

**Dickens and Childhood:
A More Positive View (2)**

Jacqueline Banerjee

要約

Dickens と子供：より積極的な見方 2. 1840年代の小説

Jacqueline Banerjee

The Old Curiosity Shop にはじまる10年間に Dickens は共感をもって子供たちを描き続けているが、この共感とは新たな写実性と健全なバランスを取っている。すすんで自身の子供時代の様々な経験を吟味し、子供というものの性格の複雑さを正面から受け止めようとしていったことで、Dickens はより個性的で、真実味に富んだ若い主人公たちを創造することが可能となった。

Dickens は *Barnaby Rudge* (1841) において、ロマン派的な「自然の子供」であるだけでは充分ではないということを我々に示している。同じ小説に登場する、自分たちの独立を求めて積極的かつ頭腦的に奮闘する若者たちの方が Barnaby よりはるかに賞賛されるのだ。子供というものの躍動的な力はまた、*Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-4) の中で、Bailey Junior の注目すべき復活によって描きだされている。Dickens がまだこの長編に取り組んでいた時に出版された *A Christmas Carol* には、また別の子供 (Tiny Tim) が登場していて、その思いもかけないしなやかさで我々を楽しませてくれる。

Dombey and Son (1844-6) と *David Copperfield* (1849-50) は子供というものを、犠牲者でもある主人公として示している。我々は Paul Dombey の死や小さな David の苦しみを詳述したい誘惑にかられましょう。しかしながら、Dickens 自身がはっきりさせているように、*Dombey and Son* は実際は *Dombey and Daughter* なのであり、また David は子供のもつ弱さを克服するすべを、苦しみに満ちてはいるが、勝利に終わる過程のなかで、身につけねばならないのだ。それほど魅力がなく、幸福を見いだせない他の子供たちが登場していることは、Dickens が一般に子供というものに魅力を感じなくなっていたことを示すものではない。続く10年間の小説において Dickens は、子供というものの、生命力を与えてくれるような特質を活用して、まさにその子供たちを抑圧しようとする社会に抗する力とすることになるだろう。

2. Novels of the 1840s

Child characters in the work of Dickens's maturity continue to be exploited, to good purpose, by the artist who so fiercely decried the exploitation of living children.

His fictional young may still appear as helpless victims, yardsticks against which evil is measured: little Paul Dombey is even more vulnerable than Oliver Twist. But, as in the case of Paul's sister, Florence, they may be strong enough to take on the roles of moral and spiritual guides for others, without collapsing under the strain. Florence is made of tougher material than Little Nell. These young figures increasingly represent the vital springs of life, in opposition to the harsh parents, guardians and educators of the Victorian world:

The boy [fourteen-year-old Walter Gay] with his open face, and flowing hair, and sparkling eyes, panting with pleasure and excitement, was wonderfully opposed to Mr Dombey, as he sat confronting him in his library chair.¹

There are no such infantile benefactors as Nicholas Nickleby's Cheerybles in the novels of this decade. While those who retain *something* of the child in them are still blessed, those who are held back in perpetual childhood, like David Copperfield's first wife, Dora, are pitied, and may even attract some new censure. Conversely, those who turn their back on what the child has to offer, or inflict suffering on the child, are less crudely trounced than the villains of the earlier novels. Their punishment may be an inner and invisible one, as Mr Chillip tells us that the Murdstones' is; for the contrite, like Dombey and Scrooge, there are possibilities of forgiveness and reconciliation which were not available to, say, Smike's cold-hearted father, Ralph Nickleby.

With his growing realization of the damage done by early hardships or mistreatment, Dickens's young characters become generally more complex in themselves; on occasion, their natures are so warped that they stand as warnings to a society blind to the threat they pose. Noah Claypole, Oliver Twist's fellow-apprentice at Mr Sowerberry's, is followed by a number of other less than appealing youths, of whom this decade's Uriah Heep is the apotheosis.

One way or another, then, the child becomes the spearhead of this author's wholesale attack on Victorian oppression, just as in the real world the child's lot was the main focus of Reformist zeal. At the same time, his sentimentality about childhood is gradually balanced by a more realistic outlook. The young characters in the novels which follow *The Old Curiosity Shop* in the 1840s face life with more energy than Oliver, and more individuality than Nicholas; they are more credible than Little Nell, sometimes unpleasantly so. Their impact is not softened by excessive pathos, like Oliver's, nor the kind of reductive humour which plays around Kit Nubbles in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. For good or ill, but generally for good, the child in Dickens gains strength, and becomes a force to be reckoned with.

* * * * *

The need to be more than a simple child of nature, indeed, the dangers of such a state, are clearly illustrated in *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), Dickens's historical novel about the previous century's Gordon riots. At first, when we see the half-witted Barnaby skipping through the countryside around his devoted mother, we are reminded of Little Nell and her lightfooted encouragement of her grandfather. Dickens himself seems to see him here as the embodiment of Romantic primitivist ideas:

It is something to look upon enjoyment, so that it be free and wild and in the face of nature.... Ye men of gloom and austerity who paint the face of Infinite Benevolence with an eternal frown.... Remember, if ye can, the sense of hope and pleasure which every glad return of day awakens in the breast of all your kind *who have not changed their nature.*² (emphasis added)

But Barnaby is not just a descendant of Wordsworth's idiot boy, and Smike—or even of Scott's singing innocents, Madge Wildfire in *The Heart of Midlothian*, and David Gellatley in *Waverley*. According to his first biographer, John Forster, Dickens was inspired by the idea that the anti-popery mob was led by men who had broken out of Bedlam,³ and Barnaby turns out to be no more a simple endorsement of Rousseau's ideas than his fellow-rioter, Hugh, the coarse and bestial hostler. As for Grip, his pet raven, far from being a counterpart of Little Nell's linnet, he suggests the evil to which such a mind is easy prey: "I'm a devil, I'm a devil, I'm a devil!" (738), he cries; and although Barnaby is not to be held responsible for it, the fact is that he takes an active part in the violence, "dealing blows about him like a madman" (525), before he is finally arrested. The Dickensian ideal in this novel rests not in Barnaby, but in two other young men, Joe Willet and Ned Chester, who are contrasted with Barnaby and Hugh. These are both *treated* as children by their domineering fathers, but very properly rebel against them, and assume responsibility for their own lives. "I shall never repent the preservation of my self-respect, sir" (312), says Ned warmly, in the confrontation which leads to his final rift from John Chester, and he is proved right. This is the route, the challenging route to independence, that the Dickens child must travel.

Ned is twenty-seven now, Barnaby is twenty-three or so when we first meet him, and even Joe Willet is twenty; young Martin Chuzzlewit in Dickens's next novel is twenty-one. Tom Pinch, who, like the simple-minded Barnaby, seems to carry something of the aura of the pathetic child about him, "might have been almost any age between sixteen and sixty" but is in fact "about thirty."⁴ Looking at the two novels together, we might find ourselves agreeing with Mr Willet:

My belief is that there an't any boys left—that there isn't such a thing as a boy—that there's nothing now between a male baby and a man.... (53)

But there is one particularly interesting youth among the minor characters in these books—namely, Bailey Junior in *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843–4).

This lad has several different faces, and is significant not just for being by turns comic and pathetic, somewhat like the Marchioness in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, but for the

way he bounces back from the very edge of the grave.

We first meet him as the ebullient, irrepressible 'Boots' at Todgers's boarding house, ill-used, no doubt, but able to escape the rolling-pin on occasion and play leap-frog and other such games with the street children. Then he undergoes a metamorphosis, and appears as a swaggering, gold-braided groom, lording it quite cruelly over humble errand boys and old ladies. But his new employment by the shady Tigg Montague (alias Montague Tigg) soon reduces him again, to being a pathetically drenched and knocked around "mere child" (727), who can be flung from the top of his master's careering, tumbling carriage on a stormy night. He is the victim less of Montague, though, than of his passenger, Jonas Chuzzlewit: "We don't want any damp boys here; especially a young imp like him. Let him be where he is" (721). The incident which so strongly confirms Jonas's inhumanity seems to have done for poor Bailey, but he has one more appearance to make—as a "something in top-boots" (893), still reeling from the effects of concussion but all set for another go at life, in Mr Chuzzlewit's chambers. "What a surprising young chap he was!" (827) says his friend Poll Sweedlepipe, before he springs that final and particularly joyful surprise.

Here is one young person, by no means as incidental to this novel about double-dealing as he might seem,⁵ who reveals not only the precariousness and vulnerability of youth, and its uncertain sense of its own identity (at Todgers's, the boy gets called any name which the lodgers happen to think of), but also its propensity to brashness and self-aggrandisement, and, above all, its resilience. Barbara Hardy finds Bailey "implausible,"⁶ but he is worth ten of the angelic little flower-strewers called in for the closing scene, and shows Dickens approaching childhood with a new awareness of its shifting, unformed nature, and a staunch faith in its recuperative powers—both useful for the much deeper, more sustained exploration of childhood in his next full-length novel.

* * * * *

First, however, there is the much-loved *Christmas Carol* (1843), in which contrasting children are lightly sketched in, for very specific didactic purposes. Nowhere is Dickens's warning to his contemporaries more direct than in the ghastly picture of the boy and girl presented to Scrooge by the Ghost of Christmas Present: "Yellow, meagre, ragged, scowling, wolfish"⁷—and abjectly humble—they are frightening in their inner and outer ugliness, and cast a long shadow forward, past that notorious young villain, Uriah Heep, to Orlick in *Great Expectations* (1861–2), and the stone-hurling Deputy in Dickens's last, unfinished work, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.

More characteristic of Dickens's vision of childhood, though, is Tiny Tim. Like Bailey, this boy dies and lives again. His father tells of visiting his green grave in the scenes shown by the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come (just as Scrooge's own neglected grave is shown); and he lives happily ever after at the end (just as Scrooge does). Tiny Tim "did NOT die" says Dickens emphatically in the concluding paragraphs. The lot of the physically crippled child reflects that of the emotionally and spiritually crippled old

miser, so that we follow the old miser's fate with a touch of sympathy, even as we condemn his meanness; the resurrection of the two is the message of hope which Dickens gives to his ailing society.

Scrooge's revelations about himself as a child are forced on him by the Ghost of Christmas Past. Nevertheless, with their references to the *Arabian Nights*,⁸ they seem more intimately personal than Dickens's earlier comments, as the narrator of *Nicholas Nickleby*, on the denial of affection which arrested Smike's development. They show a new willingness not only to look outwards from the child's point of view, as Dickens was able to do from the start, but also to look inwards—something which he evidently found harder. To pity the child who has suffered, and at the same time to acknowledge that the child was (or rather *is*) the self, and no lambent cipher—that was the challenge for Dickens. Taking up this challenge, he produced that great novel of fractured family life, *Dombey and Son* (1848–6) and those two explorations of the self in society, *David Copperfield* (1849–50) and, after another decade, *Great Expectations*.

There are still some child characters who die as a result of their hard experiences, usually to prove Dickens's point about the cruelty of certain Victorian 'isms—materialism, stern Evangelicalism, Utilitarianism—but the main concern, in the deliberately plotted, sharply focused works of these years, is with the child who lives.

* * * * *

With *Dombey and Son* there is less of the open air than in any of the earlier novels: even *Oliver Twist* has its rural scenes, however unconvincing. We are back in the kind of confinement which keeps cropping up in that early work, and with a vengeance, too. This is partly because Dickens has finally left the picaresque behind him (though the ex-seafaring Captain Cuttle brings a tang of Smollett, as well as Chatham, to us). But the main reason is Dickens's concentration on the House—or rather the home, which is no better than the House to a man like Dombey who has no private feelings, and which proves to have so much relation to the House that the two disintegrate together.

Behind the high windows of a child's room in this gloomy home (if you can call it one), looking wonderingly across at a family of rosy-cheeked, loved children on the other side of the street, is Dombey's disregarded daughter, Florence. Those other children's windows are open, and their voices and laughter issue forth into the summer air. When Florence sees the father doting on his eldest daughter, she is overcome with anguish, "and bursting into tears would hide behind the curtain as if she were frightened, or would hurry from the window" (319). Time and again, this child, whose age is six when we first meet her, is cut off from life in her rich father's mansion, confined to its upper reaches and deprived of all possibilities of love and affection.

The first occasion, the great original deprivation which has to be corrected, occurs at her birth, when her father rejects her because a female heir cannot carry on "the House's name and dignity" (51). His attitude is only reinforced when her brother Paul is born, and her second great deprivation occurs—when the mother who had nothing to recommend

her to the rest of the family except, perhaps, her submissiveness, demonstrates that submissiveness by not making the “very great and painful effort” (60) to live. There was one thing that did recommend her mother to Florence, though: “what is it that Mama did?” asks Paul later. “Loved me!” (171) cries Florence. With the great aim of having her own love accepted and reciprocated, Florence herself makes the effort to live, even though she is tested to the utmost.

Freely acknowledged to be an angelic child (Dombey’s “unknown Good Genius”⁹), she is shown as winning everyone’s heart but (until the end) her father’s—not just Paul’s, but the hearts of all who come in contact with the two children. “[S]trong only in her earnestness and simple truth” (504), she bears up as she is inexorably stripped, in cruel succession, of her surrogate mothers (Polly Toodle, Edith Dombey), of Paul himself (first by his schooling, then by his death) and of her surrogate siblings, Susan Nipper and Walter Gay. To endure all this she needs, indeed, “even more than the usual amount of childish simplicity and *confidence*” (83–4; emphasis mine). This, of course, is a source of great irritation to her father, who sees his true heir grow into a “pale child” (268), and finally die, while the unwanted daughter develops “firmness and self-reliance” (132), and sports “the blooming cheek” (501) that others press. But it is important for Dickens’s purpose, that is, for Dombey’s final regeneration, that she should, in fact, prove strong—like Walter who survives a terrible shipwreck because of the stoutness of his “nat’ral mind” —against all odds.

It was Dickens who drew so much attention to Paul, in the title and his Prefaces to the novel (written in 1848 and 1867) as well as in the novel itself, that we tend to concentrate on the dying child and give less emphasis to the living one. This, in spite of the fact that the inadequacy of the title is made plain three times—once by Walter (“here’s to Dombey—and Son—and Daughter” [99]), and twice, in the earlier editions, by Miss Tox (“To think ... that Dombey and Son should be a Daughter after all!” [298] ; “And so Dombey and Son ... is indeed a daughter” [941]¹⁰). But Paul is an affecting little figure, with several important functions in the plot: as a character he is a great advance on Oliver; and although he was, unlike Smeke and Nell, definitely “born, to die,”¹¹ and all Dickens’s child deaths invoke religious consolations, his death is arguably a more positive occurrence than theirs.

In the first place, he is not, as Carey argues, “a thoroughgoing dwarf.”¹² Dickens’s comment on his character early in Chapter 8, which sets out to analyse it (the chapter heading is “Paul’s Further Progress, Growth, and Character”), explains the cutting dialogue with Mrs Pipchin later in the chapter which Carey finds particularly unrealistic. “His temper,” says Dickens, “gave abundant promise of being imperious in after-life; and he had as hopeful an apprehension of his own importance, and the rightful subservience of all other things and persons to it, as heart [i. e., his father’s proud heart] could desire” (151). Obviously Paul wishes to put Mrs Pipchin in her place by his references to her age and greed, and Dickens’s use of the word “innocently” (164) on this occasion is ironic. As Carey points out, “It would take a mentally subnormal child to make these retorts innocently,”¹³ and Paul is anything but that.

It is quite true that he *is* “old-fashioned,” a word used again and again about him. In this he may be related to the old tradition of the wise child: “When the influence of the stars is too strong, the child talks early, has discretion beyond his age, and dies young”¹⁴—just as there are times when Florence is like a princess in a fairy-tale, as Kathleen Tillotson suggests.¹⁵ Nevertheless, there are things he wants to know, things that puzzle him, and things he needs, that mark him out as a much more realistic creation than, say, Little Nell. There are the knowing questions he puts to his father, for instance, and his attraction to old Glubb with his stories of fabulous monsters. His relief when Florence begins to help him with his studies is touching, as is his animation when he catches sight of her from his window in Blimber’s academic ‘hot-house’(206). There is truth, too, in his softening towards other children as he weakens still further, and wants their attention. Seeing death approach, largely through his own eyes, we are outraged by the father’s selfish ambitions for him (he had even delayed procuring a wet-nurse for the infant Paul, in his disdain for the alliance it would form), as well as by the educational process to which the real child is so ill-suited.

How the Victorian child suffered, right across the board! Paul’s heap of books, under the weight of which he struggles so symbolically, make his short life as miserable as that of any poor child—more so perhaps than that of the juggler’s wife, pressed closer to her breast as Paul’s funeral cortège passes by. Those who survive such a schooling, like Toots, seem to have their brains permanently addled by it. Dickens uses Paul’s death, here, to attack the system in which the rich man’s child floundered, just as he later uses Alice, Good Mrs Brown’s daughter, to show the evils of ambition in a poor dwelling. Nell had already been rescued from her trials—too late, it is true; but Paul’s death is a release from the burdens which must otherwise continue to be placed on him by his father and the society of the time.

It is also, of course, essential to the plot: there can be no changing of authorial intention here. Dombey’s uneasy resentment of Florence increases; escaping to Leamington, he becomes embroiled with Edith Granger and embarks on the ill-starred second marriage which is to begin the breaking of his spirit, which in turn restores him to his now grown-up daughter. Compared with that earlier bad parent, Ralph Nickleby, he is lucky: the reunion with Florence saves him from a wretched, lonely old age.

Although a happy family is only established at the end, Florence has much more of a family, all along, than Oliver, Smike, and Little Nell. The relationships of the Dombey family can indeed be seen as a paradigm of the Victorian family in general: the loving but powerless mother; the distant father who does not recognize the child’s needs; the affectionate substitute parents who may be suddenly removed (Captain Cuttle, however, proves a dependable father-figure here); the deeply-loved sibling. In Dickens, even more than in the eighteenth-century novel, the child character is apt to carry forward from childhood not only the unsatisfied yearning for a parent, but the craving to continue brother/sister closeness. Thus Florence can never assert herself, never blames her father, feels only shame to see the mark of her father’s “angry hand” (772) on her breast, and returns to comfort him at the end as if she were the cause of their alienation; thus, too, she

marries Walter, whom since childhood "[S]he had no thought of ... but as a brother" (784).

However, it should be admitted at once, that Dickens at this stage is aware only of the unhappiness caused to the child, and not of its long-term consequences. Although the description of the adult Florence's behaviour suggests an accurate enough prognosis, it makes no demands on our sympathy. What the post-Freudian reader might see as acts of submission and regression are the very substance of Dickens's happy ending.

There are of course some happy children in the novel. The loving Toodles family is an obvious exception to Dickens's indictment of the Victorian home, important because it shows what a stay parental love can be to an erring child: the Grinder, almost set on the path to ruin by being given a place at the charity school, is upheld by his mother's generous affection. But in the higher classes, as well as in the very lowest, more problematic relationships seem endemic. Mrs Skewton sacrifices her daughter for money, much as Good Mrs Brown does; Harriet Carker lives with her wronged brother as if he were her husband, and this does seem sad, since she also has a would-be suitor.

That Dickens is growing more and more conscious of how easily young people's lives *can* be irretrievably blighted (though he has known it, really, since he gave the background of Bill Sikes's Nancy) is shown not through the resolution of the main plot, but through these minor characters, and, more explicitly, in Edith's words to her mother about Florence: "I will have no youth and truth dragged down to my level. I will have no guileless nature undermined, corrupted and perverted ..." (514); also in John Carker's identification of his younger self with Walter, as having been "fraught with the same capacity for leading on to good or evil" (247). (Originally, Walter too was to have gone astray.¹⁶) Both Edith and John Carker develop a feeling of protectiveness towards the young people whom they recognize as morally vulnerable, but neither is in a position to offer real support. And this, in a way, points the child in Dickens forward. For the development of *self*-reliance will be the main theme of his next novel.

* * * * *

If Paul's death shows the evils of materialism, that of David Copperfield's infant brother shows the crushing of the sensitive bud of life by the repressive spirit of Victorian Evangelicalism. Like the shrubs outside "that were drooping their heads in the cold,"¹⁷ David's mother Clara fades away in the wintry Murdstone ambience, overwhelmed by the "gloomy taint that was in the Murdstone blood, [which] darkened the Murdstone religion, which was austere and wrathful" (101). Taking every hard word as a blow, "uncertain in her mind, and not happy" (185), she cannot survive in that household. Betsey Trotwood actually confronts Mr Murdstone with the charge of tyranny later (270). Herself "a child that had gone to sleep" (186), Clara is followed only a day later by her baby.

This might seem to be not only a severe indictment of Evangelicalism, for which Dickens is known to have had "a deep and bitter hatred,"¹⁸ but also the death-knell of the Romantic child in his work. However, the child who survives is able to carry his generous

impulses, through the trials which serve to discipline them, into adult life.

From the beginning of *David Copperfield*, we sense a new toughness, and an extension of psychological realism evident in *Dombey and Son*. When he hears the news of his mother's death at school, David weeps until he can weep no more, yet he comes to feel a certain sense of self-importance in his bereavement, and even makes a little show of being melancholy. There is no weeping at all over the death-bed, though the child is greatly impressed by the purity, solemnity and stillness of it. He simply checks Peggotty's hand, when she starts to replace the white covering. There is less dwelling on these deaths than on Dickens's previous ones, less than on Helen Burns's in *Jane Eyre*, which had been published two years earlier, and which was once thought to have deeply influenced Dickens's subsequent portrayal of children. Part of the new toughness lies in the writer's determination to wrench his child hero free of the past, as far as possible.

David's final response to the deaths is a curious mixture of identity and detachment: "The little creature in her arms, was myself, as I had once been, hushed forever on her bosom" (187). He seems to be saying that a part of himself has died with his mother—a common enough sentiment, if not one that a child could be expected to have—but, as his words to Peggotty reveal, what he means is that he now focuses on memories of his "young mother" (186) and the earlier, gloriously close and happy period of their life together. This of course can be taken an early sign of his mother fixation, his need for his own wax doll (253) or "child wife" (711); and his checking of Peggotty's hand supports this interpretation. On the other hand, and much more positively, David's remark also suggests a sense of release from that recently tormented relationship, which leaves him free to move on. To this extent, his guilt over the beating episode does seem to have been appeased,¹⁹ or "hushed." Thus his thoughts turn to "me and my future" at the very beginning of the next chapter: "I was very anxious to know what was going to be done with me" (187).

Simultaneously to feel the pull of a passively idyllic past (the incestuous return, ultimately associable with the Freudian death-instinct), and the dynamic challenge of the unpredictable life ahead, can be seen as the common human lot, and the interest of this novel lies in how far David can indeed put the first behind him. For, clearly, if he is to be "the hero of [his] own life" (49), the future must win, and win decisively.

Thanks to the first-person autobiographical form, which allows for the constant intrusion of the adult narrator, the conclusion is to some extent forgone. The power of this narrator's memory is great: it is there on every page, "quite wonderful for its closeness and accuracy" (61), recalling such details from his childhood as the decorative nosegay on the best parlour's red velvet footstool, the smell of Mr Murdstone's friends' coats, and the sodden little pocket-handkerchief laid out on Barkis's horse to dry. In one part of David's mind, for instance, he has *not* forgotten the broken mother of the later years, having recorded her vividly already. This capacious memory is something to boast of and cherish, part of the narrator's essential equipment as a man and as an artist. It takes him back to the past all the time. Nevertheless, this man, the writer, often establishes a perspective that was missing when the events were taking place, perhaps even for many

years afterwards: "my later understanding comes, I am sensible, to my aid here" (67). And this "later understanding" points us towards the *future*. Sometimes it makes us aware of the snares that lie ahead, but on several important occasions, it alerts us to the workings of Providence—even while the young David himself has only the vaguest intimations of it²⁰; always it assures us of wisdom and maturity attained.

However, David's struggle to achieve self-reliance is long and hard. Although it freezes Clara's youthful image in his mind, the death of David's mother is not as traumatic as it might have been, simply because what Ned Lukacher calls his "primal or originary trauma"²¹ occurs even earlier. His painful confrontation with Mr Murdstone is what first sends him out into the world "a little shrinking creature" (131), full of a sense of his own inadequacy, and as weighed down with guilt as if he were "a most atrocious criminal" (108). In a sense, the placard he is then forced to wear upon his back only serves to objectify his own fears about himself. Although the guilt does seem to go underground after his mother's death (to emerge again, still more oppressively, in a later child-hero—Pip), it will be a long time before he gains any measure of self-confidence.

At Salem House, David shows his weakness when he is quickly seduced by Steerforth's charms. It is a schoolboy crush of the first order, in which he allows himself to be exploited and condescended to in return for approval and protection. He seems to be in good company—we see Mr Peggotty and Ham falling prey to Steerforth's "enchantment" or "spell" (157) too; but we could hardly imagine either of them joining in the other boys' cheers after poor Mr Mell's humiliation by Steerforth, as David does. (Traddles, a simpler child character in the old style, given to drawing skeletons when perturbed, does not.) From the beginning, Steerforth himself hardly strikes us as a child, and his role for David is that of a substitute father—as bad, in his own way, as Mr Murdstone—rather than that of sibling. The truth about the unprincipled Steerforth will be even harder for David to confront than the truth about his "girl and boy attachment" (565) to Dora: both these figures will have to be removed from him, finally, by death.

Mrs Pipchin of the Brighton "infantine Boarding-House" (159) in *Dombey and Son* had been modelled on Dickens's landlady during the time when his father was in prison for debt. Now Dickens feels able to make more capital of that dreadful period, by thinly disguising his experience at the blacking warehouse as David's labours at Murdstone and Grinby's wine-bottling warehouse in Blackfriars, after his mother's death. At the same time, Dickens's parents are transmuted into the Micawbers, with whom the young David lodges: the undependable Mr Micawber, like his father, is a gentleman whose affairs are in a constant state of crisis, and who enters the debtors' prison during this period; Mrs. Micawber, like his mother, makes vain efforts to help, trying to open a school to which no pupils come. Dickens, finally confronting his own childhood despair, shows David reduced to abject hopelessness here, referring to him pityingly as he might have done to Oliver, as "an innocent romantic boy" (225).

In fact, the warehouse, a "crazy old house" (209) on the waterfront with dirty walls and rats, reminds us strongly of Fagin's den and the other cells in *Oliver Twist*. We sense the "shades of the prison-house" closing around the child, and call to mind the "fetters

and rivets" (98) associated with Miss Murdstone. However, David, like Oliver, Nicholas and Little Nell, strikes out for life, taking to the open road as they all did before him. Along the way he is intimidated by a series of wonderfully diversified cheats and ogres who all take advantage of his smallness, and reflect his various fears about the adult world—its dishonesty, avarice, selfishness and violence. But he has the stamina of his predecessors—more than Oliver and Nell, in fact, for he doesn't fall ill afterwards—and at last arrives at the "very neat little cottage with cheerful bow-windows" (245) which serves as his second real childhood home, and provides him with that other mother substitute, Aunt Betsey, who is so much more commensurate with his later status in life than Peggotty. It is the archetypal tale, endlessly recapitulated by the author suddenly and cruelly robbed of his childhood, of the boy who finds his way home, in pursuit of "the quiet picture I had conjured up, of my mother in her youth and beauty" (238). But that of course is not the end of it. This is a much more expansive as well as probing examination of childhood than any Dickens has undertaken so far. The David who slips between his Aunt Betsey's freshly laundered sheets is no seraphic Oliver. He still has a long way to go.

In particular, if David is to become self-reliant, he has to conquer that "undisciplined heart" (733) of his, with the earnest efforts his Aunt recommends. This is not a picaresque novel, after all, but a *Bildungsroman*—a sort of spiritual picaresque which demands that each experience along the hero's route develop his character. There is no pleasant deception or self-deception about the need to improve, the need to grow up. Lovable and useful as he is, as a vehicle for Aunt Betsey's own common-sense interpretations of things, simple-minded Mr Dick, we are told bluntly, would have been "shut ... up for life" (260) if she had not insisted on taking responsibility for him. It is patently not enough to be, like Dora, "a favourite child of nature" (607); David gives the common-sense reason when he says to her, "Because you know, my darling ... you are not a child" (669).

David himself is still immature when he leaves Doctor Strong's school. On the journey to London after this great occasion, he is as deftly handled by the coachman as he was by the carrier on the road to Dover; the waiter at the Golden Cross reminds us of the one who ate his chops on the way to Salem House, at the beginning of his school years. David is as easily overpowered and taken in by Steerforth, too, when he meets him at the London theatre. He comes out well from Aunt Betsey's trial of him, but sets out to support her in her 'ruin' in much the same boyish spirit as Oliver rushes out gladly to the bookseller, to prove himself to Mr Brownlow. He is still "younger than [he] could have wished" (348) when he marries Dora, who is only the last in his line of shepherdesses (the first, unless we count the Emily of the early Yarmouth days, was "a little girl, in a spencer, with a round face and curly flaxen hair" (323), actually called Miss Shepherd). But at every turn he is learning to tackle life more determinedly, "to live misfortune down" (560), and his career as a writer begins to take off. His childhood ends at last with the second great trauma of his life, the terrible storm at Yarmouth, in which both Steerforth and Ham perish.

The storm which destroys both good and bad alike, like the storm scene in *King Lear*—echoed much earlier in David's concern for the houseless after his trek to Dover—is a

cataclysm which purges the hero of past confusions and leaves him receptive, at last, to the essential truth. The famous chapter (55) begins with memories of David's early years—his reunion with his "good old nurse" (855) as he calls Peggotty here, his writing to Emily; it ends with the final shattering of both idyll and idol:

And on that part of it where she and I had looked for shells, two children ... among the ruins of the home he had wronged—I saw him lying with his head upon his arm, as I had often seen him lie at school. (866)

The pressure of a profound sense of loss on language of the utmost simplicity (mostly, as it happens, of Old English stock), makes the concluding paragraph of this chapter more moving than anything else in the novel, perhaps than anything else in the whole Dickens canon. The pain of parting with the cherished (childhood) past, of having to part with it in order to find one's own (adult) "centre" (983), is immense.

In the end, that "centre" is embodied in the serene and devoted Agnes Wickfield, whom David has regarded as a sister ever since his days at Doctor Strong's. Less regressive than Florence's for Walter (she replaces no lost sibling), their love brings forward what was best, most innocent in his past, yet also demonstrates that he has "set the seal upon the Past" (917)—the past of his "wayward boyhood" (890) and misplaced likings. His new maturity is established when he gradually comes to realize his love for her after his first year's recuperation in Europe, but stays on in Switzerland, applying himself to his literary career, and re-building his health. On his return after three years, he controls his ardour, putting "duty to her" (913) before his own need, and not declaring himself to her until he has a "clue to hope" (935) that she loves him in the same way. In this, as in his exertions as a writer, he shows new self-discipline and more (if not complete) self-reliance.

We know that Dickens took pains over this process.²² Nevertheless, the usual tying-up of ends in the concluding chapters has drawn the usual critical fire. As Dickens brings all his remaining characters to "the shore" (Forster 2:98) after the mighty shipwreck, he does seem now too facile, now too forced. But surely it is a mistake to complain that the domestic scene with which David's own story closes is "complacent."²³ When his youngest child toddles between Aunt Betsey and Peggotty, the two figures on whom he could always depend, it is a repetition which neatly cancels out that other pattern—the pattern of those false dependencies—and confirms the workings of Providence for another "ragged way-worn boy" (937). The dominant feeling here is that of gratitude.

* * * * *

Those who complain of Dickens's phony optimism perhaps forget that while David moves forward to safe harbour in *David Copperfield*, there are other important child characters whose fates are more equivocal. We know that in his previous novel, Dickens had been on the verge of letting young Walter Gay be corrupted. Here we find that both Steerforth, who is about fourteen when David starts at Salem House, and Uriah Heep,

who is a close-cropped, bony fifteen-year-old when David goes to stay with the Wickfields, are clearly on the wrong road from the beginning; and a considerably younger child, Little Emily, is just as clearly "springing forward to her destruction" (86) in the very first number.

There is much to explain these children's wrongdoings. Steerforth and Emily have both been doted on, spoilt by others. Steerforth's mother worshipped him long before David did: she actually boasts to Rosa Dartle of having gratified him "in every wish" (531); her love amounts to an obsession. Emily has been adored by her uncle. Uriah has a devoted mother, too (obviously fatherless children can have too much parenting, as well as too little), and his vengefulness has been nurtured from his foundation school background. Heredity seems to play a part, as well. Steerforth's mother is as "exacting, proud, punctilious, selfish" (871) as Uriah's is "umblem." We might note here that David's weakness may also be traced back to his family: though his parents were gentle, loving people (like Oliver's), and his father had "once been a favourite" (51) of Aunt Betsey's, his mother's sweet nature was not all it might have been.²⁴ But is it really possible to imagine Uriah, with his "snaky undulation" and frog-like "damp cold hand" (437) as having turned out anything other than a reptile?

The Murdstones, of course, believe in original sin—"the natural depravity of the human heart" (613), as Miss Murdstone calls it—no less than does Charlotte Brontë's Mr Brocklehurst. This is the Augustinian attitude which, in real life, put such a burden on the Victorian child. Certainly, the attitude is strongly criticized here, as part and parcel of the misguided and destructive grimness of their religion. "I must say, sir ... that I *don't* find authority for Mr and Miss Murdstone in the New Testament" (907) says kindly Mr Chillip, the doctor, at the end. This is an attack Dickens began in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, in Kit's diatribes against Little Bethel, continued in *Barnaby Rudge*, and would carry on in later novels. In such a context, young David's pangs of guilt after biting his step-father seem much less appropriate than the action itself. Yet his later shortcomings, and the more morally culpable ones of other young characters in the novel, do suggest another acknowledgement on the author's part, besides that in *Barnaby*, that the 'nat'ral' heart has the potential for evil as well as good.

One of David's earliest impressions is of being with his mother in the garden:

a very preserve of butterflies, as I remember it with a high fence,
and a gate and padlock; where the fruit clusters on the trees, riper
and richer than fruit has ever been since, in any other garden.(64–5)

It is tempting to see this as Eden, especially as " [a] great wind rises, and summer is gone in a moment" (65); and a garden later comes to David in a dream, unshadowed, he says, by the threat of Steerforth's footsteps. But what is the small child doing in that original garden? As his mother gathers fruit, he is standing by, "bolting furtive gooseberries, and trying to look unmoved" (65). This is not, after all, a childhood paradise where no evil exists. The child's capacity for wrongdoing is limited; we can forgive and even smile at his misdemeanors. But, with that adjective "furtive," their existence is thoroughly admitted. There is no such clear "polarization"²⁵ here as Barry Westburg postulates.

It is because of this, as well as because of his use of some of his childhood memories, that Dickens could produce, in *David Copperfield*/*Trotwood*, his first completely realistic child hero—one who only with difficulty acquires the strengths associated with his later surname, by which Agnes so noticeably calls him. But the old Manichean black-and-white world of *Oliver* has not completely gone. Indeed, it reappears in the more socially concerned novels which Dickens wrote between *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*, with the significant difference that there is more danger now that the troubling seed of Manichean pessimism will take root. The child who suffers and fails in these novels casts a gloom; but the child who takes on the odds—within the self, as well without—is dynamic enough to dispel it.

NOTES

- 1 *Dombey and Son*, ed. Peter Fairclough (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 139. Subsequent references to this edition are given parenthetically in the text.
- 2 *Barnaby Rudge*, ed. Gordon Spence (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 249. Subsequent references to this edition are given parenthetically in the text.
- 3 *The Life of Charles Dickens*, 2 vols (London: Dent, 1927), 1:142. Subsequent references to this edition are given parenthetically in the text.
- 4 *Martin Chuzzlewit*, ed. P.N. Furbank (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 70. Subsequent references to this edition are given parenthetically in the text.
- 5 E.g. see Furbank's Introduction to this edition: "you can sense the whole novel flowing through him," 17.
- 6 *The Moral Art of Dickens* (London: Athlone Press, 1970), 117.
- 7 *Charles Dickens: The Christmas Books*: Vol. 1, *A Christmas Carol / The Chimes*, ed. Michael Slater (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 108.
- 8 For the effect of these references, see Michael Slater's "Dickens in Wonderland" in *The Arabian Nights in English Literature: Studies in the Reception of The Thousand and One Nights into British Culture*, ed. Peter L. Caracciolo (London: Macmillan, 1988), 134–5.
- 9 In Dickens's outline for the book, reprinted in Vol 4 of the Pilgrim edition of the letters, ed. Kathleen Tillotson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), 590. Impossible to agree, here, with Dianne Sadoff's view of Florence as the most dangerous of Dickens's daughters—though her Oedipal interpretation at least has the merit of confirming Florence's strength (*Monsters of Affection: Dickens, Eliot and Brontë on Fatherhood* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1982], 60ff.)
- 10 Miss Tox's first exclamation was omitted in later editions (1985, n.1 to Chapter 16).
- 11 The words of the first number plan, quoted in John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson, *Dickens at Work* (London: Methuen, 1982), 96.
- 12 *The Violent Effigy: A Study of Dickens' Imagination* (London: Faber, 1979), 139.
- 13 Carey, 142. Beneath the irony, however, Paul is speaking innocently—i.e., not 'unawares,' but from a child's pure moral standpoint. See also F.R. Leavis's analysis of this conversation, *Dickens the Novelist* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 39ff.
- 14 Gies, Joseph and Frances, *Life in a Medieval City* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 59. Peter Coveney, however, goes too far when he writes about Paul's "infant lunacy," *The Image of Childhood: The Individual and Society: A Study of the Theme in English Literature* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, rev.ed.1967), 143.
- 15 See *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press), 174.

- 16 See Butt and Tillotson, 98-9.
- 17 *David Copperfield*, ed. Trevor Blount (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 93. Subsequent references to this edition are given parenthetically in the text.
- 18 Humphrey House, *The Dickens World* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, paperback ed. 1960), 121.
- 19 Mark Spilka, "David Copperfield as Psychological Fiction," in *Dickens: Modern Judgements*, ed. A.E. Dyson (London: Macmillan, 1968), 191. One is perhaps most justified in using Freudian approaches to this novel, which was Freud's own favourite among Dickens's works.
- 20 See J. Hillis Miller, who discusses the "unifying presence" of Providence in the novel, *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1959), 155-6.
- 21 "Containing the Destructive Work of Remembrance," in *Charles Dickens's David Copperfield*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), 117.
- 22 Butt and Tillotson find "three stages of deliberation here," 174.
- 23 Angus Wilson, *The World of Charles Dickens* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1970), 216.
- 24 That Dickens intended such an interpretation of her character is shown by his notes for the first chapter: "Young mother—Tendency to weakness and vanity," Butt and Tillotson, 117.
- 25 *The Confessional Fictions of Charles Dickens* (Dekalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois Univ. Press, 1977), 42.

(Received March 5, 1990)