinkl[e]' from Bakhtin, 'Heteroglossia in the Novel', pp. 259-360 (p. 315).

⁴⁸⁸ Dickens's obituary tribute to his fellow writer, 'In Memoriam: W. M. Thackeray', *Cornhill Magazine*, February 1864, reproduced in Charles Dickens, *Selected Journalism 1850-1870*, ed. by David Pascoe (London: Penguin, 1997) pp. 591-4, (p. 591).

⁴⁸⁹ 'Herein, then, resides the real secret of the master in any art: that he can make his form consume his material'. Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* [1794], as quoted by Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 6. For the full text see Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man, in a Series of Letters*, ed. and translated by Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), pp. 149-59.

Ballads in 1866; Walter Pater his review of ‘Poems by William Morris’ (the kernel of which became the ‘Conclusion’ of *The Renaissance*) in 1868.⁴⁹⁰ But what might be termed domestic aestheticism, characterised by renewed attention to home decor and interior design, was very much in vogue in the mid-1860s, particularly in the pages of the periodicals to which Dickens contributed, and it is in this province that Dickens’s more trackable topos manifest.

There is an irony at the heart of Aestheticism that has a bearing upon my interpretation of Dickens’s engagement. In Victorian artistic and literary high culture it propagated a focus upon atmosphere and mood, which subsumes the particular: as per Empson’s analysis of Swinburne’s poetic voice, ‘by which several precise conceits can be dissolved into a vagueness’.⁴⁹¹ This is the slightly contradictory legacy of Friedrich Schiller’s founding philosophy: ‘Subject-matter, then [...] always has a limiting effect upon the spirit, and it is only from form that true aesthetic freedom can be looked for’.⁴⁹² (Enlightenment thinking is of course at a remove from broad church Victorian Aestheticism, but ‘L’art pour l’art’, the ethos promoted by Théophile Gautier’s adopted phrase, owes a debt to both Schiller and his German compatriot, Immanuel Kant).⁴⁹³ Similarly, a key figure of Victorian Aestheticism, the Anglo-American artist James McNeill Whistler, produced traditional subject paintings that were rendered semantically opaque by the subjugation of detail: his ‘White Girl’ series of 1862-7 is a case in point; soft brushwork disbands the particular; the emphasis is upon the composite whole.⁴⁹⁴ Their exhibited titles, *Symphony in White (Nos. 1-3)* connect to Whistler’s variously categorised ‘Arrangements’, ‘Harmonies’ and ‘Nocturnes’; and anticipate Walter Pater’s era-defining maxim: ‘All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music’.⁴⁹⁵ At their most refined, these works offer a concordant aesthetic experience choreographed by non-narrative determinants such as rhythm

⁴⁹⁰ Swinburne also published an essay on William Blake in 1866 which set out the movement’s founding precept: ‘Art can never be the handmaid of religion, exponent of duty, servant of fact, pioneer of morality’. On this and other literary progenitors see Lionel Lambourne, *The Aesthetic Movement* (London: Phaidon, 1996), pp. 10-11; and Leighton (2007), pp. 2-29; on Pater, p. 10.

⁴⁹¹ Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, p. 32.

⁴⁹² Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* [1794], as quoted by Leighton, p. 6.

⁴⁹³ [Kant’s] later discussion of form and matter in Schiller’s “Twenty-Second Letter” [in *The Critique of Judgement*] is a locus classicus for Victorian aesthetes’. See Leighton, p. 6. ‘L’art pour l’art’ (art for art’s sake), features in the ‘Preface’ to Gautier’s 1835 novel. See Théophile Gautier, *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, trans. and ed. by Helen Constantine (London: Penguin Books, 2005). The phrase is thought to have been coined by French philosopher Victor Cousins (1792-1867).

⁴⁹⁴ Swinburne wrote a poem, ‘Before the mirror’, which was appended to the frame of *Symphony in White, No. 2*, also known as *The Little White Girl*, 1864-5, Tate Britain, London, upon its exhibition at the Royal Academy. See Richard Dormant and Margaret F. MacDonald, *James McNeill Whistler* (London: Tate Gallery Publications, 1995), cat. nos. 14-16, 76-80.

⁴⁹⁵ Walter Pater, ‘The School of Giorgione’. The essay was first published in the *Fortnightly Review* (1877), and abridged for the third edition of *The Renaissance* (1888). See ‘Appendix A: The School of Giorgione’, in Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, ed. by Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 122-135 (p. 124), and note, p. 178. Whistler used these prefatory titles throughout his painting career. The most famous is probably *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket* (1875) as it was Ruskin’s derogatory dismissal of it that led Whistler to sue the critic for libel. See Dormant and MacDonald, *Whistler* (1996), no. 58, pp. 136-8.

and flow, that elicit emotional response through psychological parity, much as George Eliot posits in her essay 'Notes on Form in Art' (1868): 'Form begins in the choice of rhythms & images as signs of a mental state'.⁴⁹⁶ However in Victorian material culture, segueing from theory to commerce, the *particular* gains agency as niche trends percolate down. The Orientalist bias, often the unifying trait of those details discernible in Whistler's art (the Japanese fan; the porcelain spice jar) becomes a means of instating highbrow sophistication within the home.⁴⁹⁷ Dickens participated wholeheartedly. The posthumous sale of his effects from Gad's Hill included many items of 'japanned wear', lightwood pieces lacquered to resemble ebony, and a collection of 'Pekin' and 'Old Nankin porcelain'.⁴⁹⁸ As Dickens's own choices show, the percolation of niche trends boosted the market for both the originals and cut-price derivatives that facilitated a wider participation in the home decor revolution.

Writing about place in *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens bridges that divide between experience of environment which is evolved *out* of particularity, but breaks down into essential contours of space configuration and tensions of alignment versus misalignment; and salient particulars which are often party to nonsensical interpretation, whilst ostensibly assigned exalted status.⁴⁹⁹ In this way Dickens echoes the binary paradox of Aesthetic culture in the fine and decorative arts. Simultaneously, the reader is thrust into a position whereby some of our reactions will derive from a subliminal place wherein we recognise rhythm and contour as determinants, as opposed to narrative story or mimetic detail. This is concurrent through Dickens's exploration of place, and character.

The sense of a place having a rhythm or contour that represents its most important semantic patterning, its aorta, has its precursors in Dickens's work: markedly the evocation of Chesney Wold in *Bleak House* through the aural replication of unresolved history in 'The Ghost's Walk'; and of course the severally enclosed Marshalsea in *Little Dorrit*. These, however, are overt and propagating image systems; whereas in *Our Mutual Friend* homes, or more accurately *homing spaces*, become anatomical templates, simultaneously core

⁴⁹⁶ George Eliot, 'Notes on Form in Art' (1868), in *George Eliot, Selected Critical Writings*, ed. by Rosemary Ashton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 355-59 (p. 358).

⁴⁹⁷ See James McNeill Whistler, *Symphony in White, No. 2: The Little White Girl* (1864); and *Purple and Rose: The Lange Leizen of the Six Marks* (1864), both contemporary with *Our Mutual Friend*, reproduced in Dormont and MacDonald, *Whistler* (1995), nos. 15, 22; 78-9, 86-7; also on the 'Japanese Mania' sweeping Britain in 1863, see pp. 85-86.

⁴⁹⁸ See *Catalogue of The Beautiful Collection of Modern Pictures, Water-colour Drawings; and Objects of Art, of Charles Dickens, deceased, 9th July 1870* (London: Christie, Manson & Woods, 1870); see lots 93-112 (p.10).

⁴⁹⁹ Overall there is a marked departure from Dickens's famed validation of the family home in both fiction and through *Household Words* as a heartland of good ethical practice. See, for example, Frances Armstrong, *Dickens and the Concept of Home* (Ann Arbor: U.M.I. Research Press, 1990).

and harder to narrativise, the very bones of which seem to bed into characters' psychologies. It is *through* character we learn about them, rather than vice versa; yet they differentiate from William Dorrit's absorption of the prison, as a structure, as a life ethos, by being subliminal as opposed to prominent in every encounter we have with the character concerned. Little John Harmon uses the side-staircase of Harmony Jail as an elliptical route outside his father's notice; the adult John, with his 'kept-down manner', circumnavigates the Wilfer household: 'you couldn't get rid of a haunting Secretary; stump—stump—stump-ing overhead in the dark, like a Ghost' (324; 202).⁵⁰⁰ Whatever its origin in trauma, the character-loop of presence and absence has become more apparent by the novel's end; John is ostensibly the hero but, as already posited, his remodelling of the marital residence as a materialist fantasy is founded on a lack of probity. Bella's sense of the mean dimensions and crude foibles of her family home becomes encrypted in her head, jointly informed by both nostalgic guilt, and an anger at the way domestic space baldly reflects social difference.⁵⁰¹ Fleeing the Boffin residence, she consigns a benedictory kiss upon both bedroom and house door, highlighting the way certain features become determinants of structural importance, and simultaneously anchors of related emotion, comparable to the 'stresses' that gird a poem.⁵⁰²

Such instances are concordant with Dickens's use of diverse incremental techniques to ensure a transmission of *essential form* analogous to the impact of a photographic negative, wherein structural underpinnings get attenuated through being bleached-out; boning trumps flesh.⁵⁰³ In his seminal text *The Poetics of Space* Gaston Bachelard wrote of the 'reverberation' of the 'poetic image' as an evaluative construct for assessing spatial arrangement.⁵⁰⁴ His (allusively synesthetic) noun communicates the idea of resonance; of movement in stillness.⁵⁰⁵ In my introduction I considered how Dickens's apparently most one-dimensional characters have a way of transcending substance (consciousnesses; generations; media). In *Our Mutual Friend* fibres of

⁵⁰⁰ '“Another staircase”, said Mr Boffin, unlocking the door, “leading down into the yard [...] When the son was a little child, it was up and down these stairs that he mostly came and went to his father”'. *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 179.

⁵⁰¹ 'The family room looked very small and mean, and the downward staircase by which it was attained looked very narrow and very crooked'; 'Not so gaily, but that the brilliant furniture seemed to stare her out of countenance as if it insisted/ on being compared with the dingy furniture at home'. *Our Mutual Friend*; pp. 302, 313-14.

⁵⁰² 'With a parting kiss of her fingers to it, she softly closed the door and went with a light foot down the great staircase [...] Softly opening the great hall door, and softly closing it upon herself, she turned and kissed it on the outside—insensible old combination of wood and iron that it was!'. *Our Mutual Friend*, pp. 586-87. For a summary of prosody, see Michael Hurley and Michael O'Neill, *Poetic Form: an Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁵⁰³ An anonymous article, 'Photography 1853', appeared in *Household Words*, 156 (1853). Its authorship has never been established but historian Lindsay Lambert speculates that, 'since the article carries no other by-line, it may well have been written by the editor'.

⁵⁰⁴ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), xii.

⁵⁰⁵ This connects to critical work on Dickens's interest in reverberated sound, particularly in relation to the theories articulated by his contemporary Charles Babbage in the 'Ninth Bridgewater Treatise' (1837). See 'What the Waves Were Always Saying': Voices, Volumes, *Dombey and Son*', in John M. Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 15-40.

textual underlay do likewise. Spaces, and characters, convey atmospheres, inflections, biases; a concordance of aspects that are usually contra-narrative but gradually begin to make an impress over ‘discourse-time’.⁵⁰⁶ (My analysis of individual characters below should help clarify this point).

Brian Cheadle utilises Bachelard’s observation that the view from outside-in is preeminent in its ‘direct ontology’ (i.e. *reverberation*) in his critique of Eugene’s sighting of Lizzie in her one-room riverside home.⁵⁰⁷ The moment unites legacies of Romantic ‘affect’ with nineteenth-century Aesthetic mores; Lizzie has something of the pathos of ‘Sterne’s Maria’ whilst being objectified as a ‘deep rich piece of colour’ (159).⁵⁰⁸ This most palpable of interior spaces certainly has impact within the text. It feels both hidden and baldly foregrounded, like Lizzie herself when she calls out to her dead father: a figure on a narrative promontory, her vulnerability compounded by ignorance and environment.⁵⁰⁹ The Hexam homestead is described as a ‘low building [that] had the look of having once been a mill. There was a rotten wart of wood upon its forehead that seemed to indicate where the sails had been’ (20). It is likewise both exposed and damaged: to some degree a binary Gaffer and Charlie also house within their selves. It is consistent with the novel’s subtlety of extended image patterning that mills appear in various ramifications throughout *Our Mutual Friend*, in Empsonian shuffle: not only material ones, such as the paper mill where Lizzie works; but operational paradigms which function as mills might: the churning hold between the lock gates which becomes Bradley and Riderhood’s place of mutual death; the ‘grindstone’ that figures Wegg’s tormenting of Boffin.⁵¹⁰ The labour continuum of reaping and return gets reconfigured for the financial markets of the City of London: ‘As yet the worry of the newly-stopped whirling and grinding on the part of the money-mills seemed to linger in the air’ (587). Bradley’s characteristic mode of communication, ‘grinding’ out his words, implicitly relies upon the salvage of substance from two antithetical cogs abutting

⁵⁰⁶ ‘[D]iscourse refers to *how* the story is transmitted’. See Seymour Chatman, ‘What Novels Can Do That Films Can’t (and Vice Versa)’ in W. J. T. Mitchell, *On Narrative* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 118-36 (p. 118).

⁵⁰⁷ Picking up on the evaluative idiom, Cheadle assigns the ‘connoisseur’s commodification’ to Eugene; my reading differs. See Cheadle, pp. 211-233 (p. 227); paraphrasing Bachelard (‘the “sudden salience [of] a direct ontology”’), p. 228.

⁵⁰⁸ Maria is the ‘disorder’d maid’ found weeping by the roadside in *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (1768), and is often portrayed in that stance. See Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey and Other Writings*, ed. by Ian Jack and Tim Parnell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 95; and on the resulting iconography, William Blake Gerard, ‘Icon of the Heart: Maria as Sentimental Emblem, 1773-1888’, in *Laurence Sterne and the Visual Imagination* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 135-69.

⁵⁰⁹ ‘She started up. He had been so very still, that he felt sure it was not he who had disturbed her, so merely withdrew from the window and stood near it in the shadow of the wall. She opened the door, and said in an alarmed tone, “Father, was that you calling me?”’ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 159.

⁵¹⁰ ‘Mr Wegg Prepares A Grindstone For Mr Boffin’s Nose’, *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 560. Dickens seems to preempt the vernacular expression, ‘through the mill’, for tough shaping experience, not extant until the late 1800s.

and abrading each other.⁵¹¹ Also note ‘pepper’, the ground condiment which allows Jenny to enact her punitive impulses in imagination and reality. It becomes an example of the *potent particular*: a tiny ingredient given symbolic freight, as opposed to the refinement of a supernumerary structure effected by ramifications of ‘mill’.⁵¹²

A rhythm unites disparate parts: a shape penetrates through surfaces like a branded mark. Dickens offers resonant templates that communicate a message of emotional or psychological tenor with a ‘direct ontology’.⁵¹³ The paper mill provides welcome structure in every sense, both individually for Lizzie and implicitly for her peers. Critics have commented upon the peaceable calm of the riverside setting (torn asunder, of course, by Bradley’s attack).⁵¹⁴ There is perhaps historical veracity in the fastening of Dickens’s imagination upon this utopian vision through the plastic promise of architecture, as early Victorian factories were often modelled on the Renaissance *palazzo*, with duplicate windows and flat fronts literally suggesting order and calm.⁵¹⁵ The mill affords the potently referenced ‘sweet, fresh, empty store-room’, a makeshift resting place for Betty Higden’s corpse; ameliorating the rough contingencies of her record (Betty’s refusal to get aid for Johnny is his death warrant).⁵¹⁶

Holly Furneaux has written allusively of the renegade space created by Eugene’s image of a lighthouse as an imaginary haven for himself and Mortimer; but this is not the only space emergent from the breaking of conventional boundaries, and bonds, within the novel.⁵¹⁷ In a small but prescient instance, Jenny Wren initiates communication between herself and Lizzie by requesting to move into the makeshift porch. Her friend obligingly ‘put the room door open, and the house door open, and turned the little low chair and its occupant toward the outer air’ (227). Dickens is mathematically precise about asking his reader to visualise

⁵¹¹ ‘“I should like to ask you,” said Bradley Headstone, grinding his words slowly out, as though they came from a rusty mill’; later Eugene echoes Dickens when he dubs Bradley’s thwarted pursuits his ‘grinding torments’. *Our Mutual Friend*; pp. 336; 529.

⁵¹² ‘I’d open one of those doors, and I’d cram ‘em all in, and then I’d lock the door and through the keyhole I’d blow in pepper’: ‘He ought to have a little pepper?’; *Our Mutual Friend*; pp. 218; 706. There are a myriad ambiguities lodged in phraseology which connotes the domestic or artisan life in the novel. When Wegg questions whether Venus is really ‘flush of friends’ the usage is so odd, it aptly brings to mind to contrary meaning of aligning surfaces in trades such as Venus’s own (763).

⁵¹³ Bachelard, xii.

⁵¹⁴ ‘The paper mill is a mythical construct and the river Thames [...] its source of power is “silver” and “benign”’. See David, p. 84.

⁵¹⁵ ‘Early in the nineteenth century [...] Many factories and warehouses were modelled on the Renaissance *palazzo*, with four or five stories of brick masonry rising symmetrically in a block punctuated by rows of large, uniform windows’. See David Spurr, *Architecture and Modern Literature* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), p. 40.

⁵¹⁶ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 503. Claire Wood cites ‘A Paper-Mill’ (1850), an article co-authored by Dickens and Mark Lemon, as evidence of Dickens’s utopian view of this prospect. See Wood, p. 151.

⁵¹⁷ ‘[U]nusual physical spaces often accommodate non-marital and non-reproductive domestic units’. See Holly Furneaux, *Queer Dickens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 105; *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 142.

this staggered process of new realms of space revealed, and fresh air, to mirror the opportunity for freed discourse; for difficult subjects to be explored. All these spatial paradigms represent an urge towards symbolic circumscription, an *ur*-pattern; to reference George Eliot again: ‘Form [...] refers to structure or composition, that is, to the impression from a work considered as a whole’.⁵¹⁸ When Jenny envisages imprisoning miscreant local children in the bowels of St John’s, Smith Square, she forces the reader to open up another imaginative space: pressing the boundaries of a real-life construct to locate its deviant side, somewhat akin to Kant’s noumenal dimension.⁵¹⁹ The Westminster church, a striking example of English Baroque architecture, is not identified by name but is unmistakable; moored in ‘a certain blind square, called Smith Square’ (215). The crypt of St John’s is unusually large; accommodating the substantial foundations necessary when building on marshy land, so Jenny’s ad hoc dungeon is tenable. And as she says: ‘There’s doors under the church in the Square – black doors, leading into black vaults’ (218).⁵²⁰ St John’s was nicknamed ‘Queen Anne’s footstool’, as its squat quadrant was said to be determined by the monarch, in a fit of pique, knocking over the same and telling the architect, Thomas Archer, that it should look ‘like that’.⁵²¹ So not conducive to feelings of solemnity, as Dickens himself makes clear: ‘a very hideous church with four towers at the four corners, generally resembling some petrified monster [...] on its back with its legs in the air’ (215). Locating punishment in its underside, still a nominal place of sanctity, Jenny further contravenes architectural and ethical norms. The sense of deviance is compounded by a literary heritage in which arch-subversion is carried out underground; for example sexual licentiousness beneath the monastery in the Marquis de Sade’s novel *Justine* (1791).⁵²² Of course the generic concept of a ‘demonic space’ follows similar lines: ‘The habitations of the possessed are places of concealment, but they are also [...] monuments to the dead’ writes David Spurr; an idea fully exploited in the Gothic tradition (though it is usually in the graveyard, as opposed to within hallowed confines, that deviation occurs).⁵²³

⁵¹⁸ Eliot, ‘Notes on Form in Art’ (1868), in *Selected Critical Writings* (1992), pp. 355-9 (p. 356).

⁵¹⁹ Outside sense perception, as differentiated from the phenomenal by Immanuel Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781).

⁵²⁰ ‘Beneath the church and reached by stone spiral stairs in the corner towers is [...] the crypt. Low brick vaults – hardly more than head-high – a sense of weight and gravity, a fortress as powerful as Seaton Delaval’. See Sir Hugh Casson P.R.A., *Queen Anne’s Footstall: A historical portrait of St John’s Smith Square* (London: The Friends of St John’s Smith Square, 1981), p. 4.

⁵²¹ Casson; quoted in back cover synopsis.

⁵²² I owe the reference to Sade’s *Justine* (1791), written when he was a prisoner in the Bastille, to David Spurr, whose second chapter is entitled: ‘Demonic Spaces: Sade, Dickens, Kafka’ (he focuses on *The Old Curiosity Shop*). *Justine* is kept captive in ‘a building of four stories, half underground’, the subterranean annex of a monastery, for the pleasure deviant monks. See Spurr, pp. 73-98 (p. 76).

⁵²³ Spurr, p. 73.

Identifying Dickens's material source is equally telling when examining that other upset space, contingent to the tormented (and titularly upended) schoolmaster, Bradley Headstone.⁵²⁴ The churchyard round which he ushers Lizzie (three times, Stephen James notes; as per the devil's business) is located in the 'Leadenhall Street region'.⁵²⁵ It is described as 'a paved square court, with a raised bank of earth about breast high, in the middle, enclosed by iron rails. Here, conveniently and healthfully elevated above the level of the living, were the dead' (383). This can be identified as the elevated and cordoned burial ground of St Andrew Undershaft, on St Mary's Axe; that remains literally at odds with the common ground.⁵²⁶ There is a further historical dislocation embedded in the composite name. 'Under-shaft' refers to the original building being overshadowed by a maypole that 'overtopped the church', when erected on a yearly basis.⁵²⁷ It was eventually deposited in 1547, as representative of pagan practice. The Victorian public would have been reminded of the strange synergy of May Day revels and churchgoing by the inclusion of an engraving after Joseph Nash, 'May-pole before St Andrew Undershaft', in Charles Knight's compendium of folk history, *Old England* (1845; reissued 1864).⁵²⁸ This tangential, secular, history of merry-making and presumably, courtship, is perhaps another reason that Dickens makes this the place in which Bradley declares himself: in terrible mockery of his proposal's unhappy end.⁵²⁹ The pressingly proximate 'dead, and the tombstones; some of the latter droopingly inclined from the perpendicular', create a further disruption to equilibrium (383).

The above are examples of resonant templates which, although not laboured in the text, reveal a disharmony uniquely suggestive of the character they are associated with; in Bradley's case, especially, the trope of misalignment informs a broad idiom of imagistic and linguistic dissonance. The concept of being at ease, or otherwise, within a space resembles the ancient Chinese system of 'feng shui'; often misappropriated by

⁵²⁴ '[H]e is clearly [...] chipping away at his own "headstone" with every hammer-blow of his agonised thoughts.' See Stephen James, pp. 214-33 (p. 224).

⁵²⁵ 'It is hard to think that Dickens did not have in mind the popular folkloric fancy which [...] suggests that walking three times round a churchyard after dark will conjure up the devil'. See Stephen James, pp. 214-33 (p. 225).

⁵²⁶ See Gerald Cobb, *The Old Churches of London* (London: Batsford, 1948), p. 28. Valentine Cunningham records that Dickens 'spent so many Sundays visiting' City churches and churchyards in 1860. See Cunningham, pp. 255-57 (p. 256).

⁵²⁷ Stow, *Survey of London* (1598), quoted by Cobb (1948), 28. Cobb, referencing Harben (*Dictionary of London*, 1917) writes that the name could equally have derived from the maypole socket being permanently put in place.

⁵²⁸ C. Cousens, engraving after Joseph Nash, 'May-pole before St Andrew Undershaft'; see the facsimile of the 1845 edition, *Old England: A Pictorial Museum of Regal, Ecclesiastical, Baronial, Municipal, and Popular Antiquities*, 2 vols (New York: Arno Press, 1978), I, illus. 1786, p. 121. For details of this and contemporary evocations of May celebrations see Rebecca Jeffrey Easby, 'The Myth of Merrie England in Victorian Painting', in Florence S. Boos, ed. *History and Community: Essays in Victorian Medievalism*, (London: Garland Publishing, 1992), pp. 59-80 (p. 69).

⁵²⁹ May Day, sometimes corresponding with the Christian festival of Pentacost, is traditionally a time of courtship, enacted in dances around the maypole, for example in Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874).

modern fads. They have a Victorian precedent. Robert Kerr, in his volume, *The Gentleman's House: or, How to Plan English Residencies, from the Parsonage to the Palace* (1864), laid out precise stipulations as to the direction furniture should face, the spaces between cutlery; the importance of being on the sunny side of the street.⁵³⁰ Dickens engages directly with Kerr. John and Bella's future home is 'a great dingy house with a quantity of dim side window and blank back premises' in contravention of Kerr's recommendations for 'Aspect and Prospect'; similarly it falls short on 'Salubrity': 'a piece of fat black water-pipe [...] trailed itself over the area door into a damp stone passage' (44).⁵³¹ John's decorative schemes will not compensate for a lack of natural light; for residual damp.

The phenomenon I term 'domestic aestheticism' in my section introduction was beholden to commentators such as Kerr, and fellow architect Charles Eastlake (1836-1906). Eastlake published a hugely influential article, 'The Fashion of Furniture', in *The Cornhill Magazine* in March 1864; later expanding his ideas into an equally influential book, *Hints on Household Taste* (published 1868; reissued 1869, 1870). It is likely that Dickens would have read Eastlake's *Cornhill* piece; his tribute to his fellow author, 'In Memoriam W.M. Thackeray', had appeared in the previous edition.⁵³²

In many ways, Eastlake presents a paradox that was extant in the theoretical ideals of Aestheticism as mediated through a burgeoning Arts and Crafts movement. He advocated simplicity and utility, but rated these qualities primarily in relation to their aesthetic charm as opposed to the fulfilment of function. He helped instigate a new form of snobbery, based on the elusive property of taste. Eastlake was most militant in his rejection of established populist fashions such as naturalism in interior design. He wrote:

The natural taste of our day would soon, without teaching, weave the likeness of Bengal tigers on our hearth-rugs, commit young ladies to the copying of popular paintings in Berlin wool, turn the carpet under our feet into the likeness of an unweeded garden.⁵³³

Eastlake likens a busy, naturalistic carpet design to something that implies bad husbandry; and slovenliness. There is perhaps a hidden misogynistic agenda; a fear of the imagination unleashed, of rampant femininity

⁵³⁰ See Robert Kerr, F.R.I.B.A., *The Gentleman's House: or, How to Plan English Residencies, from the Parsonage to the Palace* (London: John Murray, 1864).

⁵³¹ Wegg eventually 'obtain[s] free access to "Our House" [...] the mansion outside which he had sat shelterless so long'; *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 289. See Kerr, pp. 87-8.

⁵³² 'In Memoriam: W.M. Thackeray', in *Selected Journalism*, pp. 591-94 (p. 591).

⁵³³ Charles Eastlake, 'The Fashion of Furniture', *The Cornhill Magazine* (March 1864), 337-49 (p. 343).

stealing across the home space, with associations of atavism and even unruly sexual appetite. Eastlake was inadvertently echoing Edgar Allan Poe, who in 'The Philosophy of Furniture' (1840) railed:

The abomination of flowers, or representations of well-known objects of any kind, should not be endured within the limits of Christendom. Indeed, whether on carpets, or curtains, or tapestry, or ottoman coverings, all upholstery of this nature should be rigidly Arabesque.⁵³⁴

Poe would have approved of 'the carpets and floorcloth' which 'seemed to rush at the beholder's face in the unusual prominence of their patterns' in Eugene and Mortimer's redecorated set of chambers (275). They in turn might have been persuaded by Owen Jones's *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856), the influential design sourcebook referencing predominantly Middle Eastern material; or Christopher Dresser's *The Art of Decorative Design* (1862), focused on how botany could translate into symmetrical ornament, with examples from Asia, the Americas, Africa and Polynesia as well as Europe.⁵³⁵ This graphic decorative idiom, informed by culturally eclectic iconography, sits in critical counterpoint to old-fashioned Anglocentric naturalism which, according to Eastlake and Poe, risks being something of a personal embarrassment to the enthusiast.

So, when we read of Silas Wegg's visit to the Boffin marital residence, we know something is amiss:

Facing the fire between the settles, a sofa, a footstool, and a little table, formed a centrepiece devoted to Mrs Boffin. They were garish in taste and colour, but were expensive articles of drawing-room furniture that had a very odd look beside the settles and the flaring gaslight pendent from the ceiling. There was a flowery carpet on the floor; but, instead of reaching to the fireside, its glowing vegetation stopped short at Mrs Boffin's footstool, and gave place to a region of sand and sawdust. (54)

'Mrs Boffin's carpet' exposes her as newly party to the ideologies of taste, ill-versed in the niceties (55).⁵³⁶ Her 'territory', with its 'glowing vegetation', 'stuffed birds and waxen fruits', abuts Mr Boffin's own ideological 'arrangement'; comprising a pie, basic tap room fixtures, and sawdust to screed the floor (54-5). Dickens is doing something rather complex here, characteristic of the novel's cognisant instability of posture. He is (literally) furnishing the ground for a potential meta-critique of his own age-old conceptions of power and goodness. I don't believe that Dickens gives credence to aesthetic snobbery, but its vestiges provide a

⁵³⁴ Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Philosophy of Furniture' (1840), in *The Complete Illustrated Stories And Poems* (London: Chancellor Press, 1994), pp. 715-19 (p. 716). Poe (1809-1849) was a friend and correspondent of Dickens's in the 1840s.

⁵³⁵ *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856), is appositely titled: decorative panache is achieved by adhering to rules; naturalism is subject to stylisation if it is remain viable. Chapter I lists the 'Ornament of Savage Tribes'; and Jones goes on to appropriate and update these various design tropes, all of which are highly stylised. See facsimile edition (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1972), pp.13-17. See also Christopher Dresser, *The Art of Decorative Design* (London: Day and Son, 1862).

⁵³⁶ The novel is unique in Dickens's oeuvre for being set in contemporary society, viz.: 'In these times of ours, though concerning the exact year there is no need to be precise'. *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 2.

construct in which to undermine Mrs Boffin; or more accurately, to intimate potential redundancy of type. She is subject to the blindside of ignorance which, in whatever field it is feasible (moral; aesthetic) *shows a character up*. Mrs Boffin can hardly stand the sacrifice of legitimate naturalism that her husband's 'pious fraud' necessitates.⁵³⁷ Her kind heart manifests itself in a permeability that licences a form of emotional hyperbole: her seeing 'faces' is a measure of that.⁵³⁸ Mrs Boffin represents a type of goodness that would have been wholly estimable in Dickens's fiction of the 1840s and '50s. However in this new milieu of compromised dynamics and mixed moral quantities, that's no longer enough. Mrs Boffin's insights overwhelm her: 'I know you now! You're John!' And he catches me as I drops' (752). Her eddying sympathy cannot adapt to strategy, as her husband corroborates: 'Couldn't abear to make-believe as I meant it! In consequence of which, we was everlastingly in danger with her' (757).

Mr Boffin does not suffer from the wayward compulsion towards truth; is unbothered by interrupted teleology, divergent means and ends. Whereas readers have famously contested the credibility of the pious fraud he enacts, it is Mr Boffin's almost eerie dislocation from the seriousness of what he effects, his ease and delight in the process, that is the most disjunct element. He plays within that arena, even when the outcome is in the balance. His accompaniment of animal noises: 'Mew, Quack-quack, Bow-wow!', an aural menagerie with no logical relation to events, creates a Rabelaisian penumbra of high jinks (581).⁵³⁹ A kind of anarchic laissez-faire, in which a lack of concern is coupled with a jubilant demeanour, is a character paradox that recalls less worthy protagonists such as Wilkins Micawber and Harold Skimpole. Yet Boffin's Christian name is just that; directing us to the good Pharisee Nicodemus, to whom Jesus conveyed this edict: 'Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again' (related, fittingly, in the Gospel of John).⁵⁴⁰ Nicodemus Boffin becomes the facilitator of not only Bella's, but John's, rebirth. We understand this even whilst we are reminded, at times, of the spousal dynamic between Jeremiah and Affery Flintwitch in *Little Dorrit*; the wife representing an atavistic way of looking at the world, through vision and superstition, immolated by a kindness which sometimes pertains to naiveté; the husband undoubtedly the puppet-master. Boffin's ease with his own transformations recalls a Sternean tradition of anthropomorphic shapeshifting (the avuncular

⁵³⁷ For a full exploration of this subject, see Edwin M. Eigner, 'Shakespeare, Milton, Dickens and The Morality of the Pious Fraud', *Dickens Studies Annual*, 21, 1992, 1-25.

⁵³⁸ 'Noddy, the faces of the old man and the two children are all over the house to-night'. *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 185.

⁵³⁹ Bakhtin uses Rabelais as the ultimate example of a writer whose language bears little accountability for sense: 'In Rabelais [...] a parodic attitude toward almost all forms of ideological discourse [...] was intensified to the point where it became a parody of the very act of conceptualising anything in language'. See Bakhtin, 'Heteroglossia', pp. 301-31 (p. 308).

⁵⁴⁰ John 3. 7.

hobby horse), but it also makes him a proto-modernist figure, a mercurial survivor.⁵⁴¹ He is happy dabbling in the shallows of non-meaning; of nonsense. These became relevant to Aestheticism as rapid commercialisation diluted the rarified material iconography and the ‘Cult of beauty’ became the butt of satire. There is a prescient instant when Boffin is talking to Venus and Wegg, and suddenly veers off message:

‘Are you a judge of china?’

Mr Venus again shook his head.

‘Because if he had ever showed you a teapot, I should be glad to know of it,’ said Mr Boffin. And then, with his right hand at his lips, repeated thoughtfully, ‘A Teapot, a Teapot,’ and glanced over the books on the floor, as if he knew there was something interesting connected with a teapot somewhere among them. [...] ‘A Teapot,’ repeated Mr Boffin, continuing to muse and survey the books, ‘a Teapot, a Teapot. Are you ready, Wegg?’ (468-89)

Dickens has isolated the salient particular that was to become the symbol of Aestheticism’s demise: a joke precisely because it had acquired such disproportionate clout. In the wake of ‘Chinamania’, when ‘aesthetes sought to “live up to” their blue china’, one domestic object represented the relatable face of aspirational connoisseurship.⁵⁴² ‘[T]he collecting of teapots became a fetish’ (presumably in part because a single focus was accessible to a broader consumer demographic).⁵⁴³ Boffin’s musings on ‘a Teapot’ presages this, essentially psychological, phenomenon; he affords the humble object gnomic mystery, but of course its identity is *immaterial* in every sense. Boffin indulges the benign anarchic vein that generates animal noises ad hoc; alighting on something in what appears to be an elective way, but in fact has no rationale; skews taxonomy. The contraflow of nonsensical talk is the showcasing of secret control; he does it because he can, whilst it outwardly accentuates his posture of mental vagueness. ‘A Teapot’ is white noise; and this exactly foretells the incongruous passion that accrued around select domestic objects within the ensuing decade.

This instance links Boffin to Eugene Wrayburn, who also uses domestic objects to create distraction from the necessity of speaking truth (in his case, disclosing his preoccupation with Lizzie); and ironises their ideological status to further befuddle that procrastinating ploy. Interestingly, Eugene’s assigning domestic

⁵⁴¹ ‘—have not the wisest of men in all ages [...]—have they not had their HOBBY-HORSES’ – Uncle Toby’s conceit for whimsical habits of mind. See Lawrence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. by Ian Campbell Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 12.

⁵⁴² See Jason Edwards and Imogen Hart, ‘Introduction’, in *Rethinking the Interior, c. 1867-1896: Aestheticism and Arts and Crafts*, ed. Jason Edwards, and Imogen Hart (London: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 1-25, (p. 11). On ‘Chinamania’ see Anne Anderson, ‘“Fearful Consequences [...] of Living Up to One’s Teapot”: Men, Women, and “Cultchah” in the Aesthetic Movement’, pp. 111-29 (pp. 112-19).

⁵⁴³ Anne Anderson reveals the trajectory: ‘Back in the early 1860s, blue-and-white china [...] had been the exclusive preserve of Whistler and Rossetti; in the following decade Wilde appropriated it for the fashion conscious. The homage paid to household necessities, such as teapots and coal scuttles did seem rather extreme to those outside their charmed circle [...] the collecting of teapots became a fetish’. See Anderson, in Edwards and Hart, ed., pp. 111-29 (p. 112).

objects ‘moral influence’ and at the same time providing ardent inventories of these salient particulars, marries the values pertaining to domesticity of the mid-century, with the consecration pertaining to materiality of the Aesthetic period (c. 1865-80).⁵⁴⁴ Eugene’s relationship to Aestheticism, and indeed its later corollary, the Decadence of the fin de siècle, is especially interesting. To my mind he embodies many of the conventions of inaugural, high culture, Aestheticism; while, equally, undermining them by the pervasive ennui that renders so much of what he says mere play (and so foretells the more degenerate personae found in Decadent culture). Brian Cheadle reads Eugene’s vow that he must ‘go through’ with his ‘nature’ as proof that his character is ‘devastatingly dark’; (i.e. he must have Lizzie, whatever the consequences).⁵⁴⁵ I see Eugene’s nature as ‘dark’ in a different way; not as the apotheosis of will (Bradley’s territory) but as the confusion of one who can create the perfect semblance of function whilst inwardly lacking conviction (again, reversing Bradley). This lack of conviction is, of course, articulated by Eugene; it is central to the novel’s plot and to critical assessment of his character. But what has been less examined is the nature and repercussions of this prodigiously externalised defence. Eugene’s intellect, and aptitude for language, provides a motor that ostensibly runs whilst the engine (to speak in thermodynamic terms) is dying. Perhaps this parallels the isolation Dickens sometimes felt, especially towards the end of his life, as a consequence of being so *able*. That vitality pushes access to the real self (and rescue) further and further away, there is a direct ratio between its exercise, and the feasibility of change. Dickens’s letters, especially to those less than intimate, can seem like motors of entertainment that incrementally remove the relatable author as the reader’s amusement escalates (style often preempts meaning, especially when *an excuse* is involved).⁵⁴⁶ Mortimer, an intimate friend (and key to the reader’s maintaining faith in Dickens’s ambiguous hero) intuits this dangerous disconnect as he listens to the profane rhapsodies on kitchen utensils.⁵⁴⁷ Eugene’s psychological bent parallels the shifting dynamic of Victorian culture towards the end of the 19th Century; as beliefs were superseded by equivocal stances; and, aesthetic form trumped content. As Gilbert says in Oscar Wilde’s *The Critic as Artist*: ‘The true critic will [...] never suffer himself to be limited to any settled custom of thought

⁵⁴⁴ ‘The moral influence of these objects, in forming the domestic virtues, may have an immense influence upon me’. *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 276.

⁵⁴⁵ She must go through with her nature, as I must go through with mine’, *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 679. See Cheadle, pp. 211-33 (p. 228.)

⁵⁴⁶ See for example, his letter to The Hon. Eleanor Eden, 24 March 1859: ‘My Dear Miss Eden,/My answer to your interesting note, is (unfortunately) a short one. I am not going to the Dinner.’; to Wilkie Collins: ‘I know if you do, you will; and if you don’t, you will not’; there is such panache in the mode of expression, chiasmic structuring, the message itself is sometimes undermined. See *Letters*, IX, p. 41; ...

⁵⁴⁷ ‘Mortimer laughed again [...] but when his laugh was out, there was something serious, if not anxious, in his face’. *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 277.

[...] He will realise himself in many forms, and by a thousand different ways'.⁵⁴⁸ There is no need to keep faith, it is the ability to continually adapt (Boffin-style) that ensures survival; it is the *manner of conveyance* that is definitive. Of course what Dickens's novel resolves is that Eugene's love for Lizzie was, and is, once tested, equivalent to a belief: entrenched, proven solid.

Here is the passage on the new kitchen implements that Eugene showcases for Mortimer:

'See,' said Eugene, 'miniature flour-barrel, rolling-pin, spice-box, shelf of brown jars, chopping-board, coffee-mill, dresser elegantly furnished with crockery, saucepans and pans, roasting-jack, a charming kettle, an armoury of dish-covers.' (276)

This is, in effect, 'a thousand different' things; meaning is eroded through accumulation, no detail counts more than another. The itemisation acts to disarm Mortimer's probing, to fracture attention. The absurdity is blatant: two unmarried barristers, who are unlikely to do anything other than eat out, burdened by saucepans and pans; unemployed individuals furnishing their premises in the latest fashion. There is a terrible contingency of waste; of disregard. It is as if Eugene wilfully challenges the point at which disregard is called to account. His satirical disclosures that appear to obviate guilt could be interpreted as surreptitious confessions; served up the only way he knows how. As with Boffin, the true discourse contravenes what is said. Aestheticism, and materialist culture, with their respective gears of specificity and excess, provide a unique [satirical] idiom. Even more so when Eugene directs Mortimer to the:

'Secrétaire', you see, an abstruse set of solid mahogany pigeon-holes, one for every letter of the alphabet. To what use do I devote them? I receive a bill —say from Jones. I docket it neatly, at the secrétaire, JONES, and I put it into pigeon-hole J.' (276).

Eugene's image is 'abstruse' to the reader too: he starts off from within the cellular structure. A 'secrétaire' is an enclosed writing desk, usually with drawers in its base, surmounted by a writing slope and said 'pigeon-hole[s]' for correspondence. The reader is reminded both of Blight, and his ceaseless rota of fictitious clients; and also of course Herbert and Pip, elaborately 'dealing with' bills in *Great Expectations*; and John Rokesmith himself, who proves his worth as a professional 'Secretary' by rapidly sheafing Boffin's loose papers.⁵⁴⁹ The joke reprises Boffin's puzzlement at John's offer to 'try me as your Secretary'; 'As *what?*' he replies (93). There is a pun pending, as two professionally particular words collide. In the case of Eugene's bedside furniture, again what we should really log is the erosion of sense by nonsensical multiplicity; here

⁵⁴⁸ See 'The Critic as Artist (With some remarks on the importance of doing nothing' (1890), in Oscar Wilde, *The Decay of Lying and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2010), pp. 41-118 (p. 101).

⁵⁴⁹ 'No sooner said than done'. See *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 175.

ineffective action as opposed to excessive stuff. The ‘secrétaire’ is a debt pit; its storage facility a maw. It also symbolises the redundancy of Eugene’s maundering; and refers tangentially to John Rokesmith and his catacomb of secrets. Appositely, the frontispiece of the 1869 reissue of *Hints on Household Taste* illustrates the front of a bureau, engraved so as to fully render the intricacy of its make-up. ‘Portrait of a Cabinet, executed from a Design by Charles L. Eastlake’ is (in keeping with the Aesthetic predilection for clues as opposed to disclosure) actually a corner, showing ‘trap door’ apertures in the lid, surmounting a galleried shelf, inset cupboards with carved doors and, just visible, what resembles a fall front writing slope.⁵⁵⁰

Eugene Wrayburn

My analysis of Eugene Wrayburn as a character builds upon three premises. The first is to substantiate the link I make between Eugene and Aestheticism. The second is to track Eugene’s relationship with language in dialogue with Bradley, and then with Lizzie by the riverside. The third is to ask whether Dickens creates what might be considered a character-orientated ‘heteroglossia’ in this novel, using the scene in which Eugene is attacked by Bradley and rescued by Lizzie as a test case. Eugene as a conscious entity has little traction here, significantly so for my purposes. As explored through my examination of places that ‘tell’ on/ of individual characters, I think *Our Mutual Friend* moves towards becoming a text wherein it isn’t only established signifiers (e.g. manner of speaking, physical appearance and bearing), or narrative commentary, but a whole welter of associations, some oblique and probably unrecognisable to the subject, that represent a character’s presence within the text. Bakhtin’s term identified idiom connected to different social demographics through his close readings of *Little Dorrit*. But the effect I am arguing for in *Our Mutual Friend* remains tied to, and ultimately services, conceptions of individuality. Although external discourse contributes to informing notions of identity, it is subsidiary, sometimes so lightly present as to seem ephemeral. My readings rely upon the catching of dispersed hints, as a way of making tangible what I interpret as centrifugal character constellations that radiate matter wide into the textual peripheries.

Kelly Comfort summarises the ‘stylistic proclivities’ that came to be associated with Aestheticism: ‘the use of sketches (instead of drawings), suggestion (rather than statement), sensual imagery, symbol, synesthesia, musicality, mandarin prose, aphorisms, fragments, non-linear narratives, catalogues, lists’; a readiness ‘to

⁵⁵⁰ See Charles L. Eastlake, *Hints on Household Taste in Furniture, Upholstery, and other details*, 2nd edn (London: Longmans, Green, 1869), illustrated frontispiece, opposite title page.

fashion fantastic and unreal spaces, and to take on forbidden and taboo themes'.⁵⁵¹ Much of this pertains to Eugene; we have already witnessed his relish of 'catalogues, lists'. His ability to reach the heart of the matter quickly and adroitly is equivalent to the sketch as opposed to the laboured drawing. His constant referencing of culture and history: 'Mysteries of Udolpho!', 'Napoleon Buonaparte at St. Helena', 'Cassim Baba', peppers his conversation with erudition, a kind of 'mandarin prose' in that it prohibits return from those who do not share his level of knowledge.⁵⁵² In context, the integrated reference to Cassim Baba could be said to about a 'taboo' theme; as he elaborates on their carapace of a professional life to Mortimer:

'There are four of us, with our names painted on a door-post in right of one black hole called a set of chambers [...] and each of use has the fourth of a clerk—Cassim Baba, in the robber's cave—and Cassim is the only respectable member of the party' (19).

Eugene's imagination dives downwards, spatially, thematically. It is feasible that 'one black hole' makes allusion to that infamous tragedy of British colonial history, the 'Black Hole of Calcutta', the ultimate beleaguered 'chamber'.⁵⁵³ By segueing into *The Arabian Nights* – Cassim Baba being Ali Baba's greedy brother, who meets a messy end attempting to rob the robbers – Eugene splices literary exotica with national tragedy: a potential affront to taste. Perhaps an over-reading, but it seems consistent with the dares that Eugene lobs at life through his consistently lax behaviour (the implications of which only he truly understands); even, perhaps, with his circumspect view of the British establishment. The construct also sets up the question as to whether this character will subside into a life of sensual dissolution; often embodied by Eastern fantasies, an escape from Western mores. The dichotomy follows a curious one within the novel wherein experiences fall between an ascetic and probingly exotic prototype. Lizzie and Jenny's makeshift schoolroom on the roof of Pubsey and Co., with the baskets of fruits and flowers and air of introspective femininity, is a displaced Garden of Bathsheba; Riah and Fledgeby's interruption parallel to the gaze of David, if only (as so often) through insinuation, conveyed through the salaciousness of the latter: 'Then why [...] don't you out with your reason for having your spoon in your soup at all?' (419).⁵⁵⁴ The possibility of inappropriate desire is somehow wrought into the text by the premise of exoticism; and that in itself an eclectic amalgam of sacred and secular sources. It is all part of the novel's contrary warp and weft, and

⁵⁵¹ Kelly Comfort, 'Introduction: Reflections on the Relationship between Art and Life in Aestheticism', in *Art and Life in Aestheticism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 1-21 (p. 2).

⁵⁵² *Our Mutual Friend*, pp. 394, 674, 19. In reference to Ann Radcliffe's Gothic novel (1794). By using Napoleon as a template for the posture of folded arms, Eugene actually refers to the visual iconography, such as Benjamin Robert Haydon's representation of Napoleon from behind with his arms folded (1830, National Portrait Gallery, London).

⁵⁵³ 'The Black Hole of Calcutta' was the name given to the dungeon at Fort William where British prisoners-of-war, both soldiers and civilians, died in close captivity during the siege by Bengali armies in 1794.

⁵⁵⁴ See *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 272.

Eugene Wrayburn embodies that reach between crassness and integrity; between cruelty and kindness; between the illicit and the sound. We don't know how, or where, to trust.

As stated before, Eugene's most palpable trait is his ability to keep ahead; in physical awareness when so minded (the night-time 'sport'), in language games.⁵⁵⁵ Ironising and revision are perpetual. Eugene can press a word home using its literal sense in order to effect a joke, or let it hang within the midst of guises drawn from a wide array of sources. He exposes the realm of cliché and hyperbole so beloved of 'Society' in a performative verbal pugilism which both counters and ratifies the pretensions of those around him.⁵⁵⁶ ('I am dying to ask him what he was called out for!', proclaims Lady Tippins; 'Are you?' [...] 'then perhaps if you can't ask him, you'll die', Eugene mutters).⁵⁵⁷ There is a kind of disservice done to reality, when language is so well-exploited: 'Will nothing make you serious?', quips Mortimer (529).

Two things, I feel, are important when we read Eugene's words, particularly those baroque vagaries he releases in Mortimer's direction, that include, of course, the fashioning of 'fantastic and unreal spaces'. In *The Critic as Artist*, Gilbert makes the statement that: 'Aesthetics are higher than ethics. They belong to a more spiritual sphere. To discern the beauty of a thing is the finest point to which we can arrive. Even colour-sense is more important, in the development of an individual, than a sense of right and wrong'.⁵⁵⁸ So – retrospective vindication of Eugene's encomium to the 'moral influence' of domestic objects.⁵⁵⁹ This sentiment represents the high water mark of 'l'art pour l'art'. However its audacity could shield, or speak for, a more defensive mindset. It is the moment when Aestheticism fully collapses into Decadence: wonder dissipated, beauty bereft of naturalism.⁵⁶⁰ Gilbert's words could be read as an arch-statement of nihilism; of philosophy relegated to a local corner. If the world can no longer furnish reason or just reception for sincerity; if it itself has been rendered ineligible, then to retreat into a 'sphere' wherein colour preference is

⁵⁵⁵ 'Come, be a British sportsman, and enjoy the pleasures of the chase', says Eugene to Mortimer. Bradley comprehends that he is 'being made the nightly sport of the reckless and insolent Eugene'. See *Our Mutual Friend*, 529; 533.

⁵⁵⁶ As critics have noted of his behaviour in general: '[H]e turns his socially approved posture of insolent carelessness against society itself. And yet [...] he only compounds his own psychic divisions'. See Beth F. Herst, *The Dickens Hero: Selfhood and Alienation in the Dickens World* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1990), p. 152.

⁵⁵⁷ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 612.

⁵⁵⁸ Wilde, pp. 41-118 (p. 116). By referencing Wilde's 1890 text, twenty-five years subsequent to Dickens's novel, I am identifying what I see as the high water mark of psychological aspects present in Eugene, and marking the point at which Aestheticism degenerates into Decadence.

⁵⁵⁹ Again Edgar Allan Poe provides a preemptive framework: 'A judge at common law may be an ordinary man; a good judge of a carpet *must* be a genius'. See Poe, pp. 715-19 (p. 716).

⁵⁶⁰ The novel that most clearly embodies this shift is Huysmans's *À rebours* 'Against Nature' (1884). The protagonist lives a life of seclusion amongst artifice.

king is the ultimate tactical euphemism. Sincerity can run in that superficial province. To my mind, Eugene plays with words because he can find no sincerity with which to broker a raw language of honesty and emotional exposure (such as that he utilises when he says, 'I love you Mortimer': true sincerity being flat as opposed to theatrical, because undeniable).⁵⁶¹ One of the novel's most painful moments is when Eugene critiques his and Lizzie's conversation by the river with a dismissive gloss: 'the crisis!' (681). Overheard by Bradley, such a derisory verbal repackaging triggers his retributive narrative punishment. Of course Lizzie gives Eugene a new motive towards sincere language but until the real crisis augments his love for her, he is not willing to make the break; even afterwards it's a gentle gradient between sincerity and deprecation.

But there is something else that Eugene's habit of elision and evasion and downplaying of seriousness effects. It affords space for others. It is one of the many important binary differences between himself and Bradley. When Eugene tells Lizzie that he regrets her making 'so much' of 'so little' in regards to accepting his provision of study resources, he is twisting truth (231).⁵⁶² But of course he lays open a wide berth for her own self-image, self-forgiveness; it is the very opposite of the intense pressure that Bradley conveys in dialogue or interchange. When Eugene is so minded, his conversation could be construed as a form of prolonged euphemism whereby he obviates threats and serious concerns (the word's Greek root, 'eu', meaning 'well' or 'good' of course paralleling his own name; translating, as many have noted, as 'well-born').⁵⁶³

I want to focus on three episodes in the novel that all represent confrontations of a sort and help elucidate my points about Eugene's facility with language, and the fact that in this novel Dickens builds characters into constellations that propagate a far wider welter of associations than is traditionally affiliated to character. Worlds of selfhood collide.⁵⁶⁴ The key dichotomy between Eugene and Bradley could be roughly divvied out as: secular mythology (Eugene's sickbed delirium manifests as a Dantesque dislocation: 'wandering in those

⁵⁶¹ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 724. Holly Furneaux argues for a sexual undercurrent to Eugene and Mortimer's relationship but the calm delivery seems to derive from a place of uninflected sincerity; see Furneaux, p. 105. 'Theatre's menace [...] "was not its threat to the integrity of sincerity, but the theatricality of sincerity itself" '; Nina Auerbach, one of many scholars who have linked the Victorian melodramatic tradition with the idiom of voiced feeling, quoted by Kaplan, pp. 244-68 (p. 253). Also see John, *Dickens's Villains*.

⁵⁶² 'Agreed! Dismissed! [...] I hope it may not be so often that so much is made of so little'. *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 231.

⁵⁶³ See for example, Poole, 'Introduction', ix-xxv (xv).

⁵⁶⁴ Richard T. Gaughan says something similar: 'The characters are related as symbolic force fields which determine and shape each other/ through their energy and momentary configuration rather than through their reflective powers.' See 'Introduction: Prospecting for Meaning in *Our Mutual Friend*', *Our Mutual Friend*, xiii-xxx (xxv).

places [...] endless places') versus Bradley's, what could be termed, ironically, Old Testament sensibility.⁵⁶⁵ Bradley does not have a faith (or trace of folk psychology – contemptuous of Riderhood's conviction that he cannot drown) but his self-conceived images, when used to further expression, have an apocalyptic edge. To Lizzie: 'No man knows till the time comes, what depths are within him. To some men it never comes; let them rest and be thankful! To me [...] the bottom of this raging sea [...] has been heaved up ever since' (386). This evokes the apocalyptic tenor of the Book of Revelation; the sea giving up its dead in a divine calling to account; natural mores upended.⁵⁶⁶ It could be one of Dickens's incorporated ironies: after all, he was going to call Bradley 'Amos', a name of appropriate Hebraic heft.⁵⁶⁷ Then there is the contrast between Eugene's easeful, organic mode of operation that is critically without anchor (Dickens's first positing of Eugene could be this 1857 notebook entry: 'an/ easy, airy fellow [brought] into [relations with people he/ knows nothing about'] versus an inorganic, dissonant way of relating to the world; a chronic degree of unease.⁵⁶⁸ Bradley represents polarised ends rather than means, rigid route maps; whereas Eugene represents discursiveness, negotiation of the lost state; his own lack of commitment arbitrated as fodder for entertainment. There are other extensions to the dichotomy, but these, respectively thematic and motor-orientated, are the ones I concentrate upon.

There is a telling moment which presages the kind of linguistic acrobatics that Eugene commonly employs. Jenny Wren is the arbitrator. She elects Eugene's inner language; which is evaluative from a perspective of privilege, whereby things really do pass muster dependent upon whether they amuse. If this were Eugene's only inner language, he really would be the man who felt that a colour sense mattered more than a personal morality. It occurs when Eugene has been listening to Jenny's personal whimsies for quite a while. She has no illusions as to his reason for being present. 'What poor fun you think me; don't you, Mr Wrayburn? You may well look tired of me. But it's Saturday night, and I won't detain you' (233). 'Poor' here has a cadence derived from the dormitories of the public school: it means betraying the status quo, not preserving the

⁵⁶⁵ 'If you knew the harassing anxiety that gnaws and wears me when I am wandering in those places – where are those endless places, Mortimer?'; *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 720.

⁵⁶⁶ 'And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works'. Revelation 20. 13.

⁵⁶⁷ See Joel Brattin, 'Dickens's Creation of Bradley Headstone', *Dickens Studies Annual: Essays on Victorian Fiction* (New York: AMS Press, 1984) vol. 14, 147-165 (p. 147). In his notebooks Dickens's lists of names gradually evolve from wholly Anglicised to notably Judaic in character, e.g.: 'Rebecca', 'Rebinah', 'Zerubbabel', 'Sarah Goldsacks' (1864). See Kaplan, ed., *Notebooks*, p. 23.

⁵⁶⁸ The full entry runs as follows: 'Set of circumstances which suddenly bring an/ easy, airy fellow into [upward arrow] near [upward arrow] relations with people he/ knows nothing about, and has never even seen'. See Kaplan, ed., *Notebooks*, p. 14.

jubilant ‘folly’ that staves off ‘melancholy’ (to borrow terms from Eugene’s deflecting ditty).⁵⁶⁹ Language as perpetual euphemism. This sits adjacent to Jenny’s use in relation to her ‘blessed children’ (‘it’s poor me!’); and Jenny’s father’s appropriation of the word a few pages later, in his own self-defining vignette: ‘Poor shattered invalid. Trouble nobody long’ (235). This is also inflected, by a deliberate degrading abjection; ‘poor’ a mewling whimper of self-pity (again, such a use stems from a wider culture). Then, at the very end of the chapter, Dickens rounds off with this: ‘Poor doll’s dressmaker! How often so dragged down by hands that should have raised her up; how often so misdirected when losing her way on the eternal road, and asking guidance! Poor, poor little doll’s dressmaker!’ (237). The word gathers up on Jenny herself. Of course it occupies its only viably serious berth at this moment, but Jenny is essentially demeaned by Dickens’s need to deliver such hyperbole when she has proven herself so rebarbative, witty, strong. She cannot escape this wider knowledge of her vulnerability, in keeping with the novel’s veto on anyone occupying a position of dignity overlong.

Narrative knowledge, of course, also renders Eugene the butt of a linguistic joke when he is introduced in a vignette which both sums up his life stance and pre-empts his near-demise: ‘Reflects Eugene, friend of Mortimer; buried alive in the back of his chair’ (11).⁵⁷⁰ *Our Mutual Friend*, read closely, allows us to swivel back and forward between these instances, experiencing a kind of dual horror and amusement at the chutzpah of language that snappily does for the slower gradients of compassion or sympathy (the character sits in ‘mutual’ relation to these attitudes, like the puppet to the stage and trap door).⁵⁷¹ A version of this process of verbal repackaging is paralleled by Eugene’s treatment of Bradley in their first, and only direct, encounter.

The balance of power is established at the outset by the foregrounding of Eugene’s ‘take’. ‘Two belated wanderers in the mazes of the law’, is how he announces Bradley and Charley’s arrival to Mortimer; recalibrating the pair’s urgency of purpose in his own operational mode: evocative of myth; lacking agenda (279).⁵⁷² When Bradley and he actually begin talking a linguistic game is initiated that really does resemble a pugilistic fight or duel, with Eugene undermining Bradley’s every new move; causing him to score own goal after own goal. (‘I scorn your shifty evasions’, as Bradley, with rare perspicaciousness, says; and perhaps

⁵⁶⁹ ‘Away with melancholy,/Nor doleful changes ring/On life and human folly,/But merrily merrily sing/Fal la’; *Our Mutual Friend*, 287. Eugene’s easy musicality is another link between himself and Jenny.

⁵⁷⁰ Seated at the Veneering dining table opposite ‘the great looking glass above the sideboard’, in one of a series of documented reflections which gives the reader the essence of a character in one gestural swab. *Our Mutual Friend*, pp. 10-11.

⁵⁷¹ The ‘very-ill looking puppet’, as discussed in my chapter introduction; *Pictures from Italy*, pp. 16-24 (p. 17).

⁵⁷² Most obviously the labyrinth in the Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur.

there is a hint that Eugene learnt to fence at school).⁵⁷³ Bradley is agonisingly keen to get his point across but constantly misfires, so ends up voicing his own mechanical shifts towards a desired end: a humiliating exposé. A close reading of how this plays out allows us to fully appreciate the alacrity of Eugene's ability to use words for the purpose that suits him at a given moment; they themselves don't change but migrate according to Eugene's decided context; as did 'poor' within my previous, narrative-led, example.

The linguistic game starts straight away, when Eugene reprimands Bradley: 'My good sir, you should teach your pupils better manners' (280). Charlie is schoolchild and eyes both; leading Bradley to the correct individual, foregrounding the encounter; apparently glossing and representing the larger self behind. The conversation is immediately barbed by the implication of insufficient social grace, a sustained theme. When Bradley responds he uses 'natural' in an uninflected way, to mean inevitable, self-evidently justified:

'In some high respects, Mr Eugene Wrayburn,' said Bradley, answering him with pale and quivering lips, 'the natural feelings of my pupils are stronger than my teaching.'
'In most respects, I dare say', replied Eugene, enjoying his cigar, 'though whether high or low is of no importance. You have my name very correctly. Pray what is yours?'
'It cannot concern you much to know, but—'
'True,' interposed Eugene, striking sharply and cutting him short at his mistake, 'it does not concern me at all to know. I can say Schoolmaster, which is a most respectable title.' (280)

Eugene switches this, one instance of varying technique. He shifts words within their semantic frame; 'stronger' becomes qualitative, meaning better, more effective, and Bradley's teaching is thereby derogated ('In most respects, I dare say'). Eugene also employs a measure of semantic complexity that is a direct by-product of education and culture. By referring to 'high or low' in the context of 'nature', he introduces a conception of natural man situated on a gradient between brutishness and civility, derived from Rousseau's *Émile*.⁵⁷⁴ Twice he implies that Bradley requires a remedial degree of external corrective: 'You have my name very correctly', 'a most respectable title'; patronising the nominal values of the lower middle class, and hinting that the base opposite is worryingly proximate. When Bradley falls back upon a defensive stance Eugene is merciless in utilising that, disallowing him the key expression of identity which is the stating of the name. He takes Bradley's parrying rebuff on trust, making it over-literal; a technique he uses again and again, which cleverly reveals his rival's hypocrisy when Bradley points out that he bypasses Charlie:

'I don't know, Mr Wrayburn,' answered Bradley, with his passion rising, 'why you address me——'

⁵⁷³ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 285.

⁵⁷⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile Or Treatise On Education* (1762; published in English, 1763), as discussed in relation to *Oliver Twist*. 'The vital genius of the book inspired the whole progressive school of educational thought in the nineteenth century'; see Coveney, p. 45.

‘Don’t you?’ said Eugene, ‘Then I won’t.’ (281)

After the interval in which Charlie expounds on the set-up with Lizzie being taught via a contact of Eugene’s as opposed to Bradley and not much is said between the two men, Bradley sends the boy away, and launches into a honest confession that somehow will not accrue the seriousness to which it aspires; and we have a concentrated show of Eugene’s technique, in which he turns his interlocutor’s own words against themselves. An understandably pained cry from Bradley, which echoes Old Testament verses, is nullified by Eugene: ‘I don’t think about you’ (preempting the dialogue between Eugene and Lizzie, and all the fraught pyrotechnics of thinking about another within an intimate bond).⁵⁷⁵ Bradley counters this, using the phrase ‘you know better’ in the sense of probing an untruth; but Eugene drives home by informing the phrase with a socially derived inflection, meaning knowing how to behave; not disgracing the self within society:

‘You think me of no more value than the dirt under your feet’ [...] ‘I assure you, Schoolmaster,’ replied Eugene, ‘I don’t think about you’.
‘That’s not true’ returned the other; ‘you know better.’
‘That’s coarse,’ Eugene retorted; ‘but you *don’t* know better.’ (283)

To presume knowledge of another’s psyche is implicitly ‘coarse’. When Bradley strains to reverse this power balance by insisting on rightful audience: ‘I WILL be heard, sir’, Eugene does it again: ‘As a schoolmaster [...] you are always being heard’; creating a snide picture of a droning pedagogue (283). Ironically given the earlier instance of its use, Bradley then employs ‘nature’ in the manner of Rousseau to mean a native power that if appropriated correctly dislocates him from mere civic codes: ‘Do you suppose that a man, in forming himself for the duties I discharge, and in watching and repressing himself daily to discharge them well, dismisses a man’s nature?’ (283). At this point Bradley really does undermine himself, with no prompting from Eugene, by confessing in full to the disconnect between his social self and inner drives.

Later, Eugene exposes Bradley’s interest in Lizzie: ‘Are you her schoolmaster as well as her brother’s?—Or perhaps you would like to be?’; and goes on: ‘A natural ambition enough [...]. The sister—who is something too much upon your lips, perhaps—is so very different from all the associations to which she has been used [...] that it is a very natural ambition’ (285). What is ‘natural’ here is of course the sex drive, itself a Freudian presence in Eugene’s cigar, smoked throughout; and by taking this line he punctures what he perceives to be Bradley’s central hypocrisy: the disguising of sexual interest as something else. ‘[T]oo much

⁵⁷⁵ ‘You think me of no more value than the dirt under your feet’; *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 283. Bradley’s comment echoes Genesis 3. 15, as the Lord God renders the serpent ‘cursed [...] above every beast of the field’: ‘And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.’ Also: ‘And the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly’, Romans 16. 20.

on your lips', though ostensibly meaning spoken about, has an undeniable edge of crudity, suggesting salivating desire. Bradley does not catch this sly humiliation. Instead he reacts to the shameless class critique, and loops Charley back into his self-defence, announcing his allegiance to the boy; no doubt partly to derail the shift to Lizzie, but also perhaps because – noting Mortimer's silent companionship to Eugene throughout – he feels a lack in this regard.⁵⁷⁶ He has been truly undermined by Eugene who, when he has gone, will not relinquish the sexual insinuation, now segueing Bradley's pain about supposed origin with the biblical idea of sexual knowledge and literally un-trackable fathers: 'The man seems to believe that everybody was acquainted with his mother!' (286).

The Bradley/Eugene dialogue is Shakespearean in its semantic complexity and toughness. Dickens demonstrates therein several things that find a newly evolved equipoise in *Our Mutual Friend*. There is the switch from earlier character binaries wherein earnest feeling elicited reader sympathy; mannered pretence, particularly in an upper class character, alerting us concordantly to vice. In a further triplicate, semantic switch that is a measure of the novel's sophistication, Eugene uses pretence to unearth hypocrisy which even Bradley is only semi-conscious of. For all its occasional sadism, Eugene's voice has a wider tutelary force. He also builds upon Dickens's own narrative technique of allowing language itself to become the slipstream in which the subtlest shifts of power occur, often through semantic orientation as opposed to change in form: an art that requires the reader to have as good an ear as eye. He introduces hints of impure association that may prove critical in their revelation of character, but equally may stem purely from the reader's over-interpretation; so recalling the ambiguous puppetry at Lyons, and anticipating the ambiguities of Modernism.

Eugene and Lizzie

This sophisticated linguistic play returns in the conversation between Lizzie and Eugene; moderated by both participants. For the first time Eugene reveals himself to be the weaker party in debate. His manoeuvres are conditioned by local upset as opposed to sustained agenda. Even the instance, seen as proof of his 'cruelly callous fatalism' by Brian Cheadle, when he 'force[s] her to disclose her heart' (the one moment Lizzie occupies a stereotypical space; 'droop[ing] before' him) has the reactive sharpness of needled irritation (676).⁵⁷⁷ The stage is set for Lizzie's rescue of Eugene. She is in command. Even the chapter's titular 'Cry for Help' is hers. Though of course a spontaneous cadence of pain, it represents something of her actual

⁵⁷⁶ 'My hand and heart are in this cause, and are open to him'; *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 285.

⁵⁷⁷ See Cheadle, pp. 211-33 (p. 227).

command of landscape and scene: ‘the river and shores rang to the terrible cry she uttered’ (683). The ‘river and shores’ become cymbals; Lizzie a goddess of nature, in symbiotic relation to her waterside genealogy. Eugene relies on his culturally inherited plethora of references; and they seem patently trope-like by contrast. ‘How could you be so cruel?’ he asks Lizzie, using a term which derives from a long tradition of amatory literature, improbably protesting victimhood (675). Lizzie immediately reloads the word with the semantic force that comes from raw feeling: ‘[...] is there no cruelty in your being here to-night?’ (675).

Eugene’s most sincere invective is one of self-reproach, rather bizarrely dispensed upon Lizzie: ‘You don’t know how the cursed carelessness that is over-officious in helping me at every other turning in my life, WON’T help me here. You have struck it dead, I think, and I sometimes almost wish you had struck me dead along with it’ (675). Of course this employs another literary conceit, that of dying for love, though in a markedly deflationary image which nevertheless reveals, ironically, Eugene’s sense of invulnerability from physical harm – of a type that exactly prefigures his imminent experience. His main sentiment is peevishness. The most important exchange, which shows Eugene attempting to utilise the chiasmic patterning of amatory exchange from Renaissance to Victorian verse, occurs as Lizzie attempts a stabilising rationale:

[...] You have not thought. But I entreat you to think now, think now!
‘What am I to think of?’ asked Eugene bitterly.
‘Think of me.’
‘Tell me how not to think of you, Lizzie, and you’ll change me altogether’.
‘I don’t mean in that way. Think of me, as belonging to another station, and quite cut off from you in honour. Remember that I have no protector near me, unless I have one in your noble heart. Respect my good name. If you feel towards me, in one particular, as you might if I was a lady, give me the full claims of a lady upon your generous behaviour. I am removed from you and your family by being a working girl. How true a gentleman to be as considerate of me as if I was removed by being removed by being a Queen!’
He would have been base indeed to have stood untouched by her appeal. His face expressed contrition and indecision as he asked:
‘Have I injured you so much, Lizzie?’ (675-6)

Within the tight rotation of ‘Think of me’ many meanings coalesce. Lizzie asks that Eugene consider her position realistically (i.e. think of what you expose me to). He re-appropriates ‘think’ as the motor of all cogitation. She realigns it as purposive consciousness; asking Eugene to conceptualise her situation in a figure which connotes medieval mores of knightly chivalry. She gently acknowledges desire: ‘If you feel towards me, in one particular, as you might if I was a lady’; a dividend within class-appropriate courtship, yet also cutting across those confines as ‘lady’ becomes representative simply of gender. But then, she builds upon that more contingent sense of blood nobility, as a valid claim to behavioural concession; for obviating the primal claims of desire: ‘give me the full claims of a lady upon your generous behaviour’.

At the baseline of these verbal pyrotechnics is the question of how to sustain love through crisis. If unfeasible, love may be most truly expressed by its willed erasure: in the voluntary removal of one party. Lizzie's physical relocation and firm words counter a problematic heritage in Dickens's novels. As Adela Pinch notes, the paradox of any approximate articulation of 'Do not think of me', is that it binds the recipient into doing just that.⁵⁷⁸ Amy Dorrit and Pet Meagles are mutually guilty of sending this message to Arthur Clenham, who has unresolved romantic relations with both women; in Amy's long letters of effusive self-erasure; in Pet's mediated messages that he should think of her as 'very happy'.⁵⁷⁹ Lizzie removes herself from this garrulous (and usually feminine) zone of subverted connection; though the narrative concedes the true cost in this median aside: 'she—who loved him so in secret' (676). As time and time again in *Our Mutual Friend*, the genius is that this phrase factors like the flood that opens up under ground, undermining context; belying its slight initial show. This is partly because the reader feels a galvanising interest in a connection so much more promising than prohibition. Like Lizzie herself, when she realises that she does have 'power to move him so', emotion holds the advantage over reason (675).

Lizzie's role as representatively refuting the stereotype of the pliant, subject, feminine continues.⁵⁸⁰ It is part of a larger operation wherein, oddly, Eugene takes on some of the associations of substantive ethereality and temperamental fractiousness not usually connected with the masculine (but associated, significantly, with the Aesthetic). When Lizzie explains that she will remove herself again and again from his reach, ('force me to quit the next place') in perpetual relay, he protests, using maximum verbal (and novelistic) artillery:

'Are you so determined, Lizzie – forgive the word I am going to use, forgive the word I am going to use, for its literal truth – to fly from a lover?'
 'I am so determined,' she answered resolutely, though trembling, 'to fly from such a lover. There was a poor woman died here but a little while ago, scores of years older than I am, whom I found by chance lying on the wet earth [...] Though she was weak and old, she kept true to one purpose to the very last. Even at the very last, she made me promise that her purpose should be kept to [...] What she did, I can do.' (676)

Eugene lapses into a state of pique, discounting Lizzie's many well-modulated arguments. She, by contrast, reasserts a form of redoubtable firmness which suggests chivalric codes of honour and sacred quests. A link

⁵⁷⁸ See Adela Pinch, *Thinking About Other People in Nineteenth Century British Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 156.

⁵⁷⁹ '—for I am happy, though you have seen me crying'; 'Say I was very well and very happy. And that I thanked him affectionately, and would never forget him.' Pet's remarks typify the idiom, *Little Dorrit*, pp. 336, 440.

⁵⁸⁰ The posture Lizzie lapses briefly into, when weakened by her attraction to Eugene: 'she dropped, and he caught her on his arm', is the romantic extension of a more measured convention of gendered reliance as embodied by Miss Peecher's vision of herself and Bradley: 'the womanly form's head reposed upon the manly form's shoulder'. *Our Mutual Friend*, pp. 677, 329.

to land and history manifests through Betty Higden and ‘the wet earth’ (it is as if Lizzie ‘earths’ the whole dialogue at this point; and gives the keynote that will prevail across the rescue scene; as ‘lightening’ is conducted from its malevolent end).⁵⁸¹ Maybe we are meant to think of the consummate archetype, Queen Elizabeth I (Cf. ‘How true a gentleman to be as considerate of me as if I was removed by being a Queen!’), who famously stated that she had ‘the body of a weak, feeble woman; but [...] the heart and stomach of a king’.⁵⁸² At this stage, there is something of the beleaguered courtier about Eugene.

In fact Lizzie’s strength becomes more apparent as she tries to deflect Eugene’s arguments upon her own ground, within the region of hypothetical figure (or fantasy if we recall her gazing into the flames). When he posits: ‘Let me know how you would have dealt with me if you had regarded me as being what you would have considered on equal terms with you’, it is deliberately obfuscating; we can hardly follow the recursive hypotheses (677).⁵⁸³ But Lizzie will not occupy this little niche, this ‘theory of mind’ proclivity.⁵⁸⁴ Though her rebuttal is revealing as to the emotional conflux that has accrued around each instance of contact (later, I will discuss how her own body of love, unvoiced, is as dangerous in its way as Eugene’s ambivalence). It is noteworthy that she dwells upon ‘the night that passed into the morning when you broke to me that my father was dead’; it draws attention to Eugene’s willingness to not only witness, but be patient with, the first and inevitably messy stage of grief (677).⁵⁸⁵ Lizzie comes to a new rawness of explication when she is forced to argue still further: ‘Because you *were* so different [...] Because it was so endless, so hopeless. Spare me’ (678). The slip to a form of generic spiralling, ‘it was so endless, so hopeless’ realises the degree to which her intelligence has conceptualised their bond as one which outlaws subjective interests. She makes her story everywoman’s, everyman’s; both larger and smaller than it is. Eugene, again weakly, bypasses this subtle shift, reverting to plangency: ‘Did you think of me at all, Lizzie?’ (678); and surreptitiously pressing for her to feel wanting in the selfless compassion that she herself foregrounded. Her response fully articulates the sequential honing of what Adela Pinch terms ‘love thinking’: ‘if you do truly feel at heart that you have

⁵⁸¹ ‘Was he struck by lightening?’; Eugene’s first reaction to Bradley’s blows. *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 681.

⁵⁸² Adrian Poole notes that ‘Betty’ and ‘Lizzie’ are both derivatives of ‘Elizabeth’. See Poole, ‘Introduction’, ix-xxv (xvi). The name, of Hebrew origin, translates as ‘oath of God’; apposite to the novel’s final part, as Lizzie pulls Eugene back from the abyss of myth and rehouses him within the Christian sacrament of marriage. Elizabeth Tilbury Speech, July 1588; see <<http://www.bl.uk/learning/timeline/item102878.html>>

⁵⁸³ As per Eric Kaplan’s *New Yorker* cartoon byline: ‘Of course I care about how you imagined I thought you perceived I wanted you to feel’; quoted by Liza Zunshine, who identifies Daniel Dennett’s text, *I Know That You Know That I Know* (1983) as the first to moot the ‘recursiveness of the levels of intentionality’ which he thought ‘could be, in principle, infinite’; see Zunshine, pp. 28-9.

⁵⁸⁴ Lisa Zunshine quotes the work of Peter Carruthers upon the aspect of consciousness that facilitates role-play and empathy: ‘our awareness of our ‘trying on’ mental states *potentially available* to us but at a given moment differing from our own’. Zunshine, p. 17.

⁵⁸⁵ Brian Cheadle notes Eugene’s ‘extraordinary tact and kindness’ in bringing Miss Abbey to help break the news to Lizzie; but surely his seeing the occasion out, and never expanding on it verbally, is the strongest testament to this. See Cheadle, p. 229.

indeed been towards me what you have called yourself to-night, and that there is nothing for us in this life but separation, then Heaven help you, and Heaven bless you!' (678).⁵⁸⁶ Lizzie is saying that if Eugene really does love her then that equates to separation not as choice but as given ('and' not 'then').

By the river

In the scene of Bradley's attack on Eugene, and his rescue by Lizzie, we have three 'force fields' in play, to use Richard T. Gaughan's resonant term for what I have called constellations: networks of referents that make up individual characters.⁵⁸⁷ Bradley, inevitably, conditions the attack itself; the prose breaking down into a dissonant, fractured, fabric: 'In an instant, with a dreadful crash, the reflected night became crooked, flames shot jaggedly across the air, the moon and stars came bursting from the sky' (681). The charged fragmentation is an assault upon the fluidity of organic form that equates to rightfulness of circumstance; signalling something gone awry in the world, building upon the imagery of misalignment that Dickens creates for Bradley and articulating the same message of fundamental upset to Lizzie, within earshot: 'It sickened her, for blows feel heavily and cruelly on the quiet of the night' (681).

The attack nevertheless signals a process of cataclysmic change and renewal for Lizzie and Eugene. Pertinently, as the scene evokes the legend of Orpheus; transmuted into the Western literary canon chiefly through translations of Virgil and Ovid.⁵⁸⁸ Orpheus meets a violent end at the hands of the Maenads, who tear him limb from limb.⁵⁸⁹ A figure summarily representative of beauty and art is violated; in both body, and belief system.⁵⁹⁰ In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* the attack extends to the bard's surroundings, to his companions:

Those frantic women tore apart the oxen
That threatened with their horns, and streamed to slay
The bard. He pleaded then with hands outstretched
And in that hour for the first time his words
Were useless and his voice of no avail.⁵⁹¹

⁵⁸⁶ See Pinch, 'Introduction: Love thinking' (2010), 1-22.

⁵⁸⁷ Gaughan, xiii-xxx (xxv).

⁵⁸⁸ The classical sources are: Euripides, *Alcetes*, 357-62; Virgil, *Georgics* 4, 453-525; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 10. 1-11, 84. See Simon Price and Emily Kearns, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of Classical Myth and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 394-5 (p. 395).

⁵⁸⁹ 'They rushed upon the bard,/Hurling their leaf-dressed lances, never meant/For work like that; and some slung clods, some flints,/Some branches torn from trees'. See Ovid, 'The Death of Orpheus', *Metamorphoses*, trans. by A.D. Melville (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), XI, 30.

⁵⁹⁰ 'Orpheus, the quintessential mythical singer, son of Apollo and a Muse, whose song had more than human power'. See Price and Kearns, eds., (2003), pp. 394-5 (p. 395).

⁵⁹¹ Ovid, XI, 42.

The land echoes with the cacophonous crime: ‘The woods that often followed as he sang,/The flinty rocks and stones, all wept and mourned for Orpheus’; just as ‘the quiet of the night’ resounds with a kind of acoustic horror (681). There is a parity with Eugene here, and his attenuated privilege of verbal command (‘for the first time [...] his voice of no avail’); even the almost exorbitant traction of his charm. Lizzie collects her boat from ‘a landing-place under the willow tree’; in Greek mythology ‘the river-loving willow’ is sacred to poets and symbolic of mourning, with some accounts linking it in particular with Orpheus.⁵⁹² (There is a bilateral echo too of Psalm 137. 2, perhaps, with its tale of exile and voices silenced: ‘We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof’).⁵⁹³

Dickens is not offering up Eugene in such grandiose freight as transcendent myth however. Eugene’s Orpheus is a creature mediated by contemporary Aesthetics. As in life, his body is in perpetual elision, escaping capture; and Dickens builds up a series of phrases which emphasise the visionary aspect of this; bringing to mind the uneasy fusion of beauty and horror within later Aesthetic/Decadent texts such as the ‘Fantastic Stories’ of Vernon Lee, obsessed with ritual and perverted transubstantiation.⁵⁹⁴ ‘[S]he saw a bloody face turned up towards the moon, and drifting away’; ‘the floating face’; ‘Just so had she first dimly seen the face which she now dimly saw again’; ‘Once, she let the body evade her, not being sure of its grasp. Twice, and she had seized it by its bloody hair’; ‘It was insensible, if not virtually dead; it was mutilated, and streaked the water all about it with dark red streaks’ (682). There is an insistent evasion of form here; a repeated return of effect. A lack of distinct messaging informs the slippage to the neutral pronoun; there is a dreamy ambience to the carriage of the damaged body that belies its mutilated state; there is a congruence between floating body, and the curve of a face that in itself parallels the moon. A whole aesthetic is in place.

Oscar Wilde appropriated Ovid for ‘The Decay of Lying’ (1890), fixing upon the myth of Apollo and Marsyas; replete with that dual fascination of beauty and horror.⁵⁹⁵ As discussed, a similar binary confuses

⁵⁹² Ovid, ‘Orpheus and Eurydice’, *Metamorphoses*, x.

⁵⁹³ ‘By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.| We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof’. Psalm 137. 1-2. A basic crib runs: ‘[t]he exiles, complaining that they are unable to sing their native songs in a strange land, speak of hanging their harps on willows’. The theme of languages at odds reprises Lizzie and Eugene’s conversation and the prefiguration of Eugene in Dickens’s 1857 notebook as one exposed to difference (to humanising effect): ‘an/ easy, airy fellow [brought] into near relations with people he/ knows nothing about, and has never even seen’. See Susan Gillingham, *Psalms Through the Centuries: Volume One* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), p. 173; Kaplan, p. 14.

⁵⁹⁴ Vernon Lee, *Hauntings, Fantastic Stories* (1890).

⁵⁹⁵ Marsyas was a Greek satyr who excelled at the flute and challenged the god Apollo to a musical context. ‘When, inevitably, Apollo (who played the lyre) won, he cruelly tied Marsyas to a tree and flayed him alive.’ See Stefano Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece: Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 139; also on Wilde’s take, pp. 139-43.

our estimation of Eugene: is he pure sensualist, or does he have some moral core? The language of beauty beguiles. It is possible that Eugene's *parole*, for this is really what it is; albeit more diffused, intrinsic, than solely spoken, appears much earlier in the novel.⁵⁹⁶ A puzzlingly 'literary word' manifests after the gritty description of Gaffer and Lizzie undertaking their dark river trawl: 'A neophyte might have fancied that the ripples passing over it were dreadfully like faint changes of expression on a sightless face; but Gaffer was no neophyte and had no fancies'(6).⁵⁹⁷ The hypothesised subject surprises, but the image recurs in this account of Eugene, when his life is in the balance:

Sometimes his eyes were open, sometimes closed. When they were open, there was no meaning in the unwinking stare at one spot straight before them, unless for a moment the brows knitted in a faint expression of anger, or surprise [...] [Jenny] would sing, just above breath, when he opened his eyes, or she saw his brow knit into that faint expression, so evanescent that it was like a shape made in water (718).

This is the 'sightless face', soon to be attended by Gaffer's daughter as bride. Again, water is an element which frustrates by its fluid change as well as healing by its plastic power to wash and absolve. The title of Dickens's first chapter, 'The Cup and the Lip', has puzzled critics; but is surely bound to that 'literary word', 'neophyte', meaning acolyte or votary.⁵⁹⁸ There are two possible uses of 'The Cup', for an act of libation or inebriation, or the provision of succour. In the novel these occur in the drugging of John Harmon; and in Lizzie comforting the dying Betty Higden: 'Let me wet your lips again with this brandy'(500). The Dionysian hedonist risks the dissolution of reality in their pursuit of pleasure. The Good Samaritan augments the sufferer's consciousness by kindness and provision. When we think of Eugene and his trajectory through the novel it is one which sits uneasily at the anchor point between a conscience and a kind of moral slippage, which is in effect a forsaking of co-ordination; of firm hold. At this stage in the novel he is still the creature of secular myth; or in Victorian reimagining of myth, Tennyson's *The Lotus Eaters* rather than *Ulysses*.⁵⁹⁹

Orpheus would have been on Dickens's mind since he saw Gluck's opera, *Orphée*, arranged by Berlioz, at the Paris Opera in the winter of 1862. The opera tells the story of Orpheus and his pursuit of his wife

⁵⁹⁶ Cf. Saussure, *General Linguistics*.

⁵⁹⁷ [...] "neophyte", an oddly literary word, impossible in every way for Gaffer'. See Jeremy Tambling, *Dickens' Novels as Poetry: Allegory and Literature of the City* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2014), p. 174.

⁵⁹⁸ Empson glosses such effects beautifully: 'a word in a speech which falls outside the expected vocabulary will cause an uneasy stir in all but the soundest sleepers'. See Empson, p. 23.

⁵⁹⁹ Alfred Tennyson, 'The Lotus Eaters', from *Poems* (1832), 'Ulysses', from *Poems* (1842); see *Selected Poems*, pp. 57; 94.

Eurydice through the Underworld; and his forfeiture of her when he turns back to gaze on her face.⁶⁰⁰ The celebrated mezzo-soprano, Pauline Viardot, played Orpheus. Dickens was deeply moved, writing to Forster:

[...] the beginning of it, at the tomb of Eurydice, is a thing that I cannot remember at this moment of writing, without emotion. It is the finest presentation of grief that I can imagine. And when she has received hope from the Gods, and encouragement to go into the other world and seek Eurydice, Viardot's manner of taking the relinquished lyre from the tomb and becoming radiant again, is most noble. Also she recognises Eurydice's touch, when at length the hand is put in hers from behind, like a most transcendent genius. And when, yielding to Eurydice's entreaties she has turned round and slain her with a look, her despair over the body is grand in the extreme.⁶⁰¹

Lizzie and Eugene's marriage is effected by the 'touch' of hands: 'When the two plighted their troth, she laid her hand on his, and kept it there' (734). Recovering from near-mortal injuries, Eugene is lost in an implicitly subterranean realm, 'wandering in those [...] endless places' (720). He surfaces to the accompaniment of Jenny's song, the novel's lyre: 'she would sing, just above her breath'; her musical facility long compatible with his (718). So the myth gets dispersed incrementally but, symbolically, Orpheus's failure due to a need for phenomenal reassurance: 'longing to look,/He turned his eyes', shadows the novel's key corrective stance of love mediated through absence, selflessness, and potentially unacknowledged (so greatest) sacrifice.⁶⁰²

When Lizzie arrives at the scene of the attack a new idiomatic and symbolic presence enters the fray: a referentially Christian, choric sensibility, built upon the interwoven cadences of personal and ecclesiastical history. A true 'stay' of faith – Lizzie's word for herself in relation to her father – she acts as sometime literal support to both Jenny and her infant brother; and makes the upright of a cruciform as she holds Betty to her breast.⁶⁰³ Her reactions to the sound of blows are immediate and pragmatic: 'Her own bold life and habit instantly inspired her. Without vain waste of breath crying for help when there was none to hear, she ran towards the spot from where the sound had come' (681). As Lizzie apprehends Eugene, she contests idiomatic slippage; dreamy repetitions that threaten to disable that more elastic purpose: 'everywhere, everywhere' 'dimly [...] dimly'(682). She challenges the elusiveness of the 'drifting face', the 'drowning

⁶⁰⁰ '[...] Orpheus took his bride/And with her this compact that, till he reach/The world above and leave Avernus' vale,/He look not back or else the gift would fail'. Ovid, 'Orpheus and Eurydice', x, 60.

⁶⁰¹ To John Forster, 20 November 1862, *Letters*, x, p. 163.

⁶⁰² Ovid, 'Orpheus and Eurydice', *Metamorphoses*, x, 67. Dickens's use of the Orpheus myth could be said to embody what Pauline Fletcher calls: 'appropriating the classics in order to subvert them'. Fletcher notes that in 1844 Dickens's library included 'translations of Ovid, Plutarch and the Greek tragedies'; so he had long acquaintance with Ovid. She makes passing allusion to the Orpheus myth to support her identification of Jenny Wren with 'the swift-footed Hermes [...] escorting Euridice [sic] back from the Underworld'. See Pauline Fletcher, 'Bacchus in Kersey: Dickens and the Classics', *Dickens Studies Annual: Essays in Victorian Fiction*, 27 (1998), 1-22.

⁶⁰³ 'I know that I am in some things a stay to father'; 'So there am I, [...] keeping him as straight as I can'; 'You are/ rather heavy to carry, Charley'; 'She can't retire gracefully unless you help her, Lizzie'. *Our Mutual Friend*, pp. 28-9; 500-1; 27-8; 334.

figure'; the strange aesthetic hegemony of blood and water (682).⁶⁰⁴ It is a surprise when the prayer of thanksgiving cuts into the narration; a call to arms, and implicitly Lizzie's, until Dickens defines that it is actually only partially formulated, a stage behind free indirect speech in fact: 'not for a moment did the prayer check her. She was away before it welled up in her mind' (682).⁶⁰⁵

What is clear is that the sentiment of the prayer carries Lizzie through this difficult exercise; it brings together a sudden fervent recognition of the value of her history: 'that old time [...] through thy wonderful workings it may turn good at last!' (681). This is dual restitution of both that 'old time' and her father, to whom she acted as proverbial right hand; but Dickens carries this forward into something wider, weaving in the rhythms of labour that belong to an age-old tradition of English pastorate: 'sure touch', 'old practiced hand', 'sure stop', 'old practiced foot'. Repetition here affirms rather than destabilises meaning. There is a resilience in place that again challenges the template of the weak feminine, and rehouses Lizzie in a national line: 'she was rowing down the stream as never other woman rowed on English water'. Dickens also anglicises the image framework for Lizzie's above-water realm, making precise and evocative references to 'the red-brick garden-wall'; 'a hilly street that almost dipped into the river'; a modest Arcadia. He uses archaic phraseology to attenuate the linkage to history: 'yonder it was', 'crept aft in the boat'. This is an empowered tribute to those values that Eugene held in suspicious disdain: family, heritage, effort, work; and although Lizzie slips back into the archetype of the affected feminine once the rescue is complete – 'She is quite unconscious', remarks one of the surgeons – her actions are deft and well-measured, in no way informed by emotion, throughout (684). She is a counter-heroine to Maggie Tulliver, in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), that almost contemporaneous and equally watery novel which hinges upon a strained sibling relationship and sexual temptation. Maggie survives neither. She pays tribute to history: 'If the past is not to bind us, where can duty lie? We should have no law but the inclination of the moment', but fails to find a means of drawing together her child and adult selves, with their contingent loyalties.⁶⁰⁶

⁶⁰⁴ Is there another spike of antidote, so characteristic of the novel, here: a reference to the 'blood and water' that issued from the dead Christ's side? 'But one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side, and forthwith came there out blood and water.' John 19. 34.

⁶⁰⁵ It runs: 'Now, merciful Heaven be thanked for that old time, and grant, O Blessed Lord, that through thy wonderful workings it may turn to good at last! To whomsoever the drifting face belongs, be it man's or woman's, help my humble hands, Lord God, to raise it from death and restore it to some one to whom it must be dear!'. *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 681.

⁶⁰⁶ Maggie is pleading with Stephen Guest. George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. by A. S. Byatt (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 496.

Bradley Headstone

Bradley Headstone is perhaps the Dickens character who fits most suggestively into modern psychoanalytic and psychiatric paradigms; dramatic energy contingent to the split between his inner and outer being.⁶⁰⁷ This split is subtler than the one effected by plot between civilian guise and criminal propensities. Bradley is tortured by ‘unthought knowns’; Christopher Bollas’s term for obstacles within the psyche that remain unalleviated by conscious insight.⁶⁰⁸ Dickens expertly conveys the phenomenon of unleavened selfhood as a pressure on both story and text: a ‘loaded gun’, to borrow Emily Dickinson’s resonant phrase.⁶⁰⁹ With Bradley moves a whole world of pain and desire; roughly equivalent to his, aggressively teleological, relationship with the past and the future. It is especially hard to disentangle Bradley, so to speak, because, unusually for a major character in Dickens, we have so few clues as to his family history. He lacks a humanising back-story; we know only that he conquered the odds: a ‘pauper lad’ who forged a path into a ‘respectable’ calling.⁶¹⁰ This lack of context represents a further stricture to augment Bradley’s own inability to enact self-scrutiny in the discursive manner of John Harmon or Eugene. Bradley epitomises the harboured potency that I identify as pertaining to Dickens’s ‘stacked’ characters; though his anatomical wiring is not, as so often with characters of humorous import, simply articulated and summarily communicative, it is torturous and convoluted. The impress he makes derives from irresolution; it sits unhappily.

The irony is that Bradley is conscious of a fundamental misalignment in his engagement with that which is outside himself, and attempts to realign the two through compulsive and often inappropriate honesty; acknowledging his repressions, yet unable to dispense with them lucidly enough to make a conclusive break. ‘I am a man of strong feelings, and I have strongly felt this disappointment. I do strongly feel it. I don’t show what I feel; some of us are/obliged habitually to keep it down. To keep it down’, he tells Lizzie (337). The final phrase, spewing over its healthy confines, replicates the effect of Dickens’s first, telling, description: ‘the schoolmaster was not at his ease. But he never was, quite’ (219). ‘[Q]uite’ upends what might have been a clean statement; the adverb harbours the queazy margin between the acceptable, which Bradley purports to

⁶⁰⁷ Alistair Stewart, for example, considers Bradley’s ‘intrusive memories and ruminations’ in the light of psychiatric studies of ‘young men convicted of violent offences’, judging Dickens’s portrayal percipient. See Alistair Stewart, ‘Post-trauma symptoms in Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend*: better Abel than Cain’, *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 200 (2012), 95.

⁶⁰⁸ See ‘Introduction’, Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known* (London: Free Association Books, 1987), pp. 1-10.

⁶⁰⁹ Emily Dickinson, ‘My Life had stood a loaded gun’, see R. W. Franklin, ed., *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 3 vols., II, no. 764.

⁶¹⁰ ‘Regarding that origin of his, he was proud, moody, and sullen, desiring it to be forgotten’; ‘a most respectable title’ (said in mockery by Eugene); *Our Mutual Friend*; pp. 212, 280.

occupy, and the other. Its residual placement, cast off by the comma, conveys the way Bradley dispenses his integral disquiet onto others.⁶¹¹ They cannot shake him off; a kind of ‘transference’ takes place.⁶¹²

At times of deep stress Bradley literally throws the problem of his unresolved self outward: there is a panicky levity to: ‘I—I leave it all incomplete! There is a spell upon me, I think!’ (337). In another character this might have equated to touching vulnerability, especially as it is a unique instance of Bradley referencing the folkloric or metaphysical, albeit through a figure of speech. When he hypothesises on the consequences of Lizzie’s accepting his proposal, as he sees them, he repatriates the agency of his initial extreme conception of love: ‘You could draw me to fire, you could draw me to water, you could draw me to the gallows, you could draw me to death [...] But if you would return a favourable answer to my offer of myself in marriage, you could draw me to any good – every good – with equal force’ (386). The recursive idiom, ‘my offer of myself’, echoes something native to Dickens’s prose at its most incantatory and opaque: Pip’s ‘the innermost life of my life’, for example; essence compounded by double-involution, a strangely hermetic rhetorical device.⁶¹³ Bradley can only interpret or anticipate experience in this highly charged obverse dialectic of compulsion and force, repression, compression, and fracture under duress; of the kind played out in the minutiae of narrative incident: ‘powdered mortar from under the stone at which he wrenched, rattled on the pavement to confirm his words’; ‘tearing up a tuft of grass’ (387; 617). Bradley’s larger physical motion is equally over-precipitous. Rather than project any form of aligning grace into his environment, he contributes strain and tension: witness his figure, a prone horizontal, a source of fixated watchfulness behind a hayrick (a brilliantly soft counterpoint) as he awaits Eugene’s arrival by the river.⁶¹⁴ The pattern that Eugene choreographs for his quarry, of irregular stops and starts through the City of London, is entirely fitting.

I would propose that, with Bradley Headstone, Dickens trials a new kind of character construction that has a plastic evolution within the text. Broken sentences and extended dashes are used extensively, registering strained pauses in Bradley’s speech. When the agitated schoolmaster asks after Lizzie at the railway station,

⁶¹¹ ‘The modifying word “quite,” which does not appear in the manuscript, concludes the sentence in the proofs and the published text’. See Joel Brattin, ‘Dickens’s Creation of Bradley Headstone’, in *Dickens Studies Annual: Essays on Victorian Fiction*, 14 (1984), 147-65 (p. 149). Only one set of proofs survives; so Brattin deduces ‘an earlier set [...] corrected by Dickens.’

⁶¹² ‘He is a very strange man’, said Lizzie, thoughtfully’. *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 338. Central to theories of psychoanalysis, transference indicates the patient disposing of their burden, ‘compelling the analyst to relive with the analysand the nature of the patient’s early life and to exist with some feeling inside his internal object world’. See Bollas, pp. 1-10 (p. 2).

⁶¹³ ‘In a word, it was impossible for me to separate her, in the past or in the present, from the innermost life of my life’. An obsessive love that comes good. Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. by Margaret Cardwell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 216.

⁶¹⁴ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 673.

Dickens expounds upon the verbal disconnect between two apparently normal qualifiers: ‘ “The name of Hexam. The name of Lizzie Hexam” [...] The break he set between his last two sentences was quite embarrassing to the hearer’ (731). The effect of almost physiological disturbance is transposed from witness to reader. Both are party to cataclysmic emotion that still has, in a way, the temerity to refute recognition, as outward form (words spoken) is maintained. Again, the drama is thereby held within; in lock-down.

Bradley’s juddering body and inchoate speech map his inner rhythms, his spiritual constitution: a taxonomy of motor and function. His ‘constellation’ or ‘force field’ comprises perpetual variants of the same *kinetic* phenomenon: misfire, mishit, faulty circuit – whichever synonym we choose should convey a *process* rather than an imagistic or narrative entity. Dickens attempted to effect an analogously differential experience for the reader by instructing his printer, in manuscript corrections, to incorporate ‘Two white lines’ under the block of text describing the attack on Eugene. This request, as Joel Brattin explains, was missed.⁶¹⁵ Its fulfilment would have been equivalent to Bradley getting into the very fibres of the physical book and briefly stalling its passage, just as he temporarily cuts off Eugene’s consciousness: leaving it a blank. All these diverse ruses disrupt and potentially recondition the recipient’s response systems; much as an atonal piece of music upon the ear might, or abstract collage upon the eye.

There is an inveterate hardness to Dickens’s own narratorial stance towards Bradley which seems to harness a more pervasive scepticism; the sour kernel of that which I posited as the ‘Dickensian negative’. My analysis holds that disappointed ideals – a world-weariness – generated a new form of lyricism in Dickens’s writing; that a forfeiture of accountability released that aesthetic (and psychological) possibility. But, there is an unappeased rub to this scepticism that finds curious salve in Dickens’s worrying of Bradley (a ‘Fetish’ par excellence, as per Maggie’s ‘large wooden doll’ in *The Mill on the Floss*).⁶¹⁶ He is so nearly ‘a genuinely tragic character’, yet not ‘quite’ due to a literal median quality; that translates to an inability to move us.⁶¹⁷ Right from the start Dickens traps Bradley within the median: ‘Bradley Headstone, in his decent black coat and waistcoat, and decent white shirt, and decent formal black tie [...] looked a thoroughly decent young man of six-and-twenty’ (211). It is made clear that the praiseworthy aim of decency (i.e. sound; a positive contributor to society) is a lower-middle class prerogative, tailored by effort rather than ease. Elided with

⁶¹⁵ ‘After [...] “a splash, and all was done,” Dickens wrote in the manuscript “(Printer. A white line here)” (15/767), and then altered this to “Two white lines.” The white lines appear in the extant proofs, but by chance they fall at the bottom of a page where they do not stand out as intentional [with the result] that the lines do not appear in the published text’. See Brattin, pp. 147-165 (p. 159).

⁶¹⁶ ‘[A] large wooden doll [...] now entirely defaced by a long career of vicarious suffering.’ See Eliot, *Mill on the Floss*, p. 31. A.S. Byatt explains how Eliot references ‘the primitive religious habit of punishing a fetish as an image of her own behaviour’, 562n.

⁶¹⁷ ‘He is a genuinely tragic character’. See Gaughan, ‘Introduction’, xiii-xxx (xix).

‘decent’ as a judgement on clothing (passable; but so revealing of origin, of lack), that aim is denigrated with the snobbish efficacy of Eugene himself. There is a violation in Dickens’s own long-established values happening here; in his willingness to use the potential *bildungsroman* of a ‘pauper lad’ made good for a tale of evil in genus (212). Dickens portrays Bradley’s obsessive nature as both ignominious *and* vile; one a break upon, the other a facilitator of, agency. The phrase he uses for Bradley at a distance: ‘a bargeman lying on his face’, embodies that twinning in its combining of blatant contrivance (‘bargeman’) with prostration (‘lying on his face’) (673). Is his author condemning Bradley, or asking us to acknowledge the depths of his character’s despair? Both – in tandem – and Dickens seems to critique the inefficacy of strategy beholden to desire, that sacrifices grace.

Bradley’s relationship with children, and the way Dickens uses the symbolic heft of childhood when explicating this character, foregrounds that integral scepticism. The presence of children begins to frame Bradley in; on every side subverting what we might expect to be a reparative bond. Bradley’s ‘neat prim purse’, a gift from his class, is a rare reminder that the tutelary relationship exists at all.⁶¹⁸ In general Bradley’s vocation seems to offer him no pleasure, no aid to sociability or sympathy; the semi-autobiographical project which is Charlie Hexam forming the sole digression.⁶¹⁹ As is consistent with the novel’s retributive dynamics, no failure to elect a possible good is without consequence. When Charlie makes his ill-judged intervention at the first meeting with Eugene, we learn that:

The boyish weakness of this speech, combined with its great selfishness, made it a poor one indeed. And yet Bradley Headstone, used to the little audience of a school, and unused to the larger ways of men, showed a kind of exultation in it. (282)

It’s a damning judgement; all the more so because it ratifies the dichotomy of sophistication versus callowness that Eugene arbitrates so skilfully. Without a mutually beneficial bond with his class as a counterweight, a generic caveat to having limited adult interaction takes on overriding significance; disclosing that combination of self-aggrandisement and lack of mature perspective which proves Bradley’s undoing. And, as ever in *Our Mutual Friend*, the negative potentiality is quick to take a narrative hold, even when pertaining to the usually inviolable amalgam represented by the concept of ‘children’. Dickens has already introduced Bradley’s school as a degenerate place under hypocritical management: ‘It was a school

⁶¹⁸ ‘Bradley getting out his neat prim purse into his hand (a present made him by penny subscription among his pupils)’; *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 618.

⁶¹⁹ ‘[A]n undeniable boy to do credit to the master who should bring him on. Combined with this consideration there may have been some thought of the pauper lad now never to be mentioned’; *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 212.

for all ages, and for both sexes. The latter were kept apart, and the former were partitioned off into square assortments. But all the place was pervaded by a grimly ludicrous pretence that every pupil was childish and innocent' (208). Human instinct (and Dickens novels past) tells us that there is a chance for these children; but that it is pushed further into abeyance the more their wilder dispensations are allowed to develop unchecked (Cf. the Jellyby brood).⁶²⁰ There is a imagistic analogy to the way Bradley's own character is forced into strictures which bely its true 'nature' (the 'kind of exultation' he exhibits at Charlie's speech hints uncomfortably at a psychosexual bias to his trapped potentialities). '[P]artitioned off into square assortments', the school children replicate the lie of order and unanimity. As in *Oliver Twist*, the child may be far from 'childish'; or fit the prototype enshrined in pedagogic myth ('the good child's book, the Adventures of Little Margery, who resided in the village cottage by the mill', is a stultifying distortion of little Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss*; her character sealed by her pluck and truancy).⁶²¹ In this newly sceptical age, children play out Darwinian truisms rather than simply play. We are given an insight into Bradley's own un-childish persona, 'when a pauper lad', in this elaborate conceit:

Yet there was enough of what was animal, and of what was fiery (though smouldering), still visible in him, to suggest that if young Bradley Headstone, when a pauper lad, had chanced to be told off for the sea, he would not have been the last man in a ship's crew. (211-12)

The reader is initially nonplussed as to exactly what 'the last man in a ship's crew' means; it sounds apocalyptic. And perhaps there is that deliberate edge: connoting the blood and gore that survival of the fittest necessitates. But, nominally, its sense is hierarchical. The child Bradley, Dickens is saying, would have fought for his place in the hypothetical food chain within the archetypal constricted hold of the ship, the crew itself a contrived community, traversing the 'raging sea'.⁶²²

That Darwinian ruthlessness gets played out in Bradley's classroom. By failing to develop a connection to his charges, Bradley leaves them open to 'Rogue' influence. When he falls into his final fit, he is exposed to their joint witnessing: a mocking 'chorus' resembling that of a Greek tragedy; vigilant, at a remove:

⁶²⁰ See 'Telescopic Philanthropy', Book I, chapter IV, Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, ed. by Nicola Bradbury (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 49-63.

⁶²¹ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 208.

⁶²² 'No man knows till the time comes what depths are within him [...] To me, you brought it; on me, you forced it, and the bottom of this raging sea [...] has been heaved up ever since'; *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 386.

With those words, [Riderhood] slouched out of the school, leaving the master to get through his weary work as he might, and leaving the whispering pupils to observe the master's face until he fell into the fit which had long been impending. (776)⁶²³

Such a dour, flat, revelation of a messy and painful situation, the most abject within the novel: a man literally grovelling on the floor, out of control of his faculties.⁶²⁴ Dickens employs an objective tone that leaves Bradley doubly isolated; the narrative retreating in tandem with his escalating demise. It is thematically apt that his fit is framed by twenty or so reactions of an implicitly unilateral kind; without exploratory thought, or the compassion that breadth of perspective affords. Bradley has taught his class to think in taxonomies that would have pleased Mr Gradgrind.⁶²⁵ 'Seas, rivers, lakes, and ponds' they regale mindlessly when Riderhood asks them to recite the 'divisions of water, my lambs' (775). Of course this is perfectly correct, but the implication is of systematic learning by rote; and that there is a parallel omission of permitted subjectivity, emotion, individuation. The spiritual resonance the aquatic element holds within the novel is suppressed within this factual scale of diminution. The gloriously capacious biblical antecedent: 'And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which *were* under the firmament from the waters which *were* above the firmament: and it was so', requiring a leap of faith and imagination to even tender metaphorically, is bypassed.⁶²⁶ Dead sentences cultivate inane minds that greet the humiliation of another with curiosity as opposed to understanding, lacking the resources to construe an empathetic narrative.

In his manuscript notes, Dickens several times referred to Bradley and Charlie's like 'selfish[ness]'.⁶²⁷ Bradley continually makes his own life unpleasant, and is far from lazy. Isn't Eugene more 'selfish'?⁶²⁸ This is a leading question; but as so often, Eugene's type of selfishness is actually predicative of an escape from the stricture of conventional usage, and of future freedoms. In relation to Bradley and Charley, 'great selfishness' equates to the rapacious focalisation of virulent will (similar to Schopenhauer's philosophical conception) (282).⁶²⁹ In this sense Bradley is rather dated – and accordingly more pitiful – as both aesthetic

⁶²³ Dickens uses the term 'chorus' twice, enforcing the reference to classical Greek tragedy. See *Our Mutual Friend*; pp. 776-7.

⁶²⁴ There has been some critical speculation as to whether Bradley experiences epileptic fits. The writings of Samuel-August Tissot, the Swiss physician who specialised in the 'falling sickness', seem pertinent in Joanne Eysell's translation: 'The moral causes are: "violent passions, insults to the soul, overexertion of the mind, and prolonged cogitation."' Quoted by Joanne Eysell, *A Medical Companion to Dickens's Fiction* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2005), p. 86.

⁶²⁵ When Bitzer is asked to define a horse, he famously answers: 'Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive'; etc. See Dickens, *Hard Times*, p. 50.

⁶²⁶ Genesis 1. 7.

⁶²⁷ 'Dickens writes "selfish boy," referring to Charley Hexam, and "and selfish Schoolmaster" beneath it, stressing that Charley and Bradley are related by selfishness'. See Brattin, p. 147.

⁶²⁸ 'Lizzie [...] has affections for a frivolous and selfish upper-class waster, Eugene Wrayburn'. See Stewart, p. 95.

⁶²⁹ The scourge of man according to Schopenhauer, in *The World as Will and Representation* (1818).

and moral entity. Again, Oscar Wilde becomes a percipient spokesperson from a future locus of philosophical refinement, appositely voicing Eugene's gain: 'Selfishness always aims at creating around it an absolute uniformity of type. Unselfishness recognises infinite variety of type as a delightful thing, accepts it, acquiesces in it, enjoys it'.⁶³⁰ The binary reflects one colonising late Victorian culture, expressed summarily in Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), between a flexible way of thinking and being, and a fixed mindset.⁶³¹ Ruskin's feting of the Gothic advocated the same psychology transposed into plastic form: 'Its elements are certain mental tendencies of the builders, legibly expressed in it; as fancifulness, love of variety, love of richness, and such others'.⁶³² I have already discussed how Eugene permits others freedoms through his suspensions of the serious. He never pressures another to change themselves. But Bradley gives no credence to alternative perspectives, in fact he disdains and underestimates them. This is the reason for his striking naivety in relation to the scheming Rogue Riderhood; and his obliviousness to Miss Peecher ('You couldn't trouble me' – never so cruelly or truthfully said).⁶³³

Love, in relation to Bradley, must be understood as a potential source of conversion. The state he occupies is unhealthy, but then so are most unrealised passions in the novel. Lizzie, for example, protests when Bella advises her to dispense with 'this weakness' – her seemingly hopeless attachment to Eugene: 'No, I don't want to wear that out,' [...] 'nor do I want to believe, nor do I believe, that he is not worthy of it. What should I gain by that, and how much should I lose?' (514). It's an uneven freight, idealising the flawed object, and consciously indulging in the inverse breadth which is impossibility. It reminds us of the love of Jemima Tox, or even that of his daughter Florence, for Mr Dombey; metaphorically weaving ever larger frames of fantastical reverence as they circulate over the patriarchal 'cell' in the material household (885). Or Keats's Isabella, nursing Lorenzo's head in the Pot of Basil.⁶³⁴ It is consciously redundant, but provides a route map for articulacy, intelligence, and feeling that have their own deserve; in Lizzie's image: 'like the change in the grain of those hands which are coarse, and cracked, and hard, and brown when I rowed on the river with father, and are softened and made supple by this new work as you see them now' (514). She

⁶³⁰ Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man and Prison Writings*, ed. by Isobel Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 33.

⁶³¹ Arnold conceives of this as the Hellenic ('sweetness and light') versus the more rule-bound, judgemental, Hebraic mode. See Matthew Arnold, 'Hebraism and Hellenism', *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. by J. Dover Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932; repr. 1994), pp. 129-44.

⁶³² John Ruskin, 'The Nature of Gothic', from 'The Stones of Venice, II' (1853), in *Selected Writings*, ed. Dinah Birch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 32-63 (p. 34).

⁶³³ '“No, thank you, Mr Headstone; I'll not trouble you.” “You couldn't trouble me,” said the schoolmaster.”' *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 332.

⁶³⁴ John Keats, 'Isabella or, The Pot of Basil' (1818).

evokes another myth of the Underworld, that of Persephone, or Proserpine – the Roman name deriving from the Latin *proserpere*; to creep forth, like emergent grain – who resided half the year in the Underworld with her abductor, Pluto, or Dis; and the other half on the land with her mother, Ceres, or Demeter, goddess of agriculture and arbiter of the seasons.⁶³⁵ The theme of natural cycles and the Arcadian curvature of the images and language foretells the fruition of Lizzie's identity in the rescue scene.

Bradley, perhaps, could have become something different had his love for Lizzie been realised. When he first sees her, she is greeting her brother with spontaneous warmth. This seems to trigger something in Bradley; perhaps a longing for maternal love without judgement.⁶³⁶ The problem is, however, that he cannot gauge what this possibility is, beyond a stratified intimation: 'But if you would return a favourable answer [...] you could draw me to any good – every good – with equal force' (386). The 'force' gets compacted with anger and frustration once the possibility of fulfilment becomes further askance, so that Jenny's hypothesis to Lizzie has warning power: '*He* wouldn't do to be trotted about and made useful. He'd take fire and blow up while he was about it' [...] 'He wouldn't blow up alone. He'd carry me up with him' (338). This parallels Louisa Gradgrind's infamous warning to her father in advance to her marriage to Bounderby, whom she detests: 'Yet when the night comes, Fire bursts out, father!'.⁶³⁷ Jenny's image uses fire to similarly represent the potential overreach of male sexuality that may make a claim without return; so it becomes, paradoxically, an act of autonomy. With the element of fire, the means are the ends: burning is burnt; there is no interim space. I would suggest that, ultimately, the sexual act so hypothesised and the fire metaphor are, in the cases of both female characters, figures for the utter disallowance of the partner's identity: a scourge entire.

Stanley Cavell writes about this raging impulse to obliterate otherness at essence in relation to Shakespeare's *Othello*: 'The violence in masculine knowing, explicitly associated with jealousy, seems to interpret the ambition of knowledge as that of exclusive possession, call it private property'.⁶³⁸ The point about Bradley is that, thwarted by Eugene, his aspiration to know Lizzie ceases to be exploratory in any way (as we might have anticipated following his recognition of her open affection). It becomes local, ends-focused, and vengeful. Bradley's attack on his rival subsumes those impulses which are the same time an incitement to

⁶³⁵ Cf. Susan as she comforts the child Florence in *Dombey*, as discussed.

⁶³⁶ '“Charley! You”/Taking him to her arms in the old way – of which he seemed a little ashamed – she saw no one else'. *Our Mutual Friend*; p. 219.

⁶³⁷ Dickens, *Hard Times*, p.135.

⁶³⁸ Stanley Cavell, 'Introduction', *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 1-37 (p. 10).

delirium. Cavell expands his thesis on what he calls the ‘skeptical problematic’: ‘With his “jealousy”, Othello’s violence studies the human use of knowledge under the consequence of skepticism. The violence in human knowing is, I gather, what comes out of Heidegger’s perception that philosophy has, from the beginning [...] conceived knowledge under the aegis of dominion’.⁶³⁹

Cavell’s ‘skepticism’ is born out of an acknowledged ignorance about the viability of self and world: ‘the question whether I know with certainty of the existence of the external world and of myself and others in it’.⁶⁴⁰ Such a doubt (cognisant of an absence of faith) is the progenitor of a vengeful rapaciousness; a lack of patience with, or recognition of, others. It is borne out by characters such as Bradley Headstone and Gaffer Hexam, who suffer from critical self-doubt; from a knowledge that in some way they let themselves down, which translates into an impatient presumption of betrayal from others. Gaffer’s interpretation of Charley’s leaving the family triad disallows possibilities other than complete rejection.⁶⁴¹ Gaffer knows that he has been wanting as a father; that knowledge hastens his defence of his patriarchy; to admit otherwise would be too destructive to the self. His incendiary reactions to his children’s supposed betrayals tallies with Cavell’s analysis of Lear’s to Cordelia: ‘a self-consuming disappointment that seeks a world-consuming revenge’.⁶⁴² This helps us understand, too, how Bradley and Gaffer experience shame rather than guilt. As Herbert Morris has outlined, guilt is a reciprocal emotion, tied to ‘fault’.⁶⁴³ Shame acknowledges the failure to live up to a self-conceived standard; often one that seeks, consciously or not, to catapult that self-doubt into the corrective positive: ‘[s]hame [...] may arise through failure to do the extraordinary’.⁶⁴⁴ Morality doesn’t necessarily come into it. For Gaffer emotional honesty would equate to the ‘extraordinary’, but when Bradley repeatedly chafes at his crime’s execution, he is dwelling upon a pathological ‘extraordinary’ that would extinguish self-doubt forever: a release of the self into a fiction of apotheosis, in fact equivalent to its annihilation. In *Our Mutual Friend* the courage to be peripatetic – to ‘go about, wander, doubt’ – is also the acceptance and confrontation of personal weakness. The novel’s characters are privy to enlightenment only in that regard; and to a degree it is their only defence against their author’s supernumerary shifting.

⁶³⁹ Cavell, pp. 1-37 (p. 9).

⁶⁴⁰ Cavell, pp. 1-37 (p. 3).

⁶⁴¹ ‘Let him never come a nigh me to ask me my forgiveness [...] He’s disowned his own father’. *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 73.

⁶⁴² Cavell, pp. 1-37 (p. 6).

⁶⁴³ Herbert Morris, *On Guilt and Innocence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 61.

⁶⁴⁴ Morris, p. 61.

Conclusion

My thesis has explored the potentialities that evolve from Dickens's characterisation through close study of three novels, *Oliver Twist*, *Dombey and Son* and *Our Mutual Friend*, from the early, middle and late period of his fiction writing. I adapted Henry James's phrase the 'economy of apprehension' to sum up the conception of a ratio of notice, that applies equally to Dickens and to his reader. This equated to, in Dickens, firstly: the flexibility of his language in allowing for broad effect through narrow juncture, due to the feeling acuity of his prose as it adapts to a character's situation across the novel's sequential structure; further, proposing that this can allow the reader more pervasive understandings, if we take the time to realise them, of both an affective and cognitive cast. Secondly, that in his building of a character, especially those often deemed (albeit celebrated) as caricature, there is in operation a composition of choices, that in their distinctive quality, imply election through considerable mental processing (whether conscious or ancillary to consciousness). Thirdly, that the utilisation of a wider berth of cultural reference, specifically borrowings from and echoes of biblical, classical, and literary sources, informs Dickens's characterisation in a more allusive and subtly integrated way than has been acknowledged. These three modes, facilitators of propitiousness, parallel the scope of our reception, should we choose to consider it. Hence we can invert the ratio and think of the 'stacked' character as having an impact accordant to its compacted weight, not just of visible components, but of the breadth of choices that Dickens winnowed these from; that the work, if we can call it that, remains realisable in the phenomenon of the velocity of its impact, in the individual reader's mind; and analogously across demographics and generations. Equally, that should we follow through the subtleties of Dickens's referencing, we have in hand a radii of engagement – ideas which might help us turn back in and realise the complexity of the given Dickens character.

A counterargument might suggest that this simply offers a hybridity of critical approaches, without the discipline of one containing perspective. In a sense this is part and parcel of my argument; providing again for a reading of what Dickens does in writing, and what we do in reading, his texts. The chiasmic nature of Dickens's sentence structure, that I have at times highlighted (self-involute phrases such as 'life of my life', for example) is paralleled by the repetitions of theme and precise word formation across the novels, which has given rise to a school of thought considering Dickens's writing as poetry.⁶⁴⁵ The point about poetry is that its recursive patterning facilitates a dynamic similar to that Dickens enjoyed so much in the activity of

⁶⁴⁵ See Joseph P. Jordan, *Dickens Novels as Verse* (Madison; Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012); and Jeremy Tambling, *Dickens's Novels and Poetry: Allegory and Literature of the City* (London: Routledge, 2014).

walking (with purpose): each ground strike is underpinned by a more variant motion; each new fixing of a step is determined by that circulation of limb which conveys an individual gait. So the conventions of poetic form in relation to the mutations of its exercise; the cohesive stamps of rhyme in relation to the stretch of what is contained by a poetic refrain. In Dickens's texts an unlikely ground is there for the taking, and that is their *responsiveness* to every form of critical enquiry. Of course critical enquiry may broach any text or writer, but rarely with such confidence as it can Dickens; knowing that whatever the angle of approach he will give something back: immediately and in generous regard.

This holds for the apparently more plastic province of Dickens's characters, whether we approach them from an emphatically formal perspective, as Steven Connor did through his structuralist reading of Carker's rising with the lark in relation to the Manager's social aspiration (the early riser; the bird that heralds the morning; the escalation of flight), before welding argument into a semiotic square: 'the principle homology [...] height is to lowness as openness is to closure'.⁶⁴⁶ Or, premise a psychoanalytically orientated reading, which can produce a kind of electrically effective *image* as a means of critical analysis: such as Julian Moynahan's of Florence 'want[ing] to get Dombey's head down on the pillow where she can drown him in dissolving love'.⁶⁴⁷ Such multiform give is served by an aspect of Dickens's text that allows for redefinition; in the full cognisant knowledge that it will not be changed by figurative indulgence, and will spring back into its shape for a new critical assailant, much as Bodenheimer conceived of a 'Teflon-covered' Oliver.⁶⁴⁸ (We can't imagine, by contrast, Eliot or Hardy's characters being reprised in such tough, albeit funny, vignettes for psychoanalytic complexes). Moynahan's cross-text hypotheses of 'Jane Austen's odious Sir Walter Elliot romp[ing] in it [Florence's devotion] like a sportive walrus in the sea', is built upon the same mode of propitious, and often creative and thereby perversely enlightening, transference.⁶⁴⁹ Critics can romp in Dickens, so to speak, because his novels give them space to. As Iris Murdoch states: 'The literary writer deliberately leaves a space for his reader to play in'.⁶⁵⁰ With Dickens, that space, unusually for a nineteenth-century author, affords much reward for critical gamesmanship that utilises the device of staggered clues and final resolution; building its own 'homology' through congruence and pattern. Hilary Schor's reading of

⁶⁴⁶ See Connor, p. 29.

⁶⁴⁷ See Moynahan, pp. 121-31 (p. 126).

⁶⁴⁸ '[Oliver] also seems to have been endowed with a Teflon-covered soul that allows him to bounce back and forth between the thieves and the genteel world without incurring permanent damage.' Bodenheimer, p. 74.

⁶⁴⁹ See Moynahan, pp. 121-31, (p. 123).

⁶⁵⁰ See 'A Conversation with Brian Magee', reprinted in Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, pp. 3-30, (p. 5).

Florence's childhood adventure furnishes an example: 'Florence spends a fair part of the novel [...] in the streets: lost, only to be retrieved by that hoarder of daughterly beauty, Mrs Brown'.⁶⁵¹ There is a palpable snap of aplomb to Schor's semantically-honed deduction. The 'affordances' of Dickens's writing – to again adapt Margaret Boden's term for the giving out-ness embedded within a thing's constitution – provide for an escalated pleasure in the critical craft. This encompasses historicist scholarship and materially inflected investigation: 'Thing Theory' finding rich reward in Dickens.⁶⁵² Likewise, highly theoretical practices such as the 'Surface Reading' inaugurated by Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best in *Representations* (2009), which puts an emphasis back upon the words themselves; repackaging the legacy of close reading for an academic generation in thrall to materiality and interdisciplinarity.⁶⁵³

Yet, for all this, Dickens remains rather unknowable.⁶⁵⁴ And I wonder whether there isn't some correlation here between the affordances he provides for criticism in its multiple forms, and the paradox of his characters: both so loved by a broad readership, and regarded at a concessionary remove by scholars. Stephen Gill's summary of *Oliver Twist* is representative: 'for all its weaknesses, it remains the most compelling of Dickens's early novels'.⁶⁵⁵ The novel's 'weaknesses' have uniformly been aligned with the characterisation of Oliver, Rose Maylie, and the cast of virtue. Perhaps it is because Dickens utilises so many different aspects in his character creation: some realist tracking of mindset, as I hope I have demonstrated; alongside appropriation of melodramatic technique; framed in turn by the cultural and literary paradigms that my analysis has only touched upon. Is this equivalent to a balance so entire, it disallows us real access? In that the number of conveyances that Dickens brings into the frame when creating a character about each other and result in an integral friction that stops it being utterly solvable. In this respect the more complex characters become not, to borrow Forster's famous designation, 'round' (though the result might still seem organic), so much as polygonal.⁶⁵⁶ Each side is effected by a different treatment or approach. It is a similar paradigm to that I have sketched in terms of the affordances available to critics, in that apparent access is actually one and the same as a redoubtable integrity.

⁶⁵¹ See Schor, p. 54.

⁶⁵² See for example Claire Pettit, 'Peggotty's Work Box: Victorian Souvenirs and Material Memory', *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*, 53 (2009).

⁶⁵³ Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best, "Surface Reading: An Introduction", in 'The Way We Read Now', *Representations*, 108 (2009).

⁶⁵⁴ As Rosemary Bodenheimer posited in *Knowing Dickens* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007).

⁶⁵⁵ See Gill, 'Introduction', *Oliver Twist*, vii-xxv (xxv).

⁶⁵⁶ See E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (London: Penguin Books, 2005).

I have used figure after figure in explicating these theories, an indulgence as great as Moynahan's image of Walter Eliot romping in Florence Dombey's devotion. But there is something very apposite about employing diagrammatic figures to parse Dickens, precisely because of these integral paradoxes between control and order; and generative result, maximum colour and flair. My sub-title, the adoption of James's phrase the 'economy of apprehension', caters for that irony; for the fact that just as James perceived an 'automatic hardness, in fine', at the base of Dickens's outlook, that is the secret of its apparent antithesis in practice: the prodigality, the imaginative scope, the relentless continuance, that is universally appreciated in his writing.⁶⁵⁷

Character itself becomes rather lost in this conclusion, but it is the true locale of any unappeased debates about Dickens's standing. Henry James, in fact, has not been a kind presence to Dickens in terms of posterity, influencing twentieth century critical perspectives both by what he was as a writer (purportedly, a great psychologist) and what he said.⁶⁵⁸ When James called Dickens 'the greatest of superficial novelists', the judgement was framed by comments on character: 'he has created nothing but figure. He has added nothing to our understanding of human character'.⁶⁵⁹ Yet even here, 'figure', as a neutral noun suggesting pattern or fabric, turns the insight into a potentially good one for our purposes. Dickens offers material for play, in a way that James's novels never could. And that play is becoming newly viable again within the humanities, and especially in regards to the phenomenon of character.

Character is coming back into vogue or, to re-qualify, the human aspect of texts is beginning to seem important again, and that inevitably leads us to character. Somewhat late in the day, literature is being utilised by scholars from other fields to body out their research and thought. Susan Greenfield's book, *You and Me: the Neuroscience of Identity* (2011), bears a quote from Emily Brontë on the cover, and refers to literary conceptions within its argument.⁶⁶⁰ Literary expression can hold the germ of what is delineated and laid out by scientific argument, and hold it with cognisant power – much in the way of Dickens's compressed

⁶⁵⁷ See James, 'Notes on a Son and Brother', p. 389.

⁶⁵⁸ 'If one thinks of psychology as the depiction of an organic, completely textured, and unified personality, then obviously Dickens is no Henry James'. See John Kucich, 'Dickens', in *The Columbia History of the British Novel*, ed. by John Richetti (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 339.

⁶⁵⁹ Henry James, review of *Our Mutual Friend*, *The Nation* (New York), 21 December 1865, quoted in Philip Collins, ed. *Charles Dickens: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 469-473 (p. 472).

⁶⁶⁰ 'I have dreamed all my life dreams that have [...] gone [...] through me, like wine through water, and altered the colour of my mind'. (Emily Brontë). See Susan Greenfield, *You and Me: The Neuroscience of Identity* (London: Notting Hill Editions, 2011).

humours.⁶⁶¹ Once we compute a phrase such as Brontë's, we wonder about the context of that thought: the passions and pain that preceded it. Furthermore, there is a movement within popular culture to bring the efficacious good of literature into such divergent arenas as business and mental health. Rachel Kelly's *The Healing Power of Poetry* (2014) offers a holistic defence of the poem as consolation for the depressed spirit: getting rid of spectres in someone else's perhaps.⁶⁶² Clare Morgan has written a book entitled *What Poetry Brings to Business* (2010), detailing exactly that.⁶⁶³ Poetry is perhaps more prominent than prose within this movement, being often shorter and easier to share (despite its ostensible difficulty and reputed unpopularity with the lay reader). Prose, however, has come under the radar of moral philosophers, particularly those who have widened their gaze to aesthetics. In *Aesthetics and Morality* (2007), Elizabeth Schellekens disseminates into argument what has always been true of the fiction reader's experience: that by engaging with certain characters, we gain in empathetic understanding, and even learn how to live.⁶⁶⁴ It is a dramatic premise, and one perhaps both overly obvious and overly presumptuous, but with her example of Elizabeth Bennet from Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Schellekens advances: 'persons like her have, do, and will exist'.⁶⁶⁵ She credits fellow philosopher Hilary Putnam with bringing art's efficacy in this respect to light: 'From art we can thus gain understanding and insight into situations we might not ourselves have experienced directly'; and herself enlarges: 'art can yield knowledge of possibilities – albeit that these possibilities are sometimes realised and sometimes not'.⁶⁶⁶ This sense of contingency, and thereby growth of readerly intelligence and readiness for life's surprises, is part of Schellekens's wider argument, drawn from numerous sources.

Even in the interdisciplinary realms of theory, character has started to gain credence again. In *The Way We Argue Now: A Study in the Cultures of Theory* (2006), Amanda Anderson offers the 'characterological' as a way of reinvigorating rationalist pragmatism (via Habermas), and manoeuvring it from the 'impersonal, abstract, and arid', into a more interactive, relevant, sphere: 'The merit of an attention to characterology [...] lies in the way it brings theory and practice into relation, vivifying and testing theory through embodiment

⁶⁶¹ 'The humours [...] are incisive and spirited, very much in the manner of those Jonsonian humours whose very narrowness produce a pressure of vitality'. See Hardy, *The Moral Art*, p. 14.

⁶⁶² Rachel Kelly, *Black Rainbow: The Healing Power of Poetry* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2014). As per Dickens: 'I don't see able to get rid of my spectres unless I can lose them in crowds', quoted by Tomalin, *Dickens*, p. 279.

⁶⁶³ Clare Morgan, with Kirsten Lange and Ted Buswick, *What Poetry Brings to Business* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

⁶⁶⁴ Elizabeth Schellekens, *Aesthetics and Morality* (London: Continuum, 2007).

⁶⁶⁵ Schellekens, p. 54.

⁶⁶⁶ Schellekens pays tribute to Hilary Putnam's book, *Meaning and the Moral Sciences* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), before expanding own argument, pp. 53-4.

and enactment'.⁶⁶⁷ Anderson broaches a persistent complaint of scholars hostile to character studies: that it puts too much emphasis upon individual consciousnesses, is inward-looking, and 'evade[s] [...] the forms of social and collective practice that are generally gathered under the rubric of the political'; but she foreshadows my own thesis by arguing that character can be a capacious and *intellectual* province for exploration, as opposed to a narrow or purely affective one: 'like other complex cultural forms, the category of character is neither exhausted nor fully defined by its complicity, in various writings or historical transformations, with exclusivity and power'.⁶⁶⁸ Interestingly Terry Eagleton, a prominent haranguer of character as a scholarly praxis for precisely this reason, may be for turning. Anderson cites his 2004 book, *After Theory*, for its claim 'that what is needed is a turn to questions of morality, love, religion, death, and suffering'.⁶⁶⁹

This thesis has navigated paradoxes in its examination of Dickens's characterisation, maintaining that they are often generative, even determinate, rather than otherwise. In his way Dickens parallels Shakespeare in this most of all, within that obviously crude but fruitful referential pairing. Both writers are ultimately unknowable, being so prodigious, so able; and their language runs the gamut from lyrically expressive to concrete and gnomic in its abstraction. In the latter type we find a particular wealth of 'affordances'.⁶⁷⁰ Just as Shakespeare is used by writers to explicate a large issue under the auspices of one centrifugal phrase – 'Imagine howling' is a resonant example – so Dickens's language can provide.⁶⁷¹ Analogously the very opacity of Dickens's character conceptions, moulded in that peculiarly assertive language, allows us to utilise them, their words, their thematic surrounds, for maximum affordances in the wider sphere.⁶⁷² The 'economy of apprehension' is thereby preserved as a 'principle of Good', no less; both as a transferable construct, and as a provision of the most human kind of connection, the most humane connectivity of thought.⁶⁷³

⁶⁶⁷ See Amanda Anderson, *The Way We Argue Now: A Study in the Cultures of Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 122. Anderson acknowledges a debt to the nineteenth-century novel in her work, building upon her previous book: *The Powers of Distance* (2001), in which she '[...] argues that nineteenth-century writers give ethical depth and justification to modern intellectual postures by insisting that they profoundly affected character', p. 7.

⁶⁶⁸ Anderson, *The Way We Argue Now*, p. 131.

⁶⁶⁹ Anderson, 'Introduction', *The Way We Argue Now*, pp. 1-17 (p. 1).

⁶⁷⁰ See Boden, p. 72; and fn. 42, above.

⁶⁷¹ Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, III, I, 128. The phrase was used by the *Guardian* to explicate the trauma of those involved in the 2004 tsunami.

⁶⁷² See Boden, p. 72; and fn. 42, above.

⁶⁷³ See 'Author's Preface', *Oliver Twist*.

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