CHARLES DICKENS AND THE FORM OF THE NOVEL: 'FICTION' AND 'NARRATIVE' IN DICKENS' WORK

Graham Daldry

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the University of Liverpool for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

October 1985

TABLE OF CONTENTS

		p.
Preface		i
Acknowledgements		iii
Introduction		1
Chapter I:	From Episode to Story	30
Chapter II:	The Novel as Fiction, I: *The Old Curiosity Shop*	72
Chapter III:	The Novel as Fiction, II: *Bleak House*	115
Chapter IV:	Narrative in the Novel, I: *David Copperfield*	154
Chapter V:	Narrative in the Novel, II: *Great Expectations*	195
Chapter VI:	*Our Mutual Friend* and the In-Between World	241
Conclusion		284
Bibliography		288

Charles Dickens and the Form of the Novel: 'Fiction' and 'Narrative' in Dickens' Work by Graham Daldry.

My purpose in this thesis is to undertake a reassessment of the structure, unity and imagination of Dickens' writing. I show that the apparent division of Dickens' concerns between those of humourist and serious social critic, which critics have identified as a failing in his writing, is in fact his strength in reflecting the overwhelming preoccupation of his age. I set out in my Introduction a context of social and economic upheaval which dominates the period 1800 to 1850, and show that the uncertainty it produces is a major preoccupation of Romanticism.

Central to the thesis is my argument that the form of the novel is inherently divided, precisely as Dickens' writing is, between comic and serious, and is capable of containing both of these opposing impulses. I have called these two parts of the novel 'fiction' and 'narrative', and I show that Dickens' novels take up and explore a background and context of uncertainty within what is a peculiarly appropriate form, investigating the possibilities and limitations of a divided age with remarkable intelligence and clarity, and a concern for unity which is in turn the unifying concern of his imagination.

The main body of the thesis is divided into six chapters, each dealing with a major novel. While it has not been possible to provide a detailed discussion of each of Dickens' works, I have shown how Dickens' imagination develops the form of the novel as a vehicle for the world he inhabits, and my selection identifies the important stages of this development.

Chapter One outlines Dickens' early recognition of the uncertainties of the novel, and traces his development to the first crisis of fiction and narrative in his novels in Oliver Twist, in which it becomes clear that no easy unity can be made of the novel's form.

I then turn to a discussion of Dickens' exploration of these opposing concerns. Chapters Two and Three deal with Dickens' vision of a 'fictive' world, and show how he produces in Bleak House a work which accommodates such a vision without compromising the control of the writer. Chapters Four and Five then turn to Dickens' exploration of a novel governed by narrative, and show how Dickens first tests the control of the narrative and then shows us in Great Expectations what that control means to the novel.

My final chapter deals with Dickens' final completed work, Our Mutual Friend, and shows Dickens' developed self-consciousness engaged in demonstrating both the powers and the limitations of writing.

I conclude that Dickens' novels both generate and develop the form of the novel as the expression of his age, and as the dominant genre of the nineteenth century, and in doing so discover the capacity of the novel to fulfil the highest artistic function as a place where fiction and narrative, the comic and the serious, are brought together.

PREFACE

My purpose in this thesis is to undertake a reassessment of the structure, unity and imagination of Dickens' writing. I show that the apparent division of Dickens' concerns between those of humourist and serious social critic, which critics have identified as a failing in his writing, is in fact his strength in reflecting the overwhelming preoccupation of his age. I set out in my Introduction a context of social and economic upheaval which dominates the period 1800 to 1850, and show that the uncertainty it produces is a major preoccupation of Romanticism.

Central to the thesis is my argument that the form of the novel is inherently divided, precisely as Dickens' writing is, between comic and serious, and is capable of containing both of these opposing impulses. I have called these two parts of the novel 'fiction' and 'narrative', and I show that Dickens' novels take up and explore a background and context of uncertainty within what is a peculiarly appropriate form, investigating the possibilities and limitations of a divided age with remarkable intelligence and clarity, and a concern for unity which is in turn the unifying concern of his imagination.

The main body of the thesis is divided into six chapters, each dealing with a major novel. While it has not been possible to provide a detailed discussion of each of Dickens' works, I have shown how Dickens' imagination develops the form of the novel as a vehicle for the world he inhabits, and my selection identifies the important stages of this development.

Chapter One outlines Dickens' early recognition of the uncertainties of the novel, and traces his development to the first crisis of fiction

and narrative in his novels in Oliver Twist, in which it becomes clear that no easy unity can be made of the novel's form.

I then turn to a discussion of Dickens' exploration of these opposing concerns. Chapters Two and Three deal with Dickens' vision of a 'fictive' world, and show how he produces in Bleak House a work which accommodates such a vision without compromising the control of the writer. Chapters Four and Five then turn to Dickens' exploration of a novel governed by narrative, and show how Dickens first tests the control of the narrative and then shows us in Great Expectations what that control means to the novel.

My final chapter deals with Dickens' final completed work, Our Mutual Friend, and shows Dickens' developed self-consciousness engaged in demonstrating both the powers and the limitations of writing.

I conclude that Dickens' novels both generate and develop the form of the novel as the expression of his age, and as the dominant genre of the nineteenth century, and in doing so discover the capacity of the novel to fulfil the highest artistic function as a place where fiction and narrative, the comic and the serious, are brought together.

All references to works by Dickens are where possible to the most modern, complete and readily available Penguin editions. Where a Penguin edition is not available, reference is to the 1874 Library Edition published by Chapman and Hall, as indicated in the footnotes.

The abbreviation 'op.cit.' has been used only where its application is absolutely unmistakable; that is, where the title of a work is immediately repeated, or repeated within a few pages of a first reference. Otherwise, the title of the work is given.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like first of all to express my thanks to my supervisor, Mr Brian Nellist, whose advice, guidance and enthusiasm have contributed very largely to the writing of this thesis, and without whose encouragement and support the last two years would have been made very much more difficult. I would also like to thank Dr Philip Davis, Mr Bernard Beatty, and all the other members of the English Department at Liverpool University who have at various times given their help and advice. I would like to thank Miss Margaret Burton for all of her hard work in the preparation and completion of the type-script. Finally, I would like to thank my parents, my friends, and particularly Suzanne Habib for her support and advice.

INTRODUCTION

Charles Dickens is now almost universally accepted as a great writer. Recent criticism has compensated for any initial reluctance to treat his novels as serious works of art by discussing them in a bewildering variety of ways; but what has nevertheless seemed consistently elusive is an approach to Dickens capable of telling us precisely why he is a great novelist, and in what way. The repeated resort of criticism has been to apologise for what it has ultimately found to be missing, or present only sporadically, in Dickens' novels, a sense of coherent purpose not undermined by what it has seen as an archaic sentimentality. Such an approach has produced two dominant views; that Dickens is a great humourist, and that he is a great social critic.

Much perceptive criticism has been written about both of these parts of Dickens. Steven Marcus,[1] John Carey[2] and J.R. Kincaid[3] have all provided rich accounts of Dickens' humour; while the 'social' imagery of the novels has been exhaustively documented, first of all by Humphrey House,[4] to be followed by a plethora of critics giving us various versions of a 'serious' Dickens.[5] The most recent notable production of this line of criticism, perhaps, is Schwarzbach's impressive book on Dickens and the City.[6]

What has remained the case, however, is that these two visions have

---

1. Steven Marcus, Dickens from Pickwick to Dombey (London 1965).
2. John Carey, The Violent Effigy (London 1973).
3. J.R. Kincaid, Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter (Oxford 1971).
4. Humphrey House, The Dickens World (London 1961).
5. See for instance F.R. and Q.D. Leavis, Dickens the Novelist (London 1970); H.M. Daleski, Dickens and the Art of Analogy (London 1970); Barbara Hardy, The Moral Art of Dickens (London 1970).
6. F.S. Schwarzbach, Dickens and the City (London 1979).

been separated, often as a matter of strategy. J.R. Kincaid's admirable discussion of the comic development of Dickens' novels begins with what is effectively a disclaimer, as he tells us that "Instead of approaching the novels through imagery, structure, or theme, this is an attempt to approach them through humour",[7] so perpetrating the view that comedy and serious theme are alien and divided forces in Dickens' novels. Only Robert Newsom, in his book, Dickens: on the Romantic Side of Familiar Things has provided any opposition to this division, seeing Bleak House itself divided, in Dickens' own description of the novel, between 'Romantic' and 'Familiar', and telling us that

> Rather than simply merge the 'romantic' and the 'familiar' into some new synthesis, Dickens sought to keep each quality intensely alive for his audience.[8]

These terms are important but problematic, since they do not lead us directly and unambiguously to a view of the structure of the novels (Dickens' own critical language being characteristically vague). The terminology becomes difficult to apply to the novel as a form, a difficulty Newsom himself confronts in restricting his discussion to Bleak House, and in turning in his final chapter to Scholes' and Kellogg's definition of the novel's 'narrative' as divided between 'empirical' and 'fictional'.[9] This is a distinction of realist theory, differentiating between kinds of representational truth. It has seemed to me however that a view of the 'romantic' and 'familiar' in Dickens as a division of 'narrative' is curiously inadequate, making both subject to the seriousness of image, structure and theme which only seems half-

---

7. J.R. Kincaid, op.cit. p.xii.

8. Robert Newsom, Dickens: on the Romantic Side of Familiar Things, (New York 1977), 7.

9. Scholes and Kellogg, The Nature of Narrative (New York 1968), 15; Quoted by Robert Newsom, op.cit., 139-40.

appropriate to Dickens; a fact registered by Newsom when he adds that the novels 'play' between empirical and fictional.[10] Such a theoretical language effectively writes comedy out of Dickens.

I propose in this thesis to take up, as what I believe to be a language more appropriate to Dickens' novels, both of the traditional approaches to Dickens, as at once a 'serious' and a 'comic' writer, and to suggest these terms give the 'familiar' and 'romantic' a much wider scope, taking us to the heart of the structure of the novels.

The 'serious' concern with imagery, structure and theme can appropriately be identified as a narrative concern, where we describe narrative crudely as the representation of a course of events that follow one another in a coherent manner. Imagery, structure and theme are the tools of artistic unity, and narrative employs them to organise reality in a cognitive and rational way. Such narrative seems to understand reality within its own progression from beginning to ending, using its own form to understand the world as a coherent place in which the end contains and develops from the beginning; to move through it is to grow to understand it. In narrative, then, the end is always better than the beginning, for whatever action or event it represents, it provides us with the rational understanding only gained when we see experience as a unity. Narrative explains reality, either directly, as in mythology, or indirectly, as in tragedy, which has such narrative explanation as its ideal. Tragedy <u>seeks</u> coherence in its progression from beginning to ending, but is like narrative in nevertheless presenting its ending as a new understanding of experience.

Comedy is on the contrary a counter-narrative form; its interests are not the consequential progression from beginning to ending which concerns narrative, and which disturbs tragedy, but the disruptiveness

---

10. Robert Newsom, <u>op.cit</u>., 141.

and restorations made possible by its use of the space between beginning and ending. The substance of the comic or counter-narrative is to narrative itself mere transition; where narrative sense creates formal structure and institutes and enforces beginnings and endings as definitive of the coherence we seek in reality, the comic opposes and disturbs that sense, exploring the possibility not of progression and sequence, but of maintaining - or of overturning - the terms with which it began. The comic then undertakes to examine the orderliness of reality that narrative really takes for granted; and where narrative finds its subject in the coherence and consequence it seeks to assert its counter-form has its place away from and in rebellion against the terms of narrative, in disorder. Comedy can be satisfied by ending, as it were, back at its beginning, for it is not concerned that its ending should be a better place, but that it should be sufficient to the disruptiveness of its action and to the chaotic nature of the reality in which that disruptiveness participates. The purpose of the comic is not to understand the rationale of the arbitrary, but to expose the chaotic substance of the familiar, and it is this comic chaotic substance which seems to be important to Dickens, and which the language of 'romantic' and 'familiar' fails to register.

It will be clear from the foregoing that we are not accustomed to see the two sets of terms I have described as anything other than distinctive of two quite separate forms. Whether we see the first as narrative, myth or tragedy it would seem quite alien to the comic, or 'counter-narrative', in which the 'fictional' part of the division of the novel would properly seem to reside, and vice-versa. We have seen that both narrative and counter-narrative, both serious and comic, have been identified and expounded in Dickens' work. What I want to suggest in relation to his writing is that the novel is as a consequence of its

development dominated by narrative and counter-narrative modes, and that his novels are interesting and challenging in a way central to modern literature in providing us with our fullest and most intelligent exploration of the divided capacities of the novel's form. Where Dickens' elusive greatness as a writer lies is at that point at which narrative and counter-narrative meet and conflict; and what we have hereto defined as the sentimentality which separates the two versions of Dickens we have discovered must be confronted seriously, as part of a conscious, complex, difficult and highly intelligent attempt to face the difficulties of the genre, and in them the difficulties of an age closely related to our own.

Dickens was born in 1812, and died in 1870; his first story was published in 1833, and his final completed novel, Our Mutual Friend, in 1863.

These dates are of absolute importance in approaching Dickens' work; for no other recognised major novelist published continuously during these years. Many novels were written, of course, in the Gothic genre, and Lytton and Harrison, Ainsworth and Disraeli published more or less continuously, but to the modern reader their status is questionable (although of course Disraeli's is less so), and only Dickens survives more or less free of critical dispute. Dickens dominates the genre of the novel as we normally perceive it at this period, and we must now ask why critics have been so divided about the nature and importance of his work.

Dickens, first of all, has often seemed to offer an historical incongruity, for his life and work do not seem to accord readily with a view of the nineteenth century as the beginning of a modern, urban, scientific civilisation. His world seems harsh and cruel, often a nightmare and visionary place, and criticism has frequently sought a 'flawed' Dickens in an attempt to explain this disturbing vision in a psychological

manner; so that few writers can have had their background and childhood more thoroughly investigated. His father's insolvency and the portrayals in Micawber and Dorrit, the Marshalsea and the Blacking Warehouse as dominant images of his fiction; these things have become critical commonplaces.

Forster first helps to establish them in Dickens' own words, quoting his 'autobiographical fragment' recalling the Blacking Warehouse episode:

> From that hour until this at which I write, no word of that part of my childhood which I have now gladly brought to a close, has passed my lips to any human being. ... I have never, until I now impart it to this paper, in any burst of confidence with any one, my own wife not excepted, raised the curtain I then dropped, thank God.[11]

This admission suggested a secret Dickens which criticism has since found irresistible. Edgar Johnson tells us that these experiences were 'formative', continuing,

> In one sense the grieving child in the blacking warehouse might be said to have died, to be succeeded by a man of deadly determination, of insuperable resolve, hard and aggressive almost to fierceness. In another, that child never died, but was continually reborn in a host of children suffering or dying young and other innocent victims undergoing injustice and pain.[12]

Christopher Hibbert tells the same story, asserting that "the very spirit of his imagined world reflects the atmosphere and experience of these days":

> Most of Dickens' heroes begin their lives cut off from other people, insecure, obliged to make their way in a strange, discordant, threatening world, endeavouring to become accepted by it and

---

11. John Forster, The Life of Charles Dickens (London 1872), I, 49.

12. Edgar Johnson, Charles Dickens. His Tragedy and Triumph (London 1953), I, 45-6.

> a part of it, trying to understand themselves, and, in the meantime, sharing the sense of deprivation which makes Paul Dombey live with 'an aching void in his young heart, and all the outside world so cold, and bare and strange'.[13]

And, more recently, Steven Marcus has taken this further, suggesting that Dickens' novels are conceived "under the pressure of a progressive returning into consciousness of urgent and crucial events from his past".[14]

But, while all these observations are to some extent both true and helpful, they also tend dangerously towards that too-familiar vision of Dickens as an atypical figure, in whom this suppressed autobiography is the key to his conformity to an everyday world which is in some way less demanding than the often harsh world we find in his novels. What this autobiographical investigation evades is the necessity of treating the world of Dickens' novels seriously in terms of the hardships that they both represent and, at the same time, are generated by. It nevertheless remains true that Dickens' experience was made possible by and belonged to the conditions of his age, and we will see that this is so from a brief examination of Dickens' contemporary England.

The England of the peace following the Napoleonic wars was not the urbane and stabilised, 'modern' nation which existed, at least in the eyes of its prosperous classes, by the end of the century. In 1815, and even in mid-century, the country was characterised by social and economic change and instability, and by an accompanying general disorder.

While the industrial revolution played a major part in this condition of upheaval, it was by no means the only factor in it. In the

---

13. Christopher Hibbert, The Making of Charles Dickens (London 1967), 73.

14. Steven Marcus, Dickens: From Pickwick to Dombey, 44.

course of the first fifty years of the century the population doubled from 8,893,000 in 1801 to 17,298,000 in 1851,[15] while by that year 51% lived in towns and cities, compared to 30% in 1801. The proportion of the population under 20 in 1821 was around 50%; and this figure altered little during the next thirty years; in 1841 it was 46%, and in 1851 it was 48%.[16] Without entering upon the vexed question of the birth and death rates behind these figures, it remains an extraordinary fact that of the 17 millions alive in 1851 it was unlikely that more than two millions had been alive at the beginning of the century.

The radical changes in the structure of life produced by the growth of towns and the expansion of industry were underpinned by this continual flux in the very composition of the people. - Which, no doubt, helped to provide the flexibility and sheer inexperience necessary in the workforce in the acceptance of the new demands placed upon it. This transformation obviously affected the whole of society, and did so in terms of social position and economic status, disrupting the values of class and wealth that previously stabilised the structure of society.

The transformation of course affected all levels of society. The working classes began the long and well documented rise to self-consciousness and political influence; and while there is much disagreement about the rate at which the change in the status of the working classes took place, it is generally accepted that the long and gradual process had begun by the beginning of the nineteenth century with the industrial revolution and the migration of large parts of the workforce to towns and cities. It was still to be many years, of course, before the lower classes had any institutionalised political influence -

---

15. Mitchell and Deane, Abstract of British Historical Statistics, (Cambridge 1962), 6.

16. Mitchell and Deane, op.cit., 11.

they had no vote even after the Act of 1867[17] - but what will hardly be denied is that the social mobility which eventually gave them a coherent and organised voice already affected the work they did, the lives they led, and the aspirations they had begun to hold.

At the same time, social mobility had begun to affect all ranks of society. While Lawrence Stone concludes that "By and large, the power, wealth and even status of the landed elite survived more or less intact until 1880",[18] the structure of state and government was such as to preserve the place of the upper classes, while eroding their real power. Increasingly, the aristocracy existed side by side with the internal business of the nation, remaining as its figurehead, but taking on primarily external responsibilities, dealing with external relations, the defence of the realm, the regulation of trade and in the widest possible sense national order; but leaving local urban government, economic and social management, and every-day law and order enforcement to local authority, intervening only as a matter of necessity from time to time. The upper classes thus survived the mobilisation of the lower classes, but were affected by the creation of these new areas of responsibility which were outside their traditional areas of responsibility, and remained so.

While the roles of the working and upper classes at this period have been much discussed, the place of the middle classes seems to have been subjected to less enquiry, for they too, were affected by the changes we have outlined. The new internal 'business' of the land from which the aristocracy remained dissociated fell principally upon their shoulders,

---

17. The electorate after this Act numbered only two and a half to three million; after the Act of 1884 it grew about five million, or one sixth of the population. See David Thomson, Europe Since Napoleon (Penguin 1966), 351.

18, Lawrence Stone, An Open Elite? (Oxford 1984), 402.

in all its manifestations, as did the fluidity of status and opportunity produced necessarily by the rapid displacement and growth of the populace as a whole.

Norman Gash, in his book Aristocracy and People quotes W.J. Fox who wrote in 1835 that "in the middle classes we note an almost universal unfixedness of position" and continues,

> The middle classes as a whole showed perhaps wider variations of wealth, education, economic security, and political outlook than the classes above or below them. What can loosely be described as a middle-class culture was beginning to be a dominant influence in morality, art and literature long before Victoria came to the throne. But it was not the work of a class that was united in its aspirations or conscious of its power. This lack of social and political homogeneity, important in itself, resulted from the even more important circumstance that the middle classes did not constitute a fixed or even easily definable social caste. They were emphatically the middle classes, a plural concept as opposed to the singular noun bourgeoisie of European countries. This "universal unfixedness of position", in Fox's phrase, was no more than the fluidity of British society more actively at work than at any other level. The middle classes embraced the social detritus of the aristocracy, the upward migrants from the working classes, and much of the solid talent, wealth and intellect of the country. Their diversity, looseness and disunity were simply signs of a high degree of social mobility.[19]

The mobility which characterised English society was inevitably felt by the middle classes, though in retrospect their existence may seem solid and serene; and indeed it dominated middle class existence. If no revolution in England affected all levels of society, certainly the turbulence and uncertainty of position which affected its middle stratae produced a chaos of wealth, status, opportunity and danger which was in a limited way revolutionary in itself, creating an enormous social upheaval.

---

19. Norman Gash, Aristocracy and People (London 1979), 25.

This was not only catastrophically disturbing but also hugely productive: for it was the middle classes that took on much of the new social and economic responsibilities of an Industrial nation. It was middle class culture that rapidly became the productive culture in England, and middle class perception was rapidly established as the way in which we have continued to see both the nineteenth century and to a great extent our own. That perception, of course, immediately sought to define and rationalise its own energies, and in doing so lost sight of the point that I want to re-emphasise; that the middle classes were as entirely affected by the conditions of upheaval and uncertainty as the lower and upper classes, and were as subject to the changes that were taking place. 'Unfixedness', lack of identity, activity and productivity are all closely related, and the apparent power of the middle classes in the nineteenth century was characterised and informed by the inherent instability and fluidity of society.

This social instability must moreover be considered in conjunction with two other key areas of change. The first of these concerns the relationship of country and city. The migration to the cities of course had an enormous social and economic effect. Laslett writes, "the economic transformation of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries destroyed communality altogether in English rural life";[20] and that it ultimately did so is certainly true. The immediate effect of this new urban reality was the geographical concentration of the social instability we have described.

In practical terms, then, the improvement of the road network and the coming of the railways gave those in a position to appreciate and exploit it a new geographical mobility which produced two important and

20. Peter Laslett, The World We Have Lost (London 1965), 12.

related effects. Firstly, work and leisure, and the accompanying class-consciousness of labour and aristocracy, became for the first time specifically located in town and country respectively, and secondly towns and cities became in every sense places of transition.

The English aristocracy had long cultivated an ideal of country retirement; Weir observed in Houses of the Old Nobility,

> The stranger will seek in vain in London for palaces of the nobility, such as abound in Rome, Florence and Naples... London is, less than the capital of any other country, the place where the power and prestige of the nobility are conspicuously displayed.[21]

English cities had always been left to conduct their own business, *as* business; and so it became the social and economic dream of every respectable Victorian to escape the urban environment as a place of both opportunity and danger.

The city was the place for business, and for the worker; and the country for aristocratic ease. The city was where fortunes were to be made, and the country where they were enjoyed. The city drew not only the labouring but the aspirant classes to its centre, so that the social fluidity of early nineteenth century England became concentrated upon the urban environment, and primarily, of course, upon London. The city became the unstable centre of national consciousness.

This point brings us to the third area of change. We have seen that mobility and fluidity dominate all levels of Victorian society, and that this mobility is both social and geographical; we have seen that fluidity replaces and overturns order and structure even in the case of the flourishing middle classes. What, then, of government itself?

---

21. Quoted in Jean-Paul Houlin, Pierre Coustillas (Eds.) *Victorian Writers and the City* (Lille 1979), 12.

We have seen that the moneyed and professional classes of early nineteenth century England were beset with social and economic instability and with the consequences of social mobility, just as was the rest of society. Already, we have seen the development of a unique and strange situation, in which one system of government, which represents what is essentially a Tudor concept of Crown and country, exists side by side with the middle class, urban regime of the developing Victorian economy. We see a peculiar social dichotomy emerging, in which the aristocracy retain sufficient general power to maintain national order, but in which the middle classes are left to find a way of ruling and managing themselves, at a local level, through local bodies. Where the middle classes were dominant, in the towns and cities, they were confronted by a need for their own values of law and order.

What this position produced in the short term in the larger towns and cities, and again particularly in London, was a chaos which was both actual and moral. The middle classes, as they were represented by their prominence in the economy and business of the nation, had no real sanctions, and no code. They existed between the primitive justice of what was essentially feudal law, which prescribed ferocious penalties for minor criminals it was largely incapable of detecting, and a freedom which in the absence of a strong central government was also a freedom of enterprise.

London, then, continued to have the worst reputation in Europe for prostitution and petty crime throughout the period to mid-century; and it is fair to say that England, in comparison to other European countries, was notoriously disorderly and undisciplined. But at the same time the first fifty years of the nineteenth century saw the development of a middle-class culture which had to conceive of its own

rights and prerogatives before it could produce government, and during this period a strong governmental system would only have restricted its development. Contemporary society saw the dangers of their restriction chiefly in economic terms; the best government was held to be the cheapest.[22] What we see initiating this attitude is the beginning of the belief that government must be directed by business; and what emerges by mid-century is the beginning of a general recognition that the country as a whole is a business, and that the function of government is the middle-class function of management. We find the expression of this belief in the change of the franchise from the old value of possession of land to the grounding of right in the possession of money. By conducting the business of the nation, the middle classes came to dominate its government more by prevalence and necessity of economic attitude than by any act of volition.

This process, however, took a very long time. Even today, we see an aristocratic machinery in existence alongside the fully developed organs of a middle-class culture. At its beginning during this period, the characteristics of transition dominated the process of change. It was largely unrecognised by the ruling classes, for it represented for them, not so much an abdication of power as the gradual establishment of a new power-base. The aristocracy remained detached from urban economic culture: just as the dominant consciousness of the nation was left free to establish itself socially and economically between labour and aristocracy, city and country, so it found itself too with what we can only describe as a moral freedom, to establish itself somewhere between chaos and order.

---

22. See Gash, op.cit., 43-4.

At each of these important points of class, location and government, then, we see early Victorian society torn, in its middle as well as in its lower and upper classes, between the fragmentary and coherent, between freedom and restriction.

A divided and incoherent middle-class world, then, offers an insight into Dickens' work which would not depend upon psychological investigation. On the other hand, however, it also defeats our normal view of the way in which his novels, as social investigations, typify the emergence of what we commonly see as the Victorian, as distinct from Romantic consciousness, in the modern, analytical and philanthropic novel, and the 'realist' genre. This second perspective is the one which allows us to view the history and nature of the middle classes as very much more cohesive than it was in reality; according to it, the novel merely retains a 'Romantic' cult of the writer with a more direct, post-Romantic realism, which replaces writer with author. Clearly, the pursuit of my argument demands an examination of this 'Romanticism'.

Marilyn Butler perhaps represents this view at its most intelligent when she suggests an opposition of a Romantic concern with 'inwardness' and the writer to a Gothic and Sentimental deference to the reader, observing of the latter that "Our Romantic and post-Romantic interest in the _writer_ intrudes when we encounter a literature which keeps a partnership with the _reader_ so steadily in mind".[23]

As much recent - and often European - interpretation of Romanticism has shown us, Romanticism can be regarded as deeply divided, even where it appears to uphold its allegiance to the 'writer' and the writers' authority most categorically.

---

23. Marilyn Butler, _Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries_ (Oxford 1981), 30.

Marilyn Butler's vision of 'Romanticism' here is not so much a literary movement as an ideal interpretation of a complex situation. Many Romantic writers, moreover, had a much more sophisticated understanding of this situation than the simple identification of their concern with 'inwardness' and a cult of the writer would seem to allow. Marilyn Butler specifically notes the tendency in poetry towards 'ballad imitations' as a sentimental characteristic;[24] and yet we find such ballads in Blake's Songs and in Wordsworth's contribution to Lyrical Ballads.

Wordsworth, in particular, would seem to be central to Marilyn Butler's argument, as the paragon of a Romantic sensibility. The egotistical sublime of the Wordsworthian consciousness would seem to exemplify the 'inwardness' of the Romantic writers and to represent the "Romantic interest in the writer" at its extremity; but if we read Wordsworth's Preface to the Lyrical Ballads we find assertions which do not seem to accord with this Romantic vision. He undertakes to write in "the real language of men";[25] and asserts "that there neither is nor can be any essential difference" between poetry and prose, continuing

> rhyme and metre is regular and uniform, and not, like that which is produced by what is usually called poetic diction, arbitrary... In the one case the reader is utterly at the mercy of the Poet respecting what imagery or diction he may choose to connect with the passion, whereas in the other the metre obeys certain rules, to which Poet and Reader both willingly submit because they are certain.[26]

Wordsworth's object would seem to be not to elevate but to humble poet and reader alike. The 'certainty' which he sets out to test here

---

24. Marilyn Butler, op.cit., 30.
25. Wordsworth and Coleridge, Lyrical Ballads, Ed. R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones (London 1963), 241.
26. Wordsworth and Coleridge, op.cit., 262.

is not the defensive certainty of the writer so much as a certainty of audience and of readership; nobody, it would seem, could "keep a partnership with the reader" more steadily in mind, or be more optimistic about the audience of his writing.

This is not, of course, to suggest that Wordsworth was a 'Sentimental' writer; in the Lyrical Ballads, "Tintern Abbey" is recognisably Romantic in the terms Marilyn Butler suggests, being closely concerned with 'inwardness' and the writer, and so too is "Michael"; and both anticipate the form and style of The Prelude. What it does suggest, however, is that Wordsworth is a very much more uncertain writer than this 'Romantic' designation would in isolation allow us to believe, and that the ethos at the heart of his work is deeply divided between writer and reader in these terms. Two factors have tended to conceal this division. The first is Wordsworth's genuine but much exaggerated reaction to the French Revolution, which has been used to establish a reactionary conservatism as the dominant force of his poetry;[27] and the second factor is the intervention of Coleridge, both in his capacity as Wordsworth's friend, and as his critic.

Coleridge, of course, dissented strongly from the terms of the Preface; writing in disagreement that, "in the intercourse of uneducated men",

> There is a want of that prospectiveness of mind, that surview, which enables a man to foresee the whole of what he is to convey, appertaining to any one point; and by this means so to subordinate and arrange the different parts according to their relative importance as to convey it at once and as an organised whole.[28]

Coherence, for Coleridge the critic, if not the poet, is the value

---

27. See for instance Geoffrey Hartman, Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814 (New Haven and London 1964), 334-5.

28. S.T. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria Ed. Watson (London 1960), 201.

that separates high from low, educated from ignorant, and necessarily writer from reader. At the same time, it is almost an aristocratic value, and certainly, as he shows us in The Friend, it is a moral one:

> What place then is left in the heart for Virtue to build on, if in any case we may dare practice on others what we should feel as a cruel and contemptuous wrong in our own persons? Every parent possesses the opportunity of observing how deeply children resent the injury of a delusion; and if men laugh at the falsehood that were imposed on themselves during their childhood, it is because they are not good and wise enough to contemplate the past in the present, and so to produce by a virtuous and thoughtful sensibility that continuity in their self-consciousness which Nature made the law of their animal life. Ingratitude, sensuality, and hardness of heart, all flow from this source. Men are ungrateful to others only when they have ceased to look back on their former selves with joy and tenderness. They exist in fragments. Annihilated as to the Past, they are dead to the Future, and seek for proofs of it everywhere, only not (where alone they can be found) in themselves.[29]

Coleridge attempts to resolve the uncertainty surrounding the status of the imagination by making the two terms with which it finds itself faced into two moral values. 'Continuity', which the period seemed to lack desperately, is made into virtue, and fragmentation into a cruelty and danger. In making this distinction we see Coleridge facing the instability of the period and perhaps of himself as a matter of both narrative and counter-narrative forces. Continuity exists upon the side of consequence and cognition which, we saw, provided only one half of a literary vision of a reality that seems (to Coleridge) all too conducive to what is contrary to narrative. This Coleridgean ethos is both reactionary and conservative; and it is not surprising that it should have so strongly endorsed the great autobiographical continuum that was to have been the unity of Wordsworth's poetry and life. Its

---

29. S.T. Coleridge, The Friend (London 1904), 22.

values have come to dominate a perception of both Wordsworth and Romanticism itself: and this domination seems secured by Wordsworth's later poetry. In The Excursion, the Wanderer tells us of solitude:

> What more than that the severing should confer
> Fresh power to commune with the invisible world,
> And hear the mighty stream of tendency
> Uttering, for elevation of our thought,
> A clear sonorous voice, inaudible
> To the vast multitude; whose doom it is
> To run the giddy round of vain delight
> Or fret and labour on the Plain below.[31]

"The mighty stream of tendency" becomes an image both for the continuity of life, and of poetry itself. But this is the Miltonic language to which Wordsworth was always susceptible, the language of seeing things whole, as a great and single prospect of narrative. This Miltonic voice is not solely characteristic of the poetry, and, even here, represents not so much a complete vision as a set of choices. It is no coincidence that these words belong to the Wanderer, and not to the poet himself, and that the life he leads is seen as admirable; but also as something beyond ordinary human capability. Even in writing this vision, Wordsworth faces the choices it makes; and he confronts these choices from the beginning of his writing. In the second part of the 1799 Prelude he tells us, speaking, like Coleridge, of childhood, that

> A tranquillizing spirit presses now
> On my corporeal frame, so wide appears
> The vacancy between me and those days,
> Which yet have such self-presence in my heart
> That sometimes when I think of them I seem
> Two consciousnesses - conscious of myself,
> And of some other being.[32]

The Prelude is written in an attempt to confront and repair this division of past and present and not, after Coleridge, to deny its moral

31. William Wordsworth, The Excursion (1814), IX, 85-92.

32. William Wordsworth, The Prelude (1799), II, 25-31.

validity or existence. The poem is not so much the first statement of a new vision of things as an attempt to apply a narrative unity to contemporary reality. This unifying voice is the 'Miltonic' one; but Wordsworth does not sound like Milton here, and we find in the course of The Prelude that the stream of life and reality lies somewhere other than in the 'stream of tendency'. In the part of The Prelude that deals with life in London we hear of "The endless stream of men and moving things" (VII,158),[33] partly in rejection of the middle class business of the city, but partly in fascination at a kind of continuity that defeats continuity. The stream of writing and narrative is for Wordsworth something very different from the stream of the counter-narrative energies which are repeatedly the energies of the poetry.

While Wordsworth, then, seems to make similar choices to the ones upheld by Coleridge, these are evidently based upon a knowledge of the inevitability and insistence of a fragmentary world. 'Men and moving things' are half seen as the inevitable substance of life (reciprocated by Wordsworth's own frequent half-visions) and provide an energy for the poetry, as well as a source of bewilderment and frustration. In the same way, the 'two consciousnesses' are the unavoidable and regrettable consequences of looking back; but they also provide a real source of energy and feeling, a voice in the poetry that is distinctly Wordsworthian.

Clearly, then, there is within 'Romanticism' a division and uncertainty of literary language which is as pronounced and dominant as those other economic and social divisions and uncertainties of the period, and which is closely related to them. While we saw that the society of the period was torn between aristocratic and egalitarian impulses, between country and city, freedom and government, these

---

33. William Wordsworth, The Prelude (1805), VII, 158.

uncertainties can in literary terms be characterised as an equivocation between continuity and fragmentation. Even at its most 'written' English Romanticism conceals a division which is effectively one between narrative and counter-narrative modes.

To interpret Dickens from the perspective of suppressed autobiography is to regard him in the light of Marily Butler's 'Romanticism', as a stunted Romantic, a man with a past that could never be fully recalled, and so a writer who was never really able to find the 'Writer' in his work, or was able to do so only in a secret and surreptitious way.

At the same time, however, a divided Romanticism gives us a valuable insight into the nature of Dickens' novel, for it no longer seems adequate to see the novel simply as a new vehicle of a narrative realism - a realism which we have seen the 'Romantic' narrative, Coleridgean ideal defensive against. If we look at the pre-Romantic novel, meanwhile, we find that the eighteenth-century novelists had found the genre to be ambivalent about precisely that relation of narrative and counter-narrative which we see at the heart of Romantic uncertainty.

The early novelists found this ambivalence to be highly problematic, as an uncertainty about the moral status of the writer in relation to a reality which seemed to offer no precise moral values. We see this developing as a crisis of realism through the works of Defoe, Richardson and Fielding;[34] and bringing about a crisis in the question of whether the chaotic and fragmentary is to appear in the novel as we have seen that it appears in reality, or whether the novel is to remain under the narrative control of the writer. The important point that emerges from the early novel, moreover, is this: that the novel, unlike the Romantic

---

34. For a discussion of the moral opposition of Fielding and Richardson see Ian Watt, The Rise of The Novel (London 1957), Chapter 9, 'Fielding as Novelist'.

poetry we discussed above, can accommodate both narrative and counter-narrative without the insistence or disruption of a 'poetic' writing voice. What we saw as a disturbance in the division of the Romantic poem is natural to the novel, which effectively conceals two radically different genres within its single form. 'Narrative' and 'counter-narrative' no longer seem adequate terms for what are two modes as separate as those of tragedy and comedy. On the one hand, the novel can contain a Coleridgean narrative, the product of the writer's close control of his writing, whose values are those of coherence, and a confidence in the consequences of a cognitive vision. Its concerns are to see life and the details of life as a coherent and self-transforming whole; its medium is the wakefulness and intelligence of clear consciousness, and its ideals are those of veracity and truth. On the other hand, when the novel is concerned with a counter-narrative that views reality, not as a consequential place, but as a fragmented and mysterious world, with its obligation not to select from and control but to experience the whole of that world, these values undergo a complete transformation. If the novel depends, not upon the nature of the narrative but upon the chaos of reality, it is cast into that 'endless stream of men and moving things' in the midst of which continuity itself seems to be chaotic and disordered. Under these conditions, the values of writing are dominated by the fascination and attractiveness of a constantly shifting world, depending, not upon continuity and coherence, but on the pretences and fantasies which have the strange authority of an unconscious, uncontrolled life. This way of understanding the world is naturally incoherent and fragmentary; but it is able to grasp and reflect reality in a way that narrative never could in its own need for continuity; for where the latter kind of writing claims to be at the centre of reality, and claims that its

author, too, is at that centre, the former acknowledges its place upon the periphery of things, as the innocence of life which accompanies and complements life's actions. But this fragmentary narrative is more than merely a peripheral function of coherence. Where it remains mysterious to the novel - as a part of a bewildering reality - the counter-narrative of entertainment and amusement is like a kind of deathly life, a world outside but oddly complementary to and affirmative of the life that the orderly world lays claim to. Clearly, we need two terms for these different but integral functions of the novel, and I will call them 'narrative' where they tend towards coherence, and 'fiction' where they tend towards existence in a fragmentary, diversionary world.

This internal division, then, is highly problematic to the early novel, and it is problematic since no way of approaching the form is capable of writing the world of the novel into a single, coherent whole. To enter the world of fiction is to deny the value of a coherence that nevertheless remains in anything that is to be recognisably a novel; while to accept the sequential values of narrative is to deny the values of fiction, which must remain on the same terms. Unlike the earlier 'realistic', dramatic form, the problem is not so much one of the tension involved in a given form such as comedy or tragedy, as the impossibility of separating these things, as recognisable artistic wholes, from one another: for the novel has its two essential characteristics, to be narrative and to be fiction, invested upon opposite sides of the dramatic spectrum - yet supposedly working to the same end. The fragmentary, episodic world of fiction is the descendent of comedy, and the conscious, realistic, sequential world of narrative is similarly descended from the secular, worldly sequences of classical tragedy; and the problem for the novelist would seem to be that these claim to be the same thing, and to exist in the same place. Somehow,

the novel must combine the essential roles of the comic and the tragic, and be both innocent and cynic, both the controller and the victim of the action, both narrative and fiction.

We are now in a position to understand that Dickens' career is subject to and generated by the changes and difficulties we have described; and stands as our gateway to a modern consciousness, and to the modern novel. While it is clear that Dickens' childhood was as disorganised and chaotic as it could have been it is now equally clear that it is a mistake to attribute this disorganisation directly to Dickens' individuality, or to suppose that his background was exceptional or atypical. His past was unprecedented only in terms of his status as a writer, and it was unprecedented because it brought about a new kind of artistic career, and not the odd, constrained, or spoilt, one we have so often been presented with by his critics.

We have seen the features which characterise the rise of the middle classes as a predominance of social and economic mobilities; and we see these mobilities dominating Dickens' childhood, and dominating in the most painful of ways. W.J. Fox continues the comments on 'unfixedness' quoted above, telling us that "Every man is rising or falling, or hoping that he shall rise, or fearing that he shall sink".[35]

'Unfixedness' dominates Dickens' background through precisely such hopes and fears; his father's career was as complete a demonstration of the vulnerability of the middle class position as could be imagined.

John Dickens occupied in the course of his life precisely such an economic and social position as I have described as typical of the middle classes. His father was steward to the Crewe family, his mother housekeeper at Crewe Hall. After the death of William Dickens in 1785 the

---

35. Quoted in Norman Gash, <u>op.cit.</u>, 24-5.

Crewes took an interest in both John and his brother William and found employment for them, establishing John at Somerset House. He remained a clerk in the civil service until he was pensioned off in 1825. He married Elizabeth Barrow in 1809, whose father held the position of Chief Conductor of Moneys in Town, and whose brother was a friend and fellow-clerk of John Dickens. Both the father and the brother of his wife had respectable and well-paid positions, and his own prospects seemed bright.

By 1810, however, things had begun to go wrong. Elizabeth's father was prosecuted for embezzlement; and one source of the financial security of the Dickens family was removed with his abscondment to the Continent.

John Dickens, moreover, had begun to show his worst weakness, one not uncharacteristic of the aspiring middle classes. As N. and J. Mackenzie tells us, he "had to earn a living as a government clerk while he fancied himself as an eighteenth-century gentleman";[36] or in Edgar Johnson's words, "he simply could not live within his income".[37]

The world around him invited social aspiration; and status, more than ever before, was a commodity temptingly close to the reach of a civil-service clerk. The result was a betrayal into poverty which was the bitterer for the hopes and aspirations of which it was born.

In 1812, then, came the first of a long series of changes of house which reached its crisis with the return of a by now large family to London in 1822, and with the events which led to the employment of the young Charles in the Blacking Warehouse, and to his father's confinement at the Marshalsea.

The death of Elizabeth Dickens in 1823 and a bequest of £450 relieved

---

36. N. and J. Mackenzie, Dickens: A Life (Oxford 1979), 4.

37. Edgar Johnson, op.cit., 8.

these difficulties, releasing John Dickens from prison, and his son Charles from his menial labour; but John Dickens remained more or less in poverty until the establishment of his son's fortunes, and the return of a source of financial security to the family.

As I have already indicated, these details have been comprehensively documented. The point I want to re-emphasise, however, is that the Dickens family experienced, not so much the shame and disgrace of an individual (although John Dickens was evidently not a sensible man) as the worst consequences of a new social and economic climate;[38] a climate in which a clerk could set up as a gentleman, if he had the money - and a climate in which a gentleman could go to prison like a clerk, if he didn't.

The times were such that it was very easy for a man of limited awareness and ability to mistake his position as John Dickens did; and such that the consequences were dire, should he do so. The fate that he suffered was becoming increasingly common. Figures for the eighteenth and early nineteenth century are difficult to estimate; but what is certain is that by 1857 there were over 14000 people in prison for debt, accounting for 10 per cent of the whole prison population. That there was a dramatic increase in an already large number of imprisoned debtors can be gathered if we take into account John Howard's estimate of 1776 that 2437 people were then in prison for debt.[39]

Insolvency was a peculiar crime in that it affected all layers of society; so that it carried with it a certain aura of respectability. This perhaps explains the continued distinction of debtors from ordinary criminals:

---

38. F.S. Schwarzbach makes a similar point in relation to Dickens' experience of London in Dickens and the City, 9-11: "the experience of the city was one of profound dislocation" he tells us, so that "Dickens' reactions can be taken as typical".

39. McConville, A History of Prison Administration (London 1981), I, 335 and 341.

> Until 1869 imprisoned debtors could not be subject to the same regime as those charged with or convicted of criminal offences. They were allowed extensive visiting privileges, their own food and clothing, could continue to work at their trade or profession to the extent that their confinement allowed, and were exempt from many of the prison rules.[39]

The medieval and feudal policy of regarding crime largely in relation to social position continued in the Insolvency laws until mid-century. That the laws were reformed was an acknowledgement that aristocratic privilege had finally become an irrelevance even to this part of the criminal law; in the meantime, to the newly educated and newly monied - or unmonied - those privileges only added further to a confusion of status, as they do to William Dorrit's. While it is not possible to say that insolvency was a middle-class crime, it seems reasonable to conclude that in contemporary eyes John Dickens' fate must have seemed the occupational hazard of a respectable life, neither extraordinary in its nature nor unusual in its occurence. As much is implicitly acknowledged in the contemporary advocacy of self-help. As Samuel Smiles tells us,

> There is a constant struggle and pressure for front seats in the social amphitheatre; in the midst of which all noble self-denying resolve is trodden down, and many fine natures are inevitably crushed to death.[40]

Cobbett, writing very much earlier, absolved the individual from most of the blame, observing that

> A great misfortune of the present day is, that everyone is, in his own estimates, raised above his real state of life; everyone seems to think himself entitled, if not to title and great estate, at least to live without work. This mischievous, this most destructive way of thinking has, indeed, been produced, like almost all other evils, by the Acts of our Septennial and Unreformed Parliament. That body,

---

39. McConville, op.cit., 341.
40. Samuel Smiles, Self Help (1859), 291.

> by its Acts, has caused an enormous debt to be created, and, in consequence, a prodigious sum to be raised annually in taxes. It has caused, by these means, a race of loan-mongers and stock-jobbers to arise.[41]

Both of these writers direct their advice at a middle-class, respectable audience, clearly in their eyes at risk from the dangers of extravagancy, and in Cobbett's view the loose government which we saw was central to the rise of the middle classes.

It is evident that Dickens experienced a world that was socially and economically competitive to the point of ruthlessness, and that he was exposed from childhood both to the opportunities and possibilities that the possession of money offered - for life was intermittently comfortable - and to the hardships and cruelties Smiles and Cobbett warn against, brought about by joining in that general competition.

Before we decide then that the difficulties of his childhood were a stigma which blighted Dickens' vision and prevented the open assimilation of his past into the substance of his novels, it would seem expedient first of all to ask more carefully what it might have meant to him. The changes and transitions of the times were only partially understood by contemporary commentators, and it would seem to be folly either to ignore them ourselves, or to assume that the young Dickens wrote independently and in spite of them.

It is clear from the remarks I quoted above from the much discussed 'autobiographical fragment' that one of the ways in which Dickens was able to understand his own position and his wealth and status as a successful novelist by the middle of his career was by a 'Romantic' guilt which concealed the past in an autobiographical silence which was never openly and fully broken, and which had to be continually and secretly revisited.

---

41. William Cobbett, Advice to Young Men (1830), 15.

But might it not be possible that at the same time Dickens rejected autobiography as a means of self-expression in the novel? That he found the 'Romantic' values of coherence in isolation to be inadequate to the world he inhabited - just as the Romantics had done before him? That his chaotic and disrupted background was not just a force of alienation from such values, but an opportunity to understand a different world, in a different way? And that Dickens used and explored the novel in its ability to contain and unify the contrary impulses of the fictive and the narrative, and in doing so shows us what both the form of the novel and the social context it fully represents is capable of achieving in its moral, religious, political, economic and sexual life?

My purpose in this thesis will be to answer all of these questions resoundingly in the positive, and to show categorically that Dickens' novels are not flawed, but that his imagination instead offers us a unity which challenges any understanding of his own age, of the novel, or of our contemporary vision which is incapable of comprehending or of profiting from the intelligent reading of his work.

CHAPTER I

FROM EPISODE TO STORY

No writer could have had a more direct relationship with the literary world as he entered upon it than the young Dickens. We have heard from all Dickens' biographers how the popular editions from his father's library became the companions of much of his childhood,[1] and we can read their titles in a part of David Copperfield which bears a close relation to the truth:

> From that blessed little room, Roderick Random, Peregrine Pickle, Humphrey Clinker, Tom Jones, the Vicar of Wakefield, Don Quixote, Gil Blas, and Robinson Crusoe came out, a glorious host, to keep me company. They kept alive my fancy - they, and the Arabian Nights, and The Tales of the Genii, - and did me no harm.[2]

In addition to these popular editions, Dickens was also familiar with all the less respectable forms of popular literature. Forster quotes Dickens' own words:

> I used when I was at school, to take The Terrific Register, making myself unspeakably miserable and frightening my very wits out of my head, for the small charge of a penny weekly: which considering that there was an illustration to every number, in which there was always a pool of blood, and at least one body, was cheap.[3]

Magazines and newspapers, as well as the inumerable ballad sheets, tracts, handbills and execution sheets printed and sold cheaply would have been readily available to Dickens throughout his childhood and youth in and around the metropolis, and find their way repeatedly into his novels.

---

1. See John Forster, Life of Charles Dickens, I, 9: Edgar Johnson, Charles Dickens, London 1953, 20-2; also T.W. Hill, 'Books that Dickens read', in The Dickensian, XLV, 81-90, 201-207 (1949).
2. David Copperfield, Chapter 4, 106.
3. Forster, Life, I, iii, 43-4 n.

The literary amusement and entertainment found in these publications seems to come alive, too, in the young Dickens' experience of the theatre. He tells us in his Preface to the Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi of "The delights - the ten thousand million delights - of a pantomime" and speaks of the theatre's 'glories' and "a strong veneration for Clowns".[4]

The young Dickens, then, was an avid consumer of all these kinds of popular and street entertainments; and a consumer, too, of the drama, horrors and delights of the streets themselves from which these amusements seemed to be generated, and to which they belonged. When Dickens gives us his account of being lost as a child in London in 'Household Words',[5] it is as if he wanders among the contents of this popular literature, finding a place of 'monsters' and 'Giants',[6] a world peopled by childhood stories of Jack and the Beanstalk and Dick Whittington.[7] So Dickens tells us,

> I wandered about the City, like a child in a dream, staring at the British merchants, and inspired by a mighty faith in the marvellousness of everything.[8]

He continues,

> In such stories as I made, to account for the different places, I believed as devoutly as the City itself.[9]

This faith is the one I described above as a faith in the disorder of the world, of fiction, and in it Dickens' imagination and the early Victorian reality as we described it above are indistinguishable; and a

---

4. Charles Dickens, Miscellaneous Papers (Chapman and Hall, 1908), 1-2.
5. Household Words, August 1853, 'Gone Astray', reprinted: Miscellaneous Papers, 395-405.
6. Miscellaneous Papers, 397.
7. Miscellaneous Papers, 398-9.
8. Miscellaneous Papers, 400.
9. Miscellaneous Papers, 400.

belief in the 'marvellousness of everything' is the key to the spirit in which Sketches by Boz, Dickens' first literary effort, is begun.

These stories belong directly to the chaotic and everyday reality we see Dickens' imagination here trying to grasp in its childish encounter, and to the nexus of popular and street literature which becomes inextricably entwined with this child's understanding of reality.

This popular literature had already become a commercial literary market, as Leslie Shepard notes when, discussing the pamphleteer and ballad-writer, he tells us that by

> the nineteenth century, street ballads were printed for money, and the propaganda was largely incidental except in so far as it was likely to meet a public mood and sell well.[10]

Dickens' "mighty faith in the marvellousness of everything" which brought popular stories and everyday reality together is already anticipated by a popular literature of entertainment and amusement, and a commercial reality which had begun to recognise the opportunities in such entertainment for 'selling well'; - a commercial reality which had come about as a part of the popular life which it was now its concern to locate, express and satisfy. The fragmentary reality Dickens discovered both in his reading, in the city and in his imagination was also becoming a reality of the publishing and printing world.

Dickens did not so much plunge into the activity of writing to be published, then, as continue a longstanding participation in the 'marvellousness of everything' when he submitted his first sketch to Monthly Magazine in the hope of (eventually) supplementing his income.

His commercial motives for publishing have been much criticised, so that R.L. Patten notes rather defensively of his rapidly developing

---

10. Leslie Shepard, The History of Street Literature (London 1973), 126.

career, "Of course Dickens wrote for money. He had to."[11] Writing for money however was not simply a necessity for Dickens: it was one way, and the most natural and immediate way, of understanding his world. The direct commercial relation with the reader was as Patten again observes[12] the one on which Dickens depended, but I must emphasise the point made in my introduction in so regarding it, that the conditions of reality made it not an extraordinary but a normal relation. It accorded not only with Dickens' experience of reality but with a popular world.

Fragmentation and chaos were the conditions of a 'fictive' world and of the reciprocal fictive imagination; and we find this imagination, as Dickens' instinctive sense, to be the first impulse of his writing, informing the first of the Sketches. Almost immediately, these early stories begin to disrupt and attack ideas of continuity and coherence, and are full of jokes about the consequential nature of narrative.

These jokes occur in a variety of forms. Some are parenthetical asides - "We pause for reply; and, having no chance of getting one, begin a fresh paragraph";[13] "...looking forward as anxiously to the termination of our journey, as we fear our readers will have done, long since, to the conclusion of our paper";[14] "A troublesome form and arbitrary custom ... prescribe that a story should have a conclusion, in addition to a commencement"[15] - and others occur in the course of story telling. We are told of Mr William Barker, for example, that he "was born - But why need we relate where Mr William Barker was born, or

11. R.L. Patten, Charles Dickens and his Publishers (Oxford 1978), 9.
12. R.L. Patten, op.cit., 10.
13. 'Hackney Coach Stands', Sketches by Boz (Chapman and Hall, 1874), 94.
14. 'Early Coaches', Sketches, 158.
15. 'The Tuggses at Ramsgate', Sketches, 411.

when?" and Dickens continues,

> Mr William Barker <u>was</u> born, or he had never been. There is a son - there was a father. There is an effect - there was a cause. Surely this is sufficient information for the most fatima-like curiosity; and, if it be not, we regret our inability to supply any further evidence on the point. Can there be a more satisfactory or strictly parliamentary course? Impossible.[16]

- shrugging off the consequential responsibilities of writing. Cabs, Hackney-Coaches and Omnibuses, and their drivers, become the metaphors for Dickens' roving instincts in these stories, and he erects the irresponsibility of their exploits to legendary status: we are told of Mr Barker, for instance, that

> Mr Barker it <u>ought</u> to have been who, honestly indignant at being ignominiously ejected from a house of public entertainment, kicked the landlord in the knee and thereby caused his death. We say that it <u>ought</u> to have been Mr Barker, for the act was not a common one, and could have emanated from no ordinary mind.[17]

The figures that dominate this anarchic world seem above the law, providing the Magistracy with "half their amusement" as well as "half their occupation";[18] when in jail, the driver of one particularly ubiquitous red cab "lies on his back on the floor, and sings comic songs all day".[19]

This ability then to defeat the restrictions of the world by amusement is at the heart of the world of fiction, which refuses to conform to the narratives of writing or of law and order, or justice. Consequence is ridiculed by immediacy: it does not matter where William Barker came from, and he replaces the morality of narrative

---

16. 'The Last Cab-Driver, and the First Omnibus Cad', <u>Sketches</u>, 169.
17. 'The Last Cab-Driver', <u>Sketches</u>, 173.
18. 'The Last Cab-Driver', <u>Sketches</u>, 174.
19. 'The Last Cab-Driver', <u>Sketches</u>, 169.

with an 'ought' that defeats responsibility.

These figures are almost the deities of a street culture, untouchable even by the laws they consistently flout. They are the authors of a world that opposes cognitive expression and exists, untouched by the concerns of organised existence, in a story which they dominate by the vitality of their power to amuse. Their life is properly expressed by the episodic, for their values are immediate and non-consequential. - Courtroom and prison are not bad endings so much as occupational hazards.

Where the early Sketches are not dominated by the outright lawlessness of this humour, they are still governed by the endless continuity, the stream of men and moving things, which both defeats comprehension and engages the imagination. Fairgrounds, pawn-brokers, shops, theatres, gardens, the river - any place where people gather and entertain or amuse themselves, or conduct their business is fastened upon by Boz's vagrant vision. The continual movement of the city[20] is the theme of all of the Sketches classified under 'Scenes', most of which were published before 1836.

As the Sketches unfold, however, we begin to see a sense of responsibility and reciprocally of narrative continuity developing within them. "Romance can make no head against the Riot Act";[21] 'the First of May' uncompromisingly declares, "and pastoral simplicity is not understood by the police". The Cabbies' irresponsibilities are suddenly confronted by a justice that threatens real restriction, and jokes themselves begin to show a social conscience: "We were disturbed from our slumber by some dark insinuations thrown out by a friend of ours to the effect that children in the lower ranks of life were beginning to

---

20. For a specific discussion of the Sketches in relation to the city see F.S. Schwarzbach, Dickens and the City, 35-42.

21. 'The First of May', Sketches, 196.

choose chimney-sweeping". The former "mighty faith in everything" gives way to the beginnings of a scepticism and suddenly actions begin to have consequences, in this Sketch, after all. This scepticism, of course, is still not a serious one; but it does begin to piece the fictive world together into a narrative - and disappointed - sense which overturns childhood faith.

> We have shut out conviction as long as we could, but it has forced itself upon us and we now proclaim to a deluded public, that the May day dancers are not sweeps. The size of them, alone, is enough to repudiate the idea.[22]

The consequence (as narrative now dictates) of this discovery is a vision of 'things as they are' which for the first time is governed not by attraction and fascination but by disillusion and contempt. The conclusion, "How has May-day decayed!"[23] threatens the willing suspension of disbelief which Dickens professes in the Preface to the Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi ("we...still believe...as devoutly as we did before twenty years' experience had shown us that they are always wrong").[24]

The difference between this disillusionment and those earlier stories - 'Private Theatres', or 'Vauxhall Gardens by Day' - where the fun and laughter of illusions has fallen flat is that here the failure of enjoyment, finding disillusionment a process of growing up, and needing to revert for the full and original illusion to childhood, finds that a benevolent reality is not capable of containing a general disillusion. Where enjoyment is a confirmation of a fundamentally benevolent environment, and the success at the same time of the protagonist and of the participation of the writer in the life of the

---

22. 'The First of May', Sketches 201.
23. 'The First of May', Sketches, 203.
24. Miscellaneous Papers, 3.

world, failed enjoyment finds that reality falls short, and is a failure, in the same way, for the writing.

The failure of amusement here means the beginning of a questioning of the control of reality. While amusements have failed in the Sketches before, they have been theatrical failures, only rash self-exposures, in which the sufferer by the joke was after all its perpetrator. Such failures are deserved, and function as a kind of judgement. The sufferers in this joke - the sweeps - have suffering imposed upon them, and, in spite of the story's pretence otherwise, that suffering is in turn imposed upon the story; our attention is firmly fixed to the writings' social conscience by the telling of the story as if it were a failed joke, and the failure the fault of the sweeps. We know that their choice is no choice, and that knowledge focuses our attention, like the story's, not upon individual vitality, but upon something which excludes coincidence - as it excludes the possibility that most sweeps are princes -; the inevitable process of degradation and decline.

Suddenly, we are on the side of narrative responsibility rather than of individual anarchy. The social environment no longer appears to be a source of benevolence. Responsibilities begin to be taken more seriously, so that from now on the courts have no humour, and the former freedom of anarchic behaviour is hedged around by restrictions: the boy of thirteen tried for pickpocketing in 'Criminal Courts' produces no general laughter in court:

> Finding it impossible to excite compassion, he gives vent to his feelings in an imprecation bearing reference to the eyes of "old big vig!" and as he declines to take the trouble of walking from the dock, is forthwith carried out, congratulating himself on having succeeded in giving everybody as much trouble as possible.[25]

---

25. 'Criminal Courts', Sketches, 230.

'Everybody' is here no longer on the side of irresponsibility: we no longer see the joke. The writing begins to be more interested in the external business of control than in the inner life of the character it portrays, and finds itself excluded from its former intimacy with everyday life. The participant writer who was as much a part of his London as the cabbies now wears the hat of investigator, and begins to feel uncomfortably and even guiltily out of place in his own scenes. Reality becomes the subject of self-conscious inquiry. "Often have we strayed here...to catch a glimpse of the whipping-place",[26] Boz writes at the beginning of 'Criminal Courts' - 'straying' in default of the right to be there; 'We could not help observing them';[27] and 'curiosity has occasionally led us'.[28] And there is a whole page of justification for 'A Visit to Newgate', so that "It was with some such thoughts as these that we determined, not many weeks since, to visit the interior of Newgate..."[29]

Those 'thoughts' have usurped spontaneity as writing becomes conscious, losing the 'faith in everything', at first naively taken for granted, controlling reality within a distancing prose. This kind of thinking, which is frequently encountered in the 'Characters' sequence, sets the writer unwillingly apart. In 'the Hospital Patient', Boz is 'impressed with these thoughts'[30] and finds himself only self-consciously a part of 'everybody', of the crowd: "Somehow, we never can resist joining a crowd, so we turned back with the mob".[31] We have heard nothing of the 'mob' in the earlier pieces, for Boz has been at home

---

26. 'Criminal Courts', Sketches, 226.
27. 'Criminal Courts', Sketches, 227.
28. 'Criminal Courts', Sketches, 228.
29. 'A Visit to Newgate', Sketches, 233.
30. 'The Hospital Patient', Sketches, 277.
31. 'The Hospital Patient', Sketches, 778.

in it. The 'mighy faith' in things has gone, and comes to a crisis in 'A Visit to Newgate' where we are told of a girl seen in the prison that she

> belonged to a class - unhappily but too extensive - the very existence of which should make mens' hearts bleed. Barely past her childhood, it required but a glance to discover that she was one of those children, born and bred in vice, who had never known what childhood is.[32]

Dickens' treatment of the prostitute is the opposite of his treatment of William Barker, whom good humour and anarchic imagination made apparently indestructible in a chaotic world. The vision of this young woman divides the fictive world created by the cabby, for in her fate and suffering lies the cruelty of a real world which 'should' have done better for her. The world outside, for the writing a part of its audience and readership, has failed, so that the writer becomes dissociated from it. The moralistic voice dictates to its audience, which is no longer trusted. Whereas in the case of William Barker, narrative, and its concerns of coherence and continuity, could be abandoned in a 'mighty faith', here the writer finds that he must insist upon them, as the appearance and condition of the woman insists upon them. Her narrative 'requires but a glance' in its identification as a missing 'childhood'.

This narrative, however, is problematic, since it represents an absence of 'real' narrative organisation; its coherence depends upon the writer's voice, having been abandoned by the world outside. It leaves the writer as narrator, vulnerable, with a choice between exposing and identifying the wrong which is his subject, and thereby identifying himself with it, or dissociating himself from it, and thereby perpetrating it.

---

32. 'A Visit to Newgate', <u>Sketches</u>, 236.

The girl at Newgate represents a crisis of the fictive world, and the real crisis of a faith in reality, for she shows us that while the incoherence and discontinuity of reality may offer amusement, it offers no 'natural' and immediately protective narratives. Dickens finds here that the writer's voice must become 'narrator', imposing narrative order upon a reality that lacks it, and taking responsibility and moral authority upon itself. Implicit within this exposure by the self then is an exposure of the self; and already we begin to see why Dickens' past constitutes a well-kept secret, for this 'narrated' vision divides the self from the outside world in which it at first believed, isolating coherence in the writer's voice. - A voice, of course, which cannot then reveal its own incoherence and fragmentariness.

Already, in these early pieces, we see the equation of a fragmentary reality with irresponsibility, the amusement of fiction with an inability to protect and make sense of the individual's world; and of narrative with the coherence that provides such protection, but with a personal authority which fears and abandons the fragmentary world and the stories which belong to it. Dickens' 'moral' narrative voice finds that it must forget the unity that fiction offered and distrust the organisation of reality.

Already, then, fiction and narrative seem not only opposed but irreconcilable, and to offer the novelist a divided form in which a fictive representation of a fragmented reality threatens narrative sense, while narrative itself threatens isolation from a world which is in reality chaotic.

Dickens' narrative imagination then becomes fascinated in the later sketches by prisons, criminals, crowds, and by degradation; but it would not be true to say that a moralising, narrative voice comes to dominate his enjoyment of writing. Just as the fictive, episodic form

of the Sketches was natural to the way that Dickens saw and experienced reality, so the dissociative voice of narrator, and its moralistic distance, is entirely alien to him. One of the last of the Sketches, 'Horatio Sparkins', demonstrates clearly the energy and vivacity which is always latent, re-employing the Bill Barker jokes about narratives:

> "What!" said Horatio, who became more metaphysical and more argumentative, as he saw the female part of the family listening in wondering delight -
> "What! Is effect the consequence of cause? Is cause the consequence of effect?"
> "That's the point," said Flamwell.
> "To be sure," said Mr Malderton.
> "Because, if effect is the consequence of cause, and if cause does precede effect, I apprehend you are wrong," added Horatio.
> "Decidedly" said the toad-eating Flamwell."[33]

Here, as earlier, narrative makes itself the subject of a joke about its own dogma of consequence although it now does so within the framework of a story. The protection and continuation of such enjoyment, moreover, is the purpose of the Pickwick Papers. Mr Pickwick himself represents a subtle protective action against the conflicts and divisions of these questions of narrative and fiction. He replaces external values, as a surrogate for the benevolence of a reality now viewed with discomfort and distrust. He personifies benevolence, in order to release the kinds of individualistic irresponsibility constrained since the earlier Sketches by the need felt by Dickens for his writing to be a watchful and protecting, and not simply participating activity.

Like Bill Barker, Pickwick defies cause and effect; his life is continually in mid-story for we know neither his past history nor, ultimately, his future. His peculiarity is that he exists as such in the course of a narrative. When the cab drivers and omnibus cads

---

33. 'Horatio Sparkins', Sketches, 426.

begin and end in the middle of things in the Sketches, they do so because what matters is not where they come from, or go to, but what they unselfconsciously do. Pickwick really does nothing; what matters about him, since he exists in a narrative, is paradoxically the fact that he seems to come from and go nowhere at all. He is simply there, static in terms of both progressive and spontaneous action. The secret of the novel's 'plot' - which revolves around sexual suspicion of Pickwick - is no real secret, for there is always the undercutting knowledge that his flirtation with illicit activity must be utterly harmless, given our immovable and unmoving assurance of Pickwick's inactive innocence.[34]

While the jokes of Pickwick, then, do not stand up on their own - since there is always Pickwick to come before and after them, robbing them of their independence - his stasis at the same time defuses the sense of story. He turns the idea rather than the reality of irresponsibility into a joke;[35] and makes a story of the idea, rather than the reality, of action. While it might be claimed that he thereby gives us both jokes and story - the Victorians evidently thought he did - there is an equally good case for saying that he really gives us neither.

The Papers, and the figure of Pickwick himself, are a monument to the profundity of Dickens' faith in the 'marvellousness of everything', as well as to the depth of his real knowledge of the nature of things. But the energy of the book - what Gabriel Pearson called Dickens'

---

34. Pickwick continually creates the plot passively, through his good feelings and benevolence, allowing himself to be led through the novel. See for instance, 278; 298-9; and 358.

35. We are reminded of the force of this irresponsibility at Chapter 13 (248) when we hear of the suspected death of one old gentleman from the stage-coach driving of Tony Weller; but we only hear about this at second-hand, through his son Sam.

"immense high spirits"[36] - is the energy of avoidance and dissociation from that real knowledge, and the darker shadows of the late Sketches. The book, under Pickwick's protection, is set apart from the real forces of the world, which have to be compromised in order to ensure his survival. Jingle, Mrs Bardell, Dodson and Fogg, Sam Weller, and even the financial and business world to which we know Pickwick must once have belonged, all have their edges blunted upon Pickwick's ineffectuality, and the book depends upon their recognition of him. He conquers even Dodson and Fogg, the lawyers, by implicating them within the Pickwick, 'you may do with me as you please',[37] his ultimate compliance with any condition the world might set him. This works two ways; for his compliance is traded for conditions which are only superficially malevolent, so that even the law seems subject to his magnanimity.

The Pickwick Papers, then, are very much an aside to seriousness; in dissociating writing, through Pickwick, from the real world, from the real problems of the novel, and from both fiction and narrative, the book succeeds in avoiding the questions of association and dissociation, of irresponsibility and responsibility, and of anarchy and control, which had threatened to become problematic in the course of the Sketches.

While the form of the Pickwick Papers is in some ways a resolution of the problems which Boz had already begun to face, it also presents a problem for the novelist in itself, for it avoids identification as any single kind of writing. It is not a series of sketches; yet neither is it a continuous narrative. In trying to be both, it succeeds in becoming neither. While Pickwick seems at first to be a large enough

---

36. Gross and Pearson (Eds.), Dickens in the Twentieth Century (London, 1962), xxiii.

37. Pickwick Papers, 760.

figure to protect the secrets of the writer, and to allow the kind of freedom Boz enjoyed in the first Sketches, we are left by the end of the book to wonder what secrets produced Pickwick; for nowhere else in the English novel do we encounter such a purely protective figure.

What Pickwick excludes, and what we begin to wonder about, is the relationship of real narrative continuity to real fictive irresponsibility - the relationship of what is left out of Pickwick Papers, of Pickwick's respectable past to the full irresponsible force of Sam Weller's sense of humour.

This compromise can be treated as an evasion; but it is also a remarkable success, and one means of producing a unity of the narrative and fiction that seemed so mutually hostile by the later Sketches. Its energies, even its energies of restraint, are the energies of a public who exist within the terms of much the same compromise as the novel itself makes. So much is evident both from the sale of the Papers, and from the way the novel was sold. As Patten tells us,

> Though Sketches inaugurated Dickens' career, Pickwick made it. Dickens' first continuous fiction - many would deny that it is a novel - ushered in the age of the novel ... The success of the flimsy shilling parts, issued in green wrappers once each month from April 1836 to November 1837, was unprecedented in the history of literature.[38]

and he continues,

> ...parts publication became for thirty years a chief means of democratizing and enormously expanding the Victorian book-reading and book-buying public.[39]

While Patten suggests that this means to success was discovered "virtually by accident",[40] I would again argue that it was evolved as a way of understanding contemporary reality in writing, and that this

---

38. R.L. Patten, op.cit., 45.

39. R.L. Patten, op.cit., 45.

40. R.L. Patten, op.cit., 46.

way of writing and publishing was, or rapidly became, integral to Dickens' very imagination, which understood precisely the economic and social conditions of his age. Its place in-between the fragmentary and coherent, and its character as neither fiction nor narrative exactly reflects the predicament of a growing public to whom, as we saw above, the fragmentary world offered precisely the same natural attractions and chaotic dangers as those discovered by Boz early in his writing career. While the Papers offers no solution to the hostility of the fragmentary and coherent there encountered, it represents a radically new voice that attempts to mediate between the two. It does so by being neither fragmentary nor coherent itself, and so does not achieve a unity of the world so much as a new way of expressing it 'in-between'; a voice which itself comes about as if 'by accident', falling between irresponsibility and respectability.

The question then which remains, of how to give this apparently haphazard universality a unity and identity of its own - of how to make the novel a unified form, and find in it a reality in which faith could also bring about both true amusement and true coherence - is not simply Dickens' concern but the concern of his age. For both Dickens and his public, Pickwick Papers is a 'modus vivendi'; but for both, the problem it exists in the middle of continues unsolved.

By the end of the Pickwick Papers we see that Dickens has the invaluable and necessary capability - the capability which was the hidden preoccupation and trouble of the Romantic poets - to exist and work between the dividing impulses of narrative and fiction, and to find a literary expression for a new reality that seemed to have to find its identity somewhere between the chaotic but liberating, and the orderly but repressive.

The novel, in Dickens' hands, has become the means of exploration

of these conditions of reality, and seems after Pickwick to have a freedom the Romantic poets never had to find a form to reflect the life in-between and to bring about the birth of a new identity for a chaotic world. - The world that, as we saw, so troubled Wordsworth and Coleridge.

What this world seems to lack, then, might be characterised as a 'popular Romanticism', a common and generous narrative, providing the universal story that seemed lacking in the prostitute seen at Newgate. She "had never known what childhood is"; Oliver Twist turns towards this narrative void in an attempt to fill it.

The novel, however, does not lose sight of the world of irresponsibility and fiction; for it is conceived ambitiously, upon both sides of the division that Pickwick exists between. The story of Oliver exists upon one side of that division in terms of narrative and respectability, as the story of an identity for a world which is precisely 'middle' class;[41] as I argued in my introduction, existing between a set of social, economic and governmental possibilities which seemed in every direction extreme. He is to be an innately 'good', moral child, born into an irresponsible and chaotic world, and his story is to be the story of his restoration to his proper place. In the course of this fable, the respectable world is to be definitively separated from the lower and criminal world, so that Oliver is not only to end the 'in-between' vision of the middle classes, but, by naturally belonging to them and providing them with his narrative of identity, to establish their security and to place the power of narrative and writing in their hands. Narrative, the authority of coherence, is to be established as belonging to this novel's Pickwick,

---

41. This of course is very much the conventional critical view of Oliver Twist. Leavis, for instance, calls Oliver's story "the orphan's myth" (Dickens the Novelist (London 1970), 108).

Mr Brownlow, and to be removed from the fragmentariness and chaos which threatens, in Sikes and the underworld, to destroy narrative in the 'endless stream of things'.

Oliver's story, meanwhile, is to authorise this middle-class vision by existing at the same time upon the other side of the Pickwickian world which narrative would normally exclude. His innocence is proposed as a way of seeing everything - both narrative and fiction, coherence and the fragmentariness it fears - and of making the 'middle' vision inclusive in spite of the division of higher and lower worlds that narrative must inevitably bring out. Oliver takes us back in this way to the time before cruelty began, to the point before the disillusion of childhood that we saw in the Sketches.[42]

In Oliver, then, the reality that produces cruelty and suffering out of irresponsibility can be forgotten, and narrative and fiction re-united in an innocence which presents us with a common past - the past the prostitute lacked. Oliver seems to offer a way for the novel to be a narrative, but at the same time to retain the fictive world.

Oliver Twist is Dickens' first attempt to incorporate narrative fully into fiction, for we have seen that the Pickwickian continuity was not really a narrative continuity - and as such the question of the location of the narrator in it, the question that 'Boz' found so problematic in 'A Visit to Newgate',[43] is an immediately interesting one. Dickens begins with his own, heavily ironical narrative, as Oliver is born;[44] but Oliver is conceived of course to relieve this

---

42. See page 36 above.

43. See page 38 above.

44. In the strain of this irony the invective of Dickens' authorial voice almost seems to take on the personal tone which we saw as a danger in the vision of the prostitute (see page 39): when we read, "I wish some philosopher, whose meat and drink turn to gall within him...could have seen Oliver" we see that 'I' is Dickens himself; and that he speaks here in the moral isolation that threatened at Newgate.

authorial responsibility, and this he does when he can speak and act for himself, by running away to London. In London, he is to find his 'natural' place - as a kind of middle-class Dick Whittington - and our narrative sense would lead us to expect the authority of the narrating voice then located in what the novel establishes as middle-class existence, and in Oliver's dealings with the part of the book that represents such an existence, with Mr Brownlow and the Maylies.

His relationship to the latter, and their relationship to him, is my first concern here, for it is strangely uncomfortable. Mr Brownlow, the Maylies and Mr Losberne consistently represent the novel's middle-class narrative concerns; and it is their very narrative sense which fails to welcome Oliver, for in their strict concern with his true origin he is always to some extent under suspicion. Mr Brownlow, who is very much the leading figure of the group, is burdened (as Dickens' narrating consciousness is) by the cruelties of inconsistency discovered by his own past; he has been 'deceived before', and understands the precariousness of middle-class respectability and its morality at the expense of understanding Oliver: "you need not be afraid of my deserting you" he tells him, "unless you give me cause".[45] Instead of relieving Oliver of the responsibility for himself and for his thoughts and feelings which makes Oliver's world so private, confused, insecure and frightened - which should be the proper function of an organised, narrative respectability - Mr Brownlow makes that responsibility even greater. Oliver's obligation is to him not simply emotional and moral, but social and economic. "Speak the truth, and you shall not be friendless while I live"[46] Brownlow tells Oliver; 'speaking the truth' requires him to know and adhere to an identity which Brownlow himself

---

45. Oliver Twist, 146.
46. Oliver Twist, 146.

feels the insecurity of. Oliver's 'natural' knowledge will provide Brownlow with his own true nature and knowledge of the world.

The authority here, then, rests with Oliver rather than with Brownlow. Oliver is not adopted by a middle-class narrative; he is its author.

Mr Brownlow's generosity is a disguised demand for something that he needs from Oliver, and needs desperately:

> I only say this, because you have a young heart; and knowing that I have suffered great pain and sorrow, you will be the more careful, perhaps, not to wound me again.[47]

'Pain and sorrow' is the pain and sorrow of a faltering narrative which needs Oliver to be its good ending, and to turn out well. In so doing the cause of the pain, the lack of identity and the difficulty of recognising one's own nature in others, will be at least relieved. Mr Brownlow is like Dickens and a middle-class public, in that he needs Oliver to turn out to be the narrative he wants to believe in, and so to confirm his own place and perception in the world.

Rose and Mrs Maylie treat Oliver the same way, the only difference being that they are more willing to accept him never, presumably, having been 'deceived before': Mrs Maylie tells Oliver

> You shall give nothing at all...for, as I told you before, we shall employ you in a hundred ways, and if you only take half the trouble to please us, that you promise now, you will make me very happy indeed.[48]

As with Mr Brownlow, Oliver is given responsibility for making and fulfilling promises and turning out well; and the Maylies' happiness, and not his, is what is at stake. The abstraction from Oliver's real and immediate presence is once again a determination to wait and see

---

47. Oliver Twist, 147.

48. Oliver Twist, 285.

what he becomes. The Maylies are not interested in the present, but in the future,(and the inauspicious past), so that the whole of Oliver's relationship to them becomes abstracted from the present, and purely a matter of his past, and future life. Action in this narrative world then is invested in Oliver's story.

This makes things that happen when Oliver is with them oddly unreal. The unreality begins with the way they treat Oliver, for what they say to him relates, not to the present but to their expectation of the future. In the case of both Mr Brownlow and Mrs Maylie, what Oliver is told is a formalisation of his position which has no immediate relevance for or effect upon him. "You shall give us nothing at all" Mrs Maylie tells him; there is nothing Oliver can do to establish any immediacy in his relationship to these 'good' people.

Moreover, they never seem to do anything themselves; their mannerisms and eccentricities seem gratuitous and pointless. Mr Losberne demonstrates the inability to act spontaneously from which they all suffer; impetuosity, the price of such action, is avoided by committee, so that action, where action involves individual responsibility, becomes unnecessary. Eccentricity becomes in this context meaningless, and what does happen spontaneously seems unreal and irrelevant to what has become the concerted narrative. So that when Oliver points out the thieves' house, and Mr Losberne attempts to raid it single-handed, Oliver's encounter with the cripple while he waits in the coach seems dreamlike in that it is both disturbing, and at the same time does not seem to matter.

> ...he looked into the carriage, and eyed Oliver for an instant with a glance so sharp and fierce and at the same time so furious and vindictive, that, waking or sleeping, he could not forget it for months afterwards.[49]

---

49. Oliver Twist, 287.

This is an extraordinary and disorientating observation, for in it Dickens betrays how little the middle-class world controls the world of the novel. We are thrown upon Oliver once again as the writer's medium, bewildered by these middle-class expectations and doubts of his nature. We are dependent upon his narrative as a confirmation of the reality of this oddly inactive and expectant world; and at the same time, existing in Oliver's present, find the middle-class concern with past and future to create an existence which is oddly dream-like, abstracted from real events. "It was almost too much happiness to bear"[50] we are told at one point, when Rose recovers from illness; "Oliver felt stunned and stupefied by the unexpected intelligence".[51] We share Oliver's bewilderment here, for we find it impossible to place Rose's recovery as an event. It seems to occur at random, and to depend upon Oliver, as much as anyone, to make it by gathering flowers. Like all the other events of the middle-class world, it seems to be curiously dislocated, so that Oliver finds his existence in it to be like a dream, in a world that awaits the organisation of wakefulness.

The problem is particular to this world of the middle-classes, where once again everything seems to depend upon him. When Oliver sleeps in Fagin's den, and watches the Jew through "half-closed eyes"[52] sleep is only his disguise, for we know that what he sees happens; when he sleeps in the Maylie world, sleep becomes a way of seeing, not a secret wakefulness but a participation in itself. What Oliver sees becomes part of a general ambivalence. When in Chapter 34 Oliver, half-asleep, sees the Jew and Monks through the window of his room,[53] there is afterwards no trace of either to be seen by anyone else; but we are

---

50. Oliver Twist, 301.
51. Oliver Twist, 301.
52. Oliver Twist, 106.
53. Oliver Twist, 309.

not told that Oliver was making it up, or even, derogatively, day-dreaming. The dream has in the Maylie world a status equal to reality, and the truth of Oliver's seeing is later confirmed as valid:

> ...It was the same man he had met at the market-town, and seen looking in with Fagin at the window of his little room[54]

we are told when Monks' identity is revealed.

As with Brownlow's warnings, Mrs Maylie's assurances, and Mr Losberne's outburst, the details are not what matter; what matters is the end - the narrative. So that even when Oliver is not asleep his own vision, which registers details rather than outcomes, often seems to have the quality of a dream. The following passage occurs just after Rose's recovery, when Oliver goes out to gather flowers:

> The night was fast closing in, when he returned homeward; laden with flowers which he had culled, with peculiar care, for the adornment of the sick chamber. As he walked briskly back along the road, he heard behind him, the noise of some vehicle, approaching at a furious pace. Looking round, he saw that it was a post-chaise, driven at great speed; and as the horses were galloping, and the road was narrow, he stood leaning against a gate until it should have passed him.
>
> As it dashed on, Oliver caught a glimpse of a man in a white night-cap, whose face seemed familiar to him, although his view was so brief that he could not identify the person. In another second or two, the night-cap was thrust out of the chaise-window, and a stentorian voice bellowed to the driver to stop: which he did, as soon as he could pull up his horses. Then, the night-cap once again appeared; and the same voice called Oliver by name.[55]

The truth has become stranger than fiction, for in the Maylies' narrative world, detail, the material of the fictive and fragmentary, has the secondary status of dreaming and is displaced from reality, taking its place instead in the confusion of Oliver's imagination. Reality becomes 'a kind of sleep', a dream-world where objects seem to

54. Oliver Twist, 456.

55. Oliver Twist, 301.

to have the extraordinary quality of not belonging to anything. This strange passage heralds, in terms of the plot, nothing more portentious than the arrival of Harry Maylie. Everything here seems to be contingent and dislocated, undermining the security that the flowers are meant to celebrate. Things that ought to be familiar are made anonymous and mysterious: first, Oliver hears "the noise of some vehicle"; then the white nightcap has a face which "seemed familiar" although Oliver "could not identify the person". The voice is dislocated from its body, and, while it knows Oliver's name, belongs to nothing more identifiable than a nightcap.

This dream-world half claims us, as it half claims Oliver, using his name, but not allowing any mutual recognition. Any such recognition is alien to the Maylies' world.

It does have a security of a kind, however, a specific ideal, represented, not by affections or friendships, but by its paragon of goodness in Rose. It is not the fact that she is alive and survives her illness, moreover, - a mere detail which Oliver finds too much for him - that matters to them, but what Rose stands for. We are told that she was

> ...cast in so slight and exquisite a mould; so mild and gentle; so pure and beautiful; that earth seemed not her element, nor its rough creatures her fit companions.[56]

The Maylies dream not, as Oliver does, as the function of a waking consciousness in a bewildering world, but to stop that consciousness, and to separate their own world from it; and Rose is the symbol of the end of the dream. Physically, she hardly exists; she is "slight and exquisite" so that "earth seemed not her element". Living or dead, Rose is something that the middle classes can dream of, a consciousness

---

56. Oliver Twist, 264.

apart from the physical reality of the world. Rose is not there to be recognised, or felt for, as another human being, but to be aspired to. She is not so much a character as the condition of abstraction from details and gross fiction, the possible subject of a sexual relationship that Mr Brownlow and the committee, the plot of the novel and a part of Dickens' self all want. In her, goodness is defined as apart from the world and its "rough creatures". Rose is the end of the story Brownlow wants Oliver to tell, and with her as his ideal we are shown glimpses of Oliver in heaven: when he is first recovered by Rose and Mrs Maylie, his

> ...pillow was smoothed by gentle hands that night; and loveliness and virtue watched him as he slept. He felt calm and happy, and could have died without a murmur.[57]

This happiness is the happiness of a virtuous death. And a holiday with the Maylies in the country similarly has the power of restoring men to heaven:

> Crawling forth, from day to day, to some green sunny spot, they have had such memories wakened up within them by the sight of the sky, and hill and plain, and glistening water, that a foretaste of heaven itself has soothed their quick decline, and they have sunk into their tombs, as peacefully as the sun... The memories which peaceful country scenes call up, are not of this world, nor of its thoughts and hopes. ... There lingers, in the least reflective mind, a vague and half-formed consciousness of having held such feelings long before, in some remote and distant time, which calls up solemn thoughts of distant times to come, and bends down pride and worldliness beneath it.[58]

The narrative that Oliver is to give this perfect vision, then, will place it as the true end of the human world, and locate this ideal middle class narrative with its retirement to the countryside and to

---

57. Oliver Twist, 271.

58. Oliver Twist, 290.

peace, as the substance of reality. The confirmation of it all as 'natural' in Oliver's past is the endorsement that the middle-class world awaits, the proof of its ability to recognise and to be recognised, and so to identify itself.

The narrative we are given, however, is probably the least convincing part of the novel. The convoluted tale that Brownlow pieces together in Chapter 49 with Monks' help does not make a unity of the novel's world in any sense, for it installs Monks as the chief villain. As a middle-class criminal he can not only be dealt with upon the Brownlows' and Maylies' own terms, but also does away with the need to confront the criminal world as Oliver has experienced it. We find Oliver's story taken over at this last moment by what Mr Brownlow knows - as he tells Monks, "denial to me is vain" - so that, instead of confirming Brownlow's status by his own story, Oliver seems excluded from it. His, and Brownlow's middle class identity rests as it rested from the beginning of the novel upon a self-assertion which has at least a doubtful authority. Its power seems to depend very much upon Monks' weakness, when Brownlow asks him "do you still brave me?":

> "No, no, no!" returned the coward, overwhelmed by these accumulated charges.[59]

As a denouement this is unsatisfactory; narrative is endowed by Monks and not Oliver, and instead of discovering a natural middle-class origin it discovers an unnatural one. Oliver was to have discovered the truth and strength of respectability; Monks instead discovers respectability for us in a weakness we could scarcely imagine in Sikes, or even Fagin, producing Brownlow's story for him by effectively protecting him from their world.

Oliver, however, has not relinquished his original function, to see

---

59. Oliver Twist, 439.

the whole of reality. The world that he enters in doing so conflicts directly with narrative and respectability both in the way that it treats him, and in the way that he perceives it.

The middle-class world seems unreal to Oliver, because it is presented as a set of narrative limitations which he was to overcome through his wider narrative; - not as an organised world, but a restricted one, to which Oliver was to give a universal authority. When Oliver enters the novel's other world, we see why he could never bear that responsibility. His imaginative, fictive vision sees too much to provide the Maylies and Brownlow with the narrative they require; while his irresponsibility is innocent, it is also disorganised.

But where reality is unlimited, as it were, this innocence in turn becomes a limitation. Whereas Oliver is the active agent among the Maylies' values, seeing everything as a matter of detail, and showing us the fictive in their narrative sense as an unreality of their consecutive and sequential, carefully plotted world, in Fagin's den he finds himself overwhelmed by a world of detail. The odd, visionary authority he had in the world of narrative disappears in the underworld, where he sees things too late, or not at all.

This restriction, which is the restriction of innocence, is amenable to the middle-class, in-between vision, in the spirit of which Oliver was conceived; but it means that he cannot fulfil that intended function and become our vision of this lower, fragmented, fictive world. Here, he becomes simply a child again - and this return to his childish status has frequently been noted as something of a restoration. John Bayley notes, Fagin was in real life the boy who showed Dickens kindness at the Blacking warehouse;[60] and it seems that the reversal can be taken

---

60. '_Oliver Twist_: Things as they Really Are', Gross and Pearson (Eds.), _op.cit._, 53.

further than this. Kellow Chesney tells us that "The open-minded reader of Oliver Twist may find himself thinking that there is something to be said for Fagin and his establishment",[61] observing that "for the first time in his life, the workhouse boy finds himself with enough food, cheerful companions and a fair chance of not being wantonly flogged"[62] and that "these managers of child thieves did in fact train them in the way described".[63] The moral, narrative world treats Oliver as the human being (and not specifically child) it wants him to be; while the fictive and chaotic place that Fagin represents offers to educate (however wrongly) and to recognise childhood. In this simple recognition are contained the feelings Oliver needs so badly, and has never yet found, of human association; for what is most important about Fagin's world is not the abstract construction of narrative, but the physical immediacy of details. Fagin is not concerned with what Oliver adds up to, but with what he is - just as the real Fagin was with Dickens.

Mr Brownlow, Mr Losberne and Mrs Maylie then had no physical appearance; Fagin by contrast "was a very shrivelled old Jew, whose villainous-looking and repulsive face was obscured by a quantity of matted red hair",[64] while Sikes "was a stoutly-build fellow of about five-and thirty" who had "a broad heavy countenance with a beard of three days growth, and two scowling eyes".[65] Where Rose was so ethereal as to almost have appearance without presence, Nancy, described with her friend Bet,

> wore a good deal of hair, not very neatly turned up behind, and were rather untidy about the shoes.

---

61. Kellow Chesney, The Victorian Underworld (London, 1970), 167.
62. Kellow Chesney, op.cit., 167-8.
63. Kellow Chesney, op.cit., 168.
64. Oliver Twist, 105.
65. Oliver Twist, 126.

> They were not exactly pretty; but they had a great deal of colour in their faces, and looked quite stout and hearty. Being remarkably free and agreeable in their manners, Oliver thought them very nice girls indeed.[66]

Sexuality, and in Fagin repulsion, immediately comes to the fore in these descriptions; and in the case of this description of Nancy and Bet it is immediately problematic to a middle class narrative voice. "As no doubt they were"[67] it adds tastily to Oliver's impression of them as 'nice girls'.

Already, here, Oliver's innocent vision of this fictive world is at odds with a narrative that wants to establish its respectable voice as the unifying voice of the novel. Oliver, moreover, has not seen everything here; it is clear that much of the action in this part of the novel will take place beyond the comprehension of the innocence that might protect narrative from fiction, and from the realities we begin to glimpse in Nancy and Bet.

The exchanges we hear in this underworld certainly pass beyond Oliver's understanding; and through his innocent eyes we discover a different world, and one which is far from innocent. The most important of these exchanges, of course, form the relationship between Sikes and Nancy, and these are remarkable, both in that they appear in the novel at all, and in the function they perform.

> "Whining, are you?" said Sikes. "Come! Don't stand snivelling there. If you can't do better than that, cut off altogether. D'ye hear me?"
>
> "I hear you", replied the girl, turning her face aside and forcing a laugh. "What fancy have you got in your head now?"
>
> "Oh! you've thought better of it, have you?" growled Sikes, marking a tear which trembled in her eye. "All the better for you, you have."
>
> "Why, you don't mean to say you'd be hard on me tonight, Bill" said the girl, laying her hand upon his shoulder.

---

66. Oliver Twist, 111.
67. Oliver Twist, 111.

> "No!" cried Mr Sikes. "Why not?"
> "Such a number of nights", said the girl, with a touch of woman's tenderness, which communicated something like sweetnes of tone even to her voice: "such a number of nights as I've been patient with you, nursing and caring for you, as if you had been a child; and this the first that I've seen you like yourself; you wouldn't have served me as you did just now, if you'd thought of that, would you? Come, come, say you wouldn't."
> "Well, then," rejoined Mr Sikes, "I wouldn't. Why, damme, now, the girls whining again!"
> "Its nothing," said the girl, throwing herself into a chair. "Don't you seem to mind me. It'll soon be over."
> "What'll soon be over?" demanded Mr Sikes in a savage voice. "What foolery are you up to now, again? Get up and bustle about, and don't come over me with your woman's nonsense."[68]

These voices, suddenly, have nothing to do with the narrative of the novel, and the language of relationship sounds real and immediate.

I want, first of all, to point out the way in which the novel signifies that this exchange does not occur in the narrative world. The only interjection the novel itself makes comes in the middle of this passage, and tells us that Nancy speaks "with a touch of woman's tenderness, which communicated something like sweetness of tone even to her voice". These narrated words register the distance of Nancy from the narrative world, where "woman's tenderness" and "sweetness of tone" belong to the perfection of Rose as a part of the language narrative has in her for femininity. They are abstractions for a world which deals in the abstraction of past and future, beginning and ending. These qualities are made to belong to Nancy by becoming "a touch of" and "something like" themselves; and in the process of meeting Nancy in a real and incoherent place these terms become real details. By meeting fiction in Nancy narrative becomes a real language, and a part of her fictive world. The ideals of femininity become small and even incongruous fragments of Nancy's life and in this fragmentation the

68. <u>Oliver Twist</u>, 346.

fictive brings them alive and makes them real.

The approximation that these impressions are made into then do not give Nancy a narrative, but instead give her a fictive presence, and bring, what the Brownlow narrative missed, real feelings to her life. What is permanent and stable but abstract is replaced by what is momentary but felt: and these feelings are by their very nature not solitary but associative, reaching out to include Sikes. "Such a number of nights" she tells him "as I've been patient with you, nursing and caring for you, as if you had been a child; and this the first that I've seen you like yourself". Nancy reaches for the moment between illness - where Bill has been 'as if...a child' - and health, where he will be "like himself", and inevitably mistreat her, for the fictive instants where similitude governs reality. There, Bill is both like a child and like himself, and the approximation creates momentarily a humanity which narrative would deny in making Bill either a child like Oliver - innocent while ill of the evils around him - or the force like himself that the moral world must control and destroy. Nancy recogrises - and indeed inhabits - and momentarily asserts the other world of fiction, which evades the values of narrative; and Sikes, momentarily, accepts its immediacy, "Well, then, I wouldn't".

This fictive peace momentarily then overturns the narrative. For an instant, we rest with Nancy's fictive intelligence as the authoritative vision of a form of knowledge that the Maylies can have no part in, and from which even Oliver, in his innocence, is excluded. Nancy's fiction seems for this second to be adequate to reality as a vision for the novel and narrative to be unnecessary, and defeated.

If fiction seems to have excluded narrative, however, what now happens makes it clear that narrative will reciprocally attempt to exclude and destroy fiction. Nancy inhabits the fragmentary and chaotic

world, and does so quite passively, and without the control that Sikes asserts upon the underworld. If Nancy is the most purely fictive figure of this world, Sikes is the least fictive; when he is 'himself' he is not so much a counter-narrative figure as part of the narrative world that narrative exists to reject, a part of the story of good and evil that Brownlow seeks to tell.

As we have seen, Nancy absorbs the narrative world in her fictions, bring it to life by making it 'like itself'. Her feelings do not distinguish between the tenderness of Rose and the violence of Sikes; she feels for both, and she feels for the part of the middle-class world that has intruded into her own, for Oliver.[69] This, she knows, is her undoing, for narrative works, as fiction does not, by separation and exclusion. Narrative, she knows already, will end her fictive imagination: as she tells Sikes, "It'll soon be over", - acknowledging at the same time her own distraction from what is real to her, "It's nothing".

We begin to see here that Sikes has his own narrative; he rejects Nancy's words as 'nonsense' - which, to his own sense of continuity, they are - and takes over the story himself, imposing his own control upon Nancy, telling her, "come and sit aside of me, and put on your own face; or I'll alter it so, that you won't know it again when you _do_ want it".[70]

Sikes does not understand fictive approximations; for him, to be like yourself is to _be_ yourself, and his demand is the assertion of his own kind of narrative power which, like Brownlow's, denies that people can exist as small parts of other realities, or as anything other than the entity that constitutes themselves. He is interested, not in some

---

69. See _Oliver Twist_, 197-8: "I have tried hard for you", she tells Oliver on the evening before the house-breaking.

70. _Oliver Twist_, 357.

momentary harmony, a fragmented security in a fragmented world, but in the security of a knowledge which is like Brownlows, but which replaces moral control with physical coercion.

We begin to see that the fictive is trapped by these rival narratives, and condemned by them both to a life of suffering; and that the life of attraction, amusement and feeling will be opposed by and even sacrificed to the ends of narratives which value control above sympathy. Nancy exists as a fictive vision in a world occupied by the narrative of Brownlow opposing Sikes, the novel's two 'good' and 'evil' ways of making a sequence of things.

There follows a passage in which we see this good and evil directly opposed:

> The girl obeyed. Sikes, locking her hand in his, fell back upon the pillow; turning his eyes upon her face. They closed; opened again; closed once more; again opened. He shifted his position restlessly; and after dozing again, and again, for two or three minutes, and as often springing up with a look of terror, and gazing about him, was suddenly stricken, as it were, while in the very attitude of rising, into a deep and heavy sleep. The grasp of his hand relaxed; the upraised arm fell languidly by his side; and he lay like one in a profound trance.[71]

Here, through Nancy, the two parts of the narrative meet. The moral, Brownlow narrative sees in this description of Sikes only the effect of laudanum, the drug Nancy has given him, and waits for Nancy to further the interests of that narrative by escaping from him, and by going to Rose.

But Sikes subverts this narrative function by making the description belong to his own story, and his own potency. The terms by which he does so are disguised; but "They closed" seems to refer as much to an embrace as to Sikes' eyes: "The upraised arm fell languidly" clearly

---

71. Oliver Twist, 357.

has a phallic double-meaning; and its fall, and Sikes' 'profound trance', follows his orgasmic restlessness, with its climax "as it were, in the very attitude of rising". Sikes, having gained Nancy's obedience, imposes his version of things, upon her and upon the novel.

But the most important thing about this passage is that there is no real place in it for Nancy. She half-performs the function of the Brownlow-narrative - certainly in terms of what she afterwards does - but there is no place for her in the Brownlow world. This she knows herself; and we are forcefully reminded of the fact when, arriving at the 'family hotel' the Maylies are staying at, we are told that an

> allusion to Nancy's doubtful character raised a vast quantity of chaste wrath in the bosoms of four housemaids, who remarked, with great fervour, that the creature was a disgrace to her sex; and strongly advocated her being thrown ruthlessly into the kennel.[72]

No matter how much Nancy refuses to wear 'her own face' for Sikes, she is unable to put on the face that belongs to these family hotels and housemaids of bourgeois existence; and their hostility to her needs no further prompting. She may be half in the Maylies' world here, but she is still half in Sikes' as well.

We have seen, meanwhile, in the passage I quoted above that the division of one narrative, represented by the plot, from the other kind, represented in Sikes' potency and sexual presence, is absolute; there is no way that these two strands of the novel can be unified for they exist by opposition; and they work against each other to such an extent that the writing becomes endowed with two entirely separate meanings.

The problem the novel now has is the problem of the perception of these two contradictory strands of the writing. Oliver's vision has been left far behind; for he is all too clearly at the mercy of whichever

---

72. Oliver Twist, 359.

world happens to possess him. Nancy has become his protector, and, for his sake, the mediating figure between the two worlds. The novel's vision of both sides of reality becomes her own; and so it is she who experiences both the use of the laudanum, which is a part of the Brownlow's story of Oliver, and Sikes' own version of things, which is clearly imposed upon her.

But this imposition leaves no room for Nancy's own world, for it excludes her momentary vision. Nancy is left _without_ that fictive world which was her own. Her status as a maker of fictions rather than of narratives, of 'as if's rather of clear identifications, makes her the victim of both the chaotic and harsh narrative she has made of reality and of the dissociative will of the moral narrative.

It is Nancy then who provides the 'middle ground', the way for the novel to see both parts of the narrative; without her, we would remain in Brownlow's plotted world, or occupy the underworld with Sikes. Nancy takes over Oliver's initial role of seeing everything - but in doing so of course she loses the innocence which made Oliver oddly immune from both good and evil narratives, and the bewilderment which was his protection from comprehension becomes suffering. Her vision, then, becomes the victim of narrative.

The narrative will of the novel never ceases to seek its own ends: and Nancy becomes the point at which both parts of the narrative see its opposite. Both narratives focus upon her passivity as they previously focused upon Oliver's - Nancy, of course, is a more important prize since she knows more, and her knowing choice must have a more significant meaning. Brownlow's narrative, then, tries to claim her as a part of itself, having gained its access to her through Oliver, and to extinguish the narrative of evil in her, and it almost succeeds in this. At the very last moment, before her murder, she says to Sikes,

> the gentleman and that dear lady, told me tonight
> of a home in some foreign country,

and continues

> let us both leave this dreadful place, and far apart
> lead better lives, and forget how we lived, except
> in prayers, and never see each other more.[73]

Here, Nancy takes flight, in the face of the ending that Sikes brings to the other story of the novel; but, confronted by that story, she has already told Rose of Sikes that

> I am drawn back to him through every suffering and
> ill-usage; and I should be, I believe, if I knew
> that I was to die by his hand at last.[74]

Nancy belongs to neither narrative. As she tells Fagin, of Oliver "the sight of him turns me against myself";[75] she is divided - and Oliver enforces her division - and we see each story producing in her its opposite. This self-division makes her unlike anything, and is the fragmentedness that belongs to her world, the world of fiction.

Sikes, then, kills Nancy; and what he kills in her is Brownlow's story: - the story which, as Nancy shows Sikes as he attacks her, she has absorbed - for fictive consciousness absorbs everything - but to which we know she does not belong.

Nancy's murder is an extraordinary event; for, in killing Nancy narrative attempts to eliminate the fictive and to take over the novel. What actually happens, however, at this point of confrontation and crisis, is very different:

> Of all bad deeds that, under cover of the
> darkness, had been committed within wide London's
> bounds since night hung over it, that was the worst.
> Of all the horrors that rose with an ill scent upon
> the morning air, that was the foulest and most cruel.

---

73. Oliver Twist, 442.
74. Oliver Twist, 365.
75. Oliver Twist, 240.

> The sun - the bright sun, that brings back, not light alone, but new life, and hope, and freshness to man - burst upon the crowded city in clear and radiant glory. Through costly-coloured glass and paper-mended window, through cathedral dome and rotten crevice, it shed its equal ray. It lighted up the room where the murdered woman lay. It did. He tried to shut it out, but it would stream in. If the sight had been a ghastly one in the dull morning, what was it, now, in all that brilliant light!
>
> He had not moved; he had been afraid to stir. There had been a moan and motion of the hand; and, with terror added to rage, he had struck and struck again. Once he threw a rug over it; but it was worse to fancy the eyes, and imagine them moving towards him than to see them glaring upward, as if watching the reflection of the pool of gore that quivered and danced in the sunlight on the ceiling. He had plucked it off again. And there was the body - mere flesh and blood, no more - but such flesh, and so much blood!
>
> He struck a light, kindled a fire, and thrust a club into it. There was a hair upon the end, which blazed and shrunk into a light cinder, and, caught by the air, whirled up the chimney. Even that frightened him, sturdy as he was; but he held the weapon till it broke, and then piled it on the coals to burn away, and smoulder into ashes. He washed himself, and rubbed his clothes; there were spots that would not be removed, but he cut the pieces out and burnt them. How those stains were dispersed about the room! The very feet of the dog were bloody.[76]

This passage begins with the moral narrative voice: "Of all bad deeds that, under the cover of darkness, had been committed...that was the worst". The story that morality tells wants to hide the murder away, and keep it in its abstract world of evil.

This narrative, however, does not last for long; with the sunrise, the murder literally bursts out. The sun "burst upon the crowded city in clear and radiant glory" so that "Through costly-coloured glass and paper-mended window, through cathedral dome and rotten crevice, it shed its equal ray. It lighted up the room where the murdered woman lay. It did."

---

76. Oliver Twist, 423-4.

Suddenly, there is no control over what has happened. What the sun lights up in defiance of morality exceeds the grasp of the moral language of badness and evil by making the crime horribly brilliant. The "clear and radiant glory" of the sunlight is not the glory of Mr Brownlow's narrative. Neither, of course, is it the glory of the story that killed Nancy, of Sikes' consciousness. He finds that the reality of his action is worse than its conception and performance, and when the sunlight reveals it to him "He tried to shut it out, but it would stream in". Sikes' narrative reacts in the same way as the narrative of morality, for that, too, tried to shut the sun out "under cover of darkness". Morality and criminality are united in their opposition to the exposure of action.

What the sunlight reveals then is a terrible world, a world worse than the imagination of narrative, making the murder, what murder cannot possibly be, worse than before: "If the sight was a ghastly one in the dull morning, what was it now, in all that brilliant light?" Narrative cannot comprehend this worsening of the deed, or its brilliance, and finds itself faced by a world that becomes mysteriously alive. The 'stream' of light itself seems to have a bright activity - and nowhere else in the novel do we see the sun with such clarity; Nancy's corpse itself seems to have eyes that move, and a supernatural existence beyond 'mere flesh and blood'. Things seem to happen arbitrarily, and to have their own vitality; when Sikes burns his club a cinder, 'caught by the air, whirled up the chimney'; and blood seems to be everywhere, defying rational precaution.

At the very point then where narrative reaches its crisis it loses control; and this is true both of the story that Sikes tells, and the moral narrative of Brownlow. We are plunged back into the world of details and incoherence, and reality suddenly seems to become fragmentary

and to have no narrative. Nothing really seems to be itself any more. The sunlight transforms everything, and the reasons for the murder - which Sikes did have - are dissolved in the immediacy of brilliance. We find ourselves back in the world of fiction, the world where human action is not authoritative but passive.

And suddenly, we find that Sikes, of all people, is the passive figure in the scene. "He had not moved; he had been afraid to stir"; the reality of things outside his own crude rationale takes over his consciousness in this fear. It is fear that does have the effect, as John Bayley suggests,[77] of humanizing Sikes. The sun, we are told "brings back, not light alone, but new life, and hope, and freshness to man". To Sikes, it brings back imagination; when he hides the body away

> it was worse to fancy the eyes, and imagine them moving towards him, than to see them...

This new humanity is the gift of the fictive; Sikes suddenly becomes a man, doing what anybody would do in trying to shut out the light and hide murder away. In this, moreover, the novel sees through his eyes, and he takes over Nancy's role, becoming the way the writing can see everything.

Narrative, then, finds itself in the fictive world; and we find that in asserting its control over fiction it only finds itself faced with its own destruction in the worst possible reality, losing its authority both as a way of understanding the world and as the vision of the novel. Even in Nancy, narrative seemed to have a contradictory kind of coercive control, although as we saw the novel depended upon her suffering for the inclusiveness of its vision. Now, in Sikes, there is no question of controlling reality. The challenge offered by both him

---

77. '<u>Oliver Twist</u>: Things as they Really Are', Gross and Pearson (Eds.), <u>op.cit.</u>, 60.

and Brownlow to Nancy's in-between world has ended in disaster, in a world which narrative must now escape.

Sikes reacts as narrative must, by fleeing from the sunlight and seeking darkness. This is the rationale of a fear which now cares nothing for any narrative but the narrative of hiding away, and in this hiding narrative finds its true nature, as a selection of the real truths of the outside world, unable to include this extremity of fragmentation.

Sikes then finds the place he seeks, and in doing so almost accepts the ending which the Brownlow narrative would now impose; he returns to London, and to London's darkest place,

> Near to that part of the Thames...where the buildings on the banks are dirtiest and the vessels on the river blackest with the dust of colliers and the smoke of close-built low-roofed houses [78]

to

> the filthiest, the strangest, the most extraordinary of the many localities that are hidden in London [79]

to Jacob's Island. Here Sikes dies, hanging himself while "endeavouring to creep away in the darkness and confusion".[80]

In returning to the darkness Sikes returns and submits to the narrative which, even in killing him, is at least some form of rationale, and in his death there narrative hides his murder away once more.

With Sikes receding to this moral and coherent darkness the rest of the underworld can also be consigned to the darkness of the justice that narrative, Brownlow, and even by now Sikes have all consented to uphold against the chaos of the fictive. The criminal gang is dispersed, Charley Bates reformed, and Fagin subjected to a dark and cautionary death.

---

78. Oliver Twist, 442.
79. Oliver Twist, 442.
80. Oliver Twist, 451.

With Sikes and Nancy gone, the narrative is, it seems, given its authority to govern the end of the novel. Mr Brownlow is left with Oliver, and we begin to expect that the novel will fulfil its initial conception, forgetting Nancy and the in-between world, and assert the unity and harmony of its final justice. Brownlow then tells Oliver his story, and takes him to see Fagin in prison, as if to show how the justice of narrative has dealt with the criminal world, by concealing it in a darkness where middle-class narrative can forget and disown it.

But even here we see that Brownlow has no such authority, and his narrative no such power of unity. At the very end of what now begins to be Oliver's story once again, Oliver "was in a flutter of agitation and uncertainty which deprived him of the power of collecting his thoughts, and almost of speech".[81] This confused vision gives us the real ending of the book, usurping the coherence that narrative seeks: when he is shown the dark justice of Fagin's fate Oliver asserts his own control over the text. "Strike them all dead" we hear Fagin cry, "What right have they to butcher me".[82] The child's consciousness is still, in innocence, a fictive, fragmented vision which registers the fact that reality offers details, incoherent words and phrases, which are still the real vehicle of feeling, and which the narrative vision cannot include, and here it shows us that Fagin is still a human being, and not a moral lesson.

The fictive, then, refuses to the very end of the novel to be integrated within the narrative and coherent; and authority seems to be invested only in the limited world of darkness. Where narrative attempts to assert a control over the whole of reality - over all the world that the bright sun illuminates - it is overcome by the horror,

---

81. Oliver Twist, 454.
82. Oliver Twist, 472.

not of the violence and brutality of coercion itself (which belongs, as we saw, as much to Brownlow as to Sikes) but of its arbitrariness and its meaninglessness. This suffering sends even Sikes back to the darkness by which morality and narrative hide fiction and chaos away.

The novel however retains the sunlight as its vision; in Oliver, then Nancy, then Sikes, and then again Oliver, it adopts the vision which is most inclusive, and which runs counter to narrative, the fictive vision which is all-inclusive. Oliver Twist finds narrative to be inadequate to a reality which, even in its fullest horror, it finds irresistible. Ultimately, it is with Oliver and innocence that the novel leaves us, a conclusion which leaves us where we began, not quite belonging to narrative, morality and respectability, but not, in innocence, suffering the fate of irresponsibility - the fate of the fictive vision that Nancy suffers.

In the meantime, however, we have now seen what Pickwick protected us from, the real meaning of a narrative that seeks to control - and its limitation - and of a fictive world that both enjoys and suffers - and the strength and inclusiveness of its feeling. Oliver Twist gives us for the first time in the English novel a full experience of both fiction and narrative; and as Bayley again notes[83] it is not a 'liberating' experience, for it leaves us withdrawing from a crisis of the novel into the child's vision it set out to mature and develop, and into the innocence which we saw Boz lose. This ending will remain important for Dickens' narrative; the way that it comes about is the formative experience of Dickens' writing, which by the end of this novel begins to understand the extremities of its two integral aspects of fiction and narrative, and the problems which the form of the novel faces in its radical division between them.

---

83. 'Things as they Really Are', Gross and Pearson, op.cit., 51.

CHAPTER II

THE NOVEL AS FICTION, I; THE OLD CURIOSITY SHOP

Dickens' consciousness has by the end of Oliver Twist reached a point at which narrative and what I have called fiction seem to be divided and irreconcilable; and we are left with childhood innocence as the only experience that can exist in both worlds. This dividedness, it has become clear, is not simply an aspect of the novel but of reality itself, for the novel has attempted to be inclusive of the chaotic life Boz discovered in the outside world, while imposing a common, narrative vision as a generous but respectable way of understanding reality.

What it finds is that while only the fictive is capable of seeing everything, it has no authority over the world's action and is condemned to be passive, and to suffer. Narrative and morality both disown fiction and, in the interests of their own control impose suffering upon it. At the same time, we find that the rejection of the fictive by narrative is a limitation of the vision of narrative, which is able to control only by hiding away what it cannot afford to see.

In one sense, then, the novel is deeply threatening to what might be perceived as respectability. Henry Fox wrote of the portrayal of the underworld in the novel,

> I am very sorry for it and very shocked at their mode of life, but I own that I do not much wish to hear what they say to each other.[1]

and Lord Melbourne told Queen Victoria of the novel's

> Workhouses and Coffin-Makers and Pickpockets, I don't *like* those things: I wish to avoid them; I don't like them in *reality*, and therefore I don't wish them represented.[2]

---

1. Henry Fox, quoted in the Introduction to Philip Collins (Ed.), Dickens: The Critical Heritage (London, 1971), 29.

2. From Queen Victoria's Diaries (1838-9) quoted in Dickens: The Critical Heritage, 44.

More intelligently, perhaps, Richard Ford wrote in the Quarterly Review,

> The happy ignorance is disregarded. Our youth should not even suspect the possibility of such hidden depths of guilt, for their tender memories are wax to receive and marble to retain.[3]

Dickens of course gave his own answer to Ford in David Copperfield when he wrote of David's childhood reading, "whatever harm there was in some of them was not there for me; I knew nothing of it";[4] and this is the answer we find in Oliver, at the end of Oliver Twist. 'Happy ignorance' is not disregarded, but is the refuge of a respectable vision of the world, the only compromise that its moral narrative can find with fiction.

This is not the only compromise with which Oliver leaves us, however, and it is not the one with which Dickens himself is primarily concerned. Oliver compromises narrative, but he also represents the compromise of fiction in Nancy's death. Narrative and morality lack precisely that generosity, of seeing everything, so evidently missing from these voices of respectability, which by the end of Oliver Twist Oliver himself has to supply.

This generosity is the faith characterised by the existence of a happy ignorance in an adult world, a belief in the 'marvellousness of everything', and a trust in the benevolence of a fragmentary reality. We are shown in Nancy the impossibility of this life anywhere other than in childhood, but it remains the life of the novel. As we have seen, it is the way the novel views the world in its entirety, and it is also the way in which it provides its readership with the accurate understanding of a common predicament. While we have seen the impossibility of such generosity as Oliver compromises in his innocence,

---

3. Richard Ford, Quarterly Review, June 1839, lxiv, 83-102, reprinted in Dickens: The Critical Heritage, 83.

4. David Copperfield, 105.

we have also seen, through it, what happy ignorance itself cannot show us, and so experienced what we have seen is the dilemma of the age, the problem of retaining a sense of order while establishing a new freedom, of providing a coherence for reality while experiencing its fragmentation and chaos as opportunity as well as danger. Dickens found himself and his novel, like the public who now bought it in consistently large numbers,[5] divided between this opportunism and its dangers; but, like his public, his primary concern as indeed his own motivation was the exploration of possibility rather than the conservative rejection of the chaotic world in which it lay. Dickens _sought_ a generous world in _Oliver Twist_, to find it threatened by narrative and coherence. The question of what now happens to it and to its place in the novel as a generosity for writing will be my own first concern, for Dickens does not simply abandon the fictive world. On the contrary, it takes its place as the threatened value at the heart of his writing, and produces what is perhaps the most extraordinary of all his novels, _The Old Curiosity Shop_.

One of the oddest aspects of this novel, then, is its conception. As R.L. Patten tells us the novel began in response to declining sales of the miscellany, _Master Humphrey's Clock_, which had been initiated in "the hope, that, by invention of a new mode, he might be able for a time to discontinue the writing of a long story";[6] this scheme failed, only coming to fruition very much later with the appearance of _Household Words_. In order to recover the periodical,

> Dickens then began working on a new novel, _The Old Curiosity Shop_, expanding the hints contained within

---

5. _Oliver Twist_ reached a steady circulation of about 6000: see R.L. Patten, _Dickens and his Publishers_,

6. R.L. Patten, _Charles Dickens and his Publishers_, 105.

> the 'little child story' set up for publication 25 April.[7]

This haphazard beginning, of course, has done nothing for the book's critical reputation. The Old Curiosity Shop, and particularly Little Nell - and certainly it is impossible to have the novel without Little Nell, as recent criticism has tried to do - has often seemed the most dated of Dickens' novels.

"Nell is a poorly realized character" is Malcom Andrews' observation in the most widely read current edition of the novel,[8] while on its back we read that "Nell attracted from her creator an admiration we can no longer share".[9] Other critics have been less generous, in extending their criticism beyond the figure of Nell.

> There is not much doubt that The Old Curiosity Shop is Dickens' least successful novel, a work in which he seems to have lost much of his intellectual control [10]

is Steven Marcus' extraordinary verdict in Dickens from Pickwick to Dombey, and more recently F.S. Schwarzbach spoke of its "cloying necrophiliac sentimentality".[11]

It is clear that Dickens' intellectual control is fully engaged at the beginning of the novel, for in the figure who was to have been Master Humphrey we are given a full recognition of the lessons learnt by Oliver Twist; we could hardly ask for a clearer indication of the

---

7. R.L. Patten, op.cit., 110. See also R.L. Patten, 'The Story Weaver at his Loom'; Dickens and the beginning of The Old Curiosity Shop, in R.B. Partlow (Ed.), Dickens the Craftsman: Strategies of Presentation, 44-64, and particularly pages 50-3 for a detailed account of the novel's conception.
8. Malcom Andrews (Ed.), The Old Curiosity Shop (Penguin, 1972), 29-30.
9. This summary judgement from the back of the Penguin edition illustrates the popularly accepted modern opinion of the novel.
10. Steven Marcus, Dickens from Pickwick to Dombey, 129.
11. F.S. Schwarzbach, Dickens and the City, 75.

terms upon which this novel is to be written. Master Humphrey's instinctive home is the concealment of darkness and of night. Darkness seems to be the very medium of his imagination; the first thing he tells us is that "Night is generally my time for walking", and he continues,

> I have fallen insensibly into this habit, both because it favours my infirmity and because it affords me greater opportunity of speculating on the characters and occupations of those who fill the streets. The glare and hurry of broad noon are not adapted to idle pursuits like mine; a glimpse of passing faces caught by the light of a street lamp or a shop window is often better for my purpose than their full revelation in the day-light, and, if I must add the truth, night is kinder in this respect than day, which too often destroys an air-built castle at the moment of its completion, without the smallest ceremony or remorse.[12]

This novel is to seek, not to confront and combine fiction and narrative, but, by allowing the narrator to declare his own limitation as the 'kindness' of darkness, to give the narrative the role of protecting and generating fiction, the 'air-built castle' which is how the strange, inconsequential nature of the fictional world appears to the narrative consciousness. Master Humphrey, as Dickens' persona, is his way of gaining at the beginning of this novel the distance he needs in order to return the fictive to the novel without the suffering to which narrative condemns fiction in the daylight world. He withdraws the claims of narrative to control the world, and avoids the dilemma to which Brownlow comes by _choosing_ the darkness that Brownlow is forced to occupy, offering to sacrifice narrative effort to the imagination of fiction.

In doing so, he offers to hide both himself and the narrative will away. We are told in _Master Humphrey's Clock_ that Master Humphrey is a

---

12. _The Old Curiosity Shop_, 43.

"misshapen, deformed old man"[13] so that his own vitality and character are withdrawn from our attention. Through his eyes, the novel becomes the fruit of a "lonely, solitary life":[14] so that the "glare and hurry" which disrupted Oliver's childhood world, and made it a confusing, chaotic place, is shut out, along with the sunlight which so monstrously brought Nancy's murder out for us to see, and which illuminated the world that narrative fought to control.

Master Humphrey is a kind of negated and limited Pickwick, for like Pickwick we have no idea of his origin or destination. The difference between the two is that where Pickwick takes over fiction, Master Humphrey is a far more intelligent figure, there to retire from the action, and to do so quite self-consciously.

What is born of Master Humphrey's retirement is a novel which is dominated by his partial vision, which allows things to come about 'insensibly' and which is 'kinder' than daylight. His vision relinquishes the daylight world which, Master Humphrey tells us, makes a nonsense of continuity: under his authorship, the reader is a sick man (as Master Humphrey himself is misshapen and deformed) and his illness is the narrative will:

> Think of a sick man in such a place as Saint Martin's Court, listening to the footsteps, and in the midst of pain and weariness obliged, despite himself (as though it were a task he must perform) to detect the child's step from the man's, the slipshod beggar from the booted exquisite, the lounging from the busy, the dull heel of the sauntering outcast from the quick tread of an expectant pleasure-seeker - think of the hum and noise being always present to his senses, and of the stream of life that will not stop, pouring on, on, on, through all his restless dreams, as if he were condemned to lie dead but conscious, in a noisy churchyard, and had no hope of rest for centuries to come.[15]

---

13. The Old Curiosity Shop, 675.
14. The Old Curiosity Shop, 673.
15, The Old Curiosity Shop, 43.

Master Humphrey's authorial consciousness dissents from the terms of narrative; the identification of things, the knowledge of people which is the key to their story, is to him a 'hum and noise', the differentiation of the world merely "a task he must perform". The "stream of life", the sequence of things upon which narrative most depends, has become the oppressive insistence of 'men and moving things', "pouring on, on, on". Narrative is not so much the life of things as a disrupter, intruding into the dream-world of fiction and producing by its intrusion the worst of all worlds, the chaos of a defeated coherence which even Sikes fled from. The life of narrative becomes a churchyard life, perceived as an intrusion upon rest. The sickness which this book attempts to evade is the remorselessness of daylight, the remorselessness of action and plot; and what the darkness is there to hide is the unconnectedness of things, the sheer incoherence of the 'stream of life' and the torture which its endless shifting and changing becomes to the purposive will.

Here, for the first time in Dickens' writing, we encounter the image of the drowning man, as Master Humphrey considers the Thames and reflects,

> that drowning was not a hard death, but of all means of suicide the easiest and best.[16]

Drowning disrupts and fragments the 'stream' of things, and stops the sequence. It reasserts the private world of fiction against the relentless course of narrative; the drowning man sees his life pass before him as he drowns, and dead, or even half-dead, as Rogue Riderhood is much later in Our Mutual Friend - and as Sikes was when ill in Oliver Twist - passes into a kind of sleep which sanctifies an individuality made chaotic by the incoherence of the narratives of the

16. The Old Curiosity Shop, 44.

world. So that Riderhood, unconscious, seems a 'better' man, as Sikes did to Nancy, the latter humanised as he is in murder by the momentary suspension of narrative consciousness.[17] Drowning, Master Humphrey knows, is a form of the kindness that darkness offers, creating the fictive in a world whose worst cruelty is to murder sleep.

Master Humphrey, then, understands the terms on which this novel is to operate. But that understanding means that his own function is to retire and to offer the book the very kindness which he recognises himself as the fundamental condition of a fictive life. He knows that in order to bring the fiction about, the narrator must bring his own part to an end, and he tells us, at the end of the third chapter, that

> now that I have carried this history so far in my own character and introduced these personages to the reader, I shall for the convenience of the narrative detach myself from its further course, and leave those who have prominent and necessary parts in it to speak and act for themselves.[18]

Master Humphrey speaks the language of the novel in talking of 'character' and 'narrative'. What is important here however is that he has had no character, other than in his recognition of the importance of fiction, and that what this characterlessness (derogatory only from the point of view of narrative) brings about cannot be an ordinary 'narrative' since all his thoughts, and actions, have been to withdraw from any such medium.

The question we must now ask, of course, is what has he discovered and 'introduced' in the course of the first chapters, if 'these personages' are not the conventional characters of narrative?

Our first answer to this question must lie in the figure whom he first encounters, and who sets off what we would call in a narrative

---

17. See Oliver Twist, 346; Our Mutual Friend, 503.

18. The Old Curiosity Shop, 72.

the action of the novel, the figure of Little Nell. It is a sign of the strangeness of this book that Nell is the strangest of all Dickens' often oddly conceived females. Darkness, the old curiosity shop and Little Nell are all integral parts of Master Humphrey's imagination. The curiosity shop is a symbol of the kind of sleep he seeks, a place of complete withdrawal, where daylight cannot penetrate. The shop, we are told,

> was one of those receptacles for old and curious things which seem to crouch in odd corners of this town and to hide their musty treasures from the public eye in jealousy and distrust. There were suits of mail standing like ghosts in armour here and there, fantastic carvings brought from monkish cloisters, rusty weapons of various kinds, distorted figures in china and wood and iron and ivory: tapestry and strange furniture that might have been designed in dreams.[19]

Nell herself then appears to him, not so much as a character as a part of the furniture of the dream, so that in reflection upon his first encounter with her Master Humphrey finds it impossible to separate her from the place to which she belongs:[20]

> We are so much in the habit of allowing impressions to be made upon us by external objects, which should be produced by reflection alone, but which, without such visible aids, often escape us; that I am not sure I should have been so thoroughly possessed by this one subject, but for the heaps of fantastic things I had seen huddled together in the curiosity dealer's warehouse.[21]

Already, Master Humphrey's reverence for the darkness has taken its effect; in allowing - as his 'habit' - the outside world to take over reflection, those external objects take on the force of reflection, so that through the strange reciprocation of Master Humphrey's

---

19. The Old Curiosity Shop, 47.

20. J.R. Kincaid observes this, remarking that "the dominant critical error is to separate Nell from her surroundings" (Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter, Oxford 1971, 81).

21. The Old Curiosity Shop, 55-6.

consciousness reality becomes a dream-world. Nell, of course, is a part of the dream, to the extent that she is unimaginable without the 'fantastic things' which now occupy the external object world about her:

> If these helps to my fancy had all been wanting, and I had been forced to imagine her in a common chamber, with nothing unusual or uncouth in its appearance, it is very probable that I should have been less impressed with her strange and solitary state.[22]

Again, it is the kindness of the darkness which the Old Curiosity Shop concentrates which does not force Master Humphrey to imagine Nell in a 'common chamber' helping and preserving the approximation of real to ideal. "As it was" he continues, "she seemed to exist in a kind of allegory". The power of the fiction the darkness has made of reality has been to replace narrative with something different from a mere story. We may not see the direction in which Master Humphrey's allegory will lead us - unlike traditional allegory moral or religious associations are obscured by the identification of Nell by darkness and fantasy, and by dreaming, rather than by evil or anything recognisably wrong - but what we do see is that the image of Nell is different from a character in a narrative, as the novel's 'fictive' approximation to an allegorical symbol in a fragmentary and incoherent reality.

Nell's unconventionality is sufficient to seem to arrest, and drown narrative. When Master Humphrey, dutifully taking up his role as narrator, begins "to imagine her in her future life, holding her solitary way among a crowd of wild grotesque companions" he finds that

> the theme was carrying me along with it at a great pace, and I already saw before me a region on which I was little disposed to enter.[23]

That region is the pain and trouble of the progression of narrative

---

22. The Old Curiosity Shop, 56.
23. The Old Curiosity Shop, 56.

itself; and it is significant, and indicative of Nell's peculiar power, that Master Humphrey can withdraw from it, and return from the beginnings of a story to the stable image of his fiction:

> But all that night, waking or in my sleep, the same thoughts recurred and the same images retained possession of my brain. I had ever before me the old dark murky rooms - the gaunt suits of mail with their ghostly silent air - the faces all awry, grinning from wood and stone - the dust and rust, and worm that lives in wood - and alone in the midst of all this lumber and decay, and ugly age, the beautiful child in her gentle slumbers smiling through her light and sunny dreams.[24]

What Nell stands for does not unfold like a narrative, but recurs, as the 'same thoughts' and the 'same image'. Nell has made the river of things stand still, and has made a world of the fictional chaos of dark and decaying things. She is at the centre of this chaotic fictive world, as its brightest and purest aspect, so that in her, and in the darkness that surrounds her - in the dust and the rust, and lumber and decay - daylight is transferred from the world of narrative to the fictive world which finds its ideal in her dreams. Nell, it appears, has effected through her narrator a complete transmutation of Oliver's world, so that where Oliver had to live in a waking, conscious world, Master Humphrey allows Nell to create a world for herself, a world where the objects which governed Oliver - the material differences and responsibilities of a harsh reality - are absorbed by darkness and decay, and in which her dreams shine out as light and sunny, untroubled by the light of day, or the narrative that made that light destructive.

Nell, then, seems to be the most prominent of the 'personages' introduced by Master Humphrey. The other figure who promises to be significant at the novel's beginning is of course Quilp.

Quilp is very much a part of the fiction to which Nell belongs,

---

24. The Old Curiosity Shop, 55.

generated, not so much by narrative, as by Nell's presence in the book and by the darkness and decay which brings that presence about, in order to supply the novel with what she lacks: he is the very opposite of Nell herself. Where she has no speech and no self-generated activity, Quilp seems to be all speech and activity; and his energy is born out of what Nell precisely is not. Master Humphrey's vision divided her from "the dust and rust, and worm that lives in wood" and from "this lumber and decay, and ugly age"; things which seem entirely appropriate to Quilp, who is

> an elderly man of remarkably hard features and forbidding aspect, and so low in stature as to be quite a dwarf, though his head and face were large enough for the body of a giant. His black eyes were restless, sly and cunning; his mouth and chin, bristly with the stubble of a coarse hard beard; and his complexion was one of that kind which never looks clean or wholesome. But what added most to the grotesque expression of his face, was a ghastly smile, which, appearing to be the mere result of habit and to have no connexion with any mirthful or complacent feeling, constantly revealed the few discoloured fangs that were yet scattered in his mouth, and gave him the aspect of a panting dog.[25]

Quilp is conceived as a part of the dream-world Nell inhabits; he resembles a creature from a fairy-tale, a cross between a dwarf and giant, both sub-human - resembling an animal, 'a large panting dog' with his 'fangs' and his 'dog's grin'[26] more than he does human being - and superhuman in his near-magical powers of mobility and his mastery of circumstance.

With these two figures, then, Master Humphrey creates what promises to be a work of fiction in its purest sense, and not a work of narrative. Quilp and Nell, it appears, will be the active figures of what will be a fictional, non-directed and allegorical novel, rather than a narrative. Quilp promises to be a disruptive figure, but offers in his disruption

---

25. The Old Curiosity Shop, 65.
26. The Old Curiosity Shop, 83.

to be a part of the darkness which protects Nell, as a part of her fictional identity in Master Humphrey's dream. He becomes another aspect of "the strange furniture that might have been designed in dreams",[27] of the wild and grotesque things which impress Master Humphrey with her 'strange and solitary state'.

By the end of the first chapter of the novel, then, it appears that we have a book which offers to have no real hero or heroine in any conventional sense. While Nell, and secondarily Quilp, are offered as central figures, neither promise in the first chapters to become the book's protagonist. Instead, they together appear as the central image of an allegory which, with its refuge in the darkness of the old curiosity shop, seems, even without Master Humphrey's presence, to promise to control the action; and the narrative, the movement of things, and the pain attached to the consciousness which sees the daylight reality of the real world - as Oliver did - appears to be soothed into inclusion in Nell's light and sunny sleep.

While this is one resolution of the ending of Oliver Twist, it also presents a new dilemma: for while Dickens may not have a narrative heroine in Little Nell, or a hero in Quilp, he still has a projected novel in which to put them both. Unlike Master Humphrey he cannot simply retire from anything that promises to be narrative - that, after all, is why the persona exists in the first place. If Nell, and the figures surrounding her, are to be fictive and allegorical, what are they to do when they are called upon to act in a narrative, a demand which the novel must necessarily place upon its characters? A world asleep may work as an image or idea, but the very stasis which Master Humphrey discovered as a comfort must be highly problematic to the novelist. The image and idea of Nell and her surroundings - of the Old

---

27. See page 80 above.

Curiosity Shop and Quilp - satisfy the night-time, fictive world Master Humphrey brings about; but they hardly satisfy the requirements of a narrator who, unlike Master Humphrey, must remain active in his novel.

Master Humphrey begins the novel by providing the eyes through which its strange world is seen. With his disappearance, the question of how to see the fictive world in the novel begins to arise as a matter of urgency.

Nell continues, not surprisingly perhaps, to be a central figure in the novel; Master Humphrey's image of her, once established, remains in Dickens' mind as a central intention. He wrote, much later, in his preface of 1848 that

> in writing the book, I had it always in my fancy to surround the lonely figure of the child with grotesque and wild, but not impossible companions, and to gather about her innocent face and pure intentions, associates as strange and uncongenial as the grim objects that are about her bed when her history is first foreshadowed.[28]

A few pages before Master Humphrey makes his exit from the novel, then, we are once more shown her as we have seen her before:

> Nell joined us before long, and bringing some needle-work to the table, sat by the old man's side. It was pleasant to observe the fresh flowers in the room, the pet bird with a green bough shading his cage, the breath of freshness and youth which seemed to rustle through the old dull house and hover round the child.[29]

But the novel continues rather uncomfortably,

> It was curious, but not pleasant, to turn from the beauty and grace of the girl, to the stooping figure, care-worn face, and jaded aspect of the old man.[30]

While this is essentially the image which Master Humphrey promised

---

28. The Old Curiosity Shop, 42.
29. The Old Curiosity Shop, 70.
30. The Old Curiosity Shop, 70.

as allegory, the dark things among which Nell was conceived seem to be less a part of the 'kindness' of darkness, and of the 'furniture of a dream', than a source of discomfort and anxiety, a contrast which is "not so pleasant". The pressure which produces this uneasiness is made more apparent in the next paragraph when the narrator - still, at this point, Master Humphrey - asks of Nell and her place with her grandfather,

> As he grew weaker and more feeble, what would become of this lonely little creature; poor protector as he was, say that he died - what would her fate be then?[31]

Clearly, this is the region upon which Master Humphrey was previously "little disposed to enter"; the region of the pain and troubles of narrative. But this time, with his own withdrawal from the novel imminent, Nell's sunny dreams, which brighten the darkness around her, seem to be less important than their vulnerability. Master Humphrey worries about her future protection; for previously, as a figure who existed in order to perceive fiction, he was himself her chief protector. His withdrawal will mean that Nell must in some way perceive life for herself, and cease to be simply an object of perception, and this necessity is not a requirement of Nell's fictional existence, as a figure who can be a small but ideal, 'sunny' part of an incoherent world, and exist as a child, but a requirement of narrative, which demands that Nell must see her story as a reponsibility to reader, writer, and novel, and see it whole. With Master Humphrey's departure Nell, if she is to remain at the centre of the novel, will have to move through it, and become a part of its narrative. Master Humphrey's retirement puts a great deal of pressure upon Nell to have a story.

---

31. The Old Curiosity Shop, 70.

In some ways, the narrative given to Nell represents a kind of Pilgrim's Progress. As death will mean heaven to Pilgrim, if only he can renounce life with sufficient determination, so Nell must encounter each new experience which narrative forces upon her as a sleep-walker, in order to return to the sunny dream she was able to live out under the protection of Master Humphrey at the novel's beginning. Everything that happens to her happens as a test of her power to preserve the kindness of darkness and her own fictive existence. So that while the narrative exists to wake Nell up - as it exists in the Pilgrim's Progress to make a sinner of Christian - we find that Nell constantly resists and opposes its pressures.

Her position in the novel can, perhaps, be more fully understood however if we compare her to another, very much more Dickensian, precedent - one whom I have already mentioned in reference to Master Humphrey - that of Mr Pickwick.

Pickwick, of course, seems a strange figure to cite as a precedent for Nell. But the testing to which she is subjected is very much like that which earlier proved Mr Pickwick's vitality in spite of his apparent responsibility and well-meaning morality. The difference between them is like the difference between Pickwick and Master Humphrey; for Nell is surprisingly a more realistic figure, and as such a more intelligent figure. Where Pickwick imposes the values of fiction upon narrative, Nell, like her ally Master Humphrey, preserves them by withdrawal. Where Pickwick's transcendent enthusiasm was a celebration of his will to participate in the world, but at the same time a compromise with the harsh values of reality, Nell's resistance to much the same environment is a celebration of her power of self-preservation; and of the power of the fictional to survive in a world where things are seen whole, as narratives.

Like Pickwick, then, Nell sets out to travel through the world as a matter of choice. This choice is her first real threat, and her first test. Should she fail it, her future would appear to be a Pickwickian freedom, and Nell to be committed to dominate the forward movement of the plot. Encounter with worldly values of life and survival would supplant the dream which governs her purity.

She passes this first trial by presenting what is actually her future to us as a restoration. She sees in her journey

> a return of the simple pleasures they had once enjoyed, a relief from the gloomy solitude in which she had lived, an escape from the heartless people by whom she had been surrounded in her late time of trial, the restoration of the old man's health and peace, and a life of tranquil happiness.[32]

Nell sets out upon her story; but she does so regarding her future not as a plotted progression to a better world, but as a simple return to the childlike world she has once known. Nell defeats the necessity the novel has discovered in Master Humphrey's retirement to _be_ narrative at this first stage by making the pressure to grow up, and see things whole, into a commitment to remain what she has always been, and to preserve both her own fictional childhood existence and its fragile protection in her grandfather's health and peace. She makes of her future, not a narrative plan, but the same sunny dream that Master Humphrey saw her sleeping out as her own small part of the chaotic reality she occupied:

> Sun, and stream, and meadow, and summer days, shone brightly in her view, and there was no dark tint in all the sparkling picture.[33]

Having made her commitment to this dream of the fictional world, anything that the narrative can do to Nell will, if she is to be true

---

32. _The Old Curiosity Shop_, 148.

33. _The Old Curiosity Shop_, 148.

to herself, leave her behind in the world of her 'simple pleasures'. These will be the pleasures of restoration, of recognition, and a return to a past, protected, dream-world; the pleasures of fiction, and also the rediscovery for the novel of what are essentially the pleasures of comedy.

For Nell, then, the world remains a Curiosity Shop; and she remains, as she was at the beginning of the novel, strangely independent of the dark world about her, in a light and sunny world of her own. The only difference in her real presence as the novel progresses comes about as the 'grotesque and wild' things which surround her change, and resides in the relative brightness of her own image.

The landscape through which we are taken with Nell is not so much the first sign of a social realism which never really interested Dickens', and for which he would have been much the lesser writer, but the manifestation of the darkness of the world which Nell occupies, and which is, again, very oddly, her protector, on a truly grandiose scale. Through Nell and the industrial landscape, the dream-life of things is extended from the boundaries of childhood and child-consciousness, the territory it occupied with Oliver, to a full vision of the bewilderment which the outside world offers.

> On every side, and as far as the eye could see into the heavy distance, tall chimneys, crowding on each other, and presenting that endless repetition of the same dull, ugly form, which is the horror of oppressive dreams, poured out their plague of smoke, obscured the light, and made foul the melancholy air.[34]

Nell discovers the whole world as a Curiosity Shop, and finds herself quite at home in it. So that "she lay down, with nothing between herself and the sky; and, with no fear for herself, for she was past it now, put up a prayer for the old man".[35] Mr Newman, in

34. The Old Curiosity Shop, 423-4.

35. The Old Curiosity Shop, 426.

Dickens at Play, calls Nell a 'monster'[36] for the sympathy she finds in this environment; and to the book's narrative interest, she is precisely that, for "that endless repetition" of the landscape constitutes the defeat of the progressive structure and expectation of narrative, and is the landscape which in the Curiosity Shop, with its senseless and non-progressive jumble of dark objects, was the natural environment of the image Nell began as. Her affinity with the sheer turmoil of this monstrous and irrational landscape then is equally natural; so that what the narrative treats as anarchic and abhorrent Nell can contemplate with "no fear or anxiety".[37]

The monstrosity of Nell to the interests of narrative is shown to the full when she attempts association with others. She is only once tempted into a relationship which could be seen as anything like a friendship, with the single exception of her long-term association with Kit (which, because of her withdrawal from the novel's action, could more legitimately be called a dissociation), and this temptation is another test of her dream-nature, and of her resistence to narrative.

In Chapter 32, she witnesses the reunion of two sisters, and afterwards "could not help following at a little distance".[38] This is the first and only time that Nell has any response to the outside world other than one of avoidance or self-preservation. She comes closer here than she does anywhere else to fulfilling the function of a character in a narrative, and to family ties and associations with the figures around her - hereto, her only relation with them has been insofar as they exist as a part of the chaos and jumble of the grotesque which constitutes the curiosity shop of Nell's existence.

---

36. S.J. Newman, Dickens at Play (London, 1981), 72.
37. The Old Curiosity Shop, 426.
38. The Old Curiosity Shop, 315.

But what she does with the relationship the novel offers her here hardly supports the normal substance of character and plot:

> Their evening walk was by a river's side. Here every night, the child was too, unseen by them, unthought of, unregarded; but feeling as if they were her friends, as if they had confidences and trust together, as if her load were lightened and less hard to bear; as if they mingled their sorrows, and found mutual consolation. It was a weak fancy perhaps, the childish fancy of a young and lonely creature; but night after night, and still the sisters loitered in the same place, and still the child followed with a mild and softened heart.[39]

Far from offering the normal, active relationship we would expect of Nell in any ordinary narrative, she is again here very much like Master Humphrey. Where Pickwick would have dominated the two sisters with his vitality, disarming their story by including it within his own incoherent energy, Nell stands back, as Master Humphrey would, knowing that to join in would not be an assertion of her right to dream and to construct 'air-built castles', but a sacrifice both of that right and of her own identity to the story of the two sisters. Sympathy is an integral part of the dream-world, and Nell - like Master Humphrey - can truly sympathise only if she does not act.

Nell's inaction preserves Master Humphrey's night-time world, and the episode of the two sisters is precisely as he would wish it; a "glimpse of passing faces", affording "greater opportunity of speculating on the characters and occupations"[40] of figures seen only briefly. In the fragmented world such vision produces sympathy in the unifying emotion; what the fictional worlds of Nell and Humphrey, and Pickwick too, have in common is the good feeling that forms the basis of each.

But this very inaction also produces a problem for the narrative and plot of the novel. The emotions and affections of the passage

---

39. The Old Curiosity Shop, 316.

40. See page 76 above.

above remain utterly unshared, so that to the associative demands of narrative they seem almost impossible. Nell's experience here is very much like the later experience of David Copperfield when, running away from London to his aunt, he sleeps in the company of the sentry at Greenwich; like Nell, he is unseen, unthought of, unregarded. But in David Copperfield the novel gains at least a partial triumph over childhood; his experiences, ultimately, exist in order to be communicated as part of the story of his life; his 'friendship' had to be silent at the time, but the narrative makes its own sense of his feelings by asserting that they were felt only in order to be expressed later, and not really for their own sake. In doing so, the narrative betrays the dream-world of the child.

But for Nell, there is no later. We find that we must watch her, as a part of the curiosity shop of life, where the narrative wants to watch with her, and to see through her eyes, for Nell's experience here has nothing to do with telling a story: it is purely momentary, purely fictive. She does not in any sense tell us what happens; there is no retrospective or indirect speech. Instead, Dickens writes for her, finding it necessary to adopt her own principle of sympathy. Nell remains silent, refusing to do anything more than feel, and to be anything other than felt for.

The 'as ifs' in the passage above are not unlike Nancy's in Oliver Twist. She created a fictive and momentary reality of an arbitrary and cruel world by approximating the ideal to the real, and so gaining, as Nell does here, a temporary access to a better reality. But the encounter of Nancy's fiction with Sikes, Brownlow and the narrative meant the absorption and destruction of her feelings. Nell is already withdrawn from any such encounter with narrative - as a direct result of Nancy's suffering - and her 'as ifs' take the approximation further

and do not even venture into speech. Nell's relationship is entirely fictive; where Nancy's went into the world of narrative, Nell remains in the world of fiction.

When Dickens writes "as if they mingled their sorrows, and found mutual consolation", then, the 'as if' is not accessible to narrative as Nancy's was. These words do not publicly establish the emotion they contain, but instead privatise and hide it: was it there 'in reality', as the potential substance of narrative? In Nell's mind? In Dickens'? Or even in Master Humphreys'?

We become aware as we ask that the feeling exists outside of narrative, and beyond its scope, as a fragmented and in narrative form, incomplete thing, a part of the Curiosity Shop. Where Nancy's 'as ifs' made fiction vulnerable to the circumstances and movement of her story, Nell's - or Dickens' - , having seen the price that Nancy paid, make us aware of the preservation of feeling in the dream-world of invention which I have called the world of fiction; but also of the separation of that world from the public world of narrative.

Dickens, like Nell and Master Humphrey, begins to work secretly, in writing feelings for Nell, participating in Nell's withdrawal by making her feelings up for her. He does so in order to put them into a narrative which in Oliver Twist admitted such feeling only as a childish dream, and he finds it necessary to make an apology for the story he has thereby violated; "It was a weak fancy, perhaps" - but, given the harshness of the narrative's terms, it was the best he could do.

Nell, then, becomes a threat to the very motive forces of the narrative - to its speech and its action. The only way that narrative can deal with her is ultimately to write her out of the book,and to drown her in its own course. Nell is too extreme a figure, too special in

her nature, to afford any ground for compromise with her. We find as the book progresses that much of its everyday life begins to betray the dream that Nell lives, and to portray her as the static idea that narrative would like to see in her. So that her encounter with Mrs Jarley for instance, gives the story the opportunity to make her 'the wax-work child',[41] an image which comes both from the exasperation of the narrative with Nell and from the irresponsibility of everyday life which we have previously seen working against narrative.

But, for the novel's narrative interests, this small revenge upon Nell's fictive nature only suspends the problem of what to do with her; it does not solve it. The narrative finds itself forced to treat Nell as a curiosity - an exhibit in the curiosity shop. Each image it produces for her has close affinities with death, for narrative sees the dream world as a world of death. The waxworks, the child in the graveyard with the Punch and Judy men, Nell's sympathy with the sadness of the two sisters, and with the favourite pupil who dies - all these identify Nell's presence as a series of associations with a melodrama whose very life is born of its relation to death. It is natural, then, that the story should turn to death in order to solve the problem that Nell has become.

Nell's death offers itself to the narrative as a kind of final exhibit, the last great curiosity of her life, and appears to be an end of the odd problems that Nell raises, an ending to the resistance she has produced to the forward movement, and to the speech and action of the narrative.

At the end of her story, then, she fulfills her nature as a curiosity to the extent that people actually come to view her. As Mr Newman points out in _Dickens at Play_,

---

41. _The Old Curiosity Shop_, 308.

> By Chapter 55 parties of visitors come to the village as much to inspect the child as the mouldering church.[42]

But Nell's death itself presents the problem she is to the narrative interests of the writing at a much deeper level than these half-joking images of her nature. At her death-bed, we are told,

> She was dead. No sleep so beautiful and calm, so free from trace of pain, so fair to look upon. She seemed a creature fresh from the hand of God, and waiting for the breath of life; not one who had lived and suffered death,

and the writing continues,

> Where were the traces of her early cares, her sufferings, and fatigues? All gone. Sorrow was dead indeed in her, but peace and perfect happiness were born; imaged in her tranquil beauty and profound repose.
>
> And still her former self lay there, unaltered in this change. Yes. The old fireside had smiled upon that same sweet face; it had passed like a dream through haunts of misery and care; at the door of the poor schoolmaster on the summer evening, before the furnace fire upon the cold wet night, at the still bedside of the dying boy, there had been the same mild lovely look. So shall we know the angels in their majesty after death.[43]

What the narrative wants to do, here, as it does in its former images of Nell, is to relinquish her to her own changelessness, and to leave her in death as a kind of 'via negativa'; so that her whole life and the whole life of the novel insofar as it has focussed upon her has been like the landscape she once walked through, "like a dream". Release from Nell, the narrative hopes, will be release from her changelessness, and from the dream-world she inhabits, and an end of the resistance she has offered to real action, and to real speech.

But we only have to read of Nell's death to realise, paradoxically, the value and power of the world she occupies, even in dying. For

---

42. S.J. Newman, op.cit., 76.

43. The Old Curiosity Shop, 654.

death as Nell experiences it is not an ending, but a form of protection; it is the culmination and continuation of the protection she offers, for it is the very nature of her changelessness not to end - or rather, perhaps, to be a continual ending: "Still her former self lay there, unaltered in this change". Nell herself remains the same, with "the same sweet face" and "the same mild lovely look". In dying, Nell is born to the future life she once foretold for herself, to her own dream, experiencing the

> return of simple pleasures they had once enjoyed, a relief from the gloomy solitude in which she had lived, and escape from the heartless people by whom she had once been surrounded...and a life of tranquil happiness.[44]

In death, these dreams come to fruition:

> Sorrow was dead indeed in her, but peace and perfect happiness were born.[45]

Nell has in a sense always been dead; she has "lived and suffered death", we are told, and not life, so that even death changes nothing in her. We see in the darkness which falls and surrounds her as she dies that death is only another form of the kindness that Master Humphrey seeks and, in Nell, provides. Moreover, it is the ultimate form of that kindness, threatening no sudden revelation of the 'stream of life' in daylight, and no destruction of any 'air built castle' by some terrible clarity of action or plot, as Sikes destroyed Nancy's by murder. The dream of this final image of Nell is finally a secure one, for in death, and only in death, can we recognise that Nell always was the same - and, for the purposes of the novel, always will be.

Once again, here, Nell is shown to be what should in narrative be an impossibility - a creature without a narrative voice. Living in

---

44. The Old Curiosity Shop, 148.

45. The Old Curiosity Shop, 654.

death as she was dying in life, she seems to be "a creature fresh from the hand of God, and waiting for the breath of life". As such, she again creates what Dickens wants for his novel, the space for the feelings which the realism of the narrative in Oliver Twist devalued and excluded. Once again, Nell's nature privatises what would otherwise be the public factuality of her death: does she achieve her happiness in reality? In her own mind? In Master Humphrey's? Or in Dickens'? Once again, we are made aware that the feeling here exists beyond the scope of the associative values of the narrative, and of the novel insofar as novels consist of narrative,for the emotion she embodies is not an emotion which can exist within a narrative context, but instead one which is hidden away from the 'stream of life' Master Humphrey so fears.

Death, then, does not undo Nell, but secures the value of her dream-world for the novel. Her absence is at least as potent in this as her presence. The difficulty of Nell for narrative, however, remains.

The nature of her death does not allow the story to reassert its own values, and the problem Nell sets narrator (as distinct from novelist) remains unsolved. Her death does not change the substance of the novel, for its action continues in her absence just as much of it in any case occurred in her absence before her death, still dominated by her, as I suggested near the beginning of this chapter, through the figure of Quilp. Quilp, I have argued, is a part of the fiction to which Nell belongs, a part of the curiosity shop which represents consciousness in its fragmented, inconsequential form. While Dickens' conventional villains always have some origin for their criminality - whether it be of race, as with Fagin, or of class, as with Carker or Uriah Heep (and bound up with these conventional origins are their more complicated roots in Dickens' own obsessively class-oriented past) -

Quilps' kind of villainy has no such source, for he belongs to Nell's world, the world of dreams. As one of the 'wild and grotesque' figures surrounding Nell, his energies compliment and indicate hers, as hers do his.

Quilp is in important ways a very similar figure to Nell herself, and is similarly resistant to the demands of narrative and plot. Near the beginning of the novel, Quilp is described as follows:

> The creature appeared quite horrible with his monstrous head and little body, as he rubbed his hands slowly round, and round, and round again - with something fantastic even in his manner of performing this slight action - and, dropping his shaggy brows and cocking his chin in the air, glanced upward with a stealthy look of exultation that an imp might have copied and appropriated to himself.[46]

Quilp appears here to be more object than man. Just as Nell seemed more curiosity than character to the 'stream of life' of the novel, so Quilp seems to be more spectacle than human being. Dickens uses the same word, 'creature', to describe them both - the difference of course being that where Nell seems "fresh from the hand of God"[47] Quilp appears to be fresh from a very different source. In each case, the novel's narrative sense indicates that, if it is a human function to narrate, to plot, and to see life whole, as a story, these two figures are something different. And while we might be tempted to identify something less than human, and animal-like in the word - particularly in the case of Quilp, who is described later as "a large panting dog" - it is necessary to remember that Nell's life in death, and Quilp's near-magical mastery of physical objects and circumstances also indicates that these creatures are something more than merely human. It is Quilp's peculiar kind of potency which is the key to his nature and to

---

46. The Old Curiosity Shop, 69.

47. See 95 above.

his close relationship to Nell.

Like Nell, Quilp's character has been repeatedly misread. A.O.J. Cockshut, for example, makes the dark observation that 'Quilp's sadism' "is not content with ordinary violence and terrorism" and that "his cruelty is...linked in true sadistic fashion with sexual morbidity".[48] To associate Quilp's evidently violent nature with this language of crude villainy is to mistake the nature of the power he possesses entirely.

For Quilp's violence is always directed at objects, rather than directly at other figures in the book. Most obviously, he never actually strikes his boy, but always misses and hits something else; while instead of beating and torturing Kit - as he would no doubt like to - he beats and tortures a wooden effigy. In each case, his violence is curiously self-contained. Moreover, it governs not simply occasional outbursts, but the whole of his action. John Carey's remarks in The Violent Effigy, are helpful here in demonstrating the extent of Quilp's energies:

> Much of his time is spent in driving to ludicrous excess the components of Dickensian cheeriness. Conviviality trails a hair-raising image of itself around with it. Food consumption, for instance, is an indispensable accompaniment of Dickensian bliss. Quilp approaches meals with horrible ferocity [49]

- and he goes on to cite the eating of eggshells, the smoking of 'hideous pipes', the biting of forks and spoons, and the drinking of boiling spirits.

Quilp does not so much drive the components of the Dickensian world to excess as physically assault them; but Carey is entirely right in indicating food as a prime target for assault.

---

48. A.O.J. Cockshut, The Imagination of Charles Dickens (London, 1961), 93.

49. John Carey, The Violent Effigy (London, 1973), 25.

Food in Dickens' novels is frequently a kind of social contract: it provides a medium in which associations can appear to be real and tangible, and is always important in the portrayal of its eaters. We see it at its most threatening in Sikes, who simply absorbs it without any enjoyment or appreciation,[50] indicating to us at the same time his use and absorption of Nancy for his sole purpose of survival. Quilp is less merely brutal, however, and does not offer this kind of threat. He does threaten the contracts which narrative values, but he does so not by threatening to dominate them, but by refusing to take them seriously. Quilp turns eating into sport, and the 'horrible ferocity' with which he approaches food constitutes his determination not to be beaten. As for Nell - and for Pickwick - the world is not a coherent story to Quilp but a series of tests, or episodes; and his energy is directed at the mastery of every new event. And, like these other figures, he competes, not against other characters, as an hostility of relationship, but against the world at large, and in isolation. He does not eat eggs with shells on in order to intimidate his guests, but simply because eggs _have_ shells. The intimidation may be quite real, but it is secondary to the affrontery of the world of objects.

While Quilp is threatening, his threat is not directly to other characters, as Sikes directly threatened Nancy, but to a world which is materially inconvenient to him, and to material inconvenience itself. Where Sikes saw contracts - as he saw food - as a means to an end, Quilp sees them as an end in themselves. To Quilp, a contract - a relationship - is an object which has got the better of him if he fails in some way to consume it. Quilp's contracts with other people turn them, at least as far as he is concerned, into things. So that Kit can really become for him a wooden figurehead, into which he can drive screwdrivers

---

50. See _Oliver Twist_, 356.

and red hot pokers.[51] By doing so he fulfils his relationship to Kit in exercising his violence 'as if' he were present. The 'as if' has the same function as Nell's, even if it is put here to the opposite use. Instead of establishing Quilp's violence as a public fact, it hides it away. We can ask the same questions about it as we earlier could of Nell's emotions; does it exist in reality, as the substance of the narrative? In Quilp's mind? In Dickens'? Or, again, even in Master Humphrey's, for he has in a sense created Quilp just as he created Nell, and at the same stroke?

Again, we are made aware that Quilp's violence exists outside of the ordinary bounds of narrative, just as the dreams of Nell did. Like Nell, Quilp's nature is the stuff dreams are made of; fiction, but not a story.

This fiction governs Quilp's nature - just as it governed Nell's - in all of his dealings with the world. It even governs his marriage, and his relationship with his wife - something Nell's dream-world never has to include.

The scene when he returns to his house in Chapter 4 to find his wife and mother-in-law entertaining friends, for instance, demonstrates what Quilp's odd nature does to the ordinary course of relationship and association.

Before his entrance, first of all, we are told that

> it is no wonder that the ladies felt an inclination to talk and linger, especially when there are taken into account the additional inducements of fresh butter, new bread, shrimps, and water-cress.[52]

Food here represents quite normally the comfortable Dickensian contract of social discourse. Quilp siezes upon this immediately on interrupting the party:

---

51. The Old Curiosity Shop, 566.

52. The Old Curiosity Shop, 74.

> "Go on, ladies, go on", said Daniel. "Mrs Quilp, pray ask the ladies to stop to supper, and have a couple of lobsters and something light and palatable."[53]

And having driven the ladies away with this challenge to their digestions, goes further when left alone with Mrs Quilp herself:

> "Oh you nice creature!"were the words with which he broke silence; smacking his lips as if this were no figure of speech, and she were actually a sweetmeat.[54]

What Quilp did to Kit he here more subtly does to his wife, substituting an 'as if' for the reality, and making her into a 'creature' like himself and Nell, a part of the dream-world of the curiosity shop. Quilp has the effect upon his wife that he has upon everyone else, making her an object of his own grotesquery. Unlike Sikes, whose actions were specifically menacing, Quilp makes us all look ridiculous. Like Nell, the pretence involved in his attitude to other figures, the 'as if' which comes between his attitude to his wife and any real intention of eating her, makes of his intention a fantasy rather than a crime. As I pointed out above, this occupation of the realm of the fantastic, which Quilp shares with Nell, makes his feelings, like Nell's, not directly attributable to his nature as a character, but instead a kind of phenomenon. If Quilp, like Nell, is a fantasy, we cannot then say that he is simply his own fantasy - although that is partly true. He is also Dickens' fantasy, and Master Humphrey's; he is the novel's fantasy, it then follows, of what it normatively does to its characters; and if he is all these, he is also the reader's fantasy, both of what happens in novels, and, insofar as the novel represents a set of expectations about what happens in reality as narrative, he is the reader's fantasy of what happens in the

---

53. The Old Curiosity Shop, 78.
54. The Old Curiosity Shop, 81.

real world. His actions parody life, and so include us all:

> Mr Quilp planted his two hands on his knees, and straddling his legs out very wide apart, stooped slowly down, and down, and down, until, by screwing his head very much on one side, he came between his wife's eyes and the floor.[55]

Like his hands, which were rubbed "slowly round, and round, and round again", Quilp's actions, in their endless deliberacy, are a parody of narrative since they occur for their own sake and not to any end. Quilp 'acts'; and the deliberacy of his action is his enjoyment in its execution, and not in its consequence.

Much the same goes for his speech; as fantasy, it is enjoyed for its own sake, rather than for the sake of what follows upon it:

> Am I nice to look at? Should I be the handsomest creature in the world if I had but whiskers? Am I quite a lady's man as it is? - am I, Mrs Quilp?[56]

It is the very conception of Quilp as a 'lady's man' which pleased him - and which pleases us.

We cannot always accept the fantasy Quilp stands for quite as comfortably as this, of course, for what he most consistently represents is a fantasy of sexual exploitation. In the passage above, where Mrs Quilp is like a 'sweetmeat', Quilp tells her,

> If you ever listen to those beldames again, I'll bite you;[57]

and in the following passage, where he forces his wife to sit with him,

> The sun went down and the stars peeped out, the Tower turned from its own proper colours to grey and from grey to black, the room became perfectly dark and the end of the cigar a deep fiery red, but still Mr Quilp went on smoking and drinking in the same position, and staring listlessly out of the

---

55. The Old Curiosity Shop, 81.

56. The Old Curiosity Shop, 81.

57. The Old Curiosity Shop, 83.

> window with the dog-like smile always on his face, save when Mrs Quilp made some involuntary movement of restlessness or fatigue; and then it expanded into a grin of delight.[58]

The innuendo here, with the end of Quilp's cigar 'a deep fiery red' and Mrs Quilp consumed (as she is in the illustration by Phiz) in his smoke, is obvious. The 'as if' is taken as far as it ever is into reality; but what Quilp does to his wife remains a fantasy, with the same deliberacy and pantomine of his former actions and words and with the same parodic universality, in which we all recognise his intent, and at the same time are unable to give its direct attribution - to Quilp, to the novel, to Dickens, or to ourselves.

In this context, then, it is only of partial use to point out as many critics have done, that Quilp and Nell both have a source in Dickens' own circumstances. John Carey tells us,

> Thomas Wright notes that Quilp's mother-in-law, Mrs Jinwin was modelled on Dickens' mother-in-law Mrs Hogarth. Quilp was, in a sense, Dickens himself, as seen through his mother-in-law's disapproving eyes.[59]

In the same way, it has frequently been suggested that where Quilp, his wife and his mother-in-law are one caricature of Dickens' early married life, Nell is its complement, in being closely related to his wife's sister, Mary Hogarth, with whom Dickens had a very close and odd friendship; whom he probably loved better than his own wife; whose innocence and purity obsessed him; and who died suddenly at the age of seventeen, only three years before the Old Curiosity Shop was begun.

While these correspondences are undoubtedly to some extent accurate, they only distract from the real function of Quilp and Nell; for these figures are not characterisations of Dickens' life - as figures like David Copperfield, Pip, and even Oliver Twist, undoubtedly to some

---

58. The Old Curiosity Shop, 83.

59. John Carey, op.cit., 27.

extent, are - but dreams of that life. They are not Dickens' story but his fictions, figures which, as fantasy, are an end in themselves. It is extraordinary, and a mark of Dickens' extraordinary genius, that they appear as figures in a novel at all; the life they live and die is the dream life of the normal consciousness of narrative, and only Dickens' intelligence as a writer can bring that dream life actively into the novel as a part of a realisation made in Oliver Twist, that that essential part of human life and feeling is threatened by the realism of narrative and novel.

As the novel and narrative progress and draw to a close, then, the dream life recedes into its prevailing image of darkness. And just as darkness has been a protection for the fictive from the glare and hurry of the story, so it fends off the approach of narrative from both Nell and Quilp.

Nell dies, in the gloom of her church-like cottage, in the peculiar, dream-like darkness of the snow through which Kit and the Garlands, the Brownlow-like agents of the story in this novel, have to travel to reach her. As they do so we see in her death a source of brightness - Kit finds himself "shading his eyes from the falling snow"[60] in the middle of the night - of which narrative can make no sense. Kit, in the snow-light, "could descry objects enough...but none correctly"[61] and objects encountered on the road "as they were passed, turned into dim illusions".[62] Narrative simply does not understand the dream which it approaches in Nell.

Quilp disappears similarly at the approach of the story, lost in a darkness it cannot penetrate. It is no coincidence, of course, that he

---

60. The Old Curiosity Shop, 640.
61. The Old Curiosity Shop, 640.
62. The Old Curiosity Shop, 640.

dies by drowning, "of all means of suicide the easiest and best".[63] Both Quilp and Nell in a sense drown in their dream, defeating narrative in a death in which Master Humphrey recognised the fragmentation of the cruelty of the relentless course of daylight.

Death, then, is an intrinsic part of the fantasy world which both Quilp and Nell occupy, and both are protected and absorbed quite naturally by the darkness they have lived in. The dream which they together make of life drowns Nell in sleep, and Quilp, quite literally, in the Thames. But death, for them, becomes a protection from narrative. It paradoxically secures the life and integrity of dreams and fantasy in the novel, and secures the dream world as a separate but necessary part of a novel whose narrative can only preserve it in death, and cannot approach or understand its darkness. Death really fulfills both Quilp and Nell, and confirms their special nature as figures outside narrative. Their death preserves and establishes their fictive nature, but it is also problematic for the novel that remains. Nell and Quilp provide the novel with its world of fiction, and with its feelings, but they do not offer a way of seeing and experiencing that world. Master Humphrey offers one way, at the beginning of the book; but his retirement from the novel provides a space which Nell and Quilp can use but do not entirely fill. The withdrawal and subsequent absence of the narrator leaves room for the dream world; but it also creates the need for a mediator between fantasy and the requirement of the novel and novelist for some form of narrative, if only in the observation and direct experience of the fantastic.

So that, while narrative cannot see through the eyes of Nell and Quilp, it develops a way of viewing them.

It does so, as I hinted above in relation to Nell, by making a kind

63. The Old Curiosity Shop, 44.

of exhibition of them. Nell often appeared to be an exhibit; while Quilp was in some ways an articulate version of Punch. The novel develops its own knowledge of these two figures, and does so by placing them in the context of fairgrounds and entertainments, of races and waxworks and puppets. So that, outside of Nell and Quilp and, as it were, released by them, lie those figures which exist in every novel by Dickens, but which are never elsewhere given the powers of observation which they here possess quite freely of the usually dominating middle class world; the figures in the novel who are simply entertained by its action, or who refuse to be. In this novel, and very much more in this novel than in any other, these figures become the book's ears and eyes.

From Codlin and Mrs Jarley to Dick Swiveller, then, we are given a broad response to the world of fantasy, ranging from the overtly cynical to the innocent - but a response which exists between narrative (which has been unable to approach fantasy) and its morality, and the world of fantasy and dreams, in the everyday world.

Codlin, the Punch and Judy man, then, shows us with Thackerayan worldliness the utilitarian attitude to that world:

> If you stood in front of the curtain and see the public faces as I do, you'd know human nature better.[64]

Codlin's 'branch', as he calls it, of the Punch and Judy 'business' is of course to collect the money; and he does so

> protracting or expediting the time for the hero's final triumph over mankind, according as he judged that the aftercrop of halfpence would be plentiful or scant.[65]

As his partner Short says of him,

---

64. The Old Curiosity Shop, 183.

65. The Old Curiosity Shop, 191.

> When you played the ghost in the regular drama in the fair, you believed in everything - except ghosts. But now you're a universal mistruster. I never see a man so changed.[66]

Not surprisingly, perhaps, it is the character in the book who is least a 'mistruster' in this sense who turns out, quite accidentally in terms of Dickens' first intentions, to be one of its most important figures, filling the gap Master Humphrey leaves between Nell and Quilp and novelist, and providing the pair of eyes we need in order to view the world the novel has become.

Dick Swiveller is the one character in the book who engages with and believes fully in both fantasy and narrative. While he has a strictly non-bourgeoise naivety and lack of sophistication and is fully immersed in his consumption of entertainment, quite at home in the dreams and ideals of music-hall fantasy, he is at the same time an intelligent figure, capable of attempting to construct the incoherence and irresponsibility of his own life and the world around him into some kind of articulate whole.

Where Quilp and Nell, then, have no voice as characters in a narrative, and speak the language of a dream, Dick restores the dream to narrative, mediating between fantasy and reality by recognising the ideal as quotation; - respecting at the same time both its fictive nature and its real importance to his own existence. By doing so, Dick Swiveller gives fiction a voice in narrative.

Through him, then, as a kind of everyman, the fantasies of the novel are brought into the daylight of consciousness; and it is through fantasies that his life is made into something other than a continual hardship and sadness. And it is not simply dressed up, but really transformed, as he demonstrates upon his first appearance in the book,

---

66. The Old Curiosity Shop, 183.

when he visits the Old Curiosity Shop with Fred in Chapter 2:

> "Before I leave the gay and festive scene, and halls of dazzling light, sir" said Mr Swiveller, "I will, with your permission, attempt a slight remark. I came here, sir, this day, under the impression that the old man was friendly."[67]

In calling the Old Curiosity Shop a 'gay and festive scene' and 'halls of dazzling light' Dick recognises it for what, to the dream consciousness, it is, a source of comfort, protection, and inspiration. The music-hall quotations, the mock speechifying, and the formality of address - all these are in a sense pretence, and conscious pretence; but what they do is to recognise, and to quote the dream world and the chaotic order of Nell, and the grotesque things that surround her, to the real world in which Fred has come to extort money from his uncle. By quoting fantasy to reality, they also supply reality with what is patently missing from it, the good feelings, the 'friendliness' which Swiveller knows instinctively must be the basis of any transaction. These feelings are lost, as they were in Oliver Twist; Dick Swiveller, as a go-between for two separated worlds, becomes the novel's restorative.[68]

For Dick Swiveller's consciousness exists in both worlds of the novel; so that he can see what is missing from reality, and articulates that loss by voicing the chaos of fantasy for narrative. Because he half-exists in narrative, as Quilp and Nell do not, he survives in a world which ultimately demands progression and some form of success where Nell and Quilp, who are purely fantasies, must die. He survives by quoting dreams back at reality, even in the most desperate of real

---

67. The Old Curiosity Shop, 67.

68. Dick Swiveller has often been recognised as an 'in-between' figure - see for instance Gabriel Pearson, 'The Old Curiosity Shop' in Gross and Pearson (Eds.), Dickens in the Twentieth Century, 87-8; J.R. Kincaid, Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter (Oxford, 1971), 99; but the usual view is to regard him as a mediary between Quilp and Nell.

circumstances:

> "Quilp offers me this place, which he says he can ensure me," resumed Dick after a thoughtful silence, and telling off the circumstances of his position, one by one, upon his fingers: "Fred, who, I could have taken my affidavit, would not have heard of such a thing, backs Quilp to my astonishment, and urges me to take it also - staggerer, number one. My aunt in the country stops the supplies, and writes an affectionate note to say that she has made a new will, and left me out of it - staggerer, number two. No money, no credit; no support from Fred, who seems to turn steady all at once; notice to quit the old lodgings - staggerers three, four, five, six. Under an accumulation of staggerers, no man can be considered a free agent. No man knocks himself down; if his destiny knock him down, then it must pick him up again. Then I am very glad that mine has brought all this upon itself, and I shall be as careless as I can, and make myself at home to spite it."[69]

The comfort Dick offers himself here is the comfort of the fictive world, outside narrative. His resolution to "be as careless as I can" and "make myself at home" is a resolution to ignore the ends and 'destiny' of his story, a resolution very much in the spirit of the earlier cab-drivers of the Sketches. But Dick differs from figures such as Bill Barker in acknowledging the existence of the practical world of narrative, and of circumstance. He enumerates and orders the necessities of his life - in their absence - before undertaking to 'spite' them. While concluding with a universal truth about bad luck - that no man intentionally brings it upon himself - the price of the status he thereby achieves as a kind of everyman is the practical difficulty of this fictional kind of comfort and reassurance as a means to the end of survival. While Dick shows himself to be an attractive figure in every sense, preserving good feeling in a world of harsh

---

69. The Old Curiosity Shop, 330.

realities and so bridging the gap between Nell and the demands of the story, he is able to do so only at great cost. For of all the figures in the book it is Dick who really suffers the most hardship, lacking as he does the resources of withdrawal that preserve Quilp and Nell as fantasies.

He does succeed in making a home of the novel. He talks to himself when there is no-one else for him to speak to, and makes other people belong to his names for them. He answers back to his position and circumstances, taking swipes at Sally Brass with his ruler, and christening her 'the dragon' and doing business on his own initiative with the mysterious lodger. Unlike Nell and Quilp, he is capable of participating in either side of the fantasy world, and his feelings can be both bad and good.

His good feeling, of course, is concentrated about the Marchioness; and his ability to participate in the world of fantasy is again at the root of his relationship with her. Only Dick Swiveller could make a Marchioness of the little servant girl at the Brasses.

But his suffering is also real; if the novel is his home, it is hardly a comfortable one. It is almost inevitable that he, too, should fall ill, and do so as a direct result of physical hardship, and it is a part of the narrative's cruelty to Dick that he should not be allowed the comfort of withdrawal.

His illness is never allowed, as Nell's is, to become the kind of rest which would allow Dick to slip into the dream world he is temporarily allowed to occupy. The novel must end: and it falls upon Dick, who alone of all its figures has seen all parts of the world it offers, and seen it as we see it, neither as a dream nor a reality, but as a strange and chaotic mixture of each, to end the book for us.

His response upon being re-awakened to the world is typically brave:

> "I'm dreaming", thought Richard, "that's clear. When I went to bed, my hands were not made of egg-shells; and now I can almost see through 'em. If this is not a dream, I have woke up by mistake in an Arabian Night instead of a London one. But I have no doubt I'm asleep. Not the least."[70]

Dick Swiveller's peculiar and pervasive energy is active in even this extremity of physical weakness, making himself at home by placing his own imagination between the unkindness of reality that Master Humphrey feared and the protection of dreams and of sleep.

It is this energy then which makes Dick so central to this novel, and to Dickens' own role in writing it; for only he can carry us through the experiences the novel offers without the continued threat of termination which Nell and Quilp represent, without the aloofness and detachment of Kit, and the Garlands, who are too safe in their cottage for their principles to have any effect on the course of the book, and without the cynicism of Codlin which tells us that art is a mere exhibition, and fantasy a delusion. Dick Swiveller keeps fiction alive by adapting his own imagination to reality, and reality to his imagination. In doing so the story of the novel becomes in a strange way his story; for his sensitivity to what happens to him and around him becomes the medium in this novel for our own identification of the action.

The correspondence between Dick Swiveller and Dickens', as existing between the worlds of fantasy and reality - and between the fictional and the real - now seems quite obvious; and it is obvious, too, I think, that in this novel Dick Swiveller is Dickens ally both in recognising the value of Nell's dream-world, and in resisting the

---

70. The Old Curiosity Shop, 580.

pressure of narrative against that world, to drown the ideal, and the fantasies which the dream-world can contain in action.

But Swiveller is also in some ways a highly problematic figure for Dickens. The book began as an attempt to insert the ideal feelings of a dream-world into the action of the novel; and yet what emerges from it is the figure of Swiveller, who is compromising in every sense, for it is no coincidence that of all the characters in the book it is Dick who experiences life as a constant hardship - even if it is at the same time often amusing and even half-enjoyable. The Swiveller compromise is only brought about by a belief in the world and by a trustfulness of reality, in spite of everything, which makes him consistently and repeatedly the victim - albeit the apparently willing victim - of the chaotic world of the novel, of both its fantasy and its narrative. And it is as the victim of the novel that Dick is so useful to it.

This presents us with a very odd situation, for, insofar as Dick represents Dickens , and he does so to the extent that the action of this novel simply could not be seen as a narrative without him, Dickens becomes the victim and sufferer in his own novel, as its writer. And insofar as fantasy and fiction constitutes the imagination and feeling of this novel , which, in the novel's avoidance of Sikes' violation of the imagination of narrative they do , Dickens finds that his own persona and his own feelings have become the surviving but quite passive victims of his narrative. So that he finds himself reduced by the course of the narrative, and by the rejection by narrative of his dream-world, to the amoral, suffering, lower-class and subjected status of Dick Swiveller; to the status of everyman. While there is a real heroism in this, both for Dick Swiveller and for Dickens, there is also the threat of the world Dickens wanted the novel to write him out of: the real world of his own unprotected childhood. Narrative, the

Old Curiosity Shop finds, will not have real feeling without the past, and the trouble of the past.

The Old Curiosity Shop is at the very root of Dickens' greatness as a writer; for it not only achieves a position which is in every way a common position for reader and writer in reconciling the dividedness of dreams, and reality, and of fiction and narrative, discovered and feared by the end of Oliver Twist; but it does so as the resolution of a difficulty in difficulty. The Old Curiosity Shop solves nothing. But it faces difficulties at a price - the admission of the writer's own immersion in them - which is great, and which, like all true resolutions, creates both its own real problems, and its own real triumphs.

Dickens cannot be Dick Swiveller; but in the Old Curiosity Shop he is. He compromises himself in him for his reader, and no novelist can make a greater sacrifice, or in any real sense achieve more, than that.

CHAPTER III

THE NOVEL AS FICTION, II; BLEAK HOUSE

Nell and Quilp are formative figures, both for Dickens and for his public. Johnson writes that "no story he had thus far written so strengthened the bond between him and his readers into one of personal attachment"[1] and Dickens himself wrote that "the Curiosity Shop made, without doubt, a greater impression than any other of my writings".[2] The public response to the story, and particularly to the part containing Little Nell, was by all accounts staggering, and circulation of the final numbers reached the phenomenal figure of 100,000.[3] Nell effectively established Dickens as the writer of the age - it is ironical that she should now be the most vehemently rejected figure of his novels - and the popularity she achieved shows us how precise was Dickens' understanding of both reality and the novel. Nell is the nearest the novel comes to giving us a mythical figure, and an inclusive, fictive vision of the world in which reality is presented as a fragmentary world we can trust and believe in. The generous world we saw disappear in the killing of Nancy mysteriously returns in Nell, to disappear, but to do so as a confirmation of the purity of her fictive nature and of her allegiance to the world of which she is a little part. Nell refuses to have a narrative, as does Quilp and the world she creates by allegory about her, the Curiosity Shop.

If Nell exists as a generosity, preserving the fictive, her

---

1. Edgar Johnson, Charles Dickens, I, 304. Johnson actually attributes the observation to Forster, who pays a lengthy tribute to the novel, but not in these words (see Life of Dickens, I, 177-193).

2. The Letters of Charles Dickens, Edited by Madeleine House and Graham Storey, Vol. II (Oxford, 1969), 'Letter to Thomas Milton, 23 August 1841', 365.

3. R.L. Patten, Charles Dickens and his Publishers, 110.

creation was also an act of generosity, for she came about as Dickens' determination to retain the fictive in spite of narrative and its concerns; Master Humphrey and Dick Swiveller became, as the novel's narrating voices, the means of protecting fiction. This protection is gained by inserting these figures into the novel, as personae. The voice which we traced through Oliver Twist as its fictive vision, seeing everything, is now invested in a narrator conscious of his own limitation, who restricts and controls the concerns of narrative, and so allows the fictive to fulfil its life in the novel without becoming the vision of its narrative. - The self-consciousness of course is Dickens' own, which places a figure of the writer's function into the novel.

Master Humphrey is the first of these figures, of course; in him, Dickens attempts to maintain his distance from himself; but Master Humphrey's withdrawal became a withdrawal from the novel. Dick Swiveller then becomes the second persona of the novel, and does provide the continuity Master Humphrey lacks. He becomes a highly problematic figure, however, for he is very much closer to Dickens himself. He is active and engaged where Master Humphrey was withdrawn, but refuses to allow that action to dominate or succeed the novel's values - which are his own - of the fictive world of Quilp and Nell. Dick Swiveller marks the end of the novel's father-figures, which we can trace through Pickwick, Brownlow and Master Humphrey, and presents a kind of protection whose authority is not invested in control. He is the novel's first truly self-conscious figure, and does not so much assert his own narrative as present the fiction. In doing so he becomes his own victim, finding himself unprotected from the narrative world he belongs to by his narrative, which is not the control that would destroy fiction so much as the passive authority of survival.

This passive kind of narrative, then, seems to find a way of including and expressing reality, and a way for the narrative to gain access to what becomes its ideals. The close identification of Dick and Dickens, however, remains problematic, and without the distance of withdrawal real action becomes, as it did for Nancy, a life of suffering, but a suffering from which this time the writer cannot shift back into innocence. Adulthood, which the novel set out to provide in generosity, produces, not 'happy ignorance' but noble self-sacrifice, to a world in which ignorance is both vulnerability and a relinquishment of complete control.

Dick Swiveller, clearly, is not the ideal persona for fiction, for his narrative becomes a self-sacrifice not only for himself, but for the writer. It is some time before we find another persona in Dickens' novels, although we certainly find heroes that are self-conscious - on Dickens' part at least - in parodying heroism, in Nicholas Nickleby, Martin Chuzzlewit and in Dombey, in all of whom 'authorial' control of reality is found to be highly problematic. It is not until Bleak House, however, that we find another narrating figure in the novel who is manifestly designed to limit rather than to test and explore the narrative (and this exploration of narrative will be my own next concern) and this figure of course is Esther Summerson.

It is remarkable that critics have either largely ignored Esther, or found her to be unsatisfactory. Her narrative is a radical departure in terms of Dickens' novels, both in that she is the first of his women characters to be given a narrative voice, and in that she is the first of all Dickens characters to share the narrative openly, and this fact alone would seem to merit more than the usual dismissal of Esther as 'weak and twaddling'.[4] - Charlotte Brontë's criticism has become the

4. Wise and Symington (Eds.), The Brontës: Their Lives, Friendship and Correspondence, Vol. III (1932), 'Letter to George Smith, 11 March 1852', 322 quoted in Collins (Ed.), Critical Heritage, 273.

common judgement. She gives us "a coherent and convincing impression of a neurotic personality", Michael Slater tells us; "Esther is static, consistent, passive",[5] W.J. Harvey writes and continues,

> the difficulties of combining these properties to produce a compelling character are so immense that we should wonder not that Dickens fails, but that his failure is so slight.[6]

Dickens' plan in taking up Esther as a central character is clearly so ambitious as to seem absurd to most criticism. The best verdict we can find is John Carey's, that

> The features that make Esther unwholesome to the modern reader...are not mistakes in Dickens' portrayal of her, but shrewdly observed symptoms of a young girl's inhibitions about sex.[7]

If this is an accurate view, how can Esther be the narrator and heroine of a novel?

In order to answer this question it is helpful to realise first of all that Dickens was at the time of writing the novel at the height of his self-confidence. It had not been until after the success of Dombey and Son that he had been able to write, with guarded but unmistakable satisfaction:

> I am not rich, for the great expenses of my position have been mine alone from the first, and the Lion's share of the great profits has been gorged by the booksellers. But I have changed all that, within these three years or so, - have worked back half of all my copyrights which had gone from me before I knew their worth - and have got, by some few thousand pounds (I could count the thousands on one hand) ahead of the world. Dombey has been the greatest success I have ever achieved.[8]

---

5. Michael Slater, Dickens and Women (Dent, 1983), 256.
6. W.J. Harvey, 'Chance and Design in Bleak House' in Gross and Pearson (Eds.), Dickens in the Twentieth Century, 149.
7. John Carey, The Violent Effigy, 173.
8. The Letters of Charles Dickens, Ed. Graham Storey and K.J. Fielding, Vol. 5 (Oxford, 1981), 'Letter to D.M. Moir, 17 June 1985', 341.

In spite of the fact that David Copperfield represented a slackening of sales, Dickens' position and income from his other copyrights and writing were by now secured, and he was never again in any financial difficulty, and in addition David Copperfield was well received critically.

This financial and artistic stability is the key to an understanding of the conception of Bleak House; for in adopting Esther as his persona Dickens once again takes up the conclusion of The Old Curiosity Shop, and does so with a confidence which is of the utmost necessity in placing his trust in what seems in Esther to be weakness. This trust is a brilliant and daring strategy, for it takes up the conclusion that The Old Curiosity Shop reached, that real action is suffering, and at the same time overcomes the problem of identification we saw in Dick Swiveller, where the persona seemed to sacrifice the writer's authority.

Where the earlier novel began tentatively, then, with Master Humphrey's night-time walks, the beginning of Bleak House plunges directly into reality, to experience the world Master Humphrey would have protected us from. The endless stream of men and moving things, we see immediately, is that world of 'wrong' narratives, of stories told only to confuse, from which Mr Brownlow's morality sought to hide us. At the beginning of this novel there is no action and no wrong action, but only a daylight world where even that daylight is fragmented and obscured in fog. This foggy daylight is shown to break down the possible narratives of the outside world, just as the sunlight broke down the narratives of Oliver Twist. Although the fog seems to obscure the sun, it is used to emphasise the lack of coherence that the sun revealed beneath the artifices of the narrative will. We saw in my Introduction that this will is invested principally in social status, location and justice as

an assertion of the coherent against the fragmentary, of the orderly against the chaotic, and we see the beginning of Bleak House taking up all of these concerns.

> Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snowflakes - gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun. Dogs, undistinguishable in mire. Horses, scarcely better; splashed to their very blinkers, foot passengers, jostling one anothers' umbrellas, in a general infection of ill-temper, and losing their foot-hold at street-corners, where tens of thousands of other foot passengers have been slipping and sliding since day broke (if this day ever broke), adding new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud.[9]

This is the daylight Master Humphrey feared, in which nothing is immediately identifiable in the mud and fog. This light is like darkness - except that it promises the stories of the waking, conscious world it disguises. Even the 'endless stream' of consciousness is broken into dreamlike apparitions; "fog everywhere", Dickens continues;

> Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all around them, as if they were up in a balloon, and hanging in the misty clouds.[10]

Where in the earlier novel the crowd threatens the fictive with the insistence of the world's stories, we now face those stories to find them - as Oliver Twist found them - to be themselves curiously fictive and ghostlike. The endless footsteps are silenced and stifled by the fog, which removes people from the streets and places them in the 'clouds' as 'chance' people. Even the river, we now find, loses the sense of progression it symbolised in The Old Curiosity Shop in the fog:

> Fog up the river, where it flows among great aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls

---

9. Bleak House, 49.

10. Bleak House, 49.

> defiled among the tiers of shipping, and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city.[10]

The fog makes no distinction between meadows, docks and city, and all appear - as narrative would never have had them before - as the same chaotic, shadowy world. The clear sense of place, of country and city, and even of streets, houses, and bridges, becomes obscured in this foggy daylight.

The fog breaks the city and its surroundings into fragmentary apparitions; and it is used to do the same for justice, which, it shows us, is only another aspect of its shadowy confusion:

> The raw afternoon is rawest, and the dense fog is densest and the muddy streets are muddiest, near that leaden-headed old obstruction, appropriate ornament for the threshold of a leaden-headed old corporation: Temple Bar. And hard by Temple Bar, in Lincoln's Inn Hall, at the very heart of the fog, sits the Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery.[11]

Chancery, we are moreover told,

> so exhausts finances, patience, courage, hope; so overthrows the brain and breaks the heart; that there is not an honourable man among its practitioners who would not give - who does not often give - the warning, "Suffer any wrong that can be done you, rather than come here!"[12]

The fog, here in Chancery, defeats what justice should in narrative defend, the stories of peoples' lives, just as it obscures the stories of the world outside, of people, streets, cities, fields and rivers. In Chancery narratives are not restored - as in Mr Brownlow's justice - but destroyed, so that, here as in the foggy world outside, reality withholds its promised beginnings and endings. We see what Master Humphrey tried to protect us from, that the world itself disappoints

---

10. Bleak House, 401.
11. Bleak House, 50.
12. Bleak House, 51.

narrative sense, offering justice only to deceive, and deny it. We face the world's stories only to find that they do not control reality - as, again, we recognised in Oliver Twist and Master Humphrey, whose narrative is preserved in darkness.

If a sense of place and a sense of justice then were two aspects of our narrative sense of things, and two aspects of the confusion I outlined in my 'Introduction', the third must be a sense of social status;[13] and we find the fog there, too, in the second chapter of the novel. Of the 'world of fashion', we are told,

> the evil of it is, that it is a world wrapped up in too much jewellers' cotton and fine wool, and cannot hear the rushing of the larger worlds, and cannot see them as they circle round the sun. It is a deadened world, and its growth is sometimes unhealthy for want of air.[14]

This fashionable world is just like the world of justice and the world outdoors; its daylight is a limited and restricting daylight which, like the fog, gives only a partial vision, and 'deadens' the senses. Like those other foggy worlds, this one is part-deaf, part-blind, and as such provides another disappointed narrative, for the 'fashionable intelligence', its consciousness, is 'like the fiend'; "omniscient of past and present, but not of the future".[15]

Once again, we see that the social world is one without endings; of unfulfilled stories with past and present, but no future, and in this, we are told, it is like Chancery:

> Both the world of fashion and the Court of Chancery are things of precedent and usage; oversleeping Rip Van Winkles, who have played at strange games through a deal of thundery weather; sleeping beauties, whom the Knight will wake one day, when all the stopped spits in the kitchen shall begin to turn prodigiously.[16]

---

13. See pages 14-15 above.
14. Bleak House, 55.
15. Bleak House, 57.
16. Bleak House, 55.

The fog suspends the fairy-tale; there will be no Nicholas Nickleby to perform heroic deeds in this novel, and no Martin Chuzzlewit to return at the novel's end to resolve the difficulties of narrative. The Knight the former provided for the novel is a dream for the future, but not the present 'precedent and usage'; while the latter, who seemed even in Martin Chuzzlewit to be the Rip Van Winkle of the novel and to return at its end to a life passed by, has already overslept. What narrative, then, can we have for this foggy reality? - Or rather, where can we find a narrative to preserve our belief and faith, our fictive sense of the marvellousness of everything, in a world where narrative itself seems to fragment and destroy? How can the novel keep faith with this reality?

We have already seen one such narrative, a way of keeping faith, in Dick Swiveller's story. As I suggested above, Dickens now returns to Swiveller in giving us another persona in this novel; but one whose life, unlike Swiveller's (who was too closely identified with the life of the writer) can be a life that thrives upon the passivity and suffering we found him subjected to as the only source of strength in a world where narratives continually disappoint.

In Esther, then, narrative itself becomes fictive, where in Swiveller it could only be mediary between fiction and narrative. This of course means that her voice is a very odd one. Michael Slater comes close to identifying its character when he observes critically and in some bewilderment that "Dickens seems, in fact, to be trying to make Esther function both as an unreliable and as a reliable narrator at the same time".[17] This is precisely the function of her fictive narrative, and it does produce some strange effects. When she refers to Alan Woodcourt at their first meeting, for instance, she tells us,

---

17. Michael Slater, op.cit., 257.

> I have forgotten to mention - at least I have not mentioned - that Mr Woodcourt was the same dark young surgeon...[18]

Esther neither mentions nor forgets her future husband here, for she is a secret to herself in spite of her position as narrator. She remains innocent of her own ends, and has an innocent, fictive faith in her own narrative, even while telling the story of her own life. She begins her story as a voice the novel finds in the fog that reality has become,a voice of past and present; and as such her chief allegiance is to her own obscurity. Her very first words make this plain:

> I have a great deal of difficulty in beginning to write my portion of these pages, for I know I am not clever.[19]

In spite of the fact that she is beginning an autobiography, Esther knows and can contribute only 'my portion' of the story. She begins her narrative as with the reluctant coherence of a fictive vision, her voice quite distinct from that of Dickens' 'narrative', and curiously existing almost in spite of it. His voice remains quite distinct in tone from hers, and uses Esther, not collaboratively (as Conrad later did Marlowe) but as an entirely different kind of vision.

We begin to realise that a large part of this difference is invested in Esther's status as a woman, for it is her <u>accepted</u> obscurity that sets her apart from the world of narrative. She is a narrator without ends of her own. Narrative is active and cognitive, as even Dick Swiveller must be at the very end of his novel; the fictive is unselfconscious, passive, and inevitably suffers, as Swiveller does in the course of his story; and it is this part of Dick Swiveller that Esther takes up unequivocally. In her, the passive world speaks directly, and so turns the norms of authority and control upside down.

---

18. <u>Bleak House</u>. 255.

19. <u>Bleak House</u>, 62.

We find that Esther's voice, then, is ready to do what the world's other narratives will not, and what even Dick Swiveller found to be highly problematic, and declare its own limitation. It is this limitation which, drawn within the world of narrative, can be of use to the imagination of the novel, for while it remains bound to its own past and present it makes a blank page of the future - hence the refusal to identify Alan Woodcourt - and by declaring itself frees the future, narrative imagination that the foggy world confines. In this way, Esther's very weakness becomes a strength; for language seems restored in her to what is a potency in her very lack of authority. She promises us the benevolence in others which as a faith in the outside world is the trust the novel seemed to have lost. She tells us early in the novel that

> My lot has been so blest that I can relate little of myself which is not a story of goodness and generosity in others,[20]

assuring us that her narrative will achieve the commonality which has seemed to become the province of the fictive and fragmentary, the province of the world that suffers rather than of the voice that coheres and controls. Her speech claims to be the speech and good feeling of others, and exists to express the common feelings of fiction as we have never heard them in narrative.

Her own identity seems then as the novel progresses to be a blank space, vacated by herself to be occupied by the outside world. "It hardly seems to belong to anything", she tells us when mentioning Woodcourt's name elsewhere; and when she is established with John Jarndyce in Bleak House he creates her identity for her, answering her opening words by telling her, "You are clever enough to be the good

---

20. Bleak House, 647.

little woman of our lives here".[21] Esther continues,

> This was the beginning of my being called Old Woman, and Little Old Woman, and Cobweb, and Mrs Shipton, and Mother Hubard, and Dame Durden and so many names of this sort, that my own name soon became quite lost among them.[22]

While Dickens' characters sometimes change names - David Copperfield does, of course[23] - Esther is the only figure in his novels to lose one. Even her name belongs to the limited, fictive narrative and becomes a place for the outside world to write its stories. Esther's fictive life leaves room for the narrative that we have seen reality deny, and she seems to thrive upon the very substance of the threatening world.

Illness became in the course of the earlier novels a kind of test of allegiance, the ultimate choice between the world of reader and writer, between fiction and narrative. Nell and Quilp, by dying, confirmed their allegiance to the fragmentary world they occupy and their withdrawal from narrative; while Dick Swiveller by suffering illness achieves a compromise of fiction and narrative. Illness elsewhere in Dickens' novels is frequently a crisis of authority. We see it in Oliver, whose illness represents the importance of narrative control over his destiny (which answers it by the oddly-patronised illness of Rose), in Martin Chuzzlewit at the limit of his dream in Eden, in Dombey, after Paul's death (which _is_ in a sense his illness) and in David Copperfield, as we shall see later in my argument.[24]

For Esther, however, illness becomes a _source_ of authority, and of her own identity, producing and produced by, not psychological

---

21. _Bleak House_, 147.
22. _Bleak House_, 148.
23. Upon his arrival at his Aunts she renames him 'Trotwood', see _David Copperfield_, 271.
24. See page 188 below.

crisis but self-confirmation. It does not challenge her individualism so much as threaten her *with* individual action: for whereas in the other novels illness is partially welcomed as a sign of difference, a removal of the authorial consciousness from the foggy world and its compromises, Esther rejects it upon precisely this ground, as removing her life from reality.

Her reaction at first looks like the rejection of the world of fragmentation by the consciousness of coherence, of the fictive imagination by the imagination of narrative:

> I lay ill through several weeks, and the usual tenor of my life became like an old remembrance. But this was not the effect of time, so much as of the change in all my habits, made by the helplessness and inaction of a sick-room. Before I had been confined to it many days, everything else seemed to have retired into a remote distance, where there was little or no separation between the various stages of my life which had been really divided by many years. In falling ill, I seemed to have crossed a dark lake, and to have left all my experiences, mingled together by the great distance, on the healthy shore.[25]

In illness, Esther seems to enter a fragmented, fictive world, and to find it to be different from her own. She tells us of the disruption of the 'usual tenor' of her life as if of the disruption of a narrative; so that "there was little or no separation between the various stages of my life which had really been divided by years"; and her 'experiences' are "mingled together by the great distance". Her whole life no longer appears to her as the orderly progression which, in spite of her unconsciousness of the future, it now appears she has always seen in her life, but as the dream seen by a drowning man; and drowning, we have already seen in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, is a death which defeats progression. Dreams, and the disorder they produce become the source of great distress to Esther's apparently narrative mind; and we see

25. *Bleak House*, 543.

her explicitly clinging to the "precedent and usage"[26] of the stories we expect her to answer:

> While I was very ill, the way in which these divisions of time became confused with one another. distressed my mind exceedingly. At once a child, an elder girl, and the little woman I had been so happy as, I was not only oppressed by cares and difficulties adapted to each station, but by the great perplexity of endlessly trying to reconcile them. I suppose that few who have not been in such a condition can quite understand what I mean, or what painful unrest arose from this source.[27]

Esther dreams as narrative would dream; unwillingly, experiencing the disorder of the dream-world as "painful unrest". The imagination of the dream-world is a source of terror, which Esther finds herself scarcely able to mention:

> Dare I hint at that worse time when, strung together somewhere in great black space, there was a flaming necklace, or ring, or starry circle of some kind, of which _I_ was one of the beads! And when it was such inexplicable agony and misery to be a part of the dreadful thing?[28]

Esther's own verdict upon her illness then seems to be the verdict of narrative:

> Perhaps the less I say of these sick experiences, the less tedious and the more intelligible I shall be. I do not recall them to make others unhappy, or because I am now the least unhappy in remembering them. It may be that if we knew more of such strange afflictions, we might be the better able to alleviate their intensity.[29]

Dreams are "sick experiences" and are "incomprehensible"; they are signs of disorder, and so of unhappiness; and Esther is concerned to make it clear that they exist in the past, re-asserting the order of past and present which dreams disrupt. She continues, with the clarity

---

26. See page 123 above.

27. _Bleak House_, 543.

28. _Bleak House_, 544.

29. _Bleak House_, 544.

of narrative, to assert that more knowledge of them would render them less terrifying.

What Esther rejects, however, is not the fictive but the narrative imagination. The 'starry circle' belongs not to the world of incoherence and dreams but to the imagination of the novel's other narrator, to Dickens, and Esther rejects it as a part of the foggy world, a chaotic narrative which brings her own narrative suffering, as it brought Dick Swiveller's suffering. Esther's narrative in its allegiance to the fictive rejects this other narrative utterly, and by suffering it - in rejecting it - she gains the "space" for the fictive world of her own story, which she clings to throughout her illness. Suddenly, what seemed weak in her narrative is shown to be strong and active in suffering, and to have the power to bring fiction and narrative - her own narrative - together. Esther shows herself to be equal to the foggy world which, in Dickens' voice, as narrator, threatens her: as she tells us above, she is not now "the least unhappy in remembering" her dreams. For the first time, in Esther, narrative is seen, for all the 'agony' and 'misery' Esther suffers in her dreams, not so much as the enemy of fiction, as its complement. Esther's illness achieves one kind of unity of fiction and narrative, and one kind of common language, and does so by perceiving the world in the limitation of her subjected position, and by turning that limitation around, absorbing Dickens' own authority within it; and this in turn shows us a further generosity in the writing for Dickens allows in Esther a self-limitation of the authority he has restricted in conceiving her.

By personifying himself in Esther, then, Dickens allows the fictive to control the narrative, and allows his novel to take on a new generosity in making a chosen limitation the space for the fictive, for feeling and for dreams.

> I had never known before how short life really was, and into how small a space the mind could put it.[30]

Esther tells us here of her brief glimpse of the controlling narrative imagination. This is a fictive knowledge of narrative and of writing, and here it becomes a self-knowledge for the novel in being a recognition of the limitation of writing a story. While these words are ostensibly narrated by Esther, they contain a knowledge which is the knowledge of fiction, while illness, and its imagination, comes to represent the substance of narrative, putting life into the small space of what we realise is here writing. Esther presents us, and Dickens, with a way beyond that small space, back into the wider outside world of fiction.

Esther's consciousness, we have seen, is moreover a generous one. It is not "the least unhappy in remembering" the narrative and its threat, and we see as the novel unfolds that it admits both written and unwritten to it, controlled, not by the 'future imagination' which narrative seems to promise us, but by Esther's inverted narrative consciousness, which views the narrative of the outside world as fiction would, rejecting its authority.

Esther's recovery from illness, then, is a return to the real world of fiction from the foggy world which has temporarily dominated her life, and it has the peculiar authority of restoring both worlds to the scope of the novel through Esther's new authority of suffering.

This authority changes Esther, and is new to the novel, since it gives the survival which seemed in The Old Curiosity Shop to replace and be secondary to a full narrative control a new grasp upon reality. Where Swiveller's recovery had to become a triumph for the novel and for the narrative over the death that threatened him - and herald a 'happy

---

30. Bleak House, 543.

ending' - Esther retains the knowledge she has of suffering as her narrative, and without the necessity of conquering it in any way. Her acceptance of survival as sufficient to life means that her recovery becomes, not a triumphant continuation of a former story, but a new life, which can begin again, newly informed by the hostility of the narrative world. As she tells us after her illness,

> I felt for my old self as the dead may feel if they ever revisit these scenes. I was glad to be tenderly remembered, to be gently pitied, not to be quite forgotten.[31]

Whereas Dick Swiveller has to bring his former life to a conclusion after his illness, Esther's fictive narrative can die and be reborn, strengthened by death, to live a second life as if an afterlife. Esther's accepted passivity means that this fragmentation can be absorbed within her narrative, as it cannot in the narrative that seeks authority and control, so that her resurrection contains both her knowledge of narrative, of the world whose imagination threatens her own, and of the fragmentary, fictive world to which she belongs in accepting the chaotic nature of reality.

This creates a space for the plot of the novel and for the control and authority which narrative needs, unthreatened by the incoherence of reality and the foggy world, although that control and authority is of course limited by the special condition of Esther's narrative which allows it to occur. This part of the novel is exploited by the narrative will to become its ideal world, a kind of heaven in which action seems to become almost god-like. Esther gives this limited narrative its fulfilment, in the space created by the inverted, fictive nature of her own narration, so that the world's stories are re-awakened in her, as if they had always existed for her protection.

---

31. Bleak House, 682.

John Jarndyce becomes her guardian Angel, and takes possession of her future, while inspector Bucket, "like the fiend" as Dickens remarks of the fashionable intelligence in a similar context earlier in the book, takes possession of her past. Through these two, the agents of a Pickwickian respectability and of legal justice, elsewhere in the novel become stagnant and lost in the confusion that reality seemed to offer, the middle class values of respectability and justice are re-established as parts of a narrative secured to Esther's ends. It is paradoxically because Esther's consciousness has now been proven by her illness that she can with confidence place herself in their hands, and allow her consciousness to be fully governed by theirs; for they represent narratives which need only an ending in order to be complete, and it is as a part of the knowledge that Esther has gained from her illness that she knows that the narratives of the world will be complete in her own fictive story.

Esther surrenders her future to Jarndyce in promising to marry him, and in doing so surrenders herself to a narrative which has made her its end. On the night that Jarndyce writes to her to propose marriage, she tells that story over to herself:

> I began with my overshadowed childhood...I passed to the altered days when I was so blest as to find friends in all around me, and to be beloved. I came to the time when I first saw my dear girl... I recalled the first bright gleam of welcome which had shone out of those very windows upon our expectant faces on that cold bright night, and which had never paled. I lived my happy life there over again, I went through my illness and recovery. I thought of myself so altered and of those around me so unchanged; and all this happiness shone like a light from one central figure, represented by the letter on the table.[32]

Once again, while Jarndyce is apparently the hero of this story, the 'central figure', it would not have come about without the opportunity

32. Bleak House, 666.

that Esther's narrative, the blank space that her fictive, passive and suffering self makes of the narrative _she_ tells, gives. - It is a small irony of the novel that Jarndyce actually gets his part in that narrative wrong, and has to give way to Woodcourt. The story he is allowed to construct, of a Pickwickian, paternal authority, however, remains unchanged, and is even endorsed by the note of sexual uncertainty:

> It was not a love letter though it expressed so much love, but was written just as he would at any time have spoken to me. I saw his face, and heard his voice, and felt the influence of his kind protecting manner, in every line. It addressed me as if our places were reversed; as if all the good deeds had been mine, and all the feelings they had awakened his.[33]

Esther here creates Jarndyce's authorship, just as she created his speech - and indeed this letter is itself a continuation of that speech, asserting no written authority of its own - by providing the space which the narrative he wants, but elsewhere has found so difficult of achievement, can occupy. Esther reads it "as if our places were reversed", as she tells us; as if he were writing an account of _her_ feelings, and this 'as if' makes Jarndyce's narrative into a fictive approximation, and thereby gives it the protection it needs.

Esther's narrative, then, has a kind of double knowledge of what it tells us, which is both narrative and fictive, locating the activity of the world around her in her own passivity. Slater's comment that she is 'both an unreliable and a reliable narrator' comes close to recognising this knowledge, for her fictive knowledge of all of the world, and of the suffering the foggy world imposes upon her passive, unifying narrative exists side by side with her participation in Jarndyce's narrative vision. She sees things both ways, on the one hand as

---

33. _Bleak House_, 666.

fragmentary and arbitrary, needing her passivity, and on the other - the way she narrates to us - as coherent and benevolent.

This doubleness reaches its extreme with Jarndyce's proposal to her. One of the most important outcomes of her illness, and the way it marks her suffering, is a change in her appearance, and much is made of the 'alteration' in her face. In addition to this, she discovers when she finds that Lady Dedlock is her mother, that she is illegitimate. No two things could in a woman more fully discredit the ostensible ideals of narrative. After recounting Jarndyce's letter of proposal, then, in which of course he mentions neither of these things, Esther continues,

> But he did not hint to me, that when I had been better looking, he had had this same proceeding in his thoughts, and had refrained from it. That when my old face was gone from me, and I had no attractions, he could love me just as well as in my fairer days. That the discovery of my birth gave him no shock. That his generosity rose above my disfigurement, and my inheritance of shame.[34]

Esther continues, "but I knew it".[35] Where in The Old Curiosity Shop the fragmentary and immediate seems to have no location, and to be beyond narrative,here it is contained by what Esther knows. We cannot be sure exactly what Jarndyce has done, and why he has done it; what we can be sure of here is that any fragmentation or uncertainty in the story Jarndyce has to tell is answered, as it never was in the earlier novel, by Esther's acceptance of it. We cannot be sure whether Esther 'knows' his narrative, or his confusion, whether she confronts him in the faith of facing an authoritative figure or in her own passive authority which knows the end and concedes his dislocation and his inability to control reality in her acceptance of his kind intentions.

---

34. Bleak House, 667.
35. Bleak House, 667.

What we do know is that all eventualities are included in her knowledge, rather than dissipated, as they were in The Old Curiosity Shop, beyond the grasp of narrative, into a series of questions as to the location of those feelings which were beyond narrative. Esther's narrative, in leaving room for this uncertainty, is itself beyond the scope of ordinary narration.

This double nature does not only govern Esther's relationship with Jarndyce; for it is characteristic of the kind of narrative she tells that, while she is particular to *his* narrative, which she authorises, he is not particular to hers, and is only one part of the world of frustrated narratives that exists in the foggy world and which all need the ending that Esther allows. All of Esther's relationships have a similar ambivalence about whether she is protecting or protected; and the happiness and reciprocal benevolence of these figures comes to depend upon their own acceptance of Esther's benevolence.

Ada and Woodcourt come to depend upon it as completely as Jarndyce, as we see from the end of the novel: "don't you know that you are prettier than you ever were?"[36] Woodcourt asks her, and Esther replies, in her narrative voice,

> I did not know that; I am not certain that I know it now. But I know that my dearest little pets are very pretty, and that my darling is very beautiful, and that my husband is very handsome, and that my guardian has the brightest and most benevolent face that ever was seen; and that they can do very well without much beauty in me - even supposing - [37]

This, as the last word of the novel, shows us precisely how Esther's narrative works. She is only half there herself as the ending of the novel, making the people around her the real ending of the narrative.

---

36. Bleak House, 935.
37. Bleak House, 935.

In this way, she does not *need* to assert herself or her own narrative, which is theirs, and whether she is herself pretty or not is irrelevant to the story. She does not need the world to tell *her* story - in which case her prettiness would be the key issue, as would her birth, above, - but instead fulfils the need of the outside world to have its stories told by her. Ada, Jarndyce and Woodcourt all find that they can assert their own kind of vitality - the vitality of narrative, of coherence and of happy endings - in her; and Dickens, too, of course, is given precisely the same licence to enjoy this narrative that ends well.

This is not the only kind of story to which Esther gives us access, however; for she perceives the whole of the world, and takes us beyond the limitation of happy ending. She does so in two ways; by showing us the chaotic nature of that world, and by showing us, and allowing, the kind of narrative that can exist in it.

This second kind of narrative is concerned, not so much with the story that attempts to secure the private happiness of the individual, but with the one that attempts to discover the outside world as narrative. Once again, it is in Esther that things cohere as they should, and once again Esther is given an agent for this public narrative who has a curiously double relationship with Esther herself. This agent, of course, is Bucket; where Jarndyce protects - and is protected by - Esther's private and emotional self, Bucket protects her public status, and sees to the proper discovery of her past as a public narrative should; but again there is an ambivalence in this 'protection'.

Esther's surrender to Bucket is apparently complete. She seems to be willing to return, under his authority, to the confused and vivid world of the 'writer's' imagination in the world of the author's written and plotted narrative that she left upon the far shore of the dark lake she crossed in illness. Called from her bed in order to see

Bucket's resolution of the plot, and to see the secret of her own identity to its end, she tells us that "I was thrown into...a tumult"[38] so that "I did not seem, to myself, fully to recover my right mind until hours had passed";[39] her journey is "like the horror of a dream";[40] and we even see beyond the confusion into the very substance of this other narrative imagination when by the river in the dead of night

> the light of the carriage-lamps reflected back, looking palely in upon me - a face, rising out of the dreaded water.[41]

This is not Esther's vision at all, of course, but the vivacity of the narrative she releases. That narrative discovers in her a secret coherence in the outside world. As H.M. Daleski observes,

> though Esther is made to tell the story of the Jarndyces and Chancery, her story is an integral part of the narrative that is concerned with Lady Dedlock; the omniscient narrative, in other words, is also Esther's story, and once again what appears to be separate is not. It is all one...[42]

Insofar as the novel is invested in this public narrative, this is certainly true. The discovery of Esther's relationship to Lady Dedlock seems to release a series of connections which extend throughout the world of the novel, so that Esther's past becomes a source of authority for what seemed to be chaotic and meaningless; just as her emotional life was a blank page for happiness, so her real life seems to offer a blank page for a social organisation, and Bucket, who becomes the author of that organisation, is liberated by it.

In Bucket, then, the plot of the novel becomes a game in which Tulkinghorn, Lady Dedlock and Hortense turn out to be the other players.

---

38. Bleak House, 825.
39. Bleak House, 825.
40. Bleak House, 827.
41. Bleak House, 828.
42. H.M. Daleski, Dickens and the Art of Analogy (Faber, 1970), 159.

In this, Bucket is simply the most expert of players:

> From the expression of his face, he might be a famous whist-player for a large stake - say a hundred guineas certain - with the game in his hand, but with a high reputation involved in his playing his hand out to the last card, in a masterly way.[43]

Within this context, then, Mr Bucket seems omnipotent. "Mr Bucket's interpretation" we are told "is little short of miraculous";[44] and his vision too is superhuman, so that he "mounts a high tower in his mind, and looks out far and wide".[45] And he determines that the murdress Hortense

> shall do nothing without my knowledge, she shall be my prisoner without suspecting it, she shall no more escape from me than from death, and her life shall be my life, and her soul my soul, till I have got her.[46]

"You are a Devil"[47] Hortense tells him; and she is right, for he becomes in a sense a god of that 'fiendish intelligence' which is "omniscient of past and present". This godliness, however, fulfils nothing so much as itself. It discovers Esther's past for her; but in doing so the narrative that is made is oddly limited, brought about by and even at its ending unable to pass beyond Esther. Once again, we see her double nature at work, for it is as if she fulfils the need of the world to have its stories told <u>in</u> her. Bucket's authority does not go beyond Esther - as Jarndyce's did not. Once again, this authority is secured in her rather than dissipated in that series of questions as to its real location; and once again, while we do not know whether Esther regards Bucket as authoritative or as unable to control reality -

---

43. <u>Bleak House</u>, 780.
44. <u>Bleak House</u>, 820.
45. <u>Bleak House</u>, 824.
46. <u>Bleak House</u>, 796.
47. <u>Bleak House</u>, 793.

in faith or in her own passive authority - what we do know is that all eventualities are included in what we see in her knowledge.

This knowledge then allows the narratives of both Jarndyce and Bucket, as both private and public stories. But it also half-knows the world that is beyond either, and in which narratives are disappointed or fail. Esther's narrative is rooted in passivity and suffering, and belongs as much to the fragmentary and incoherent as to the limited narratives that she allows to exist among the incoherence she suffers. Her identity becomes a place where the world can write its stories; but it also remains a place where the chaotic is registered, for as a fictive sense of things in spite of its status as narrative, it notices everything.

We have already caught brief glimpses of this world through the vitality of Bucket's narrative. When Esther sees "a face, rising out of the dreaded water" we pass beyond the scope of Bucket's control for a moment; the river's "fearful look, so overcast and secret"[48] hides a truth which neither of the limited narratives we have seen will discover and, "creeping away so fast",[49] tells a story they can never keep up with.

The river remains beyond the narrative world, and unconquered by it; and so do Chancery and the Fashionable Intelligence, for each claim a victim in Richard and Lady Dedlock, whom neither private nor public story can save. While these figures are excluded by narrative, they are included within Esther's vision, for while her narrative invites the coherent narratives that Jarndyce and Bucket need, it is also a readiness and a form of authority to view the world for which authority can do nothing. Just as Esther's vision allowed coherence through its

---

48. Bleak House, 828.
49. Bleak House, 828.

knowledge of fragmentation and was prepared to accept the limitations of the authority it at the same time recognised, so it also knows and accommodates the world beyond authority, where stories go wrong, or where they do not even begin. In Bleak House narrative takes us in Esther to the world that is uncontrollable as readily as it accepts the limited attempts at narrative control we have examined above.

Just as Esther suffers the control of authoritative and coherent figures such as Jarndyce and Bucket, so she suffers too the fates of those figures who reject the control of these characters, or who lie beyond their limited help. Esther accepts energy directed toward and placed in her; but she also becomes the register of the novel's misplaced energies. Richard Carstone, Lady Dedlock, Jo, the mysterious Captain Hawdon, and the more marginal figures of Mr Guppy, Miss Flite and even Krook are all curiously connected to Esther's perception in a way which goes beyond the bounds of plot and narrative.

The deaths of the first four of these figures would seem to suggest that misplaced energy is registered as melodramatic tragedy, and disposed of as such. But Esther, as we have seen, is no ordinary narrator. While Lady Dedlock provides us with the language of catastrophe we might expect when she tells Esther, "This is the earthly punishment I have brought upon myself. I bear it, and I hide it",[50] Miss Flite provides a very different vision of the same foggy world when she tells Esther of Chancery,

> there's a dreadful attraction in the place. Hush! Don't mention it to our diminutive friend when she comes in. Or it may frighten her. With good reason. There's a cruel attraction in the place. You can't leave it. And you must expect.[51]

Miss Flite's voice, again, belongs not to Esther's narrative or

50. Bleak House, 566.

51. Bleak House, 553.

imagination - as, we realise, Lady Dedlock's does not - but to Dickens' own, more vivid imagination, which sees the vitality of the world that, as in the narratives we have discussed, Esther perceives for it. With our knowledge of her fictive control, which brings us back to the normality which exists by suffering rather than controlling the world, we, and Dickens, are free to enjoy the energies of fatality and chaos, as well as those of coherence and the tendency towards harmony and happiness. Esther herself expects nothing, and so provides a place for the whole range of our responses to reality, whether they be concerned with controlling the world, as with Jarndyce and Bucket, with tragedy, or with fatalism, with coherent life or with a fragmentary existence within the confusing and unfixed terms of contemporary reality. Esther gives Miss Flite a place in a narrative which would never admit her upon conventional terms: Esther asks her,

> Would it not be wiser...to expect this Judgement no more?
> "Why, my dear" she answered promptly, "of course it would".[52]

Just as Richard does when it can be of no use to him, Miss Flite acknowledges the nature of reality; but she chooses instead to occupy her own world, and her own story, and if Esther were not our narrator there would be no real place for this eccentricity in the novel. In Bleak House, however, such eccentricity has become the very substance of the book, as another, vital part of the world Esther occupies. Miss Flite is not Dickens' narrator, any more than Jarndyce or Bucket is; but, through Esther, she becomes another possible voice for the novel.

Miss Flite is, moreover, an essential figure for that part of the book which finds itself suffering the loss of its control over reality,

---

52. Bleak House, 553.

for she has a kind of faith which Jarndyce and Bucket do not have. The choice she makes, of not knowing what she might know, and of living in her own story rather than in the stories of reality, is a curious, and curiously heroic kind of faith in a world that she knows, but does not really believe, is unlikely to fulfil her dreams, and make a real narrative of them.

This faith is as essential to the writer's imagination as the will to control which we see in Jarndyce and Bucket; and once again we see that its place in this novel is Esther's gift, as a kind of energy which it has become impossible for narrative to admit. The fictive vision Esther offers shows us, not so much tragedy (which is how narrative views misplaced energy) as the faith which, being against the world's narratives, makes comedy - a fragmentary and transitory story - out of such tragedy, again showing us that the true function of authorship is to suffer rather than to control where narrative is to have access to reality. This suffering has, we have seen, effectively been written out of the novel since the fate of Dick Swiveller in The Old Curiosity Shop; for Miss Flite's words undermine the order of the plotted narrative of the novel, being confined to the foggy world and against the possibility of a finished, written story. At the same time, however, they are integral to the world that we discover through Esther, in which Dickens rediscovers the energy of a writing which is vital in spite of the directionlessness of the foggy world in which it must exist, being the faith of the writer in his or her own capacity to tell the right story in spite of Chancery, fog and fashion.

This faith then has its own life, akin to the earlier faith and life of the figures in the early Sketches, which we have seen in Esther as a fictive life within narrative. Dickens' imagination is freed from a narrative voice which seeks a propitious ending, and it is freed, as

it were, by his reader, to tell the wrong stories in spite of the harshness of the world's narratives, which makes such stories end badly.

Miss Flite's words, moreover, are characteristic of a faith which runs through a large part of this novel, and speak for characters other than herself. Certainly, they speak for Richard, who even at the end of his life is able to turn one dream into another, as different forms of the same faith:

> "It was a troubled dream?" said Richard, clasping both my guardian's hands eagerly...
> "And you; being a good man, can pass it as such, and forgive, and pity the dreamer, and be lenient and encouraging when he wakes?"...
> "I will begin the world!" said Richard, with a light in his eyes.[53]

Miss Flite showed us it is characteristic of this new comic sense that the end should be mistaken for the beginning. We might dissent from the sentimentality of Richard's death - and of the novel when it takes up Richard's faith to tell us that he

> began the world. Not this world, O not this!
> The world that sets this right.[54]

- but we can see the value of such faith, at least here, where all else seems lost.

Miss Flite speaks, too, and more importantly, for Lady Dedlock. For she too believes in the world she lives in, in spite of her knowledge of it, just as she once believed in Captain Hawdon. Lady Dedlock's faith is a very much more desperate one than those we have encountered in Miss Flite or Richard, but it is of the same kind. In not choosing know the end of things, and in believing in the end, in life as a dream, in spite of knowledge, their faith was not only in life but in death. For death is the end of expectation, an end which Esther's reading can

---

53. Bleak House, 927.
54. Bleak House, 927.

perceive - though not understand - as well as it perceived other parts of reality. Death is the end of narrative, for it takes away narrative's right to end itself (as it did in Little Nell and Quilp), but it is a part of the life of that vision which sees things as they happen to be, making a beginning of the present as an adjustment - and often enjoyment - of the gap between the way the world is believed in, and the way it is known; between what ought to be, and what is. We have seen that, while written narratives deny the world of death, Esther's fictive narrative does not.

Lady Dedlock is driven to choose death; but in doing so she displays the depth of her own faith in things.

> ...a terrible impression steals upon and overshadows her that from this pursuer, living or dead... there is no escape but in death. Hunted, she flies. The complication of her shame, her dread, remorse and misery, overwhelms her at its height; and even her strength of self-reliance is overturned and whirled away, like a leaf before a mighty wind.[55]

Her dreams of life - her hopes and expectations - have been so disappointed as to leave her only one remaining hope; even now, her "shame, dread, remorse and misery" show the strength of her hopes and dreams, and her belief in the values of a life that has failed her.

Moreover, the narrative is again not Esther's but the novel's and Dickens' here; and once again Lady Dedlock's faith is the novel's own, as Richard's was, for the novel, too, sees death as a kind of faith; and while, as with Richard, it takes it up here as a kind of rhetoric, in following Lady Dedlock's fate it leads us towards what is a central image of its beliefs. At the end of the search for her mother Esther, Bucket and Woodcourt find themselves at the heart of the city:

---

55. Bleak House, 816.

> At last we stood under a dark and miserable covered way, where one lamp was burning over an iron gate, and where the morning faintly struggled in. The gate was closed. Beyond it, was a burial ground - a dreadful spot in which the night was very slowly stirring; but where I could dimly see heaps of dishonoured graves and stones, hemmed in by filthy houses, with a few dull lights in their windows, and on whose walls a thick humidity broke out like a disease. On the step at the gate, drenched in a fearful wet of such a place, which oozed and splashed down everything, I saw, with a cry of pity and horror, a woman lying - Jenny, the mother of the dead child.[56]

Although this voice is Esther's, her narrative takes us at this point beyond ordinary narrative and into another world - "the unreal things were more substantial than the real" she tells us immediately before this - which she does not understand, as we do not fully understand ourselves, but which she perceives nevertheless. It is entirely consistent with the life of fiction that her mother has become the mother of a dead child, and fiction takes control of Esther's narrative here, making a joke of the literal qualities of her imagination and their inability to believe in the truth of an image. Esther finds narrative unable to recognise death when it sees it, for a moment turning the recognition upside down and seeing a dead child where she is shown a dead mother. - Seeing the death that is not there before the death that is, and substituting imagination for the reality of the scene. In doing so imagination retains the order which Esther has lost from reality itself, and narrative saves itself from the dream she witnesses, at least for a few minutes.

But the imagination which really governs the writing is the imagination of fiction which was sought by Master Humphrey at the beginning of The Old Curiosity Shop. It is dominated by the darkness which in the earlier novel seemed to offer to protect: the morning

---

56. Bleak House, 867-8.

only 'faintly' struggles in, "the night was very slowly stirring", and the place is "hemmed in" by houses with "dull lights". And for all the repulsion of the narrative from the place, and for all its unpleasantness - in spite of the 'thick humidity' which 'broke out like disease' - it begins to appear that protection is indeed what this place has finally offered to Lady Dedlock, who had written to her husband "I have no home left". In death she decides to seek the home she had lost, and in this hidden place, which harbours death, she finds what she wanted. The life of the place is the life of death, with disordered 'heaps', its 'fearful wet' and 'oozing'; but at the same time it is the life Lady Dedlock desperately needed. While the darkness which was to restore imagination in the earlier book now offers no hope of reconciliation with narrative - it seems repellent to a sense of purpose and direction and only takes Lady Dedlock in death - it still provides a refuge for an imagination which, for whatever reason, seeks to evade the literal: - And again, it does so through Esther. Lady Dedlock's reasons are the private reasons of her past; but contained within them is the necessity she feels to find a language which can include her.

The language Lady Dedlock finds in the graveyard is the language of death: she has been there before, of course, to look at Hawdon's grave, when she

> shrinks into a corner - into a corner of that hideous archway, with its deadly stains contaminating her dress.[57]

Having known its 'stain', she knows that she can find inclusion here, if she can find it nowhere else. Her faith in seeking inclusion above all else is that same faith that Miss Flite had in admitting the

---

57. Bleak House, 278.

attraction of expectation, and is itself a form of expectation, working against narrative in seeking an end, rather than in knowing one. The graveyard becomes the home of an imagination which refuses to be defeated by the world's narratives, and by the failure of the foggy world to provide a unity of dreams and reality, and to make a universal story of the future. It becomes the common home offered by the novel; Captain Hawdon is buried there, and Jo too finds in it his refuge and his resting place; - Jo who is to the narrative sense of the novel little more than an animal:

> It must be a strange state to be like Jo! To shuffle through the streets, unfamiliar with the shapes, and in utter darkness as to the meaning, of those mysterious symbols, so abundant over the shops, and the corner of streets, and on the doors, and in the windows! To see people read, and to see people write, and to see postmen deliver letters, and not to have the least idea of all that language - to be, to every scrap of it, stone blind and dumb! ...It must be a strange state, not merely to be told that I am scarcely human (as in the case of my offering myself for a witness), but to feel it of my own knowledge all my life! To see the horse, dogs, and cattle, go by me, and to know that in ignorance I belong to them, and not to the superior beings in my shape, whose delicacy I offend![58]

These words, of course, belong to the written part of the novel - to Dickens' 'novelist's voice'. But while they express Jo's distance and separation from the world of knowledge that the written world belongs to, they also express their own distance and lack of understanding about Jo's world; and they recognise that the most impenetrable part of the mystery he represents to writing is the part that unconsciousness and death play in his life:

> His whole material and immaterial life is wonderfully strange; his death, the strangest thing of all.[59]

---

58. Bleak House, 274.
59. Bleak House, 274.

Jo occupies a world of imagination and sheer faith in reality which in its distance from the consciousness of narrative blurs the division of life and death; as the furthest figure from narrative, he is the figure most capable of showing in his faith a loyalty and trust not possible to the conscious world. Jo, who seems to the narrative most like an animal, is at the same time most capable of showing those associative feelings which are socially necessary; and the character in the novel who is least able to write seems most able to speak. While Jo's speech is illiterate, we hear his voice - as we hear Miss Flite's - whenever we encounter him, and once again we hear him, as we hear Miss Flite, through Esther's mediation, which not only includes him in the plot, but above all listens to him.

Jo's voice is what Dick Swiveller's voice threatened to become - a deathly one; for speech is gained at the price of innocence, and innocence paid for by the the vulnerability by which he dies.

But Jo's death matters less to this novel than Swiveller's would have done to The Old Curiosity Shop. Just as in dying he uses a common language shared in its faith by Miss Flite, Lady Dedlock, Hawdon, and Richard, so he shows the novel a voice which can in turn be a common one.

For Jo, together with all of these other figures, demonstrates through Esther's narrative how the world can be believed in and written. Esther allows the world of death, which would normally in the novel be a tragic and subversive world, to dominate the novel, her vision making tragedy into an act of comic fatih.

The most outrageous and extraordinary of these acts of faith is the Spontaneous Combustion of Krook.

Krook's death clearly belongs to the graveyard world, as one of the fullest manifestations in all of Dickens' writing of its peculiar energy. In it, death is made a physical, tangible thing; it would almost be

true to say that in Krook's ending death comes to life.

Mr Guppy and Tony Weevle, who we see plotting in Krook's rented room, discover his death for us. Guppy first finds that the soot which falls down the chimney is "like black fat";[60] and then, leaning out of the window, "hastily draws his hand away":[61]

> "What in the Devil's name," he says, "is this! Look at my fingers!"
>
> A thick, yellow liquor defiles them, which is offensive to the touch and sight and more offensive to the smell. A stagnant, sickening oil, with some natural repulsion in it that makes them both shudder.[62]

It is as if death, or something belonging to death, has actually appeared upon Mr Guppy's fingers; so that the two go downstairs to investigate "more dead than alive", to discover "a smouldering suffocating vapour in the room, and a dark greasy coating on the walls and ceiling".[63] What they find in Krook's room is too horrible to face:

> O Horror, he _is_ here! and this from which we run away, striking out the light and overturning one another in the street, is all that represents him.[64]

Krook's death is more than simply repulsive; for the novel runs away with Guppy and Weevle not only in disgust, but out of the belief that it is facing death. Spontaneous Combustion does not matter as a scientific fact but as a fact of the imagination, and as the imagination of what death looks like. Dickens wrote in defence against criticisms made by Lewes, among others, of the possibility of Spontaneous Combustion, that "I shall not abandon the facts",[65] citing several 'cases' in his support; but in reality he had already written a very

---

60. _Bleak House_, 505.
61. _Bleak House_, 509.
62. _Bleak House_, 509.
63. _Bleak House_, 511.
64. _Bleak House_, 511.
65. Preface to the first edition; reprinted in _Bleak House_, 42.

much more convincing defence into the text of the novel. The doctors who attend the inquest "regard the late Mr Krook's obstinacy, in going out of the world by any such by-way, as wholly unjustified and personally offensive";[66] and their offence is not really very different from Esther's at her illness, when she complains that "if we knew more of such strange afflictions, we might be the better able to alleviate their intensity".

Esther's offence was the offence of narrative - albeit passive and fictive - at the impingement of the narrative of the chaotic writing imagination upon the order of it's world: but Krook's fate is, like Esther's illness, only Dickens' demonstration of his faith and confidence in her negative control. Spontaneous Combustion exemplifies that gap between the way the world is believed in and the way it is known first shown us by Miss Flite, and Dickens shows us that the novel itself is susceptible to the very crisis we see at work in Miss Flite. In standing out for Krook's death as in one quite legitimate way true, Dickens and the novel take the opportunity Esther's double vision gives to see things momentarily as fiction would, and in facing death, to step beyond the limitation of what narrative can itself know.

In doing so the novel restores innocence and spontaneity to the novel's narrative, even though it has become clear that they offer something quite different to the knowledge by which narrative normally controls the novel, and indeed oppose that knowledge.

Innocence and spontaneity, moreover, do not simply offer the imagination of death, although, as the imagination missing from narrative, their energies have begun to seem concentrated there. So far we have only seen the world of fiction as a world of death, and as the failure of the realisation of dreams. Even Krook's combustion is

---

66. Bleak House, 523.

brought about by the extraordinary nature of his obsessive expectations.

But for much of the novel failure becomes a way of life, and where it does so we see that comic sense restored to the novel which was lost when Dick Swiveller tried to realise his dream.

Miss Flite is half a comic figure; Mr Guppy is purely comic, for he blatantly opposes the vision of narrative, literally seeing what it refuses to notice in committing the sin of identifying Esther with her face.

All of Mr Guppy's plots are doomed to failure; for his imagination, like Dick Swiveller's for most of The Old Curiosity Shop, is the spontaneous imagination of amusement and enjoyment. So that he is convinced that every newcomer to Kenge and Carboy's, where he is a clerk, "wants to depose him"[67] and

> On the strength of these profound views, he in the most ingenious manner takes infinite pains to counterplot where there is no plot; and plays the deepest games of chess without any adversary.[68]

Mr Guppy, like Swiveller, makes amusements of boredom, and is a kind of comic writer of his life. His wisdom does not even acknowledge the wisdom of narrative, as Miss Flite's does, but exists in a comic world; "If he be ever asked how, why, when, or wherefore he shuts up one eye and shakes his head";[69] - wisdom which works against narrative, as his plots do, confusing the narrative's plot, and failing, in narrative terms, to gain its own end, for he fails to gain possession of the all-important letters, and he fails too to gain possession of Esther. Insofar as his activities are literary they end in confusion. When he makes notes of his explanation of Esther's background to Lady Dedlock on a piece of paper, it "seems to involve him in the densest obscurity

---

67. Bleak House, 327.
68. Bleak House, 327.
69. Bleak House, 327.

whenever he looks at it"; and he tells her,

> The fact is, that I put down a head or two here of the order of the points I thought of touching upon, and they're written short, and I can't quite make out what they mean.[70]

Mr Guppy here succeeds in the direct destruction of the narrative; for what he has to tell Lady Dedlock is actually of the utmost importance to the plot, and amusement is gained at the price of clarity.

But the use of this kind of enjoyment to narrative is to provide narrative with a generosity which is quite alien to it. Amusement, we see here, is actually gained from the failure and impedence of narrative; and seeing things from one end, as it were, in innocence of ending, has a power of faith in not knowing, which amounts to self-confidence and self-belief, as we are continually reminded when Guppy confronts Lady Dedlock. We gain access to this power, then, as we gain access to Miss Flite, Krook, and Lady Dedlock, by Esther's mediation, which sees the world as both narrative and fiction.

It is as a part of Esther's consciousness that room is created in Bleak House for the fictive vision. This novel does not depend upon its control of things, but upon Esther, so that when the outside world fails the novel does not.

At the close of Jarndyce and Jarndyce, then, Esther and Woodcourt find something odd happening at the court:

> It appeared to be something that made the professional gentlemen very merry, for there were several young councellors in wigs and whiskers on the outside of the crowd, and when one of them told the others about it, they put their hands in their pockets, and quite doubled themselves up with laughter and went stamping about the pavement of the Hall.[71]

The joke, of course, is that the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce

---

70. Bleak House, 461.

71. Bleak House, 920-1.

has ended, to be absorbed in costs: so that the people coming out of the court "were more like people coming out from a Farce or a Juggler than from a court of Justice".[72]

The narrative perception of the novel would see only failure in this amusement; but while we see that failure, it is impossible for us not also to see amusement in it, for Esther's mediation, which registers all of the world's choices, allows room for such failure in the novel.

Esther shows us no resolution of the fragmentary and coherent, but she does admit them both into the substance of the novel. The ordinary, chaotic, dangerous, fictive world returns in her narrative as it was ultimately excluded by Mr Brownlow's and even by Dick Swiveller's: she shows that she is capable of seeing the whole of the reality the novel represents, and of suffering all of its outcomes. In Esther, the uncertainty and dividedness that we saw characterised reality in its impulses towards chaos and order, fragmentation and coherence, irrational amusement and cognitive identification, fiction and narrative becomes the structure and organisation of the novel, and at the centre of it is her narrative,which in being passive rather than coercively authoritative is fictive in its ability to see everything. This complete vision finally becomes the unequivocal vision of the novel in her, ending the search for a stable fictive voice that began in Oliver, and passed through Nancy, Sikes, Oliver again; Master Humphrey and Dick Swiveller; before coming to rest in her. In Esther, we are given a persona finally capable of doing what these earlier figures could not, of making the chaotic, fictive, incoherent world the substance of the novel's unquestioned authority and of accepting the coherent narratives of the world as but a small part of its reality.

---

72. Bleak House, 922.

CHAPTER IV

NARRATIVE IN THE NOVEL, I; DAVID COPPERFIELD

We have seen that Dickens evolves in Esther Summerson a persona for fiction, a figure who is capable of making the narrative of the novel fictive; but in doing so we have been concerned specifically with the fictive. It is now necessary to consider Dickens' use of narrative. As we saw, narrative is not the instinctive medium of Dickens' imagination, and we have seen too that his early work is dominated by a peculiar distrust of narrative which produces mechanisms of detachment which seem to indicate self-consciousness in the writer wherever narrative is employed as the resolution, or as part of the structure of a novel. I suggested that this detachment tended to personify the writer's authority in the novel's characters, and was evident in Nicholas Nickleby, in Martin Chuzzlewit the elder, and in Dombey; in the first in heroism - which of course provides one way for the narrator to tell his story, around a central figure; in the second in 'authorial' control in retirement; and in Dombey,[1] in his assertion and failure of his authority over his world. We saw that the personae that seemed conducive to fiction were produced by the liberation of this self-consciousness from its narrative allegiance to narrator, first rather tentatively, in Master Humphrey and Dick Swiveller, and then, with full confidence, in Esther Summerson. In this liberation, of course, narrative self-consciousness is transformed into what in the fictive world is insight and perception.

We see, then, that in his early novels Dickens maintains a detachment from the autobiographical story which, as we saw in relation to the 'Romantic' idea, is the ideal of a narrative coherence, asserting

---

1. See page 117 above.

an individual unity against a fragmentary world; and that he does so as a matter, not of his inability to reveal his secret self, but of his instinctive and intellectual refusal to accept the dangerous and isolating terms that narrative, with its insistence upon the individual and responsibility of the life of writing, and its division from what we have seen are the terms of reality, seems to offer. The only figure that really offers any narrative identification of the narrator in the early novels is Dick Swiveller; and what he identifies is an allegiance to the fictive, a solitude in the name of a common life.

As I have shown above, Dickens' position only became financially secure after the publication and success of Dombey and Son;[2] and just as this security offered what I suggested was a new confidence in providing us with Esther as a persona for the novel, so it offered the assurance necessary to test the nature and capacity of narrative. The figure of Dombey moves towards an examination of narrative by showing us the failure of authority; David Copperfield finally gives us a narrative figure who is close to Dickens' self.

The 'natural' faith of narrative then is in its narrator, a faith which Dickens deeply distrusts. Even at the beginning of David Copperfield it is held very much in reserve. A complete faith in narrative would seem to indicate autobiography as its appropriate form, as it did to Coleridge's Romantic ideal;[3] and while this novel is in some ways autobiographical it is by no means an autobiography. The details of its correspondence with the events of Dickens' life have again been well documented;[4] and what concerns me here is the literary

---

2. See page 118 above.

3. See R.L. Patten, Charles Dickens and his publishers, 196-7, and page 18 above.

4. See J. Forster, Life, III, 12-13; Edgar Johnson, Charles Dickens, see also Owen Major, 'Into the Shadowy World' in The Dickensian, 40 (1944), 15-18.

purpose of the novel, for it sets out to test what the narrative form can do, without necessarily accepting it. David's first words tell us as much:

> Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show.[5]

The novel is not a narrative but an account of narrative, and a history of a narrative consciousness. It begins with a childhood governed by the fictive, by fragmentation and by instinct, and only traces its transformation into a narrative sense as a rude awakening by a harsh reality whose terms then become the subject of the novel.

This narrative voice in the novel, moreover, is not given real access to the life before its inception, for such access would deny its true nature and function. David's adult, narrating consciousness remembers it instead as a different world, preceding the world it occupies, and respecting the distinct nature of the world of the child.

As this adult voice then tells us,

> ...I think the memory of most of us can go farther back into such times than many of us suppose; just as I believe the power of observation in numbers of very young children to be quite wonderful for its closeness and accuracy. Indeed, I think that most grown men who are remarkable in this respect, may with greater propriety be said not to have lost the faculty, than to have acquired it; the rather, as I generally observe such men to retain a certain freshness, and gentleness, and capacity of being pleased, which are also an inheritance they have preserved from their childhood.[6]

Here, the adult knowledge of the world acknowledges the potency of childhood; although not so much in its imagination, which belongs to the world of fiction, as in its capacity for observation, which is legitimately a narrative skill. In doing so narrative acknowledges its

---

5. David Copperfield, 49.
6. David Copperfield, 61.

difference from fiction, and while it confronts the inaccessibility of that world to narrative - the childhood world remains a 'memory' - , in doing so it also confronts a loss in growing up; a loss of what some men 'retain', "a certain freshness, and gentleness, and capacity of being pleased".

These things remain the "inheritance" of adulthood, not its substance; memory belongs to narrative, and immediately begins to untangle what the vision of the child makes of experience. When David continues, "the first objects I can remember as standing out by themselves from a confusion of things, are my mother and Peggotty",[7] it was that 'confusion of things' which provided the substance of Oliver's fictive childhood vision. But memory can acknowledge the meaning of the confusion to narrative, even though it cannot enter it; David tells us - as narrative begins to disturb his childhood world in the figure of Murdstone -

> I could observe, in little pieces, as it were; but as to making a net of a number of these pieces, and catching anybody in it, that was, as yet, beyond me.[8]

It is natural to the vision of fiction to see the world in little pieces; the darkness at the beginning of The Old Curiosity Shop allowed precisely that kind of fragmentary vision to Master Humphrey, and we have seen how Esther restores it to Bleak House. But such vision is a weakness to narrative, and while it can recognise it - here in memory - and can even regret its loss, it cannot itself make anything of it, other than as a state of innocence.

It is very much in terms of innocence that it is seen here; for the knowledge that the pieces make up is a trap, in which David is

---

7. David Copperfield, 61.
8. David Copperfield, 70.

about to be caught. It is a part of the protected (childish) nature of his life so far that nobody has ever put the pieces together to catch him, and a part of his innocence that David does not 'as yet' see the point of putting them together himself to catch other people.

It is Mr Murdstone, then, who catches David out, at the same time forcing him into the action of a narrative world which deals, not in little pieces, but in wholes:

> I say, David, to the young this is a world for action, and not for moping and droning in. It is especially so for a young boy of your disposition, which requires a great deal of correcting; and to which no greater service can be done than to force it to conform to the ways of the working world, and to bend it and to break it.[9]

This 'working world' then threatens to destroy David's childhood, fictive self - the self we have glimpsed through the recollection of David's own narrative - and to restrict it by 'correction'. Mr Murdstone offers the threat that narrative must always hold out to fiction, of taking forcible control; a threat we saw in Oliver Twist represented as much in Mr Brownlow as in Sikes.

David of course does not exist to be protected - for that is the function of the fictive world - but in order to discover what narrative can do to protect itself. As such, there is no Mr Brownlow in David Copperfield, and Mr Murdstone does not linger in the novel as a malevolent presence as Sikes does, but translates his words directly into action; and that action is the world of work and, for David, the wine warehouse. Once again, the correspondence between wine warehouse and blacking factory is obvious. The 'autobiographical fragment' quoted by Forster repeats much of the eleventh chapter of David Copperfield directly, where it relates to his condition as a child. Both Dickens and David record that

---

9. David Copperfield, 206.

> ...but for the Mercy of God, I might easily have been, for any care that was taken of me, a little robber or a little vagabond.[10]

Forster quotes Dickens, at the end of the 'fragment', writing that

> I have never, until I now impart it to this paper, in any burst of confidence with any one, my own wife not excepted, raised the curtain I then dropped, thank God.[11]

and David Copperfield writes of this time in his life,

> I never thought of anything about myself, distinctly. The two things clearest in my mind were, that a remoteness had come upon the old Blunderstone life - which seemed to lie in the haze of an immeasurable distance; and that a curtain had for ever fallen on my life at Murdstone and Grinsby. I have lifted it for a moment, even in this narrative, with a reluctant hand, and dropped it gladly.[12]

The interrelation of autobiography and novel is obvious; what I am concerned with is the difference between them, which lies in the difference of the imaginations that inform the writing. In the 'fragment' Dickens' imagination is bound and restricted by the narrative that lifts the curtain that hides the past, whereas in the novel it is David's imagination that is so bound. Dickens himself is freed to show us what the narrative imagination does, and to show that remembering the past as a secret, upon which a curtain falls, is a part of the peculiar action of that imagination. In <u>David Copperfield</u>, then, Dickens is able to show us the life behind the curtain, the world beyond the reach of narrative recollection. Even David's narrative vision is able to admit this other world, as a partial loss of that vision in the innocent life of childhood:

---

10. See <u>David Copperfield</u>, 216; Forster, <u>Life</u>, I, 37.
11. Forster, <u>Life</u>, I, 49.
12. <u>David Copperfield</u>, 272.

> When my thoughts go back, now, to that slow agony of my youth, I wonder how much of the histories I invented...hangs like a mist of fancy over well-remembered facts! When I tread the old ground, I do not wonder that I seem to see and pity, going on before me, an innocent romantic boy, making his imaginative world out of such strange experiences and sordid things![13]

This 'mist of fancy' lies beyond, and is something quite different from the 'facts' which are not obscured by it, but remain 'well-remembered'. David's narrative vision can only acknowledge this other world, and its "strange experiences and sordid things". The detail he gives, however, and which his narrative ultimately rejects as Dickens' own autobiographical vision did, takes us behind the curtain, as a vision that does not belong to narrative. Narrative itself emerges - in the retrospective observations I have quoted has already emerged - from the world of 'strange experiences'. It is this emergence which is now Dickens' subject; as it could not have been in his own autobiography.

David finds himself plunged into the life of suffering to which Mr Murdstone's harsh story condemns its victims, and as such we find ourselves temporarily in the fictive world which we saw in Dick Swiveller and in Esther could exist only at the price of suffering. While a part of David's story is told by the narrative rhetoric of pain and pity, it has another part at this point in the novel, which is told by the Micawbers.

The Micawbers' world is a very different place from the world of narrative, and the most important sign of its difference is the place in it of immediate comforts and attractions, and particularly of food. Where it is the chief anxiety of the narrative that in the Murdstone world David was "insufficiently and unsatisfactorily fed"[14] the

---

13. David Copperfield, 225.

14. David Copperfield, 216.

Micawbers transform eating from an animal necessity to an associative language. In the Micawbers, David's imagination becomes the social instinct that narrative rejects, so that David finds in the Micawbers what Oliver unexpectedly found in the underworld, and what Dickens found in Bob Fagin; a sense of friendliness and of belonging, and the language that narrative excludes, of feeling. The Micawbers' sense of reality,and their ability to make a language, and so a comfort, out of hunger itself, brings congenial relationship in the midst of the discomfort which life in narrative has shown itself to be.

David, then, goes to Mr Micawber's house to find "a close chamber, stencilled all over with an ornament which my young imagination represented as a blue muffin";[15] and from this moment his imagination finds a home in the nourishment of the food which has appeared, oddly, but not unwelcomingly, on the wall. It is as if the room speaks to David itself, in offering a sign he can clearly understand; and what it says diminishes the fact that it is 'scantily furnished' by making it seem familiar. Food becomes a medium of communication (though not the only such medium) between both people and objects, and one person and another:

> Mr Micawber returned to the King's Bench when the case was over... The club received him with transport, and held an harmonic meeting that evening in his honour; while Mrs Micawber and I had a lamb's fry in private, surrounded by the sleeping family.[16]

The lamb's fry in private is the friendship of David and Mrs Micawber. Lamb, of course, is for the innocence of the occasion. Eating comes to represent perfectly the unlikely relationship of ten year old child to pauper's wife. Littleness is displaced by an imaginative life of things, where the world of objects suddenly and

---

15. David Copperfield, 212.
16. David Copperfield, 226.

strangely comes alive and begins to speak. While we have heard this speech as the very structure and substance of The Old Curiosity Shop, which gave us a world of strange and grotesque, speaking objects, it is only here that we hear the speech of fiction, unprotected, and revealed to the narrative world of this novel in a mist, by the momentary lifting of a curtain. And although what is said is not 'factual' speech - what the lamb's fry says is not 'well-remembered' - it is felt nonetheless. A few paragraphs later, when Mrs Micawber breaks down into tears, Mr Micawber

> immediately burst into tears, and came away with me with his waistcoat full of the heads and tails of shrimps, of which had been partaking.[17]

Mr Micawber's food here bespeaks his anxiety, both as to its degree (extreme - heads and tails) and as to its kind (absurd - of shrimps).

The Micawbers' emotions are demonstrable like this because they are immediate; they are physical, real things as they are encountered. After the assaults of creditors, for instance,

> Mr Micawber would be transported with grief, and mortification, even to the length...of making motions at himself with a razor; but within half an hour afterwards, he would polish up his shoes with extraordinary pains, and go out humming a tune with a greater air of gentility than ever. Mrs Micawber was quite as elastic. I have known her to be thrown into fainting fits by the King's taxes at three o'clock, and to eat lamb-chops, breaded, and drink ale...at four.[18]

Mr Micawber's feelings here are the creditor, his razor, shoe shining and his hummed tune in turn; while his wife's are the King's taxes, and her lamb-chops.

While the Micawbers represent a fictive existence, however, they

---

17. David Copperfield, 227.
18. David Copperfield, 214.

exist in a world which even they perceive as one of narrative, in which 'elasticity' is not so much irresponsibility as failed responsibility. They show us the other side of Dick Swiveller, and demonstrate that while his compromise protects fiction there is no such protection in compromise for narrative. The novel exists in order to discover what narrative can do for itself; and the Micawbers show David what narrative must do for itself. They are in a sense David's revenge upon adulthood, his way of learning Mr Murdstone's lessons for himself, rediscovering his childhood in them in order to leave it behind for himself. Just as he has been forced to enter the adult's world as a child, so he revisits the child's world among adults. We, and Dickens, see the attractiveness and comfort of the fictive world; but David sees only what Dickens himself knows - the knowledge that David releases him from - , that fiction does not protect narrative, and that the suffering it offers is the price of its comforts.

David then determines, as Dickens did when he wrote his 'autobiographical fragment', to leave suffering firmly in the past, in the place he puts it when his narrative voice lets the curtain fall. The Micawbers have an interim usefulness to David's narrative; but there is always David's own narrative sense of things behind the compromises they make with reality. As they leave, at the end of David's association with them, Mrs Micawber sees this narrative truth about him as she "saw what a little creature I really was".[19] This sense of littleness pervades the whole of David's association with them, so that their departure seems more David's rejection of them than their own action - although, of course, it is a part of their own subjected predicament that narrative continually moves them on.

---

19. David Copperfield, 231.

With the Micawbers gone, David "determined that the life was unendurable",[20] and performs his first narrative action of his own - and the one with which the rest of the novel really becomes preoccupied - and leaves the whole of his unfortunate childhood behind by leaving London for his Aunt Betsey's, at Dover.

Aunt Betsey is an important figure in this novel, and her conception in David's mind does seem to offer him the protection he needs, not so much for his narrative, but as a part of a narrative purpose and direction; for it is purpose and direction that are the ends and protection that narrative offers. Aunt Betsey does at first seem to protect David in a curious way from the direct action of the world to which he has hitherto been subjected. His experiences on his journey to Dover are harsh and cruel ones; but the harshness and cruelty has been oddly transformed, and no longer seems to threaten as Mr Murdstone's cruelty threatened. David's story begins to look like the fairy story which it has often been suggested determines the course of his life. The figures he encounters on his journey to Dover seem more like ogres and bad fairies than people. He meets, in rapid succession, two devils of Victorian social morality; a miserly pawnbroker and a vagrant thief. These speak the fairy-tale language of wicked giants:

> Oh, what do you want? Oh, my eyes and limbs, what do you want? Oh, my lungs and liver, what do you want? Oh, goroo![21]

and then,

> "Come here, when you're called," said the tinker, "or I'll rip your young body open".[22]

And the bad fairies are not limited to these characters; hunger

---

20. David Copperfield, 229.
21. David Copperfield, 240.
22. David Copperfield, 242.

poverty, fatigue, weakness and solitariness all have to be encountered on the road to Dover.

But while all of these threaten, none do so with the grim realism of the criminal world of Fagin and Sikes, or of the business world of Murdstone. While David begins to deal in action upon his own account, and finds in it hardship, he does not encounter the suffering of passivity inflicted upon Oliver in Oliver Twist, upon Dick Swiveller and Esther Summerson, and upon himself, in the earlier chapters of his own novel. Absorbed in the narrative - as the journey to Dover is - action becomes Action, seeming to occur in a controlled way which gives it a theatrical quality.

The source of this control would seem to be Aunt Betsey, just as she is the way that David conceives his story.

This conclusion is supported by what happens when David arrives at her house in Dover. She acts quickly and professionally, first staging a denouement with Mr Murdstone, whose action she is quite equal to, and then whisking David off to school in Canterbury before he quite knows what is happening to him.

Aunt Betsey seems to become the manager of the narrative, providing the control that makes action theatrical, but highly organised. Her function as author is enforced by the fact that Mr Dick, David and even Janet and the protegees

> whom my aunt had taken into her service expressly to educate in a renouncement of mankind, and who had generally completed their abjuration by marrying the baker[23]

are her second life: we are told in the opening chapter of the novel that she

> had been married to a husband younger than herself, who was very handsome, except in the sense of the

---

23. David Copperfield, 250.

> homely adage, "handsome is, that handsome does" - for he was strongly suspected of having beaten Miss Betsey, and even of having once, on a disputed question of supplies, made some hasty but determined arrangements to throw her out of a two pair of stairs' window. These evidences of an incompatibility of temper induced Miss Betsey to pay him off, and effect a separation by mutual consent.[24]

Aunt Betsey then seems to offer the authority of experience, and her authority to come _out_ of the suffering we saw Esther undertaking to occupy. Already, then, narrative promises an emergence from the fictive world and its suffering. From the beginning, Aunt Betsey is important to the novel's imagination, for we are told upon her departure at the end of the very first chapter that

> She vanished like a discontented fairy; or like one of those supernatural beings, whom it was popularly supposed I was entitled to see; and never came back any more.[25]

Her wishes then would seem to lie at the heart of the ideal that narrative has for the novel, transporting us out of the mundane world of a threatening and cruel reality into the magic world of fairy tales.

But the cause of her departure is very odd; for she leaves in offence when she discovers that David is not the human being she wants. As she tells his mother at the beginning of the chapter,

> I intend to be her godmother, and I beg you'll call her Betsey Trotwood Copperfield. There must be no mistake in life with _this_ Betsey Trotwood. There must be no trifling with _her_ affections, poor dear. She must be well brought up, and well guarded from reposing any foolish confidences where they are not deserved. I must make that _my_ care.[26]

We begin to see that if Aunt Betsey represents the direction of narrative, then that direction does not evade suffering, writing the

---

24. _David Copperfield_, 51.

25. _David Copperfield_, 60.

26. _David Copperfield_, 55.

individual out of what we have called the fictive world, but is actually informed by it. Aunt Betsey wants David to be a girl, firstly so that her own life can be made good by the protection of 'hers', and secondly so that 'she' might not inflict further suffering upon women such as herself. Aunt Betsey offers to re-educate childhood, and to bring David up initially, only upon these terms. When, upon his arrival at Dover, she relents, she asks him,

> Your sister, Betsey Trotwood, would have been as natural and rational a girl as ever breathed. You'll be worthy of her won't you?[27]

And, of course, she re-names David, although dropping 'Betsey' and calling him 'Trotwood'.[28]

We see then that something of a contradiction develops in Aunt Betsey's acceptance of the boy David. He has rejected the Murdstone world of work, the male world at whose hands Aunt Betsey suffered, which seeks to make a harsh coherence of the dreams of innocence, and to destroy the fragmentary world. But he has also come to Aunt Betsey, having really rejected the Micawbers (and of course their association with John Dickens), in search of that very coherence for himself, albeit in a more favourable form.

Aunt Betsey of course knows this when she asks him to be worthy of his sister; that she accepts him is an act of pure generosity, both to David and to her own past (a generosity which, as we later discover, is not simply invested in the past, for we find that she is still supporting the husband who deserted her.)

To Aunt Betsey then life does not have the simple and singular direction of a fairy tale, but instead is fraught with hidden divisions. While she presents reality to David as a writing of purpose and

---

27. David Copperfield, 331.

28. David Copperfield, 271.

direction, exercising a quiet responsibility and never really seeming to lose control of the novel's action, this coherent self is her own contrivance. As she tells David,

> We must meet reverses boldly, and not suffer them to frighten us, my dear. We must learn to act the play out.[29]

The whole weight of her experience lies behind these words, and we see how much of what she presents to us as reality is dependent upon 'playing out' events which in reality seem contradictory and fragmentary.

This fragmentation, we realise, is the very substance of her own existence. Her decisiveness and purpose depends upon Mr Dick; she is separated from the man she secretly supports; her caution leads to the loss of most of her money; and while she is opposed to men she marries the maid to the baker. Her acceptance of David then is only another of these secret inconsequences, and while she offers the substance of his narrative, she achieves this function only by sheltering him from the world's incoherence. She gives him his story and makes a writer of him - a man with an autobiography - by withholding those forces which would disrupt the story, the forces of the fragmented, hostile and chaotic world which we saw above was the province of the fictive.

Aunt Betsey provides a protection not for the fictive world but for a sense of story; and she is really the first of Dickens' characters to succeed in doing so without the reservation of detachment which I suggested qualified the function of earlier authoritative figures. That she does so, however, is entirely due to her suffering in the world of fiction, a suffering which invests her with the authority to protect the writer. She does not provide us with a heroism; but instead with a stage, the artifice of her own self-conscious action, prepared for a

---

29. David Copperfield, 560.

hero.

In making a proper stage of the novel, Aunt Betsey offers to solve the narrative problems of Oliver Twist and Dick Swiveller, the refusal of life to resolve its fragmentary and self-divisive nature and become a fairy-tale. At the same time, she removes the problems of authority and control we saw in Sikes and Brownlow, and in Murdstone. It seems now, in David's Aunt, to be the function of the mother of the novel to produce the narrative from a kind of failure not available to its fathers; a failure which constitutes a complete breakdown of all that narrative demands, and an abandonment of an authority not informed by loss and suffering. This 'failure' is like Esther Summerson's, an acceptance of suffering, and only from it is the narrative authority of Aunt Betsey's stage produced, the result of a subjectedness and incoherence not previously admissible by narrative, as the substance of its opposite world of fiction.

At the same time, moreover, continuing suffering is the price of Aunt Betsey's second-time vision, as an humiliation which must be persistently present behind the whole course of David's story.

The world that Aunt Betsey produces for the novel is however often curiously melodramatic. While Aunt Betsey plays her 'game' with resignation and dignity, and with the complete self-discipline of meeting reverses boldly, not all of the actors upon the novel's stage are so professional and experienced. We saw that even upon the road to Dover narrative made reality curiously unreal, and this unreality is perpetrated by the novel's characters in the course of its development.

Mr Wickfield, Dr Storey and his wife all join in the game with rather too much enthusiasm, and succumb at the crises of their lives to the melodramatic:

> I have preyed on my own morbid coward heart, and it has preyed on me. Sordid is my grief, sordid is my love, sordid is my miserable escape from the darker side of both, oh see the ruin I am, and hate me, shun me![30]

cries Mr Wickfield in one of his more moving speeches. And Annie Strong answers her husband, at the end of what must be the longest speech in the book (so long that it needs to be extended three times, with "Let me say a little more!", "A little more! a very few words more!" and at the last gasp "Another word!")

> Oh, hold me to your heart, my husband! Never cast me out! Do not think or speak of disparity between us, for there is none, except in all my many imperfections. Every succeeding year I have known this better, as I have esteemed you more and more. Oh, take me to your heart, my husband, for my love was founded on a rock, and it endures![31]

These speeches have the near-masochistic sentimentality of Victorian theatre, with its predilection for emotional humiliation as the denouement of the plot. They show us that it is not easy to exist in Aunt Betsey's world, and to play upon the stage she offers. As she knows, the price of narrative is the real feeling she keeps hidden in her suppressed and suffering self. Narrative, once made public, preserves no place for private feelings. These figures accept Aunt Betsey's terms without question, and the result is autobiographical exposure: the assumption that these figures make is that life _has_ the purpose David Copperfield seeks in Aunt Betsey, the strong moral direction of a journey towards a coherent and authoritative goodness. That they were exposed in the very space that she creates for David for such goodness is not due to any malignancy on her part, moreover, but to the nature of a world which will not allow them to authorise such

---

30. _David Copperfield_, 643.
31. _David Copperfield_, 732.

moral, middle-class stories as publicly heroic actions. The close identification of autobiography and reality which this morality demands, and which these figures attempt to embrace, is precisely the identification which Aunt Betsey reserves in secrecy.

The Strongs and Mr Wickfield suffer in this way, from not having Aunt Betsey's self-consciousness; but the worst case is that of Little Emily, and the writing of melodrama reaches its highest pitch with Rosa Dartle's verbal flagellation of her in her fallen misery. "I have come to look at you", she tells her; and at this point mere words are not enough for Little Emily, and the narrative turns to mime:

> ...I could just see her, on her knees, with her head thrown back, her pale face looking upward, her hands wildly clasped and held out, and her hair streaming about her.[32]

This is the action of narrative, and what it is evidently in pursuit of is a correspondence with the tragic, in an attempt to make of the novel a classical stage. The supporting cast contributes to the effect; in the case of Little Emily, Mr Peggotty and Ham do their utmost to promote the tragedy.[33] We see Mr Peggotty like a demented Lear,

> with his vest torn open, his hair wild, his face and lips quite white, and blood trickling down his bosom (it had sprung from his mouth, I think), looking fixedly at me[34]

- while Ham becomes at his end a ham Hamlet, paraphrasing the famous speech ("If it be now, 'tis not to come", V, II) with heartening good will:

---

32. David Copperfield, 787.

33. Q.D. Leavis approaches this view in "'Dickens and Tolstoy': the Case for a serious view of David Copperfield" in F.R. and Q.D. Leavis, Dickens the Novelist (London, 1970), but she concludes that he is writing "at two levels at once" and 'muddling' caricature and seriousness; see pp.78-80.

34. David Copperfield, 513.

> "Mas'r Davy," he said, cheerily grasping me by both hands, "if my time is come, 'tis come. If 'tan't, I'll bide it. Lord above bless you, and bless all! Mates, make me ready! I'm a-going off!"[35]

This world of melodrama then is the outcome of an unselfconscious narrative, and an instinctive occupation of the stage Aunt Betsey offers. But David Copperfield, although an actor, and in some ways the leading actor upon her stage, is also ostensibly the author of it, and is a very much more self-conscious figure; this self-consciounsess keeps him apart from her authorship.

When he enters upon his life with his Aunt the division that I suggested above between narrative - the life of retrospect which then seemed unpropitious - and a 'fictive' existance with the Micawbers, seems to be resolved with the realisation of his Story.

The unexpected identification of that narrative with Aunt Betsey's suffering knowledge however makes the resolution appear very much more problematic, for David pursues his narrative in the expectation that suffering will not be necessary but subject to its vision; in the expectation that narrative will be, not a game made possible by a second-time vision, but a reality visible from the first.

It is reality, of course, that fails David from the beginning. During a brief respite from school at the Creakle's he tells us,

> I almost believed that I had never been away; that Mr and Miss Murdstone were such pictures, and would vanish when the fire got low; and that there was nothing real in all that I remembered, save my mother, Pegotty and I.[36]

The narrative is most true - to Dickens' own story - where it is most fictive; and, here, strives hardest for the fictive world, of

---

35. David Copperfield, 864.

36. David Copperfield, 165.

"my mother, Peggotty and I", where it is hardest pressed by that truth.

Life with Aunt Betsey is born of the disappointment David lives in his early life; of his mother's suffering, which is much like his Aunt's, and of his own, which compelled him to run away.

As it progresses, the fairy tale which David's first vision of life in Dover seemed to promise recedes. David tells us, as he leaves Dr Strong's academy,

> I know that my juvenile experiences went for little or nothing then; and that life was more like a great fairy story, which I was just about to read, than anything else.[37]

This is the voice of David's own experience, and it sees - as the figures discussed above do not - that Aunt Betsey's world is a divided world; that the narrative of looking back, the narrative she now provides, is very different from the narrative of innocent anticipation which it is her concern to protect, and which was David's own first consciousness and his purpose in seeking out his Aunt. We begin to realise that Aunt Betsey does not provide writing with any easy grasp upon reality; and that the first consideration due to her generosity is one of what it has itself cost her. No writer can exist self-consciously in her narrative world; and here we see the beginning of David's own doubts. "I know that my juvenile experiences went for little or nothing then" he tells us, realising in retrospect that his vision of growing up was an escapism; he sees 'now' the impossibility of that easy unity of adult and child, and looks back to the past with what we see is almost his Aunt's own vision, remembering it as a first life, and offering the present as a disappointed second, as a life of shame and suffering. Only that past life, Aunt Betsey has shown us, is real in the way that David at first sought, and the price of writing

---

37. David Copperfield, 330.

a narrative is the dismissal of dreams and fictions, and not, as David had childishly expected, the future realisation of them. So that, upon a visit to the theatre, we are told,

> ...the mingled reality and mystery of the whole show...were so dazzling, and opened up such illimitable regions of delight, that when I came out into the rainy street...I felt as if I had come out from the clouds, where I had been leading a romantic life for ages, to a bawling, splashing, link-lighted, umbrella-struggling, hackney-coach-jostling, patten-clinking, muddy, miserable world.[38]

David here reproduces Dickens' realisation in the Sketches, and shows us the clarity of his realisation of the terms of the writing consciousness, demonstrating that he does not live in the protected world of Wickfield and the Strongs, or of Little Emily. Theatre and the 'romantic life' of the theatrical world is, as he sees, a long way from the reality outside - and here, of course, in the city, it exists outside Aunt Betsey's protection at Dover as well as beyond the 'clouds' from which David seems to descend. In David, narrative leaves its stage and goes out to meet the world; and in doing so finds out the division, suffering and sheer ordinariness inherent in its conception.

David's maturing consciousness then sees the responsibilities of the life he has written in anticipation of reality to reality itself. Effectively, in going to the theatre he discovers its audience; and in the same way in writing a middle-class drama - the story of Mr Wickfield, of Dr Strong and his wife, and of Little Emily and Steerforth - he meets the world that lies outside it, in spite of his Aunt's attempts to keep that world hidden away.

Dickens, of course, is not David, but remains closer to Aunt Betsey. The disappointment that David finds in the nature of the narratives' stage is not Dickens' own, but the disappointment of the teller of a

---

38. David Copperfield, 344.

narrative; and much the same is true of the responsibility David now discovers as the responsibility of narrator, to do nothing less than confront and defeat the world at whose hands Aunt Betsey has suffered in order to assert the truth and freedom of his story. David finds that the task of autobiography is to provide a new coherence and unity for the world.

This then is the task that self-conscious narrative finds it must undertake; to reconcile stage and reality. It does so by attempting to produce the story of the self as the fairy-tale romance that seems missing from the world; so that although David leaves his past behind we never see him admit its dividedness. He accepts the Micawbers in spite of his ultimate rejection, and tries in the course of his narrative to retain them within the story and provide a place for them. The place he finds, of course, is Australia, but the effort is there to make his narrative good for them as a universal truth. The fictive then is already problematic, so that David's narrative has already tried to have things both ways, both accepting and rejecting what it sees as beyond itself; so that the rejection of the Micawbers seems to happen merely in the course of things.

This first narrative action then becomes central to the book, as the question of whether that course of things can be the narrative self-consciousness needs to unite world and stage, and to confirm that the fairy-tale can be <u>un</u>selfconscious, and occur away from the stage. The romantic visions of childhood were like this, but existed in 'little pieces'; David failed to piece together Murdstone's threat to his mother, and in the same way, in his innocent romance with Little Emily, his thoughts did not go beyond the attraction itself:

> As to any sense of inequality, or youthfulness, or other difficulties in our way, Little Emily and I had no such trouble, because we had no

> future. We made no more provision for growing older, than we did for growing younger.[39]

This rather prim retrospect looks back to a life innocent even of anticipation. "We had no future" sounds, in the language of looking back which the writing speaks like a pessimism or even nihilism, but it indicates the operation of a different kind of imagination altogether, the romantic imagination of immediate attraction.

This imagination, however, does seem to offer a story in Dora, where romance does make 'provision for growing older' by leading to marriage.

Once again, this begins very much as a matter of appetite and attraction. Until his marriage, David's romantic hunger is insatiable, and he uses all his resources of colour, dress and food by which to express its physical immediacy. When David goes to Mr Spenlow's for the first time,

> I don't remember who was there, except Dora. I have not the least idea what we had for dinner, besides Dora. My impression is, that I dined off Dora entirely.[40]

As to dress, David's 'passion' "makes me wear my silk handkerchief continually"[41] (although this relates to his infatuation at an earlier stage, for Miss Larkins) and

> If the boots I wore at that period could only be produced and compared with the actual size of my feet, they would show what the state of my heart was, in a most affecting manner.[42]

And, as to colour, Dora appears at her picnic "in a white chip bonnet and a dress of celestial blue"[43] and David buys her a ring "with its

---

39. David Copperfield, 87.
40. David Copperfield, 452.
41. David Copperfield, 326.
42. David Copperfield, 458.
43. David Copperfield, 542.

blue stones"[44] - white and blue, of course, signifying innocence and purity.

But when infatuation becomes marriage this world of appetites - the world of dreams, of spontaneity and irresponsibility - and the world of narrative collide, and bring a crisis to bear upon David. The anticipation which marriage, as a part of the formal world to which narrative belongs, makes of the dream-world finds itself in retrospect disappointed:

> It seemed such an extraordinary thing to have Dora always there. ... Sometimes of an evening, when I looked up from my writing, and saw her seated opposite, I would lean back in my chair, and think how queer it was that there we were, alone together as a matter of course - nobody's business any more - all the romance of our engagement put away upon a shelf, to rust - no one to please but one another - one another to please, for life.[45]

The vision of narrative tells us here that romance has been fulfilled and hunger satisfied; but suddenly that fulfilment does not seem a matter of social integration but of separation. Innocence views its own starvation through the looking glass, as it were, and sees in hunger the companionship of dreams; such companionship disappears, as narrative concludes romance with the business of marriage, making 'mingled reality and mystery' a matter of past dreams. Marriage becomes an end of and separation from innocence, and David finds himself trapped in the world he wanted to leave behind. Marriage takes romance back to mundane reality, and David finds himself still in the same world as the one the Micawbers' occupied, having to deal with the economic facts of life, and finding romance - in the form of Dora - a continual obstruction. David finds himself back in the wine-warehouse, his life returning to the everyday reality of mere necessity. Work replaces both fairy tale

---

44. David Copperfield, 550.

45. David Copperfield, 701.

and fiction, and shows itself to be the real substance of romance; and now it is at the very heart of life, forming the relationship that was conceived as romance. "No one to please but one another" defines and contains happiness. Romance is removed by its fulfilment, and fulfilment brings a new hunger for romance, for the continuation of the story that now seems ended. David is returned to his earlier crisis; he needs a new narrative to write him out of an everyday continuity that now seems endless and, at the same time, cannot afford to reject life with Dora, and so admit his self-division. As with the Micawbers, he both accepts and rejects life with Dora, bearing the division he feels within himself:

> The old unhappy loss or want of something had, I am conscious, some place in my heart; but not to the embitterment of my life. When I walked alone in the fine weather, and thought of the summer days when all the air had been filled with my boyish enchantment, I did miss something of the realisation of my dreams; but I thought it was a softened glory of the Past, which nothing could have thrown upon the present time.[46]

Past and present have become separated, and David finds that it is the responsibility of his own consciousness to hold them together, and himself to be the forcible realisation of the world's unity.

The immediate result of this self-division is an abstraction from the present which makes life seem unreal. Soon after his marriage David tells us,

> We have a delightful evening, and are supremely happy; but I don't believe it yet. I can't collect myself, I can't check off my happiness as it takes place. I feel in a misty and unsettled kind of state; as if I had got up very early in the morning a week or two ago, and had never been to bed since. I can't make out when yesterday was.[47]

---

46. David Copperfield, 713.

47. David Copperfield, 695.

David finds that he no longer belongs to a story; "I can't collect myself", he tells us. At the same time, he no longer exists in little pieces, since he lives the story out, although he does not feel it. He finds himself, neither a fragment of the world and able to submit to its control, nor in control himself. Reality seems to exist as a narrative, but as one which seems to happen without him.

This division is enforced in the novel in another way. David attempts to unite the world by experiencing narrative as romance - as attraction. From childhood, however, this romance of attraction has usurped narrative by proving itself incapable of choice, or of the moral perception central to narrative. The Micawbers were half-accepted in this incapacity, as Dora is accepted; but attractiveness also has a less benevolent force. We saw that the immediacy of life with the Micawbers was born of the hardship inflicted by Mr Murdstone; and there is throughout the book a strong association of attraction, feeling and even enjoyment, and the world of suffering. It was so with Mr Creakle who "had a delight in cutting at the boys,which was like the satisfaction of a craving appetite", and of whom David tells us,

> I don't watch his eye in idleness, but because I am morbidly attracted to it, in a dread desire to know what he will do next.[48]

The very vitality of Mr Creakle's paranoic existence proves irresistable to David; and so does the figure who confirms his dividness in the novel by confronting him with an alter ego, Uriah Heep:

> I saw him lying on his back, with his legs extending to I don't know where, gurglings taking place in his throat, stoppages in his nose, and his mouth open like a post-office. He was so much worse in reality than in my distempered fancy, that afterwards I was attracted in very repulsion, and could not help wandering in and out every half-hour or so, and taking another look at him.[49]

---

48. David Copperfield, 142.

49. David Copperfield, 144.

We saw that in Murdstone David sought to leave malevolent narrative behind; and now he does not recognise such a narrative in Uriah Heep. His romantic imagination is unable to pass beyond the repulsion he feels to view the real - narrative - danger that Heep holds out. David's narrative will abstracts him from the actual story which, like his happiness with Dora, happens without him. Attraction and repulsion - which would govern an ideal narrative world - are irrelevant to the stories that David Copperfield's world tells, and he finds himself left out of them.

David refuses to admit the threat that divides his world, and that he does not succeed in leaving behind with Murdstone: Heep's kind of narrative merely repulses him. Uriah Heep, then, takes up and attempts to occupy (and for most of the novel succeeds in occupying) the stage that David leaves vacant. He does so with an outright determination which displays its origin as its source of power, where David hides his in the romance he has for reality. 'Umbleness' is in a sense Uriah's disguise; but it is also a declaration of his narrative aspirations, and of the linear way in which he sees the world, and it is one which David consistently, and as a matter of principle, refuses to recognise. Uriah Heep's designs are transparent, and David rejects them out of repulsion, not daring to admit their ends. We see this in what Uriah sees as his sexual competition with David over Agnes:

> I suppose you have sometimes plucked a pear before
> it was ripe?

he asks David after his first attempt to make Agnes marry him; and continues,

> I did that last night...but it'll ripen yet! It
> only wants attending to.[50]

---

50. <u>David Copperfield</u>, 645.

What matters to David is not so much the plot in what Uriah says as his comprehension of his words. Uriah knows that he threatens David, not directly by his actions, but by insisting upon their recognition, so that he tells David a few chapters later,

> Oh, its very kind of you Copperfield...and we all know what an amiable character yours is; but you know that the moment I spoke to you the other night, you know what I meant. You know you knew what I meant, Copperfield. Don't deny it.[51]

Uriah forces David to see the nature of a narrative without ideals; he acts the play out with a vengeance, delighting in the identity of dissembler and unscrupulous cheat that the narrative of the stage-world gives him. Oddly, he is the only character in the book to share Betsey's knowledge of the way that narrative works; but instead of using that knowledge to create a stage for himself, he shows us that the place for self-consciousness on this stage must be in villainy, and uses it to exploit the parts the other actors play. He is in a sense Aunt Betsey's true son, for he actually learns the lessons she half-attempts to teach her protegees; he treats life as a game rather than as a fairy-tale, and is well educated in the renouncement of mankind. Uriah never has a 'first-time around' life, but lives from the beginning as if for the second time, without Betsey's generosity which divides her between her narrative knowledge and her fictive sympathy. Uriah Heep exists to torture the fictive imagination - even his name seems to invite the repulsion which is David's romantic, half-fictive response, beginning with a wriggle and ending in a Heep - by being made almost purely of and by narrative.

David succeeds in refusing to accept his part in the stage world, and in remaining in his romantic life, even, as I suggested above, at

---

51. David Copperfield, 683.

the price of self-division, until the time of Dora's death. It is this event, as a second attempt to preserve romantic life by leaving the past behind, that confirms David's place upon the stage, for only there, we are shown, can romance exist. Dora's death signals the failure of reality to supply romance. Barbara Hardy writes of Dickens that in the relationship between David and Dora he "is touching on a marvellous subject for a psychological novel, but only touching on it" and continues

> He chose to summarise, to evade, and then to cut the knot with Dora's death. Many a marital problem in Victorian fiction has to be solved by the Providential death.[52]

Dickens, of course, is one step ahead of his critic here; for again the point is that David is not Dickens. It is David who is writing this story, and it is David who 'cuts the knot', to choose the life of writing. Dora is killed by his hoped-for romance; but she is killed more exactly by the narrative which, it is now clear, is the only place in which romance will survive. We see this from the writing with which David seals her grave:

> I sit down by the fire, thinking with a blind remorse of all those secret feelings I have nourished since my marriage. I think of every little trifle between me and Dora, and feel the truth, that trifles make the sum of life. Ever rising from the sea of my remembrance, is the image of the dear child as I knew her first, graced by my young love, and by her own, with every fascination wherein such love is rich. Would it, indeed, have been better if we had loved each other as boy and girl, and forgotten it? Undisciplined heart, reply![53]

This is narrative; but it is not Uriah Heep's knowing narrative. David, in pursuit of the romantic life, finds no place for the self-consciousness that narrative makes into villainy, and provides us here

---

52. See Barbara Hardy, The Moral Art of Dickens, 131.

53. David Copperfield, 858.

with a rhetoric of ignorance. Autobiography here takes control of events - as it does in Dora's death - and narrative is no longer a form of control, for Uriah Heep has shown us what that control means, so much as a restriction of the self to a written world, and an exclusion of the reality from which Aunt Betsey wanted to protect David. He is left to feel that "trifles make the sum of life"; but here he is no longer in limbo but under the directive control of narrative. When he tells us that "I came to think that the Future was walled up before me"[54] we know that it is not - his story continues - and that this is a strategy of submission to the terms of narrative.

It is not long before we see that narrative is action, moreover, for it is at this point, when David's narrative seems exhausted in its efforts to see the world whole, and to grow up from childhood, that narrative takes over the novel, and shows its full potency; and at this point also that David begins to realise its true nature.

David goes to Yarmouth immediately after Dora's death, as if to turn his attention to the narrative which he has so long evaded, turning back towards the novel's wider stage. It does not disappoint him; for the storm it provides as the conclusion of the sub-plot involving Ham, Steerforth and Little Emily is a piece of cosmic stage craft:

> It was a murky confusion - here and there blotted with a colour like the colour of the smoke from damp fuel - of flying clouds, tossed up into most remarkable heaps, suggesting greater height in the clouds than there were depths below them to the bottom of the deepest hollows in the earth, through which the wild moon seemed to plunge headlong, as if, in a dread disturbance of the laws of nature, she had lost her way and were frightened. There had been a wind all day; and it was rising then, with an extraordinary great sound.[55]

David's bewilderment at this point is not the bewilderment of

54. David Copperfield, 859.

55. David Copperfield, 857.

childhood, in which the world seems odd in its incoherence. This vision has a chaotic activity, and a massive energy; but it is not David's energy in the way that what Oliver saw was the energy of his childhood vision. This melodrama defeats self-consciousness and comes from a narrative which has continued without him, and carries him along with it. We are shown that David's feelings remain quite separate from it, as they remain separate from any other reality: when he arrives in Yarmouth,

> I was very much depressed in spirits; very solitary; and felt an uneasiness in Ham's not being there, disproportinate to the occasion. I was seriously affected, without knowing how much, by late events; and my long exposure to the fierce wind had confused me. There was that jumble in my thoughts and recollections, that I had lost the clear arrangement of time and distance. Thus, if I had gone out into the town, I should not have been surprised, I think, to encounter someone who I knew must be then in London. So to speak, there was in these respects a curious inattention in my mind. Yet it was busy, too, with all the remembrances the place naturally awakened; and they were particularly distinct and vivid.[56]

David's bewilderment is the bewilderment of dissociation - and not like Oliver's, of a participation not understood. "I had lost the clear arrangement of time and distance" he tells us; the consciousness of loss is again a kind of limbo, neither completely ignorant of the dimensions of narrative nor belonging to them. His solitude now is real isolation, having no recourse to the comforts of childhood loneliness which found companionship in the dream-world. There, his feelings were never 'disproportionate' to reality as they are here. David both knows and does not know; "I should not have been surprised, I think, to encounter someone who I knew must be in London". And again this interim state of mind, neither reality nor imagination, finds itself invested in the Past rather than the Present the novel unfolds before

---

56. David Copperfield, 860.

him. The "curious inattention" to real events is accompanied by "all the remembrances the place naturally awakened".

But the Action of the novel now becomes inescapable, and David finds himself passively taking part in it, the observer of the hysterical parts that everybody around him plays:

> Joining these groups, I found bewailing women whose husbands were away in herring or oyster boats... Grizzled old sailors were among the people, shaking their heads, as they looked from water to sky, and muttering to one another; ship-owners, excited and uneasy; children, huddling together, and peering into older faces; even stout mariners, disturbed and anxious, levelling their glasses at the sea from behind places of shelter, as if they were surveying an enemy.[57]

But as the hysteria grows, David is still encased in his own solitude. "Something within me, faintly answering to the storm without, tossed up the depths of my memory and made tumult in them";[58] so that, left alone to try to sleep, he finds himself gazing at nothing but his own reflection:

> I got up, several times, and looked out; but could see nothing, except the reflection in the window-panes of the candle I had left burning, and of my own haggard face looking in at me from the void.[59]

The 'void' is reality itself; and it is also the narrative which has brought the world of the novel to this pitch. Nothing less could show David his exclusion from the story he himself supposedly writes. He finds himself the helpless spectator of his own story, and of his own loyalties, as Ham makes ready to attempt a rescue of the victims of the wreck, one of whom, of course, he discovers to be Steerforth:

---

57. David Copperfield, 858.
58. David Copperfield, 860.
59. David Copperfield, 861.

> I was swept away, but not unkindly, to some distance where people around me made me stay; urging, as I confusedly perceived, that he was bent on going, with help or without, and that I should endanger the precautions for his safety by troubling those with whom they rested.[60]

- The Action of the novel is beyond David, and the extent to which this is so is demonstrated by his final discovery of his former friend and hero. A fisherman

> ...led me to the shore. And on that part of it where she and I had looked for shells, two children - on that part of it where some lighter fragments of the old boat, blown down last night, had been scattered by the wind - among the ruins of the home he had wronged - I saw him lying with his head on his arm, as I had often seen him lie at school.[61]

This is in a sense the heart of the in-between life of remembrance. Even as David looks, the past and present are confused, and what he experiences is neither reality nor dream, neither the Justice of the narrative in casting the sinner at his feet in a grand gesture, nor the confused associative instinct of Oliver, which we see when he allows us to hear the last words of an earlier sinner, "what right have they to butcher me?"[62] David secretly knows too much to feel the killing of Steerforth as injustice, but refuses the guilt - of his own former attractions - of feeling it as justice.

Once again, the novel enacts his crisis for him. Just as with Dora, he must accept his own shame, or relinquish the writing. The Action which the narrative offers has now done its utmost.

And now the part he has so far refused begins to come to him. It begins with his last visit to Steerforth's house, for only here does he begin to take revenge upon his own mother's failed motherhood,[63] and to

---

60. _David Copperfield_, 864.

61. _David Copperfield_, 866.

62. See page 70 above.

63. Again, Q.D. Leavis anticipates this argument in her essay; see _Dickens the Novelist_, 105.

act Aunt Betsey's play out. Miss Dartle, of course, speaks the words, but the words are David's, as they have never been before. His first thought, after Steerforth's death, is to take the news to his mother:

> I knew that the care of it, and the hard duty of preparing his mother to receive it, could only rest with me; and I was anxious to discharge that duty as faithfully as I could.[64]

The real cruelty of the action lies in the 'duty'; and Miss Dartle only enforces the justice David acts out in performing it:

> "I will speak!" she said, turning on me with her lightning eyes. "Be silent, you! Look at me, I say, proud mother of a false son! Moan for your nurture of him, moan for your corruption of him, moan for your loss of him, moan for mine."[65]

Mrs Steerforth, with the rest of her kind, the narrative tells us, is at the root of the action that makes the world suffer, as the producer of the infidelity which brought both Murdstone and Aunt Betsey into David's life, and which brought about the image of himself in Heep. And David never sounds more like Uriah Heep than here; "Oh, Miss Dartle, shame! Oh cruel!",[66] he interrupts her, as Dickens is unable to suppress his delight in David's new role any longer. The exorcism of Steerforth is also the exorcism of David's secret loyalty to the glory of a past dominated by attraction, by Steerforth and Dora. His acceptance of Miss Dartle's humiliation of both through Steerforth's mother is also to some extent the Heep-like acceptance of his own humiliation:

> "A curse upon you!" she said, looking round at me, with a mingled expression of rage and grief. "It was in an evil hour that you ever came here! A curse upon you! Go!"[67]

---

64. David Copperfield, 867.
65. David Copperfield, 871.
66. David Copperfield, 871.
67. David Copperfield, 873.

With this dismissal, and with his own dismissal of the Micawbers, Mr Peggotty and Little Emily to Australia and of Uriah Heep to prison - as David finally plays the game and imposes a moral narrative on him - David breaks off his attachment to the glory of the past, as Aunt Betsey hoped he would never have to, but at the same time knew he would. In doing so Aunt Betsey is left behind, and David enters the limited world which she provides, but which she herself stands outside of, in which life in the past is not changed, or integrated into the present, but in which narrative disowns fiction, entirely, for ends of its own - for the sake of a second-time coherence:

> The knowledge came upon me, not quickly, but little by little, and grain by grain. The desolate feeling with which I went abroad, deepened and widened hourly. At first it was a heavy sense of loss and sorrow, wherein I could distinguish little else. By imperceptible degrees, it became a hopeless consciousness of all that I had lost - love, friendship, interest; of all that had been shattered - my first trust, my first affection, the whole airy castle of my life; of all that remained - a ruined blank and waste, lying wide around me, unbroken, to the dark horizon.[68]

So David's own second-time vision is born - as Aunt Betsey of course hoped it never would be. David describes this time as an awakening from a dream, and insofar as it is an awakening to a new life of narrative this is true. David leaves behind the world of dream and fiction in his knowledge of its loss, and wakes up to a world experienced for a second time. But this second life is a lost life, and his new life is a life of writing, of experience at second hand. We see as he celebrates in blank verse that the life of the narrative is adopted at the expense of the life of imagination. That earlier life has become for once and for all 'a ruined blank and waste'; and only with it condemned for ever to the past can David make this new beginning:

---

68. David Copperfield, 886.

> I came into the valley, as the evening sun was shining on the remote heights of snow, that closed it in, like eternal clouds. The bases of the mountains forming the gorge in which the little village lay, were richly green; and high above this gentler vegetation, grew forests of dark fir, clearing the wintry snow-drift, wedge-like, and stemming the avalanche. Above these were range upon range of craggy steeps, grey rock, bright ice, and smooth verdure-specks of pasture, all gradually blending with the crowning snow. Dotted here and there on the mountain's side, each tiny dot a home, were lovely wooden cottages, so dwarfed by the towering heights that they appeared too small for toys. So did even the clustered village in the valley, with its wooden bridge across the stream, where the stream tumbled over broken rocks, and roared away among the trees. In the quiet air, there was a sound of distant singing - shepherd voices; but, as one bright evening cloud floated midway along the mountain's-side, I could almost have believed it came from there, and was not earthly music. All at once, in this serenity, great Nature spoke to me; and soothed me to lay down my weary head upon the grass, and weep as I had not wept yet, since Dora died![69]

Here, then, writing takes over experience. 'Great Nature' of course is the world of narrative which produced the storm as it now produces Wordsworthian tranquility. Only now, however, does David fully join in with its action, hearing its voice as a rhythm which replaces a lost life of hopes and expectations. And now, with the past relinquished as a place of shame, and with his loyalties to it extinguished, writing seems to begin its fulfilment for him as a kind of paradise. Not only do its words provide a scenic vision: they provide a kind of love, when upon opening a 'packet of letters' David reads "the writing of Agnes", and they provide an occupation:

> I worked early and late, patiently and hard. I wrote a Story, with a purpose growing, not remotely, out of my experience.[70]

It is only at this point, then, that David can tell us, "this

69. David Copperfield, 887.
70. David Copperfield, 889.

narrative is my written memory",[71] for only now is it true that the writing is the conscious activity of remembrance in words - the literal life of memory made plain by the second thought of writing.

Agnes is very much a part of this second thought; and the end of the novel belongs to her. As she first appeared to David in writing, so she continues to exist in the written world:

> When I read to Agnes what I wrote; when I saw her listening face; moving her to smiles or tears; and heard her cordial voice so earnest on the shadowy events of that imaginative world in which I lived; I thought what a fate mine might have been.[72]

It is as if David experiences his relationship with Agnes through writing, making her laugh and cry, and hearing her voice in it. The appetites and feelings of the dream-world are vanished entirely, along with the expectations that dreams had of narrative, that they should be realised in it. Reality itself, in its immediacy, has disappeared, as either a dream or a narrative, and has been replaced by the consciousness that only the Narrative is true. This Narrative, the narrative of a fairy-tale, is a world of duty, of justice, and of formal relationship which exists as a 'mirror' image of reality, and which sees its own End as the true end: which has learned from the disappointment of dreams, and from the cruelty of the world's action, and has moved, as it were, inside itself. Narrative is a reflection of the world, refusing to do what the world of fiction and dreaming did, and pass through the glass and into the real world of action and deceit and cruelty, in which Narrative sees itself. That world brought about our dreams, but it did so with absolute immediacy, and dreaming in it produced in participation a kind of faith. The world of Action which reflects the

---

71. David Copperfield, 889.

72. David Copperfield, 931.

the action of reality, and refuses to pass through it, becomes a World withdrawn from the world. Its only companionship is in its own stagecraft; so that while expectation no longer disappoints, it is no longer really expectation either. The novel becomes a 'written memory'; and from the point of 'awakening' knowledge is governed not so much by the perception of anticipation as by the recollection of retrospect. Upon _this_ side of the looking glass we need no perception to tell us that the future exists indoors, and that to look forwards is to look backwards, and to look out is to look back in again. Little has really changed since the night of the storm in Yarmouth when David looked out of his window and saw only himself. His bedroom has grown according to his knowledge of his loss, and his admission that he has lost everything makes the whole world his stage; but at the same time he has only revealed himself as the source of the novel's stagecraft. In doing so he gains control over his world - as he gains Agnes. But the knowledge of the Dream has been bought at a price; and the price that David has paid is the price of childhood, the price of knowing what lies beyond the Dream, in what, even on that night in Yarmouth, he could recognise as a 'void', the place in which the self exists on the other side of the glass, beyond Dreaming.

Agnes, then, exists indoors, and David's recurring image of her sees her standing in a window:

> I cannot call to mind where or when, in my childhood, I had seen a stained glass window in a church. Nor do I recollect its subject. But I know that when I saw her turn round, in the grave light of the old staircase, and wait for us, above, I thought of that window; and I associated something of its tranquil brightness with Agnes Whitfield ever afterwards.[73]

---

73. _David Copperfield_, 280.

The association returns when David first remembers Agnes after Dora's death -

> And now, indeed, I began to think that in my old association of her with the stained-glass window in the church, a prophetic foreshadowing of what she would be to me...had found a way into my mind.[74]

- and the image reappears at the end of the book, to symbolise their final union:

> We stood together in the same old-fashioned window at night, when the moon was shining; Agnes with her quiet eyes raised up to it; I following her glance.[75]

While Agnes is represented by what is an opening upon an outside world, she is not so much an opportunity for as a limitation upon vision. In her, the house of writing becomes constricted to its own, indoor world. The principle in Agnes is much the same as that of the window in the church, by which she is symbolised; where we would normally expect to look outward, we see in the picture in the window the substance of the thought that has created the interior of the building; we become, as it were, surrounded by belief.

But while Agnes, like writing, makes a building of belief, she does not allow David to pass beyond - as, indeed, he no longer wants to do - and to experience life immediately; so that writing has come to replace the faith of dreaming, by interposing its own structure.

In accepting Agnes, then, David Copperfield understands life as narrative - as a Dream - , as an indoor world. But the price of doing so is the understanding of life only as narrative, and of leaving dreams and fictions, and the realism which is the realism of innocence and of amusement, in childhood. While David condemns himself to a second-time

---

74. David Copperfield, 839.

75. David Copperfield, 937.

life, we see that narrative has failed him, as autobiography would have failed Dickens, for it has shut out the real life of imagination, and left him in a shadow-world. That shadow-world becomes a place for recrimination and shame, where the written word displaces the loyalties of dreams. In the David Copperfield that emerges at the end of this novel, narrative displaces fiction, and the indoor world of the writer excludes the wider world of fiction.

David then finds himself rejecting his Aunt's generous vision, for he finds that a life of narrative cannot risk an experience of the whole world; while that world contains figures such as Aunt Betsey, it also contains Uriah Heep. Narrative finds itself forced then to stage its own reality, its own justice and its own feeling, and to reject the reality that Aunt Betsey half-exists in. While she helps David to choose an indoor life with Agnes, that life - as she well knows - can do nothing for her, and exists by isolating itself from the knowledge and division we have seen in her.

Effectively, then, in this novel, narrative fails; it fails to provide a vision of the world that is true beyond its own limitation, it fails to provide a generosity that can afford to care about the world outside itself, and it fails to make a better world for Aunt Betsey. The end of <u>David Copperfield</u> is the most restricted, and most house-bound point of Dickens' writing.

As I suggested above, however, we must once again realise the importance of Dickens' own place within it and his distance from David. It is not so much that he has failed his reader in David, as that David, and the orthodox writer, has failed Dickens' consciousness and vision. Dickens stands closer to Aunt Betsey than to David Copperfield, as a writer divided between fiction and narrative, hoping that narrative can make a coherent sense of the world but, rather like Miss Flite in

Bleak House, doing so in spite of his knowledge of narrative.

What Dickens both discovers and demonstrates in David, then, is that the narrator of the novel must be a persona, and cannot be the fully self-conscious writer. Writing, we see, is not an isolated activity but the act of mediation which Aunt Betsey undertakes for this novel between the writing consciousness and the muddy, miserable, but also fascinating and attractive world outside, the world that belongs to fiction.

CHAPTER V

NARRATIVE IN THE NOVEL, II; GREAT EXPECTATIONS

David Copperfield produces a writer's world, from which, rather oddly, we find Dickens at a distance. In this novel, the coherence of individuality, and the individual authority upon which such coherence depends, is tested, and fails. Authority comes to rest instead with Aunt Betsey, divided between private narrative and public fiction.

David Copperfield represents an attempt to produce a world without the irony which we saw interfering with the earlier attempts at authorial assertiveness, and taking us back into the fictive world of the reader, where the writer must be a persona of himself. Only in a writing without irony, of course, can narrative exist as an authoritative and significant medium. In the emergence of Aunt Betsey as the Novel's dominant voice this attempt fails. Aunt Betsey demonstrates narrative's failure - and it fails very much in spite of her - ; but she is also the last resort of Dickens' narrative sense, insofar as that sense attempts to be an inclusive and unified whole.

In the novels that follow David Copperfield we see any such attempt at a narrative unity abandoned. As we have seen, Bleak House effectively makes Aunt Betsey the controlling voice of a fictive world, Esther taking up and demonstrating the universality of a suffering, subjected vision. In the figure of Little Dorrit narrative is then seen as an imprisonment. She confronts David Copperfield's failure, not as Esther does, with the generosity and self-limitation of suffering and hardship, but instead with a ferocious determination whose awful tenacity survives and conquers everything. In Little Dorrit narrative returns as a conscience, asserting that the values of domestic and social

order, of careful housekeeping and sound economics should govern the world in spite of their imaginative limitation. Instead of Krook, lightening the burden of existence by evaporation, we find Little Dorrit making it heavier by a dogged solidity which is the solidity of narrative intention. It is she who bears the weight of the narrative, emerging from the gloom of the Marshalsea - with all its associations in the past of both the novel and Dickens' own life - to revitalise the will of social respectability in Clennam, who seems more the novel's victim than its hero.

This revitalisation I find one of the deadest things in all Dickens' writing, for in creating it Dickens buries his instinctive self in his purpose.[1] Moreover, the purposive will now barely seem his own; for the first time in his writing a character - the figure of Little Dorrit - seems to be armed with the writer's purpose and, more importantly, manages to carry that purpose through to the end of the book. In her, the attractive, infatuating world is ironed out of the novel by an overwhelming common sense. She represents the other side of Esther's limitation; while both figures embody the abandonment of narrative as a unifying and inclusive medium, Little Dorrit shows us the result of a determination to have the novel as a social success rather than the Swivelleresque achievement Bleak House leaves the writer as the best that the novel can do. While the latter novel is content, in the interests of the fictive, to show the incapacities of narrative, Little Dorrit is determined to have narrative as unity at any price.

It is in this unity then that the meaning of the novel as narrative, as it failed Aunt Betsey, seems least acceptable. We begin to realise

---

1. F.R. Leavis echoes this view when he writes that Dickens' 'genius' in Little Dorrit "is a potency of thought" in Dickens the Novelist, 219.

that failure itself was a protection from Little Dorrit's terrible success, and that in David Copperfield Dickens was saved from the ending of his own novel by Aunt Betsey's knowledge that narrative must always fail; and was saved from the story of David's life by the story of Aunt Betsey's life.

But while Little Dorrit presents us with narrative as conscience, the novel also faces the source of that conscience. Little Dorrit takes over the writer's narrative purpose; but in doing so she provides an opportunity to examine the causes of failure, and while we find in the novel what is least acceptable to the imaginative world of writing, we also find an opportunity to discover the root of the limitation in narrative which has made the novel so difficult and problematic of achievement.

What the novel then discovers is that the limitations of narrative lie in its very virtues, just as the great failure of the novel is Little Dorrit's success. Where David Copperfield sets out to test narrative, the real purpose of Little Dorrit - no less tenacious than her own intentions - is to confine the novel *to* narrative. In this way, the novel can become an act of exorcism. The product of the Marshalsea is no longer what, but for Aunt Betsey, it would have been in David Copperfield, Dickens himself, but the separate figure of Little Dorrit; and in the same way the lessons of economic necessity no longer impinge upon the writer, but are absorbed in the enervated figure of Arthur Clennam. In these two figures autobiographical interests are objectified, and the close identification with the past which threatened David Copperfield is restored to an act of sympathy and of self-examination. The past no longer seems productive of an inescapable self, an all-embracing phantom of narrow individuality, but instead of different *kinds* of self, and of individuality now viewed not so much in

fear of constraint as in the liberty of an intelligent self-analysis.

That self-analysis begins a process of renunciation; the world of Little Dorrit is a world of narrative, and as critics have repeatedly pointed out, it is a world of prisons. Narrative exists as this world, and not as an escape from it; and we realise by the end of the novel that Clennam and Little Dorrit are still imprisoned with it:

> They went quietly down into the roaring streets, inseparable and blessed; and as they passed along in sunshine and shade, the noisy and the eager, the arrogant and the froward and the vain, fretted, and chafed, and made their usual uproar.[2]

What the writing knows, here, is what Aunt Betsey knew, but what David Copperfield, in his proximity to Dickens, cannot afford to admit; that no narrative purpose or intention can change the world. What it implicitly accepts is that the Marshalsea is as real to the end of the novel as it was to its beginning, and that nothing has been or can be written out of the lives of Little Dorrit or Arthur Clennam. In providing this acceptance the novel provides an acceptance of the past of the individual - of the blacking factory - and of the fact that the limitation of narrative lies in what seemed to be its virtue, in the promise of a better world. In the end of Little Dorrit the fairy tale that narrative promised recedes, as does the vision of an unlimited possibility in the brave new condition of the middle class world.

It is in this promise of a better world, then, that this novel finds narrative wrong; and while it provides in Little Dorrit herself the figure that lies guiltily behind David Copperfield's hopes and actions, the figure of a sister that never was, it also shows - what Aunt Betsey knew all along - that that guilt was as wrong as the expectation which produced it. Little Dorrit, and her forebear in

---

2. Little Dorrit, 895.

Betsey Copperfield,[3] is the figure narrative would have made of Dickens in its promise of a better world; and only now does that fact begin to be realised as characteristic of narrative and of the middle-class expectations behind narrative, rather than of a guilty past.

Little Dorrit begins a process of realisation, of what the failure of narrative means to the writer; and that process is continued and completed in A Tale of Two Cities.

As Edgar Johnson pointed out, this novel takes the figures of Little Dorrit and Clennam further in their objectification of parts of the writer's self, making this novel a highly personal fiction. He quotes Dickens' Preface to the novel,

> I have so far verified what is said and done and suffered in these pages as that I have certainly done and suffered it all myself,[4]

and continues,

> The idea for the story had come to him while he was tearing himself apart as Richard Wardour in The Frozen Deep, and Sidney Carton's sacrifice of his life...magnifies into chords of exaltation, Wardour's death struggle among the ice floes of the artic. Watching Dickens die every night... was the fair and unattainable creature whom his imprisoning marriage rendered hopelessly remote... During the month that followed, Dickens had thought of separation from Catherine as impossible, of his marriage as an iron-bound and stone-walled misery ...from which he could never escape. It is not strange that in the fantasy from which imagination is born he should dream of a prisoner bitterly immured for years and at last set free of a love serenely consumated, and a despairing love triumphantly rising to a height of noble surrender. These emotions were his; he had known and suffered them all.[5]

---

3. Little Dorrit is the daughter Aunt Betsey conceives in David Copperfield, in her initial attempt at direction of the novel.

4. See Penguin edition of A Tale of Two Cities, 30; and Edgar Johnson, Charles Dickens, 972.

5. Edgar Johnson, Charles Dickens, 972.

The purpose of the novel is not, however, this crude relief of real feelings in fiction. While these correspondences are important, Dickens' intentions in dealing with them operate at a much deeper level. The novel is concerned primarily with the relationship of narrative, writer and novel, and is a study of the dissociation begun in Little Dorrit. Each figure represents withdrawal and dissociation revealed within what have previously been the primary associative processes of narrative.

Mr Lorry, then, seems at first to be the descendant of Pickwick and Brownlow, the man of generosity and sheer good feeling: but he has acquired a tactfulness here which undermines his usefulness to narrative. At the very beginning of the novel he asks Lucie to regard him as a "speaking machine"[6] and tells her her past as "the story of one of our customers";[7] his attempt to approach the subject of Dr Manette's obsessive shoemaking as 'blacksmith's work' may seem more annoying than absurd until it is remembered that this is precisely what Dickens did for his own past when he wrote David Copperfield, making the blacking factory into a wine warehouse. Mr Lorry's tact represents precisely the bourgeois fastidiousness of the transformation from shoe polish to wine bottles. The stories Mr Lorry tells are machines which are engineered as vehicles of dissociation; so that he becomes an important part of Dickens' feelings about himself and his writing. His tactful truth is also a tactful truth about narrative, which - anticipating Mr Lorry's strategy - has come to be a form of dissociation. Mr Lorry takes the story of Little Dorrit one stage further in its self-consciousness, telling stories that are palpably there to fail. By telling us that stories are dissociative he also tells us that he himself

6. A Tale of Two Cities, 54.
7. A Tale of Two Cities, 54.

has nothing to do with the novel, becoming a kind of anti-Pickwick and offering, not his protection, but his indifference.

Mr Lorry would in one of Dickens' earlier novels be the writer-protector of the action, and his dissociation, while ungenerous, seems born of a detachment from action. But, curiously, in this novel, the other figures, from whom we would expect action, seem as dissociated and as convinced of the failures of their own stories as he is of his. Lucie, Manette and Darnay, the figures who would have been central to an earlier novel - interrelated as they are by the bonds of love, formal relationship, and a common past - fail to make any of these things, which previously seemed to be the values of narrative, matter to the story. Instead, the novel becomes the tale of the one man who seems to have no story and no past, of Sidney Carton. The narrative remains, and becomes identified with his choice of death, so rejecting the human ends of domestic stability and happiness, and of the working out of the past, the preoccupations of <u>David Copperfield</u>, from the substance of the narrative process.

Here, then, the guilt of the writer, which narrative seemed to press in failing to provide an humanitarian reflection of the world, is dissolved in the realisation that narrative must fail in every ending but that of death itself. Narrative, and its values, is left behind with Carton at the end of this novel, to realise itself in a death of sacrifice; and in the process narrative reveals itself as an enactment from which the stories which end before death must be excluded. In showing itself to be a form of death, it demonstrates its failure for those human stories of domestic happiness and personal memory, and so absolves the writing from personal guilt; narrative, it now appears, is not an individual failure - the failure of a Dickens who could not afford to <u>be</u> David Copperfield - but a general, collective failure which

is at once both literary and cultural. Narrative fails to provide a better world that is at the same time a humanly possible world, and in showing that failure A Tale of Two Cities brings the ending of Little Dorrit to its absolute conclusion.

It is only at this point that Dickens is fully prepared to examine the meaning of failure, not in its implications for his personal self, but for his function as writer, and for narrative itself.

By the end of A Tale of Two Cities Dickens has exorcised the ghost of the autobiographical self, and of the narrative without irony, which haunted David Copperfield, and is ready to return to the failures of that novel in an effort to confront the meaning of narrative, and of an existence in the writer's world. This, I shall argue, is the achievement of Great Expectations.

This novel is very much a reworking of David Copperfield; so much so that Dickens wrote in a letter to Forster while the book was being planned,

> To be quite sure I had fallen into no unconscious repetition, I read David Copperfield again the other day...[8]

Great Expectations is from the beginning a work of self-confident virtuosity, taking up the uncertainties of the earlier novel and replacing them with a firm sense of direction. "Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show",[9] we are told by David in the first sentence of his novel, as he goes on to "begin my life at the beginning of my life".[10] David Copperfield never really trusts the

---

8. Forster, Life, III, 329.
9. David Copperfield, 49.
10. David Copperfield, 49.

narrative that ultimately, as we have seen, betrays him, and begins at the beginning not because he feels himself identified with the narrative, but in order to perform the necessary function of narrator. Pip has no such doubts; and the beginning of Great Expectations could hardly be more different:

> My father's family name being Pirrip, and my christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer and more explicit than Pip. So, I called myself Pip, came to be called Pip.[11]

Pip takes it for granted that he and the world in general which is to be encompassed by his story are identical, and so does what Dickens elsewhere remains reluctant to do, and initiates a world of the writer; a world where the substance of the novel is to be the substance of the life of the individual. David's story begins, "as I have been informed and believe";[12] and this belief is the belief of narrative, a belief which confines and limits David's consciousness, but one which the novel sets out to test. What it presents as David Copperfield's starting point, however, is the possibility that a belief in narrative might be a belief in the outside world. When Pip plunges into "My first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things" the act of narrative is unqualified, but it contains no such belief in the outside world, and so is a solitary act.

Pip then does not exist, as David did, in order to test narrative, nor even to enforce some form of narrative life, but to show us the life that narrative produces for the individual who would undertake it as an authoritative - written - course of events.

Where David seeks to invent a narrative, Pip categorically invents himself *as* narrative; and, the greater his attempt to create a world

---

11. Great Expectations, 35.
12. Great Expectations, 49.

beyond his own individuality, the greater is the weight we see placed upon his own shoulders. We have already seen that he invents his own name; and he goes on to invent a family:

> The shape of the letters on my father's [tombstone] gave me an odd idea that he was a square, stout, dark man, with curly black hair. From the character and turn of the description, "Also Georgiana Wife of the above", I drew a childish conclusion that my mother was freckled and sickly. To five little stone lozenges, each about a foot and a half long, which were arranged in a neat row beside their grave, and were sacred to the memory of five little brothers of mine - who gave up trying to get a living, exceedingly early in that universal struggle - I am indebted for a belief I religiously entertained that they had all been born on their backs with their hands in their trouser-pockets, and had never taken them out in this state of existence.[13]

We begin to see here that Pip's loneliness is the condition of his narrative, and that his story is born of bereavement. Already, irony dominates the novel, for while we see a peculiar coherence in what Pip thinks, and so narrates, we also see that it is generated by his own utter fragmentation from the outside world. By inventing his own name Pip loses any identity that might still be given him by the world he lives in, and, in the same way, by inventing his mother and father he relinquishes his real -albeit past - relationship to them. Narrative does not respect memory, we see, but extinguishes it, enforcing its own form of invented association. It replaces Pip's relationship with reality with his story, and begins as the ending of any past life. So far as the narrative is concerned, the thoughts we hear in the first chapter of this novel are Pip's first thoughts, and he has no life before them, unlike David Copperfield, whose beginning exists only "as I have been informed and believe". Autobiography does not uncover but extinguishes the past of the writer, as we saw in the

---

13. Great Expectations, 35.

earlier novel which, without Aunt Betsey, would have condemned us to David's isolation at its ending.

Without Betsey's protection, Pip becomes bound to his own thoughts and words, in a world that is at once produced by his consciousness and destructive of it. Narrative seems to promise everything to Pip, but really offers nothing; hidden behind the inclusiveness of the idea of the story is the reality of its solitariness.

What this produces in terms of the action of the novel is very odd indeed. On the one hand, everything seems associative and coherent; the action does not seem chaotic and arbitrary, so much as to occur in direct response to the consciousness which relates and interprets it. But, at the same time, it is curiously limited to Pip.

Once the story has begun, then, everything that happens takes on the relation of narrative, and seems connected to what has happened already; but does so, not in terms of the wider world of the novel, but as an aspect of the privacy and solitude of Pip's world which seems unable to reach beyond the limitation of its own voice. We see this curious kind of division at work in the first chapter of the novel:

> My first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things, seems to me to have been gained on a memorable raw afternoon towards evening. At such a time I found out for certain, that this bleak place overgrown with nettles was the churchyard; and that Philip Pirrip, late of this parish, and also Georgiana, wife of the above, were dead and buried; and that Alexander, Bartholomew, Abraham, Tobias and Roger, infant children of the aforesaid, were also dead and buried; and that the dark flat wilderness beyond the churchyard, intersected with dykes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, was the marshes; and that the low leaden line beyond was the river; and that the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing, was the sea; and that the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry, was Pip.
>
> "Hold your noise!" cried a terrible voice, as a man started up from among the graves at the side

> of the church porch. "Keep still, you little
> devil, or I'll cut your throat!"[14]

The mastery in this passage is that of Dickens' own ironical consciousness, which shows us how narrative works as the correlative of need. Pip's misery and loneliness are the introduction for the convict, as if he occupies the space Pip creates for him. His first 'impression of the identity of things' is also his first impression of his own solitude and lack of identity; narrative begins as the sense of loss which the convict is conjured both to fill and express. Pip's crying produces the command to stop, but at the same time is produced _by_ it. His misery began, not necessarily on this "memorable raw afternoon" but "at such a time". What is acting here is not his memory but the memory of narrative, which extinguishes the precise course of real events by drawing them into the chain of association. The appearance of the convict confirms the existence of misery and solitude as narrative, just as that narrative in turn began in order to fulfil the need of which misery and solitude are the expression. Narrative then is revealed in the convict as a sense of guilt, and this guilt becomes the link between Pip's fear and the convict's appearance, writing his past into a story.

Pip's voice is a defensive one, and is defensive against solitude; but what it conjures in its associative impulse only confirms its solitariness. When Pip looks outwards to the world outside he sees only the marsh - which in a sense is his version of the foggy world of _Bleak House_, a world of real, but ordinary lives, outside and resistant to the special life of narrative. In the same way, when he seeks relationship with the world, and some identification of the people who occupy it, he finds the convict who, as we see, is a kind of human marsh

---

14. _Great Expectations_, 35-6.

himself -

> A man who had been soaked in water, and smothered in mud, and lamed by stones, and cut by flints...; who limped, and shivered, and glared and growled; and whose teeth chattered in his head as he seized me by the chin[15]

- and who brings Pip knowledge of what the marshes contain and mean. They become a world of animal realities, dominated by energy and terror. As he tells Pip,

> There's a young man hid with me, in comparison with which young man I am an Angel. That young man hears the words I speak. That young man has a secret way pecoolier to himself, of getting at a boy, and at his heart, and at his liver. It is in wain for a boy to attempt to hide himself from that young man. A boy may lock his door, may be warm in bed, may tuck himself up, may draw the clothes over his head, may think himself comfortable and safe, but that young man will softly creep and creep his way to him and tear him open.[16]

This phantom becomes the spirit of the marshes, and has two real faces. The first is that of Compeyson, the man behind Magwitch's own predicament - "hid with me" not literally, but as the enemy who has driven him both to criminal action at first, and then to this escape - ; and the second is Pip's own enemy, Orlick, whom he sees as a part of the marsh, and who brings the fear the convict evokes out of marshes, and into Pip's house. To both of these figures I will return; the point that I want to make here is that in each case the marshes become a death-like demon, and as Magwitch returns to his hiding-place he seems to half-belong to this world of the dead:

> As I saw him go...he looked in my young eyes as if he were eluding the hands of the dead people, stretching up cautiously out of their graves, to get a twist upon his ankle and pull him in.[17]

---

15. Great Expectations, 36.
16. Great Expectations, 38.
17. Great Expectations, 38.

and then

> I could faintly make out the only two black things in all the prospect that seemed to be standing upright; one of these was the beacon by which the sailors steered...; the other a gibbet, with some chains hanging to it which had once held a pirate. The man was limping on towards this latter, as if he were the pirate come to life, and come down, and going back to hook himself up again.[18]

Already, then, the marsh has become an image of a world Pip wants to leave, and his narrative has in it its initial identification of the world which it is to evade. This world is the world of Pip's own past, for the hands that reach out at the convict's ankles, "the dead people" in the graveyard, are in a sense Pip's family; the marsh makes this graveyard seem universal, a kind of general reality in which people live and die in oblivion. The marsh land becomes a vision of an underworld from which the convict emerges to threaten, and into which he now returns.

This marsh world is the world Pip wants to write himself out of, just as David sought to write himself out of life under the direction of Murdstone. While David, however, saw the world he lived in divided - between life in the Murdstone world, and life at Dover with Aunt Betsey - Pip makes the division in himself. The appearance of the convict produces in him a secret self. As he tells us, "...I have often thought that few people know what secrecy there is in the young, under terror" so that "I am afraid to think what I might have done".[19] The marshes represent not just an external threat but another, private terror, an alter ego over which the narrating Pip is 'afraid to think' he might have had no control.

This fear then is at once the source of Pip's written authority

---

18. Great Expectations, 39.

19. Great Expectations, 87.

and its limitation. His narrative, writing voice is produced out of it; but is afraid to think of the secret world it seeks to leave and conceal; the world that Dickens' ironical vision of coherence in Pip makes of what we have previously known as the world of fiction.

I will return to the role that the fictive world plays in this novel later in my discussion. As yet, however, we have only seen the beginning of Pip's 'writing'; it is necessary now to see how it develops the narrative world it has initiated, and is committed to.

The figure upon which Pip's narrative focusses, of course, is that of Miss Havisham.

Just as the beginning of Pip's story is a parody of David's loneliness and hardship, so the aim he conceives for his story parodies the purpose David conceives in his evasion of the world of his childhood. Miss Havisham is in a sense a version of Aunt Betsey; but where the latter is a divided figure, and half exists in the world of the reader, the former remains entirely undivided. In a novel which is concerned to show us the nature of the narrative voice, Miss Havisham gives us a vision of the life of writing.

Miss Havisham then shares Aunt Betsey's knowledge of reality, and of the disappointment of innocence which is at the root of the suffering that Betsey seeks to hide. This suffering, we saw, either destroys control or drives it indoors to Agnes. While Aunt Betsey gains her own authority for that novel, however, by recognising the futility of attempting to control the world, Miss Havisham has refused to make any such recognition.

Pip, of course, is sent to Miss Havisham, shortly after the convict episode, upon her whim, to amuse her:

> ...I saw that everything within my view which ought to be white, had been white long ago, and had lost its lustre, and was faded and yellow. I saw that the bride within the bridal dress had withered like the dress, and like the flowers, and had no brightness left but the brightness of her sunken eyes. I saw that the dress had been put upon the rounded figure of a young woman, and that the figure upon which it now hung lose, had shrunk to skin and bone. Once, I had been taken to see some ghastly waxwork at the fair, representing I know not what impossible personage lying in state. Once, I had been taken to one of our old marsh churches to see a skeleton in the ashes of a rich dress, that had been dug out of a vault under the church pavement. Now, waxwork and skeleton seemed to have dark eyes that moved and looked at me.[20]

Where Aunt Betsey, then, half-resigns the story she once made for her life to a reality beyond her control, Miss Havisham has never let her story go, and lives out its ending. Where Aunt Betsey determined to accept the unwritten and chaotic world which ruined her life - and thereby saved it from complete destruction - Miss Havisham clings to events as they were once set down. Nothing chance, or written, impinges upon the objects in her room; in adhering to that once-happy sense of narrative she had made life an ending. At the same time, however, she has retained a self-defeating kind of control over the events that are finished, remaining the author of an existence she once wrote for herself.

It is this sense of authorship in her, of course, which Pip immediately finds impressive. Like the waxwork and the skeleton, she is a kind of morbid artefact, presenting her life to us as a completed spectacle. In this, Pip sees the marshland churchyard oddly transformed from a sense of ordinariness and commonness into a home for his sense of himself. While he sees death in Miss Havisham, it seems a different kind of death to that of the universal graveyard of the marshes. Miss Havisham brings death indoors, and in privatising it seems to Pip to

---

20. <u>Great Expectations</u>, 87.

control it. In her, everything seems to have been completed, and to be set out for ever:

> I began to understand that everything in the room had stopped, like the watch and the clock, a long time ago. I noticed that Miss Havisham put down the jewel exactly on the spot from which she had taken it up. ... Without this arrest of everything, this standing still of all the pale decayed objects, not even the withered bridal-dress on the collapsed form could have looked so like grave-clothes, or the long veil so like a shroud.[21]

The last action of Miss Havisham's narrative was the last action of the real world for her, and in this way she shows us the real meaning of David's indoor world, achieving a final unity through the isolation he found to be the world of narrative. She shows us that truth to narrative is truth to its ending, and that autobiography ends as a curious kind of self-arrest. Miss Havisham's life then is the book David wanted to write, and she is the true author of it.

In Miss Havisham, Pip quite literally sees his end. He has no interest in the reader's world - the marsh-world - which Miss Havisham seems to exclude, and he wants to share her story and to enter her part of reality, the world where things are written and apparently permanent. What he does not see, of course, is what Esther showed us; that the writer's vision of retrospect does not include the reader's anticipation. Miss Havisham controls the past, and makes the world seem a place controllable by looking back; and Pip wants a place in that backward vision, not realising that its coherence does not defeat fragmentation, but exists alongside and even subject to the chaotic and arbitrary.

Miss Havisham then is only the projected end of Pip's story, the

---

21. Great Expectations, 89-90.

place where his narrative is to be finished. As with the convict his vision of her seems associative, and to offer him a kind of social inclusiveness,while what it in fact becomes is not so much a wider, outside world, as another aspect of the limitation of his own voice. His identification of her as the end of his story is also a separation from her; again, unlike David, he does not believe in her as a figure external to himself - as David believes in his Aunt - but as an aspect of the narrative which he has conceived as a part of his own ego.

Pip only begins to have a direct relationship with Miss Havisham as he nears the end of his own story. In the meantime, he views the substance of his narrative very differently, as attached to the figure of Estella.

Estella, predictably, shows us what would have become of Aunt Betsey's protegees if the latter had remained in the writer's world - and not allowed them to marry the baker. Estella is the child of disappointment; but she is also the child of Miss Havisham's purpose and intention which as we have seen occupy the written world. In Estella, the world as Miss Havisham sets it down exists to be mistaken for reality. If the latter is the author of the work she has made of her life, then Estella is the present realisation of its content, bringing her retrospective vision into the real world. She is the embodiment of the knowledge of suffering, and such knowledge is the content of narrative, so that in her Pip sees the true content of his own story, a way of belonging to the story Miss Havisham looks back upon. Estella then represents Pip's direct relationship with the narrative world.

Even this relationship - indeed, we might say, this relationship in particular - is subject to the limitation of Pip's voice to his own consciousness. Pip shows us that, in the written world of narrative, association is itself a form of suffering which takes the form of a

continual disappointment.

Upon his first visit to Miss Havisham's, Estella is instructed to feed Pip:

> She came back, with some bread and meat and a little mug of beer. She put the mug down on the stones of the yard, and gave me the bread and meat without looking at me, as insolently as if I were a dog in disgrace. I was so humiliated, hurt, spurned, offended, angry, sorry - I cannot hit upon the right name for the smart - God knows what its name was - that tears started to my eyes.[22]

The name of Pip's smart of course is the consciousness of commonness. Estella makes him feel like the animal he saw in the convict on the marshes, and as if he belongs to that marsh world which, we saw above, his narrative is conceived to evade. Estella seems to live at this point of the novel in the other world he sees ending in Miss Havisham, and from this point he aspires to that world, and to Estella, as the substance of his own story. It is here, then, that we hear his first complaint against life with his sister, and with Joe:

> I had known from the time when I could speak, that my sister, in her capricious and violent coercion, was unjust to me. I had cherished a profound conviction that her bringing me up by hand, gave her no right to bring me up by jerks.[23]

Pip's rejection of his sister is most important to this early part of the novel. If we remember the veneration in which David's sister was to be held by Aunt Betsey, we realise that Betsey's protection is precisely what Pip's sister has never had. She becomes the demon of the suffering that exposure to the harsh necessities of the world produces; while we hear of her sharp tongue, and of her bringing up by hand, she never treats Pip with any cruelty which is other than the cruelty of the world as she sees it, and as it has treated her. Estella becomes to

---

22. Great Expectations, 92.

23. Great Expectations, 92.

Pip his Betsey Trotwood, the figure of the ideal sister and woman, replacing his sister's presence in his consciousness; and Estella, as Miss Havisham's protegee is in a sense precisely that protected and cared-for figure the earlier novel sought.

She is also, however, the protege of resentment. Her protection is actually born out of that very cruelty that Pip seeks to evade in his sister. Both in her adoption by Miss Havisham, and in her actual parentage, she belongs to the marshy, foggy world that destroys stories; and while she is presented as the content of narrative, the ideal sister Pip wants, the secret that is at the root of her nature is that narrative is as ordinary, and as common, as the world of the marshes, and can only exist alongside that world.

The irony in this is that Pip's narrative, in rebelling against a home life with the sister who seems to restrict aspiration, replaces her with a figure who is the representative of that very restrictedness, the child of the suffering he seems to reject. Pip's narrative punishes his sister for not providing the content it wants, through the resentment and violence it creates in Orlick, condemning her to a life of constant suffering as an invalid.

In Estella this cruel world which narrative would control becomes the very content of narrative. She is herself the child of cruelty, both in birth and in upbringing; in her, the suffering world takes its revenges upon narrative, showing that the content of the world is beyond control, and belongs to the marsh-world, the limitless, ordinary world in which it began, and which it wants to escape.

The difference that Estella makes, of course, is that in the content of narrative rather than of the everyday world, everything is removed in her from its first and immediate context. Narrative puts everything into a second-time world. Estella is the second version of Miss

Havisham's life; and when Pip in turn adopts her for his story she becomes the second version of his life, replacing his sister and his life at home. She reveals the fictive world as being newly disguised by narrative - where it would seek to control fiction - and in doing so shows the world of fiction to be lost to the narrating consciousness. Once left, the marshy world and its real feelings cannot be revisited; life at home disappears from narrative.

Pip suffers this disappearance; Miss Havisham herself seems to design it, but, as we shall see, she finds herself as limited by her design in her relation with Estella as Pip does and suffers similarly. Meanwhile, its consequences are stranger and more far-reaching than she herself realises, for in investing his story in Estella Pip does not merely suffer disappointment, but continual hints - and terrors - of a world he has lost. The first of these occurs upon Pip's first visit to Miss Havisham, and produces an incident which seems inexplicable. In the garden of the old brewery, Pip tells us,

> [I could see] that there was a track upon the green and yellow paths, as if someone sometimes walked there, and that Estella was walking away from me even then. But she seemed to be everywhere. For, when I yielded to the temptation presented by the casks, and began to walk on them, I saw her walking on them at the end of the yard of casks. She had her back towards me and held her pretty brown hair spread out in her two hands, and never looked round, and passed out of my view directly. So, in the brewery itself...I saw her pass among the extinguished fires, and ascend some light iron stairs, and go out on a gallery high overhead, as if she were going out to the sky.
>
> It was in this place, and at this moment, that a strange thing happened to my fancy. I thought it a strange thing then, and I thought it a stranger thing long afterwards. I turned my eyes - a little dimmed by looking up at the frosty light - towards a great wooden beam in a low nook of the building near me on my right hand, and I saw a figure hanging there by the neck. A figure all in yellow white, with but one shoe to the foot; and it hung so, that I could see that the faded trimmings of the dress were like earthy

> paper, and that the face was Miss Havisham's, with a movement going over the whole countenance as if she were trying to call me.[24]

Pip has effectively excluded strange and dream-like incidents such as this in asserting the form of narrative as the substance of his vision; as indeed has Miss Havisham, to whom Estella is a revenge upon narratives, and not intentionally a part of the suffering and fictive world. The apparition of Miss Havisham, then, which would have seemed integral to Oliver's fictive imagination, is merely terrifying to Pip, and is in a sense an aspect of that 'secret' self which Pip makes of his alter ego in the marshes, as a manifestation of its (to narrative) deathly imagination.

Estella then shows Pip's world of narrative what Miss Havisham herself does not entirely understand, the suffering of the marshy world that threatens and terrifies it. With "a movement going over her whole countenance" we see Miss Havisham for a moment racked with the feeling and suffering that Pip's narrative would exclude, in another world. Estella brings to the story what is unwritten in Miss Havisham's past, and represents the secret life on the other side of narrative intention as well as being the vehicle of resentment, which is again a suppressed suffering.

Pip finds that the life he had before his narrative was conceived is lost to him; and that, having left the world of the marshes, he cannot return there. Apprenticed to Joe, he finds himself living between two worlds, living an everyday life with a narrative conscience:

> Home had never been a very pleasant place to me, because of my sister's temper. But, Joe had sanctified it, and I had believed in it. ... I had believed in the forge, as the glowing road to manhood and independence. Within a single year, all

---

24. Great Expectations, 93.

> this was changed. Now, it was all coarse and common, and I would not have had Miss Havisham and Estella see it on any account[25]

so that

> I was haunted by the fear that she would, sooner or later, find me out, with a black face and hands, doing the coarsest part of my work, and would exult over me and despise me.[26]

The 'exultation' Pip projects in Estella here is in a perverse way his own, a means of leaving behind his sister, Joe and the forge even while he remains there. These feelings, the feelings of narrative, replace the old feelings of Pip's home life, where, as he tells us - for we have never witnessed it - he 'believed' in things as they were. Now, his resignation to the marsh life is his resignation to obscurity;

> I used to stand about in the churchyard on Sunday evening, when night was falling, comparing my own perspective with the windy marsh view, and making out some likeness between them by thinking how flat and low both were, and how on both there came an unknown way, and then the mist, and then the sea.[27]

It is not so much the prospect of death or ending that Pip fears here, as that of a 'flat' and 'low' oblivion; not so much the sea itself as the dark mist of the unknown way towards it. Once again, this is narrative's, and the writer's vision of what we saw in Bleak House could be the fictive world.[28] The river which is here an 'unknown way' is the same fog-bound story with which the earlier novel began; but here Pip views not a life within it, as Esther did, but (here an apparently impossible) escape from it. To narrative, the foggy world is a limbo, a meaningless, inactive, and not least common place.

Strangely, we find that even Pip is capable of experiencing this

---

25. Great Expectations, 134.
26. Great Expectations, 136.
27. Great Expectations, 135.
28. See pages 123, 153, above.

ordinariness as a kind of protection, as if for narrative self-contempt can become a half-fictive barrier between the self and the world. As with Dr Manette, the activity of blacksmith's work leads away from the narrative he has made of life, as an escape from the narrative meaning which was in turn conceived as an escape from the life he leads. In Great Expectations, Dickens shows us that while the two worlds of Pip's consciousness seem mutually exclusive, they really belong together, and at this point in the novel the terrors and fears which have haunted Pip's narrative sense of himself cease as an ordinary life evades for a while the relentless course of the story.

When the story returns with Pip's fortune, this protection becomes unbearable to him. His will never ceases to be a narrative will, and once it is able it rejects home, and the figure who increasingly occupies that home, that of Joe.

With his sister's disablement, Joe, who from the beginning had 'sanctified' Pip's sense of home[29] becomes the voice of the marsh world, and as such directly opposes Pip's narrative sense in a way which in offering protection as we have seen Pip finds more difficult to disown than his sister's bullying. Where Pip's sister presented merely a shrill and uncomfortable voice of hardship, Joe shows us that there is a strength and solidity which can endow the ordinary, unwritten world (Joe, of course, is illiterate, and so dissents directly from any narrative Pip might write for himself).

This strength becomes most apparent and most wrong to Pip when he does seem to succeed in leaving it behind, upon the apparent fulfilment of his expectations. In his illiteracy and apparent stupidity he seems to be beyond the scope of writing; but upon close examination we find that his words are only beyond the writing of narrative, and themselves

29. Great Expectations, 134.

belong wholly to that same world we saw the convict appearing from, and Estella disappearing to. When Pip asks him, in his 'improved position', whether it isn't "a pity now...that you did not get on a little more, when we had our lessons here?"[30] Joe replies,

> Well, I don't know... I'm so awful dull, I'm only master of my own trade. It were always a pity as I was so awful dull; but its no more a pity now, than it was - this day twelvemonth - don't you see![31]

Pip emphatically does not see; but the sense of story which his promotion confirms is not one that Joe can share. To Joe, nothing really changes in progression, so that what is 'a pity' now always was, and always will be a pity. Pip's narrative consciousness is meaningless to him, as life at home now means nothing to Pip, being something he finally seems to have left behind.

With the resumption of progression, however, he loses that protection he rejects in Joe and in which even now he does not believe. The first sign of this new loneliness is the return of terror with the appearance of some convicts on a coach on the way to Miss Havisham's, and Pip's recognition of the man who had been Magwitch's messenger. At this point, Pip experiences "the revival for a few minutes of the terror of childhood".[32] But this terror is only a momentary loss of control of a condition which is now endemic to Pip's world, as he begins to realise the nature of the narrative world which, he sees, must replace his life with Joe for ever.

It becomes the prelude to his reunion with Estella, and to what is perhaps the oddest and most difficult part of the novel. As he tells us in Chapter 29, he goes to meet Estella as if to claim, finally, the

---

30. Great Expectations, 174.
31. Great Expectations, 174.
32. Great Expectations, 252.

content of the story we have seen him write for himself, supposing that Miss Havisham has "reserved it for me to restore the desolate house, admit the sunshine into the dark rooms, set the clocks a-going" and "do all the shining deeds of the young Knight of romance, and marry the Princess".[33]

This of course is still the fairy-tale that Pip has imagined for himself from the beginning, and he makes the assumption which we saw that Bleak House refused to make,[34] that the sleeping narratives of the foggy world can be awakened by a Knightly hero. What we see happening in the course of his meeting with Estella is a process of disillusion; but this is not a disillusion with narrative but with everything other than narrative. As he tells us in his own retrospective, narrative voice,

> The unqualified truth is, that when I loved Estella with the love of a man, I loved her simply because I found her irresistible. Once for all; I know to my sorrow, often and often, if not always, that I loved her against reason, against promise, against peace, against hope, against happiness, against all discouragement that could be. Once for all; I loved her none the less because I knew it, and it had no more influence in restraining me, than if I had devoutly believed her to be human perfection.[35]

This faithlessness is the direct opposite of Miss Flite's fictive belief. Instead of placing his faith in the outside world in spite of the doubts of his own self, Pip places a faith in himself, and in the narrative it has made, in spite of the lack of belief that it has in the world outside. Insisting always upon his 'I', Pip maintains his narrative in spite of everything, just as Miss Flite - and through her Esther - maintained her fiction in spite of everything. The failure of Pip's belief in a world outside here is the failure we see in David, at

---

33. Great Expectations, 253.
34. See page 123 above.
35. Great Expectations, 253-4.

the end of David Copperfield; except that here, its faithlessness governs the whole narrative. We only realise its real meaning now, when it is challenged by the failure of the outside world. Pip's aspirations have seemed isolating and limitating, but only here do we begin to see the extent of their limitation.

Pip's continuing narrative makes self-presentation seem the function of narrative, and makes it appear to be an end in itself; and this is effectively the realisation he reaches in the passage above by resolving to write without faith.

A momentary panic began this realisation; Pip's faithlessness now controls such panic, and while it does not extinguish the possibility of further terror, of shock and disappointment, it is a sign of his preparation for anything that might become his story, for Pip now effectively possesses a readiness to believe in nothing but the images of the self, and to turn the world into the writing that can be the province of that first person vision. Pip here ceases to offer the real self that did half-believe in the forge and in Joe, and offers instead the written individuality that reality demands if narrative is to be continued.

We see this self-presentation at work almost immediately: Pip finds that Estella

> ...was so much...changed, ...in all things winning admiration had made such a wonderful advance, that I seemed to have made none. I fancied, as I looked at her, that I slipped hopelessly back into the coarse and common boy again. Oh the sense of distance and disparity that came upon me, and the inaccessibility that came about her.[36]

Already, Estella is made an image of Pip's love, and we see in her the ideal which narrative has previously only suggested to Pip. Pip ceases to see 'through' Estella, as he did before, and into the world

36. Great Expectations, 256.

of suffering, for his faithlessness allows him to believe only his own vision. This vision makes what was previously general and universal, even in Pip's childish eyes, individual and singular. He sees only his own aspirations in Estella now, and nothing beyond them, and plays out the scene as her adorer.

At the same time, her previous disappearance becomes her private mystery, fastening the younger Pip's imagination upon Estella herself. Where he previously glimpsed the pain and sorrow of Miss Havisham, he now sees only the figure before him:

> What *was* it that was borne upon my mind when she stood still and looked attentively at me? ... I looked again, and though she was still looking at me, the suggestion was gone.
> What *was* it?[37]

- And then,

> In another moment we were in the brewery so long disused, and she pointed out to the high gallery where I had seen her going out on that same day, and told me she remembered to have been up there, and to have seen me standing scared below. As my eyes followed her white hand, again the same dim suggestion that I could not possibly grasp crossed me. My involuntary start occasioned her to lay her hand upon my arm. Instantly the ghost passed once more and was gone.
> What *was* it?[38]

It is extraordinary that Pip does not remember here his earlier apparition; narrative so dominates his consciousness now that his imagination can seek only stories in others, and those earlier glimpses of another world are lost to him. We shall return to the story he seeks in Estella; meanwhile, of course, Pip has taken up precisely the part that Miss Havisham wants the male world, the world at whose hands and through whose hypocrisy she suffered, to play. As she herself tells him, 'real love'

---

37. *Great Expectations*, 259.
38. *Great Expectations*, 259.

> ...is blind devotion, unquestioning self-humiliation, utter submission, trust and disbelief against yourself and against the whole world, giving up your whole heart and soul to the smiter - as I did.[39]

The course of the novel seems determined. She has herself no idea that the world of suffering could be glimpsed through Estella; the latter seems to her, at this point in the story, to be as written and finalised as her own fate. Miss Havisham is herself like Pip in believing only in the world of narrative, in spite of the fictive and innocent world she, like Pip, half occupied in her youth.

Miss Havisham and Pip then seem to have in common the content of the control they have chosen to exercise as the stories of their lives. Miss Havisham offers Estella as the content of a narrative she will tell, as it were, from its end; and Pip accepts Estella for the sake of that control, however malevolent it may turn out to be.

We have already seen that Estella's nature has seemed to offer a side that we have seen neither Pip nor Miss Havisham accept or understand, for she represents the suffering world at the heart of both of their narratives, and is its child.

This gives her a power we have already seen in her as a child, to disrupt the course of the story and to suggest the other world of real feelings which we have seen oddly invested in her. The change of heart that occurs in the middle of Pip's relations with Estella and Miss Havisham seems inexplicable; and, as with much else that seems strange in the novel, its source would seem to be Estella.

Firstly, then, we hear Estella warning Pip in a rather different voice from the taunting one we have heard and know as a part of Miss Havisham's control. Pip himself depends as he has from the beginning upon this control - "she knew she could not choose but obey Miss

---

39. Great Expectations, 261.

Havisham" - and accepts "that tone which expressed that our association was forced upon us".[40] But, he tells us, "There were other times when she would come to a sudden check in this tone and in all her many tones, and would seem to pity me":[41]

> "Pip, Pip," she said one evening, coming to such a check, when we sat apart at a darkening window of the house in Richmond; "will you never take warning?"[42]

There can be little doubt that here Estella tries to change the course of things by leading Pip away from the narrative Miss Havisham has decreed. She fails, of course, Pip referring us in his own narrative back to Miss Havisham's control,[43] and continuing with the distinct and formal observation that

> My dread always was, that this knowledge on her part laid me under a heavy disadvantage with her pride, and made me the subject of a rebellious struggle in her bosom[44]

sounding, in this labouriously written prose, more like a civil servant than a lover.

Estella's second attempt to change the story is more successful. Having failed to lead Pip away from his written self, she turns to her adopted mother, and shows her what that writing means in reality.

As I suggested above, Miss Havisham is like Pip in that she knows only the narrative she attempts to bring about through Estella, and she wants, through her, to leave the world of suffering, her first life, behind in a perfected narrative in which she both revenges and controls. Like Pip, she rejects the 'home' life of the ordinary world which first

---

40. Great Expectations, 319.
41. Great Expectations, 319.
42. Great Expectations, 319.
43. See page 211 above.
44. Great Expectations, 319.

deceived her, and does so without realising that it can have any importance to her. Unlike Pip, however, she has not determined to be completely faithless, for she has one faith left to her; and that faith is Estella.

In a world where all faith seems lost, this relation is the one means Estella finds of changing the narrative that is to destroy all relations. We hear that Miss Havisham is "dreadfully fond"[45] of Estella; when Pip's association with her is at its height he accompanies her to Satis house, where he witnesses, for the first time as he tells us, the following confrontation between them: "What would you have?" Estella asks:

> "Love," replied the other.
> "You have it."
> "I have not," said Miss Havisham.
> "Mother by adoption" retorted Estella, never departing from the easy grace of her attitude... I have said that I owe everything to you. All I possess is freely yours. All that you have given me, is at your command to have again. Beyond that, I have nothing. And if you ask me to give you what you never gave me, my gratitude and duty cannot do impossibilities.[46]

Estella's words here are the opposite of her words to Pip; they are peculiarly formed and written. In them, Miss Havisham faces the lost meaning of her story, and the meaning of the story she has made for Pip as nothing but another kind of loss. She finally begins to see Estella's life deprived of the feeling she still seeks herself, and finds herself left with the feeling she has written out of Estella. Miss Havisham finds that her faith to narrative, and to her own disappointed story, is that faithlessness in all else we have seen in Pip; it is no coincidence that Pip sees her late that night in a passage in the house, "going along it in a ghostly manner, making a low

---

45. Great Expectations, 320.
45. Great Expectations, 322-2.

cry", "a most unearthly object"[47] by the light of her candle. She finds that narrative is not a way of continuing life, but of living without feeling, and this knowledge, which Pip showed us above, makes a ghost of the world she has made of Estella.

Miss Havisham recognises Estella as the disappearance of those ideals of narrative, which we see Miss Havisham still holds, into a world of commonness and suffering which has been missed for ever, along with the real feelings that accompany such suffering. Miss Havisham knows that she can never return to that first world of feelings; but here, through Estella, she effectively rediscovers it in the mirror of the written that Estella holds up to her.

The change that this rediscovery brings about is limited. It shows us how much narrative really depends upon the world of the fictive, and upon words and language that are not written as Estella's are in this exchange. Estella herself, however, remains confined by the knowledge of suffering and disappointment that Miss Havisham's narrative sense has bred in her. While she both seeks and knows the faith which is at the root of feeling, and of another world, she finds that faith only in her relationship with her adopted mother. Estella knows, what Miss Havisham discovers here, that all life is suffering, and that narrative in attempting control only wastes the opportunity of relationship and feeling. She shows Miss Havisham that what she has still regarded as her special story, her special revenge, is merely a further participation, through her, in what is common and ordinary.

What this episode produces, then, is a resignation of Estella to that ordinariness, in Bentley Drummle; and a resolution to leave Pip's idealism, the narrative he has chosen for himself, to its own end. At the end of the chapter we see Estella with Drummle. Pip reproaches her,

---

47. Great Expectations, 325.

> I have seen you give him looks and smiles this very night, such as you never give to - me:
> "Do you want me then," said Estella, turning suddenly with a fixed and serious, if not angry look," to deceive and entrap you?"
> "Do you deceive and entrap him, Estella?"
> "Yes, and many others - all of them but you."[48]

From this point, Pip's narrative must exist on its own, in spite of Miss Havisham and in spite of Estella. Estella has effectively vanished from the narrative, and receded into the common, everyday world; but, as we will see, Pip does not give up his own story so easily, and through it he retains some hope of reclaiming her for his world.

First of all, however, we must turn to his relation with another aspect of the world he expects, with that part of the story which belongs specifically to Miss Havisham's control. The return of Magwitch is the other part of the major destruction of the narrative Pip has created for himself, at least in terms of its correspondence to the real world.

Magwitch returns like another ghost to a world already made miserable to Pip by the absence of Estella; alone at night, he hears a footstep on his stairway:

> What nervous folly made me start, and awfully connect it with the footstep of my dead sister, matters not. It soon past in a moment, and I listened again, and heard the footsteps stumble in coming on.[49]

Just as we saw the past return to Miss Havisham as a thing ghostly to narrative, so the past, returning here in Magwitch, conjures his sister's rejected world as a ghostly association in Pip's mind. His intuitive apprehension here is entirely accurate, as if he feels his narrative threatened by some other story. Certainly, this is what happens as Magwitch tells his - rival - tale:

---

48. Great Expectations, 329-30.

49. Great Expectations, 332.

> All the truth of my position came flashing upon me; and its disappointments, dangers, disgraces, consequences of all kinds, rushed in in such a multitude that I was borne down by them, and had to struggle for the breath I drew.[50]

Pip is here directly confronted with a story from the world he left behind and, included within its marshy truth, he finds himself floundering and drowning in it, his sense of himself - which is his narrative sense - for the moment destroyed. Magwitch brings the marshes and the world of childhood and convicts into Pip's own room in London, to the very core and centre of his gentility; as he eats and drinks,

> I saw my convict on the marshes again. It almost seemed to me as if he must stoop down presently, to file at his leg.[51]

The past seems to occupy the present after all, Pip finding himself back where he began. But Pip's sense of himself, and of his own story, is all that he has, and he does not relinquish it as easily as this. Instead of accepting or welcoming the past in the form of Magwitch he accustoms himself to it; and does his utmost to rid himself of it, planning to send him back abroad, and rejecting any further money.

Magwitch is rather like a Uriah Heep that must be included within the content of narrative. Unlike David Copperfield, Pip has no Aunt Betsey to take responsibility for the outside world he represents: as he tells us, at the beginning,

> Words cannot tell what a sense I had...of the dreadful mystery that he was to me. When he fell asleep of an evening, I would sit and look at him, wondering what he had done... Once, I actually did start out of bed in the night..., hurriedly intending to leave him there with everything else I possessed, and enlist for India, as a private soldier.[52]

---

50. Great Expectations, 336.
51. Great Expectations, 340.
52. Great Expectations, 353.

Magwitch seems to be beyond Pip's 'telling'; while at the same time he seems to have made Pip the subject of his story. "I done it",[53] the convict tells him, having proprietorily looked over his belongings, as if the realisation of all Pip's hopes was a crime in itself, and laying waste to the comfort of his life.

Pip only comes to terms with what happens to him in the process of reasserting his own control. It very quickly becomes apparent that Magwitch has acted irresponsibly and rashly in returning home, and in looking after him Pip manages to regain some sense of his own authority. Responsibility even becomes a kind of affection by the time the convict makes his ill-fated bid for freedom; Pip tells us,

> Looking back at him, I thought of the first night of his return...when I little supposed my heart could ever be as heavy and anxious at parting from him as it was now.[54]

Pip's concern here is also partly a relief; for, on the first night of his arrival, Magwitch threatened to take over completely. Here Pip's own voice has been re-established, and has survived the discovery of the source of his fortune. Pip's faith in himself is restored, in terms of his own generosity of feeling; it has not become a faith in the convict, however, whom even as they row down the river Pip regards as a kind of alien being. In the boat, Magwitch "looked...a natural part of the scene",[55] for even now it is to the marshy world that he belongs, and which sets him apart in Pip's eyes: as he tells us,

> It was remarkable (but perhaps the wretched life he had led, accounted for it), that he was the least anxious of any of us. ...he was not disposed to be passive or resigned, as I understood it; but he had no notion of meeting changes half-way.[56]

---

53. Great Expectations, 339.
54. Great Expectations, 392.
55. Great Expectations, 447.
56. Great Expectations, 447.

That 'as I understood' provides Pip with the distance his narrative needs, restoring his own words to their proper place as the interpreter of Magwitch's 'dreadful mystery' - and making that mystery seem to be subordinate to Pip's interpretation.

Pip's control seems to be re-affirmed when he goes back to Miss Havisham with this new intelligence as to the source of his fortune:

> She turned her face to me for the first time since she had averted it, and to my amazement, I may even add to my terror, dropped on her knees at my feet; with her hands raised to me in the manner in which, when her poor heart was young and fresh and whole, they must have been raised to Heaven from her mother's side.
>
> To see her white hair and her worn face, kneeling at my feet, gave me a shock through all my frame. I entreated her to rise, and got my arm about her to help her up; but she only pressed that hand of mine which was nearest to her grasp, and hung her head over it and wept.[57]

While this is hardly the narrative Pip wanted - he thought Miss Havisham was in a manner his mother, and controlled his story - it does not destroy or threaten his narrative sense but, again, merely places responsibility onto his own shoulders as an unexpected but not, to Pip, particularly hostile or incongruous reversal. As with Magwitch, Miss Havisham offers him the opportunity for a different kind of self-presentation to the one he expected; a self-presentation based in generosity and in magnanimity, in taking responsibility for the whole world himself, rather than in finding his life written out by others. He simply replaces the narrative he thought the world would give him with the narrative he writes for himself. The scene above is again as formal and written as his feeling for Magwitch, and the narrative depends upon the control it rediscovers in Miss Havisham's supplication. Pip's imagination deals in written images rather than in speech, and in relationships of responsibility, and control. He appears to make

57. Great Expectations, 410.

himself the father and mother of the action of the novel in Magwitch and then in Miss Havisham by inverting their initial and apparent control over him.

The real test of this new control and responsibility however remains Estella; for in continuing his narrative Pip continues his attempt to bring Estella back within the action, over which it now appears that he has a new mastery. His unremitting concern since her desertion of him and of her marriage has been to claim much the same voice of authority and responsibility for her as that which he has come to have over Magwitch and Miss Havisham. To this end, then, it has been his continual concern to make those glimpses of the fictive world that he had in her, and by which she seemed to escape him, into a part of his narrative understanding and responsibility. All his energy is now pressed into the identification of that mysterious 'something' he has recognised in Estella, for he is convinced that such an identification will give him much the same power over her as it did over the convict and her adopted mother, and so provide his narrative with the re-establishment it seeks.

He makes the connection which he believes he needs, then, upon seeing Mr Jagger's housekeeper:

> I looked again at the hands and eyes of the housekeeper and thought of the inexplicable feeling that had come over me when I had last walked - not alone - in the ruined garden, and through the deserted brewery. I thought how the same feeling had come back when I saw a face looking at me, and a hand waving to me from a stage-coach window; and how it had come back and had flashed about me like lightening, when I had passed in a carriage - not alone - through a sudden glare of light in a dark street. I thought of how one link of association had helped identification in the theatre, and how such a link, wanting before, had been riveted for me now, when I had passed by a chance swift from Estella's eyes to the fingers with their knitting action, and the attentive eyes. And I felt

> absolutely certain that this woman was Estella's mother.[58]

These 'links of association' still, as the connections of Pip's narrative, form the substance of the reality in which he believes. He is too fascinated with the narrative behind these connections to understand any meaning beyond the associations they make. He does not see a world beyond his narrating self, but instead attempts to use the limited perception of narrative - as a means of control. He believes in nothing but the authorship of his own fate, and, even now, its capacity to include Estella's,and to control the world by understanding its interconnectedness.

He very rapidly discovers, however, that whatever else his discovery might be, it is not the story he hopes for, which will make a unity of the world. He does so through Jaggers,who is a figure much like Bucket, the arch-priest of the stories that exist in the real world, and, as a lawyer, the novel's representative of the justice Pip has always sought.

It is Jaggers,then, who continues Pip's story for him; continues, but does not finish it. As he says, of himself,

> Put the case that he lived in an atmosphere of evil, and that all he saw of children was, their being generated in great numbers, for certain destruction. Put the case that he habitually knew of their being imprisoned, whipped, transported, neglected, cast out, qualified in all ways for the hang man,and growing up to be hanged. Put the case that pretty nigh all the children he saw in his daily business life, he had reason to look upon as so much spawn, to develop into the fish that were to come to his net - to be prosecuted, defended, forsworn, made orphans, bedevilled somehow.[59]

This is the story that Pip seeks to uncover; the general, fog-bound world of the marshes. It is a general connection for the

---

58. Great Expectations, 403.

59. Great Expectations, 424-5.

characters in the novel, for it is common to them all. It belongs directly to the convict Magwitch and his wife, and to Compeyson, who makes his living in this marshy world. It belongs to Pip, since as we have seen it is at the root of his own narrative sense, as the fear that impels him to narrate his life. It belongs to Miss Havisham, whom even wealth and status could not save from the deceit it holds out. It belongs doubly to Estella,whose fate it dictates both through Miss Havisham and through her initial plight as an homeless orphan. It belongs to Pip's sister, who struggled incessently to rise above it, and to Orlick, whose violence and resentment it produces. It belongs to Wemmick, whose home and business life it divides, and it belongs even to Joe and Herbert, who must live with and in spite of the hostility and chaos it offers.

While this is the continuation of the common story Pip stumbles upon, it does not end or complete it, for Jaggers shows us that the marsh-world swallows endings and completeness in its own senselessness. In this world, as Jaggers tells Pip, narratives have no such common use:

> For whose sake would you reveal the secret? - For the father's? I think he would not be much better for the mother. For the mother's? I think if she had done such a deed she would be safer where she was. For the daughter's? I think it would hardly serve her, to establish her parentage for the information of her husband, and to drag her back to disgrace, after an escape of twenty years, pretty secure to last for life.[60]

In the marsh-world there are no endings, and no final and happy resolutions. The narratives of this world are made of a confusion which is as bereft of endings as it is of beginnings.

Pip, however, is incapable of heeding this warning, and the novel shows us both what Jaggers' words mean and why Pip cannot comprehend

---

60. Great Expectations, 426.

or act upon them in the course of the next chapters.

Hereto, Pip seems to have evaded the marsh-world, and created a world of his own responsibility. Jaggers' voice is precisely that; it threatens Pip's world with a limitation of its vision, but does not bring the marsh-reality back within the boundaries of Pip's life. Jaggers' words are a warning, and they warn of the mysterious summons Pip receives in the next chapter: "If you are not afraid to come to the old marshes...you had better come".[61]

This is to Pip a challenge, and what it challenges is his new-found authority and responsibility. Pip puts the matter to himself in terms of his responsibility for Magwitch: "in case any harm should befall him through my not going, how could I ever forgive myself!"[62] This however is merely the actual effect of the general burden he has taken upon himself, to bring his whole world within the province of his story.

Pip then returns finally to the marsh, and even as he arrives at the place feels its threat against himself:

> There was a melancholy wind, and the marshes were very dismal. A stranger would have found them insupportable, and even to me they were so oppressive that I hesitated, half-inclined to go back. But, I knew them, and could have found my way on a far darker night, and had no excuse for returning, being there. So having come there against my inclination, I went on against it.[63]

Already, it is the place that Pip finds disturbing, and opposed to his own sense of things, and already he finds its power defeating his own will.

The figure he goes to meet, of course, is Orlick. Orlick has been criticised, as has this whole episode, for a lack of realism and

---

61. Great Expectations, 430.
62. Great Expectations, 431.
63. Great Expectations, 432-3.

motive;[64] but in fact he has had a large part in the nexus of associations that the marshes have come to represent for this novel. He belongs to all that Pip once tried to leave behind, as the equal - both he and the adopted Pip were apprentices at the forge - Pip sought to rise above, the man who seemed to Pip to belong above all others to the oppression of the landscape. We have already seen him start "up, from the gate, or from the rushes, or from the ooze (which was quite in his stagnant way)". It has been in Orlick that Pip's narrative and his will to leave things behind has created the resentment of those left, and that resentment of course has already brought about his attack upon Pip's sister, which as I suggested above, and as Orlick himself now suggests to Pip, was in a sense Pip's own, as the violent expression of the disownment that narrative seeks. At the root of this disownment, of course, and inextricable from the 'oppression' Pip feels in the marshes, is that first appearance of the convict; and Orlick is in a sense the final appearance of the "Young Man hid with me",[65] the evil and levelling cruelty of the marsh-world.

Orlick then returns as that childhood terror which threatened everything; and whereas Pip has found every threat to his story capable of containment within the writing by which his world reaches a form of coherence in his own experience, the threat Orlick poses is unequivocal and final: "You're dead".[66] In him, the graveyard Pip has continually sought to escape returns with unavoidable force: as Pip tells us, "I felt that I had come to the brink of my grave".[67]

Narrative now faces the crisis it cannot overcome; a complete and final storylessness in the marshes. As Orlick tells Pip,

---

64. See for instance, H.M. Dalski, Dickens and the Art of Analogy, 242.
65. See Great Expectations, 38; and page 207 above.
66. Great Expectations, 436.
67. Great Expectations, 436.

> I won't have a rag of you, I won't have a bone of you, left on earth! I'll put your body in the kiln - I'd carry two such to it on my shoulders - and, let people suppose what they may think of you, they shall never know nothing.[68]

This is complete obliteration in the dark world that Pip has feared from the beginning, and it removes the one faith that his narrative has, in himself, and in what we now realise is his own immortality, the preservation of his 'I':

> The death close before me was terrible, but far more terrible than death was the dread of being misremembered after death. And so quick were my thoughts, that I saw myself despised by unborn generations - Estella's children, and their children - while the wretch's words were yet upon his lips.[69]

Once again, it is not only death that the marshes offer, but the death of obscurity and of ordinariness that destroys Pip's story. Orlick does not simply offer to kill Pip, but to absorb him back into the marsh world, and thereby to kill the memory by which narrative has its life. We see this life in frantic activity now -

> In the excited and exalted state of my brain, I could not think of a place without seeing it, or of persons without seeing them. It is impossible to over-state the vividness of these images [70]

- but Pip's narrative sense has no answer to what it sees as "the tiger crouching to spring".[71] Pip, of course,is rescued; but his rescue does not re-establish his defeated story as the responsibility he thought himself to bear before the encounter with Orlick and the marshes. Instead, it reduces Pip's world to a series of small, fragmentary coherences - to the status of the marsh-world itself. His imagination

---

68. Great Expectations, 436.
69. Great Expectations, 436.
70. Great Expectations, 438.
71. Great Expectations, 438.

remains the imagination of narrative; and shows us what happens to it where it is confronted with the confusion of a chaotic reality. And in facing the obscurity of death in Orlick, it ceases to produce a story, and produces a series of vivid pictures.

We have already been given the first of these by the time of the meeting with Orlick, as if the narrative has already been at work to produce resources for its own defence.

After his last visit to Miss Havisham, as "twilight was closing in",[72] Pip walks again in the ruined brewery, where he once again sees the apparition of the hanging figure, although here it is a 'fancy' and an 'impression' which "caused me to feel an indescribable awe".[73] We soon see that this 'awe' is invested not so much in the outside world as in Pip himself this time, however; for his own intuition now becomes the real import both of this vision and the consequent events. Upon the return of the ghost Pip returns "to assure myself that Miss Havisham was as safe and well as I had left her":

> I looked into the room... In the moment when I was withdrawing my head to go quietly away, I saw a great flame spring up. In the same moment I saw her running at me, shrieking, with a whirl of fire blazing all about her, and soaring at least as many feet above her head as she was high.[74]

Pip's story can make no narrative of this spontaneous combustion; he fails to save her life, and at the same time prevents her death and consigns her to a painful decline, wrapped, as we hear, in cotton wool. The confusion and chaos of reality takes over from narrative, and destroys its coherence. As with Orlick, this confusion only makes the picture brighter, as the memory that narrative clings to in the twilight world which it now occupies as the means to its vision. Here, as on

---

72. Great Expectations, 413.

73. Great Expectations, 413.

74. Great Expectations, 414.

the marshes with Orlick, daylight offers no respite, no reassertion of control or responsibility, and the narrative imagination finds itself having to exist between the confusion which occupies the daylight world and the darkness which ends everything. The written is sent, as David Copperfield found, indoors, to a place that is sheltered from the real world, in order to find a world that can still be written.

Miss Havisham then is saved from the chaotic and remembered by Pip's imagination as a 'great flame', the image standing for the immortality Pip once sought for himself in narrative, as an imitation of it.

We find Magwitch similarly preserved. As Pip tells us of his trial,

> The whole scene starts out again in the vivid colours of the moment, down to the drops of April rain on the windows of the court, glittering in the rays of the April sun[75]

and as the death sentence is pronounced,

> The sun was striking in at the great windows of the court, through the glittering drops of rain upon the glass, and it made a broad shaft of light between the two-and-thirty and the Judge, linking both together, and perhaps reminding some among the audience, how both were passing on, with absolute equality, to the greater Judgement that knoweth all things and cannot err.[76]

This scene becomes another symbol to Pip; this time, of the Justice which narrative has so palpably failed to work, as Magwitch is consigned by the reality that has mistreated him from his birth to the death he does not deserve. Magwitch, the judge and the audience all belong to the same confused and chaotic world (an equality which in the narrative omits the convict); Judgement is saved, here, by bringing the sun itself into the indoor world of the written to symbolise an ending in which the narrative imitates the justice it seeks.

---

75. Great Expectations, 466.
76. Great Expectations, 467.

If immortality and justice are saved by these two pictures, then, the narrative's most important symbol is its final one, for this imitates nothing less than its own ending, and in it Pip saves his own imagination from the chaotic world.

It is concerned, of course, with Estella, in whom Pip had from the beginning seen his own special destiny. Once again, this final scene occurs in twilight, and is not so much a real ending - hence Dickens' equivocation and flexibility about its content - as the image of one. Quite literally, of course, it is an imitation of Paradise Lost:[77]

> I took her hand in mine, and we went out of the ruined place; and, as the morning mists had risen long ago when I had first left the forge, so, the evening mists were rising now, and in all the broad expanse of tranquil light they showed to me, I saw no shadow of another parting from her.[78]

In presenting Pip and Estella as Adam and Eve, this image is hardly there to be believed; and belief is made the more difficult when we remember that it represents Dickens' own second thoughts. We may well agree with Forster, that the original ending, in which Pip only recounters Estella by chance in London, after she has suffered much, and remarried, is "more consistent with the drift, as well as natural working out, of the tale".[79] At the same time, however, it remains true that the second ending reminds us of the nature of the novel, and of the artifice of the narrative which is the novel's real subject.

77, See Edgar Johnson, who quotes Milton, Paradise Lost XII, 646-9 in Charles Dickens, 994:

> The world was all before them, where to choose
> Their place of rest, and Providence their guide;
> They, hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow,
> Through Eden took their solitary way.

78. Great Expectations, 493.

79. Forster, Life, III, 336.

Dickens shows us Pip's limitation in it more subtly than in the first ending, showing that reality lies beyond the writing of the narrator by confining him for ever within one final written image. Pip's whole life has in writing become an imitation of itself, bringing David's indoor world to its realisation, and at the same time showing us unequivocally the restriction of the grasp of narrative and narrator over human experience. This ending resolves nothing and answers no questions; the story, insofar as it sought to be the integration of narrator and reality, remains even now to be told - or simply, as Jaggers showed us, to continue. Pip seeks his own loneliness here, as a written individuality separated from a reality through which he has passed, it seems, with no effect upon anything but the home he left, and remains isolated from here; Joe and Biddy - whom Pip again missed as the woman who could have been his wife - can only imitate a life lost to the real world by calling their own son Pip.

CHAPTER VI

OUR MUTUAL FRIEND AND THE IN-BETWEEN WORLD

The ending of Great Expectations brings Dickens to a position where the command of his self-consciousness over writing is absolute in his understanding of the meaning of the demands of both narrative and fiction. He produces in this novel and in Bleak House two masterpieces which take up the two opposite possibilities offered by the form and structure of the novel. In Esther and Pip Dickens offers us personae for the worlds of fiction and narrative respectively, showing how these worlds can be represented in the novel, and the ways in which each concern characterises and limits the form of the novel. In both of these works exploration becomes masterly demonstration, for in each case Dickens replaces his own voice, which he finds exploited in its own attempts to provide either a fictive or a narrative vision, with a figure designed to write first a fictive and then a narrative novel.

Bleak House, then, became through Esther's passive voice the most complete register of a Dickensian reality, sacrificing in her the will of the individual which we might normally expect to invest the authority of the narrator, and thereby reversing the usual characteristics of narrative. In doing so, it provided space for a faith which lay in Miss Flite's belief in a world in spite of the suffering it imposes, which destroys coherence. Esther's own suffering restored this fragmentary faith to a novel in which narrative purpose had threatened such fictive and innocent life.

In this novel Dickens thus finds a way of including the arbitrary and chaotic variety of experience, the fictive world, within the novel; while in Great Expectations we see that the price of the narrative Bleak

House abandons is the limitation of the narrator to the vision of the self. In Pip we are shown that autobiography, which as we saw in David Copperfield seemed to promise the perfect relation of self to world in narrative, is limited to its own voice which in believing in itself ceases to believe in the world outside. The fictive world - the world of disunity and disorganisation that Esther admitted to the novel - continues to exist in Dickens' vision, but does so beyond Pip's narrative voice.

In these two great novels then we see the two opposite ways in which narrative meets fiction; by suffering and including, or by controlling and excluding the disordered reality which the fictive embraces. Or, if we put it the opposite way, we see that fiction meets narrative by giving its imagination to a passive narrative, and by withholding imagination from the will to control. In our identification of this interaction Dickens' sentimentality has effectively disappeared, and has been revealed as the authoritative if often frustrated exploration of the possibility of a consciousness that can exist in the middle of narrative and fiction, of coherence and fragmentation, of order and chaos. This concern, we have seen, is not simply the concern of the novel, but of the age it reflects. It is nothing less than a concern with how to find a means of identifying the self among the conflicting pressures of early Victorian society, with its simultaneous impulses towards a fictive and narrative existence, towards lower and upper class life, work and leisure, freedom and order. Dickens inaugurates what is literally the middle-class novel, the novel that must find its place in-between.

Both Bleak House and Great Expectations occupy such a place; but this middle ground is not simply identifiable as a voice in the novel, which is where we might perhaps have expected to find it. It is rather

represented by the whole novel. In these two novels, writer and writing have become curiously divided, for while Dickens is identified with the second, he is detached from the first, insofar as the writer represents the will to write, by the ironical relationship of persona. Thus, the writing brings fiction and narrative together in each case, but does so by renouncing its will, and by providing the world of writing as a world of coincidence. The chances of its procession become the in-between place in which we find Dickens himself, oddly peripheral to both the purposes of narrative and the innocent, suffering faith of fiction. The writing has itself become a kind of self-consciousness close to irony, which exists between but refuses to belong to either fiction or narrative, and which has relinquished its own control over their meeting[1] (hence its adoption of personae) while fully knowing the importance of their interaction.

This middle vision finally succeeds in uniting the experience of writing and the experience of reality which seemed in the earlier novels to conflict, producing in Dick Swiveller a figure in whom reality compromised the novelist, and in David Copperfield one who restricted novelist to novel. The purpose of Dickens' final completed novel is to show us the meaning of this in-between world, and to make the novel a place where fiction and narrative can meet and exchange in an accidental world. Our Mutual Friend represents the realism of neither fiction nor narrative, but of a mature vision of the world between, and shows us the meaning of a world governed by accident.

---

1. This irony is not unlike what S.M. Sperry described as an English version of 'Romantic Irony' in his essay, 'Toward a Definition of Romantic Irony'; "Rather than a device, it is a state of mind or disposition, a kind of realisation that arises,...in part unconsciously. If I had to describe that sense of realisation in a single word, I should choose the word indeterminacy" (in G. Bornstein (Ed), Romantic and Modern (Pittsburgh 1977), 5). In Dickens this irony is more certain and confident, existing as I have argued between the evolved terms of fiction and narrative.

This novel, then, ceases to be concerned with a search for a figure to unite, or for a persona to characterise fiction and narrative, and turns instead to what lies between their two worlds - to the writing itself. "Seldom", James complained, "had we read a book so intensely written",[2] and his observation is accurate, for this novel is concerned directly with the way in which its text reflects the whole of the outside world; with the way in which it is legitimately realistic, treating that world, and its own substance, as a landscape in which its disparate elements meet. We see this in its much-discussed dominant narrative image;[3] for where in Great Expectations narrative was characterised by marshland, and in Bleak House by fog, Our Mutual Friend takes us beyond the peripheries of the marsh, to the world hidden by the fog, to the landscape of the river. From the Old Curiosity Shop and Master Humphrey's vision the river characterised narrative as "the stream of life that will not stop".[4] But this image also holds out an opportunity to fiction, as we see in the fog of Bleak House, and in Master Humphrey's own observation that "drowning was not a hard death".[5] Like the fog, the novel now acknowledges, the river offers an imagery - essentially a narrative tool - into which we can sink and rest; so that, unlike the foggy world of Bleak House which exists for fiction, the river establishes an imagery between fiction and narrative, a current, like the writing, in which we alternately drown and progress. The river can be at once a fragmentary drowning world, and the progressive 'stream of life that will not stop'. No single sense of things will be adequate to a novel whose structure admits the river as its imagery, and

---

2. Henry James, The House of Fiction, Ed. Leon Edel, 1957.
3. See for instance W.M. Daleski, Dickens and the Art of Analogy, 271-2; A.O.J. Cockshutt, The Imagination of Charles Dickens, 170, 175.
4. See The Old Curiosity Shop, 43 and page 77 above.
5. See The Old Curiosity Shop, 44 and page 78 above.

no universal role will allow us to sink or to swim in a landscape that exists in the middle of the novel's terms. In this image we see a place where life and death, coherence and fragmentation, chaos and order, fiction and narrative are not singly served (as they were in opposite ways by fog and marsh) but in which they meet, and in which they remain separate, but nevertheless do so in the course of encounter.

We see this in-between world extended not only into the novel's imagery, and structure, but into its characterisation and humour as well. The river has aspects of both narrative structure and fictive imagination, and can be both a written image and a means of perception. The first chapter of the novel gives us two figures that enter these opposite worlds in Gaffer Hexam and in Lizzie. To Lizzie I will return; I want first of all to discuss Hexam and the novel's world of narrative.

Gaffer Hexam represents this world in its crudest and most imperceptive, and unself-conscious form; for he makes a living of drowning.

Hexam's ignorance is in this novel the worst of all ignorances, for he seeks to live upon one side of its reality, and to do so by pulling drowned men from the other. The work he does is almost profane, the crudest of all kinds of realism, heaving corpses bodily from the drowning world back into his own sordid business. He lives upon the surface of the river; but even at the beginning of the novel we see the mark of the river upon him:

> Allied to the bottom of the river rather than the surface, by reason of the slime and ooze with which it was covered, and its sodden state, this boat and the two figures in it obviously were doing something that they often did... Half savage as the man showed...with such dress as he wore seeming to be made out of the mud that begrimed the boat, still there was business-like usage in his steady gaze.[5]

---

6. <u>Our Mutual Friend</u>, 44.

For Hexam, life is a living, a 'business-like usage'; and we see here that it is already a dead thing. He lives upon the thing that engulfs him with no knowledge of its nature, so that his 'business' meets death without knowing it as such in river and corpse alike. This ignorance, as an assertion that life is separate from the death that feeds it, is the ignorance of death - both unknowing, and itself deathly. He is already half-absorbed by this death,which is the life that he denies, in a 'savagery' which expresses the brutality of the assumption that the only river with which he must deal is the narrow river - the narrative - of his own living. He says to his daughter when he accuses her of hating the river, "As if it wasn't your living! As if it wasn't meat and drink to you!"[7] To Hexam, the only river is his own. He looks at the river; but he fails to see into it. We are told at the end of this first chapter,

> What he had in tow, lunged itself at him sometimes in an awful manner when the boat was checked, and sometimes seemed to try to wrench itself away, though for the most part it followed submissively. 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.[8]

If Hexam looked under the surface of the river he would see himself covered in 'slime' and 'ooze', and 'sodden', within it, as the novel sees the river in him; but he has not the imaginative power to pass beyond the narrative that is both his gain and his loss. His living makes a desert, a dust-heap of the river, a waste-land of mud and slime - and makes a small version of that desert in himself, and in his boat. 'Business' denies the life-in-death, the imaginative life that lies through the surface of the river; and at the same time it makes a truly

---

7. Our Mutual Friend, 45.
8. Our Mutual Friend, 47.

dead thing of itself.

This dust-heap of dead things does not simply belong to Hexam but is the imagery, the part of the river, that the novel uses for narratives, for the knowing world of ends and purposes. Dust, dirt and slime become the images of the dead world that pursues only itself, and this world extends beyond the course of the river into the city's world of business and usage. As with Hexam, the river exists at its centre, both metaphorically, as the writing's knowledge that dust and slime belong to the dead and drowned; and literally, for the city meets the river as the heart of its usage and trade. The dust, and the dust-heaps, do not liberate narrative into a world of image and theme, but bring us back to the river which makes and drowns them.

The first point in the book, then, at which we are shown a landscape away from the river, takes us into the wasteland that the city has made of itself; as we follow Mr Wilfer home from the office we are taken across a desert-land:

> His home was in the Holloway region north of London, and then divided from it by fields and trees. Between Battle Bridge and that part of the Holloway district in which he dwelt, was a tract of suburban Sahara, where tiles and bricks were burnt, bones were boiled, carpets were beat, rubbish was shot, dogs were fought, and dust was heaped by contractors. Skirting the border of this desert, by the way he took, when the light of its kiln-fires made lurid smears on the fog, R. Wilfer sighed and shook his head.[9]

This desert exists, not in the city itself, but in the space just beyond it; the space that we are told is occupied nominally by 'fields and trees'. Like the Gaffer's living, which looks into the river to see only that living in it, the city sees only its own business in the space around it, failing to see _into_ the countryside, and to see something different from itself. That failure creates a dead landscape,

---

9. _Our Mutual Friend_, 76.

a landscape of 'usage' which fails to see the spaces between one world and another (this 'green belt' is another river) and instead sees only its own nature. In the process the landscape is wasted; but the reverse also happens - again, as with the Gaffer - and the city itself is revealed as a dead land, in its refusal to recognise anything but its own 'living'.

Within the city itself, then, we see the landscape business makes of its own territory, as the place where this deadness is manufactured:

> It was not summer yet, but spring; and it was not gentle spring ethereally mild, as in Thomson's Seasons, but nipping spring with an easterly wind, as in Johnson's, Jackson's, Dickson's, Smith's and Jones's Seasons. The grating wind sawed rather than blew; and as it sawed, the sawdust whirled about the sawpit. Every street was a sawpit, and there were no top-sawyers; every passenger was an under-sawyer, with the sawdust blinding him and choking him.[10]

London is like a great factory, a sawmill, in which the wind is its machinery; and humanity its workmen. Spring brings only the working of the mill, as any other season will; the fact that it is spring only enforces the cruelty of a world that ignores what is natural. "April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land":[11] as in Eliot's poem, the London spring brings not hope but betrayal:

> The wind sawed, and the sawdust whirled. The shrubs wrung their many hands, bemoaning that they had been over-persuaded by the sun to bud; the young leaves pined; the sparrows repented of their early marriages, like men and women; the colours of the rainbow where discernible, not in floral spring, but in the faces of the people whom it nibbled and pinched. And ever the wind sawed, and the sawdust whirled.[12]

10. Our Mutual Friend, 191.
11. The Wasteland, I, 'The Burial of the Dead', 1-2. The wasteland imagery has been well documented. In the draft of the Poem, Eliot quoted from Our Mutual Friend for its title, "He do the Police in Different Voices". See 'The Wasteland'; a facsimile and transcript of the Original Drafts, Ed. Valerie Eliot, 1971, 5 and Note 125, For further discussion of the correspondence with the poem see Edgar Johnson, Charles Dickens, 1043.
12. Our Mutual Friend, 191.

The betrayal, moreover, is registered by the natural world before it is registered in human beings. It is the shrubs and the birds that do not belong to the factory; 'men and women' are the inmates of the mill, and have always repented of early marriages. It is this relegation of humanity from its good nature, from its natural sphere, that is so telling in this short passage. The faces of the people are not the faces of the 'floral spring' of nature but the factory-faces of usage, and the 'rainbow' of colours becomes in their faces an awful spectre of the hope that God promised. The city offers the hope of machinery, the hope of business, and does not comfort but 'nibbles' and 'pinches'.

This factory-world has a profound effect upon the book; it produces figures like Hexam and Riderhood, the nameless Inspector whose function it is to know the nameless places it contains and produces, the world of Podsnaps and Veneerings, and figures such as the usurer, Fledgeby, and the deceiver, Lammle. But this landscape does not dominate the novel as it dominated the worlds of Esther and Pip, in its covering of fog and in its human wasteland of marsh. What we are shown in these landscapes, as in Hexam's use of the river, is narrative's image for the world; and this hopeless humanity is not the whole of human life, but a life reflected in its 'living', a life with no knowledge of what, even here, at the very centre of the world of usage, lies upon the other side of itself. Even in this sawmill of existence the shrubs and the birds show us a way out of narrative ends into the imaginative world where feelings exist. The novel, even as it describes the factory, half-lives in another world, and, unable to attribute the feelings that are the imaginative world of the writing and the river to human life, gives them instead to the non-human things that become a way out of the world of business.

The world of usage comes to defeat itself, and, again, does so very

much as Hexam does. He finds himself absorbed by the death of oblivion he has made of his own life; vitality is self-absorbed by 'living'. Hexam dies as he has lived, by belonging to the surface of the river. At no time is he truly alive, and death makes little difference to his imaginative existence. At the end of the novel the 'winds' taunt him,

> Why not speak, Father? Soaking into this filthy ground as you lie here, is your own shape. Did you never see such a shape soaked into your own boat? Speak, Father. Speak to us, the winds, the only listeners left to you![13]

It is as if the earth absorbs Hexam, here, sucking him back into itself; and shows us where he has always belonged, to the waste-landscape of the business world. In this world of usage, death is no release, no freedom, but the working of a great machine that recycles corpses as Hexam himself recycled them for his living. The very earth becomes predatory upon human life, which is there only for the usage of the slime and the ooze, the rubbish that living makes upon the landscape.

The novel itself, however, has nothing to do with this inhuman cycle. Instead, it takes the part of the 'winds'; and these are not the winds of the sawmill. They are the winds of a river which does not belong entirely to narrative, the voice of the place in which Hexam has drowned. They speak as the river speaks, taking the part of the writing; they offer what river and writing have offered, to speak and to listen, to be the mirror in which Hexam might see and converse with himself - although now they can only taunt with what might have been. They tell us now, what we saw in Hexam's own life, that his death has been the failure to sink and swim together, to control and to be controlled, to give and to receive, to speak and to listen, to write and to read. His failure and his death are his nullification, for in his supposed control

---

13. Our Mutual Friend, 222.

of his own destiny there is the control only of usage; so that we see narrative as 'living'; as a self-contained cycle where nothing can survive, and where nothing is but what is not.

What we re-discover here constituted a grave threat to Dickens' earlier writing, where narrative dominated the figure of the writer, even where it did not dominate writing itself. Pip's story evaded precisely this self-limitation for the novel by personifying narrative in a way we hardly see in Hexam or in the dust, in both of which Pip's narrative seems to be returned to a direct realism. But in this novel the writer has realised that the writing can find and indeed already is its own voice, as it was in both Bleak House and Great Expectations, in spite of the presence of author personae. At Hexam's death, this writing finds its voice in the wind: and, far from seeing the narratives of the city through the fog of injustice or as a part of the marshland of commonness, the wasteland which is revealed in it has a kind of self-contained clarity from which the writing is fully dissociated. No justice, no protection or distinction, is expected from the factory of life that the city has produced; the writing has discovered itself as the true judgement both of its own function and of the life it seeks to represent.

This is a new confidence; but it is also the re-awakening of some of the old confidences of Dickens' writing. Following Bradley Headstone and Charley Hexam to the place where his sister Lizzie lives, we are told that they

> got to the Surrey side of Westminster Bridge, and crossed the bridge, and made along the Middlesex shore towards Millbank. In this region are a certain little street called Church Street, and a certain little blind square called Smith Square, in the centre of which last retreat is a very hideous church with four towers at the four corners, generally resembling some petrified monster, frightful and gigantic, on its back with its legs in the air.

> They found a tree near by in a corner, and a blacksmith's forge, and a timber yard, and a dealers' in old iron. What a rusty portion of a boiler and a great iron wheel or so meant by lying half-buried in the dealers' fore-court, nobody seemed to know or to want to know. Like the Miller of questionable jollity in the song, They cared for Nobody, no not they, and Nobody cared for them.[14]

The writing seems restored to its old topographical confidence, bringing back Dickens' local knowledge of his city which was smothered by fog and marsh alike, and by the need to present himself. Like the early writing this passage collects objects rather than symbolises them - as we have seen narrative trying to do in Pip - rejecting the business vision of things, the vision of 'living', by refusing to make meaning of the world. We even see the shadow of the old ghost amongst the clutter, the blacksmith's forge which became the transposition of the blacking factory. Here, then, the writing again stands for the writer's vagrant voice - a voice like the river-wind - restoring it to its former Swivelleresque inclusiveness and dismissing the chaotic variety of the London scenery with a snatch from the music hall.

The difference in this late writing, however, is that the writing itself has become the Swiveller. It neither accepts nor rejects chaos, but puts it in its place with a scrap of folk-wisdom, "They cared for Nobody, no not they, and Nobody cared for them", which it is the writings' achievement to make sound like common knowledge. It does so by existing, like the river, between the narrative of the dusty world and the imagination of fiction, and by doing so takes its true place as a common act.

As such, this novel exists curiously between the characters that live among its pages, adopting no single mouthpiece for its thoughts and feelings. Dickens releases his writing, as it were, from himself. We

---

14. Our Mutual Friend, 271.

have already seen the novel adopt the voice of the wind and of the music-hall; any speech which seems propitious can become the words of the book, and the act of writing becomes an in-between activity, setting down what becomes a definite realism. This realism fastens upon that speech which, like the wind and the music-hall song, seems itself to exist in the in-between world, somewhere between the world of business and the world of imagination - of fiction and narrative.

Returning now to Lizzie, then, we find that the novel adopts its Swivelleresque stance in relation to her as much as to her father. She is the opposite of him, and it is immediately clear that it is her gift to see into things; she sees beneath the surface of the image to which her life is put, and her response of horror (we see her watching the river like her father, but "in the intensity of her look there was a touch of dread or horror")[15] is the response of the fictive imagination to the business of narratives. Gaffer Hexam allows himself to be absorbed by the river; and it is this absorption that Lizzie fears, for her horror is of his lack of respect for and understanding of the separate energies of another world. Her own vision, her ability to see into the nature of things can however when it is exercised upon her own account produce, not fear or horror, but a special kind of insight, which we see at work a few chapters later when she sees 'pictures' in the fire, telling her brother Charley his past and future. Lizzie shows us that she is able to recognise the transformation of things from death to life, and to see a special, imaginative power on the other side of the point at which the two worlds meet. Her pictures come in the 'glow' of the embers; when Charley goes to stir the fire she tells him,

> Don't disturb it, Charley, or it'll all be in a blaze. It's that dull glow near it, coming and going, that I mean.[16]

---

15. Our Mutual Friend, 43.

16. Our Mutual Friend, 71.

The coals of the fire are both the root of 'business', the ground of England's prosperity, and the substance of the domestic hearth. Lizzie's life, the world of her imagination, is on the domestic side of the life in-between that the fire represents when it burns with this dull glow; it is the imagination of home-life that Pip rejected when he sought, not unlike Hexam, to make the river his own business. The fire comes to echo the river as a point at which business and imagination meet, and the writing finds itself with Lizzie, telling stories of past and present that are quite unliterary. As Charley tells his sister, "Your library of books is the hollow down by the fire, I think".[17]

Lizzie exists, in the first place at least, in the fictive world of the novel, on the imaginative side of fire and river. Her vision is at the same time the passive and subjected vision of fiction which sees into the life of the world she lives in, and not the knowing and controlling vision of narrative. Her knowledge of the future is not 'written' but real, limited by the temporality of her own imagination. She is not like Esther or Pip, an authorial persona foreseeing the story, or knowing as fact; her knowledge and foresight are not written and secure, but they have nevertheless a reality of their own.

This reality becomes another of the novel's rediscoveries, for where Esther preserved suffering by personifying it and making a proctective impulse of it, Lizzie returns us to the world before personae, to the vulnerability of passive life, and to Nancy. Her relationship to Charley and to her father has at its centre the same imaginative but passive wish to make life better that we saw in Nancy in her relation to Oliver and to Sikes. We see this relation, and the way it can exploit her, when she foretells the future to her brother. She tells Charley that the secret of his education will come to have "divided you from father,

---

17. Our Mutual Friend, 73.

and from me", and continues,

> ...It is a great work to have cut you away from father's life, and to have made a new and good beginning. So there I am, Charley, left alone with father, keeping him as straight as I can, watching for more influence than I have, and hoping that through some fortunate chance, or when he is ill, or when - I don't know what - I may turn him to wish to do better things.[18]

What Lizzie does not see, here, is as important as what she does see. Her imagination sees through the fire, as it sees through the river. She sees a better life for her father in the river that his business and living rejects, in the drowning of his activity; and she knows that such a change can come only in immersion, in illness, or even in what Charley has already forbidden her to mention when she tells him a few pages later, that if she would make her father

> believe that learning was a good thing, and that we might lead better lives, I should be amost content to die.[19]

("Don't talk stuff about dying, Liz",[20] is Charley's immediate response.) Death, Lizzie knows, is the only way her father will ever reach the imaginative world between the living and the dead.

What Lizzie does not know, here, however, is that it is the only way that Charley will ever get there. It is made plain enough to us when he shows us that learning can be another kind of business, undertaken without imagination. Lizzie's perception in the fire is blind to this worldliness, and is very much a domestic life, for the hearth is at the heart of the home. Lizzie has her fictive imagination in the context of her Victorian woman's place, and as such is very much like Nancy, real and speaking because of her vulnerability; for she is just as likely to be drowned in the course of the narrative, at this stage, as Nancy was. The difference in Lizzie from the earlier novel,

---

18. Our Mutual Friend, 70.

19. Our Mutual Friend, 70.

20. Our Mutual Friend, 71.

and the reason why she no longer needs the intentional passivity that in Esther was a protection for the fictive, is that her words are no longer personified as a way of speech for the writer. Lizzie's vulnerable and fictive, drowning imagination opposes the river's dead images which dominate the book's narratives, and brings life to a dead world in comforting her father and her brother. What the novel knows, however, is that she will do nothing for them; and just as it has no investment in narrative, so it has no direct investment in Lizzie's fictive imagination. What Lizzie must learn is much the same as what her father and brother must learn (although neither of course do so); the passage between the narrative world and another in which the novel finds its true nature and intelligence. Rogue Riderhood shows us the only way in which Hexam might have achieved such passage as the point at which he is literally half-drowned, and hangs between life and death. Of the 'rough fellows' that stand around him while he fights for his life, we are told, "Neither Riderhood in this world, nor Riderhood in the other, could draw tears from them; but a striving human soul between the two can do it easily".[21]

It is this Swivelleresque state between two worlds that the writing finds to be a common ground; and we see it here in the river, in the wind, and in the fire in which Lizzie has her fictive existence.

This life in-between then rediscovers the fictive world of Nancy just as it rediscovers the harsh narrative that threatens her in Sikes; and this rediscovery goes further, for in Lizzie's friend and ally, Jenny Wren, we find ourselves returned to the wholly fictive life of The Old Curiosity Shop, for Jenny is curiously both Nell and Quilp together. Like Nell, she is neither adult nor child; while "of very tender years indeed"[22] she has in her drunkard father the "troublesome bad child"[23]

---

21. Our Mutual Friend, 504.
22. Our Mutual Friend, 283.
23. Our Mutual Friend, 283.

that Nell has in her grandfather. At the same time, she is her own contrary. As we are told in the second chapter of Book Two, she has, 'happily for her', a dream of being courted and married by 'Him'; having dealt with her drunken father she becomes preoccupied, as she tells Lizzie, by "what I would do to Him, if he should turn out to be a drunkard",[24] and continues, when Lizzie objects, "Oh, but he won't",

> I shall try to take care of it beforehand, but he might deceive me. Oh, my dear, all of these fellows with their tricks and manners do deceive! ... And if so, I tell you what I think I'd do. When he was asleep, I'd make a spoon red hot, and I'd have some boiling liquor bubbling in a saucepan, and I'd take it out hissing, and I'd open his mouth with the other hand - or perhaps he'd sleep with his mouth already open - and I'd pour it down his throat, and blister it, and choke him.[25]

Here, Nell suddenly seems to be taken over by Quilp's imagination, as if the novel now acknowledges their existence in the same fantasy world. For, once again, it now has no investment in the world of fiction, and no interest in distinguishing the fictions of good and evil. Nell and Quilp seem objectified, and where in the earlier novel narrative wanted to make a waxwork doll of Nell, it now half succeeds in Jenny Wren, who has a bad back and queer legs, and is a dwarf, and a doll's dressmaker.

What does interest the novel, however, is the revisiting of her world, and the knowledge of its difference from narrative. The writing is now the Swiveller, and what it delights in is Jenny's encounter with narrative, when narrative finds her merely incomprehensible. We see this incomprehension at its most forcible when she meets Fledgeby - perhaps the most extreme of all the novel's encounters. Fledgeby represents the world of the business and usage of narrative at its most

---

24. Our Mutual Friend, 294.
25. Our Mutual Friend, 294.

brutal, and at what might in an earlier novel have been its most dangerous, for his is not the brutality of mere stupidity. Like Hexam, he is the product of the factory world and we are told, "His youthful fire was all composed of sparks from the grindstone",[26] but, unlike Hexam, he presents us with the intelligence and consciousness that the factory can produce. He is a later form of the previously highly problematic figure of Uriah Heep, and his knowledge is the knowledge of bad stories that has always threatened the good story of the novel. As we see in the encounter with Lammle in Chapter V, book 2, he presents us with a form of self-consciousness that opposes the authority of the river writer:

> "What did you think of Georgiana?" asked Mr Lammle.
> "Why, I'll tell you," said Fledgeby, very deliberately.
> "Do, my boy."
> "You misunderstand me," said Fledgeby." "I don't mean I'll tell you that. I mean I'll tell you something else."
> "Tell me anything old fellow!"
> "Ah, but you misunderstand me again," said Fledgeby. "I mean I'll tell you nothing."[27]

Fledgeby lets Lammle know "something" here, but in doing so conveys that his meaning is "something else": he says what he wants to say by saying nothing. His speech is there for show; he displays it as a trader would display goods, waiting for Lammle to pay. To Fledgeby, speech is merely a part of a world that exists for show, and as such he understands the way that it functions very well: he tells us as much when he says to Lammle, of the dinner at the Podsnap's the evening before,

> I am not calculated to show to advantage under that sort of circumstances. I know very well you two did show to advantage, and managed capitally. But don't you on that account come talking to me as if I was your doll and your puppet, because I am not.[28]

---

26. Our Mutual Friend, 321.
27. Our Mutual Friend, 321.
28. Our Mutual Friend, 323.

These words usurp social speech, as they usurp the social function of the dinner party, contaminating its language. To Fledgeby, 'show' is not merely the external appearance of things, but the whole business. The display absorbs the whole of his energy, as it absorbs the whole of Lammle's: it is 'calculated' and 'managed'; and its rewards are 'advantage' and 'capital'. The whole show is under the control, not of Fledgeby or of Lammle, but of these words. Although these two are less crudely ignorant than Hexam, they are defeated by the same trap, for they are themselves controlled by the language they use to control others, just as Hexam is used by his own world of usage.

We see the new freedom of this novel at work then when this corrupted, factory and city speech is encountered by the fictive world it cannot see in itself. When Fledgeby disturbs Jenny Wren in the rooftop garden over the Jew, Riah's shop, Jenny tells him: "We are thankful to come here for rest, sir", explaining, "It's the quiet and the air":

> "The quiet!" repeated Fledgeby, with a contemptuous turn of the head towards the City's room. "And the air!" with a "Poof!" at the smoke.
>
> "Ah!" said Jenny. "But it's so high. And you see the clouds rushing on above the narrow streets, not minding them, and you see the golden arrows pointing at the mountains in the sky from which the wind comes, and you feel as if you were dead."
>
> ...
>
> "How do you feel when you are dead?" asked Fledgeby, much perplexed.
>
> "Oh, so tranquil!" cried the little creature, smiling. "Oh, so peaceful and so thoughtful! And you hear the people who are alive, crying and working, and calling to one another down in the close streets, and you seem to pity them so! And such a chain has fallen from you, and such a strange good sorrowful happiness comes upon you!"[29]

This encounter, then, is something of a tour-de-force; fiction and narrative meet, while the novel, in-between, registers their

---

29. Our Mutual Friend, 333-4.

difference. Neither are seen to be directly involved in the novel's action, for, taking place upon the rooftops, their encounter is almost physically removed from the novel. The writing reclaims for itself both the imagination that Jenny represents, which previously died out of the course of the novel, of an unprotected fantasy world, and at the same time the language that Fledgeby corrupts. The writing embraces both Nell and Quilp and the world of Sikes; and here the impossible happens, and they are brought momentarily together, and shown to be mutually exclusive. Fledgeby cannot enter Jenny's world of drowning imagination, while she cannot participate in the business of the city. The rooftop garden becomes another in-between place, where two worlds meet and exchange.

The exchange here, of course, is marginal, and the meeting of these two extremes little more than a demonstration of the writing's new confidence in its own middle place. Not all of the meetings it brings about, however, are so cursory and ultimately insignificant. We have seen the world of narrative in the novel only at its crudest, and its world of fiction at its extreme. Although the world of Hexam, Riderhood, Fledgeby, the world of dust and dirt, is incapable of meeting the world of imagination in any meaningful way, just as Jenny's fictive world, limited by its necessary precariousness and disability cannot meet the world of business, elsewhere the novel finds its figures more capable of using the space it provides for the meeting of narrative and fiction, of authority and imagination, and these encounters become its chief concern.

We saw that Lizzie, in reproducing Nancy's subjected female and working-class imagination, occupied the fictive world, and that where Oliver Twist was concerned only with what could be done to her, protection seeming to be the responsibility of the novel, Our Mutual Friend is very

much more concerned with what she can do for herself, with the way that she can interact with the narratives the world offers, and in which narrative can in turn interact with her. Again, the writing offers itself as a middle ground, and while it is one Jenny Wren cannot use, Lizzie is not incapable of meeting the narratives of the world in it.

The ground of this meeting, of course, is the ground of Jenny's fantasies, the encounter with 'Him', the romantic story which as Jenny tells us provides a man as either the god or devil of a future existence. While the angelic and demonic seem to belong to her nature, 'His' remains the all important identity of the narrative she will herself never meet, and an important part of the novel now centres upon what 'He' might in reality be like, and upon the kinds of narrative that might be capable of meeting Lizzie's fiction.

We have already seen that her father's world of 'usage' is not capable of doing so; and that her brother's aspirant intelligence similarly rejects imagination. Two very different figures engaged in the active world of the novel - in its narrative business - seem willing to approach her world, however. The first of these is closely related to Charley in being his schoolmaster, Bradley Headstone.

Bradley Headstone is very clearly and openly the narrator of his world; a man who finds the world to be the way that David Copperfield feared it would be at its beginning, but finds himself grown up in that world. Where David tests the language narrative offers, Headstone invests himself in it, exchanging the flexibility of a childhood self-consciousness for the inflexibility of an adult vision. Pip shows us the defeat of the writer; and Headstone shows us how the writing ego proceeds after defeat, approaching Lizzie in the self-justification, the proof, of its control over reality. Headstone refuses to recognise the difference of her world to his own; so far as he is concerned, she

is merely inferior by education, his own self-improvement. While his narrative is not dogmatically hostile to feeling or imagination, and desperately wants Lizzie's feelings to assent to his own, the awful mistake that Headstone makes is the refusal to distinguish between feeling and speech; and the mistake is the more dreadful for the fact that it is made simply by believing too much in the reality of things. He stands for and embodies the values of Victorian middle-class society; for progress, for education, for self-improvement and for self-enlightenment. Those things are to him what his feelings are; they are his passion, his life, and his love, so completely does he absorb what seems to him to be the order of things within his own nature. What he says is what he means; so that he refuses to distinguish between his own meaning and the meaning of the world, assuming that the difference between what he was and what he is - which is to him a great virtue and good - is a communicable and so common good. He effectively believes in and practices a common language of himself, and asserts that language in his dealings and conflicts with others. He tells Eugene Wrayburn,

> You reproach me with my origin...you cast insinuations at my bringing-up. But I tell you, sir, I have worked my way onward, out of both and in spite of both, and I have a right to be considered a better man than you, with better reasons for being proud.[30]

That 'better' is at the root of Headstone's language, and in it his speech, feeling and belief are united. But he finds that unity of self destroyed even in the process of its expression:

> "Oh, what a misfortune is mine," cried Bradley, breaking off to wipe the starting perspiration from his face as he shook from head to foot, "that I cannot so control myself as to appear a stronger

30. Our Mutual Friend, 346.

> creature than this,when a man who has not felt in all his life what I have felt in a day can so command himself!" He said it in a very agony, and even followed it with an errant motion of his hands as if he could have torn himself".[31]

Progress has only made of Headstone a kind of sophisticated Hexam, and has failed to lead him from the savagery which is at the heart of the world of usage. He finds himself caught in an identical trap to the one that absorbs Hexam: social progression is his river, and he makes his 'living' of it. Just like Hexam, he is incapable of seeing a world beneath its surface. Where Hexam's failure is a failure of ignorance to enter the world of imagination, however, Headstone's failure is the failure of knowledge and of consciousness: and where Hexam's savagery is that of an animal, Headstone's is the failure of a human being, the failure of power and control. Where Hexam is used by use, Headstone is compelled by his own compulsion, finding that those things that seem to offer social control and a way of dealing with the human world - his feelings and passions - somehow de-humanise and make a monster of him. He finds himself dissociated and de-valued by what he sees as and fully believes to be his associative powers and genuine, proper and common values. He calls himself a 'creature' while seeing Eugene as a 'man', and stands, a mere animal even in his own eyes, sweating and violently restless, as a result of what he knows to be his very self-control, internalising what he believes to be external and common values even as he places his faith in them.

Moreover, there is nothing that he can himself do about his predicament, for this faith is his living, and it is his constant surprise and frustration, but never his expectation, that it is not everybody else's. Headstone's consciousness is literary in the way that Pip's would have been had it not been sensitised by constant defeat, and is

31. Our Mutual Friend, 345.

incapable of knowing that feeling must often remain silent, and unspoken. Pip represents Dickens' relinquishment of unity, while Headstone shows us what its full assertion must mean for the individual.

Headstone, then, only discovers meaning in the assertion of that unity for himself, remaining convinced of his 'better' way of living, and unable to see the other side of himself, such as he admits of its existence. As he tells Lizzie,

> It seems egotistical to begin by saying so much about myself...but whatever I say to you seems, even in my own ears, below what I want to say, and different from what I want to say. I can't help it. So it is. You are the ruin of me.[32]

These words, of course, are an appeal; and what they seek - or rather demand - is that Lizzie should step through the looking-glass of the words that reflect Headstone's self-esteem, his "confidence", "resources" and "government" of himself as he says,as merely "egotistical" and "below what I want to say",[33] and assent to them as common values. He wants Lizzie to join him, to save him from joining her: - an outcome, of course, which goes to the root of his fears, since Lizzie is herself a part of precisely that humble origin he evades in himself. The egotism of this is very nearly sublime, the attempt at honesty becoming an assertion of control, not over an abstract reality, but over Lizzie herself. His language must be common language, or it is nothing; it may seem 'low', but it will be heightened by assent.

It is a compulsion which Lizzie must and does refuse; and her refusal leaves Headstone with the true nature of his words, as self-compulsion. Because of his belief that the words he speaks must come from somewhere other than himself - and so are a language - he finds himself controlled through them by a power which is that of his own ego:

---

32. Our Mutual Friend, 452.

33. Our Mutual Friend, 452.

> I must try to give expression to what is in my mind: it shall and must be spoken [34]

he tells Lizzie. 'It', he feels, is tangibly there, a reality outside himself, when it is really only him. His torture is that while its 'must' compels him, it has no power whatever over Lizzie, or over anybody else; and his "I can't help it" is not the register of an unearthly power, but of his own impotence.

Bradley Headstone then shows himself capable of approaching Lizzie only as a reassurance for his own world, and as an assertion of his own narrative control. He demands in doing so that the fictive shall be controlled by narrative, showing himself to belong to the world of usage and offering Lizzie no middle ground in which her fictive existence can engage. His approach to her is a demand that she relinquish her own nature in his.

The other approach to Lizzie's world of fiction seems at first to be more promising. Eugene Wrayburn becomes Headstone's great enemy and adversary, and seems to take an opposite way, for where the latter assumes that his language is a common one, Wrayburn makes the contrary assumption that no language is a common one. Eugene sees in silence the kind of potency that Headstone wanted so desperately for his speech, and where Headstone stands for the impotence of the open morality of narrative, insisting as Pip found he could not upon himself as its centre and source, Eugene opposes such narrative. "It's not easy for me to talk to you" Lizzie tells him, "for you see all the consequences of what I say, as soon as I say it".[35] This power of interpretation is not undertaken by appealing to the social significance of individual responsibility, which Headstone finds to be mere egotism, but by

---

34. Our Mutual Friend, 453.

35. Our Mutual Friend, 288.

Eugene's refusal to acknowledge any responsibility at all, his assent to whatever seems to happen without interference. Eugene sees all experience in little pieces; but his vision is not, like David Copperfield's, a sign of his innocence but of his disbelief in the unity of life. This, Lizzie finds, makes him impossible to talk to, for he does not, like Bradley, see only one end, but all ends: he expects reality to disappoint, and in a curious way makes narratives of incoherence. His power and his perception which give his grasp upon reality, are born of a faith in faithlessness, in the incoherence of the world, and in the devaluation of his stories, amid which he nurtures his own, secret narrative, born out of narrative's failures. This secret he guards fiercely. When Mortimer Lightwood challenges him, early in the book, with 'withholding something' and asks him whether it is true, Eugene replies,

> Upon my soul, [I] don't know. I know less about myself than about most people in the world, and I don't know.[36]

Eugene knows about other narratives what he won't know about himself - that they fail. He refuses to see any such failure in the secret of himself, unlike Headstone, who constantly confronts the brick wall of his own story. As Eugene later says, when the object of his distraction has been settled as Lizzie,

> I don't design anything. I have no design whatever. I am incapable of designs. If I conceived a design, I should speedily abandon it, exhausted by the operation.[37]

This silence is against the feelings that 'designs' admit; in so being it produces a problem, for while what it fears on the one hand is Headstone's failure, it fears on the other the feelings themselves,

---

36. Our Mutual Friend, 338.

37. Our Mutual Friend, 348.

wanting a secret story without their exposure. In this second instance, Wrayburn is against the best intentions of narrative, to be responsible and open, as Headstone is not; and is not unlike Fledgeby in his refusal to put anything into words. Eugene moves towards a 'wrong' narrative, the narrative of exploitation and cruelty, and of a threat which offers real danger to Lizzie, where Headstone's story was at least 'right' in expressing its direction and needs. Once again, it seems that Eugene wants Lizzie to confirm the power of his irresponsibility, his version of the narrative. When Lightwood, speaking for the schoolmaster morality, tells him to "Look on to the end", which is the duty of narrative, it is to the responsibility of so doing that Eugene objects:

> Ah! See now! That's exactly what I am incapable of doing... When we were at school together, I got up my lessons at the last moment, day by day and bit by bit; now we are out in life together, I get up my lessons in the same way. In the present task I have not got beyond this: - I am bent on finding Lizzie, and I mean to find her... I ask you - for information - what does that mean? When I have found her I may ask you - also for information - what do I mean now? But it would be premature at this stage, and it's not the character of my mind.[38]

Eugene here sets open narrative upon the side of the schoolmaster, and sets himself against the plot that 'gets up its lessons' in advance. He refuses the language which is narrative and moral responsibility, for he sees no opportunity within it - whether that opportunity is to include or to reject the world of feeling. Narrative sits around the Podsnaps' dinner table - in the Podsnaps, in the Veneerings (and aspirantly in Headstone) - and when Eugene finds himself there, he declines to participate.

Condemnation of Eugene is rendered difficult in this social context,

---

38. Our Mutual Friend, 600.

for it is clear that his reticence is self-protective from the devaluation of feeling that speech becomes in the world of Podsnappery. At the same time, however, reticence is the privilege of his position at the table, and his silence in the passages quoted above does not relinquish the control that moves him consistently towards a position which will be the direct exploitation of the relative positions of himself and Lizzie, and so produce another direct exploitation of fiction by narrative. The novel becomes curiously divided in its attitude towards him, for while reticence copes properly with the false values and false narratives of 'society', its reserve also refuses to protect the feeling of fiction by denying its own secret ends. The following is typical of the novel's external observation of the character:

> So much of what was fantastically true to his own knowledge of this utterly careless Eugene, mingled with the answer, that Mortimer could not receive it as a mere evasion.[39]

Here, the novel equivocates between condemnation and qualified approval, for it is impossible to know what lies within Eugene's silence. Headstone betrays his nature, and condemns himself; but while we cannot see this self-betrayal in Eugene, we cannot believe in his authority as a constructive social value either.

Neither Headstone nor Wrayburn then seems to offer to approach the world of fiction and to relinquish narrative in the hope of finding an in-between life; and in neither does Lizzie as yet find the opportunity she needs to act in her own, different way, by meeting them there. Her only response to these approaches, which seem to belong securely to the self-defeating world of narrative she has seen in her father and is growing to understand in Charley, can be to reject them.

---

39. Our Mutual Friend, 339.

To these three figures I will return; but first of all it is necessary to pay closer attention to what we have called 'narrative' and 'fiction' in this novel, for in having no commitment to either the writing shows the 'real' nature of each. Headstone, Wrayburn, Jenny and Lizzie all have as their inner ideal the meeting of fictive and narrative, and the finding of the in-between world where authority and vulnerability are brought together; but what we now begin to realise is that such an encounter is horribly difficult to achieve. Jenny shows us that fantasy is born out of the necessity of an isolation that the writing now knows it can do nothing for, as is Lizzie's emotional imagination; and at the same time, nothing can be done to relieve the male identities of Headstone and Wrayburn of the isolation of their respective narratives, for narrative, too, lies oddly beyond the common grasp and language of writing. All the writing can do, here, is to wait upon coincidence.

It is this dependence upon the chances of life in-between that creates the structure of the book, and which dictates the odd contrast of its other part. This contrast has frequently been criticised as error. Kincaid, for example, notes, "I think that the reader is forced to pay for the increasingly moving Wrayburn-Hexam plot with the increasingly silly Wilfer-Harmon plot"[40] and quotes Taylor-Stoehr's suggestion that "the novel is really one-half of a great novel".[41]

But the 'Wrayburn-Hexam' relation is not really a 'plot' in the sense of its being a narrative at all; as we have seen, the writing <u>refuses</u> to plot. The accompanying 'Wilfer-Harmon' story is not an artistic error, but shows us why the writing depends on chance.

---

40. J.R. Kincaid, <u>Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter</u>, 228.

41. See Taylor Stoehr, <u>The Dreamer's Stance</u>, (New York 1965), pp.203-205; Kincaid, <u>The Rhetoric of Laughter</u>, 228.

This second part of the book, then, is the only place that we really find a narrative, where narrative produces a language; the story of 'the man from Somewhere' is the story of the whole novel, the plot that is on everybody's lips, and the common, and only property of its public wisdom. Lightwood and Wrayburn, Hexam and Riderhood, the dinner table of the Podsnaps and Veneerings and the public at large all tell it; and in a world where other languages seem private and dissociative it is hardly surprising that the notoriety which provides common ground should take up so much of the novel's attention.

The nature of this story, moreover, and the way that it is treated, accord entirely with the writing's occupation of a middle ground. It is essentially the story of John Harmon, of course; his father, we learn, was the 'Golden Dustman', the man who made a fortune of the dust which, we saw, was the image the river gave to the world of business. It is entirely apt that the only common language the figures of the novel find is constructed by his Will. It is this, and the furore it creates, which fills an emptiness of common speech, and provides an order that the dusty world can embrace.

The Golden Dustman, then, becomes the novel's narrator; and the story he sets out is his son's, that he shall return from abroad, from exile from his father, to inherit the dust conditionally upon marrying Bella Wilfer. Should Harmon die, or refuse the marriage, the dust will pass to Mr Boffin, his foreman.

The novel itself asks no questions of this narrative; it places it as we see among the dust to which it consigns its other progressions, as a language which merely confirms the world's void of languages. John Harmon, however, takes up what in an earlier novel might have been the writer's part, to dissent from and question it. Since he enters upon his story missing, assumed drowned, he is granted anonymity which it

appears can be used to test and control the narrative which is then to be his. He is not unlike Dickens as we saw him at the beginning of David Copperfield in holding back from the autobiography the world seems to offer in order to explore its possibilities and limitations; but unlike Dickens, of course, he is utterly committed to the story which he wants to narrate. His reticence is a competition with his father for control of a world which he sees as his story, where Dickens' reticence was to discover whether the world could be his story.

Where Headstone and Wrayburn then represent two egotisms of narrative Harmon represents a third, and perhaps the worst. For where, in the first two, identity is problematic and obstructs feeling, in Harmon it is almost a religion. He believes, as the others do not, not in the love which is at the heart of both Headstone's impotence and Wrayburn's silence, but in the bringing about of love, in the control which is narrative. His consciousness is dominated by narrative, so that his 'death' achieves, not a meeting with Jenny Wren's dead world of fiction, but the after-life Pip wanted so badly as the end of narrative; as he tells us,

> Dead, I have found the true friends of my lifetime still as true, as tender and as faithful as when I was alive, and making my memory an incentive to good actions done in my name. Dead, I have found them when they might have slighted my name, and passed greedily over my grave to ease and wealth, lingering by the way, like single-hearted children, to recall their love for me when I was a poor frightened child. Dead, I have heard from the woman who would have been my wife if I had lived, the revolting truth that I should have purchased her, caring nothing for me, as a Sultan buys a slave.
>
> What would I have? If the dead could know, or do know, how the living use them, who among the hosts of dead has found a more disinterested fidelity on earth than I? Is that not enough for me? If I had come back, these noble creatures would have welcomed me, wept over me, given up everything to me with joy. I did not come back, and they have passed

> unspoiled into my place. Let them rest in it, and let Bella rest in hers.[42]

That Harmon finds death so successful as a strategy is due simply to the fact that he is _not_ dead; unlike Pip, he evades the fear of mismemory that real death offers to narrative. That Harmon is not properly immersed in the river of things becomes clear here. Unlike the novel's own voice he exists between the two worlds of life and death in an artificial way, calling what continues to be his life, his death; he is not even like Aunt Betsey, living a 'second time around' existence, for his first life is palpably not over. Memory, and the awareness of memory, belongs to the world of narratives, and to the world of the living, and Harmon's concern for his place in the world as a 'dead' man is still a concern for the world of the living. He makes no passage between the two worlds, but finds himself - insofar as he wishes to preserve his position as author of events - living in a world he cannot enter, and this exclusion becomes the price of a happy ending.

Harmon's 'death', then, is an image of what we saw at the beginning of this chapter was a division of 'writer' and 'writing', and in him Dickens shows us what he discovered in _David Copperfield_, that no strategy of separation is capable of avoiding this division if what it seeks in the novel is a world that the writer can comfortably occupy at its ending (absence being the only proof of that world); separation only becomes an affirmation of his commitment _to_ the world. "If I had come back"; these words present us with Harmon's dilemma, for while in one sense he is still missing, in another he is already and inextricably returned, and indeed was never absent. Harmon shows us that the narrator cannot pass through the looking-glass into fiction, unifying experience, where writing represents a personal interest, and a personal

---

42. _Our Mutual Friend_, 429.

fate. The writing of Harmon's story is not the river that exists between fiction and narrative, but another version of the narrative that represents the writer's absorption in himself. John Harmon's interest is in this control of his own fate; but the outcome of that interest is that, even 'dead', his imagination is controlled by interest itself, and the writing that is his is appropriated by him.

The result that is produced is the appropriation of the other figures in his story - for all his agonising over their happiness without him - to his own. Mr Boffin seems to become a part of the machinery of this tale, which by the end of the novel appears to work perfectly: at the climax of this narrative, where all is revealed to Bella, "By a master-stroke of arrangement, the inexhaustible baby here appeared at the door, suspended in mid-air by invisible agency".[43] And Bella, too, is absorbed; when she asserts to Harmon's proposal of marriage,

> ...Bella responded "Yes, I am yours if you think me worth taking!" And after that, seemed to shrink to next to nothing in the clasp of his arms, partly because it was such a strong one on his part, and partly because there was such a yielding to it on hers.[44]

The narrative Harmon proposes thus comes true, and his control seems justified, having brought about one of those changes of heart of which narrative is so fond as the revelation of its underlying omniscience. That it does so depends heavily upon the other factors in it. The first of these of course is Bella herself, for Harmon does not really change her. From the beginning, his inheritance claims Bella for his narrative, and even in her change of heart, it is in that narrative world that she remains. We see this even in the way that the change in her consciousness occurs:

---

43. Our Mutual Friend, 841.

44. Our Mutual Friend, 671.

> "What he said was very sensible, I am sure, and very true, I am sure. It is only what I often say to myself. Don't I like it then? No, I don't like it, and, though he is my liberal benefactor, I disparage him for it. Then pray", said Bella, sternly putting the question to herself in the looking-glass as usual, "what do you mean by this, you inconsistent little Beast?"
>
> The looking glass preserving a discreet ministerial silence when thus called upon for explanation, Bella went to bed...[45]

Here, as indeed elsewhere, Bella seems curiously one-dimensional. She sees herself reflected in Mr Boffin as she sees herself reflected in her mirror, and once again these reflective media offer the values of writing as an intermediary, interpretative place. But Bella is never allowed to see through the glass; she only sees herself reflected in it. Her nature is entirely unlike Lizzie's for it exists in the narrative world of mere observation, without the fictive dimension of imagination. Because Bella has been claimed by narrative and by expectation, in having them forced upon her, she is unable to recognise writing, and the places in which writing exists, as an in-between world, a place of refuge - a fictive world - but instead finds stories, and her own story among them, as a place only for exposure and commitment.

Bella's greed and her wilfulness, then, are a kind of romantic expectation of the outside world that is at all times controlled by that world. John Harmon only redirects it into marriage, preserving narrative at all cost. What makes Bella so flat a figure in relation to Lizzie is the fact that her allegiance to narrative makes her at all times personal to John Harmon, and to his story. Her charm and her declarations are constantly controlled by the hidden fidelity she must have to the figure who has made her consciousness, both in its initial greed and in its subsequent self-realisation. Just as Harmon is a

---

45. Our Mutual Friend, 527.

living deadman, so Bella is a widow whose husband is curiously present, hidden, as it were, in the surface of the mirror through which he will never allow her to pass and through which he has never passed himself. What Harmon discovers, then, in Bella, is not the liberation of the other world that both Headstone and Wrayburn seek in Lizzie but only what is after all his own narrative, the same story that he himself lives out, told by his father, and accepted by Bella.

The second, and most important factor in Harmon's apparent success is represented by Mr Boffin, and also by Mr Venus, for it is these figures who construct his narrative for him by pretending to be what they are not. This pretence - particularly in Mr Boffin - has often been criticised as an absurdly clumsy machinery for the narrative; but this is precisely the important point, for, once again, the novel has no investment in what they do for narrative. It is they themselves that matter to the novel, for both are placed in the position that it recognises as its own, in the middle of things. They echo the judgement of the writing by showing us how unconvincing the interference in narrative to produce a happy ending must be. In both Mr Venus and Mr Boffin fiction and narrative meet. Mr Venus is caught between the dust-heap of his business and his unlikely love affair with Pleasant Riderhood, and we see the Swiveller at work in his eventual compromise; as he tells Wegg, Pleasant's objection to his business is overcome when he asks her

> whether if, after marriage, I confined myself to the articulation of men, children, and the lower animals, it might not relieve the lady's mind of her feeling respecting being - as a lady - regarded in a bony light.[46]

Unlike Wegg, Mr Venus does not belong entirely to the dusty world, and his success here is to humanise his own business with a dignity

46. Our Mutual Friend, 853.

that makes even the dust-heaps respect human feeling.

Mr Boffin's position, meanwhile, is not dissimilar. As the manager and then the owner of the dust he remains a half-fictive figure both in his home life (he concurs entirely when Mrs Boffin remarks, "Lor how many matters are matters of feeling"[47] asserting, as Kincaid remarks, "the key comic doctrine, the primacy of feelings")[48] and in his innocence. We see most forcibly in his dealings with Wegg the vulnerability of his illiterate simplicity to Wegg's sharp narrative consciousness. At the same time, we see his narrative intellect overcome by his imagination: Mr Boffin, we are told at the end of Wegg's first reading,

> ...had soon laid down his unfinished pipe, and had ever since sat intently staring with his eyes and mind at the confounding enormities of the Romans[49]

and "was so severely punished that he could hardly wish his literary friend Good-night".[50]

It is Mr Boffin's innocence which has often been found so difficult in his complicity with John Harmon. When he joins in with narrative he does so more convincingly than the narrative itself might have required, producing in the point where real feelings meet the artifices of narrative a confusion in which the story finds itself taken over by the power of Mr Boffin's good feelings; which, as critics have often noted, produces a great deal of mystification. Mr Boffin plays the game of narrative, but does so with the real feeling which has no place in it. He does what the novel would do, and makes the most of a life in-between the imagination which left him vulnerable and the narrative which seems

---

47. Our Mutual Friend, 389.
48. J.R. Kincaid, Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter, 245.
49. Our Mutual Friend, 104.
50. Our Mutual Friend, 104.

to exploit, or at least control. Boffin very oddly comes to dominate the Wilfer-Harmon plot, which is left with a happiness that seems mere rhetoric in comparison to his own feelings. He brings inspiration to mere narrative; as he tells us himself in chapter IV, XIII,

> When John said, if he had been so happy as to win your affections and possess your heart, it come into my head to turn round upon him with "Win her affections and possess her heart! Mew says the cat, Quack quack says the duck, and Bow-wow-wow says the dog." I couldn't tell you how it come into my head or where from, but it had so much the sound of a rasper that I own to you it astonished myself. I was awful nigh bursting out a laughing though, when it made John stare![51]

Narrative, in Mr Boffin's hands, comes as if from nowhere, and takes over Harmon's story, discrediting the language of the Will as Venus discredits it in Wegg, and replacing it with his own spontaneous speech. What is important here is that it is he, and not Harmon, in whom the novel has its interest, whatever the interest of the narrative. He exposes the weakness of Harmon's end, and the emptiness of its language, and gives his happiness the feeling that seems so sadly missing from the dreary rhetoric of his marriage, when "O there are days in this life, worth life and worth death. And O what a bright old song it is, that O 'tis love, 'tis love, 'tis love, that makes the world go round!"[52] It is the Boffins who re-stage this marriage at the end of the book with its proper feelings.

While Mr Boffin's good nature, however, exists between fiction and narrative, it does not exist between Bella and John Harmon. Their happiness is Boffin's; their life remains the self-absorbed life of narrative. Bella and Harmon then do not so much meet each other, as are themselves met by Mr Boffin's imagination. We do not find a middle

---

51. Our Mutual Friend, 848.
52. Our Mutual Friend, 738.

ground in their relationship so much as in what Boffin does for it, and their happiness depends upon his peripheral involvement and is displaced there. Narrative cannot control this happiness, we see; it rests instead with the chance encounter of narrative with the fictive imagination.

Returning now to the novel's other chief concern, of Lizzie, Headstone, and Wrayburn, the isolation in which we left these figures does at least seem to promise more than the dead and unhappy associations of narrative. Their very isolation seems to leave a space for the kind of interaction that was impossible between Bella and Harmon, even if that interaction must come about without control, and by chance. At the same time, while such relationship is difficult, all three figures seek a marriage in a world different from Harmon's, a world in which fiction misses narrative and narrative fiction, in which authority misses vulnerability and vulnerability misses authority; a world in which a middle ground is <u>sought</u>. Whereas in the story of Harmon and Bella there is no room for the operation of that 'in-between' vision, the kind of irony which refuses control of either fiction or narrative, here, in the relation of these figures, we see that there is a kind of void in which no figure is capable of asserting a fictive or narrative voice as an authoritative vision. None of these figures, it becomes clear, is capable of emerging alone as the dominant force of this part of the plot, for each is governed by a crisis of feeling and action. Lizzie finds herself confined by feeling; Eugene and Bradley by opposite kinds of action, the first by the limitation of silence and the second by the limitation of speech.

Each, moreover, finds him- or herself the object of the narrative or fictive wills of the others. Lizzie becomes an object of home; Bradley of middle-class aspiration (which Lizzie rejects); and Eugene

of middle-class detachment and ennui (which Lizzie distrusts). While narrative in each case finds itself incapable of moving towards fiction, it does find in its opposing form an effigy of the world it hates. In Eugene this produces merely bored contempt; in Bradley Headstone it produces violence. This violence then becomes the medium of the novel's in-between vision, the middle-ground in which what happens is accidental and beyond control. It is the equivalent in human relationship to the image of the river, existing <u>between</u> individual and social responsibility, having neither the authority of narrative, in the blindness of its passion, nor the innocence or incoherence of fiction in its clear purpose. This passion is the exasperation of the middle world, the only <u>active</u> feeling we see remaining to the middle classes, the blind impulsion of the resentment of its expectations against a world which can impose a structure of expectation without a structure of fulfilment. This, we see, is the accidental energy of the middle-world which exists outside any narrative control, and at the same time beyond any imaginative acceptance, as what Nietsche might have called the conclusion of a social order 'against itself',[53] as the consequence of the disparity and separation of the fictions and narratives it contains. Bella and Harmon became trapped in the similarity of their ends; now, the opposition of the ends of Bradley and Eugene begins to offer the possibility of a freedom. Bradley cannot plot to make Lizzie love him, but he can plot to overthrow what already exists in his own world, and to destroy Eugene's silent consciousness. If his narrative cannot control fiction, then at least it will seem to assert its authority in the world of narrative, where that world seems to oppose his feelings.

---

53. See <u>The Genealogy of Morals</u>, Trans. H. Samuel, Ed. Levy, (London 1910), 209.

In a sense, Bradley's attack upon Eugene is then the expression of his love for Lizzie, and of his own will to move where he cannot, towards her world. At the same time, the attack takes Eugene where he has no will to go; and confronts him with the failure of his secrecy, bringing his knowledge of other narratives, that they _must_ fail, into his own, and releasing him from the terrible self-absorption that a survival in secrecy has become. The two figures are brought together by narrative, in the violence engendered by their different kinds of self-obsession, the one craving authority and the other a hiding-place, as the outcome of the opposite activities of a male search for the imagination of feeling. The following is the climax of this interaction - for, as we will see, it ceases to be a narrative - :

> The rippling of the river seemed to cause a correspondent stir in [Eugene's] uneasy reflections. He would have laid them asleep if he could, but they were in movement, like the stream, and all tending one way with a strong current. As the ripple under the moon broke unexpectedly now and then, and palely flashed in a new shape and with a new sound, so parts of his thoughts started, unbidden, from the rest, and revealed their wickedness. "Out of the question to marry her," said Eugene, "and out of the question to leave her. The crisis!"
>
> He had sauntered far enough. Before turning to retrace his steps,he stopped upon the margin, to look down at the reflected night. In an instant, with a dreadful crash, the reflected night turned crooked, flames shot jaggedly across the air, and the moon and the stars came bursting from the sky.[54]

This is the point at which Eugene's silence becomes the spoken lie it hides, and it is at this point that chance takes over.

The choice, of course, is impossible; but here Headstone saves him from choice. Once again, we see the action from the perspective of the writing, which finds its own intermediary; and, once again, it finds it in the river. The river produces 'reflection', a 'correspondent stir',

---

54. _Our Mutual Friend_, 765.

which functions as a moral, narrative sense. Functioning for a moment like a mirror, it produces the judgement upon Eugene that we have never quite had access to, revealing 'wickedness'. For a moment, we see the river as the relentless force that Master Humphrey feared; as the force that Eugene fears in feeling, the force that Headstone embraces and assents to,"all tending one way". Headstone only becomes the tool of this mighty stream of tendency, in punishing Eugene for the lie that is finally spoken.

Immediately, the river changes; "In an instant, with a dreadful crash, the reflected night turned crooked,...and the moon and the stars came bursting from the sky". There is in this change a certain amenity, for the river does not simply swallow Eugene into its terrible surface. We see again here that it has another dimension; that reflection only betrays the depths that lie within it. "I'll send you to the moon, I'll send you to the stars", Orlick tells Pip; and Pip, rather like Harmon, can think only of how he will be remembered. Here, the moon and stars become a reality, another world, and in the instant of the violence that the 'movement' of the river has done to Eugene's will to sleep we have passed through its surface, away from memory and reflection, to glimpse another world, the dream-world of death that is the reality of silence. The river becomes our passage between two worlds, as it becomes Eugene's, and as it never was Harmon's.

This immersion in the world of fiction provides Lizzie with her opportunity to act. She pulls Eugene, half-alive, from the river just as her father pulled corpses, and in doing so finds a kind of equality with Eugene in which both acknowledge an existence both on and through the river's surface. The 'Word' Eugene is able to find in marriage is entirely unlike the word that John Harmon uses to marry Bella, for it is born of this in-between equality, the half-immersion of Lizzie and

Eugene together creating a real language which exists in-between the worlds of silence and lies, just as each character has come to do. Headstone, meanwhile, having murdered in the guise of the once-drowned Riderhood, finds the river his resting-place, the place of peace and of sleep and dies,as he resolves, the death that Master Humphrey told us was 'easiest and best', in his evasion of the 'movement' of things that eventually threatened to destroy him as he had attempted to use it to destroy Eugene. Thus, Headstone, too, passes through the surface of things; and while, like Hexam, there is no in-between place for him, he persists, in a sense, in the man his violent integrity makes of Eugene; so that Twemlow's final tribute is a tribute to Headstone as well.

Twemlow's voice, ending the novel, has a dual function. First, it reminds us of the part of the novel which has been of real importance; mediated by Mortimer, Twemlow's 'Voice' has the authority at least of a tired but persistent decency, and recognises a strength in Eugene with which Harmon was unable to provide us:

> "I say," resumes Twemlow, "if such feelings on the part of this gentleman, induced this gentleman to marry this lady, I think he is the greater gentlemen for the action, and makes her the greater lady. I beg to say, that when I use the word, gentleman, I use it in the sense in which the degree may be attained by any man."[55]

The second function of this judgement lies in the character of Twemlow himself, reminding us that if the writing has a voice, it does not belong to the narrative, and neither to the world of imagination and innocence. Twemlow has had no part in the story, while he has at the same time experienced too much for his bewilderment to be in any sense fictive. Curiously, the ending comes between the two endings we

---

55. Our Mutual Friend, 891.

might have expected; the 'happy ending' of the novel's narratives has been achieved in the previous chapter, and its life is over. "Nobody's business any more",[56] David Copperfield's lament after his marriage, might be the complaint of narrative, and of its story of John Harmon and Bella, here. At the same time, the nemesis of the dinner table, and the fall of the Veneerings, is yet to occur. Twemlow's tired tribute provides another place for the novel's in-between vision, for it comes from what is apparently the periphery of things, Twemlow having had nothing to do with either the novel's fiction or its narrative. Writing here refuses to glorify or sustain itself by ending, and in doing so preserves what it has discovered in its course, an accidental world which has discovered the 'Word' Eugene seeks by refusing to pursue it into either the world of imagination or the world of beginnings and endings. Twemlow renounces the writer's will, and in doing so confirms the achievement of the writing in having evolved the form it can finally dominate without the intrusive and, as we have seen, disruptive intervention of impulses towards the imagination or coherence of fiction or narrative.

---

56. See David Copperfield, 701, and page 177 above.

CONCLUSION

I have now shown how Dickens' novels are composed of the disparate forces of fiction and narrative, and I have shown how they investigate the meaning of this disparity with a profound clarity and intelligence. I have discussed the way in which this investigation develops, from its first crisis in Oliver Twist, in which the authority of narrative meets the fragmentation of fiction fully for the first time, to the resignation of Our Mutual Friend, which accepts that the writing is and indeed can only be a place for such a meeting. The later novel comes to accept irreconcilable division by the conscious choice of an 'accidental' vision, which, I suggest, can be viewed as a kind of accidental irony. While we see a development in the novels towards this resignation, it also remains the case that the essential substance of Dickens' novels throughout his writing remains dominated by the meeting of fiction and narrative, as a continuous underlying concern. I would like now to suggest briefly in conclusion some of the ways in which this re-interpretation of the construction of the novels might be of importance to our views of the nineteenth century and of the novel.

I began this thesis with an evaluation of the social, economic and literary conditions of Dickens' age, in an attempt to show that his position and career were not eccentric or remarkable in any way other than in Dickens' own genius in identifying and capturing the imagination of a public; that he wholly knew that public, as it knew him, in sharing and participating in its hopes and fears, and in its condition. We saw that this condition was most aptly described as 'middle class', and that under this title was included a range of uncertainties of social

position, of economic function, of geographical location, and of class responsibility. We have seen that all of these uncertainties are taken up in Dickens' work, and we might now consider the consequential possibility that the development of Dickens' writing is the development, through a readership that grew with him, of a class-consciousness.

As I argued at the beginning of this thesis, Dickens develops and is deeply, if unconsciously, influenced by divisions within Romantic literature, and his novels accommodate what we have seen is a middle-class crisis which is present within Romantic literature. It would seem that the structure of the novel is capable of exploring this crisis in new and more complete ways; and if Dickens' early writing takes up this Romantic crisis, then Our Mutual Friend might be seen as both the first full expression and the first real crisis of a middle class society, as a world where accident becomes the real substance of human consciousness; a world whose narratives draw conclusions against each other, and whose fictions and imagination seem locked in inactivity, to be released only by chance. Dickens' development of the consciousness of the age might in turn be seen as the root of the questions of self-determination that drive later Victorian literature and, specifically, we might see the English tradition in Hardy and in Lawrence as continuous with an irony of accident. Such an irony is central to Hardy's writing, and to Lawrence's close concern with Hardy.[1]

Dickens' writing then would seem to suggest a continuity we are not accustomed to see in the nineteenth century, between Romantic and Victorian, and early and late Victorianism. We can see this continuity as a development, in which Dickens plays an important and as yet

---

1. See Study of Thomas Hardy, reprinted in Phoenix (London 1936), 398-518. Lawrence criticises Hardy for allowing his novels to be governed by the indeterminacy Lawrence sees "betwixt life and public opinion" criticising Hardy for "a lack of sternness" (Phoenix 440); dissenting against the uncertainty which in Hardy is almost a dogma of accident.

substantially unrecognised part; a part which would seem to demand a significant reassessment of certain aspects of nineteenth century literature and particularly, perhaps, of the transition from 'Romantic' to 'Victorian'. This development would then represent a literary history of middle class consciousness, emerging through the Romantic and Victorian period, and giving us an account of both its origins and its consequences.

While such a view would seem entirely plausible, however, Dickens' novels at the same time also profoundly question our comfort in it, for, as we have seen, the very structure of his writing suggests that this language of progressive sequence must be inadequate to the world he occupies, participates in and expresses. His concerns exploit the possibilities of the novel and return us to what, at least in our own English literature, would seem to be the essential concerns of comedy and tragedy, of the reconciliation of the momentary, in fiction, and the purposively active, in narrative. Dickens' novels recover that moment of passage in Troilus and Cressida where Troilus' complaint is that "the desire is boundless, and the act a slave to limit".[2] Between the momentary desire and the action of narrative which limits it within causal sequence, Dickens' novels remain most actively engaged at a point which must always be that at which reader and writer meet, between immediate context and temporal perspective; at the meeting of fiction and narrative. Dickens' novels suggest that our contemporary vision might be less comfortable than it at first seems to be in its identification of what is like, and of what is not like itself; of what is present and of what is past. While I have suggested that we should reorder our historical perspective where it refuses to acknowledge Dickens' importance as a writer I would also like to suggest, in

---

2. William Shakespeare, Troilus and Cressida, III, ii, 89-90.

conclusion, that Dickens' greatness is invested in his insistence upon what is always the case when we read or write, that we must find the point of meeting in the work. Dickens insists that we meet him continually as we read, and that we understand the accident of that meeting as neither a modern, academic privilege, nor the privilege of imagination in a bygone age we half-enter as we read, but something that exists in-between, as the recurrent pattern of human relationship.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Works

Thomas Carlyle: *Selected Writings*, Ed. Alan Shelston (Penguin 1971).

William Cobbett: *Advice to Young Men* (London 1819).

Samuel Taylor Coleridge: *Biographic Literaria*, Ed. George Watson (London 1965).

———— *Poems*, Ed. John Beer (London 1963).

———— *The Friend* (London 1904).

Charles Dickens: *Pickwick Papers*, Ed. Robert L. Patten (Penguin 1972).

———— *Oliver Twist*, Ed. Peter Fairclough (Penguin 1966).

———— *Nicholas Nickleby*, Ed. Michael Slater (Penguin 1978).

———— *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Ed. Angus Easson (Penguin 1972).

———— *Barnaby Rudge*, Ed. Gordon Spence (Penguin 1973).

———— *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Ed. P.N. Furbank (Penguin 1968).

———— *Dombey and Son*, Ed. Peter Fairclough (Penguin 1970).

———— *David Copperfield*, Ed. Trevor Blount (Penguin 1966).

———— *Bleak House*. Ed. Norman Page (Penguin 1971).

———— *Hard Times*, Ed. David Craig (Penguin 1970).

———— *Little Dorritt*, Ed. John Holloway (Penguin 1967).

———— *A Tale of Two Cities*, Ed. George Woodcock (Penguin 1970).

Charles Dickens: *Great Expectations*, Ed. Angus Calder (Penguin 1965).

——— *Our Mutual Friend*, Ed. Stephen Gill (Penguin 1971).

——— *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Ed. Arthur J. Cox (Penguin 1974).

——— *The Christmas Books*, 2 Vols., Ed. Michael Slater (Penguin 1971).

——— *Selected Short Fiction*, Ed. Deborah A. Thomas (Penguin 1976).

——— *Sketches by Boz*, Library Edition (London 1874).

——— *American Notes and Pictures from Italy*, Library Edition (London 1874).

——— *The Uncommercial Traveller*, Library Edition (London 1875).

——— *Miscellaneous Papers*. Additional Volume to Library Edition (London 1908).

The Letters of Charles Dickens: Ed. Madeleine House and Graham Storey, The Pilgrim Edition, Vol. I (Oxford 1965).

The Letters of Charles Dickens: Ed. Madeleine House and Graham Storey, The Pilgrim Edition, Vol. II (Oxford 1969).

The Letters of Charles Dickens: Ed. Madeleine House, Graham Storey and Kathleen Tillotson, The Pilgrim Edition, Vol. III (Oxford 1974).

The Letters of Charles Dickens: Ed. Kathleen Tillotson, The Pilgrim Edition, Vol. IV (Oxford 1977).

The Letters of Charles Dickens: Ed. Graham Storey and K.J. Fielding, The Pilgrim Edition, Vol. V (Oxford 1981).

Charles Dickens: *London Crimes*, Ed. Nadya Aisenberg (Massachusetts 1982).

——— *The Uncollected Writings from Household Words 1850-1859*, Ed. Harry Stone, 2 Vols. (Bloomington and London, 1968).

De Quincey: *The Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, Ed. John E. Jordan (London 1973).

T.S. Eliot: *Complete Poems and Plays* (London 1969).

T.S. Eliot: *The Wasteland: a Facsimile and Transcript*, Ed. Valerie Eliot (London 1971).

William Hazlitt: *The Plain Speaker* (London 1928).

———————— *Selected Writings*, Ed. Ronald Blythe (Penguin 1970).

Henry James: *The House of Fiction*, Ed. Leon Edel (London 1957).

D.H. Lawrence: *Study of Thomas Hardy* reprinted in *Phoenix* (London 1936).

John Milton: *Paradise Lost*, Ed. Alastair Fowler (London 1971).

William Shakespeare: *Complete Works*, Ed. Peter Alexander (London and Glasgow 1951).

William Wordsworth: *Poetical Works*, Ed. Hutchinson, Revised De Selincourt, Oxford Standard Authors (Oxford 1936).

———————— *The Prelude*, Ed. Jonathon Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill, Norton Critical Editions (New York and London 1979).

William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge: *Lyrical Ballads*, Ed. R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones (London 1965).

Secondary Works

Robert Altick: *The English Common Reader* (Chicago 1957).

John Bayley: *The Uses of Division* (London 1976).

George Bornstein (Ed.) *Romantic and Modern* (Pittsburgh 1977).

G.L. Brook: *The Language of Dickens* (London 1970).

Marilyn Butler: *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries* (Oxford 1981).

David Cannadine: *Lords and Landlords; the Aristocracy and the Towns* (Leicester 1980).

John Carey: *The Violent Effigy* (London 1973).

Louis Cazamian: *The Development of English Humour* (North Carolina 1952).

Kellow Chesney: *The Victorian Underworld* (Pelican 1972).

G.K. Chesterton: *Appreciation and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens* (New York 1970).

A.O.J. Cockshut: *The Imagination of Charles Dickens* (London 1961).

Philip Collins (Ed.): *Dickens: The Critical Heritage* (New York 1971).

———————— *Dickens: Interviews and Recollections*, 2 Vols. (London 1981).

H.M. Daleski: *Dickens and the Art of Analogy* (London 1970).

R.T. Davies and B.G. Beatty (Eds.): *Literature of the Romantic Period 1750-1850* (Liverpool 1976).

Dyos and Wolff (Eds.): *The Victorian City* (London 1973).

A.E. Dyson (Ed.): *Dickens*, *Modern Judgements* (London 1968).

———————— *The Inimitable Dickens* (London 1970).

George H. Ford: *Dickens and his Reader* (Princeton 1955).

Ford and Lane (Eds.): *The Dickens Critics* (New York 1961).

John Forster: *Life of Charles Dickens* (London 1872).

Northrop Frye: 'Dickens and the Comedy of Humours, *Experience in the Novel*, Ed. Roy Harvey Pearce (New York 1968), pp.49-81.

Norman Gash: *Aristocracy and People* (London 1979).

Joseph Gold: *The Stature of Dickens: a Centenary Bibliography* (Toronto 1971).

John Gross and Gabriel Pearson (Eds.): *Dickens and the Twentieth Century* (London 1962).

Barbara Hardy: *The Moral Art of Dickens* (London 1970).

Geoffrey Hartman: *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814* (New Haven and London 1964).

Christopher Hibbert: *The Making of Charles Dickens* (London 1967).

H.W. Hill: 'Books that Dickens Read', *The Dickensian*, 45 (1943-4), 81-90, 201-207.

Susan R. Horton: *The Reader in the Dickens World* (London 1981).

Humphrey House: *The Dickens World* (London 1961).

Jean-Paul Hulin and Pierre Coustillas (Eds.): *Victorian Writers and the City* (Lille 1979).

Louis James: *Fiction for the Working Man, 1830-50* (London 1963).

Derek Jarrett: *England in the Age of Hogarth* (London 1974).

Edgar Johnson: *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph*, 2 Vols., (London 1953).

P.J. Keating: *The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction* (London 1971).

Arnold Kettle: *An Introduction to the English Novel*, 2 Vols. (London 1951).

James R. Kincaid: *Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter* (Oxford 1971).

Suzanne Langer: *Feeling and Form* (New York 1953).

Coral Lansbury: 'Dickens' Romanticism Domesticated', *Dickens Studies Newsletters*, 3 (1972), 36-46.

Peter Laslett: *The World We Have Lost* (London 1965).

F.R. and Q.D. Leavis: *Dickens the Novelist* (London 1970).

Jack Lindsay: *Charles Dickens* (London 1950).

Sean McConville: *A History of Prison Administration* (London 1981).

Maynard Mack: *The Garden and the City* (Toronto 1969).

N. and J. Mackenzie: *Dickens: a Life* (Oxford 1979).

Steven Marcus: *Dickens: From Pickwick to Dombey* (New York 1965).

J. Hillis Miller: *Charles Dickens: the World of his Novels* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958).

B.R. Mitchell and Phyllis Deane: *An Abstract of British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge 1962).

Sylvère Monod: *Dickens the Novelist* (Oklahoma 1968).

S.J. Newman: *Dickens at Play* (London 1981).

Robert Newsom: *Dickens; on the Romantic Side of Familiar Things* (New York 1977).

Friedrich Nietsche: *The Genealogy of Morals*, Trans. H. Samuel Ed. Levy (London 1910).

John Charles Olmstead (Ed.): *A Victorian Art of Fiction* (New York and London 1979).

Harold Orel and George J. Worth (Eds.): *The Nineteenth Century Writer and His Audience*, University of Kansas Humanistic Studies, 40 (Kansas 1969).

George Orwell: 'Charles Dickens', *Dickens, Dali and Others: Studies in Popular Culture* (New York 1946), pp.1-75.

D.J. Palmer: *Comedy: Developments in Criticism*, Casebook Series (London 1984).

Robert B. Partlow Jr. (Ed.): *Dickens the Craftsman* (London and Amsterdam 1970).

Robert L. Patten: *Charles Dickens and his Publishers* (Oxford 1978).

Martin Price (Ed.): *Dickens: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Twentieth Century Views (New Jersey 1967).

George Rudé: *The Crowd in History* (New York 1964).

Raphael Samuel: *East End Underworld* (London 1981).

Scholes and Kellogg (Eds.): *The Nature of Narrative* (New York 1968).

F.S. Schwarzbach: *Dickens and the City* (London 1979).

P.J.M. Scott: *Reality and Comic Confidence in Dickens* (London 1979).

Leslie Shepard: *The History of Street Literature* (London 1973).

David Simpson: *Irony and Authority in Romantic Poetry* (London 1979).

Michael Slater: *Dickens and Women* (London 1983).

W.E. Smith: *Charles Dickens; in the Original Cloth* (Los Angeles 1982).

Michael Steig: *Dickens and Pliny* (Bloomington and London 1978).

Taylor Stoehr: *Dickens: the Dreamer's Stance* (New York 1965).

Lawrence Stone: *An Open Elite? England 1540-1880* (Oxford 1984).

Harvey Peter Sucksmith: *The Narrative Art of Charles Dickens* (Oxford 1970).

Kathleen Tillotson: *Novels of the 1840s* (Oxford 1954).

Deborah A. Thomas: *Dickens and the Short Story* (London 1982).

E.P. Thompson: *The Making of the English Working Class* (Penguin 1968).

David Thomson: *Europe Since Napoleon* (London 1957).

Dorothy Van Ghent: 'The Dickens World: A View from Todgers'' *Sewanee Review* lviii (1950), 419-38.

Ian Watt: *The Rise of the Novel* (London 1957).

Alexander Welsh: *The City of Dickens* (Oxford 1971).

Raymond Williams: *Culture and Society* (London 1958).

________________ *The Country and the City* (London 1973).